Capt. Chuck Ruch: Hooked on navigating the waterways

With the din of twin 700 horsepower diesel engines filling the wheelhouse, Capt. Chuck Ruch looks out over the bow, headed offshore on The R/V Cape Fear.

The 70-foot refurbished fishing boat pushes through the light, rolling swell at 14 knots. As Capt. Ruch sits surrounded by two global positioning units, a pair of radar screens and a depth finder, he checks the myriad controls.

He calls ahead on a two-way radio to The R/V Savannah, which his ship is scheduled to meet 5 miles off Wrightsville Beach.

The 40-year-old captain has spent his days on the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s vessel for the past three years. He drifted south from New York City following 9/11.

“I was a block and a half from ground zero on 9/11. That was it. It was enough. I wanted to get out for a while. I needed a place with a little slower pace,” he said.

Originally headed to Florida, Capt. Ruch stopped in Wilmington and was hooked.

He began looking for a captain’s job by asking around at local marinas and working his connections in the small commercial fishing community and hit the jackpot.

“I lucked into this job. Right place, right time,” he said.

The boat is usually used for day trips near its home port but is currently gone on an extended stint.

“We’ll be out for a week, back in … then out for a week.”

The schedule might seem hectic, but for the former New York City ferry captain, who rescued terror victims from Manhattan on that fateful day, it’s a nice change.

“My job is this,” he said as he motioned out the front window of the cabin. “Don’t get me wrong, there are days that you’re out here getting your butts kicked, but you get to see sea turtles, ocean sun fish, basking sharks. It’s different every day.”

Capt. Ruch sat back in his chair, pushed back the brim on his floppy hat and revealed a slight sunburn on his nose.

“For us, a day on the boat is a day in the office,” he said with a sigh and smile.