



Story By STEVE D'ANTONIO

I received the call from Capt. Bill Band as I was sitting at my computer early one Saturday morning in February. "Steve, we have a fast ship scheduled to make its way up the bay for an all-daylight passage tomorrow morning. Are you interested?"

Just a few days earlier, I had requested that Bill, who has been a senior pilot for the state of Maryland for more than 30 years, allow me to accompany him as he guided a ship up Chesapeake Bay so that I could write an article about what he and his colleagues do. He had told me it would probably be several weeks or even months before the right ship on the right schedule came along. Now my chance was here. I'd have to gather my cameras, foul-weather gear, inflatable PFD, and other equipment and get under way from my home at 0400 in order to reach the Cape Henry Pilot Station, at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, at 0600.

"Yes," I responded. "I'll be there." I hung up the phone, feeling both excited and anxious. I wondered what adventure lay in store for me.

"Safely guiding ships on the Chesapeake Bay since 1852" is the maxim of the Association of Maryland Pilots. But this phrase only touches on the complex work the pilots do. If, after watching these folks and their support crews in action over the course of several days, I were

asked to distill their jobs into a single phrase, it would have to be: "Extreme multitasking with cool confidence." Like many professionals who do what they do exceedingly well, pilots make it look easy. After all, when was the last time you read or heard *anything* about a ship's pilot, other than a brief news account about a pilot being injured or killed in the line of duty? Every time you see a commercial ship on Chesapeake Bay or anywhere other than at sea, a pilot is aboard, ensuring a safe passage during what is the most dangerous portion of any voyage: landfall and inshore navigation.

I've been fortunate enough to develop a relationship with several members of the Association of Maryland Pilots, an organization founded by 36 free-agent pilots who met in a Baltimore hotel in 1852. The association was the first state-chartered pilots' group in the United States. A group called the "Bay Pilots," however, predates the association, having been referenced in official Maryland records as far back as 1640. The first pilotage laws were established by Maryland's legislature in 1787.

What follows relates specifically to what Maryland pilots do and the way the Association of Maryland Pilots has chosen to carry out its mission. Generically speaking, however, it applies to the work pilots do all over the country and, in many cases, all over the world.

MARYLAND Bay Pilots

EXTREME MULTITASKING AT ITS BEST



Photos by Steve D'Antonio

A control tower located at Fort Story on Cape Henry allows watch-standers from both the Virginia and Maryland pilot associations to keep an eye on, and assist with, the flow of incoming and departing ship traffic.

The territory of the Association of Maryland Pilots includes all of Maryland's navigable waters. Additionally, through a relationship that has been forged over the last century and a half, Virginia's pilots allow their Maryland brethren to transit "their" portion of Chesapeake Bay, provided the ship they are aboard does not intend to make landfall in Virginia. If, for instance, a ship approaches Chesapeake Bay and is bound for Baltimore, it will be guided by one of the Maryland association's pilots, while ships bound for points south of the Potomac (such as Alexandria) are guided by pilots from Virginia.

The mission of the Maryland pilots is more encompassing than the territory in which they operate, and the burden they carry in performing it is a heavy one indeed. The way the pilots see it, they have multifaceted obligations and responsibilities, primarily to the state of Maryland but also to the owners and crews of the vessels they pilot. These responsibilities are independent of monetary or business considerations. Pilots make every effort to accommodate the requests of ship captains where timing is concerned; however, they never do so at the expense of the safety and security of the vessel.

Perhaps above all else, pilots are responsible to the environment, acting as guardians of Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Maryland state law deems every pilot a protector of the environment once he or she sets foot aboard a commercial vessel, most of which are foreign owned and have crews that might speak English only

as a second language. Additionally, since 9/11, pilots must also act as the eyes and ears of the Department of Homeland Security. Pilots often are the only American citizens aboard what could be considered an extremely large and dangerous "weapon," since simply crashing a large ship into a bridge or grounding it in a channel could have a huge impact on the lives of thousands of people. Pilots also are tasked with remaining alert for possible terrorist activity aboard the vessel they are guiding and on the vessels around them.

