



Unsung Heroes: The Invisible Workforce Powering Global Trade

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Seafaring in the popular imagination is a realm of fearless adventurers heroically battling the elements. Historically, ships carried a cast of characters forging new trade routes and engaging in various forms of legitimate and not-so-legitimate business across the globe. The reality for the men and women working at sea today is rather different. The vital role that contemporary seafarers play in the everyday lives of the consuming population is largely invisible, though no less heroic.

The maritime industry does not exaggerate when it claims to be fundamental to the functioning of today's global supply chains. Around 90% of traded goods are moved over the waves.¹ These goods and raw materials are shipped around the world by approximately 1.89 million seafarers operating over 74,000 vessels in the world merchant fleet.²

Most of the world's seafarers come from a handful of countries, with the Philippines, Russia, Indonesia, China and India making up 44% of the global workforce, and significant numbers also come from Ukraine and Myanmar.³ With the days of national shipping long gone, the vast majority of ves-

(top left)

Title: *Isolation*

Photographer: Min Yan Pai

Location: Japan Inland Sea

Photographer's description: "Taken in the Japan Inland Sea. A photo description of the loneliness inside the heart. The feeling of isolation, homesickness and frustration."

(bottom left)

Title: *Hero At Sea*

Photographer: Ike S. Dagandanan

(Winner of the STILL AT SEA photography competition 2020)

Photographer's description: "We are en route to China from Argentina, 40 days at sea, total lockdown. We experienced bad weather which caused some of our stanchion posts to collapse. We used our best seamanship to protect the cargo, ship and environment, and most of all our prayers to almighty God for the safe voyage."

sels fly “flags of convenience”⁴ unconnected to the nationality of shipowner or crew. These flags offer owners tax benefits, light-touch regulation and no restrictions on the nationality of seafarers employed on board.

In the spring of 2020, the world was utterly unprepared for the trajectory and consequences of a global pandemic. The tentacles of COVID-19 extended their reach across borders, curling out through Asia to reach Africa, Europe and North America, not a localized disaster but a fully-fledged global pandemic. Different nations took different measures to limit the spread of disease and to balance the expectations of open, internationally connected societies against the realities of a public health emergency. Supermarket shelves were suddenly empty, essential products rationed. Global supply chains had been rudely interrupted. For the first time in history, nation-states closed their borders, and the population of the world was grounded. Seafarers were either at sea or at home and unable to join vessels.

Although disastrous in many ways, there was one positive outcome of the pandemic: a moment of increased visibility for the world’s seafarers.

The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF)—a global trade union federation representing 20 million transport workers across 150 countries—and the International Chamber of Shipping—an organization of national shipowners’ associations—called for seafarers to be recognized as essential workers and sought to facilitate the rapid changeover of ships’ crews.

In “normal” times, around 100,000 seafarers are repatriated or join vessels every month; during COVID-19, the closed borders led to an estimated peak of 400,000 seafarers stranded at sea well beyond the terms of their contracts. Depending on rank and nationality, seafarers’ contracts⁵ normally vary from 4-6 months to 9-11 months

on board. During the pandemic, seafarers found themselves stuck at sea for more than 17 months without repatriation or shore leave.⁶

In spite of significant, high-level cooperation, it was not possible to find a solution allowing free movement of seafarers. Instead, exemptions were granted to requirements of the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention, allowing for contract extensions. Effectively this permitted state regulators and shipping employers to apply flexibility to seafarers’ working conditions and human rights. In the absence of any international consensus around tackling the pandemic and mitigating its economic consequences, seafarers were obliged to remain working at sea, barred from going ashore and, on many occasions, denied access to essential medical treatment.⁷

Six months into the pandemic the ITF “slammed government inaction to alleviate the crew change crisis, declaring that current COVID-19 border and travel restrictions risk creating an epidemic of forced labor and modern slavery as seafarers are increasingly forced to stay onboard working against their will.”⁸

Around this time, the ITF Seafarers’ Trust, a charity registered in England and Wales and funded by the ITF, launched its first seafarers’ photography competition.

STILL AT SEA invited seafarers to submit photos of their experiences on board during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a view to complementing the lobbying undertaken by unions and the shipping industry. The idea was to collect an unfiltered record of seafarers’ firsthand experience and provide a platform for their thoughts and reflections as well as images from daily life at sea. The response was remarkable and fascinating. Many seafarers embraced the opportunity to share their innermost thoughts, as well as the daily routines and dramas of living and working as part of a crew



Title: *Home Sick*

Photographer: San Ko Oo (Winner of the Life at Sea photography competition 2022)

Location: At the sea

Photographer's description: "*Home sick*"



far from home. The photographs are accompanied by the seafarers' own descriptions, often written on their phones at sea, and with only light editing.

