

The Future of the U.S. Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner Credentialing Program

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Over the years, improvements in technology have made our lives simpler. The industrial revolution brought new inventions to make life and work easier. In recent years, we've seen how information technology has transformed today's world. There is a good chance that most of the readers of this article use email daily and conduct transactions over the Internet such as banking, investing, research and e-commerce. Automatic Teller Machines dispense cash in any denomination from banks around the world. Many young people today have grown up with these technological advances. Yet despite all this, merchant mariners must still conduct credential transactions with the Coast Guard by filling out paper forms by hand. Change is needed.

Below is a story about the Coast Guard's Mariner Licensing and Documentation program written from the future. It provides a vivid description of how mariners will interface with the National Maritime Center when conducting credential transactions. This story illustrates what the world will look like when the NMC achieves its big audacious goal of building the mariner credentialing version of Intuit, Inc.'s Turbo Tax. One day mariners will be able to upgrade or renew their credential on demand from any location in the world, much like you can access your bank account and withdraw cash from an ATM or file your income taxes on line.

Onboard MV Renewed Hope Malacca Straits, Andaman Sea

August 14, 2015

Welcome aboard the M/V Renewed Hope, underway in the Malacca Straits on August 14, 2015.

The liner business today was not what Captain Scott had dreamt of when he chose the sea going career. In some ways it was harder, lonelier, more complicated. In other ways, it was a great time to be a U.S. Merchant Mariner sailing around the world.

Captain Scott looked out over the water from the bridge. The traffic in the Malacca Straits always worried him. He preferred to be on the bridge even though the Second Mate was experienced and had piloted the straits several times.

Suddenly, the PDA on his belt chimed with the arrival of a new email. Pulling it from his hip with a quick, downward glance, a sudden anxiety came over him. "How could I have forgotten, again?" he sighed.

The email was an auto generated message from the U.S. Coast Guard's Merchant Mariner Credentialing Program, in particular, the system at the backbone of the program – Merchant Mariner Secure Electronic Application System, or MM-SEAS. It reminded him that his license was due to expire in the next two days!

He cursed himself when he remembered that a week before, while crossing the Suez Canal bound from Hamburg to Singapore, he had received another in a series of reminder e-mails. He had said to himself, "I will take care of it when we clear the canal.

One issue at a time..." But once the nightmare of the Suez transit was over, he was so relieved that the renewal reminder completely slipped his mind. Over the next few days, the Bab-el-Mandep Straits took all his attention and once in open ocean, his mind and efforts were elsewhere.

Now, a week later heading into Singapore, he had still not taken care of it. They had just one day scheduled in port and he knew there would be no extra time. Apart from the normal port work, drills, class and internal audits were scheduled.

As Captain Scott piloted the strait, he reflected on the daily pressures of a Master. Navigating through the undisciplined traffic in low visibility, he cursed the container vessel's schedule, which gave him no time to rest or go ashore. The vast amount of paperwork and pressure associated with Port State Control (PSC) inspections in each port didn't help either.

The Captain heard the bridge door creak and was relieved to see that it was the Chief Engineer. The Chief looked around, cursed the visibility and said while shaking his head, "What a mess. The traffic's bad enough out there without the weather making things worse. How's it going Captain?"

"Still recovering from the lack of sleep and backlash of work. How are you doing Chief?"

The Chief expressed his concern about his expiring license, trying to figure out how he will go about renewing with all the time planned at sea. Immediately, the Captain was reminded of his own predicament and that the time had finally come to take care of it. He told the Chief that his license would expire in two days.

Concerned, the Chief asked, "What are you going to do during the next PSC document review? I remember hearing about how long the U.S. takes to issue licenses. Captain, have you lost your mind!?"

Captain Scott laughed and explained with a smile that it was no problem as he could do it online. He told the Chief that he was right to worry when talking about the old Mariner Licensing and Documentation Program ten years ago. "But, today it is different. It took awhile, but the U.S. Coast Guard finally figured out how to do it right".

The Captain called the Second Mate to keep watch and advised the Chief, with a confused look on his face, to accompany him to the bridge wing as he went about renewing his license from ten thousand miles and one big ocean away from the National Maritime Center located in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

The Captain sat in his chair and the wireless workstation established the Pacific satellite connection. Within moments, he was online. The U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner Credentialing site was in his favorites and made him smile as it opened - finally, something easy and stress free.

As the page came up, he said to the Chief, "We are in business!" He selected the 'LOGIN' tab and entered his personal identification number followed by the password. The interactive program prompted him to place his right index finger on the biometric scanner located on the screen and hit send when the print was captured. MM-SEAS instantly and securely verified his identity. His license details then flashed a red banner, "Renewal Due". He clicked 'RENEW' and the initial screen immediately showed him what information was required, what information had already submitted to the NMC and what information was still missing.

