

# Cadets in danger of being left high and dry

**Space is at a premium in today's pared-down shipping fleet, not least to train the next generation of seafarers. So acute is the problem that the idea of a lifetime career in shipping is under threat, writes John McLaughlin**

**T**HERE are 10 of them, standing proudly to attention on the upper deck of the 39,728 dwt product tanker *Quebec*. It is January 1991, and this is the first batch of cadets on a new training programme launched by shipmanagement company VShips, photographed at the end of their first voyage.

There is confidence there, and the promise of youth. Skip forward almost two decades and that group of ambitious young men will be approaching middle age, having lived through a time of unprecedented change in their career.

Time often lays waste the best-laid plans. What is startling about the fate of this first class, however — and certainly by today's standards and despite the tumult they have lived through — is how many of them made good on that youthful promise, and with the same company that trained them.

Four became masters with VShips and a fifth is now a marine manager in the company's Glasgow office. Two more made it to master with other companies. Yet to hear VShips president Roberto Giorgi tell it, this is not a pattern that is likely to repeat itself any time soon. The conditions that made it possible disappeared long ago.

"We started the programme in 1990 with two training vessels, *Quebec* and *London Bridge*, a 20,000 dwt multipurpose vessel," he says. "Both were Vlasov Group ships. We had an instructor on each one, drawn from the company's roster of senior officers, with 10 cadets on *Quebec* and eight on *London Bridge* for periods of six months at a time."

"The ever-diminishing period of qualifying sea time as a cadet meant a huge amount of practical training had to be compressed into a relatively short seagoing period, the most critical part of which was the first trip to sea. It is during this impressionable period that sound habits are formed that could then be developed."

Even then, it was difficult to find ships with enough space onboard to accommodate the extra bodies as well as a cadet classroom and recreational space. On one of the two training ships, Mr Giorgi says, single cabins were converted into doubles to cater for the additional numbers and extra life-saving equipment was installed.

Keith Parsons, who rose to first officer with P&O before moving to VShips and is now VGroup's director of human resources, concedes this was by no means the first project of this kind: "Through the 1970s and the early 1980s a lot of shipping companies operated similar schemes."

He cites the training ship *Otaio*, which in its P&O years was fully operational as a commercial vessel, but with a full crew of raw cadets commanded by seasoned officers. "But then there was a decade, starting with the market downturn of the early 1980s, when very little happened."

Mr Parsons calls VShips' 1990s training programme a great success. "Not only did it provide an excellent grounding in the basics of seamanship and safety at sea, but in terms of retention it has been fantastic."

From a training point of view, he says, sessions in the onboard classroom would be followed by practical sessions during ship operations: an explanation of a cargo discharging plan made real by a period understudying an officer on cargo watch, or a navigation class followed by a first sight on the bridge.

There might not have been as much chipping, painting and cleaning as in Nelson's Royal Navy, but it was there nonetheless. By the same token, so too was what Mr Parsons calls "a taste of real leadership", sometimes for the first time, rotating in the role of senior cadet and taking responsibility for the assignment of daily tasks.

Training the cadets was also something in which almost everyone onboard was involved to some extent. "Some masters, who were handpicked for these vessels, enjoyed sharing their experience with the cadets and taking an active part in their instruction. It was quite common for the captain and other senior officers to hold classes on subjects of interest."

Mr Parsons says this added to the feeling of togetherness onboard: "Cadets came to identify with their particular batch. They had a loyalty to each other. They also developed a very strong attachment to the company. Over time, that allowed us to develop the concept of a lifetime career in shipping, and many of the cadets who passed through the programme ended up in shoreside jobs."



The class of '91: VShips cadets complete their first voyage (right), but such periods of practical onboard training (above) are becoming ever harder to replicate.



Over the course of the decade, around 400 cadets from India, Sri Lanka and the former Soviet Union were trained onboard the two vessels. Mr Parsons argues that it was also a sound investment and one that shipowners of the time valued as such.

"Apart from the initial set-up costs of \$45,000 for the two vessels, the main additional cost was the salary of the cadet instructional officers, a key element of the programme. Taking everything into account, the additional cost of the programme was around \$150,000 per annum, per vessel, including the cadets' wages, victualling and travel. This worked out at less than \$9,000 per cadet."

**B**y the end of the 1990s, though, it was apparent that the calculation was changing. "We started looking for replacement vessels and suddenly had huge problems. We eventually found a liquefied petroleum gas carrier that could take six cadets, but there were fewer and fewer spacious vessels available."

"Until the early 1980s, vessels were built with officers' ward rooms, gyms, pools. There was plenty of space. But that era ended. By the turn of the millennium we were having to place cadets in ones and twos. It is still the case today."

That puts a significant practical burden on a company that has 1,244 cadets, almost 500 of whom are doing sea training at any one time. Today, almost all are serving singly on ships VShips has under full management (around half of its 1,000-ship roster).

Mr Giorgi, who recalls cruiseship masters in his youth who "loved to spend an hour a day mentoring cadets on the observation of the stars, safety or passenger handling", describes the disappearance of the opportunity to place numbers of cadets aboard working ships as "a huge loss" that the use of dedicated training ships, however valuable, cannot make good.

"It is much better for young people to get practical training onboard a ship that is trading commercially," he says. "What value can you put on the professional actions of a ship's master during times of crisis? The first six months onboard really can make all the difference to the next 20 years of development and help create a group of highly motivated professionals."

Those first few months at sea are particularly



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important at a time when recruitment remains a challenge. During the shipping boom that shuddered to a halt at the end of 2008, demand for officers surged, salaries soared and opportunities for promotion came much faster than in the past. The bonds that tied individuals to a particular company also begin to fray.

Mr Giorgi says: "In 2008, when the market was still going bananas and the owners had very deep pockets, we had 85% retention onboard and slightly less than that onshore. It improved last year as the market turned down, to 93% for seagoing officers and 91% for office-based managers."

He worries, nonetheless, at the speed at which young officers scale the career ladder. "It does not matter what rank you are, if you do not spend enough time at that rank absorbing all the lessons you should, promotion can be a problem, not financially obviously, but in terms of experience."

Mr Giorgi is also concerned at the impact on company loyalty and the "lifetime career" programmes VShips and others have put in place — piloting promising young cadets through the ranks at sea and eventually to senior positions ashore — in an atomised training environment in which cadets are placed singly on ships without dedicated supervision.

Despite the downturn, Mr Giorgi says most owners remain convinced of the need to carry more cadets onboard. "When you start talking hardware, meaning the ship, everyone is in agreement, but when you say you want to resurrect the training ship, with not one but 20 cadets onboard, you cannot go ahead because the ships with the capacity to carry them are not there."

"This has to be addressed. It has to be made compulsory to have facilities onboard for cadets and through mandatory regulation, not just stronger guidelines." He says that as president of shipmanagers' association Intermanager, he will raise the issue of new rules on ship design with the other major industry associations because "the only way something will happen is through a unified approach".

"We need to make sure young people look at the industry with different eyes," he says. "Criminalisation and piracy may be much more tangible issues. But this goes to heart of what we are trying to offer them in terms of training, and a career in shipping."