

# A tug team

By Correspondent  
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Coffee and cooperation... that pretty much sums up the tug boat culture.

It was supposed to be a 2½ hour shift starting late on a recent sunny afternoon, but for Mort Bartel, captain of the Compass Rebel, and Henri Oskam, the deckhand and relief captain, it turned out to be only a routine job about 45 minutes downstream from their home-dock at Fraser Port on Annacis Island.

Their job, one of hundreds they perform as a team every year, was to assist the larger tug Caleb 'kick off' from Lafarge's marine dock with its cargo the Santos, a gutted navy ship now carrying about 4,500 tons of lime. Specifically, they were going to help free her from the dock by pushing an old barge against it to create slack in the ropes so that they could be loosened off.

Bartel and Oskam work for Compass Navigation of Aldergrove, B.C., a company established in 1989 by Lee and Brenda Henshaw. The company's fleet of five tug boats and crews are hired out for all kinds of jobs; assisting large tugs and barges, hauling log booms, assisting visiting vessels through the unfamiliar waters of the Fraser River and positioning construction barges and geotechnical testing equipment.

The tugs are available for jobs on a 7-24 basis, and as both Bartel and Oskam agree, the split shifts and irregular hours are hard on the body.

"Tide and time of day doesn't

matter for a lot of jobs, but we try to work them when we can" says Bartel. The tugs in the fleet vary in overall length, horsepower, manoeuvrability, wheelhouse room and comfort, "but they all have a coffee-making stove."

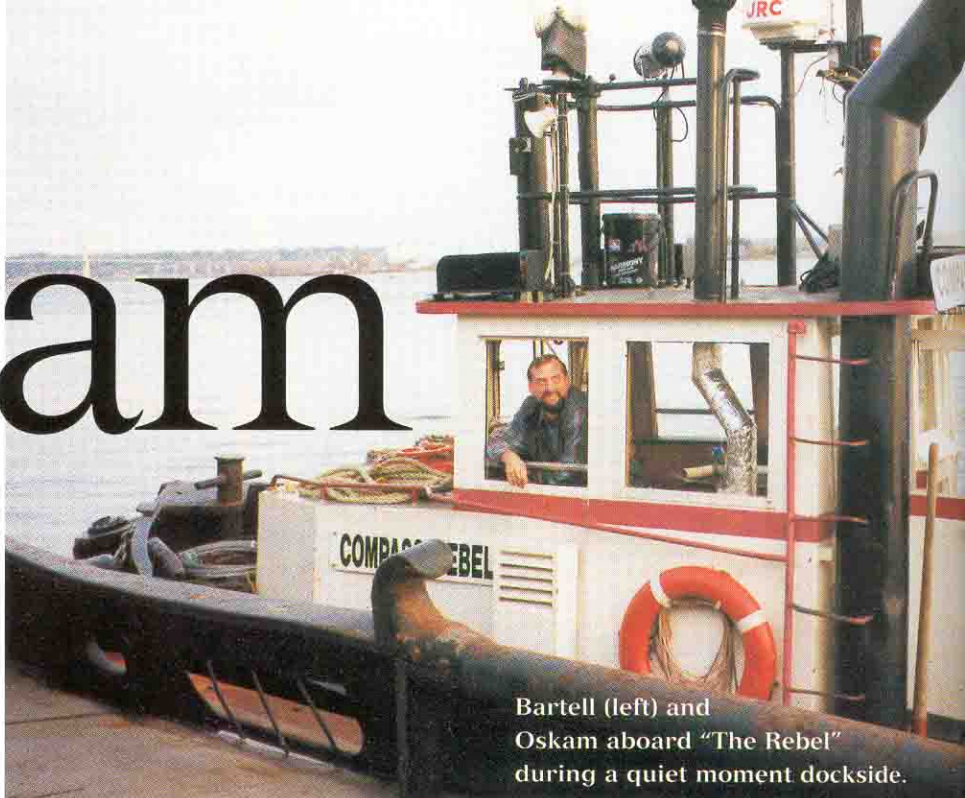
The tug that Bartel and Oskam operate is called "The Rebel," a vessel about 10 m long and powered by a 300 kW turbo-charged V8-892 Jimmy engine.

Log towing is one of the major components of their business, and it is also one of the more physically demanding jobs for the deckhand.

Log booms come in standard lengths of 21 m long by about 20 m wide, and typically contain about six sections. Up to 32 sections can be hauled at once, a formation that can make it tricky to move around and through some of the rail and road bridge foundations, or to navigate the river itself with a few hundred meters of wood in tow. A second tug must be there to assist with log tows around bridge foundations.

