

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 and welcome to another edition of The Quarterdeck podcast. Kind of an exciting podcast for this episode, we're at the US Coast Guard Innovation Expo in Tampa, and for the first time in our podcasting history I'm able to sit down with my co-host, Admiral Watson. Admiral, how are you so?

Admiral Watson: I'm doing great, Ben. It's great to be sitting here next to you instead of across the airwaves.

Benjamin: Yeah, our distributive technology works well so that we're able to get together online, but it's much nicer to meet in person. And I think we're being spoiled by the Florida weather, so I'm kind of glad to be down here this week. I can't say we're relaxing because we're working pretty hard, but it's nice to catch up with everybody, it's always a good thing.

Admiral Watson: Sure.

Benjamin: And Amver, we've been busy this summer, and into autumn we're up now over 5,000 ships on plot every day which is remarkable, I mean just remarkable. And you just returned from Greece?

Admiral Watson: I did. I was invited by the International Propeller Club of Athens, Greece. Wonderful group, huge turnout. We were able to give awards to approximately 135 different companies who collectively own 945 ships.

Benjamin: Yeah, it's an amazing...

Admiral Watson: All participating in Amver, many of them for up to 20 years, longstanding participants. So it was great to meet the people, meet the ship-owners. I met a lot of the captains, so it was very, very good for me.

Benjamin: And that award ceremony, not that it's a competition, but it's the biggest in the world. But what's nice is we have those ceremonies emulated and replicated around the world. So the international turnout, it may be two or three people at the consulate in New Zealand or over 1,000 people at the inter-continental hotel in Athens, but it's really a nice opportunity to be able to recognize our merchant mariner partners that participate in Amver. And the Greeks know how to throw a good party.

Admiral Watson: Oh, yeah. And I know you go to a lot of them, but I was really happy to be able to go to that particular one.

Benjamin: It's ironic, I've actually never been to that dinner. So one of these days I hope to be able to attend and hopefully I'll have enough stamina to get through the night. And I know the Greeks would be proud to hear that we're mentioning their contribution to Amver again, but notwithstanding, they set a good example and we're pleased with all of our Amver participants. And I'm also excited because here with us at the Innovation Expo, we have Lieutenant Christie Casey from the National Maritime Center, and the National Maritime Center handles -- you're going to have to correct me if I'm wrong here -- but you handle all of the Merchant Mariner Credentialing for US sailors, is that correct?

LT Casey: Correct.

Benjamin: So if I want to work on a boat, I've always heard rumors much the building I work in houses a regional exam center or an REC, so I've heard terms like Z-Card and MMD and things like that, these are all terms that I know our audience will understand.

LT Casey: Definitely. And they're actually now housed under the Merchant Mariner Credential, so that's just a migration from the Z-Card MMD to their MMC.

Benjamin: Alright. Exciting, but I know that you get on the message boards or you talk to people out in the field or you talk to somebody on the docks and they say it's kind of like making sausage, how does the whole process work? And I thought that it would probably be good for listeners to get kind of first-hand knowledge and hear first-hand exactly how the process works, and it's changed a little bit hasn't it?

LT Casey: Definitely, from before centralization in 2008 where regional exam centers handled the processing of an application, and from medical to security, basically that was all handled at the regional exam center level. Now at the National Maritime Center in Martinsburg, West Virginia, we have medical professionals that are in-house that handle issues that mariners face medically. You have a branch solely dedicated to qualifications, testing requirements. A branch solely dedicated to security. And in-processing of the application, making sure the application is complete and ready to go through kind of the cycle of the building to basically produce the MMC for the mariner.

Benjamin: Right. So let me just take a step back. I'm a young guy, I want to go to sea. My memory of it, or I'm sure I'm going to talk to some salty guy on the ship who's going to say "oh, you go down to the regional exam center." How do you do it now? Talk to me as a person that wants to become a mariner, what do I have to do now to get that credential, to get that piece of paper?

LT Casey: Basically, the first step in the process is the Transportation of Working Identification Credential, the TWIC card.

