

Alongside Future Thinking - ep 1

[00:00:00] Why do people choose a career at sea? What makes it special? And what are the challenges? As a seafarer myself, and with more than 25 years in the maritime industry, I'm often surprised at how little people actually know about the life of a seafarer. On this series of Future Thinking, we are going to hear more from seafarers and experts from the industry to explore those questions and much more.[00:00:30]

[00:00:30] Hello, I'm Captain Yves Vandemboren. I'm the head of loss prevention for the Asia-Pac region at North Standard. Welcome to this series of Future Thinking, where I am joined by experts from across the industry to discuss the welfare of seafarers, their careers, and look at the work being done to support them.

[00:00:52] Two seafarer charities who are uniquely placed to discuss these challenges are The Mission to [00:01:00] Seafarers, a global leader in welfare that works in 200 ports across 50 countries, offering care and support to seafarers of all ranks, nationalities, and beliefs. And Stella Maris, the world's largest ship-visiting network focusing on 24/7 pastoral care and immediate crisis intervention.

[00:01:22] With me today is Steve Willows, a chaplain from Stella Maris, and Ruth Campbell, a chaplain development manager at the Mission [00:01:30] to Seafarers. Thank you both for talking to us, and welcome. Now, if I can start off with a question to you both, but I'll, I'll come to Ruth first. We know that the majority of goods that are, that we are using on a daily basis are being shipped by sea.

[00:01:46] But that is quite an abstract way of looking at shipping, actually, and very often people forget that there are seafarers operating those ships. So my question here is how can we shift the [00:02:00] focus from the wider world? Instead of looking at the cargo that is being shipped, how can we make people understand that there are seafarers on those ships who need to be taken care of?

[00:02:13] Well, I think this is an age-old question, really. You know, you go back to HMS Victory, and all you think about is what an amazing vessel it was. We don't think about the crew that were on board then. So I don't think we can ever change it. But what we can do is to keep talking [00:02:30] and keep talking positively, um, about seafarers, so keeping them in people's imagination, really.

[00:02:36] So that's what I would say. We just need to keep talking and talking positively. It can be all too easy to talk quite negatively about seafaring. Um, so I think it's really important to talk about in a positive way, in a positive light, um, and just be really, really proud of our seafarers, um, and what they achieve on a day-to-day basis.

[00:02:54] And Steve, from your perspective? Yeah, I think, um, it's, it's more, uh, [00:03:00] than ever we see how much we rely on shipping around the world at the moment. Um, and that's why we need to think bigger than just the, the cargo. When I go and speak to groups and to schools, it's saying, like, when you, when you're at the coast next and you're looking out at the sea and you see a ship, don't just think about the cargo they're bringing, but actually think about the people on board.

[00:03:26] You don't know who they are. You don't know where they're from or how long [00:03:30] they've been on there, but they're, they're doing, uh, such a dangerous job, and they do it without recognition, really. Um, and we're so grateful for everything they do so that we can live our lives. I think, Steve, you brought up a really interesting point there because if we tap into schools and we speak to children, they're going home, and they're sharing the message, aren't they?

[00:03:52] Um, and children love facts and figures. Um, but we – you're probably like me. Um, I live quite close to a port- And, um, [00:04:00] it's surprising how little the children know, um, about what's going on on their doorstep. You know, gone are the generations of granddad worked there, uncle worked there. Um, you know, they really don't know what is behind this kind of high concrete wall with, you know, sort of it's got, um, metal gates at the front of it.

[00:04:18] Um, you know, it's just ... And it's surrounded by housing and industry. Um, and they really don't know what's there. So to be able to go into schools and share with schoolchildren, um, and they do love a fascinating fact, how many containers [00:04:30] you have, how big a ship is, those sort of things are really interesting to them.

[00:04:33] And a couple of times as well, I've even managed to take one of my regular ships happened to have been in at the same time as I was going out to a school, and I've managed to nab one of the seafarers for an hour and take them into the school with me. Um, and that's great for them to be able to visually actually see somebody, um, standing there in their boiler suit.

