



L'ASSOCIATION DES PILOTES MARITIMES DU CANADA
CANADIAN MARINE PILOTS' ASSOCIATION

PILOTAGE ON THE WEST COAST OF CANADA

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It is a great pleasure for me to be participating in the Nautical Institute's Command Seminar.

The B.C. Coast Pilots Corporation and the Canadian Marine Pilots' Association, both of which I have the honour of serving as an executive member, share the values and goals of the Nautical Institute. Like the Institute, marine pilots are committed to improving the safety and efficiency of shipping.

I very much appreciate the invitation from the B.C. Chapter of the Institute to be a speaker at this seminar and I especially welcome the opportunity to say a few words about the role of pilots and some of the challenges we face both in performing our duties and in ensuring that there are well-qualified pilots ready to serve long into the future.

Before discussing the relationship between a pilot on board a vessel in a compulsory pilotage area and the bridge team, it is essential to define what the role of the pilot is. My comments in this regard are based on Canadian maritime law and may not apply in every detail in other jurisdictions. That said, I believe the observations I will make about the pilot-bridge team relationship have universal application.

Here in Canada, a pilot is the person who has the conduct of a ship in compulsory pilotage areas. To be more precise, "to have conduct of the ship" is to have charge and control of navigation; in other words, to be responsible for the movement of the vessel.

Since the pilot is not merely an advisor, but is entrusted with the navigation of the ship, his instructions must generally be followed by the bridge team. The reason he is placed in charge is because he almost certainly is the person on board who has the best knowledge of the local waters and the dangers for the vessel being navigated. The pilot is entitled to the assistance of the bridge team and the bridge team has the duty to provide that assistance.

With this in mind, it is easy to see that a good working relationship between the pilot and the bridge team is essential for the safe navigation of the vessel. On the one hand, the pilot knows the local waters best, while, on the other, only the bridge team can execute whatever maneuvers may be required to keep the vessel safe.

In general, this relationship works very well and there is no better evidence of that than the fact that the number of incidents involving piloted vessels on Canada's west coast or, for that matter, anywhere in Canada, is extremely low.

As a long-time pilot, however, there are at least two trends that I have noticed over the years that make the pilot's job a little more challenging.

The first of these, which all of you are familiar with, is the reduction in the size of crews on most vessels. Of course, some of these reductions are perfectly justified on the basis of new ship design and new technology. Others, however, are almost solely driven by a desire to cut cost and maximize profit. In these cases, my experience is that considerations of safety can be given rather short shrift.

When I talk about reductions in crew size, I am not necessarily referring to a reduction in the number of deck officers. In fact, the complement of deck officers hasn't changed much over the years, but as the number of junior officers, cadets and apprentices has been reduced, the duties of deck officers have expanded and their ability to rely on others for assistance has shrunk.

For example, many vessels no longer have a radio officer and the position of chief steward seems to be largely a thing of the past. As a result, deck officers find themselves with a significant increase in the amount of paperwork they must complete and with more responsibility for communications.

From the pilot's perspective, this means deck officers are often less available, more preoccupied and, frankly, in some cases, just plain overworked. All of this can affect the quality of the interactions between the pilot and the bridge team, impairing responsiveness and collaboration.

This situation is compounded by the fact that deck officers do not always have the depth of training and experience that was the case in years past. It follows that if there are fewer junior officer and apprentice positions, there are fewer opportunities, and of shorter duration, for on-the-job learning before assuming senior positions.

Deck officers come to their job with less experience at sea, not only because there is a reduced opportunity for "hands-on" training, given the reduction in junior positions, but because of yet another change driven by the cost-cutting imperative. It is easier, faster and cheaper to train officers at institutes using simulators and other technologies and to minimize the amount of time at sea required to qualify. The problem with this approach is that it sometimes leads to a situation where officers on the bridge have all the textbook and theoretical learning anyone could want, but lack the skill and assurance that can only come with experience.

For pilots, when navigating a vessel through difficult waters, this can mean having less confidence that the bridge team can fulfill the role of trusted advisor and reliable collaborator. This would obviously be an unwelcome development in any case, but it is even more so when we consider that bridge teams are already in danger of being over-reliant on technology, tending to use the screen rather than the window to navigate the vessel.

