

A JOURNEY ON THE HIGH SEAS FOR A MARINER

Few school leavers opt for a career in the merchant navy, but a graduate of an Aberdeen-based cadet scheme is rocking the boat with his resolute rise to command

Mark Arnold is only 26, yet he has the lives of a dozen crewmen in his hands. He waves goodbye to his young family for a month at a time to navigate his 72-metre, 2,200-tonne ship through the buffeting winds and surging waves of an often brutal North Sea.

Mark is believed to be the youngest master mariner in the UK, a role that commands a salary of £50,000 upwards. He has reached a point in his career that others typically arrive at in their 40s, with the help of an Aberdeen-based cadetship programme. Now, he champions a career path that he believes is far too hazy in the minds of school leavers.

“The merchant navy isn’t very well heard of, I’ve found from my experiences,” he says. “When people hear about ‘the navy’, they automatically think of the Royal Navy. People see oil tankers, but nobody knows much about them and how you get on them.”

Mark hails from a seafaring family in Scarborough, but believes his line of work should appeal to anyone set on avoiding a humdrum office job.

“It’s a fantastic career for young people,” he says. “You can travel the world if you want to; no two days are ever the same. It’s hard work, but it’s very rewarding.

“You get to be a part of something that means something, a part of a crew. It’s like a second family - you have to trust the guys you’re with.”

Mark, who lives on the Wirral with his wife and four-year-old daughter, took his first seaman’s exam aged 14, but the catalyst for his rise to master mariner came at 17.

He was offered his dream of a sponsored cadetship by North Star Shipping, part of the Aberdeen-based global shipping and energy company, the Craig Group. He attended Fleetwood Nautical College for three years, where he completed academic studies and got experience at sea; in Scotland, only Banff and Buchan College, Glasgow College of Nautical Studies and Shetland School of Nautical Studies provide similar training.

Mark joined the Merchant Navy after completing the cadetship in 2004 and being offered a job by North Star; his wife, Katie, qualified as a second officer at the same time. At 20, Mark was second officer on the Grampian Explorer, an emergency vessel, on which he learnt to carry out search and rescue missions. He returned to Fleetwood to study for his chief officer qualification and became second-in-command on the Grampian Talisman. It was in April 2011 that he received an unexpected call - asking him to take charge of his own vessel.

North Star Shipping says Mark's career has been "remarkable". Managing Director Callum Bruce stresses that, in 30 years within the industry, he has never witnessed anyone becoming as accomplished in such a short time.

Mark leads a crew of 12 to 18 aboard the Grampian Explorer, a supply vessel for North Sea oil and gas rigs, which is no place for the fainthearted. He has faced winds of 100 knots that rock the ship from side to side like an overzealous babysitter (65 knots constitutes a hurricane). Once, in the Pentland Firth, between Orkney and Caithness where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean clatter into each other, raging conditions broke the lashings around much of his cargo. Mark and his crew had to secure 30 container units, each 10 feet long and eight feet wide, as they thudded around the ship.

Crew aboard the Grampian Explorer work six hours on, six hours off, but even when he is not scheduled to be on duty, Mark can have a lot of paperwork to do. He is typically at sea for a month, before enjoying a month at home with his wife and four-year-old daughter. Satellite television and a small gym provide distractions, but younger crew often find it difficult to be cut off from girlfriends and home comforts, and it soon becomes clear that some are not made for life at sea. Even Mark admits it is hard to be away from loved ones for so long.

His job involves far more than steering a ship. He must have a sound knowledge of ship construction, marine law and how to handle security breaches and now trains cadets himself. He believes he has learnt skills that could be applied in countless onshore jobs: ushering a crew and valuable cargo through fickle, often vicious conditions demands a robustness of leadership, decision-making and problem-solving with few parallels in land-based careers.

In November 2010, Mark was named winner of Oil and Gas UK's overall excellence award. He is almost certain he would not have gone so far, so young, without the support from the Craig Group, which has given him time off and funding to further his career.

There are many following behind him, with the Craig Group presently training more than 80 cadets. Mark still believes, however, that too few school leavers are aware of these routes into the oil and gas industry and choose careers such as engineering instead.

Teenagers can be voluble in demand for respect from their elders. Mark knows that his career promises true, properly-earned respect, from the moment a fresh-faced teenager proves to his hardened fellow crew members that he is not just filling a berth.

"You're not just a number, you're a person, and people look out for you," he says.

(Courtesy: "TES magazine")