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 SIGNED R.N. WOOD, RADN, USCG, COMMANDER COAST GUARD DISTRICT ONE  
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Roger Francis Sr. wishes there were more safety training for recreational boaters.



Center and lower right: Photos courtesy Gary Oliveira. Above and top: Photos courtesy Roger Francis II. Telegram courtesy Roger Francis Sr.

# THE WORKING WATERFRONT

## **Pull of the Sea:** FATHER-SON TEAMS MAKE TUGBOATS A FAMILY TRADITION

*By Monica Allard Cox*

Twenty-four hours a day, everything from coal to cars to cobblestones comes into the Port of Providence, much of it guided by tugboats from one company, Providence Steamboat Company, which has been operating tugs in Narragansett Bay since 1881.

"I went to sea when I was 13," says Roger Francis Sr., tugboat captain. Francis is a member of one of two father-son teams working for Providence Steamboat. "All three of my brothers worked with my father—he was always offshore dragging. Fishing was good and it was in our blood."

For him, though, working on tugboats had greater allure.

"When I was fishing, I would get sick of the times there was bad weather and we wouldn't get paid," he says. "There's just a mystique about tugboating. Once you get it ...," he trails off. "I've been doing it for almost 30 years now."

In that time, he has seen a number of changes. Providence Steamboat provides assistance to ships and tug-and-barges (where another tugboat is driving a barge) anywhere from their entering the Bay to lightering in Newport (offloading some cargo so the ship draws less water) to docking in Providence.

"The industry around here, it's gotten very busy lately. I think it's a sign of the times," he says, noting that the shipping industry increasingly wants the security of a tugboat's assistance.

### **Liabilities Lead to More Work**

Gary Oliveira, Providence Steamboat tugboat captain, and his son Nathan Oliveira, mate, agree that accidents and oil spills have led to increased security measures, so that they find they are assigned to meet ships and barges farther and farther down the Bay.

"We want to do things better and safer, so we're escorting more tug-and-barges to dock them," the elder Oliveira says. "The consequences are getting too great."

Roger Francis II, also a captain, feels that previously, ship pilots felt a sense of pride in not needing an assist boat. Now, he says, "That attitude is going away."

### **"You Have the Day Off—So Far"**

He adds that in addition to being busy with the increasing requests for assist boats, the crews find their hours more unpredictable, ironically, thanks to improved communications technology. Previously, ships filed a notice of arrival with Providence Steamboat, which was kept in a book in the office. Crew members could look in the book and see "I have a good chance of being off Tuesday and

Wednesday," and you did," he says. "If a ship was coming in they might slow to meet the ETA—now they just call and say, 'Oh, we're an hour early.'"

Other changes include the way oil is purchased and delivered. Before, an oil tanker would be docked solely at Mobil for 36 hours, for example. Now, that ship might go from Mobil to Sprague to Capital, which means triple the berthing work for the tugs. "It doesn't happen all the time; it could happen at any time," the younger Francis says, adding that Providence Steamboat has been making an effort to protect its crews' time off. The unpredictable hours, he says, lend a sense of urgency to his free time, during which he works on small boats and does woodworking and sign-carving, creating some of the nameplates that adorn Providence Steamboat's tugs.

### **"Every Day Is Different"**

Both Roger Francis II and Nathan Oliveira found tugboat work in New York—what Francis calls "the epicenter of tugboating"—where they worked two weeks on board a tug with two weeks off, during which they would return to Rhode Island and fill in at Providence Steamboat.

Working in New York, Francis says, he once spent six weeks straight on board a tug, where he was busy all day: "I missed the fall of '92, I think."

Oliveira found that the hectic pace of work in New York prepared him for returning to Rhode Island: "I learned a lot fast. It made it easier to come back home. It's easier to pick up and safer."

Tugboating at Providence Steamboat is considered "day boat" work—though that day starts and ends at midnight. The company has six boats and five crews, hiring extra people on an as-needed basis. Each tugboat is assigned a rotating number from one to five. Boat one is the first boat to do any work that comes along that day. While much of the work is scheduled, with ships coming in from around the world, weather along the way affects when they arrive. "You never know when you're going to be called. That's the trade-off for not punching a clock," Gary Oliveira says.

Nathan adds, "All the days run into each other," but "we get paid to do what other people pay to do"—being out on the Bay in boats. There's the excitement of bringing a 1,000-foot aircraft carrier into Newport or saving a ship that has lost power—"It's a personal reward," Gary Oliveira says.

And as for the work schedule, both have been pulled over by police officers who want to know what they're doing on the road at odd hours. Nathan explains he once told an officer he was coming home from working on a tugboat; the officer responded, "Yeah, but it's 1:30 in the morning."

Roger Francis Sr. has an answer for that: "I tell them I'm on my way to Providence to dock an oil tanker; I work under the Department of Homeland Security," of which the U.S. Coast Guard, which regulates tugs, is a part.

### “Everything Is Safety, Safety, Safety”

While new safety regulations mean more requests for tug assists, they also mean more training for tugboat crews. For instance, all Providence Steamboat crewmembers have received firefighting training. “Where the firemen trained, that’s where we go,” says Gary Oliveira. The training was very realistic; he says, “I got burned” from the steam from sweat under his jacket. Nathan Oliveira’s training in New Jersey “was strictly ship firefighting. The ship firefighting is a lot worse. They light a room on fire and you’ve got to go down into it.”

“The schooling and technology requirements—it’s forever changing,” his father says, “it costs us a lot of money, but it can save your life or someone else’s life.”