Benjamin: Which is different than the licensing isn't it?

LT Casey: Exactly, exactly. So you start with the background checks and everything. That requires fingerprinting. And after you've vetted and you receive the TWIC card, then you start the application process, the 719K. So you complete that form and actually, on our website, we have a checklist of you know, from beginning to end, how to present us with a complete application so we can go forward and there's no lag time, sending back requests for information from you. You have that checklist to go back to make sure it's fully complete when it gets to NMC, and it further reduces the time it takes to get the credential in the mariner's hands.

Benjamin: So there's really no excuse for me to not follow the process correctly if you've got this checklist available.

LT Casey: Exactly.

Benjamin: And what's the website for the checklist?

LT Casey: It is www.uscg.mil/nmc

Benjamin: Alright, and we'll make sure that that link is in our show notes so that folks can download that list. How long does it -- I know you're not the TWIC card expert, so I don't want to put you on the spot, but if I need a TWIC card to then work towards my... do I have to have a TWIC card before I get my Merchant Mariner Credentials now?

LT Casey: At this time, there is still the requirement that everyone that has Merchant Mariner Credential has to have a TWIC Card.

Benjamin: Which makes sense, because I'm going to have to have access to the port. I may not necessarily be driving in or bringing goods in by truck, but I'm going to end up in the port because I'm on a boat. And what's the timeframe for a TWIC card, how long does that generally take?

LT Casey: I would say anywhere from 30 to 60 days, I'm not...

Benjamin: Right, I know you're not the TWIC card expert. Well, we can also include a link. I'll look up the TWIC process so we can include a link in that as well and kind of show that sequentially. So once I've downloaded my checklist and I've filled out, I assume there's an application online that I fill out and then I remember, just because I work with a regional exam center in the same building, do I bring a sack of cash with me or how does this...? I've seen, there are examples of mariners coming in literally with change and dollar bills. Is that what I do now or do I use a credit card, how do I...?

LT Casey: Generally now, you go to pay.gov and pay using your credit card, debit card, and you actually can print a receipt from there to bring in with your application.

Benjamin: Okay.

LT Casey: Or you know, you can do the same thing when you go into a regional exam center. They can actually help you complete that process of payment there inside as well.

Benjamin: Now do I have to go inside a regional exam center at all?

LT Casey: You do not.

Benjamin: Okay.

LT Casey: You can complete your application fully online through our website. You have the link to fill out the application there. And then actually when you forward it, it goes to the regional exam center from there, but you don't actually have to step foot in.

Benjamin: Okay, so times have changed.

Admiral Watson: But I want to emphasize that the regional exam centers are all still there. There was a lot of concern back, as Christie mentioned, when we centralized that there wasn't going to be an interface location for the mariners and there still is. We still have all of the regional exam centers. In fact the people there can even be more helpful to the walk-in customers because they don't have to do all of this evaluation work, it's all done at the National Maritime Center. So really we've added a lot of customer service to this whole system that used to be a bit challenging, really, for the mariner and for the coast guard back before we had a National Maritime Center. And you know, we have to thank actually our supports in congress for the fact that we were able to get funding for both the facility and

the additional people at the National Maritime Center in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

Benjamin: So if I'm having a hiccup, and I don't know, I live in Manhattan and I happen to work in Manhattan, I can schedule an appointment and go into the NMC, and now this person -- I'm sorry, can go into the regional exam center, and the person that's there is not working on a line of ten other mariners and they can take a little extra time and help me through the process. That's pretty nice.

LT Casey: Exactly. That have that time, and you can do that by either going on our website and actually hitting the link for the regional exam center that's nearest you, you can call into our customer service center, 1-888-427-5662 and they can schedule the appointment for you, but the regional exam center representatives, they have the past experience of completing the application, going through the whole process. So they have valuable experience to impart to the mariners to help them along in the process and to answering any questions that they may have.

Benjamin: Great. Now let's say I've got my application in and I've done my payment. The \$64,000 question is how long does it take? When should I expect to get my license?

