

Insight & Opinion

Lloyd's List

69-77 Paul Street, London EC2A 4LQ

The proof of burden

A DESCRIPTION of the cargo being loaded on a ship has never been noted for its precision, even though accuracy as regard content and weight is specified by Carriage of Goods by Sea legislation. Thus, "machinery" could encompass anything from a complete car production line or a knocked down power station to a carton of office staplers. In the days before containerisation, "earthenware", shortened for further unclarity to "e'ware", would be the manifested description given to a consignment of lavatory bowls, lest the

Australian dockers demand "embarrassment money" for discharging it. This habit of euphemism and approximation has been carried down through the years as regards both weight and content, with shippers often, it seems, regarding what they have stuffed into a container as entirely their business. Alarming experiences as supposedly innocuous cargoes have ignited or exploded have still failed to convince all shippers that they have some responsibility in this respect. Similarly, as regards declared weights, incidents of containerships revealed — by a hasty recalculation of the stability — to be in a lolling condition as they come off the berth shows that there is a sort of assumption among shippers that as long as they can get the door shut all is well.

It was rather assumed that after September 11, 2001, with the US demanding more precise details of container contents to be dispatched to them before a ship had sailed, there would be a global outbreak of greater candour

which would delight the carriers as much as the American authorities. Sadly, it seems to be the case that a "two-tier" regime is emerging, with the clerks in the stuffing stations alert and precise when the cargo is US-bound but as slovenly as ever when it is destined elsewhere. If anyone wanted confirmation that this is the case, other than the smoking remains of severely damaged boxboats and feederships lying on their beam ends in a number of instances, the *MSC Napoli* seems to be a source of first-class data.

The entire deck cargo, other than that lost, has been safely landed by the energetic salvors in Portland, where the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has taken the rare opportunity to weigh, empty and examine several hundred containers. They have then been able to compare the reality of the weight and contents with that shown on the documents offered by the shippers.

As was revealed at a Nautical Institute conference last week some discrepan-

cies, it appears, have emerged, and it could well be that prosecutions follow. And a good thing too if it persuades shippers that "fictionalising" container contents can be a dangerous and criminal act that can menace a ship and all aboard it. It may be no big deal if one forty-footer is so overweight that its cornerposts are torn bodily out of the base when it is lifted. Several hundred underdeclared boxes, a scenario that in some ports is nothing unusual, can put severe stresses on a ship structure, menace the stability and risk collapsing stacks.

There is the widespread perception that weight inside containers is not a matter to concern anyone unduly. Weighbridges are few and far between and their use regarded as an unacceptable delay. But, if it was looked on as an important matter, containers could be weighed as they are lifted off lorries and trains into the stackyard.

Let us be quite clear here. The sea carriers are the victims in this matter, those who offer the cargo being the

perpetrators and the terminals having the responsibility for detection. It is a strongly safety-related matter that needs resolution urgently.

Cold cure needed

WHEN Rotterdam sneezes, it is said, half of Europe catches a cold. The giant Dutch port seems to be going through something of a difficult time, with one group of essential port workers after another in dispute with their employers.

Such problems reverberate around the globe, not to mention running up the Rhine like a tidal bore, in a "just in time" world that places great stock on the reliability of the logistic systems. And, while it might seem to those engaged in the dispute that they hold all the cards, mobile ship operators will be considering their options and examining alternatives.

A day in the life of the P&I Club's ship inspector

THE little ship, a two-year-old general cargo vessel, lay at one of the many small wharves to be found scooped out of the silt on the North Sea Canal a few miles inland from the great lock at IJmuiden.

Here were a host of small specialist terminals, where shortsea and inland craft congregated around piles of timber, scrap and offshore equipment. A fire-damaged trawler leaned on a quay awaiting repair and clearly not going anywhere fast.

Our ship was on one of the smarter terminals, where big clamp trucks scurried around with multiple bales of paper pulp, hurrying them across the wide apron into the shed.

