

Narrator: You are listening to the Quarterdeck with Benjamin Strong and Coast Guard Admiral Jim Watson.

Benjamin: Hi, it's Ben Strong from amver.com and welcome to another addition of the podcast, The Quarterdeck. I'm joined again in person, which is a nice treat, with my co-host Admiral Jim Watson. Admiral Watson, how are you, sir?

Admiral Watson: I'm doing great, Ben. This is kinda nice. We saw you in Florida. Now I'm up in New York City.

Benjamin: Yeah, we're coming to you live from New York City.

Admiral Watson: Well, I'm here. This worked out so great because we had a conference with the North American Environment Protection Association yesterday, and today, I'm at the Council of Foreign Relations. And it's convenient because it's in your neighborhood, so it's gonna be a nice time to do a podcast.

I'd like to also mention that CAPT Melissa Bert is a fellow from the US Coast Guard here at the Council of Foreign Relations. She'll be here for about a year, and she's the one that allowed me to come here today. So, I think what we ought to do is dwell on some subjects that are related to foreign affairs.

Benjamin: Absolutely, yes, absolutely.

Admiral Watson: And certainly maritime is an international activity and I think it's appropriate that we do a podcast right here from the green room from the Council of Foreign Relations.

Benjamin: That's right, in the green room, and I think it's a good, I think it demonstrates the Council takes things seriously by having a Coast Guard officer here. But CAPT Bert, welcome. Welcome to the Quarterdeck and tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do here.

CAPT Bert: So I'm Melissa Bert and my background in the Coast Guard is kind of varied. I started out on ships and then became a JAG officer. So my background is in the law, maritime international law, specifically. And then I went back to ashore units and some other places around the service.

Here, at the Council, my focus has been primarily with maritime international law -- the Law of Sea, the arctic, oil and gas -- some of those things that we tend not to think about in New York, which is an economic center. But I don't think a lot of people think much about what's happening off shore when they don't see it, so it's nice to be here and bring a little focus on that.

Benjamin: Absolutely, now the Law of the Sea is sometimes a touchy subject as far as the rest of the world and their view of the United States. Kind of where do we stand right now?

CAPT Bert: Well, it's interesting. As a nation we certainly support the tenets of the Law of the Sea convention. We enforce them all of the time and it was our idea. So it's interesting that now we've gotten to an odd position where we haven't ratified it and we're the only Arctic nation that hasn't ratified it, but we're one of the few nations in the world who hasn't; we're really with Syria and Iran, and just a few other places. And hopefully, we'll see that change.

There's been universal support in the United States in terms of the Joint Chiefs, industry is really behind it, the Coast Guard obviously, finds it, we'd find it very useful, and environmental groups also like it because it standardizes a lot of the pollution issues.

So we'll just see how that goes. There are a few detractors to the convention who feel that any kind of international engagement diminishes our sovereignty, so that's been the, that's been what we've heard in terms of resistance. But we'll see how that goes.

Benjamin: Mm-hm, well it's interesting because you know, from an Amvert standpoint we, the Amvert system really just kind of doesn't differentiate between flag, or nation, or political ideology. We have ships from around the world, including Syria and Iran, and other countries that participate and engage in search and rescue.

A lot of our you know, just let me take a different approach because a lot of our listeners are kind of these deck plate sailors that are underway, and why would they be interested in knowing that there's a US Coast Guard person here on the council? I mean do you guys have effect on international maritime policy? Does the council have input in the IMO? I mean if I'm an AB on a tanker somewhere, why would I be interested in knowing that you're here helping to shape things?

CAPT Bert: That's a great question. I think what happens here is you have a huge international interaction of people from all kinds of industry and policy makers. People from here tend to come in and out of government. Many of them are government leaders. And in and out of industry, they run industries. And to get the word out about important things to our seafarers and to the industry, that's something that, that interaction is really critical.

Otherwise they would have no exposure to these issues, so just having these conversations here...this morning we had a discussion with some financiers and others about some things that they were just so surprised to hear. They had never heard of Amvert.

Benjamin: Right.

CAPT Bert: We were talking about how important it is that you know, the fleet is out there and what's going on. It's just getting that word out is really critical and it's hard to do in other venues. You're meeting with different people and different places, but New York is a place where you're definitely meeting people from the financial markets and a lot of people from around the government, so it's interesting.

Benjamin: Well, and I think it's interesting, and I think it's important, and perhaps a lot of our listeners may not think that they've got an advocate in very high places, but as somebody who's in the Coast Guard and understands maritime law, and is now having this exposure to international law and the reach back to folks like Admiral Watson, you know.

You've got the Coast Guard at your disposal, but you really are, you're not just protecting Coast Guard interests or our interests, but really you're an advocate for people who go to sea here at a big international venue where it could be a financial decision that's being made, it could be a regulatory decision that's being made. I mean we've all had been to meetings and interacted with different agencies, whether it be IMO or with IKO or any of the other safety organizations.

