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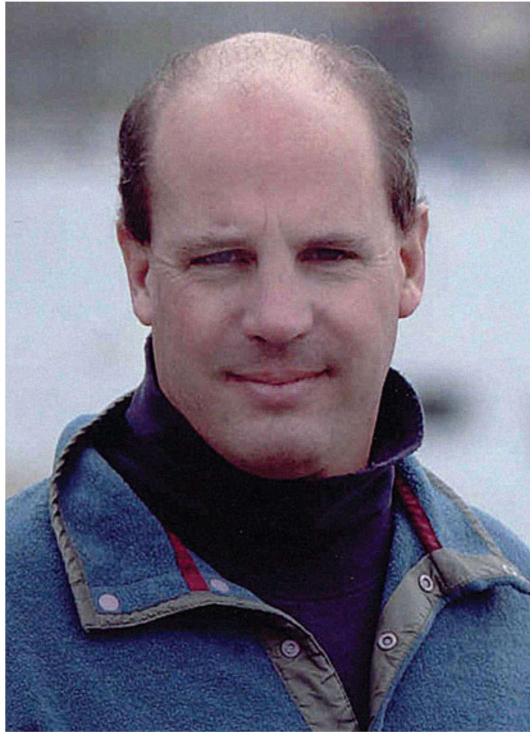


Pete Travers

Frank Dover

Inset: Penobscot pilot Skip Strong. Above: Strong's tanker Cherry Valley *in a storm off the coast of Florida.*

Pilot

If you can rescue a tugboat with a 688-foot oceangoing tanker, you have the skills to be a harbor pilot in Penobscot and Frenchman Bays. Captain Skip Strong can and does.

BY JANET MENDELSOHN

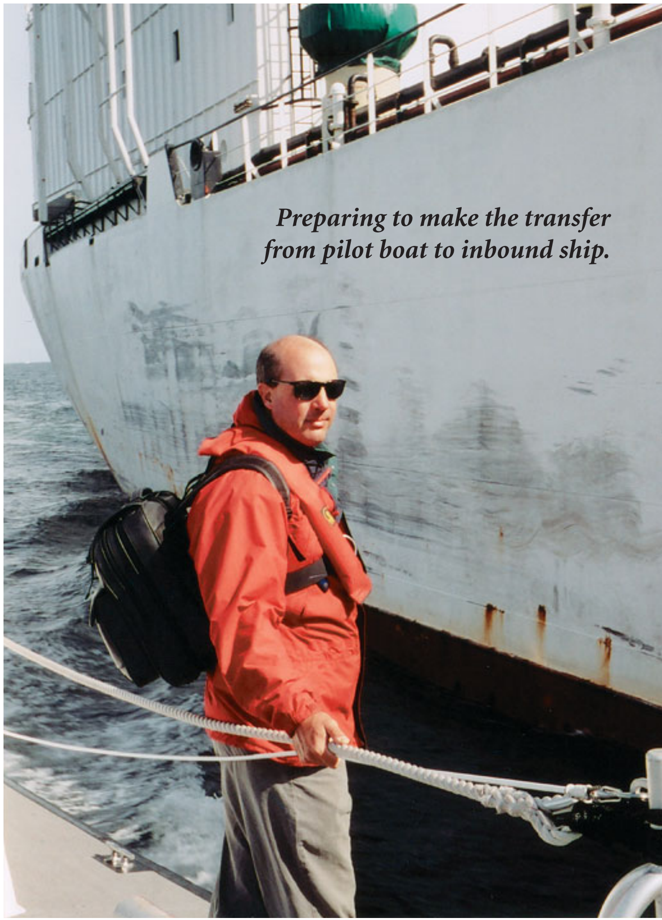
CAPTAIN JANE RYAN readies the pilot boat as her boss, Skip Strong, steps on board. Strong drops a black leather backpack on a bench in the wheelhouse. It's Labor Day, overcast, eerily quiet on Penobscot Bay as we get under way from Rockland.