[00:04:51] Um, and they're able to answer questions as well in a way that we cannot. So yes, schools are absolutely vital, but as Steve said, going around and just speaking to any [00:05:00] opportunity we can to any of the groups, um, that we have locally in our community. I think that's the important part, isn't it? Because when, when the general population out there, when

[00:05:09] At what point do they see shipping? They only see it when it appears in the news, when, when the Suez Canal is getting blocked or when there is an accident that happens and, and there is a pollution or, uh, casualties. Uh, that's when they see shipping. So I, I wonder that people have the wrong impression about, uh, what shipping is.

[00:05:29] They think it is [00:05:30] something that is full of, of incidents maybe and not see all the good that it is that, uh, exactly what you mentioned, what the seafarers are doing. Coming back to you, Steve, quite often you, uh, Stella Maris, your, your chaplains, they will be the first that are, uh, going on board of ships when they come into port.

[00:05:50] What is the, the pulse of the crew? What is it that, that they talk to you about most of the time? They'll talk to us mainly about, um, their, their [00:06:00] families, um, how, how they're, uh, doing at home. One of the, the main things they'll first ask is if there's a seafarer center as well. They want to get to a seafarer center, to the shops, and that's what, what we'll be there for, is to make sure they've got the transport to get somewhere, and encouraging them to get ashore.

[00:06:21] On the flip side of that is the fatigue that they, uh, they experience as well from all the work they're doing. So they have to [00:06:30] make a choice between Having rest, which they need, or going ashore Yeah, and, and what are the, the, the main issues that they, that they are facing on board? I'd say one of the main issues is communication with family back at home.

[00:06:47] Although this has, uh, improved drastically over the years and there's more ships with Wi-Fi now, it's still a really important part having Wi-Fi that they can [00:07:00] use And Ruth, similarly, the Mission to Seafarers is visiting vessels. What, what do you hear from, uh, those ships that you visit? Really similar to Steve, really.

[00:07:10] I would say fatigue, um, is one of the things that they feel the most that they speak to me about. Um, you know, just that sheer exhaustion. Um, so there's work exhaustion, isn't there, and there's personal exhaustion as well, so,

you know, being able to get enough sleep and, um, you know, having a very demanding job as well.

[00:07:27] Um, so yes, fatigue would be my top issue that I come [00:07:30] across on board the ship. Um, and as soon as they get in, of course they want to know where they can have shore leave, where the nearest sort of shopping mall is or the nearest supermarket. And for us, um, on the Thames of course, it's where the nearest train station is so that they can jump on board and, um, go up to London and have a photograph taken.

[00:07:48] So, um, those are the kind of questions that we get, um, when we go on board. I think that's really interesting. But when, then when you are visiting, what do they say, what does the crew say [00:08:00] about why do they choose a career at sea? I know for myself when, back in the days when I chose to go to sea as a, as a career, I knew the things I wanted, to sail the world, I wanted to discover different cultures, experience the different food in the countries that I would go to.

[00:08:17] But these days, what, what do you hear the crew saying? What do they enjoy most of their career at sea? So this is cold, hard honesty. The number one thing would be money. They say to, you know, escape poverty and [00:08:30] have a really good job. And what motivates them all is their families, isn't it? So it might not be wife and children if they don't have it.

[00:08:36] It might be parents. But the one thing that motivates them is giving them a better life. And, um, how they see they can do that is to, you know, go to sea and make enough money. Um, you know, we see people that are supporting sometimes 15 members of their family at home, so, you know, this one job is providing them with a quality of life, um, that they feel that if they were taking a job within their own country they wouldn't be able to [00:09:00] have.

[00:09:00] And then the other reason, um, is to see the world, um, and to be able to make friends and to live in with different cultures. So, you know, there's a variety of reasons, depends who you ask, um, as to what's the most important one for them. And Steve, from, from your visits? Very similar. There's the same top two reasons.