But if I'm sailor it's gonna make me feel good knowing that you're here advocating for those of us who

go to sea. So I think that's a good thing. Now, do you find, how often do you find that either that the council looks at kind of the maritime bend to things? I mean how often does that come up? Probably more than I would imagine.

CAPT Bert: Actually, I think the reason I'm here is because it doesn't come up that much.

Benjamin: Okay.

CAPT Bert: I think you know, we've had a few folks here. We had Steve Flynn here, who really brought focus to that, and Scott Borgerson, but other than...and there's a few other fellows who were looking at global governance and when you look at global governance, obviously the maritime sector is critical.

But it's something that people don't realize. They don't realize how critical it is and until you have somebody who's talking about it all the time and bringing it into the picture, you don't think about it.

Benjamin: Right.

CAPT Bert: And a lot of businesses here, it doesn't seem to come up that much. So it's interesting to me, when I got here how little people knew about the Law of the Sea Convention, knew about the issues that are important to seafarers and important to industry...not something that's regularly discussed, surprisingly.

Benjamin: Sure, and up until what, three or four years ago, people thought piracy was something that you read about in books, and now we know that piracy has a huge impact on shipping. People didn't think and I'm still surprised how many people don't really know a) the dangers of shipping, how dangerous it is yet. There are still ships going down every day; b) the significant environmental impact. We've got the arena in a...

Admiral Watson: Down in New Zealand.

Benjamin: Down in New Zealand right now. And I think people are like you say, perhaps a bit naive or unaware of the impact of the maritime sector and the commercial maritime sector. And it's really quite big and I'm glad that you're here to share those stories.

CAPT Bert: Actually Admiral Stavridis was here, about a week or so ago, and he talked a little bit about piracy and the impact. I think economically talked about between \$7 billion to \$10 billion impact. I think a thousand people were held hostage last year by pirates. It's huge and you're absolutely right. It's a big danger and something that we have to look at in industry and figure out better ways to stop this.

Benjamin: Well, and this is a good tie-in too because the Coast Guard has a pretty robust international affairs department or directorate, the Amvert program. Certainly we're more international than we are domestic, so it's good to know that, makes me feel good knowing that I've got somebody I can reach out to at the council if there's something perhaps I want to share either from the Amvert community.

And I would say to our listeners if there's something perhaps that you want brought up at an international venue, you can send us an email or leave us a comment in the show notes. And we've got CAPT Bert here who can perhaps look at those things and find out if there's a way to move those kinds

of questions forward.

Admiral Watson: I think, Ben, it's important to note that this is two-way as well. I think most mariners and most people who are in the maritime profession just know that they're involved with the world economy, even with a lot of geopolitical issues that are important to their countrymen, whether they're US citizens or citizens of other countries.

The rest of the world may not know that, but I think mariners, just because of the nature of their business, it's just intuitively obvious to them that they are very important in all of these things that really are discussed here, but don't include that actual discussion of the maritime. And maybe what certain policy implications of these larger issues, whether they're the financial crisis or whether they're certain political crisis or relationships between countries, Law of the Sea, what have you...

Benjamin: Right.

Admiral Watson: Might have on worldwide transportation systems. So I think it's important for somebody like CAPT Bert to actually get a pretty good handle on what are those things that are being discussed in an institution like this that could end up becoming public policy at some time in the near future.

Benjamin: Right.

Admiral Watson: And bring those things back to the US Coast Guard, which I think does provide that sort of policy voice for the maritime in at least the United States government, if not, the International Maritime Organization, the UN, the International Labor Organization, these other organizations.

So in other words, we're gonna be in those places participating in policy making. The question is okay, do we actually know enough about the larger issues beyond our core competencies...

Benjamin: Sure.

Admiral Watson: To be doing a good job of those policy making.

Benjamin: Well, and not to over simplify it, but it's good to have a knowledgeable fly on the wall everywhere; like you said, we're at the IMO and we're at these various...the UN and the Arctic Council, and we've got our foot in the door and we're helping to shape policy and make policy, and build consensus globally.

But if we're not here, we don't know what's going on. And there are a lot of decisions being made around the world that are going to affect the commercial maritime sector, absolutely. So what's probably, and I'm gonna throw you a curve ball here, but what do you think would be the most, what's the most interesting thing that you've had to deal with here thus far?

CAPT Bert: Well, I would say you're here to do whatever you want. There's no...people often say oh, what is the council's stance on this or that, but there is no council stance. So you can take this time to use it how you see appropriate. And for me it's been on the issues of the sea, obviously, and so there hasn't been one thing that has just been a big surprise.

But it's been a great opportunity to be involved, deeply involved in things that I wouldn't have a chance

to otherwise.

