

Last Run



Frank Wall and his daughter Katie-Jean.

on the River

by Captain Frank Wall
Hudson River Pilot, *(Retired)*

Last February 27th I decided to “hang up my anchor”. I had been working for the Sandy Hook and Hudson River Pilots for over 42 years. That day I piloted the tanker *Afrodite* down through the ice out of the Port of Albany and brought her safely to Yonkers - It was my last run!

People often ask me what I’ll miss most about working on the “River”. My immediate response is always the same, namely the people I meet and work with!

Spinning a ship around in the Port of Albany and helping

it wend it’s way along is not an easy task and depends on the help of many others to make it happen safely.

It all starts with the goodbye hug from my wife as I leave the house. Then I meet the security guard at the port who greets me and checks me through to the ship. Next I meet the agent (whose job it is to please everyone) who then gives me the OK that everything is ready. As I walk along the berth I greet the line handlers who are happy to know that their job is at hand as they shift back and forth with the cold.



About This Photo:

Please note in a poignant moment, after this last trip, Frank and others were on the ice with his iceboat near the channel when one of his fellow captains was passing southbound on a huge ship. The pilot in charge blew the ship’s whistle several times in salute. This delighted the bystanders who paused to reflect on its significance. (It may be hard to understand the uniqueness of this photo, let me explain, first in my 65 years of iceboating, I have been on Hudson River ice maybe ten times. Last year in early March - the pinnacle of everything iceboat-

ing, saw over 31 ice yachts on the Hudson River at Barrytown, NY. Captain Frank Wall has become one of our most enthusiastic ice boaters just happened to be on the ice while he also was retiring from his job as Hudson River Pilot. The salute to his passing by his co captain on board the ship passing was long and hard on the horn! Frank’s daughter, Katie-Jean, stood by his side at the stern of the *Aurora* waving with Frank as the ship passed. Wow, what a moment in time!

John H. Vargo, Publisher

The tugboats (*Kathleen, Francis*) along the key blow smoke from their funnels as they warm up their engines in anticipation of assisting the ship away from her berth. Their Captains and deckhands wave as I pass. The boson and mate meet me at the top of the gangway to escort me into the leviathan.

The Captain and all the crew (who have known me from previous trips) gather up and “man” their stations.

A short time later the last of the mooring lines stream aboard and we are underway. I then depend on the crews and pilots of the up bound tugboats and ships to cooperate in passing each other in the unforgiving ice, most of these people (fellow pilots and captains) I know personally. There is a brief radio transmission from each ship on the river as it passes a turn. VHF radio is line of site, therefore transmissions may or may not be heard unless frequent position reports are made.

Today as I pass under the Rip Van Winkle Bridge I spy three characters up on the bridge, leaping over the rail. I recognize them as my wife and two friends swinging their arms off waving to me and taking pictures of my last trip down. I ask to be relieved for a moment by fellow pilot Paul Chevalier and wave back from the ship’s wing.

The lighthouse keeper at Saugerties waves a greeting as we crunch our way past in the ice.

At Barrytown I see people walking out to the channel’s edge. These folks turn out to be my ice boating buddies. They gather and wave and then man their antique iceboats and race the ship all the way down to Rhinecliff.

Deer, coyotes and fox stroll about looking for a meal. Geese, ducks and Bald Eagles congregate on top of the broken pieces of flow ice trying to stay warm.

One is continually held spell bound by all the natural beauty - the ice itself; the snow filled branches of the many

trees; the snow defined mountains; the small streams frozen in their tracks as they seek the main channel; the sun streaming it’s last wave of colors across the tarnished gunmetal winter sky; and the skim ice that shatters and flings itself tinkling and skittering across the frozen shoals.

The courses are given to the quarter-master who stands at the wheel. He acknowledges the order and swings the ship onto it’s next heading. The chief mate takes his orders as well and then adjusts the speed of the ship with the telegraph. Not much time for idle chat - we all must concentrate and yet we still find a moment to acknowledge each other in a friendly tone. All these people I’ve learned to trust implicitly and consider them friends as well as co-workers. The river that surges along side reminds me that it is a privilege to work here and I am grateful.

At the end of our journey a small launch pushes past the ice flows at Yon-



Captain Frank Wall, (with beard) and crew of *Afrodite*.

kers and creeps alongside. Once relieved by the next pilot (who will take her another 3 hours or so to sea) I say my goodbyes and find myself climbing down a Jacob's ladder for the last time into the launch. The launch operator (Eddie) greets me and shakes my hand and then brings me safely ashore. A while later the familiar smile of a train conductor guides me across the platform to a waiting train car and I start my overland journey back to my home. And last but not least Roy, the taxi cab driver, meets me at the final station and whisks me off to my snow-encrusted car in the parking lot.

At this moment as I stand alone in the darkness I'm overwhelmed by the fact that my life has changed and some of these people I may never see again. I want to thank all those who have joined me on this journey through the years, from my fellow workers who have taught me many things and to the child who waved to me along the river's bank leaving me no option but to blow a blast on the ship's whistle in response.

(From the publisher: This is not a simple task to move through the ice, in a narrow channel. Wind, tide, currents and other vessels all play a role in safely getting the ship to its destination.)

Afrodite in the ice, heading southbound on west side of Hudson River north of Rip Van Winkle Bridge.

To the average reader seeing a ship move up or down the Hudson River it may seem that the captain of the ship is in "charge"! Nothing could be further from the truth as the Hudson River Pilots Association provides a "pilot" for each ship that transits the River. As the ship that has a Hudson River Pilot on board fly's a red/white pennant indicating that a Hudson River Pilot is in charge of the ship.

A "pilot" goes on board a ship at the Yonkers Pilot Station for the first part of the 56 mile, trip under 6 bridges, twisting through the sharp turns at West Point, and ending at the first part of the trip at Hyde Park Pilot Station at Norrie Point State Park. After a second pilot exchange, the 54-mile trip involves a second run to the Port of Albany. Total transit time from Yonkers to Albany can be 12-16 hours. Ice can make a huge difference in travel time!