Captain Scott loved using the MMC website so much he had, from time to time, logged into his personal account to keep up his sea service logs. The page showed him that his logs were up to date and had already been reviewed and verified. "I still keep them by hand out of habit", he told the Chief with a grin. "But the funny thing is, I cannot tell you where they are in my cabin, but I know the

ones I keep online are perfectly accurate and secure”.

Some of his STCW course renewals had been due when he was last on vacation in Honolulu, so he had taken the opportunity to complete the training. Though he had hard copies of the certificates, the schools also sent the results electronically to the NMC using an automated service within MM-SEAS. The results were validated electronically. Though not surprised, he was still relieved to see that his account had already been updated with the STCW refresher course results. Finally, someone he could count on!

No doubt from life as a Master, Captain Scott had battled hypertension over the past several years. His medication had helped immensely, and besides the fact that he had to take his pills daily and keep his prescription up to date, he sometimes forgot about it entirely. Years ago, the NMC had issued him a waiver to sail with the medication and it has never been a problem since. With MM-SEAS online, his primary care doctor was able to validate that Scott's condition had not changed using the website and electronic signatures. He could see from the website that a few weeks ago the NMC had emailed his doctor to prompt him to go to the website and update the information from the physical he had completed on Scott in Honolulu recently. He could also see that the doctor did not respond immediately, so someone in West Virginia called him personally to remind him. The same day, the doctor completed his part.

“What if all of that information wasn't already in the system?” asked the Chief.

“That is the great thing about the MMC Program,” the Captain said, turning with excitement. “I receive periodic emails to remind me of my status and what is still needed. I always know where I stand and there is no more guess work about if and when I will receive my renewal.”

The Captain continued. “For the junior officers, they can use the online wizards to see what they need for a raise in grade or endorsement. When I applied for my license years ago, I had to read through the application packets and even some of the regulations to try to figure out my options. In the end, I had to go to Regional Examination Center to try to figure it out. Not anymore. The website tells you what is needed in minutes as you step through the process. Now, we just visit the RECs for certain examinations and if we need local licenses or pilotage endorsements.”

The Captain and the Chief navigated the site for a few minutes, marveling at the ease at which the pages simplified the amazingly complex credentialing program. The Chief stared in stunned silence until finally he said, “I had no idea the US had so many variations of credentials! Do you realize that you have more inland credentials than most countries have total credentials?”

With a chuckle, they both realized why it has taken the Coast Guard so long to get to where they are today. “With the way they have streamlined credentialing, I would not be surprised if simplifying the US regulations is next,” speculated the Captain.

Remembering the Malacca Straits, Scott knew it was time to complete the transaction and get back to work. The final item in the “to do” list was the question: ‘how would you like to pay?’ Scott pulled out a credit card and entered the details. “Processing” appeared on the screen and he waited. In seconds, he was shown his confirmation and receipt with the option to email them to himself. The next screen informed him the process was complete and the IMO database on mariners had been updated with the required information. He knew with certainty that the bar code on his passport-style combined merchant mariner credential would pass the scan in his next port of call.

“Guess you are done”, said the Chief, turning to leave.

The Captain almost laughed out loud. "Not quite yet, Chief". In bold letters in the middle of the screen was the prompt: 'Are there any other immediate interested parties who should be informed?' Scott uploaded the e-mails of the agents in the next four ports, the charterers, Owners and the PSC officials in the next 2 countries, including Singapore, and pressed send.

Total time to renew: 15 minutes, including surfing the NMC MMC website for fun.

Captain Scott had his renewed license and all parties were informed. He looked at the Chief, who seemed impressed but not too cheerful. Surprised, the Captain asked "What's the matter?"

"I need to go - I have to go back to my cabin and complete my paperwork in preparation for the PSC inspection in Singapore! Perhaps one day, PSC inspections will be as easy as renewing my license. "

They both rose and started their separate ways. As the Captain strode with confidence back to the bridge he was thinking, "I remember those days..."

Author Information: Captain David C. Stalfort is the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard's National Maritime Center. He and the crew of the NMC are leading the effort to reengineer the Mariner Licensing Program and achieve the vision described in this article. Captain Stalfort has worked in the Coast Guard's Marine Safety program for 23 years. He also holds a Coast Guard license as a Master of Steam, Motor, or Auxiliary Sail vessels. The author would like to thank the senior staff of the NMC, including Mr. Ike Eisentrout, Ms. Tina Bassett, Mr. Jim Cavo, Mr. Jeff Brandt, Mr. Bob Kenney and CDR Craig Swirbliss, along with Mr. Andrew Lauden and Mr. Jonathan Davis with Quality Management International, Inc., for their contributions to this article and for their efforts to make this vision a reality.