

Gil Porter has worked with crews and captains from around the world

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Clarance "Gil" Porter's career on the water started in 1941, when he joined the U. S. Coast Guard during World War II. Over the years, the Twin Ports' resident has bumped from ship to ship, with many colorful adventures.

The 1960s found him still with the Coast Guard, only this time stationed in Duluth and sailing the cutter *Woodrush*. On one occasion, Porter and *Woodrush* took aboard supplies for the 24-hour round trip to service the Rock of Ages, Passage Island, Manitou, Stannard Rock and Huron Island light stations. The would-be routine supply run turned out to be one of his most memorable experiences.

Woodrush would reach Manitou Island around midnight before making the run to Stannard Rock. Porter went below to catch some sleep during the two-hour trip between stations, when the ship's executive officer awakened him. The pilothouse was unusually quiet when Porter stepped inside. *Woodrush* was where it was supposed to be, but no one could see the lighthouse—the Stannard Rock beacon was dark.

Obviously something isn't right, he thought, ordering the executive officer to take the ship's launch and determine the problem. Tension in the pilothouse was palpable as the crew waited for the launch to report back.

"Dammit!" sounded the executive officer's exclamation into the radio. "We've got big trouble; they've had an explosion."

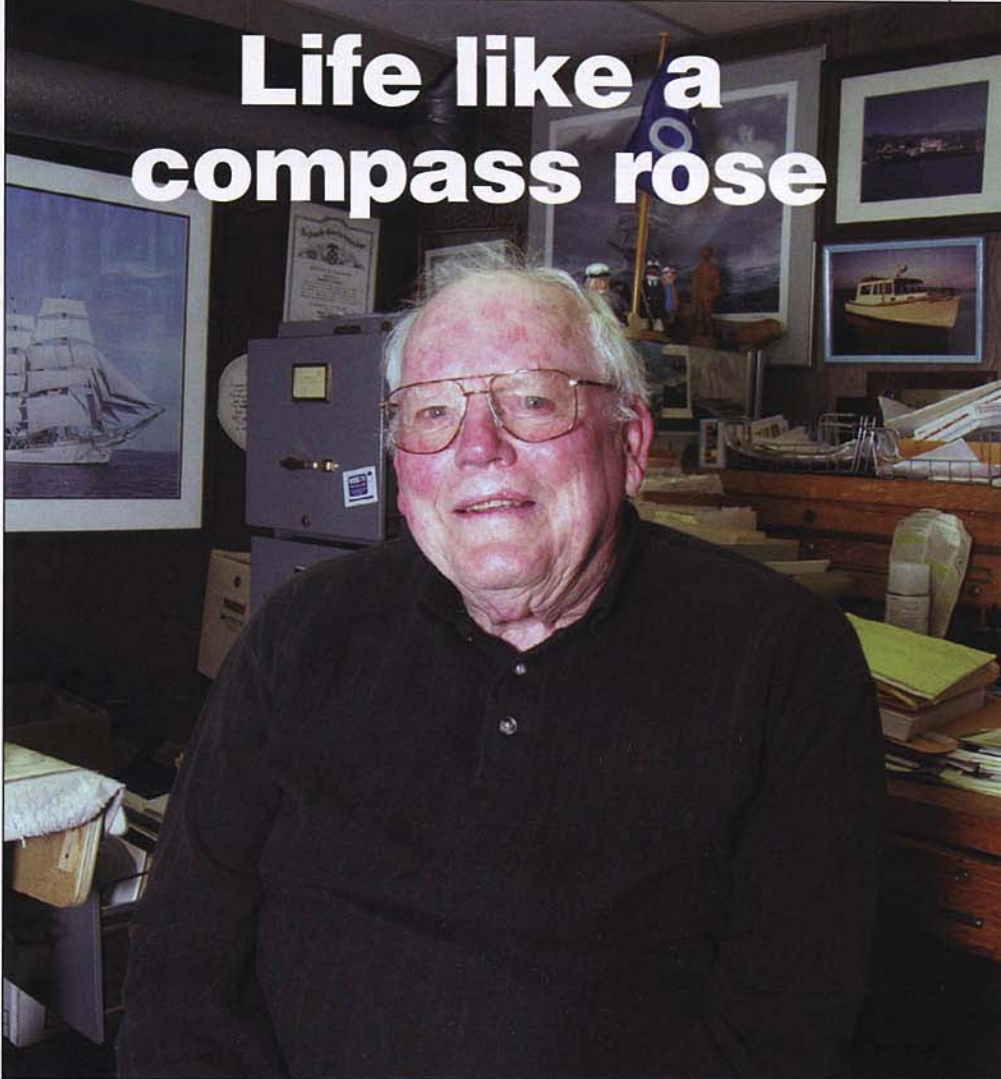
Smoke was billowing out of the top of the lighthouse and charred debris littered the basin. During the next several hours, *Woodrush* rescued the two survivors of the blast, removing them by Stokes litter and getting underway as quickly as possible for the Lower Entry of the Portage Lake Ship Canal to a waiting ambulance.

