

3 January 2008

Learning from *Annabella*

Time for some serious rethinking?

***A one-day conference in London Docklands
Tuesday 22 January 2008***

On 22 January at the Museum in Docklands, a former warehouse near Canary Wharf in East London, a one-day conference will address a number of issues affecting the safe operation of shortsea container ships and will question a number of established practices and traditions. For example, should the ultimate responsibility for the safety of the vessel always lie solely with the master, even when he and his fellow officers have little opportunity to monitor accurately what is being loaded? And if, as the industry seems to accept, there is a serious problem with container weights being understated by shippers, why don't we insist on weighing boxes before they are loaded?

Taking as its starting point a report by the UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) into an incident on board the 868TEU UK-flag container vessel *Annabella* in February 2007, the conference will address the question "Is the shortsea container shipping industry capable of implementing safe working practices given the operational complexities and commercial pressures it faces today?".

On a voyage from Rotterdam and Antwerp to Helsinki, a stack of seven 30ft containers stowed in *Annabella's* no 3 hold collapsed. Fortunately little damage was done and no one suffered injuries but the outcome could have been catastrophic given that the top three containers in the stack were carrying Butylene Gas (IMDG Class 2.1, UN 1012). Furthermore, *Annabella* had been built to an open-hatch design; no 3 hold was an open hold.

The subsequent report by the MAIB was thorough, various specific failings were identified and recommendations were directed to those involved, including the ship manager and the charterer. However, the terminal operators and the software suppliers were also found wanting in certain areas.

It should be noted here that *Annabella* was a modern ship built by one of Germany's leading shipbuilders and managed by a highly professional ship management company. That such an accident could happen to this ship, the conference organisers suggest, indicates that some aspects of shortsea container shipping operations are fundamentally flawed and need examination, especially with regard to the future development of intra-European intermodal container equipment.

The MAIB recommended to the International Chamber of Shipping that it should work with the industry to develop and then promote adherence to a best practice safety code. This is clearly a laudable initiative but how far should we go in search of solutions?

Is the master in a position to ensure that his vessel stowage plan is safe?

In *Annabella*'s case, one of the principal causes of the stack collapse was that the two containers stowed at the bottom of the stack of seven containers were crushed by the weight of the containers loaded above them. These containers were of similar construction and both had an allowable stacking weight for 1.8g of 100.5 tonnes. However the stowage plan prepared ashore resulted in the lowest container supporting a weight of 191.22 tonnes and the second lowest 159.14 tonnes. The third container in the stack had an allowable stacking weight of 108 tonnes which was also exceeded by 20 tonnes.

As the MAIB pointed out, while an individual container's capacity, strength and maintenance details are clearly marked on the CSC safety approval plate, this was of no assistance to either the planners or the chief officer in alerting them, either at the planning or loading stage, to the fact that the allowable stacking weights of the containers would be exceeded when the seven containers were stowed in number 3 hold.

Since the master had no way of knowing that he was dealing with containers that had not been designed to support a stack weight of even half the ISO standard, 213.36 tonnes, he was clearly not in a position to assume ultimate responsibility for the safety of his vessel.

Conference delegates will be invited to consider whether it is now time that the shipping industry made a break with tradition by placing full responsibility for the safe planning of a container vessel stow with properly qualified shore personnel.

As things stand at present, the conference organisers note, ship planners need no professional qualifications. Surely it is questionable as to whether this is acceptable given the safety implications associated with the work they do?

If the industry is not ready for such a break with tradition, it should perhaps reflect on what the MAIB said on this subject:

“Notwithstanding any cargo planning carried out ashore, the master has ultimate responsibility for the safety of his vessel. He must therefore be given the tools and the time to satisfy himself of the safety of the planned cargo disposition.”

Container shipping lines, and terminal operators for that matter, might like to calculate how much time the master of a container vessel, whether it be *Annabella* or *Emma Maersk*, would need “to satisfy himself of the safety of the planned cargo disposition” and how that might impact on handling rates.

Why not weigh containers?

While the misdeclaration of container weights was not identified as an issue in the *Annabella* report, the conference organisers found that this was a really hot subject for many of those with whom the draft programme was discussed. Therefore it was decided to include time in the schedule to discuss whether it would be practical and desirable to weigh all containers prior to loading thus ensuring that the ship planners have access to accurate data. For reasons that are not at all clear, there seems to be resistance to the concept of mandatory weighing of containers despite the fact that it would not only improve safety levels at sea but it would also enable road transport operators to know accurately the weights of the containers they are carrying, so avoiding illegal running.

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The MAIB report is available by clicking on:

http://www.maib.dft.gov.uk/cms_resources/Annabella.pdf.