

A Personnel Shortage? Really?

People are the key ingredient in a smoothly running harbor, and we've known a lot in our years of covering the topic. Here is a cross-section; some are beginners, some are veterans, some have gotten out, some have retired, some have died. Representing all kinds of backgrounds and upbringings, viewpoints and ambitions, they've been among the best people we've had the pleasure to meet.

— Text & Photos by **Don Sutherland**

"The [New York School of Seamanship], on [Staten] island's north shore, home to the most vital remnant of New York's once-mighty shipping industry, is the first school for sailors to open in the city for many years. It reflects the reality that while jobs for merchant mariners around New York City are not increasing, those that remain are subject to more and more regulations and licensing requirements."

— *New York Times*
August 22, 2006

can Waterways Operators (AWO) for the House of Representatives two months ago, that demand "is reaching crisis proportions." How did the New York Times, an authority on things Congressional, miss it?

All the tugboat companies are advertising for personnel. The internet is buzzing with it. Companies large and small feel the pinch. But what dissuades droves of folks from lining-up for the employment opportunities in the maritime trade?

respectable prominence. He is middle-aged, but nowhere near the customary point of retirement. "I'm giving it another couple years," he'd said, "then I'm getting out before this eats me up."

Even if they no longer recur, tales of this sort live on. So let's say you're choosing between two jobs, truckdriver or boatman. The lore about one cites speeding tickets. The lore about the other cites Glocks. Which do you choose?

You are What You're Called?

Without actual statistics, we don't know whether more tugboats than eighteen-wheelers are pulled-over for inspection per unit of measurement, but it doesn't matter. Some people feel harassed. And actions are based on feelings, not statistics. And in the merchant marine, people

Zealous sea marshals weren't the only thing making crews feel like criminals.

Incarcerated people are deprived of many things, especially their perceptual senses. They get nothing to look at, or little they want to. That is a feeling sometimes shared by crews who, for whatever reason, are delayed at some terminal. They're forbidden to leave the boat. Or, more precisely, they're forbidden to pass through the terminal to buy a newspaper or provisions. The terminal won't permit it. Security risk. So they stare at one another for a day or two.

We asked many crewmembers what they thought of all this, and their composite comes out something like: "I broke my butt renewing my license, it cost me a lot of money, it took forever, but my background proved to be clean, I'm completely checked-out, and they won't let me off



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The *New York Times*, whose last foray into the Kill Van Kull provided an article titled "Tugboat Alley" one year and one day before the above, is this time almost correct. Nobody disputes that mariners "are subject to more and more regulations and licensing requirements." Nor would we argue that the jobs around New York are not increasing. But we can wonder why they're not increasing. Did the increase in regulations have something to do with the decrease in applicants?

If the jobs are not increasing, it's certainly not because the industry is not "mighty." As mentioned here in recent issues, everybody's working and if anything, more boats are needed. Plenty of owners say that if they had more boats, they'd be even busier. So why don't they get more boats?

Some of the companies tell us they can't find the crews. If the jobs are not increasing, it's not for lack of demand. It's for lack of qualified people to fill the demand.

According to testimony by the Ameri-

Let us count the ways.

Legends Die Hard

For starters, there's the old lore. "The Gestapo of the harbor!" That's what one skipper described, a couple years ago. "Where else in America can a law-enforcement agency stop you in the middle of doing your job, for no reason, while a 19-year-old points a 9mm at you, and push you around until they're done with you?" That same skipper, a couple years later, acknowledges that this much of it has improved. "I don't hear about those kinds of boardings, guns drawn, so much," he reports. Still, memories die hard. "We're treated like criminals," he said back then. It was, he said, a matter of "their Mekong Delta attitude." As he put it. "They acted like I had Osama Bin Laden hidden in the forepeak." It was, he seemed to think, a problem of attitude.

The speaker was representative of a lot of harbor voices, a gent who grew up in the towing business, and achieved a

aren't in a position where they have to feel harassed.

Most people who work on tugboats are able to work on other things too, such as building construction or automotive repair, perhaps even on trucks themselves. According to *The New York Times* last February, trucking companies have been holding job fairs all over the east, in hopes of reversing a 10,000-driver shortfall in anticipated need.

