

Spanning the Meridians of Time – A Sailor’s Journey through Change

By

Geoff Walker

Early 1960s was a very interesting juncture for a young person to embark upon a seafaring occupation. The Industry offered new horizons and solid development with the prospect of an exciting career and long term employment. By this time international shipping had basically recovered from WW2, and had entered a period of transition and renewed growth, in which there still existed a very visible mix between old and new tonnage in the global fleets. Many of the World’s major ship-owners were involved in modernizing their fleets, whilst newcomers to the fold engaged in establishing themselves by procuring and operating discarded tonnage (acquired at very competitive prices) that had become available on the market as a consequence of world fleet upgrading and expansion. These vintage ships gave many of today’s shipping giants their first start in the industry.

This short, non-technical article outlines the changes in the World Shipping Industry during the period 1960 to 2004 as seen through my eyes and is the basis for my nostalgia on the subject, albeit veiled and now somewhat clouded, due to the mists of time

On occasion, I sit in my garden, usually with a cold beverage. I reminisce over the many years I spent at sea. I always become nostalgic when I think of how it used to be and the changes within the industry, ashore and afloat, types of ships, the modern seafarers and the transition and changes I have witnessed between when I first went to sea as a deck apprentice in June 1961, and my swansong voyage as Master in December 2004. I tried early retirement but frankly I was not ready for it, so I worked in various managerial posts ashore to keep myself busy. There was always someone needing the experiences gained over a span of 40 or so years spent at sea.

A visit to any of the World’s larger ports around that era would show any enthusiast a variety of ships; the ex WW2 Types with their classic rigid lines, mainly using steam as their primary form of propulsion, which was in sharp contrast to the sleek new motor ships being delivered in increasing numbers, during the early and mid 1960s.

By mid -1968 there were 7 major seagoing merchant fleets, each with more than 10 million dwt tons, accounting for 65% of the world tonnage. During the post war years 1955-68 the total world tonnage increased overall by 120% of which Tanker fleet expanded by 160% and Dry Cargo fleets by 104%. Many sailors consider 1960 - early 70s to be the “Boom” years with no shortage of jobs, but also signaling times the changes to the industry started to take hold and

become most visibly evident. Although these golden years were before the serious onset of global containerization, other deep rooted changes had started to manifest themselves.

There came about a change in the caliber of person wishing to follow a sea-going career, due in part to the reduction of shore based training establishments and then recently revised training schemes; academic achievement seemed to be the main criteria, rather than a combination of both good schooling and aptitude towards the profession. This was most noticeable amongst Cadets where there was a relatively high percentage of wastage amongst the intakes, many leaving the occupation to follow other careers, after only a few years, or in some cases less. I hasten to add this did not apply to all, but became very obvious industry wide on a global basis. Also, external factors seriously influenced the situation.

Firstly, the fuel shortages of the early 1970's, which caused many sea-going jobs to quickly dry-up worldwide, created an influx of Asian Officers, many undercutting each other in terms of pay scale in order to secure a berth, a number of which (prior to STCW) may have been holders of questionable licenses, all at the expense of the traditional well qualified and experienced (but more costly) European officers. Not only that, there was a visible decline in the professionalism and efficiency amongst the Bridge teams during these years, especially until STCW gained a foothold. Most evident was that one gained the impression many did not really want to be in the job, there was a marked lack of sincerity and commitment demonstrated by a good number. The first thing after joining was that the calendar was posted in their cabin and they crossed off the day's religiously, presumably counting down until pay-off time?

Secondly, the lack of new blood and training during the late 1970s and 1980s caused serious shortages of good quality and qualified crews - this continued thereafter for a number of years. On British Flag ships it was particularly damaging because the "Thatcher" years had virtually decimated the UK shipping industry anyway, with consequential damage to recruitment and training of new intakes, which caused a huge overall reduction in UK tonnage and shipbuilding.

These two elements, allegedly aided and abetted by "back room" accountants, the Industry started to lose its hitherto nationalistic image in many ways, due to the emergence of Flags of Convenience (FOC), introduction of cheaper crews; diversification of crewing was claimed to be a necessity in order for many ship owners to survive but in reality I suspect in many cases it was just ice cold opportunism, more likely in the interests of increased profitability. This, coupled with the ongoing fuel instability and continued crew shortages, impacted on the entire industry and triggered changes that took place at a quicker than predicted pace.

