High speed caused grounding

A Suezmax oil tanker loaded with crude oil was transiting the Suez Canal from North Africa to India. On the bridge were the pilot, Master, helmsman and Chief Officer. It was morning and a second set of pilots had just boarded the vessel. The pilots carried out a handover on the bridge – this was carried out in Arabic. After the handover the new pilot ordered the vessel to increase to full speed ahead. The Master asked the pilot if full speed was really necessary as the vessel was fully loaded and had a draught of 14.5 metres. The pilot replied that there were strong currents ahead and that full speed was required. The vessel managed to achieve a speed of 9 knots over the ground.

About one hour later the vessel had to alter course to port from 171 degrees to 154 degrees. The pilot ordered port 20 to the helmsman, and the vessel began to alter at a rate of turn of 15 degrees per minute and was rapidly closing the distance to the eastern canal bank at full speed. To counteract this the pilot ordered hard to starboard. This caused the vessel to swing to starboard at a 25 degree rate of turn, and the vessel listed heavily.

The Master asked the pilot if the western branch of the channel was safe. The pilot stated that it was not. At this point the Master took over and relieved the pilot as he determined that the pilot had lost control of the vessel.

The Master ordered hard to port and the vessel just missed the buoys by the centre embankment. The vessel was again heading for the west bank and the Master initially reduced the engine speed to slow ahead, but realised that he needed to turn more quickly, so he ordered full speed ahead to increase the rate of turn.

Unfortunately, the Master could not avoid the bank and made contact a couple of times before ending up in the middle of the canal where the vessel finally stopped.

About an hour later the vessel anchored in the Bitter Lakes and informed the Suez Canal Authorities about the incident. There was no pollution and divers inspected the vessel and found several dents in the hull.

The vessel had to dry dock to repair the damage to the hull at a substantial cost. The vessel was out of service for over a month.

The Swedish Club

What can we learn?

- This was a fully laden tanker, and increasing the speed to full ahead in the Suez Canal caused the stern of the vessel to swing towards the near bank (the Bank effect). Neither the pilot or the bridge team discussed this possibility as the pilot increased the speed. It is obvious that the Master was uncomfortable with the pilot's decision, but he still accepted it.

- The reality was that there were no strong currents at the time. If the bridge team had checked the current this could have been brought to the pilot's attention.

- The pilot's action was not up to the expected standard and to relieve a pilot is an unpleasant and stressful experience. It is essential that managers train their Masters to challenge a pilot who does not comply with the vessel's SMS and company's ISM regulations. However, there should have been a proper pilot briefing where the pilot and the rest of the bridge team discussed the upcoming pilotage and what to expect. This should have included expected environmental conditions, what speed and what rate of turn would be suitable, how the vessel performed when it was fully laden and any upcoming traffic. If these issues are discussed it is likely that all involved parties can give their input on why a suggested action is advisable or not.

Pilot comment

The pilot is the adviser to the Master, and the Master remains responsible. A pilot cannot force a Master to go full speed if he has grounds not to do so.