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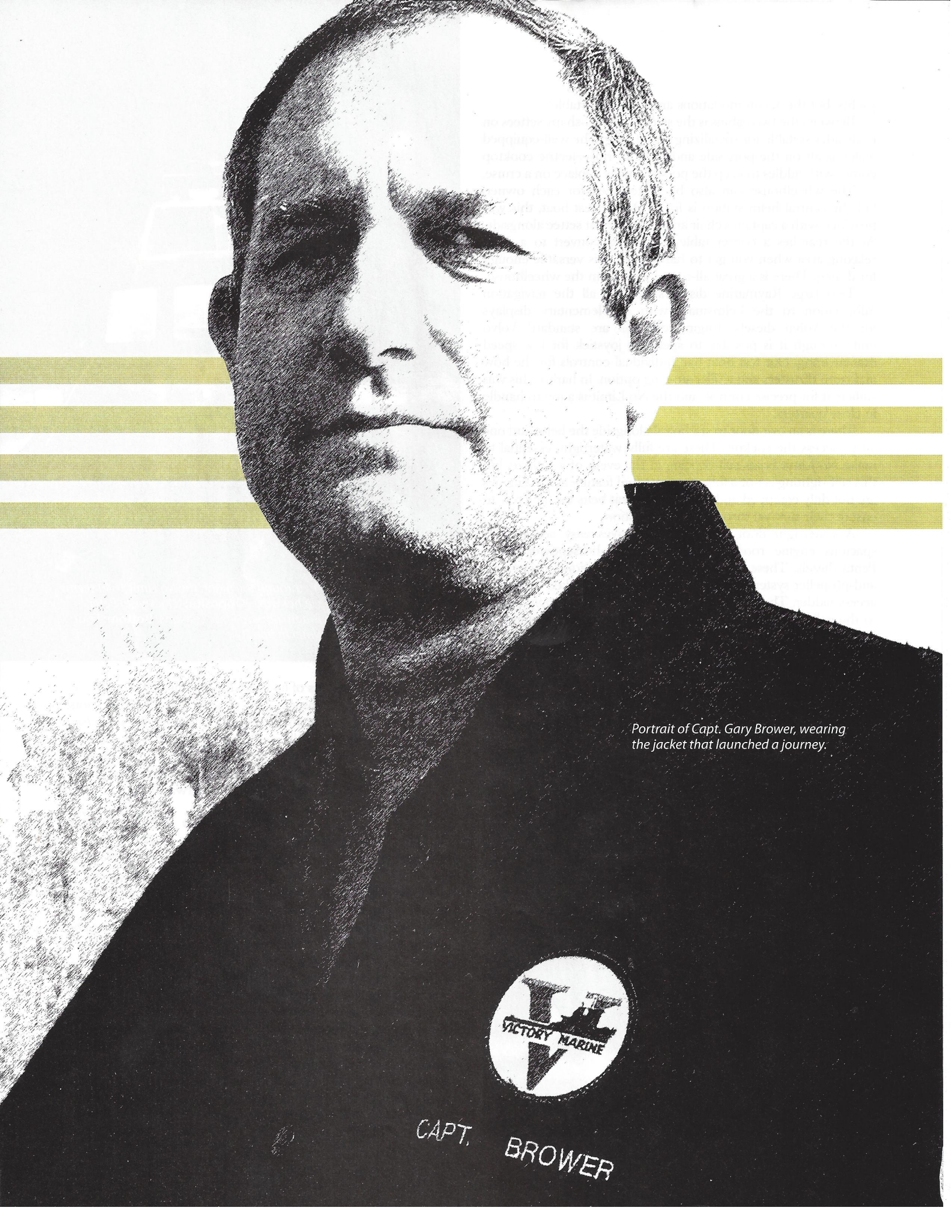
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Are you a Captain? One mariner's quest to obtain his captain's license may inspire you.

By Gary Brower





*Portrait of Capt. Gary Brower, wearing the jacket that launched a journey.*



CAPT. BROWER





A few years ago I inherited a Victory Marine jacket from my dad. I had worn the jacket from time to time without giving a second thought to the letters “Capt.” embroidered on the chest. Occasionally people would ask, “Are you a captain?” Once the question was raised, my mind wandered. It was a simple question on the surface, every time I ventured out on the open water with my boat I was the captain. However, I did not feel entirely comfortable claiming the title.