[00:09:18] Um, it's always been a, a way of seeing the world, seeing different ports, seeing different cultures Uh, working with different cultures as well when they're on multinational [00:09:30] ships, and then it's, it's about their, their families, about, uh, getting a better pay than they would if they got a job in their

own country, making sure that their children have the money to get a good education and grow up and have the best lives possible back at home.

[00:09:48] So, you know, we, we do hear the word sacrifice a lot, um, from seafarers. It's a, it's a sacrifice they make, you know, being away from family. It's [00:10:00] such a, a long period and missing occasions and missing birthdays, and they do it all out of love for their families to have the best lives possible. And I think that's really interesting, and I want to build on that answer actually, Steve, because you're mentioning the, the long contracts that seafarers have and how they are missing their, their family when they are away for that long.

[00:10:22] How do you think that, that those long contracts, the lack of shore leave sometimes, how is that affecting the mental wellbeing of, [00:10:30] of seafarers on board? And as a consequence, how does that affect the safety of the vessel? You do see that when seafarers are, are working longer contracts, nine months plus one month, plus another couple of months extending it further, that's tiring and mentally tiring, and it can, can affect their concentration on the job they're, they're doing.

[00:10:58] It's a, it's a double-edged sword is [00:11:00] that they, they've, they've got better communication to know what's going on at home. But if there's a problem going on at home- That can affect how they, they're doing their, their job on board and, uh, the, uh, being able to concentrate and put everything into their job. I still think it's better that they have the communication, but it, it does provide that kind of instant access most of the time to [00:11:30] if there's issues going on at home which they wouldn't have found out.

[00:11:33] And hopefully, you know, they've, they've got someone they can, they, they can speak to when they're on board. You know, they'll have some friends, but that's not always the case, so that's where the isolation, uh, on board comes into play, and that can really, again, affect their mental health. I think that's definitely one of the big advantages that, that Stella Maris and, and a lot of the charities, um, who [00:12:00] provide similar support are, are able to give.

[00:12:02] And Ruth, I think, uh, the mission has so many, uh, centers across the world where seafarers can, can gather if they don't go to the, to the city. Um, is, is that similar when, when you are talking with seafarers in your centers? Do they share their concerns and, and their mental, uh, pressure with you? Absolutely.

[00:12:23] Sometimes it's just we get just a few moments with them where maybe while we're transporting them from the vessel to the seafarer center. Um, [00:12:30] but that time is so precious, um, to be able to speak to them. Sometimes somebody doesn't even realize they have an issue or that they're feeling down. Um, but we can spot it.

[00:12:39] It's something that, you know, over time we begin to pick up on. Could I just talk very briefly when you were talking about the contracts? I'm seeing a real change on board vessels now with a lot of six-month contracts, and the difference that they say those, those – that six months versus the nine months work.

[00:12:56] They say that six-month contracts really do make, um, a [00:13:00] difference to their wellbeing, um, that they can kind of get to see, put their head down, and sort of go through those six months quite well. But they always say the, the additional three months on the end are always the killer. Seeing a real shift in the number of, um, companies now that are only offering six-month contracts.

[00:13:17] Um, I'm seeing a definite improvement in the wellbeing of their crew. And Steve, coming back to you. Stella Maris, the main aim that you have is to, what, what you call to provide a [00:13:30] friend in every port, which I think is a really nice, uh, way of saying it, and it goes very much with what you have been explaining.

[00:13:38] What are any other ways in which Stella Maris can, can assist seafarers? We are a, a worldwide network of support. Um, so we, we make ourselves available for all crew. Um, we are that neutral presence when um, on board a ship. [00:14:00] We're not asking them to do any work. We're, we're just there as a, a listening ear and, and a support, um, if they feel they can't share or speak to someone else while they're on board.

[00:14:15] And because of the Positive experiences that they've had with Stella Maris, Mission to Seafarers, um, in other ports, I think that really helps build that trust, um, that they know that [00:14:30] we're there for them. So when there are bigger issues of non-payment of wages or problems with their contracts, then they know they can come and speak to us.

