

Moving Monoliths

By Katherine Nichols
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Harbor Pilot Ed Enos stands on the starboard side of the 788-foot Matson container ship Ewa, his hand cupped over a crackling radio so his instructions will not be carried away on the wind.

He alternates between radioing commands to the two tugboat captains below and shouting orders to the crew on the Ewa's nearby bridge, allowing him to simultaneously choreograph the Ewa's movements with the tugboats' efforts to spin the ship 180 degrees and position it ever-so-gently at the dock in Honolulu Harbor.

Imagine trying to parallel park an 18-wheeler in a tight space. Or on a sheet of ice, where every move is exaggerated, stops take longer and turns must be carefully anticipated. Winds can pull you in ways you can't control. Rain can blind you. Modern instruments help, but often you must rely on your instincts. If you make a mistake, millions of dollars will be lost. Or a catastrophic environmental accident will occur in the form of an oil spill. Or people will die.

And you will be held responsible.

Few people understand what harbor pilots actually do. Even fewer know what it takes to become one. But pilots are among the most carefully trained experts on the water. And in Hawai'i, they face their greatest challenge: operating in harbors that were not meant for the kinds of ships that now dock here.

The problem is intensifying as Celebrity, Carnival and Royal Caribbean make plans to land 965-foot cruise ships in the Islands this fall. One of the trickiest harbors to navigate is Kaua'i's Nawiliwili, with its zig-zag passage and the need to turn a ship in a narrow space before docking. The potential tourism dollars at stake and the pilots' reluctance to take risks that seem acceptable only on simulators — especially in a harbor that was originally designed for ships no longer than 492 feet — has sparked tension between the two entities. (See today's Business section for more on Hawai'i's harbors.)

At all levels, the pilot's job is inherently dangerous. This is why their focus is safety. Everything else is secondary.

The nine pilots based in Honolulu serve all Island ports. The two busiest are Honolulu and Barbers Point. About every third month, at least one pilot is the designated traveler, working Port Allen, Nawiliwili, Kahului, Hilo, Kawaihae and Johnston Atoll. For two weeks a month, when they are on call, they must be available 24 hours a day. They have the other two weeks off each month.

A pilot's training involves spending years at sea, earning an unlimited Coast Guard master's license (meaning they can serve as a captain on any vessel in any waters), intensive testing, from which only the top scorers are chosen, at least 1,500 "jobs" or portages as an apprentice, multiple certifications that must be repeated every five years, and simulator training in France or Britain. As 27-year veteran pilot Dave Lyman said, "It takes 15 years to get to the bottom of the ladder."

Each job, of which a pilot might perform two or three a day, is a unique adventure. "As much as it might seem to be routine," said Enos, "it's always different."



Between "jobs," or ship movements, harbor pilot Ed Enos relaxes aboard Ikaika, the boat that transfers the pilots to the ships they will bring into the harbor, and picks them up after they have escorted ships safely out into the open ocean.
Bruce Asato • The Honolulu Advertiser

On the way out from Pier 19 on a 35-foot, twin-engine harbor pilot boat to meet their respective ships, pilots Ed Enos and Steve Baker take note of the rising surf in the channel, which "makes it a little more challenging," said Enos, because a ship tends to roll and move unpredictably as it rides the swells.

Boat operator Herb Nahinu escorts Baker to the Alkyonis, a 738-foot oil tanker from Greece. Baker wonders aloud if he will be able to communicate with the crew — an additional challenge pilots face when boarding ships from all over the world.

As Baker climbs to the deck, Enos recalls a recent job aboard a cruise ship with a multinational crew. "Everyone was trying to speak English to each other," said Enos. "I emphasize 'trying.' "



Pilot boat operator Herb Nahinu transports harbor pilot Tom Heberle to the SS Chief Gadao, a Matson container ship. Gregory Yamamoto • The Honolulu Advertiser

The Global Positioning System indicates that we're a mile and a half offshore; the pilot boat heads into the wind toward Diamond Head and the Ewa, sucking spray and bouncing enough to instill panic in any mildly seaworthy guest.

Ships rarely slow down for a pilot coming aboard. This can be treacherous. "We're going full speed and they're still going by us," said Enos. "Sometimes a crew has been at sea for a week to 10 days and they're late and they're trying to make up for lost time in the last five minutes. They have no concept of the time/space thing. They can't really grasp how fast they're going."

