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EDITORIAL

## SHIPS SHOULD DIE IN PEACE

In writing this editorial I am mindful of the recent loss of two factory fishing ships in the Southern Ocean. This comes on top of a growing number of ships that are being added to the Pacific graveyard annually.

The tragic part is the continued loss of life when we operate in a most sophisticated maritime safety-conscious world. Maybe that's our world. It certainly does not apply to many Third World countries or many from the Asia-Pacific region. Internationally, the world fleet of fishing ships is in decline as our wild marine fisheries reduce in size.

Many crews are trying to scratch out an existence from older ships by travelling further, in many cases falling way below the safety standards recognised for tramping on the high seas or the Southern Ocean.

The sinking of the *Princess Ashika* and the tragic loss of 74 souls only highlights the sad state of shipping in the Pacific, where many ships are bought or sold in the belief that they are still fit for purpose. When one reads of international shipping losses in the region, particularly of passenger ferries, the numbers become scary.

It was for this reason that *Professional Skipper* magazine entered the debate when one of our tired vehicular ferries was recently sold to Fijian buyers. They probably purchased the vessel in good faith in the comfort that the ship currently meets Maritime New Zealand's exacting safe ship management requirements and has a current certificate valid to December 2012. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth.

The ship concerned has had a series of major refits. She began life as two dumb barges built by A&G Price in 1954 and 1956, which makes the original hull steel about 55 years old. One can still see the remnants of the old bow sections as they form sloping bulkheads constructed of both Corten and mild steel.

While she may be structurally solid in parts, her hotchpotch design struggles to withstand the constant wracking and twisting it receives daily when loading or operating in a seaway, all leading to continued cracking within the hull. She was not designed, or maybe we should say assembled or built from bits, for coastal or open water work.

I have it on good advice that the machinery spaces and voids suffer from constant wetting and downflooding from the deck above in rain or heavy weather and the toilet only adds to the flow. There remains a significant concern about the bow ramp and her status and safety at sea.

But it could be said that to operate in the enclosed sheltered waters between Half Moon Bay and Waiheke Island, she was fit for purpose. Note the term "was", as this ship has attracted the ongoing attention of Maritime NZ safety officers and was recently detained as not being fit for purpose.

What can one do when a ship reaches a point in her life where she is beyond economical repair to keep in service. You either scrap or sell her, and on this occasion she has been sold and is destined for Fiji.

This is where the alarm bells rang. The shadow of the *Princess Ashika* hangs low as a result of the Fijian owners selling a ship that should have been scrapped long ago as being suitable for open-water service in Tonga.

Legally, the companies can do what they like and until this magazine got involved it was highly likely this ageing ship would have quietly disappeared from our coast, departing below the radar with cursory inspections - out of sight and out of mind.

Had this happened and the ship entered service in Fiji in her current state and sunk with any accompanying loss of life, you can imagine the furor. I can just about hear the cries of blame and shame. Is this an example of Maritime NZ's SSM safety standards from here? But, not so now.

Following a discussion of our concerns with Maritime NZ, before the vessel can leave New Zealand or engage in any commercial activity, we are advised that she must have her nationality confirmed and be declared fit to operate by a competent surveyor to the satisfaction of the director of Maritime NZ.

She is due to be relocated to Whangarei for slipping, survey inspections and the necessary work to be carried out to bring her up to standard for departure and her intended work in Fiji by surveyors from both countries.

This is all we as an industry can ask for. The responsibility for this task will weigh heavily on the surveyor to get it right. The alternative is the potential for loss of life, which will weigh much heavier if there is an accident as a direct result of New Zealand sending a substandard ship into the Pacific to die. I congratulate the director of Maritime NZ for taking a positive stance in this matter.

The industry should remember the up and coming seminar on MOSS, safe ship management and safety by the New Zealand Marine Transport Association in March, followed by the annual conference in May.

By the next issue we hope to report on the changes to MOSS and the status of the current QOL review – all key issues facing operators large and small.

In the meantime, if you find someone keeps stealing your copy of *Professional Skipper* be a good sort and give them a subscription.

Keith Ingram, Editor