

Ship Report Transcript

Tuesday, August 27, 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 Tuesday, August 27, 2024.

Well, today I wanted to follow up on a story that I posted on the Ship Report Facebook page yesterday about the Military Sealift Command, and that was sent to me by a listener. And thank you to Richard Gibson for that information.

The Military Sealift Command is an agency affiliated with the U.S. Navy. They have civilian crews that operate Navy owned support ships that supply active duty vessels. We see quite a few of them on the river here. And they tend to be homeported in Portland at the Swan Island shipyard, where they rent space and they stay there when they're not at sea.

These ships are mostly, but not always that military grade color. And they do things like haul vehicles and equipment, tanks, general cargo, fuel. Some are ships called Oilers that have the capacity to fuel ships at sea. So these vessels perform a very vital support function for the military, but their crews are civilian. So a plan has been proposed to make what seems like significant changes to the number of ships operating in the MSC Sea fleet.

Now, MSC Sea here is the acronym for Military Sealift Command. So don't confuse it with the messy container ships that come into the river here quite often. That is a global company called MSC Sea. I think it's the MSE group. Today, we're talking about those military supply ships.

I want to read a little bit from a story that was updated yesterday on the U.S. Naval Institute website under News.

“The Military Sealift Command has drafted a plan to remove the crews from 17 Navy support ships due to a lack of qualified mariners to operate the vessels across the Navy. Based on the crew requirements on the platforms, sidelining all the ships could reduce the civilian mariner demand for mercy by as many as 700 billets. And that term billet means a job slot. A Navy official when contacted by us and I news, acknowledged the service was working on a plan to retasked civilian mariners but did not provide details. The new effort, known informally as the Great Reset, has yet to be adopted by the Navy and is awaiting approval.”

Now across the MSC fleet, there are about 4500 billets for mariners on a wide variety of U.S. support ships like resupply vessels, Fleet Oilers that I mentioned, and salvage ships and submarine tenders and hospital ships. The USNS Mercy that left the Columbia River recently is a military Sealift Command vessel. So for every billet on an MSI ship, there are about 1.27 mariners. That's the statistic to fill the positions. And this is significant.

So what that means, that ratio is that if you're required to have, say, 100 people on a vessel, there are only 27 more people on shore at any given time to rotate those crew members. So at that ratio, a mariner would be at sea for four months at all for about a month, and then have to go back to sea.

Here's a quote from a retired MSC Mariner. "No one is able to have a healthy work life balance and be able to get off the ship and get adequate time to go home, have time at home with their family, take leave, take care of medical requirements. In that timeframe, there's so much training required of every billeted MSC to stay proficient with navy requirements and training and merchant marine credentialing."

So that's much more time at sea than commercial mariners do. For example, the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association union contract requires their members to work with two mariners for every billet, which translates into paid month off for every month at sea. So this great reset could free up 600 to 700 sailors to the massive pool of available mariners, and that would bring the ratio closer to 1.5 mariners per billet and allow embassy mariners more time on shore.

It does bring up the issue of mariner retention and attrition, meaning who stays and who goes. So this punishing schedule for the mariners that exists now led to retention issues for MSC that were made even worse by the "gangway up" order that was in place during the pandemic, meaning people could not get off the ship to go home as planned because of COVID.

So during that time, nobody was getting off the ships and mariners were just feeling that they were being treated poorly and they started to quit. So since then, mariners have been quitting MSI at a greater rate and the agency can hire new ones.

Here's a quote from another mariner that said, "I had to quit because it's a terrible work life balance. I can't go to sea and also have a family and I have to leave."

So hopefully this rebalancing, it is taking ships out of commission, but it will make it easier for them to give these people a better work life balance.

So that's an overview of an article that's on the US Naval Institute website under News.

Now, this is a matter of concern in the MSC in the U.S., but the story highlights an ongoing problem that is in the global seagoing professions, and that is finding people who are willing to go to sea and spend months there without a break.

I usually share on a quarterly basis here on the show an international Mariner survey called the Seafarers Happiness Index. The surveys conducted by an organization called The Mission to Seafarers, and it's a survey that asks ten questions about things like mental health, physical well-being, family contact and working life. And they analyze the results quarterly to identify areas that may have improved or worsened.

Now, during the pandemic, Seafarer happiness dropped and is slowly gaining ground so that worldwide catastrophe left sailors stranded on ships for many months beyond their contracts and unable to get home. And that's soured many people on the idea of going to sea.

And while there are many aspects of seagoing life that can be problematic for sailors, the big issues that caused people to leave the profession or at least consider it are how well can they stay in contact with family and their ability to leave the ship on time and in a reasonable time interval so they can maintain healthy relationships with those near and dear to them.

The harder those things become, the more people drop out. Plus, in recent years, fewer people are willing to accept a job that keeps them away from home for months on end.

nd unrest in some parts of the world, like the Red Sea, in an area where many merchant ships travel, cargo ships are being attacked with heavy artillery like missiles. I talked about this on yesterday's show about the tanker that is on fire in the Red Sea after being attacked. Luckily, that crew got off safely, but it must have been terrifying for them. Conditions like this just leave sailors traumatized and wary and the risks are making some unwilling to continue working in the trade.

Here's a quote from a Reuters story that was published in June about Mariner attrition: "Over 80% of global trade is shipped by sea and an estimated 1.8 million seafarers service ships with growing shortages of qualified mariners. So that is the world fleet of about maybe 80,000 ships. 1.8 million mariners doing all that work to bring us all of our 90% of everything.

So about 18,000 additional officers would need to join annually to meet demand, and thousands of higher level officers are needed to service the oceangoing world fleet.

Some people are already asking to be transferred away from the Red Sea and some shipping companies are deciding not to cross that area. But the alternative is a longer trip south around the southern tip of Africa through dangerous seas. So there are risks everywhere.

The overall result is that the maritime industry is losing ground when it comes to retaining the sailors. They need to do business as they have traditionally done it. People want a reasonable work life balance, better pay and a job that is not life threatening from unreasonable factors like terrorist attacks. As far as the embassy and the ships we see on the Columbia River, I have no idea whether any of those in particular will be taken out of service in this effort. I'll keep you posted if I learn more.

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