

**The value of sea training**  
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The Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service operates a wide variety of support ships and employs 2300 UK seafarers to deliver afloat support from British registered merchant ships to the Royal Navy and other armed forces. These seafarers comply with STCW and meet the mandatory standards of competence necessary to ensure they are properly educated and trained, adequately experienced, skilled and competent to perform their duties. I do not have any difficulty with STCW *per se*, but I cannot regard them as anything other than the basic minimum standards for my particular needs, which are by force of circumstance, more akin to military needs. Some ships have mixed RFA and RN manning and present interesting management and leadership challenges, for the cultures born of initial training are quite separate and distinct, although I am working to change this. To meet the requirements of military capability, I must exploit Naval establishments for particular individual training and collective Naval training facilities, including exercises, to establish, build and hone, individual and team skills to a satisfactory level of competence. I will discuss the human element and the value of live training against this background and will consider pilotage in the Deck department and fire fighting/damage control across the whole ship's company to illustrate this theme.

Let me begin with pilotage: Consider a young third officer who joins the RFA from a commercial environment, holding the internationally recognised STCW bridge watch-keeping certificate for a foreign going ship. He or she may be appointed as an officer of the watch on a small fleet tanker with both liquid and solid replenishment rigs, a flight deck, close range weapons, decoys and of course a mode of operation that demands manoeuvring in close formation. While my new joiner may meet legal requirements, am I to consider him/her competent or not? The answer is most certainly not, for the procedures and

language in the military environment will probably be well outside our new third officer's past training and experience. In this instance, step one on the road to gaining competence, has to be some form of familiarisation with the environment and generally takes the form of a 3-4 month appointment in a supernumerary capacity. Step two, in an ideal world without manning shortfalls, is formal education and training in the classroom as part of a junior warfare course alongside naval officers who themselves are progressing towards a bridge watch keeping certificate. (This includes attainment of STCW under an equivalency agreement with the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency) The object of this process of instruction, simulation and examination is to ensure that my new RFA third officer has the necessary knowledge and understanding of 'grey ship' bridge operations. He or she will have practiced in simulators, those techniques they will be expected to use at sea. In short, they will be properly prepared for the job they have to do but will have limited experience in the real environment and need time to become effective as part of a team.

Let us now follow progress back to sea, on that small fleet tanker, and have our new deck officer assume his or her duties as part of the bridge team. It is a sobering thought that, before the ship is out into open water where it is able to replenish other units, it may first have to transit a narrow swept channel through a minefield in close formation. The team may have to gain a precise anchorage position in darkness or in poor visibility with limited navigation aids. SIR GALAHAD recently spent many hours in a swept channel before reaching Umm Quasr. The bridge team, of both officers and ratings, must understand the plan, be aware of their responsibilities, know how to do their job and be able to react quickly to changing circumstances. They must have the confidence to question where there is uncertainty and of course, be able to communicate vital information in a useable form at the right time. My teams have the benefit of staff covered exercises conducted in a carefully planned and monitored environment in their own ships, with as much realism as safety allows and I regard this as step three in the development of their competence. Precise navigation skills are built

upon the basics of both visual and blind pilotage exercises, conducted close to land but in open water along routes that are designed to challenge as well as draw out lessons in the real environment. Specialist navigators monitor these exercises, make constructive comment and provide appropriate feedback with recommendations for future training. Where necessary, exercises may be repeated or modified to improve techniques or broaden experience. It has been my experience that such training not only provides an objective assessment of the team's competence, but it also binds the team together and it is pleasing to see how their confidence develops. If my third officer has achieved all of this to the required standard, then only now might I be justified in considering him or her to be competent.

If steps one to three are concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competence, then step four must relate to the improvement of that knowledge, the maintenance of skills, expanding experience and demonstrating continued competence. This is precisely what a programme of continuation training is designed to achieve. Not only are bridge teams required to conduct full pilotage techniques each and every time they enter and leave harbour, but they must also practice precision navigation for swept channels at regular intervals. They may choose to use bridge simulators in naval establishments or, when time permits, they may run the ship through the pilotage training routes with or without staff cover.

Turning now to my second illustration that centres on fire fighting and damage control. All seafarers, regardless of rank, rate or specialization must hold the 4 basic element training specified by STCW and this includes basic firefighting. As with pilotage I have a need to do more, but why? The answer centres upon expectations, equipment and the way we use it. Almost all the portable and much fixed equipment is common to both warship and auxiliary, and it should come as no surprise that the procedures used in the RFA mirror those used in a warship.

The ability to maintain an aggressive, rolling and sustained attack on a fire does not come without education, training and practice. In my eyes, STCW provides basic knowledge that must be adapted and developed, such that anyone in the ship is capable of carrying out appropriate first aid measures that conform to my standards. They must be able to locate and use the correct extinguisher and raise the alarm, they must be able to deliver the appropriate information to the leader of the emergency party, who relies upon a conditioned response from the emergency party, which in turn, depends upon the skills of a full support party to bring more effective appliances and measures to bear as the attack develops. Each must understand the organization, their role and responsibilities, appreciate the overall philosophy, communicate the right information at the right time and make an effective contribution as part of the team. If I ask the reader to imagine a number of separate fires throughout the ship and maybe a flood, perhaps as a result of some hostile action, then the importance of wide understanding and the imperative of competence is clear. Individuals normally refresh their basic knowledge in the classroom every 5 years and this includes practice drills in both firefighting and damage control simulators. Ship knowledge, teamwork and further confidence are derived from a programme of live training on their own ships as it is with pilotage. Staff assessment, feedback and continuation training are the essential elements in maintaining this competence too.

I am in no doubt that I derive great value from sea training, and by this I mean training together in the real environment, as it provides me with the benefit of quality assurance through objective assessment and feedback. Ship's companies and individuals gain confidence and competence as they adapt and develop their skills to meet the particular challenges they may face as they go about their tasks and duties in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. In summary, my argument is that sea training, as I have described it, fills the vacuum between these two statements:

- a. “These seafarers comply with STCW and meet the mandatory standards of competence necessary to ensure they are properly educated and trained, adequately experienced, skilled and competent to perform their duties” and:
  
- b. “These seafarers comply with STCW and meet the mandatory standards of competence necessary to ensure they are properly educated and trained, adequately experienced, skilled and competent to perform their particular RFA duties”.

I appreciate that sea training can be both expensive and time consuming, but it is worth asking yourself whether such a vacuum exists in your particular activity and if so, could some form of sea training give you as much value as it gives me?