She lay outside the floating crane brought in for the discharge, her paintwork bright in the March sun, rocking gently as successive loads were lifted out of the forward hold, and in the wake of a monstrous car-carrier hurrying down the canal from Amsterdam to the sea locks.

David Wright carefully picked his way over a slightly worrying gangway onto the crane pontoon and hefted his heavy bag up the pilot ladder which gave us access to the maindeck of the small ship.

I cautiously followed, glad to have both arms free as we walked aft down the narrow walkway between rail and hatch coaming, to be greeted by the mate.

Capt Wright is a ship inspector for the UK P&I Club, one of five full-time inspectors who protect the members' interests as regards the quality of the ships which are entered in a mutual association which now comprises some 20% of the world's tonnage.

With permanent bases in Rotterdam and Houston, and periodic sallies to other shipping centres, the five inspectors, four ex-shipmasters and a chief engineer "sample" the tonnage on the club's books, randomly selecting vessels in a scheme which began in 1991 and which continues to this day.

Then, concerned by the spiralling costs of claims, and to the consternation of classification societies, the inspection scheme was begun.

Capt Wright, who was in at the beginning of the ship inspections and is now the senior inspector, remembers that there was probably 15% of the ships entered which "caused concern", even though they were fully in class, and recalls a substantial number of ships which were not up to scratch.

Today, he suggests no more than 2% of the ships which they look at are problematical, giving rise to a full-scale condition survey.

A routine inspection will take about four hours, depending on the size of the ship and is primarily a "walk around", formalised by the ship inspector's notebook which records information about the ship, her equipment, her crew and management.

Ultimately, the inspector has to answer two "killer" questions after this exercise — Is the ship acceptable to the club? Would you sail on the vessel?

If either question prompts a negative, then a condition survey, to fully address the deficiencies, is called for.

In the professional assessment of a ship, says Capt Wright, a "gut feeling" is important. In this, of course, experience is what tells.

He spent 22 years with Denholms, from cadet to captain in command, and during this time sailed in virtually every type of vessel, from ULCCs to gas-turbine driven containerships, bulkers and passenger ships.

He spent time as a marine superintendent for the big Glasgow ship management company, before branching out as an independent safety inspector and superintendent.

Capt Wright spent a couple of years as the general manager and operations director of Cenargo, when that company was operating small tankers and ro-ro ferries.

He is a lead assessor for ISO 9000 and a qualified lead auditor for the ISM Code. With this varied experience and a lifetime around ships, there is probably

Viewpoint



Michael Grey

not a great deal that will surprise Capt Wright.

The mate of our little ship passes us on to the master, a cheerful and enthusiastic seafarer, whose surprise at our visit (the agent hadn't passed on the message) gives way to curiosity as Capt Wright explains what the inspection will entail.

Probably a fair number of the people who tramp aboard ships these days cause the master some trouble and alarm, but this clearly does not come under the "threatening" category and, indeed, the inspector makes it plain that this is so.

Ultimately, the inspector has to answer two "killer" questions after this exercise — Is the ship acceptable to the club? Would you sail on the vessel?

He takes the master through the procedures, explaining why the club has this policy, and exactly what he will be looking at.

He brings some gifts of useful training DVDs and literature, and an electronic library of all the club's publications, which the master copies on the ship's computer.

This is not a "survey" as such but it is still far from superficial. The inspector, on the short walk from the gangway to the ship's office has noted a good deal about the appearance of the topsides and general maintenance of the ship and her equipment.

He has taken in the state of the lifeboat and lifesaving equipment, and by the time he has entered the accommodation has "clocked" the after mooring deck and the state of the winches and lines. He examines the ship's certificates, scrutinises the crew list with particular reference to the experience of the crew and, individually, their time with this ship and this employer.

In his polite questioning of the master, he is getting a feel for the "management" of the ship, and the relations with the company. He gains an impression of the communications, the degree of supervision, and whether the ship is properly husbanded with stores, provisions and spare gear.

