

Container Shipping's 'Guess Your Weight Game' Set to End



By Michael Grey from London ~ May 2014

How long is it since the first containers went off to sea? You can argue about this endlessly, but an answer of “half a century” would surely not occasion too much dispute.

So at least fifty years after this remarkable advance started to change liner shipping and accelerated the pace of globalisation, the industry is now on the cusp of regulations which will require the weight of containers to be verified.

Fifty years of collapsed container stacks, wrecked handling equipment, countless boxes squashing cars and pedestrians en route to ports and terminals – even capsized and sunk ships - and this very reasonable amendment to the SOLAS Convention will hopefully come into force in July 2016. Why on earth has it taken so long?

It is not as if there was no compelling requirement for an accurate weight to be supplied, as opposed to complete guesswork, which seems often to be the case. In a corner of practically every container terminal on earth there is a “graveyard” of squashed boxes which have been damaged after falling off lifting equipment, rolling off loaders or plummeting from great heights. If port workers were not killed or injured because of the cavalier neglect of those who filled these containers, it was probably more attributed more to luck than judgement.

Ignorance, poor supervision, greed – the belief that as long as the doors could be shut the box could not be overloaded - these have all been reasons for these accidents. It has not helped that sea carriers themselves have, over the long years, been unwilling to speak roughly to their customers and refuse to carry the boxes of those who treat cargo weights so carelessly. There has been an endless game of “pass the parcel” over who should take responsibility for weight verification, the nonsense of blaming the ship’s master, or even more stupidly a lorry driver (neither of whom can practically intervene) for overweight cargo, persisting down the years.

Shippers, packers, hauliers, terminals, stevedores, sea carriers – all have participated in the long and desultory debate as to who ought to be responsible for establishing the weight. Common sense suggests that it is far too late to be weighing a container at a terminal gate, or even as the wretched box is suspended from a shiploader being put aboard a vessel! An overweight box starts to put a lot of lives at risk, the moment it pulls out of the loading bay on its way to the docks. The shipmaster comparing the weight of cargo stated in the documentation from the terminal, with the weight indicated by his draught marks shouldn’t be surprised at an enormous discrepancy which makes nonsense of his stability calculations.

But let us not begrudge the success that has been finally achieved at the recent IMO Maritime Safety Committee meeting which has approved changes to SOLAS that will eventually require container weights to be verified as a condition for loading them aboard ships. Who knows, there might be some useful commercial gain to be made in the provision of weighbridges.

Of course the weight of the cargo is but one factor; it would be desirable if the load was not pushed down one end of a forty foot box, securely lashed so it would not simply roll through the thin steel walls. Contents should resemble the manifested description, so that “household goods” could not be mistaken for “explosives”. So doubly welcome is the IMO’s approval of a new Code of Practice for the Packing of Cargo Transport Units (CTUs) which will inform everyone down the transport chain about the behaviour we all ought to expect.