



Iceman navigates the Arctic

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People come to Victoria to avoid winter. But Capt. David (Duke) Snider regularly seeks opportunities to leave his Island home to sail where water is crusty and often solid.

Snider is an ice pilot/navigator with 27 years at sea -- 10 of those in the ice. He divides his time between commanding Canadian Coast Guard ships and contracting out his ice expertise across the Northern Hemisphere. Between frosty assignments, he works on ice research, and writes about ice navigation in Canada. "I don't know what else I'd want to do, but go to sea and work the ice -- it's what I live for," said Snider.

Ice pilots give ship captains advice on the unique requirements of operating in ice. Having an ice pilot onboard is required by domestic and international regulations governing ships in ice-covered waters. To enable a ship to safely proceed where ice is an impediment, the pilot considers weather, preferred routing, ship characteristics and abilities and available icebreaker support. Each hour and each ship is different, according to Snider. "We operate 'in the moment.' Critical decisions are made in extreme conditions. Patience, adaptability and rapid decision-making are vital attributes."

Capt. Snider was honoured as the runner-up in the 2004 Annual Lloyd's List, Shipmaster of the Year Award (announced Feb. 19 in London), with global recognition for his service in the the Canadian Coast Guard and as an ice pilot. He came second to Commodore Ronald Warwick, the master of the Queen Mary 2.

Snider didn't intend an icy career, but a mentor was the catalyst. "Capt. Fred Wedgewood suggested that one of the best things I could do career-wise was take a turn on the Mackenzie River and in the Arctic," recalls Snider. "He said it was seat-of-the-pants operating up there, and you had to rely on your own skills more than anywhere else. He was right."

Since then Snider has toiled in the Arctic, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Atlantic Ocean, and Baltic Sea. He combatted ice aboard a variety of ships, some of which had no special reinforcement. Further skills were honed onboard MV Arctic -- then the world's highest ice-class cargo ship -- which operated in the ice before and after the seasonal presence of Coast Guard icebreakers. "Ice-classed ships, rather than ice-strengthened, are the most fun -- you can push the limits breaking ice, instead of avoiding it," said Snider.

One of Snider's memorable ice moments occurred in 2002 aboard RV Mirai (world's largest research ship), when it passed latitude 72-north in the Chukchi Sea. "We believe it's a record, reaching the farthest north position of a non-icebreaking research ship," said Snider. Scientists wanted to go even farther to collect water samples, but the temperature plummeted and ice re-formed as fast as Mirai spun around to create an opening. "Mirai's master asked, 'what do you think, pilot-san?' and I had to make the call," said Snider. "Mirai is only lightly ice-strengthened. We couldn't risk becoming ice-bound."

The outlook for ice pilots is globally warming, according to Snider. "Despite a hiatus in the Canadian Arctic due to mine closures, the tourist/cruise market is growing. A deep-water port is being considered for Bathurst Inlet. Shipping direct between Murmansk and Churchill is contemplated. East Coast winter shipping appears unabated. Petroleum resources, refinery and port facilities are developing in ice-infested areas." Ships for in-ice duties continue being built, including some hybrids that have a conventional bulbous bow for open water -- but in ice they proceed stern first, the stern being constructed as an icebreaking bow.

Increased demand for ice pilots means increased demands on the pilots. Ships are bigger; faster, operate with fewer people, carry more expensive cargoes and work under greater time constraints. "A mariner can no longer simply get by with a good ship and a star to steer by," says Snider.

Eric Manchester lives in Victoria.

Profile of David Snider

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