He takes in the ISM Code requirements and the appropriate certificates, checking on whether this is a "living" system in which the crew participates, or something imposed from above that is regarded as a nuisance.

We then walk around the ship with the master, and it is interesting to watch Capt Wright at work. Armed with a digital camera, which must be a godsend compared with what went before, his seafarer's eye is everywhere.

The hatches with their seals and cleats get a close scrutiny and if there was any doubt about their watertightness, there is an ultrasonic testing set in the back of the car.

Safety is an important matter — think about all those claims for slips,

trips and falls in addition to the unavoidably hazardous operations that take place as the winches and pontoon gantry are used. We take in the fore-castle space and paint locker, the engine-room and workshop, the well-equipped bridge, with its logbook and electronic navigation outfit.

Manning, bridge procedures and equipment, engine-room and steering gear, safety, lifesaving and firefighting equipment, anti-pollution arrangements, ballast systems and mooring equipment are all assessed.

This is clearly a ship about which those two killer questions would be answered in the affirmative, but Capt Wright spends considerable time talking over his findings with the master and his relief, who is also the owner.

He is friendly and positive, stressing the good things that he has found, and offering suggestions for a number of improvements. He suggests painting the top and bottom rungs of ladders in bright yellow or orange, and the use of non-slip paint at the foot of the ladders where unsuspecting feet slip on the wet deck. A patch of non-slip where somebody working a winch drum end stands pays dividends, he hints.

There are "housekeeping" issues which have cropped up, in the way of fire doors being held open with line or even an "illegal" magnetic catch. The forward life raft would benefit from a knotted lifeline.

The ship is on her way to drydock, so he suggests a padeye might be welded at the top of the engine-room escape, so that a casualty could be more easily handled. The logbook entries in pilotage waters were a little light, which could be important in the event of a claim.

The safety of the access to the ship might be improved, while it could be useful to have the safety goggles in the engine-room workshop rather closer to the grinder.

He suggests a safer way of turning synthetic mooring ropes up on their bitts, so they do not jam. The inspector passes on these hints, which the master seems to appreciate.

The ship is a clean, well-maintained vessel, and the various points are really practical matters of general housekeeping that will help in risk reduction. Capt Wright tells the master and owner of the importance of this club strategy, showing how a reduction in the number of small claims can be influential in reducing the number of large claims in excess of \$100,000.

In a helpful manner, he conveys the club's messages and risk reduction strategies, points out how everybody aboard can play a part in risks reduction, and how simple preventive strategies, most of which are no more than good seamanship, can build up into substantial gains.

The ship has not been inspected before, so this will be a new entry into the club's database, along with a full report of what the inspector has found. An abbreviated although constructive report will be given to the owner.

The inspector is sensitive to the needs of the crew, while the owner's permission is always sought before a visit.

"We don't intrude more than is necessary," says Capt Wright as we drive away toward Rotterdam, pointing out that if the ship is particularly busy "we will back off and inspect another time".

With more than 600 ship visits every year, the UK Club has accumulated an enormous database of information from the inspectors' work, which is invaluable in detecting trends and providing information about why certain claims seem to be rising or falling. It is clearly a very worthwhile strategy.

Variety is the inspectors' inevitable lot, not to mention a great deal of air miles and time at the wheel of a car.

Capt Wright, who had driven down to the little general cargoship directly from visiting an 8,000 teu containership at the ECT terminal out on the Maasvlakte, will, the following day, have a tanker in Antwerp and, back in Rotterdam, a problematical containership which had been marked down on a previous inspection. Clearly, he will be looking for signs of improvement.



Sorting out the paperwork: Capt Wright checks documents on the bridge to make sure everything is in order.



Seal of approval: the ship inspector checks rubber seals on a car carrier stern ramp.



Attention to detail: particular care is taken to ensure the hatches are in proper working condition.