Some would say that pilots have reached the pinnacle of a seafaring career. From the conversations I've had with Capt. Bill Band, I clearly sense that he and other experienced pilots get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from competently and accurately directing the



Evergreen's *Ever Renown* is nearly 1,000 feet long and displaces more than 70,000 tons. Pilot launch operators must approach these behemoths with extreme caution.

movement of some of the world's largest man-made objects. By his own admission, Bill enjoys his work and considers it a privilege to be entrusted with such a vital mission. When a pilot is aboard a ship, the captain remains in overall command, and many pilots will stress this point when asked about their duties. The pilot serves as an "advisor," albeit one who gives commands directly to the helmsman. However, Maryland's pilots are responsible for moving ships that may be longer than 900 feet with a 150-foot beam and a draft as deep as 48 feet in a channel whose controlling depth is just 50 feet. If an accident occurs, chances are very good that the pilot will be held at least partly accountable.

The Maryland pilots carry out these maneuvers in close proximity to land, bridges, and other vessels, often during severe weather conditions, along a pilotage route





that is the longest in the United States. Typically, ocean passages are boring at best, and it's not unusual for vessels to operate on autopilot while transiting vast stretches of trackless ocean. In contrast, while guiding a ship from the Virginia Capes to Baltimore (a distance of roughly 150 nautical miles; about nine hours for the trip I made), a pilot may give commands for more course corrections than the captain of the vessel gives during an entire ocean passage. When the weather is fair and other traffic is light, as it was on the day I made my transit up the Bay with Bill, a pilot makes a minimum of 44 course changes over the aforementioned route. The number of changes multiplies when the weather deteriorates or when traffic density increases. (Summer months are always tougher because of the numerous small recreational vessels in the Bay.)

THE FIRST STEP IS A BIG ONE

I arrived at the Cape Henry Pilot Station in the cold, still darkness of a February morning. An imposing brick building set on the water's edge at Lynnhaven Inlet, the station, along with the pilot tower located at nearby Fort Story, represents the pilots' southern command headquarters, watching over the approaches to Chesapeake Bay. In 1985 the station replaced the pilot boat *Maryland*, a 190-foot former Dutch salvage tug (a ship, really, but the pilots and other station personnel consistently refer to her as a boat). Pilots and launch crews lived and worked aboard *Maryland* for two weeks at a time.

Capt. Bill Band began his career with the pilots as a mate aboard *Maryland*'s predecessor, *Baltimore*, a 200-foot, twin-screw, single-rudder vessel that originally was built as a yacht in 1929 for Alfred Sloan, the CEO of General Motors. Those who worked from the decks of these ships speak of them with a mix of reverence and nostalgia; you'll also hear some "boy, those were the days" comments. When I asked Bill what life was like aboard *Baltimore*, he raised his eyebrows a bit and gave a response that was quintessential pilot understatement: "It was, well, interesting."

He went on to say that his first indication that living and working aboard the pilot boat might be a dangerous job came shortly after his arrival. He noticed a length of manila line bent between the vessel's bow cleats and the mooring pendant. When he inquired about this weak link, he was told that it was designed to break should the pilot boat need to get under way in a hurry. What would necessitate getting under way *that* quickly? In those days, there was no GPS, and electronic navigation was still in its infancy. It wasn't unusual for the vessels making landfall after long ocean passages to steer straight for the pilot boat, knowing it was in "good" (deep) water.



William Band

Ever Renown has an especially high freeboard, so the Jacob's ladder leads to a gangway, shortening the ladder portion of the climb and making boarding somewhat safer.

Sometimes, however, the crews of these vessels, in their exuberance to confirm that they were indeed in good water, would overshoot their mark and collide with the pilot boat.

In favorable weather, the pilot boat remained moored; when the weather was poor, she'd be under way, which made life for the pilot launch crews even more "interesting." Bill described the dance that occurred between the pilot boat (the mothership) and the launches: "To board the ships, we would work the pilot boat upwind of the inbound ship. At a quarter mile or less, the pilot would board one of the two 36-foot aluminum pilot launches and ride it downwind to the ship." The launches were towed alongside the pilot boat, secured to booms.

"Conversely, when pilots were disembarking their ships, the pilot boat would work her way downwind of the ship for retrieval. When the visibility was poor, this little dance could be very stressful," Bill continued, invoking more pilot understatement. "Poor visibility could be as a result of fog, rain, or blizzard conditions. In these situations, the captain or the mate on watch would work their way upwind, get the pilot in the launch, give the launch a compass course to steer to the ship—there was no radar on the launches—break away, and maneuver to come up behind the inbound ship."



