

SEASONAL TRADITION CONTINUES

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Catherine Avalone / Hearst Connecticut Media

Captain Anna Milne, 26, with the Volsunga IV Thimble Islands cruise boat in Branford.

Navigating adversity in the Thimbles

Anna Milne thrives as captain of Volsunga IV

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — For four seconds on the morning of Aug. 22, the blast of a horn reverberated across the Stony Creek town dock, through scattered shell seekers on the town beach, and along the gabled houses up and down Thimble Islands Road.

"Welcome aboard the Volsunga," said Capt. Anna Milne into a microphone headset, as she piloted the 40-foot Thimble Islands Cruise tour boat and its 48 passengers into choppy waters amid a faint smell of engine oil and wind-whipped foam under threatening skies.

From the way she simultaneously plied the lashing waters and held her passengers in thrall in the 45 minutes that followed, you wouldn't know Milne has

been captaining the Volsunga IV for just three years; this is the first season she is alone at the helm. Or that she's among the 3 percent of cruise ship captains worldwide who are female, according to the Women's International Shipping and Trading Association.

It's safe to say that few, if any, of those cruise ship captains lead up to seven 45-minute narrated tours each day, six days a week, from Memorial Day to Columbus Day, around craggy rock formations in sometimes less-than-ideal conditions. Or that any of them are 26-year-old business owners negotiating the vagaries of a seasonal enterprise.

Which is not to say that the stiff headwinds and turbulent waves weren't prompting a slight unease in Milne earlier that morning.

"This might be a bit challenging," the willowy, laid-back Stony Creek native said, emerging in bare feet from the engine room as the

"In a bizarre way, everything I've done has prepared me for this. I studied American history, and what I do is drive around all day ... telling the history of the Thimbles. I minored in women's studies and I'm a woman running a business that's pretty exclusively male."

Anna Milne, captain of Volsunga IV

boat squeaked in its moorings, in preparation for the first tour of the day.

Of course, rough waters, both figuratively and literally, are nothing new to Milne.

"Growing up, this was my life," she said. "I spent what seems like most every single day, following him on a little 13-foot Whaler. That's how I learned to navigate through this area."

"Him" is her father, Bob Milne, the native Creeker known around the village as Captain Bob. From a young age, he was accumulating information about the islands and their colorful

history. In 1986, he assumed ownership of the Volsunga III, a line of ferry boats that stretches back to the 1950s. Soon he became renowned for animating the rocks that form the Thimble Islands with stories "as intricately crafted as a New Yorker piece," as Yankee Magazine put it.

"This was my dad's everything," Anna Milne said.

Two weeks before her graduation from Franklin Pierce University, she got the news. Her father had suffered life-threatening injuries after his motorcycle

See Captain on B3

CAPTAIN

From page B1

collided with a pickup truck near Route 1 in Branford. He was on life support. It was May 2, 2015. He was 55.

"For the first couple of months, it was something between he was never going to wake up to he could be totally fine," said Milne, who had majored in American history with a concentration in Native American studies and had plans to attend graduate school in Colorado.

While she and her mother, Beth, were focused on Bob's care, the small coastal community rallied around the family.

"Before the hospital even contacted me the night of the accident, Mike Infantino, our direct competitor, called and told me the Volsunga would leave the dock tomorrow as if nothing happened," she said.

For Infantino, captain of the Sea Mist Thimble Islands Cruise, enlisting employees and family members to keep the Milnes' business afloat was a given. "Bob and I were great friends. It's a small town, and it was the right thing to do," he said.

"That's the beauty of the



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Anna Milne, 26, captain of the Volsunga IV Thimble Islands cruise boat.

Creek, Mike and Bob Lillquist and so many others stepping in; everyone is family, whether it's blood family or not," said Anna Milne, as she waved at family friends boating in from Governor's Island.

There was also her mother, Beth, "the unsung hero of the story," she said. "Without her, I can't even imagine where I would be. She's been there to support me emotionally plus she keeps everything going on land. She really runs the business."

When it became clear that Bob's injuries would leave him with lasting, permanent damage, Milne attended a 12-hour-a-day,

six-week captain's course and purchased the business from her father's estate.

"The course was grueling, but incredibly educational," she said, adding that she was the only female in a group populated by mostly older men.

All along, she was piecing together the tales of Tom Thumb and Miss Emily, and the quips about how Mother-in-Law Island got its name, stories that she'd listened to her father narrate year after year, as deeply ingrained in her as the rhythms of the tides.

"In a bizarre way, everything I've done has prepared me for this," she said. "I studied American histo-

ry, and what I do is drive around all day long telling the history of the Thimbles. I minored in women's studies and I'm a woman running a business that's pretty exclusively male.

"I feel like I got here in a really nasty and sad way, but I feel very fortunate and happy and grateful to be where I am."

To judge from the show of enthusiasm among the Wednesday morning passengers, that's evident.

"She made the islands come to life," said Barbara Simard, of Watertown, as Milne maneuvered the boat into a tight spot at the dock, the waters having calmed.

"Aside from being great ladies, Beth and Anna are invaluable to the Creek," said Bruce Deegan, the longtime window clerk at the U.S. Post Office on Thimble Islands Road, later that morning.

"Every time I hear that blast coming from the Volsunga, it means it's summertime and everything is as it should be."

For information on the Thimble Islands cruise, visit thimbleislands.com or call 203-481-3345.

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