

# Interview with Captain Alexandra Hagerty

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## *Breaking glass ceilings on the "Seven Seas"!*

We have the honor to host **Captain Alexandra Hagerty** for this post's interview. She earned her Captainship just last year after a decade—since we first met her—of hard work, studying and spending time at sea.

Captainship bears centuries of tradition and often institutional knowledge of the industry, and requires unparalleled demands to both command a ship and also manage all of a ship's affairs, not least of them of being a leader of the crew. And, more recently, captains also have to learn to be good administrators too, as the amount of "paperwork" for running a ship keeps adding up, from formalities to important commercial and regulatory documents.

Besides the formal academic requirements, "field experience" has to be earned at sea over time, several years of it, and more exams to be taken in the interim, in order for one to become a Captain; in this job, they "do not deliver" and neither depend entire on the "online" experience. It will come as no surprise, that unlike the thousands of people "making the cut" each year in other professions (i.e. lawyers, etc and without minimizing the sacrifices one has to make to qualify as a lawyer), only a handful of new captains are minted each year. And, quite often, it will take them some more years until they get full command of an actual ship.

To put it into perspective, in 2020 in the US, there were 210,000 merchant mariners in total, but only 15,465 of them were female (just a bit above 7%); clearly, it would appear it's a "man's world" being a seafarer. And, when start narrowing down the field, from those 15,465 female merchant mariners, just 4,729 hold a credential endorsed as "Master". And, looking the top ranks, of those 4,729 females bearing the "Master" endorsement, only 149 hold a credential endorsed as "Master Unlimited Any gross tons", effectively certified to command ships of any size, globally—Seven Seas and all!

In short, **there are only 149 U.S. female Captains** to command a ship globally, out of a US merchant marine workforce of 210,000, and a US population of appr. 328 million people. Talk about a glass ceiling! Probably becoming an astronaut (or a U.S. President!) would appear to have a higher gender threshold to overcome!

The statistics partially explain our enthusiasm for hosting Captain Hagerty for this interview; however, her youth and her dedication and commitment to overcome all obstacles, along with her personal story and sailing experience, provide inspiration to all of us in the maritime profession—male and female— and far beyond. And, an inspiring story indeed, and excited for having the opportunity to share it with our readership.

**Question: What does it take to get a Captain's license? In terms of mandatory education, time and sacrifices? Which one was the biggest challenge?**

**Captain Hagerty:** There are two ways to obtain the Master Mariner license: one is by attending one of America's seven Maritime Academies (**Great Lakes Maritime, Mass Maritime, Maine Maritime, SUNY Maritime, Kings Point USMMA, California Maritime or Texas Maritime**); otherwise, one can work "up the hawsepole" route which is starting in an unlicensed position and by gaining years of sea time, assessments and exams over time.

The greatest challenge to the primary route is making it through the grind of a maritime academy, both education and experience. Cadets give up normal college experiences to live in a military college environment with its incessant demands on their time and efforts to meet those military requirements, such as daily personnel and weekly room inspections. Add an extra 40 credits for the license requirements onto an already demanding degree program (most semesters at or above 20 credits), and those cadets without outstanding time management skills, excellent work ethics and a strong desire to succeed simply won't make it.

If a cadet makes it through the grinder of the first school year, he/she moves forward to the first of three summer sea terms, spent onboard the academy's training ship. This combination of watch standing, classes and work is even more demanding than the school year, with sea sickness and "round the clock" watch standing adding to the challenges. It is definitely not a "semester at sea" with cocktails on the lido deck and evenings at the disco on a re-purposed cruise ship. Rather, the training ship is meant to be a challenging and transformative experience, turning "land lubbers" into responsible, professional mariners who are ready to stand a watch and maintain a ship's systems competently as soon as they graduate. Twelve hour days and "around the clock" operations are the norm at sea, and cadets learn to succeed in that environment from the first summer sea term on.

While the first summer is a personal development experience focused on the individual learning to be a capable team member and the "hands on" basics of seamanship or engineering, the second and third summers add a significant leadership development aspect to the experience, as cadets begin to take charge of watch standing teams and lead working parties repairing or maintaining ship systems. The four-year maritime academy experience culminates in a week-long set of examinations (in lieu of Spring Break) that validate all the extra work you've done both ashore and at sea. Despite excellent preparation, the pass rate is usually less than fifty percent. I passed all seven exams on the first try!

