

# 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.

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.”



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

the Coast Guard icebreakers. “They do 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

“Conditions change from hour to hour.”

After the captain gave his executive officer, Lt. j.g. Stephen Hart, a simple order to “Get us underway,” the *Morro Bay* pointed south and accelerated to 12 knots, vibrating as it pushed through 6 to 8 inches of “brash,” chunks of ice that had been broken up.

The *Morro Bay* and its eight twins with their reinforced angled bows can break through 3 feet of ice while moving forward and even more when they engage in a maneuver called “back and ram:” running up onto an ice sheet and using the ship’s 660-ton weight to crush it. “You hit it until you stop; then you back up and get going as fast as you can and then hit it 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



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

of 17 has already encountered ice up to a foot thick and has seen ice accumulate as far south 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.

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