

The story of a pilot

Captain Josephine Clark outlines some of her experiences as a marine pilot and coming up through the seafaring ranks

WRITING A COLUMN ON WOMEN

in maritime pilotage is a perplexing prospect, given the average person is often ignorant of the existence of the job, let alone whether it is done by a man or a woman. As such, any discussion around whether a male vs female pilot may have a different perspective on their job is usually preceded by explaining what the job is in the first place. Unfortunately this is a reflection of the general invisibility of the role of shipping in the wider Australian community, so it is unsurprising that the specifics of the industry are largely unknown.

NEED FOR MARINE PILOTS

Why is there still a need for marine pilots in the age of electronic navigation and global positioning systems? If the difference between a ship's master and a pilot were to be oversimplified into one word, it would be practice – practice of specific ship-handling manoeuvres in specific channels, and specific berth approaches in specific ship types and environmental conditions.

A pilot, having a career as ship master or chief officer to build on, has the opportunity to spend considerable time training and practising the transits and

conditions. With some exceptions, ship masters have little opportunity to hone these skills. Depending on the trade, port arrival and departure operations may represent a fraction of their job and the pilotage area experienced only periodically, or be completely new to them.

PATH TO PILOT

My own particular pathway into this career was pretty typical for an Australian pilot. After high school, an early love of all things boating led me to investigate careers in both the Royal Australian Navy and commercial shipping. I started a seagoing career as a deck cadet and spent 16 years in various seagoing ranks, eventually progressing to master. From there I sidestepped into pilotage and have now worked in the job in two ports for a total of 12 years. Classmates who started as deck cadets at the same time as me, some 29 years ago, are working in similar pilotage roles around Australia. From that perspective I can say that my career has been nothing out of the ordinary, other than for the fact that I am not male.

In Australia, the pathway to becoming a female ship master or female pilot was established before me. Captain Liz Datson,



Captain Josephine Clark, Port Kembla marine pilot, Port Authority of NSW

There are frequently surprised looks when I reach the top of the pilot ladder, but with the aid of a few well-rehearsed jokes, it is quickly down to business. On the walk to the bridge, many crews will tell me of other ports where they have encountered a “lady pilot”. Encouragingly, being met by a female cadet or deck officer is not as rare as it used to be. Filipino crews in particular love to giggle when they automatically respond to conning order with “Sir”, but the novelty soon wears off.

In my 12 years as a pilot, I have only conducted one pilotage where the master was also female. The vessel was a Norwegian-flagged car ship and it was probably the one job in my life that I was most eager to impress and do a perfect job. The captain was the first female to be promoted to master in her company, which I found surprising, given the Norwegian origins, and the fact that it was 2016.

Although the vessel is still a regular visitor to our port, soon afterwards the Norwegians onboard were replaced by officers of another nationality, so I await the day in the future when I have the pleasure of working with another female master. ■ *These opinions are those of the author and do not represent those of the Port Authority of NSW.*

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manoeuvres that are particular to their jurisdiction. This daily practice and execution polishes the skill to a high level. Additionally, training in emergency and non-routine situations is undertaken in simulators so that contingencies are pre-considered and practised.

Every port has its own challenges for the ship handler, whether it be tidal streams, wind, low under-keel clearance, restricted visibility, etc. Pilots spend their working lives honing their skills in regards to the specific geography faced each day, throughout the annual cycle of climatic

Captain Sandra Risk and Captain Helen Cole were the forerunners who showed other women starting out in the industry what could be achieved.

WORKPLACE ISSUES

At the risk of being boring, I can't say that I have faced any extra difficulties or experienced any workplace issues by being one of only a few female pilots. On the whole, the masters and crews that I work alongside are professional and polite and the business of conducting the ship to the berth is the primary focus.