

# FIGHTING FATIGUE



Viewpoint

Michael Grey

**T**HERE is such a thing as the last straw, the final occurrence which, while of itself is not that significant, nevertheless promotes a major policy change. In the case of the UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch, the grounding on a gently shelving beach of the 3,696 dwt general cargo vessel *Antari* may not appear to have been a "significant" casualty. There was no great spread of oil to lay waste to sea life, or broken bodies lying in the surf.

It was an alarming experience for a North Ireland motorist who was driving along the coast road and saw the shape of a large ship parked on the beach by dawn's early light and raised the first alarm.

The damage was not that desperate — a small hole in a ballast tank and the requirement for some 25 tonnes of new steel to the bottom — and the ship was able to make it under its own steam to the next port of call and subsequently to the repair yard in Poland.

The grounding of the Antigua and Barbuda flag *Antari*, while not qualifying for anything other than a footnote in the great catalogue of marine disaster, might nevertheless mark a major change in the way we regard watchkeeping responsibilities, adequate crewing and what we really mean by an "adequate" lookout.

Because the *Antari* was the latest in a long line of casualties, which have been caused by the officer of the watch falling fast asleep in the comfortable chair thoughtfully provided for him by the owners, with no separate lookout posted, the watch alarm turned off, and all the evident symptoms of fatigue that are almost endemic in a small ship with the master and mate working watch and watch.

This, you might think, makes the accident all the more unremarkable, albeit that the case was a particularly bad one, the evidence pointing to the fact that the officer of the watch fell asleep shortly after taking over from the master off the Scottish coast at midnight and did not wake until the ship came to a grinding halt on the Irish side of the North Channel more than three hours later.

But just as the slumbers of the Russian mate were caused by the accumulation of insufficient rest over a long period throughout the intensive patterns of the small ship's trading, it is the cumulation of similar accidents which has persuaded the MAIB to recommend that the UK authorities take what we might consider the nuclear option and unilaterally clamp down on the scandal of these hard worked, undermanned ships which represent such a menace to themselves and to other users of the sea.

It's not even remotely hard, if you have ever kept night watches at sea, to put yourself in the place of the exhausted officer of the watch. It was a calm summer night, with the ship rolling gently in the westerly swell as it ran south down the western shore of the Mull of Kintyre, with its full load of scrap from the Highland port of Corpach, bound for Ghent.

The two wheelhouse doors were shut despite the warm summer night, there was the comforting burble of the exhaust and the hum of the electronics, the hypnotic rotation of the radar scan on the screen in front of the OOW's chair.

Why would he not fall asleep in such circumstances, and sleep soundly too, after months of a disturbed sleep pattern that had even seen him spending two hours engaged in chart corrections, with the ship alongside when he might have been getting a full night's sleep?

I often think that the chances of meeting such a ship with anyone awake in it during the midnight to six watch would be fairly slim these days.

This ship was operated by Briese, one of the biggest shortsea owners in Germany, and very efficient it is too, although its efficiency seemingly did not extend to discovering that all the hours of rest/work sheets had been completed in advance of the event, and that lookouts were not being posted at night, despite their written instructions.

The sailors and the cadet who was carried as an 'extra' on the minimum crewing scale had plenty to do in keeping the ship smart and all the other duties in connection with the cargo and hold cleanliness, without the bother of keeping a night lookout. As for the watch alarm, they liked to have it off, because it otherwise would disturb the watch below. This seems to suggest that it tended to be activated rather a lot, but maybe I am reading something I shouldn't into the MAIB report.

To a certain extent, they were very lucky, as it could have been a whole lot worse, with the mate fast asleep and missing the alter course position at the southern



From the top: the *Antari*; the vessel's bridge, showing the position at which the officer of the watch fell asleep in a chair; and the ship grounded, at night, on the Antrim coast. MAIB

end of the Mull of Kintyre, just 11 miles into his watch. The ship picked a gently shelving beach upon which to ground itself, when it could have dashed itself to pieces on all sorts of razor sharp rocks on the Antrim coast.

But there is a whole series of awful scenarios which

the smiling face of Lady Luck helped *Antari* avoid. It could have run down some yacht in the middle of sailing season, or a fishing craft with a crew preoccupied (as they are) in hauling nets in the middle of the North Channel.

Plunging south, it could have met another short sea

ship, its OOW in exactly the same situation, in a fairly busy stretch of waterway.

It doesn't require too much of a stretch of imagination to visualise this little ship, motoring along like a unguided missile, albeit with a precise autopilot keeping it on the straight and narrow, triggering a really frightful maritime disaster.

Conceive, if you will, a fully laden very large crude carrier, anchored for a couple of days for orders, while the cargo owners mull over the price of crude. This ship, just like another which has been in our minds lately, was anchored safely, with an alert anchor watch, in a legitimate and safe anchorage and the approval of the coastguard.

