

An everyday story of seafaring life.

When Miss Bigg arrived at the office she immediately noticed that, overnight, the fax machine had been hard at work. She hung up her coat, turned on the electric kettle and turned to the machine.

When Mr Small (Chief Executive of Carefree Carriers) arrived Miss Bigg was already reading the first of the messages. It was from Captain Little, Master of the bulk carrier “Carefree Coast” and read:

“ Weather conditions deteriorating steadily and wind now SSE Force 10, vessel pitching steeply, pounding and shipping water overall. Revolutions reduced to minimum consistent with maintaining steerage way but little improvement noted. Accordingly, at 1710 turned to run before the sea and vessel now proceeding without violent movement.

Charterers informed that ETA now uncertain and will update this when conditions improve and course resumed . Regards Little”



The second message was from the charterers of “Carefree Coast” – Agostine Brothers, and read:

“Profoundly disturbed to learn that “Carefree Coast” has reversed course and must advise that as from 1710 local time vessel is “off hire” and will remain so until she regains the position where she turned around. You will recall earlier difficulties with this Master when he refused to co-operate with stevedores at Port Yokomo and declined to accept block loading and insisted on a reduced load rate in alternate hatches in accordance with his calculations of sheer forces/bending moments. This delayed the vessel by some 14 hours and again incurred you an “off hire” penalty.

Suggest you instruct Master to resume course without delay and endeavour maintain his original ETA.

Regards Luis.”

When Miss Bigg took Mr Small his coffee he put down the newspaper and asked “ Anything of interest in those messages you were reading?” Miss Bigg thought for a moment and said “ Well, yesLuis. Agostine is not very happy about something to do with the “Carefree Coast” – I think Captain Little has turned the boat around, or something, because of the wind and he is going to be late ... just a moment, I’ll go and get them”.

Oh God, thought Small, he’s at it again –when will these people realise that the charterers will not be messed about like this. He lifted his phone and said, “Bob, come round”.

Bob Tiny (or Captain Tiny, as he was often called at business meetings) put down his paper and walked the short distance to Small’s office : He knocked, paused briefly, entered and sat down.

Miss Bigg appeared and put a long roll of fax paper on Small’s desk but, without looking at it Small said “ Bloody Little is at it again – it seems that he has stopped, or turned or something, and his ETA is all to Hell – here, read it” Tiny took that proffered roll of paper and started to read.

“That bloke really IS the limit” said Tiny “ Surely he knows how he upset them in Yokomo – what do you want me to do? ”

Tiny had served at sea with Carefree Carriers (when they were “direct” employers) and attained the rank of Second Officer before coming ashore when his wife developed an illness. The shore posting – as an assistant to the Marine Superintendent, Captain Minim – was meant to be a temporary one but when Minim was given “early retirement” Tiny was given the title of “Operations Manager”. Much as he had enjoyed working with Minim he had never understood Minim’s inability to see the economic sense of Small’s arguments when some of the Masters took decisions that upset the charterers.

Small thought for a moment and then said “ Send him a message stressing the importance of maintaining his ETA and stressing how he has upset Agostine – remind him of that nonsense at Yokomo” Tiny looked worried; he had sailed with Little as Third Officer and knew him to be a good Shipmaster.

“I will put your signature to it Sir, it will make more of an impact” said Tiny .

On board “Carefree Coast” a weary Captain Little was trying to snatch a few minutes rest on the chartroom settee and keep an eye on his Third Officer. Rodriguez was a good Officer but like so many of his associates he was reluctant to keep the Master informed of developing situations of possible danger until the “11th hour”. The ship was riding comparatively easily, although the wind and sea had not eased, and the worrying pounding had stopped.