For me that simple question was the turning point in a journey that had started years earlier. You could say I have the sea in my blood. My father was a tugboat captain with a 3,000-ton open ocean master’s license. But my family connection goes back farther than that. A. G. Brower, my great-great-grandfather, owned a shipping company and was a member of both the New York Yacht Club and Atlantic Yacht Club; sailing the 58-foot *Heartsease*, and the 78-foot schooner yacht, *Frisia*. Over the past 40 years I had gained a lifetime of knowledge, skills, and experience on the water. Now, I was determined to make the commitment to become a licensed U.S. Coast Guard master.

You will note the official designation is master. There is no Coast Guard sanctioned captain’s license. To claim the appellation of captain you will need to set your sights on acquiring a Merchant Mariner Credential with an officer endorsement as Operator of Uninspected Passenger Vessels (OUPV) or master. I am sharing this chronicle in the hopes that it will shed some light on the process and perhaps inspire you to consider the challenge of obtaining your own master’s certificate.

Before we start on our journey, let me begin by explaining that I am sharing my singular story with you, and there are many details that are beyond the scope of this article. For complete, timely, accurate information, I recommend that you visit the U.S. Coast Guard National Maritime Center’s website [www.uscg.mil/nmc](http://www.uscg.mil/nmc).

## CALL TO ACTION

I had the good fortune to meet some amazing individuals on my journey. Marvin, one of my classmates, had already obtained a limited 25-ton master’s license earlier in his career. He ran a

successful guide service, fishing more than 200 days per year. His new license would provide a competitive advantage, allowing him to expand his fishing territory from specific bays and rivers into the Pacific Ocean.

Another classmate, Keith, started his adventure from the unlikely location of Prosser, a landlocked town located in eastern Washington. He and his wife, Camille, decided to abandon a lifetime of farm, orchard, and vineyard operations to start a kayak business ([www.kayakvoyagers.com](http://www.kayakvoyagers.com)) in Florida. Keith was planning to pilot a 70-foot catamaran that acts as a mother ship for kayak expeditions in the Bahamas, Gulf Islands, Everglades, and Florida Keys.

The hardest part of each journey is usually the decision to begin. This decision would mean committing a substantial amount of time, energy, and financial resources to my goal. Before I could make this decision, I first needed to determine if I met the minimum qualifications. The primary consideration was sea time. To record this information, I had to look back over nearly 40 years of boating experience. I was able to complete the documentation by poring over old log books, photos, Coast Guard documentation, and other evidence. Once I had the information, I collected signatures from owners, operators, and masters who could verify my experience.

Next, I had to get a Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC). I started with this, because the application process can consume a fair amount of time. Since my goal was to minimize time away from work, and since I was already taking a vacation day to pick up my TWIC card, I scheduled my drug test and medical evaluation for the same day.

On the day of the exam, traffic was crawling more slowly than usual, so I arrived at the health center a few minutes late, feeling slightly rattled. As a result of the stress, my blood pressure was slightly elevated, and I was concerned about the impact that this development might have on my overall plans. However, the medical technician had apparently seen this phenomenon before and simply asked me to sit quietly for a few minutes and then completed the test again with satisfactory results.

## PAPER SAILORS

Completing the Merchant Mariner Credential application turned out to be a fairly elaborate, expensive, and time-consuming process. The application was composed of many sections. It started like any other form, asking for my name, address, date of birth and other basic information. As the application progressed, it became a little more complicated, and I had to review my experience to determine which license(s) I was qualify to earn. Truthfully, I was slightly bewildered by the technical requirements for the various licenses, but I was able to tap into a knowledgeable nautical community to get some sound advice.

Next, I swore an oath to perform my duties and to carry out





**Above:** *Classmates: The Author, Keith, Instructor Dennis, and Marvin in front of one of the last maritime schools conducted inside a residence. Inset: Instructor Dennis, during his earlier years, lands tuna.*

I was excited to learn that the Coast Guard started accepting applications via email in 2010. In addition, they allowed for online payment of the application fee using the [www.pay.gov](http://www.pay.gov) website.

## RED TAPE

Applying for a license is by no means an endeavor for the bureaucratically squeamish. After all, there are lots of rules that need to be respected in order to maintain the integrity of the licensing process. That being said, the Coast Guard was very helpful throughout the process. After receiving my application, the CG soon responded with a helpful update explaining the evaluation process. I am not sure what I expected. Maybe I thought the application would go into a black hole for a few months before I would receive any news. Instead, I received a personal email from Dawn at the Portland Regional Exam Center. I was so delighted that I sent her a personal thank you letter.

Soon after, I received a tracking number for my application, as well as regular email updates each time the status of my application changed. The website even provided a personalized chart showing the progress of my application.

When the letter from the Coast Guard finally arrived, telling me

the lawful orders of superior officers aboard a vessel. Rather than completing the oath in person, it was more convenient for me to complete the form with a local notary.