Photos by Steve D'Antonio

Top: The 956-foot-long *Ever Renown*, loaded with 3,500 containers, prepares to pass beneath the twin spans of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Above left: Capt. Bill Band guides the ship, watching from the large bridge windows. Dual radar monitors stand to his left. During our daylong passage up the Bay, he shuttled constantly between the windows and the monitors, comparing what he saw on the screens with what the view outside told him. Above right: *Ever Renown* prepares to overtake a slower ship. Whenever such a situation arises, the pilots on both vessels communicate with each other before maneuvering.

"After boarding the pilot, the launch would fall off the side of the ship and stay in the ship's wake. The pilot boat would keep advancing until she came up behind the launch and then repeat the process for the next ship. It was imperative to stay close but clear of the ship traffic and not lose the launches in the gloom. I recall one memorable watch when we handled 19 ships in near-gale conditions during the midnight-to-0600 watch. Because the ships were so closely spaced, I was never able to work the *Baltimore* back into the Bay. At dawn we were miles out to sea in very rough weather. I was concerned about

the pilot launches. Fortunately, with the sun's arrival, the weather began to moderate, and we were able to finally work our way back into the Bay."

At the Cape Henry Pilot Station, I entered the building and spoke with the watch officer, who directed me to the large, dimly lit lounge area where pilots, launch operators, and other personnel can relax, take meals, watch TV, or access computers for ship arrival information and other particulars. Bill emerged from the sleeping quarters and informed me that there had been a slight change of plans, but that wasn't a bad thing. The ship we were hoping to



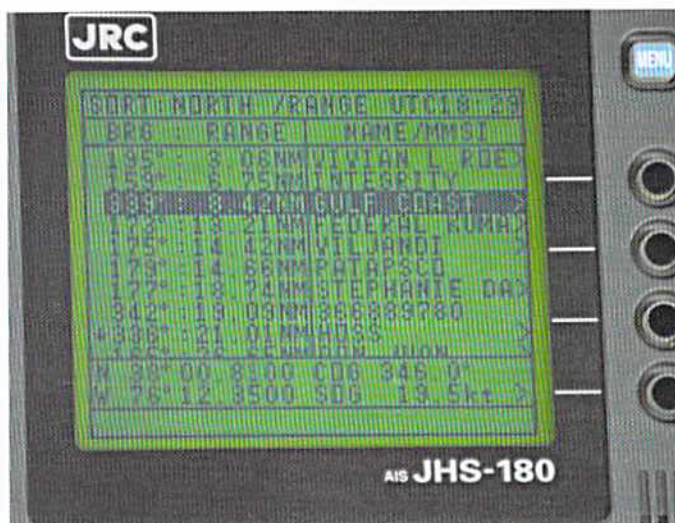
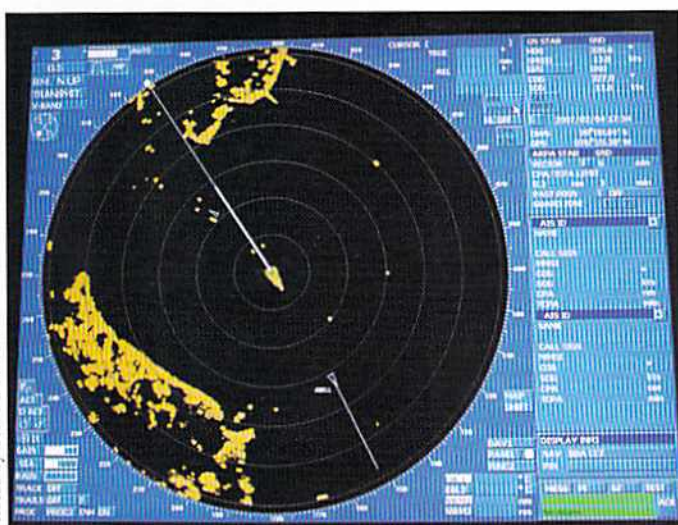
pick up was running a little late and would arrive at the Cape Henry buoy, where pilots embark and disembark, at approximately 0900 rather than 0700, so we had some time to kill. The hours passed quickly, as I spent much of the time poring over every detail of the station's two Chesapeake Class pilot launches, *Patuxent* and *Patapsco*. (You can read my article about these rugged, duty-driven boats in the September '07 issue of *PMM*.)

