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Inexperience or Ignorance is not a bliss Onboard Ship

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440V switchboard used by Ship's crew for plugging / unplugging Reefers





Panel on the reefer unit where local power switch is located

On a sunny afternoon in the port of Zeebrugge an 8400 TEU container ship was discharging her cargo with 3 cranes. The discharged cargo comprised of dry, reefers and dangerous goods. The Stevedores were unlashng the containers stowed on deck as per the discharge plan. In order to ensure continuous power supply for reefer containers it was a standard practice onboard to keep them plugged in until a few minutes before they are discharged from the ship. Unplugging is usually carried out by the ship's electrician or the OOW (Officer of the watch) on duty during discharge. The OOW was monitoring the cargo operations as per the discharge plan provided by the Chief Officer. He was assisted by a Duty A/B (Able-bodied seaman) and an O/S (Ordinary Seaman) who joined the ship just a couple of weeks earlier.

During the cargo watch the OOW was monitoring the two cranes in the forward part while the A/B was monitoring cargo operation in the vicinity of the third crane and the O/S was maintaining a security watch at the gangway. The following morning during routine inspection of reefer containers the ship's electrician noticed a problem with seven containers stowed in position from 541284 to 540084.

These containers were found plugged in but their machinery was not running. From the log he noted that the units were idle for the past 12 hours. All the units were close to the lashing bridge on Bay 54 and were found turned off from the local power switch in the unit. This act puzzled the ship's crew as they usually turn them off by unplugging the power cord from the 440V switchboard. Upon investigation the duty A/B

revealed that on the former day he was approached by a stevedore requesting him to turn off the power supply for reefers on bay 54 to reduce noise. The Duty A/B refused to disconnect the power as the containers were scheduled for discharge on the following day.

Based on the A/B's statement the Master issued a Note of Protest to the Zeebrugge Terminal for allegedly turning off the power supply for reefer containers and held them responsible for any subsequent cargo damage resulting from it. The terminal was resilient and came back to the Master informing that the stevedore in question was subjected to a very high noise level in the work area and was facing tremendous inconvenience while unlashng the containers on Bay 54.

The stevedore claimed that the ship's crew ignored his request which forced him to turn off the unit locally. Master clarified the issue stating that the high noise level in the area was mainly contributed by the Ventilation fans for the cargo hold which were located on Bay 54 underneath the work incident. If the issue was addressed to an Officer this situation could have been immediately resolved by switching off the ventilation fans from the Cargo Control Room.

However the inexperienced Duty A/B wasn't aware of the shipboard operational procedures and also failed to report the OOW about the request made by the stevedore. In any case 'Switching off' the power supply without the knowledge of ship's crew was totally unacceptable and failing to turn on the reefers upon completing his work still held the stevedore responsible for his infamous action.

Well, lessons need to be learnt in a bitter way.