"The engineer was missing," Porter said. "We never found him."

While stationed in San Francisco, Porter began thinking of life beyond the Coast Guard. The only real question was how to do that while staying connected to the sea, the life he thoroughly loved. A chance visit



Life like a compass rose



Above: Gil in his study at home in Duluth. Upper left: Gil's first "command" on the whaleboat from the USCG Cactus, nearing Graves Light, Boston, 1947. Upper right: A youthful Gil in his Coast Guard uniform.

to the home of a local harbor pilot one sunny afternoon in Eureka, California, rekindled his interest in piloting.

Tony Rico, president of the Upper Great Lakes Pilots Association, had already contacted Porter, asking him to join the organization when his career with the Coast Guard was completed.

On November 1, 1965, Porter officially retired from the Coast Guard, concluding his career as Captain of the Port in San Francisco. His next step was to get his pilotage license for the Lakes and rivers, which required a minimum number of actual trips in addition to passing a written

exam. By the summer of 1966, he had completed his license requirements, enabling him to work on his own as a pilot.

"It was completely different, and it was a challenge," he said. "I believe I was the first Coast Guard 'retired' that came piloting. There were a lot of very experienced skippers that came from Midland (Midland Steamship Line) and other fleets who had folded, and they were very capable ship handlers."

Piloting first Russian vessel. One assignment that came early in Porter's career was his selection to pilot the first Russian vessel allowed above Port Huron.

"I really don't know why," he recalled. "Tony picked me to go down specifically to take this fellow from Port Huron to Kenosha. I don't know whether he figured on a little diplomacy."

He remembers the difficulty he had in trying to communicate with the ship's captain, a man who did not speak English. Relying upon his piloting experience on other vessels, Porter sketched out the maneuvering they would need to do to bring the boat into the harbor. In the end, it was rudimentary and simple.

"I drew pictures," Porter explained, "and it worked like a charm."

On another run, in October 1969, he took the Greek freighter *Salamis* outbound from Duluth with a load of grain. Before the first day was over, Porter knew this was not going to be a usual trip across the Lakes, but little did he know how many twists and turns it would eventually take.

Just past the Keweenaw Peninsula, a little more than 12 hours from Duluth, something went wrong with the ship's engine.

"We went into Bette Grise Bay to give their engineers a chance to make repairs. They had to tear down a Docksford engine. Something was wrong with the bearings and the crosshead, or something."

Twenty-four hours later, they got underway again to test the repair, but it wasn't satisfactory to the chief engineer. Rather than head back to the shipyard at Superior, or north to the shipyard at Thunder Bay, the ship's owners and agent figured they could pull into Marquette and make the repairs there, with the assistance of a machine shop at the Brownstone Mine, near Negaunee.

It took some ingenuity and teamwork for the engineers and crew to dismantle the engine, lift the piece through the engine room skylight, swing it onto a waiting fish tug, ferry it to the dock, lift it onto a flatbed truck and haul it to the Brownstone Mine. The entire process took so long Porter eventually moved on to another assignment, leaving the *Salamis* quietly at anchor in Marquette harbor while the clerks at the Upper Great Lakes Pilots Association in Duluth generated one of the company's largest invoices.

A number of years later he would more than make up for the slow trip on the *Salamis* by taking part in the fastest known trip across Lake Superior.

Passing the Cliffs Victory. The *African Dawn* was a C-4 cargo vessel built by Ingalls Shipbuilding at Pascagoula, Mississippi. Sailing for the U.S.-flagged Farrell Lines, the vessel was upbound on Lake Superior heading towards Duluth, following behind the speedster of Great Lakes freighters, the *Cliffs Victory*, known for running at speeds up to 23 mph. Most ships on the Lakes did about 12-15 mph. A typical trip across Lake Superior would take 24 hours, from Gros Cap light to Duluth. If pushed, the *Cliffs Victory* could make it in 16 hours.

"I caught up with the *Cliffs Victory* off of Stannard Rock," Porter said, "and went by him like he was standing still at 27 mph."

From 1965 until 1977, he logged about 1,400 different assignments, ranging from harbor moves to river runs and cross-lake transits. Working with crews and captains from all over the world required great communication skills, patience and diplomacy.

Porter's life, like the compass rose that guides the mariner, has taken him in many directions, helping him to steer a true course in all that he has done.

As an esteemed member of the Twin Ports maritime community, Porter now lives a (relatively) quiet life in Duluth. He operates a small compass repair and adjustment business and these days most enjoys frequent meetings with friends and old colleagues. ■



Gil, as commander, photographed for *Life Magazine* on the bridge of the USCG *Woodrush* near Stannard Rock, Lake Superior, in the early 1960s.