

Epilogue



Marconi Marine is no longer in existence as a manufacturing company for marine radio, and the job of Radio Officer or Electronics Officer is virtually extinct. Like with the Radio Operator previously needed on aircraft, technology and economics have caught up with us. We were always seen as non productive, and for many years were just tolerated – carried only to satisfy the international safety regulations. Later we were found to be essential for the smooth running of the ship, its complex electronics systems, communications and the ever more complicated logistics of running an international business. Then came automated telex, satellites and completely automatic communications systems. Now, a few Radio Officers still hang on in the passenger and cruise ships, where the work load and complex communications systems justifies their keep, but the majority of merchant ships now only use Satellite or automatic HF telex for their communications. Some of the developing countries still use hand sent Morse and have Radio Officers on their ships and coast stations, mainly because they cannot afford the highly expensive satellite equipment. These however are a minority and becoming smaller each day. A number of Radio/Electronics officers have re-trained as Electronics Engineering Officers, as particularly in the modern gas or oil tankers, electronics are all pervading and essential for the ships daily work and safety. Their job however no longer revolves around communications, and their work place is basically the engine room. Some have joined the offshore oil and gas industry, where complex electronics

are fitted to platforms, and communications for the men that run them are still essential. It is however the end of an era.

It all started with the Marconi Company putting radio operators on some ships in the very early 1900's, working up to a highly complex and reliable, global MF/HF safety and communication network for shipping, all based on hand sent Morse code. The advent of satellites and affordable high-tech radio equipment meant the demise of the Radio Officer even for distress and safety. The safety regulations have been changed so that a radio officer is no longer required, providing the satellite communication system fulfils certain criteria. Modern satellite and HF telex systems are all totally automated, and when all goes well, it is just like picking up a phone or using a telex at home (only more expensive). Unfortunately, when it doesn't, then possibly nothing works at all.

The worst case scenario is that a ship in distress is unable to alert anyone to its plight. In some cases this is thought to have occurred where the ship has disappeared and there are often no survivors and no indications of what happened. Multiple back-ups of essential systems, with self diagnosis and display of faults, allegedly allow intelligent, but untrained personnel to rectify problems by changing circuit cards. I personally however would never feel secure with such a system. Satellite antennas are quite large, and if not pointing at the satellite, totally useless. Complex guidance systems must ensure they are on target. A ship listing at 50 degrees in a heavy sea is not a suitable platform for such a system, particularly if all power has gone due to a flooded engine room. The small antennas which do not need to be steered, use a different satellite system and it can be several hours before anyone is alerted. Morse code is now officially extinct at sea, and quite a few coast stations have either closed down, or are fully automatic. The safety aspect is handled by the Global Maritime Satellite Safety and Distress system, with automatic free floating distress beacons in case of a ship sinking. This works well when ALL ships are using the system. Then the 4 or so distress centres worldwide know where all ships are, and can selectively call the nearest ships to aid a distress. Until all the developing countries are also using the satellite system however, I consider there are serious holes in its coverage. Ships not using it are unknown to the system, and cannot be called in to help - even if just over the horizon. It seems almost to be a return to the times of the Titanic! Ships continue to have a 500 KHz auto alarm receiver, a 2182 R/T alarm receiver and transmitter as well as a 500 KHz automatic keyed transmitter for distress. How well these work however, without on board maintenance and regular tests, is open to debate. The disadvantage of R/T in distress situations with its attendant language difficulties, especially under stress, is well known. Morse, with its international Q codes and trained operators circumvented these problems, and proved to be a highly reliable and versatile communications medium. The regular testing of the satellite distress system is also not without hazard. When these tests are carried out, a rigid procedure must be adhered to in order that a real distress call is not sent out. The dramatic increase in erroneous distress calls monitored by the GMSSD centres show that these procedures are not followed. This also seems to confirm that intelligent but untrained personnel are NOT able to follow instructions! These false calls could mean that a real call is not given the attention it deserves – like the boy who kept calling “Wolf”.

The increase of “Flag of convenience” registered ships, severely reduced manning levels, and lack of experience and qualifications of officers and crew, has led to a marked decrease in shipping safety. Higher work loads, long working hours and low maintenance budgets cause many more accidents and problems than previously. One has only to look through the shipping casualty statistics to see this only too well. All in all, I think I have served through the end of the good times, and the beginning of the bad times of Merchant Shipping. It is no longer a job I would recommend, even for young people. Shore leave is much less than before, free time in port is severely reduced, and pay and conditions are no longer what they

were. These days one sees lots of water and very little else. Now, ports are generally far from areas of interest, are highly automated and efficient. Containerisation has reduced the turn around time to only a few hours. Port costs must be kept to a minimum and any delays can be very expensive. Working hours on board are frequently long uncomfortable and under high pressure, with only short rest periods, especially on the quick runs between close together ports. The ship is often short-handed, requiring officers and crew to double up, and cover the jobs of others who are missing. Sometimes ship owners do not hire enough personnel intentionally in order to save money. Officers and crew become exhausted and start to make mistakes. It is no wonder that stranding, collisions and other accidents are on the rise. Today's ships are composed of very high-tech systems, requiring only a few, but very highly qualified officers and crew, who work long hours and sometimes under great stress. Social life is limited and tours of duty quite long. Recruiting these highly qualified and motivated people is difficult, particularly as pay and conditions are often worse than an equivalent job ashore. Owners and operators are often more than happy to get almost anyone on their ships at all. Qualifications are taken at face value and not questioned or checked particularly thoroughly – if at all. Shipping is a highly competitive business. The days of 45 or more officers, men and boys on a ship, with a long time in port and a good social life on board are gone. Today's seamen are career men - or sometimes societies misfits.

The days of romance are over.

Swiss marine radio station Bern Radio in 1987

