



Parker and Capt. Virgil Robinson scan the course ahead as the ship nears Anchorage.



Cargo essential to Southcentral Alaska is carried deep into Cook Inlet as pan ice crowds the ship.



Parker directs Robinson on the wing of the bridge as the ship nestles up to the dock.

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anchor down and back 'er full, but it was just too quick."

Parker is a ship handler. He is like the valet who parks your car in a crowded lot, and he enjoys his work. "Oh, I just like ship handling," he says with a big smile. "I really do... I'm gonna tell you, when I go to work, I go to work whistlin'."

Parker was born in Mississippi and raised in Burns, Ore., the youngest of seven children of a lumbermill worker. In 1943, at the age of 17, he dropped out of school to join the Navy. He's been at sea ever since.

"There was no place for me once the war was over," he says. "It was terrible. Seems like every time I was ready to quit going to sea, there was no other jobs. Seems like one thousand times I said, 'This is my last trip.' Then I just made another one. Seems like every sailor does that."

In 1966 he went to work in the Panama Canal, bringing ships through the locks from Christobal on the Atlantic to Balboa on the Pacific side. In the canal he learned ship handling — and the difference between piloting and sailing on the open ocean.

"Piloting is not a science. It's strictly an art," Parker says. "You can't make angles and squares — ships don't act like that. It's like an airplane. You're in a fluid, and wherever the water goes, the ship goes."

After the Panama Canal and before Cook Inlet, Parker piloted tankers in the Gulf of Mexico and the South China Sea. He handled vessels up to 1,200 feet long and 200 feet wide. Sea-Land's Alaska ships are less than half that size. Nevertheless, if you took one out of the water, fully loaded, it would weigh 22,000 tons. That's about the same as 14,000 Toyota

four-wheel-drive pickup trucks — enough to fill the Sullivan Arena to the rafters three times over.

"You got so much mass that you're in control of, and to make everything work out — you know, a pilot's always trying to do a little bit better each trip."

Parker brings up two ships a week, every other week (Sea-Land sends a third and sometimes a fourth ship each week in summer). Another pilot who subcontracts to Parker works the alternate weeks. After the ships are unloaded, the pilots guide them out of Anchorage and back down the inlet. Each week, one vessel stops in Kodiak, and Parker gets home by flying to Anchorage and then to Kenai. He can be gone three days on those trips, arriving back home just in time to take another ship up the inlet.

His family — wife Teddy, 63, children Scott, 29, Stacy, 25, and Marc, 32 — are used to his absences. But the schedule is better than before. "In the 20 years before the canal," he says, "I'd never seen two Christmases at home."

