

# Aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Morro Bay

by Bill Bleyer

Aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Morro Bay* on a January morning, the crew of the 140-foot icebreaker released mooring lines straining against the assault of huge blocks of fractured ice pushed by the Hudson River current. As a “bubbler” device shot compressed air through four valves underwater to reduce the friction that held together the ice chunks hemming the ship alongside a pier in Rhinecliff, 80 miles north of The Battery, a crewman on the bridge nudged the throttles of the twin 1,250-horsepower diesel engines forward and the *Morro Bay* edged out into the semi-frozen waterway.



**“Morro Bay” moves through ice-clogged Hudson River in January.**

It was the start of another day of plowing a channel for tugs and barges that keep residents and businesses in the Albany region supplied with home heating oil, gasoline and aviation fuel and allow upstate firms to get their products to markets to the south. The Coast Guard relies on the *Morro Bay* with its 5/8-inch reinforced steel hull, two Bay Class sister ships and three smaller icebreaking tugs to keep the river open from mid-December through March to assist the passage of about 300 commercial vessels that would ground to a halt without the specially built agency vessels.

“Our mission is to maintain the navigable waterway and keep commerce moving,” said Lt. Cmdr. Douglas Wyatt, the *Morro Bay*’s captain for the past year and a half. “We ensure a lot of product gets to where it needs to go.”

a fabulous job under extremely adverse conditions,” he said.

The *Morro Bay* is not only designed to break ice; it’s not encumbered with a barge or a cargo, the captain noted. “They may have more horsepower than we do, but because of our hull shape and the equipment we have, we can cut through it where they would get stuck. We have a rounded hull and a reinforced ice belt at the waterline. Plus our frames are closer together so they are less likely to deform in. And we have a piece of equipment called a bubbler.”

After a warm start, “we’re having a cold winter,” said Wyatt, 49. The *Morro Bay*’s crew of 17 has already encountered ice up to a foot thick and has seen ice accumulate as far south

again,” Wyatt said. “It’s not often you get to hit something with a ship, but that’s the fun part of breaking ice. We hit things on purpose.”

Wyatt’s first destination was Crum Elbow at Hyde Park, where the river makes a sharp S-turn and forms a “choke point” that traps ice. “The ice forms and flows back and forth with the tide and the river narrows and the ice gets pushed together and refreezes and even gets pushed on top of ice that’s already there or underneath it so it gets thicker,” he said.

As the cutter passes the ice-encircled Esopus Meadows Lighthouse, the ice blocks flowing downstream at 1.5 miles an hour are bigger — the size of cars — and completely fill the river. They continually push a green buoy underwater until it pops free. The *Morro Bay* shudders, rumbles and sways like a subway express train as it makes its passage.

Scott Kanter, 18, of Wantagh, N.Y., gets to feel the bumpy passage through the ice but doesn’t see much of it because he is a fireman whose job is to tend to the twin diesels. He’s been in the Coast Guard for three months and was assigned to the *Morro Bay* right out of basic training. “I like it,” he said of the icebreaking duty. “I learn a lot” and he’s anticipating being promoted to machinery technician in a few months.

Crum Elbow turns out to be completely choked with ice, the river invisible under the brash and looks more like an arctic landscape than a waterway. But it’s not thick enough to stop the tugs. So Wyatt orders a reversal of course.

“There are a lot of different terms for ice,” Wyatt said. “You’ve got ‘grease ice,’ which is the surface of the water looking greasy just as it’s about to freeze. You’ve got ‘pancake ice,’ which is little round pieces where it’s starting to freeze and the edges are raised because water laps up on it. When it all freezes together into one solid mass, it’s called ‘fast ice,’ which means it’s frozen fast to something and not drifting. ‘Drift ice’ is moving. ‘Brash’ is ice that was frozen and has been broken. ‘Refrozen brash’ is brash ice that has frozen into a mass.” The cutter’s biggest concerns are “hummock areas” and “pressure ridges” where the ice pushes on itself and rises into mounds or lines and becomes

**Continued on page 6**



**This photo group shows various activities of the cutter including her visit to Rhinecliff Pier.**



“We couldn’t operate on the Hudson River in the winter without the Coast Guard,” said Morton Bouchard, owner of Melville, L.I.-based Bouchard Transportation Co. His vessels carry petroleum products up the river to Albany several times a week, often following in the wake of the Coast Guard icebreakers. “They do

as West Point, where the river makes an S-turn. “It’s getting much thicker every night as the temperatures are going down into the teens,” he said. On a calm night, 4 inches of ice can form. “Conditions change from hour to hour.”

After the captain gave his executive of-

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Continued from page 5

thicker. On this January day, the brash looks like little cathedrals, castles, shark fins, snow crystals or broken panes of glass.

The Coast Guard technique is more than just pushing through the center of the river to create a channel because that channel continually refreezes. While continuing to run back and forth through the created channel to keep it open, "as it gets colder we're hoping that it will freeze solid to the bank" or be carried downriver and out into the ocean by the current and outgoing tide rather than refreezing in mid-river. The ice-breaking - except in emergencies - is only done in daylight and the tugs also don't operate at night because it's too dangerous.

The Coast Guard removes regular navigation buoys for the winter because their design traps ice and makes them susceptible to getting pulled under or being dragged off station. But even the special ice buoys designed to remain above the ice sheets often get pulled under and must be broken out by the cutters. "Buoys tend to go under the ice and then you can't see exactly where they are and they get dragged off station and sometimes they'll just pop up where you don't expect it, and if it's dark you can't see them," Wyatt said. "They also get covered with ice so you can't see them." There are also floating trees and other debris to contend with. "We



Writer Bleyer visits the cutter's bridge crew.

try not to break ice at night unless it's an emergency," such as the Albany airport about to run out of aviation fuel.

Once a cutter comes through an area, "the track is usually good 12 to 24 hours, depending on whether somebody comes through it," Wyatt said. But overnight with no traffic, the openings can freeze quickly. Freeing a vessel stuck in the ice is a tricky maneuver. "If a crack forms in the ice, the ship naturally wants to go that way because that's the path of least resistance," Wyatt explained. "If the crack forms towards the ship you're trying to help and you

can't stop in time, it's going to get ugly fast. So you really have to pay attention to what you're doing." When the ice gets really bad, the tugs and barges form convoys to closely follow the cutters. Wyatt said he had a convoy of four tugs with barges the day before.

Heading back north towards Kingston, the *Morro Bay* encounters the only commercial traffic of the day - a 2,200-horsepower tugboat named *Zeus*, owned by Dann Marine Towing from Maryland, that is pushing a barge loaded with cement on a trip from Catskill to Flushing. The tug is following the open lead in the ice created by the *Morro Bay* on its trip downriver an hour earlier.

The *Zeus*' captain, Paul Nowacki, says he travels the river once a week during the winter. "You can't do it without the ice being broken by the Coast Guard," he said. "We can't do more than about 6 or 8 inches of ice" without an icebreaker. "A lot of times they have to come and get us out of the ice because we'll be at a complete stop."

When they are not looking for river traffic or staring at the ice, the crew can enjoy the beautiful scenery and wildlife spotting. "We see bald eagles on the ice all the time, usually 10 or 12 a day," Wyatt said. "We saw a fox yesterday and deer."



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