

Gibraltar a safe haven for seafarers

Several months out on the high seas in a cargo ship where the number of crew members seldom hits above 20 can be a lonesome existence. The ordeals confronted out at sea are both physical and mental with casualties often found when ships come into port and its battered crew steps onto land. James Ferro worked in the port for 42 years before he retired in 2007 and took the head role in the Gibraltar Port Welfare Committee. His job is to ensure that the seafarers who dock into Gibraltar are looked after and given the support they need after an arduous journey. Mr Ferro spoke to the Chronicle on some of the cases he has dealt with and the latest improvements to the service the Port Welfare Committee provides.

by Mark Viales

Seafarers can experience awful conditions and are bombarded with uncertainty, he said. “They spend months out at sea, sometimes encountering storms and pirates, all without seeing their families. You never know what psychological or physical trauma the crew may have suffered.” Mr Ferro said that a terrible situation occurs when a ship is abandoned because the ship is travelling across the seas with no money and waiting for orders. He said that, once permission is granted, his team boards the ship and are immediately confronted with a large number of requests. “We go on board and talk to the crew to get an idea of what they need,” he said.

“It is quite commonplace for them to ask for a priest. Nowadays the majority of the crew members on cargo ships are Filipinos and are Catholics. They request a priest immediately after they arrive.” Filipinos are employed as seamen worldwide, more than any other nationality, and in 2013 the number of Filipino seamen was estimated at around 460,000. Mr Ferro said that requests range from helping seafarers wire money over to their families to providing Bibles, rosaries, soap, biscuits and phone cards. “We assist them in many ways and some of the members’ wives even knit woolly hats for the crew,” he said. “Little gestures like that go a long way.”



The Flying Angel Club is a regular port of call for seafarers.

MARITIME JUDICIAL SYSTEM
Mr Ferro reflected on a scenario where a ship was detained in Gibraltar for non-payment of wages, which happens quite often on the Rock. “People in the maritime trade know that the maritime judicial system in Gibraltar is quite mature,” he said. “It is better than others and there are many lawyers who dedicate themselves solely to maritime law.” Mr Ferro said that, at this stage, the company wants nothing to do with the ship or crew and they are taken to the Detached Mole. He said that the Port Welfare Committee provides the crew with basic things like food and water because they have been

left to fend for themselves. “When they see us they are overjoyed, but all they want to do is be repatriated back home,” he said. “Unfortunately it is not a simple task and it is a very difficult situation as there is always a lengthy back and forth before it is resolved.” Mr Ferro said that the International Transport Federation, which takes care of seafarers’ rights, is contacted at this point to care for the stranded seafarers. “We do not have someone in Gibraltar, so we use the branch in Algeciras,” he said. “We have tried to get the ITF to send someone to Gibraltar, but it does not feel it is worthwhile.”

FACILITIES UPGRADED
Mr Ferro was full of praise with the improvements made to the facilities at the dockyard and port for seafarers and other maritime workers. Gibraltar Port Welfare Committee received a grant of around £22,000 from the UK Merchant Navy Welfare Board to make improvements to the service and facilities. “We have installed a porta cabin which will be used as a private internet room exclusively for the seafarers and without the distraction of dock workers who also use the Flying Angel Club,” he said. “It is also free of charge and there is a traditional British red telephone box outside the porta cabin which they often use to take snapshots



The emblems of the numerous ships that have visited Gibraltar.

of themselves.”
The Flying Angel Club offers homemade food, a pool table and it has been freshly painted which makes it more comfortable for the users. The club at the dockyard is still under development, but will eventually offer a public

telephone, television, couches, a pool table, WIFI and a library. There will be no alcohol in this facility. Isabel san Leandro Torres works at the Flying Angel Club and said she tries to make the seafarers feel as comfortable as possible on the Rock.

“The seafarers do not say much,” she said. “They generally come to use the WIFI service we offer so that they can contact their families.” Sra Torres described them as ‘very tranquil people’ and, perhaps due to spending so much time on their own out at

sea, they are not used to social contact. “Sometimes I catch a glimpse of a happy family behind a computer screen,” she said. “It must be terrible to spend months upon months away from your family every year, but they have no choice it seems

because it is a well-paid job for them in comparison. They spend hours chatting to their families.” Mr Ferro said the improvements were part of an ongoing effort to help the seafarers feel as comfortable as possible in their short stay on the Rock.



The new development at the club at the dockyard will eventually offer similar facilities to the flying Angle Club, but there will be no alcohol.



The relaxing atmosphere is a great help to those who are out at sea for long periods of time.



Workers at the port also use the facility which can sometimes cause tension.



The British red telephone box is a source of attraction for visitors.



Works are currently underway at the new internet portable cabin to be used by seafarers, who wish to contact home.