

Surveyor's Notebook

Anchoring Offshore

The club has seen a number of recent anchoring incidents that are specifically related to ships anchoring in or near undersea pipelines or cables near to oil and gas installations, offshore rigs and / or terminals and production facilities. However all ships' Masters should be aware of the dangers presented by undersea cables and pipelines.

The international Cable Protection Committee which was formed in 1958 by the submarine cable industry has recently determined that since 2007 nearly 50% of submarine cable damage is done by ship anchors. (Previously cable damage was predominantly thought to be caused by the fishing industry).

Shipowners should also be aware that since the introduction of AIS successful identification of the ship causing the damage has increased.

These incidents often concern offshore ships servicing installations and offshore terminals, FSOs and FPSOs or a mixture of these. They also may be engaged in other duties such as moving personnel, or small amounts of cargo and maintenance equipment from one offshore unit to another, or may be being called upon to act as a tug or a guard ship for offshore tankers berthing and unberthing. The routine of the ship may be irregular, being there and 'on call' to carry out the various duties whenever called upon. As a result the charterer, or the terminal or field operator, will often need the ship to be available at short notice.

The Master

Every master before anchoring must be absolutely certain that there are no underwater obstructions in or near to the anchoring position. When operating in a field or close to installations where there are underwater oil/gas/communication/power lines the master should:

- know with certainty the location of the underwater lines. It is not sufficient when operating in a busy and changing field to rely just on the 'admiralty charts'
- get written or emailed confirmation from the charterer or field operator where the safe anchorage areas are with up to date local field charts. These should be controlled documents, issued by the field not just random photo copies
- demand that this information (if necessary via the owners) is supplied
- demand that underwater charts are regularly issued and provided, even if there is no change from the previous chart
- not anchor in a location where there is even the slightest uncertainty of the sea bed pipeline distribution
- not accept a verbal 'OK' from the field operator or unit
- not accept the fact that the previous master or previous ship always anchored here and it was 'OK'. Check the facts for himself

- not accept that the charterer or field operator or his owner has considered the problems that he may encounter. Often the problems of the master are low on the scale of priorities of major field development. The master should not be afraid to voice his concerns over operational safety issues
- keep a vigilant anchor watch to ensure the ship does not drag onto a pipeline or cable

What do you do if you have snagged a cable or line?

Often the ship is unaware what it has lifted on the anchor flukes. In this situation assistance should always be requested so that further damage is prevented. Dropping the anchor to remove a cable (which may be a high powered electric cable) should not be attempted as this may damage the cable. Power lines and cables are well protected, but also very expensive to repair and replace and can present a serious hazard.

If the ship is anchored in an area where pipelines are located and there is a possibility when heaving on the anchor an obstruction has been snagged assistance from the shipowners and from ashore should be sought. This may involve using a diver to ascertain whether the anchor has caught a pipeline or not. In an area of subsea pipelines, continuing to pull up on the anchor may cause considerable damage and all the consequences that follow, such as pollution, claims for loss of pipeline usage and field shut downs.

Shipowners and managers

Shipowners and operators of these ships have a duty to ensure that the masters are fully supported and it is evident that often the root cause of these incidents usually comes back directly to the shipowners and managers.

Shipowners and managers fail in a number of ways:

- charterparties do not give due regard to the operational difficulties likely to be encountered by the master. (Operational managers are often not consulted in the charter negotiations)
- the charterparty does not provide for the charterer to supply controlled charts of the operating areas, particularly in a changing offshore field environment
- the charterparty does not provide that a field operational manual for the ship is provided by the charterer
- no risk assessments are carried out by the owner / manager as to the difficulties and expected risks. Are there sufficient people onboard to carry out the tasks required of the ship? Is the ship able to comply with the STCW working hours regulations?
- once the charter is fixed, the master is left on his own to sort out the 'local' operational difficulties. The master is often not given or introduced to a local focal point with whom he can discuss local operational problems
- masters are not given specific guidelines and procedures. These are often written (on purpose) to be open so that the onus is on the master on location. This is not how an effective safety management system should be implemented

Charterers

Charterers also have a responsibility. Charterers will always place the onus of where the ship anchors on the master. The charterer may require the ship to be available at a moments notice.

Charterers should provide a forum where masters can communicate safety issues. If not shipowners should suggest a forum.

However, if the master is not given the correct or sufficient information from the charterer, field operator or his shipowners, then the master should either;

- not anchor and drift (explaining his actions clearly)
- anchor in a location where he knows is safe. This may be a distance from where the charterer may ideally want the ship. The master should clearly explain in writing why he has had to anchor in this location

Anchoring in an area which there are undersea pipelines is a potentially hazardous operation. Masters must use good judgement and be forceful with their charterers and shipowners to ensure that he is always given the correct and up to date information. Do not assume that charterers and shipowners have done the thinking for you.

Although many incidents relate to offshore ships all ship's masters should be aware of the dangers of subsea cables and pipelines when anchoring.

(Article extracted from The Standard Club's publication – Standard Safety)