

Captain Mitch



Guard us oh god, almighty king,
From Gale of Fall, oh keep us safe.
From Shoal and Reef, protect us from
The Inland Seas.
To Long Ships passing through the night,
Please give the guidance of thy light.

The following tribute was written with the help and cooperation of the shipmates and colleagues of Captain Hallin.

It was a chilly spring morning as the M/V *Paul R. Tregurtha* cleared De Tour downbound into a windswept Lake Huron. A southwest course was ordered in response to the deteriorating weather conditions. First Mate Mike La Combe glanced at his watch, its minute hand moving closer to the top of the hour when a master's salute, customarily given to in respect to the master of a passing vessel, would be given in honor of the memory of the *Tregurtha's* longtime skipper, Captain Mitch Hallin. Fifteen minutes into their southwest course the giant air horns on the *Paul R. Tregurtha* sounded the salute, fittingly to a horizon void of any passing ship.

That same morning in Superior, Wisconsin, over a day's sailing time from De Tour, and regular port of call for the *Paul R. Tregurtha*, Interlake Steamship Company port representative Kevin Alway stepped onto the *Elton Hoyt 2nd* where he had readied an air compressor to sound the ship's long silent whistle. At precisely 9 a.m. on the morning of Friday, May 10 Alway pressed the lever from the pilothouse of the *Hoyt*, sounding a long and heartfelt Master's salute

that carried down the harbor's East Basin toward the hills of Duluth.

A week earlier, on May 3, 2002, Captain Mitch Hallin passed away on board his command, the M/V *Paul R. Tregurtha*. For many on the crew of the *Paul R. Tregurtha* it had been a long and difficult week and the reality of life without Captain Hallin was slowly beginning to sink in. Across the Great Lakes ships sounded their whistles at exactly the same time to add to the salute for Captain Hallin, a tribute that had no parallel in recent memory.

"The experience of command of a ship at sea is unforgettable;
It is without parallel or equal. The responsibility is heavy,
But the rewards which become embedded
In the very fabric of your life are priceless." Joseph Conrad

It was just past one in the morning as we stood on the concrete apron that forms the lengthy dock at Superior's Midwest Energy Terminal. A surge of water rushed beneath our feet as an outbound Canadian laker moved away from the dock. My oldest son Pete and I watched as the vessel receded, its deck awash in light that rippled in the heat of the mid-summer night, our feet still vibrating with the pulse of the ship's powerful diesel engines.

Waiting patiently away from the bright lights beyond the dock was the vessel we were to board that morning. A pencil thin line of blue light shot from the darkness to our left. Barely discernable against the dark water the giant American laker *Paul R. Tregurtha* loomed toward the dock, its shape so immense that it obliterated the lights behind it along the Duluth hillside.

Over the course of the next half hour the activity along the dock area intensified. In the parking lot behind us cars and trucks arrived and we were soon joined by others. Some were family, some were friends; men, women, and children, while others were service people here to repair something on the boat for the short time they would be in port. A supply van loaded with groceries pulled up onto the dock, a pick-up truck with an orange light flashing on top of it followed behind. A taxicab idled near the phone booths at the entrance to the parking lot, its amber parking lights hovering above the asphalt until its customer could be released from duty on the ship.

All the while as the *Tregurtha* slowly maneuvered up to the dock men were swung over the ship's forward railing on the boson's chair to haul mooring lines to the dock bollards while on the after end the boarding brow was readied to lower over the side was once the vessel was fully secured. Some of the crew waved and talked to people on the dock while others stood with cell

phones pressed to their ears, their heads lowered in conversation. An hour later we waited in the quiet of the ship's lounge, high above the noise and activity of the loading deck. I had been on the vessel a number of years earlier at the very same dock. Back then the ship was named the *William J. DeLancey*, but known as the "Fancy DeLancey" for its stylish guest accommodations and observation lounge. After fifteen years the name had changed but the ship's reputation had not. To go aboard this vessel was an honor. To take my son was a privilege and a moment in time to cherish forever.

