The Porthole

Volume 18 No. 07 July 2018

The newsletter of
the South Australian Branch of the Company of Master Mariners of Australia,
PO Box 1, PORT ADELAIDE, SA 5015
Branch Patron: His Excellency the Honorable Hieu Van Le AC

Branch Master's Comments

Greetings to all our readers,

Winter has us in its grip finally, though I could do with some more rain, but all in all, it could be a lot worse. With the promise of future maritime construction at Port Adelaide, and the economic future looking brighter than it has in a long time, the confidence factor in SA is pretty high. It's a pity that our merchant shipping industry is not sharing in this prospective surge of naval shipbuilding activity, but, to be honest, our lack of Cadets/Trainees at sea over the past 20 years have rendered us unready, if not unable, to participate in any economic upsurge without importing foreign labour. We, in the COMMA, have been warning of this for the past few decades to my own knowledge, but nobody has the political will to change the situation. Australian ships are more expensive to run than foreign ships. We all know this; but without our own ships, there is no ' Next Generation' of qualified men to run our own maritime infrastructure - senior officers, pilots, port captains, surveyors etc.

When thinking along these lines starts making me despondent, I go outside and sit on my verandah with a bottle of local shiraz (I can recommend anything by Bremmerton), and watch the local selection of hawks dive-bombing the mouse population on the hillside across the dam, and stop worrying about the short-sightedness of governments which would allow the world's biggest island nation to slowly lose its shipping capacity.

Happy Sailing

Bob W (BM)

Speaker: Philip Hammond, who will conclude his talk on the voyage of the PS "*Marion*" in 2017, covering the passage from Renmark to Morgan.

The next Branch meeting will be held at the Largs Pier Hotel, 198 The Esplanade, Largs Bay, on Wednesday, 25th July, 2018, at 1145 for 1200.

Please confirm your attendance at the lunch or register your apology before 1200 on Monday, 23rd July 2018 with Bob Westley (0427 644 947) or David Holmes (0417 444 742)

The Company of Master Mariners of Australia Ltd. is a Company established to promote and further the efficiency of the Sea Service generally, and uphold the Status, Dignity, and Prestige of Master Mariners in particular.

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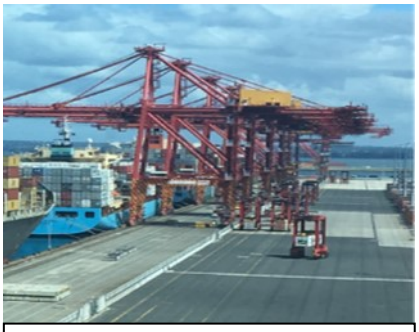
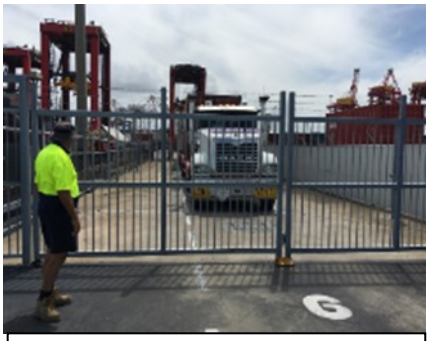
Flinders Adelaide Container Terminal (FACT) Future Developments

Summary of a talk given by David Sleath (FACT General Manager) to the South Australian Branch of the Company of Master Mariners of Australia on 27 June 2018.

To begin his talk, David spoke about the current operating environment which has seen extensive merger and acquisition activity in shipping companies. Many of the smaller companies, which operated independently up to a few years ago, have been absorbed into a few large companies, with greater market power. Also, until fairly recently, there has been an effective stevedoring duopoly in the eastern seaboard ports, but new players have since entered the stevedoring market, increasing competition. This, in turn, has led to downward pressure on stevedoring tariffs. Furthermore, with tariff rates being based on volumes shipped (higher volume, lower tariff rate), the larger companies have benefitted from their high shipped volumes to obtain the lower tariffs.