More common problems include weather-related difficulties and lines breaking. “Every day is different and you never know what to expect. You always have to try to be aware and have a backup plan,” Gary Oliveira says—for instance, knowing where to stand so that if a line breaks you’re not going to get hit. In New York, his son says, “I’ve seen hooks shoot across 50 feet and break a guy’s arm.”

### Bay Traffic Poses Challenges

Another challenge has been avoiding recreational boaters. The Oliveiras say that people don’t appreciate how ships that are built for speed across the ocean are difficult to turn and stop in the Bay.

Roger Francis Sr. wishes there were more safety training for recreational boaters. “I realize it’s a fun thing they want to do, but above all, it’s a serious thing,” he says. “Last week a sailboat hit a tanker coming up the Bay. He just had no idea that the tanker couldn’t maneuver like he could.”

“Any 15-year-old kid can jump in a 300 horsepower boat and go 50 miles an hour up the Bay with no idea what a red buoy means or what three

whistles means. I don’t know the answer. It’s a never-ending vigil.” He says tugboat crews constantly scan the water to see small boats that might stray into their paths.

His most dramatic incident took place one foggy day several years ago on Buzzards Bay when he was on the *King Phillip*, towing an oil barge and following a Canadian tug that was also towing a loaded barge. He saw a target on the radar to the left of the barge. Suddenly it was gone, and there were little targets in its place. He realized something had been hit. It turned out to be a fishing boat, the *L/B Steven F.* He and the other crew members rescued the fishermen, who later told them that they had seen the Canadian tug, and heard the three whistles, but thought that was a greeting, not a warning that the tug had a barge in tow. So they whistled back and waved, and drove their fishing boat behind the tug, where the towing wire cut their boat in half.

“We pulled them out of the water. I gave them some ginger brandy. They drank the whole bottle,” Francis says. “Everything turned out well.”

### New Tugboat Technology Means More Training

New technologies are being adopted that may reduce the number of such accidents, while also making tugboats more specialized for certain tasks. Providence Steamboat tugs are assist boats that accompany ships and tug-and-barges, using the tugboat itself to maneuver the ships to help them dock, and therefore don’t use wires. But tugboats towing barges may use 1,200 feet of wire, says the younger Francis. A loaded barge may be pushed by a tug from New York; when the tug-and-barge reaches the swells of Long Island Sound, the push cables may be released, the tug will move alongside the barge, and attach a wire to the stern of the barge to tow it. The process may be reversed



Nathan (left) and Gary Oliveira. Photo by Monica Allard Cox.

when entering Narragansett Bay. A recent innovation—the use of hydraulic pins 50 inches in diameter that protrude from either side of the tug and are locked into the barge—eliminates the need for tow wires. These articulated tug-and-barges, he says, are excellent at moving oil barges, but “the tug is dedicated to that barge. It’s a huge capital investment.”

In 2004, Providence Steamboat bought a new \$4.5-million tractor tug, which he describes as having propellers in a nozzle that rotates 360 degrees, a technology that allows more control for assist boats—“there’s nothing better for docking ships”—but isn’t designed to tow barges.

These technological advances have meant more training for tugboat crews. “You need a lot of credentials. It’s not an industry you just walk into,” Gary Oliveira says.

With the time invested in specialized training, “if you’re going to make that commitment to being a tugboat guy, you’re a tugboat guy,” Roger Francis II says. He adds that many people currently working on boats are fortunate. “It takes a long time to become a professional boat guy, but a lot of the guys don’t realize it because they grew up on boats.”

New people entering the industry, he says, haven’t grown up on boats, and it’s tougher to bring people into the business, as rules and regulations become ever more stringent. At one time, he says, fathers would take their kids on the tug, and if they showed an interest, they might eventually start crewing and work

their way up. Now, for liability reasons, those days “have kind of passed.”

### Looking to the Future

Of whether his own young boys will follow him into the business, the younger Francis says, “I think they’ll be interested in boats. Whatever they decide to do is fine. But they’ve got to have something to fall back on.”

His father is looking forward to retiring next year and moving to Florida. When asked whether he will miss being on the Bay, Roger Francis Sr. says, “Even when my father retired—we were all from Gloucester—when he retired, he moved to the mountains.” When he asked his father why, “He never really answered me and I couldn’t understand it.”

As he nears his own retirement, he is beginning to appreciate his father’s point of view. Francis, who goes camping on his vacations, says that he sees being at sea as a profession, not recreation. “I’m starting to look at a more relaxed life. As you get older, your thoughts change.”

Gary Oliveira, whose father, like Roger Francis Sr.’s, was a fisherman all his life, says he was the only one of four brothers who didn’t become a fisherman. “It was a hard lifestyle I didn’t want to do.” Instead, he worked for Electric Boat before joining Providence Steamboat.

He and his son talk about their pride in their work, and of knowing “guys that work from Florida to Seattle.”

Nathan Oliveira’s enthusiasm for the work is evident. He says that “You want to get what you’re carrying where it’s going as fast as you can,” and that if not for his job, “I would’ve never seen Virginia, Delaware City, or Oyster Bay.”

His father adds, “There’s a bit of a challenge there that you can’t let go.” Roger Francis Sr. agrees that if he had to do it over again, “I probably would.” Despite the hours and challenges, “If you ask any of these guys, they wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“It’s just salt in your blood.”

—Monica Allard Cox is a Communicator for Rhode Island Sea Grant.



Left and below: Photos courtesy Roger Francis Sr.



Left: Photo courtesy Roger Francis II.



Photo by Monica Allard Cox.

At one time, fathers would take their kids on the tug, and if they showed an interest, they might eventually start crewing and work their way up. Now, for liability reasons, those days “have kind of passed.”

—Roger Francis II, tugboat captain

Photo courtesy Roger Francis II.

