THE MISSION TO SEAFARERS
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June 2026

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Bridge watchkeepers should never rely on one source of information to fix the ship's position

Prepare for the unexpected

Felicity Landon *shares advice on how to react to and deal with positioning interference*

Incidences of AIS and GPS jamming and spoofing have rocketed since the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf. What can, and should, seafarers do if their ship is in a conflict zone with no reliable position?

The first message is – of course – 'don't panic'. The second is – remember your training and use it.

"People were navigating around the world for thousands of years without using satnav," says Gregor Stevens, nautical director at the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS). "Only in the early 2000s did we get to technology giving a constant position fix. The main thing is the training that seafarers have – they are trained to navigate without a satellite position."

Stevens was at sea for 12 years, gaining his master's ticket before coming ashore two years ago. The ICS is contributing to the current International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) review and he warned: "A lot of people have been saying celestial navigation is obsolete. But considering what is going on, a lot of these principals of navigation are still very important. Knowledge and the fundamentals of position fixing are important because of what we are seeing with interference with all the satellite signals."

Andy Glen, loss prevention director, Asia Pacific, at NorthStandard P&I club, noted that while jamming and spoofing is not a new issue, it is now "more prevalent and being used by state actors", including in the Red Sea, Black Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

"It's really down to the watchkeeping officers on the bridge being alive to what the issues are and getting back to some of the more traditional practices when it comes to navigation and position fixing that are required," he said. "I think most watchkeepers are managing and doing it well; that just comes down to a level of preparedness. There is a better degree of awareness, reports come in and are shared, and people are more alert to it happening."

He emphasised the preparations a ship should make before going into locations where interference is well reported. "Crew should know when doing the vessel's voyage risk assessment what the likely risks and threats are and the likely impact. They should know what systems could be affected, the procedure to isolate the potential threat before they get there, and how to deal with it once they are in that environment.

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Andrew Glen

"The crew need to know what information is compromised. They need to know which systems they can no longer rely on and what plan B is, in order to do what that piece of equipment used to do."

"Before entering these areas, they should be thinking about disconnecting the really sensitive equipment. And a fundamental thing taught in bridge watchkeeper training is that you never rely on one source of information when fixing the position of the ship."

Avoiding complacency

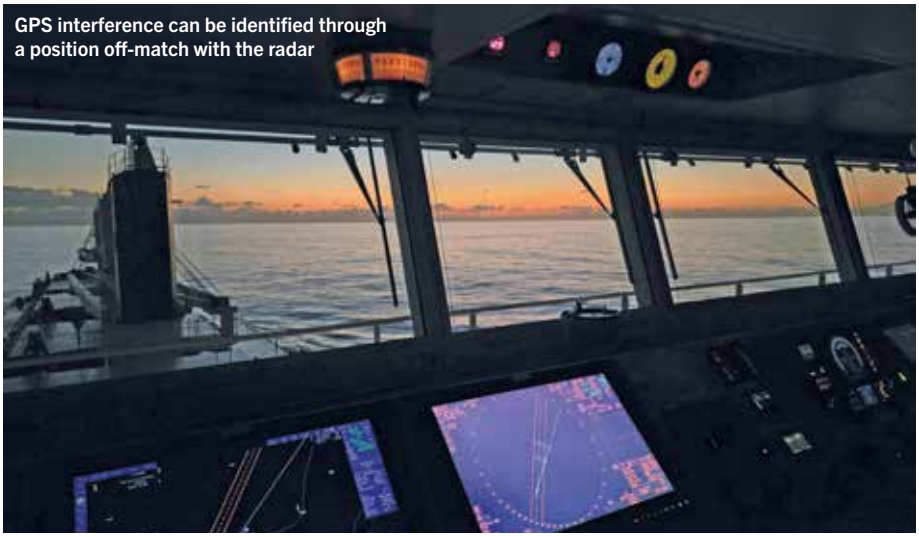
It's human nature to choose the path of least resistance, said Glen – after all, most people are susceptible to the convenience of Google maps and satnav in cars, and get out of the habit of doing things the way we used to. Complacency can creep in, especially since electronic charts have become prolific across the industry. "It is still legal to use paper charts where positions are manually charted. For that, you have to take bearings and distances from known points of land or lighthouses or coastal features and physically plot on the chart. You can still do that on electronic charts if you disconnect – you can use radar range rings to measure the distance from a known point of land. These are traditional coastal navigation techniques which watchkeepers should be familiar with and should be doing anyway to cross-check their positioning."

Some challenges are more difficult. "If jamming takes place, it's pretty obvious – you would have alarms going off on the pieces of equipment that aren't able to function. With spoofing, sometimes you know there's a problem, sometimes you don't. It's more nuanced."

Spoofing could gradually introduce an error of bearing or latitude/longitude – small incremental measures so the bridge team might not be immediately aware they have a problem.

"There could be a lack of awareness that the systems aren't working as well as they should if you are not cross-referencing with other techniques. It's human nature – you see the information presented to you on the screen, and 50 weeks of the year it's accurate and you can rely on it, and then two weeks it's not."

The Royal Institute of Navigation (RIN) warns that any equipment affected can retain the wrong information even after leaving the area where the attack has taken place and recommends powering off and on to remove corrupt data from the system. "If you have powered down in advance, it's easier to power up again when you are out of the affected area," says Glen.


GPS interference can be identified through a position off-match with the radar

Credit: Arda Kaykisiz

Understand your systems

In its recent report, the RIN outlined the risks and actions to be taken relating to GNSS/GPS interference. For example, spoofing can cause the displayed position on ECDIS to change rapidly. The operator needs to know how to put their ECDIS into different modes to ignore the incorrect GNSS data; some manual intervention is required to return it to normal functioning after interference.

Time calculations can be affected, causing digital licences to 'expire' and so charts to disappear from systems. The gyrocompass can lose accuracy, Speed Over Ground can be unavailable or inaccurate, and the autopilot could incorrectly manoeuvre the vessel and have to be manually disabled. Emergency Beacon technologies – Man OverBoard and GMDSS (Global Maritime Distress and Safety System) alerts, for example – depend on an accurate position fix, but interference could stop the emergency broadcast or send out an incorrect position.

