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Moving Up the Hudson Against the Floe; After Two Easy Winters, a Fleet of Icebreakers Is Back on the River

By ROBERT F. WORTH

This 700-ton Coast Guard icebreaker set out just after sunrise, with the temperature hovering between 2 and 3 degrees and a few stars still visible in the sky above the Catskill Mountains.

Its mission was to rescue a tugboat and barge that were stuck just south of Kingston, casualties of the ice that formed on the river this past week.

After two mild winters, the Coast Guard's New York icebreaking fleet is back on the job. Its three large cutters are equipped with hulls thick enough to cut through ice up to 30 inches thick. They keep a channel open for the barges and tankers that carry oil, gas and industrial supplies up the Hudson.

As it plowed along, the cutter crashed through a glittering field of ice 12 to 18 inches thick, making a sound like waves breaking on shore.

On either side of the bow, cracks spread outward like lightning bolts, and shards skittered across the hard surface. A 10-ton air compressor on the ship's fantail forced clouds of bubbles under the ice to help break it up.

Closing in on its goal, the 140-foot cutter turned and passed the port side of the stranded barge, which was carrying almost three million gallons of gasoline and oil up to Albany. Then the cutter wheeled around and passed the barge on its starboard side, its wake creating a frosty soup.

At last the tugboat, the Coral Sea, was free. Its captain, Bill Papa, told his Coast Guard rescuers that he had not seen ice like this for several years.

"I'm trying to figure out where I can go here and not get stuck," Mr. Papa's voice crackled over the two-way radio.

There will be many more stranded vessels in the coming weeks, said Lt. Eric R. St. Pierre, the commander of the Penobscot Bay. Even if the weather warms, newly formed floes of ice -- some of them dislodged by the icebreakers -- will float southward and jam up the river's narrow stretches, he said.

Already, ice floating down the Hudson has begun affecting commuter ferry service in New York Harbor.

[Three commuter ferry piers were closed yesterday: Pier A, near Battery Park; Pier 84, at West 144th Street; and Pier 63, at West 22nd Street. The pier terminal in Ossining, N.Y., has been closed since Jan. 15, and Belford Pier in Sandy Hook, N.J., is also closed, said Pat Smith, a spokesman for New York Waterway. The Staten Island ferry has not been affected.]

Ice in the harbor has also caused ferry delays, Mr. Smith said. It is not a serious threat to the aluminum hulls of commercial ferries, he said, but it could damage their propellers.

The Coast Guard spends about \$2 million each winter to operate its New York icebreakers, which include three 140-foot vessels and three smaller ones that work closer to shore. In the coldest years, it rescues about 100 trapped barges, said Bernard Reiner, a statistician with the Coast Guard.

About 650,000 people in the region rely on these barges to supply them with home-heating oil, and keeping the supply lines open is important to the economies of New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont.

"It's the largest fuel-oil delivery system in the United States," Mr. Reiner said.

After rescuing the Coral Sea, the Penobscot Bay continued northward, cutting a channel for the barge to pass through. With subzero winds buffeting the ship, its crew stayed inside, intermittently munching biscuits and watching ESPN and MTV on two large televisions in the mess room and the lounge.

On the bridge, a dazzling array of computer screens tracked the ship's progress via radar and satellites. But the officers still kept a

handwritten log of weather conditions, including water and air temperatures and minute descriptions of the ice they encountered.

Most of it was "brash," the technical term for the masses of drift ice that make the river resemble a vast road littered with quartz gravel.

But there are also gauzy layers of "frazil," the first phase of ice development. It is sometimes called "grease ice," because it gives water an oily or opaque appearance. The flat pieces of ice that form afterward are "cake ice." And the larger flat segments, like vast lily pads, are "pancake ice."

After cutting a channel all the way to the Port of Albany, the Penobscot Bay turned south again as the sun sank toward the horizon. Within a few miles, the dark path it had cleared earlier had already begun to freeze over with new ice.

Like a patient surgeon, the Penobscot Bay will soon be back at work, cutting circles around trapped vessels and clearing a ribbon of moving water north to Albany.

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