



## Captain's speech at the annual shipping dinner of the Nautical Association of Hamburg Hotel InterContinental Hamburg 02.02.2010

*Captain Erich Schapmann, Reederei NSB*

Ladies and gentlemen,

The chairman of the Nautical Association of Hamburg requested the management of our Reederei NSB to invite a Captain from the fleet to speak to you at this shipping dinner.

Our CEO Helmut Ponath invited me from our group of 180 Captains to deliver this address. I was naturally delighted by the offer and am glad to meet his request.

I've been in this profession for nearly four decades now. Although I don't sport the typical Captain's beard, somewhat higher on my head it can be impressively seen that this statement corresponds to the truth.

I'll report on my career and my long-standing experience in seafaring and would also like to take this opportunity to make some critical comments on some changes in shipping.

**So how did my shipping career begin?**

How does someone from Münsterland after passing his advanced-level school-leaving certificate hit on the idea of making seafaring his career? There is the river Ems, which could be used at most for launching little paper boats folded out of newspaper.

I sat together with friends in this beautiful Münsterland in 1971. We were looking forward to the forthcoming end of our schooling. I didn't actually know much about ships, and I'd never considered the possibility of going to sea myself.

One of my friends then told me about his decision to train as a nautical officer and managed to make me enthusiastic about seafaring. I decided to learn this profession directly after this discussion.

The possibility of doing a nautical training in lieu of the forthcoming national service did not necessarily stand in the way of my opting to learn this profession, so I have this decision to thank for the fact that I've already been a seafarer for nearly 40 years.

I live in Münsterland again today, and for my friends the profession of Captain is just as impressive as it was for me at that time. In particular the dimensions in container shipping today are imposing, which I could confirm not least by the fact that I had the camera team and the moderator of the programme Quarks & Co., Ranga Yogeshwar, on board for some days.

So I started off with my training here in Hamburg at the Finkenwerder School of Navigation in summer 1971. My fellow students and I were prepared for our first deployment. Before we went on board, we were accommodated in the School of Navigation. We learned about handling fire extinguishers and life boats as well as the first seamen's knots. A special focus was laid on interpersonal relationships, how to get on with others in a team and the rules for life on board, an important part of our profession, as was later continually evident.

When I now report on for instance the ships I've got to know, I won't be giving an orderly itemisation year by year but presenting vessels that could somehow impress me.

My first ship concerning which I can also say that she was the most interesting vessel was MS HOLSATIA of the shipping line Hapag-Lloyd.

I had the great good fortune to obtain a training place on this modern general cargo ship. We were 9 officer applicants, who were instructed by a training officer and a training bosun. This vessel, with its own cargo-handling gear, was the most interesting ship for me because I greatly enjoyed working with derricks and masts, blocks and wire ropes as well as loading and unloading and stowing and lashing cargo, which made me even more enthusiastic about shipping. It was impressive to see for instance heavy cargo being loaded and unloaded with the vessel's own cargo handling gear or tanks being prepared for filling with vegetable oils. The Indonesia round voyage, from one island to the next, with countless additional checkers, tallymen and unskilled workers for tank cleaning who were all on board, in some cases accommodated on deck as they travelled along with us, was certainly a uniquely exotic experience.

MS ISARSTEIN, built in 1954, was the oldest ship and also the least comfortable. She still had direct current and for operating for example a tape recorder a "converter", as we called it, was required. Without an airconditioning plant, it sometimes

became quite hot and damp. There were naturally only communal showers and toilets. On the ship's side on which the communal showers were located, no washbasins had been installed in the cabins. It was certainly not a comfortable life on this vessel by today's standards, but I'm glad to have served on a ship with hatchway beams and wooden hatchcovers in the 'tweendecks. This type of vessel will probably never be built again. But it is still impressive for me today that I could directly experience how life was on ships in the 1950s.

My active time at sea was interrupted for three years when I studied nautical science in Bremen. It was just as important to study rules of stability and navigation as for instance the maritime laws and regulations. Instruction in terrestrial and astronomical navigation was naturally given far more importance than for example training in technical navigation. Having to solve problems in astronomy with the aid of log tables, etc. at that time was already quite a challenge for us shipping students. The computer was still in its infancy and with the instruction in information technology in those days it was still impossible to forecast how swiftly IT, as it is called today, would develop in the years ahead.

I concluded my training with the certificate Master Mariner and the graduation document as qualified nautical officer, a reward for three strenuous but also interesting years.