Understanding that positioning information feeds into a lot of critical systems is a key precautionary step, said Andy Glen. "The crew need to know what information is compromised. They need to know which systems they can no longer rely on and what plan B is, in order to do what that piece of equipment used to do."

As to navigation solutions, parallel indexing is a simple pilotage technique which can be used in coastal waters, with no link to GPS or satellite positioning. "There are several practical navigation techniques, tried and tested for decades, which watchkeepers should still be using," he said. "But these are professional navigators – the definition of professional is to be doing something repeatedly, expecting it to be different every time you do it. You always approach the task as if it's the first time

you have done it and prepare for all eventualities."

The ICS' Stevens also emphasised that 'traditional' navigation techniques are not alien to seafarers – they are still on the syllabus for cadets. "Even before the current issues, you could occasionally have problems with GPS anyway. The first thing you will get is alarms on the bridge as soon as you don't have a GPS input. There may be five or six pieces of equipment alarming at you – for autopilot, automatic charts, radio communication, and so on. So, the first issue is silencing the alarms and making sure you are dealing with them."

While older seafarers may have more experience with traditional techniques, younger seafarers offer the advantage of more recent training and are often more tech savvy, he said. "If you have an issue with your electronic chart changing from GPS to manual fix, younger seafarers will be more used to using that."

He warned that GPS interference could happen without setting off any alarms – other identifiers to look out for include an off-match with the radar and a sudden position jump from your last position.

"There are small indicators that the crew need to be aware of. If you have had the correct STCW training, you should be able to spot them."

Accident investigations often conclude by highlighting the importance of watchkeepers not relying solely on one type of electronic input but using their eyes and ears too, said Stevens.

Taking steps

The RIN's recommendations relating to GNSS interference, for masters, navigators and officers of the watch, are to maintain an accurate connectivity diagram; understand and follow the vessel's cybersecurity policy; understand onboard equipment; maintain awareness of where GNSS interference may be encountered; share knowledge and experience and maintain training; and 'report, report, report' to the appropriate authorities, the vessel's owner/operator/manager, and the relevant equipment providers.

Of course, the experience of individual seafarers in situations such as these depends on the type of ship, Stevens noted. A large vessel that is part of a high-performing company will likely have a strong shoreside operation centre and provide a lot more input; a small vessel being run by a two-vessel owner/operator will not have that level of support.

"But VTS are there for a reason, to assess and help. They will notice if there are AIS problems. You really need to use all available means to assist you."

Looking at the broader picture, there are tech developments being discussed. The EU has submitted a submission to the IMO for R-Mode (ranging mode), a terrestrial positioning system that can kick in if GPS is down. While GPS is the most widely used system, there could be the option of using multiple GNSS systems such as Galileo and BeiDou, through a receiver that could automatically switch from one signal to another.

Starlink and other commercial satellite systems could also provide a solution, said Glen, and NorthStandard is investigating what it could provide to members in that area.

"We do recognise that this is a serious issue and if signals are lost or people are misinterpreting information on the bridge, there is a risk of collision or grounding, leading to claims – and anything that can reduce that risk, we want to invest in. It's about education and also what we can provide in terms of practical solutions. And it also requires an investment from operators."

What about the risk if another ship in the vicinity has switched off its AIS, whether for innocent reasons or because it is involved in nefarious activities? Glen said that in collision avoidance, case studies often show watchkeepers spending too much time trying to contact the other ship to find out what they are doing, rather than focusing on what they can do to avoid the collision.

"You don't need to know the name of the ship to know the position of the ship in order to take action. We are just going back to that set of circumstances where you no longer have that information – but it shouldn't stop you understanding the rules of the road and taking sufficient action to stay out of the way. That should have been taught as part of STCW training."

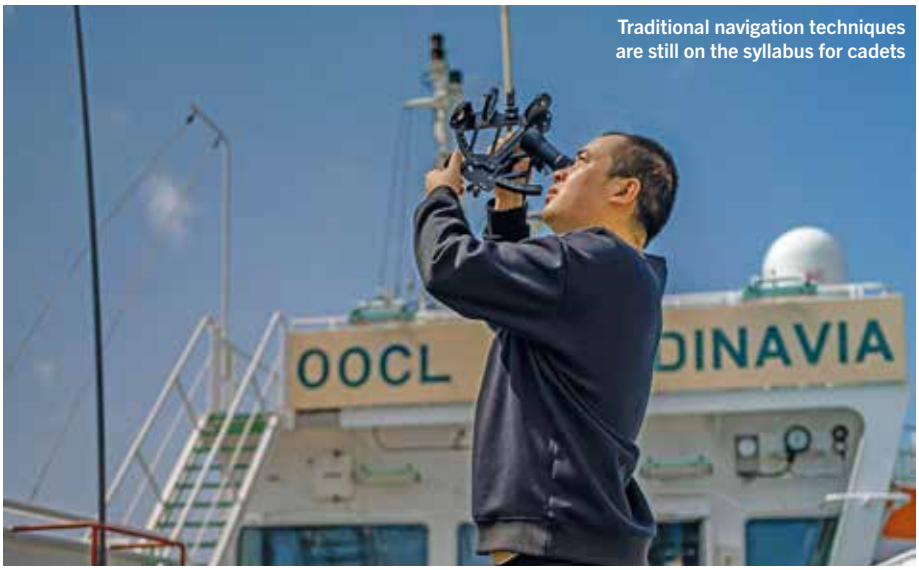
The importance of preparation

In conclusion: training and preparation are key. "It will be more stressful for seafarers if they are not prepared," said Glen. "For a junior watchkeeping officer going anywhere near the Persian Gulf area, the master or chief officer should be talking to them about the risk and the threat and how they are going to manage it. We would expect that individual to be asking 'how do you want me to respond if I am concerned about the accuracy of this, or if things are not matching up as they should'. That should be discussed.

"In loss prevention sessions, we encourage a positive challenge with positive intent culture. If you have a concern, you should be comfortable to raise that in a civilised way to satisfy your curiosity. Sometimes it's the youngest, newly qualified individual who knows the most about a particular piece of equipment. Senior officers should recognise that expertise in the junior officer and learn from it."