A few minutes out, Strong radios the captain of *Corner Brook*, a freighter from Port Cartier, Quebec, loaded with 5,200 tons of baled wood pulp destined for a paper mill north of Searsport. The pilot boat *Penobscot Pilot*, a 48-foot fiberglass vessel designed and specially built for Strong's company, Penobscot Bay and River Pilots, will be meeting the freighter off a buoy near Matinicus Island. Strong provides precise instructions.

"Rig a ladder on your starboard side three feet above the waterline," he orders the captain. "Cut your speed to between seven and eight knots."

An hour later *Corner Brook* approaches the *Penobscot Pilot*, dwarfing it. Ryan easily matches the ship's speed. Smooth as silk, Strong steps off our deck onto a ladder slung over the freighter's side and effortlessly climbs aboard. Before I can shoot three photos he's barely visible above us on the deck of the freighter, shaking hands with the mate. The two men walk out of sight as we speed back to shore.

Every hour of every day, in harbors around the globe, harbor pilots like Skip Strong advise vessel captains as they bring ships in and out of port. In Maine a pilot is regulated by both the U.S. Coast Guard and state law. Becoming a harbor pilot is considered by many to be the pinnacle of a merchant marine deck officer's career, comparable to a top attorney being tapped for a judgeship. In Maine, there are hundreds of merchant mariners but only 15 licensed pilots; the International Maritime Pilots'



Preparing to make the transfer from pilot boat to inbound ship.

Janet Mendelsohn

Association has only 8,000 members in more than 40 countries. Even among serious boaters, few people seem to know what harbor pilots do.

The Maine Pilotage Commission licenses pilots and sets rates for all Maine harbors except Portland and Kittery. (The latter falls within the U.S. Navy's jurisdiction over Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.) "We don't want anyone cutting corners to get jobs," says Brian Nutter, executive director of the Maine Port Authority, explaining that fees are based on a formula that calculates length, breadth, and depth of the vessel and varies by the specific area of pilotage.

"When I was about 16," Skip Strong says, "I heard you could work on the water, make a reasonable amount of money, and get about six months off a year. That was it."

"Pilots are mariners who have sailed in high seas and come back to provide expertise for ships coming to the pilot's home port," Nutter says. "They know local law and local conditions. It's their job to make sure no one gets hurt,

that cargo arrives safely, the environment is protected against oil spills and accidents, and ships don't run aground. They ensure high standards for proficiency and improve commerce in the region." Nutter has received just four or five pilot applications in eight years on the job.

"Pilots' hours can be horrible," Nutter says. "Ships come in when ships come in. We might have 40-mph gale winds, and they're still needed. They [the pilots] all love the cruise ships in the fall but in January there are times when you wonder." He says Skip Strong is one of the most conscientious pilots in the state.

Strong, born Prentice Strong III, loves the smells of ships, the smell of salt water. Family legend has it that his father took one look at his newborn son, said he would be skipper of his own ship by age 35, and gave him his nickname, which stuck.

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While Strong's classmates at Holderness School aimed for the Ivy League, he only applied to two academies, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (Kings Point) and Maine Maritime Academy (MMA). He graduated from MMA in 1984, took a job as third mate on an oil tanker, and moved up the ranks quickly, making chief mate at 25, captain at 27.

Strong is a deck officer, not an engineer. He's direct and confident when he tells me that he's good at the operational

Harbor pilots are federally and state licensed. What does it take to get a license in Maine?

- College degree, usually from a maritime academy
- 10 years' experience on the open ocean
- Licensed captain of 1,600-ton vessels
- U.S. Coast Guard-licensed Captain, generally involving 12 round-trips on ships in the applicant's region
- Coast Guard written exam
- Sponsorship by an existing pilot association

Additional state requirements vary by harbor. For Penobscot Bay:

- A minimum of 30 round trips in the region within the past five years
- At least half of those on vessels of 5,000 gross tons or more
- Written exam that tests from memory how to bring ships in under varying conditions, including knowledge of landmarks

Janet Mendelsohn

The Penobscot Pilot*—built to take all weather in all seasons, day or night.*

aspects of running a ship, but this directness comes across as pride, not arrogance, because, well, that's how it is when you know what you're doing and love your job.

