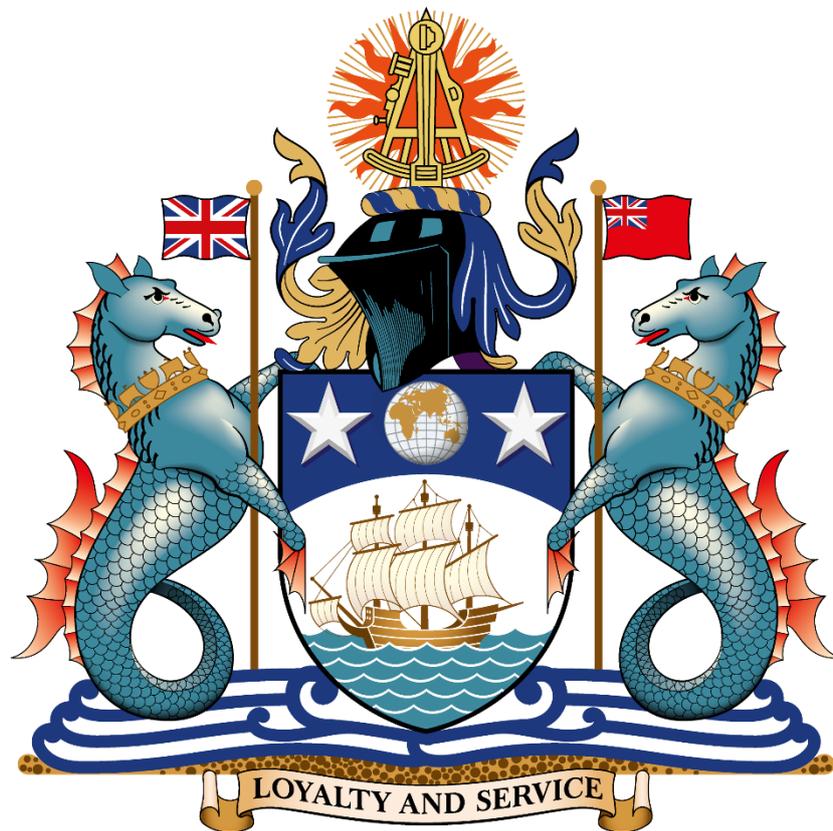


GOOD SEAMANSHIP AND NAVIGATION PRACTICE



THE HONOURABLE COMPANY OF MASTER MARINERS

*Maritime Administration
Working Group*

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The Issue

It is clear from reports of collisions at sea that basic lessons of good seamanship and navigation are neither universally being learned nor followed and that there are repeated failures in interpretation of and adherence to the International Regulations for Preventing of Collisions at Sea.

Illustration

An investigation report by the Marine Accident Investigations Branch (MAIB) serves to illustrate common problems.

In this case, a large container vessel, Ship A, was leaving a port at night via a long, narrow dredged and buoyed channel. At the same time a laden tanker, Ship B, was shaping up to enter the same port by the same buoyed channel. To seaward of the buoyed channel a tug and tow were passing along the coast.

The pilot of Ship A left the vessel before she had reached the end of the channel with the intention of proceeding to board Ship B. His departing instructions to Ship A were to maintain course to leave the channel.

Meanwhile, Ship B, which by this stage had manoeuvred to a position very close to the channel entrance and was monitoring the harbour control frequency by VHF, heard an instruction to the tug and tow to pass astern of the inbound vessel. However, that message was misinterpreted in Ship B so that the inbound master assumed it had been sent to the outbound Ship A and that the latter would pass astern of him. This was even though, under the crossing rules, Ship B was the give way vessel given that Ship A was on a steady bearing for some 20 minutes during the incident.

The bridge of Ship A was manned by the Master, the 3rd Officer and a helmsman. However, the Master ordered the 3rd officer who was the OOW, to escort the departing pilot to the pilot ladder at which point the Master became, de facto, the OOW. When the 3rd officer returned to the bridge, on instruction from the Master, he ordered speed to be increased to “full away” 80 shaft rpm. He then proceeded to collect information to complete the log. It appears that no attempt made in Ship A to compile a shipping plot of targets beyond the buoyed channel nor were visual bearings taken of vessels ahead. The Master estimated by eye that Ship B would pass 1.5 cables down his port side but did nothing to confirm the CPA.

