

THE AGE OF THE PROFESSIONAL STOWAWAY

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Over the last 15 years, we have witnessed a change in the market which has now seen the arrival of the age of the professional stowaway.

Our concerns were raised at the International Group P&I conference in Amsterdam in 2009, and we advised the conference on the difficulties which ship owners faced in dealing with stowaways once on board ships, their removal from ships and the increased costs that were being incurred by both ship owners and P&I clubs in order to resolve stowaway cases.

One would have hoped by 2015, that the number of stowaways gaining access to ships would have decreased now that ISPS has been fully implemented and we have much additional port security which include, gates, booms, access control, fencing, roving security guards and cameras.

Yet despite all these additional measures, how are so many stowaways still able to gain access to ships - unfettered in numerous parts of Africa and why have we not seen a decrease in their numbers?

Our investigations from interviewing stowaways and observations in and around South African ports is that there is an organized network in operation which assists stowaways in obtaining access into ports and then on board ships. This intelligence gathering has revealed that in East, South and West Africa we have now moved away from the period of disenfranchised people seeking a better life, to the age of the professional stowaway. The latter is someone who looks to stowaway as a means of earning a living.

These professionals work in syndicates and share information. They know when and how to strike in order to achieve their objective.

- Late at night or early hours of the morning
- Clothing easily blends-in with Stevedore Gangs
- Colours not easily seen at night
- Generally climb up berthing ropes, gangways and hide in empty containers and log-ships
- Many personnel working on vessel enables stowaway to blend in
- They pay money to Dock workers and Stevedores to enable them to get aboard vessel or empty containers
- Arrange provisions for part of the journey

Immigration laws in South Africa are dealt with in terms of our Immigration Act. Under the act, the Director General within the Department of Home Affairs can issue policy directives. In this regard, the Director issued a policy guideline dealing with stowaways and under this policy should any unlawful person gain access to a ship then that person is automatically deemed to be a stowaway unless evidence can be

produced that the person is a South African citizen or that the person boarded the vessel in a South African port.

We have never had a South African stowaway. Foreigners who were living in South Africa legally and who were registered with the Department of Home Affairs were removed from ships and treated as trespassers. The organized network of stowaways soon realised that if they were found on board a vessel in possession of such a document it simply meant that they were removed from the vessel as a trespasser and handed over to the authorities for prosecution under local law. The stowaway was failing to meet his objective and the ship owner was under reprieve.

As syndicates work, they soon reorganized themselves and the document/permit was discarded or left with a friend before boarding the vessel. Without proper evidence to rebut the hard-line approach from the South African Immigration officers, the trespassers achieved their objective and were categorized as stowaways.

It is common knowledge that the difficulty in repatriating and resolving stowaway cases is a topic which people do not discuss at the dinner table. Stowaways, especially professional stowaways, can be exceptionally aggressive in their demands and the way they expect to be treated. The professional stowaway is well read and is knowledgeable on which countries are prepared to assist in the resolution of stowaway cases and which countries will protect stowaways. They know where and when they can be difficult in order to create the greatest impact. It is not uncommon for a stowaway to arrive at the boarding gate and to kick up a scene before boarding the plane. They know how airlines and airport security will react to the situation. They are not afraid of the repercussions for their actions. Knowledge is power.

It is the strategy of the professional stowaway and part of their objective in stowing away to demand money from the ship owner in order to go home quickly and quietly. Ship owners often refuse to pay such money or travel allowance. Professional stowaways intimately know the rules of the game and they are well versed in the tactics of the game and how to win the match. These stowaways are rarely first time players. They know what to expect and they know the outcome.

In most countries that allow stowaways to be landed, and South Africa is no exception, if the stowaway refuses to board the plane to be repatriated home, then he has to be returned to the ship. Often the international airport is far from the shipping port where the stowaway was landed. The stowaways may have been on board the ship for an extensive period of time whilst the P&I correspondent endeavours to obtain a travel document. The stowaways know the costs involved and the difficulty their being on board causes the ship owner.

We have experienced first-hand the tactics used by stowaways from removing their clothes at the boarding gate to even throwing faeces at the escorts. Airlines have strict policies in place regarding sedatives or restraints used to combat unruly stowaways. We have also experienced stowaways being repatriated from long distances to countries in Africa arriving at a transit airport in Africa to become agitated and aggressive demanding money before boarding the plane for the final

leg of their journey. They strike at these airports knowing full well that if their demands are not met that they are to be returned to the country of departure and put back on board the ship at huge expense to the ship owner. The professional stowaway knows how to play the game and win.

So how in this modern age of shipping are ship owners going to win the stowaway game? The answer is that as soon as the stowaway is able to gain access to the ship the owner is going to lose.

To win, ship owners must stay ahead of the game and they must learn to defend their ships from stowaway attacks.

Prevention is better than cure. Stop stowaways getting on board is far easier than trying to get them off and is far less expensive.

In this regard, ship owners should consider appointing private security guards to act as the shore gangway watch and to monitor the security on deck

They should carry out properly coordinated stowaway searches prior to departure. The ship should remain at the port until the search has been completed which must be methodical and systematic.

Other additional measures include the following:

- They must recommend that the owners employ private security to patrol the quayside
- They must tell the ships security to take their desk to the bottom of the gangway.
- They must not allow anyone on board the ship who does not have a port permit. Every visitor should have ISPS clearance.
- All visitors should surrender their port permit to security and they should collect the same when they leave the ship.
- If they find someone who should not be on board the ship, they should be taken to the bottom of the gangway (not to the ships office) and they must call port security and advise them that the person in their custody at the bottom of the gangway tried to board the ship but they do not have a port permit.

The age of the professional stowaway is not going to go away unless the problem is stopped at the gangway or mooring ropes. The battle lines have been drawn and at the moment, the only winners are the stowaways. It's time for ship owners to take back control of their ships.