



BRISBANE MISSION MATTERS

SPRING 2021



President's Address

It's been sometime since putting together our last e-Newsletter which is sadly a reflection of the impact that COVID-19 has had on our Mission and the rest of the seafarer's welfare centres around the world.

Since the outset of the pandemic, the humble servant of the global freight task – the seafarer - has been severely impacted. Their shore leave has been stopped, their repatriation from their ships to home and from their home to their ships has been significantly disrupted, with many seafarers spending up to two years away from their families or those remaining onshore without an income. In turn, these restrictions have curtailed all except the most essential services our seafarers' centre can offer and we have equally felt that our hands have been tied.

As time has progressed, the seafarer repatriation system has evolved and specific ports around the world have provided appropriate processes for the COVID-safe handling of quarantine and transport arrangements for seafarers. Brisbane is the only port in Australia with a well found and proven seafarer repatriation system in place which has relieved the stress on the mental, physical and spiritual turmoil that this isolation has caused the seafarers, their families and their extended communities. We are enormously proud and appropriately supportive of the work of Maritime Safety QLD in the seafarer welfare space. As I write, the development of a seafarer's vaccination program for QLD ports nears the final stages of development.

While we all generally focus on the negative impacts the pandemic has had on our families, friends, communities and lifestyles, rarely do we recognise and leverage off the positives that have surfaced through these challenging times.

This Spring e-newsletter will hopefully reflect on our curtailed activities, focus on these positives and inspire you to continue supporting us in our endeavours as we evolve our services to meet the much needed welfare demands of the modern seafarer, who has carried an unrecognised but significant burden through this pandemic.

Ross Nicholls

Capt. Ross Nicholls
President

Online Shop

One of the favourite activities a seafarer enjoyed when visiting our centre was to spend some time, and some of their hard-earned cash, on presents and souvenirs for their family and friends back home. While this often extended to snacks like chocolates, chips and nuts, it wasn't unusual for a shopping trip to be a highlight ashore.

When shore leave was cancelled and the opportunity to wander around the seafarer's centre shop, Wynnum Plaza, and for those with more time, the centre of Brisbane, we considered "why can't we take the shop to the ship". A financial Grant from Viva Energy made this possible and has allowed us to develop a "fit for purpose" online store. A simple online shop has initially been accessible through our website and seafarer's will soon be able to shop directly through our own e-commerce platform. We're excited!

While a far cry from the 14,000 bus trips and an estimated \$1.1M these seafarers spent in the local community shopping centres, Heather, our Centre Supervisor, and her tireless volunteers have responded promptly to the online orders and shopped, packed and delivered over 250 orders since April 2020. While most items purchased have come from our online store, it hasn't been unusual for a delivery of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Hungry Jacks, KFC and an odd Domino's pizza to reach the bottom of a gangway!

With the introduction of a more efficient online store, we hope to be able to increase the coverage of ships visiting the port, provide a service to a wider group of seafarers, both under the current conditions and into the future, and provide greater efficiencies for managing the seafarers centre shop. This initiative has highlighted how important access to these shop items are to seafarers who are living and working in enhanced isolation.



Container vessel MV Bellini

Enhancing Connections with Seafarers

“Face to face” contact with seafarers has brought both the seafarer and our team at the seafarer’s centre great joy over the years. The ability to converse with someone other than your shipmate or to talk about a range of items, or even something personal, has been one of the cornerstones of our support for the seafarer’s mental, spiritual and physical needs.

With seafarers confined to their ships around the world, this key ingredient to their happiness has left a significant gap in their daily lives aboard. Our volunteers also look forward to the personal engagements.

An occasional visit to the bottom of a gangway for a package delivery or unfortunately a hospital visits or a ship side service following a death onboard, do not provide the full level of support required. Connectivity is the seafarer’s “life blood” and even in these globally connected times we live in, the seafarer is still significantly isolated.

Reduced satellite connection charges have benefited some seafarers, as the ships Owners/Operators have allowed Wi-Fi access onboard. While this may be the case on several ships, it is still common to hear that a seafarer is asked to pay a significant sum, often a day’s pay, for access to Wi-Fi while at sea. Over 80% of the world’s fleet of ships have no personal internet access for seafarers.

Several years ago, Mission to Seafarers U.K. commissioned an ongoing survey – The Seafarers Happiness Index – which is helping track a seafarer’s life, providing valuable feedback to the welfare providers and industry. <https://www.happyatsea.org/> The survey tracks ten key components of a seafarer’s life including their Welfare, Workload, Training, Leave, Food, Interactions onboard, Connectivity, Wages and General Happiness. For the last quarter the index indicated a higher approval rating but this is cyclical and there is a developing and worrying trend that is indicating that a life at sea under the tough restrictions is now a less desirable work option.

Connectivity is one area in which we can assist. In Brisbane we are more active on our Facebook and Messenger accounts and regularly post Chaplains Reflection videos to provide spiritual support to the seafarer. In conjunction with these videos, frequent contact with ships, discussions around shore leave and vaccinations, the mental health of the crew onboard and access to “nice to have” items through the online shop, which are predominantly phone cards, are keeping our connections alive.

While our Chaplains and remaining volunteer teams have continued to visit hospitals, delivering critical items to seafarers in quarantine or providing a wharf side church service following an onboard trauma, developing stronger digital connections with seafarers into the future will enhance communications and hopefully provide a bridge for the spiritual and emotional connections that are required.

