

Old Fashioned or Just Safe



Not long before this issue of Hydro International went to press, a major problem with Galileo, the European equivalent of the American GPS system, occurred. A few days later, the malfunctioning system has still not been corrected. It appeared to be an incident related to the Galileo ground infrastructure that resulted in a temporary interruption of the Galileo Initial Services.

Disrupted Hydrographic and Oceanographic Operations

Galileo is widely used by most of the commercially available receivers. Multi-constellation GNSS receivers will remain unaffected and compute position and timing using other constellations, said experts for the European GNSS Agency, the industry, the European Space Agency and the European Commission. The incident affected a wide range of users and disrupted, among others, hydrographic and oceanographic operations. It highlighted again how much we made ourselves dependent on modern technology.

Pointing at the Ship's Compass

This reminded me of the first trip I took on a commercial sailing ship as an enthusiastic but rather inexperienced seafarer. I embarked on the beautiful ship from a hot, dirty, and dangerous South American port. On our way to one of those pristine Caribbean islands, the old captain insisted that I should learn how to use a sextant. So every day at noon I tried my best to find our ship's position, to mark it on a paper chart and to set out a new course using a pair of compasses, a ruler and a pencil. It always felt like a small victory when I could say to the helmsman "course 256", or something similar while pointing at the ship's compass.

Sophisticated Positioning System

Although the ship was equipped with a sophisticated positioning system and a state-of-the-art chart plotter, to be able to use the instruments sailors had been using for ages, thorough knowledge of the art of navigation was vital, my captain said. "Navigation involves more than watching a screen and pushing a few buttons. All those things could be broken at the moment you most need them. As a professional seafarer, you have to bring your ship and crew to the next port of call safely without having to rely on something you can't influence."

Having a Plan B

Was my captain an old salt who was afraid of modern technology? Certainly not. He thought me a lot and I will never set sail without at least having a plan B, just in case all the navigation satellites stop functioning or be switched off.

Cees van Dijk, content manager

cees.van.dijk@geomares.nl