

Narrator: You're listening to The Quarterdeck with Benjamin Strong and Coast Guard Admiral Jim Watson.

Benjamin: Hi, it's Ben Strong from Amver.com. I'd like to welcome you to the fifth edition of the Amver podcast, The Quarterdeck. Today's episode is a special interview with IMO about Day of the Seafarer. Hi, it's Ben Strong from Amver.com and I'm in London, England at the International Maritime Organization Headquarters. I'm here with Ashok, the Head of Maritime Training and Human Element Section. Good morning. How are you?

Ashok: Fine. Good morning. I'm here with Karine, the new Media Officer. We want to talk a little bit about the Day of the Seafarer, which is coming up June 25th. You'll probably be listening to this perhaps a day or two after the Seafarer. But, at least at the Amver family, we thought it was important to share with our audience what IMO is doing in regards to Day of the Seafarer. So Karine, tell us a little bit about what Day of the Seafarer is.

Karine: Yes, definitely. This year basically Day of the Seafarer is the first campaign. It's an online campaign, so we are using a new approach here with IMO. The goal really is to pay tribute to the world's 1.5 million seafarers – you know, the men and the women – for their unique contribution to world trade and the well-being of all of us, really. The approach is new this year, because we want people to voice their support for seafarers by social networks like Facebook, Twitter, posting videos on YouTube, discussing seafarers issues on LinkedIn and writing blogs about it, about life at sea and such.

Benjamin: You've got a pretty aggressive campaign online. I've seen you on LinkedIn. I've seen there's a Flickr page. There's a YouTube page. Actually I think beyond the IMO, I recently saw video – and I'll have to include a link to it in our show notes – but there was a UK-based "What if they all disappeared?" It's as if all the mariners in the world disappeared.

Ashok: It's something, which I would like to talk about. Unfortunately, the poor seafarer is not given his due. That was the first time when you looked at what happens when the ships disappear, rather a grim situation. But just pause for a minute. Think what would happen if the seafarer was not doing his job today. What would happen? There would be probably places where foodstuffs will not reach. There would be places where fuel would not reach. There would be places where gifts, loaded in containers, would not reach in time for the festive seasons. I don't think the general public today is aware at all when they go into either a supermarket or to a gas station or to one of the luxury item stores, or realize that but for the seafarers, their life would have been pretty difficult. To say the least it would be difficult, if not pretty impossible. Imagine that, in a severe winter storm, on the northeast coast of America there is no fuel around. What would happen with the famous lake-effects that you get, winds blowing in?

Benjamin: Right.

Ashok: These are the things, which we take for granted, yet forget giving the seafarer his due. When something happens – I'm not saying that it should happen, but accidents do happen – when does the seafarer or shipping come into the news? When there's an accident. People are more concerned about a bird with oil or a beach with oil. I'm not saying that that is very good. At the same time, recognize the difficulties that seafarer faces. It could have been an accident due to elements of nature. Yet, the first thing that is done against the seafarer is hold him guilty. The normal legal terminology that you are innocent until proven guilty works the other way round when it comes to seafarers. I'm sorry, but that is the truth.

Benjamin: I think you make some excellent points. One of the challenges with the Amver system that we face, because it's one of the goals that we have with Amver, is to share the good news of shipping. These are our mariners, seafarers. Many of these men and women are at sea most of the year, away from their families and they are out saving lives. One of the challenges that I face is, particularly with the media at times, sharing the good news stories. They are very quick to show an oily bird. But if we have say a Sri Lankan able-bodied seaman, who is away from home 300 days out of the year but he rescues a baby, it's very difficult to get that on BBC or SkyNews. I'm sure here in an island nation like Britain, people are somewhat, perhaps aware of their dependency, maybe not as much as we would like. But even in the United States we may produce a lot of goods. But the majority of our things come by ship.

Ashok: No, it's a fact. It's a very funny thing that we depend on them so much, yet we just don't know anything about them.

Benjamin: That's a good point. That's a good point. There is very little known about them.