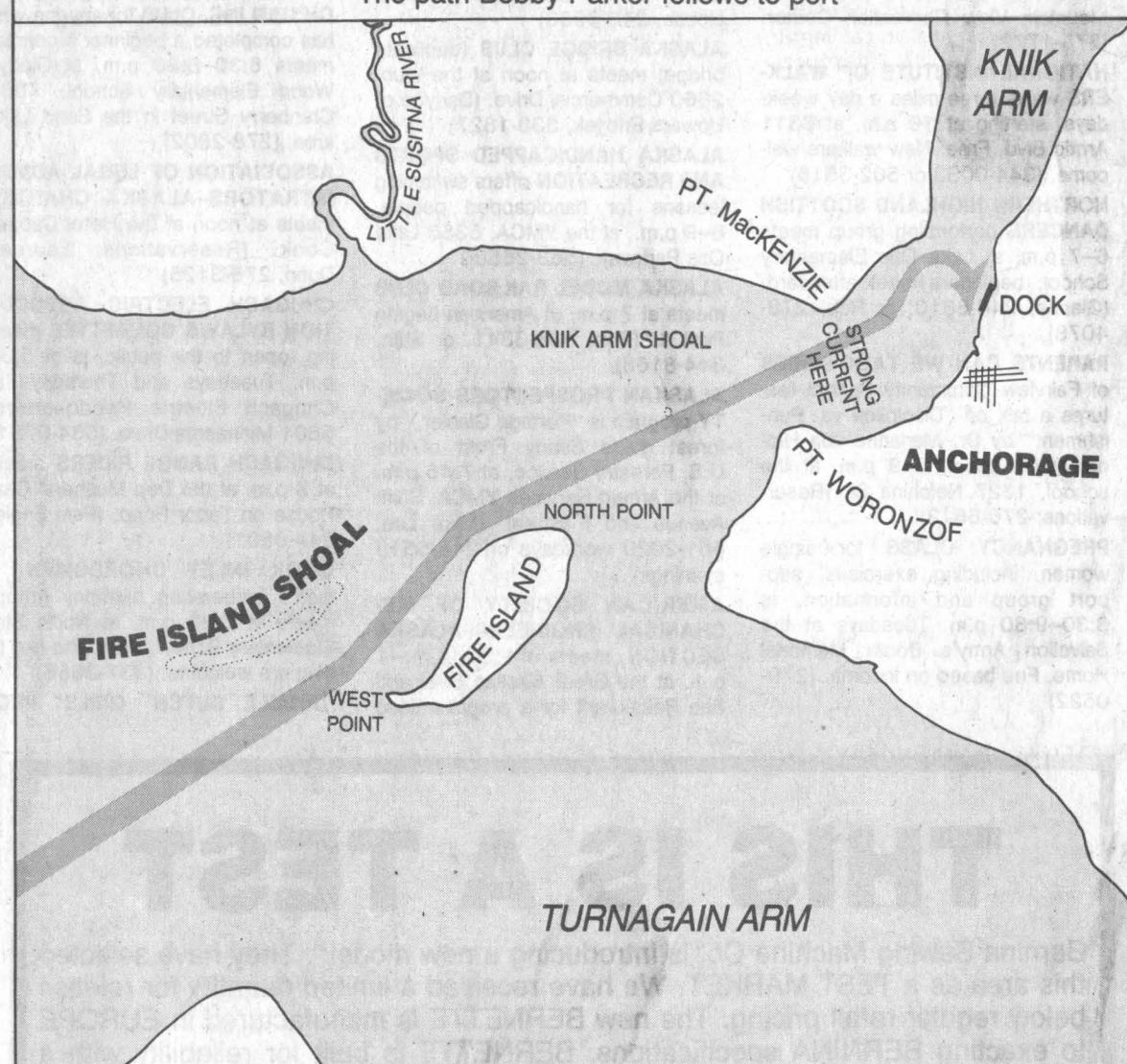
Parker won't say what Sea-Land pays him. He does say he makes roughly the same as other pilots. A good Alaska pilot, one who works often, can earn \$100,000 and more annually.

"Everybody thinks it's easy," Parker says. "But when you get that snowstorm roarin' down on you, and you can't see nothin', and you gotta dock 'er — that's what you get paid for. You can't see the bloody barn!"

After the Portland has made its U-turn in Knik Arm, Parker takes his station out on the wing. Shivering in his windbreaker, he calls his orders back inside through the open wheelhouse door. If the wind is right, longshoremen and others on the dock can hear his

NAVIGATING UPPER COOK INLET

The path Bobby Parker follows to port



Anchorage Daily News/Peter Dunlap-Shohl

voice from hundreds of feet out — a sharp burst like a bark.

"Stop!... Half astern!... Stop!... Slow ahead!... Hard left!... Midships!... Stop!"

To flush away the pans and margarita ice, Parker shimmies the ship up to the wharf. He pushes in the bow — the front of the ship — then swings in the stern. He swings the stern away, creating an instant lead — a break in the ice. Through the lead, the current washes some ice away.

Parker forces the bow in closer. A little more ice squeezed away. The stern swings in, then away. More lead, more ice washed away.

Nearly an hour after the U-turn — three hours and 20 minutes after Parker came aboard — the first line is tossed to the dock and tied. It isn't over, however. Another 45 minutes pass while the Portland continues its slow dance against the wharf, trying to tease the remaining ice away.

When the ice is gone, the port side of the big ship comes slapping up against the dock's wooden fenders with a bang. In more favorable conditions, Parker can be much gentler. Sometimes he will bring the ship in so softly that you would have to stand on the edge of the dock to hear the quiet crunching of wood.

Anita Creech, Sea-Land's assistant marine manager, thinks Parker is a genius. "If Bobby Parker was a surgeon, and I needed an operation, I would have no qualms if he was going to operate on me."

"There are people who wouldn't touch this job with a 10-foot pole because of the icing conditions," says Capt. Robert Carlson, the Portland's shipmaster. "Bobby Parker is one of the most competent pilots I've ever worked with."

The Portland's lines are secured and its engines stopped at 8:18 a.m. Job done, Parker goes below, walks down the gangplank, across the dock, and into Sea-Land's office. He picks up his messages and collapses in a chair.

Outside, dock cranes grind into position.

Parker says he doesn't know and doesn't care what comes up on the ship. The docking went smoothly; that's what counts.

"It was normal," he says. "Didn't bend anything or break anything."

□ Peter Porco is editor of the Anchorage Daily News Weekend section. Erik Hill is a Daily News staff photographer.