



Making Captain's Lives Easier

I've always held that sailors are a different breed. Whether time on the water instills admirable traits, or good people simply gravitate to the ocean, I don't know. But even I was surprised by some new proof that the world would be a better place with more sailors.

This month's comparison of online captain's schools (page 18) turned up an unexpected back story. Every marine education leader we spoke with praised the National Maritime Center (NMC), an entity that had once been loudly criticized for its irritating bureaucracy.

The center is in charge of issuing credentials to the nation's 275,000 merchant mariners, ranging from paid

Capt. David C. Stalfort helped direct the transformation of the National Maritime Center.

charter skippers to captains of super-max tankers. Until December 2006, the paperwork required for original or renewal captain's licenses was handled at 17 different Regional Exam Centers (RECs), each with its own idea of efficiency. In some RECs, processing delays dragged for months.

If you recently renewed your license, as I did last year, you might have noticed an astounding transformation at the NMC. Five years ago, renewing my 100-ton license had taken a nearly two months. Last fall, processing the paperwork took just 17 days.

Had I been sucked into a bureaucratic wormhole where eons were compressed to seconds? After all, this is the post-911 era, when even Sunfish are regarded as potential security threats. And the Department of Transportation (DOT) had introduced a whole new kink in the licensing process, the Transportation Worker Identity Card (TWIC), requiring fingerprints, background checks, and photographs.

This month, I discovered the real reason: A sailor had taken the helm of NMC. For the past four years, Capt. David C. Stalfort has been the commanding officer at the NMC. Stalfort grew up racing sailboats, and was applying the lessons on efficiency and teamwork that he learned aboard competitive J-boats to the Herculean task of remaking the NMC.

Since 2005, the NMC began the gradual process of decentralization. Gradually, each of the 17 RECs were folded into a high-tech "green" facility in Martinsburg, Va., which opened in 2009.

The new center features a fully staffed call center, automated application status updates, a modern interactive website, and a streamlined data-sharing system with the DOT. Processing time fell from 54 days to 18 days, mariner satisfaction jumped from 30 percent to 90 percent, and credential errors dropped to less than 0.1 percent. The backlog of 12,000 or more applications disappeared.

The people we spoke with unanimously agreed that had it not been for Stalfort and the NMC's mission to broaden its reach, online mariner's schools might still be a pipedream.

Now for the kicker.

By the time you read this, Capt. Stalfort will be retired. After 29 years of service, his last day is June 23. His post retirement plans are sure to include some sailing, so if you see him on the Chesapeake Bay this summer, give him a little room around the windward mark. He's earned every inch.

Cover photo: Nirvana, the 1974 Hinckley 49 PS tested for this issue, rests at her home dock in the Florida Keys. (Photo by Ralph Naranjo)

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