

**“Ultimate Responsibility”. My Journey Becoming a Navigation Officer:** People often ask me why I wanted to become a Marine Navigation Officer. My father has been a Master for many years, and from a young age I have always admired his position and professionalism as a Captain. But there are other reasons why I have chosen this path; I love the beauty and power of the ocean, the sheer size and engineering of ships, the practice of marine navigation, and I love the responsibility. Sailing as a Cadet I often heard the phrase “ah Cadet, no responsibilities, easy life”. I hated this statement. I wanted responsibility; I strived for responsibility; without some sort of responsibility what is your purpose onboard a vessel? Being a Navigation Officer you have lots of responsibilities, you are responsible for the lives of the sailors that sleep soundly below the bridge, you are responsible for the safe navigation of the ship, you are responsible for protecting the marine environment, and you are responsible for contributing to the safe and effective operation of the ship.

My journey to becoming a Navigation Officer started in September 2012 at British Columbia's Institute of Technology (BCIT), in North Vancouver BC, Canada. For my first semester of school I was given a general overview of the various aspects of shipping and navigation. After 6 months I was off to join my first vessel *Americas Spirit* in Whiffen Head, Newfoundland. I remember the day clearly, it was cold and grey outside, I was driven to an oil terminal that felt like it was in the middle of nowhere and was greeted by a 260m long Aframax conventional oil tanker. Walking up the gangway I felt like I was going to be sick. A flood of emotions were running through my body, excitement, nervousness, anticipation, and sadness for knowing the fact I would be away from the people and things I loved back at home. After 5 months of sailing up and down the East coast of North America it was time to come back home for another school term at BCIT. My second school term was much more valuable. I had some sailing experience under my belt I could better relate and understand topics. Before I knew it I was back out to sea, this time on *Matterhorn Spirit*.

I joined her on May 7, 2014 in Brofjorden, Sweden. I was onboard her for 7 months sailing all over the North Sea and Baltic. I was on a mission, a mission to get as close to that officer role as possible as this was to be my last time sailing as a Cadet. I was expected to act like an officer and that is what I did. Even while disposing of garbage when in port, while the wind was blowing nasty food juices in my face, in my mind I was there acting as the responsible officer, overseeing the operation and making sure the garbage was disposed in accordance with statutory and terminal requirements. On December 13, 2014 I returned home to Victoria BC, Canada, where I began my final school term at BCIT as a Cadet. It was a



very important year for me. At the end of the 7 month long semester I would face my oral examination to become an officer. I studied hard, I put in the effort, and on July 20, 2015 I officially became a Navigating Officer. I stepped out of that Transport Canada building and on to the brick road of Government Street with a piece of paper in my hand, a piece of paper that said I could legally hold a navigation watch on any size of vessel anywhere in the world.

I was ready to go. I couldn't wait to get out to sea as a Navigation Officer. I waited for what felt like forever, until finally one day I received notice from my company. It wasn't the news I wanted to hear but a few days later I was on a plane to Manila in the Philippines to do some company specific training. I was there for little over 3 weeks doing mostly simulator courses. They put us through the paces, navigating through some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world in all kinds of conditions. It may have been all simulated, but it felt very real, and I left the Philippines with even more confidence than before. I waited a few more weeks at home and then one day it came. I was to join *Galway Spirit* as she was passing through the Strait of Gibraltar en route to Rotterdam. A few days later on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 just before midnight, I found myself on a small tugboat heading towards *Galway Spirit*. As I was sitting in the rolling tugboat a flood of emotions washed over me much like my first time joining a vessel on *Americas Spirit*. I was excited to finally be joining a vessel with a proper stripe on my epaulets, but with that stripe came a whole lot more responsibilities and expectations. This is what I had been striving for since the beginning, but as we approached closer and closer to *Galway Spirit*, the pitted feeling in my stomach became stronger and stronger. I signed the Articles of Agreement early morning November 14<sup>th</sup> and I was officially a Third Officer.

