

### **An Interlude with "Halcyon the Great".**

Modern shipping is possibly one of the last almost unregulated truly international business ventures. The regulations which do govern business practice in shipping are almost impossible to police and extremely convoluted. A ship can be owned by a one man company with a brass name plate on a pokey one room office in Monrovia. It could perhaps be registered on the tiny Pacific island of Vanuatu (a tax haven, which has a merchant fleet of well over 500 ships, and a population of only a couple of thousand!), then insured by some cheapo insurance company based in a third country which does not look too closely at certificates. (The real owners perhaps hiding behind various convoluted holding companies and agencies set up around the world). It can be manned with cheap labour via an agency in a Third World country, and managed via a ship management company in yet another. No one really knowing (or caring as long as the money gets paid) who the real owner is, or how legal his business ventures are. Surprisingly, this all works reasonably well as long as things are handled fairly. When things break down however, it becomes almost impossible to find out who is responsible or who pays the bills. The losers are always those on the last rung of the ladder, i.e. the seamen that serve on the vessel.

The Halcyon the Great was a large crude oil carrier owned (on the surface) by the Halcyon Shipping Company in Monrovia. The crew were an international mixture with a British Captain, Chief Engineer and Radio Officer. My initial contact with this ship was through the latter. We were running almost parallel for a while and the Radio Officer had asked us to relay his traffic for him as the main transmitter had a fault he could not find. We had frequent radio "skeds", where I used to relay his radio traffic and helped him repair his long-range transmitter by 2 MHz R/T discussions and remote diagnosis. Afterwards, we kept in contact over several months until he entered port for discharging at Thameshaven. I later visited the ship whilst on leave and experienced his problems at first hand.

The ship had been bought second-hand, and had operated a couple of years successfully when the demand for tankers and the freight rates were high. This time she had loaded a cargo of Kuwait crude oil at Mina Al Ahmadhi with a final destination to be announced, but probably within Europe. The cargo, as is quite normal, was sold and re-sold several times whilst being transported, finally being destined for England. The ship had been bought when freight rates were high, and large profits could be returned. Now however, there was a glut of large crude carriers, and freight rates had hit rock bottom. A number of VLCCs had been laid up, and others were operating at below cost, just to keep ships and their crews moving. It could sometimes be cheaper to have ships running at a loss, instead of the expensive business of laying them up, then returning them back to use again later if and when the market picks up. Also, once an experienced crew has been let go or made redundant, it is often not easy to get reliable and experienced people back again. It was all basically a big gamble. Large tanker companies could absorb the costs - for a while. The small operator, however, was hurt badly.

Halcyon the Great was a steam turbine powered vessel, and thus expensive to run and maintain. Her days were quite obviously numbered. Messages and letters from the crewmembers' families had complained that wages had not been paid for several months. Complaints to the owners at first received replies saying there had been some temporary banking difficulties, but all should now be ok. After a while however letters, telegrams and even phone calls went unanswered and tension mounted. Day to day business was with the charterers, but the owners in Monrovia remained ominously silent.

Halcyon the Great entered Thameshaven and discharged its cargo, but it turned out that the officers' and crews' wages had still not been paid and

the crew refused to take the ship back to sea until their money was forthcoming. The cargo legally belonged to a British oil company and could not be withheld, the ship itself however, was another matter. The ship was moved to a "lay-by" berth with the aid of tugs until things could be cleared up. Refusing to sail a ship from a port is not considered as mutiny, and anyway, the Captain was also supporting his crewmen. He had not been paid either. The ships agents tried to contact the manning agency, who stated that under the contract signed with the owners, all operating expenses (such as crew wages) were to be paid direct by the owners. Repeated attempts to contact them in Monrovia, however, were fruitless. An attempt to get the Monrovia authorities involved merely confirmed the obvious. The brass name plate on the tiny office of the Halcyon Shipping Company had been removed, and it was deserted. The ship was now effectively without an owner.

The officers and crew meanwhile were running out of generator fuel and food. The port dues had not been paid, and a writ had been served to get them to leave the ship. Halcyon the Great however was registered in Monrovia, and as such was effectively a little bit of Monrovia moored in England. The crew could not be forced to leave if they did not wish to. As their only way to try to recoup the unpaid wages owed them, they decided to stay aboard until either the ship could be sold to pay its debts, or the owners were traced and forced to pay up. If they left the ship even only for a few moments, they could be arrested and sent home. The crew were therefore in a virtual prison aboard their own ship!

Numerous seamen's church and welfare organisations such as the Flying Angel tried to help, but could only stand by and offer moral support. Money with a large M was required. Local social services helped a little, but no attempt at sorting out the mess seemed to have much chance of success. Until the debts were paid, nobody wanted to know. Even the ship's agents did nothing more. Without any chance of being paid for their services, they simply stopped providing any.

Several weeks passed and conditions aboard the Halcyon deteriorated. All attempts to trace the owner(s) had led to nothing. The generators were only run for short periods, just enough to keep the refrigerated store rooms at their correct temperature, and so conserve what little fuel remained. Food was effectively rationed as there was no money to buy more. At night, there were candles for light, but under these conditions, this could not be classed as being romantic! The port authorities threatened to tow the ship out to an anchorage as the berth was needed. The crewmen had been offered a small sum if they left the ship, and their airfare home would be paid. If not, no one knew how long things would drag on until it could be sold. They had an unenviable decision to make. Stay on and hope that maybe at some undefined time in the future they could go home with some of their back pay, or go now with only a pittance, but at least their fare home paid for. Inevitably, after a 6 month voyage at sea, over a month in their ship "prison" alongside, and with virtually no food or fuel left, the crew and officers reluctantly decided to leave. There were no other options open.

The only money they received for their more than 7 months tour of duty aboard Halcyon the Great, was for the first 3 months. The ship was towed out and anchored by the port authorities. Eventually it was sold for scrap. No one wanted an elderly VLCC, and the Halcyon Shipping Company had disappeared into the oblivion from which it had sprung. To my knowledge, no person or company was charged with the unpaid bills. No investigation was started as to who the owner(s) really were. Very likely a few palms were greased in Monrovia, and all problems were eliminated - together with all records. Probably now it is only a few seamen who remember how they were duped out of several thousand dollars of hard earned money, together with effectively several months of their lives.

At least in this instance no one was hurt, and the ship had been reasonably run up until the owners did a bunk. Sometimes however, greedy and unscrupulous owners and masters were the causes of major disasters. Ships have been sunk for the insurance money, or purposely run aground or set fire to. A number of ships' masters are known to have taken part in such activities. Often, their certificates were either forged or bought for a few dollars. It was quite easy up until a few years ago, for almost anyone to buy a foreign going masters or a chief engineer's certificate in certain countries, for a very reasonable sum. Even now it is possible, but more difficult and expensive than before. These certificates were valid world wide - if not very welcome to those in the know. Some of these "Captains" had virtually no seagoing experience, and were a hazard to themselves and anyone near them. International policing is difficult to say the least. Sometimes it may only be due to long and painstaking investigations by insurance companies that the truth behind the loss of a ship becomes known. Even then, the culprits are rarely brought to justice.