

THE DRAMA IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

On 28 September 2019, the tanker *Stena Impero* headed into port in Dubai. The arrival marked the end of a 71 day trauma after the vessel was seized by Iran in July as it transited the Strait of Hormuz. "We must commend both the crew and our employees for their professionalism in dealing with this difficult and stressful situation," says Stena Bulk's Managing Director Erik Hånell.

Stena *Impero*, flagged in the UK register, was seized by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on Friday 19 July in the Strait of Hormuz on Oman's territorial waters. The vessel and its 23 crew members from Russia, India, Latvia and the Philippines were then taken to the port city of Bandar Abbas in Iran. The seizure of the vessel, was preceded by an escalated situation in the Strait of Hormuz. The situation was probably exacerbated by the UK's earlier seizure of an Iranian vessel off Gibraltar.

The following ten weeks were a difficult and challenging time for the ship's crew and their families. This also resulted in

one of the most extensive crisis management efforts in Stena's history. The vessel's owners, Stena Bulk and Northern Marine Group, responsible for crewing the vessel, worked together closely to deal with the dramatic event."

LIVED AND BREATHED STENA IMPERO

"The vessel and its crew were never out of our minds for even one second of our waking time. As we received many false signals about the vessel's imminent release, and we wanted representatives from both Stena Bulk and Northern Marine Group on site to receive the crew on the vessel's arrival in Dubai, we were

virtually commuting there during this period," explains Erik Hånell.

After the seizure of *Stena Impero*, there followed international political negotiations, with both the UK and Swedish governments playing active roles. These negotiations probably resulted in the vessel and its crew drawing a lot of international attention in many contexts, which contributed to the final resolution and release of the vessel.

In early September, Iran released seven of the crew members of *Stena Impero* – the number that could leave the vessel without it falling below the minimum crew requirement. A few weeks later,

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Erik Hånell, MD, Stena Bulk

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The vessel was seized for 71 days

Iran gave the long-awaited go-ahead for the release of *Stena Impero*. At 9 am on Friday, 27 September, the vessel left port in Iran after having been detained there for just over two months.

COURAGE AND ENDURANCE

The next day, the vessel docked in Dubai and the crew were met by their relatives and a large delegation from Stena Bulk and Northern Marine Group. Once ashore, they received medical checks and were also offered crisis counselling before returning to their respective home countries for a well-needed rest. “The crew showed both courage and

endurance during this difficult period. The captain of the vessel was later presented with the Merchant Navy Medal for Meritorious Service by the Princess Royal for his exceptional leadership aboard a British-flagged vessel. This award reflects the conduct of the entire crew,” says Philip Fullerton, Managing Director of Northern Marine Group.

Even though the *Stena Impero* incident can be described as the worst crisis in Stena Bulk’s history, it still brought with it something good, according to Erik Hånell. “It gave us proof that our crisis management plan works. We experienced tremendous commitment and willingness to

help from our employees, who were there for us around the clock. We also gained important knowledge and experience for the future,” he says.

“We would also like to thank the Swedish Foreign Ministry, the UK Government and everyone else who was involved in efforts to secure the release of the vessel. But first of all, we would like to thank the crew and their families, who showed unique courage and endurance,” he adds.