Always hovering in the background was the increased awareness of global containerization expediting the rate of change, not only to the physical design and performance of the ships but also in transportation concepts which were to ultimately have such a significant influence on

the future make-up of the entire shipping industry; no doubt expedited by the manning and fuel cost issues. It was during this time that we all observed the downturn, and in some cases demise, of some of the World's most iconic and most historic shipping fleets.

Many fleets lost their national identity, being reflagged, in some cases to less stringent Flags of Convenience, fleet sizes reduced due to an unprecedented disposal rate of older and uneconomic tonnage, and with some, it brought about the reduction in size or demise of long, well established shipping concerns. Ship's crew requirements were reduced due to the remodeling, downscaling and re- organization of fleets, this necessitated many crew to enlist on FOC registered tonnage. However, at the other end of the spectrum, there emerged many fledgling ship-owners, particularly in Asia, who offered attractive wages, very good terms and conditions, together with real promotion prospects to those ambitious officers willing to join on longer term contracts. There is a myth that these companies were mainly "Fly by Night" operators and whilst some were dodgy to say the least, the majority was solid, of which several have now become recognized as "Captains" and "Leaders" in the shipping world.

During the 1970-80s, at which time the shipping industry remained more or less self regulating, coupled with the rapid expansion of third-world operators, it became increasingly common for some ship owners to disguise true beneficial ownership of their vessels, by hiding behind a "Corporate Veil", with each ship being owned by a single ship company, the ship being that company's only asset. These one ship companies were little more than a brass plate in a lawyer's office in some obscure location such as Panama, Somalia, Liberia, Honduras or St.Vincent, amongst others, where it was very difficult or almost impossible to identify the ship's true ownership. This had far reaching implications; if the ship was involved in any kind of serious incident, it meant the owners could quickly close down their offshore company and walk away from any and all liability by disappearing overnight, into obscurity. Similarly, some ship operators literally abandoned their vessels and crew, usually leaving the crew with unpaid wages, no vitals and destitute, with no means of support. It was not uncommon to see such ships under arrest, lying derelict, around the world's ports.

One good example of this was a case in Malaysia where an SD 14 class of vessel (flying some obscure FOC), allegedly owned by PRC interests, capsized and sank at the jetty with only the upper works remaining above water. The ship lay there for some time because, according to reports, the owners could not be located and had closed up shop and disappeared more or less overnight. The consequential damages resulting in costs to the Port (or their insurers) for salvage and wreck removal, pollution prevention, not to mention loss of revenue to the Port due to the wharf being out of commission for a number of months, must have been significant. Although this case was in the 90's it does however typify the ease by which avoidance of

liability can be as simple as closing down all communications, switching off the computer, and disappearing into the sunset.

I became one of those who decided to jump ship in 1965 and “Go East”, a decision I have never regretted because I found most of the Asian ship operators I sailed with, to be very decent and honorable employers, operating good ships to high international standards. In fact I know many of my contemporaries who worked for Asia based ship managers or owners, share my views on this. I firmly believe the dodgy ones were in the minority, but unfortunately they are the ones that made the headlines and tarnished the good name of most others, trying to run a decent show.

My years working for Asian based ship-owners, was in the main most satisfying. During these years I watched changes take place in our industry, sailing on various categories of dry cargo, special purpose, and container ships. It was a time when the number of crew was dramatically reduced, with a more multi-task or general purpose role expected of them. Mixed crews became the norm, but over many years I never experienced any racism or animosity amongst the various ethnic groups on board. As sea we all wore the singular brand of being “Sailors” first and foremost, and relied on each other for our well being and safety. There was never any scope for ethnicity on the ships in which I served. The introduction and implementation of STCW codes by the IMO during the mid-late 1970’s, also did much to improve the standards of training amongst diverse crews from the younger and developing maritime nations, although it did take time to become fully effective. Much stricter oversight of crew competency came about as a result.

From the late 1970s onwards, with the introduction of more state-of-the art shipboard technology, one was required to become more technically savvy. The introduction of the micro chip, ARPA, Satnav, GPS, AIS (Automatic Identification System) and more latterly Dynamic Positioning (DP), ECDIS and GMDSS made us all wake up with startling rapidity, and realize we were now entering a new phase of shipping and moving into 21st century. Sextants were put away, to be fondly dusted off and used only occasionally. By the 1990’s electronic equipment was looked upon as more of less standard equipment, although the demise of the Radio Officer with the introduction of GMDSS did not fully come about until February 1999; the loss of this position on board ships was regrettable but many R/Os took the opportunity to retrain, and return to sea as Electro-Technical Officers (ETOs), once they had re-qualified.

