



Captain George Livingstone: Crossing the Bar

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A San Francisco Bar Pilot boards the MSC Anna as it enters San Francisco Bay. Photo credit: Abner Kingman

I've spent the last few mornings looking out over the San Francisco Bay wondering about the far-flung, widespread scope of marine transportation. I remember as a boy my father taking Grant and I to the harbor where we would sit and watch the ships come and go for hours on end. Even though children, we grasped the idea that the ships we saw came from the farthest reaches of the globe and it pulled on our imaginations. Not so today, I've written many times about the disconnect the greater public has regarding ships and the sea. Folks just don't seem to realize that most of what they touch, handle, or use throughout any day has come to them via ship or barge. Ninety percent of all commerce worldwide is moved on the water and without it, our world would come to a crashing stop.

It would not be a stretch to argue that the one million or so professional mariners manning those ships are vital.

I Hope to See My Pilot

What about the individuals tasked with the safe arrival and departure of ships entering or departing the thousands of harbors around the world – ship pilots? Most ships around the world will take a pilot upon entering a harbor. In most cases, the ship is grateful to have the help. In the forward of *'IMPA On Pilotage'* Captain Geoff Taylor writes "...think about the incredible value of the Master/Pilot relationship which, were it to be established in today's litigious world, would require cohorts of lawyers and accountants together with a lengthy and detailed contract. The welcoming handshake and exchange of information at all hours and in all weathers that precedes a pilotage is a wonderful example of the practice of good seamanship and an example of all that is best in our maritime world. Long may it remain thus."

The public may have moved on, but it doesn't change the facts; trade by sea is as indispensable today as it was 100 years ago. And there is no arguing about the dangers involved in seaborne trade or the responsibility that goes along with it. Agreeing that it is already dangerous, being a pilot is a scale more dangerous. There are a host of reasons for that, and one of the simplest? The pilot must physically board and disembark ships daily, throughout a decades-long career, night and day, in any and all kinds of weather.

I have included just a couple of photos of yours truly boarding and departing a ship in normal conditions. I would hope it shows the underlying danger pilots face every day throughout a career. It just isn't the same as driving into the office five days a week, no disrespect intended. In the case of an offshore pilot station like many around the world, the pilot must use a mountain climbing technique called 'repelling' when descending from the ship to the pilot boat.



Photo courtesy George Livingstone.

That is an everyday occurrence in good, bad or foul weather, and frankly it can be downright challenging. No safety ropes, no safety nets, no safety anything, get it right or face almost certain injury, even death. Every single year pilots are lost in the line of duty, *every single year*. Three have been lost in the United States in the last 12 months.

I honestly do not believe pilots get enough credit for what we do; for the personal danger faced, for the responsibility regarding *The Public Trust*. Protecting the lands and waterways served while engaged in vital trade. Much of it is our own fault, if you don't tell and show folks what you do how will they understand?

(Fellow colleagues would scold me for having my bag over my shoulder. If I fall into the ocean, the bag could well cause serious problems when my float coat inflates. The orange float coat inflates when immersed and is the primary safety device to survive in the ocean while waiting for rescue.)



Photo courtesy George Livingstone

The fact is, we go about the dangerous business of piloting with little fanfare or notice. We don't even discuss the dangers amongst ourselves, better to leave sleeping dogs lie I suppose. Until that is, we lose one of our own. Then comes time, too much time, to regret, reflect, and repent.

How much is a life worth? In the context of a career where life and limb are in daily danger. How much compensation is it worth expending for professionals who ensure the safety of the lands and waterways of this nation and the world? Most folks work from 8 to 5, how much compensation would it take to convince you to change your daily schedule, rotating 24/7 for the rest of your working years? Just some honest questions. There are few more dangerous, stressful professions that I can think of that are more important *and* less understood than marine pilots.

A Star to Steer By

I have always believed, however, if you want respect, earn it first. Nothing new there just putting it out to the universe. If mariners, ship pilots included, want recognition and compensation for the dangerous, stressful job we do, then be accountable for it. Take responsibility, listen *and* hear critical voices. Regardless of good intent, we must deliver, there can be no excuses. That is the only place from which we can look ourselves in the eye and hold fast to our expectations in this dangerous, stressful profession with the weight of public and regulatory scrutiny upon it.

Finally, we owe it to our colleagues who have gone before us; who have sacrificed their lives doing business on great waters; and who have gone to the deep in ships.

Captain George Livingstone is a San Francisco Bar Pilot, co-author of 'Tug Use Offshore', contributing author of ['IMPA On Pilotage'](#) and a regular contributor to gCaptain.