[SUNY Maritime](#) also has a master's level version of this experience, which I completed, given that I had already completed a bachelor's degree when I made the decision to pursue a seagoing career. I melded a master's degree and all the license courses into a 2.5 year grind with rigor similar to the undergraduate program. I started the program in September 2010 and worked towards a **Master of Science in International Transportation Management** along with the coursework to qualify for a 3rd Mates

License. My last semester was 26 credits. I completed the program in December 2012 and took license exams in January 2013.

To advance one's license after graduating, mariners must sail 360 days at each license level before taking another set of exams to qualify for the next level license. While personal preferences and job opportunities vary, it is typical to work at sea for about 6 months per year. So, advancing one's license every two years is typical. There is usually a month or two worth of additional classes to complete before taking the next exams as well. For most mariners, it is at least six years to acquire the needed sea time and experience to advance from 3rd Mate to 2nd Mate, then Chief Mate and finally to Master Mariner.



Captain Alexandra M Hagerty, MS, MA, AFNI

**Q: What made you choose a seafaring career, which is still an “unorthodox” choice of a career?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I fell in love with sailing when I worked with Southampton Fresh Air Home as a sailing instructor for physically handicapped children when I was nineteen. It was truly an amazing experience getting them on the water, some of them for the first

time of their lives. I realized how exciting it was to be on the water, with its inherent sense of adventure and a means to travel the globe. I wanted to experience more.

The following summer I worked as an intern with **Tall Ships America** learning marketing and sailing on all the different Tall Ships in the Great Lakes Challenge. I met an intern attending Mass Maritime who told me a bit about the Merchant Marine and kept in touch with her. Upon graduation from my Bachelors at **Earlham College**, I went to France to sail with Etoile Marine yachts and I was recruited that summer by the Danish Sail training Association to race on Jens Keogh - a 100 year old schooner throughout the North Sea with 20 Danish college students. I fell in love with Denmark, sailing and I started studying in Denmark for a Master's in Cognitive Semiotics while racing. I learned about Maersk, a large Danish based company and realized that in order to get a license it would take 6 years in Denmark or 2-3 in the United States. Nor was there a Master's degree program with a license in Denmark. After further research, I decided that SUNY Maritime College would be a perfect fit for my love of traveling and once I was accepted, I knew I had made the right choice.

### **Q: What have been the biggest challenges?**

**Captain Hagerty:** Some of the greatest challenges in this career are the sacrifices you make. You miss special engagements, ceremonies, conferences, and many family and friends events. Sometimes you are forgotten and you lose touch with communities and networks you once had on shore because you are gone for months at a time. You come back to ashore and realize that you personally have changed so much, your perspective has changed as you have truly navigated around the globe and it takes time to re-enter yourself into a community that has been continuing without you. This is why I greatly recommend joining clubs and organizations that promote our industry, community work, like Rotary International, that have domestic and international networking programs. They build community. I attended a Rotary meeting in Guam while my ship was stationed there and spoke to the group about the good work the Aspen Rotary group was doing with eradicating Polio in Africa. Sharing ideas domestically and internationally while building friendships and community help me reconnect to locals. Loneliness is a huge challenge and this industry is not for everyone. You must have grit and integrity to wake up every day and work 12-15 hour days for months on end and realize you will reap the rewards upon signing off. This lifestyle is premised upon delayed gratification. If you can't play the "long game" shipping out for months at a time, this isn't for you!

### **Q: And, the greatest rewards?**

**Captain Hagerty:** Sometimes the greatest reward, strangely enough, is having the regular comforts you expect to have on a daily basis on land taken away from you for a long period of time, and when you come back from sea, you appreciate them so much more. I remember being out to sea for a month straight with no internet and rough seas in Iceland. When we pulled into port, having a home-made meal with an Icelandic couple at their house meant so much to me and I was so appreciative of that experience. I am so thankful and appreciative of everything and all the choices we have in US when I get off a ship. From being able to go swim laps in a pool to hiking a mountain in Colorado. When I cannot physically leave the vessel, every little experience and moment I personally experience is more meaningful. Merchant mariners also have the opportunity to pursue

any hobby or interest they want because for the 4 months of hard work they did, they get 4 months of vacation to do and afford almost anything their mind can fancy.

**Q: What types of ships have you sailed on / commanded as a senior officer or captain?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I have worked as a Chief Mate on Oceanographic Survey Vessels **USNS Henson** and **USNS Bowditch** under the US Navy with navy and NASA scientists onboard from the top universities in the country. I also served as Chief Mate on a Maritime Administration vessel (**MV Cape Washington**, roll-on-roll-off vessel), and as Captain on the Military Sealift Command **LMSR Surge Vessel (908 Feet) USNS Shugart**, based out of Norfolk, Virginia.