The good news was that the weather was calm and sunny. We would be heading out with another pilot launch that would disembark her pilot aboard *Federal Kumano*, a 656-foot bulk carrier, just before we proceeded to our charge, the Evergreen Line's containership *Ever Renown*. Watching the pilot climb the Jacob's ladder from the launch to *Federal Kumano's* deck, I quickly realized why this is often referred to as the most dangerous part of

running at 6 feet, the wind at 25 knots. Diebert had been wearing a floatation device, which was later found, but the pilot was never seen again. Some surmise that Diebert may have had a heart attack while climbing the wood-and-rope ladder, or that ice on the ladder may have caused him to fall. Between January 2006 and February 2007, five pilots or support crew lost their lives while performing their duties in U.S. waters.

As we approached *Ever Renown* from the stern, I began to appreciate her truly massive girth. If you transported the ship to Paris and then managed to stand her on end in the Champ de Mars, alongside the Eiffel Tower, the folks in the tower's pinnacle would be looking nearly straight across at her bow. (With an overall length of 956 feet, *Ever Renown* is just 30 feet shorter than the French landmark.)

Photos by Steve D'Antonio



Left: The ship's radar is a vital tool for pilots, as it provides a wealth of information. Right: *Ever Renown's* AIS (Automatic Identification System) transceiver also provides invaluable information to the pilot, indicating the name of each ship within range, along with course, speed, and other data. According to Capt. Bill, AIS has made his job considerably easier and the movement of ships safer.

a pilot's job. The heavily laden vessel's low freeboard made the climb a relatively short one, only about nine rungs. But I could easily imagine how death defying the climb would be in driving rain or snow, darkness, and 6-foot seas.

On the very day I traveled with Capt. Bill Band up the placid, sun-drenched Chesapeake Bay, a pilot met his end while making the same type of transfer, from a pilot launch to *Energy Enterprise*, a 645-foot coal carrier heading toward Delaware Bay. Witnesses indicated that the pilot, Capt. Lynn Diebert, a 30-year veteran, began his ascent up the 45-foot ladder, paused for a moment after climbing about a third of the way up, and then fell into the 39° water 2 miles southeast of Cape Henlopen, Delaware. It was just before midnight, and seas were

The launch operator brought us up alongside the green slab side that is *Ever Renown's* freeboard, paralleling her course and speed. Bill reminded me yet again just how dangerous this procedure can be. "Look at the ladder, and don't let go of one rung until you have a good grip on the next," he instructed over the drone of *Patapsco's* twin Detroit Diesels and the water rushing between the two vessels. Clearly, he was concerned for my safety. I was here at his behest, and if anything were to happen to me, he would feel responsible.

The controlled collision between the colossal *Ever Renown* and the 52-foot *Patapsco*, the resulting jolt, and the 15-degree heel of the launch's deck promptly shook those thoughts from my head. I followed Bill out onto the deck, handed my gear to the launch's deckhand, and



waited my turn to ascend the Jacob's ladder. This one surely wasn't leading to heaven and there were no angels, although members of *Ever Renown's* crew hovered around its terminus. As I watched Bill take each deliberate, well-practiced step, I wondered how many times he had done this in his more than 30 years as a pilot. I knew he'd had his share of close calls, one of which he shared with me while I was researching this article (see "The 'I'm Tired And I Want To Go Home' Factor," part of the Web Extras at passagemaker.com).

Once Bill had arrived at the top, I let go of the launch's deck rail and reached for the ladder's thick polypropylene line. It was wet with spray, but its rough, splintery filaments were comforting. The crew of *Ever Renown* had arranged a boarding gangway that intersected the ladder about halfway between the waterline and the deck, which made the climb a manageable 20 feet. This isn't always the case; some Jacob's ladders are more than 40 feet long. I transitioned from the ladder to the gangway, and deckhands quickly hoisted up our gear. After introducing ourselves to the mate, we made our way to the bridge, another six flights up. *Ever Renown*, like many modern commercial ships, is equipped with an elevator, but it was inoperative during my visit.

GETTING THERE

It wasn't long after I met Bill Band several years ago at a "Safety at Sea" conference that I began to wonder how one becomes a Chesapeake Bay pilot. In Bill's case, when he became an apprentice pilot back in 1973, things were somewhat different than they are today. The apprenticeships were shorter, formal testing was less frequent, and there were more restrictions on the size of the ships junior pilots were allowed to direct. Today, the distinction between pilots who guide ships up the Bay and pilots who dock the ships is fading; pilots learn to do both tasks. When Bill graduated from the State University of New York Maritime College in 1971, he had a Bachelor of Science degree, a third-mate ocean license, and a commission in the Navy Reserve, but not much experience. (In Bill's day, the majority of pilot applicants were *not* maritime college grads.)