Shortly after two in the morning we were introduced to the vessel's master, Captain Mitch Hallin. Captain Hallin, standing well over six feet tall, was a big man with a booming voice. His large hand engulfed my son's and instantly put the fear of God into my young son's eyes as he warmly greeted him. This was Pete's first meeting with a ship captain and Captain Hallin's authoritative tone left no doubt who was in charge of this ship. It was a meeting that my son has always remembered.



"Only a seaman realizes to what extent an entire ship reflects
The personality and ability of one individual, her Commanding Officer.

To a landsman this is not understandable, and sometimes
It is even difficult for us to comprehend, - but it is so." Joseph Conrad

It was approaching noon below us on the spar deck of the *Tregurtha* as the last tons of coal were loaded. Looking out over the large coalfield that comprised the storage yard of the Midwest Energy Terminal I was impressed at the spectacular view we had from the pilothouse of the boat. Like the night before the ship was suddenly alive with activity in preparation for departing. On the dock the deckhands stood ready at the mooring lines, men were stationed at the forward and after winches to pull the lines in while the "iron

deckhand" rumbled along the deck, each hatch cover thundered back into place. The British author Joseph Conrad wrote, "Commanding a ship is the simplest task in the world, even if at times it seems complicated. A captain has only to pick good courses of action and to stick to them no matter what. If he is good and generally makes good decisions, his crew will cover for him if he fails occasionally. If he is bad, this fact will soon be known, and he must be removed with the speed of light." Conrad himself, a sailor in both the French merchant marine and the British merchant navy, maintained his love of the sea long after he left the service for civilian life, writing often about the sea and the experience of command.

Captain Hallin paced the pilothouse floor, surveying the activity below from different vantage points. A few remaining friends and family had gathered along the dock apron to say goodbye. Satisfied that everything was in order Captain Hallin radioed his Mate to set in motion the chain of events to get the vessel underway. After letting the forward line go a young deckhand hurried along the dock to give his girlfriend a farewell kiss before climbing back aboard the vessel. In the brief exchange the young lady's dog got loose from her grip and ran excitedly around the couple before it managed to vault itself off the end of the wharf into the bay. The radio crackled as the Mate forward called out the distance to the captain as the *Tregurtha's* bow swung farther away from the dock. Captain Hallin held the vessel's after end against the dock as he waited for the deckhands to return to the boat. The young deckhand hesitated on the dock, not sure what to do about the dog or his girlfriend. With a thousand foot vessel on the move loaded with over 62,000 tons of cargo there was no hesitation in the captain's voice. "Get that Goddamned deckhand on the boat now!" I suggested to my son that we go outside to watch the boat slip beneath the Duluth Superior High Bridge and then walk to the forward end of the ship to see the crowds that line the Duluth Ship Canal. There would be plenty of time to visit the pilothouse on the trip.

Over the course of the next week we rode with Captain Hallin and the crew of the *Tregurtha* on a trip that was as memorable as one could have dreamed it to be. My young son experienced all he could absorb about life on the Great Lakes. His initial fear of Captain Hallin faded each day as the captain patiently answered his questions about sailing, about the boat, about the lakes and about being a captain. Just less than three years after our trip we were both saddened to learn of the loss of Captain Hallin.

Jerry Garramone of Superior, Wisconsin had worked with Captain Hallin aboard the *Tregurtha* long enough to not let a dog jumping into the water affect his morning duties. "There was always something going on, always some excitement going on whether you made a dock or left a dock," Jerry recalled of his years sailing under the Captain. Just over two months after helping carry Captain Hallin from the *Tregurtha* Jerry also remembered all of the badgering that the Captain had done to push Jerry to study for his AB ticket and when Jerry and some other crew members were ready to write their tests Captain Hallin drove them from the dock at St. Clair down to Toledo. To those on the outside Captain Hallin may have appeared as the stern taskmaster, but he always placed his vessel and crew at the top of his priority list. "He was very loud and outspoken. You could hear him; he never needed a radio. I could hear him all the way up forward from the pilothouse," laughed Jerry. "Them were some of the fun times being with him. I'll never forget him."