"There's a special place in my heart for the smell of hot number 6 oil," Strong says. "It's not what most people would put on their list, but for me, that's what I did for 12 years. I moved oil around. Operating big ships, figuring out how to move them through small spaces, is what I was meant to do." Now it's what he does as a licensed pilot for the waters of Penobscot and Frenchman Bays.

"As a pilot," Strong says, "I now get to do the most fun part of the job, taking the big ships—tankers, cruise ships, freighters—putting them alongside the dock, making 45 or 50,000 tons of stuff do what I want it to do, making all the forces work together. And they pay me. Then I get to go home at night to my wife and daughters. I can watch Maggie, who's four, and Emma, who is six, grow up."

At first Strong seemed like a regular guy, but when I asked about the

extraordinary sea rescue that confirmed his credentials for piloting, his demeanor changed. He grinned broadly. With fingers spread wide, he used his large hands to illustrate ship movements in the air as he recalled perilous lifesaving maneuvers in the storm-tossed Straits of Florida. Suddenly I saw him on the bridge of a tanker, unflappable, decisive, in command. I began to understand why he's a natural for the job of harbor pilot, a career in the same insurance risk category as police officer and fire fighter.

In November 1994, Strong, then 32 years old, was master of the tanker SS *Cherry Valley*, en route to Jacksonville, Florida. It was just his second trip as master of an oil tanker. The captain and his crew were keeping an eye on tropical storm Gordon, a heavy weather system that had already taken 1,000 lives in Haiti and was building power as it approached U.S. shipping lanes. Northeast winds at times exceeded 60 knots. And then *Cherry Valley's* second mate received a distress call. The *J.A. Orgeron*, an oceangoing tug, was having engine trouble. It was towing an unmanned barge; both vessels were now adrift near Bethel Shoal, a shallow spur near Fort Pierce, north of Miami.

Cherry Valley was 40 miles south of the tug, the only vessel close enough to respond. For the 688-foot oil tanker with a draft of 35 feet—parts of the shoal were only 28—to go to the rescue was a potentially hazardous role. It was a grave situation. The storm was churning the Gulf Stream. With a dead weight of 44,000 tons, the fully loaded ship, which

Skip Strong

Cherry Valley*'s salvage operation in progress. Strong has a hawser to the tug on the left, which has another hawser to the barge carrying a NASA fuel tank. The other tugs are preparing to take over.*

required 8 1/2 minutes and nearly a mile to go from full ahead to a complete stop, was hardly suited for rescue maneuvers. Just three-quarters of an inch of steel—the ship had a single hull—separated nearly 10,000,000 gallons of heavy, black fuel oil from the relentless waves.

Captain Strong weighed brash foolishness against its close sibling, skill, and decided there was no choice but to honor the maritime code: "We did it to save the lives of five guys on the tug," he says. "We were the only ones in position to render assistance." Not until late in the game did he know that the barge was carrying a 150-foot external fuel tank for the Atlantis space shuttle, NASA's 100th manned space mission.

"Given the conditions of the storm that night," Strong says, "and knowing we were carrying 235,000 barrels of oil with a tropical storm crawling up our ass, no one would have faulted us for determining a rescue attempt was too great a risk to our vessel, the crew, and the environment. We were definitely playing on the edge."

Captain Strong went ahead anyway, and through a complicated series of maneuvers—difficult enough for a small rescue ship designed for the job but seemingly impossible for a huge tanker topped off with oil—he and his crew saved not only the tug but also the barge it was towing. Later, when the salvage rights were determined, the owners of *Cherry Valley* were awarded $4.1 million, of which the crew earned $1.7 million. The skipper's share was 16 percent. Everyone, Strong says, walked away happy.

