

Another Iceberg - more Innocent Victims

Since the advent of 2012 many people in the western world have been obsessed - very understandably - with an iceberg and the loss of the White Star liner "Titanic" a century ago on April 15th. 1912. The story is legendary - a huge liner on her maiden voyage steaming too fast through a dark ocean where icebergs had been reported, the inevitable collision and the huge loss of life due to the lack of lifeboats. In many cities throughout the United Kingdom people lost loved ones and none more than the port city of Southampton where the casualty list of crew members was in excess of 500. The centenary of her loss was honoured throughout the country and many acts of bravery and sacrifice were recounted with pride and sorrow by the relatives of those who perished.

Undoubtedly, the ship will never be forgotten and the numerous plaques and memorials detailing the names of many of the crew members will be visited on the anniversary of her loss - and people will remember with pride the part played by loved ones so many years ago.

Today, as the recent memories of that huge ship start to fade perhaps we should give thought to another much-smaller ship - a relatively tiny roll on-roll off cargo vessel called "ICEBERG 1" launched more than 35 years ago and owned by a small company in Dubai. On March 29th. 2010 the ship was on passage to the port of Jebel Ali with a cargo of cement, building materials and equipment. She had a multi-national crew of 24 comprising 8 Yemenis, 7 Indians, 4 Ghanaians, 2 Pakistanis, 2 Sudanese and a Filipino and although she was steaming in waters known to be frequented by pirates she was not in the recommended Transit Corridor where she might have enjoyed some form of protection.

Again, the inevitable happened and when she was approaching the port of Aden, in darkness, the pirates attacked and the ship was taken.

Under extreme duress the Captain was instructed to proceed to an anchorage off the Somali port of Hobyo and, once there, the pirates sent their ransom demand to the owners in Dubai.



The entire crew of 24 was then incarcerated in a forward cargo compartment less than 5 square metres in floor area and in December 2011 - some 21 months since the ship was captured - the Master, Captain Ali Saleh smuggled a message to a French news-agency saying that they were existing on one meal of boiled rice daily and drinking unclean water. All of them are suffering physically and mentally. Unconfirmed reports say that six Indian crew members were released when their relatives in India managed to raise an adequate ransom payment but the owners of "ICEBERG 1" in Dubai have gone into liquidation and there is no money available to meet the ransom demand. Recently, one man managed to escape from his tiny prison and committed suicide by jumping into the water.

Those of us who have plyed the trade routes of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean find it almost unbelievable that, in 2010, a small cargo vessel en route some ten miles off the busy port of Aden could be boarded and captured by a gang of ransom-seeking desperadoes but, unfortunately, it has happened several times since then. Another ship, the "ASPHALT VENTURE" was captured in a similar manner and, although her owners paid the ransom demand and the vessel was released, her captors retained about 15 of her crew - and demanded a further ransom.

Today, insofar as is unknown, some 9 ships and more than 236 merchant seamen are being held captive. Many of the seamen have been brutalised and others have been murdered. Reports from their homelands suggest that when those held captive ARE released and repatriated they have been so damaged mentally and physically that many will never work again and little, if any, support is forthcoming from their erstwhile employers.

It would be untrue to say that, today, nothing is being done to ensure the safety of vessels transiting the vast area of ocean threatened by these criminal activities but it would not be untrue to suggest that it is a case of "Too Little - Too Late" and procrastination at all levels has allowed the malefactors far too much operational freedom - and little fear of the consequences in the unlikely event of their being apprehended.

Most worrying is the plight of the hostages - more than 236 innocent merchant seafarers endeavouring to enjoy their right of innocent passage on the trade routes of the World. It is now more than two long years since "ICEBERG 1" and her multinational crew fell into the hands of the Somali gangsters but their plight - and that of their fellow captives - goes unrecognised by the vast majority of people, many of whom recently sat with bowed heads and sombre thoughts as we relived the horrors of "Titanic"and that, earlier, ICEBERG.

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