

Sikuliaq's crew delivers the ship home

Story and photos by Sharice Walker

Several minutes pass before I sense that I'm not standing in the blackness of the room alone. As my eyes adjust to the dark of the ship's bridge, I'm startled to discover a sailor standing just a whisper away. We're hurtling through a strait that, somewhere in the February night, narrows to 800 meters. "Seems like a lot," third mate John Hamill says, "but it's really not for a ship in the dark."

It's easy to imagine a dragonhead carved into the top of the Research Vessel *Sikuliaq's* distinctive foremast, and tonight the ship seems to be channeling a particularly strong Viking vibe. In the tight strait with a fast-moving current, the ship surges forward, then draws back on invisible haunches before lunging forward again and again. The *Sikuliaq* is new to Alaska waters, and after five years of construction it is finally headed to its home port, Seward, Alaska.

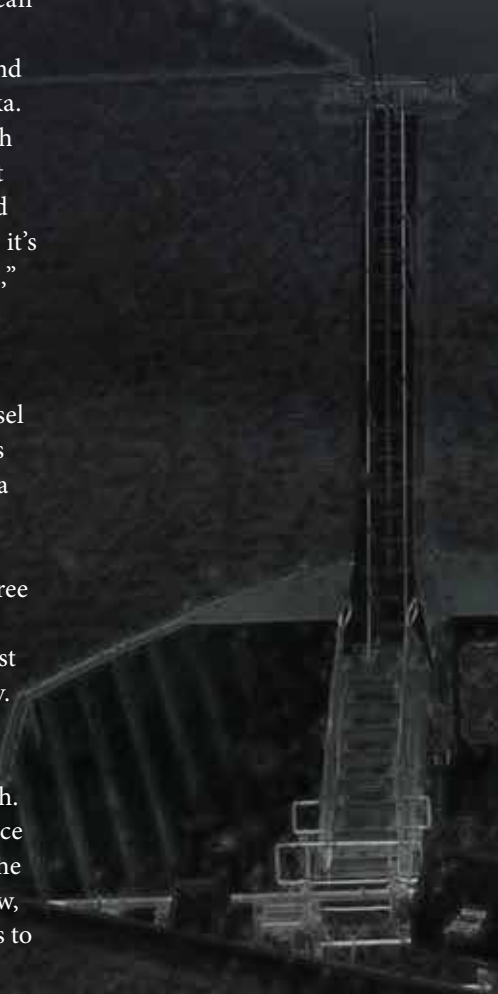
Exterior deck lighting illuminates the mast against the black of sky and sea, framed on either side by white spray violently cast off the bow. I grip a railing to steady myself. Faint lights periodically blink from a lighthouse in the distance. There is land out there, and I can't make out any of it. I wonder how the crew can.

"You know how when you are trying to look at a star, and every time you look at it directly it disappears, but if you look just to the left you can see it again?" asks boatswain Paul St. Onge. "Just do that all night. Don't really look at anything at all, and you can see it."

St. Onge is standing a watch on the bridge along with Hamill and deckhand Kari Anderson. They form little more than shadows slightly outlined by the faint glow of computer monitors dimmed by red plastic sheets to preserve night vision. St. Onge and Anderson softly call out numbers, operating in tandem to navigate the ship through Icy Strait and Cross Sound toward the Gulf of Alaska.

Hamill enjoys maneuvering through the narrow passage. "When you're out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and you haven't seen another ship in days, it's an awful lot of just trying to stay alert," he says. "It's actually a lot easier when you've got things to think about."

I'm thinking about the five days I'll spend exploring the new research vessel and getting acquainted with the ship's crew while crossing the Gulf of Alaska from Juneau to Seward. The *Sikuliaq* is the first ship the National Science Foundation has built in more than three decades. Its construction has generated national and international interest among the ocean sciences community. The School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences operates the ship, which is designed specifically for polar research. The *Sikuliaq* should drive Arctic science forward, but it can't do that without the men and women who make up its crew, many of whom have planned for years to be here.





John Hamill, the *Sikuliaq*'s third mate, reviews a recently completed man-overboard exercise with other crew members on the research vessel.

