



— SAFETY & OPERATIONS

Bulk carrier safety and respecting the workhorses of the sea

OCTOBER 2025 • BY MATT SHIRLEY • 6 MIN READ



The FMG Nicola loading iron ore in Port Hedland. Image: Marco Blanco.

People often think of bulk carriers as the easiest and most basic of ships. And while yes, a shoebox made to carry lots of shoes isn't perhaps an inaccurate description, having spent years not only working on them but also piloting them, take it from me - they're anything but simple to load or manoeuvre.

Bulk carriers are the workhorses of the sea, moving billions of tonnes of iron ore, coal, grain and other dry bulk cargoes every year. But the knowledge needed to operate, load and discharge them safely is remarkable. Get it wrong - a cargo liquefies, a hold isn't trimmed, stability shifts under way - and the consequences can be immediate and catastrophic. So while there are far more complex vessels from a design perspective sailing about our oceans, tell me you can load a bulkie well, and you'll have my respect.

The state of play: improving, but not enough

The latest Intercargo Bulk Carrier Casualty Report (2015-2024) confirms some progress. Ship losses have declined compared to earlier decades. Yet the risks remain sobering:

- Cargo liquefaction remains the single biggest killer, accounting for more than 60% of lives lost in the period.
- Groundings continue to dominate total vessel losses.
- The average age of ships lost is 18.3 years, underscoring the vulnerability of aging fleets.
- External threats are rising: three bulk carriers were lost in the Red Sea due to attacks, with tragic loss of life.

Where risk hides

The report identifies cargoes like nickel ore and bauxite as repeat offenders in liquefaction events. But risk isn't just in the holds. Weak maintenance regimes, desensitisation to near misses and authority gradients that silence concerns all add to the danger. Bulk carriers may look simple, but the margins for error in loading plans, trimming, draft management and ballast exchange are razor thin. As are, on occasion, the margins they operate to - hence the pressure and perhaps one of the reasons for a temptation to cut corners.

Learning before loss

The thing is, what's missing isn't an awareness of the risks - we know them well - but the discipline to learn before another ship and crew are lost. And that could mean:

- Predictive tools (digital twins, cargo behaviour modelling) built into planning.
- Shore and ship teams rehearsing degraded scenarios, not just routine ones.
- A reporting culture where near misses are gold, not an embarrassment.
- Stronger oversight of older tonnage, where survey fatigue can creep in.

The bigger lesson (pun intended)

Intercargo's report makes clear: while the numbers are improving, "better than before" is not good enough. Bulk carriers are still among the most vulnerable ship types and the lives lost prove it.

So, what's the answer? Well, maybe it's accepting that bulk carrier safety is a system's challenge and our systems are still on occasion not quite up to scratch. It's about culture, competence and foresight and not just compliance. If we treat these vessels as "basic," we underestimate them and we fail the crews who sail them.

Respect the bulkie. Operate it well. And never stop learning from the workhorses of the sea.

This opinion piece was first published in [Daily Cargo News \(DCN\)](#) on 6 October 2025.



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