



Radar shows ship off Pt. Woronzof.

Ship shape

Ice, currents challenge harbor pilot



An Anchorage-bound Sea-Land cargo ship sails north through Cook Inlet off Kenai.



Inlet pilot Bobby Parker arrives aboard ship. The chopper landing is the most dangerous part of his job.

Upper Cook Inlet, with its huge tides, shifting shoals and sloppy ice, is a thing alive and up to no good.

A hundred times a year, 30 times a winter, Capt. Bobby Stewart Parker duels with the inlet's hostile waters. As a marine pilot for Sea-Land Service, Parker joins cargo ships in the last hours of their journey from Tacoma, Wash., and guides them to the city dock.

Few harbors, he says, can compare with Anchorage when it comes to hazardous navigation. A 1,500-mile voyage can go awry in the last few miles. Especially in winter, when the port's single tug stops working, ships can take an hour and a half to squeeze past the final 100 feet of ice and tie up at the wharf.

"It's the worst dock in the world to have to come to on a regular basis," says Richard Griffith, who directs marine operations for TOTE (Totem Ocean Trailer Express), Sea-Land's chief local competitor.

Each year about 155 Sea-Land ships, 100 TOTE ships and 60 other cargo vessels dock at Anchorage, bringing the cars and avocados and hammers and nails and other goods on which most of Southcentral Alaska lives. To get here they must cross rough seas in the Gulf of Alaska, sail the length of Cook Inlet, and thread their way through a bottleneck and a pair of troublesome shoals. Once in Knik Arm they swing into a critical U-turn to dock against the tide.

At 4 a.m. one Sunday in mid-December, a helicopter carrying Bobby Parker rises into the darkness above Kenai airport. Parker has made this same flight, he guesses, between 300 and 400 times since 1982. He's headed for the Portland, a 522-foot-long moving target steaming past Nikiski. Over the lighted landed pad on the Portland's fantail, behind high stacks of cargo containers, the air eddies turbulently. The copter lurches hard, leans, pitches forward and has to be muscled into landing upright.

The chopper ride is the riskiest part of Parker's job. TOTE also flew its pilots out to moving ships but stopped when two men were killed in 1977; the helicopter flier lost his bearings in a heavy snowstorm and the craft went down in the inlet's frigid waters. TOTE's pilots now stay aboard from Tacoma to Anchorage and back.

Most other Alaska pilots ride small boats or tugs to meet their ships.

As the chopper flies back to Kenai, Parker climbs to the bridge. At 59, five years after a heart attack and bypass surgery, Parker still smokes. He is a shade under six feet tall and paunchy — 30 pounds overweight, he says. He has fine silver hair and deep creases in his face.

In the wheelhouse, he lounges in the high captain's chair, watching through the darkness outside. Or shuffles over to peer at the radar screens. Or steps to the back wall to read the fathometer for water depth. East of Fire Island, he opens the door to the wing, leaning out into the cold, looking back, waiting until a pair of range lights line up — the signal for a course change.

Parker never touches the wheel. He merely calls for changes in the ship's course and speed. The quartermaster and second or third mate do his bidding.

"Zero-five-four now, quartermaster," Parker says in an easy drawl.

"Zero-five-four," the quar-

termaster repeats, turning the large spoked wheel until the gyro-compass dial stops at 054.

Parker is not the skipper of the ships he pilots. State and federal laws require experts to guide large vessels on local waters. Shipmasters, ultimately responsible and always in command, defer to him in pilotage waters.

Parker directs the entire journey from memory, checking neither sea chart nor guidebook. Up to the ship's entry into Knik Arm and the start of docking, the course through the inlet is so regular he can recite each move as if he were giving directions to his Kenai home. The regularity allows him time to have coffee, eat a sandwich, joke with the crew.

Once the ship moves into the arm and maneuvers to dock, however, Parker's concentration intensifies — especially when the ice gives him trouble.

Ice develops in the upper inlet as early as October; it can stay as late as May. Gray and dirty, it forms into "pans," a type of floe the size of a bathtub or a garage or larger, and into slush the consistency of a margarita that nestles among and beneath the pans.

Ice can throw a ship off course, or stop it dead if enough pans gather in a strong current. In January 1984, heavy ice that covered 90 percent of the water forced a Greek tanker to shear from its path; minutes later, the tanker grounded across the arm from the city dock, spilling 180,000 gallons of Jet-A fuel.

Ice isn't the only hazard. Cook Inlet owns the greatest diurnal tidal range in the United States, second greatest in the world. The tidal swing off the Anchorage dock can be as high as 35 feet — 35 feet of water moving in and then out of Knik Arm in 12 hours, a rise of six feet an hour. Huge freighters at dockside can be seen to rise on such a tide like immense balloons.

Big tides mean swift currents. On the flood tide, the water can move 7 miles an hour and faster. Almost every crew making regular calls at Anchorage times its ship's departure so it will take advantage of the flood.

High water is also needed to get safely past Fire Island Shoal, a three-mile reef of gravel and sand creeping along the main shipping channel. "This shoal does change shape," says Parker. "It can change within a few days."

Matters worsen in the bottleneck between Point Woronzof and Point MacKenzie.

"Sometimes you get a real vicious current in there," Parker says. A flood can move up Knik Arm, while ebbing on both sides. Or there can be a strong current on each side with slack water between. "You just don't know what it's gonna do."

Three vessels have collided with the Anchorage dock in the last five years, and four have grounded while maneuvering nearby. Parker himself piloted one of those ships — a Sea-Land vessel that lightly punched the dock after the inlet's play of current and ice outfoxed him.

Parker was docking the ship on its port, or left, side, pushing the ship hard through heavy ice, heading for the dock at a 45-degree angle. A pan hit the right front just as the ice against the wharf got flushed away by the current. It was like someone suddenly yanking open a door you've been leaning against on the other side.

"The ice moved away, and the big pan caught the bow and — whango! — right into the dock. I tried to get an

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See Page D-3, HARBOR