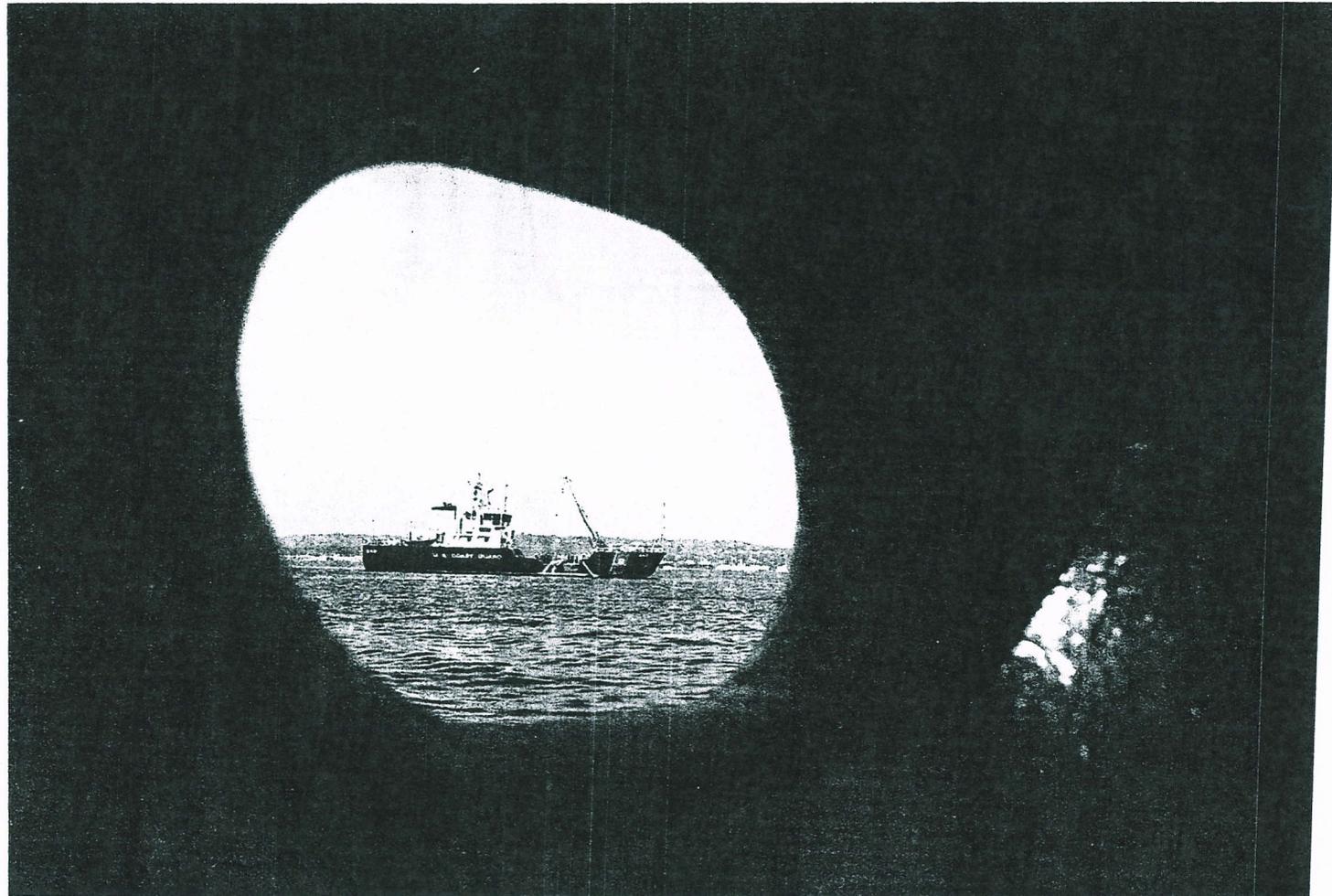


Up in the captain's chair it's



PHOTOS BY BEN FREDMAN/THE STAR-L

Viewed from the Marine Spill Response Corporation's boat, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Katherine Walker passes through the waters of the Upper New York Bay yesterday during an exercise simulating an oil spill.

... a woman!

High school girls look at their options

BY SULEMAN DIN
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Edison high school students Kali Turner and Karishma Satpute passed burly men heaving rope into a large winch as they climbed aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Katherine Walker.

They headed past the mess galley, and went up a flight of metal stairs until they reached the operations deck — a wide, window-paneled room featuring an array of instruments, computers and controls to guide the 175-foot ship. In the captain's chair giving orders was Lt. Amy Florentino, a 29-year-old sailor from Connecticut, and 12-year veteran of the Coast Guard.

"It was really eye-opening to see her, because most of the ship was run by men," said Turner, 14, a student at Bishop Ahr High School. "It's inspiring."

Turner and Satpute were part of an all-girls student group from Edison in the STEP program, which previews science and technology careers for women. The program helps girls to see career options first-hand as they consider their futures.

Yesterday, the program took them aboard the Katherine Walker, which primarily manages all the buoys floating around New York Harbor, Long Island Sound and the Hudson and East rivers. The ship is named after the famous keeper of Robbins Reef lighthouse.

When a storm shifts the harbor floor's sediment, it is up to Florentino's crew to guide traffic to water lanes safe to travel. When a buoy needs maintenance, her crew hauls it out and onto the deck — a task neither easy nor safe, since each buoy weighs roughly 18,000 pounds.

"It's like fixing the roadways," Florentino said. "And there's an amazing amount of traffic, from barges to oil tankers. This is the area's backbone of commerce. For every iPod or pair of shoes, it comes through here."

The students got to see the Katherine Walker practice another of its key functions yesterday — instant oil spill cleanup. The ship may quickly deploy plastic booms from its sides, which allow it capture, then suction up polluted water.

Crew members assembled on deck, moving the 45-foot orange plastic booms to the ship's starboard side. Each member wore different colored helmets: white for safety, blue for labor, yellow for foremen, and green for the ship's newest hands. They attached ropes to the boom and the ship's forebitts, and lowered a steel boom arm to the water. The boom was set afloat, forming a U shape.

The process is not cheap. Factoring in manpower and resources, such an operation runs between \$3,500 to \$5,000 an hour, said U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Craig Gilbert, who was in from New England to observe the practice run.

Also participating in the operation was the New Jersey Responder, a dedicated oil spill removal vessel run by the Marine Spill Response Corporation. A gleaming 210-foot blue vessel worth more than \$20 million, it has the ability to suction up to 4,000 barrels of oil from a spill. It was among the ships responding to a large crude oil spill in the Arthur Kill in 2003.

Both ships are highly automated. Long gone from the operations deck are the big wooden wheels. Headings are inputted by little dials and digital displays, and levers no bigger than a hand steer the entire ship.

Florentino smiles as she discusses how easy it is to navigate with the ship's controls. Gilbert, though, said Florentino made a difficult task look easy.

"It's like driving a big building on ice," he said. "It doesn't stop, it's always moving, you just have to make it go in the right direction. That requires tremendous skill."

Being at sea is tiring and can be isolating. The visiting students heard that among the qualities of a sailor is the ability to be able to work with others. For her fellow cuttermen serving aboard the Katherine Walker, Florentino said it was the life they wanted.

"We were drawn by the romantic idea of being a mariner," she said.

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