

# God Is Watching Over Your Crew

STEVE CUSHING



## SINCE 9/11, THE JOB OF PORT CHAPLAIN HAS BECOME HARDER—AND MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.

I would have called it an incredible coincidence if I did not believe that the power of patient prayer and God's intervening grace was at work here on a little noticed dock in an industrial city just north of Boston.

For three years, crews from oil tankers docking at Exxon's Everett Terminal had been barred from coming ashore. Even though they had been cleared by border control, the company that ran the dock—citing post September 11 security concerns—refused to let sailors cross their eight-foot-wide dock.

Today, the tanker *Maersk Rochester*, the first ship to experience these restrictions back in 2001, is docked at the Exxon terminal on the first day the restrictions have been lifted, allowing the crew ashore. The faces of the chief mate and the second officer

of the tanker show surprise and relief at hearing the news.

Alex, the second mate, is from Romania. He has been sailing for twelve years because of the limited and low paying jobs in his country. He tells of the rigors of security procedures that he and his shipmates must undergo before they are permitted to dock, and of the frustration of being stuck onboard ship, just a few hundred feet from shore.

"Without chaplains, we would suffer even more than we do," he says. "The companionship and help you bring with you are a ray of sunshine in our world."

For more than 125 years, Covenanters from the New England Seafarers Mission have been taking the gospel message of hope and compassion to those who make their living on the sea. The job of port chaplain has become

more vital and more difficult in recent years, as security concerns have left seafarers increasingly isolated and stuck in limbo, far from the ones they love.

Because the first 9/11 planes left from Boston, the pressure on all of the authorities involved was enormous as well as chaotic. A week after the attacks, I arrived at the Black Falcon Cruise Ship Terminal in South Boston, only to find the front door of the Seafarers Mission had been chained shut by port security. This was to be the first test in a series of challenges to ensure access for our staff and volunteers, not just at the Black Falcon Center, but also for the dozens of terminals in Boston and Providence where we work.

After finding the doors locked, I went to see Captain Mike Grady of the MassPort police and he agreed to review the situation.

"I have seen many of the crew members running to your mission," Grady told me, adding that he felt the Seafarers Mission was "a necessity not only for the crew but for the port of Boston."

This willingness to acknowledge the importance of our ministry would resurface frequently as we approached port authorities and terminal operators for security clearance. Still, that didn't make things any easier.

Fortunately, we did not have to face these challenges alone. The Seafarers Mission works with three other local maritime ministries: Apostleship of the Sea, headed in Boston by Father Philip Laplante; the Seafarers Friend, directed in Boston by Ted Coates, U.S. Coast Guard retired; and Mariners House, managed by Commander Michael Cicalese, USCG active reserve. Coates and Cicalese, because of their connections in the Coast Guard, were valuable partners in negotiating with port authorities.

Brian Salerno, the captain of the port who initiated the new security measures, was also supportive. "Life at sea can be brutal enough," he told us, "but to deny crew members a compassionate hand while in port would be inhuman."

To back up his words, Captain Salerno convened a meeting of the port operators in Boston. All agreed to allow chaplains access to terminals and for seafarers with proper visas to have access through their terminals for shore leave. Even the LNG (liquid natural gas) terminal, proclaimed by the Coast Guard as a high terrorist target, permits our entry, albeit after passing through no less than five security checkpoints.

The Exxon terminal superintendent was the sole holdout, not allowing seafarers to cross their facility. The sailors remained onboard their ships, separated from shore by an eight-foot dock and two locked gates.

The terminal operator did allow



**"I am in your debt for your kindness. You have made this difficult trip a blessing for my crew and me."**

As soon as he boards ship, Steve Cushing stops at the security checkpoint.



Cushing hands out reading materials to Alex, second mate of the *Maersk Rochester*.

chaplains into the facility to visit the seafarers on the restricted vessels. For the next two and a half years, chaplains brought cell phones and prayers onto the ships in lockdown at Exxon.

For the Seafarers Mission, it was an opportunity to show the face of Christ to those who feel trapped and a long way from home. After being at sea for days and weeks, sailors desperately long for the chance to call home, something they are unable to do onboard ship. It can be devastating when that chance

evaporates because the seafarer is denied the liberty of leaving the ship—even to go down the gangplank to a payphone near the dock.

So we started the Seafarer Phone Home Program three years ago to help those seafarers who cannot leave their ship. By providing cell phones, we can provide a lifeline for detained seafarers

Steve Cushing is director of the New England Seafarers Mission, a Covenant ministry with offices in Boston, and Providence, Rhode Island.



to speak with family and let them know they are alive and well, albeit incredibly lonely and stressed.

