

Cheerful to be or not to be.

By Spyros Ranis

We cheer at the vast (190m dwt and counting) Hellenic controlled fleet – a thrilling global first – two thirds of which fly alien (about 100) flags.

This fleet far outstrips tourism, as the main resource of foreign exchange earnings, proving to be the lasting and silent salvor of our country's current accounts. But nobody cheers at it. Shipping stays far and apathetic on state subsidies – tourist industry mirthfully enjoys – but very much concerned for Greek crew shortages, Officers in particular. And what it expects from the state is a realistic MET to tackle the problem. Our most recent cheer is at government's last "measures" on softening manning requirements, to make national registry nearly as competitive as other EU Registries, years ago, are, and attract to it the mavericks.

To what extent the said "measures" will trigger a stampede of the homesick, a mediocre return fever, or a vague longing for repatriation, remains to be seen.

"Privately, opinions differ sharply as to whether an ambitious target of Shipping Minister Manolis Kefaloyiannis – gaining 1,000 additional ships for the Greek registry – is realistic or pure fantasy".¹

But where is the beef?... Where is the sufficient national Maritime Education and Training (MET) system, to provide for the professionals, to properly beef up our present and future maritime cluster, in general, and the "expected ones" in particular?

Let's guess that simply 500 ocean rovers will sail into the home registry to join the 750, already there. Each one needs 12 or more, Officers to man deck and engine (8 months aboard – 4 ashore), which makes a demand of (vessels 1250 x 12 =) 15.000 Officers. The rest, about 2.500 Greek owned but remaining "abroad", need 3 to 4 national Officers aboard, for safety and trade efficiency. This means that 6 should be available, and (vessels 2500 x 6=) a further 15.000 are required (and do not miss the harmony of the numbers). Further than that, another 700 smaller vessels (coastal toddlers, ferries - motorships – passenger etc) fly the Greek flag and need Officers – 4000 might be a reasonable guess. And this makes a rough total of 34.000.... Going to the Cluster the picture gets less ... rosier.

Competence Based Training

About 1000 ships' management offices operate in the Piraeus – Athens – suburbs' area and abroad, as well as about 3000 firms on fringe maritime activities. Ships, nevertheless, may be efficiently operated and sensibly served only by people with sea and ship experience, gained "before the mast". The sea, you remember, instructs and teaches on issues that, by no way

could ever be learned in the classroom. Nobody, for sure, may undervalue the part of scientists in the industry – lawyers, economists, naval – mechanical – electronic engineers etc., etc., yet marine competence remains cardinal. But something here went totally awry as a strong and warlike trade guild imposed their views and theories on our MET system, in their quest to best serve their interests. The academics (a total of about...12000, but a very small minority is involved) in this maritime country decided that, they are the only ones able, to teach people how to run vessels though, they themselves never tried to run – load, unload, a single one, or ever spent a week "before the mast" of a laid up vessel. Ship has its own body language you have to understand, if you are to communicate with. "It takes several years' experience before one can fully interpret what the behavior of the ship is telling him"². And let's not touch on signs of a latent scorn the "sage" brood for the mariners.

Our national marine workforce strongly links the Industry with the country, it gives the competitive edge, it infuses life and "citizenship" into the aforesaid 190m (otherwise) dead. w.t. , it is the breeding ground of first class owners, and it is critically endangered.

The Endangered Species

Shipowners around the world are – for long – alarmed, as the numbers of Officers being trained is not keeping with demand, and the ISF / BIMCO credible manpower reports toll a loud alarm and warn: "...Officers shortage will become more severe unless maritime training is further increased".³ The European Commission is calling, on the other hand: "... for a more unified approach to be taken throughout the European shipping

community to tackle the worsening problem of European crew shortages. A recently published EC report on the training and recruitment of seafarers has highlighted that the total number of EU nationals employed on board EU-flagged vessels has dropped by 40 per cent since 1985 to stand at some 120.000. It is estimated that the shortage of Officers in the EU might reach

around 13.000 in 2001, rising to 36.000 by 2006"⁴ And further states that the member states, social partners and the Industry should take immediate action.⁴ This means that Western owners, having confidence and comfort (let dependence aside) with labour – supply countries, now feel the labour noose tightening. On the other hand a minimum of national Officers aboard is a must if national shipping is to stay national, and something must be done about. And some countries actually – for long – do.

