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Breaching a Frozen Blockade

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

The inch-thick steel bow plates on this 140-foot, bluff-nosed cutter thundered as it pulled away from the wharf of the United States Military Academy at dawn and quickly began "hardwater sailing," the term its commander uses to describe ice breaking.

"It's a lot rougher than softwater sailing," said Lt. Andrew Raiha, 31, the ship's captain, as the 700-ton vessel plowed into Worlds End, a serpentine turn in the river near West Point, 50 miles north of New York City, where it cuts through a gap in the 1,300-foot-tall ramparts of the Hudson Highlands.

After a brutal cold snap last month, the river started freezing so thick and fast that powerful tug boats pushing 1 million- to 3-million-gallon loads of heating oil and other fuels upriver were becoming trapped at this turn, where drifting ice floes piled up like plaque in an ailing artery.

The ice blockade on the Hudson, which developed over the last two weeks, is the worst in six years, according to Coast Guard officials.

With shortages of heating oil already growing in many parts of upstate New York and prices topping \$2 a gallon, the ice-breaking mission that the Coast Guard has had on the Hudson since 1933 has rarely been as urgent as it is now, Lieutenant Raiha said.

The mission was made more difficult after the Department of Transportation last year eliminated money for three 65-foot ice breakers that assist the Penobscot Bay and a sister ship, said Lt. Danna Lopez, a spokeswoman in the Coast Guard's regional headquarters on Staten Island.

The ships have been operating despite the budget cut, she said, with the Coast Guard absorbing the cost. "It costs \$1,194,000 to operate those boats for a season," she said of the smaller craft. "Compare that to the \$1.8 billion in fuel delivered during the last ice season up the Hudson. It's nothing to operate these things and the benefits are tremendous."

The benefits of the ice breakers did not need to be spelled out to Sloan Danenhower, the captain of the Mary Gellatly, a tug boat that was pushing a bargeload of 600,000 gallons of heating oil north toward Poughkeepsie -- or at least was trying to. Normally, there would have been a second tug hired to help out, Mr. Danenhower said, but there was so much demand for oil these days that every tug on the river was already working.

"I think I'm losing ground here," Mr. Danenhower called over the radio to the cutter. Halfway through the turn near West Point, the tug and its barge had come to a halt, even though the tug's twin propellers, driven by a 1,800-horsepower engine, churned the brown water furiously.

The reason became clear as the cutter circled back and the crew noted a 100-foot-long wedge of slushy ice stuck in front of the square bow of the barge.

The cutter's helmsman, Chief Petty Officer Deane Smith, drew the ship alongside the barge, then -- jiggling a joystick rather than the traditional wheel -- slid the black-hulled cutter ahead of the barge's bow, in a maneuver that left several coast guardsmen holding their breath.

"That's about as close as it gets," said Lieutenant Raiha, exhaling for the first time in half a minute as the cutter began breaking a channel and, with its propeller wash, blasting the wedge of ice away from the barge's bow. Roiling bubbles rose from air pumps in the cutter's keel, helping break up the ice.

The move paid off as the tug gained speed. "We're really moving now," Lieutenant Raiha said, clapping his fist into his palm. The speed indicator showed the ship was making 3.3 knots, a fast walking pace. The radio crackled with Mr. Danenhower's voice. "I really appreciate this," he said. "It's not often that I pay taxes and it comes right back to me."

The small convoy slowly nosed into the broad expanse of Newburgh Bay, passing Storm King Mountain, which was wrapped in a veil of snow that rapidly spread, erasing the shorelines and seemingly transporting the vessels to some Arctic wilderness. As the ship broke into a mile-wide plate of virgin ice, it sent black cracks speeding in every direction and turned the blank white surface into a crazy-quilt checkerboard.

The Coast Guard crew settled into a rhythm, trading places at the helm, noting the temperature -- 22 degrees and barely climbing -- watching ahead and behind, and absorbing the relentless vibrations, which made everything from ceiling panels to coffee cups squeak, jiggle and hum.

Shortly after noon, out of the snowy haze, a cluster of green storage tanks materialized on the eastern bank of the river. The cutter carved a channel and the barge was slowly nudged alongside an oil terminal. Waiting at the pier were three Nash Brothers heating-oil delivery trucks, ready to fill their 10,000-gallon tanks and head to homes around Dutchess County.

The Penobscot Bay retraced its path back to its temporary berth at West Point. Behind the ship, the ice floes closed in over the channel it had recently cut.

By nightfall, the frigid wind would be welding the seam into a frozen scar, ready to be cut open again in the morning.

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