

A DAY IN
THE LIFE OF...

Safety first

Captain 'Pete' Kysar of Buffalo Marine Service Inc. gives a unique insight into the daily life of a bunker tanker captain

It was 6.00 a.m. on a Saturday morning and Capt. Philip 'Pete' Kysar of Buffalo Marine Service, Inc. scanned the *M/V San Tomas*' computer to verify the details of his next bunker job. While he had already verified the location, bunker stem details and ship particulars with his 'back watch' counterpart (i.e. relief Captain), it never hurt to double check the wheelhouse computer.

This morning's first job was slated for the *M/V Star Kinn* located at the **Port of Houston's** City Dock. As the dawn cast off the previous evening's shadows, Capt. Pete manoeuvred his tow from the backside of Brady's Island and set course for City Dock 26. He then verified with his bunker tanker captain that the valve configuration was set to pump 850 metric tonnes (mt) of 380 centistoke (cst) bunker fuel from the *T/B Buffalo 409*.

As the native Houstonian navigated the tow past the line of ships moored at the City Dock complex, Capt. Pete took note of the *Star Kinn's* mooring configuration. After assessing the ship's layout, he radioed his tanker captain: 'She's moored port side to. So I'll take the *San Tomas* past her and we'll set up for a port side delivery. Just keep me honest on the hose alignment during the approach.'

Capt. Pete knew the alignment would not be an issue with the day's first bunker job since the *Star Kinn's* header was set up midships and on the outboard side of the ship. This was an optimal set up for a bunker job since the bunker barge would not extend beyond the stern and the pushboat itself would be well inside the bow of the *Star Kinn*. After passing the *Star Kinn* on his starboard side, he slowed the forward momentum of the *San Tomas* and the *Buffalo 409* and began to twist his tow to starboard. While he had already notified 'Houston Traffic', the local Vessel Traffic Service managed by the **US Coast Guard (USCG)**, of his orders to bunker the *Star Kinn*, he also had to inform the **Port of Houston Authority** via radio that he was preparing to moor alongside the vessel for a bunker job.

'Roger, *San Tomas*, just give us a call when you are done,' responded the Port dispatcher.

Capt. Pete slowly eased into the *Star Kinn's* outboard side and offered up a rare smile as he nailed the barge's alignment with the ship's header.

He popped his head outside the wheelhouse door and yelled to the tanker captain: 'It's a bit easier without the wind and current to push you around!' He quickly added, 'Make sure those mooring lines are tight. I

don't want any passing ships to surge us too badly if they're slack.'

He kept his door open to help him better monitor the bunkering and then studied his *Automatic Identification System (AIS)* to see which vessels were transiting in the City Dock vicinity.

Meanwhile, the Chief Engineer's representative from the *Star Kinn* descended to the deck of the *Buffalo 409* to validate the tank barge's hose certification, verify pumping rates and product intended for the *Star Kinn*, and determine the type of meter



being used to track the transfer of bunkers with the Buffalo Marine tanker captain. As a veteran of scores of bunker jobs throughout the Houston Ship Channel, the tanker captain was familiar with this 'vetting visit'. He also recognised the importance of making the duty engineer comfortable with the planned bunker operation. Granted, there were times when the language barrier made it difficult to discern if the two mariners could understand one another. Nonetheless, with enough hand gestures and rudimentary English the communications barriers can be overcome. In the case at hand, the *Star Kinn's* representative had no difficulty in understanding English and the bunker boom was quickly shifted to facilitate the connection of the hose to the *Star Kinn*.

'Safety is everything in this business,' Capt. Pete emphasised. 'However, if you cannot figure out how to properly connect the hose

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to the ship, the Chief Engineer will quickly lose confidence in our ability to perform a bunker job.' He went on to add that there are times when bizarre bolt patterns make it quite challenging to connect the hose to the ship's header.

