

## The Need for VTS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A Personal Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is a personal view on why the need for port and coastal VTS services are needed around the world and in places where the need was never perceived before. From a professional former mariners perspective the growth of VTS exactly mirrors the reduction in the standards of marine officer and the resulting reduction in the regard for the profession as a whole.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

I am a serving VTS Officer working at Aberdeen Harbour in North East Scotland. However, my background is as a seafarer on commercial dry cargo ships commencing as deck cadet in 1978 moving up through the ranks with various owners until coming ashore in 2005. For the last 9 years of my sea service, I served as Master on coastal traders and medium sized vessels on longer deep sea and Mediterranean general tramp trades.

Throughout my time at sea, shore “interference” in the navigation and routing of ships was regarded with a large degree of suspicion and the input of shore VTS and monitoring services was seen, at best, as snooping and, at worst, an attempt to usurp the authority of the Master and effectively remove his responsibility for the safe navigation of his vessel.

Coming ashore into VTS in 2005, I will admit to bringing some of these prejudices with me but in the 9 years since then it has become increasingly apparent that VTS, particularly in port areas, plays an ever increasingly vital role in navigational safety.

### 2 SEA SERVICE

Going back to 1978, I started my cadetship straight from secondary education at school and the cadetship was 5 years duration. In common with virtually all of my contemporaries I was not particularly highly educated and we would all have had the same notion – that a 5 year cadetship before taking a watch alone was an absolute requirement in order to give the junior officer the confidence and competence to execute watch keeping duties effectively and safely.

During the mid-1980s in the UK, as well as in many countries in Europe and the western world, there was a distinct falling away of training of ships officers due largely to the difficult trading conditions experienced at the time. The UK fleet contracted dramatically and with it the requirement for junior ships officers diminished to a point where almost no training was taking place. Subsequently though, changes in government policy and an upturn in trading conditions highlighted the need for more officers to be trained. The gap in supply of personnel was such that the UK government removed the requirement for British flagged ships to carry British officers. This resulted in the employment of many

foreign nationals on board UK flagged ships working under Certificates of Equivalent Competency in order for owners to keep their ships manned with certificated officers without the need to flag out. This also encouraged the fast tracking of cadets on much shorter cadetships of only 3 years. During this period, the whole training environment had changed and cadets were coming onto ships with a requirement for a much higher standard of education than had been the case 15 or 20 years earlier, thus the perception was that a shorter cadetship was more appropriate.

Throughout my own sea service there were rumours and schemes afoot that, in certain more congested parts of the world, the navigation of ships should be controlled from ashore. This has been, quite rightly and successfully, resisted so far but, now working as poacher turned gamekeeper, I can increasingly see evidence that this may not be a bad thing in some cases. The worldwide fast tracking of cadets into officer positions appears to have created an industry where the seafaring aspect is no longer a respected profession – indeed, what has been created is a third world industry where the competence of many within it has to be questioned.

The infrastructure of the industry has evolved over the past 20 or so years to the point where the ships Master and officers are slaves to paperwork with more and more input from shore inspection and auditing authorities. Rarely does a ship arrive in port without some inspection, survey or audit taking place and more and more authority regarding the operation and maintenance of the ship being transferred to shore personnel. The Master and his officers are regarded more and more as operatives rather than skilled professionals. This approach has therefore enabled a dumbing down of the shipboard side of the industry to the point where ships crews are there to do as they are told by shore officials, be that from the ships owners or managers or from port state and inspection authorities. There is a feeling that an officer prepared to do what he is told is preferred to one who would stand up for what is right but at risk of being sharply replaced by one who is prepared to toe the line and obey instructions blindly.

### 3 VESSEL TRAFFIC SERVICE

The dumbing down of the standard of personnel on board ships has, ironically, gone hand in hand with an explosion in technology on board these ships. This is particularly so on vessels working in the offshore and oil sector with which I am very familiar in Aberdeen. Propulsion systems and machinery on offshore vessels are very complex and it is becoming increasingly clear from my own standpoint that many of the officers charged with the operation of the ships do not have the required depth of knowledge to carry out their duties safely and effectively. The principles of VTS are based around safety of navigation, safety of life and protection of the environment and, particularly in a busy port VTS area like Aberdeen, we are faced with policing waters where many users are, quite clearly, unfamiliar with the way their ships operate. Traffic management in a busy TOS (Traffic Organisation Service) VTS area, as Aberdeen is, needs

the traffic to flow effectively and this is increasingly compromised when ships Masters and officers are not as competent with their ships as they ought to be. The foregoing points regarding training and outside influences are therefore more and more relevant as owners place and promote more and more inexperienced and increasingly inept officers into positions of responsibility without the familiarity and experience of the ships they are manning. Instead of raising standards, the owners and flag state authorities are sacrificing safety and competence for the sake of financial expediency. There are, of course, good and responsible owners amongst all this with crews who are completely adept at operating their ships but these are getting fewer as the years go by. Even in the 9 years that I have been in VTS at Aberdeen the standards of ship handling and awareness of surroundings have reduced significantly. It is therefore more and more an incumbent responsibility of the VTS Officers to keep an ever closer watch on the movements of vessels within our waters.

As a TOS, we are not able to give navigational instruction to Masters, but, even in Aberdeen, this may well become a reality in the not too distant future. The obvious reduction in the standards and capabilities of many of the officers in charge of the navigation of the vessels will, sadly, only continue and the input of shore VTS directly into ship navigation will become the reality that we all stood steadfastly against for so long. It is a sad fact that the more regulations put in place by owners, managers and port state authorities in attempts to drive up standards will only serve to have the reverse effect. Indeed, the more the standards fall the more regulation is put in place to stop the trend but having the effect of only exacerbating the problem further. VTS is a growing industry and is an ever more vital cog in the wheel of navigational safety because the training of ships officers is not good enough and is not keeping pace with the advances in shipboard technology. The basic principles that those of my generation trained under are being ignored for financial expediency and unless there is a fundamental change in the approach to and practise of the training of shipboard personnel the quicker the introduction of “navigation from shore” will be. This will signal the death of one of the finest and oldest professions in the world and one that every professional marine navigator should be aware of.

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The manner and speed in which the crewing of merchant ships world-wide has been reduced in importance is shocking. Without skilled and well trained ships officers, no amount of VTS input and shore based navigational advice will prevent disasters happening. Now, we see a proposal to actually trade unmanned ships across oceans and maritime skills therefore actually considered to be totally redundant in the day to day operation and navigating of ships. This can only serve to further reduce the morale of existing seafarers, reduce the desire to serve at sea and, clearly, reduce the caliber of any persons actually taking to the sea as a career. The blame for this must

lie at the door of Government agencies which have played into the hands of those seeking to cut their costs by employing ever cheaper and thus less capable crews. Instead of addressing a problem, Governments have sought to circumvent the problem of falling standards by regulating more and more, taking more of the day to day ship operations away from those who are best placed to carry out those duties – the ships crews. It is far beyond the time when skilled ships officers should be valued, listened to and encouraged and, clearly, without a root and branch change in attitude and approach from all sides of the maritime industry, standards are going to fall further. There is only so much that technological advancement and shore based navigational assistance can do – the world needs skilled seafarers on the

ships who are capable of making decisions and sound judgements. Only the licensing Governments can do this by insisting on proper crewing levels, proper training and qualifications and the right sort of people doing the job. Sadly, I feel we are past this point – and past the point of no return already.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] IALA Vessel Traffic Services Manual. Edition 5. International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities, Saint Germain en Laye, 2012.