

# MARITIME

SHIPPING

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MARINE MINING

MARINE ENGINEERING

SHIP SUPPLY

STEVEDORING

REVIEW AFRICA

MARCH/APRIL 2014

The ship repair industry is generally doing well despite the world economic downturn, but control of high input prices such as labour, steel and electricity charges is essential to counter international competition.

## SHIP BUILDING AND REPAIR

SECURITY  
SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

## To expect casualties is not an acceptable answer when lives are at risk

**Picture the scene. It is just after 1am and a containership is sailing towards Durban. She is 65nm away when there is a massive explosion in number five cargo hold. Containers stowed on deck are quickly engulfed in fire as the flames leap out of the hold and within minutes the accommodation section is also on fire.**

As it will subsequently transpire, the cause of the fire will be attributed to mis-declared cargo which should not have been stowed below deck or close to a heat source. In this case, a fuel oil tank which had to be heated in order to transfer bunkers to the engine room.

The Second mate and an AB are the duty crew on the bridge and the Second mate has just a brief moment to send a mayday message before evacuating the bridge. AIS has recorded the vessel's last position before the signal is lost.

The crew muster to their stations and begin fighting the fire to the best of their abilities. They are able to extinguish the fire in the accommodation section, but the bridge has been completely burnt out. One crew member is missing, two crewmembers have extensive burns to their bodies and others are suffering from smoke inhalation. The crew have not been able to extinguish the fire in the cargo hold, which continues to burn furiously. She is a dead ship drifting at the mercy of the sea.

MRCC in Cape Town is made aware of the situation and it is essential that a helicopter gets to the stricken vessel as quickly as possible in order to save lives and airlift the injured crew to shore. NSRI are also made aware of the casualty, but the vessel is outside the limits of their best craft which is 50nm.

However, we hit one major snag. What helicopter?

### A gap in the helicopter service

It is well documented that the pilot helicopters at both Richards Bay and Durban were out of service recently. Transnet National Ports Authority (TNPA) are investing in training their own flight crews and engineers to fly their helicopters.

There is nothing wrong with this proposal. But, it is a well-known fact that to train as a helicopter pilot, takes more than a few months. Add in flying at night and then add in flying, hovering and landing on ships and you can probably add on a lot more months - if not years.

I do not understand why after the contract with the operators of the helicopter expired there was no contingency plan in place for an operator to fly the helicopters

until the TNPA pilots and engineers are ready for service.

Newspaper reports stated that Acher Aviation vacated the helipad premises at the end of January on the understanding that the new service provider would take over the following day.

For that reason, Archer did not inhibit (prepare for prolonged downtime) one of the TNPA-owned helicopters and it was just left outside the hanger the newspaper said referring to a statement from an aviation source. The source also went onto say that with all the time that has now elapsed that there are fears that the aircraft could potentially be damaged.

At this time the ports of Richards Bay and Durban reverted back to the old pilot boats as the marine pilot transfer system. After the power outage in Richards Bay which caused serious delays at the coal terminal reverting to the use of pilot boats did not improved the congestion at the outer anchorage where more than 40 ships are anchored waiting to load.

The pilot boat cannot always sail especially if there is a large swell at the harbour mouth. This only adds to the congestion.

### Rescue sorties

The TNPA helicopters were not only used for marine pilot transfers. In fact, the helicopter in Durban was also used on rescue sorties. Eleven people were saved one night when a fishing vessel ran into

difficulty off Durban and they flew sorties to rescue the crew before the vessel sank. The pilots and the winch man were praised for their herculean efforts.

But what about the South African Air Force? Yes, they too have helicopters but they cannot fly over the sea at night. Also, to fly over and hover above a rolling ship takes great skill and training.

So returning to the scenario that I have described above one has to ask, as a major maritime nation, what are our rescue capabilities on the east coast should a major maritime accident occur? What assistance can we render and when that urgent assistance is required.

To expect casualties is not the answer that the world would want to hear from South Africa. We are a proud nation of awesome achievers and the above situation should have been prevented. I do not want to be reporting to a ship owner and any of the crews' families that South Africa cannot render assistance until first light or until the ship drifts closer to shore.

It is pleasing to note that just at the time of going to press that TNPA had just announced that they had awarded the helicopter pilotage contract to Denel Aviation. This is indeed great news. It should however be noted that for the first month, April, the helicopters will only run from 06h00 to 18h00 and only start 24/7 duty in May.

It is also pleasing to note that according to the TNPA media release Denel were on site in March servicing the helicopters to check that they were ready for flying on 1st April.

But what about the air force? They need practical training and they cannot keep cancelling training sorties because of administrative transfers.

Michael Heads, P&I Associates

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Tel +27 31 368 5050, Fax +27 31 332 4455

Mobile phone 24 hr number + 27 83 250 3398

Email: [pidurban@pandi.co.za](mailto:pidurban@pandi.co.za)

<http://www.pandi.co.za>

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