"In the 30 months since the Indian maritime training sector was thrown open to private enterprise, as many as 86 institu-

Officers' shortages make a time bomb ticking in the foundation of our Shipping industry. The State turns a deaf ear and a blind eye.....

tions have been given operating licences, and several more are under the consideration of the director – general of Shipping’s Office.

It is startling to realise that nearly 100 maritime institutions

(including the government–run ones, which have been in existence for several years) are functioning in India”.⁵

Look at that..... 100 MET Institutions for the 1,5% of the world’s fleet. Also, look at the table below:

Top-ranked but....			
	World Fleet dwt. Percentage	Population	Area – Km2
1.	Greece	(18.48%)	11.213.000
2.	Japan	(14.01%)	128.138.000
3.	Germany	(6.90%)	82.727.000
4.	China	(6.77%)	1.289.665.000
5.	U.S.A.	((5.52%)	296.209.000
6.	Norway	(5.24%)	4.601.000
7.	Hong Kong	(4.88%)	6.864.000
8.	Korea	(3.25%)	49.930.000
9.	U.K.	(3.08%)	60.609.000
10.	Taiwan	(2.78%)	22.795.000
11.	Singapore	(2.66%)	3.548.000
12.	Denmark	(2.01%)	5.412.000
13.	Russia	(1.82%)	144.004.000
14.	Italy	(1.60%)	58.609.000
15.	India	(1.51%)	1.094.871.000
16.	Switzerland	(1.37%)	7.452.000
17.	Saudi Arabia	(1.32%)	21.772.000
18.	Malaysia	(1.17%)	26.501.000
19.	Iran	(1.13%)	68.458.000
20.	Turkey	(1.04%)	73.598.000

The top notch gives us pride.
The bottom one gives – to football fans –.... revenge

In short supply of national quality officers, owners are unable to man ships with the right levels of skills and experience, the multi-national crews in the international labor market are poorly trained, and about 80% of marine accidents is attributable to human error. These make what happened to the “Sea Diamond” in Santorini bitterly opportune, but nobody looked for the roots of the casualty. T.V presenters and “window experts” were totally irrelevant and irreverent, but they attracted viewers.

In theory and in Practice

Marine skills shortages have become a common feature of world shipping, specially in aging countries, and the tables seen above, should normally alarm the most dumb Greek head, even remotely involved in the Industry. Top and bottom notches send a strong message which even Minister M. Kefaloyiannis might get moved upon.

Several years ago the European Commission entrusted a Committee of shipping sages to study the MET systems and the uniform application of the STCW/95 Convention in the EU nations. The World Maritime University – Malmö headed the Committee, another two universities and two marine schools participated in the proceedings, also many institutions, organizations and governmental MET administrations were repre-

sented, providing information and opinion.

In June 2000 the Committee published its report (Harmonization of European MET schemes – METHAR 2000) of 92 pages, which is an excellent guide for any nation which actually means to tackle crew shortages and considers it a must, a decent percentage of national officers to man its vessels and the Cluster.

Technological Fictionalization...

Several academics and teachers having an interest in MET, argue that: “scientific and technological advancements in recent decades, have turned the practical art of controlling and guiding vessels, into a science”. But these advancements - the electronic aids to navigation namely - already are 67 or older, being the early products of World War II⁶. The modern Satellite Positioning, Navigation and Timing system is a descendant of those aids and it is more “user friendly”. Old salts, with a touch of nostalgia, remember the long standings on the pilot bridge with sextant and eye fixed to the horizon and a star, for a sight reduction. But horizon’s line wasn’t certain, vessel was rolling, the weather might be bitter, and clouds played hide and seek with the target star. And then you should have a correct GHA, a good computed position and a lot of persistence. But scientists have sent it all to History’s dustbin to

the benefit and delight of the practical navigator? though he must be always ready to grasp his old sextant and shoot a star. Just in case. Modern automation and computerization systems, scientists endowed the engine room with, have – on the other hand – made the engineers' life easier and their watch far more efficient. Besides, technical advice, consultation and information exchange between vessel and shore based services or the management Office are now promptly available, thanks to modern communication facilities, so the Master isn't alone and "first after God" any further. This is another critical scientific advancement that made life at sea safer, and it considerably relieved tedium for the master and the officers, but it didn't turn them into scientists. It only sent Sparks to oblivion.