At that time, the Vietnam War was winding down, and offshore jobs for maritime academy graduates were few and far between. Merchant marine officers' unions were closed to new membership. Bill, seeking any port in a storm, took a position as a licensed wheelsman and then mate aboard the Cape May-Lewes ferry line. At the time, these ferries were 4,000-ton steamships, and handling them required great skill (as does piloting the ferries today). Bill put the year and a half that he spent with the ferry line to good use, obtaining not only an unlimited-

tonnage inland master's license but also a first-class pilot's license for the lower Delaware Bay. Through his maritime college alumni connections, he heard that the Maryland pilots were accepting applications. They were looking for a mate aboard the pilot boat *Baltimore*. Bill got the job and, with his foot planted firmly in the door, waited for an apprentice pilot position to become available. By the end of 1973 he had earned a spot as an apprentice, and in the years that followed, he worked his way up through the ranks, ultimately becoming a senior pilot.

Today, there may be as many as 200 applicants for just one or two pilot positions, and nearly all applicants are graduates of one of the six U.S. maritime schools. In addition, the average applicant has between eight and 10 years of experience on oceangoing ships or tugs. Those who are successful in passing the State Board of Pilots' rigorous application process become apprentice pilots for two years. (For most, this involves taking a substantial pay cut.) Upon completing that phase of training, they become junior pilots for three years. Draft and length limitations are placed upon apprentice and junior pilots. In the first year, apprentices may pilot ships with a maximum 28-foot draft and 750-foot length. (A senior pilot accompanies each apprentice pilot for the first two years.) They move up to 800-foot ships with 34-foot drafts, then to a maximum length of 850 feet and a 37-foot draft in the second and third years, respectively. With myriad restrictions and regulations, training during this time alternates between Chesapeake Bay, Baltimore Harbor, and the C&D Canal. Each step upward is voted on by the association's senior pilots. At the end of five years of training, the pilots are said to "go free" as unlimited senior pilots.

In addition to undergoing the above-mentioned training, apprentice pilots must pass a battery of written examinations. Perhaps the most challenging of these is the arduous USCG pilotage exam. In this test, the apprentice is handed a sheet of paper that is blank except for an outline of land. He or she must then fill in, completely from memory, all relevant information and characteristics, such as depths, wrecks, depth contours, navigation aids, shoals, bottom composition, and so on. For the run I made up the Bay with Bill, an apprentice would be required to create nine separate charts, scoring a minimum of 90 percent to receive a passing grade. As well as you may know your home waters, and as many times as you may have looked at the same chart, do you believe you could do that?

LIFE FROM 100 FEET UP

I had heard that the visibility from the bridge of a super containership like *Ever Renown* is notoriously poor, but I

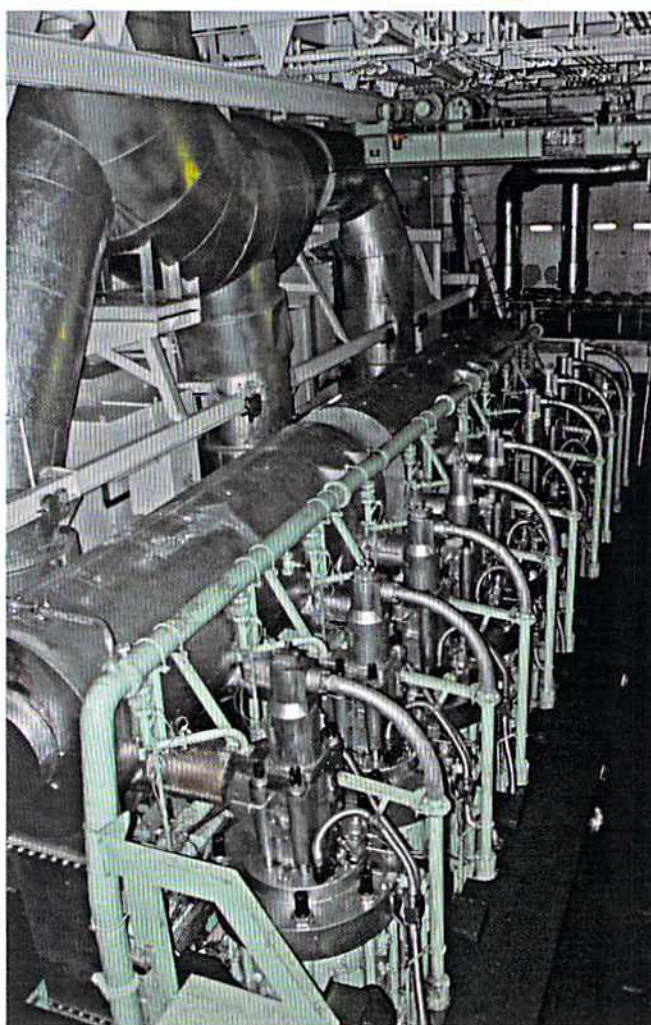
wasn't prepared for just how poor. Like many ships in her class, *Ever Renown* is capable of carrying thousands of 40-foot shipping containers. On the day I visited, her decks were piled with 3,500 of them in five tiers, limiting the view ahead considerably. How considerably? Let's just say that if you were crossing her bow with 1,000 feet separating your 15-ton fiberglass hull from her roughly 80,000 tons of steel, chances are good that her bridge crew would never see you. Officially, the water surface that I could see from the bridge windows was 1,597 feet forward of the stem.