"I don't know how Mitch got started in sailing. Like a lot of others that lived in Northwestern Minnesota, he probably got a ride in a grain truck down to Duluth and never went back," speculated Captain Bob Libby, longtime ship-



Mitch and Mike Hallin early in their sailing careers.
photo: Macy Hallin

mate and friend. Rural Minnesota in the late 1940s and early 1950s didn't offer a lot of options for a young man other than work above ground in the farm fields and lumber industry, or below ground in the iron mines. In the years following the Second World War the small town of Bagley, Minnesota was just such a place. Surrounded by farmland and Indian reservations Bagley hung on to its rural livelihood with a population of just over 1,000. Mitchell Hallin, one of two boys in triplets born

on May 11, 1946, saw his chance for adventure in the shipping port of Duluth, Minnesota where a sailing life on the chain of Great Lakes could be traced across a map in a matter of seconds with the stroke of his finger. Mitch's uncle, Earl Gunning, sailed as an oiler for Gartland (Steamship) and had enough pull to get Mitch and his brother Mike a job on the boats. In the fall of 1966 the Hallin boys, both just over twenty years old, headed to sea.

Mitch and Mike each began their sailing careers with the Gartland Steamship Company on September 6, 1966 when they boarded the steamer *W. E. Fitzgerald* in Milwaukee. In December 1966, nearly forty years before Mitch

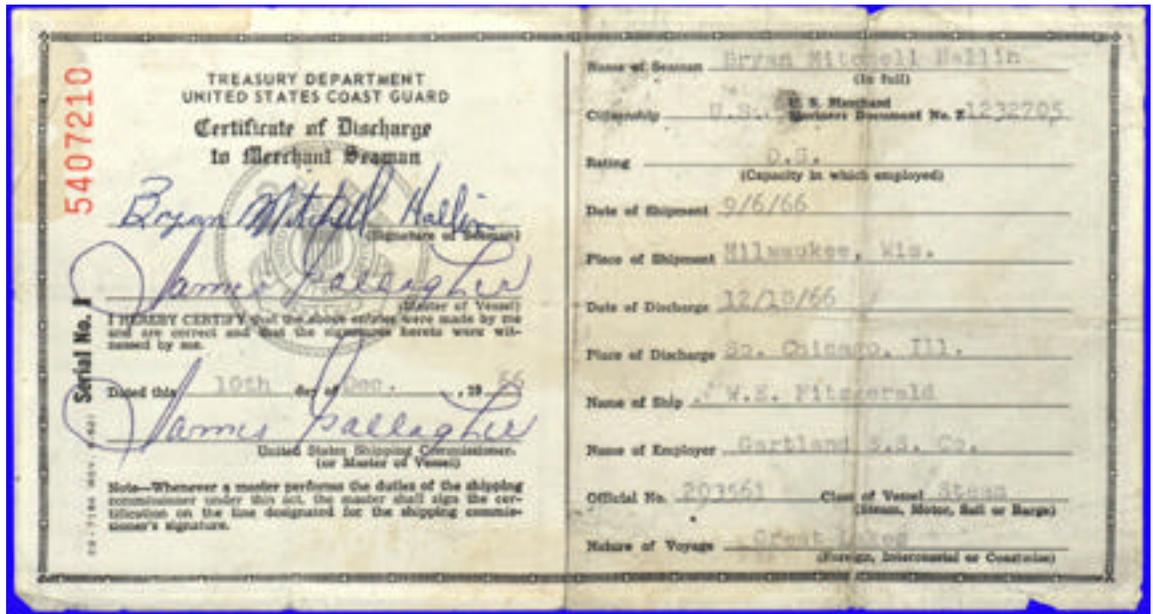
Hallin ever stepped on its deck, the ice laden *W. E. Fitzgerald* limped into the upper St. Mary's River, heading for the Davis Lock over seventy hours late from its

expected arrival. The

well-traveled steamer had been caught in a terrific late season storm on Lake Superior. The ship's captain had to rely upon every ounce of power delivered from the *Fitzgerald's* triple expansion engine to get his ship and crew off the lake and out of the storm.

