

Pilot Ladders and Beyond – A Pilot’s Perspective

There has always been a great deal of emphasis on the safety of pilot ladders and boarding / disembarkation of pilots. The UKMPA are closely involved with the review of ISO 799 through the International Maritime Pilots Association (IMPA) and they also work closely with a number of other bodies including **CHIRP**, the MCA, and other sister organisations abroad.

Speaking as a serving pilot I have found that most vessels do comply with the pilot ladder regulations, but experience has shown some don't, mainly the smaller coasters. Pilot ladders have been found in a poor condition and rigged to handrails rather than a secure point on deck. Also, I often witness the lack of safety equipment at the pilot boarding / disembarkation position, with the absence of a responsible officer, and no communications to the bridge. Some masters argue that the bridge wing lifebelt will suffice in place of a lifebelt at the pilot ladder, and for communication the parties can shout to each other. Usually a polite but firm chat with the master or a direct order from the pilot launch rectifies this. On rare occasions an inexperienced deck officer has the con of the vessel when picking up a pilot because the master is resting. As well as this being a danger, the inexperienced officers have trouble manoeuvring the vessel to create a sufficient lee, especially in traffic.

I have on several occasions refused to board or disembark until the regulations are complied with. Normally these coasters are sailing with minimum manning – sometimes only five persons – so the person rigging the pilot ladder and associated safety equipment may not be properly supervised. Although this is no excuse for poor seamanship, I do put it down as a contributing factor. Company management and masters must ensure that the arrangements comply with SOLAS and they should have an inspection regime with properly-kept records. A replacement ladder should always be available.

In our port, during the first contact with both inbound and outbound vessels, VTS will enquire if the pilot ladder is properly constructed, recently inspected and rigged to IMO regulations. Since we commenced this system the standard and condition of pilot ladders has improved appreciably but there are still areas of concern. The rigging of the associated safety equipment has not improved, so more training in this area is required.

Another problem we come across is the access between the pilot ladder and the bridge. We frequently have to negotiate walkways blocked with cargo and/or lashing equipment with, in some cases, very poor lighting. On some container vessels the walkways have been littered with steel lashing bars and twist locks, although storage facilities for these are available.

The occasional ro-ro vessel has lashing chains and wheel chocks laid in dedicated walkways and has raised walkways which have been damaged by vehicles and trailers. Again, storage facilities are provided but not used. This can be put down to poor onboard management and ineffective planned maintenance systems. It is the responsibility of the crew to correctly stow all redundant lashing equipment in observance of good seamanship. The onboard management system should also include procedures for reporting and repairing broken walkways.

One of the contributing factors, I believe, is the crew being out of practice with pilot boarding procedures, because most of the container feeder and ro-ro vessels have masters with a Pilot Exemption Certificate (PEC) allowing them to pilot their own vessel within the port. The only time an authorised pilot will board, will be to carry out an assessment of the PEC holder for revalidation purposes, or when the vessel does not have a PEC holder on board. Such vessels can sometimes go years without taking a pilot.

Sometimes a polite but firm talk with the master does resolve the problem, but not always. Pilots are the first point of contact with an inbound vessel so a good assessment can be made starting with the pilot ladder, but without reports from pilots or a port state control visit unsafe procedures will go uncorrected.

My own conclusion is that these problems are a result of a poor standard of seamanship and lack of supervision and training, exacerbated by the minimum manning levels. It is the management and the master's responsibility to ensure the seafarers involved receive the necessary training and have a full understanding of the requirements.