



**Sea Salts**  
**Harbor pilots are key ingredient of port's success**  
**By Jameson Gregg**  
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It's a dog day of summer, a Friday afternoon, and Capt. Bruce Fendig is downtown having a leisurely cup of java while a lady waits at a dock across town.

Downing the last of his coffee, he asks for a refill.

"Ships run on part diesel and part coffee, you know," he explains.

He glances at his watch, slips on his sunglasses and strides to the company car parked close by. He has a 15-minute drive and five minutes to spare. He hops in and turns the ignition key. The battery is dead as a mackerel.

Welcome to another adventurous day in the life of a harbor pilot.

Fendig, a pilot since 1989, has a date to meet the M.V. Talabot. She is a cargo ship, a RoRo (short for roll on/roll off cargo) capable of holding 3,900 cars in her belly. He's to take her back to sea, but his own car trouble threatens to leave him high and dry. He radios the Brunswick Pilots' office on Glynn Avenue and a back-up car races to the rescue.

He speeds down U.S. 17, turns right onto Colonel's Island, chats briefly with the security guards at the gate and races through a sea of cars behind tall fences parked in neat rows – Range Rover, Volvo, Jaguar, Mercedes and more.

Fendig approaches Dock 3, where the Talabot waits. He parks and hustles to her side, his windbreaker flapping and coffee sloshing from the hole in the top of the paper cup.

Today, the weather is clear. In the past pilots have had to suspend service due to inclement weather – high winds, zero visibility, heavy rains.

"The most difficult decisions for pilots are those right on the bubble of go/no go," Fendig says. Because time is money for all involved, no go is a rare call.

"Sometimes the sea can be pretty rough," says Senior Pilot Lawrence Gray, "but you still have to go. We always have a bucket in heavy seas because a pilot can't leave the bridge just because he's seasick."

Once on the dock, Fendig exchanges howdy-do's with the longshoremen standing alongside the ship – two bow, two stern – who are waiting to release the cables and lines.

Up the gangway, he is greeted by a jump-suited man who announces the pilot's boarding into a hand-held radio. They squeeze like sardines into a tight elevator for the 100-foot climb, equal to the height of the St. Simons Lighthouse. Once at the top, they make their way through a catacomb of stairs and hallways to the bridge.

The ship's master, Capt. Jaldeep Gode from Bombay, India, in proper King's English and high-pitched Indian accent, happily reunites with Fendig, who piloted the Talabot into port earlier in the day.

The Brunswick Pilots' scheduling philosophy is, "You bring her in, you take her out." That way the organization ensures that the pilot guiding a ship back to sea is familiar with both the captain and his vessel. On board ship, a harbor pilot does not outrank the captain. He is in charge of the ship's navigation while in compulsory pilotage waters.

On the Talabot's bridge, Fendig commences barking terse navigational orders – engine speed and rudder angle – the most critical orders given by a pilot. A jump-suited able seaman executes the orders as the mate watches closely over his shoulder. The captain paces, watching instruments, doing paperwork, eyeing the river, conversing with mates moving on and off the bridge.

Fendig monitors the ship's true course on the gyro repeater at the binnacle of the wheelhouse and notes that she's a little sluggish today. Behind him, the row of instruments spins and glows and clicks. He monitors them regularly.

"Instruments are just tools," he says, "only tools. They don't account for wind and current or the feel of the ship. A pilot has to have a certain personality and keen situational awareness."

Plenty of danger exists, visible and invisible.

One of the biggest looms ahead, 185 feet overhead. Sailing out of Colonel's Island, the Sidney Lanier Bridge approaches quickly. There she stands, white sails all aglisten in the westerly sun. Cars drone in both directions across the bridge, like ants on the march to food.

As the Talabot eases away from the dock, Fendig begins lining her up with the center span of the Sidney Lanier Bridge. The Talabot is two-and-a-half football fields long and tall as any building in town, but she clears the underbelly of the naked, suspended slab of concrete with ease.

The widely set piers of the bridge offer passing ships horizontal clearance galore. Nevertheless, the Talabot's anchors are manned until the ship safely clears the bridge. Should she stray from the channel, the anchors may be deployed in an effort to stop the ship, rather like slamming on the brakes of a car to avoid collision.

Making the first turn on her seabound trip, the ship slowly rolls to port then corrects to starboard like a lumbering fat man.

"This turn is particularly tricky," says Fendig.

Talabot's draft is 30 feet, 6 inches. She must avoid a 30-foot shoal.

Completing the dog-leg left, the ship clears the north end of Jekyll Island, crosses the Intracoastal Waterway and begins the dog-leg right which positions her in the St. Simons Sound between St. Simons and Jekyll islands.

A 50-foot yellow pilot boat comes scrambling out of the Frederica River after Talabot. With a 20-knot nor'easter blowing, Fendig will take the ship up a stitch to maintain steerage.