Safety Drills on a Drillship!

**Q: What challenges / hurdles you met as a woman in this career path?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I have definitely been challenged in the past as a woman. However, I think being physically active and motivated helps to break some of these stigmas. I also am not afraid to speak up and over someone if they are trying to cut me off in a conversation or confront someone if there is an issue. Due to the fact, you are living with your co-workers you must respect their space as you work and live with them 6 months

out of the year normally. If I am stressed I take a break from people in my room and make a phone call to a friend or family member or someone supportive of me that may understand what I am going through. The tight-knit relationships of mariners makes us like a family and everyone is going to see you on an up day and a down day. We are human and we are all a work in progress. I always tried to find someone who I could learn from and look up to when I was coming up through the ranks. That made a big difference. I have had a Captain say to me on a drillship with 200 men, "What's it like to make photocopies with 2 Master's degrees?" and I replied, "Captain, there is no job above or below me, they are all important". He responded by walking away quietly. I must say, know your self-worth and do not put up with bad behavior. I have no problem putting someone in their place and at sea, it's a much rougher and challenging environment that is constantly changing.

**Q: How have you been treated so far as a "woman captain"? Have you had any challenges to your leadership / command just for being a "woman captain"?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I have not had any serious issues as a female Captain in the industry except when I was originally signing on. The front gate guards when I drove up looked at me and said, "Wait, you are the new Captain", and I said "yes, is there an issue?". Thereafter, they have been polite. Youthful captains are still rare and young female Captains are even more so. I am lucky to have had a Female Captain and Mentor on the ship docked next to mine, **Captain Kristi Westphal**. I notice it is mainly contractors in the area that still give me a long stare and I've gotten used to it.

**Q: What are your career aspirations?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I would like to see more women in leadership positions on the ship and off the ship. I enjoy my membership with [WISTA \(Women's International Shipping and Trading Association\)](#), currently in 54 countries! The group has helped me grow my knowledge of all the careers in our industry and female executive leaders paving the way as well as Women Offshore, the Nautical Institute, and the International Maritime Organization whose 2020 theme was "Empowering Women." My aspirations are to work specifically in maritime government relations such as the Maritime Administration to help build up the American maritime industry both domestically and internationally. The US has so many excellent programs from the USAID program, cadet training ships, Military Sealift Command that truly exemplify the great American merchant marine. We also have a robust commercial and drilling industry. I have worked on drillships, commercial ro-ro's and government vessels, they are all important parts of our industry. Our unions continue to train our mariners (MITAGS/STAR/PMI) while our maritime academies pump out some of the best and brightest that will turn into the next generation of mariners, astronauts, admiralty lawyers, and business owners of the future. We need to continue to grow our maritime industry as it is key to our national security. US merchant mariners are the ones helping move FEMA workers when a hurricane comes through, and sailing ships with aid key to helping fight the pandemic on our hospital ships. Whenever a natural disaster or if a war occurs. I want to be part of the bigger picture.





A Jacob's ladder to the top!

**Q: As a new captain, what are biggest thrills? Challenges? Lessons you learned?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I have learned that when I have two phones ringing, someone calling my office from the engine room, my email inbox dinging constantly and 4 contractors standing in my door waiting to ask me questions, I have to take a second, organize my priorities and stay focused. I can multi-task but it is important to take notes and follow-through. The job is very much that of a diplomat. You are working with contractors, co-workers, departments, the company, **Military Sealift Command** and an operating company all at the same time. Everyone has different needs and expectations and deadlines they expect you to meet and perform on a regular basis. I have found that you will find yourself with a loyal crew if you treat them with respect and appreciation, and lead well. The loyalty and rapport I build with my crew is paramount to our vessel's performance and day to day tasks. I have learned that I must also get up, walk around the vessel and not be sucked into the work day and night. I enjoy the job because every day is completely different.