Ashok: Probably the reason is very clear to me, because the poor seafarer is not a vote bank for the politician. Let me be honest about it. His vote doesn't matter. If they were a vote bank anywhere, believe me, the politicians and the powers to be would listen and would have given them their due.

Benjamin: Well, hopefully the Day of the Seafarer will help to spread the word and share the significant contributions of mariners around the world.

Ashok: For this I'm particularly pleased, because this was an outcome of the Diplomatic Conference last year in June, on the 25th, when we adopted amendments to the new training and certification regime for the seafarers. The Conference decided that this day should be dedicated to the seafarer to tell them thank you for all they have done. I'm not saying that we will achieve everything in one year. If we get 15% to 20% recognition in a period of five years, I would consider my job done.

Benjamin: Well, that's the nice thing about this. This will be a recurring event, correct?

Karine: Exactly. Every year, every 25th of June, we will have this campaign. This is the first time this year and we have already exceeded some of our expectations. We are really happy that at least the people out there are reaching out, are helping to spread the word and that every year it will get bigger and bigger and people will finally start to understand and appreciate the role of seafarers around the world.

Benjamin: You mentioned – we were talking in the elevator beforehand – beyond the Facebook and Twitter and the new social Internet tools that you are using, there's a group of seafarers in South Africa that's going to do a flash mob.

Karine: Yeah.

Benjamin: There are some very interesting ways that people are celebrating. I think celebrating is the right word. Celebrate the seafarers.

Karine: Yeah, people have gotten very creative this year. We were very impressed by some of the events being held. In South Africa they were doing a flash mob where everyone will be wearing a life jacket in public spaces, photo contests of life at sea in Brazil. People have gotten really creative and we are very happy. We encourage more and more nations to follow and jump on the bandwagon with that, yes.

Ashok: This truly will be celebrated on a regular basis. It is now on the UN calendar as one of the UN events, that every year, the 25th June is celebrated as the Day of the Seafarer.

Benjamin: I think that's important. We talked about how people don't really know seafarers. I know that there's another campaign – the Save Our Seafarers. Besides the fact that people don't even know seafarers, they probably don't realize that there are hundreds, as we speak, being held hostage, ships that have been held by pirates and terrorists for months on end. I'm sure it's very rewarding for the men and women who are sailing. But it's certainly still a very dangerous profession.

Ashok: It indeed is. Ask me. I have sailed on ships right from as a cadet to being a Captain of a very large crew carrier, bulk carrier. Believe me, it is a difficult job, definitely. Challenging, adventurous, but at the same time, pretty dangerous. We do not realize it sitting here today. But believe me, when you are in the ocean, left to the fury of the elements of nature, it's Captain next to God and God is their only Savior there. They are very lonely over there, because there would be nothing for miles together. Yes, Amver does do a lot of things. But there are times they have their limitations. Maybe it takes a couple of days for something to get across. He has to manage until he gets the help. There are times when they don't even get help. Yet, should something happen, as I mentioned earlier, he is the first one who was strung behind.

Benjamin: It always boils down to the master.

Ashok: Yes.

Benjamin: Yes indeed. Well, in celebrating mariners, I had an opportunity yesterday to head down to Portsmouth. Probably the best part of my job is being able to recognize seafarers that have saved lives. We have an interesting statistic with Amver that I hope IMO can use as well. In 2010, when we broke down the number of lives that were saved by Amver ships – and there are many, many more ships that are saving lives, of which the three of us probably will never even know – but when we did the math, it boiled down to every 33 hours an Amver ship, and those are just a narrow slice of the shipping community, a commercial ship, an Amver ship was rescuing a life somewhere in the world. So almost one a day. That's significant. To be able to give life back, to save lives is a significant contribution. So yesterday I was able to recognize the crew of a Royal research vessel that saved four people off the coast of Africa, whose sailboat was in danger. But these cases happen every day. Sadly the media doesn't report them like we wish they would. But they occur every day. There is a tremendous risk that these crews put themselves through to help people.