LT Casey: Within 30 days. We've actually gotten the processing time down to 10-13 days, but 95% of the merchant mariners out there now are receiving their Merchant Mariner Credentials within 30 days.

Benjamin: So of course I'm going to be rubbing elbows with somebody on my ship or in my crew who is one of those outliers who doesn't get his license within 30 days, and that crewmember is going to be very vocal about how long it takes. So if I've got a question or complaint, you mentioned a phone number, do you mind, I can call and say what's up? Where's my license?

LT Casey: Definitely, right. And it's 1-888-427-5662, and if you're offshore, you have no phone capabilities, you can also email and we generally answer all email queries within 24-48 hours of receiving them, and that's at iasknmc@uscg.mil. That's iasknmc@uscg.mil.

Benjamin: And we'll have a link to that in the show notes as well. You've really made it pretty easy.

LT Casey: We're trying.

Benjamin: Now what kind of things might trigger a hiccup or what might slow the process up because there are always going to be hiccups.

LT Casey: Definitely. Medical complications, testing.

Benjamin: So you've got physicians or PAs, you've got medical professionals on-staff that are looking at this that can say oh, this isn't an issue, let's move it on or it is an issue and then do they go back to the mariner or to their physician and ask additional questions or how does it work?

LT Casey: They go back to the mariner. They'll send an email, basically, running down what information they need back to make a determination on whether the mariner can sail, whether there will be additional issues or anything like that. The mariner then goes to their doctor, gets the information and then provides it back to NMC.

Benjamin: Okay, so it's still pretty streamlined even if there is a flag that pops up.

LT Casey: Exactly.

Admiral Watson: And there can be professional issues as well, such as the sea time, the course completions, the things that you need to do. A lot of folks are trying to upgrade their license. They are typically trying to request as many credentials as they can, and they're of course using their experience on whatever ships they've sailed on and there's lots of different rules that the professionals there at the National Maritime Center can answer questions about as well as the REC. But sometimes, that's where the back-and-forth gets involved too with needing just the right evidence that you are qualified for the particular credential that you've applied for.

Benjamin: And that evidence hasn't changed since the days of the REC, you still have to produce that evidence.

Admiral Watson: Absolutely.

Benjamin: So it's not like you've made the process more burdensome, it's just instead of bringing that piece of credential to the REC you're forwarding it to the National Maritime Center.

Admiral Watson: That's right.

Benjamin: Okay, so it's not like you've tripped us up or anything like that, there's no funny...

LT Casey: We're trying to make it easier.

Benjamin: Easy and as smooth as possible. Now we were talking a little bit out at your stand, and if I understand correctly, I may be putting you on the spot a little bit here -- but you're going to be exhibiting soon, and this will be on the Amver website here soon, but you're going to be exhibiting at the Work Boat Show down in New Orleans, that's I believe the first week of December, and you're going to have a pretty healthy... you're going to have doctors there, I'm saying healthy and it sounds kind of corny, no pun intended. But you're going to have a robust presence there so that people who do have questions or maybe want to check, New Orleans is a pretty big maritime community. So if I want to check the status, can I do that at Work Boat? Can I come by the booth and you guys can kind of check on things and help me out?

LT Casey: Definitely. We'll have the medical staff on board, the professional qualification evaluators, they'll be on board as well. So they'll be able to actually look at your individual.

Benjamin: So if I'm maybe somebody like in an operations department, I'm on shore now, it might be a good idea for me to -- it almost sounds like I'm promoting the Work Boat Show, but this would be a good opportunity to meet the people behind the scenes in West Virginia, maybe develop and foster a good relationship with them from an operations standpoint or a ship management standpoint. Really once you've got that relationship built, and we all could probably agree that things automatically go smoother. So it's good to know you're going to have a strong, robust presence there at the Work Boat Show, and you're reaching out to other shows as well. Is that on your website as well, any potential trade shows or places that you're going to be, is there a link for that as well?

