

Nancy Wagner

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Guides & Mentors



Nancy Wagner
Captain and Bar Pilot, San Francisco Bar
Pilots
San Francisco, California

Describe your job as a San Francisco Bar Pilot.

A Bar Pilot is the advisor to the Captain of the ship, and is the local expert providing information about the harbor to the Captain. A pilot has the local knowledge of the tides, currents, wind, weather, depths of channels, characteristics of berths, etc. A San Francisco Bar Pilot knows the entire Bay Area — from 11 miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge, as far south as Redwood City and north to Sacramento and Stockton — 200 miles of pilotage waters. The pilot has memorized the wrecks, rocks, shoals, aids to navigation, channel depths, anchorages, cable and pipeline crossings, heights and widths of bridges, local rules and regulations for vessel movement ... anything to do with the safe and efficient navigation of the vessel while transiting the Bay Area.

A pilot is highly specialized in this area of expertise. After many years at sea, the pilot is a Captain with a lot of ship or tug boat experience behind him. In addition, the pilot apprentice program is 3 years; during that time the apprentice rides with the "senior" pilot and gets hands-on experience, actually "conning" the vessel, directing the assist tugboats, and docking or undocking the vessel. The apprentice is also studying to take the pilotage endorsement license exams at the US Coast Guard. The 200 miles of pilotage is divided into 13 areas, and there is an exam for each area including a chart drawn to scale with every detail from memory. Before being allowed to take each exam, the

apprentice pilot must take 15 round trips into each area — a very lengthy process, to say the least. Trained here in the San Francisco Bay, we can't go to another bay as a pilot without starting all over again, making trips, taking the tests.

In talking with your colleague Captain McLaughlin, we learned that pilots work 7 days straight and then have 7 days off. Can you tell us more about your work schedule?

Yes, when we're on duty, we're on call 24 hours a day. Ships come and go at all hours. We work 12 hours in a 24-hour period and our day consists of getting our assignment from our dispatcher, coming to the office, looking at the charts, looking over the soundings, doing our prep work for the job, checking out the tides and the current, the size of the ship. Preparing yourself mentally for it. We undock the ship, bring it to sea (11 miles out), hop out on the station boat, wait your turn, board an inbound ship, dock it and return to the office to finish paperwork, and go to the bottom of the rotation again.

We are sent to France for simulated training — it's the best in the world. We drive scale models of the ships that we handle, practicing docking and undocking in different current situations. It's pretty cool. It teaches a lot about your limits. And if you are going to crash and burn, that's the place to do it. Not out there (she points to the bay). We have a tremendous amount of responsibility. We have millions and millions of dollars worth of goods beneath our feet.

Have you brought in oil ships?

Oh yes, we do everything. Tankers, passenger ships, container ships, car ships, the bulk carriers that go up the river, anything that goes in and out of the bay.

Since the time you moved to the Bay Area in 1987, how has your work changed?

Yes, there have been many changes as a result of the Exxon Valdez [oil spill] incident. The maximum work period (12 hours in a 24-hour period), a minimum rest period of 12 hours, tug escort for tankers, speed limits in the bay of 15 knots for all ships, and changes in equipment, technology-wise. Now we have tractor tugs — powerful boats that can maneuver on a dime and are very responsive, quick and effective. It has changed many pilots' style of docking and undocking.

In terms of the Bay's topography, with which you are very familiar, have there been significant changes?

There's always silting because of the rains and runoff, and dredging is a constant battle to maintain the proper depth in the channels. The Oakland project has been going on for years to create the Oakland bar channel down to 48 feet. They're still working on the inner harbor to get that down.

How much water depth does a large ship require?

Two feet under keel clearance. The deepest ship that comes in here is 50 feet and they are oil tankers which go to anchorage 9 just south of the Bay Bridge because that's the only place they can go. They have to lighten up to 34 1/2 feet draft to go upriver to the Martinez or Benicia facilities.

What inspired you to become a bar pilot?