Finally, he warned, there is a wide degree of variability in how management companies, company security officers and the senior management team on board prepare the crew for circumstances such as these.

"Seafarers can only do what they have been trained to do and then they are dependent on their employers and senior leadership team being up to speed on issues and telling them what to do."



Traditional navigation techniques are still on the syllabus for cadets

Credit: Jefe King

From research to regulation

Lloyd's Register brings alarm management strategies to the IMO

At the IMO's 12th session of the Sub-Committee on Ship Design and Construction (SDC 12) in January, alarm management stepped into the spotlight as a priority issue.

When Asger Christian Schliemann Haug, lead data scientist at Lloyd's Register's technical directorate, presented his latest research findings to the IMO delegates, it was a moment that brought years of investigation, lived experience and growing industry concern into a single, focused discussion.

For Haug, IMO SDC 12 marked a significant milestone. "When I took on the Alarm Management project back in 2023, we believed it had the potential to significantly improve maritime safety and crew wellbeing," he says. "But we also knew that nothing would change unless everyone was willing to engage with it."

Haug's research took a critical approach: first investigating if there was a challenge (Vol 1), then potential improvements for existing ships (Vol 2) and also for new ships (upcoming Vol 3).

That sense of shared responsibility has been central to the work from the beginning. And at SDC 12, there was a clear sense that the industry is starting to align around the issue. The issue gained new visibility and urgency at the IMO level after being formally raised, in part by the Norwegian Maritime Authority, following recommendations from the Viking Sky investigation.

From analysis to international attention

The work traces back to recommendations for the management of cargo alarm systems issued by the Society of International Gas Tankers and Terminal Operators (SIGTTO), which highlighted a clear disparity between maritime practices and the more mature alarm management frameworks used in shore-based industries.

"Looking into this early on, it was quickly clear that there was quite a lot to learn from our neighbouring industries," Haug explains. "That's when it became clear this wasn't just a small improvement exercise to see whether our rules could align better. It was something more fundamental."

To understand the scale of the problem, Haug and his team collected data from vessels, spoke face-to-face with seafarers and analysed more than 40 million events from the alarm logs on ships. What emerged was a consistent picture across ship types and operating profiles. During events, alarm systems often produce so many alarms that this exceeds what a human operator can reasonably process. In those moments, discrimination as to what is important becomes difficult, if not impossible, trust in the system reduces, and decision-making suffers.

The results confirmed what many at sea had long reported: alarm systems frequently overwhelm rather than assist.

"If you hear a chief engineer say they get too many alarms to even count, and then you see 4,000 alarms in ten minutes in the data, you know they're not exaggerating," Haug notes. "It was important to put that human experience next to the objective evidence to provide impactful data to the industry."

Asger Christian Schliemann Haug presenting at IMO

Credit: LR

A shift in how alarms are understood

This integration of human and technical perspectives is central to the work. Haug's expertise, through his degrees in marine engineering and data science, alongside his experience working at sea, allowed him to analyse event logs and conduct onboard studies, using his technical and analytical skills for deeper investigations.

In Haug's view, alarm management in the maritime industry has long been misunderstood to be merely about presentation of alarms. "At its core, it is about managing the abnormal situations behind the alarms," he explains. "Although we describe these situations as 'abnormal', they are still a foreseeable part of a ship's design basis—otherwise, an alarm would not have been installed in the first place. And that's a different way to think about it.

"An alarm is essentially a request for a human response. It's a system's cry for help" Haug explains. "If the alarm response isn't feasible, because there are too many alarms, or they're unclear, or they arrive too late, then the system isn't supporting safety, regardless of how it looks on the paper and what colour it has."

The urgency of addressing this issue is supported by industry-wide safety data. Maritime incident rates have remained broadly static over the past

Credit: LR

decade, with a significant proportion attributed to human error. For Haug, that statistic points to a design issue rather than a people issue.

"We need to start treating human factors like any other engineering discipline," he says. "Because there are just as many design constraints around a human, probably more." Haug emphasises the importance of better understanding how the engineering crew use alarms in their daily work.

Why the timing matters

The presentation at IMO SDC 12 provided member states and NGOs with a robust, evidence-based foundation for discussion. It helped move the discussion away from isolated incidents and towards a broader understanding of how alarm systems function in real operations.

"Our role isn't to tell the industry what to do," Haug says. "It's to give an informed basis for the discussion on the development of a new performance standard called ECRAM (Engine Control Room Alert Management)."

The response suggests that this approach is working. Several member states have already referenced LR's research in their IMO submissions, and a correspondence group is now being established to take the work forward.

"I am confident that Anne Norderud-Poulsen from the Danish Maritime Authority will be an excellent coordinator for the correspondence group," says Haug.

For Haug, the importance of steady, collaborative leadership is fundamental to the success of the work. "If you just push solutions onto people, it doesn't work," he says. "It has to be an organic process where everyone is involved."

This includes not only regulators and designers, but also manufacturers and seafarers, whose insights are critical to ensuring practical applicability of the upcoming ECRAM regulation. "In our view, the performance standard for ECRAM should be developed from the front line of ship operations, because that's the context where it needs to work," Haug says.

This human-centred perspective is deeply personal for Haug. Having worked at sea as a marine engineering officer, and with close family members still in seafaring roles, he remains closely connected to the realities faced by crews. "Everybody out there is someone's family," he says. "As safety professionals, we have a duty of care to make sure these systems actually help them do their job safely."

Looking ahead, the next phase of the work will focus on practical guidance on how to design alarms that are genuinely useful from the outset. That means making sure alarms are actionable, timely and reasonable, while at the same time enabling front line safety professionals such as surveyors to objectively evaluate these qualities during the newbuild process — at a time when changes can still be made at minimum cost.

"There is currently a strong focus on alarm design, or rationalisation. At first, many think it is just a colouring exercise, or simply prioritisation, but once you begin, you quickly realise its real purpose is to ensure that the crew has a realistic chance to respond to the abnormal situation behind the alarm itself, thereby preventing the alarm's consequence of concern."

What SDC 12 has done is bring that reality into sharper focus. For Haug, that shift is both encouraging and necessary. "This is about recognising that people are part of the system," Haug reflects. "If we design alarm systems that genuinely support the crew, especially when conditions are at their most demanding, we can make a real difference to safety at sea.