Photographer Frank Patyk captured a haunting image of the 440-foot long *Fitzgerald* upon its arrival at the Soo Locks, coated with an estimated 250 tons of ice. The stark photographic image shows the awesome power generated during storms on the Great Lakes. The image is in a sense more noted for its haunting imagery leading one to wonder what it must be like to stand up in the face of such fury and to question the mental courage it must take to come through a monstrous storm where the vessel itself is painted with the face of death. In the human experience there is more to sailing than moving a vessel across the water.

Whatever notions the Hallin brothers had about the adventure of sailing on the boats their beginning was memorable, but not for the right reason. Before the *Fitzgerald* ever left the dock both boys were seasick. In his later years Mitch would say that if either of them had the money they would have gone back home that same day. Mitch eventually found that life on the lakes agreed with him, in weather good or bad, sticking with the job and the *Fitzgerald* into the 1968 sailing season. In the summer of 1968, with uncertainty in the air about the survival of the Gartland fleet, Mitch worked for a week as an OS



Mitch Hallin's Certificate of Discharge from first ship, Str. *W. E. Fitzgerald*. document: Macy Hallin

aboard the *George M. Steinbrenner (1)* before finishing the season as an AB aboard the *Nicolet*, operated by Boland and Cornelius. In 1969 the Gartland Steamship Company, joining a growing number of lake fleets dwindling in size, consolidating with other companies or going out of existence, was absorbed into the Boland & Cornelius fleet. Mitch had survived the demise of the Gartland Steamship Company when he joined the *Nicolet* the previous season and spent the 1969 and 1970 seasons wheeling aboard the *Nicolet*, often running into many of his former Gartland shipmates.

"Mitch was a very talented person," recalled Bob Libby. "He could have succeeded at any endeavor that he would have wanted to go into." Mitch enjoyed food and cooking and by the end of the 1970 sailing season Mitch had saved enough money to pursue a dream, to own his own restaurant. In December of 1970 he purchased the restaurant / bar at the Rapid City, South Dakota regional airport. While the restaurant provided a certain amount of satisfaction Mitch also took up flying and operated air charters out of Rapid City,



Captain Mitch Hallin.
photo: Macy Hallin

providing a certain amount of adventure to balance the day-to-day business of operating a restaurant. In spite of all his accomplishments, after two years ashore Mitch found that he missed the lakes and decided to return to sailing.

In 1972 Mitch signed aboard the converted self-unloader *Hennepin (2)* under the management of Boland & Cornelius. The *Hennepin* was Mitch's fourth boat; interestingly all of the vessels Mitch had sailed on up to this point were built in Michigan shipyards between 1905 and 1906. During the winter of 1972-73 Mitch took a big step toward staying on the lakes when he obtained his papers to work as a Third Mate. In 1973 Mitch fitted out the Boland & Cornelius steamer *Consumers Power (3)* but did not have the seniority to hold the job. In April 1973 Mitch signed on with the Interlake Steamship Company of Cleveland as the new Third Mate aboard the

steamship *Harry Coulby*. It on the *Coulby* that Mitch would meet many of the men who would mentor him in his new role as Third Mate, including several who would form the nucleus of the crew that would later sail with him aboard the

Tregurtha. Captain George Eskolin fondly remembered Mitch as a young man who was conscientious about his job and took steps to make sure that all of the things that needed to be done were taken care of. Captain Eskolin had to admit that it is difficult to tell whether someone working his way up the ranks really has what it takes to eventually command a ship. "Sometimes we think we can tell, but I don't think we're always correct. Sometimes I think a man isn't capable," admitted George, "but after a few months, you know, a little more time as a Mate they fool us too!" In Captain Eskolin's discerning eyes Mitch had potential. "He had the common sense and of course he had the desire to do things right."

The desire to do things right, and to push to do the extra little bit helped Mitch move up with Interlake, doing relief work on other ships when needed. When the company requested Mitch's help in training vessel crew's in artificial respiration Mitch worked from ship to ship in the fleet. In the winter he assisted his friend Captain Eskolin in the Duluth-Superior harbor as part of the winter gang, a job that encompassed everything from wielding paintbrushes to supervising shipyard repair crews. In time Mitch eventually took over the duties of port captain from his friend George Eskolin.

