

# How I Work

SMI talks to industry leaders and asks

## **What motivates them and how they deal with the rigours of the shipping industry**



**Catherine Mulvihill**  
CEO, IFAN

**T**he International Foundation for Aids to Navigation (IFAN) is a registered UK-based not for profit company that has an operating division in the Middle East Gulf – MENAS (Middle East Navigation Aids Service). Catherine Mulvihill is the new Chief Executive Officer, having taken up the role in late 2023 after a long a varied career in Maritime.

The aim of IFAN's work is to promote safety at sea and protect the marine environment. This includes directly and indirectly providing and maintaining navigation aids, safety systems and

information; promoting the use of modern navigation techniques and procedures and other essential maritime skills through seafarer education and training; and supporting and improving all aspects of the marine environment.

"IFAN is the only independent lighthouse authority in the world, providing assistance in the field of maritime safety and protection of the marine environment for the past 100 years," says Catherine.

Its origins date as far back as 1911 when it was first set up as the authority for aids to navigation in the Middle East Gulf, and parent company IFAN was formed in 2011 to reflect its extended global safety at sea and Aids to Navigation (AtoN) activities.

Catherine lists what she sees as the vital assets that help the charitable organisation fulfil its objectives.

"First of all, the human asset. IFAN employs qualified staff specialised in the maritime industry, including a major shipping, oil & gas managers and others with maritime backgrounds in

international organisations. Moreover, IFAN's governing Board includes representatives from major shipping, oil & gas companies as well as experienced independents who have sound financial and auditing backgrounds.

"The second asset is a detailed knowledge and long operating experience in the Middle Eastern Gulf, which today is carried by MENAS, a leading innovator in the development, monitoring, fabrication, supply and maintenance of AtoN. IFAN's operational branch employs top qualified staff, and it contributes to IALA (International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities) committees to set international standards in the field of navigation services.

"IFAN also has a long-term experience of funding successful initiatives worldwide – including in the



Pacific region, Asia and Europe - whose objectives are aligned with those of IFAN.

"Finally, IFAN possesses a solid asset represented by its established yet growing network in the maritime industry and, more and more, in international organisations. This allows the Charity to advocate on the importance of navigational services and to take into consideration further funding opportunities."

Catherine herself has almost 40 years' experience in the maritime industry, first with a container shipping line then 15 years working in P&I insurance and 20 years working with global insurers handling complex claims in the Ports and Terminals industry. She says she was motivated to join IFAN last August, taking over as CEO in October, "because of its reputation for excellence and the belief that I could bring so much of what I had learnt and experienced in my career to the role. I was also very interested in the opportunity to seek and work with global partners and authorities to help them with projects to provide aids to navigation and help further IFAN's objectives."

THE IFAN CEO notes many recent technological advances in the

Aids to Navigation sector, including "digitalisation generally, the use of AIS and satellite systems to provide updated information to the mariners (i.e. ECDIS on board vessels and VTS in port control towers) and managing vessel traffic, implementing Risk Assessment to improve traffic in waterways & channels, monitoring the status of AtoNs (buoys, lighthouses)." Plus she identifies e-navigation and autonomous shipping as notable emerging trends.

But it's important that the human element keeps pace with those technological advances, she feels, saying: "I think that one of the biggest challenges across all of the maritime sector is attracting and retaining talent."

For this reason IFAN is an active supporter of the IALA World-Wide Academy. IFAN/MENAS also successfully delivered the first Level 3 Aids to Navigation course which was tailored by IFAN/MENAS to familiarise mariners with the main Marine Safety of Navigation services and systems - the first of its kind in the Middle East region - and are planning to deliver L2 Aids to Navigation course for AtoN technicians/Engineers responsible for AtoN maintenance by Q2/Q3 later this year.

MENAS recently had to increase its navigational aid fees (or 'light dues') in the Middle East, which was met with some opposition. But Catherine defends the decision, saying: "We have worked very hard keeping the tariff at the same rate since 2006 – indeed, MENAS set its tariff to cover operating costs without making any profit. However, over the past two years the cost of providing MENAS Nav Aids has risen sharply, compounded by the need to replace some major equipment such as DGPS transmitters.

"This, unfortunately, means that without increasing the tariff charge, the income we receive is not enough to sufficiently fund the service, which is vital to ensure the safe navigation of vessels in the Gulf through the provision of Nav Aids.

"Not only does MENAS provide Aids to Navigation, consisting of 54 buoys/lighthouses, AIS and Racons and sending signals from its 4 DPGS transmitters, it is also the Acting Sub-Area Coordinator for NAVAREA IX, coordinating the NAVTEX service for navigational and weather warning for seafarers and also issuing Notices to Mariners, providing vital updates on navigation changes or notification of works or events. Though MENAS undertakes contract work for third parties, as a way of helping to reduce nav dues to shipowners, all services provided by MENAS are paid for by these dues."

However, "in the main, the increase has been accepted by the ship operators," she affirms, "as they understand and appreciate the vital work that MENAS is doing to keep them safe."

When not attending to her professional duties Catherine says she is "a big walker, which perhaps is inevitable when you own a Cocker Spaniel! I attend the theatre regularly and you can normally find me with my nose buried in a murder mystery - I'm a big fan of the golden age of detective stories."

Her other "great joy" is as a Liveryman and Court assistant of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights – one of the livery companies based in the City of London to which numerous senior shipping industry folk belong. There she chairs the Education and Charity committee as well as The King's Silver Medal Competition where final year apprentices from shipyards, boatyards and the marine supply chain across the United Kingdom take part in the week long Phipps Leadership and Development Programme on Kielder Water in Northumberland. She has recently been elected to the position of 5th Warden.

The 800-year-old livery company's founding aim of safeguarding the quality of shipbuilding would seem a perfect fit with IFAN/MENAS' mission of promoting safe navigation - especially in area so vital to global trade as the Middle East, as recent events have shown. ●