A number of recurrent themes stood out. These themes were exacerbated during the pandemic but in reality illustrate the consistent challenges (and opportunities) of life at sea. Some are unavoidable aspects of working on a vessel in the middle of the ocean, some are due to the structure of employment and the difficulties of applying decent standards in a global labor market. Others are very personal to each seafarer.

An underlying theme is the feeling of isolation and detachment, of being absent from key moments of family life, accompanied by a keen sense of the sacrifices made to support others. In a sense, seafarers are the ultimate migrant workers, sacrificing time spent with family in exchange for an income higher than could be achieved at home.

There is also exhaustion. As commercial pressures have increased, with requirements for fast port turnarounds combined with numerous inspection requirements, fatigue features as another common theme.

On the upside, many enjoy the camaraderie on board and the satisfaction of pulling together as a team. There is enormous pride in carrying out a demanding job with professionalism and stoicism.

An unexpected feature of the photos submitted was the number of images showing seafarers having fun and making the best of their moments of relaxation on board.

In 2021 the ITF Seafarers' Trust launched its second photography competition: OUT OF SIGHT, NOT OUT OF MIND—this time to collect 40 portraits of seafarers by seafarers in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the organization.⁹ And with the third competition, LIFE AT SEA 2022,¹⁰ ITF confirmed the project as an annual event, tracking the consistent issues faced by seafarers and capturing key events of the moment and their unique impact on seafarers.

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine with devastating consequences for the civilian population and dramatic implications for the employment of both Ukrainian and Russian seafarers. As the COVID-19 restrictions started to ease, the industry faced new challenges in deploying seafarers from both countries. More practical and psychological hardship and difficulties for seafarers ensued. That said, examples of the absence of conflict on board vessels with Ukrainian and Russian crew were notable. In addition, some 2,000 seafarers were trapped in Ukrainian ports as the war broke out. Diplomatic efforts on a national and international level enabled some crew to leave the country, and negotiations to establish a "grain corridor"

(top left)

Title: *Rest, My Fellow*

Photographer: Edmar Rosales Ogao-ogao

Photographer's description: "Seafarers are also front-liners; even when the world locks down, ships continue to trade across continents. Photo was taken after departure from a port, particularly after mooring lines were secured and depicted emotions stemming from exhaustion and the mere fact that during this pandemic, rises a lot of uncertainties."

(bottom left)

Title: *Cheerful Buddies*

Photographer: Harold Papa Melendez

Location: Jingtang, China

Photographer's description: "Being at port is the busiest time for a seafarer. Aside from keeping watch, there is the supply of provision, stores, bunkering, inspections and no shore leave. But whatever the circumstances are nothing can dampen the mood of a jolly person."



Title: *Happy Faces After Evacuation from Ukraine
(War Zone)*

Photographer: Vinod

Location: Mykolaiv, Ukraine

Photographer's description: *"We arrived at Mykolaiv Ukraine for loading on 23 Feb 2022 and were supposed to leave on next day, but next morning war started, port operations were stopped and we got stuck in war zone. Even though we have enough food and water stored, to stay there was like a nightmare, families were worried after seeing many vessels were attacked during this conflict. Every day we saw smoke all around after shelling, bombing nearby our ship and each passing day seems to be not less than a year. After many sleepless nights, stressed days and horrible times, Govt of India and our crew management evacuated all of us with other seafarers and reach home safely. This moment was the happiest moment for all of us and smiling faces tells the rest of the story."*

allowed dry bulk vessels to load and ship grain out of the war zone.¹¹ However, the situation is indicative of the enormous risks faced by international seafarers in an unstable world.

On the other side of the globe, in Myanmar, seafarers have had to contend with the consequences of the military coup that took place in February 2021. Overseas companies closed their operations in the country, and union leaders became targets of the military junta, leading to increased vulnerability of Myanmar seafarers.

The competition has also been able to highlight the importance of women working at sea, and in particular women working as engineers and deck officers. While women account for an estimated 2% of the seafaring workforce, there is increasing interest in encouraging diversity, particularly in the light of the predicted shortage of officers.¹²

It is clear that much more needs to be done to raise the profile of seafarers and ensure that they are afforded the recognition and respect for the essential work they do in our interconnected and globalized world. There are many stories to tell, some tragic, some heartwarming and joyful. The ITF Seafarers' Trust is committed to building, maintaining and promoting this unique archive of seafarers' stories and photos to give a voice to the hidden workforce that "moves the world."

