

A tale of vigilance

David White

Nine hundred miles due east of Norfolk, Va., in the North Atlantic in February. The seas run in long, dark furrows lifted up then set down into yawning, plunging canyons of cold by the big, underlying ocean swells that run out here, their tops torn away by gusts. The weather is picking up and the 800-foot container ship Lykes Motivator slams over a swell, and is knocked back in by the sea. The wind is howling at 32 miles an hour past the bridge wing — and its voice is not one sound but a blend of sounds, shrieking, humming, whining, all mingling together.

Out here, the wind has 9 million square miles to barnstorm around in and whip into chaos, and it does with you, and with a 42,000-ton container ship, what it wants. It throws this giant from side to side, lifting it up in its hold, then plunging it down into the shuddering, gray canyons of frost below. Salesmen sell space on container ships such this one. Executives devise ways to make the corporations built upon them run better. Customers buy these companies' reputations and records of service. But this is the face of what executives manage and customers buy: the work and effort that ships, captains and crews put in out here on the winter North Atlantic, their record and performance out here on the pitching, heaving field where the weather meets the watch.

Capt. Richard B. Johnston, a bearded, tough, personable mariner who has sailed liquid natural gas tankers all over the world and was once attacked by pirates in Guayaquil, Ecuador, is the master of the Lykes Motivator, which is owned by Lykes Lines Ltd., a division of CP Ships and one of the last four companies operating U.S.-flag container ships in foreign trades. Johnston says his first three concerns are the safety of his crew, the safety of his ship and the schedule.

"If the ship isn't safe to go to sea, I won't take her," Johnston says. Vitally important are "company procedures, the safety and well-being of the crew, the whole management of the ship."

Johnston is keenly aware of competition, of schedule, of the need to make his ship and his crew perform. "You have to meet your schedule. If you don't make schedule, you might drop a port so you can make rotation again."

Sunday, Feb. 17, 3:02 p.m., roughly 1,000 miles from Bishop Rock, off Britain, the light far out here in the remote passages of the open ocean a different light — pale, silver, intense on the waves. The master strategy and all the elaborate, intricate, complex details of CP Ships' and Lykes Lines' business game plan quite simply boil down to the careful vigilance of Chief Mate Fran Goodwin, now standing the 8 a.m. to 12 noon watch on the

immense, broad bridge of the Lykes Motivator, where two great control consoles command, crowded with dials, gauges and switches. The ship is on auto-pilot. Able Bodied Seaman Tom Corrales is the sailor on watch assisting Goodwin.

Goodwin, as with any watch standing officer, must have mastery of the hundreds of instruments and indicators on this bridge; of perhaps 30 basic navigational functions deriving from them. He must then have the sense and judgment of a seasoned mariner to run this operation with the utmost proficiency. Then he gets the job of playing "ship driver" and watchdog to 42,000 tons of U.S. exports.

Goodwin's three chief concerns while standing watch are keeping a good lookout, being certain of everything around the ship and that she is safe from trouble; navigation, the ship's position now, her progress across the sea; and engine performance. "We'll get an alarm; we'll see what it is. You give the engineer a call and see what happened." Other principal duties of the watch are compiling weather reports, monitoring the banks of equipment and chartwork.

Seven levels down from the bridge stands the thundering heart of the Motivator, a looming, 45-foot-tall Sulzer marine diesel engine the size of a small church, lost in the oily, amber gloom of the engine room. This engine, its thousands of hopping, tipping, rocking, squirting, tapping parts, and the maze of pumps, compressors, generators, electrical works and steering machinery that propel the vessel, are the domain of Gregory Baars, the cordial, 6-foot, 4-inch chief engineer and his staff of six. "There are hundreds of functions a ship engineer has to be aware of," says Baars, who laments the passing of his trade — and all the U.S. Merchant Marine.

"We're losing a lot of jobs. It's another skill that our country seems to be exporting overseas. I wouldn't be surprised to see no ships."

This trip will be a superlative one for the Lykes Motivator. On Wednesday, Feb. 20, after eight days of relatively good weather and smooth sailing out of Norfolk, Va., she will put in to Antwerp as an orange-and-pink dusk falls. Tugs nudge her up to the dock; at 6:22 p.m. she is alongside, 2,700 cargo containers from the United States safe in harbor, courtesy of Lykes Lines. A light drizzle starts to slant across the bridge windows in the evening, now bitterly cold.

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