

ON AND OFF HIRE SURVEYS

This time I will share my experiences of On and Off Hire Surveys from a survey practitioner's point of view.

On and Off Hire Surveys go hand in glove – “a pigeon pair”, one might say! Simply put, these surveys are conducted to provide a before and after perspective to enable a client or clients to come to a mutual agreement on the changes to condition of a vessel during a given period of hire or charter, and establish responsibility for any costs arising from these changes. In the same way as car hire companies request you walk around before and after to gauge condition and sign a waiver stating who will pay for what – a differentiation between damage and fair wear and tear!

Additionally, the quantity of bunkers (fuel) on board before and after may be assessed for the same reason. On and Off Hire Surveys may require both bunkers and condition to be established; however, this will depend upon how the hire agreement or charter party is written.

Marine surveyors will be engaged for such surveys, with the appointment stating whether bunkers, condition or both should be assessed and reported to the appointing client. As with all such engagements, it is most important that the scope of work is clearly understood, and concerned parties are aware of the intention to conduct the surveys. This is especially important if you have to travel – there is nothing worse than getting on board a vessel, only to find that the Master is not aware of the requirement and exercises their right to refuse you access to the vessel or crew to conduct the surveys.

So, key take out number 1 – positive communication is key! If issues arise, this is where it will generally start. Focus on the appointment – you are looking at condition (and maybe bunkers), not conducting a hold cleanliness inspection.

Okay. You have all the preliminaries in hand, you have arranged permission to attend the terminal of facility to access the vessel, and you may also have gathered relevant information to assist with efficiently conducting the required surveys. Take some photos of the vessel at berth (or elsewhere as the case may be) and read the forward and aft draughts to enable calculation of vessel trim if doing a bunker survey. Please make sure you are allowed to take photos as some facilities and vessels require prior permission for this to take place.

Once on board the vessel, introduce yourself to the Chief Officer or Master, stating why you are there. If doing bunkers, request to meet the Chief Engineer. Depending upon the situation, you may need to do some juggling with your time on board so all the survey tasks can be managed in a reasonable timeframe. If the vessel is about to load, you should consider how your survey activities may impact cargo operations. You must also consider how to get bunker tank soundings and do cargo hold or other inspections at the same time. Soundings should be taken prior to cargo/ballast operations so the vessel is not moving about – you will need about 20 – 30 minutes for this. “But how do I also inspect the ship at the same time” I hear you ask. Cleverly allocate your resources. Consider not entering the first loading hold if you are conducting cargo hold inspections, rather take some notes and photos from deck level – if the ship-loader has positioned above that hold, it will provide enough light for night time photos.

Whilst the loading operations and ship shore checks are being conducted, you can take the bunker soundings, then go back to inspections (ensure all terminal, ship and your own safety requirements are being met – hatch covers positioning and radio/phone communication for example). You should always have a ship crew member accompanying you as a spotter. Never enter holds that are not

partially open, ask ship to test the atmosphere if uncertain, and never enter if wood products or chemicals have been previously carried without a full risk assessment. Cargo holds may be considered Confined Spaces in some instances; however, approached with caution, they are more often referred to as restricted or enclosed spaces – this is a rather grey area and open to a great deal of interpretation and debate. As a ship surveyor, you will likely consider a cargo hold as a place of work since crew are regularly required to enter and work in these spaces during hold cleaning and maintenance. Cargo spaces on tankers, however, are most definitely “Confined Spaces”.

So now that you are completely knackered and wet with sweat from climbing all those ladders, you can advise the C/O and ship-loader that you have completed your inspections and go back to calculating the bunkers.

Key take out number 2 – safety, communication (again), time management, fitness and not impacting cargo operations. Although some terminals may wait for inspections to take place, it will inevitably be recorded as a delay on account of the appointing party, so I suggest you avoid causing any such delays unless agreed prior to the job.

I am making the assumption that it is an on hire, you are attending alone, and the vessel is a bulk carrier or similar. Of course, this may not be the case. It may be a barge, a tug, or any number of other vessels or craft that are hired or chartered. If the scenario is applied to off hire, all the same principals apply. You may have to contend with remnant cargo; however, you must focus on the scope of appointment and see through this to describe condition. Mention the residual cargo by all means, but do not focus on it.

If you have enough personnel, I suggest attending with two surveyors, so that all the required tasks can be adequately completed in a timely manner, especially if the job involves substantial inspection time – a cape size ship or a large multi-compartment barge for example.

Key take out number 3 – although principles remain the same, scope of appointment and circumstances will dictate how the job should best be undertaken.

I am not going into detail of bunker surveys here as this will give me something to write about next time, nonetheless, you will find that they will test your mettle – and your patience.

Reporting styles vary greatly within our profession and there is no standard that would dictate best practice – in my humble opinion. The more traditional reporting styles will include a lot of information which is readily available to the clients in our internet connected world. A modern reporting style may be tabular, contain only basic vessel identifiers and concentrate on the scope by providing little more than condition descriptions supported by photographic evidence. The ease with which we can share high quality photos has completely changed how we report. Personally, I prefer the middle ground with reporting – sufficient vessel specific information with tabulated condition description and quality, meaningful photos. This is a very individual thing that develops between you and your clients. If they like your style, they will come back for more!

Key take out number 4 – the resulting report that clients pay for is open to your own interpretation. Most of us have taken the best bits from others and come up with our own style.

“I am not getting many on hire jobs” you say. This marine surveying business is a bit like hull fouling – it takes some time to grow, but once established, it can flourish under the right conditions. There are no secret recipes for success, so you must stick with it for the long term and offer cost effective, quality service and reports if you want to get onto clients’ radar. When I say cost effective, I do not

mean cheap. It is a fickle business – clients will pay for good service, ethics, and trustworthiness, but not too much.

Key take out number 5 – you cannot build a successful business on these surveys alone and is more of a supplement to your core business. The market is competitive, and it takes time to establish your reputation and client base.

Equipment revolution!

When people started using mobile phone cameras about 6 years ago, I was somewhat sceptical. Would they provide the sort of image quality I was used to after having a high-end compact camera that could take photos in extreme, low light conditions? However, I am a convert. For several years I have used my smart phone camera with excellent results. The software trickery enables very good quality photos across a wide range of conditions, both day and night. You may need to do some homework before you buy, but if you choose wisely, your phone can achieve great results as your principal camera, communications device and at hand computer all in one. This is the single greatest advance for a professional who is constantly on the move, constantly communication, being on time for jobs and meetings, accessing scheduling and berthing web pages and recording quality images to use in our reports.

Another item I have come to rely on in recent years is a quality, powerful headlight. This is attached to my safety helmet and offers two levels of brightness and adjustment from spread to spot beam. It is good enough to readily read draughts at distances up to 20 meters, so it provides more than adequate light for cargo hold inspections. The beauty of a headlight is that you still have both hands free to climb ladders and operate your camera/phone, thus improving safety whilst working. The additional weight soon becomes unnoticeable and you find yourself using it in all manner of situations where you require descent light – traversing decks, taking soundings, noting features and damages, to name a few. The model I have is an intrinsically safe unit that I can use on tankers and in tank farms and petroleum terminals.

I trust that this will provide a few insights for those who are starting out in this field. I will discuss the trials and tribulations of the bunker survey in the next instalment.

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