My goal was to take advantage of my existing Red Cross first aid card, which was valid for two years. However, I soon learned that the Merchant Marine Credential specified that first aid training had to be completed within the past year. So, I took another vacation day to complete a combined First Aid/CPR/AED class. Upon completion of the class, my application packet was ready to send.





that my application was accepted, I was also excited to learn that I qualified for the 100 Gross Registered Ton endorsement for which I had applied. I was honored to trade the eight-inch stack of paper I had accumulated during the application process for this one thin letter. At this point, I took a moment to revel in the accomplishment. All that was left was the most difficult and expensive part of the venture, studying the material and passing the exam.

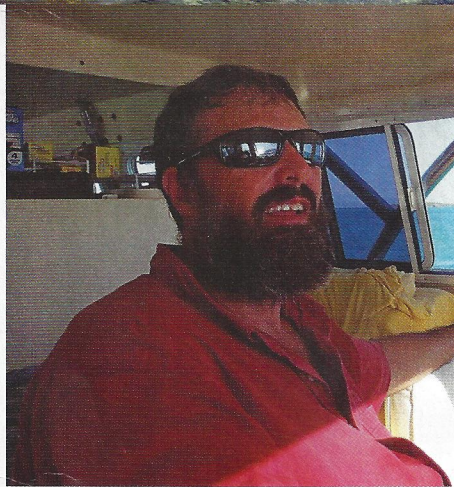
## THE CLASS

I could have pursued two options at that point—take a Coast Guard approved course or locate reference materials, study, and schedule an exam at the Coast Guard's Regional Examination Center. I decided to take a formal class, which allowed me to accurately predict the cost and time required to secure the license and benefit from a trusted advisor who could guide me through the process.

I was fortunate to find Capt. Dennis Degner who runs the Columbia Pacific Maritime school ([www.columbiapacificmaritime.com](http://www.columbiapacificmaritime.com)). His business is one of the last sea schools held in a personal residence (although the dedicated school is well separated from the residence). Since Degner's classroom was about 60 miles from my home, I was planning to use vacation time to follow a routine of drive, study, test, drive, sleep, and repeat.

I arrived at school to find the ambiance much as you might imagine. The décor included life rings, a brass bell, and a ship's wheel. Inside, there were pictures of fishing boats from Degner's past. One item of particular interest was a letter of recommendation from a tugboat captain. The captain had lost his license during the economic downturn and Degner had helped get it reinstated. As I learned, Degner was not only an excellent educator, he also acted as a mentor for many professional mariners.

When the time came to get started, I was apprehensive about the intensity of the training. In fact, many of us were nervous that we might not be able to pass the class or complete the material on time, but the instructor provided a constant, calm reassurance. Whenever there was doubt, Capt. Degner reminded



**Top:** Enjoying some free time on a sea kayak from Keith and Camille's *Kayak Voyagers*.  
**Above:** Captain Keith at the helm of *Mirage*.

us to trust in his system. The Coast Guard approved test has thousands of possible questions and Degner was familiar with each and every one. In order to help prepare us, he first provided all of the information, supplementing the lecture with valuable reference materials, memory aides, and mnemonics. Then he arranged practice sessions, exercises, and discussions, followed by a review of the hard-to-remember items. This process provided a constantly increasing focus on the objectives that were most likely to appear on the test. During the tests, I felt as though I could practically hear Degner's voice echoing in my head.

Some of the most interesting moments in class came when the instructor illustrated points with stories based on his experience working on commercial fishing boats, research ships, and oil-

spill response vessels. In fact, I stayed after class one evening to talk with Degner about our mutual experience growing up on commercial fishing boats. We also learned much from the other professional mariners in class. It was a special treat when Marvin regaled us with stories from his fishing adventures.

The master's class consisted of 10 days and five tests: Charting, Navigation General, Rules of the Road, Deck General, and Master.

Despite being on the West Coast, we used Block Harbor for our charting exercises. These exercises engulfed Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. During those three days my chart became thin with abuse as I calculated, measured, plotted, and erased. For me there was also a bit of a learning curve, because like many tasks, navigation can be accomplished with a variety of tools. In the past, I had used dividers and parallel rulers, but in class we used a rolling parallel plotter and a speed bow compass.

Thursday's topic was Navigation General. The focus for this day was weather, tides, and tidal currents. On Friday and over the weekend, we learned about sound signals, lights, day shapes, and other navigational rules laid out in the COLREGS. The rules of the road test was the most exacting portion of the class, requiring a score of 90 percent to pass. It was also the most



humorous section, because the instructor had us construct paper boats, which we laid out on the plotting table to visualize various crossing situations.

