

JOHN NICCOLLS

TUGBOATS OF THE CHESAPEAKE

An Illustrated View



Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges contributions of these special, some might even say unusual, characters in the development of this tugboating story.

- Tug Boat Annie (whose adventures in the Saturday Evening Post were relished)
- The St. Louis Eagle Boat Store Company (which employed the author as a tugboat deckhand)
- Popeye the Sailor Man
- Bean
- Wirednut
- Newman
- And the Knock Off delivery boat crew of October, 2005, as seen below:



W. B. Raufer — Senior member of the delivery crew; loyal brother-in-law of Knock Off captain, scribe par excellence and patient listener of Herdlein's many stories.



Ted Cody — Long time neighbor, father of Megan and Katy, husband of forgiving wife, Tracy; helmsman extraordinaire; Ted stood helmsman duty in rough seas for two days. Not bad for a novice!



John Herdlein — Captain's oldest friend from a misspent youth; pictured with "Little John" (the first boat owned in a partnership involving a 1,086.6 mile trip down the Mississippi in 1958)

And a special thanks to Thomas G. and Norma J. Gates, partners in Blue Charm. Tom freely gives up Wednesdays every week first to sailing and now to tugboating with the author.



Blue Charm, the 38' Wauquiez Hood sloop the Gates and Niccolls owned, at anchor outside St. Michaels Harbor, Miles River, Maryland.



Tom Gates finishing installation of new name and hailing port graphics on Blue Charm — May, 2004. Blue Charm was named for a fly fishing lure and her inventory included a nice water color of the lure itself. We kept the name but changed the hailing port and graphics.



Normal and Tom Gates enjoying a quiet moment in the cockpit of Blue Charm. Quiet because Tom was thinking about whether to pass an approaching tugboat on the port or starboard and Norma was thinking "Does he see that damn thing?"

Introduction

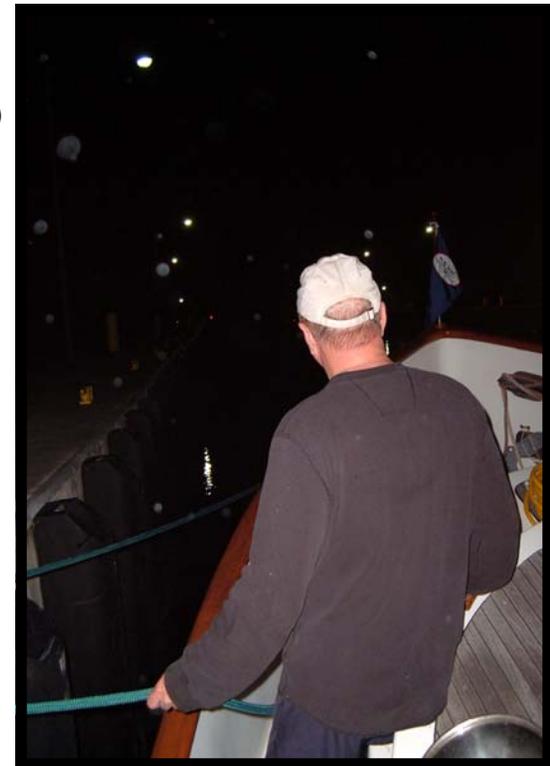
The Chesapeake Bay region has long been served by boats of many sizes, designs and manufacture. From the earliest log canoes to the latest “cigarette boats” (otherwise understood to be male “prowess” enhancement devices), none has contributed more to the economy than the simple tug boat. Whether pushing or pulling its “tow”, tugs serve us all by bringing the best of Chinese merchandise to the American home.

This brief *Illustrated View of Tugboats of the Chesapeake* will familiarize its readers, young and old alike, with these workhorses of the bay. Join with me in appreciating, even honoring, tug boats as seen through the eye of one “wannabe” tugger. No tugboat story would be complete without a description of “locking through”. Moving valuable cargo around dams, rapids or other waterway obstructions requires locks to raise or lower tugboats and their barges to the water level above or below the obstruction. Here, an unidentified deckhand on Knock Off’s 150 mile delivery cruise from Great Bridge, Chesapeake, Virginia, (without cargo) up the bay to Friendship, Maryland, holds the tug steady off the wall as the water falls in the lock to the level of the Elizabeth River below.

Here’s a happy bunch after enjoying a sightseeing cruise around Baltimore Harbor. Emi came from California just for the experience!



