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West's seafarers on the challenges and rewards of a career at sea

Any seafarer will tell you that it's an incredibly demanding job at the best of times. The isolation of long periods at sea or at distant ports with little infrastructure hits home hard on #DayOfTheSeafarer. On this day in particular it is especially important that we show our appreciation for the women and men who have taken up this vocation.

There are lots of ex-seafarers working at West. To celebrate Day of the Seafarer those in West's Loss Prevention department shared their experiences of life at sea.

Crossing The Seas



Amongst our seafarers, one particularly stressful aspect is navigation in coastal waters and high-density traffic areas. One of the areas of highest density marine traffic in the world is the South China Sea, with a high number of fishing vessels. Local traditions in South East Asia have added to the complexity and stress for mariners, as Dean Crossley, a Senior Loss Prevention Officer who worked on general cargo, bulk carriers, containers as well as ro-ros during his career at sea, explained:

“There’s a superstition in parts of South East Asia amongst fishing communities which brings about a phenomena where a fishing vessel will steam towards another and try to cross as close to the bow as they can to cut off their bad luck. You can imagine the sense of panic when you have 20 fishing boats all gunning for you.”

Further Education

Training can also be a challenge, especially when changing vessel or sector, and key systems of work are different between vessels.

Emma Forbes-Gearey, Loss Prevention Officer, who began her seafaring career on bulk carriers and dual cargo vessels before moving into cruise, explained that learning these new systems on the bridge quickly enough to efficiently hand over can be difficult. In her case, the difference between passenger and cargo operations was initially challenging to learn.

The same is true on the engineering front; as Dmitry Kisil, Senior Loss Prevention Officer, who was at sea for 15 years on general cargo ships, container liners, and ferries, said “ The engine room of a vessel is quite a complex beast. Unfortunately, by the time you’re more or less comfortable that you know that what to do if something goes wrong, many operators then want you on another vessel.”

See The World

Alongside these challenges come unique experiences. Travel is an obvious benefit, one that Paul Andrew, Senior Loss Prevention Officer, who served in the merchant navy after qualifying as an engineer and worked largely on LNG vessels, stresses led to his lifelong love of Japan.

Seafaring also allowed our former seafarers to experience breath-taking feats of nature. Dean says that watching a pod of humpback whales breaching off the coast of Madagascar made him realise "...just how amazing this world is, and how precious it is." Dmitry witnessed an astonishing black and white rainbow at sea, and Paul said that a highlight of his career was when the underside of the hull of his ship was completely underlit by dinoflagellates. He described it as looking like "two massive Katherine Wheels of light."



Seafarers and the West

This experience is invaluable to the level of service that West can provide to its members. Because all insurance partly depends at least in part on the proper evaluation of risks, having a team who are able to understand what processes look like on the ground and what operational issues may occur is vital. As Dean Crossley said, "We've been there and got the t-shirts, so we intimately understand the often overlooked human and mechanical elements that can create an inefficiency or contribute to a failure."

The Day of the Seafarer is about celebrating those people across the world who do this vital job today. This year's theme, 'Seafarers Are Key Workers,' is an especially timely reminder of the additional issues that seafarers are facing today as well as the support needed from governments to allow vital shore leave and repatriations in these extraordinary times.