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Ice Dancer

The *Timberwind* comes home.

BY PATRICIA ERIKSON

CRAFTED IN 1931 from Maine white oak, the 70-foot *Portland Pilot* served heavy shipping traffic in Portland Harbor for nearly 40 years before being sold for a passenger schooner in Penobscot Bay. But before moving Downeast to begin a new life with a new name (the *Timberwind*), she exhibited bold heroism countless times in deadly weather when she was tapped by the Coast Guard to serve as an auxiliary patrol that protected the Maine coast from German U-boats during

World War II.

Thanks to a recent purchase by the **Portland Schooner Company** this summer, *Timberwind* has returned to her birthplace for the first time since 1969 and rekindled memories throughout the maritime community.

SAILING THROUGH MINEFIELDS

It was the winter of 1943. The crew of the schooner *Portland Pilot* had sailed into snotty weather. After navigating a tank-

er through the harbor's shallow waters to a point 10 miles offshore, a pilot needed to be picked up. Despite 40-knot winds, *Portland Pilot* pulled him safely aboard. Getting to port would be another matter. The sea heaved 20-25 foot waves. The mainsail—printed with PILOT on both sides in large letters—was close hauled. Lines and cables of the 70-foot vessel doubled in thickness with ice buildup. Waves broke over the stern, glazing the deck with treacherous ice. Pilots who served in these times told Cap-

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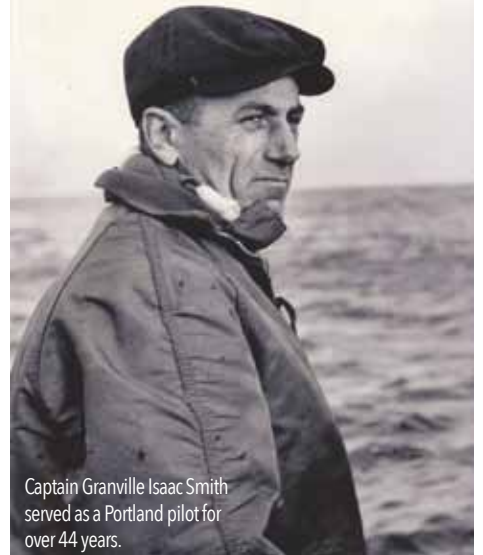
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Captain Granville Isaac Smith served as a Portland pilot for over 44 years.

tain Earl B. Walker that "when the winter weather was lousy, they could only stay out for 15 minutes at a time at the open helm. Then they had to relieve each other." Two crewmen waited below for their turn.

Visibility in the driving snow was so poor that Captain George Lubee sent Coast Guard signalman Daniel Ward forward to spot navigational buoys. Years later, Ward remembered, "I took my station but could not see the stern. My rubber gear was starting to freeze solid. I could not hear the bell buoys. I saw through the snow *surf breaking in front of the boat.*" The deadly shoreline of Portland Head. Yelling "Rocks ahead!" Ward slid back to the helm and pulled hard to starboard, knocking the Captain onto the slippery deck. Lucky to have missed a wreck, the crew faced an even greater problem in the snowstorm. Before *Portland Pilot* could return safely to port, she had to navigate anti-submarine defenses—underwater nets and buoyant minefields designed to snare the German U-boats that lurked offshore and terrorized the Atlantic seaboard. In the wild snow and wind, the crew blasted the horn, hoping to alert the minesweeper guarding the protection zone. Would they run afoul of the floating mines? The minesweeper heard the *Portland Pilot*, opened the nets, let the schooner pass into the harbor, and closed the nets behind her.

A STATE SHROUDED IN DARKNESS

Because of the U-boat threat in particular, the need to protect the coastline was the greatest it had been since the Confederates invaded Portland Harbor in 1863.

COURTESY GARY F. SMITH, PRESIDENT, PORTLAND MARINE SOCIETY (2)

Blackout orders required residents to cover windows, car headlights—even light-houses—at night. Disgruntled lobstermen endured the bisecting of their fishing grounds by submarine nets. Petroleum rationing allowed more tankers to convoy across the Atlantic and supply the Allied effort. Thousands of workers in the South Portland shipyards churned out Liberty Ships as fast as they could.

A DARING QUARTET

The four captains of the Portland Pilot Association—Captains Lube, McLain, Dorsy, and Martin—considered these “the terrible times when the military ran the harbor” during World War II. The military handed out radios to fishermen. The Coast Guard commissioned yachts, fishing boats, and sailboats to fortify coastal patrols. Ferries were commandeered to shuttle personnel between mainland and island military reservations. Each Portland harbor pilot was given the honorary commission of Lieutenant Commander (a “two-and-a-half strip-er”). The glossy black *Portland Pilot* with a red bottom was painted wartime gray and worked double duty—shuttling pilots and patrolling the harbor.

Even in normal times, “these were rugged Maine characters,” Captain Walker says. Harbor pilots worked year round—all hours, all weather, and always clad in white shirts and ties. They stationed themselves 10 miles offshore at a “lightship”—think floating lighthouse—to rendezvous with ships scheduled to sail into Portland.

DEADLY ICE, SLAPPING WAVES

A pilot, a bowman, and a sternman would climb from *Portland Pilot* into their dory. “In the winter,” Walker explains, “they’d

Ice coats the hulls of both *Portland Pilot* and her dory in the winter of 1933. Later, her bowsprit was added and the mainsail was gaff rigged.



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have to break ice off of the dory to use it." Then they rowed frantically to keep pace with the tanker, looking for the moment when the dory rose high on a wave. "It was a fair jump from the gunwale to the ship-side rope ladder. You either made it or you didn't," he says. If the timing was off, the pilot could be crushed between the two vessels or lost to the waves. A heavily-laden tanker meant only a five-foot rope ladder climb. An empty tanker? As much as a 30-to-40 foot climb.

IT'S ALL UP HERE

The pilots trusted each other—and *Portland Pilot*—with their lives. According to Walker, before they could earn their pilot's license, "We had to draw a nautical chart from memory on an exam—the least depths along courses, the locations of anchorages, ledges, bell buoys. Everything. From memory. The chart has to be in a harbor pilot's head."

LOCAL TOUGHNESS, AN OIL-FIRED HEART

While envisioning the *Portland Pilot* design requirements in 1931, harbor pilots spent countless hours talking over hull shapes and seaworthiness with each other and ship carpenters. One of the pilots cut a large stand of white oak on his Ossipee Mountain farm in South Waterboro, Maine, and



dried it in his barn until it was “hard as a rock.” Portland Engineering Company built her on Browne’s Wharf, occupied today by DiMillo’s floating restaurant. The pilots outfitted her with Portland Sailmaking Company sails and a cast-iron brute of an oil-fired stove.

AND FOR MY NEXT ACT

After nearly four decades of service and thousands of runs in and out of the harbor, the Portland pilots replaced her with a steel-hulled vessel that featured a helm closed to the weather. In 1969, they sold the 1931 *Portland Pilot* to Bill and Julie Alexander, who converted her into a passenger schooner and took her Downeast. There she stayed until her poignant return to Portland Harbor this summer as the newest member of Portland Schooner Co.’s fleet.

RESTORED TO LIFE IN THE HARBOR SHE LOVES

Co-owner **Michelle Thresher** says, “We are really excited about bringing *Timberwind* back to her home port of Portland. This vessel is a preserved chapter of the history of Portland’s working waterfront. We are proud to be her next. Passengers can go on board, hear the history, and get a feel for how an early 20th century pilot boat operated.” ■

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