The responsibility I was looking for hit me hard. In my handover I read my duties and responsibilities. The list seemed to never end. My primary duty and responsibility was to hold a navigation watch while out at sea and a cargo watch while in port from 8-12 am and pm. But that was only the tip of the iceberg, my secondary duties extended from port papers and ships administration to keeping inventory and organization of flags and day shapes. I remember my first navigational watch as an Officer. It was on that same day that I joined *Galway Spirit*. Saturday's for a Third Officer are generally a busy day and not the ideal conditions for a first time Officer. Emergency systems are tested, alarms going off everywhere, fire zones needing to be isolated. It was the quickest 4 hours of my life. After watch there is still always much work to do. I had to familiarize myself with all my secondary duties, all of the ship's computer systems and where I could find the information I needed to do my jobs. I remember feeling completely overwhelmed, like I was never going to remember everything and wouldn't be able to do my job. But with time these tasks became almost second nature.

Standing watch on the bridge felt right, it was what I had been striving for. I would find myself smiling from ear to ear for no apparent reason, just because of the fact that I was happy to be doing what I loved. For my first few days as a

Navigation Officer I simply just had to follow the passage plan, maintain a good lookout, actively assessing the situation, using all available means to determine the vessel was safe. There were a few overtaking/being-overtaken situations but nothing exciting, as we steamed north off the coast of Portugal and across the Bay of Biscay. But soon



we were in the English Channel and transiting through the Dover Straights where my knowledge and skills were really to be put to the test. I remember my first collision avoidance situation where I was required to take substantial action. Leaving the port of Rotterdam, following the Traffic Separation System (TSS), I detected a vessel crossing from starboard in the approaching junction. The Closest Point of Approach (CPA) was zero. We were steaming half ahead, there was a vessel overtaking me on my starboard side. I weighed out my options; reduce speed

further, alter boldly to starboard to pass astern - but after accessing the situation I determined that I would be able to pass at a safe CPA ahead by increasing to full ahead and a slight alteration of course to port. This I saw to be the safest option due to the overtaking vessel on my starboard quarter and the large amount of vessels astern of me that would also have to overtake in a narrow traffic lane if I had reduced speed drastically. It was when I put that telegraph to full ahead and the rudder to port that my heart really started racing, as the situation unfolded and I saw that I was passing safely ahead I could relax and I left the bridge that evening with a boost in confidence.

Throughout the next few months my experience and skills grew as a navigation officer. I was presented with different situations in which I had to apply the different rules of the collision regulations. I became more and more familiar with the ship's equipment on board. I'll always remember the first time I called the Master to the bridge. Our ship was awaiting orders, steaming dead slow into the heavy wind and seas making about 1.5kts over the ground. Two vessels were approaching from my port side; one was overtaking the other, both with zero CPA. Rainsqualls were passing every 5 minutes or so, at one moment visibility could be over 10 miles and the next less than 2. As the two vessels approached it became clear the one would pass ahead of me but the other continued to maintain her course and speed. I waited until she was at a 2.5-mile range and when I could see she still hadn't taken any action, I called the Captain. We both contemplated our options, we couldn't reduce speed as we were already barely moving, increasing speed would reduce the CPA with the vessel passing ahead, an alteration of course to starboard and running parallel to the two vessels seemed the best option but would still result in a close quarter situation. I was standing by the horn and just about to blast 5 short when finally she altered her course to starboard and it became clear she was going to pass astern. Both vessels passed our ship at the exactly same time, one ahead and one astern, CPA both less than a mile. That situation got my heart pumping and made my palms sweat. When I looked over at the Captain I couldn't read any emotion on his face. No sign of nervousness, but also not too relaxed, just calm and collected, the face of years and years of experience. The situation that day was a perfect example of the importance of calling the Master in good time whenever in doubt. While holding watch you are the Master's representative, the responsibility of the safe navigation of the ship is with you, but overall the responsibility is with the Master, he will be the first to be questioned and convicted in the event of a collision or accident. That is why he has four gold bars on his epaulettes; that is why his title is "Master", that is why he holds the *ultimate* responsibility.

I signed off *Galway Spirit* on March 10, 2016, I had successfully completed my first contact as an Officer. I still had a lot to learn and experience to gain but for the first time since my journey started I felt a complete sense of pride for what I had accomplished. After all, I was a Navigation Officer, sailing on the vast ocean, responsible for keeping my crew, my ship, and the oceans I love safe.

**Dylan Fowler**

**Notes:** 1) An edited version of this article first appeared in the August 2016 edition of *Seaways*, the journal of The Nautical Institute. 2) See FTB February 2014, Page 1 for another article written by Dylan Fowler. 3) Dylan is a Director of the BC Branch of The Nautical Institute.