### **Back to the ships**

My first job as navigation officer was on the Ro/Ro ship UN-DINE of the Bremen-based Wallenius Reederei. The vessel was deployed in commuter traffic between Antwerp and Harwich. We thus had to cross the English Channel every night with the assistance of only a very simple radar and a Decca unit. Coming fresh from school, I naturally had the rules of the road in my head and knew that every ship approaching from port and on a collision course has to give way. However, I had to find out in practice that not every vessel keeps to these rules.

I thus had to perform my first turning circles to prevent collisions. The experience that certainly not every ship meets its obligation to give way is unfortunately still confirmed by practical examples.

I went on cruises in the Caribbean on MS CARIBE and MS BOHEME for two years. I can't say that this time bored me, quite the opposite in fact, it was pure fun and those were probably the finest trips I've experienced. Weekly departures from Miami led to the most beautiful destinations, mostly in the best weather. The Captain's cocktail party on Sundays was a strenuous duty for me as unpractised dancer. We officers stood on the stage and the Captain introduced us one by one to the passengers. Then followed "Ladies' Choice", and so you couldn't evade the compulsory dances even without special capabilities in Viennese waltzes or slow fox. The shipping line was very generous and had allowed wives to go along free of charge. Even if on Sunday our wives had to sit back and watch the Ladies' Choice, we enjoyed the time together with the entertaining life on board and wonderful shore excursions.

The England ferry PRINCE OBERON, in liner service between Bremerhaven and Harwich, was the most family-oriented ship. We were in Bremerhaven every second day and could see our families, even if only for a few hours in each case. I was on this ship between 1978 and 1983, initially as 1st officer and then as Captain.

Then there was a vessel on which the crew members were expected very longingly by their wives in port. I served for a long time under foreign flag and there it was the rule that the sailors were paid gross in US dollars only for the time on board. They were themselves responsible for saving for their holidays, social security and tax declaration. Wages were paid in cash on board at the end of each voyage of five weeks and not transferred to a bank account. You could thus be certain that the wives always longingly expected their husbands when the ship arrived in Hamburg.

The ship with the greatest roll movements I experienced was under Liberian flag. The WILLIAM R. ADAMS did not have any side keels but was equipped only with a "flume tank". Two side tanks connected with one another prevented the vessel righting up too fast. I'm not spinning any seaman's yarn when I now say that the ship rolled 45° and more in bad weather in the North Atlantic. The overflowing water of the "flume tanks" added on up to 5° more. They were extremely unpleasant conditions. The worries about the stability calculation, which I had indeed done myself, vanished in part only after the ship had righted itself again sometimes from an over 45° list.

The vessel on which I had the finest voyages was MS NOBLE EAGLE. She was my first containership, on which I went as Captain of Moorender Schiffahrtsgesellschaft. This was a newbuilding of the shipyard Bremer Vulkan with a container capacity of 1,022 TEU. In 1985 that was certainly a really impressive number of boxes. The voyages around the world are among the most beautiful trips I have made. A particularly impressive one was that over the Atlantic to the east coast of America, which was pretty strenuous in winter and often demanded a great deal from the ship and myself. But when we reached Savannah after Halifax and New York, the winter was over. We went on through the Panama Canal and then headed for Tahiti at a leisurely speed of close on 16 knots. No other ships, no bad weather, no stress. I got to know nice people in New Zealand and Australia. We stopped for three or four days in Sydney and the port was inviting for shore excursions. We went via South-East Asia back through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean. I still fondly recall the Mediterranean ports, as they were mostly in the towns and it was possible to go on shore on foot. This was how I had imagined life as a seafarer when I opted for this profession.

I then got to know and appreciate the swift and impressive development of container shipping with ever larger vessels and the connected rapid changes in technology from March 1996 at my present company Reederei NSB.

One of my most imposing vessels in this respect was MS CONT-SHIP EUROPE, a newbuilding of the shipyard Bremer Vulkan of type BV 1.700. This was the most advanced vessel I had got

to know up to then. The computer finally entered my life, and from then on it was impossible to imagine work without it. The equipment included a modern loading computer as well as a ballast and bilge system managed via a screen. The engine data was visible on screens and naturally also accessible for us nautical officers. That was an innovation that did not immediately meet the approval of every Chief. The joint ship's office for deck and engine also initially caused slight friction between the nautical and technical officers. After a brief familiarisation phase, in which the nautical officers mistrustfully observed the engineers and vice versa, the ship operation, also in terms of interpersonal relationships, ran smoothly again.