Most of the wood that

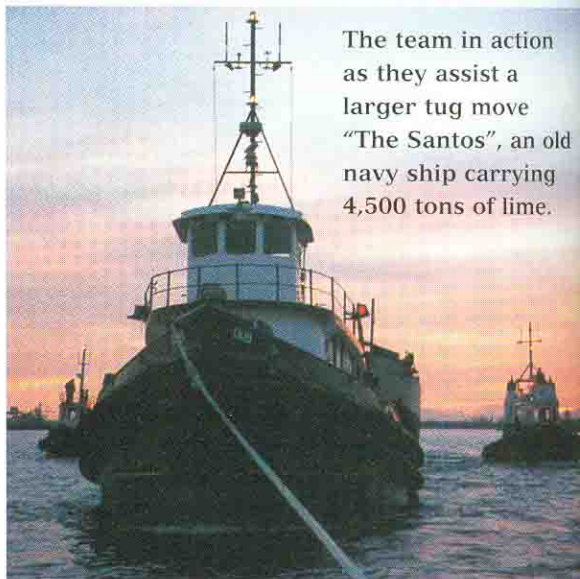
Bartel (left) and Oskam aboard "The Rebel" during a quiet moment dockside.



Bartel and Oskam tow is hemlock, fir, spruce and pine, all of which can get toredos (shrimp-sized bugs) in them from being stored in the chuck. To kill the bugs, the wood is often hauled to fresh water in New Westminster about 10 to 12 hours upstream.

All the booms are named so that the customer can have the boom with the species of wood and log sizes they want delivered to the mill. The dispatcher will often help the mills keep a map of their inventory. Sometimes the boom that the mill wants is the boom on the beach

The team in action as they assist a larger tug move "The Santos", an old navy ship carrying 4,500 tons of lime.





behind several other booms so this job has to be done at high tide.

“Log towing is really wet work,” says Oskam. “It’s the deckhand’s job to loosen off and contain all the booms to get to the one they want, then to re-secure the rest. Sometimes during the selection or worse during the haul, the 50 pound and up boom chains can break. Even worse yet is when the side sticks break and logs start drifting all over

the place and must be recovered.

“Pleasure craft regularly fly alongside and they don’t realize that if I don’t see a wave coming, and they keep coming for a long time after the boat is gone, that I could lose a hand or a leg,” says Oskam. “But loading log ships is probably the hardest job that I do.

“We also dock a tug at Vancouver Pile Driving’s yard in North Vancouver so we do some interesting jobs for them,” adds Bartel. “We work on some of their sites where we help them position barges for densification work, move barges with three or four concrete trucks on them, or help position a barge with a ‘moon-hole’ for geotechnical drilling.

“We did a job for them right in Vancouver, near Stanley Park, where there are a lot of expensive boats. This kind of work is more challeng-



ing for the captain so the deckhand gets a little break. It’s really important to be gentle with the throttle. The safety of the deckhand and the other crew gets highest priority. Making a buck for my owners, plus keeping the customer satisfied, are secondary to safety.”

As mentioned at the outset, “The Rebel’s” role on this job was to primarily assist The Caleb and Santos and to “hang around” in case The Caleb had a problem with one of its engines during the move.

The captain of The Caleb radios Bartel: “Have you got another job to go to after this? No? Good!” Even if they did, they wouldn’t be able to get to it because once freed from the dock, the falling tide is creating a strong downstream current and in a matter of minutes, The Santos and The Caleb are a fair distance from Lafarge’s dock. Bartel moves The Rebel into position in front of The Caleb. As soon as they are close, Oskam and The Caleb’s deckhands secure the tugboats together while Bartel gently turns the convey around. He has to be gentle because if he isn’t, he could easily capsize The Rebel.

As strong as The Rebel is, it hasn’t got the power to muscle The Caleb and The Santos upstream against a falling tide and safely dock her. A nearby smaller tug, The Delta Fox, comes to assist. The two tugs are able to keep the two other vessels inching upstream towards the dock, but everyone is waiting for the 825 kW Tiger Shaman to come and do the grunt work.

Once The Tiger Shaman arrives, the boats become a regular fleet. The lead boat, the Tiger Shaman, is in charge.

With The Santos safely docked, The Rebel heads for home where Bartel and Oskam will await their next job as A Day in the Life of “A tug team.” ♦

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