Rumor among officers and hands aboard Knock Off during the delivery was that Captain John hired this particular hand from the midlands of the country not for his tug boating experience (which is nil) but for his conversational style. Indeed, those aboard never grew tired of hearing stories of this seafaring, obviously experienced sailor. This was a man you could trust when things got tough. Unfortunately, he jumped ship at Patuxtant, Maryland, but promised to return for further duty aboard Knock Off whenever invited. Indeed, the summer of 2006 found him aboard Knock Off regaling the crew with stories about his beautiful grandchild.



Early tugboats and their competitors

Successful tugboat operations require stamina, determination and capital. Stamina to withstand the harsh and critical comments of “friends” and “advisors” not to mention spouses who question the sanity and prudence of spending long hours cleaning, fueling, watering, painting, varnishing, oiling, waxing, washing (did I mention cleaning?) the tugboat. Determination is required to do the job right. And capital. Well, enough said about that.

Competitors to the tugboat arise from many swampy places. Some have outboard engines and come equipped with fishing rods; some have sails.

Tom Gates at the helm of his tugboat. Among the many watercraft owned by this sailor, angler and power boater, none exceeds the beauty of this Pioneer center console blue-hulled baby. If only it had a fish finder.

Tom, always ready to lend a hand for the betterment of Knock Off, operating on Knock Off's balking auto-pilot. The device subsequently was replaced.

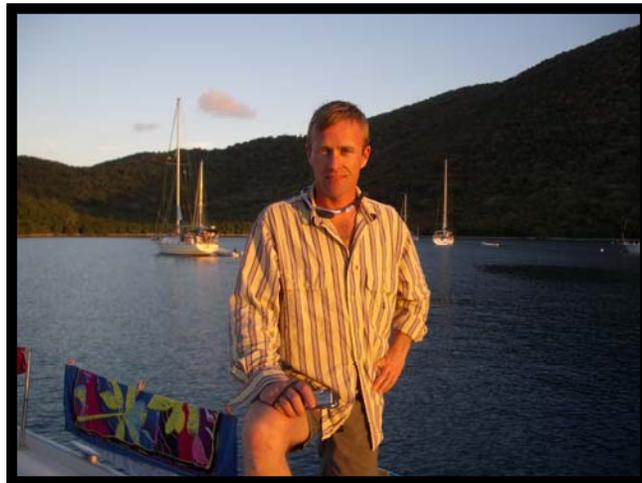


Feeding the Crew

A well fed crew is a happy crew. A happy crew is, well, a happy crew. And these galley slaves always produce a happy crew.



Here's the co-captain piloting Knock Off out of the Patuxtant River on the third day of the delivery cruise.



Even our rock climbing son, Will, is "into" tugboating. Here he is somewhere in the Carribean studying essentials of tug boat operation and maintenance as well as beaches, sea turtles and tropical fish.



Here a happy galley crew prepares dinner for the captain's table. Hands dined on wormy hard tack. The TV was removed after complaints about the cooks becoming distracted by re-runs of the Phil Donahoe Show and burning the buns.

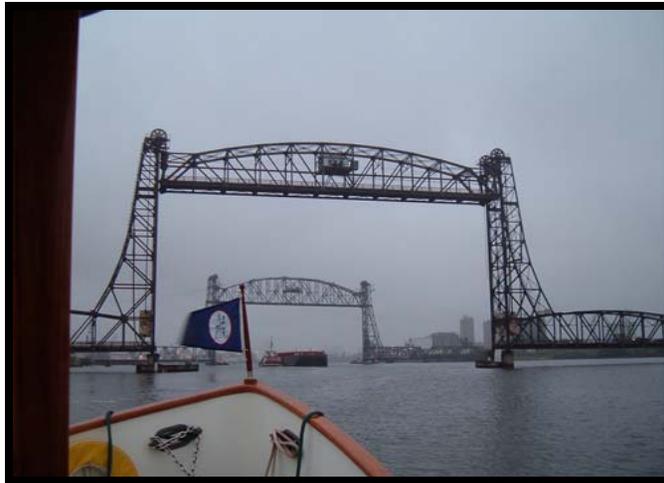
Tugboats helping other tugboats

Tugboaters stick together on the water.

The 100 foot masts of Volvo Round the World mega-sloops tower over spectator yachts as they reach south toward the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay at Hampton Roads. In true tugboat fashion, Knock Off stood by to aid any boats in need. She also was photographed by numerous boaters.



Here, Knock Off follows the MacAllister tug under a draw-bridge on the Elizabeth River thus making sure the bridge closes correctly. Note the Lord Nelson Victory Tug burgee flying on the pig stick.



