

# Every day is an adventure on the Great Lakes

Beth LeBlanc, Port Huron Times Herald 8:59 a.m. EDT March 29, 2016



(Photo: George Haynes)

Just like the fickle waters he navigates, George Haynes' job is always changing.

Each day brings a new crew, a new ship, new weather, and a new challenge for the lakes pilot.

"I can be sent anywhere," Haynes said. "I could be six hours on the river between Port Huron and Detroit or I could be 18 hours going across Lake Erie."

Haynes is a pilot with the Lakes Pilots Association.

The company is one of three on the Great Lakes that provide piloting services to foreign vessels entering the lakes from the ocean. Foreign vessels are required by both the U.S. and Canada to have an American or Canadian pilot on board since the foreign ship officers aren't licensed in the U.S.

The American or Canadian pilot helps handle communication with other vessels and ports, or gives them advice on how to safely navigate the rivers and waterways.

“That’s why they need a pilot, somebody who knows how to get a big ship through these narrow waterways,” Haynes said.

Lakes Pilots Association provides pilots on Lake Erie, the Detroit River, the St. Clair River and all the ports in between.

That means Haynes is getting on ships just north of the Blue Water Bridge, under the Ambassador Bridge at the entrance of the Welland Canal or at any port in the Lakes Pilots’ district.

And getting on and off isn’t as easy as it sounds.

“We climb up the side of the ship on a rope ladder with wooden slats while the ship is moving,” Haynes said. The up to 35-foot climb — while the ship is in motion — is necessary to keep the ships on schedule.

“We’re all kind of used to it. I don’t think much about it unless we have 10-foot seas and then it’s kind of wild.”



The Lakes Pilots Association Huron Belle delivers a pilot to a waiting vessel. (Photo: George Haynes)

Haynes said making decisions on high seas isn't easy either. Haynes remembers, on one occasion, waiting for more than two days outside Toledo in November 2014 before he was able to bring a ship to port.

The Lakes Pilots busiest season is in the fall and early winter. The operations shuts down completely from January to March, when the closure of canals in the St. Lawrence Seaway make it impossible for foreign vessels to move into the lakes.



A Lakes Pilots Association pilot climbs the ladder up the side of a moving vessel. (Photo: George Haynes)

Haynes said the pay for the piloting job isn't much when compared with pay for pilots outside of the Great Lakes. He declined to list an average pay as it fluctuates year to year. Haynes said lakes pilots are working on increasing the pay, especially considering the unique skills required of Great Lakes pilots.

"We have some of the most difficult routes and conditions on the Great Lakes in the country," Haynes said.

"These are big ships and some of these channels, we have two feet or less beneath the ship to the bottom of the river. When the ships go into the locks, they might have two feet of extra space on either side."

Haynes said he's loved the Great Lakes since he was a boy, but it's the constantly changing demands of his job that keep him on the water.

"In about five minutes after getting on board I have a good idea of what I need to do to get the ship from point A to point B," Haynes said. "As we go I get a good feeling for how the ship is handling."

"Pilots are quick studies. You have to be."

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