

## CONTAINERS FROM MSC NAPOLI IN CAPE TOWN but Container Trade still presents Problems



St Helena working cargo at Walvis Bay where on some voyages, she calls en route to or from the Islands. Much of the cargo she carries between Cape Town and Walvis Bay is feeder cargo for vessels on deepsea trades.

Inward from the British port of Portland via the Atlantic islands, the Royal Mail Ship **St Helena** berthed in Cape Town on last week and sailed three days later for the islands via Walvis Bay.

It was house-full from E Berth to G Berth when she arrived. The small Antiguan-flagged freighter **Topaz** was loading containers and construction materials at E Berth, **African Cobra** was loading steel, and further along at G Berth, port's floating crane was discharging earthmoving equipment from the Gulf Africa Line vessel **Columbiand** that had arrived from Jacksonville, Florida, laden with trucks and other cargo.

Thus **St Helena** was dispatched to H Berth to disembark her passengers and shifted to E Berth once **Topaz** had crossed the Duncan Dock to the Eastern Mole.

Why E Berth had not been cleared prior to the passengership's arrival is anyone's guess, particularly when her arrival time had been fixed days before. Equally frustrating was the fact that, with no bunker barge in the port and obsolete bunker pipes at E Berth, she had to shift to Eastern Mole once cargowork had been completed to bunker. Overall she was delayed by about 15 hours. (Has no one found a bunker barge to tide the port over until the arrival of new barges early next year?)

Well-known for her 132 berths for passengers taking the leisurely voyage to St Helena Island, the mailship also has capacity for 92 twenty-foot containers (TEUs), and 1500 tons of general cargo, much of which is bound for the handful of shops on the island.

On number two hatch is space for several forty-foot containers, although discharging these larger boxes over the side into lighters at St Helena and Ascension Islands and handling them ashore can present difficulties.

Twenty-one electrical plug points power refrigerated containers that carry the island's ice cream, dairy and frozen chickens.

Watching her crane loading roofing for an island house, drums of paint and pallets of potato pockets a day ago, I recalled an incident that underlined the importance of this ship to the everyday life of the islanders. I was hiking from Rupert's Bay to Jamestown, St Helena's capital, along the path via Munden's Point where the cliffs descend to the Atlantic.

Trudging her way from Jamestown was a woman wearing a bright red dress. She was weary - the walk is strenuous - but she was very happy as she walked. When we offered to help her carry her load, a pocket of potatoes, she refused politely. "*Now that the RMS has brought these,*" she said, pointing to the potatoes, "*we can eat a good meal again.*" And off she went to Rupert's Bay.

Among the container cargo on the mailship's southbound voyage were two containers of mailbags that had begun their delivery to South Africa aboard **MSC Napoli**, the containership that was beached near Sidmouth, England in January after sustaining serious hull damage during heavy weather in the English Channel.

One of the containers removed from the stricken vessel and landed in Portland by the Dutch salvage contractors Smit was a forty-footer filled with the mailbags, and despite its being submerged, the contents were dry.

A visit by the mailship's master, Captain Martin Smith, to the Smit office in Portland led to the mail being restowed into two twenty-footers that were put aboard **St Helena** for Cape Town.

**MSC Napoli's** unscheduled sojourn on the Devonshire sandbank has raised several issues relating to container shipping. Since this is the first time that a British-registered containership has come to grief in home waters, authorities have had an opportunity to open each salvaged container to compare the contents and weight with the details provided by the shipper. UK shipping journals report that customs and the coastguard were eager to undertake this survey, and some shippers could face penalties if incorrect declarations regarding containers' contents have been made.

Their findings in the **MSC Napoli** case have yet to be revealed. However, other instances of erroneous - or fraudulent - declarations by shippers are alleged to have caused severe damage to several ships when containers loaded with dangerous cargo, yet designated benign at their point of origin, were stowed incorrectly with disastrous consequences.

Ships have suffered serious explosions or fires, crewmembers have been killed and some ships have become total losses following a serious incident of this nature.

A ship's agent told me that he had a request from an owner to book Cape Town's floating crane to land a container that the ship's cranes with a capacity of 30 tons could not lift. Loaded in a foreign port by container gantry, the box in question actually weighed nearly 40 tons, far in excess of the safe limits of the container, let alone the average ship's gear.

Indeed, over-weight containers can render ships unstable, especially when they are handling cargo in port. It is alleged that a feeder ship nearly capsized in Walvis Bay because of incorrect weights provided by the shippers of several containers aboard. I wonder if the capsizing of the **Grimaldi** ro-ro ship in Antwerp in March was similarly caused as she was loading the last of her container cargo at the time. (As an image of the capsized **Grimaldi** vessel flew around the internet with images of heavy seas off Durban last month, many readers queried why I had not mentioned the "*accident in Durban*" in this column.)

Since it imposes a range of draconian measures to combat the ferrying of terrorist tools in containers, one would have thought that the strict **International Ship and Port Security Code**, introduced after 9/11, would have eradicated problems relating to the contents of containers.

The ISPS code also excludes friends and relatives of passengers aboard vessels like **St Helena** from the quay when the ship arrives or sails. A sad world when age-old traditions get trampled!