



The American Club

Heavy Weather
All hands on deck?



The famous Hawaiian swimmer and surfer, Duke Kahanamoku, said, “Never turn your back on the ocean.” That advice applies to a vessel in heavy weather, too.



What’s “heavy weather” for one vessel might not be the same for another vessel, particularly related to vessel motion and the potential for heavy seas to expose crewmembers on deck to grave danger. It depends on the vessel's size, draft, and trim, the vessel’s stability characteristics for its loaded condition, sea conditions, the shape of the hull, and the vessel’s speed and heading. A fully loaded ultra large crude carrier (ULCC) that is 1,300 feet (400 meters) long obviously will handle bad weather quite differently from a car carrier, or a 380 feet (115-meter) long bulk carrier in ballast.

What all vessels navigating in open water should do is carefully assess the risks before sending crewmembers out on deck during heavy weather. The specific risks to crewmembers should be carefully considered and mitigated whether the crewmembers need to go out on deck to secure cargo, secure loose mooring lines, secure watertight doors and hatches that may have opened, or any other reason to secure the safety of the vessel.

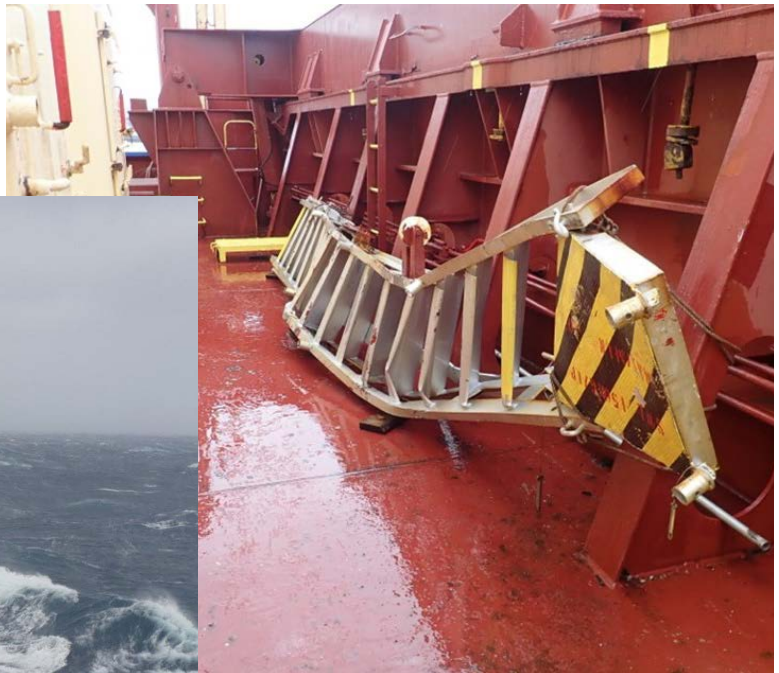
Ideally, the vessel should be readied for heavy weather in advance of that weather, but unforeseen situations can and do arise that might require action by the crew to prevent serious damage to the vessel and vessel systems, prevent major damage to cargo, or prevent large pollution incidents.

In those situations, the risks should be formally assessed and the Master should approve the work. A permit to work process should be used similar to the process for assessing risks for working aloft or confined space entry complete with required approvals. When sending crewmembers on deck in heavy weather, the permit should include:

- A description of the work to be done
- The need to do the work
- The need to do the work now
- The weather and forecast
- How the vessel is riding in the current sea conditions
- Identification of specific risks associated with the specific work

It is critically important that risk mitigation measures are identified and employed. They can include:

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) such as hardhats, gloves, life jackets, and waterproof and warm clothing
- Safety harnesses, tethers, and anchor points
- Rigging lifelines
- Close supervision of the work from a suitable vantage point
- Communications between the supervisor and the bridge
- Use of pairs or teams of crewmembers
- Adjustments in course and/or speed to improve the ride and decrease the likelihood or severity of shipping green water while the work is being done
- Deck lighting and other lighting available
- A rescue plan to assist crewmembers doing the work



Photos courtesy of [Independent Maritime Consulting, LLC](#).



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