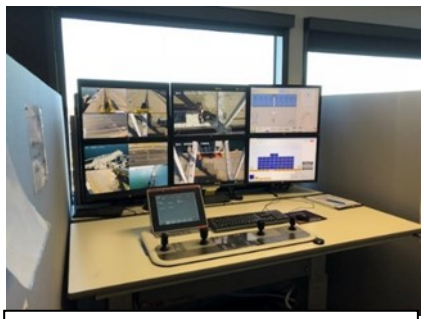


Patricks Terminal, Port Botany.
Fully automated yard. Note the wall separating the manual and the automated spaces.



VICTL, Melbourne.
The remote control position of the operator of a semi- automated portainer crane. He cannot physically see either the wharf or the ship.

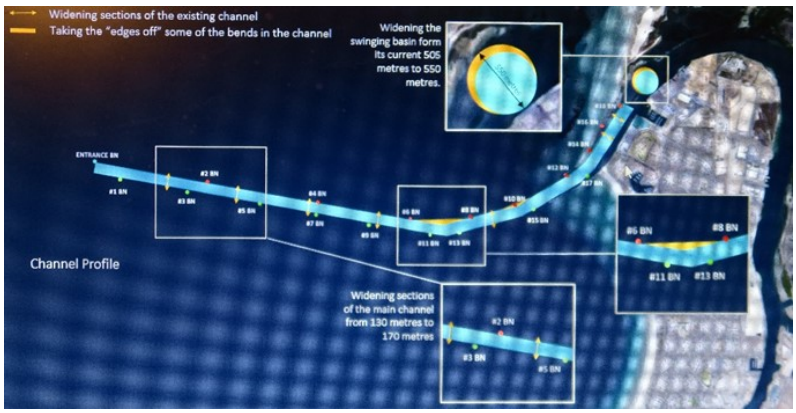
In addition to these revenue reductions, there are various reasons for increased operating costs, including the MUA/CFMEU's approach to industrial relations. FACT management has developed a number of strategies to meet these challenges. With a cost focus, the Company is looking at improved labour utilisation outcomes, and implementing other cost-saving measures such as the optimisation of operating systems. For example, reducing straddle carrier travel distances and un-aden trips. With a revenue focus, the Company is implementing new, sustainable, indexed and broad based ancillary revenue streams, such as Container Weighing and an Infrastructure Levy. David emphasised the importance of these and similar ancillary revenue streams to the stevedoring business model going forward.



Patricks Terminal, Brisbane
Transport drivers must leave their vehicles and move out of the automated area before the transfer of containers can commence

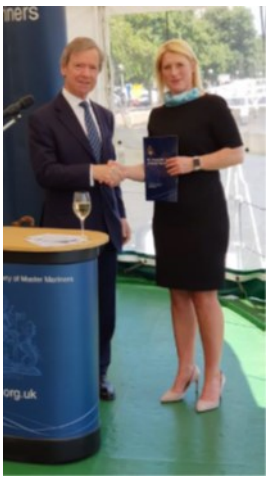
David then drew members' attention to recent developments in automation in the ports of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. These developments include (driverless) automated straddles, semi-automated portainer cranes (where the crane operator's task is limited to the connection and disconnection of the freight container) and even fully automated stacking cranes. The multiple benefits of automation include labour costs reduction, improved safety and workers' compensation outcomes (and reduced insurance premiums), greater operating flexibility and scalability, more reliable service levels, reduced maintenance costs and increased equipment lifespan (automated equipment operated at optimum steady speeds) and a reduction in damage events. Furthermore, automation provides continuing improvement opportunities. Presently, the Adelaide terminal is not automated, but this is something that would be carefully considered into the future.

Finally, David outlined the planned widening of the Outer Harbour shipping channel, recently approved by the State Government. The channel would be widened from 130 metres to 170 metres, and the diameter of the swing basin increased from 505 metres to 550 metres. This widening has been necessitated by the increasing beam of container ships over recent years, and Shipping Lines' intention to deploy even 'beamier' ships in the immediate future. The channel widening will permit vessels of 48.9 metre beam and 9,300 TEU to call (a relatively modest increase of 13% in length of ship over recent callers, but because of increased beam/length ratio resulting in a massive 124% increase in TEU capacity). Without this channel improvement, Adelaide would simply be by-passed by the largest container ships to the detriment of the state economy. Some 1.6 million tonnes of material would need to be dredged to widen the channel and then be transported to an existing spoil ground some 30 kms from Port Adelaide. Thirteen navigational aids would need to be re-positioned to the edge of the widened channel. The dredging for the channel widening is expected to commence in March 2019.