What if 10,000 tugboatmen took the driving course (about \$3k) and mastered the art of keeping awake? That could make the personnel shortage around tugboats even sharper than it appears to be now.

To put it in perspective, Charlie Chellimi, past president of local 333, says the current union membership in New York is around 2500. So even if all the tugboaters got disgusted and quit, there still wouldn't be enough truck drivers.

Sounds like they've got what you call a seller's market.

the boat. I'm good enough for the Coast Guard, but not for the terminal?"

The Price of History

New rules and regulations are not the only gripe voiced commonly around the harbor. Mr. Chellimi, for example, sees part of the personnel situation originating in the unforgotten work action of the late 1980s, described both as a strike and as a lockout.

"After that," said Mr. Chellimi, "the companies cut the wages and benefits to the bare bones. People could make more money in service industries like McDonald's, or service stations. People didn't come into the industry for five or six years, because the wages weren't the best. If people had come in then, they'd be licensed now and we wouldn't have the shortage there is today."

There are forces outside the industry too, broad social ones. The nation's gone white-collar, or thinks it has. It seems to love its new "service-based economy,"

and looks askance at the industrial age and its "smokestack industries." What has a more prominent smokestack than a tugboat?

A lot of folks may still think a tugboater looks like Wallace Beery (an actor who played in "Tugboat Annie") and smell as described. Joe Sixpack is gone, of course, replaced by the maritime pro. Regulations enacted around 1990 have insisted. But this kind of lore, too, dies hard.

It's never been an easy business, it's never been that safe. Boats catch fire, get slammed by storms, for all sorts of reasons they sink. And two-weeks-on gets mixed reviews as regards family life. And maybe potential new mariners are reading, in the *New York Times*, that there are no jobs, anyway.

Even when there are jobs, career advancement can go slowly. There's a lot you must know to succeed on the deck, a

aboard?

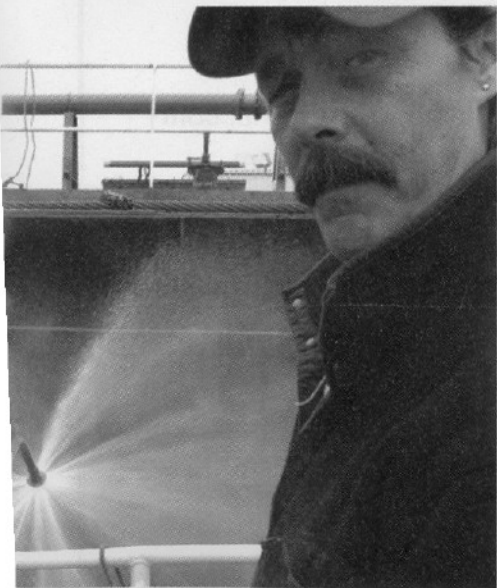
"The Coast Guard licensing process," Capt. Sause told the Congressmen, "can and does exacerbate a situation that is reaching crisis proportions. The lengthy delays, bureaucratic quagmires, and enormous backlogs at the Coast Guard Regional Examination Centers ... are the

difference between working and not working, operating a vessel or tying it up. When I talk to AWO members around the country about this issue, I'm struck by the emotional intensity of their response. People are frustrated. They're angry. They feel devalued."

It's hard to stay in love if you feel deval-

ued. "Why can't we establish a simple, efficient system for processing the documents that mariners require to do their work? In many parts of the country, delays in the processing of mariner credentials have gotten so bad that the Coast Guard routinely advises mariners to submit an application for renewal a full year

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"The path from entry level to being fully licensed as a master of a vessel," said Dale Sause, chairman of the AWO during July's testimony before the House Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, chaired by U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo's (R-NJ), "while rewarding, can be long and demanding. Not everyone finds himself or herself suited to a maritime career."

A Compensating Factor?

The boatman took all this stuff because that's what he was — a boatman. His love for his boats, enriching though it is, and his love for a life on the water, could be his Achilles Heel. In exchange for those things he seems to accept the perils and the exhaustion and the distorted views by the world at large. Ask him, and he'll probably say it's something in his blood.

