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Case of missing Cadet from a container ship

1. What happened?

On 03rd Oct 2010 at 0505hrs, a Cadet, 21 years of age, was reported missing from a Container vessel, in location, 24 NM East of Indira point, Andaman Nicobar Island, India. Vessel was en route from Port Klang to Colombo at the time of the incident.

2. How it happened?

2.1 On 03rd Oct 2010 at 0505hrs, the 4th Engineer decided to call the Cadet to assist in the engine-room. However, he could not be found in his cabin. The 4th Engineer reported to the Chief Officer who in turn, asked the other four Cadets to start searching for the missing Cadet. The Master was also informed, emergency alarm sounded and a thorough search was carried out on board. During the search, the ship side railing (presumably the guard chain) near the bunker manifold was noted to have been removed.

2.2 The vessel was turned to the reciprocal course at 0606 hrs on 3rd oct. to search for the missing cadet. Subsequently, nine ships in the vicinity and three Coast guard aircrafts also joined in the search. However, the cadet could not be found. The search was called off after 72 hours.

2.3 The previous night on 2nd Oct 2010, the Master had called all the five Cadets for evaluating their training records. As per the other Cadets, the missing Cadet had argued with the Master for his discretion to alter marks already given by the previous Master. The missing Cadet had apparently highlighted to the Master that he had taken his final evaluation under the previous Master and was awarded high marks. But the Master chose not to reply to him and reiterated about the final evaluation to be conducted the next day. After coming out from the Master's cabin the Cadet was depressed and reported by other cadets, to be sweating. The missing Cadet told the other Cadets that he was not happy

with the Master and was not able to take the pressure and would jump overboard.

2.4 The missing Cadet was 'Dual' cadet i.e., undergoing a combined (Deck and Engine) training program. He was due to sign off at the next port, having completed sufficient seagoing service to undertake the certificate of competency examinations. He was described by his peers, as being sensitive, well liked but lacked self confidence and was not known to have any personal problems. He was last seen on board at about 2205hrs on 2nd Oct.

2.5 The Master was aware that all the Dual Cadets were serving their final period of seagoing service but was of the opinion that they were lacking in theoretical knowledge, an observation, supposedly shared by the Chief Officer. The Master decided to "crash-train" the Cadets and accordingly got the approval to proceed from the Cadet Administrator (based ashore). As part of this crash training, the Master would conduct a final evaluation of the Cadets before their signing-off and this was made known to the Cadets in Aug 2010. The Master took personal interest in the Cadets' training and the Cadets were assigned additional work (practical and theoretical). In an email dated 22 Sept 2010 to the Cadet Administrator, the Master reported that all the Cadets have shown improvement and this was also made known to the Cadets. On the evening of 2nd Oct 2010, the Master had gathered all the Cadets in his room to brief them about the final evaluation to be held the next day.

2.6 During investigation, it was reported by the Cadets that the Master used to threaten them about ruining their career by giving adverse remarks in their training record books. The missing Cadet had told the other Cadets at an earlier occasion that he was unable to withstand the pressure from the Master. On an earlier occasion, the missing Cadet had also confided with the 2nd cook on board about his distress and had asked him to send his valuables to his parents, if something was to happen to him. According to the 4th Engineer, the missing Cadet had confided in him about his fears of the Master's threat to downgrade his final evaluation marks and thus delaying his taking of the entry-level CoC examination. Similar threats were also echoed by two other Cadets.

2.7 The Master was 45 years of age, was promoted on the same ship in Jan 2010 and this was his 2nd tenure on the same ship. He had a total of 4.5 months of command experience prior to this incident. He was described as a strict, no-nonsense Master. There is no evidence to suggest that the missing Cadet was singled out by the Master and treated more harshly. Similar working conditions were reported by all the other Cadets.

2.8 The investigation did not reveal any foul play. Neither did the search of the vessel and the belongings of the missing cadet, reveal any suicide note. The missing cadet was not given any job during the period he was last seen till he was reported missing. However, analyzing all the statements given by the officers and the crew of the vessel, it would emerge that the missing cadet may have taken the most unfortunate step of jumping overboard from the area near the bunker manifold.

3. Why it happened?

3.1 The Cadet's action was probably influenced by his fear of not being able to satisfactorily complete the final period of his seagoing service because of the Master's threat to downgrade his final evaluation marks.

3.2 There is no specific evidence to suggest that the missing Cadet was singled out by the Master and treated more harshly. However, clearly the Master's strict management style adversely affected the mind of the missing cadet.

3.3 The Cadet possibly decided to take the drastic step of jumping overboard due to depression caused by the fear that the Master may ruin his career.


4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 The Master was known to be strict and had a no nonsense style of approach as noted during the investigation. The management style of senior officers **must** take into consideration, the family background, the academic and training background and any special attributes, of the entire ship's complement, particularly that of the trainees and the young persons.

4.2 Colleagues who note signs of depression and inability of crew members to cope with the ship board working pressures, should not shy away from reporting to their superiors. Had the missing Cadet's remarks to the other Cadets and to another member of the crew been reported to senior officers, a possible change in attitude by the Master may have helped.

4.3 Senior officers must be aware at all times that the trainees look upon them as 'role models' and therefore their approach to training them can not be in any sense, threatening to undermine the careers of the trainees since this would severely affect the morale and self confidence of the subordinates.

4.4 Ship-owners/managers/employers/operators, should take note of the unfortunate incident and evolve in-house mechanism for effectively monitoring and should suitably train all senior shipboard staff, particularly those who have been newly promoted or have recently joined the company, for inter personal relations on board and for training of cadets.



(Capt. Harish Khatri)

Dy. Director General of Shipping [Tech.]