Long after George retired and Mitch became "Captain Hallin" the two men would meet in the galley of the *Paul R. Tregurtha* to talk about the changes taking place on the lakes in recent years. Captain Hallin would seek the advice of his old friend, air his concerns, and of course share a laugh about the old days as they caught up on the comings and goings of former shipmates. Captain Eskolin will always cherish his memories of Mitch Hallin. "To me he was a good friend. He was a darn big hunk of humanity."

Dick Madden, bosun on the *Tregurtha* began his career with Interlake in 1959 and had been on the lakes for fourteen years before he met Mitch on the *Harry Coulby*. Dick loved his job on the job lakes. In his mind there wasn't a better place to be. Dick thought that these same beliefs were the force that kept Mitch and others like him sailing every year. "...with the majority of us anyhow, you think that there is no other (life) - I never thought there was a life beyond that." Dick was working as a wheelsman aboard the *Coulby* in 1973 when Mitch joined the vessel as the new Third Mate. Mitch had worked his way up the ranks, through the "hawse pipe," and had earned his share of the reputation of a young man that liked to have a good time up the street. Mitch soon found that along with the license and the piloting skills came a new set of skills that centered on the responsibility of the Mate's job. Many men who have sailed the Lakes have never been able to outgrow or overcome the indiscretions of their youth. "At first, he wanted everybody to be his friend," Dick recalled of

the young Third Mate. "He tried to get along with everybody." Learning to work with the crew was something that you couldn't pass an exam for in Toledo. It would take a couple of years for Mitch to settle into his new role but he stuck with it and continued to be more comfortable in his ship navigational skills, as well as his people skills, setting his sights on a long career with Interlake.



Mitch as mate aboard the Str. *Charles M. Beeghly*.
photo: Macy Hallin

In 1977 Mitch was appointed Third Mate of the newly commissioned M/V *Mesabi Miner*. Two years later in 1979 Mitch earned his Master's license although he would have to wait a number of years before he actually began work as a relief captain in the fleet. In the meantime he continued to hone his skills as a ship's Mate, working with a number of vessels before receiving his first captain's position as a relief for Captain Arnie Robertson on the *Herbert C. Jackson* in December 1987, with Mike La Combe working as Second Mate. From there Mitch went on to relief positions aboard the *Elton Hoyt 2nd*, *Mesabi Miner*, and the *Charles M. Beeghly*, fine-tuning his ship handling skills as he learned from the veteran captains.

Captain Libby was impressed with Mitch's raw talent and thought that Mitch had the makings of a good captain. "Mitch was a very talented person. He could have succeeded at any endeavor that he would have wanted to go into." There were many others who didn't always share Captain Libby's enthusiasm for Mitch's abilities. On the Great Lakes the skill of ship handling was only part of the equation of being a good Captain. The other half from Captain Libby's perspective was the ability to get along with the crew. Every captain had to find his way. It was rarely something personal, but just part of the job. "You learn from other captains and finally you develop your own style of handling the crew and," cautioned Captain Libby, "perhaps ship handling. He was his own man and when you're a captain on a ship you do things your own way. You're the man."

Mitch did develop his own style of being captain. To many who didn't sail with him Captain Hallin's reputation became that of the "gruff sea captain." This image of Captain Hallin was one that would follow him throughout his career; a reputation that many peers and shipmates felt was unjustly granted. "Some people feel that Mitch was very controversial. On the other hand, many of the people that feel that way weren't steamboat captains." Captain Bob Libby was quick to defend his longtime friend. "Mitch started as a deckhand and worked his way up to master and Mitch always had this thought in his mind. He was very much a company man to the extent that he wanted his vessel to succeed and making it a good operation for the company per se, and in a safe manner. And sometimes those things get in the way of trying to please people in the crew."



Mitch as captain on *Lee A. Tregurtha*.
photo: Macy Hallin

"He was a quiet kind of captain actually," recalled Sandy Van Tassel, Second Cook on the *Paul R. Tregurtha*. "If you were a brand new hire and you walked aboard he was never the type to go out of his way and go introduce himself as "Captain Hallin." He was a little stand offish, where people might think he was intimidating. I never really felt his intimidation." If push came to shove Sandy would admit that Captain Hallin could be gruff, but she quickly points out that he also stood up for his crew. "He didn't let a lot of people outside the ship mess with anybody on the ship. Some people said he spoke before he thought. I think he said what he wanted to say."



