

REPLICA OF HISTORIC BRIG SAILS INTO PORT

Trip on U.S. Brig Niagara offers glimpse of an 1800s voyage

Originally published in The Blade on Saturday, July 28, 2007

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ABOARD THE U.S. BRIG NIAGARA — Dashter Bien had the best seat in all of Toledo yesterday and he couldn't even enjoy it.

Perched 100 feet above the Maumee River near the top of the U.S. Brig Niagara's tallest mast, it was Mr. Bien's job to help make sure that it didn't scrape the new Veterans' Glass City Skyway.

You see, the reconstructed War of 1812 vessel tops out at 120 feet above the river. The bridge's highest clearance is 124 feet, ship officers said, and the river was running a little high.

Mr. Bien had to help lower the mast a few feet — just in case — but even after the 33-year-old sailor from the Marshall Islands performed his duties and returned to the deck, he looked ahead at the oncoming bridge and wondered aloud, "Think we're gonna clear?"

A second passed and a smirk crossed his lips.

"I'm not going back up."

The Niagara did pass — by "two inches," according to a worker on the bridge who shouted as the ship slid by. It was just one more challenge overcome by the ship, an earlier version of which Comm. Oliver Hazard Perry famously used to win the Battle of Lake Erie against the British in 1813.

This time, victory meant a grand welcome to Toledo, where impressive crowds lined the banks of the Maumee as the ship floated downtown, fired one of its great guns, and docked next to the S.S. Willis B.

Boyer Museum Ship. It is here for the weekend as a fund-raiser for the Boyer.

MULTIMEDIA

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The U.S. Brig Niagara, with the new Veterans' Glass City Skyway at her stern, sails toward downtown Toledo for weekend tours. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

is in the way the ship is run.

"We say that this is a new ship. It's the original process," explained Capt. Walter Rybka, 57.

Most people on board, other than higher-ranking members of the crew, sleep in hammocks in a low-ceiling room below deck. There are no showers, just a hose that they use to spray off on deck. The cook makes meals on a wood-fired stove.

The Niagara has a professional crew of 17, but the rest of the 32 on board for this voyage are volunteers or trainees, many of them learning the ropes. That's no easy task, because there are five miles of rope on board, coils of it everywhere. They hang from pegs on the side of the ship and dangle from the sails like a spider's web.

"It's a very complicated ship," the captain said.

Based in Erie, Pa., the double-masted, square-rigged ship that left for Toledo on Tuesday is a rare breed: a historically significant tall ship that sails regularly. This is the fourth incarnation of the Niagara, built in 1988. It has 60 beams from the original in the hull, for symbolic rather than structural reasons. But the bigger tribute to the men of Perry's Niagara

That goes for the language used by the crew, too. To an observer, it might appear to be pure gibberish but everyone on board seems to know what chief mate Jamie Trost means when he tells them to take in the spanker (a particular sail) or to do something handsomely (in a controlled and steady manner).

It's all second-nature to Mr. Trost, a 32-year-old native of Erie, Pa., with thick, tattooed arms who has been sailing since he was 5. When he was 12, he tried to volunteer to help restore the Niagara but was deemed too young.

Mr. Trost loves the self-sufficiency of sailing, the idea that you can fix anything with a little string and leather. The job isn't without its drawbacks — like when he was up until 3:30 a.m. Friday monitoring oncoming squalls on radar — but he knows that being on the Niagara is a rare privilege.

"Yeah, I could be at home asleep, but lots of people get to be home asleep," he said.

For crew member Katie Burns, the whole experience has been much tougher than expected. The University of Pittsburgh student was one of a few on board as part of a maritime history class covering the Great Lakes.

Miss Burns, 21, came into the experience thinking she would get to chill out a bit. That wasn't the case.

Crew members take turns being on watch throughout the night. They wake up before 7 a.m. and regularly exert their muscles pulling ropes to adjust sails or pull up the vessel's 1,600-pound anchor.

"I was like, this is more work than I've ever done in my life," Miss Burns said. "I feel like I'm living in the 19th century. I think that when I go to bed: 'Oh my God, I'm sleeping in a hammock.'"

There are some modern intrusions, like GPS, radar, and engines to motor the sailboat around at times. There's even an electric coffee maker.

Clearly, though, part of the experience is getting away from modern conveniences like i-Pods to DVD players, and get a chance to live history. As a result, some of the best moments are the quiet ones: The sound of the waves lapping against the vessel and the ship creaking, the sight of a stunning sunset.

This is what touched Jake Keszler, 28, an able-bodied seaman who is working on a master's degree in writing in Portland.

He got involved in sailing a number of years ago when he wanted a little adventure before entering the world of work. The result, he said, was life-changing, teaching him about self-reliance and teamwork and the beauty of the world around him.

"When I went home, everything was exactly the same, but I had changed," he said.

How could he not change after seeing Chicago for the first time as the Niagara raced toward it at midnight? Or after being aloft, high above the deck at 2 in the morning?

"As I stood there, the wind would lift the sail back and kind of brush me," he said. "It's kind of like a sleeping lover ... brushing against you."

The days the ship's company puts in are long and hard. Still, they find some time at night to play cards or a harmonica before turning in.

During the fleeting down time between training exercises and maintaining the ship, Jamison Hermann likes to practice tying knots.

"It's something that I do because sailors in the 18th and 19th centuries took a lot of pride in their seamanship, which includes knot work," he said.

The trainee was working on one recently called the Matthew Walker knot, one of the few knots — maybe the only, he said — named after a sailor. The story, at least as he heard it, is that Walker was captured and gained his freedom by tying a knot that his captor's leader could not untie.

The 19-year-old sailor from Mystic, Conn., has worked at Mystic Seaport, but its sailing ships don't get out on the open sea.

Actually sailing one has given him a greater appreciation for their power and speed and plenty of stories that his friends spending their summers working at restaurants or painting houses won't be able to match.

"A lot of the experiences you have on board vessels are not things that can easily be shared" with those who have not been on board, he said. "But I'll still brag."

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