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The sailor and the farmer

In addition to his shifts in the wheelhouse as a bridge watch officer, Hamill serves as the ship's safety officer. The bear-like 40-year-old's trainings are thorough and detailed, his inspections meticulous — skills likely honed during his 14 years in the military.

Hamill is a veteran of both the Army and the Coast Guard. He radiates unflappable invincibility, from his high and tight haircut down to the tan cargo shorts he wears every day of the February voyage from Juneau to Seward.

Originally from Nebraska, Hamill started sailing while in the Army, then bought his own 18-foot sailboat. He left the Army for the Coast Guard. “I decided I really liked being on boats,” he explains.

Ten years later, the *Sikuliaq*'s siren song enticed Hamill away from the Coast Guard. He enjoyed his time stationed in Alaska and discovered the *Sikuliaq* while Googling Alaska research ships. “At that point, I think they were just getting ready to lay the keel,” Hamill recalls. In 2011, he exchanged emails with then-project

manager and UAF Seward Marine Center Director Dan Oliver, a retired Coast Guard captain, and took the leap.

“This was my number one goal,” he says. “Everything that I did was structured for getting my license and getting myself set up to get a job on this ship.”

Hamill attended the Alaska Vocational Technical Center in Seward to obtain his merchant marine license and prepare for the shift from military vessel to research vessel.

In addition to indulging his fondness for boats, Hamill's time in the Coast Guard led him to an even greater love. A fellow sailor studying online through Liberty University introduced Hamill to the biology instructor, Amy Hetrick, who lives in Albion, Washington.

The two began a correspondence that grew into a courtship, an engagement and, on May 2, 2015, a wedding celebration.

Once the *Sikuliaq* left the shipyard in Wisconsin in July 2014, Hetrick traveled to ports along the route to Alaska to greet Hamill. She met him at Woods Hole, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Seward. “Nobody ever met him in port in the Coast Guard,” Hetrick says. “I'm going to change that.”

The pair credits the success of their relationship to their independent natures and long-distance coping skills.

After years of living on her own, Hetrick is comfortably self-reliant. She has

a master's degree in biology, handles her own house maintenance and raises livestock, including cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, ducks and rabbits. She also keeps a dog and three cats for company. "Yep, a sailor married a farmer," she jokes.

"I know she knows how to fix a car," Hamill says. "She knows how to fix things around the house. She actually has more experience with most of that than I do. And anything that she can't handle, she's got a huge support network of friends who can show up with anything from a screwdriver set to a full-size bulldozer."

The go-to GoPro guy

The challenges of a sea-going profession are familiar to Bernard "Bern" McKiernan, who spent 13 years working on a research vessel for Columbia University and 12 in the Navy before coming to work for UAF as a *Sikuliaq* marine technician.

"Being away is probably the hardest thing. You try not to miss all the milestones of life, but inevitably you will miss some," he says. "You've got to have

someone at home who can manage things and is able to handle the fact that they're married, but they're a single mom, because they are dealing with discipline, they are dealing with all the things that come up."

With wild black hair, a full beard and an anchor earring, the 6-foot-4-inch McKiernan resembles a pirate more than a devoted family man. But, in the half of his face not covered with hair, his vivid blue eyes dance and his laugh lines deepen when he talks about his family members, who are a long way from Alaska.

His wife, Kelly, and their 16-year-old daughter live in the small town of Liberty, New York. Their 22-year-old son is a student in the UAF process technology program at the Community and Technical College and works at the Fairbanks campus heat and power plant.

The 47-year-old McKiernan points out there are also some benefits to the unusual work schedule. "Anyone who has less than five months of vacation a year is just not doing it right," he jokes. "I have six to eight weeks to tackle a whole new

kitchen, if I wanted, instead of hack jobs every weekend."

Marine technicians such as McKiernan configure the ship for the scientists' needs and help with the instruments.

McKiernan compares the new ship to an empty house that needed furniture. Because the ship is designed for science, technicians can install that "furniture" more easily. "There's a lot of dedicated cable trays, transits and science connectivity," McKiernan says. "In order to do what traditionally was a nightmare, to run cables when scientists came onboard, is an easy dream. We can plug and play and have science up in a couple of hours."