The introduction of SMS (Safety Management System) and follow on DOC (Document of Compliance) for owners and managers were great improvements because it introduced more regulation into an industry which hitherto had been largely lacking, being left to its own devices to govern and administer, with differing standards, and with varying degrees of success.

It forced the improvement of international standard for safer ship management and operation of ships and it introduced more stringent rules for pollution control and prevention.

The origins and implementation of such codes (as part of SOLAS) date back to the 1980s when they were phased in progressively until finally becoming compulsory in 1998, this was mainly due to string of serious marine accidents during the 1980s, raising alarming concerns over poor ship management and operations standards in shipping. As a consequence, arose a litany of procedures and checklists, substantially increased safety awareness, regulated working methods, improved health and safety, and shipboard security and environmental consciousness and perception. Many seamen complained about changes at the time of its inception, complaining about “Red Tape”, additional workload etc., but in retrospect, I am sure those who initially objected now appreciate the benefits these codes have since provided to the industry. This period also brought about the introduction of the Ship Safety Officer, and Ship Security Officer amongst serving officers. Likewise, ship owners, operators and managers were obliged to make similar corporate appointments to oversee Safety and Security policies were observed, both ashore and on board the ships under their jurisdiction.

These intervening years also triggered major changes to an already reforming, but still mainly a self- controlling industry. Fewer and fewer of the classic general cargo ships of earlier years were to be seen so readily, plying the oceans of the globe. By this time most of the world’s major operators of this type of ship had sold them off cheaply for demolition or to smaller 3rd world countries who capitalized on their few remaining useful years of service, by operating them “on the smell of an oily rag” in most cases, prior to their final demise.

It became a sad time to witness the disposal of fine ships, many less than 15 years of age – when normally their life expectancy would be around 20-25 years, in some cases longer in the top tier liner companies. These ships were now being replaced by a more sophisticated and flexible multi-purpose class that slotted readily into the changing market; and which were able to cater for a wider range of ports, due to their self sustaining and multi-task characteristics and ability to include a much higher proportion of containers into their onboard cargo carrying capacity. Most importantly, they were far more fuel efficient and economic to operate.

The major global demolition yards, mostly located in Taiwan, China and India at this time, had a field day as huge amounts of “uneconomic classified” tonnage flooded the market and was sold off. This heralded once again, the slimming of many major ship-owners, or causing the emergence of very large shipping conglomerates, brought about by the merging of a variety of, hitherto more modest shipping empires. Some smaller, but efficient operators, who were genuinely struggling to survive, were also swallowed up and absorbed into larger groups, then rebranded, losing their traditional identity.

The larger and now more visible shipping conglomerates were becoming more and more intent on serving fewer ports, but rather by using a major international array of “Hub Ports” such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Yokohama, Rotterdam, Felixstowe, and the like, to which containers and cargoes could be consolidated or distributed, and which became known as the **“Hub and Spoke”** concept. This proved to be a highly efficient means and brought about the introduction of smaller class of container vessel, which had a TEU capacity of 4-500 and which was to become known as the “Container Feeder” and in many ways completely reorganized shipping and trading strategies.

Newer ships of this period seemed to have lost their heart, soul and character and appeared completely void of any such vibes, in comparison to those of the 50, 60 and 70s. Later in life whilst a Pilot, I recall boarding ships and thinking to myself how “Sterile” the modern ships seemed to be, lifeless and without spirit. This, I think was one of the most important changes felt by mariners, and sets off a lot of nostalgia; ships were no longer a home from home with an atmosphere of being cosy, comfortable, welcoming and friendly, but rather having no personality whatsoever, and simply a floating workplace that held no appeal at all.

I served my waning years at sea on “Container Feeders” but like most seafarers I ultimately succumbed to the temptation to work ashore. So, after a lengthy period spent mainly sailing in the Far East, I swallowed the anchor – much to my wife’s delight. She had sailed with me frequently but I must say, in all honesty, she never really enjoyed it, always worrying in case we got “lost” once land dipped below the horizon, her fear when sailing mid-ocean at night in pitch darkness, or feeling seasick even in the most benign of conditions.

After I moved ashore, for me it became a case of quickly assimilating to corporate policies, internal work systems, and adapting to the office culture and the inevitable politics. Previously I had never been involved in any kind of corporate shenanigans or intrigue; such was all alien to me as a simple sailor, since aboard ship these matters seldom if ever arose.

