Able-Bodied Seaman

Patrick Murphy

Career Interview Transcript:

What are your primary duties on the ship?
On this particular boat, the *Lake Guardian*, my duties are I'm an able-bodied seaman and I stand a watch of 6 hours on, 12 hours off. While we are underway, I do a watch in the wheelhouse with the mate. When we're on station, I assist the lab technician with putting all the instruments overboard, rigging up equipment. And then there's cleaning stations and be available with the radio on you, be able to be found.

What path did you take to get where you are today?
I got on my first boat in 1973. I worked on lake traders for quite a few years. Then I went to help with barges, salvage work, and fishing; I worked on sub chasers for the Navy. I've been on the oceans with the salvage work, taking scrap ships to Brazil. Did a lot of reconditioning work on barges in Guyana and Colombia, and fishing in the Virgin Islands. I did tug deliveries for Great Lakes Towing, and relief work on freighters throughout the Great Lakes, and here I am.

What did you want to do growing up?
I wanted to work on a boat. So I'm actually living my dream, I believe. It was a little hard when we married and had kids, but when the kids grow up, it's good.

What special skills or knowledge are required for your job?
When you start out working on the lakes, you start out with an OS ticket from the Coast Guard. That's an Ordinary Seaman. After 360 days on your OS, you can take a test for an Able-bodied ticket. And then there's Able-bodied Unlimited, then you can go right for a license. So there's schools, unions provide schools or you can do it on your own. Now all the information you study from is online, so you move up the ladder at your own pace, but there's time constraints when and on the tonnage that you have to have to do it. It's all tried and true, like the times you have to work on different tickets before you can achieve the next thing.

What advice would you give a student interested in this kind of work?
Maritime industry has some hard times. Some highs and lows in the maritime industry. But if you have something to fall back on, maybe a degree in something, or a craft – woodworking or metalworking, drafting. Something to fall back on. Because during the hard times you need something else. But when it's not the hard times, it's a good job.

Has communication changed on ships over the years?
Yes, tremendously. There used to be a marine operator, before cell phones and satellite navigation. And you'd call a marine operator to get any calls. When I first started on the freighter, the captain would walk up to a phone booth and call the company to find out when our next trip was. Now it's emailed or faxed over. There would be a line on the dock with ten guys standing in line with change in their pocket waiting to call their wives or their mothers, with limited time. It's changed a lot.

What surprised you when you first started working on the Lakes?
The size of the Great Lakes. I knew they were big, and I knew there was five of them. But the size is massive, the towns along the way and the distance between them and all the different ports. Basically, it would be the size of the lakes themselves.