Iceberg Wrangler

When a million-ton iceberg threatens your $5 billion oil platform, who you gonna call? Jerome Baker

BY MICHAEL RYAN

THERE ARE JUST A HANDFUL of people in the world who do what Jerome Baker does—venture out far into the North Atlantic, tie a rope around a rogue iceberg heading toward an offshore oil platform, maneuver a 9,600-horsepower, 270-foot-long boat and drag the 250,000-ton ice cube away before it collides with the platform. If Baker makes a mistake, it might cost him his life and those of his crew.

Baker, 48, is the master of the *Norseman*, a 6-year-old, 4,600-ton ship with a steel-reinforced hull that services the Hibernia oil platform. The platform, which lies almost 200 miles off St. John's, Newfoundland, drills for crude oil in 250 feet of water and supplies Exxon, Mobil and four other oil companies. Baker and his crew of 10 to 14 men spend most of their monthlong tours of duty steaming between St. John's and the platform, delivering food and water, pipes and equipment, cargo containers and fuel. (Baker heads home to his wife, Maxine, and three children in Marystown, Newfoundland, for four weeks after each stint at sea.) From February through July, his most important responsibility is watching for the hundreds of icebergs that float down the Labrador Current from Baffin Bay each year as the weather warms. Often as long as two football fields and rising as much as 240 feet above the sea, these bergs drift along a corridor known as iceberg alley, off the eastern coast of Newfoundland.

Although the Hibernia platform is stationary and boasts a massive concrete structure designed to withstand being run into by a million-ton iceberg, Baker says the company doesn't "want anything coming into contact with the platform, even something the size of a piano."

Following the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* in 1912 after it hit a half-million-ton berg 400 miles south of Newfoundland, a consortium of North American and European nations established the International Ice Patrol (IIP) to prevent such tragedies. Today, the IIP, which operates out of Groton, Connecticut, sends U.S. Coast Guard C-130 aircraft on patrols over the North Atlantic and supplies information to the maritime community about iceberg-free lanes of travel. A private Canadian company, Provincial Airlines, which is hired by Hibernia and the owner of another oil-drilling company, uses this data to direct a small fleet of two-engine Beech King Air 200s. Observers in these light planes scan for potentially troublesome icebergs. They, and radar operators aboard the oil rigs and platforms, must constantly monitor the bergs; the storm-lashed seas of the North Atlantic often throw them off their projected paths. Just last year, the shrimp trawler *BCM Atlantic* struck an iceberg and sank within five minutes.

Provincial Airlines keeps a lookout not only for full-fledged icebergs but also for "bergy bits," pieces of ice that have broken off. (Despite their snack-food name, bergy bits can be larger than houses and as dangerous as torpedos.) When the drift pattern of a berg or a bergy bit appears to intersect with the Hibernia platform, the *Norseman* or its sister craft, the *Nascopie*, gets a call on the radio.

"For a smaller bit," Baker says, "I back up to it and use prop wash" to push it into a current that will take it away from the platform. Big bergs are something else again. "We get close to them—maybe 100 feet," he says. "The berg is like a piece of glass, full of cracks. Something could break and come off at any time. In the nighttime, you might have projections sticking out of the side of the berg that you can't see. All these things are in your mind."

TO ROUND UP AN ICEBERG, Baker uses lengths of polypropylene towropes up to 1,200 feet long. "When the rope goes out, it's eight inches thick. It's only an inch thick in places when it comes back," he says. "The rope looks like a camel's been chewing on it."

Wrangling an iceberg sounds simple enough: just pay out a length of rope; if you need more, shackle another to it, then another, until the iceberg has been completely encircled. "You just steam around the berg and come back," Baker says. "A seaman with a grapple catches the other end." Then, add a wire towline (to weigh down the rope in the water so that it does not slip off the ice), steam away, and with any luck you're home free. But it's not so easy in practice.

Icebergs have a nasty tendency to turn over and slip out of towropes; some have hidden undersea projections that cause chaos when the bergs flip. (A towrope from an overturned berg may sport a tangled knot six feet high.) And a flipping berg can generate large waves. Which is why Baker likes to keep a half mile or so of open water between the *Norseman*

and any berg he's towing. And talk about slow motion.

"We can spend up to three days towing a big berg," Baker says. Pulling a 250,000-ton berg, the *Norseman* can barely manage one knot (and the ship may need ten hours to build up to even that speed).

BAKER, ONE OF 13 CHILDREN born to a shipyard worker and a housewife, grew up in Marystown and quit Memorial University after a year to enter the nautical training program at the Marine Institute in St. John's. "I couldn't see spending my life at a desk," he says. He rose from deckhand to captain by the age of 30, and first handled an iceberg in 1983. The job, he says, hasn't grown any easier.

Not that people haven't tried to make it so. In his 20 years of iceberg work, Baker has seen and heard about many innovative berg-taming techniques. There was the time in the 1960s when the U.S. Coast Guard spread carbon black on several bergs in the belief that the substance would absorb warmth from the sun and melt the ice. Mostly, however, the blackened bergs just flipped over.

In 1985, Baker tried using a powerful water cannon, which worked fine for small bergs but not for large ones. In another experiment, a boat crew tested a remote-controlled vehicle, which was designed to drill holes into an iceberg, insert towlines and then freeze them in place with liquid nitrogen. The rough seas made accurate drilling impossible.

Though Baker has never lost a man, there have been some close calls. Once, in the mid-1980s, the rope got stuck in one of the ship's two propellers—Baker didn't know which one. "I had to declutch and do an emergency shutdown of the two engines," he recalls. "We were being dragged very slowly toward the iceberg. There isn't a hull strong enough to withstand its being scraped against a berg; if there was, it wouldn't float."

About 300 feet from a collision, Baker took a chance, reversing the right propeller shaft. After a few frantic seconds, the rope began to untangle. "It felt pretty good to get out of that situation," he says.

Conditions in the North Atlantic can be too rough to work. "If the wind gets above 45 or 50 miles per hour, you just don't try; it's too dangerous," Baker says. Thanks to patrol reports and radar, he usually has several days' notice about any berg on a collision course with a platform. That usually means he'll have time to let a storm blow over and still get the job done.

But one day in the 1980s, a complacent observer on a now-defunct floating rig somehow let an iceberg get to within five or six miles of the rig. Typically, bergs move at a clip of about one knot.

"There was a mad scramble," Baker says. "The weather was too rough to tow the iceberg. Three of the deckhands on one boat and two on another were washed around the deck and got hurt." The only option left was to try to pull the rig's eight massive anchors up and move the rig out of danger. But one of the anchor chains on the rig got tangled; there was no question of breaking free. It was far too late to deploy helicopters or use rig-to-ship baskets to evacuate the crew on the rig.

"The guys on the rig were watching to see which way the berg was going," Baker says. "At the last minute, the supply boats managed to pull the rig 100 meters sideways. The berg came straight over the wellhead where the rig had just been. That was the closest call." In times like those, says Baker, "your heart rate starts going up and you hit maximum blood pressure. There are so many things that can go wrong."

Still, with a son, Chris, at Memorial University in St. John's studying engineering, a daughter, Amanda, heading off to college next year, and an 11-year-old son, Andrew, at home, Captain Baker has no plans to hang up his foul-weather gear anytime soon. The pay is good, about $100,000 a year. As for that incomparable feeling he gets when he spies an iceberg on radar?

"It's no big deal," he says. "It's all part of the job."

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