

Ship Report Transcript

Tuesday, June 18, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Tuesday, June 18th, 2024.

Let's take a quick look at marine weather and we're going to talk about a really neat ship, a very favorite ship of mine that is at the Port of Astoria today. But first, our grandmother forecast is a bit of an improvement over the weekend. We have high pressure offshore that will persist through the week. That means pretty good weather with increasing northerly use across our coastal waters. Today we have Northwest winds around five knots, rising to 5 to 10 in the afternoon. Seas around three feet. Wave detail, northwest two feet at 4 seconds and west three feet at 10 seconds apart. And southwest two feet at 16 seconds.

Well, today I'd like to talk with you about something that I really love. One of my favorite ships in the whole world is at the Port of Astoria right now. I got to go aboard her and talk with the captain a number of years ago, and I will never forget it.

This is the research vessel Atlantis. And she is at the Port of Astoria right now. She's doing research work in the Pacific Ocean near us. And sometimes she comes in to Astoria to perform routine things like maybe getting more supplies and food, changing crews and other things that ships do when they come into port. And Astoria actually is a very convenient place for vessels like this to do this because we're so close to the sea only 17 miles away compared to other ports on the Pacific coast that can handle ships. So I'll share some information about the Atlantis from her website and also add some memories of my own about her.

First of all, the research vessel Atlantis is owned by the U.S. Navy and operated by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution that's based in Massachusetts for the oceanographic community. It's one of the most sophisticated research vessels afloat and is specifically outfitted for launching and servicing the Alvin, which is a human occupied submersible. So on board the Atlantis is this really cool thing called the Alvin. And I'll talk about her in a minute. Delivered to Woods Hole in April of 1997, Atlantis was built with six science labs, storage spaces, precision navigation systems, sea floor mapping, sonar and satellite communications. The ship's three winches, three cranes, machine shop and specialized hangars were specifically designed to support the Alvin and other vehicles of the National Deep Submergence Facility.

So this is a vessel that goes out in the ocean and has the capability to send scientists down about 15,000 feet. If needed, to do research on the ocean floor, gather data, gather samples, things like that. So the ship carries a complement of 36 crew members, science technicians, deep submergence group members, as well as a scientific party of 24 men and women for as long as 60 days.

Because Atlantis is constantly going where Alvin is needed for exploration, this ship operates in all of the world's oceans and is rarely seen in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. In recent years, the ship and sub have spent most of their time exploring underwater volcanoes and hydrothermal vents in the Pacific Ocean. So that is from the Atlantis website and has some very interesting information about her.

But now let me tell you a little bit about what I remember about her. So I got to go aboard and meet the captain who took me on a tour of the ship. First of all, I love being aboard ships. So I was really in my happy place there. And this one was really interesting.

In addition to the areas where crew live and work, they have quarters, living quarters and laboratories for scientists onboard who vie for the chance to go aboard this prized vessel and do research projects out in the ocean. So they have the crew that runs the ship, and then they have the scientific crew, which are kind of like guests on board, except that they are working all the time using their valuable time aboard to conduct experiments and gather data.

Now, some of the things that come to mind when I think about the Atlantis is the interesting laboratories where they have these big shiny metal tables and lots of space to do work, special refrigerators to store specimens. They have meeting rooms where scientists can gather and discuss things.

And I remember peeking in the door of a meeting room - there's a big long hall inside the ship - and seeing that each chair around that conference table was strapped to the floor with adjustable straps to keep it in place. And the table itself was bolted to the floor. So in case they were out at sea in rough conditions, you could pretty much carry on a meeting as usual, as long as people were not too seasick to work.

And I would imagine that the people who are out on a vessel like this were pretty, pretty sea-hardy before they would go out in a place like this. Because I guess once you go out, there's no coming back. So you would have to attempt to stay out there until you were done.

But the highlight of my tour was getting it to go down inside the Alvin Submersible. And this was on deck. I did not go down in the water, but that was a really cool experience. There was a crew member there who was the pilot of the Alvin, and he was specially trained to handle the Alvin, which is a small vessel, and take it down in the ocean to as far below the surface as 15,000 feet if needed, to let scientists gather data. Now, that's really serious depth and the pressure is intense there. So the Alvin, it's kind of small anyway, but it's small inside. And I climb down a ladder inside it and sat on the floor. There are no benches. It's tiny inside. They take about three scientists, Max, and the pilot in there. When they go out, when they go down below the surface.

And when I stretched my legs out, I leaned my back up against one side of it and stretched my legs out and my feet touched the other side of the passenger compartment. So I'm about five foot seven. I'm not a terribly tall person, but there's not a whole lot of space in there. And certainly it's not a place for people with claustrophobia for sure, because once you shut that door, you're going to be down there for a long time because it's very precious time for those folks to go down to do that.

So they have a schedule that is jam packed with gathering data. And while they are down there in the Alvin, it's a very special privilege to be able to do that.

Now, the captain told me that sometimes he would do something really cool to show people how the depth affected objects way below the surface. He would take a bunch of white Styrofoam coffee cups, you know, about eight ounces, and put them in a storage box outside the Alvin on a rack outside so that they were exposed to the pressure and not inside the pressurized cabin area where people were. So they were exposed to the pressures, the extreme pressures out there underwater. And when they would come up to the surface, the cups would be crushed to the size of thimbles. Crazy. He gave me one as a little

gift. I still have it. I put it on our Christmas tree at Christmas. So it's really odd but true that the cups shrink instead of just being flattened by the pressure. A really powerful demonstration of the heavy pressure at such incredible depths.

Now the Atlantis is part of a class of similar Navy owned research vessels that were all designed and built in a shipyard in Mississippi. Her sister ships are vessels that we also see her sometimes. The research vessel Thomas G. Thompson, which is operated by the University of Washington, and the research vessel Roger Revelle, operated by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. So we have seen those vessels here at the Port of Astoria. Also, the Atlantis is the only one that is designed to support both the Alvin and General Oceanographic Research.

So there have been educational shows galore done about the Atlantis and the Alvin. They are both really stars of the maritime research world. So if you get a chance to go down to the Port of Astoria while she's here and take a picture, she's a really cool vessel that has a special place in my heart.

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