Mike LaCombe, Sandy Van Tassel, Captain Hallin.
photo: Sandy Van Tassel

Sandy recalls being teased by many of the crew on the *Tregurtha* for being the "daughter that Mitch never had." Captain Hallin was like a father to her in many respects, an analogy that Sandy could see with many of the crew on the *Tregurtha*. "You wanted to please him. You wanted to give him the right

distances. You didn't want to get yelled at – just like your own father," she told me, "and that's how Mitch was. He screamed a lot. Everybody says, 'He screamed at me,' 'He yelled at me,' but if you did it right he didn't! All he did was try to get the best of you - the right out of you. He would throw a cadet in the window and scream at him till he got it right, but I'll bet you that cadet knew, ten years down the road. 'Oh, I remember when Captain Mitch yelled at me because I made that wrong.' But he learned."

Sandy also shares the belief that the Great Lakes and his job were a special for Captain Hallin. Having been raised in a family of sailors, Sandy could see the same traits in Captain Hallin that she saw in her own family. "I think he loved being captain. There are a lot of people that like their job...with Captain Mitch, it was his life. I come from that kind of a family. I had uncles that sailed forty years. This was their life. They didn't have anything outside that. They were an Engineer, and that's what their life was."

Early into the 1993 season Captain Hallin was appointed command of the largest vessel on the Great Lakes, the M/V *Paul R. Tregurtha* when Captain Ray Smith announced his retirement. The command of the *Tregurtha* was a job that carried a certain weight with it that went beyond the normal realm of moving cargo. As the flagship of the Interlake fleet the *Tregurtha* catered to a busy schedule of guests during the summer months. Captain Hallin became very skilled at balancing the business concerns of the company and the needs of his crew with his responsibilities of hosting the numerous guests. "He loved his passenger quarters. That was one of his pet things," recalled Dick Madden. "He worked with John to take care of the details." John Duning, Steward on the *Tregurtha* took care of the details as Mitch played host to guests that ranged from Governors to ranchers, and corporate executives to artists. He never let on if the talk of business wearied him and went out of his way to make a trip on the *Tregurtha* a special experience, particularly for the children of visitors or the family of his



U. S. Coast Guard Captain Gordon presents Capt Mitch Hallin with commendation for the rescue of 3 fishermen from disabled "Sunbird" in dense fog on Lake Superior on July 27, 2001.
photo: Macy Hallin

crew. "He knew we had something special here," recalled John, and keeping the guest quarters in top-notch shape was on of the duties that Mitch took pride in. "Mitch would give us responsibilities and he would expect us to carry them out," explained John. Yet, as demanding of perfection as the captain was at the end of the year he would write Christmas cards to all of the passengers, to retired crew members and special friends of the *Tregurtha*.

Captain Hallin extended the hospitality of the *Tregurtha* beyond the ship as well, taking special time for a Second Grade class from Brimley, Michigan who "adopted" the *Paul R. Tregurtha* as a special class project. Along the vessel's well-traveled route from Superior to St. Clair the captain fly his trademark Arizona state flag on the fo'castle and blow whistle salutes to strangers and friends along the shore to those who came to wave at the big ship. This simple gesture played a big part in being an ambassador of the American ships on the Great Lakes.

With each passing year Captain Hallin solidified his role on the *Tregurtha*, earning the reputation as an excellent ship handler and a captain who looked out for his crew and his duty. During the holiday seasons, long after the passengers were gone, Mitch would use his love of cooking and food to help Steward John Duning create a festive atmosphere aboard the vessel. "We'd have lights all over this boat," laughed John. "We'd have that boom lit up - we have a sleigh and all the reindeer that go across the boom. That was Mitch's call." John and the captain shared a love of cooking and would often swap ideas for meals, especially during the holidays. There were numerous occasions when John would be summoned to the captain's office to discuss a new recipe. Whether they knew it or not the crew of the *Tregurtha* benefited the most from the adventurous collaborations between the captain and the cook. When not

giving cooking advice Mitch simply enjoyed helping prepare special dishes or helping out on cookouts when time permitted.