'I remember when I first came to Buffalo as a tanker man about nine years ago and I was amazed at all the connections, spacers and exotic bolts we had stored on the tows. I figured it would be impossible to use all of the various configurations for a hose connection. Was I wrong!

Worse than a jigsaw puzzle

'Some of the ships from Russia have bolt patterns that are worse than a jigsaw puzzle. There are even times when we commandeer the ship's drill press to add holes to a flange. But, if you bunker enough ships, you gain a sense as to what works and what can cause you to have a very long day cleaning bunkers off your deck.'

Capt. Pete took in the process and he was satisfied that the Texan tanker man and engineer from India understood one another's expectations. In just over an hour from the *San Tomas* pulling alongside the *Star Kinn*, the tanker man had fired up the tank barge's pumps and transferred over 30 barrels of 380 cst bunkers every minute.

'We can ramp up our pumps to load over 500 mt an hour but we are typically limited to the loading capacity of the vessel,' noted

Capt. Pete as he eyed the boom and hoses to ensure that there was nothing amiss. As a former tanker man who is required to keep his USCG-issued tanker man licence current as a Buffalo marine captain, he always takes the time to make a round on the bunker barge during a job.

'Two sets of eyes are always better than one,' he said. 'Sometimes the hot weather, the noise of the pumps and the length of the job can wear on a tanker man. You cannot afford to make a mistake or let your guard down when thousands of gallons of black oil are being pumped to a ship that may only have a one or two people who understand English.'

Although this particular bunker job was not overly challenging due to the midship's hose alignment and sheltered location, Capt. Pete was alert for any potential problem. He was quick to point out that: 'In this business you cannot afford to get a single drop of oil in the water. If you do not have a culture of zero tolerance for spills you will not last in this game. In fact, we go to great lengths to ensure that the ship understands that when they disconnect the bunker hose, the blank flange - gasket and all - is securely bolted in place to avoid a spill from the hose.'

These days oil is not the only thing a bunker captain has to worry about. A recent change to the *Clean Water Act* requires that any vessel over 300 gross tons (GT) must possess a *National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES)* permit from

the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**. This permit covers over two dozen potential discharges from vessels, which include rain water runoff and condensation from air conditioning units. Capt. Pete stressed that before every bunker job, or at least once a day, he and his crew are required to ensure the tank barge deck is free of any type of debris that can be washed over the side.

'If we are bunkering a grain ship or any other vessel that can leave dust or residue on your decks you are required to clean it up and keep it out of the water,' he noted as he walked back to the pushboat.

As Capt. Pete settled back into his chair in the wheelhouse, he called the office to verify his next job. He then watched the *Star Kinn*'s duty engineer exchange documents with the tanker man aboard the barge.

As he observed the completion of the bunker delivery receipt (BDR) and verification of the bunker barge's meter reading, Capt. Pete pointed out that the BDR transaction is one of the most critical elements of the entire job: 'They say the devil is in the detail. This is **Chevron's** oil and we need to account for each and every barrel. If we put down an incorrect barrel count, temperature, or gauge readings, we cause headaches for Chevron. Unfortunately, a little mistake can cause a prolonged dispute between the supplier and the ship.'

Capt. Pete reviewed the BDR and ensured the barrel delivery count was in sync with his original order as the tanker man headed back to the tank barge to prepare to get underway. He slowly nodded his head as he confirmed all was in order and radioed back to the Buffalo Marine dispatch his departure information. He was informed by dispatch that he had several hours before he had to reload his barge for the *San Tomas*' next bunker job.

'Guess that gives me some time to catch up on our fire fighting and spill response training - that's what's on tap this month,' he remarked.

Good as your last job

He told his tanker man to let go his bow line as he angled the tow away from the *Star Kinn* and checked in with Houston Traffic to let the Coast Guard know he was heading towards his lay berth. While the tanker man was securing his mooring lines, Capt. Pete scanned the ship channel for unreported traffic and summed up the morning's efforts: 'You are only as good as your last job. Gotta impress them at the next one!'

