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NOT keeping the watch

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Some of the first things that mariners learn are how to keep the watch and the importance of keeping the watch. The rest of the crew trusts their lives to you keeping a proper watch, as does the ship owner and the cargo owner. Other ships in your vicinity trust that you are keeping a proper watch. Owners of the waterfront facilities that you call at or pass along the voyage trust that you are keeping a proper watch. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the public trusts that you are keeping a proper watch, because your failure to do so has the potential to harm persons, property, and the environment.

Lack of training and knowledge

There are several variations on how to keep a proper watch, but all involve training, knowledge, skill, and attention to detail. On the other hand, there are innumerable ways for not keeping the watch. On rare occasions, an individual without adequate training and knowledge comes into the position of keeping the watch. This can occur when the individual's training and experience records have been falsified or the system has just failed. Fortunately, these situations are generally (but not always) discovered quickly and the individual is removed from the position. On 23 July 2008, the towboat Mel Oliver was pushing the barge DM932 across the Mississippi River at New Orleans when it collided with the tanker Tintomara, resulting in a major oil spill. Investigation revealed that the individual at the helm of the towboat was unlicensed and unskilled. On 10 March 2016, the Department of Justice (DOJ) announced the arrest of the master of a dinner cruise vessel in Houston. The individual is accused of stealing the identity of a deceased mariner to obtain, among other things, a merchant mariner credential and a transportation worker identification credential.

Lack of skill

Sometimes, an individual without the necessary skill is assigned to keep the watch. These instances can be more difficult to detect as the individual has the necessary training and knowledge to do the job, but lacks the skill to meaningfully apply that training and knowledge to the task at hand. This can occur, for example, when a highly capable chief mate is promoted to master, but lacks the skill set to handle the new job, a situation sometimes referred to as the Peter Principle. Unfortunately, these situations, while fraught with potential misfortune for all

involved, can be difficult to detect. On 16 April 2014, the ferry Sewol sank en route from Incheon to Jeju, South Korea. Of the 476 passengers and crew on board, only 172 survived. Among the various factors leading to this tragedy, it was revealed that the master, who had the proper training and knowledge, lacked the temperament and skills to perform his duties except under the most routine circumstances.

Lack of attention to detail

The most common circumstance in which an individual fails to keep a proper watch is due to lack of attention to detail. This can occur and has occurred for many reasons and in a plethora of situations. A few examples follow.

Health

On 23 June 1995, the passenger ship Star Princess grounded on the submerged Poundstone Rock in the Lynn Canal of Alaska's Inside Passage, resulting in no injuries, but significant bottom damage. The probable cause of the casualty was the pilot's poor performance, which may have been exacerbated by chronic fatigue caused by sleep apnea.

Drug abuse (legal and illegal)

On 7 November 2007, the container ship Cosco Busan allided with the Delta Tower of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, spilling 53,500 gallons of fuel oil. The primary cause of the casualty was the failure to safely navigate the vessel in restricted visibility due to, among other things, the degraded cognitive performance of the pilot from his use of numerous impairing prescription medications.

Alcohol abuse

The general cargo ship Lysblink Seaways grounded in West Scotland on 18 February 2015. The ship grounded at full speed, suffering severe damage, and was later declared a constructive total loss. Investigation revealed that the primary cause of the grounding was that the officer of the watch and sole watchkeeper had become inattentive shortly before due to the effects of alcohol consumption.

Stress

The tug Caribbean Sea and its tow collided with an amphibious passenger vessel in the Delaware River at Philadelphia on 7 July 2010. The passenger vessel sank quickly, with a loss of two lives. The primary cause of the casualty was the stress being experienced by the mate on the tug leading to distraction as he almost continually utilized his cellular telephone and laptop computer, dealing with family matters.

Fatigue

On 23 June 1989, the tanker World Prodigy grounded on Brenton Reef in Rhode Island Sound, spilling several thousand barrels of diesel oil from its cargo tanks. The probable cause of the casualty was the impaired judgment of the master due to acute fatigue. The master had been on the bridge conning the vessel almost continuously for 33 hours.

Distraction

The cruise ship Costa Concordia grounded on charted rocks off the Italian island of Giglio on 13 January 2012. The master, who was conning the vessel, wanted to pass close to shore as a treat to passengers and a favor to a crew member. He was apparently distracted from his navigational duties by the young Moldovan dancer whom he had invited to dine with him on the bridge.

Complacency

The bulk carrier Oliva, carrying 60,000 tonnes of soya beans from Brazil to China, grounded off Nightingale Island in the Tristan da Cunha archipelago in the South Atlantic on 16 March 2011. At the time, the vessel was travelling at full sea speed (about 12 knots). Undetected poor passage planning had resulted in a course tracking right through the obscure island. At sea, the vessel was steered primarily by means of autopilot fitted with GPS input. The officer of the watch at the time of the incident saw something ahead on the radar, but thought that it was merely the return from the low-lying storm clouds that he had observed. He did not realize that the clouds were directly over and obscured the large (and hard) island. The grounding ripped open the bottom of the vessel, but the crew was able to evacuate to a passing fishing vessel. The soya beans and the 1,700 tonnes of fuel oil from the Oliva spilled into the sea.

Conclusion

While the incidents described above can be depressing for mariners to read, it must be acknowledged that the vast, vast majority of watches are kept properly. Proper watchkeeping is so common that it does not attract attention and is seldom recognized. A mariner can keep the watch properly for twenty years, yet one instance of not keeping the watch may end a career. Life at sea, as with many professions entailing great responsibility, is rewarding, but also unforgiving.