Slave of the Sea – A day in the life of a New Bedford Scalloper through his eyes

You just finished unloading your catch, it is 2:30 am in the middle of the winter and you have been up for over twenty-four hours straight. Tired, exhausted, beat up…yet somehow, deep down, you feel invincible. You know that what you just went through and how hard you pushed not only your body, physically, but also your mind, mentally, is nothing short of incredible.

You carry a pride that not many other people can understand unless they experienced it themselves. When you are out in the middle of the ocean and the guys around you and their families are depending on how hard you work and how much you produce on a daily basis, the same way you are relying on them, there are no sick days. There are no "watches," aka shifts, where you are just too tired or don't feel like working. Pain and fatigue are irrelevant. Sleep and food are like distant cousins, you look forward to seeing all day but it feels like its never often or for enough time.

So, you pack up your dirty clothes and sea bag and get ready to finally go home. You get to go home to your wife, your children, your family. A normal shower and full-size bed. But right before you take the final step back on land the Captain shouts "Be on standby, I will call and let you know when we are heading back out." and this could mean you will be home two days or two weeks and everything is always subject to change.



Fast forward to the middle of your next trip. Its day six of a two-week trip. The lights are thrown on in your bunk and you hear a stern “next watch” from the Captain. You look at your clock and it’s 9:00 pm. By now your body is used to this schedule, it does not change.

Wake up and you have a mere twenty minutes to get dressed, grab a coffee, and head out onto the deck to start your shift. You will work non stop on your feet in the cold air and harsh weather conditions of the Atlantic Ocean in the winter time. Twenty, thirty-foot seas? Snow? Rain? Ice? All means nothing when you have scallops to catch.

During your watch you will either be standing in the “box,” shucking scallops or bent over in the pile, picking them. Sometimes through rocks and boulders or sand and mud. Sometimes through piles so big you can’t even see the guy on the other end. Oh yeah, all while moving and producing as fast as you can. Giving 100 percent effort 100 percent of the time.

When your watch is finally over and the scallops are cleaned, bagged, and put on ice in the fish hole, it is creeping up on 9:00 am. You rush in to eat the first meal you have had in the last sixteen hours which can be anything from a couple of hot dogs or burgers to a full breakfast or pork chops…depending on who’s cooking.

So finally you eat, wash up, get undressed, and crash into your bed. By bed I mean a hard mattress that has been there for the last fifteen years and probably has had hundreds of men in and out of it, smaller than an average twin sized mattress. If you are lucky, it is only about 9:30 am and you fall right asleep because you will be starting the cycle all over again in three and half hours at 1:00 pm. This will go on for what seems like forever – twelve hours on and four hours off, 12 on 4 off, for the entire two-week trip.

Did I mention while you were away you had no cell phone or

internet service? You missed family birthdays, anniversaries, your child’s first steps or words. You missed the big game or the unfortunate death of a loved one. You couldn’t be there for your wife when she got bad news or got into a car accident. It really is not a glamorous lifestyle – many people only see the money and not the sacrifice. Sacrifice from not only the men and women who decide to make their living on the water but also from their other halves who hold down the entire household while you are gone.

Now, every trip and every boat is a little different and I have personally worked more hours, under more harsh conditions than this, and have also worked fewer hours with not as harsh conditions as this.. every boat, crew, and Captain have their own “style.”

I hope you guys enjoyed a small glance at what it takes physically and mentally to be a full-time commercial scalloper, through the eyes of someone who has been in the industry going on 10 years.

Thank you, and Much Respect
– Ryan Tavares/Slave Of The Sea