

## Can tugboat death be guide to safety?

### Maritime workers' unions raise questions in wake of an accident.

By Ronald D. White, Times Staff Writer  
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On the last morning of her life, 26-year-old Piper Inness Cameron was doing exactly what she had always wanted to do.

She was working on the deck of a tugboat and counting the days until she, like her father, would be piloting one. There were 41 to go.

Then, at 11 a.m. Feb. 20 while moving through Santa Monica Bay about two miles off Marina del Rey, something went wrong. A line linking the tug and the barge it was towing suddenly struck Cameron and slammed her into a railing. She died before reaching a hospital.

The accident almost four months ago was a wake-up call for the unions representing more than 15,000 West Coast maritime industry workers. The swell in global trade and the technological advances that have made shipping more efficient than ever before have compounded the hazards of maritime jobs, and labor leaders are calling for new safety studies and standards.

"We can't let her death go in vain," said Alan Cote, national president of the Inlandboatmen's Union.

The career Cameron settled on when she was in elementary school has always been risky, the work much the same as it was when the first tugboats, steam-powered paddle-wheelers, worked a canal in Scotland more than 200 years ago. Tugboats still fight the elements to muscle freighters, tankers and barges to and from port. Pilots who steer oceangoing vessels in local waters still climb to their jobs on a Jacob's ladder fashioned from hemp and oak or ash.

But there have been fundamental changes. Container ships grow larger and heavier every year, forcing harbor pilots to spend a lot more time on the rope ladders, sometimes as the vessels pitch and roll in high winds and heavy swells. Containers are stacked and lashed down in rows that are wider and longer, and the tugs and winches that move the ships are built to exert much greater force. Kevlar towlines are strong but so light that they whip easily, making them harder to avoid.

"When something goes wrong, it goes really wrong," said Charles Naylor, a San Pedro