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STEAMING

WITH PASSION

With a young fleet of VLCCs, Hong Kong-based Landbridge Ship Management is built on a unique team of industry experts with a global view of the maritime industry. In conversation with Andy Probert, Managing Director Captain Sanjeev Verma spoke further on the company's aims and goals. Andy Probert reports.

Established in 2018, Landbridge Ship Management has asserted itself quickly as one with an enviable reputation with strong business links to several oil majors and traders.

Operating six Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) tankers, the Hong Kong-based shipping platform has been adept at keeping its assets quietly ticking over, even in these worst of times, on various routes across the globe, with no accidents to date.

The management company is part of the Landbridge Group, a private multinational conglomerate from Shandong Province, China. It operates Landbridge Port, China's biggest private port as well as a handful of ports overseas, and has business interests in logistics, oil and gas, real estate and tourism, manufacturing and trade.

"The owner decided to enter the ship owning sector in 2014 and in 2016 took three new VLCCs from China's reputed Dalian Shipyard. But he decided quickly to scale up further and, by 2020, took another three new VLCCs. With six in the fleet, the ship management company followed, and we have been fully operational since 2019," commented Capt Sanjeev Verma, Managing Director, Landbridge Ship Management.

Dynamic and on top

With a team of 22 shore-based staff, they oversee a pool of 300 seafarers from China, India and the Philippines to maintain the VLCCs, which each have a capacity of 310,000 DWT.

"Two-thirds of the pool is from the Philippines as they are mostly ratings. We're proud to say that they all mesh together and provide exceptional service," stated Capt Verma, a Master Mariner.







with 26 years in the shipping industry. He has spent the last eleven years in different shore roles, from being a risk assessor for oil majors and heading the quality and safety department of a leading shipowner in Hong Kong.

The VLCCs are chartered out to global oil majors, traders and pool operators on either long-term contracts and operate on well-known, established routes worldwide.

While several ship management companies are relocated out of Hong Kong, Landbridge is regarded as one of the youngest entrants. Still, it is making a mark as a dynamic, quick-acting company.

“We may well be a tiny player, but we differentiate ourselves in a crowded marketplace as a uniquely young, go-getting dynamic and enthusiastic team,” declared Capt Verma.

“We manage our vessels seamlessly. Running tankers and catering to the oil majors from the start, complying with their rules and regulations and the industry’s best standards, has been a significant achievement.

“But the additional milestone for the team is not in reaching the top, but staying at the top and maintaining that excellent performance.”

Making a difference

The company’s next ambition is to expand the third-party management business.

“Definitely, now that we have consolidated our platform and presence in the market, we are interested in taking more ships into ship management,” asserted Capt Verma. “We are exploring many avenues, and we are confident of meeting any clients’ requirements. We are in advanced talks with ship owning parties and are looking to leverage our experience on to their non-VLCCs.”

He added: “We can cater for any vessel, whether it’s tankers, dry bulk or containers, as our ship management can easily diversify and adapt.”

Reflecting on the impact of Covid-19, the Captain said Landbridge’s crews and land-based management have been working extremely hard throughout the process.

“The inability to carry out crew changes as frequently as possible has been a challenge for the maritime industry. Seafarers have been seriously impacted by the pandemic due to significant restrictions to travel home. Equally, there have not been enough commercial flights to bring new crews in.

It has also affected opportunities to carry out services and inspections on vessels, with shore-based staff being unable to travel and reduced face-to-face interaction with captains and crew.

“Thirdly, trying to supply a vessel adequately has resulted in costs spiralling upwards as a result of Covid-19,” he reported.

A new uncharted territory

Capt Verma zeroed in on major challenges facing the industry, the biggest of which was the compliance of environmental regulations.

“It may well be a target for our industry to cut carbon emissions, but we have been operating for the last 80 years relying on oil. The question that arises is: what is next.

“A lot of research is ongoing into alternative fuels, but where do we have the engines for burning these potential fuels and full supply chain to deliver these fuels? And yet, in achieving environmental compliance, everything comes at a high cost and will reflect in future investments for shipowners.

“The IMO’s goals are optimistic and will require a lot of effort not only in terms of finding the right fuels and developing the right engines, but in finding the answer to how this will affect the entire global supply chain to a vessel.”

As a young company, Landbridge has established an IT-savvy infrastructure with a light cloud-based platform, enabling its employees to work anywhere in the world and to seamlessly connect with their ships.

“When I look at us and compare with other ship management companies, yes we are young and dynamic, but our IT-driven



strategy in day-to-day operations helps to heighten our transparency,” he said. “That puts us in a different position from market leaders with traditional legacy systems. IT is a strength for us, and we have nothing to hide.

“Secondly, we operate one of the biggest VLCC fleets out of Hong Kong with scrubbers. Operating five ships with scrubbers gives us exceptional operational and technical expertise. We were the pioneer to made a quick decision with owners to install scrubbers in response to the IMO 2020 low sulphur convention, which in hindsight, was the best decision to make.”

He added: “Having a young shore team with an average age of about 42 years means that we bring a lot of different ideas to the operational performance for Landbridge.

“We treat each and every vendor, supplier and service provider as a partner. For us, our philosophy is evident: anyone serving us is in a partnership. If we grow, they will grow. It’s a mutual advantage for all.”

Positives from the pandemic

Reflecting on the trials and tribulations of the past Covid-ridden 12 months, Capt Verma said: “In the mid to short term, the tanker sector is still near the bottom of the cycle, but it is improving. China has recovered well, and that is reflected well

in different parts of the shipping sector. It is not yet there for tankers, but we need to wait one or two quarters to see some recovery of freight rates.

“Going forward, in 2022-23, I hope the tanker market will improve. Environmental regulations and new technologies will begin to kick in, and demand for new and modern vessels will organically grow.”

He commented: “The pandemic has taught us many things. Among them, that ships are still running, and the broader use of technology means we don’t need to be in an office.

“But we need to be careful that as a ship manager, we don’t micro-manage ships from shore. Captains should be trusted and allowed the responsibility of managing their vessels. The industry has diluted down the management of ships from ship to shore too much.

“The transition of the last decade moved management from ship to shore. But in the last year, it has shifted back, and that’s the biggest positive.”

He concluded: “In today’s world, people need to be embracing IT more and adopt a holistic approach to interpret the data coming from the ships so that informed decision-making is made more on analysis than gut, historical memory or previous practised experience. I believe the next decade will be completely revolutionary.” ■





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