Here in Boston, even though all the terminals are now open, not all seafarers are allowed to leave ship. In the past, almost every ship visiting the port would come with a crew list visa, which gave crew members permission to go ashore. After 9/11, these visas became more expensive and difficult to get—so more and more ships come into port without them.

A few months ago, I got a call from the ship's agent for the *Ocean Access*, a ship docked at port without a crew list visa. The crew was from Turkey, all Muslim, and going stir crazy. The agent asked if I could check in on them.

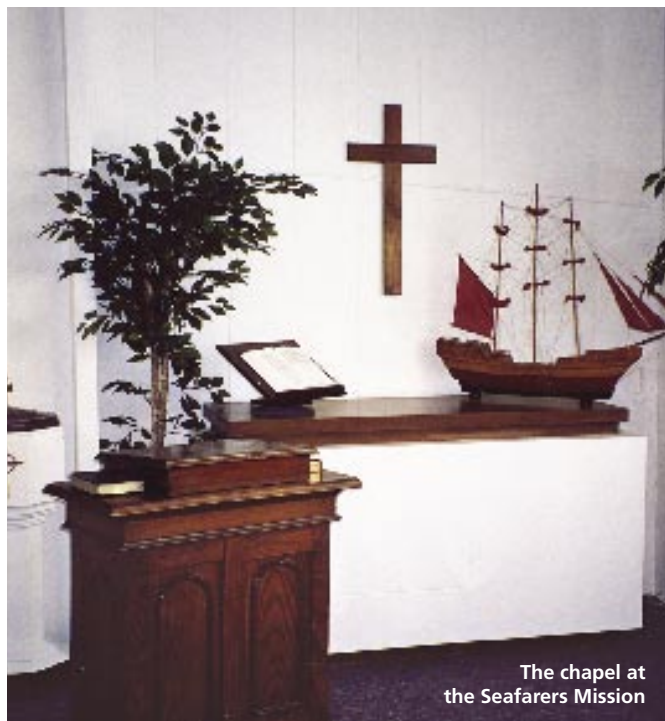
The crew, while unsure how they as Muslims would be received in the U.S., were disappointed they could not leave the ship and visit America. They would be in port for several days as they unloaded their cargo of road salt.

The temperatures in Boston had plummeted to below zero and they asked me if I had any warm clothes they could buy.

"None to buy," I told them, "but I have some free clothes and hats, if you are interested." They looked incredulous and were grateful.

Outside the ship, guards and gates made sure none of the crew left the ship. If one did, the ship would be fined between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per incident, with some of the fine paid for by garnishing the man's wages, who would then be fired and sent home.

I dropped off some cell phones and phone cards, which the crew could buy and use to call home. On my last visit to the ship, I sat in the cargo control



**"Without chaplains, we would suffer even more than we do. The companionship and help you bring with you are a ray of sunshine in our world."**

room with two officers and two crew members, waiting for the last man to finish using the phone.

The seafarers seemed agitated. Finally the chief engineer spoke up. "Sir, I know you are a Christian priest," he said. "I am embarrassed to ask this of you. Several of our crew members have not the funds to pay for the phone cards you left. This is all we could collect."

He slid some bills over to me, and they are about \$50 short. The engineer was a proud man who did not want to have to ask for this welfare. I told him not to worry, but that in fact two days earlier a member of my church had given me \$100 to use to pay for phone cards for those who could not afford them. "Apparently God is watching over your crew," I told him.

He asked for a Bible, and with a sincere thank you and a bow of the head he left the room abruptly.

As I said my goodbye to the oth-

ers and turned to leave, the chief engineer came back with his hands holding candy wrapped in a napkin.

"Today is a holy day on our Muslim calendar," he said. "I am in your debt for your kindness. You have made this difficult trip a blessing for my crew and me."

He walked me to the deck of his ship and stopped at the top of the gangplank. In the dark night filled with swirling snow, I said a prayer for him and for his ship.

I walked down the gangplank, passing the guards and leaving the locked gates behind, knowing a seed of God's love had been planted. In the quiet ride home to my family, I said another prayer that the seed planted would make its way across the ocean and take root on a distant shore. □

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**New England Seafarers Mission (NESM) began ministry in the 1880s with the arrival of the Swedish Covenanters to the U.S. The first chaplain was Olaus Olson, an ex-sailor who became a Christian during a revival meeting held by Boston-area Mission Friends (as Covenanters were then known). Today, Covenant churches and volunteers help NESM provide services to sailors in Boston; Providence and Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island; and Portsmouth and Portland, Maine.**

**The New England Seafarers Mission**  
**1 Black Falcon Avenue**  
**Boston, MA 02210**  
**(617) 443-0282**  
<http://www.neseafarers.org>

**Providence Mission**  
**Municipal Warf**  
**Providence, RI 02905**  
**(401) 461-6190**