LT Casey: That's in development, so in the future we will have that for mariners too.

Benjamin: Okay, great. So there's no excuse for me to not be able to reach somebody for help, to have a

smooth and easy way to send in my information and to get my credential almost as quickly as possible.

LT Casey: Exactly.

Benjamin: Good. I really appreciate you taking some time to talk to us.

LT Casey: I appreciate you having me.

Benjamin: And for the work that you do. So thank you very much, lieutenant. Admiral, it seems like a pretty smooth process.

Admiral Watson: It is. You know, I'd also like to mention that as the policy guy, that we actually have two excellent advisory committees, the Merchant Mariner Personnel Advisory Committee and the Merchant Mariner Medical Advisory Committee, which just had its inaugural meeting just about a month ago, and so a lot of the mariners, no matter what segment of the industry they're in, they have a representative on that committee, maybe one or both of those committees, and we obviously take their advice very, very seriously. We're in the process of writing multiple navigation and vessel inspection circulars, on for example, the medical issue to provide guidance to the National Maritime Center on processing of different applicants' medical issues. We're also very involved right now with implementing the STCW changes that the United States is a party to, and a lot of those affect the training and the requirements for people that need to sail internationally.

Benjamin: Okay.

Admiral Watson: And so I just want to point folks to those two committees. I think that they have members that are reachable by just about anybody in the maritime themselves. I don't have the websites, but maybe we can get you that too.

Benjamin: Sure, we can look that up and include those links as well. So I guess the bottom line here is this has become a much more inclusive process, a much easier process as far as accessing customer service, and perhaps the horror stories that people may have heard in the past are history, really a thing of the past.

Admiral Watson: Well we made this a cornerstone of our marine safety improvement plan. Priority number one was to take care of the mariners themselves. We had, obviously, to do some internal issues with our own competencies in training and I can talk to those another time, but as far as the mariners credentialing process, I think we've really throw everything we can at it. We know that there's still room for improvement, and so please give us your thoughts by email or phone call or through your representative at the advisory committees.

Benjamin: Yeah, and if people who are listening or reading the blog have comments, they can leave comments on the blog and as the Amver team we're happy to forward those on to the National Maritime Center. So there's no excuse if people have feedback or suggestions to not get that to the right people. You've got Admiral Watson who's in charge of the whole show, and we've got representatives here with Lieutenant Casey from the National Maritime Center, and we're listening just as much as you're listening to us. So this is good, I'm glad that we had an opportunity to sit down together face-to-face and have a chance to talk about credentials at the National Maritime Center. Anything on the horizon that's coming up?

Admiral Watson: Well, I'm continuing to go to various meetings. I just attended a meeting of the Intertanko Environmental Committee in Connecticut. I'm on my way down to Houston soon to a Mary Conference, which is also going to be some tanker folks. We'll be out in Seattle for the Fishing Vessel Safety Advisory Committee as well as the Fish Expo that occurs on an annual basis there. I'm looking forward to learning a little bit more about our fishing industry. As you know, we got some legislation last year that directs the coast guard to make some improvements in fishing vessel safety, so never a dull moment.

Benjamin: No, never. And we're actually going to be -- for those that want to interact with the Amver team, we'll be out in China at the Marintec Shipping Exhibition the first week of December, essentially the same time Work Boat is going on we'll be in Shanghai. So for all of our international partners and listeners that want to come see us, we'll be in the US pavilion there in Shanghai and look forward to meeting with you and enrolling more Chinese and Pacific-area ships. So I think this is going to turn out to be a good year for Amver. We've got numbers that are at least telling us that we've got record numbers of ships on plot, and we're very proud of our partners that help us achieve these goals and gosh, that's about it. It's nice to actually sit down and be able to chat with you. So I think for now, that'll wrap things up for this edition of The Quarterdeck and we'll look forward to catching up in the next month.

Admiral Watson: Good seeing you again.

Benjamin: Thanks, Admiral Watson. Thank you, and thank you Lieutenant Casey.

LT Casey: Thank you.

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.