Honourable Company of Master Mariners awards Chartered Master Mariner status to Captain Susie Thomson who becomes the first female recipient.

The Honourable Company of Master Mariners has announced that it has awarded Chartered Master Mariner status, the highest accolade in the industry, to a woman for the very first time.



Capt. Susie Thomson, Risk Learning and Assurance Advisor at BP was presented with her award at a formal presentation by the Honourable Company of Master Mariners, on HQS Wellington on Monday 25 June, becoming the 20th maritime professional to be awarded this prestigious, senior recognition. Significantly this was officially the Day of the Seafarer, during Seafarers Awareness Week. The award was presented by Lord Jeffrey Mountevans (Alderman), former Lord Mayor of the City of London and current Chair of Maritime UK. In his address Lord Mountevans noted that the pinnacle of a Merchant Navy officer's sea-going career, and for that matter the same in the Royal Navy, sea command as a Master has always been the preserve of a chosen body of people, subject to demanding training and examination. However, as you well know, as with other professions such as accountancy, engineering, surveying etc. the maritime equivalent had, to date, not been recognised by the award of Chartered status, but he was delighted to hear that, after several years of the most determined and careful work by a consortium of maritime bodies, the Privy Council issued an Order in Council granting Masters their own Chartered status.

Susie Thomson (37) went to sea at 16, joining the RFA (Royal Fleet Auxiliary) as a deck officer cadet. She spent 12 years at sea, working her way up through the ranks on a range of military support vessels, tankers and ferries, gaining her Master's ticket at 27 years old. Susie is currently a Risk Assurance and Learning Advisor with BP, working with the Marine Director, who is also an ex seafarer, and working as part of a team to mitigate the safety risks associated with the company's marine activity, everything from an explosion to piracy, groundings to cyber security events. Alongside her employment with BP Susie works closely with the Merchant Navy Training Board and Maritime UK on the Female Charter for the Maritime Industry ,to raise awareness within the industry and ensure that better support is built into contracts for both women and men moving forward. Susie also manages to juggle the demands of a young family.

The Chartered Master Mariner status represents a hallmark of excellence, helping to highlight the value and importance of all of those working across the maritime industry. All the candidates applying for Chartered Master Mariner status are assessed through a rigorous and exhaustive process. All professionally qualified at the outset, the shortlisted applicants must clearly demonstrate what value they have been adding to the industry for a period of at least 10 years post Command Qualification, and how they will continue to do so over time and how they will share their expertise and professional values with all those who follow them. It must be said that not all those applying are successful.

Source: MNA2018-13 180716

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Whistleblowing Ship Master Wins Case Against Matson and Hails Seaman's Protective Act as Powerful Tool to Require Ship Owners to Maintain Safe Ships

July 11, 2018 by gCaptain

Captain John Loftus, an advocate for merchant marine safety, won a decision from the Administrative Review Board of the Department of Labour that sustained a $1.1 million judgment against a company that punished Loftus for reporting unsafe conditions aboard the company ships.

The decision, delivered on May 24, 2018, may also open the gate wider for seamen to qualify for protection under the "Seaman's Protective Act" and help prevent tragedies similar to the loss of the SS *El Faro*.

"Seamen need to be able to stand up and report deficiencies," Captain Loftus said. "It is the first line of defence in preventing major accidents".

"Think about the cost in lives and money from the Deepwater Horizon incident," he continued. "If Seamen on the *El Faro* were not in fear of job jeopardy, then deficiencies may have been brought directly to the attention of the USCG, and that may have precluded that horrific tragedy."

Captain Loftus, who won an initial judgment against Horizon Lines, now owned by MATSON, hailed the decision as a victory against ship owners who harass maritime officers for reporting deficiencies.

"The court has seen through MATSON'S ruse, just as they saw through the fabricated scheme for my termination by Horizon Lines," he said. "The message has now been sent, by not one, but two levels of the court system: Retaliation against seamen who report safety issues to regulatory agencies will not be tolerated." Matson was denied on every count of their multi-point appeal.

