



MEDIA COVERAGE



Trial by Media

By Edgar Gold - LLDCN | 01:38PM, 02 Apr 2009

The real facts surrounding the container loss from the *Pacific Adventurer* will not be known until detailed reports from the various government agency enquiries become public. That is very likely to take some time.

In the meantime it appears that the media will continue to make statements related to almost all aspects of this regrettable accident.

Such reports appear to be generally based on conjecture, innuendo and a total lack of understanding of ship operations.

Any ship-sourced marine pollution is unfortunate and when it occurs off some of the most pristine coastal areas in the world it is especially regrettable.

Video and other images of soiled beaches, floating oil and endangered or oiled wildlife sends out a powerful message that very quickly relegates the real facts surrounding the occurrence.

As a result, the written, voice and video media in these cases seem to take over and quickly draw their own conclusions on what happened.

In the *Pacific Adventurer* case, the media did not seem interested at all in examining the background to what occurred and almost instantly made a decision that a “scapegoat” must be found.

As often happens in marine pollution cases, it has become the master of the ship – Captain Bernardino Santos from the Philippines.

Headlines such as “Captain Disaster” appeared on the front page (*Sunday Mail* , 19 March 2009) within 24 hours of the accident.

This report also cited an interview with a “senior crew member” who, “on condition of anonymity” described the master as “inexperienced” and faulted him for not slowing down or changing course.

Another headline stated starkly: “A frightened crew, ruptured fuel tank and falling cargo, yet the captain pushed on. Why?”

However, the same report also states that the crew feared for their lives during terrible sea conditions.

As ship, crew and most of the cargo were saved, the master must have done something right.



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However, the media seems to be less interested in that.

The *Pacific Adventurer* is a multi-purpose general cargo ship, built in 1991, weighing 25,561 dwt, 185 meters long and engaged in a regular general cargo service between south-east Asian ports and Australia.

The vessel is owned and operated by the China Navigation Company, which is part of the long-established Hong Kong-based Swire Group (Cathay Pacific Airlines is another member of this group).

In other words, the vessel is owned and operated by a credible company which is known to pursue high international standards of maritime safety and environmental control.

Capt. Santos has been with the company for 14 years and in command for 5 years.

The *Pacific Adventurer* is designed to operate in all weather conditions and the master appeared to be fully qualified to be in command. The vessel carries adequate liability insurance underwritten by a major UK protection and indemnity underwriter.

The ship's liability coverage for oil pollution and related claims should be in excess of all expected claims—even though these are likely to be quite large.

This coverage is further augmented by international oil pollution liability conventions to which both Australia and the ship's flag state are parties.

The ship was en route from Newcastle to Brisbane when she ran into trouble.

It is most likely that prior to departure, the master was well aware that Cyclone Hamish was moving southward along the Queensland coast and that the vessel would be experiencing some severe weather, including heavy, confused seas and high waves.

It is not, at this stage, known whether additional securing of on-deck containers and other items was undertaken but it must be assumed that it was.

In any case, a decision was taken to sail into unpleasant weather conditions, but nothing that would place ship, crew and cargo into exceptional or unusual danger.

However, the ocean and its weather are not always predictable and during this short voyage this was proven once again.

As already indicated, the *Pacific Adventurer* is a multi-purpose vessel, that is, designed to carry almost anything including containers.

Unlike dedicated container vessels, multi-purpose ships carry containers in dedicated holds as well as wherever they can be loaded.



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Many containers are carried on deck and stowed on top of general cargo holds. This often makes securing more difficult.

During this trip, the ship experienced severe sea conditions with waves in excess of eight to ten meters and, due to the movement of the cyclonic system, obviously very confused seas.

Under such circumstances it is not unusual for waves to wash over the deck and carry away container securing.

This is what happened to the thirty odd containers that were lost overboard.

At this stage it is pure conjecture to speculate whether the ship was moving at excessive speed or whether a course change would have been advisable.

Experienced masters use their judgement to do whatever is best under the prevailing circumstances.

Sometimes it may be best to go at full speed in order to reach shelter as quickly as possible. At others, it may be more prudent to slow down and heave to, or even head further out to sea by changing direction.

These are the factors that will be examined during the various investigations that are under way or planned.

In hindsight it may well be determined that Capt. Santos could have taken different actions that might have been more prudent.

However, it is probably fair to say that Capt. Santos did what he thought was best under the prevailing circumstances and brought his ship, crew and almost all the cargo safely into Moreton Bay.

Maritime accidents and their unpleasant by-product, marine pollution, can never be eliminated as long we need world trade operating through busy ports.

Severe ocean weather causes maritime accidents and containers are lost regularly, even from very large, dedicated container vessels.

In this case, the *Pacific Adventurer* was especially unfortunate as some containers punctured the vessel's fuel tanks when they were lost.

Although this is unusual, it is not unheard of. Large, loaded steel containers can easily cause damage when they fall.

Under the circumstances, there was probably little that could be done on board when this happened.

It can be assumed that Capt. Santos was doing everything to keep his ship under control during this trying time and was probably not even aware that one or more fuel tanks had been affected.



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Capt. Santos is now involved in an extensive investigation process in Australia. His passport has been handed over to local authorities to ensure that he does not leave the country.

However, the shipowners have stated on several occasions that they and the master will cooperate fully with the investigations.

The master of the *Pacific Adventurer* has come through a very harrowing experience at sea and is now undergoing further close examination by investigators.

It is hoped that he will be treated fairly. He certainly has not been treated fairly by the Australian media.

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