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It was a new record for awards to nonprofessional salvors. For extraordinary seafaring skills, Captain Strong and the crew of *Cherry Valley* received the 1995 American Merchant Marine Seamanship Trophy, presented by the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York. In 1996, Strong also received the Outstanding Alumnus Award and a Presidential Commendation from Maine Maritime Academy for his skill and humanitarian action.

In the months that followed the salvage award, Strong paid off his student loans and bought a house in Southwest Harbor, already his home base for 11 years. At the end of 1996, he left *Cherry Valley* and joined friends from the academy, Jeff Cockburn and Dave Gelinas, in a new venture, Penobscot Bay and River Pilots Association, based in Belfast. Another classmate, David Smith, joined them later.

On Penobscot Bay in 2004, 225 cargo vessels required pilots for navigation and another 70 cruise ships required them for arrival in Bar Harbor. Business is

good and increasing for the company's four owner/pilots. All are in their forties, all are graduates of Maine Maritime, all are family men with young children.

I asked Strong what he missed about his old life at sea as captain of an oil tanker. He said he missed the 12-hour shifts, working hard for 2½ months straight, then getting 2½ to 3 months off. "I miss the clear horizons," he said. "I love being on the water, when there's no land in sight. But piloting work is like a giant puzzle, especially when we're turning as we approach the dock, slowing down, using all these forces to make it work smoothly, safely, when the pivot point on the vessel keeps changing with location and conditions. To me, being a harbor pilot is the best job in the world."

In bigger ports, such as Portland, the job is divided between sea (or harbor) pilots, who handle vessels until they meet the tugs, and docking pilots, who maneuver the ships around the docks. But in the smaller harbors served by Strong's company, the harbor pilot does it all.

Recently the Maine Pilotage Commission upped its already high standards. The state's pilots had decided existing standards weren't adequate, given local weather, topography, strong currents, and what is believed to be the most productive lobster fishery in the world. All four members of the Penobscot Bay and River Pilots Association have active roles in the state's maritime industry, and all four volunteer to train Maine Maritime Academy cadets.

courtesy NASA

The external fuel tank for the shuttle Atlantis.

One of the other pilots, Jeff Cockburn, explained why their partnership works: It has to do with teamwork that hinges on shared values.

"There always seems to be a Christmas ship for somebody," Cockburn said, "but we take turns so no one gets stuck year after year, and there's an unspoken policy that we cover for each other if someone's daughter has a dance recital. This is anything but a 9-to-5 job. As harbor pilots we're as likely to work at three in the morning as three in the afternoon. Time is money with these ships."

When cruise ship season begins each fall in Frenchman Bay, Strong said it's a welcome time, not just because of his short commute. "They're easier to handle," he said. "We don't dock cruise ships in Bar Harbor, they anchor in port. But even more, cruise ships have so much horsepower, bow thrusters, stern thrusters, radar laid on chart plotters which show you where you've been and where you'll be in several minutes. They're light years ahead of freighters in terms of technology. The newer tankers

have some of this navigational equipment, including bow thrusters and stern thrusters, and with the new generation of ships more will be high-tech equipped. Right now, cruise ships essentially have built-in tugs."

Day to day, the most dangerous part of his job, Strong said, is transferring between two moving vessels. "We try to make the boarding area as smooth as possible, which is harder on a tug than on a big ship. You have to have absolute confidence in the vessel's captain. If it's not safe, we don't do it. Every year in the U.S. several pilots are injured or lost when something goes wrong in the transfer. What I like least is moving ships in fog. My worst day is a Saturday in July or August in fog when a lot of recreational boaters are out there. Too many think that if they have GPS, they're safe because they know their own location. But it's not enough if you don't know where everyone else is."

Perhaps the company's most serious emergency came one March day before dawn when rough seas swept *Penobscot Pilot*'s deckhand, Jim Philbrook, overboard when the boat was coming alongside a 525-foot Swedish freighter headed for Canada. Captain Ryan reversed course and used GPS to retrace her route.

One of the pilots explains why their partnership works: It has to do with teamwork that hinges on shared values.