"It's field studies like these that can really help policy makers at the IMO make informed decisions."

There is growing tension among seafarers

Credit: Arda Kaykisiz

A quarter of two halves

Steven Jones looks at the human issues behind the latest Seafarers Happiness Index numbers

The latest Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI) from the first quarter of 2026 should, at first glance, have been a story of relative stability. After a modest recovery to 7.26/10 at the close of 2025, the index slipped marginally in Q1 to 7.18.

A casual observer might read that as equilibrium. Yet this was no ordinary quarter. Beneath that small numerical shift lies a growing concern and story that reveals not only stress and anxiety, but a deep and spreading fear. This was, quite literally, a quarter of two halves.

For the first weeks of 2026, optimism seemed to grow. After a turbulent year of volatility and strain, seafarer sentiment seemed to be finally finding its feet again. The vital signs of the seafaring profession were improving. Then, abruptly, everything changed.

With the launch of Operation Epic Fury in the Persian Gulf, conflict returned to one of the world's most vital shipping corridors. Within five weeks, the SHI had tumbled from 7.35 to 7.01, a 4.6% drop that captured the shockwave that rolled through the industry.

The numbers stand as testimony not only to operational disruption, but to fragile humanity at sea. Even seafarers thousands of miles away reported rising fear, describing a "new pandemic" of uncertainty and anxiety.

The Gulf turns hostile

For thousands of seafarers, the Persian Gulf has become a place of involuntary confinement. Many remain stranded aboard vessels unable to leave the region, trapped by maritime insecurity, legal ambiguity, or blocked sea lanes.

Firsthand accounts gathered for the Q1 index paint a worrying picture: drones passing overhead, fighter jets roaring low, and missiles glimpsed from deck. Even when not under direct threat, crews describe the tension as constant and "a fear in the air".

Such fear is corrosive. It drains morale, distorts judgement, and frays both discipline and resilience. One seafarer working aboard a tanker confessed he hides the truth from his family: "I've told my wife and daughter we are fine. I don't want them to know how we are feeling."

For many, the crisis is reminiscent of the pandemic years: ships again becoming cages, contracts extending indefinitely, and relief crews unable to board. "We learned nothing from COVID," one officer lamented. "This all feels the same. I cannot go home, and no one can come here."

While ships wait in anchorages, stores run low. Basic necessities, including water, fuel and food, have shifted from background logistics to existential concerns. Several respondents describe rationing meals and boiling seawater for drinking at anchor after desalination systems failed.

"The ship can produce fresh water only while sailing," one engineer explained. "Now, we are boiling what we have left. We contacted the owner and hope for water by tomorrow."

The stark fact is that ships, aside from lifeboat rations, do not have a minimum level of emergency stores on board. So, if they are caught unawares there is little wriggle room to keep crews fed and watered.

While the tone of seafarer testimonies is one of quiet endurance, there is no disguising the growing tension. Seafarers invoke professionalism, not panic; they keep busy; drills, routines, watchkeeping, maintenance, safety checks punctuate the stress, but behind those routines loom fear and exhaustion.

Another respondent, a master leading 20 crew, shared his coping mechanism: "I don't allow myself to become desperate because I'm in charge. I've told my team where to run, where to jump, what to carry if something happens. We prepare for the worst."

This is the line between order and collapse. The operational competence of seafarers, their instinct to carry on, should never be taken for granted. No human being can remain indefinitely steadfast under isolation, fear, and deprivation.

"For many, the crisis is reminiscent of the pandemic years: ships again becoming cages, contracts extending indefinitely, and relief crews unable to board."

Wider ripples

Aside from the dramatic impact of conflict, the Q1 index also confirms what earlier surveys in late 2025 began to suggest: seafarer resilience is approaching its threshold.

The data shows that when conflict hits, it doesn't create new problems so much as magnify old ones. The consequences ripple far beyond the immediate danger zone, through the operational day-to-day challenges.

As such, the Q1 2026 SHI report is a reminder that seafaring is deeply human and that supply chains, trade routes, and geopolitical strategy ultimately rest on individuals living extraordinary lives of duty and isolation.

When violence explodes into shipping, it spreads its own kind of contagion. Fear multiplies, trust withers, and communication falters. It is a new pandemic not of disease, but of distress. This 'virus of violence' carries real human cost, infecting not just those in the Gulf, but their families, communities, colleagues, and entire supply networks.

By the close of the first quarter, one truth had emerged: resilience has limits. Seafarers continue to perform with courage and professionalism, but courage cannot indefinitely substitute for care.

To navigate what lies ahead, the industry must go beyond praising seafarer endurance. It is vital to recognise, value, celebrate and support seafarers, but more than that we must build systems that prevent such endurance from being tested to breaking point.

This latest index is not just a measurement of happiness; it is a warning. It marks the point where endurance risks turning into exhaustion, and where silence at sea begins to carry the weight of abandonment.

If this was truly a "quarter of two halves," the divide lies not only between optimism and fear, but also in how the world perceives shipping. Often it is seen simply as a service, masking what it actually is: a community of people weathering storms not of their making.

Behind each percentage point and each decimal in the index are real human beings that are still working, still waiting, and still hoping that when the world looks to the sea, it finally sees, understands, and helps them.

There are hopes that peace will come, that there will be an end to this conflict. However, there will be new ones, new pandemics to overcome. If we are not learning and not improving, then the same problems will simply be repeated. We must take this opportunity for positive change from the terrible negatives of war.

Steven Jones is the founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index.

Seafarers are trying to work as normal despite the geopolitical upset

Credit: Saruhan Osmanoğlu

Wherever you are sailing, you are not alone

Credit: Marlin Clark

Loss of control

Peter Rouch on finding inner strength when the world around you is in conflict

Many of you reading this may be expecting another article about the situation in the Strait of Hormuz. It is in the news every day. There are many opinions, many reports, many strong words. Some of you may feel tired of hearing about it. And many of you may feel something else too: that this situation is far beyond your control.

It is hard to change what is happening there. It is hard for governments, for companies, and certainly for individual seafarers. As the English thinker Bertrand Russell once said, "War does not decide who is right, only who is left."

