



## CONSTANTIN KAKOURIS

**After sailing the world, Kakouris finds the Lakes special**

In Greek mythology, the sea god Nereus was able to change shapes and possessed the gift of prophecy. Perhaps Nereus was at work on the neighbor of Constantin Kakouris, when he occasionally enlisted his young friend's help in ferrying supplies and tourists from the bustling quay in the harbor to the large ships at anchor in the bay. It was on one such visit that Kakouris wandered onto the promenade deck of an old Lusitania class liner, where, framed above him, a magnificently detailed stained glass skylight depicting the planet Earth commanded his attention.

"That fascinated me," said Kakouris. "After that, I made a promise to myself to conquer that sphere."

No more than a year later, the 16-year-old took his first step in conquering the world from the deck of a merchant ship. Sailing from Bordeaux, France on a ship named for the beneficent Greek god of the sea, Kakouris returned triumphantly to his hometown of Batras, Greece. Never mind that the youth was really working his first job as the "bosun's saddle," or that the *Nereus* was an old war reparation vessel parceled out to the Greek merchant fleet.

Two years later, during a lengthy voyage, another ship landed Kakouris in Shanghai, China, at the height of Mao's Cultural Revolution. This trip took him from Italy, around the Cape of Good Hope, bypassing the Suez Canal due to the war in the Middle East, across the Indian Ocean and through the Malacca Straits to Southeast Asia.

"We made a 72-day trip with one four-hour stop at Singapore for bunkering," recalls Kakouris, "and then into the Yellow Sea and on to Shanghai."

But the long trip brought no complaints from the world-widened young sailor. "I was 18," Kakouris said shrugging. "It was beautiful. It was awesome. It was an adventure."

And after all, like so many of his Greek forbearers, he was on his way to conquering the world.

During these long voyages on the open sea, Kakouris learned his basic seamanship, as well as the nuances of his trade: cargo handling and stowage, navigation and meteorology. In his spare time, he concentrated on schooling, completing correspondence courses and returning his packets home via Greek consulates located throughout the world. Hidden somewhere within his pledge to conquer the known world, Kakouris came to realize that an even greater world of knowledge exists within everyone.

On August 2, 1971, Kakouris returned to Greece to fulfill his compulsory military duty. Rather than let it derail his maritime career, he enrolled in the NATO compliant Greek Navy. Growing pressure from his family to find a livelihood that would keep him closer to home, which by the mid-70s was the distant metropolitan Toronto, led Kakouris to Canada.

After agreeing to "visit" this inland world of pine and snow and get a taste of life ashore, it didn't take long for him to decide that standing on the deck of a swaying ship was far superior. He returned to sailing, but, aware of the angst this decision would create in his family, he applied for work sailing on the Great Lakes, a job that would allow him to sail and in return, give him several months at home when the shipping season closed during the winter.

In the short term, it meant a big step back in rank to the position of Ordinary Seaman for six months to acquire the minimum sea time needed to write for his ticket as a licensed mate. On August 2, 1979, Kakouris watched his first freshwater sunrise from the deck of the *Hilda Marjanne*. Twenty years later, he has never regretted his decision.

For a man who has sailed to all four quadrants of the globe, circumnavigated the world a dozen times or more in the course of conquering the Earth's sphere, Kakouris has great respect for the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway system. He finds

its history of growth, adaptation and change to be a particularly unique use of logic by the maritime industry to service a regionally-confined system of waterways with fewer, but larger ships.

While logic and perfection are the hallmarks of efficiency, none of this can be accomplished without the industry's most vital component, its people.

"People are the soul of the industry," he said. "It's the crew that makes a ship. If you have a good crew, you've got it made."

On the Great Lakes, generations of local knowledge and experience are embedded in its mariners. Traditions are continually handed down to and adapted by the next generation.

"It's a cycle," Kakouris said. "We carry on when they leave with the same loyalty, efficiency. We succeed each other for the continuing of this particular industry. Somehow, we all have the ability of local knowledge."

While his career has spanned four decades and he has learned many skills and life lessons, Kakouris has learned what he believes is the most important thing to have in life—identity.

"It is extremely important, and this is where you build your own foundations to succeed in life. This is your own past," Kakouris said, gesturing to all that surrounds him. "Your past is your father, your mother, your grandparents, and when you can look back and see your trail in history, that can make you a stronger individual."

On the Great Lakes and the Seaway, the knowledge accumulated through years of experience is only one aspect of the job that makes sailing on the Lakes so special.

"It is how we interact with each other that I enjoy the most about my job," he said. "When you go down to Quebec or other ports, like Thunder Bay, everybody knows everybody. We all care about each other. We have something between an association and a friendship, which after 15 to 20 years leans towards friendship for each other. It's a beautiful industry." Patrick Lapinski ■