Bill and I boarded the bridge after our long climb, and we met the captain and mate. The captain was Chinese, as were many of the officers and crew members, while others of the crew were Filipino or Ecuadorian. The first question was, "Mr. Pilots, would you like coffee?" The steaming brew, made fresh in the bridge kitchen's espresso machine, was welcome indeed. Bill proceeded to set up his laptop, stringing the GPS antenna wire across the overhead with paper clips that had been placed there who knows how many pilot visits ago. With the laptop, Bill has a means of navigation that does not rely on the ship's systems in any way. Interestingly, because of the vessel's size, he must enter the antenna's position on the ship into the computer. The portside reference is particularly important for safely passing other vessels in the Bay's narrow channels.

Bill says he's had two experiences where ships he was piloting were struck by lightning, rendering all navigation gear useless. In such cases, the pilot conns the ship either with his own laptop and charting software or by using "traditional" methods with paper charts, bearings, and ranges. Essentially, pilots are trained to work under nearly any conditions and with minimal equipment (that's when the memorized charts come in handy).

As I watched Bill go about his routine, I could see that over the course of three decades and more than 3,500 Bay transits, there was little this man had not seen or done from the bridge of a very large ship. He describes it as exacting work that is at times exciting. I asked Bill what makes a good pilot. His answer: "Experience, anticipation, good judgment, and, of course, steadiness under pressure." Like any highly demanding, technically challenging work, the job involves lots and lots of training. But it also requires a certain character to take charge of some of the world's largest movable objects. If Bill was stressed at any time during our transit, he didn't show it. He was the picture of cool confidence.

There are times, however, when things get lively. Bill shared with me one such moment, one he terms a life-altering event. It was September 1991, and he was steaming up Chesapeake Bay aboard *Nosac Takayama*, a



Photos by Steve D'Antonio

Top: A member of the ship's engineering crew monitors instrumentation and computer displays in the control room. Above: *Ever Renown's* huge, nine-cylinder diesel engine.

541-foot automobile carrier. Just after midnight, as the ship passed Gwynn's Island, Virginia, on the lower Bay, Bill communicated on the VHF radio with a fellow pilot who was heading in the opposite direction. They exchanged the clipped pleasantries that are common among pilots, sharing information about vessel course,



along with any other information that might be useful to a colleague headed for waters through which the other had recently traveled. As his fellow pilot's ship passed, Bill stepped onto the bridge wing to enjoy the cool September air and view the phosphorescence churned by the other ship's propeller. He heard two cries for help in quick succession. "It was a terrible feeling," Bill told me as we stood on *Ever Renown's* bridge sipping coffee. "I knew it meant someone was in the water on this dark night, far from land."

Without hesitation, Bill gave the orders to execute what's known as a Williamson turn, in which the ship reverses course and comes back on the same track to retrieve a person who has fallen overboard. (Remember, it's dark, and the ship is over 500 feet long and traveling at 19 knots.) He also alerted the Coast Guard, saying that he believed a person or two people were in the water and that he was effecting a rescue. As the ship glided back to where Bill had heard the cries for help, he gave orders to turn the ship into the wind and drop the anchors. Upon doing so, he heard the cries for help once again. A searchlight scan of the water next to the ship revealed what Bill said looked, from that elevation, like a grapefruit. Then, a hand popped out of the water next to the grapefruit, and Bill knew his instincts were as good as his hearing. It turned out there were four men in the water, all stowaways who had boarded a Baltimore-bound coal carrier that had been berthed in the Dominican Republic. Three were taken aboard *Nosac Takayama*, and the fourth was rescued by the Coast Guard. Bill had managed to maneuver the ship with such precision that one man was able to swim to the ship's side and clamber up a boarding ladder. The others were picked up by one of the ship's launches.