And who is 'left' right now includes thousands of seafarers – people like you – continuing your work, often in uncertainty, sometimes in fear, and usually far from home.

If this piece reaches you, please know this: you are not forgotten. Your life matters. Your hopes, your worries, your families, your future – all of these matter. The Mission to Seafarers, and many others around the world, are thinking of you and standing alongside you, even when we cannot change the situation itself.

Some of you may be receiving extra support from your companies – better internet access, higher pay, more ways to stay connected or distracted during long and stressful days. These things can help. But we also know that many of you are not receiving these benefits. For many, the days are still long, the risks still present, and the sense of waiting still heavy.

So, what can we do when we face situations we cannot change?

This is not only a question for those in the Strait of Hormuz. In many ways, it is a question for all seafarers. Life at sea is often shaped by things outside your control – weather, schedules, contracts, decisions made far away. You cannot always change these things. But there is one place where you may still have some choice: in how you respond.

This is not easy. It does not remove danger or difficulty. But it can help you carry those difficulties in a different way.

Coping techniques

Around the world, across many cultures and religions, people have developed simple practices to help them stay calm, focused, and strong in hard times. Some call these practices mindfulness. Some call them meditation. Some call them prayer. The names are different, but the purpose is similar: to find a small space of quiet and strength within yourself, even when the world outside is uncertain.

At The Mission to Seafarers, we serve people of all faiths and none. We do not ask what you believe. We are here to support you as you are. But we also know that many seafarers draw strength from their beliefs. In fact, when we asked seafarers last year, 78% told us that their faith was crucial in helping them face life's challenges.

With that in mind, here is a simple practice you might try. It does not require special equipment. It does not depend on any one religion. You can adapt it to your own beliefs or simply use it as a way to rest your mind.

1. Find a quiet place
Choose a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed. It does not have to be perfect. Even a small, quiet corner will do.

2. Sit comfortably
Sit in a relaxed but upright position. Let your hands rest naturally. You can close your eyes or simply look softly at one spot.

3. Focus on your breathing
Take slow, steady breaths. Do not try to control your breathing too much. Just notice it – air coming in, air going out. Let your body begin to relax.

4. Use a simple word
You may find it helpful to repeat a quiet word in your mind. This could be something from your own faith, such as 'peace', or 'mercy'. Or it could be a simple word that matters to you, like 'calm', 'strength', or 'hope'.

5. Let your thoughts come and go
Your mind will not stay quiet. Thoughts will come – about work, home, worries, plans. This is normal. Do not fight them, but do not follow them. Just notice them, and then gently return your attention to your breathing or your chosen word.

6. Rest in the moment
For a few minutes, allow yourself simply to be. You do not need to solve problems or make decisions. This is a time to pause, to breathe, and to reconnect with yourself and what matters most to you.

7. Finish slowly
After 5 to 15 minutes, gently bring your attention back to your surroundings. You may wish to end with a quiet moment of gratitude – however you understand that in your own life.

If you try this once, it may feel unfamiliar. That is normal. The benefit usually comes with regular practice – even just a few minutes each day. Over time, it can become easier to find that quiet space inside yourself.

This practice will not change the situation around you. It will not remove danger or difficulty. But it may help you to respond with more calmness, more clarity, and more strength. And sometimes, that can make a real difference in how we endure hard times.

There are moments in life when we can act to change our situation. And there are times when we cannot. In those moments, how we respond – inside ourselves – can be an important part of how we get through.

Again, thinking of Russell's words: it is not enough that you are simply 'left' when difficult times pass. Our hope for you is something more than that. Our hope is that you will come through these challenges with your strength intact, standing alongside your crewmates, supporting one another as you always do.

Wherever you are sailing, you are not alone.

We are here to listen. We are here to support. And we are here to walk alongside you – on every journey.

The Ven Dr Peter Rouch is the secretary general of The Mission to Seafarers.

Seafarers need to take time for themselves

Credit: Mikail Firat

Here to Help

The Mission to Seafarers is here for you, without condition, wherever you come from and whatever you believe. If you are in the Strait of Hormuz right now, you can reach us here:
Bahrain
The Revd Dr Franklin Isaac,
+973 3340 2317;
UAE
Willy Nebria,
+971 50 458 6957.

Any seafarer can also contact us anytime, 24/7, through the Happy@Sea app (available on Apple Store and Google Play), or through our CrewHelp service: www.missiontoseafarers.org/help-where-can-i-get-help and crewhelp@mtsmail.org.

Recognition of a maritime past

Why retired seafarers need care that understands their career history

By Captain David Dominy

Retired seafarers do not lose their love of the maritime community

Credit: Yiğithan Akbay

Living and working at sea is a career unlike any other, shaping a strong sense of identity tied to ships, crews, and the open water in which the seafarers conducted their working lives. Seafarers' families and loved ones also experience a sustained impact with separation anxiety being a routine element of their lived experience. When that chapter ends through retirement, injury, or age, the transition to a shore-based life can be disorientating.

Identity doesn't retire when a seafarer or maritime worker does, and any approach to later-life care that overlooks this risks missing something fundamental. With the need to better support those who have spent their lives at sea, prioritising their wellbeing after their careers is a clear necessity.

Seafarers may be out of public view, yet they form a vast global workforce. In 2024, the world's merchant fleet comprised around 1.9 million seafarers, with 24,550 active UK seafarers in 2025. Beyond these numbers lies a shared culture built on tradition and camaraderie. Their years at sea remain the defining chapter of their life story.

Yet the transition to life onshore can bring unexpected challenges, including social isolation and a loss of routine. Having spent much of their working lives away from any one place, seafarers have fewer ties to a fixed community onshore, making the loss of their maritime world feel particularly acute. When identity is overlooked or diminished, it can deepen feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Conversely, care that recognises and respects a person's life story can be protective. For retired seafarers, being surrounded by people who understand maritime language, experiences, and culture can offer a sense of belonging that would not be found in a generic care setting.

Reinforcing a sense of belonging and purpose

Specialist care environments, like those provided at The Royal Alfred, have a unique ability to turn familiarity into comfort and community into care. Equally important within this system are staff who understand maritime culture and can speak openly with residents. When caregivers can engage meaningfully with their histories, it reinforces residents' sense of identity in a new setting.