“Messages, Captain”. Rodriguez handed Little a sheaf of papers and returned to the radar.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Little read:

“Charterers are extremely angry about your decision to alter course and insist that you must maintain your ETA as advised previously. They were upset by your actions in Yokomo and the “off hire” incurred by that and your present actions will be detrimental to our trading position and reputation. Please reconsider and advise us and charterers as soon as you have resumed course to discharge port. Acknowledge. Small”

The second message, from Agostine was much shorter and read:

“ You are currently “Off Hire”. Advise position where you reversed course. Am in discussions with your owners. Agostine”

Dusk was falling as Little walked to the Bridge wing. The ship was rolling and pitching but that worrying pounding and slamming had gone. Astern, huge seas rolled towards the ship, lifted her effortlessly and pushed her along before hissing past – to be followed almost immediately by another one.

Little knew that his stance at the loading port had been a correct one and despite the stevedore’s threats to “ throw you off the berth” he had stuck to his guns and insisted on loading in accordance with his plan. Granted, he HAD reached a bit of a compromise with them by allowing them to load faster than he had said but it had probably been OK. The Chief Officer had not really understood the workings of the “ Loadmaster” but he knew that the Captain was an experienced Bulk carrier Master and he accepted his workings. The “Off Hire” business HAD worried him and he knew that there would be trouble.

As darkness fell Little pondered on the situation. Maybe, just maybe, it HAD moderated a bit and perhaps it would be worth turning her around and having a look. After all, if it was still bad he could always turn again. Sending the Third Officer down to tell those below that “she is going to roll her guts out” Little walked to the autohelm and gave her starboard helm.

In London, Small was making his third phone call to the Charterers assuring them, that if Little did not reply shortly then he would give him a precise instruction to resume his course and speed.

Tiny was sitting in his office reading about the ISM Code and wondering how he was going to cope with the the paperwork.

Tiny’s phone rang and a moment later he was sitting in Small’s office. “Listen,Bob” said Small “ I’m not a bloody sailor but as an accountant I can well see the dangers of this situation. We had enough trouble fixing that ship at a lousy rate and any more “off hire” will kill us. How old is Little ?” Tiny thought for a moment and remembered celebrating the Captains 52nd birthday in Lower Buchanan when Third Officer of the “ Lake”.

“About 58” he said.

“Thought so” said Small “and that’s getting on a bit for a bulker Master. He’s a good enough bloke but he has trouble accepting today’s trading realities. That business in Yokomo really was over the top and now this rubbish. Surely he must know that these ships are built strongly to withstand this sort of weather and that we simply cannot allow him to do as he pleases every time the going gets unpleasant and the job becomes uncomfortable”.

“I think he has changed a lot since I sailed with him” said Tiny “ He was really good then but I agree with you that maybe he is getting a bit past it – what do you want me to do? ”

“Have a word with Lillian and see if we can rid of Little. Ask her to speak with the Manning Agency and see if they have a Master available – one of theirs will do, and we can do the change at the discharge port. We’ll tell him that the charterers have lost confidence in him and that as the three ships are chartered to them we cannot see any way to employ him. We’ll sort out the details later but it will not cost a lot ”.

On the bridge wing of “Carefree Coast” Captain Little gripped the dodger top and peered into the darkness. It was cold , he was very tired and he was already regretting his decision to turn. The weather seemed to have got worse and the ship was pounding heavily on almost every occasion she pitched. The Chief Officer steadied himself between the radar and the ARPA and waited for the next gigantic crash followed by the shuddering that ran throughout the entire hull." Maybe, if I put the revs up a touch she will take it better" said Little to anyone who was listening. “Hell’s Bells”, he thought “I suppose I’d better tell them what I’m doing” and ten minutes later Small smiled with satisfaction when he read:

“ Resumed course towards discharge port and increasing speed to safe maximum. ETA and details of diversion to follow. Advise charterers. Regards. Little”

In London the rain started as Tiny and Small left the office and made their way towards “The Underwriter”. In the South Pacific a solitary EPIRB endeavoured to alert the World to the loss of yet another bulk carrier in unexplained circumstances.