The Profit / Monopoly Nexus

Far from real trends and developments "in recent decades", and our diachronic persistence in the maritime adventure, the few heralds of a degree level (d.l.) MET simply ignore:

- a) Shore employment is today more available and we know that there is an image problem with shipping, these combined make a serious bar to recruiting efforts. d.l.MET is a "front end" training, which keeps entrants three or four years in school before ever having any taste about life at sea. As a result the "wastage" is up to 60%, very high, compared with a 10% "wastage" in the vocational (1-2 years schooling) training, and even less in the sea service - exams, for a consecutive – promotion system. In our Marine Academies, about 30% of entrants jump the school early, and about half of the remaining, follow the officer's career for 4 years or more – after graduation. This means that this system.... systematically undermines any recruitment efforts, as it provides entrants with no inkling on the career's particularity, and the recruiters rather mind to fill the classrooms and keep their jobs, than wooing the right people. Many entrants on the other hand only care for the certificate, having no intention ever to go afloat.
- b) Electronic signposts now amply mark the sea paths, yet, as traffic grows, a new problem – avoiding collision – arises, and emphasis has tended to shift from finding the way towards avoiding collision. Those with sea experience and competence know that, on the roads the dangers are from collision, whereat the skill to prevent isn't learned in the school. In spite of any grandiose rhetoric on d.l.MET.
- c) Piloting in restricted waters is the other field where marine competence (v. knowledge), decides the safety of a passage? and the extract below from the best navigation manual I know, is loud and clear:
 "On the high seas, where there is no immediate danger of grounding, navigation is a comparatively leisurely process. Courses and speeds are maintained over relatively long periods, and fixes are obtained at convenient intervals. Under favorable conditions a vessel might continue for several days with no positions other than those obtained by dead reckoning, or by estimate, and with no anxiety on the part of the captain or navigator. Errors in

position can usually be detected and corrected before danger threatens.

In the vicinity of shoal water the situation is different. Frequent or continuous positional information is usually essential to the safety of the vessel. An error which at sea may be considered small, may in pilot waters be intolerably large. Frequent changes of course and speed are common. The proximity of other vessels increases the possibility of collision. Navigation under these conditions is called piloting.

No other form of navigation requires the continuous alertness needed in piloting. At no other time is navigational experience and judgement so valuable. The ability to work rapidly and to correctly interpret all available information, always keeping "ahead of the vessel", may mean the difference between safety and disaster.

In piloting, positions are commonly obtained by reference to nearby landmarks, or the bottom. Advancements in electronics have provided additional aids which are of particular value in piloting."⁷

d) In the EU – METHAR 2000 report we read:
 "For fully exploiting the potential national resources for seafarers it is necessary to offer MET for unlimited certificates of competency to potential students with different qualifications in general education". – page 10.

And:

"There will be a change from the knowledge-based requirements of STCW 1978 to the competence-based requirements of STCW 1995". – page 12.

These do not assuage the obstinate professors' will to keep their privileges, concomitant with the "public character" of the high level education. They make good use of their strong lobby and they occasionally sway students to battle reform.

The Shipping Pragmatists

The no-nonsense-talk shipping people are for diligent consideration, quick decisions and practical solutions – negatively disposed to pompous theories, may be considered as Philistines by those with a penchant for "academic" humbug. Lastly, strong trade guilds, in our corporate state, having their own priorities, leave no room for a national shipping policy. Very few – if any - ... Philistines serve in our public maritime authorities, where landlubbers rule the waves. Simply for political convenience and partisan expediency.

The results we see in our TV screens, to the detriment of our peace of mind.

Notes:

- 1 "Lloyd's List" – 12th February 2007
- 2 "Fairplay" – 26th March 1998
- 3 BIMCO / ISF Manpower 2005 Update
- 4 "Fairplay Daily News" – 24th July 2001
- 5 "Lloyd's List" – 1st May 2001
- 6 Radar was a British / USA invention. Of the "hyperbolic" systems – DECA was British, LORAN USA, and CONSOL German.
- 7 BOWDICH – "American Practical Navigator" page 240.