

We are just getting our AIS transponder installed on the ship of which I am a second officer. What a waste of money! To me, this piece of equipment only symbolises how detached regulators are from reality. Seeing how navigation is being conducted on an everyday basis, I wonder how anyone can think another technical device is what we need to improve safety of navigation.

Let me briefly describe some of the most frightening and appalling situations I have seen from the bridge during the five years I have been a second officer:

- On a VLCC approaching the entrance of the Persian Gulf, another ship was crossing our bow from port to starboard, approximately 30 degrees from counter-course. I thought the bow crossing range and CPA would be slightly small, but decided keep course and speed. The other vessel passed our bow and was opening up on the starboard side when she suddenly went hard to starboard, crossing our bow again passing down our port side at close distance.
- On another VLCC, heading south in the safety fairway leaving Galveston after lightering, we were meeting a northbound tanker in medium visibility. On a few miles distance the other ship made a 180-degree turn to port followed by another 180 degrees, which took her back to original course. Shortly after the first round turn, she made another 360 degree turn before passing down our port side. By the second turn, she was close enough that we had engaged hand steering and were preparing to leave the safety fairway by going hard to starboard.
- Westbound through the Singapore Straights on a chemical tanker, I met a medium sized container vessel from a well-known company steaming against traffic in the wrong lane of the TSS.
- Southbound in Malacca Straights at night, a vessel that later turned out to be a reasonably big fishing boat without any lights was spotted on the radar. As I was altering course to starboard navigating on radar plot only, without visual contact, the other vessel altered course to port causing a close quarter situation which forced me to go hard to port to avoid her.
- Northbound in the Malacca Straights, south of Port Klang, I met a container vessel crossing the TSS diagonally against the direction of the lane, apparently to join the southbound lane at some later stage, without regard of the TSS and instead of using the junction off Port Klang. When it was obvious the other vessel would do nothing to solve the situation, I altered course to starboard. Doing this, I observed the other vessel starting to alter course to port. I engaged hand-steering and went hard to starboard to avoid her. The other ship then stopped her port alteration, came over to starboard and passed on our port side.
- Steaming west in the English Channel, a trawler engaged in fishing crossed the separation zone and entered the TSS from starboard, forcing me to alter to port towards another westbound ship on my port side. I reported the incident to Cherbourg Traffic including the registration number of the fishing vessel.
- Northbound in the North Sea, heading for Moss in the Oslofjorden, another ship was overtaking us on our port side, approaching at an angle from slightly aft of abeam indicating crossing our bow on a CPA of 0.5 miles. I called the other vessel on VHF asking her intentions and explained that I was not happy with her crossing with such a small CPA. She claimed I was overtaking and had to alter course! I ended the conversation and altered course to starboard.

In what way would an AIS transponder or any other technical device have helped in avoiding the situations described above? None, I would say. They arose from poorly skilled officers manning the bridges, officers who lacked fundamental understanding of the situation they were involved in. What will the consequences be of the introduction of the AIS transponder? Keeping in mind the very frequent ship-to-ship calls today including phrases like “Ship on my port side, this is ship on you starboard side, what are your intentions?” I think the VHF will be absolutely clogged with conversations of how to solve traffic situations that are already clearly regulated in the colregs. Furthermore, I think that the ships and boats you would really need to contact will either not be equipped with an AIS transponder, or will simply not respond to your calls at all. If you would manage to establish contact with the other vessel, the chances are that the officer of the watch will not grasp what you are trying to tell him anyway. We do not lack information at sea, we do not lack communication channels, but we lack skill and professionalism!

It would of to the greatest benefit to the industry, if ship-owners and regulators paid more frequent visits to ships. A few watches on a bridge transiting the English Channel or the Malacca/Singapore Straights would certainly be an eye-opener to most people!

What the industry needs to do is to put the right people on the bridges of the ships, people who are on top of things and know what they are doing. Technical aids on the bridge are secondary, as long as such a big percentage of watch-keeping officers act like in the above examples. Ask anyone of my colleagues and I can assure you that they will give you as many examples of poorly navigated ships as you want to hear. The episodes described above are only the worst examples of what I have been involved in. When navigating in congested waters, the officer of the watch sees or is involved in awkward situations on an almost daily basis. I am not the slightest surprised when reading reports of accidents at sea resulting from chains of events which should never have taken place. What surprises me is that we do not see more accidents. I guess the ocean is simply big enough to let most such situations pass without notice.

To put the right people on the bridges of ships will of course cost money, in respect of higher wages and more extensive training as well as more thorough recruitment. This is probably why efforts from both regulators and ship owners focus intensively on technical equipment on one hand, and on laid down procedures and management systems – “safety through paperwork” – on the other. Neither of these approaches will help to solve the problems the industry is facing. The question is; is the industry interested in opening its eyes and address these major safety issues, or has quality gone out of style for good?

Sincerely,
Per Setterberg,
2nd Officer