

## **Sailing below the Radar**

**As the maritime industry navigates the turbulence of the coronavirus pandemic, a disregard for overworked seafarers is threatening to spark a humanitarian crisis**

**By Abby Williams**

**As the coronavirus pandemic** unfolded into a global nightmare that eroded the foundations of normality and saw the world collapse into lockdown, not everybody made it home.

The disheartening stories overwhelming our news feeds in 2020 illustrate every extremity of the crisis, from the rising death toll to the plummeting economy, from humanity nearing the verge of chaos to the lonely silence of self-isolation. Scattered amongst these news items are fragments of a damaged maritime industry, with some of the most outrageous stories emerging from cruise ships and their passengers.

But while the world watches as cruise lines become embroiled in scandals and subsequent investigations, cruise ships comprise less than one per cent of oceangoing vessels. There is a darker side to the shipping industry, which is elusive at the best of times and invisible at the worst.

A world of rust and sea spray that sprawls from humid equatorial coastlines to frozen polar oceans, the closest many have come to the wider maritime industry is watching the tiny grey silhouette of a container ship as it drifts slowly across the horizon. That little silhouette is one of 53 000 merchant ships trading internationally; its small crew belonging to a global community of more than 1.6 million seafarers. In a world already characterised by exhaustion and uncertainty, Covid-19 has left the industry utterly debilitated.

With port schedules disrupted, anchors lowered, and thousands of sailors trapped at sea, working far beyond the extent of their contracts and their own physical limitations, seafarers are being crushed by the pandemic, but their desperate situation is being overshadowed and ignored.

They want to go home.

**Frank Fylling should be in Port Moresby** right now. As chief mate on the *MV YWAM PNG*, a small vessel which enables volunteer healthcare workers to provide medical services throughout the islands of Papua New Guinea, Frank is responsible for assisting the captain in running the ship's deck department.

Port Moresby is a long way from Frank's home in Norway. However, since the coronavirus outbreak disrupted shipping schedules worldwide and the *MV YWAM PNG's* port itinerary was abolished, Frank has been even farther away from home. The vessel was forced to sail to Australia, where it has been moored since late March. Moreover, the already difficult situation has been further complicated by the charitable nature of the ship, with a multicultural crew working in a country which, at the time, had no cases of coronavirus.

"Since the ship is usually operating with international volunteers, it was getting impossible to get staff for the ship," Frank explained in a text message sent from the base where he is staying. "In addition to that, we could risk bringing the virus into areas that wouldn't get it otherwise."

With the ship's future obscured by uncertainty, the crew are harnessing the indefinite gap in the itinerary to get a head start on operations which would normally take place later in the year.

"For the moment we are in Townsville doing maintenance on the ship, so we are ready to go back whenever it's possible," Frank said. "It's been an interesting experience, but it seems like it slowly starts to go back to normal."

While the gradual easing of restrictions is seeing regular routines fall back into place for some, others won't experience this return to normal for quite some time.

**Endre Bjorå is chief mate junior** on the *Torill Knutsen*; a Norwegian shuttle tanker which sails between the North Sea and Barents Sea in the Arctic Ocean, delivering oil to refineries in northern Europe. The crew rotation schedule of six weeks on board followed by six weeks

onshore allows Endre to recuperate between extensive periods at sea, and spend time at home in Kristiansand, Norway, with his new wife, Mechitas.

These crew changes are more than a taste of freedom between demanding shifts aboard the vessel. They are vital to seafarers' mental and physical health and welfare, which are critical in an industry where one mistake can threaten the safety of not only the individual, but the entire crew.

Although Endre has been able to disembark as per the rotation schedule, coronavirus restrictions in various countries and ports pose a myriad of logistical complications and prevent some nationalities from returning home.

"The sailing schedule is the same and the Norwegians on board have been able to do crew changes, but it is more complicated to be able to do it now," Endre wrote in an email. "For the Filipinos, it is not possible to do crew changes at the moment, so they need to stay on board longer than their contracts."

With more than a quarter of the world's seafarers coming from the Philippines, these restrictions virtually paralyse the substructure of the maritime industry. However, while Filipino workers comprise the most significant portion of the industry, the impact of the restrictions is not limited to certain nationalities, but rather varies from port to port, and is dependent on government regulations.

Unfortunately, as a world in lockdown relies on a functioning shipping industry to maintain the flow of international trade, governments are prioritising the movement of merchant vessels rather than the wellbeing of the workers keeping them running.

**While the most pressing issue is relief** for seafarers who have worked beyond their contracts, the solution relies on a response to the opposite side of the problem: mobilising replacement crewmembers. The constant movement of vessels typically requires workers to fly to the country where their ship is berthed before commencing their shifts at sea. Naturally, in the midst of global travel restrictions, this is problematic.