Ashok: The media doesn't like good news. The media thrives on bad news.

Benjamin: We hate to laugh. But yes, you're absolutely right.

Karine: That's why we have to organize campaigns to actually voice that a little bit more prominently. If the media doesn't, then we'll be on Facebook. We'll be on Twitter and we'll hopefully be spreading the good words and promoting the campaign.

Benjamin: More and more mariners are starting to use these tools as well. They are becoming more savvy. The Internet is becoming a little more available on ships.

Ashok: Yes. But like Karine was saying, what we need to do is use these tools and get people to understand and recognize the seafaring profession. Today they are blissfully unaware. In some ways the press has not been the friend that we would have liked it to be, because for them, I understand they have to sell their space and everything. We need to find a media by which we can get across to people to realize what seafaring is. They must recognize that there is a profession on which we are totally dependent. Without shipping or the seafarers, your world economy will grind to a stall. Forget having a recession. We will probably go down to a meltdown. That is not something, which– this is a slow process. I can say that it'll take us a long time. Like I said before, if I achieve 10% to 15% in the next five years, I am very satisfied. It will take a very long time. But we are on it. Karine is there. I am there. We are working together. We will definitely get there. I'm very positive about it.

Benjamin: Well, we're certainly going to share the links to the Day of the Seafarer and remind our listeners and our participants that this is recurring. This is going to be an annual event. Mariners should look forward to it. The three of us can't solve this problem of recognizing mariners. So I would issue a challenge to our listeners and to the readers of the blogs and Facebook and to the mariners themselves, that we can't go out and take photos and videos and recognize them. It's their responsibility as well. One of the challenges we face is that it's difficult to promote people that perhaps aren't maybe as savvy. Certainly there are restrictions on Internet and time and crews are smaller. But one photograph of a sunset over the bow or a wave over the stern or something – we need them to contribute. I guess I'll issue the challenge at least to the Amver community. We want to recognize you. The IMO certainly wants to recognize you. You deserve to be recognized. But I'll challenge you and say that we need your stories and photographs and videos.

Karine: And to the general public and the listeners, our call to action this year is very simple. You go on Facebook. You log on Seafarer Day and you just write, "Thank you seafarers." That's all we ask for this year is your recognition and your respect for seafarers. So log on or you can tweet, "Thank you seafarers." You can use any social network that you want and just voice your support and we will be very happy for this year.

Benjamin: So, "Thank you seafarers.", is what we are asking for.

Karine: Exactly.

Benjamin: We hope that people take the time to thank a mariner. Maybe they are on a cruise ship. They can thank their crew right there. Maybe they live down by the docks and there is a mariner, who comes into their grocery store to buy a phone card and some fruit before getting underway again. Maybe it's one of the seafaring ministries. They could thank a minister or maybe there is a woman in the West End of London, who knits mittens for mariners. Thank her. There are a number of ways for people to get involved. But you are certainly encouraging the "Thank you seafarers." on any host of social networks. We'll be doing that in Amver and I know that there are many followers, who will be doing so as well. Any last thoughts you have for the maritime community or the general public?

Ashok: I am an ex-seafarer. So I know what they go through. I'm trying to get some kind of recognition to them. I'm trying. I can't say I can succeed. But it will not be for want of trying. But once again, thank you for all the good work that you are now continuing. It has been a tremendous effort from your side. Thank you.

Benjamin: Well, from the United States Coast Guard and from Amver and just as a guy that needs things – consumer goods and food – thank you, because, as a mariner, you have helped provide a lifestyle to which I have become accustomed. To all of our listeners, thank you. To Karine, for helping to share the word and spearhead this effort, thank you. So we'll have links to these various social media sites in the show notes. Again, we encourage everybody to check out Day of the Seafarer on June 25th and to make sure that they say, "Thank you seafarers."

Ashok: Every year.

Benjamin: Every year. Absolutely.

Narrator: You have been listening to The Quarterdeck. Learn more about the Amver program 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.