The following years saw the construction of ever larger and faster ships. These new vessels were equipped with the latest technology, from electronic nautical chart to auto pilot systems and state-of-the-art radar units.

I have found it extremely impressive to have experienced the development of Reederei NSB, which for me began with 1,700 TEU ships and over time continued via 2,000, 4,000 and 6,000 TEU vessels up to my present regular ship MS EVER CONQUEST with 8,100 TEU capacity.

I think I may say at this juncture with all due modesty that I can look back on my career to date not entirely without pride having met the professional challenge of serving on the largest and most advanced ships.

I'd now like to continue with my comments on the major changes that have occurred in the personnel and technical areas over these decades.

The first impressive change for us seafarers resulted from the switch from general cargo shipping to container shipping, with general cargo vessels being replaced by containerships. The number of vessels declined, resulting in many seamen being made redundant.

The situation on the labour market for seamen was quite critical in subsequent years with the reduction in crew strengths and flagging out of ships.

The negative image resulting from unemployment in the sector meant that from then on German shipping could attract hardly any young people as trainees. The School of Navigation in Hamburg had to close.

Then came an event that also resulted in a major change for German shipping and its staffing situation: the opening of the border between the two German states at the end of 1989. The first DSR seafarers signed on on ships from the west. We encountered one another on board initially with reserve and a certain curiosity. But over time we found out about interesting aspects of life in the GDR and the work at the DSR that we had not known up to then. The initial, mutual suspicion has meanwhile, sensibly enough, largely given way to acceptance based on the healthy common sense typical of seafarers.

The shipping industry recovered and slowly picked up steam again. German container shipping achieved a top position

worldwide. This meant that for us the situation on the labour market improved and there was even a shortage of experts.

New forms of training, mostly shorter, were created in order to attract young people again to the now interesting careers in shipping. Today there are fortunately again many young people who have opted to train for a profession in this sector.

In the past, we first had to go to sea before we could begin studying, but it is now possible to study nautical science without having previously worked on a ship. We older colleagues are now called on to give these young people effective support to enable them to make a good and successful start in their careers. We gladly do this, but I believe that the success of theoretical training is better assessed on a practically oriented basis than learning these skills without having ever been on a ship.

Today state-of-the-art ship simulators are available for modern basic and advanced training, and it would be impossible to imagine life without them. They are very useful for learning sophisticated manoeuvres, but cannot replace day-to-day practice at sea.

Let's hope the economy recovers soon so young people can find the jobs they are looking for in shipping.

Apart from the changes in the labour market, there were considerable innovations in recent years as a result of the technological development, as I have already indicated and as you have all certainly experienced yourselves.

I've witnessed these changes directly, and they have even involved the change in the spelling of the German word for shipping, which now has three "fs" instead of two in the past.

The greatest influence on the change in the bridge as workplace resulted from the introduction of the satellite navigation system GPS. It is impossible to imagine shipping today without this system. We used to be glad to obtain an astronomical position in the open sea with a precision of 1 or 2 nautical miles, mostly in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Now ships keep their course with a precision of about 30m. Unfortunately, the vessel may also, unnoticed by the nautical officer, be unwanted next to the course line when the GPS is not working or is defective. The nautical officers thus still have to determine the ship's position reliably also in the traditional way.

Modern ARPA radar units provide information on the passing distances to other vessels. Safe distances are unfortunately all too frequently no longer kept. A vessel coming from port does not necessarily deviate to pass behind one's own ship safely but tries to cross the stem at a short distance. The ARPA information can give a deceptive feeling of safety and lead to a risky handling of the ship.

At that time, there was still a radio operator on board who could lead a rather quiet life. He sent off one or two telegrams for the Captain, received the weather chart and otherwise assisted with administrative work. Today the radio operator has been rationalised away by the GMDSS station, and the Captain also has to handle these tasks.

Modern communications, by e-mail, have expanded swiftly and taken on a dynamism of their own. In the past phoning the shipping company or also sometimes contacting my family was possible only via "Norddeich Radio". These phone conversations were also heard by half the world and the concept of data protection thus had more or less no significance for seafaring. Communications technology has greatly improved. The ship can now be reached round the clock thanks to the modern satellite telephone, mobile phone or e-mail. When one is at sea for months on end, one naturally enjoys being able to keep in constant contact with one's family.