Matson has until July 23 to file an appeal.

The Seaman's Protective Act (SPA) was enacted in 1984 and amended into its current version in 2010. The purpose of the SPA is to augment the Coast Guard's limited enforcement resources by encouraging seamen to report possible violations of safety regulations. It does so by prohibiting retaliation against seamen who report possible regulatory violations to the United States Coast Guard (USCG) or American Bureau of Shipping (ABS). In so doing, the SPA promotes safe working conditions for all Mar-

iners while protecting the environment and public safety.
Part of MATSON'S appeal was based on trying to have the case dismissed as non-qualifying under the "Seaman's Protective Act." MATSON became responsible for Horizon Lines liabilities after it purchased the company.
Captain Loftus said MATSON passed up a chance to take the high road, and, in continuing the appeal, aligns itself with Horizon Lines corporate managers who broke the law and fostered an attitude that has contributed to such tragedies as the loss of the SS *El Faro*.
"Matson has followed down the path of those executives, who did not really stand for safety at sea, but rather wanted the façade of safety at sea," Captain Loftus said.
"Isn't that the exact type of thinking that was prevalent within the TOTE organization and was a factor in the loss of the S.S. *El Faro*?" the Captain asked.
"Instead of trying to prop up the illegal nature of these former executives," Captain Loftus said, "MATSON would better serve the Maritime Industry by using this legal case, as an example of what management should *NOT* do.
"In the 2016 Spring Issue USCG Proceedings, for example, Rear Admiral Paul F. Thomas, USCG discusses the SMS and ISM Code, and puts it very succinctly:
"An effective SMS must not only be very well developed in terms of process and procedures: it must also be deployed from the boardroom to the boiler room. There shouldn't be any disconnect between the auditors and the surveyors, or between the CEO and the seaman. We all must work together to discover and eliminate such disconnects."
"My hope going forward is that with this two-tier court decision, and affirmation, seamen will be better protected from retaliation, and that safety will become stronger to help prevent major accidents," Captain Loftus said.
Source: gCaptain 180712

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US, SAILORS AND FAMILIES SUE TANKER OWNER OVER *McCAIN* COLLISION

Stars and Stripes 3 Jul 2018 By Caitlin Doornbos

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan -- The U.S. government, Navy sailors and victims' families are seeking more than $66.5 million in damages from the owners of an oil tanker involved in a fatal collision with an American warship last year.

Ten sailors aboard the Yokosuka-based USS *John S. McCain* were killed and others injured in the Aug. 21, 2017, collision with the *Alnic MC* oil tanker off the coast of Singapore.

Energetic Tank Inc., which owns the tanker, filed suit in February asking a federal court in New York to relieve it of liability in lawsuits resulting from the crash.

Citing a Navy report and the discipline and prosecution of several Navy leaders for the crash, the Liberian company stated in its claim that the accident was "not due to any fault, neglect or want of care" of the *Alnic*.

The guided-missile destroyer *John S. McCain* (DDG 56) is shown moored at Changi Naval Base, Singapore, following a collision with a merchant vessel while underway on Aug. 21, 2017. (Grady T. Fontana/Navy)

Now 42 parties, including the families of the 10 *McCain* sailors killed, have filed counter claims against the company totalling more than $66.5 million for personal injury, wrongful death and property damage.

The parties argue that Energetic Tank is liable for the accident, which happened when the McCain sailed into the path of the *Alnic* in waters east of the Strait of Malacca.

After confusion over shifting speed and steering control, the destroyer veered left and crossed in front of the tanker, which ran into the McCain, according to a Navy report.

Court documents describe the horrors experienced by survivors of the crash.

An attorney for enlisted McCain sailor Kerrington Harvey – an operations specialist of unknown rank, who is asking for $10 million in damages including medical expenses, pain and suffering and loss of earnings – said, in the documents, that Harvey "endured extreme hardship in saving his life and participating in attempts to save and aid his fellow sailors."