Mitch was noted for his love of "spicy" foods. In the early 1980s he persuaded Gary Lewinski, the owner of Whisker's Spirits & Eatery in Marquette, to



Captain Mitch with his "Chef" hat.
photo: Macy Hallin

consider serving chicken wings. Gary agreed to give it a try, with the condition that the next time Mitch was in port he would come to the restaurant to help prepare the new menu item. Mitch concocted the spicy sauce while Gary added

the breading and the rest is history. "Captain Mitch's Cajun Chicken Wings" are still served at Whiskers and have been one of the most popular items on the menu for over twenty years.

In his spare time Mitch was an avid reader, on occasion devouring several books in an evening. Unknown to many Captain Hallin did a lot of things without seeking any credit for his actions. He would make it a point to get up early when in port so he could go up the street to get newspapers for his officers and crew. When there were delays in port or there was down time on the lakes due to weather Mitch would have his Mates make sure that the younger guys on the crew were "hitting the books," studying for their exams or licenses. In the case of Jerry Garramone and others, Mitch would drive them to Toledo and back to the boat to help them out.

Over the years John and Captain Mitch developed a lasting friendship, talking about family, friends, sharing photographs and conversation. John would be the first to admit that for all those simple conversations, those moments are what he will miss the most. The talk of family was never far from Mitch. While living in Rapid City Mitch met the love of his life, Macy. Mitch and Macy were married in January 1974 in Duluth, where the couple resided during the off-season. Macy fondly recalled Mitch's devotion to his wife and family. "He was more than sailing. He was a family man, and a father, and a brother and a husband. I think one of the things, more so than any of the sailing, he was the proudest of his son Dan. They had a wonderful relationship."

Mother Mary, hear my prayer.
Take me in your tender care.
With me always may you be
As I ply from sea to sea.
A Seaman's Prayer

Captain Hallin was not a pretentious man. He was not one to put on his Captains uniform, even when the vessel carried special guests but the fraternity of men and women who sail the Great Lakes is a close knit one, and when the occasion presented itself to honor those who had gone before them, Captain Hallin donned his uniform for a tribute that was all about honor and fraternity.

Dick Madden can still recall the day and the occasion - the anniversary of the loss of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. The *Tregurtha* was on a course that would put them in the same place at the same time that the *Fitzgerald* sank. Captain Hallin arranged that a wreath made of 29 roses be delivered to the vessel. Arlene Earl, known along the lakes as "the Flower Lady," gladly complied with

Mitch's request for the special wreath. "The anniversary that year came on a Sunday," remembered Dick. "We all came and took part in it. I don't believe there was anybody on the crew that didn't take part in it." The accommodation ladder was lowered along the side of the ship as the crew gathered. "We weren't all Catholic but the majority of us were and we said a rosary. When we got in the area we checked the boat down and he laid the wreath down there." Sunday, November 10. "He never wore his captain's uniform. He thought that this was something that he had to do for the *Fitzgerald* bunch, you know, putting on the uniform." Dick Madden retired in 2002, shortly after the loss of his friend Mitch Hallin. "I have nothing but good to say about him. There was more good in him than bad."



Captain Hallin with wreath for the crew of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.
photo: Sandy Van Tassel

Mitch was not a superstitious sailor, but he had a ritual that he would complete before leaving home at the start of each sailing season. Every spring Mitch and Macy would drive south from their home to the small San Xavier del Bac Mission south of Tucson. Within the quiet confines of the 300 year old mission, far from the waves and winds of the Great Lakes, Mitch and Macy would attend mass, and offer a prayer for their many friends and colleagues. "Mitchell was a big guy with a big, generous heart, and he never did anything in a small way," explained Macy. "He'd buy boxes of candles and we'd go to mass, and then he'd light all these candles for the crew, the boat, for a safe season. Every year." Sadly, it was a side of the captain that few knew about. "He was a lot more than the job."

There are few moments in time when the lives of a crew of a freighter on the waters of the Great Lakes come to a stop. During the shipping season time is money and the cost of operating the largest of ships on the lakes carries a burden of responsibility to the vessel's owners and management. From the moment a vessel arrives at a dock for its cargo it begins to load and when the job is done the lines are let go and the vessel moves to its destination with all possible haste.