Yes, a great deal has certainly changed in shipping. The open life boats with oars or jury sails are today closed and equipped with an engine. The sextant has been replaced by state-of-the-art GPS navigation. Radar units are ultramodern with daylight monitors and electronic nautical chart. The engine plant has an output of over 90,000 hp and is computer monitored. The radio officer has, as I noted, been replaced by a GMDSS station. Weather charts are no longer drawn but are continuously updated via e-mail. Telegrams have been replaced by ongoing data exchange between ship and shore. The vessel's position can be tracked from shore via the internet.

The working language on German ships, also for communication between the ship and the shipping company, is English. The crew is mostly international. Crew strength has shrunk to a minimum while on the other hand maximum performance is demanded from the people on board. This crew, these people, remain essential for safe and successful ship operation despite all the technical innovations.

The introduction of the ISM and the ISPS Codes involved a new challenge for shipping companies and crews. Companies and vessels are now together called on to comply with the regulations and guidelines and document results.

There can certainly be no objection to effective safety management and, of course, protecting the ship and crew against criminal activities.

There was initially resistance to these regulations and the related audits, but this has meanwhile subsided. With the understanding for their necessity at international level came the realisation that the regulations today generally have to be met professionally. However, these inspections should be designed in such a way that the guidelines intended to promote the protection and safety of shipping do not get out of hand. The work that has to be done must still be performed.

I know that you also expect me to say what I think about the problem posed by piracy.

There has been an increase in the number of pirate attacks, and the violence involved with these naturally represents a danger for the crew and the ship. In the past pirates in the Strait of Malacca mostly aimed to plunder the Captain's safe and steal valuables, whereas today the sometimes heavily armed pirates, for instance in the Gulf of Aden, seek to kidnap the ship and take the crew as hostage. You will certainly appreciate that the

crew undergoes great mental stress when their vessel is proceeding through the pirate zones.

For me as Captain and the person responsible for the ship and the crew, it is thus essential to report to the naval units in the Gulf of Aden and take the recommended protective measures.

The possibility of carrying weapons on board is continually discussed. However, I am of the opinion that this would backfire in the truest sense of the word. The crew comprises seamen, nautical officers, engineers, engine operators, sailors and kitchen staff and not trained naval personnel. I shudder at the thought of having to arm a sailor with a machine gun.

We comply with the regulations and for instance keep the fire main under pressure, although everyone knows that a fire extinguishing hose is useless against an attack with rocket-propelled grenades. But doing nothing is certainly not the right approach. Protection against pirate attacks can be provided only from outside, in this case by the naval units from various countries patrolling in the Gulf of Aden.

The issue of global climate change and the ever greater appreciation of the importance of environmental protection involve new challenges for shipping in the ecological area. Compliance with the MARPOL guideline is now more important than ever.

Refuse used to be thrown thoughtlessly over board, and no one had a bad conscience. This negligent attitude has today given way to the appreciation that the environment does not stop in front of ports or on the coasts, but that the oceans belong to the most important areas of our planet as an ecosystem.

Refuse and oil residues are collected on board and disposed of on shore. A refuse management plan is necessary, in addition to the well-known Oil Record Book. Infringements are rightfully penalized with fines and it is to be hoped on a worldwide basis.

To cut exhaust gas emissions, the sulphur content of heavy oil is being reduced and may no longer exceed limit values within for instance the newly defined SECA area.

In ports, consumption of heavy oil is being gradually replaced by consumption of diesel oil. Ballast water must no longer be pumped carelessly over board, and strict compliance with a ballast water management plan is necessary. This regulation involves additional work and extra costs. But all efforts taken to protect the environment are worthwhile and will surely be appreciated by our children and grandchildren.

You will certainly be able to appreciate that life at sea has undergone a transformation in recent decades. Much more comfortable accommodation is provided on board ships. Single cabins with toilet and shower are fortunately the norm today.

The working day of every crew member is more demanding than ever. Shore excursions belong to the past. When work is at last over, one likes to retire to one's own cabin and enjoy

one's privacy a little. While in the first years of our training, as I already noted, great importance was placed on community spirit on board, today we are unfortunately not very willing and or have little time to engage in shared activities. The Filipinos, who indeed mostly form a large group, always liked to meet at the popular karaoke evenings. These events take place only seldom in some cases, and unfortunately ever less priority is given to maintaining social contacts.