"[Harvey] was thrown to the deck, covered within debris, water and oil, suffered severe injuries, witnessed death, injury and destruction [and] was in grave fear of his own life ending," the attorney said in the documents

Source: Shipping News (002)

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"We're looking for a Treasurer for the Xmas fund", said Paddy. "Didn't you take on a new one last month?" said Murphy. "That's the one we're looking for", Paddy replied.

China Launches Two Guided Missile Destroyers

Source: YouTube
2018-07-03 20:41:34
China launched two Type 055 guided missile destroyers in Dalian on Tuesday.
The vessels follow two others launched over the last 18 months, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy is expected to commission at least 10; another two are already under construction. It is anticipated that the first destroyer will be formally delivered to the PLA Navy by the end of the year after undergoing sea trials.

The multi-role destroyers would be classed as cruisers by the U.S. They are a development of the Navy's Type 052D Luyang III-class destroyers and are about 30 percent larger. They are designed for air defence, anti-missile, anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare and are expected to play an instrumental role in China's future carrier strike formations. The class are one of the first among PLA Navy surface combatants capable of land attack missions. They are anticipated to be armed with electromagnetic railgun technology.

General characteristics

Type: Guided missile destroyer Displacement: 13,000 tons, Length: 180 meters (590 feet), Beam: 20 meters (66 feet), Draught: 6.6 meters (22 feet), Installed power: 6 × QD-50 turbine generators (5MW each) Total: 30MW Propulsion: COGAG 4 × QC-280 gas turbines (28MW (38,000 hp) each) Total: 112 MW Speed: In excess of 32 knots Range: 7,000 nautical miles Complement: 310

Source: Shipping News (002).

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Solving the Ocean Plastic Crisis starts with Asia -Opinion

June 26, 2018 by Bloomberg

By Adam Minter (Bloomberg Opinion) — Since Jan. 1, when China stopped accepting the rich world's recyclable plastic waste, it has received a ton of criticism for worsening the already deep crisis of ocean plastic pollution. But China isn't the only culprit here. This is a crisis made — and growing worse — throughout developing Asia.

Photo: MOHAMED ABDULRAHEEM / Shutterstock

Just eight countries in the region are responsible for about 63 percent of total plastic waste flowing into the oceans. Little of that junk has been exported by rich economies. Instead, it's almost solely generated by Asia's newly minted consumer classes, the vast majority of whom lack access to garbage collection, modern landfills and incineration. Any progress in reducing ocean plastic will have to start with them.

A boom in garbage is almost always the result of two related phenomena: urbanization and income growth. Rural dwellers moving to the city shift from buying unpackaged goods to buying stuff (especially food) wrapped in plastic. As their incomes rise, their purchases increase. That growth in consumption is almost never matched by expanded garbage collection and disposal. In typical low income countries, less than half of all garbage is collected formally, and what little is picked up tends to end up in unregulated open dumps. In 2015, scientists estimated that as much as 88 percent of the waste generated in Vietnam is either littered or tossed into uncontained dumps. In China, the rate is about 77 percent. By comparison, the U.S. rate is 2 percent.

Every big city in developing Asia faces this problem. Jakarta's waterways are choked with plastic trash. In Kuala Lumpur, instances of open dumping line the high-speed train route to the airport. On the outskirts of any Chinese city, loose plastic bags and instant-noodle cups litter every road's shoulder. Much of this junk ends up in waterways — and, eventually, the ocean. One study found that eight of the 10 rivers conveying the most plastic waste into the oceans are in Asia. China's Yangtze alone delivers 1.5 million metric tons of plastic to the Yellow Sea each year.

Solutions to all this have proved chronically elusive. China has prohibited retailers from providing free plastic bags for a decade, to almost no effect. In Indonesia, longstanding efforts to tax plastic bottles and containers have run into the reality that few locals have access to piped or uncontaminated water. Although recycling is common in Asia, plastic presents an often-insurmountable challenge. Technical and environmental factors render much of it unrecyclable, especially in developing regions. In fact, only about 9 percent of plastics are recycled globally.

Yet there's another, far more promising option: improve regular old trash collection. A recent study, by the Ocean Conservancy and the McKinsey Centre for Business and Environment, found that boosting trash collection rates to 80 percent in just five Asian countries — China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam — could reduce ocean plastic waste by a whopping 23 percent over a decade. No other solution can promise such an immediate or lasting impact.