This is a pinnacle of my career. I never even dreamed of shipping or being in the merchant marine as a child, because girls didn't do that. But I was aware of it because my father had gone to sea, as did my grandfather. I knew about ships, but as a child I never dreamed of being where I am today. In fact, I was quite the dancer and I wanted to be a rockette. Don't laugh, it's true. Far from being a

rockette now.

I went to college in Syracuse, NY and studied communications. While there, I had to read the *New York Times*, and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines for my news writing class. I saw an article in the newspaper that King's Point was opening up to women. I knew the opportunity was there and I jumped on it. I gained admission there and was one of 16 women who started, and 8 of us graduated. I started out as a 3rd Mate with Exxon and worked my way up. I was on the East Coast, Gulf Coast, West Coast; clean oil, dirty oil, chemical carriers ... you name it, I've been exposed to it.

From your time on the Bay, is there a memorable experience you would like to share?

It seems like every week I have some little quirky thing to laugh about, because to this day there are a lot of captains that don't know that I'm here, that I'm a pilot, though I've been one for 8 years. Oh, Mrs. Pilot...! They don't know what to call me for one thing. I had one Italian skipper who did not want me as a pilot. There are many cultures that we interact with, and especially China and the Far Eastern countries. But this skipper was Italian, and there was nothing wrong with the job I did — I did a beautiful job for this guy and everything went well, but he was so upset that I was a woman. "I don't know what we're going to do about it, but I can do this job for you." Even afterwards he said something to the agent about having a woman pilot, just going off about it. The agent asked, "Well, did she do a good job?" "Yes. But I don't want her to sail me." The captains look at me and get upset. But there are many repeat customers and they know me now. They are very respectful and they will "Sir" me to death — they don't know Ma'am (not that I'd want them to call me that). When I'm not there they'll often ask about Captain Nancy. "Where's Captain Nancy?" Because now they like me. They know that I can do a good job for them and I guess they'd rather see me than some grumpy old guy. (She laughs.)

Do you ever sail on the bay for recreation?

No, it's kind of against my religion (though I have 4 years experience sailing at varsity level), because of my profession; the little boats on the bay often get in the way. Some people think that because their sail boats are smaller, they have the right of way, but they don't. It's written in law that ships have the right of way. It's very difficult to stop. Now with the tug escort on the tankers at least you have some braking power, but you aren't going to stop on a dime. Those Maersk ships that come in here — 42 feet deep and they're 986 feet long — they carry a lot of weight and you are not going to stop quickly. But we have a good performance rate and are very proud of it. We're the guardians and protectors of the bay. Like I said earlier, we have a lot of responsibility, not only to the ship, the crew, the cargo, but to the water outside the window and the environment. We try to operate as safely and efficiently as possible, and keep everything moving, and in rare instances do we ever close down. Last night being an example. It's got to be really bad. I've been here 11 years, and in the time I've been here, it's the third time we've closed the bar station.

I've been out on the first job after they opened the bar (following a storm) a couple years ago. It was pretty exciting — still very rough, a lot of wind all night long, none of the container ships could make their sailings. The container cranes couldn't operate in the high winds, so ships are stacking up outside. We decided, Let's try it. Oh gee, it's only blowing 60 now. It took us two and a half hours to get out there. We'd be on the crest of a wave, then down in a trough, then on the crest, then down in the trough again. It was like that the whole way. The wind was blowing out of the south, and every time we'd get up we'd see a buoy and be on the other side, needing to fight our way back. When we got out there I got on the first ship as pilot and I was steering 100 degrees to make the channel. The course is 70 degrees, but the wind was out of the south, pushing hard. "Full ahead sea speed, give me everything you've got, Cap." Because on my first approach to the channel, by the time I got on the ship and got up to the bridge, the channel wasn't in front of me — we were blown to the north.

So I made a big round turn and then made a second approach. We made it, but it was pretty scary. Never underestimate the power of the ocean.

The job can be very exciting but I like it when it's dull.

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