



Chris Bonanno, FLORIDA TODAY 6:16 p.m. EDT August 20, 2015

## Port harbor pilots have dangerous but critical mission



Captain Ben Borgie

Canaveral Pilots Association helps ships into Port Canaveral. By Chris Bonanno, FLORIDA TODAY Posted July 19, 2015.

According to an economic impact study of Port Canaveral, \$1.1 billion dollars in revenue is created each year by the activities in the port and that relates to more than 13,000 jobs.

Would you believe that a huge portion of that wouldn't come to fruition if it weren't for a small group of harbor pilots and boat drivers that perform potentially dangerous activities each day?

The Canaveral Pilots Association is a group of seven licensed pilots, one pilot in training and four boat drivers that help guide large boats, including cruise and cargo ships, into port.

"Very few people know about the harbor pilot business," said Captain Ben Borgie, one of the seven licensed pilots currently with the group. "There's less than 100 of us in Florida, and less than 1,000 of us in the country."

The risks they take are at times remarkable. Responsible for helping to guide ships into the port, a boat driver will take a pilot out about six to seven miles offshore to meet a ship that he wishes to board. From there, the boat driver will pull the boat alongside of the boat, where the pilot will jump on a rope ladder that's been deployed by the incoming ship at which point the pilot must climb up the side of the ship. They'll then go to the bridge of the ship where they assess the situation and navigate the boat in, if conditions are met.

It's as risky as it sounds.

"It can be very dangerous and pilots in Florida have lost their lives during that transfer," Borgie said. "When you think about it, the ship is rolling and the pilot boat you're on is not rolling in sync with the ship. It's a smaller boat. It's reacting to waves differently.

"So as the boat's going up and down, when you make the jump, you have to time the jump to the ladder when you're at the top of the swell, then you've got to jump and grab on and then the boat drops out from underneath you. If you don't time your jump right, or if you miss the ladder, you end up in the water being crushed between the side of the ship and pilot boat."

According to [floridapilots.com](http://floridapilots.com), four pilots and a boat driver were killed during transfers between January 2006 and February 2007, and in 2013, a harbor pilot fell off a rope ladder and drowned.



(Photo: Captain Rich Grimison/for FLORIDA TODAY)

There have been some scary instances for Borgie, too.

"I've been on cruise ships where I've lost power and had to drop the anchor," Borgie said. "I've been on oil tankers where the rudder, the steering device, stuck hard over. I had to take emergency action ... using tugboats and dropping anchors and praying to God that he would have mercy on me ... you didn't hear about it, so I guess he did."

There's plenty of pressure not just on the pilot but on the boat driver as well, says Captain Mike Rigby, a boat driver, and it takes extensive training to be able to perform those duties.

"There has to be a level of trust between the boat driver and the pilot, and that trust is accomplished over time in training, coming out and driving the boat and learning how to come alongside, handling the boats and things like that," Rigby said. "You just don't come off the street and start driving a pilot boat. You have to train."

The job of the boat driver is also important even after the pilot has boarded an incoming ship, Rigby notes, as incoming boats will have him on radar and vice versa.

"They're utilizing me as an extra navigational aid in order to get the ships out of the harbor," Rigby said.

To become a pilot or boat driver, one must apply for a position and have the experience and time on ships.

The association is completely privately-funded despite being certified and regulated by the state.

"We get paid 100 percent on commission," Borgie said. "Our fees are not taxpayer fees. Some people say you're state pilots, you're state employees. That's not true. We are completely independent contractors and we make our fees through pilotage fees that we charge to the vessel, and the fees are based on the vessel gross tonnage."

To that end, the group recently purchased a new boat that debuted in December, named "Timacua," after the Native American Indian tribe. The boat, according to business manager Doug Mutter, was sorely needed.

"Right now, our model is that we buy a new pilot boat every 15 years," he said. "The one that we replaced was well over 20. It was almost 25 years old."

The boat is 45 feet long and has one propeller out the back and can reach a top of speed of 25 knots, or a little under 29 mph. It's also replete with navigational technology and what Mutter says is a notch that is cut out of the boat's fendering that makes it safer for pilots.

But it wasn't cheap.

"This boat was a major investment," Borgie said. "This boat was almost a million dollars and that's all private funds from our small business. That's not taxpayer money, that's not grant money, that's private investment and one of the reasons we decided to do this investment is because this port is growing rapidly.

"... As pilots, we need to be able to support that growth," he added.

Borgie said it's all about one thing.

"It's all about safety, safety, safety. That is paramount to everything else," he said.

Those interested in finding out more information about the Canaveral Pilots Association can do so by visiting [canaveralpilots.com](http://canaveralpilots.com).



Captain Ben Borgie and Captain Mike Rigby prepare to leave port aboard "Timacua." (Photo: Chris Bonanno).