Pulling it off won't be easy. Garbage collection and disposal is often the most expensive line-item on city budgets in the develop-

ing world and achieving the study's goal would require $4 billion to $5 billion per year. But that's not impossible: In the U.K., aid organizations are pushing the government to spend 3 percent of its annual foreign aid on waste collection and disposal in the developing world (currently, it spends 0.3 percent). If that goal were adopted by other rich countries, it could be a game-changer for ocean plastics.

The private sector could also help. An American advocacy group called Closed Loop Ocean is raising $150 million from global corporations — including 3M Co., Coca-Cola Co., and Procter & Gamble Co. — to invest in scalable waste collection and disposal businesses in India and Indonesia. Petrochemical and plastics companies should be next to join.

All this is just a start, of course. Developing Asia will eventually need many more modern landfills, incinerators and self-funding recycling programs. But for now, one reform could have a bigger global impact than just about any other: Start picking up the trash.

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Source: gCaptain 180627

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Chinese Rescue Diver to Receive IMO Exceptional Bravery at Sea Award

July 10, 2018 by gCaptain

The 2018 IMO Award for Exceptional Bravery At Sea will be awarded to Mr. Zhong Haifeng, senior diver and deputy of the Engineering Team of Guangzhou Salvage

Photo: International Maritime Organization.

- A Chinese rescue diver who led a series of dives to help rescue six crew members from a sunken cargo ship will receive the 2018 IMO Award for Exceptional Bravery At Sea, the International Maritime Organization has announced.
- The rescue started 27 November 2017 when the bulk carrier M/V Jin Ze Lun collided with another ship in Guangzhou Port, China, causing the bulk carrier to sink in the main channel to the port. Of the 14 crew on board, two were immediately rescued but 12 remained missing.
- The award recipient, Mr. Zhong Haifeng, was a senior diver and deputy of the Engineering Team at Guangzhou Salvage and put in charge of the desperate search for survivors.
- Facing strong currents, Haifeng organized a series of dives resulting in the discovery of six missing crew members trapped inside an air pocket of a cabin. After their discovery, the team worked to replenish oxygen and talk to the trapped survivors to calm them.
- Haifeng even dove down to deliver scuba diving equipment for those trapped.
- The following day, Haifeng made six dives to help teach survivors how to use the scuba gear before helping them to the surface.
- He is personally credited with rescuing three of the crew members over the course of just one hour.
- Mr. Haifeng was nominated for the award by China.
- A Panel of Judges agreed that Mr. Haifeng demonstrated "truly exceptional bravery and human spirit" during the rescue "by personally exerting tireless efforts under highly dangerous circumstances," making it deserving of the IMO's highest award for bravery at sea.
- The decision was endorsed by the IMO Council last week at its 120th session in London.
- Of a total of 22 qualifying nominations for this year's award, another three will receive Certificates of Commendation and eight will receive Letters of Commendation.
- The awards will be presented during an IMO Awards ceremony to be held on 6 December 2018 at IMO Headquarters in London.

Source: gCaptain 180711

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The Dublin pensioners club go on a mystery tour every Wednesday and to make it interesting they have a sweep to guess where they are going.
Shamus, the coach driver, has won five weeks on the trot.

Colleen dropped a Euro coin, intending it to fall into the blind man's hat on the pavement, but missed. As quick as a flash, he scooped it up and put it in the hat. "You're not blind" she said. "No, I'm not" said Paddy, "Its Murphy whose blind, I'm just filling in for him while he's gone to the pictures"

Opinion: 2020 Sulphur Cap May Augur an Oil Shock

July 18, 2018 by Bloomberg

By David Fickling (Bloomberg Opinion)

What's the most important element in global commodity markets right now? Carbon? Copper? Gold?

Wrong on all three counts. Sulphur — the yellow, infernal substance that gives rotten eggs their smell and hardens the rubber in car tires — is quietly roiling the energy industry. The disruptions could reshape everything from Australian coal, to the diesel and gasoline in your car, to petcoke, a coal-like residue of oil refining burned in Indian power stations.