Design and décor also play a powerful role. Surroundings reflecting maritime heritage comfort and validate, while personal memorabilia like uniforms, medals, and photographs prompt memories and pride in a life at sea. This is integrated into the interior layout at The Royal Alfred's care home, using photography and maritime design choices throughout the rooms.

With a long-standing mission to care exclusively for seafarers and their families, the Royal Alfred Seafarers' Society has created maritime-themed spaces, activities, and events that reflect its commitment to preserving seafaring identity. For instance, visits from sea shanty singers and trips to venues such as the British Legion veteran hub provide meaningful opportunities to reconnect with the past, demonstrating how engagement with maritime culture can deliver genuine wellbeing benefits throughout the care community.

For retired and veteran seafarers, identity and wellbeing are inseparable. The role that they have undertaken doesn't simply fade into the past but remains a defining part of who they are. Care environments that recognise this, and actively honour it every day through thoughtful design, meaningful activity, and genuine understanding, help uphold the wider mission of creating specialist care environments for different residents.

It's a recognition of a lifetime of service, ensuring that those who spent their lives at sea continue to feel valued, understood, and at home.

Captain David Dominy MA RCDS is CEO of the Royal Alfred Seafarers' Society.

Social interaction matters at sea

The hidden engine of maritime wellbeing and safety

By Dr Kate Pike

The global maritime workforce has always operated largely out of sight, yet its contribution underpins nearly every aspect of modern life. Around 95% of the goods we rely on daily, from food and fuel to electronics and clothing, are transported by sea. In recent years however, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions affecting the Strait of Hormuz have brought unprecedented public attention to the lives of seafarers. These crises have not only disrupted global trade but have also revealed the human cost of sustaining global supply chains.

For seafarers, the challenges of these unstable times extend far beyond operational risks. Prolonged periods at sea, uncertainty over crew changes, and restricted shore leave have left many unable to return home to their families. In some cases, even access to adequate provisions and a sense of personal safety has been compromised. While these challenges have long been part of maritime life, recent global disruptions have intensified the strain on seafarers' mental and emotional wellbeing.

Traditionally, the maritime industry has prioritised the technical demands of seafaring. Only more recently has attention turned to the equally vital role of social interaction. Research led by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN), through its Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project Phase Three, represents a significant advancement in this change. By focusing on the lived experiences of seafarers, the project reveals that strong social connections at sea are not optional extras, but essential to both wellbeing and operational effectiveness.

The findings show that positive social interaction acts as a powerful protective factor. Seafarers who engage in shared activities, including celebrating milestones, participating in sports, or simply spending time together, report higher morale, reduced stress, and stronger team cohesion. These moments of connection provide a vital psychological break from demanding routines, helping crew members recharge and maintain a sense of community in what can otherwise be an isolating environment.

Challenges remain

However, the research also reveals persistent barriers including long working hours, fatigue, and constant operational demands which often limit opportunities for meaningful social engagement. Officers and crew on certain vessels, such as superyachts, are particularly impacted, frequently lacking both the time and energy to participate in social activities. Notably, even when rest periods are available, the quality of that downtime is not always sufficient to support genuine recovery. Limited privacy and the blurred boundaries between work and personal life can further restrict the ability to fully relax and connect with others.

The study also emphasises inequalities within the seafaring experience. Women and higher-ranking crew members are more likely to report emotional strain and reduced participation in social life on board. These disparities point to deeper cultural and structural challenges within the industry, indicating the need for more inclusive environments where all seafarers feel equally supported and able to engage.

Encouragingly, the SIM Project highlights practical solutions, including the use of onboard Social Ambassadors, who are trained individuals who actively facilitate social interaction and promote wellbeing among crew members. This initiative offers a scalable strategy for shipping companies who are seeking to strengthen crew morale and cohesion.

Additionally, for seafarers' charities, these insights reinforce the importance of promoting overall wellbeing at sea. Social interaction should not be viewed as a luxury, but rather as a fundamental aspect of safe and sustainable maritime operations. By addressing operational pressures, promoting inclusivity, and supporting initiatives that foster connection, the industry can move toward a future where seafarers are not only productive, but also socially supported and emotionally resilient.

At a time when the world has gained a rare visibility into the realities of life at sea, there is a clear opportunity, and responsibility to act. Strengthening social bonds on board is not only about improving individual experiences; it is about protecting the people who sustain global trade every day.

Kate Pike is an associate professor emeritus at Solent University, Southampton. She is also director of Field-Research, a company specialising in maritime research, and was research lead for ISWAN's SIM Project. For the full SIM Report Phase Three, visit this link: www.iswan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Social-Interaction-Matters-SIM-Report-Phase-Three.pdf

Quality downtime is important for seafarers

Credit: Mohammed Alim

Health check for decarbonisation

Seafarer health must not be overlooked in the drive to meet the IMO's net-zero targets

By Dr Jens Tülsner

The maritime industry's drive towards decarbonisation is both necessary and inevitable. With the International Maritime Organization's net-zero targets for 2050 shaping the future of global shipping, alternative fuels such as LNG, methanol, ammonia and hydrogen are being introduced to the industry at a rapid pace.

This transition is rightly being framed as essential for our planet's health. Cleaner fuels promise reduced emissions, regulatory compliance and a more sustainable future for shipping. But amid this race towards greener shipping, there is an issue that deserves far more attention than it currently receives: the health and medical safety of the seafarers expected to work with these new fuels every day.

The reality is simple – while alternative fuels may reduce environmental harm, they also introduce an entirely new range of medical risks on board. Exposure to toxic vapours, chemical burns, inhalation injuries and explosion hazards are not simply theoretical concerns. They are very real occupational dangers tied directly to the fuels now being adopted across the industry.

This creates an uncomfortable truth. Shipping's green transition cannot be considered truly sustainable if it protects the environment while exposing the very people who keep it afloat to even greater health risks without proper knowledge and training regarding these medical dangers. Currently, medical preparedness is not evolving at the same pace as the rest of related topics in the industry.

