

Airwaves

By, Commodore Stanley Hill

Chapter One

Since accepting an invitation to crew on Dale Smirl's sailboat, Airwaves, in the Annual TriState Race across Lake Michigan, like a young child anticipates the thrill of Christmas, I anxiously awaited the start of the race.

About ten years ago, I took a summer park district sailing course with my oldest son, who was eight at the time and learned to sail a small dingy. About sixteen years earlier, I purchased a half interest in a 27-foot Columbia sailboat with a friend. The boat mostly remained docked in Burnham harbor until my friend accepted a job in Baltimore, and we agreed he should take the boat with him. I've been scuba diving since 1978 and have been on several powerboats in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the waters of Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, and smaller lakes, rivers and quarries throughout the Midwest. I've been on large ocean liners in the English Channel, the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas, and on a river boat down the Nile River in Egypt. However, with over twenty years of open water experiences, I had never learned to sail a large keelboat in deep waters until this season. I was fired up and ready to participate in a major yachting event, at the highest level of the sport.

Skippers participating in the TriState are experienced sailors and members of the prestigious yacht clubs at harbors along the coastal shores of Lake Michigan. Each year, over 200 sailboats are divided into ten racing divisions, competing against other boats in their division, in a three-part race that starts on the Friday evening of Labor Day Weekend. The first leg of the race is from Chicago, Illinois, approximately 65 miles across the lake, to St. Joseph, Michigan. The second leg of the race is 31 miles, from St. Joseph to Michigan City, Indiana. The third leg of the race, on Labor Day, is the 35-mile return trip to Chicago from Michigan City. Type, dimensions, riggings and sails classify the boats. Generally, the larger the boat, the faster it can go. To permit smaller boats to be competitive, handicapping rules apply. This means that in order to win, larger boats must finish the race fast enough to exceed the time credits that will be received by smaller boats in a division.

Chapter Two

I pushed to Jackson Park harbor on Friday afternoon, arriving exactly three o'clock, the time the crew would take off. A client emergency had kept me at the office longer than expected. When I arrived, a tinge of disappointment came over me. I had expected Airwaves to be docked at the yacht club pier with other crewmembers waiting for my arrival and to depart. Instead, she was still anchored to her mooring in the harbor and not a crewmember was anywhere in sight. Had something happened? Had the race been canceled? Did Airwaves have mechanical problems that caused it to withdraw from the race? I was relieved fifteen minutes later, when Paul arrived calmly eating a cantaloupe with his pocketknife utensil set, and told me that we probably wouldn't be leaving for the start of the race for another 90 minutes.

Edith was the next to arrive. She had rushed from work, concerned that she would not arrive in time to see us off. She'd been humming the theme song to Gilligan's Island since I told her I had accepted an invitation to crew on Dale's boat. From hanging out at the yacht club, she had heard stories and rumors about Dale's boat. She was aware that Airwaves had made a cameo appearance in the Mackinaw race scene in the movie, The Jackal, in which Bruce Willis starred as an international assassin bent on killing the First Lady of the United States. However, she was also aware that this 42-foot Pearson racing boat was old. Airwaves' fiberglass hull, plywood bulkheads, loomed and clamped wiring, Dacron sails, masts and rigging were in need of repair. Airwaves had once sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean in waters off the coast of Florida. It was salvaged by the previous owner's insurance company, refurbished and purchased by Dale. She had heard that as recently as two days ago, Airwaves reportedly still had several unresolved electrical and mechanical problems. In fact, Paul had been working on the boat all week trying to prepare it in time for the race. To be candid, I was also a little bit concerned about the boat's seaworthiness in the unpredictable waters of Lake Michigan.

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