

Mercy Ships medics and crew: the epitome of key workers

Hospital ship volunteers embody this year's IMO Day of the Seafarer theme

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The Day of the Seafarer theme that seafarers are key workers is particularly relevant to Mercy Ships, which takes medical help on its converted ferry to some of the neediest parts of the world.

IMO secretary general Kitack Lim said he was deeply touched by "the challenges, hardships and sacrifices that seafarers have made to keep the global supply chain moving" during the coronavirus pandemic.

Lim highlighted how crews have continued working to deliver the goods, food and medicine the world needs, often continuing months beyond when contracts should end, and have faced myriad problems trying to be repatriated from ships.

For the 400 or so seafarers and medics on board the hospital ship Africa Mercy, the issue was doubly distressing. They had to abandon their mission to help people in Senegal on 31 March.

STILL SO MUCH TO DO

It was not an easy decision to leave early: they had already performed more than 1,400 surgeries, but there was still so much work to do.

On a 10-month field service in neighbouring Guinea last year, 10,000 patients had tumours removed, hernias, cleft lips and/or palates repaired, or underwent paediatric procedures.

Virus permitting, the plan is for the 16,600-gt, 1980-built vessel to return to Senegal in late October.

The Africa Mercy had to pack up and leave within 10 days, an operation that normally takes three weeks, and 180 of the crew were repatriated. It then sailed to the Puerto de Granadilla on Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The remaining 240 crew were quarantined there, but remain Covid-free.

Annual maintenance on the ships is done in the Canaries, so, for the technical staff, work continued, and more maintenance could be done, as there was no need to minimise disturbance to patients.

The main issue now is to get the ship through its annual surveys and maintenance before it runs out of people, with crew returning home as flights open up out of the Canaries.

The Spanish state of emergency does not allow international travel-

lers into the country except for key workers, so it has been necessary to protect the remaining personnel on board by following two-week quarantine rules. All crew have been confined on board since 14 March.

Most of the Mercy Ships crew and medical staff are volunteers, and the charity is going to need 600 more people when a purpose-built new-building, the 37,000-gt Global Mercy, goes into operation next year.

The Africa Mercy's Captain Taylor Perez — who first came across Mercy Ships in 1984, and has captained every one of the charity's ships at some time — said: "The ship is the hospital. You can't have the hospital without the ship.

"The doctors and nurses, who do such an amazing job, could not do it without the ship. The ship can't operate without its mariners.

"We don't just need doctors and nurses, we need ratings, able seamen, motor men, engineers and professionals who can take the time to see something different and be part of something with a big impact."

Perez said that in the past year, the 115 volunteers for the Africa Mercy came from 25 nations for varying lengths of time to fill its 31 deck and 29 engineering positions.

"We will need roughly the same again for the new ship and are taking applications for those interested to be in our 'talent pool'."

CREWING CHALLENGE

Mercy Ships would love to liaise with companies in the industry open to giving employees some time in a corporate social responsibility role, or that might consider partnering the charity.

"All ship operators want to attract qualified, dedicated, competent crew for their vessels. The obvious challenge for Mercy Ships is to gain visibility to the maritime community so that those who would want to volunteer will know of this avenue to use their skills to benefit others," he said.

Crewing requirements will really expand when the Global Mercy goes into action and the Africa Mercy has undergone a refit, allowing the charity to operate two vessels for the first time.

It will need about 1,000 key workers at any one time. Upwards of three times that number will work on the front line for Mercy Ships every year.



TW PRIDE AND DEDICATION

Third engineer Joe Biney from Ghana has been volunteering with Mercy Ships since 1991.

Seafarers like Biney look after the generators in the engine room that provide lighting for the hospital, power for the galley and air conditioning to keep the ship cool.