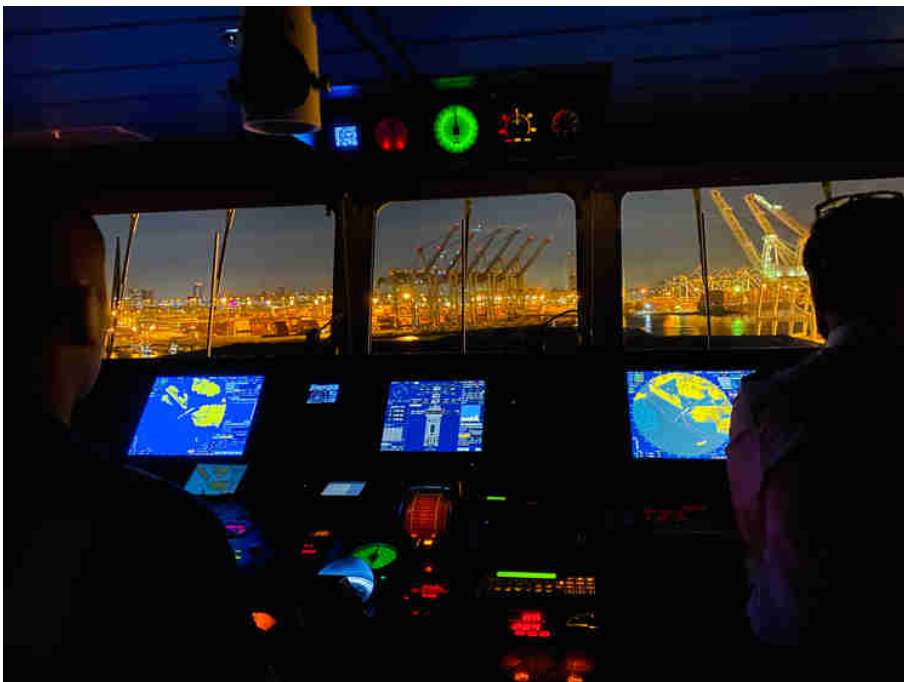
**Q: What was your favorite aspect of the curriculum and your training?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I love hands on experience. That is who I am to the bone. I loved learning how to sew sails on the Tall Ships and climb up the mast, go out to the yardarm and unfurl a giant sail on a square-rigger. I love escaping with purpose and pay to a new destination. I think hand-on experiences are key and I am concerned with how COVID is

affecting the practical experience pieces of the maritime education. Cadets must complete 225 hands-on assessments (that's what it was back when I graduated) and to be prepared for their first Third Mate or Third Engineers job.

**Q: What advice would you give to high school person contemplating a career in the maritime industry? A high school girl? Especially for a sea- going career, especially for a career-oriented person to follow the officer ranks? Would you advise/recommend a high school girl to follow your career path? What mistakes / traps to avoid?**

**Captain Hagerty:** This career is not for the faint of heart or someone that wants to stay home or local. This career is for someone who is flexible, ready to be delayed on the other side of the world because of possibly international relations or a pandemic and can handle the consequences. This is never going to be the 9-5 job unless you want something shoreside. Most graduates work 3-5 years at sea on average and then move shoreside. However for those that want to move up ladder, I encourage them because there is a big difference in responsibility from Second mate to Chief Mate and from Chief Mate to Captain. Responsibilities change and gain complexity, and your day-to-day problem-solving skills must grow and adapt as you advance in rank & position. I think high school girls interested in this career must be ok with being physically active 10-12 hours a day. On some ships you are constantly moving and working. However the hard work pays you're back in vacation time. What 21-year-old graduating with a four-year degree can make six figures in six months of work and have 6 months of vacation a year while obtaining excellent medical and retirement benefits all at the same time? **An American Merchant Marine Officer!**



The View from the Bridge, at Night!



**Q: Most rewarding experiences / anecdotes in your career as an officer?**

**Captain Hagerty:** I will never forget seeing the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis) coming out in Iceland and it felt as if it was engulfing our vessel in a greenish spiritual light. It was absolutely stunning and the pictures from that evening by the Arctic Circle will never do justice to watching its movement across the sky. I also remember watching flying fish fly the length of a swimming pool off the coast of the Northern Marianas islands and blue-footed boobies landing on the vessel while transiting through the Panama Canal. It was amazing talking to a Panama Canal Pilot and fellow graduate from our school who brought local coffee and Panama Canal Pilot hats to my crew while we transited the canal with him talking about local customs. Meeting a 75-year-old Japanese pilot in the Naikai Sea (Inland Sea) and saying to me, **“age is just number, I started this career at 55 years old after working 20 years as a Ship Captain.”** He was so inspirational and kind.

**Captain, Alexandra, thank you for your time and for sharing with us and our readership your truly inspiring story. You have accomplished a lot, and you have seen most of the world by now, despite your young age. Well done! We wish you every professional success in your career and fulfilment of all your professional aspirations. May you always have safe passages with the ships and crew under your command, “fair winds and calm seas” as they say, and may one day very soon, the glass ceiling of the “captainship” come down crushing, and the sight of a female Captain will be as common as one of a female doctor, lawyer, astronaut!**

**Aye, aye, Captain!**