

He links ships to the people at home

By LETHA D. WILLIAMS

He runs mail on the water-boundary that splits two nations. Duane Upton of Avon Township began delivering mail to Detroit River freighters last spring. He is a deck hand on the J.W. Westcott II. Upton, 33, is a Great Lakes freighter expert. While growing up, the Avon Township Fire Department lieutenant began studying the mammoth ships as a hobby. "I guess I can name every fleet on the Great Lakes that flies the U.S. flag," Upton said.

Upton works at Pontiac Motors, but during his free time he drives to the St. Clair or Detroit rivers to watch and photograph freighters. In past years, he spent much of his time in the park next to the Westcott office just west of the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit.

But last spring he began working relief shifts on the Westcott. He said he finds the work exciting and unique.

"This is the only floating zip code in the world," Upton said. "It is the only contact on all the Great Lakes for the (freighter crews), between their ships and their homes."

The Westcott building is a marine version of the U.S. post office. Huge mail bags are labeled with the names of all American, and most of the Canadian, ships traveling the Detroit River.

AS A FREIGHTER approaches,

its captain notifies the Westcott office by marine radio. When Upton is on duty, usually two or three times a month, he loads the freighter's mail and other supplies aboard the Westcott. A captain joins Upton on board and pilots the 48-foot, steel vessel out to the freighter.

As the Westcott clings to the freighter's great hull, Upton empties mail into a bucket suspended from the ship. When the bucket is raised, the Westcott is piloted from the ship at nearly a 90-degree angle.

In about five minutes, the mail is delivered and the Westcott is secured at its own dock. It remains there until the next freighter approaches.

The Westcott also delivers other items such as parcel post, laundry, newspapers and supplies like detergent.

Upton said he has also transported American pilots to foreign ships. Law requires such pilots to be on board the ships while they travel American waterways.

The Westcott, Upton said, usually services 15 to 17 freighters during an eight-hour shift.

"People don't realize that the Detroit River is one of the busiest waterways in the world," Upton said. "There's a lot of stuff that comes through here — like grain and steel."

'This is the only floating zip code in the world.'

— Avon's Duane Upton

UPTON SAID his work on the Westcott is especially challenging because of ever changing weather conditions. Sometimes he delivers mail while great waves pound over the Westcott's bow.

Upton, however, assures his wife, Sharon, that the job is not dangerous. Even severe weather cannot discourage his love for big ships.

"I really enjoy this," Upton said. "I never know what's going to happen, but I learn more each time I come down here."

However, Upton said he would not give up his 15 years with Pontiac Motors to join a freighter crew.

"If I had to leave Pontiac Motors, I'd work full-time for the fire department," Upton said. "It's hard to work on freighters because you're out there for months. The money is fantastic, but it's bad to be away from the family so much."

He said he is content with his part-time work on the Westcott. He has plenty of time to gaze into Detroit River sunsets and keep written records of the freighters that pass by.

"Man, I love this job," Upton said, squinting his eyes slightly as he watched up the river for the next Great Lakes freighter to round the bend.

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