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## THE SIRC COLUMN



When seafarers arrive home on leave, the initial excitement of seeing loved ones can turn to

**disappointment as they find the home runs perfectly well without them. One answer, says Michelle Thomas, of the Seafarers International Research Centre in Wales, is shorter tours of duty.**

**T**HERE cannot be many seafarers who do not anticipate their paying-off day with some considerable excitement. Indeed, the intense emotions associated with ending a tour of duty have been so routinely experienced that British seafarers have a name for these emotions – “the channels” – after the last strait of water they typically traversed before paying off. After long months of separation, reunions

with partners and family are filled with excitement and expectation. Seafarers have described their return home as like a honeymoon or, as one British seafarer commented: “Coming home: to me, it’s just like Christmas”. These feelings are also reflected by seafarers’ partners: one wife of a senior officer talked about her husband’s homecoming saying: “It’s like you are on your first date again and you’ve got to meet someone all over again, you know, butterflies in the stomach and you can’t wait to see each other again.”

However, all too often, initial excitement can turn to disappointment as seafarers attempt to settle in at home and find that the realities of the leave period are far from the images pictured during

long separations. Homecomings are necessarily periods of adjustment for seafarers, their partners and their children. Seafarers have to adjust from shipboard life to the dramatically different world of home and family, and wives and children have to make changes to accommodate and adjust to the seafarer’s presence in the family again. In reality, long-awaited reunions can be fraught with anxieties, tension and conflict. As one seafarer said during the first few days at home: “You feel like a round plug in a square hole.”

Inevitably, when their husbands are away, wives have to take responsibility for management of the home and family and, in many cases, assume roles that their husbands would take were they at

home. These responsibilities may range from acting as both mother and father to children, to the management of household finances and accomplishment of routine, and indeed emergency, household maintenance tasks. The ability to cope successfully with these responsibilities is, of course, vital to the well-being of the wife left to manage alone. They are also important to enable the seafarer to work aboard without worries or concern for matters at home.

However, the very necessity for women to manage all aspects of home and family in their absence can leave the seafarer feeling redundant, unnecessary and unimportant. As one seafarer commented: “I always felt as if ... not as if I wasn’t important, but that they could

survive without me anyway”.

Other factors can also contribute to seafarers’ feelings of displacement. Routines associated with the social, educational and employment commitments of partners and children often necessarily continue whether the seafarer is home or at sea. However, seafarers may take time to become accustomed to these routines and to find their own place within them. As one seafarer commented: “They’ve got a set routine haven’t they? And it doesn’t involve me in the routine. When I do come home everything’s all in place. It’s not to do with me really at all.” Unfamiliarity with routines, venues or social relationships established in their absence, can leave seafarers feeling like outsiders or even lodgers when they return

# Home is the sailor, home from the sea...

home. As one seafarer remarked: “First of all it’s sort of like ‘hang on a minute I’m just coming in and pay the rent – what’s going on here?’ I’m the lodger and that’s basically it.”

These difficulties experienced during the seafarer’s initial return home can encroach on valuable leave time and can put undue strain on family relationships. There is no doubt that communication has a role to play in smoothing these transitions. Recent developments in telecommunication technologies, such as email and use of cellnet phones, mean that many seafarers and their families are no longer dependent on prohibitively expensive satellite phone communication or the vagaries of regular mail, and can

contact their families both quickly and (relatively) cheaply. Such contact can help bridge emotional gaps and provide couples with a sense of continuity within their relationship and, importantly, the immediacy of telephone and email communication can allow seafarers a sense of continued participation in household events and decisions, despite their physical absence. However, electronic contact is not always enough. What is really necessary to improve the lives of seafarers and their families are better employment conditions that include shorter tours of duty and improved work-to-leave ratios.

It may be argued that such changes are unrealisable luxuries in the context of the economic realities of the intensely competitive shipping industry. However, the associated costs may in fact be a small price to pay for the retention of stable, content and, above all, safe crews who have not had to sacrifice their family life for the sake their work at sea.