Crew members prefer to use modern consumer electronics and in their free time for instance write a letter to the family on the laptop and send it off by e-mail. For me as Captain, it is becoming increasingly important to bring the crew together now and again and for example invite everyone to a grill evening as a way of promoting interpersonal communication and ensuring people do not feel alone. It essential for instance at Christmas to ensure that there is a grilled sucking pig.

With regard to this subject, socialising, I'd like to mention at this juncture an institution that continues to perform unselfish service for seafarers in ports: the German and International Seamen's Mission. I'd like to make a point of expressing my appreciation to the many helpers for their voluntary service on behalf of the seafarers, mostly on an honorary basis. They were and always will be warmly welcome on board. I trust that the seaman's missions weather the currently very critical economic situation.

Finally, I'd like to say something about the tasks of a Captain. The word "captain" is derived from the Latin "caput", the head, which is in turn not to be understood in connection with a fine head of hair.

Legally, the Captain is the superior of all crew members. He has the supreme authority to issue instructions on board.

Today, however, Captains are well advised no longer to conduct themselves as "Master next to God". The many requirements of modern ship operation can no longer be handled by the Captain alone. Team spirit is required in a crew comprising capable employees, nautical and technical officers, showing the relevant commitment to handling their comprehensive duties. To lead this team, the Captain must have good management skills. Particularly on ships, it is not always easy to keep motivation high.

The duties of each crew member, also of the Captain, are clearly defined in a "matrix of responsibility". Even if according to this division of labour the 1st officer is in charge of the loading of the ship, for example, no one releases the Captain from responsibility for ensuring the safety of the ship and the cargo.

The administrative tasks as well as communication with the shipping company, charterer and authorities of the ports affected represent an enormous and immensely time-consuming workload for the Captain. The requirements from the ISM and ISPS Codes can also be met only with careful documentation. The Captain is responsible for ensuring compliance with these rules.

The Captain has the "overriding authority". But when, for example, the Captain has to decide to reduce ship speed because of adverse weather conditions, this decision is not necessarily approved of by the charterer – who is concerned about complying with the schedule, which is definitely understandable.

Not entering a port with wind force 9-10 with a ship length of 334 metres because it is out of the question in view of the prevailing weather conditions is a necessary and absolutely reasonable decision from a seaman's point of view. This is also certainly not challenged by intelligent shipowners and charterers. Yet a Captain, apart from his duty to inform the charterer, must be prepared to justify his decision at a later point of time. The Captain is representative of the shipowner, but in charter business often has two superiors, which is sometimes not that simple.

Despite all the administrative work that has to be handled, a Captain's chief responsibility remains for me ensuring the safe navigation of the vessel.

My ship, MS EVER CONQUEST, has Hamburg as home port. After a successful voyage to Asia and back, the last leg, up the Elbe to Hamburg, is still something I look forward to. The pilots speak German, I'm familiar with the area, and one is on one's way home in the truest sense of the word.

Now I cannot, of course, go up the Elbe with this vessel alone; I receive professional support. An 8,100 TEU containership is an "unusually large vessel". When I come with such a ship to Hamburg, there are countless people employed to guide the vessel and provide advice to ensure a safe passage up the Elbe to the container port. The estuary pilots steer the ship, supported by radar pilots, up to Brunsbüttel and on to Hamburg. The port pilots – two pilots are prescribed because of the size of the vessel – turn and tow the giant ship with tug assistance into the confined port basin. It is certainly impressive to observe the professionalism with which these tricky manoeuvres are handled.

After seven or eight hours of proceeding up the estuary, not only the water protection police but a very normal working day awaits the Captain until then perhaps at midnight of the same day the command is given again to make the ship ready to put to sea.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my address I've tried to give an extract from my 40 years at sea and present what I consider to be the most interesting events and problem areas, without claiming to deliver a complete account.

Seafaring, past and present, has always called for a high level of commitment from everyone concerned with it. You can achieve this only if you are prepared to face the challenges involved.

Seafaring remains a source of fascination for countless people. Many people involved with and at the same time thrilled by it meet not only in the nautical associations, such as the Nautical Association of Hamburg. Finally, I can only say that notwithstanding all the problems resulting from the long time seafarers have to spend at sea and their long absence from home, I wouldn't have chosen a different profession today.

Thanks for your attentiveness to my remarks, and I hope you continue to have a pleasant evening.