

# Pilotage

*One of the oldest yet least-understood maritime professions.*

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*President*  
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## The Pilot

State-licensed compulsory pilots are experts in all navigational aspects of a local port or waterway who temporarily go aboard vessels to guide them into and out of port. This is in contrast to individuals who may obtain a federal pilot endorsement or otherwise serve as a "pilot" while a member of a ship's crew.

Rear Admiral Brian M. Salerno, the Coast Guard's Deputy Commandant for Operations, described the work of a pilot as follows:

"Each day, pilots are asked to take all sizes and types of vessels through narrow channels in congested waters where one miscalculation could mean disaster. They are trained, highly professional individuals, whose judgments must be spot-on for the hundreds of decisions they must make at every turn to bring a vessel safely to its berth or out to sea."



**Captain Stuart Lilly of the Biscayne Bay Pilots mans the conning station. All photos courtesy of APA.**

Twelve-foot waves break over the small wheelhouse as the pilot boat makes its way toward the waiting 1,000-foot foreign flag container ship. When the pilot boat arrives alongside the ship, the state-licensed compulsory pilot steps out into the frigid night air and freshening 20-knot winds to evaluate how best to safely time her step from the pilot boat onto the pilot ladder and commence the several-story climb up the hull of the huge container ship. After carefully scaling the long rope ladder, she steps aboard the ship and proceeds to the bridge.

Once on the bridge, the pilot goes through an exchange of important information with the ship's master, which must be done carefully because the foreign master's first language is not English. During this two-way exchange, the pilot discusses with the master (who may never have been to this port) how she will navigate the ship in the approaches, through the channels, and to the pier. Among other matters, she informs the master of any relevant local port peculiarities or navigational nuances, as well as anticipated traffic. She asks the master if there is anything she should be aware

of regarding the ship's maneuverability or equipment and then surveys the ship's bridge team and equipment.

After this "master-pilot" exchange, the pilot assumes navigational control of the vessel and begins directing its movement by giving helm and engine commands. While the pilot has made this trip hundreds of times, this is no routine task, considering the ship is far wider than originally envisioned by the channel designers and the draft of more than 46 feet leaves little space between the hull and the bottom of the 47-foot dredged channel.

Scenarios like the one described unfold thousands of times each year as state-licensed pilots around the country use in-depth local knowledge, seasoned navigational and shiphandling expertise, and informed independent judgment to guide ocean-going foreign trade ships of all sizes and types into and out of the constricted and often shoaled channels of America's ports.

#### **Shared Authority, Singular Purpose**

Even though pilots are a critical component of safe and efficient maritime transportation of people and cargoes, and have been operating in port areas for hundreds of years, there still exists some confusion and misunderstanding regarding the role and function of pilots.

When a ship is in U.S. compulsory pilotage waters, responsibility for its safe navigation is shared between the pilot and the vessel master. A pilot, when aboard a ship and engaged in pilotage duties, directs the ship's navigation. The pilot's authority to direct the ship's movements is, however, subject to the master's overall command authority and responsibility for the ship's safety.

The pilot and master share a common purpose: Guiding the vessel safely to its berth or out to sea. The state-licensed pilot, whose primary responsibility is to protect the interests of the state that issues his or her license, is expected to act in the public interest and to exercise independent judgment to protect the property, lives, environment, and economic well-being of a port area.

Since the pilot is not a crewmember, he or she is insulated from the economic pressures on shipping interests, and directs the movement and navigation of the ship in a manner that protects the marine environment and maintains navigational safety while facilitating waterborne commerce.



**Captain Morgan Hoburg, San Francisco Bar Pilots, steps from the pilot boat to the pilot ladder.**

#### **American Pilots' Association Guidance**

It is not unusual in some segments of the maritime community to hear a pilot described as merely an "advisor" to the master. That description, in my opinion, is misleading and unfortunate and does not accurately capture what is expected of a state-licensed pilot. Additionally, this description is not consistent with principles of U.S. pilotage law; it is counter to mandates given to vessel masters under international regulations and doesn't reflect how a pilot carries out his or her duties on the bridge of a ship.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to the overall navigational safety of a vessel that the master, bridge team, and other vessel in-



terests have an understanding of—and respect for—the role and responsibilities of the pilot.

While not having the legal effect of case law, agency rulings, or regulations, the American Pilots' Association statement on the role and responsibilities of the pilot, developed in cooperation with the shipping community, summarizes the legal responsibilities and duties of the pilot and is a good reference in the event of any confusion or misunderstanding regarding the proper role of the pilot.

**About the author:**

Captain Michael R. Watson, a graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, has been a pilot and leader in the piloting profession for more than 40 years. He was president of the Association of Maryland Pilots for 18 years and has been president of the American Pilots' Association since 2000. In 2006 he became the first American in over 30 years to be elected president of the International Maritime Pilots' Association (IMPA). He was re-elected IMPA president in 2010.

**Endnote:**

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see *Ralli v. Troop*, 1 U.S. 386, 15 S. CT. 657 (1895); *The China*, 74 U.S. 53 (1868); IMO Assembly Resolution A.960(23) "Recommendations on Training and Certification and Operational Procedures for Maritime Pilots Other than Deep-Sea Pilots," adopted in 2003; IMO Seafarers' Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Code, as amended, section A-VIII/2, part 3-1; and Commandant Decision, May 14, 2001, Re: M/V *Skava*, 2001.

### The Respective Roles and Responsibilities of the Pilot and the Master

*Navigation of a ship in United States pilotage waters is a shared responsibility between the pilot and the master/bridge crew. The compulsory state pilot directs the navigation of the ship, subject to the master's overall command of the ship and the ultimate responsibility for its safety. The master has the right, and in fact the duty, to intervene or to displace the pilot in circumstances where the pilot is manifestly incompetent or incapacitated or the vessel is in immediate danger (in extremis) due to the pilot's actions. With that limited exception, international law requires the master and/or the officer in charge of the watch to cooperate closely with the pilot and maintain an accurate check on the ship's position and movement.*

*State-licensed pilots are expected to act in the public interest and to maintain a professional judgment that is independent of any desires that do not comport with the needs of maritime safety. In addition, licensing and regulatory authorities, state and federal, require compulsory pilots to take all reasonable actions to prevent ships under their navigational control from engaging in unsafe operations. Because of these duties, a compulsory state pilot is not a member of the bridge "team." Nevertheless, a pilot is expected to develop and maintain a cooperative, mutually supportive working relationship with the master and the bridge crew in recognition of the respective responsibility of each for safe navigation.*

—Official APA statement



A small pilot boat from the Virginia Pilot Association makes its way to sea to transport a pilot to a merchant ship.