

The Ultimate Nightmare

By Cachalot Michael Grey MBE.

For years after I came ashore, I used to have recurring nightmares about running a ship ashore. No sandy beach – huge razor-sharp rocks sticking out of the sea to port and starboard and worst of all, dead ahead. It never worried me unduly while I was at sea, but maybe, buried in my sub-conscious, it was the worst thing I could ever have imagined.

None of us can possibly imagine, unless we had been standing in his shoes, what must have gone through the mind of Captain Schettino, as the alarms and damage reports came flooding in to the bridge of his mortally wounded *Costa Concordia*. Would anyone be capable of rational thought as the lights and power died, the list increased and the full import of what those thousands of souls aboard were facing, registered in his mind? It was, without a doubt, the worst thing that he could have possibly imagined in his dreams, but in terrifying reality.

Would any training, during his career from cadet to cruise ship captain, have prepared him for this frightful moment? He would have had sessions on simulators, where sadistic instructors pile the pressure on, producing one navigational or technical crisis after another for the pressurised bridge team to solve. There would have been damage control exercises, with the ship's teams reacting to a range of "paper" emergencies. But these were exercises and it is doubtful that anyone would have fallen apart as a result of such evolutions. And it is one thing to make errors in an exercise- the magnitude is multiplied unimaginably, if the emergency is real, desperately serious and it is -arguably- all your fault.

The armed forces, perhaps, are the only organisations which train their personnel to cope with the worst things human beings can possibly comprehend. They employ the very best technology, realism to the extent of mortal risks, but also draw heavily on their traditions, their history and the culture that makes the laying down of one's life just part of the price that may have to be paid as the cost of victory. The training of character, the evaluation of courage, in addition to judgement, all feature in the preparation for leadership in armed forces and the selection of those potential leaders who might be faced with those frightening decisions.

Life is expected to be rather less dramatic aboard merchant ships, although tradition has it that the master does not easily give up his ship and is expected to be the last to leave her, if the battle to save her has been lost. Curiously this is recognised officially in the Italian Navigational Code, which was used to convict the *Concordia's* late master, in addition to the manslaughter charges he faced for the 32 people who lost their lives in the tragedy off the island of Giglio.

Criminal charges were once very rare in maritime accidents, but have in recent years become quite routine after serious incidents. Marine professionals, naturally enough, worry about this trend, although it is reflected in society at large, where the definition of an "accident" is far more widely drawn and has become something that should not be tolerated, in the public's expectation of "perfect" safety. A fatal road accident, a disastrous mistake by a gas fitter resulting in an explosion, or even an error in a medical diagnosis or surgical procedure, can now lead to criminal charges and custodial sentences. It might be considered part of our changing social mores, in an intolerant age with a delight in litigation, and the merchant marine is on the receiving end, but no more than any other job or profession which might be considered vulnerable, by its very nature, to make fatal mistakes.

It could be argued, quite reasonably, that a long custodial sentence is an inappropriate reaction to anyone who has made an "honest error", even when the consequences have been so horrendous. Admiral Byng, who failed to accomplish a military task, was shot by firing squad, according to Voltaire, "to encourage the others", but it is doubtful that fear of execution has ever been part of the subsequent decision-making process in the ordinary conduct of a ship of war.

Will a cruise ship master, who is required, by nature of his role, to take greater risks with his ship than the master of a vessel which can routinely stay well clear of the land, bear in mind the fate of Captain Schettino, as he and his navigator program their computers for the upcoming voyage? Does a long gaol sentence – to further punish a man who has the deaths of 32 people on his conscience, the loss of his job and a lifetime of professional disgrace to be faced, fulfil any purpose whatsoever? It is very difficult to answer such questions without stoking up the fires of controversy.

Perhaps the relatives of those who died and were seriously traumatised by the events of that evening expect nothing other than a lengthy custodial sentence for the author of their misfortunes. That, perhaps, is the real reason for the criminalisation of accidents in this era, not so much "revenge", as society's proper recognition of their loss and their role as victims. It is the way of the world in the 21st century and it is unlikely to be changed, even if it should be.

With permission of 'Ship Management International', where it appeared in Michael's column, Alternative Viewpoint.