McKiernan also prowls the ship setting up cameras to record the *Sikuliaq*'s adventures. He turns the footage into movie trailer-style clips. McKiernan's interest stems from using a GoPro to record the cross-country trip he took from New York to Alaska in 2014 to bring his son, Stephen, to UAF.

"I started making it into a movie, and I really got into it, and I was like, let's just GoPro all the time, and now I'm the 'GoPro Guy,'" McKiernan says.

Bern McKiernan, marine technician on the *Sikuliaq*, prepares to place GoPro cameras on the research vessel during its trip from Juneau to Seward in February.



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The hawsepiper

The *Sikuliaq*'s schedule has it arriving in Seward around noon on Feb. 23. After making quick time across the Gulf of Alaska, the crew takes a day in Resurrection Bay to conduct safety drills and instrument training. The sky is gray and spitting rain.

McKiernan's cameras are rolling, and he is working in the Baltic Room with deckhand Kari Anderson. Anderson's preferred work clothes are Carhartt cargo pants, and both she and McKiernan sport orange life vests and hard hats. They're helping drop and raise the CTD rosette, an instrument that measures conductivity, temperature and depth of the ocean. Anderson's long, light brown hair is pulled back, and the top of her head, 5 feet 5 inches above the deck, barely reaches the rosette's top bar.

Anderson is an enthusiastic worker who balances intense focus on her tasks with easy humor. As an able seaman, or deckhand, she does a little of everything — steers the ship, stands watch, operates cranes and winches. Yet she is not a full-time crew member; the *Sikuliaq* employs only a single permanent individual for each position, so Anderson provides temporary relief. She works full time on the Alaska Marine Highway System's ferries.

Anderson's family, the founders of Anderson Tug & Barge Co., settled in Seward when she was 4 years old so she could attend school, and she started working on boats at 16. Tour boats, schooners, tugs, yachts, research ships, ferries — “they just seem to keep growing in size,” she jokes.

“The research ships are probably my favorite, for two reasons — because the people who work here really want to be here, and I enjoy the interaction with the scientists,” she says. “I like learning about what they are studying and that we have a real mission, a purpose for being out.”

Anderson attended Duke University, earning a degree in biological anthropology and anatomy. Like Hamill, she completed her maritime training at AVTEC. She earned her first license at

22. Now 35, she is a hawsepiper, someone who advances by logging time at sea rather than attending a maritime academy, where graduates earn a third mate license and a college degree. (A hawsepiper is the hole in a ship through which an anchor chain passes.)

Anderson's years at sea give her a clear view of the risks. She has experienced 100-knot-wind gusts in Antarctica and 30-degree-plus ship rolls while crossing the northern Pacific Ocean on the *Sikuliaq*. “That is really difficult just for working or eating or sleeping or everything,” she says.

Anderson attended a presentation in 2008 given by Dan Oliver, who was director of the UAF Seward Marine Center at the time. “After that, I started working on some other research ships, in Alaska and Antarctica, and then applied to be relief crew here and jumped up and down when they said yes,” she says.

As the *Sikuliaq* moves up Resurrection Bay toward Seward, rare sunlight splits the clouds and illuminates the city. Community members line up, waving to the ship. The *Sikuliaq* lets out several horn blasts and turns a circle before joining a fireboat escort for the final approach to the dock.

Anderson describes the moment as “magical.”

“It's been a unique experience being from Seward and being able to be part of the ship's crew, because the community has been so excited about the ship for years,” Anderson says. “I'm pretty proud that I got to be a part of that process. That was a great feeling.”

Sharice Walker '04, former public information officer for the School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, made her first sea voyage, heavily medicated against seasickness, aboard the *Sikuliaq* as the ship approached its home port of Seward, Alaska. Walker is now the community and public relations director at the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

Web extra: See the *Sikuliaq* in action, including its travels through the Panama Canal and its first ice trials up North, at www.uaf.edu/aurora/. “Like” R/V *Sikuliaq* on Facebook to follow its continuing journey.

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Kari Anderson, a *Sikuliaq* deckhand, points to a spot in the sea during a man-overboard exercise held while the research vessel was en route to its home port of Seward in February.