

Narrator: You are listening to the Quarterdeck, with your host, Benjamin Strong.

(musical interlude)

Benjamin: Hi, it's Ben Strong from Amver.com, and I'm at the Connecticut Maritime Association Shipping 2012 Conference and Exhibition in Stamford, Connecticut. I'm joined by Mr. Douglas Stevenson from the Seamen's Church Institute. How are you, Mr. Stevenson?

Mr. Stevenson: I'm fine, Ben. How are you?

Benjamin: Very good, thanks. It's great to have you with us. One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you today is, first to learn a little bit about the Seamen's Church Institute. So, Doug, if you don't mind, why don't you tell us a little bit about what your organization is and what it does.

Mr. Stevenson: The Seamen's Church Institute is one of the many seafarers' welfare organizations that seafarers go to in various ports around the world. There are about 954 chaplains around the world in 127 different countries. Almost every port will have a seamen's club run by a church organization and Seamen's Church Institute is one of them.

Benjamin: Wow. How many mariners do you service?

Mr. Stevenson: We service virtually all ships. We visit all ships that come into the port of New York and New Jersey. We collaborate with other seamen's organizations in the port like Seafarers International House and Norwegian Seamen's Church, etc. So, basically, we cover all of the seafarers that come in the Greater Port of New York, which is the third largest port in the United States. Seamen's Church Institute is very comprehensive and we have simulated trainings, we have chaplains who visit ships, we have a club in the port where seafarers can come, use free internet to call home. My job is I run the Center for Seafarers' Rights, which is a worldwide legal aid and advocacy program for merchant seafarers.

Benjamin: So this is more than just get a calling card to call your family back home or a spiritual guidance.

Mr. Stevenson: Much more, much more. The church has been involved in the maritime industry, at least Seamen's Church Institute, since 1834.

Benjamin: Wow. That's significant. I've been to your facility in New York, I know that the mariners, I know there's a club room and, I mean, it's just a host of different activities. But you've got, as you mentioned, training centers in Paducah, Kentucky?

Mr. Stevenson: And Houston, Texas.

Benjamin: Oh, wow! Okay. So there's some significant training that goes along as well.

Mr. Stevenson: Absolutely. In fact, we collaborate very carefully and closely with the Coast Guard in Paducah, Kentucky because that's the Coast Guard's Center of Excellence for the new internal waterway system, the towing vessel industry.

Benjamin: Right. Wow, that's really interesting. Now, besides the Seamen's Church Institute, you're not

just a guy who sits on shore, you're on the road quite a bit and you've had an opportunity to get under way with some mariners and actually sailed through the Gulf of Aden, didn't you?

Mr. Stevenson: We've been very involved with the piracy issue. I mean, I've been working in Seamen's Church Institute for some years, and in the early 1990 was a different problem. Today, the problem is focusing on Somalia, just turning on 2006 and 2007. What we have been trying to do is to put the effects of piracy on seafarers on the world agenda. We go to the United Nations, I spoke at the United Nations, and we've got a project to study the psychological and mental health effects of piracy on seafarers that we're conducting at Mt. Sinai University and Medical School. Also, to get a better understanding of how crews react, I took a voyage on a container ship through the Red Sea, through the Gulf of Aden just to see what it was like, and it was a very, very interesting thing to do.

Benjamin: Are the tensions higher? I mean, is the crew nervous? I mean, I'm sure, watch schedules have to change, and there are just a host of changes that occurs as you transit those waters.

Mr. Stevenson: Well, I should preface my remark by saying I was aboard a vessel with a highly experienced, highly trained crew. That was also interesting because I participated in the training. Many members of the crew had gone through the Gulf of Aden more than 70 times in the last year and a half, so they are highly trained. It was a fast ship with a high free board, so the risks were lower than other types of ships. But I will say that, because of their training, because of preparations, I felt very confident being on the ship. That being said, while we were transiting the Gulf of Aden, there was an incident where a suspicious vessel was sighted ahead of us. So the crew of the ship went in to their training mode of what they've been trained to do, anticipating there might be a pirate vessel ahead. So, yes, there was a definite rise in tension, alertness, but I will say this crew was very highly trained and they performed extremely well.

Benjamin: It's good that the transit was successful, thankfully you weren't hijacked.

Mr. Stevenson: Oh, yes.

Benjamin: But that isn't the case for a lot of these mariners. Actually, we talked a little bit before we started recording, you showed me some video where you're capturing the experiences of mariners that had been hijacked. Tell me a little more about that.