How the four men had come to be in the water is another story, but one thing is certain: Capt. Bill Band's experience, quick thinking, and top-notch ship-handling skills saved their lives. "Those guys were lucky it was him [Capt. Band]. They had divine providence on their side," said Capt. Mike Watson, president of the Association of Maryland Pilots at the time. The stowaways were eventually sent back to their home, but it was said they vowed to try to reach the United States again. "I often think of that night and wonder what became of them," Bill said, gazing through the thick bridge windows at the shimmering Bay. I believe he does.

MAKE A PILOT'S DAY

Want to make a pilot's day, or night? There are a number of things that you, as a recreational boater, can do to ease the burden on these men and women who already have so much on their minds. (Remember, even if

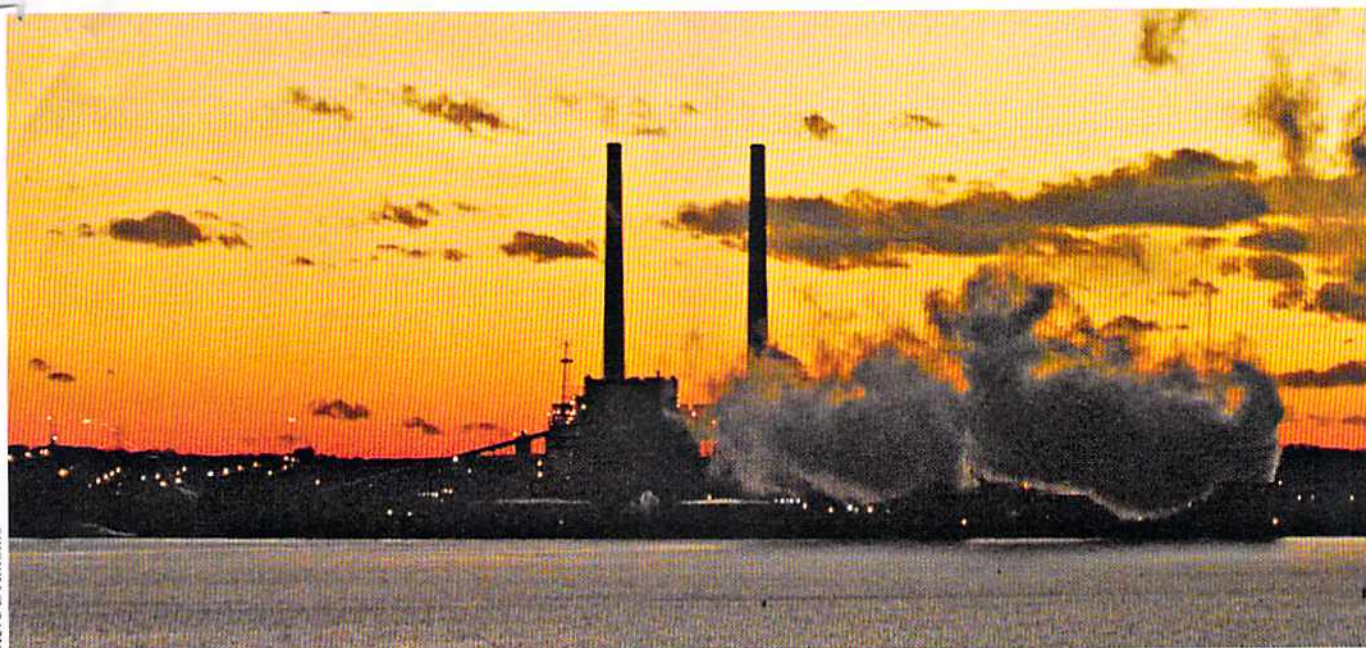
your vessel is 65 feet long, it's very small compared to the behemoths that pilots are guiding.)

