

Tight scheduling puts pressure on Masters



SA Helderberg in Cape Town.

Sad internet images showed the damaged containership **SA Helderberg** after a collision with a tanker in the approaches to Singapore last week. She will discharge her cargo prior to drydocking for surveyors to ascertain the full extent of the damage.

Having sailed from Dunkirk on her maiden voyage in December 1977 as Safmarine's first large containership on the South Africa-Europe container trade, she has enjoyed nearly 30 years' trouble-free service. The advent of bigger, faster ships on the run allowed Safmarine to switch their famous Big White quartet to the Far East trade in 2005.

Whether **SA Helderberg** will continue operating is debatable as she and her three sisterships - now owned by the Danaos Group of Greece and on bareboat charter to Safmarine - may be withdrawn prior to their 30-year surveys.

The facts behind this incident - and those behind several other recent containership accidents - have yet to reach the public domain, and observers will have to wait to have their curiosity assuaged.

The competitive nature of containership operation pressurises masters to ensure that their ships maintain tight schedules. Pragmatic owners, where management understands the stresses of those in command, decree a safety-first operation. However, arriving after the high tide or the scheduled time at the pilot station at certain ports can translate into delays that less prudent owners or charterers will not countenance.

Thus, in their efforts to have their vessels arrive on time, some masters may push their ships a bit too hard in heavy weather, or through congested waters, or during times of restricted visibility. A certain Captain Smith was urged to keep the engineroom telegraph at full ahead - against his better judgment - so that his brand new passenger liner could break the record for a trans-Atlantic voyage. His command now lies in the depths of the North Atlantic.

Container shipping differs greatly from ship operations of a previous era, emphasises a former Blue Star Line master who switched from leisurely conventional freighters to the helter-skelter of a containership that would be alongside for a few hours in Fremantle, two days in Melbourne and Sydney, whereas the old Blue Star reeferships would have been in each port for much longer.

A reader, John Edwards, sent me fascinating insights of his 14-year career with British India Line, whose ships linked Britain and India from 1874, as well as trading to the Far East, Australia and East Africa. Durban ship-spotters regularly saw the beautiful BI liners **Kenya** and **Uganda**, and the sisterships **Kampala** and **Karanja**.

"*My next trip,*" ran Edwards's email, referring to his second voyage as a cadet on **Woodarra**, built with extensive bale space for the Australian wool trade, "*was to Australia where I transferred to the Eastern Service...and spent the next year [aboard the 9200-deadweight Chakdina] running between Australia, India, Persian Gulf, Singapore, Malaya and Burma...*"

Another of his ships was the 1945-vintage steamer **Pentakota** that managed 7 knots on her 50-day voyages from the Bengali coast to London, a 13-day trip on a modern containership that, in the process, would handle about five times the volume of cargo carried by the old **Pentakota**.

"*A marvelous run!*" was Edwards's enthusiastic description of his time aboard **Santhia**, BI's handsome passenger ship with accommodation for over 1000. During the two-month round trip from India to Japan, she called at eight ports on both the outward and return voyages, and at each, cargowork took days to complete, giving crewmembers time for a reasonable run ashore.

At least one similarity exists between a BI innovation in 1961 and one relating to today's container expresses. The company introduced the rank of security officer aboard their ships on the Persian Gulf trade, following the sinking off Dubai of their passengership **Dara** after a huge explosion that caused the loss of over 200 lives - thought to be the work of anti-British terrorists, although little forensic evidence supported that theory.

With no training in this field, John Edwards became the security officer aboard **Sirdhana**, sistership to **Santhia**, and engaged on the exacting trade from India to Iraq via nine ports outward and eight on the return trip. When **Sirdhana** was in the Gulf, the overnight voyage between ports gave little respite after a hectic port stay - amid blistering heat - to work hundreds of tons of cargo using primitive methods, and with some 1400 passengers aboard, including 333 "*bunked*" in dormitories, and 987 crammed on deck.

Diverted to the Cape route during the Suez closure, the BI cadetship **Chantala** was steaming from Britain to East Africa when the vessel's Chinese carpenter developed a gut ache, diagnosed by the ship's ageing doctor as appendicitis. Complications set in when the appendix burst. Long retired, the doctor was aboard to fulfill the legal requirement for a "*surgeon*" as the ship carried over 50 cadets, 12 passengers, as well as about 30 officers and ratings.

Unwilling to operate, he recruited Edwards, the ship's training officer, to do the job - with the old medic peering over his shoulder. Miraculously, the carpenter left the ship in Mombasa (**Chantala**'s next port) under his own steam, but with an 18-centimetre abdominal scar from the apprentice surgeon!

A containership master once confided that he envied Commodore Robin Thomson who had commanded cargoships, mailships - including **SA Vaal** on her last voyage - and **SA Helderberg** on her maiden voyage.

Perhaps his envy was rooted in Commodore Thomson retiring before the advent of the endless paperchase, the increasing congestion of the shipping lanes, and the pressurised existence that are the lot of a latter-day containership master.

Some would long for that 50-day 7-knot voyage aboard **Pentakota**.