Up to a point.

If he loses the love, what keeps him

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before their license expires!" And from that comes license creep. "The system is broken," said Capt. Sause. "A fix is desperately needed, and long overdue."

Injury to Insult?

The maritime industry is considered a line of defense, for which it has proved itself so able. Who evacuated all those people five years ago this month, from a lower Manhattan that lacked the sense to

harder?

They say things get harder if getting credentials requires a face-to-face meeting, in one of just 17 RECs nationwide. And word got around that new plans would proceed without public comment. That much of it, it seems clear, has changed. But at first, for some, it seemed to reprise lore from the days of yore.

Testimony before a House Subcommittee could be considered a component of

public comment, and the Coast Guard seems to be listening. They're going over the material, with findings expected later in the year.

They maintain the importance of face-to-face contact such as the RECs provide, and of the TWIC issued by the TSA. Although the TWIC itself has been debated on various grounds, it's seen as an avenue toward streamlined procedures by the Coast Guard.

"There will be many more TSA enrollment centers," said the Coast Guard's Capt. Ernest J. Fink, Director of the National Maritime Center, "something in the range of 130 or so. I think it'll be a lot easier for the mariner to find a TSA enrollment center than a REC." The RECs in the future, Capt. Fink told us, would operate more as a "storefront," and streamlined procedures would come into place, including online submission of



place bollards on its shore?

Those same gents and their shipmates take lifesaving courses, firefighting courses. Each year come dozens of reports about tugs called away to fight other peoples' fires. The crews are efficient and heroic and were they not, some very ugly consequences would have ensued. So some in the business wonder how come there are forces trying to make their jobs

applications and payments of fees.

"There will be a website where they can go in and find out the status of their application," said Capt. Fink. "Doing it on the internet will cut down on phone calls, freeing people to work on the applications." Among further steps to relieve logjams would be measures such as training Coast Guard Auxiliary and Reserve personnel to do the requisite fingerprinting.

The future of credentialing is still a work in progress, but the dialog on the topic seems to have begun.

Tomorrow's Crisis Today

Mention a personnel shortage, and some people mention a threat to the Jones Act, raising hackles within the industry. But inside and outside the industry, everyone seems to hope -- and optimistically expect -- that the dialog with the authorities will arrive at a thoughtful, thought-out balance between the needs of security during wartime, and the requirements of civilians doing private-sector jobs.

We're doubly hopeful. From our perspective, a personnel shortage is bad enough for today's harbor fleets, but what about tomorrow's? The way some discussions are headed, the future holds a demand for tugboats and their services even greater than the present. Who'll be on tap to run them?

The issue has been raised in realms far outside the industry. Organizations as land-based and design-oriented as the Municipal Art Society, described last month as influential in New York on the quality of life, has formally identified waterborne transport as a desirable alter-

native to an increase of trucks bringing goods into the city. What if those 10,000 drivers are hired?

The Society sees the waterways as a way to reduce congestion, wear and tear on the roadways and streets, asthma and cancer. They've found out that one container barge could replace 200 tractor-trailers in local and regional deliveries, a point to ponder for all quality-of-life fans.

Meanwhile, not long ago, New York congressman Jerrold Nadler proposed a cross-harbor rail tunnel, with many similar objectives. In addition, if freight came by rail through a new tunnel from Greenville to somewhere in Queens, the congressman advised, it would be a great backup if something happened to the one bridge or two tunnels now linking the New Jersey containerports with points east.

The New York Economic Development Corporation (EDC) drafted the Environmental Impact Statement, examining various solutions for the foregoing issues. It declared Congressman Nadler's Tunnel to be the Number One solution, expanded tug/barge transport the second choice.

Mayor Bloomberg nixed the tunnel because a huge railroad yard would diminish the quality of life for citizens of Queens. With that decision, by default, Choice Number Two became Number One.

It looks like everyone who's thinking about the Grand Scheme wants there to be more tugboats. By default, again, they want more tugboat crews. It's not clear how far the EDC has thought this through, nor even the industry itself.