The pilot boat, dwarfed next to the container ship, bobs and weaves in the wake of the moving monolith. Survival often depends on the skill of the boat operator. Enos waits until the pilot boat is on a rising swell before grabbing the highest rung he can reach on the ship's flimsy ladder. It's called a pilot's ladder — much like the type found hanging from a tree house. Its wooden steps, only inches

wide, sway with the ship. The space from ocean to deck is about 30 feet. It looks and feels like 100.

If he doesn't time it right, the boat could lurch up and crush Enos' legs against the ship, or knock him into the ocean. Of the 1,150 male and female pilots in the United States, an average of three or four die each year in boarding accidents.

With a shoulder bag containing a radio, a chit book for the ship's captain to sign, tide table, spare battery for the radio, and a flashlight, Enos methodically climbs the ladder. He also wears a state-of-the-art life jacket that is deflated, but contains CO2 cartridges that will inflate it on impact. If a harbor pilot falls into the ocean — provided he survives the plunge and doesn't get pulled under the ship — he probably will be unconscious; the self-inflating jacket will keep him afloat for rescue.

Hetty Fernandez, a 22-year-old Merchant Marine Academy cadet, escorts Enos across the deck and up several more flights of stairs to the bridge, where Capt. Jerry Burke, looking every inch the leader in his red suspenders, bushy beard and abundant tattoos, waits with the first mate and the helmsman. Enos and Burke address each other as "Captain."

"So how was the trip?" asks Enos.

"Beautiful," replies Burke.

The brief exchange of pleasantries is essential. "It's not so much a law as it is understood that you have what's called the master/pilot exchange," Enos explained earlier. "The theory is, that's your moment to find out if something's not right. And that's the captain's chance to ask, 'What are we doing? Do you have enough tugs? Which side are we going to tie up?' "

There's another important reason for establishing mutual respect in the first minute: "For the next hour, you're sort of entrusting each other with a whole lot," said Enos, "and if he doesn't like you from the get-go, it'll just go downhill from there."

The relationship with the captain on the bridge is a delicate dance between two people accustomed to being in charge, each cognizant of the other's authority in a separate arena. It's Capt. Burke's ship. But right now it's Capt. Enos' harbor.

"How's your load?" Enos asks within two minutes of coming aboard. The weight of the ship will influence how it handles, how much the 3,000-horsepower tugs will be needed, how deep the ship sits in the water (referred to as draft) and, therefore, how much room Enos has between the bottom of the ship and the ocean floor.

"Not too heavy," answers Burke. "About 11,000 tons."

Though he's surrounded by a rudder angle indicator, an rpm indicator which tells the pilot which way and how much the propeller is turning ("You have to look and make sure you got the command you wanted," said Enos), an electric gyrocompass, radio and a radar, Enos relies most often on his own eyes. He instructs the crew in measured speech, often supplementing his directions with arm and hand signals.

"Slow ahead."

The crew repeats every word as they respond to his commands.

"Midship." A pause. "Anchors standing by?"

Burke confirms that they are, then adds, "all navigation equipment is working fine."

"Ease the rudder to 10."

Once in the harbor, Enos discovers that a ship is still at the dock where he plans to tie up. There's nothing he can do until the other moves. "Once I start going, to stop and wait is not a very comfortable thing to do," he admits. "I'm just dogging it here, trying not to get stuck." On a ship this size, braking is not an option.

Soon the other ship pulls away and Enos prepares the tugs to spin the Ewa around, as though backing a car into a parking space. Moving into position, the Ewa passes within a stone's throw of the surrounding docks. Enos evaluates the distance with a glance. "Oh, yeah," he says. "Tons of room."

Not a phrase the pilots use when they think of massive cruise ships inching into Nawiliwili. They do, however, want to be part of the solution to the big ship/little harbor problem, and will keep working cooperatively with the Coast Guard and the cruise ship owners. But no matter what the economic stakes, the pilots will continue to make all decisions based on their pre-eminent concern: safety.

When Enos is finished with the helmsman, he tells Burke that it's OK to release the crewman from his duties, but is careful to let Burke give the command: "Finish with the wheel."

Longshoremen secure the lines. A shout, a wave, laughter, a dying breeze. Anxiety fades. The ship is finally at rest. A light mist gives way to a double rainbow. With a satisfied nod, Enos declares the job "uneventful. And that's how we like it."



At the ship, Heberle, wearing a life jacket and a gear bag containing a radio, waits for an upward swell to climb the pilot's ladder. The wooden handles, only inches wide, sway with the ship, making the climb dangerous.

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