Many vessels are being prepared technically for alternative fuels and onboard technology, but not medically. Existing onboard Safety Management Systems and crew healthcare frameworks were suitable for vessels many years ago but are no longer fit for their intended purpose, particularly in settings where fuel-related incidents become more likely.

Regulators need to give more priority to the health of seafarers

Credit: Simon R Minshall

Mind the gap

This gap between environmental progress and crew protection is where the industry must now focus its attention. For shipowners, the first priority should be recognising that decarbonisation is not solely an engineering challenge. It is also a human safety challenge.

Risk assessments must expand beyond emissions and machinery to include fuel-specific medical consequences. What happens if a crew member suffers ammonia exposure hundreds of miles offshore? Is the vessel equipped to respond effectively to methanol poisoning? Are crews sufficiently trained to identify and manage chemical burns caused by new fuel systems? In too many cases, the answer is still no.

Safety Management Systems must therefore evolve. Procedures need updating to reflect the practical realities of handling alternative fuels, including toxic exposure response, specialised protective equipment, emergency evacuation plans and medical treatment protocols specific to these substances. Without these revisions, the industry risks creating vessels that are environmentally advanced but medically underprepared.

Crew training is equally critical. Traditional first aid knowledge alone may not be enough when dealing with fuel-specific hazards. Seafarers working with alternative fuels require practical, scenario-based medical training that prepares them for the distinct dangers and unique challenges that these substances present. These very real risks can include recognising toxic exposure symptoms, responding to chemical burns, managing respiratory emergencies and understanding the unique risks associated with each fuel type. Additionally, training on the best practices to avoid such incidents is equally as important.

A poorly managed medical emergency at sea can jeopardise not only individual wellbeing, but vessel safety and crew confidence handling such fuels moving forward. Medical

"A poorly managed medical emergency at sea can jeopardise not only individual wellbeing, but vessel safety and crew confidence handling such fuels moving forward"

supplies are another factor that must be acknowledged. Many ships still carry medical chests that, while compliant under existing standards, may no longer serve modern operational risks. As alternative fuels introduce new medical threats, onboard medical supplies must be reviewed accordingly and treatments for toxic inhalation, chemical burns, and fuel-related injuries may all require some improvement.

Current limitations are not restricted to alternative fuels alone. Medical chests often already fall short in areas such as pain management, women's health and essential medications following current applicable medical standards. The industry risks treating alternative fuels as a new isolated challenge, when in reality they are being layered onto a system that already has structural gaps. If shipping is serious about workforce wellbeing, it cannot allow decarbonisation to become another area where safety is added to a growing list of things that it is catching up on rather than leading the way.

Issues such as women's health on board remain inconsistently addressed. This is no longer a niche concern given the increasing diversity of the seafaring workforce. Adding new fuel risks to an already imperfect system only increases the urgency for reform.

Humans first

The IMO's net-zero ambitions are necessary, but environmental regulation must be matched by equal progress in medical and occupational safety standards. This means ensuring that as decarbonisation policies accelerate, so too do international expectations and regulations around crew healthcare, medical inventories, safety certifications and training requirements.

A green transition cannot be considered complete if it overlooks human safety. There is, however, a significant opportunity here. Shipping has the chance not only to lead on environmental sustainability, but also to better integrate crew welfare into major industry transitions. By proactively modernising medical systems alongside fuel technologies, shipowners and regulators can demonstrate that decarbonisation and innovation do not have to come at the expense of those working on board. This is not simply about compliance, it is about responsibility.

Seafarers remain the backbone of global trade, and that importance should be reflected in the way their wellbeing is treated. The maritime industry has long demonstrated its ability to adapt to technical and regulatory change. The challenge now is ensuring that medical safety evolves with equal urgency. The future of shipping should not force a choice between environmental responsibility and human welfare.

"Many vessels are being prepared technically for alternative fuels and onboard technology, but not medically"

To meet the IMO's 2050 goals successfully, the industry must embrace a broader definition of sustainability, one that recognises protecting seafarers as essential to protecting the future of shipping itself. Alternative fuels may be key to cleaner oceans and lower emissions, but without proper medical safeguards, the burden of that transition risks falling disproportionately on those at sea.

That is a burden the industry cannot afford to ignore. If shipping truly wants to lead on sustainability, medical safety must keep pace every step of the way.

Dr Jens Tülsner is CEO and founder at Marine Medical Solutions.

Seafarers could be exposed to more hazardous substances as a result of decarbonisation

Credit: Jefe King

theSea **Leisure Page**

There are many health benefits to spending down-time solving puzzles. Lower stress levels, better memory, uplifted mood, improved problem-solving abilities, and better work performance are just some of them.

Sudoku

The aim of Sudoku is to fill in the empty cells so that each column, row and 3x3 region contain the numbers 1 to 9 exactly once. Find the answers to both puzzles in the next issue.

MEDIUM LEVEL

		2		8	3			
6						8		
3	9			7	1			
7						1	2	
	3	6				9	4	
	2	4						5
			3	6			9	7
		9						2
			9	5		6		

TRICKY LEVEL

					9		4	
			3				8	
2	4	1			5			
	6				4			5
	9			7			1	
4			6				3	
			9			4	7	3
	3				1			
	8		5					

Credit: www.sudokuoftheday.com

EASY LEVEL
solution (March 2026)

7	9	1	3	2	4	5	8	6
8	3	4	5	7	6	1	9	2
2	5	6	9	8	1	4	3	7
5	4	3	2	6	8	7	1	9
1	7	2	4	5	9	8	6	3
9	6	8	1	3	7	2	5	4
6	8	5	7	9	2	3	4	1
3	1	7	6	4	5	9	2	8
4	2	9	8	1	3	6	7	5

MEDIUM LEVEL
solution (March 2026)

6	4	9	2	3	8	7	1	5
1	2	3	5	6	7	4	9	8
7	5	8	1	4	9	3	6	2
5	8	1	4	2	6	9	7	3
3	6	7	9	8	1	2	5	4
4	9	2	7	5	3	1	8	6
8	7	4	3	9	5	6	2	1
9	3	5	6	1	2	8	4	7
2	1	6	8	7	4	5	3	9