The Master of Ship B had become aware of the risk of collision but was very close to the channel entrance and proceeding at dead slow speed awaiting the arrival of the pilot. His manoeuvring ability was therefore severely restricted, and additional time was lost when he attempted to communicate with the harbour control by VHF.

Ship A, now travelling at about 12 knots, carried on without altering course or slackening speed and struck the starboard bow of Ship B, causing extensive damage to both vessels.

The International Regulations

Although in apportioning liability there has been extensive debate about whether the crossing rules or narrow channel rules applied in this case, examination of the requirements of Rules 2, 5 and 7 in the light of what happened reveals numerous breaches that, together led to this very serious incident.

Rule 2

Responsibility

(a) Nothing in these Rules shall exonerate any vessel, or the owner, master or crew thereof, from the consequences of any neglect to comply with these Rules or of the neglect of any precaution which may be required by the ordinary practice of seamen, or by the special circumstances of the case.

(b) In construing and complying with these Rules due regard shall be had to all dangers of navigation and collision and to any special circumstances, including the limitations of the vessels involved, which may make a departure from these Rules necessary to avoid immediate danger.

Regardless of whether the crossing or narrow channel rules prevailed, neither vessel's actions were justified by any special circumstances that permitted a departure from the Rules in the situation prevailing at the time of the incident.

Rule 5

Look-out

Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper look-out by sight and hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision.

In order to comply with the requirements of both Rules 5 and 7, a ship's bridge team must be suitably manned and deployed. The duties of a helmsman should therefore not be doubled with the requirements to also maintain a good lookout.

In the case of Ship A, a proper lookout was not maintained in that no shipping plot was established by any means and, particularly when the 3rd Officer left the bridge, only the helmsman remained along with the Master who had assumed the OOW's responsibilities. Ship A's bridge team only appear to have become aware of the proximity of Ship B seconds before the impact. It is clear that "all available means" were not employed to determine risk of collision.

Rule 7

Risk of collision

(a) Every vessel shall use all available means appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions to determine if risk of collision exists. If there is any doubt such risk shall be deemed to exist.

When arriving or leaving a port, it may be common practice that the bridge complement on a standard merchant ship comprises the Master or another suitably qualified and experienced senior officer, a qualified OOW and a helmsman. However, in this case it can be argued that Ship A's bridge team was insufficient to cope with the situation at night, in confined pilotage waters and thus to comply with Rules 5 and 7, particularly when the OOW was ordered to leave the bridge for a period of several minutes.

In the absence of any other qualified officer, it is inadvisable that the Master should take the con since he then becomes singlehandedly responsible for keeping an overall lookout, for fixing and plotting the ship's position, monitoring the ship's movement, viewing the radars, compiling a shipping plot and monitoring or participating in communications internally and externally.

Under these circumstances the specific requirements of Rule 7 to use "all available means to determine if risk of collision exists" cannot be met

If, as it seems, this is what often happens when a ship is picking up or dropping off pilot, it is a cause for concern.

Conclusions

This incident, and others where that have been similar failures to comply with the International Regulations, was compounded by inadequate manning of the bridge of Ship A given the particular circumstances of that departure from that port at night.

As pointed out in the MAIB report, the actions of both masters were based on assumptions unsupported by sound, seamanlike precautions using all available means to determine if risk of collision existed and what timely action was necessary to avoid it.

Most worrying of all is anecdotal evidence that dangerous bridge manning practices of this sort are not uncommon.

As a body of professionals, the Honourable Company of Master Mariners is concerned that, as with other consequences of minimum manning practices, risks continue to exist of further incidents of this sort.

HCMM Actions

Wherever possible, the HCMM will encourage, those responsible for officer training and mentoring as well as sea-going Masters to reinforce the need for strict adherence to the Regulations which are there to prevent incidents such as illustrated here.

More generally, the HCMM encourages all professional mariners involved in debate about manning levels and practices to continue to drive home the point that financially driven reductions in crew numbers are no excuse for disregarding the legal requirements of the International Regulations and the requirements of basic seamanship.

The HCMM would also encourage all professional mariners, senior and junior, to read the summary of the long running legal dispute over liability in such a situation and that it is also posted on the HCMM website. The significance of the UK Supreme Court ruling has considerable significance for masters and bridge watchkeepers when navigating in complex situations where there may be uncertainty about the precise application of the crossing and narrow channel rules.