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## Steering Alaska's Ships

Marine pilots shepherd vessels through waters they know well

By WESLEY LOY  
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VALDEZ -- When it comes to guiding giant oil tankers safely out of Prince William Sound, the most important person isn't the captain.

It's guys like Richard Desautel, a marine pilot.

A pilot is like an extra captain on the bridge. He's a highly experienced, veteran skipper with expertise in local waters such as the Sound, Cook Inlet or Bristol Bay. Pilots know the docks, the charts, the markers, the currents, the tides, the weather -- all the factors a captain must juggle in moving a steel colossus in and out of port.

They also know responsibility.

"One mistake and your job is done," says Desautel, shortly after guiding an oil tanker uneventfully out of Port Valdez one morning in late August. "You're only as good as your last docking -- that's how I see it."

Like other coastal states, Alaska requires pilots aboard ships in certain nearshore waters. The idea is that pilots bring more local knowledge than the overseas captains who normally command the vessels.

The goal is to avoid disastrous shipwrecks.

No pilot was aboard the oil tanker Exxon Valdez when it steered off course and hit Bligh Reef in 1989, spilling nearly 11 million gallons of oil. The pilot had already left the ship by the time of the wreck. The rules have since changed to require pilots to stay on outbound, oil-laden tankers until they sail past the reef.

This change was one of dozens of reforms enacted after the Exxon spill, including a mandate that tankers have double hulls by 2015.

Alaska pilots handle not only tankers but cruise liners, container ships and other huge vessels.

Pilots don't come cheap, costing ship owners thousands of dollars depending on the length of a voyage.

But like doctors and engineers, pilots require many years of training to develop their skills. State regulations specify dozens of voyages, dockings and U.S. Coast Guard tests required to become a marine pilot. Desautel figures it takes about seven years to become a top pilot.



Marine pilot Richard Desautel, left, eyes instruments, landmarks and other vessel traffic as he guides BP's new double-hull tanker, the Alaskan Explorer, through the tricky Valdez Narrows. Able-bodied seaman Chris Avila, second from left, mans the helm. Third mate Mike Kozlowski keeps track of navigation while tanker captain John Moore, right, remains on the bridge to oversee the tanker's progress. (Photos by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)



A bulletin board in the dining room of the Rocky Point pilot station shows the daily schedule of tankers and cruise ships the pilots will guide. (Photos by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)

Three pilot associations serve exclusive regions of Alaska's vast and wild coastline. Desautel's Homer-based Southwest Alaska Pilots Association covers Kodiak, Cook Inlet, Resurrection Bay and Prince William Sound, which takes in the tanker port at Valdez. The association has 20 member pilots.

Aside from tankers, a big job for pilots is driving the enormous cruise ships that come to Alaska during the summer months.

are way different, the pilots say. Tankers are big, heavy and slow. Cruise ships are big, light and fast.

Another difference: Tanker crews prefer to stay far away from dangerous ice, while cruise ships go hunting for calving glaciers.

"We'll spin the ship this way, we'll spin the ship that way, they go 'ooh, ahh,'" says pilot John Taylor, describing a typical gig aboard a 2,000-passenger cruise ship.

It's lunchtime, and Taylor, Desautel and other pilots sit around the galley of the Emerald Island, a sturdy boat anchored in a secluded cove at Rocky Point, about 20 miles out of town along the east side of Valdez Arm. Today the cook offers enormous red prawns trapped in the pristine waters right around the boat.

This is a floating base station for pilots in the Sound, a platform where they wait to board inbound ships and rest after coming off outbound ships. A board on the galley wall bears vessel names, dates and their estimated arrival times.

The pilots travel to and from ships aboard small, speedy boats with "pilot" emblazoned on the side. Pilot boats are a common sight in any major Alaska port.

Getting off ships once the job is done is one of the main workplace hazards for pilots.

or rope ladder and hops aboard a pilot boat nosed up against the ship's hull -- a tricky maneuver during winter when it's icy or when the Sound is rough.

Desautel, 54, lives in Girdwood and figures he's logged hundreds of tanker trips. Born in Reno, Nev., he came to Alaska in 1969 to work in the North Slope oil fields but ended up commercial fishing instead. He would captain the largest of fishing ships before becoming a pilot.

He works days, nights, whenever -- and stays in touch with life on land via BlackBerry. He's prone to explosions of laughter, but couldn't be more serious about the work he does.

Want pressure?

Try docking a 900-foot oil tanker in winds gusting to 50 miles an hour or more -- not uncommon in Port Valdez. Tugs help control the ship, but it's still dicey.

The pilots figure they could have it worse. The television shows video of Hurricane Katrina damage in New Orleans, one of the top U.S. ports.

"I'm glad I'm not piloting down there, John, dealing with that mess," Desautel says to Taylor.



Even with all the electronics on board new oil tankers, crews still use nautical charts to provide a paper trail and act as legal documents attesting to the actual route a tanker takes on its voyage. (Photos by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)



The Silver Bullet holds its position against the side of a moving tanker. Marine pilots, who guide tankers and other large vessels through Prince William Sound, use the sturdy pilot boat to travel to and from the ships. (Photos by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)