At the St. Simons Island Lighthouse, he cuts loose with three long blasts on the ship's whistle.

"We only do it during gentlemen's hours," he says with a reverent smile. "It's a 100-year-old tradition. It used to signal the location of the ship to the pilot house. Later, before cell phones, three blasts would let your wife know when to pick you up."

In open water, now full steam ahead, the water rages past Talabot's hull and the waves crash harmlessly against her side, no match for this giant. The pilot boat behind is catching air with each wave.

Ten miles past the lighthouse, the sea buoy "STS", the good-bye buoy, looms. There, Talabot slows but does not stop for Fendig's exit.

He negotiates several flights of steep stairs, down into the bowels of the ship. At the hull on portside, he climbs down a couple of metal tubes with steps onto a small platform looking down at the pilot boat below, bobbing in the rough sea, kissing the side of the ship with its thick black wrap-around fender.

A 50-foot rope-ladder is suspended against the ship's side, from the platform down to the pilot boat. The Jacob's ladder, that death-defying last (or first) leg of the trip, is designed by international standards. Pilots don't normally travel on one more than 30 feet up or down one, "but don't take a misstep, or it could be your last," warns Edwin Fendig III, Bruce's brother and fellow pilot.

Bruce Fendig makes it down the rope ladder and hops onto the bow of the pilot boat. He holds tight as the boat eases away from the Talabot, bound now for Norfolk, Va., then Baltimore and a transatlantic crossing to England, Germany, Belgium and ports beyond.

Bruce Fendig throws a farewell wave to the ship's captain towering a hundred feet above. Ten pounding miles later, he's back at the St. Simons Island Pier.

Jeff Glenn, captain of the pilot launch, watches for shark fishing lines as he eases the boat's nose up to the ladder affixed to the fender system of the pier.

Bruce Fendig climbs off the boat and onto the pier, walking past an ice cream-eating gauntlet of curious tourists toward a truck he hopes will cooperate.

### *Porthole to the Past*

Sea-going vessels have lingered on the horizon off the Golden Isles coast at least since the mid-1500s when the Spanish explorers came in tall-masted sailing ships. When they learned to navigate the bar guarding the harbor, which would later be named the Port of Brunswick, they discovered a natural harbor, a deep water port, very close to the open sea.

English settlers were likely the port's first European cargo in the mid-1700s. In 1789, President George Washington signed an act authorizing the Port of Brunswick as a seaport, along with New York, Philadelphia, Boston and others.

The march of progress is reflected in the sea-faring ships which have called on Brunswick – from sail to steam engine to Liberty Ships to RoRos. The precious cargo also tells an historic tale – from English settlers to slaves to timber to present day rolling stock and bulk freight.

The captains of sea-going ships cannot foresee the dangerous nuances of every port of call – the shoals and sandbars, the currents and tides. So a profession was born in this country, one already established in other countries, that of harbor pilot, an expert

in local waters. For a fee, he boards a ship and navigates her through the channel to her berth in the port, and out to sea again.

A harbor pilot's skill base is different from the captains of the ocean blue.

"A captain gets nervous when he sees land and a pilot gets nervous when he can't see land," explains retired Brunswick Pilot Edwin Fendig Jr.

Before telegraph, in the sailing ship era, Brunswick pilots aggressively and competitively hailed inbound ships, signaling with flags, to see if a pilot was needed. In the mid-1800s, the Brunswick Pilots organized to reduce costs and provide better service.

The number of Brunswick Pilots swelled to 15 in the late 1800s as the timber trade boomed and as steam ships were replacing sailing ships. The number is now six.

Today, the legal threshold for compulsory pilotage is 200 gross tons. How big is that? The M.V. Talabot, a typical car carrier, is 55,000 gross tons. The Emerald Princess II, on the other hand, a gambling ship that docks just southwest of the Sidney Lanier Bridge, is just under 100 gross tons and does not require a pilot.

Piloting, like so many other maritime occupations, is a skill often handed down from fathers to sons. Bruce Fendig and his brother, Edwin Fendig III, learned much of piloting through long-term osmosis from their father, Capt. Edwin Fendig Jr.

Senior Pilot Lawrence Gray, who worked alongside the elder Fendig for 39 years, was hired as a Brunswick Pilot in 1962 by Edwin Fendig Jr. and Capt. Alfred Brockinton. Gray is the third generation in his family to work the local waters. His father, Edward R. Gray, ran the first diesel tug in the harbor in 1929.

"I feel like I'm the last of the Mohicans," says Gray. "My father said we used to have wooden ships and iron men. Now we have iron ships and wooden men."

These days, apprentice pilots usually come with college degrees from a maritime academy, but still require plenty of on-the-job training.

Gray and the Fendig brothers are striving to pass the knowledge to the newer pilots – John Biemler, Jonathan Tennant and Jamie Kavanaugh.

"My dad says it's 75 percent art and 25 percent science," Bruce Fendig says.