

The Province

Floating Nightmares

Mon Sep 22 1997

Page: A21

Section: News

Byline: Christina Montgomery, Waterfront Reporter

Column: Ships of Shame

Source: The Province

Illustrations: Photo: Staff photo by Jon Murray / A ship of Cypriot registry lies in Vancouver's inner harbor. Last year, 1,500 freighters visited the west coast.

Marine workers call them ships of shame.

They're vessels with gross deficiencies in everything from hull structure and hatches to lifesaving and firefighting gear.

And while they don't make up the bulk of the traffic in Vancouver's port, they provide the bulk of marine workers' nightmares.

Less than two weeks ago, 600 American university students sailed out of Vancouver, headed for Japan on a four-month study tour aboard the chartered cruise ship The Universe Explorer.

In July of 1996, five crew members died in their berths aboard the same Panamanian-registered ship on an unrelated Vancouver-to-Alaska cruise. They were overcome by smoke from a fire in the nearby laundry room.

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation has yet to determine the cause of the blaze. It took three tries for the crew to pass a mandatory post-blaze fire drill. The U.S. Coast Guard, which initially ruled the ship in need of extensive upgrading, including an automatic sprinkler system, later gave the ship's owner until 2005 to install a sprinkler. Last week, James Hall, the horrified head of the United States'

National Transportation Safety Board, said the vessel should never have left port.

Why is the ship on the water?

In early August, the Greek vessel S.K. Junior sailed into Vancouver in such wretched shape that Canadian safety inspectors detained it a week for structural and lifesaving-equipment deficiencies. Conditions aboard were so bad that half the 28 crew members refused to work. Some jumped ship. Unionized longshoremen in Vancouver refused to load the ship's grain.

In a rare move, officials from Cyprus, where the ship was registered, threatened to pull its flag.

Why was that ship on the water?

It's a question being asked by a number of frontline marine workers who believe that failing to deal with substandard shipping will one day result in a local disaster.

Last year, some 1,500 foreign vessels paid at least one visit each to B.C.'s coast. Federal inspectors, obliged by international agreement to examine 25 per cent of them, inspected 381.

Deficiencies in everything from paperwork to structure were found in 237 of the

vessels. Forty-eight were detained for repairs.

Most of those detained fly flags of convenience, which means they are registered in countries that allow their owners to skirt safety and employment regulations in their own countries.

Canada is one of the world's maritime nations attempting to deal with the problem by exercising what's known as port-state control -- which allows officials in the port a vessel visits to inspect it for safety violations.

Bill Nash, who oversees inspection in B.C., says the worst of the world's ships are no longer sent to Canada "because they know we're tough and we'll inspect."

Port of Vancouver harbormaster Chris Badger agrees the scene is slowly improving.

But the picture still doesn't look good to others.

B.C.'s 110 marine pilots, who guide all foreign vessels in local waters, say they still see an appalling array of woes.

"Our first concern is the ladder we have to climb to board the ship," grins Capt. Roger Myerscough, president of the pilots' association.

The pilots, officially concerned only about the navigational systems on a vessel, can -- and do -- refuse to bring deficient ships into Canadian waters. Most also report serious non-navigational deficiencies they observe on board -- but pilots steer a fine line, balancing safety concerns with the need for rapid cargo movement critical to

their employers.

Longshoremen, thousands of whom work the Lower Mainland's waterfronts and aboard vessels while cargo is being transferred, stand constant watch for gangway, deck, hatch and moving-tackle hazards.

Al Lemonnier, chairman of the safety committee for local 500 of the longshoremen's union, admits the union has the muscle to back a worker who declines a dangerous job.

But Lemonnier says it also battles constantly over the details of on-board conditions that can leave a worker maimed or killed in the time it takes a gangway to collapse or a frayed wire to snap or bite.

The solution?

Transport Canada's Nash says port-state inspections are slowly resolving the problem, and the cost of detention, reinspection fees -- \$1,000 per visit, until deficiencies are fixed -- and the shame of appearing on its quarterly list of vessels detained, all add up to an effective deterrent.

The pilots' association has urged Ottawa to go farther and institute "severe deterrent penalties" for the ongoing "flagrant disregard for our Canadian environment and infrastructure."

The International Maritime Organization, a United Nations body, is also contemplating a push to make flag-nations more responsible for enforcing higher standards.

**BULK CARRIERS FLYING CERTAIN
FLAGS GET EYE**

The offenders:

For the most part, bulk carriers, which are the oldest and most structurally stressed vessels in the world's fleet.

In particular, those flying flags of convenience from nations such as Panama and Liberia, which sell registrations to foreigners.

The official problem:

Inspections at port in Canada take time, money and energy, which inspectors get around by carefully targeting ships

The unofficial problem:

Regulations, like bylaws, require someone to report violations. It's the Third World crew of a substandard ship who know the deficiencies best, but they're the least able to speak out, given rampant blacklisting.

The statistics:

Some 1,500 freighters visited the west coast last year. Forty-eight were detained for everything from deficient lifesaving and firefighting equipment to structural problems. In 1995, 95 ships were lost worldwide.

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