

10 Difficult Circumstances

10.1 Port of Refuge



Any port in a storm

IMO resolution A949(23) states:

“Place of Refuge means a place where a ship in need of assistance can take action to enable it to stabilize its condition and reduce the hazards to navigation and to protect human life and the environment.”

When permission to access a place of refuge is requested, there is no obligation for the coastal state to grant it, but the coastal state should weigh all the factors and risks in a balanced manner and give shelter whenever reasonably possible

Under International law, a coastal state may require the ship’s captain to take appropriate action within a prescribed time to stabilize the situation with a view to halting a threat of danger. In the case of failure or urgency, the state may exercise its authority in taking responsive action appropriate to the threat.”

In earlier times, ports recognized that they owed their existence to ships and the seamen on them, so ‘port of refuge’ was established as an international obligation to take in and provide assistance to ships in distress. Today you are quite likely to find a ‘closed’ sign on the door, especially if there is any danger of pollution. If you are really in distress, and it is your opinion that you are

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endangering the lives of your ship’s company if you proceed further, what are your alternatives when you are advised that the port is closed to you?

Your main aim is to protect the lives of those onboard. If time allows you might be calling for assistance from salvage tugs/helicopter and rescue services. But, in the meantime, the prudent Captain will be closing with the nearest safe place, which will be land or a nearby port.

While I personally accept that there is no obligation for a coastal state to give permission to use the place of refuge, the IMO states that it must weigh up all of the factors and risks, which must mean to human life first and pollution second.

The port will often seem to have only one interest, regardless of the lives onboard, and that is the pollution dangers that your ship could cause. The IMO guidelines in resolution A949(23) discuss the Master assessing the situation together with the salvor and any others involved. However, I find I cannot agree with this as all other parties are likely to have their own agendas while the Captain has only one, regardless of how many tons of oil might spoil the beaches, the safety of those on board.

This is not a callous disregard for the distress such pollution might cause, but it does put human life first and ahead of the environment. If you feel that the options offered will not guarantee the safety of life you have to take the action required to preserve it.

If you approach a place of safety and you are forbidden to use it, I can only recommend that you press on until you have reached a place where you can either safely disembark your crew or until your ship is sufficiently stabilised that repairs can be made. You will then have done all you can.

Then you can call the media, because you can hardly be blown out of the water on television. You may well find yourself in hot water over such an action, but you will probably have followed the rule that puts the safety of your crew first!



I did use such extreme measure in the Pacific. I had a critical medical emergency with a crew member who was getting steadily worse. The only island near was to the north and was an American naval base. When I contacted them to explain that I had no charts for the approach and asked for assistance and guidance, they told me that they could not assist and to go elsewhere. So, having checked the draught in the pilot book, I turned up in the middle of their channel which as it wasn't very wide. My ship was a 50,000 dwt container vessel so it completely blocked it. With very bad grace they removed the sick crew member but refused to treat him there, instead putting him on a flight to Honolulu. I was warned of America's displeasure with my actions and never to darken their base again. I unblocked their base and carried on my way.

There are two things to note about this story. First, those pilot books, some of which were written a long time ago, are truly excellent in their approach advice

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and I have made a number of approaches without charts based on their recommendations. Second is that the seaman made a full recovery after an emergency operation.

10.2 Abandon Ship

As I have never had to deal with this particular emergency, I am not really in any position to advise you how to go about it. With a well trained crew who are exercised regularly in abandon ship procedures, the normal seamanship aspects will govern your actions. In an emergency that is the prelude to taking such an action, it would have been prudent to have the boats readied. But, as discussed earlier, this depends on the number of crew you have available. If they are not ready you must allow time to separate yourself from the emergency to prepare and lower the boats without any panic.

If the ship still has power and is an automated system, you can abandon the engine room and still be able to give the boats a lee as they are lowered. I need not have to remind you that, as Captain, you are last off the ship. However, even if it is your fault, staying onboard while saluting is only for the movies.

