

# Witamy na pokładzie (Welcome aboard) Polsteam

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Courtesy Polsteam



The *Drawsko* heads across the Atlantic to the Twin Ports.

The opening of each Seaway shipping season brings heightened anticipation to the Twin Ports, from the maritime community to local residents. From the time the first saltwater vessel arrives in April, curiosity abounds. In 2017, 61 overseas vessels called on Duluth-Superior, with export totals of nearly 1.1 million short tons of cargo, primarily grain products. Like the freshwater lakers, many salties make regularly scheduled visits and follow established trade routes within the Great Lakes.

One fleet whose bulk freighters are familiar to the Twin Ports is the Polish Steamship Company (Polsteam). It is easy to identify Polsteam vessels because the name is emblazoned across their hulls in billboard-sized letters. The company's distinctive logo also is painted on the stack: the letters "PZM" (for the Polish name, Polska Żegluga Morska) in white on an inverted red chevron with the pointed tines of Neptune's trident boldly rising skyward.

"The first transports of Polsteam to the Great Lakes began in the late 1970s," said Krzysztof Gogol, spokesman for the Polsteam Group in Poland. "We began regular trips in the first half of the 1980s."

Polsteam is one of Europe's largest owners of bulk cargo ships, with a fleet capacity that exceeds 20 million tons of cargo a year. Worldwide, it operates 56 vessels along oceanic trade routes. Unlike most European shipping companies, which are privately held, Polsteam is a state-owned entity, headquartered in Szczecin, Poland, a large port city on the Baltic Sea. This means the Polish state has a majority or significant interest in the company. In deference to social-oriented programs, Polsteam has a distinct set of guidelines for commercial operation.

In 2003, it began a concerted effort to modernize its fleet, contracting with China's Xingang shipyard for four large bulk carriers. Over 10 years, 34 vessels were delivered to Polsteam as part of its renewal program, including eight

30,000-ton bulkers for service on the Great Lakes.

Polsteam currently has a fleet of 13 "specially dedicated laker vessels" and anticipates adding at least two more in 2018. On average, four Polsteam ships are on the Great Lakes at any given time during the shipping season. About 10 to 12 Polsteam vessels load grain in the Twin Ports every year, each departing with around 22,000 metric tons of grain.

The basic economics of efficient ship operation dictates that vessels have to bring some type of trade commodity into the system and carry something out. Once

an inbound cargo is set and the voyage underway, the company negotiates for an outbound cargo, competing against other oceanic carriers on the Lakes for the same load. In industry vernacular, this is called "tramping," with the vessel referred to as a "tramp" steamer.

Typically, bulk cargoes coming into the Lakes are steel products, raw steel by-products, fertilizers and sugar. Once ships complete discharge at Lake Michigan, Erie or Ontario, they proceed to Lake Superior to load grains coming from the U.S. or Canadian prairie regions. According to Gogol, "The main export ports are Duluth-Superior in the U.S. and Thunder Bay on the Canadian side."

In the Twin Ports, Guthrie-Hubner, Inc., is a local agent for grain cargo owners and serves as the liaison between merchants and the inbound Polsteam vessels.

"We direct the ship from Port Huron, Mich., into the Port of Duluth," said Chuck Hilleren, owner of Guthrie-Hubner. "We're organizing pilotage, tugs, lines, elevator, crew to the dock, whatever; it's all part of the whole scheme of things, and we sail the ship from Duluth-Superior back out to Port Huron."

All activities and arrangements are coordinated through Polsteam's office in New York City.

Something unique to the crews of Polsteam vessels in comparison to most ocean-going fleets is that "everyone is Polish." Poland has a strong maritime tradition, with about one-quarter of European maritime-related jobs held by Polish nationals, including an estimated 35,000 seafarers. Gogol believes this factor contributes to the high quality of Polsteam's services and good inspection statistics with the U.S. Coast Guard. Hilleren echoes those sentiments about Polish seafarers.

"I think they are, as far as the Great Lakes are concerned, the cream of the crop," said Hilleren. "Most of the officers and even the crew members, down to the bosun

and deck hands, all are pretty fluent in the English language, so, when we have a Polish vessel coming, it's kind of a sigh of relief because we know we're not gonna run into anything too dramatic or unusual."

The average crew size for Polsteam vessels is 20, nearly identical to the lakers. Guthrie-Hubner assists the vessels and their crews in any way possible.

"People going to the doctor, going to the dentist," Hilleren said. "Sometimes you've got to organize repairs to the vessel or inspections. It runs the gamut ... they have problems just like you have with your kids or your house or anything else."

"Duluth is a very nice city where Polish sailors feel safe and are very welcomed by the local community," Gogol said. While in port, many of the

crew enjoy doing the same activities as tourists; or simply going for long walks, something that is hard to do on a ship.

"They love Best Buy!" laughed Hilleren. "They love their computers and all the rest. Most of the crews have been coming and going, so we know a lot of the captains and the crew by their first names. They come back every year or so."

Polsteam does offer private passage aboard some of its vessels from the Port of IJmuiden, on the North Sea Canal near Amsterdam, to both Cleveland and Burns Harbor. Passage on its bulk freighters from points on the Great Lakes is offered, as well. Buyer beware. As tramp steamers, orders and lengths of voyages can and often do change. If you choose adventure, "Witamy na pokładzie." Welcome aboard Polsteam!



Matt Silverness

Another Polsteam vessel, the *Isa*, was here in May to load grain.