

Sean D. Elliot/The Day

Longshoremen with Logistec connect cable slings to coils of rolled steel in the hold of the cargo ship Parandowski as the ship is unloaded at State Pier in New London on Monday. To see a photo gallery and video, go to www.theday.com.

Shipments from China add a new dimension to activity at State Pier

New London - Like a ballet synchronized to the roar of heavy machinery, two dozen workers at State Pier moved hundreds of Chinese-manufactured steel coils from the massive Parandowski cargo ship Monday into on-site warehouses run by port operator Logistec USA Inc. for eventual trucking to points north and south.

Workers in the hold of the 655-foot-long ship, wearing hard hats and reflective gear, attached coils to the end of a huge crane, which hoisted the steel products - weighing up to 25,000 pounds each- to waiting crews on the pier.



Lift trucks with protrusions known as coil rams then trundled forward to snatch the spools of steel and lay them down on flatbed trucks run by Bozrah-based Commodity Carriers for a short ride to the Adm. Harold E. Shear State Pier warehouses, where they will sit until claimed by steel processing centers.

"This is a good month for us," Jeremy Riddle, New London operations manager for Montreal-based Logistec, said as he watched the offloading operation unfold.

Riddle expects three cargo ships to tie up at State Pier in November. In addition to the Parandowski - owned by the shipping company Shipolbrok, a joint Chinese-Polish venture - the port is gearing up for a monthly shipment from Europe as well as another load of steel coil, this time from Japan.

The Chinese shipment offloaded Monday is only the second that Logistec has welcomed to New London, the first arriving about six weeks ago. So far this year, he added, 31 ships

have tied up at State Pier, most of them, like this one, manned largely by Filipino and Eastern European crews.

The 6,500 metric tons of metal aboard the Parandowski - a cargo carrier the length of two football fields - is significantly larger than the usual steel coil shipment of about 4,000 metric tons, said Riddle. (A metric ton is a little more than twice a ton, which is 2,000 pounds).

A total of 753 coils will be moved over the two-day off-loading period.

Steel coil had been shipped here from Brazil on a regular basis, but recent economic turmoil in the South American country forced an established client of Logistec to seek another supplier.

"There was about a six-month gap as they were switching over (to a Chinese manufacturer)," Riddle said. "They're playing catch-up."

The same could be said of the New London port itself. But, after a few tough years following the U.S. financial crisis of 2007-08, the port is getting its groove back, according to Logistec officials who last year decided to end their operations in New Haven and consolidate all of their Connecticut activities to New London.

Shipping activity in New London, Logistec's U.S. headquarters, doubled between 2011 and 2012, according to figures released earlier this year. And Frank Vannelli, New London-based senior vice president of Logistec, said this year will nearly match 2012.

"There's a lot of activity here," he said.

The Parandowski tied up to State Pier on Sunday but had to wait till 8 a.m. Monday before stevedores arrived for an eight-hour shift. Unlike larger ports, New London keeps a contingent of only seven full-time employees and must send out a call for extra hands on the few days a month that a cargo ship arrives.

"We cross our fingers that we get enough guys," Riddle said. "However many show up, we have to make it work."

Riddle said the key is minimizing delays, and he praised the dedicated workers in New London for their efficiency and attention to detail.

"We don't work hard; we work smart," he said.

Stevedore Sam Blackburn, who helped land the coils on the pier and detached them from the crane, said the port has a good safety record. In fact, every shift starts with a safety reminder to coach workers on how to avoid the potential dangers associated with hauling tons of material.

"If you get hurt down here, there's no Band-Aid," Blackburn smiled.

Blackburn said he is hoping that the port picks up next year. New London used to be a significant import stop for the lumber industry as well as an active place for copper off-loads, but both of these markets have dried up in recent years as the building industry imploded.

A surveyor, Reza Sayadi, said his main responsibility at the port is to inspect the condition of the cargo and make a full report to Logistec about how smoothly each offloading operation has gone. Other surveyors represent the shipping company and the receivers of products.

Sayadi said he was pleasantly surprised by the condition of the cargo, considering its long route through the Suez Canal and a host of ports, including Houston, New Orleans and all the way up the East Coast. The ship was first loaded in August.

"This cargo looks fine," Sayadi said. "These are very well packaged."

Bearing Chinese lettering, the packaged coils will be bound for processing plants throughout New England and as far south as Pennsylvania. Manufacturers could turn the thin steel pieces into components for products ranging from automobiles to washing machines.

The 40-acre State Pier property contains 100,000 square feet of warehouse space where material generally sits for no more than two months before being hauled away by truckers plying Northeast routes. About three-quarters of the material is preordered, while the rest is stored on site while awaiting a buyer.

Logistec, whose three-year lease on State Pier expires in January 2016, makes its money mainly from the offloading process and warehousing fees. Company official Frank Vanelli said Logistec would like to make a commitment to New London for the long haul by signing a 10-year lease - which could motivate the company to make more investments in the pier - but the state has been more inclined to offer short-term deals.

Earlier this year, the state Bond Commission voted to fund \$5.8 million in State Pier improvements that could create more opportunity in the next few years for larger ships and a greater variety of cargo in New London.

"For what we're handling, it's ideal," Riddle said. "It's an easy port of call."

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