On the morning of May 3 Relief Mate Jack Callahan, working as a relief mate aboard the *Tregurtha*, sat in this room as the vessel was down bound in

Whitefish Bay at the southeast end of Lake Superior. Captain Callahan, a veteran of over thirty years on the lakes and ship master in his own right, sensed that something wasn't right when he heard footsteps pounding down the stairs from the deck above. He quickly went to his door where he came upon the ship's Third Mate summoning help to the Captain's stateroom.

Captain Hallin, stricken by an apparent heart attack, lay motionless in his stateroom. In the ensuing minutes efforts by members of the crew to revive the captain proved futile. Within reach of his radio and emergency alarm Captain Hallin was unable to call for help from his shipmates. The startling news of his death spread throughout the *Tregurtha* like a charge of electricity, reaching every corner of the ship almost instantly. In that brief instant of time life on board the *Paul R. Tregurtha* had changed forever. The following hours were difficult ones for everyone on board, from those who barely knew Captain Hallin to those who knew him well. A sense of disbelief hung over the vessel.



Captain Hallin aboard the his ship,
M/ V Paul R. Tregurtha.
photo: Sandy Van Tassel

"I think God took a man that was way too young," insists Sandy Van Tassel. "He was like a father to me out here. For the five years, for the five straight years I sailed with him he was like a father to me." Sandy recalled how Captain Hallin had impulsively left the ship one day the previous fall to redecorate the mess rooms near the galley. After nearly ten years of looking at the same old flower box Mitch had suddenly had enough. He returned several hours later with an American flag neatly displayed inside of a wooden case - a tribute to those who fell on September 11, and a subtle reminder of how precious life is.

First Mate Mike La Combe guided the *Paul R. Tregurtha* gently up against the West Pier above the Soo Locks on Friday May 3 and waited quietly for the numerous agencies that would need to come aboard the ship. When all of the necessary paperwork was completed Captain Hallin's body was lowered from the vessel. Mike remembers how surreal the moment was for everyone. "At that time I blew the "Company Salute." This pretty much stopped everyone in their tracks and a lot of the reality of what had happened began to set in. I think this was very hard on the crew and also the officers," recalled Mike.

Mike La Combe first met Mitch in 1973, shortly after Mitch had signed on as Mate on the *Coulby*. "I roomed with Mitch's brother Mike while we wrote our original licenses at AMO in Toledo," recalled Mike as if it were only yester-

day. The two men would bounce from ship to ship, sometimes working together for a year or two, sometimes working on different vessels. In 1993 Mike and Mitch hooked up again for the final time when Mitch was assigned command of the *Paul R. Tregurtha*, with Mike working as First Mate. "Mitch and I worked well together and the years I was First Mate there I had a great job."

Like those firefighters and police officers left in the wake of disasters the crew of the Tregurtha had to move on. With little time to grieve the vessel moved on down through the Soo Locks. Mike La Combe assumed temporary command of the Tregurtha while the crew adjusted to the loss of its long time captain. "When somebody passes away on a ship you bond. To let an outsider in, on a ship... it's not a good thing," reasoned Sandy. "With Michael it was a real smooth transition because he took the ship, just as he had before with emergencies with Captain Mitch."

Sunset and evening star
and one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
when I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
too full for sound and foam
When that which drew from out
the boundless deep
turns home again.
Twilight and evening bell,
and after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
when I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne
of time and place
the flood may bear me far
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
when I have crossed the bar.

"Crossing the Bar" Alfred Tennyson

On a beautiful summer day in June family, friends, colleagues, and ship-mates gathered aboard the *Paul R. Tregurtha* outside the Duluth harbor to pay tribute to Captain Hallin. For the crew of the Tregurtha it was the first real chance to honor their friend and Captain; a chance for closure. Mitch's son Dan, with Macy looking on, scattered the ashes of his father in the waters of Lake Superior in honor of a man, who gave his life in the service to others, in duty to his family, his crew and company, and in duty to the sea to which he was returned.