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Citation for final published version:

Winchester, Nik 2005. Spotting a fake is no simple matter. *The Sea* (178) , p. 4.

Publishers page:

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THE SIRC COLUMN



Fraudulent certificates make life at sea more hazardous, says Nik Winchester of the Seafarers' International Research Centre. But tackling the problem is a challenge for the industry

WHEN seafarers take up a new position, apply to enter an examination, enter the books of a crewing agency or present a certificate for endorsement, the proof of their qualification is demonstrated by the certificates that they possess. A certificate of competency defines their level of qualification in accordance with STCW'95 and outlines any additional skills or restrictions. A medical certificate attests to their fitness to work onboard. Various ancillary certificates give notice of specific skills, for example in the use of specialist equipment. Testimonials offer evidence of periods of service and brief assessments of the quality of their work. Throughout their careers,

Spotting a fake is no simple matter

seafarers collect a plethora of certificates attesting to genuine qualification and experience that enable their continuing access to employment. These certificates are designed to be the demonstration of proper training and experience of those seeking employment and that they possess adequate skills to carry out their duties.

Or, at least, this is supposed to be the situation. With unerring regularity the maritime press tells of seafarers taking to the sea with fraudulent certificates. There are claims of mass cheating in examinations, swarms of forged documents and even the bribery and corruption of government officials. The letters pages of maritime publications confirm these with anecdotes of seafarers presenting a sheaf of documents, yet acting on vessels as if it was their first trip to sea.

More systematic research conducted in 2001 by the Seafarers' International Research

Centre found evidence of a plethora of fraudulent practices such as: the presentation of a forged document attesting to qualifications that the seafarer does not possess; the alteration of details on a valid certificate; the acquisition of examination papers prior to examination; the purchase of passing grades at training institutions; the fabrication of seafaring time to gain a qualification; and the purchase of certificates from government officials. In this context, it is unsurprising that the International Maritime Organisation continues to express "deep concern" over the existence of fraudulent practices in the certification process.

Given the financial rewards associated with a seafaring career, the costs of training and the length of time associated with climbing up the ladder of qualifications, it is not surprising that a small minority wish to take advantage of easy, simpler and less time-consuming routes

to financial gain. The easier these routes are to take and, if the probability of being caught is low, then the more of a temptation this may become. The response to this problem comes in the form of regulation designed not only to prevent the existence of these practices, for example by auditing training institutions within a specific state, but also to detect those fraudulent certificates already in circulation.

In the following comments I wish to report on a number of findings from a more recent research project that deals with the issues of how certificates are treated when they are presented to the different bodies within the maritime industry. Given that it is true that there are fraudulent certificates, then how does the maritime industry seek to stop their continuing usage? The emphasis is on the maritime industry as a whole here: not a series of discrete bodies but a community attempting to

deal with a problem within its bounds.

When a certificate, or commonly a number of certificates are presented to a flag state, an employer or a training establishment, those who receive them are afforded the opportunity to check them and decide whether to accept them as evidence of legitimate qualifications. The issue here is what do these institutions do, and what criteria do they apply in accepting these certificates?

The first problem for these institutions is that they will receive a plethora of certificates issued from a variety of bodies located around the world. There is no centralised database of certificates that they can check a particular certificate against, or indeed a database giving information of what a particular certificate from a particular institution looks like, what security features it possesses and suchlike.

An obvious way to check



ON a day to day basis seafarers place great trust on the abilities and skills of their fellow crew. (Photo: Crispin Hughes)

a certificate is to approach the institution that issued it and ask them to verify the certificate. However, in the course of the research we found that links between institutions were frequently non-existent or, where they existed, they were not used. Often certificates would be sighted and accepted on this basis. Where communication between institutions did exist, it was often only within one

country, or only between government institutions. A significant number of certificates simply were not verified and were accepted as is, with little in the way of systematic inspection and verification. Even where communication should be commonplace, as in the case of the issue of flag state endorsements, problems of communication and limited resources existed to the extent that endorsements were being

issued without any independent verification of a certificate.

In plain terms, the safe and effective operation of vessels across the world's seas depends on the existence of fully qualified and adequately skilled seafarers. On a day-to-day basis seafarers place great trust on the abilities and skills of their fellow crew. If just one of those seafarers has come aboard with fraudulently obtained certificates and lacks the necessary skills, then a profession already suffused with risk becomes perilous.

Perhaps this article adopts a somewhat negative tone, but the problem of fraudulent certification exists, and the only way of tackling it successfully is both to treat the source of the problem and to stop the circulation of existing fraudulent certificates through the maritime community. When it comes to the latter, the maritime sector is only beginning to address the problem – a problem that will remain until the approach becomes more systematic and recognises that it needs to be addressed by the maritime community as a whole.