When operating in the vicinity of large ships in confined waters, keep in mind that pilots like to hear from you; they want to know your intentions. Pilots typically use Channel 13 for bridge-to-bridge communications, so this is the best way to reach them. (Of course, they monitor Channel 16 as well.) Describe where you are in relation to the ship, preferably using geographic references rather than latitude and longitude. As good as pilots are, they can't accurately crunch these lat-lon numbers in their head, converting them to a position that has any reference for them. Instead, they must divert their attention from the water ahead, walk over to a paper chart or their laptop, and plot or cursor these numbers to determine where you are. In this time period, say a minute, the ship may have traveled a third of a mile.

You can offer more readily usable information that won't divert their attention from the task at hand. For instance, you might say something like, "Trawler *Evening Tide* calling the northbound containership at Bloody Point light." Indicating the heading of the ship is very important; it gets the attention of the right people. The response you will hear will sound something like, "This is the *Ever Renown* northbound at Bloody Point." And you will then say, "*Evening Tide* back. We are a blue-hulled, 36-foot trawler southbound at approximately 2 miles east of Thomas Point Light. How would you like to meet?" And so forth.

At night, you could identify yourself by offering to shine a searchlight in the direction of the ship. With this type of simple communication, it's virtually impossible for you to get into trouble. Rest assured, unlike vessels at sea, a ship under pilotage will always respond to your VHF calls. You should make contact with the ship under pilotage when you are roughly 4 miles apart. Any farther is probably too far to be useful to the pilot, particularly on Chesapeake Bay. When traffic is heavy, be as specific as possible about your heading, position, and distance from the ship, if you are able to make that determination. If you get within 1 mile of a ship under pilotage and you have not made contact, you can bet you have the pilot's attention. (Every hair on Bill's head is white, and I suspect that is partly due to those under-a-mile encounters.) If visibility is limited, in fog, rain, or at night, keep your closest point of approach (or CPA) to a *minimum* of 1 mile.

If you force a pilot to maneuver a large, deep-draft ship to avoid a collision with you, he may collide with other vessels or run aground in doing so. It's worth remembering some statistics about these vessels, which



Steve D'Antonio

The sun sets as we approach Baltimore Harbor, completing an uneventful but enlightening nine-hour transit of Chesapeake Bay.

may have a draft as deep as 47 feet. They typically move at 15 knots, which means they are covering 25 feet per second. Because of this speed and their mass, it could take miles for them to stop. They are very quiet, especially if they are approaching you from astern and they are downwind. Because of their size, they often appear to be moving more slowly than they are.


You should make clear and deliberate course changes. Don't turn a degree at a time. This will help the pilot understand your intentions quickly and without any doubt. AIS (Automatic Identification System) has made life for pilots and other ship handlers both easier and safer. If you have AIS on your boat, that's great, but it's still uncommon for most recreational vessels. If your vessel offers a poor radar return, then the pilot won't be able to rely on the ship's next most useful nav tool, radar, to determine where you are, particularly in poor weather conditions or at night. Therefore, make certain you present a clear return. You can do so by installing *and testing* a radar reflector (my preference is for the Cyclops, available from northseanavigatorinc.com). Once the reflector has been installed, ask passing commercial ships for a report on your return to ensure it is operating properly.

Along those same lines, make certain your navigation lights are fully operational, properly aligned (improper alignment is common), and unobstructed by dinghies, flags, radar masts, or other deck gear. Remember how far ahead of a ship you must be in order for the pilot and bridge crew to see you. It may be as much as half a mile,

so the sooner they can see you by virtue of your radar reflector or navigation light, the better. Finally, if you intend to operate in confined waters after dark, it is imperative that you be familiar with the various navigation light configurations you may encounter, particularly those of tugs and tows.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

We completed our journey, arriving at Baltimore's Key Bridge just as a brilliant midwinter sun was setting, bathing the wheelhouse in hues of gold and vermillion. Bill handed off his charge to a docking pilot with a handshake and a few words about the ship, and we departed the way we had come, via the Jacob's ladder to a waiting pilot launch. By the time we arrived at the dock, the temperature had plummeted below freezing. Dusk had given way to total darkness, and the first stars were making their appearance.

I've been cruising Chesapeake Bay for many years, and I thought I knew what it looked like and fully understood its vagaries, dangers, currents, and unrivaled beauties. However, I was mistaken. I've now seen it from an entirely different perspective—from 100 feet up at 20 knots, through the eyes of a Maryland pilot. Should you be fortunate enough to meet a pilot or speak to one on the radio, be sure to let that pilot know how much you appreciate the very important job he or she does. 

Steve D'Antonio operates Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting LLC (stevedmarineconsulting.com).