

SEAFARERS



Society's support for centres recognizes the importance of seafarers.

By Captain George Adams

Seafarers' centres have always provided comfort, relaxation, an understanding ear and, as far as is possible, a home away from home to seafarers visiting Canadian ports. Today, the role of the International Seafarers' Society Canada (ISSC), a Registered Canadian charity, is to provide support to those seafarers' centres, both secular and ecumenical, through financial contributions towards their operating expenditures, grants to specific capital projects and, as requested, suggestions and advice.

The Society's presence in Canada began in 1907 when the Rev. J. Wheeler, of the British Sailors' Society in London, arrived to work with loggers and sailors in Vancouver. In 1949, the Society



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became an autonomous body under Dominion Charter operating seafarers' centres in its own name in ports from Sydney, Nova Scotia to Sidney, British Columbia, providing ship visits, accommodation and canteen services, library and writing facilities, social programs, compassionate care and counselling to visiting seafarers.

By the 1970s, the growing number of "competing" seafarers' organizations in major Canadian ports persuaded the

ISSC gradually to close its own branches across Canada and redefine its purpose to become the support agency of other centres.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary technological advances in communications, the life of today's deepsea mariner is probably more isolated than ever. In the middle of the last century, when some of the more mature amongst us (including the author), sailed these waters, the crews on most of the ships calling at our ports numbered up to 50. Ships would spend many days, even weeks in our ports, firstly to discharge the inbound and then to load the outbound cargoes, frequently sitting idle for long periods. In-port working hours were much less than today — there was no evening work during the weekdays and no weekend work except perhaps for four hours on a Saturday morning.

This was all "pre-security" when the docks were usually wide open to the public and it was quite normal for the local populace, as part of their evening constitutional, to drive to and then stroll beside the tied-up ships, mingling with and talking to the seafarers, often inviting them to their homes. The local populace took a great interest



Through its financial support, the ISSC helps organizations like the Mission to Seafarers who will regularly pay onboard visits to ships' crews.

Photo courtesy of the Mission to Seafarers.

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in the ships and their trades and as a result, were knowledgeable about the different trades, the cargoes carried and the visiting seafarers and some of their activities.

For the seafarer, those were relatively civilized times. Although contact with home was by mail, which was slow and unreliable, great joy and excitement greeted the arrival of any familiar envelope.

One of the favourite places to visit during these lengthy port stays was the local seafarers' centre of which there were many around the B.C. coast. Sports competitions, such as soccer games, were arranged between ships; weekly dances were held; and sightseeing outings were organized, all providing opportunities to meet local residents.

How times have changed! Today's freighters are manned to a bare minimum, usually numbered in the teens, and port-time has been reduced significantly, virtually eliminating the opportunities for more than a very brief shore leave. Another outcome of smaller crews and longer confinement is the inability to avoid any disagreeable shipmates, of which there are usually a few. These factors, together with added security restrictions, have served to eliminate almost all contact between the seafarer and the port residents. Not only has the seafarer suffered as a result but most of the population of our ports now take the coming and going of ships for granted, quite unaware of the major part they play in the trade of this nation. They pay scant or no heed to the individuals manning the ships.

Off-setting these deteriorating conditions for the mariner has been a major improvement in communications between seafarers and their families. Today, I doubt any of them use letter-writing for maintaining their contacts — instead they make use of modern equipment and technology for almost instantaneous communications which offer also the opportunity to view the family member with whom they are speaking and even to watch the growth of young children.

Today, the mariner makes great use of the communications equipment and connections available at seafarers' centres, facilities which are not available onboard their ships. The sympathetic and understanding ear is still available as is moral support, encouragement and local information.



Photo credit: BC Shipping News.

The Mission to Seafarers new trailer at Roberts Bank came to fruition with some help from the ISSC. The centre give seafarers an opportunity to relax, shop for necessities or use a computer to contact home and family.



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To the mariner, the seafarers' centre is as important as ever and yet, unfortunately, the public awareness of the institutions is remote at best and their financial and volunteer support scarce.

Over the past 35 years, the ISSC has contributed over \$800,000 to support and develop centres and help maintain the high quality of services provided by their dedicated staff and volunteers. The financial reserves of the Society are supplemented by various events including dinners and auctions. These fundraising activities do not compete with, nor do we wish to detract from those of local centres. They deserve support; we respond to the needs of centres in all Canadian ports.

We welcome enquiries and especially contributions to help us support seafarers who play such a critical part in the trades which are an essential part of our economy. Our contact information is available at www.sailorssociety.ca. We will be delighted to hear from you.

Captain George Adams started his sea-going career as an apprentice with Shell Tankers Ltd. in 1954. Following positions with Furness Withy & Company Ltd. at sea and ashore, Adams moved to Vancouver where he began a career with Canadian Transport Company Ltd., ultimately becoming their President as well as Vice President of Transportation for MacMillan Bloedel Ltd. He has been a director of the International Sailors' Society Canada since 2007 and its Chairman since 2009. Captain Adams can be reached at george_adams@telus.net.

Supporting seafarer centres
across Canada



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