Added to this is one other characteristic of the bridge team that causes pilots concern – a much higher rate of turnover than was previously the case. Experienced deck officers are leaving the bridge sooner than ever, to accept positions ashore, allowing them to spend more time with their families, or other positions at sea on private yachts, providing them with bigger paychecks. So, the bridge team is tending to come in with less experience, and is tending to leave just when they have acquired that experience.

The multinational characteristic of ships' crews, which is on the bridge as well as elsewhere on the vessel, is commonplace and has been for many years. My own opinion is that this phenomenon does not constitute a significant impediment to pilots discharging their responsibilities when on board a vessel.

I should make a distinction here between a “multinational” crew and a “non-English speaking” crew. If a pilot is working with a bridge team that does not speak English, there can, of course, be communication problems that make the job of piloting more difficult. The fact is, a multinational bridge team is less likely to pose a communication challenge for pilots than one made up of, say, all Russian or Chinese speaking officers, for the simple reason that the multinational bridge team almost invariably uses English as its *lingua franca*.

The multinational crew can have another advantage for pilots. While it might seem counter-intuitive, a bridge team made up of officers from two or more nationalities may tend to be more open and welcoming to a pilot just coming on board than might a team comprised of a single nationality, all speaking the same language. In this latter case, it is sometimes more challenging to establish an easy rapport.

You would be correct if, based on what I have said so far, you concluded that I believe the bigger challenge facing pilots in terms of establishing that all-important cohesiveness with the bridge team has less to do with the nationality or the mother tongue of deck officers and far more to do with their competence, experience and confidence.

These same qualities of competence, experience and confidence are, of course, those we look for in candidates for pilot training. I am happy to report that, thus far, we have been able to maintain a very adequate pilot candidate pool on the west coast of Canada. This may surprise you, given what I have just said about the bridge team. After all, virtually all candidate pilots come from the world of seasoned marine officers and, as I have noted, this group is getting less at-sea training and has a high turnover rate.

In fact, this very situation led the Pacific Pilotage Authority to shorten the length of time mariners must serve as deck officers before qualifying as candidates for a pilot license. But, we have been to not only maintain a good

candidate pool but also our professional standards by introducing new requirements and training for apprentice pilots.

The measures taken include a pilot familiarization program that, in its original form, was optional and intended for masters without sea time, but which now requires all candidates to take 20 familiarization trips before qualifying as an apprentice.

Not only does this give potential candidates an opportunity to test their interest and aptitude for the pilotage profession, but it begins to give them that confidence I spoke of earlier that is so important when navigating a vessel in difficult circumstances.

In the past, the apprentice period for pilots here on the west coast was largely a fixed period of six months. Increasingly, additional time is being added to candidates' apprentice period based on regular assessments of their progress. Now, the six month apprentice period is the exception rather than the rule.

In case anyone has come to the wrong conclusion from my earlier remarks about the value of at-sea training versus on-shore training, I should say that we place great value on land-based training, particularly using simulation technology. In fact, we have added a one-week simulation component to the apprentice training program.

All of these steps, as well as an emphasis on informal mentoring by veteran pilots, have served to compensate for any diminishment in experience that we have found in the candidate pool.

For the foreseeable future, I believe the west coast of Canada will continue to have a good complement of pilot candidates, ensuring that the profession will be able to continue its role as stewards of safety and thereby contribute to a sustainable shipping industry.

What has worked for us here in British Columbia may not be the answer in other parts of the world or even in other parts of Canada. One of the pillars of our pilotage system is the recognition of regional differences and the need for local solutions to local challenges. In our case, we are fortunate to have a very constructive and collaborative relationship with the Pacific Pilotage Authority and, together, we have been able to take the steps necessary to maintain high pilotage standards in our region.

Of course, we do that while borrowing shamelessly from the best practices and lessons learned of other groups. In a way, this brings me full circle and allows me to end my remarks by again saying how happy I am to be here and how useful it is to have this opportunity to talk to other mariners about the industry and its prospects. Thank you!