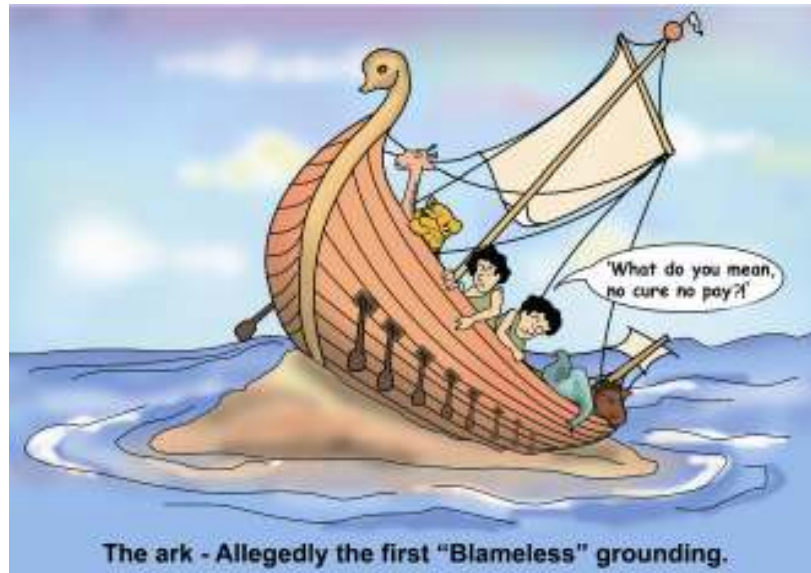
10.3 Grounding



When is a ship aground not aground?

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Be careful how you use the word ‘grounding’ as it rings lots of alarm bells. ‘Touched’ or ‘caressed the bottom’ sounds so much better. ‘Moved through the mud and stopped’ was another interesting expression I once saw. You could also try ‘when proceeding down the river, the current was stronger than anticipated and the sandbank hit us on the port side’, but do not expect too much success with that one.



There are groundings and groundings. The real ones are when you come to an abrupt stop with a crunching noise and the ship takes on a different angle of repose. If your engines have not already stopped, then emergency stop them. If after sounding around and checking the tanks it is obvious that you have a piece of rock sticking through your hull, take a moment to calm yourself and your officers down before taking action. It is not as if you are going anywhere. The main task, after sending the appropriate emergency messages, is to ensure your hull integrity while establishing your exact position. It could be that you have found an uncharted shoal area or single rock outcrop. More exist than is recognised, especially when you are navigating in seldom used waters with a deep draught vessel. If this is so, then you now will have your ship’s name on the charts of the future. Check for pollution. Those ashore are likely to consider this far more serious than your ship or even your sailors’ lives. If there is any sign of pollution immediately try to alleviate it by transferring the oil to other tanks. In the meantime, provided that it is only your double bottom that is breached and you are satisfied that the ship will float in a stable state when you are afloat, you can attempt to get the ship off.

If it is hard rock you have found the chances are that you will not have gone very far into it, so it will just be the forward part of the vessel that is affected. Sound around, especially aft, and check the state of the tide. If it is a rising tide then wait until it is at its highest point. Meanwhile, empty the tanks you can forward and fill

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them aft. If you are in ballast you can also consider ballasting your after holds, provided that your stability can take this. In a small ship in good weather, consider using your boats to run your anchors astern. This does not have to be very far, just enough to give you extra assistance. When the tide is at the highest, provided your propellers are in deep water, come astern using your helm from hard port to hard starboard repetitively. There is a school of thought that says that if this does not work then try coming ahead and then astern. If there is nothing else to try it might be worth it, but ensure that all else has been tried first. If there is a tug available this should be engaged, even if only to standby and escort you to wherever your managers or owners wish the ship to go for repairs.



I remember as Salvage Tug Master being called to pull a ship off the rocks and being surprised at the ease with which it came off. We later discovered that the crew had done nothing to try to get off, just waited a day for a tug to arrive.

My one experience of grounding on hard ground was actually on concrete. I was making an approach to a port in Canada, when we grounded on a disused war-time seaplane slipway that was not marked on the chart. As the port was close and had shallow water that I could get to if I was taking in water, because of the rapidly falling tide I took my chances and immediately ran the ship full astern using port and starboard wheel. It was a bit like coming unstuck from glue, at first reluctant and then suddenly free and traveling astern at a rate of knots. Watch this if you are in confined waters! Luckily there was no water ingress and, after calling for divers, they presented me with photographs of a chunk of concrete embedded in the now very twisted port bilge keel. We had a rippled bottom that required 70 tons of steel in the next drydock. The last time I saw a chart for the area it was still not marked!

If you are to use a tug, it generally be its hawser that is used. This is very heavy and, as an example, a 9 inch wire towline would mean the messenger line will have to be heaved onboard using the windlass. In good weather the tug might send someone over to ensure that the line is made fast as they require, if not, follow the tug's directions and ensure that all crew are clear of the line when tension comes on. There is a possibility that the towline will be shackled onto your anchor cable, which gives a certain spring to the line. Care must be taken to avoid any nips where the lines come onboard the line should have as fair a lead as possible. Where nips exist, ease them into a new position at least every 24 hours. In addition, if the line is in a position where it chafes against any part of the ship, it might also be necessary to parcel the wire with canvas and grease to ease the wear and tear. Most towing Masters have their own preferred ways and you should be guided by them.