Kiribati Seafarers – Stranded Around the World



Kiribati National Flag

The Kiribati islands are a group of tiny atolls in the Pacific Ocean, located some 3,500 kilometres or 5 hours flying time from Brisbane. Their nation of only 120,000 has a naturally strong connection with the ocean which is why it comes as no surprise that they are a provider of cost competitive seafarers to international shipping companies. The Kiribati islands have hosted a maritime training academy which has trained several thousand seafarers over the past 50 years. Sadly, this pandemic has wreaked havoc on the individual seafarers, their families and their tiny communities, which have generationally benefitted from this employment source. It is now clear that they are no longer a desired source of seafarer for the world's shipping Companies, driven by the significant logistical challenges of crossing multiple closed borders.

Proudly, our seafarers centre, in conjunction with the Deutsche Seemannsmission in Hamburg (<https://www.seemannsmission.org/>) and Human Rights at Sea UK (<https://www.humanrightsatsea.org/>) have spearheaded a campaign to have the Kiribati seafarers plight recognised and an appropriate response developed to reunite these humble folk with their families, friends and country. Sadly, these efforts have not as yet been able to penetrate a range of barriers that have been erected to prevent the cross border transmission of COVID.

While the long-term situation has its complications, there are number of positives that have surfaced during this campaign, and to some degree, have softened the primary issue. During their stay here we have engaged with them on Kiribati National Day, built unexpected friendships, developed a better understanding of the Kiribati and their culture, assisted with an engagement at the QLD Maritime Museum and learnt about the importance of employment for this tiny island nation. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity of others and the care and respect that our endeavours have fostered. None of this would have been possible without the care and love of Heather and a wonderful group of volunteers. These responses and engagements are triggers of positive endorphins that have circulated through our welfare community and have kept our collective spirits high.



The Kiribati boys at the QLD Maritime Museum

Enhancing Connections with our Shipping Community

The complexities that have arisen in managing shipping logistics through the pandemic have created challenges across the industry and in many cases have brought organisations closer. The controls that have been implemented in managing crewing repatriation, quarantine, medical assistance and general welfare requirements have strengthened our relationships with Shipping Agents, Companies, MSQ, AMSA, Terminal Operators and other key members of our local maritime and wider communities.

We are enormously grateful for their support, improved communication and understanding of the role that the welfare provider can play in the more “human” aspects of the global shipping industry and hope that the strength of these relationships will continue.

Our Donors

Our needs for donations over the past year have reduced given the restricted contact with seafarers. We haven't had the pleasure of watching the seafarers sort through beanies or clothes and stand in front of the mirror while their colleague's step back and laugh or provide fashion advice. While that aspect of our donatable clothing is missing we are still delivering beanies to ships with our “care packages”, online shop orders and by request. These small gestures remind the seafarers of the care and love that our Mission brings and hopefully continues to bring a smile to their faces as they reminisce.

We are enormously appreciative of the continued support of our tireless knitters and donators. Their support of the seafarers and the work that do we reinforces our efforts to keep bridging the current void in the social interactions of a seafarer's life.



Our Christmas Bag appeal is under way and we are actively seeking Christmas related items to pack the hundreds of bags that cross the wharves onto ships as we enter the festive season. We are aiming to bring some hope and joy to their lives over Christmas which can be an incredibly lonely time of year for a seafarer.

Rebuilding our Team

The Mission to Seafarers, like many Charities, has been subject to significant disruption of its activities. These activities are normally underpinned by our Volunteers who have become unseen victims of the restrictions imposed on movement due to the obvious threat of disease transmission. In our specific industry, the ban on all shore leave for seafarers, who are travelling internationally across multiple borders and seen as significant threats to our sovereign health, has severely impacted our income source. The restrictions on Volunteers and their heightened vulnerability given their average age, has reduced our available workforce to approximately 20% of those pre-COVID. We are not unique, and this is being felt by the majority of welfare providers globally and within Australia.

While we have been fortunate during the past 18 months to operate effectively in “caretaker mode”, the loss of volunteers to power our organisation forwards will have a significant impact on our ability to reopen and to provide the same level of service to the seafarer. We are now needing to look at opportunities to

engage/re-engage our maritime and broader communities and hopefully rebuild and strengthen our future volunteer pool.

The impact of this reduction in operating activities has also reduced the number of people actively involved on our Committee (Board), which now requires re-strengthening. Whilst initially this challenge brought with it a loss of knowledge and capability, we now have an opportunity to rebuild a team with a new and varied set of skills and experiences that will underpin the future stability of our service in the Port of Brisbane. It is our vision that the new team will ensure that the provision of our services will be stronger and more sustainable.

We would encourage you, or maybe someone you know, to consider a role on our Committee to help us ensure that we are structured and operating in a way to secure the future of our Mission. Roles on Committee are bound by our Constitution, renewed annually at the AGM and require attendance at bi-monthly Committee meetings, as well as assistance elsewhere when time and other life conflicts allow.

As we start to sow the seeds of reopening our centre, there are some great positives for us to draw upon along with several areas to consider as to how we rebuild our capability. Our service is initially likely to be leaner and more focused to meet the ongoing needs of seafarers as they emerge from their “shipboard lockdown” but with the same Values that make us who we are.

It’s been a pleasure bringing this e-newsletter to your inbox and we look forward to your continued support and engagement down at the Brisbane Seafarers Centre.

Smooth sailing