This fellow tugger was clearly in need of Knock Off's assistance during Volvo Round the World start of the Annapolis to London leg. She steamed northbound among a fleet of 3,000 spectator boats gathered for the race. Knock Off provided invaluable piloting advice permitting this tug to continue on with its cargo of industrial chemicals bound for Baltimore.



Knock Off Delivery

Knock Off captured our hearts in September, 2005. She came up for sale because the former owner's wife developed vertigo problems when aboard. She was on the market only briefly when the author sped down to Great Bridge, Virginia, to inspect this 37 foot "Lord Nelson Victory Tug".

After settlement in early October, delivery of the tug 150 miles from Great Bridge, Virginia, to Herrington Harbour—15 miles south of Annapolis—was planned, crew carefully selected (among those who applied only 100% were accepted), provisions and charts gathered and the dates set. The crew arrived on time and took time to partake dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant. Here's the log of the trip north:

Knock Off at anchor, Harness Creek, October, 2005.



Knock Off's uncluttered wheelhouse as seen on August 28, 2005, when first inspected by the author.

Sunday, October 9, 2005

- 4:40 am Knock Off leaves Shed No. 2 at Atlantic Yacht Basin, Great Bridge, Virginia, and motors short distance out into the Eastern Inter-coastal Waterway (A.K.A. Albemarle Chesapeake Canal). The captain intended to catch the 5:00 am bridge opening.
- 4:45 am Knock Off's powerful 150 HP Cummins engine stalls just off the transient yacht and fuel dock area; captain (disregarding shouted advice from the midlands deckhand) lowered anchor. Descending into the engine room, the captain single-handedly determined the problem was air in the fuel line which resulted from incomplete bleeding of fuel line and fuel filters when the Racor fuel filter was cleaned and cartridge replaced at Atlantic Yacht Basin. Captain skillfully used the manual priming pump to correct the problem; the engine was restarted but too late for 5:00 am bridge opening. Drats. More coffee, Herdlein stories and a one hour wait for the bridge to be raised again.



5:45 am

Knock Off was under way to north on the ICW again, passed under Great Bridge bridge (yes, that the name) and approached Great Bridge lock; the lockmaster (seeing the powerful tug approaching) opened the lock doors smartly and she slid into the lock. The lockmaster advised captain to tie up to left side of the lock and the deckhands complied with orders barked from the bridge—that's Knock Off's bridge not the Great Bridge bridge. The south doors closed and (after a pause) the north doors opened. Knock Off left the brightly lighted locks and motored into the dark channel of the ICW north of Great Bridge. The captain's memory is that Knock Off was lowered by the lock but that puzzles him because one would think that the Elizabeth River would be higher than sea level. On the other hand, the canal connects the upper reach of the Elizabeth River—South Branch—and the upper reach of the North Landing River which flows into Albemarle Sound, or so the crew was led to believe.

Novice deck hand Ted Cody holds Knock Off away from the rough side walls of the Great Bridge lock.

After some discussion among the crew, the captain determined Knock Off was “leaving” the South Branch of the Elizabeth River (which on the charts appears to end at the locks) and that the green daymarks and lights will be on our starboard. The tug's 1,000,000 candle power spotlight was used to find daymarks ahead and easily slid down the canal toward the second draw bridge. Steel Bridge was opened as Knock Off approached. The bridge tender probably heard Knock Off's radio traffic at the locks.

As Knock Off approached the second drawbridge, some confusion arose as to the bridge name so Knock Off chose to follow a MacAllister tugboat which was pushing (later to be seen on Hampton Roads towing) a single large barge. The bridges all opened to her and Knock Off followed behind toward Hampton Roads.

8:30 am

Knock Off entered the Portsmouth/Norfolk area and the crew enjoy seeing dolphins, large U.S. war ships including carriers and missile cruiser plus two cruise ships—one of the Disney Line.

- 10:00 am Pass the Thimble Shoal area off Hampton heading north on the lower Chesapeake Bay; seas two to three feet; wind NNE. We are traveling up the west side of the bay, away from the large commercial traffic which generally follows the eastern side of the bay.
- Noon +/- Pass New Point Comfort which marks the northern side of Mobjack Bay
- 2:15 pm Pass Wolf Trap light and decide to put in for the night at Fishing Bay on the Piankatank River
- 3:30 pm We have rounded Steve Point and turned into Fishing Bay. See several sailboats on the river and enjoy flat water for the first time since leaving Hampton Roads.
- 4:00 pm Anchor down and set in 20 feet of water; beer and cheese out; dinner plans made and set in motion



Ted Cody demonstrating his "boarding-house reach" for the last hot roll as Herdlein recoils in surprise at the mild-mannered helmsman's appetite. Standing duty at the helm for six hours builds a powerful hunger.

