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Harbour pilot Alivia Tay looks out for the launch that will take her out to sea for her first job of the day. Her large backpack contains two mobile phones, a PDA, a laptop with GPS, and water.



Miss Tay needs to be constantly in touch with the pilot base for instructions and updates. Her job is stressful and demanding, and calls for precise decision-making, quick wits and oodles of grit.



Miss Tay in a pilot launch, which is a small boat that ferries pilots between their jobs. With her are (from left) Class A1 pilots Yap Siew Eng, 56, and Shapudin Othman, 50, and (right) Class B pilot Zahari Abdul Rahman, 41.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HARBOUR PILOT

Life on the rope ladder

Alivia Tay is one of just two female harbour pilots in Singapore



STORY & PICTURES
By ASHLEIGH SIM

THE well-paid life of someone with a job in a bank looks pretty good to most people but Alivia Tay had no hesitation in jumping ship a few years ago to hit the high seas.

Her nautical ambitions has taken her to the Navy and PSA Marine, which has now made her one of only two female harbour pilots working in Singapore.

It is a stressful, demanding job that calls for precise decision-making, quick wits and oodles of grit – and all while standing out at the harbour in a rocking boat.

"I do not regret leaving a comfortable bank job because I love the sea a lot, and it is a wonderful experience meeting crew from all over the world," says Miss Tay, 30, an accountancy graduate from Nanyang Technological University.

Many of those crews request mass photo sessions with her because they have never come across a female harbour pilot, while German and Korean captains stuff chocolates and ginseng drinks into her bag as gifts.

Even fishermen in fishing trawlers offer to send sashimi to her home.

Not that there is much time for her to lap up the attention.

Singapore is one of the world's busiest ports so there is never much down time.

About 330 vessels a day – or 120,000 a year – traverse in and out of the ports here, ferrying everything from calamari to cars and crude oil.



Miss Tay approaching the 58m-tall, 304m-long container ship Hanjin-Shenzhen. As both the launch and the ship are moving, she has to jump onto a rope ladder before she can make her way up. She does not usually climb on to ships of this size, and boards it with her mentor as part of her training to become a Class B pilot. Miss Tay holds a Class C licence currently.

Before they can unload their cargo, they must berth at designated ports and terminals but this requires specialised knowledge of local regulations, fairways, hydrography, tidal patterns and currents.

Enter the harbour pilots. They play an essential role in guiding ships safely.

Singapore has about 220 harbour pilots. Due to the physically demanding nature of the job, it is a male-dominated profession. Candidates applying to be a trainee harbour pilot need to either possess at least a Certificate of Competence 3, which is the entry grade for a deck officer, or have served as an officer in the Republic of Singapore Navy for at least four years. After they are recruited, they have to undergo nine months of training conducted by PSA Marine.

Finally, trainees have to pass a series of four exams comprising written, simulator, practical and a panel interview, which can take up to a month, before they can obtain a Class C pilot licence. There are five categories of harbour pilot licences - C, B, A3, A2 and A1. The licence determines the size and tonnage of the vessel that a pilot is qualified to handle.

Miss Tay, who has a Class C licence, navigated her way into the job after a roundabout journey through audit, the military and private enterprise.

After getting her degree, she joined an audit firm for a year before signing on with the Navy as a communications officer. Next stop was a bank, as a settlements staff member for a year, before she set her heart on becoming a pilot with PSA Marine two years ago.

On the day that I followed her, her day started at 8am. The first of three ships she boarded with her mentor as part of her training to become a Class B pilot was a 58m-tall, 304m-long container ship.

Armed with two phones, a PDA, a laptop with Global Positioning System (GPS), a walkie-talkie and safety equipment such as a helmet, life vest and gloves, she rode a smaller boat out towards the ship. She then jumped onto the vessel, landing neatly on the ship's rope



Korean captain Park Dong-Soon of the Gas Fortune stuffs boxes of ginseng drinks into Miss Tay's bag even though she says they are too heavy for her to carry down while climbing a ladder.

ladder.

Piloting ships has many of such thrills and spills. This is because ships, unlike cars, cannot come to an immediate stop. The momentum of a large vessel can send it gliding for several hundred metres even after the engines have stopped.

Snap judgments can be called for, she says. Her mentor Shapudin Othman, 50, adds: "A lot of things can go wrong. You depend on the current, wind, swell, the mooring gang, the crew and the equipment. There are many factors to completing a job safely."

Mr Othman, a Class A1 pilot, believes that his job is "90 per cent anticipation and 10 per cent reaction, as there is no room for complacency".

When I was on board the container ship he was piloting, a tugline snapped while the ship was doing a 180-degree turn. The pilot with more than 16 years'

experience quickly steered it clear of danger.

Nine months on the job, Miss Tay has had her fair share of close shaves. Once, a captain lied about the condition of his ship's engines. She suspected something was amiss because of the unusually slow speed it was travelling at and guided the vessel to a holding area instead of a berth.

True enough, the engine broke down soon after. "It would have been a disaster if the ship had crashed into the berth," says Miss Tay, who is single.

She plans to stay in the job as long as she is physically fit, and stays active by running at least 10km a week. "When a captain praises you and says 'Good job,

pilot!' I get an immediate sense of job satisfaction and all the stress is worth it."

ashs@sph.com.sg



Miss Tay working closely with Captain Vladimir E. De Los Reyes of Eastern Mermaid to guide the chemical ship safely out of the Seraya Chemical Jetty.