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Endnotes

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Title: *Patintero*

Photographer: Arvy Verder

Location: China anchorage

Photographer's description: *'PATINTERO' Playing Filipino game' (Patintero Game) Patintero, also known as block and catch or block the runner, is a traditional Filipino children's game. It is one of the most popular outdoor games played by children in the Philippines Crew wellbeing while vessel at anchor in China."*



Title: *Transiting Pirate Zone*

Photographer: Centfred T. Conde

Location: Gulf of Aden

Photographer's description: *"My life as a sailor moves in a spiral motion. I come home to go away. I go away to come home."*





(left)

Title: *Sea Witch*

Photographer: Sabrina Mccoy Villaruz

Location: Philippine Sea (Forecastle)

Photographer's description: *"Homesickness, change of life style, sleepless nights because of continuous operations, bad weather, trying to get along with different nationalities, you are physically and mentally tired and being a female in a men dominated world. And because of this Covid season many seafarers suffer onboard like difficulty in crew change that results to overdue of contract, no shoreleave and being exposed during this pandemic. But despite the challenges of being a seafarer, we also have ways to divert and cope up with our situations that this pandemic brings us. We also know how to have fun and enjoy the moments that the opportunity gives us because we value mental and emotional health onboard. Indeed life at sea is never easy and I think it will never be however we can always find ways to*

make every moment a positive one. Cooperation, camaraderie, respect and love are the basic foundation to enjoy life at sea despite of all the challenges that are physically present onboard."

(above)

Title: *THIS GIRL IS ON FIRE!*

Photographer: Christine Melliza

Location: Gibraltar Strait

Photographer's description: *"The light coming from the welding is as strong and wonderful woman she is. A mother, wife, and a kind and caring sister on board, she is a thing of beauty."*



Title: *Scrub, Scrub, Scrub!*

Photographer: Buen Ray Ortega

Location: Tema, Ghana Anchorage

Photographer's description: *"Ship's Hull contaminated by dirty slick of Oil from previous port. Insurance claims were raised & cleaning teams sent to have our Ship's hull be cleaned in Tema Anchorage. Under the blazing heat of the sun it took them almost whole day to finish the cleaning operation. (Had to give them food & drinks as a token of appreciation for their excellent work.)"*

Title: *I Am a Seaman and I Am a Hero*

Photographer: Aljon Manlangit

Location: Yanbu, Saudi Arabia

Photographer's description: *"This is a portrait shot of my fellow crew AB Mark Lester Gamorot imitating the pose of the fictional movie character Superman. Like Superman, all of us seafarers are heroes too, not in a movie but in the real world. We don't have any super powers like all other super heroes does, but as a seafarer we have a big role to keep this world move forward. Without seafarers our global economy will be paralyzed for we are the main transporter of the primary goods and necessities all around the globe. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development or UNCTAD, around 80% of the volume of international trade in goods is carried by sea, and the percentage is even higher for most developing countries. Our contribution in this time of Covid 19 pandemic is indeed heroic for we are also transporting not just the primary goods but also the medicines and Covid vaccines that are urgently needed to the countries where international flight are still not allowed due to the lockdown and restrictions. Helping the world in this time of pandemic makes me proud cause I am a seaman and I am a hero."*





Title: *A Brave Women That Can Make a Difference! Still Blessed in Spite of This Pandemic*

Photographer: Mayvine Cloma

Photographer's description: *"I remember the days of my first contract, a little bit scary because of discrimination but time goes by and I felt welcome. I wanted to prove to myself that I can do this—well it's really difficult but with faith and prayer nothing is impossible. I want to inspire women to pursue their dreams no matter what. Dream high! Fly high! This pandemic is a little bit different we can't go ashore to buy*

necessities (ha ha especially as a woman) like sanitary pads. Well lucky me I bought a lot before lockdown, so not such a big deal for me. I always think that I'm blessed to have a job, not like other people who are suffering now. Me, I have work, I can still support my family, I advise them to be happy, pray always and have faith. God is in control and everything will be alright soon. God bless us."



Title: *Dirty Hands and a Sweaty Face Are the Signs of Clean Money*

Photographer: Aljon Manlangit

Location: Underway from Russia to Turkey

Photographer's description: *"This is a photo of my crew mate, an engine wiper after cleaning the oil leaks in the engine room underway from Russia to Turkey. With the lowest rank and a lesser salary, the wipers has always assigned to do the risky job. Without them cleaning and maintaining the good condition of the engine or the so called 'heart of the ship' it*

will not work properly and may delay the voyage of a ship. Engine crew's job is to maintain the ships engine running and without any delay in order to deliver the goods in time. It took hard labor sometimes maintaining a ships engine to work properly. Dirty hands, greasy coveralls and a sweaty face are normal to them. They work in a dirty workplace in a high temperature especially during summer. Life at sea is not what they think of, every day we conquer different struggles in order to survive and earn clean money. Respect all seafarers, they are the modern heroes helping the world in moving forward."



Title: *Say a Little Prayer*

Photographer: Kenneth Ian T. Ricafort

Location: *MV Sagar Kanta*

Photographer's description: *"Cargo hold cleaning is an essential ship operation which seafarers may find grueling at times. Here, the seafarer is seen mumbling a short prayer before starting cargo hold cleaning operations."*