There are certain rivers in Africa and South America where towing off with ground tackle and low powered tugs is the method still used. The tug will help lay the tackle, which consists of heavy wires run from your ship to anchors, and you then heave your vessel off. If you are a small vessel they might well use your own anchors and cables, but this entirely depends on the weight. If the tug's wire is to be attached to your anchor cable there is a rough rule of thumb of 3

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shackles of cable to 150 fathoms of wire and the size of wire about 2 ½ times the size of cable.

Aground on sand or mud is a very different situation. With both of these conditions, if you are at full ahead and the shoaling area is gradual, the ship can go a good distance onto the bank before stopping and quite often without anyone noticing. Generally, in such a gentle shoaling situation the hull will be intact although the sand is likely to have taken all your bottom coatings off. If the ship is secure your immediate problem, especially with mud, will be your engine cooling water intakes becoming fouled. Once again, wait for the tide unless you are in the unfortunate position of going aground at high water. If that is the case, then you will probably need to have tugs to get you off.

River or estuary groundings are the “bottom caressing” ones and are far more common.



An interesting one I had was in South America in the Berbice River in Guyana, which is not a good place to take a large vessel. We loaded to our maximum, allowing for the high tide in the channel out, and always sailed just before the high tide. The problem was that, going out, the thick weed that grows very tall on the bottom hampered the speed of the ship and we were not able to clear the channel in time before the ship got so close to the seabed that the weed blocked the engine intakes. We had to stop the ship, which meant that very quickly we settled on the bottom, and we sat there for the night with no power, waiting for the next tide to refloat the ship. As it was going to be a while between floating and restoring power, I let go the anchor to hold us in position during this delay. Then, with power back on, up came the anchor and away we went. That was caressing the bottom. We went aground regularly in that river, which you can also do quite easily in the further reaches of the Mississippi and the Amazon, especially in the tributaries.

In any of these situations try to get the ship off as soon as you can as, unless you are unlucky enough to find a hard lump of rock sticking up in the mud, there is no danger of a breach in the hull. There are times when the ship might be on the edge of a bank and this is generally indicated by the ship lurching to one side or another when going on. In such a case, if going astern doesn't do much, try going ahead with the wheel hard over to the side opposite the lurch. In most cases you can get the ship off with engine and wheel movement unless you are on a rapid falling tide, in which case you will have to wait until the next high tide. In this case sound around and see where the deep water is because, if you are on the edge of a bank on one side, by pumping out your ballast or changing around your fuel oil you may be able to list the ship and slide off.

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10.4 Piracy



Piracy is a growing industry and becoming more competent with strong leadership

At least one sector of the shipping industry is growing! There was a time when the warships of the first world nations roamed around the world with little regard for the waters they were in or the nationality the pirates were when they blew them out of the water. No one bothered about any inquiry afterwards either. In those days pirates confined their activities to the more local shipping in their area. With the withdrawal of the international responsibilities of the established Navies, control of these sea areas was placed into the hands of governments that had neither the naval resources nor the inclination to police. More recently the pirates have found, I believe much to their initial surprise, just how easy it is to extend their activities to the deep sea sector. They were probably even more surprised to find that the majority of ships have their arms removed, in keeping with the policy of peace and goodwill to all men. The only problem is that, in the areas of the world where law and order do not exist, there is not always an understanding or agreement with this peaceful policy.

Since then, as Captain, I have voyaged regularly through the known pirate areas of the east, notably the Sunda, Lombok and Malacca straits and the Cebu Sea areas, mostly on very large vessels. The advice has not changed - keep a good lookout, try to isolate the accommodation, secure all entry points, rig hoses and have the decks well lit. This is from government authorities who ensure that, when their government ships travel in such waters, there are armed guards onboard! A case of do as we say, not as we do. I did try to get rolls of razor wire supplied to put around the rails but, as this is not a SOLAS requirement, it was not supplied.

Here is a point to ponder on. If you are attacked by pirates in territorial waters and there is a naval vessel nearby that is not of the nationality of the country whose waters you are in, the warship is not allowed to interfere with the pirates

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without first obtaining authority from that country, by which time the pirates could be back on the beach counting your money. The good news is that the warship is allowed to help you afterwards. Everything is alright then!



All the advice is against arming ourselves. This is for reasons such as we are not trained in the use of weapons and that the weapons might be stolen. Much of the advice is open to debate, with strong views on the merits of each position from both sides. What I will say is that it is a debate that should be raised and discussed. For me, it all seems very strange. In the years leading up to the Second World War and into the 60's, ships trading around the world regularly carried weapons. As a Cadet and as a junior officer, on a Saturday morning I was allowed to practice with the Webley 38 revolvers that the ship carried. Ships trading on the China coast were quite heavily armed.

