

Ship Report Transcript

Monday, August 26, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Monday, August 26th, 2024.

Today, I'd like to share a story with you that has global importance with some parallels to us here.

Usually I try to report when possible about local things, things on the river here that pertain directly to us. But there is something happening far from us elsewhere in the world that is a pending international ecological disaster related to a ship, a petroleum tanker. And the whole world is watching this potential tragedy unfold right now. And since we have quite a few tankers and ships of all kinds arriving and departing here on the river, I thought it would be relevant to talk about this here.

Right now, there is a ship on fire in the Red Sea. And what happens next could turn into what could be the worst ship related environmental disaster in history. The ship is a Greek flagged crude oil tanker that was attacked by Houthi rebels a few days ago. The ship lost power after it was attacked and its crew was evacuated. And then attackers apparently placed explosives on the ship that set it ablaze. The name of the ship is The Sounion. It's currently located in the southern part of the Red Sea between Eritrea and Yemen, just north of where the Red Sea meets the Gulf of Aden.

This story also relates to international shipping as a whole, because of the effects of political upheaval in that part of the world, which has a heavy presence of cargo ships historically.

Here's a quote from a [gcaptain.com](#) story about the reason for this attack: "Yemen's Houthi rebels have attacked vessels in protest against Israel's war with Hamas. Although other ships have been sunk, the SOE union risks being the most severe incident given its cargo. After the first attack on the tanker earlier in the week, the vessel lost power and its crew was evacuated with assistance from a French naval ship. At that time, the vessel was anchored in international waters. The EU navy said Saturday, However, following the fires on board, it was reported to be drifting."

In terms of the politics of this, you can Google it and read up on what is a complex situation. But I'd like to focus on the shipping end of it right now.

The ship is currently unmanned, meaning no people on board, drifting and burning in the Red Sea, carrying 150,000 metric tons of crude oil. If the fires are sufficiently destabilising to cause the ship to sink, this could create a huge environmental issue.

Here's a comparison: The Exxon Valdez oil spill and disaster in 1989 spilled almost 40,000 metric tons of crude oil into Prince William Sound in Alaska. The oil slick from that incident covered more than 460 square miles and polluted 800 kilometers of coastline. The spill is considered one of the largest environmental disasters in U.S. history.

If you look at this ship the Sounion, it's carrying 150,000 metric tons of crude. That's more than three times the volume of the crude oil that was on the Exxon Valdez. So what's next here?

From what I've learned, it takes quite a bit of heat to ignite crude oil. But the ship is burning pretty hot right now from explosives that observers believe were detonated on deck. So it's conceivable that the cargo could catch fire, which means the heat generated from that whole situation could destabilize the ship and cause it to sink, releasing burning crude oil into the water.

I watched a detailed video on this on the YouTube channel, "What's Going On in Shipping?" hosted by college professor and professional mariner Sal Mercagliano. He's pretty tuned into this story. So if you're interested in more detail on this, I'd recommend you take a look at his channel.

He said that under normal circumstances, salvage companies would be on the scene here trying to deal with this. But the hostile environment created by the attackers in this region of the world right now has made it so dangerous that salvors won't go there for fear of being attacked themselves. So the usual response to a situation like this, which would be immediate - a very vital next step that would normally happen that could lessen or prevent further damage - is not happening.

Why would ships be going there in the first place despite the risk? Well, let's look at the geography. If you look at a map of the Red Sea, you can see that it runs along the east coast of Egypt and Africa, just south of the Suez Canal. And because of that and the canal, it's an active waterway with lots of ships from around the world.

Piracy against ships in the Red Sea and in that region in general has been a problem for decades, but the Houthi issue has raised the bar on that to the point where attacks on ships have been quite deadly, with some vessels sunk entirely by heavy artillery like missiles.

So the goal here in this situation is destruction and disruption, not financial gain, which has generally been the motivation historically for piracy.

So to avoid this hazardous situation in the Red Sea, some shippers are choosing to send their ships elsewhere, which is around the dangerous and longer route around the southern tip of Africa. But this puts ships in the position of spending quite a bit more time and fuel to make their journeys and also traveling through some of the most dangerous waters in the world, which are called the Roaring Forties. Those latitudes are called that because of their awful weather, their high winds and life threatening sea conditions.

So the result for some ships is damage and loss of cargo as they travel around Africa. Here's a recent news item from earlier this month. This quote is from the Maritime Executive Online. It's a news item about a container ship that did not use the Suez Canal to avoid these risks, but encountered other serious issues attempting to go south around the southern tip of Africa:

"For the second time in approximately a month, one of CMA CGM lets a container ship line. One of their large container ships has lost boxes, containers overboard in storms off South Africa. South African Maritime Safety Authority received a report from a container ship that it had lost as many as 99 containers off the east coast of South Africa, saying there was significant storage collapse and that the vessel was seeking a port of refuge."

So here we have a ripple effect from an incident in one part of the world that is affecting more than just that area and could have wide reaching environmental effects throughout that region if the ship sinks and spills its cargo.

What does that have to do with us here? Well, we are spared from this kind of dangerous political upheaval. And we currently, as far as I know, do not have crude oil cargoes happening on the river here. But we do have something in common with this situation because of the presence of ships on our waters and pretty much all the ships that we see here are carrying petroleum not as cargo but their own fuel.

So a container ship like the ones we see here, can carry about 2 million gallons of fuel. And that's the fuel that uses to power itself around the world. So any petroleum burning ship carries on board with it that kind of inherent risk that makes any ship an environmental risk.

This is one reason why here on the river, our marine pilots are so careful in how they handle vessels and why in bad weather, ships are asked to wait and the Columbia River Bar closes and we don't see ships traveling on the river until conditions are safe.

So pilots and their support staff are constantly evaluating conditions, water depth and other factors. Even in good weather all the time, 24/7 every day, to make sure ships are traveling under safe conditions.

A tremendous amount of planning and expertise goes into each ship transit. It's something I say often here on the show. These professionals make it look easy when it's not. Their expertise makes it possible for us to enjoy these ships as they pass by. Doing their jobs well and making commerce happen on the river.

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