Benjamin: Well, and the people, we were just talking a little bit earlier, who was on the panel this morning?

Admiral Watson: We had Alan Greenspan and we had the OMB Director Lew.

Benjamin: All right, so the Office of Management and Budget...

Admiral Watson: Which is pretty amazing, so we're hearing somebody who actually had a lot of influence over economic decisions up until I think 2006, and then we had the guy who's the current policy director for the US budget right now.

Benjamin: So yeah, so the depth and the breadth of the people that you have access to is far beyond what you could get working at Coast Guard headquarters or in you know, any number of offices.

CAPT Bert: I am surprised that people pick up the phone and we talk to them here. We had a great panel actually at the Harbor Faculty Club on Arctic issues recently. And Admiral Salerno was a panelist, and John Bellinger who you probably know from the former administration, he was as well, and Scott Borgerson, so just a great opportunity to introduce the folks in the Boston area to the members of the SF4 in that area, who are tend to be more in the financial and academic areas to issues in the Arctic, Law of the Sea issues, mariner issues, development, the gas development and other things.

Benjamin: Mm-hm.

CAPT Bert: You do have great access to people and it's nice. It's a little surprising to me sometimes who walks through the door here.

Benjamin: Right.

CAPT Bert: I try not to gawk.

Benjamin: I'm sure it's easy to sometimes. I think it's good to know that the international maritime sector's needs and desires and questions, and that they're interests are well served here in the Council of Foreign Relations. And I want to thank you, CAPT, for being their voice here on the council.

Anything as we're kind of coming to a close I think with the happenings today, but Admiral Watson, you just finished a NAMEPA even here in New York.

Admiral Watson: I did.

Benjamin: What's on the agenda here in the future?

Admiral Watson: I'm heading up to Boston for a meeting with the Passenger Vessel Association...

Benjamin: Right, the PVA.

Admiral Watson: Executive folks up there. There's still a lot of activity going on and changes to

regulations, and new expectations for operational type things. We're seeing new technologies. One of the interests, and I don't know if I'll hear about this tomorrow, but I've had other meetings recently about the use of liquified natural gas as bunker fuel on ships.

Benjamin: Right.

Admiral Watson: There's also as we discussed yesterday, concerns about the ballast water and invasive species, about air emissions and greenhouse gases. Then there's just the economic challenges that most of the industry faces. And yet there needs to be business decisions that look forward.

So we do try to get out and listen to the different elements of the industry and provide the best crystal ball we can...

Benjamin: Right.

Admiral Watson: With regard to future government policies.

Benjamin: Well, that's good, and we're gonna be, the Amvert team will be out in China and Shanghai at the Marintec shipping exhibition at the end of the month and into the first part of December. And we'll be doing Amvert awards ceremony there. I believe we're gonna have our Coast Guard liaison officer there to China joining us as well, so that will be nice.

And we've had some significant rescues. The last week or so we've rescued seven or eight people. We had a sailboat just north of Bermuda that was taking on water and one of our Amvert participants, it was kind of a heavy lift RORO kind of a vessel and luckily they're got a low freeboard, so they were able to get the four sailors off of that. And three others rescued. But we'll have some photos and releases up on the Amvert blog about that.

But that'll be it I think as we wind down into the holiday season, one thing that folks who read the Amvert blog look forward to, and something that I look forward to, are the messages that we receive from the ships. So we receive our positions report every so many hours, depending on the watch schedule on deck, on the bridge.

But we always receive some kind of holiday message, so we try to aggregate those and put those together into a blog post, and it's neat to see where from around the world these folks are, and probably more importantly and the part that a lot of people forget, you know, CAPT you've talked about people not really knowing that there are so many ships and that the people are out there really.

It really makes an impact when you see how many people are at sea, hundreds and hundreds of days a year, and you know, over our holidays. So for me it's an eye-opening experience every year to get these holiday messages and to find out you know, you've got thousands of men and women at sea underway almost every day to ensure that we have the kind of life that we've accustomed to.

So, thanks to our Amvert participants. I don't know if this will spur more holiday messages or not, but we look forward to receiving those and we'll have those up on the blog in December.

So until the next time we meet, Admiral Watson, thank you very much.

Admiral Watson: Thank you.

Benjamin: CAPT Bert, thank you for taking time out of what is a busy time here at the Council of Foreign Relations and sharing a little bit about what you do here, thank you.

CAPT Bert: Thank you and thanks to the folks from Amvert. You do so many rescues, we could never do what Amvert does and you're a really great partner.

Benjamin: Well, thank you very much. And we'll catch up with everybody soon. Thank you.

Narrator: You have been listening to The Quarterdeck. Learn more about the Amvert program at amvert.com. The Quarterdeck theme song is called Botany Bay by the Blaggards, available at Musicalley.com, or follow the link in our show notes.