Changes were not limited to the ships but also ashore. In the early stages of ISM/SMS, because it was still a bit of an “unknown”, some staff felt as if they were under constant scrutiny. I quickly found that there were two categories of management within the shipping fraternity, namely; those managers in their 30’s usually University graduates, generally smart but with limited practical knowledge (in most cases), but with many holding big egos; and those in their late 40-50s mostly ex seafarers with solid practical and managerial experience. With the former, I often experienced these elitist types looked upon us ex mariners with suspicion, as if posing something of a “threat” that jeopardized or conflicted with their own position, a trend I came across repeatedly. The other older and more experienced category, viewed us ex seagoing types as an asset, because of the level of proven experience we brought to their camp and it

was extremely refreshing when they listened and then acted appropriately, based on the recommendations or course of action we may have proposed.

These diverging work ethics, cultures and social behavior of certain people, I learned to live with, accept, and handle in an appropriate fashion, never becoming involved, but at times it was not without frustration. One interesting aspect was the “management by committee” syndrome with some managers unable to take the personal responsibility of making a decision, for fear of being wrong and subsequently ostracized. One’s day became bogged down with meetings, mostly fruitless meetings about meetings, which frequently ended up side stepping or circumventing the main issue at stake, achieving very little, but it made the indecisive and insecure types feel better. Another office trait I observed was how many were reluctant to accept any form of self or corporate criticism (no matter how well intended) and quickly responded by engaging in the blame game culture, instead of looking for positive and remedial solutions to issues or challenges that arose. Of course, whilst not limited to Asian work places and cultures, it became annoying but I was fortunately able to steer well clear of it all and just looked on with distant amusement, but sometimes unable to avoid the occasional wry smile and chuckle to myself. Nevertheless, when working in both Singapore and Thailand, I did detect a slight undercurrent of rivalry between local office staff, all vying for the bosses eye; not so in Hong Kong or Korea.

One laughable tendency was that, even though their work had usually been fully completed by the end of the working day at 6 pm, junior staff would sit around the office “pretending” to be busy until the boss left for the day, then there would be a mass exodus. On many occasions when working late I found that it became necessary to remind many staff to go home, once their work was completed.

During all my years ashore, in order to mould a more coherent work force, I made a practice of putting on a “Sundowner” for staff on Fridays between 6-8pm, at a local Bar or Hotel. It was open to all employees and proved very popular with staff of all levels. It did much to harmonize staff and generate a Team spirit. My wife was very creative and hosted a ladies evening for staff wives at our apartment on the last Wednesday of each month with an array of Chinese, Thai and Japanese culinary delights on offer. Sometimes these gatherings went on until midnight and I almost had to expel the guests. I tried to avoid these ladies gatherings because the noise of the chatter and laughter was a bit overpowering for me. I preferred the solitude of a quiet drink elsewhere during these events.

Weekends were a nightmare and the “Blackberry” became my worst enemy. If, for example, there was any kind of issue or incident (even of the most minor nature) every man and his dog became involved. To ensure they were seen to be 24/7 employees, everyone in the company from top to bottom was “CC’d”. The outcome was the continual (and I mean continual)

“Beeping” which drove one to insanity. Most of the messages were repetitive and superfluous. It took me some time to stamp this out and introduce a “Prioritized System” of communication, where cascading was limited to those who needed to know and not “a cast of thousands”.

As a relatively recent retiree and looking back and pondering over what it used to be like, I sometimes ask myself if my analysis of the merits and faults of change I have experienced within shipping are a little too severe and jarring to the senses, but on reflection I feel they are in the main balanced and justified.

With today’s technology and transport revolution already well advanced, what of the future? Fully automated ships controlled from a desk top computer in some far distant and remote office, rather similar to piloting a drone, which will undoubtedly lead to fully autonomous ships? Will ships continue to be crewed like we know today or will there be only a Master and handful of elite technocrats? It would appear anything is possible in this computerized and robotic day and age.

It is not unrealistic to anticipate a fully autonomous ship within a few years, using highly sensitive Radar, GPS cameras, sensors and lasers to navigate around conflicting traffic, and ultimately dock and undock, since the technology already exists. This is all feasible but is it practical? Will the IMO and other International Regulators let it all happen? It remains to be seen and only time will tell. What will today’s Mariners think of it all; not if but when, it all eventuates?

Nevertheless, whenever asked if I could turn back the clock, would do it all again? My resounding answer would be **YES**.

End