But then, despite urgent messages from the coastguard, and the OOW of the tanker over the VHF, the 10 knot missile, like a slower version of the suicide boat that blew open the *Limburg* off the Yemeni coast, ploughs into the side of the tanker.

The tanker is double hulled, but that is no great help as some 4,000 tonnes of steel crunches through the plates into the great cargo tanks, hitting the tanker on a bulkhead so that two whole wing tanks can void themselves into the sea.

There is a roaring, incandescent fire of enormous heat, which incinerates half the crew of the big ship as they struggle to escape, along with the crew of the coaster.

This, in fact is the accident which the authorities have been dreading for years. It is also the scenario to which the shipping industry has been resolutely shutting its mind, despite the warnings about fatigue, and about crewing practices in an age of high operational intensity.

As the tanker blazes, and 100,000 tonnes of oil surges up and down the tidal streams of the Irish Sea and its beautiful coasts, the shipping industries, and governments, and maritime authorities, and lawyers, will experience a wave of rage and revulsion that will set back the industry and its image for a generation.

This was not some extraordinary unforeseen circumstance coming out of the blue to provide something that needed to be learned. It was an accident which responsible and experienced professionals had been warning about for years and years and years. In not doing anything about these warnings, collectively setting its mind against the possibility of such consequences, and ignoring the reality of inadequately crewed small ships operating in a such a manner (which everyone in the business knew was the case), is not the industry condemning itself?

Not just the industry. Think of the determined efforts by Germany, the Netherlands and others to prevent the matter being properly taken up at the International Maritime Organization. Consider the role of the European Commission, and its power-seeking officials, forcing the UK and Denmark to withdraw important papers on crewing from the IMO, because it is something it jealously guards as its competence.

The guilt from this oily and fatal casualty will sweep over a very large number of important people, in both the industry and its regulators.

**Y**ou might say, stop this at once. The casualty you extrapolate into a catastrophe was but another shortsea grounding. Why make it out to be more significant than it was? Well, the alarming frequency of these fatigue-related casualties has persuaded the MAIB to request the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to "press for an urgent review of the process and principles of safe manning at the IMO to reflect the critical safety issues of fatigue and the use of dedicated lookouts".

Well you might say, that's fine, but we have been here before and not a lot has happened.

Which is why there is an important interim recommendation — "to instigate robust, unilateral measures to address the fatigue of bridge watchkeeping officers on vessels in UK waters and to ensure that a dedicated lookout is always posted at night, during restricted visibility and as otherwise required in hazardous navigational situations".

Note that word "unilateral", because the UK doesn't do unilateral. But also foresee a huge targeted clamp-down on shortsea or intensively operated ships with port state inspectors poring over logbooks, work-sheets, overtime accounts, standing orders and the like, interviewing seafarers, and (most importantly) detaining ships where there is a problem until the vessel is adequately crewed.

That is why we ought to remember the case of the *Antari*, and the sleeping watchkeeper; not because of the accident itself, but because of what it might have prevented. Ship's officers everywhere, and the professionals of the Nautical Institute who have been promulgating its Two Too Few campaign, will be cheering their assent, if the MCA takes this important recommendation aboard.

If you forget all these tedious arguments about competition, and manpower shortages, the industry ought to be grateful too, if by properly tackling fatigued people, we avoid the horror of a major fatigue-induced calamity.

**I** LEARNED my Collision Regs, like a parrot, being called to recite them like party pieces every Sunday afternoon in front of the master, which modern educationalists would probably think terribly passé. There were a few reasonable books of advice, with little black and white pictures which showed you what to look for when you couldn't quite make up your mind about which ship should give way.

Last week, there being nothing on TV, I spent an hour watching a really excellent film produced by Steamship Mutual, which clearly has become

## Safety aid with vision

extremely exercised about the wads of money being spent on settling collision claims.

It is narrated with enormous conviction by the broadcaster Edward Stourton, and really, if the Steamship had dressed him up in a master's uniform, everyone would have been fooled.

The film, which shows some graphic after-

maths of collisions, to give the viewer a certain frisson of anticipation, focuses on four key provisions of the rules. It looks at the importance of lookout, the often neglected issue of a safe speed, the ascertainment of collision risk and action to avoid collision.

I have to say that if I had enjoyed such a visual

aid when I was learning my lines, my performances before the master on Sundays would have been that much more convincing. It is sensible, practical, interpretative and in some respects, really quite scary, with some worrying reconstructed case studies, which leave the viewer just asking himself what he would have done in the circumstances.

I suppose this is exactly what the producers of this fine film, which is issued to the Steamship's members free of charge, are trying to achieve. [rjmgrey@dircon.co.uk](mailto:rjmgrey@dircon.co.uk)