



BC Coast Pilot Peter Vivian

Piloting the largest ships on our coast is a challenge, and one that pilots like Peter Vivian don't take lightly

BY MARIANNE SCOTT

It's nearly midnight and waves are building near Brotchie Ledge, just south of Victoria. The wind is near gale force. The characteristic light pattern signifying an outbound freighter, green starboard light winking, is moving west. The ship changes its position slightly, creating a lee. A pilot launch is lurching through the whitecaps and with a sharp turn, jams itself against the ship's freeboard. I know that to leave the ship, one of BC's 110 coastal pilots must descend a rope ladder, up to 30 feet in length—the approximate height of a four-story building. At the ladder's bottom, he (today all pilots are men) must time his step onto the launch as it heaves in the metre-high waves. And I wonder how that poor devil pulls off this feat.

PETER VIVIAN IS one of those poor devils. For the past 31 years, he's completed nearly 3,300 assignments, with about three-quarters of those involving the boarding or leaving of a ship via a rope ladder. "It's harder to come down than to climb," says the lanky Peter, who's a fit 65. "Down, you have to step off the ladder onto the launch, an unstable platform."

Peter was smitten by boats from childhood. "When I was five, my dad woke me and said, 'wanna go fishing?' I shot out of bed," he tells me, grinning. A year later, his father allowed Peter to cut the engine on their 16-foot rented

fishboat so it'd drift into its slot. He now berths ships measuring up to 366 metres (1,200 feet or 3.3 times the length of a US football field) into their slots.

To get up to that level of competence took a while. By the time Peter was 13, he'd take the family runabout and go camping with his buddies on Vancouver Island's beaches. Still in his teens, he took a Power Squadron course and learned the charting invaluable in his career. "My dad empathized with my interest in the marine field,"

says Peter. "He introduced me to a coast pilot. That planted the seed of a piloting career into my brain."

AS A FIRST STEP, he enrolled in Toronto's George Brown Marine Navigation program. He got a job on an East Coast tanker at the academic year's end. "I was a cadet, the lowest on board," he recalls. "It was dirty and ugly but I kept my head down and after six weeks I was offered deckhand pay. Worked seven days a week, but I didn't mind. I was earning seetime, and after hours I'd mount the bridge and observe. It was good!"

After his second school year, he got a West Coast job and drove his jalopy as far as Saskatchewan, where it died. The bus took him to the *Imperial Skeena*, a coastal tanker. Peter took on more responsibility when a seaman went AWOL after too much partying. When the tanker arrived in Prince Rupert, he was offered a fulltime abled-bodied seaman job—but only if he abandoned his George Brown studies. "It was an agonizing decision," Peter recalls. "I was only 20. Should I drop out of school? But Imperial Oil gave me a real opportunity."

It wasn't the end of formal education though. After earning enough seetime, he studied in Vancouver for Transport Canada's first mate certification, then spent 12 years shifting between Imperial's tankers getting to know every nook and bay on BC's coast. He also achieved his unlimited Near Coastal master's ticket, and although he frequently covered the tasks assigned to the ship's master, he was never appointed captain. "There were no openings," he explains. "The captains had seniority and weren't quitting."

A change in the BC Coast Pilotage regulations in 1986 gave Peter his chance. The previous rules had required a year aboard as master. Now mates could apply with 1,000

days seetime. Peter had 2,000 days under his keel.

TAKING PILOTING EXAMS isn't trivial. Besides seetime and the master's certificate, a candidate must take 20 familiarization trips with active pilots. He must know maritime rules and regulations, and most of all, have a deep familiarity with BC's coast. "The exam has three parts,"

says Peter. "First, you must know the rules and regs. Next, you get asked to draw from memory all the critical parts of the coast on a chart. You might see faint outlines or the paper may be totally blank."

After the written exams, the candidate faces five examiners—three active pilots and one each from the Pilotage and Transport Canada (the Pacific Pilotage Authority is a

Crown corporation under the federal government). "In this exam I felt great confidence," says Peter. "When they asked how I'd take a ship through certain passages under specific conditions, I could tell them. I'd been practicing for years.

"Now, I'm an examiner myself."

After the exams, the new pilot must apprentice six months with a veteran pilot. ▶



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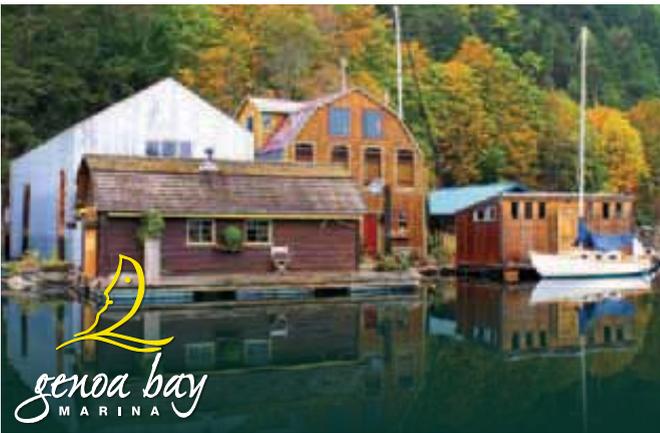
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Once licensed, the pilot starts with the smaller ships and then learns to handle ever-larger ships over the next seven years. Peter vividly remembers the first ship he piloted on his own. "I flew to Squamish, backed and turned the ship. It was a 600-footer, fully loaded. Off Bowen Island, a sailboat appeared on my bow. I went for the warning whistle. Not a sound. A nightmarish thought flashed through my head. 'The ink isn't dry on my certificate and I'm hitting a sailboat!' Nothing happened, thank heavens."

FOR PETER, who loves piloting, there's nothing more satisfying than bringing a ship into a tight spot under adverse conditions. He remembers a 60-knot wind landing in Duncan Bay aboard a Norwegian cargo ship with a crusty old-timer captain. "It was a tough dock, lots of tide too. I did a textbook landing. The crusty captain turned to me and said, 'Pilot, I guess you've done this once or twice.' That's what gives me satisfaction."

When he gets the call to pilot a ship, he might go to the Juan de Fuca Strait, Vancouver, Nanaimo, Kitimat, Prince Rupert or Pine Island. During the three hours he's given before departure, he studies the weather, winds and tides. He brings his own laptop and e-charts, and phones the tugs he'll likely need to line up the ship for berthing or undocking.

Pilots are required to take periodic training courses. "I've gone to Iwala, Poland and Port Revel in France," Peter says. "Both places have artificial lakes that replicate real navigation conditions with scale-model ships ranging from 40 to 50 feet. It's a chance to practice the emergency procedures we can't in real life. They also prepare us to handle ever larger vessels like supertankers, container ships, LNG carriers and cruise ships."

"What about the controversy over the Kinder Morgan pipeline increasing tanker traffic in BC waters?" I ask.

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Two deckhands stand ready to steady the pilot as he steps off the freighter's ladder onto the pilot boat.

he responds. "We're way beyond the *Exxon Valdez*. The US and Canada heavily scrutinize tankers in these waters. All are double hulled. They always have tug escorts starting in Vancouver Harbour and through the Strait of Georgia and Boundary Pass past Race Rocks. From Boundary Pass, a tug is tethered to the ship so if an engine or rudder fails, the tug'll keep the ship from grounding. A tanker with a 40,000 summer deadweight tonnage has two pilots aboard. There's lots of safety built into the system."

WHEN WILL PETER retire? "Not as long as I'm fit," he says emphatically. "In 2017, I bicycled 7,500 kilometres to maintain my stamina. I don't want to leave this profession. It's always new, I'm always learning. And it gives me deep satisfaction." 

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