Tugboaters are almost never too tired to dine. The steaks were fine as was the wine on the first night of the delivery trip.

Cooking aboard Knock Off on its maiden voyage revealed empty propane tanks so the steak grilling was done on the electric range. Propane is now safely stowed aboard on every voyage.



On the other side of the table, the gentleman skipper and first mate Bill Rauffer toast their safe arrival in Fishing Bay after slogging up the Chesapeake Bay against horrendous wind and waves.

Monday, October 10, 2005

- 7:00 am Heading out the Piankatank River passed Stingray Point light (off Deltaville, Virginia) then on to Windmill Point which marks the Rappahanock River.
- 8:00 am John punches in the Herring Bay coordinates to his GPS and advises that we're 70 some miles from home, that laying over in Solomons Island is a good idea. Crew applauds decision not to spend 14 hours today bucking high waves and winds.
- 9:00 am Passing Fleets Bay which probably saw a lot of Knock Off as White Stone, Virginia, (home of Fred and Linda Byrum, former owners) is nearby
- 10:30 am Pass the entrance to the Great Wicomico River – home of the manhaden fishing fleet. Two trawlers were seen entering the river
- 9:00 pm Crew asleep. Knock Off swings on anchor in 8 to 10 knot breezes all night.
- 11:30 am Pass Smith Point which is the south point of the entrance to the Potomac River
- 12:35 pm Nearly past Point Lookout which is the southern tip of Maryland on the north side of the Potomac. Damn the Potomac is a wide river at the bay!
- 2:00 pm Pass "Point No Point"
- 2:45 pm We're off the Cedar Point Hollow south of the Naval Air Warfare Center at the Patuxtant River
- 3:30 pm Round Cedar Point and enter the Patuxtant River approaching Solomons Island area
- 4:00 pm Find the "tee" end of H dock and tie up with our starboard side to the dock. Knock Off has a left turning prop so she backs slightly to starboard. That made this docking pretty and easy.

The First and Finest Delivery Crew Jumps Ship in Solomon's

Arriving in calm water at a transient slip in a Solomons Island yacht basin just might have been the highlight of the delivery trip. None of the crew failed to quickly find the gang-plank and kiss Mother Earth hello—if only with a dirty deck shoe. Traci Cody and the captain's mate arrived in a red bus-like vehicle to transport the weary crew to Leesburg.



Tracy Cody and Jeanne Niccolls flash the pearlies as the crew joins them in Cody's van for the trip home.



Herdlein and Niccolls enjoy a view from Knock Off's forward deck after arrival in Solomons.

Senior journalist, raconteur and anecdotist Bill Rauffer bids a fond adieu to Knock Off. The captain promises another cruise soon.



Knock Off, at rest at dockside in Solomons. She awaits further adventures on the last leg of her delivery to Her-rig Bay and boating seasons to come.



Ted Cody (far right here -- t not politically) relaxes after two harrowing days at the helm. His nautical skills come naturally from Old Navy. Ted's daughter, Megan, whose sail on Blue Charm preceded by one day Hurricane Isabel, is at left.



Knock Off Delivery (continued)

The following weekend (October 14 and 15, 2005), Knock Off's owners set out by car for Solomon's Island and found her still safely docked where she was abandoned by the delivery crew. The weather was mild and skies clear so we decided on a trip across the bay to the Little Choptank River where we would anchor for the evening. An easy run home to Herring Bay was anticipated on the next day, Sunday. Leaving the dock, however, looked problematic because a strong wind from the west was pushing her to the dock. We solicited help from some visiting sailors who were resting up for a trip to the Caribbean Sea. Knock Off came off the dock into the wind and we turned down the Patuxtant River to the bay.

We found the bay a bit choppy but made the Little Choptank River by early afternoon and anchored peacefully in Harness Creek with only one other trawler for company. After a dinghy ride to investigate Harness Creek, we were hailed by the trawler's crew who provided cocktails and advice on power boating.

That evening Knock Off's generator wouldn't start (a problem that was to have been fixed in Great Bridge) but we managed dinner and breakfast using the batteries and the power inverter.

Sunday morning brought more sunny skies and lots of wind. Harness Creek was the last flat water we saw for nearly six hours. The Little Choptank River was seriously choppy as we headed upwind 12 nautical miles across the Chesapeake to Herring Bay. On the bay itself, waves broke over Knock Off's bow and she pitched hard on the waves. We only made four knots speed and the going was rough.



