

Don't miss the near misses



Safety: Eddie Janson

Captain Eddie Janson of MariTrain AB, instructor and consultant in maritime safety, points the spotlight at safety related matters in each issue.

What is a near miss? There are many different definitions of the term. OCIMF defines it as "events or sequence of events that did not result in an injury but which, under slightly different conditions, could have done so". Or you can define it as every time you sit down in the mess-room and say, "Wow, we were lucky this time". The difference between a near miss and an accident is typically a few millimetres, a split second or just pure luck.

Some companies use the terms "hazardous occurrences" or "near accidents" instead, but it all refers to the same thing.

During the 1960s, a US insurance industry specialist, Frank Bird (1980), did a survey of 1,700,000 accidents and devised his "accident ratio". He found that on each serious or fatal

»A near miss shall be investigated in the same way as a real accident. Next time the same situation occurs, your luck may have run out.«

TMSA 8.1.1

→ "The fleet operator has procedures that ensure prompt reporting and investigation of all incidents, accidents and near misses."

injury there are 10 other injuries, 30 property damages and 600 near misses. Based on his information we should have more than 14 near misses reported for each damage to property or life.

A more common statistic used in the shipping industry is based on a study from 1950 that states that there are 10 near misses for each accident.

I have not seen any tanker company reporting 10 near misses per accident yet. There are maybe some out there, but not many. The Swedish Transport Agency has between 1998 and 2007 received reports on 1,408 accidents and only 197 near misses. That is 0,14 near misses per accident.

So why do we not report our near misses? One reason can be that it is in the human nature not to want to admit mistakes. If you fall on the street the first thing you do is to check if anyone saw you falling. If not, you try to stand up quickly before anyone sees you.

Other reasons can be a blame culture, or even that if your company has a no-blame culture you are not aware of it. It is important for a shipping company to communicate the no-blame culture to everyone employed.

Some people might think that it is too burdensome. You have to fill in a form and maybe answer some questions afterwards. However if you can prevent a real accident from happening, it will be worthwhile. Therefore it is important to have a user-friendly reporting system.

Some seafarers say "why shall we report near misses when nothing happens after the report?" If this is the case your company is missing a great opportunity to prevent accidents in the future. A near miss shall be investigated in the same way as a real accident. A Root Cause Analysis shall be performed and the result of the analysis shall lead to safety improvements on board. Next time the same situation occurs, your luck may have run out.

Whatever reason we have not to report, we should try to increase the reporting.

As usual it is interesting to compare with the aviation industry.

The Swedish Transport Agency/Aviation has an anonymous reporting system in which they receive about 3,000 reports per year, all of them incidents or near misses.

Why is the aviation industry better at reporting near misses?

Mr Andrew Dow on Oxford Aviation academy (Ex. SAS flight academy) states that teaching the importance of reporting "starts from the first day of training". I cannot remember that we talked about it at all when I attended the Maritime Academy, but that was a while ago.



Moluptatisi. Equis augiam, volenit.

Another comment from the Swedish Transport Agency/Aviation was that maybe the airline pilots can see bigger potential consequences and therefore are keener to report everything.

The Operational Safety Manager on the Swedish Transport Agency/Aviation Lars Sandberg says that the reporting did not become mandatory until 2007. However even before this legislation came into force they did report everything. He claims that this is due to their no-blame culture and safety awareness.

On Swedish flagged vessels we have two legislations covering reporting, the Swedish Maritime Code and the Act on Investigation of Accidents.

I believe that we have to change the attitude in order to increase reporting. The most effective way to get people to report more is to improve the safety culture, this can be done in many different ways, but the most important is commitment from the top. This no-blame culture must of course be present within the company you work in, but also from authorities and governments.

Another threat to the no-blame culture is the criminalization of seafarers. Even if an officer works in a company where he knows he will not get blamed at all for reporting near misses, this might lead to prosecution in some countries. For example I do not think that the Captain from M/V Finneagle is so keen on reporting anything in the future. He did exactly what he was supposed to, reported an accidental oil spill from his vessel, but he ended up in a cell (read more about that on page 42). *

ISM CODE 9.1

→ "The SMS should include procedures ensuring that non-conformities, accidents and hazardous situations are reported to the Company, investigated and analysed with the objective of improving safety and pollution prevention."

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No shadow should be cast on a seafarer that reports a near miss.