[00:14:44] And in, in those kind of occasions, that's when we can help signpost, get others on board who can then help and, and make, uh, make the changes that are needed. And then, I know we'll go back to shore leave, [00:15:00] but that's what we're there to encourage and, uh, and support them with. So the

transportation that we can take them off of the ship, even, even just for 10, 15 minutes, I think it's, it's important to be able to see something different.

[00:15:16] I remember when I was at sea going, being able to just leave that environment of the ship, being able to just see something else instead of the ship or the terminals. It, even if it is only for a very short period of time, [00:15:30] it really changes your, your wellbeing. It really boosts you up again to be able to deal with work on board and, and the stress that comes with it.

[00:15:40] It sounds a lovely thing, um, and it's okay if you're on a bulk carrier for seven days, um, sat in the Port of Tilbury where you've got a seafarer center right opposite you. But if you're on a container ship, um, in London Gateway, um, it takes about 45 minutes to get out, then, you know, it's a little bit more difficult if you're only in the port for eight hours.

[00:15:57] You know, and some of them say they would love to have [00:16:00] shore leave. Nobody's stopping them from having shore leave, but they just are too exhausted to have shore leave. Um, you know what I mean? If you've just finished a long shift, um, and you're beginning to eat into your rest time, um, you know, possibly taking 45 minutes to get out the port, you're out the port for an hour, and then you come back, you know, that's a big chunk of your rest time.

[00:16:18] Sometimes we focus on the fact that there is no shore-- that seafarers aren't taking shore leave. Um, but I think sometimes we need to look at the reasons, um, because it's not because they're being denied shore leave, it's [00:16:30] because they are too fatigued. So I think for seafarers, we have to sometimes look a little bit deeper as to why they're not taking shore leave.

[00:16:37] Um, and I don't think we just say a blanket that they're being prevented. I mean, you know, one thing that Steve and I will always do is if somebody says they're not taking any shore leave, um, I'm sure that Steve also would ask the question, "Are you allowed shore leave?" We would check that, um, they're not being prevented from having shore leave.

[00:16:52] Um, but what I hear more and more is just at the end of the shift, they just want to go back to their cabins, speak to their family, that's the most important thing, and to be able [00:17:00] to, um, have a rest, um, you know, and things, and a bit of time of recuperation. Now, in general, uh, ship owners are, are key players in this whole shipping, uh, ecosystem.

[00:17:12] How can, for those ship owner listeners that we have, how can they move beyond the compliance part? How can it- they contribute more effectively to the wellbeing of the crew that they are employing on board? What does a good partnership between owner and [00:17:30] seafarer look like to you? I think it's important for ship owners to continue to make crew welfare a priority. If they're updating seafarers that the, the mission Stella Maris, we're there for them in the ports.

[00:17:47] And by doing these things, I think it will help crew consider the, the ship owner as being a good company to work for. Um, and, and from their, their perspective, that might help [00:18:00] with the retention of, of, of crew as well. Another thing is the continual improvement of, uh, internet access on board because it, it varies so differently between, uh, general cargo ships, containers, just, well, any, any ship.

[00:18:17] So you can go from one ship where they've got unlimited internet access for free, and then you go to another ship and they're having to pay \$20 for a gigabyte, and then you go to a ship where they [00:18:30] still don't have any Wi-Fi on board. Ruth, from, from your perspective, what, what does good partnership look like?

[00:18:37] So it's making the crew your focus, isn't it? And on vessels that we go onto where, um, the standards are high, um, so even really basic things like food, um, you know, crew love. The food is like, you know, it's their one little bit of happiness, isn't it, on board. So where you've got a great price per head for the food, um, you've got a fantastic chief cook, [00:19:00] um, you've got these six-month contracts that I spoke about with, you know, maybe, um, three months back at home, so they've got time.