Jennifer and Jeanne enjoying life on the upper deck, October, 2005.

Finally, after entering Herring Bay, we rode up close to the lea shore in calmer water so dock lines could be prepared. Our landing in the assigned slip wasn't pretty but no boats were damaged though captain's pride in his seamanship was a bit bent. Onlookers were sympathetic as most wisely decided to stay shore-bound that windy Sunday.

Enjoying Knock Off Style Tug Boating on the Bay



New "bow pudd'n" by the Marlinspike Artist.



Hauled for the pre-purchase survey -- September, 2005

Knock Off deserved this new Garmin color GPS chart plotter plus a new Simrad autopilot in 2006.



Captain's oldest nephew John is hard at work polishing brass.

Defeating the bay's stinging nettles with the Nettle Net swim pool, Norma, Tom and captain enjoy a soak in the Rhode River.



Home port is Herrington Harbour North, Friendship, Maryland

Some seventy-six Lord Nelson Victory Tugs of the 37 foot class were completed by master yacht builder Tommy Chin in Taiwan beginning in the 1980s. Knock Off, Hull No. 66, was delivered to her first owner in 1986. Her hull and topsides are molded reinforced fiberglass built to American Shipbuilding Standards. No veneer was used on the yacht and all the teak brightwork is from a single log. The skilled craftsmen in Tommy's yard knew how to join teak to exacting standards.

Her designer, Jim Baccus, estimates her tipping moment to be 85 degrees so while she rolls in a beam sea she can be expected to survive serious knockdowns. She is powered by a 150 hp Cummins turbocharged diesel engine and equipped with a 8.8 kw Westerbeke generator to supply energy for her 120 VAC systems (air conditioners and range). She burns about 1.5 gallons of fuel per hour and cruises flat water at 7.5 knots. She displaces 20,000 pounds of water and is a US Coast Guard "documented" yacht. Her hailing port is White Stone, Virginia. Her prior name, fortunately changed by the former owners from White Stone, was "Tuggy" and she was berthed in Chicago. She traveled on her own bottom from Chicago to the Chesapeake Bay and has made two trips to Florida on the Intercoastal Waterway. She may go again.



Knock Off began her first full season at Herrington Harbour in 2006. Tom Gates and captain moved her from D Dock to her permanent Slip, E-24, on April 1.



New Friends on Peugeot Sound

The Lord Nelson Victory Tug Association, headquartered in Port Ludlow, Washington, sponsored its LNVT rendezvous in August, 2006. While we could-

n't take Knock Off, about a dozen other 37 footers, two 49 foot and two 44 foot LNVTs arrived at Bell Harbour Marina in Seattle. We attended technical sessions with a Cummins representative, anchor manufacturer (yes, made in America) and a knowledgeable young chap who explained how his company's dripless shaft seal works. About 24 boat owners attended the rendezvous and partied quite well together. We met and formed a warm friendship with LNVT owners from Church Creek, Maryland, (Vicki and Dave Howell) who cruise Peugeot Sound on their "Nellie D".

St. Louis to New Orleans — 1958

The captain's first "tugboat" was purchased jointly with John Herdlein in 1958 for the purpose of canoeing the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans. That trip of over 1,000 miles required 35 days, generated untold worry among parents, but ended successfully in the now devastated Crescent City. Arriving at the foot of Canal Street one afternoon in August, we found a friendly harbormaster who agreed to store "Little John" (as the canoe was named) and arrange its passage back to St. Louis on a tugboat (!).

The 35 millimeter slides taken during the trip have lost much color but the memories of the flooded river, heat, mosquitoes, isolated sand bars with roaming razorback hogs and being shot at in Mississippi remain bright. This trip, and sailing with Sea Scouts on the Alton pool of the Mississippi River above St. Louis made this Aquarius a boater for life. Sailing and tug-boating the Chesapeake Bay is as fine a boating experience as one can have.



Herdlein at the bow and Niccolls at the stern leave Camp Bereton harbor above St. Louis and head out to the Mississippi River on day one of their 36 day, 1,086.6 mile, canoe journey to New Orleans, August, 1958.



Herdlein watches huge Mississippi River tugboat pushing upstream.



Jennifer enjoys tugboating as long as it is in the British Virgin Islands.

Herdlein and Gates admire Knock Off while visiting Cambridge, Maryland, Town Creek — Summer, 2006