Deck General, deck safety, and environmental protection was an entertaining catchall. On Monday, we learned about radio operation, line handling, engine operation, anchoring, safety, and lifesaving. The rest of the crew completed the OUPV portion of the class on Monday. I remained for a few more days to complete the training for my master's ticket.

## TOWING BONUS

I was the only student on Tuesday, and since we finished up early, the instructor asked if I would be interested in a Commercial Assistance Towing Endorsement. I was eager to gain some insight into my dad's work as a tugboat captain, so I jumped at the opportunity.

After the towing test I had a perfect run, scoring 100 percent on each of the first five tests. However, the test for the last two days' work included more details on survival skills, anchoring, block and tackle use, and the fundamentals of ship stability (including some detailed mathematical formulas), and so on my final day I missed a few questions. Nevertheless, I was happy to learn that my score was easily within the passing range.

## DISASTER STRIKES

Ten days of training can be rather monotonous, especially for active seamen. After sitting for a few days, we were all craving an adventure. But you know what they say, be careful what you wish for. During a rare break in the training we were getting some fresh air outside the classroom. As we enjoyed the peaceful neighborhood, we watched as an elderly gentleman quietly walked his dog. In an instant, the dog tugged on the leash and the gentleman took a tremendous fall. The man landed on his head and was bleeding profusely from his face and nose. Lucky for him, all of the mariners at the school were well trained in first aid and the injured man received good care.

We called 911 and stabilized the patient. I sacrificed my shirt for use as a pillow, and the school provided clean towels that we used as a compress. After taking care of these critical needs, we comforted the dog and checked the neighborhood for relatives. All ended well when the paramedics arrived to transport the patient.

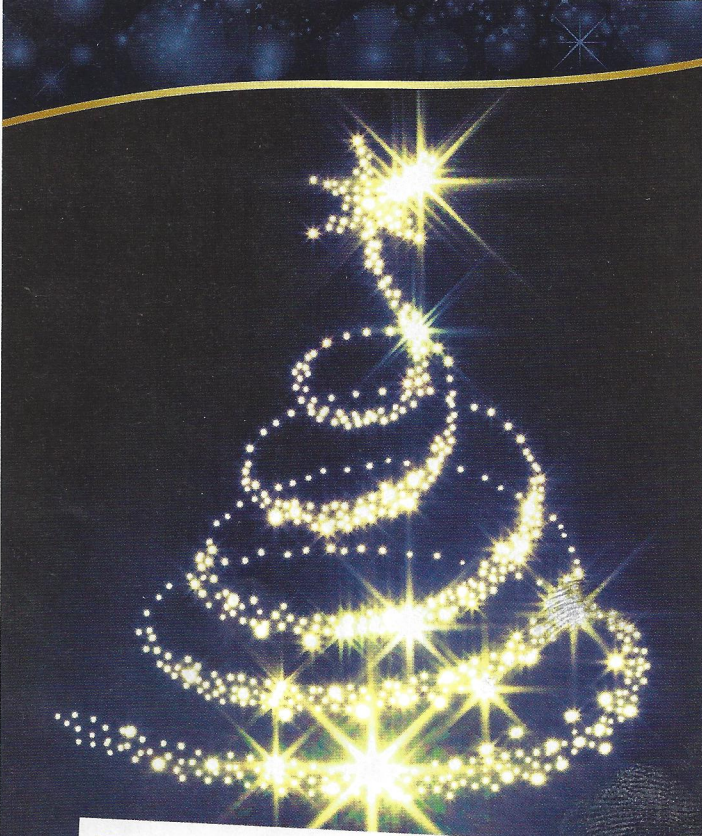
## REWARD

It's here! The official Coast Guard letter came in the mail. The letter is smaller than expected because the Coast Guard switched from a license certificate to a passport-style Merchant Mariner Credential (MMC). However, a certificate that is suitable for framing is still available from the Coast Guard at [www.homeport.uscg.mil/mmcert](http://www.homeport.uscg.mil/mmcert).

Obtaining this license was a dream that took 40 years to come true. Would I do it again? Absolutely. Not just for the title, but for the safety, satisfaction, and confidence that can only come from proper training and experience.


As for my classmates, they are also enjoying the benefits of their new credentials. Keith is living the dream as the captain of *Mirage*. And Marvin's website ([www.fastactionfishing.com](http://www.fastactionfishing.com)) proudly states, "Marvin's Guide Service is US Coast Guard Licensed!"

And now, it's time for me to grab my captain's jacket and spend some well-deserved *Time Out* on the water.




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