

CAPT'N KEVO'S

Boating Tips



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

Tugboats

I arrived at 1200 hours (noon) at the Foss SF Bay headquarters in Richmond. It was mid-February and the temperature was in the upper 50s. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather report on my portable VHF (channel 4) said small craft warnings in effect through the next afternoon.

Normally, I would be very concerned about a report like this if I were instructing, captaining or delivering a boat on the Bay or west Delta, but today it just made me chuckle. After all, I was about to embark on the biggest, baddest tugboat in the Bay Area.

Foss' *America* is a 98-foot-long

“tractor tug.” She can generate over 6,600 horsepower with her two 16-cylinder diesels. The crew consists of two Able Bodied Seamen (Abs), an engineer and two captains. The entire crew lives onboard two weeks out of the month and has the other two weeks off. They work six-hour shifts. The sleeping quarters were quite spacious for a tugboat! (I've been on cruise ships with (much) smaller quarters!)

Specifications:

Length Overall (LOA).....98 feet
 Beam:..... 40 feet
 Draft:.....17 feet
 Engine Power:.....2 X 3305 HP @ 2000 RPM
 Bollard Pull:85 tons

Speed:.....12 knots
 Crew:..... 6 persons
 Fuel Oil:..... 46,176 U.S. gallons
 Fresh Water:..... 3,596 U.S. gallons
 Lube Oil:..... 500 U.S. gallons

First Things First

The first thing they did when I arrived was hand me a hard hat and a life vest; then I proceeded to sign a liability waiver. Next, we boarded the boat and Senior Captain Paul Sweeney took me on a tour of the boat as we got underway.

At least I thought it was a tour in the beginning. It soon became apparent that he was walking me through all of the safety features on the vessel and what my responsibilities would be in the case of an emergency. It seems that safety is strongly embedded in the corporate culture of this company. Good for them!

The engine room was massive (and spotless) and the engines deceptively small for the amount of power they produce. At first I couldn't figure out the propulsion system. What the [heck] is this? The captain took me through a watertight door where the answers awaited me.

Tractor tugs use Azimuth drives or Z drives for short. The shaft hits a gear and makes a 90-degree turn



The Foss tugboat *America* plies the waters of SF Bay.

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down to the “pods.” Two joy sticks at the helm in the wheelhouse independently operate the pods. They can rotate 360 degrees independently. This gives the tug the ability to do just about anything in terms of maneuvering. All systems are easily monitored by one computer screen in the engine room and another at the helm.

The tour ended at the wheelhouse where I met Captain Mike Wark, who was on duty.

Our mission was to escort and assist in docking a tanker from Richmond to the refinery at Rodeo. The ship, *Overseas Tampa*, was behind us and coming up on us. The Foss tugboat *Marshall* was already in place.

Coincidentally, the pilot on the tanker was the same pilot I worked with on an article about SF Bar Pilots two years ago. What are the chances? Well, there are about 60 pilots in the association, so I guess it's about 60 to 1.

So before the tanker arrives, the captain shows me how to control the boat using the two joysticks. He starts spinning the boat on a dime



Captain Mike Wark at the helm on the Foss tugboat *America*.

at an absolutely incredible speed. We had to stop when one of the crew said she was getting dizzy! I was astounded at the maneuverability of this vessel: 98 feet long and spinning like a WaveRunner® – incredible!

The pilot ordered the *America* to attach a line on the port bow first. Both vessels were going about 10 knots and getting ever closer. This nautical ballet went on for a few minutes while they attached a line.

Then he ordered the *Marshall* to attach a line about a third of the way from the stern. The tide was ebbing something fierce. The dock is right in a bend in the river, so the bow of the ship wants to peel off the dock in strong ebb tide.

The keys to docking this ship successfully lie in maintaining pressure on the bow with the tug so it is snug against the dock and securing it with many more forward spring lines than normal.

Once we were in position and applying pressure to the ship's hull, the orders came in rapid succession: “*America* do this, *Marshall* do that.”



Senior Captain Paul Sweeney on the stern deck of the tugboat *America*.

The tugs responded immediately and achieved the desired result quickly and efficiently due to the Z drives and the exceptional communication and close quarters maneuvering skills of these captains.

It took a full two hours to tie up the ship. All this time, both tugs were exerting pressure continuously on the hull of the ship – sometimes more, sometimes less.

After the pilot released us, the



The tanker *Overseas Tampa* glides into the Rodeo refinery docks.

America headed back to base just to do a touch-and-go landing in order for me to get back on terra firma. It was now 1900 (7 p.m.) hours.

During our voyage to and from Rodeo, I had an opportunity to ask both of the Foss captains what recreational boaters in the Bay and Delta need to know about navigating near tugboats.

They seemed more concerned about sailboats than powerboats. This is (probably) mostly a function of where they navigate more than anything else. They are mostly in the Bay where there are far more sailboats than powerboats and not in the Delta where there are far more powerboats than sailboats. Apparently, sailboats sometimes navigate too close for comfort.

Always be courteous around a tug pushing a ship. Try not to throw a wake at them. Give them a wide berth. If you see a few tugs just hanging around, look around because there is probably a large ship in the vicinity. Never anchor in a channel. (This is illegal and just plain stupid!)

Kevo's Tip:

You don't see too many tugs pulling barges around the Bay and Delta. If you happen to be navigating near such a configuration, DO NOT navigate between the tug and the barge. If you have to ask why, perhaps you should consider another activity other than boating. HA!

Be safe & happy boating!

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsman magazine.com. 📧



Foss' America showing off her turning radius in the Bay.

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