

Supplying the North by sea

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NUNAVUT - Twin brothers from Arviat Charlie and Robert Karetak have signed on with the sealift freighter Qamutik as it winds its way across Arctic waters.

"It's a great experience," said Robert. "I've been to places I've never been to see that I've always wanted."

The Qamutik is the newest sealift freighter with Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping, having just started the Arctic supply route in 2008. This season she is scheduled to visit Iqaluit and parts of Nunavik in July, then Arctic Bay and Grise Fiord in August and south along the Baffin coast from there.

Robert was the first to sign on with NEAS in the spring of 2008. He received a three-week training course in Port Hawkesbury, N.S., which taught him important seafaring skills. The Marine Emergency Duties course included things such as marine firefighting, first aid and basic survival.

Since then Robert has earned the rank of Able Seaman, and at times even steers the massive, 137-metre vessel under direction of the captain or one of the mates.

"The St. Lawrence River is a lot of manoeuvring so we're on double-watch," Robert said. That means there are more personnel on the bridge, watching the instruments and water to make sure the ship stays clear of the many islands and shallows in the river.

While unloading operations are happening, Robert is a tug operator assistant. The tugboats that ferry barges back and forth between ship and shore need two people: one to steer and another to do everything else. That's Robert, who manages the ropes of the tug and watches the tug boat operator's massive blind spot past the barge. When the cargo is a vehicle, Robert drives it off the barge to shore.

Charlie Karetak joined NEAS halfway through the 2008 sealift season. Each NEAS freighter has two Inuit on the crew and Charlie joined to fill a sudden vacancy.

At the time, Charlie was untrained and inexperienced, but he's since gone through the same training as Robert and is now at the level of an Ordinary Seaman. That means he does most of the average maintenance on the boat. The constant exposure to salt water means there's always something that needs a fresh coat of rustproof paint. He also helps with the ship's



Robert, left, and Charlie Karetak work aboard the NEAS freighter Qamutik. Visible behind them are the cargo hold and the cranes, deployed to unload. - Gabriel Zarate/NNSL photo

ropes at dock, takes inventory of cargo and helps secure it, and takes ballast soundings to make sure the ship stays level when the top-heavy cargo cranes are deployed.

During unloading operations, Charlie is among the team helping the cranes move each sea-can from the Qamutik's cargo hold to the barges. He helps spot for the crane and secures and removes the chains on the sea-cans as needed.

The Qamutik's schedule will keep her busy from late June to early September. During that time her 22-person crew will be living on her full-time and working non-stop, especially while unloading. She has dormitory-style, two-person rooms for her crew, with all the amenities of the average apartment. Robert says the biggest consideration for him is what to bring with him when the ship leaves port, knowing he can't buy anything new until the ship returns to the south.

"It doesn't seem like it's that long when it's done," he says.