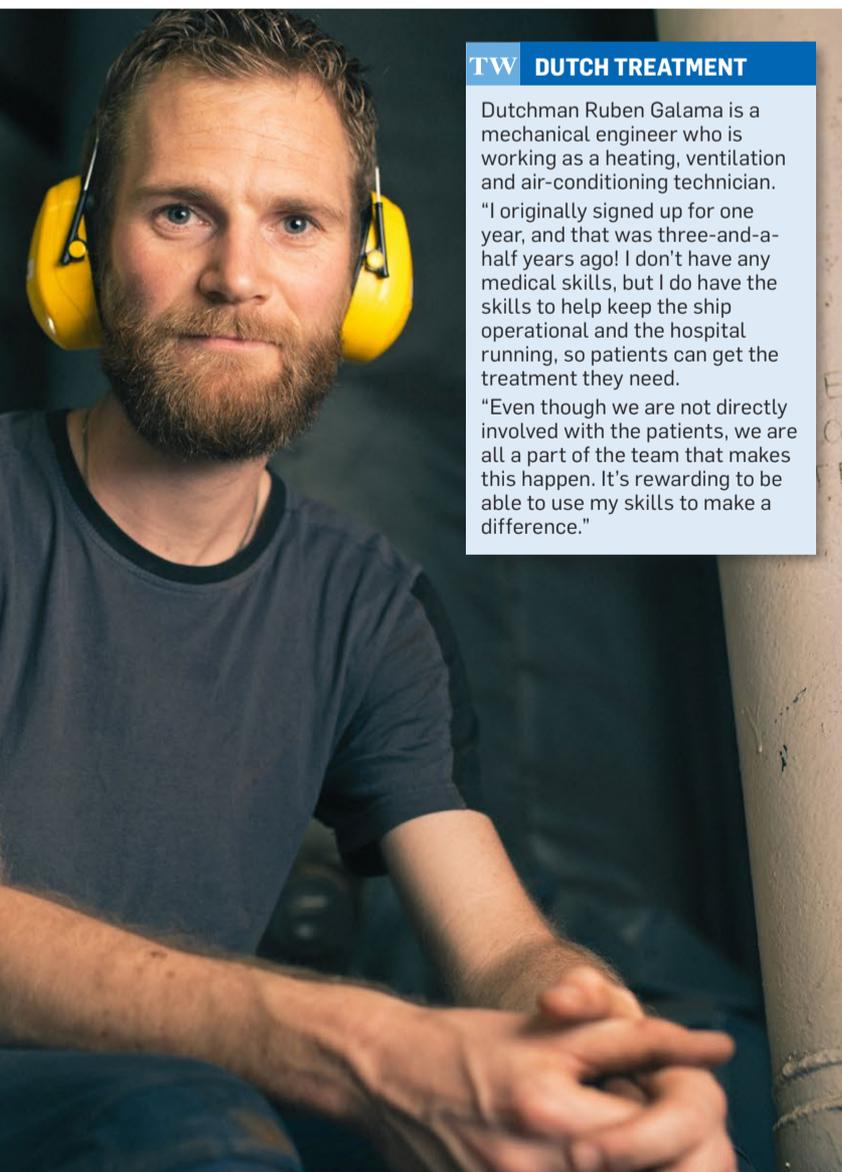
"On a commercial ship, you may be alone, but on board with Mercy Ships, people are standing with you. These people become your brothers and sisters, they become your friends. We have one goal that we are all working to achieve — to make sure people get help."

TW HOME AWAY FROM HOME

For Brazilian chief officer Rodrigo Silva, a highlight of volunteering on the Africa Mercy has been having his family sail with him.

"One of the cornerstones of seafaring life is that we are away and missing the things that are happening back home with the kids, with schooling and with your spouse. Being on board with Mercy Ships is different; you're able to be together.

"So you can work and, at the end of the day, walk back to your cabin and see your family. It's unbelievably good."


TW DUTCH TREATMENT

Dutchman Ruben Galama is a mechanical engineer who is working as a heating, ventilation and air-conditioning technician.

"I originally signed up for one year, and that was three-and-a-half years ago! I don't have any medical skills, but I do have the skills to help keep the ship operational and the hospital running, so patients can get the treatment they need.

"Even though we are not directly involved with the patients, we are all a part of the team that makes this happen. It's rewarding to be able to use my skills to make a difference."

DEPARTURE WAS DEVASTATING, BUT THIS BIG ONBOARD 'FAMILY' PULLED TOGETHER

Curtailing the Africa Mercy's assignment in Senegal was a difficult decision.

Captain Taylor Perez said the experience of leaving and going into quarantine in Tenerife brought practical and emotional problems for the crew and medics, particularly those from Africa.

"For me, it started with an obvious concern for the crew," Perez told TradeWinds, "but the level of concern was similar to having a bad flu outbreak on the ship." (In January, it had dealt with a virus-borne illness, successfully isolating those with symptoms.)

But he added: "The concern increased dramatically as we learned more about Covid-19. We had highly respected anaesthesiologists and public-health doctors on board who raised the bar on our response quickly.

"My concern was for the safety and emotional health of the crew — to allay fear and anxiety by being transparent with news and plans for the safety of the patients and crew.

"We were fully supported by management ashore, so it was challenging but rewarding to navigate through the whole process, to be up front and bring clarity, and consequently calmness to the situation."

Perez's Christian faith helped him find the words and attitude needed to get the ship through the emotional challenges of having to end surgeries and leave well before its expected departure time.

CONFUSION

For many of the technical crew, most of whom are from multiple African nations, there was confusion as to why the ship was leaving, and concern about their futures.

The decision to leave the field was based on the concerns of medical staff. They feared they would not be able to take care of anyone who got sick on board, because the Senegalese authorities said anyone who tested positive for coronavirus would have to be treated in a local hospital.