[00:19:07] 'Cause they, often they're sort of saying that when they go home, um, they've got to kind of sit, um, further examinations, or they've got obviously the travel time home, and that can eat into their time with their family. So to be able to have that, um, six-month contracts, three months at home, on board where we can see they've got great facilities for the crew, such as fantastic gym facilities.

[00:19:27] We're seeing that where those kind [00:19:30] of facilities are on board, it's really, really helping the crew and their mental wellbeing. I'll tell you something else that we're, we're seeing as well, is that crew messes, due to the fact that people are choosing to take their, um, calls with their family in their, in their cabins, um, crew messes now are just becoming kind of desolate areas really.

[00:19:48] Um, and at time, they're just becoming the overspill for storage. So where people are focusing again, once again, on the crew mess and making it somewhere that's exciting and somewhere they want to [00:20:00] be. So, you know, putting the latest PlayStation in. Where we're seeing that they're beginning to bring it back to life again.

[00:20:05] I think after COVID it kind of died a little bit, um, you know, and people fell out of love a bit with the crew mess. But I'm seeing that now where they're investing a little bit of time and money in making those very sociable places again, so people are spending time together because, as we've already touched on, uh, Wi-Fi makes people very lonely Um, so to bring them back together and put film nights on, um, you know, and like I said, the gym, another place where you'll [00:20:30] socialize, um, together as well.

[00:20:32] So where all these factors are coming together, um, you know, then I see a real, real benefit to the crew on board and, um, very simple things for ship owners, um, but really vital, um, for the crew. And I think that's such an important point, Ruth, that social cohesion on board of ships is so important. And I agree with what Steve was saying earlier.

[00:20:54] Yes, of course, we do need to provide connectivity on board to seafarers. We need to be able to, [00:21:00] to allow them to, uh, be in touch with their family. But at the same time, exactly what you were saying, Ruth, we need to provide the means for them to come together as a crew, to have a karaoke session, to, to enjoy discussing how the day was after, after they finish their day job.

[00:21:18] I think that's so important. Now, one last, uh, practical question that, that I wonder maybe our listeners are not really aware of. At what point should a seafarer [00:21:30] or A ship owner reach out to the charities I don't think they need to wait for a casualty or something serious to, to get in touch. We're a resource that P&I clubs and, and ship owners can use as a support for their, for their crew.

[00:21:49] It's important that we've got an awareness of each other. Um, so from, from our side as, as, as, as a charity, we can get in contact with the P&I club [00:22:00] if we hear about any issues, uh, from, from crew on their vessels. But yes, definitely to get in contact when there's issues of a casualty, you know, suicide, um, even if there's a death of a seafarer's family back at home.

[00:22:17] Um, because of our worldwide network, we're able to provide that support for family members back in their own, uh, own countries, and we can follow their ships around the world into [00:22:30] different ports and make sure they've got support. I think already P&I clubs and ourselves have a fantastic relationship. Um, you know, it's a very small world, isn't it?

[00:22:40] And, um, you know, I think we all work really well together. Funding as well. Um, you're absolutely great at funding us. We can't exist, neither ourselves or Stella Maris, without, um, you know, we're very, very grateful for the funding that we get. So I think we can really work so well together. We can kind of complement each other.

[00:22:58] Um, you know, and as [00:23:00] far as the crew are concerned, they trust us. Um, you know, so I think it's just that reassuring kind of presence really, um, at a time of crisis, and hopefully we're able to offer some kind of, um, calm, um, and reassurance to those, um, on board the vessel. I think this was, was a really interesting discussion with, with both of you.

[00:23:20] Um, and I would like to thank both of our guests for this episode of Future Thinking. Steve Willows from Stella Maris, Ruth Campbell from the Mission to [00:23:30] Seafarers, thank you both. Thank you. Thank you. On the next two episodes, we are going to hear more from seafarers and discuss managing their wellbeing, and also explore the challenges of recruitment in the maritime industry and look at cadet training and the pathways into the industry.

[00:23:48] You can find all the episodes in this Future Thinking series and North Standard's other Alongside podcasts at north-standard.com or on your chosen podcast player