

Pea Soup

R. Mattsson 11/02

McAllister Brothers Towing had a policy of only using engineers with a United States Coast Guard issued engineers license, unless of course, it suited them. I was studying for my license and was employed as an oiler on the Teresa McAllister when an engineer was needed in an emergency on the 900 HP canal tug Eileen McAllister. She was the one with portlights for pilothouse windows installed at McAllister's old Black Tom repair yard. I was called at home on my time off by the port engineer and told to call in that night and report as engineer the next day.

This was a real break because my seniority as an engineer would begin the day I was officially entered into the boat's log as an engineer. Besides that, I was excited that Red Edmunds, the Port Engineer had enough faith in my abilities to give me the opportunity. That evening I called the McAllister dispatcher and started to proudly tell him that I was the relief engineer for the Eileen when he cut me off and said "Pier 13, North River, noon tomorrow" and hung up. I guess he wasn't as excited as I was.

Being relatively new and reporting for my first job as an engineer I was nervous and arrived at Pier 13 at eleven o'clock in the morning to make sure I would be on time. It was a cold and windy day in December with the wind and the rain coming out of the Northeast and a heavy chop out in the bay. I kept looking for the Eileen down the bay and up the river because I didn't know where she would be coming from.

She had a very low pilothouse with portholes as pilothouse windows and was hard to see even in normal conditions but she wasn't in sight and I was afraid to go back inside the pier for fear of missing the crew change.

When I left home in the morning I had my small carry bag with my toilet articles, socks, work shoes and work clothes but I did not bring any heavy weather gear as I was only a relief engineer and didn't want to carry too much back and forth. The dress coat I was wearing to get from Staten Island to Manhattan and Pier 13 was not a heavy coat and now with the rain and the wind I was becoming extremely cold. I thought of walking back through the pier to the street to try and find a telephone to call in. The pier itself was all of 800 feet long and hadn't been used for a long time and I didn't know how far I would have to go in the West Street area to find a working telephone. I felt if I left the pier to make the call to the dispatchers the boat would surely show up and I would miss my crew change.

By 12:30 in the afternoon I was very anxious, very cold and very hungry. The Eileen was nowhere in sight and if anything it seemed to be blowing harder and getting colder. I began to think I was at the wrong place because I could not believe the boat would be this late. By one o'clock I was a real wreck, I thought for sure I was in the wrong place but I just knew if I left this spot the tug would magically appear and I would lose the job. I tried to keep to the southern side of the pier in one of the cargo door setbacks but it seemed an eddy would form and find me no matter where I went. One thirty in the afternoon and no boat. I was positive of two things. One, if I left the pier she would surely show because how late could she be. The other that I was in the wrong place and should beat it up the pier, find a telephone and find out where I was really supposed to be. I was still weighing the problem at ten minutes to two o'clock when I seemed to see something low moving north off of Bedloe Island. What I saw was mostly spray but I

knew there had to be a boat behind there somewhere. Two o'clock, it was definitely the Eileen and she cutting across the river heading directly for my little spot of hell. The tide was out and the closer she got the smaller and lower she looked. The tide and current were at the last of the ebb and the guy steering new how to handle a boat. Later I learned he was one of the infamous frenchy brothers "Ozzie LaFontaine". It seemed like he came to within 10 feet of the pier head before he clutched out, stemmed the tide with a little right rudder and came into the piles with a small bump and stuck like a magnet. The deckhand yelled to me to throw my bag and jump down. It looked like quite a ways down but I was young so I threw the bag and jumped. I didn't fall but crouched my legs and spread out my arms to take the shock. Before I could even straighten out the captain gave her left rudder and full ahead and we were out of there. He was good. I looked around for my bag but the deckhand had already thrown it into the galley and across floor. I entered the galley through the starboard watertight door and the cook who I had never met before yelled, "sit here" while pointing to a stool near the port door. There were no interior doors except for a small opening to the pilothouse forward and over to the starboard side. The galley was small and dark as there were only two small portholes. Most D.C. boats tried to keep un-needed lights off in the daytime so the shaft generator could charge the batteries. The table was small with four small stools around it. The standard issue red and white checkered tablecloth was on the table and there was only one setting, mine. The cook without so much as a 'how do you do' plopped a steaming hot bowl of pea soup down in front of me. Now, my mother made pea soup all the time (she was Irish) and I would never eat it. I couldn't stand the smell or the looks of it. Pale green and thick with lumps of ham didn't look like something one should eat.

Well, I was starving and I was cold through and through so I ate it and what ever came after it. While I was still eating the engineer came in and said he had been up for over 18 hours and was hitting the sack. My jaw dropped because I had never worked on this tug while it was operating although I had been on her during overhaul at McAllister's yard at Dock 19, Jersey Central Railroad. The yard was located behind the Statue of Liberty and is now part of Liberty State Park. He didn't notice or care about my obvious distress but went to his bunk. I gobbled down the rest of the meal, thanked the cook and headed for the engine room without changing my clothes. For the next three and a half hours I just stared at the gauges, the thermocouples, felt the shaft bearings, checked the stern gland and the switchboard hoping nothing would go wrong or get hot or run out of fuel. Well, luckily, nothing did go wrong. I investigated all the nicks and crannies of that small engine room and when I was relieved at 6 o'clock by the engineer, it was with profound relief and also pride that I had stood a watch (half a watch) as an engineer.

It ended up being a great crew, great boat, good experience and...I have loved pea soup ever since!

I'm going to guess the picture of Ozzie LaFontaine is in mid 50's. He has his hand on the old LST throttle control with the bicycle grip on it and you can see one spoke of the steering wheel in the foreground. He is looking out of an open pilothouse port. If you look just above his head you can see the portlight swung up in its stowed position not far from his head and he wasn't a tall man. Besides bumping your head on them, every now and then, particularly when backing they would vibrate off their hangers and come down with authority. They were not light by any means. A natural thing to do was to put your hand at the bottom of the port and/or stick your head out slightly to see better and that is when they fell naturally. It was a real problem and was finally remedied by moving the anchor points of the hangers towards the portlights so they were at an

angle and were hard to release. No easy job as they had to remove the overhead and burn off and reweld the anchor points.