

# 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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Edith didn't know much about Dale or the crew's sailing experience, but one thing she knew for certain: I was a novice sailor and racing in Lake Michigan waters can be dangerous. Billionaire tycoon Ted Turner found this out when he raced in the 1987 Mackinaw Race and had mistakenly taken the second largest of the Great Lakes for granted. Although Mr. Turner had participated in the America's Cup and several Trans-Atlantic yacht races, he left here humbled by the heavy weather sailing conditions that he encountered on Lake Michigan when he raced from Chicago to Mackinaw Island that year.

Since purchasing my 31 1/2-foot Cal 31 in mid-July, 1998,

we christened, Simple Justice, I had sailed along Lake Michigan's Chicago coastline. I once had gone as far as 7 miles beyond the water intake crib northeast of Navy Pier. Two weeks earlier, I'd completed Colgate's basic sailing certification course with

my sons, Stan and Nick. I had even participated in two official yacht club races that took place just outside of Jackson Park harbor. But, Edith and I knew I was still a rookie. In order to mask her uneasiness about this race and her concern for my safety, she would jokingly release her tension by comically humming the theme song of the popular 1960's television sitcom about Gilligan and his ship-wrecked crew stranded on a deserted island.

I'd been told that Bill Pickney, the Chicago sailor who successfully soloed, his 42-foot sailboat around the world had said, "You can sail anywhere in the world if you can sail Lake Michigan." Although Edith was very worried, knowing and loving me as she does, she knew I had to do this race. Sailing can only be learned by doing.

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## CLUB ACTIVITIES CONTINUED IN 2006:

**FEBRUARY:** We participated in the Strictly Sail show at Navy Pier.

**APRIL:** The theme of our Spring Bash was "Let's Come Together."

**MAY:** On St. Jude's Day, we honored the Chicago Police Department by serving breakfast to the fine women and men in blue; we held the annual spring work party; we hosted the Chicago Yachting

Association meeting; and, the club's opening Day ceremonies were held over Memorial Day weekend.

**JUNE:** The Commodore's Cruise made its annual stop at our clubhouse for recreation and refreshments; and our club had a "Ship Wreck" Party.

**JULY:** We celebrated the Blues Fest, MORF Round up.

**AUGUST:** We hosted our annual Jazz Festival.

**SEPTEMBER:** We gathered for the annual Commodore's Cup/Kid's Day Celebration.

**OCTOBER:** The season concluded with the Halloween Party.

(In addition, throughout the season, Friday Night Movies, Saturday Evening Socials and Open Dock Receptions were the Standard fare.

### JPCY's sailboat racing program repeated itself this year:

- **May:** Hosted the second J-105 Match Race Regatta.
- **August:** Held the Raske Race, directed the Judd Goldman Freedom Fleet Regatta, and gathered for the Bennett Cup.
- **September:** Hosted the third leg of the TriState Regatta from Michigan City back to Chicago during Labor Day weekend.