Having recognised this predicament, airlines and shipping companies are working together to deliver seafarers to their vessels, but despite these efforts, the overarching obstacle is the current lack of flights.

The complexity of the dilemma runs so deep that it demands a response and a solution from governments worldwide, who are the difference between prolonged hardship and eventual respite. Sadly, as the issue is competing with the urgency of international trade, it is being severely overlooked by those who have the power to improve the situation.

In a letter addressed to the United Nations Secretary General, the International Chamber of Shipping disclosed that: “There are now over 200,000 seafarers onboard vessels worldwide who have completed their contractual tour of duty, but have been prevented from returning home.”

A survey conducted by the Honourable Company of Master Mariners in the United Kingdom confirmed that, statistically, remaining at sea due to limited crew changes is the greatest challenge for seafarers during Covid-19. The survey also revealed that other common challenges include remaining at home with no income, a lack of shore leave, increased workloads and subsequent accident risk, and limited availability of personal protective equipment.

What governments need to understand is that the industry they are determined to sustain relies directly on the workers they are failing to support. They are interconnected. So, as the number of seafarers affected by Covid-19 restrictions grows, international trade becomes progressively less sustainable.

Similarly, the longer this continues, the closer they come to what the International Chamber of Shipping has called an ‘emerging humanitarian crisis’.

**Elusive at the best of times** and invisible at the worst, the foundations of the shipping industry are seafarers, and these foundations are crumbling.

This is the worst of times.

The magnitude of the disruption brought about by the coronavirus outbreak is pushing exhausted maritime workers to their limits, and although their endurance has kept global trade functioning through the thick of the pandemic, there is little relief in sight for those still confined to their vessels.

So, while governments worldwide neglect to recognise their desperation, let's make sure society doesn't.

As we emerge from self-isolation and resume what might be referred to as 'normal life', we should be grateful for this freedom. As we return to our coastlines, let's relish the breeze and breathe in the salt air. But as you look out to the ocean and your gaze falls to the tiny grey silhouette on the horizon, let it linger for a moment. That ship may be distant, but remember that the lives on board matter.

Their world of rust and sea spray has been overshadowed and ignored, but no affliction can surpass that of being forgotten.

They're not free until they're home.

## Bibliography

- Cruise Lines International Association 2020, *IMO 2020 Cruise Industry FAQs*, International Maritime Organization. Available from: <https://cruising.org/-/media/IMO/IMO%202020%20CRUISE%20INDUSTRY%20FAQs>. [26 May 2020].
- International Chamber of Shipping 2020, *Global Supply and Demand for Seafarers*. Available from: <https://www.ics-shipping.org/shipping-facts/shipping-and-world-trade/global-supply-and-demand-for-seafarers>. [25 May 2020].
- International Chamber of Shipping 2020, *Joint ICS and ITF and ITUC letter to UN on crew changes*. Available from: [https://www.ics-shipping.org/docs/default-source/Press-Release-downloads/covid-19\(20\)75---annex-b---joint-ics-and-itf-and-ituc-letter-to-un-on-crew-changes.pdf?sfvrsn=2](https://www.ics-shipping.org/docs/default-source/Press-Release-downloads/covid-19(20)75---annex-b---joint-ics-and-itf-and-ituc-letter-to-un-on-crew-changes.pdf?sfvrsn=2). [27 May 2020].
- International Chamber of Shipping 2020, *UN must persuade governments to adopt crew change protocols or risk 'humanitarian disaster'*. Available from: <https://www.ics-shipping.org/news/press-releases/2020/05/22/un-must-persuade-governments-to-adopt-crew-change-protocols-or-risk-humanitarian-disaster->. [27 May 2020].
- International Maritime Organisation 2020, *Coronavirus (Covid-19) – Recommended Framework of Protocols*. Available from: [http://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.14%20-%20Coronavirus%20\(Covid-19\)%20-%20Recommended%20Framework%20Of%20Protocols.pdf](http://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.14%20-%20Coronavirus%20(Covid-19)%20-%20Recommended%20Framework%20Of%20Protocols.pdf). [29 May 2020].
- Nautilus International 2020, *Master Mariners speak out about Covid-19 concerns*. Available from: <https://www.nautilusint.org/en/news-insight/telegraph/master-mariners-speak-out-about-covid-19-concerns/>. [30 May 2020].
- Statista Research Department 2020, *Number of merchant ships by type 2019*, Statista. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264024/number-of-merchant-ships-worldwide-by-type/>. [26 May 2020].
- YWAM Medical Ships 2020, *The Ship*. Available from: <https://ywamships.org/medical-ship/the-ship/>. [24 May 2020].