Ten minutes after falling into icy water, Philbrook was in the warm engine room being treated for mild hypothermia.

For several years, the Maine Oil Spill Advisory Committee has set a tax on every barrel of oil coming into the state, capped at $6 million, for cleanup. For the past two years, $30,000 of that money annually has been allocated to pilot training. Figuring that the best remedy for oil spills is to avoid accidents, MOSAC is funding 75 percent of the cost of approved training courses, with the individual pilots paying the balance. (Pilots are required to have at least 40 hours of new training every five years.) With their share, each of the Penobscot Pilots enrolled in a one-week program run by the French Maritime Institute outside Lyons, France. Skip Strong calls it the Gold Standard for pilot training.

"We train on exact scale models of ships, from 40,000 to 400,000 tons, that handle exactly like the real thing except that the time it takes for maneuvers is compressed," says Strong. "It's a chance to go out there with pilots from around the world and play what-if games. How will ships interact? What happens if at six knots you decide to let both anchors go?"

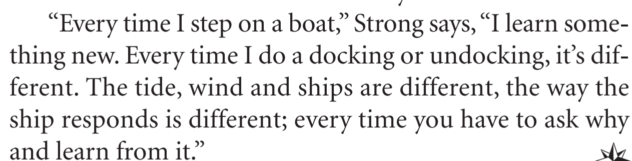
Given the depth of knowledge and breadth of experience required, harbor pilots are paid handsomely by the shipping companies for their services. The more vessels they move, the more they earn. In small ports, pilots can expect to earn under $100,00 per year; in big

ports, such as Houston, Texas, they can make $400,000. But Skip Strong is staying put in the Gulf of Maine. It's home. After his experience on *Cherry Valley*, he does have a fascination with salvage. "If I had my career to do over," he says, "I'd probably go into salvage work. Those guys do everything. As a pilot, my job is to minimize risk. Their job is to go out and find it."

Skip Strong and his wife, Annie Dundon, have hopes that some day they can serve as volunteers on a Mercy Ship in Africa. The two met as students at Maine Maritime; she's a licensed deck officer who found her calling as a medical officer and went back to school to train as a physician's assistant. When their two daughters are old enough to appreciate the experience, they'd like to work for six months on the hospital ships that provide medical care, relief aid, and training in developing nations along the coast.

But for now, time off means days with the family aboard their 25-year-old whaleboat and spring vacations in the Bahamas. The ocean is never far away.

"Every time I step on a boat," Strong says, "I learn something new. Every time I do a docking or undocking, it's different. The tide, wind and ships are different, the way the ship responds is different; every time you have to ask why and learn from it."



Janet Mendelsohn, a freelance writer, splits her time between Boston, Massachusetts, and Kittery Point, Maine.

In Peril

A Daring Decision, a Captain's Resolve and the Salvage that Made History

by Skip Strong and Twain Braden

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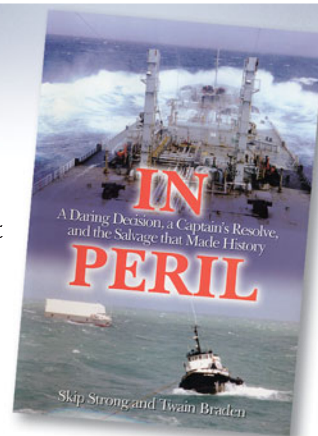
252 pages. $22.95



Strong's first-person account of the rescue of the ocean tug *J.A. Orgeron* and the barge *Poseidon*, and its historic aftermath, is bolstered by the co-authors' extensive legal documentation to insure accuracy. Braden, former managing editor of *Ocean Navigator* magazine and former maritime casualties editor of *Professional Mariner* magazine, interviewed the crews of both vessels, as well as commercial salvors who picked up the tug for its final journey, admiralty attorneys for NASA and Keystone Shipping Co., and the crews of two other ships caught in the storm. Mind-boggling side stories of commercial salvage add swashbuckling action to their riveting account.