If oil prices rise from their current levels of $74 a barrel to $400 or more in 2020 — a situation predicted by analyst Philip Verleger that would almost certainly trigger a global recession — you'll have sulphur to thank.

The reason sulphur is important isn't that the world is running short. Quite the opposite: There's enough locked away in the world's fossil fuel deposits to feed current levels of demand for more than 7,000 years. The problem is that there's too much of it.

The proximate issue centres on the world's shipping fleet. Atmospheric levels of sulphur dioxide have been falling since the early 1980s, when fears around acid rain, asthma and heart disease saw coal-fired power plants install scrubbers to remove the pollutant from their smokestacks. The maritime industry, however, has been stuck in the past.

For years, cargo ships have been powered by about 4 million barrels a day of the dirtiest, bottom-of-the-barrel fraction of crude, a tarry substance known as bunker fuel or residual fuel oil. That's set to change in less than 18 months, after the International Maritime Organization adopted rules that would keep the sulphur content of the bunker fuel on standard ships below 0.5 percent from Jan. 1, 2020.

That's a problem, because almost two-thirds of the world's crude oil production is in medium sour and sour grades that are at least 0.5 percent sulphur (the "sweet" grades like the Brent and West Texas Intermediate benchmarks are so called because of their lower sulphur content). Bunker fuel and petcoke have traditionally been where refiners have dumped the sulphur that's already banned from lighter distillates such as jet fuel, gasoline and diesel. The new rules present them with a waste-disposal problem.

The new IMO rules won't make bunker fuel production dry up altogether. The likelier outcome is that refiners will blend each barrel with about three of lower-sulphur fractions — principally gasoil or middle distillate, essentially the same stuff as automotive diesel — to get the proportion down from 2015's average of 2.45 percent. But that, of course, will require an additional 2 million barrels a day or so of lower-sulphur fuel, and it's not clear that the world's refiners can shift so fast.

What would the result be? One possibility is that the rules are simply ignored by the shipping industry, but the IMO's rules on the issue don't leave a lot of wriggle-room for cheats.

Another would be for shipowners to install their own scrubbers allowing them to use higher-sulphur fuel — but while that's a potentially cost-effective option, it's looking unlikely. There simply isn't the capacity for more than a fraction of the 60,000-strong global fleet to be fully retrofitted in time to meet the deadline, and with that knowledge and a backdrop of chronic overcapacity and low margins, shipping companies have passed the buck to refiners.

The decisive issue will be how they deal with it. Those set up to consume sour crudes and produce large fractions of higher-sulphur fuel oils may find themselves struggling, as the sudden shrinkage of an end-use market eats into the economics of their operations and they have to rejig to stay in business.

Those with the capacity to process sweeter grades will do better — but they'll also need more raw materials. As we wrote recently, the world's most abundant supplies of sweet crude are currently locked away from global markets in the U.S. oil patch, and it's touch and go whether new pipeline developments will clear that bottleneck in time.

There may even be potential to process sour crudes into sweeter end-products by using cokers to turn the residual fractions into petcoke — but that model may be under threat too, as gCaptain will explore in a subsequent column.

That, and the widening discount of January 2020 fuel oil over Brent, gives weight to a more pessimistic analysis: shortages in the heaviest fractions of the barrel will drive up the prices of gasoil, jet fuel and gasoline, boosting the cost of crude itself until the market rebalances.

If refiners make the wrong adjustments, that could play out in unpredictable ways. The last time we saw this sort of disruption in the oil-products market was arguably in 2008, when prices topped out at $150 a barrel. The world may already be seeing the early signs of an oil shock. How it deals with this tiny impurity could decide whether recent price rises turn into an all-out frenzy.

Source: gCaptain 180719

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AUSTRALIA AND AUSTRALIANS

The following has been written by the late Douglas Adams of "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" fame:

"Australia is a very confusing place, taking up a large amount of the bottom half of the planet. It is recognisable from orbit because of many unusual features, including what at first looks like an enormous bite taken out of its southern edge; a wall of sheer cliffs which plunge into the girting sea. Geologists assure us that this is simply an accident of geomorphology, but they still call it the "Great Australian Bight", proving that not only are they covering up a more frightening theory, but they can't spell either.