It is obvious to all of us at sea that, without adequate law and order, piracy will continue to grow. There is no sign yet that all of the governments in the piracy areas are able or willing to take the appropriate action. We often sail our ships in waters where the rule of law is not as it should be, and in some parts the governments and armed forces themselves are known to participate in acts of piracy. Shipping agencies in these areas must be treated with caution as considerable information is able to be passed to the pirates through them.

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The choices you have are to either offer no resistance in the hope that they will appreciate this co-operation and treat you civilly or, when walking in the jungle, carrying a big stick. I believe a sensible route might be to institute a proper Master at Arms course in handling and dealing with weapons. This way we could have one or more crew onboard trained properly in their use and maintenance, with the weapons under their control. However, for now we must continue to navigate through these areas of danger without any self protection.



Both my experiences of piracy were when I was a Chief Officer on the West African coast in 1971. The first was when anchored in Lagos harbour where we were boarded, in daylight, by pirates looking for cargo from the containers. We had an armed watchman onboard who was provided with a bow and some arrows! When we urged him to shoot his arrows he was rather unwilling as this might upset the pirates, who were busy looting the cargo. Further, he knew the pirates as they were from the Nigerian army. So we stood on the bridge and watched the cargo being removed into a lighter and transported to the shore, where it was placed into Nigerian army trucks. They didn't bother us and we didn't bother them.

The second time was in Cameroon, again in port but this time alongside. We were boarded at night by five armed pirates looking for cargo, but our decks were clear. The ship astern of us was a German ship so we called them on the VHF and warned them what was happening. Shortly afterwards we heard several bursts of gunfire and then silence. The pirates were rather unlucky as the Captain of the German ship was not heavily into peace and goodwill, so his ship was well armed with automatic weapons. The three pirates who boarded were shot dead and the two remaining in the boat drove off. The authorities were not concerned, declaring that the pirates could not have been from Cameroon as piracy was not allowed!

My advice is to take all of the recommended precautions and, if you perceive you are in danger of being boarded, try to steer away. However, with the regard to the advice to use the hoses, be very careful as you could well be putting those manning the hose in considerable danger. From my own experience, it is amazing just how much more confident you feel with a couple of automatic weapons on the bridge, but the moral and safety debate will continue to be a strong one.

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10.5 Medical Emergencies



Ship Captain's Medical Guide, one of the most practical books onboard a merchant ship today

'The art of medicine consists in amusing the patient while nature cures the disease' Voltaire.

I often feel that this type of emergency is one of the most difficult to deal with, mostly because of the feeling of total inadequacy that passes over you as you attempt to cope with the problem. With all other types of emergency you have at least a professional base to fall back on, enabling you to get your teeth into the predicament. A medical emergency can appear at any time in many ways, leaving you scrambling for the Ship Master's Medical Guide. This is the best guide book you will have onboard and it has been honed and polished since it was first published in 1868.

If the patient is conscious you must maintain an air of complete confidence, even if you haven't a clue what to do. Even if it looks serious, tell the patient that it is not as bad as they think and that you will have it fixed shortly. This will help to stop the patient becoming agitated and maintain their morale. If they are in pain, try to relieve it. If you are successful at this the patient will calm a little, and you will feel a lot better too!

With anything that is at all serious, get medical advice. When you do this, ensure that the patient is never left alone. Try and leave them with someone who will be sympathetic to their condition, the last thing you want is someone asking if they can have his TV!

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First use the Sat-phone and call the best medical centre near your position. The numbers are found in the Admiralty List of Radio Signals, Volume 1. However, if you are crossing the oceans regularly, or are trading on a regular route, it is an idea to write these numbers down near the Sat-phone so you won't have to waste time looking through the book.

When you call make sure you have to hand all of the information suggested in Chapter 13 of the Medical Guide. This is another good time to have your tape recorder handy, as I doubt if you will have a Sat phone extension in either the treatment room or the ship's hospital. If you have to be talked through procedures, you will have to rely on an officer who can speak good English on the Sat-phone using a portable transmitter to relay to another officer standing near you.

Do not forget other ships in the area. These days there are a lot of cruise ships sailing around and, although few cross the oceans, you never know who is around or the facilities or experience they may have. Who knows, even amongst your crew you could find ex-service personnel with practical medical experience. If there are naval vessels or cruise vessels they will have medical staff onboard and usually a dedicated rescue craft for transfer. If you are within range of land or naval ships, helicopter assistance can be provided to either transfer the patient or to bring medical staff and equipment to you.