# The 'old man' and the sea

PUTTING YOUTH ABOVE EXPERIENCE WHEN EMPLOYING KEY
PERSONNEL COULD HAVE WORRYING CONSEQUENCES

**MICHAEL HOWORTH REPORTS**

The other day a yacht captain friend phoned to tell me he had been out of work for eight months and he asked if I knew of any jobs. Knowing him to be a conscientious fellow I asked him why he had been out of work for such a long time and I was shocked by his answer. He said that he thought it was that because he was too old — at 45!

Apparently, he had just spoken to a crewing agent who had told him that, following his latest interview with an owner, he would not be employed because of his age.

This conversation took place on the very day that captain Chelsey B Sullenberger III — a grey haired and highly experienced airline pilot — described to the world what happened when he expertly crafted an emergency landing onto the surface of the Hudson River, saving the lives of who knows how many hundreds who might otherwise have been killed had his plane crashed onto the city of New York.

It was, it turns out, precisely because he had so much experience — from flying aircraft in the days before automation was the norm — that he was able to revert to the library of hard earned experiences and use them to save lives.

Clearly questions have to be asked of crew agents and those others who appoint the masters of superyachts that in some cases are hardly smaller than mini cruise liners.

So just how old is too old? And at what point does looking good in a pair of white shorts become a better bet when employing a captain to oversee a crew of 20-plus professional yachties? Surely there can be no substitute for experience built upon the sound foundation of top class training. Just because a candidate for a job has a piece of paper saying they are qualified to command a yacht, it does not mean they should be allowed to do so without first having served under the command of a senior yacht captain from whom they can learn the tricks of the trade.

We all work hard to gain certificates issued by the MCA, but ask any of the examiners who issue the certificates and they will tell you the same thing — that

there is no substitute for experience when it comes to command and while we all have to become a captain once, for the first time, it should, I feel, be at the back end of the career rather than on day three.

As a grey haired sailor who first went to sea in 1967 after three years of pre-sea training aboard the Merchant Navy Training ship *HMS Conway*, I believe I am allowed to use the adjective 'experienced' when I describe myself as a superyacht captain.

I well remember a serious fire occurring on board a yacht of which I was in command. I can recollect the sinking feeling when I first heard the fire alarm and I can still recall the rush of adrenaline when I looked at the CCTV screens that showed an engine room engulfed by a fireball of flame.

I consulted my chief engineer who confirmed my worst fears and for several hours it looked as if we might lose our yacht entirely.

Years after the incident — during which I had ordered the evacuation of all non-essential personnel and, with the help of my extremely well behaved and trained crew, saved the yacht from sinking, seeing her safely towed into port by tugs — I still reflect
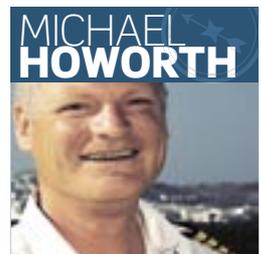
## MICHAEL HOWORTH

Highly experienced, captain Michael Howorth has commanded a number of significant superyachts and written extensively on the subject

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on the events and wondered how I coped. I ask myself how I knew what to do. The answer is that I do not rightly remember.

All I do know is that I reacted automatically by drawing upon the library of training I had built up and drawing on the problems that life at sea had taught me to overcome.

Perhaps it is this which makes a good captain. Not for nothing then that traditionally the affectionate term for the captain by a crew is 'The Old Man'. ●