The first of the confusing things about Australia is the status of the place. Where other landmasses and sovereign lands are classified as continent, island or country, Australia is considered all three. Typically, it is unique in this.

The second confusing thing about Australia is the animals. They can be divided into three categories: Poisonous, Odd, and Sheep. It is true that of the 10 most poisonous arachnids on the planet, Australia has 9 of them. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that of the 9 most poisonous arachnids, Australia has all of them.

Any visitors should be careful to check inside boots (before putting them on), under toilet seats (before sitting down) and generally everywhere else. A stick is very useful for this task.

The last confusing thing about Australia is the inhabitants.

A short history: Sometime around 80,000 years ago some people arrived in boats from the north. They ate all the available food, and a lot of them died. The ones who survived learned respect for the balance of nature, man's proper place in the scheme of things, and spiders. They settled in and spent a lot of the intervening time making up strange stories.

Then, around 200 years ago, Europeans arrived in boats from the north.

More accurately, European convicts were sent, with a few deranged people in charge. They tried to plant their crops in autumn (failing to take account of the reversal of the seasons), ate all their food, and a lot of them died.

About then the sheep arrived and have been treasured ever since. It is interesting to note here that the Europeans always consider themselves vastly superior to any other race they encounter, since they can lie, cheat, steal and litigate (marks of a civilised culture they say), whereas all the Aboriginals can do is happily survive being left in the middle of a vast red-hot desert, equipped with a stick.

Eventually, the new lot of people stopped being Europeans on 'extended holiday' and became Australians. The changes are subtle, but deep, caused by the mind-stretching expanses of nothingness and eerie quiet, where a person can sit perfectly still and look deep inside themselves to the core of their essence, their reasons for being, and the necessity of checking inside their boots every morning for fatal surprises. They also picked up the most finely tuned sense of irony in the world, and the Aboriginal gift for making up stories. Be warned.

There is also the matter of the beaches. Australian beaches are simply the nicest and best in the world, although anyone actually venturing into the sea will have to contend with sharks, stinging jellyfish, stonefish (a fish which sits on the bottom of the sea, pretends to be a rock and has venomous barbs sticking out of its back that will kill just from the pain) and surfboarders. However, watching a beach sunset is worth the risk.

As a result of all this hardship, dirt, thirst and wombats, you would expect Australians to be a sour lot. Instead, they are genial, jolly, cheerful and always willing to share a kind word with a stranger. Faced with insurmountable odds and impossible problems, they smile disarmingly and look for a stick. Major engineering feats have been performed with sheets of corrugated iron, string and mud.

Alone of all the races on earth, they seem to be free from the 'Grass is greener on the other side of the fence' syndrome, and roundly proclaim that Australia is, in fact, the other side of that fence. They call the land "Oz" or "Godzone" (a verbal contraction of "God's Own Country"). The irritating thing about this is... they may be right!

TIPS TO SURVIVING AUSTRALIA

Don't ever put your hand down a hole for any reason - WHATSOEVER.
The beer is stronger than you think, regardless of how strong you think it is.
Always carry a stick.
Air-conditioning is imperative.
Do not attempt to use Australian slang unless you are a trained linguist and extremely good in a fist fight.
Wear thick socks.
Take good maps. Stopping to ask directions only works when there are people nearby
If you leave the urban areas, carry several litres of water with you at all times, or you will die. And don't forget a stick.
Even in the most embellished stories told by Australians, there is always a core of truth that it is unwise to ignore.

HOW TO IDENTIFY AUSTRALIANS

They waddle when they walk due to the 53 expired petrol discount vouchers stuffed in their wallet or purse.
They pronounce Melbourne as "Mel-bun".
They think it makes perfect sense to decorate highways with large fibreglass bananas, prawns and sheep.
They think "Woolloomooloo" is a perfectly reasonable name for a place, that "Wagga Wagga" can be abbreviated to "Wagga", but "Woy Woy" can't be called "Woy".
Their hamburgers will contain beetroot. Apparently, it's a must-have. How else do you get a stain on your shirt.
They don't think it's summer until the steering wheel is too hot to handle.
They believe that all train timetables are works of fiction.
And they all carry a stick.

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