Jumble

Can you correctly unscramble these anagrams to form four words? If so, send your answers by email to thesea@missiontoseafarers.org by July 30, 2026.
All correct answers will be entered into a draw for a chance to win a US$50 Amazon gift card. Please include your answers, name, the vessel you are working on, your nationality and finish this sentence:
"I like The Mission to Seafarers because…"

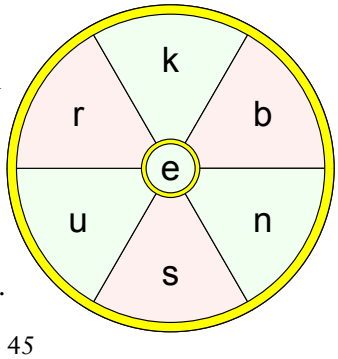
1. Dankdceh 2. Aileuqty 3. Endsturpentine 4. Weeal

March 2026 issue solutions:

1. Bulbous 2. Winch 3. Freeboard 4. Generator

Word wheel

This word wheel is made from a 7-letter word. Try and find that word, then make as many words of three letters or more as you can from these letters. You can only use each letter once, and each word must include the letter E.



Answer for March 2026 issue: 45 possible words, eight-letter word was ***Pipework***

Flag code

Can you tell us what words these flags are communicating? Answer in the next issue.

Answer for March 2026 issue: ***Lubricant***

See Michael Grey's feature on page 16

"The industry wants a more visible link to the supply chain!"

Help for seafarers around the world

Are you one of the 1.89 million people around the world working at sea, or a loved one of someone who is?

The Mission to Seafarers is a great source of support for anyone working in the industry, and we've been helping people like you since the 19th century.

We work in over 200 ports in 50 countries and are available 365 days a year. We can provide help and support, no matter your nationality, gender or faith. Our network of chaplains, staff and volunteers can help with any problem – whether it's emotional, practical or spiritual help that you need.

Our services include:

- **Ship visits** – we carry out approximately 43,000 ship visits a year, welcoming crews to ports, providing access to communication facilities and offering assistance and advice on mental health and wellbeing.
- **Transport** – Our teams can arrange free transportation to the local town, shopping mall, doctor, dentist or a place of worship.
- **Seafarers' Centres** – We operate over 120 Flying Angel centres around the world, offering visiting seafarers a safe space to relax between voyages, purchase supplies, seek support for any problems they might have and stay in touch with their families.
- **Emergency support** – Our teams are trained in pastoral support, mental health first aid and critical incident stress counselling. We can also provide advocacy support.
- **Family networks** – We operate these networks in the Philippines and India where seafarers' families can meet, share information and access support.

Our mission is to care for the shipping industry's most important asset: its people.

To find out where we work, visit www.missiontoseafarers.org/our-ports. Here you can find information about all our centres, including contact details, facilities and opening times or download our free Happy at Sea app.

CREW HELP CONTACTS

SeafarerHelp

Free, confidential, multilingual helpline for seafarers and their families available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, provided by ISWAN.
Direct dial: +44 20 7323 2737
Email: help@seafarerhelp.org

WeCare

Our WeCare e-learning programme gives seafarers access to mental health advice and wellbeing resources on board and on shore. For more information contact your local Seafarer Centre, www.missiontoseafarers.org/our-ports.

CrewHelp

The Mission to Seafarers can provide help and support if you have a welfare or justice issue. Please get in touch with us at crewhelp@mtsmail.org

Get in touch!

Have you got news or views that you'd like to share with *The Sea*? Please get in touch with the Editor, Carly Fields at thesea@missiontoseafarers.org

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The invisible seafarer

Michael Grey warns that if no ships equals no shopping, no seafarers equals no ships

When was the last time you offered a word of even unsaid thanks to the people who keep your lights on, clean water flowing from your taps, or the drains from overflowing? You have a vague idea that these services exist, but it only really registers when they are interrupted, when we bring down all sorts of imprecations upon their operatives, regardless of what causes the problems.

If people who work in the utilities are so rarely thought of, those hardy folk who run the world's merchant ships are even more invisible. But even when there are serious interruptions to their operations caused by wars, blockages of canals and straits and the like, the plight of the crews of the ships rarely enter the consciousness of the general public.

People will be wringing their hands about the soaring price of fuel at the pumps, or the cancellation of their holiday flights or non-availability of some products in the supermarket, but their connections to the physical supply-chain only goes so far.

They can just about comprehend the fact that the goods they want are stuck somewhere along the line, possibly on a ship, but fail to probe a little further to consider what it all means to the people who run those vessels.

In the current crisis over the Straits of Hormuz, there are endless discussions throughout the media about prices, commodities, shortages and the legalities of blockades etc., but very rarely does any commentator consider the plight of the seafarers stuck aboard ships, in real hazard, and the difficulty of getting them relief crews in what is in reality a war zone. Nobody asks them what they are feeling about their situation, because, as always, they remain invisible.

More recognition is needed of seafarers' role in 'keeping the lights on and the food on our tables'

Credit: TungArt7

Repeating history

As Steven Jones notes on page 6 of this issue, for seafarers in these dangerous places, the situation almost replicates their plight during the pandemic – collateral damage in a far wider human tragedy. Another wise person said, very firmly, that unless we stop treating those who man our ships as if they do not exist, it will become ever more difficult to recruit people into the maritime workforce, and then to retain them. Just think about the loved ones of those seafarers marooned in a war zone – will they not be moving heaven and earth to persuade their seafaring partners or relatives not to give them such anxiety, and take up a safer career ashore? And who would blame them?

It would help, of course, if there was rather more recognition of the role of seafarers in operating the complex network of ships which is so crucial in keeping the lights on and the food on our tables. There is arguably too much talk about exciting developments in the field of autonomous vehicles and the prospects of ships with nobody aboard them. More sceptical and realistic souls suggest that we are probably decades away from this scenario, and we should thus more greatly value the flesh and blood seafarers, whose interventions are as vital to our wellbeing as they ever have been.

"For the bread that we eat and the biscuits we nibble" wrote the poet Masefield, in an early recognition of the importance of the maritime supply chain. The other week the same thought was cleverly summed up in a maritime website by one of the invisible mariners: "NO SHIPPING – NO SHOPPING", and if the train of thought is carried to its logical conclusion, if there are no seafarers, there will be no ships.