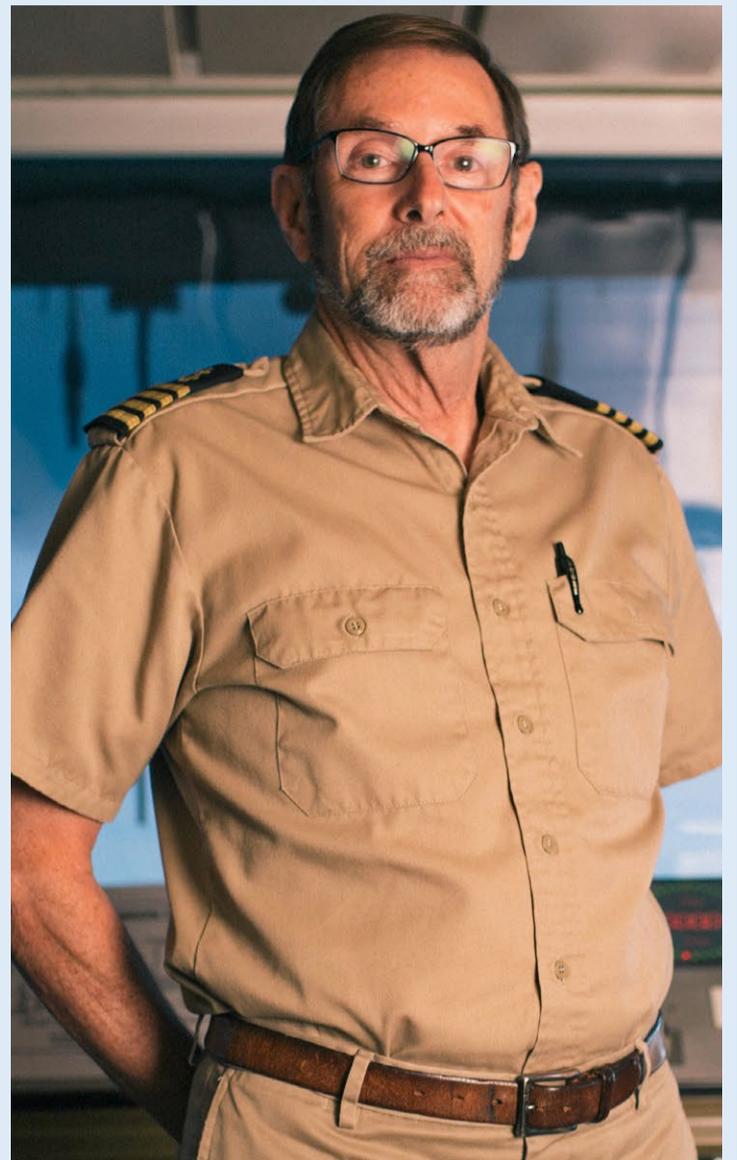
"We would not be in a position to help, but would reduce the capacity of the Senegalese health system to take care of their own people," Perez explained.

"There was a great sadness in having to disconnect from the about 250 day crew, people hired from the Senegalese population to help in various technical, operational and medical jobs, including supporting programmes ashore."

And it was "devastating" for the medical staff: "There were still patients waiting for surgery. Patients who had become friends and were loved were having to be told their surgeries would not happen as scheduled. It was hardest for the medical staff."

Mercy Ships had to reduce crew numbers to mitigate the risk of possible Covid-19 infections on the ship.

Crew experienced the industry-wide problems of struggling with airports and borders shutting



FROM MASTER TO BARISTA: Captain Taylor Perez on the bridge of the Africa Mercy
Photos: Mercy Ships

Captain Taylor Perez: Patients who had become friends and were loved were having to be told their surgeries would not happen as scheduled

down, limiting how many could return to their homes or to hospitals and medical facilities in their own countries that needed their skills urgently.

Backfilling the jobs of departed crew and having a guaranteed port of refuge to go to were additional problems. "We needed a location with a healthy enough medical infrastructure to potentially handle any crew who might get sick."

But Perez said benefits included witnessing the inspirational love between the patients and day crew and the ship's volunteer medics and seafarers.

"When we isolated, 57 day crew volunteered to isolate with us in order to help staff the positions crew had vacated when they were repatriated, and to continue to translate and help the patients that remained on board and at the shoreside facility."

He also commended the positive attitude and adaptability

of the remaining crew, mostly medical, to take on jobs that they had not signed up for.

"My job did not slow down. There was still a ship to run, reports to make and problems to solve. But what was nice was that, with more work to do than people to do it, I got a chance to drop into different roles and help, such as barista in the cafe, dining room cleaner, dishwasher and trash hauler."

Perez, who is American, said the most amazing aspect of the quarantine period was the feeling of being a giant family.

"For the most part, we don't have the option of social distancing in our floating home. Someone is always coming up with a new distracting activity for the evenings or weekends.

"We have had 'Pandemic Olympics', ping-pong tournaments, karaoke nights, escape rooms. It has been delightful to be quarantined on a ship with people you like."

Perez said Mercy Ships has always maintained strict anti-contagion protocols, but will implement additional screening and quarantine measures when the Africa Mercy returns to operation.

"It is hard to predict how people will respond to a post Covid-19 world in terms of their willingness to volunteer in Africa. However, I am always amazed at the sacrifices people are willing to make and their generosity of spirit towards the forgotten poor."