Mr. Stevenson: Yes. The maritime industry has put together best management practices and the Navy has been involved. There's a lot of activities calculated to reduce the risk of being captured by pirates. The risk of being captured by pirates has gone down or fewer ships being held by pirates now than any time since 2007. But we can't just pat ourselves on our backs without remembering that since 2006, more than 4,500 seafarers have been held hostage by pirates.

Benjamin: That's a small town.

Mr. Stevenson: What's happened to them? How are they doing? Are they being provided the medical care? Are they being stigmatized? Are they being viewed as damaged goods because of the experience? All these we're addressing, but one of the important things that we're trying to do now is to draw public attention to the effects of piracy on individual seafarers. I mean, if you go to the internet, you can bring up YouTube videos of pirate attacks and that sort of thing, but what we are doing is putting on the internet small video clips of actual interviews of seafarers who've been held hostage or otherwise affected by piracy. They're on our website, I encourage you to view them, we'll be getting more. In fact,

just last week, I was in Mombasa, Fujairah in Dubai, interviewing more seafarers who've been held hostage.

Benjamin: Well, and we'll include links to that in the show notes of the podcast. It's interesting because after 9/11, you know, when thousands of people perished there, there is a 9/11 registry to track the effects. The Veterans Administration, at least here in the United States, tracking the effects of combat on our soldiers that are returning. But really, this sounds like one of the first initiatives to really put, not just a face and a voice behind mariners who's been hijacked, but to really track the long term effects on their well being.

Mr. Stevenson: We're trying to do that, and you're right, it is the first ever, particularly with looking at the psychological effects. There've been a lot of studies on military police, etc, but seafarers are a different population. You have multicultural, international aspects of seafaring, seafaring is a culture all of its own. Seafarers are not military, they're not warriors, they didn't join the merchant vessels to do what military people do. In fact, when we started our clinical study, The Mental Health Effects of Piracy, we did a literature review and discover that there's actually no mental health studies [xx] on seafarers. There's not even a baseline from which we could assess the effects of piracy on their mental health.

Benjamin: For you to start with even producing a baseline. I mean, that really let's you know that your work is cut out for you.

Mr. Stevenson: Yes. It's been very interesting. I mean, we have to be very careful not to make any assumptions. You can't make an assumption that because seafarers has been held hostage that he's unfit for working anymore. People are resilient, people get over things. But, on the other side, there are normal symptoms that most humans will experience following a traumatic event. The extent to which we can help seafarers identify those symptoms and to identify the effective therapies that are available to deal with them, that's what we're trying to do. The biggest issue today, however, is the stigma associated with receiving mental health care. There are effective therapies that work, and seafarers should not be stigmatized by taking advantage of it.

Benjamin: Sure. I think that stigma crosses a lot of boundaries, both in the military and in public safety, and it's good to see that you're addressing that with the merchant marine community. I mean, I've had the opportunity to board ships and meet our Amver participants, and these are hardworking men and women, these are people who are at sea. If the average American or the average world citizen knew just the work that goes into getting their stuff - iPods and Nike shoes - and their goods to their local grocery store, to their electronic store I think they'd have a stronger respect for these men and women who get underway every day.

Mr. Stevenson: Yes. We both work around New York, and New York is a city there because of the maritime industry, it's there because of the harbor. A hundred years ago, everybody knew a seafarer, everybody knew about ships because if you look anywhere in Manhattan, there was a forest of ships' masts around. Today, we are even more dependent on merchant shipping than probably anytime in the history of New York City. But, because the shipping, for the most part, out of sight, out of mind, most people don't appreciate the contributions that the maritime industry makes to their daily lives.

Benjamin: Sure. I think a lot of people are naïve to the issue of piracy. I mean, with the exception of Maersk Alabama, which was just laid across the headlines here in the United States, most people don't know if there are probably several hundred mariners, as we speak, being held hostage and several ships

that are being held. I read the maritime papers and you see, if not daily perhaps weekly or monthly, there's another occurrence. I think it's important that Seamen's Church Institute, you've taken this on, and hopefully, we can share that story and help raise awareness to the piracy issue and to the aftereffects.

Mr. Stevenson: Thank you, Ben. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to talk about it.

Benjamin: Doug, thank you very much, I appreciate it. We'll make sure that we've got links to all these things in our posts.

Mr. Stevenson: Great. Enjoy your conference.

Benjamin: I will, thank you. You, too.

Narrator: You have been listening to the Quarterdeck. Learn more about the Amver Program and at Amver.com. The Quarterdeck theme song is called "Botany Bay" by the Blaggards, available at MusicAlley.com or follow the link in our show notes.

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