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The SIRC column

Bunkers or ballast?

The issue of food aboard ships is one which is more important and complex than it first appears, say Helen Sampson (left) and Michelle Thomas, researchers at the Seafarers' International Research Centre



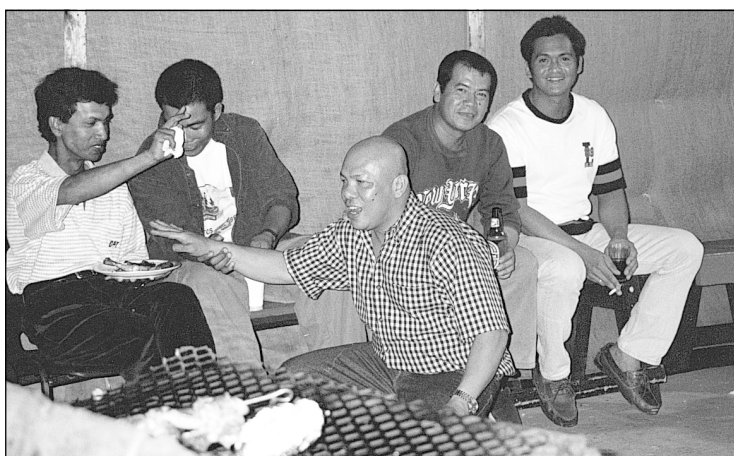
THE fact that seafarers complain about food may be seen as bizarre given the plethora of hazards they face in the course of their daily working lives. However, the issue of food aboard ships is one which is more important and complex than it first appears. Apart from the health aspects of food storage, preparation and eating, patterns of food consumption have important social implications which are generally disregarded.

In recent years Western Europe has seen an explosion in health club membership reflecting an increased concern, among men as well as women, with health and image. Seafarers have not been immune to this trend. Indeed, our shipboard research indicates that seafarers of all nationalities and ranks are conscious of diet and fitness. However, unlike their shore-based counterparts, seafarers are in the relatively unusual situation of having little control over their diet and even less over exercise.

While seafarers generally have access to adequate quantities of food, the question of nutritional quality and balance needs to be addressed. Perhaps what we should be asking is whether the food eaten by seafarers qualifies as "bunkers" or merely "ballast"? In our view this question is largely ignored by the shipping industry, a perception which is reinforced by the fact that many companies are currently considering operating ships without carrying qualified cooks. Not only have seafarers expressed concern over this issue, but even where cooks are employed, many seafarers are dissatisfied with the standard and range of food available to them. A recent Australian study (Parker et al., 1997) has shown that seafarers are unhappy with the large quantities of fried food and absence of low-fat products on some ships. The same research indicates that consumption of both fat and sugar are significantly higher at sea compared with ashore.

It is disturbing that while ship operators continue to offer their employees little opportunity to follow a healthy diet on board, some countries are reported to be introducing measures to screen out seafarers judged to be obese (using standardised height/weight ratios). Such contradictions frequently place seafarers in the iniquitous position of having to decide whether to consume food aboard which is unhealthy and calorie laden, or not to eat anything at all.

This is not to say that ships' cooks are poorly trained or that they are not conscientious in undertaking their work. The creation of interesting, varied, and popular meals is something



ANY doubts about the social importance of meals might be dispelled by seeing a barbecue at sea (Photo: Helen Sampson)

that most cooks take very seriously – and with good reason. Dissatisfaction can manifest in itself in a variety of forms, from uneaten meals and empty mess rooms, to complaints to the master and potential dismissal. In this respect the cook's job is highly pressured as s/he has the unenviable task of satisfying individuals with invariably different likes and dislikes; a duty which is further complicated by the constraints of budgets and the availability of supplies. The phasing out of chief stewards has meant that nowadays chief cooks are often responsible for ordering supplies as well as providing meals on a daily basis. Many experience this as an additional, unwelcome, pressure, and with the best will in the world are unable to ensure that they sail with adequate stores. On being asked what he did not like about his job, one chief cook told us:

When we run out of food – provisions – that is very bad... they supply us very well but sometimes they don't know where we go and sometimes they don't know if we go to Africa or Brazil so I don't know how much to order for provisions... When I was first here the cook had a problem, they didn't know where we were going, they went from Europe to New Zealand – about a month and a half, so you don't know what to do. It is very difficult. I don't want it to happen to me.

While issues of nutritional value and the provision of balanced diets aboard ships are undoubtedly important, dining also provides a crucial opportunity for social contact at sea. At a time when crewing levels are declining and ships are operating to tighter deadlines, seafarers frequently experience periods of isolation and loneliness. Modern seafarers often work alone or in conditions that prohibit conversation. After work they may be too tired to take advantage of whatever opportunities to socialise exist aboard which, in any case, may be limited. Meeting together at meal times may be the only situation where seafarers are able to converse, share a joke

or story, and develop a sense of camaraderie. Traditionally, one of the attractions of seafaring was the comradeship which could develop aboard ships. Indeed the very term "comradeship" is said to originate from the Spanish word "camaradas", referring to the shared sleeping "chamber" of the Spanish mariners of the 16th century who survived their epic voyages, if at all, thanks to the mutual aid of their fellows (Perez-Mallaina, 1998). In today's industry such opportunities to develop comradeship are severely restricted and the mess room may be one of the few remaining venues where companionship can be experienced. Any doubts a stranger might have about the social importance of meals might be dispelled by witnessing a barbecue at sea. These events are generally well attended and elaborately prepared. Cooks tend to go to a great deal of effort in preparing food for such occasions and crew members may all join together in setting up tables, lights, decorations and so forth. Seafarers may also use food as a way of differentiating between days at sea. Hence, weekends are sometimes marked by the preparation of "special" meals (smorgasbord, biriyani, traditional British Sunday dinners etc.) and the consumption of wine, schnapps, beer etc. Parties and public holidays may also be marked by the preparation of special dishes or "nibbles".

Many pleasures taken for granted ashore are denied to seafarers and, in this context, food inevitably takes on a special significance. However, there are other good reasons, both social and health-related, why ship operators should be concerned with issues of food and nutrition. At a time when they are considering cutting cooks from the payroll, ship owners might be better advised to invest in their proper training and development. Just as ships cannot run on ballast, seafarers cannot be expected to perform effectively without being provided with adequate "bunkers".