

INSIGHT & OPINION

Chaplain made leave a shore thing for foreign crews

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reports

STATESIDE opposition to Dubai Ports World's \$6.8bn takeover of P&O offers yet another reminder of the "holy cow" status of security in this country.

The facts that the US Coast Guard remains capable and responsible for port security, and that US ports largely remain municipally owned, have cut no ice with politicians and the common people they seek to inflame. The cheap, convenient cause célèbre now is to banish all those Arabs who would "wrest control over US ports".

For foreign seafarers sailing into US harbours, such characterisations are old hat. There is no dearth of anecdotes since September 11, 2001, involving valid visa-holding crews forcibly made to remain onboard their ships, either by private terminals or by federal authorities.

Over the last few years, Lloyd's List has met, or been made aware of, several foreign shipmasters whose crews have faced such hassles. Most of

The fact that visiting foreign merchant seafarers in Philadelphia and nearby ports along the Delaware River are able to visit shore with minimal problems – provided they have US visas, of course – is largely due to the efforts of one man, Rev James Von Dreele.



The Rev. James Von Dreele

them requested anonymity — their chagrin at being mistaken for terrorists perhaps outweighed by that overwhelming desire to just swallow it and slink away. Nonetheless, some cases made news.

One such in 2003 involved the Arab-owned chemical tanker, the 1982-built, 23,016 dwt NCC Asir, and its Swedish-master led crew who were prevented from going ashore. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* exposed their troubles, thanks to a business writer familiar with the ways of international shipping.

Still, given the propensity of Americans to fear the worst, it must rank as a minor miracle that, in and around Philadelphia at least, the "shore leave" problem for visa-holding crew is now largely solved.

A large part of the credit goes to Rev James Von Dreele, executive director of the Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia and South Jersey, and Philadelphia port chaplain.

At the invitation of the recently retired US Coast Guard Port Captain, Jonathan Sarubbi, in 2004 Rev Von Dreele became the chair of a docks and terminals sub-committee of the area maritime security commit-

tee. The subcommittee was charged with the difficult issue of terminal access.

"This was not an easy subject," Rev Von Dreele tells Lloyd's List. "The difficulty after 9/11 was that no one wanted to press the seafarers' rights issue.

"Politicians would of course not be interested; and even private terminal operators cited their customers' concerns.

The result was that the issue remained in the shadows." Nonetheless, the likes of Rev Von Dreele and Doug Stevenson, of the Centre for Seafarers' Rights run out of the SCI counterpart in New York, raised hell regularly. These efforts finally gained traction in Philadelphia, first with the NCC Asir story, and then when Capt Sarubbi saw the connection between discontented crews and ship safety.

What followed was simply a matter of communication, Rev Von Dreele says. "The committee's work opened up much needed communication among the various stakeholders to make the process less adversarial," he says. "In fact, several terminal operators proactively reached out to agents, vendors,

contractors and others to address their commercial concerns in terminal security."

There still are isolated cases where seafarers with visas who are caught without proper papers cause the entire ship to be banished, the chaplain reports. Nonetheless, shore leave problems at the 28 terminals along the Delaware River falling within his remit are down to "zero", he says.

Under the new protocol, "pre-approved" personnel from the SCI have undergone background and drug testing in order to qualify as escorts authorised to take valid crewmembers ashore.

Procedures have also been established to get these crewmembers to and from area shops and establishments without violating the plethora of post-September 11 security laws enforced in the US.

"Clearly, terminal operators saw and recognised the link between crew morale and ship safety," Rev Von Dreele says.

"Our combined efforts have resulted in seafarers being treated with greater dignity and professionalism, and there is a higher level of safety and security aboard ship and on the terminals."

Seafarers' rights advocates nationwide have also begun reporting a welcome decline in discrimination and shore leave denials at terminals in other parts of the US. Rev Von Dreele believes his fellow chaplains have a lot to do with this turn of events.

"The response of chaplains in 2002 and 2003 was extraordinary," he says. "The Coast Guard, as it formulated new legislation, held public hearings to get industry reaction.

"There was a chaplain at every single one of these hearings. This, as much as anything else, got the Coast Guard's attention, so that finally, most legitimate seafarers now have a reasonable assurance of shore leave when they come to the US."