

# **CAPTAIN MINDAUGUS BALANDA**

(1934-2004)

**ISMA Pennant Number 10171**

(Installed on February 24, 1976)

**Served as President of Detroit Lodge No. 7 in 1936**

**Served as Convention Delegate in 1987**

**Member of Detroit Lodge No. 7 for 28 years**

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◆◆ TUESDAY, SEPT. 21, 2004

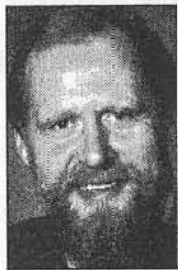
**LOCAL NEWS**

## **LOCAL DEATHS**

# **Mindaugas Balanda: Love of sailing led to a career**

By **CHRISTY ARBOSCELLO**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Mindaugas Balanda transformed his oppressed World War II-era upbringing in Europe into a free-spirited adulthood in America, sailing as a master ship captain on the Great Lakes.



**Mindaugas Balanda**

His appearance was akin to a rugged explorer, and his heart was as wide as the sea, his family said.

At 6-foot-6 with a full beard

“he looked like some big Viking,” his eldest son, Mykolas, of Kalamazoo said. “People would see him coming and they didn’t know whether to run.”

But when they stuck around, they were charmed by his warm and outgoing personality, he said.

He was born Aug. 20, 1934, in Lithuania. During World War II, he and his family fled to a British sector of Germany to escape Soviet rule. They later migrated to the United States, landing in New York and establishing a home in Detroit in 1949.

He graduated from Northwestern High School in Detroit and studied naval architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. During his college years, he earned money doing odd jobs on ships. He worked as a bouncer on the Aquarama, a cruise boat that sailed the Great Lakes. One summer, he helped on the construction of the Edmund Fitzgerald-

ald, which sank in 1975.

After five years at U-M, he left to pursue a life on the lakes full-time. He labored as a deckhand and seaman on ore freighters and then as a wheelsman on a Ford Motor Co. boat. On that ship, wheelsmen stood on a step to peek over the wheel as they steered. But at his stature, he didn’t need it.

That’s not the only time his height worked to his advantage. He met his wife at the Tip-Toppers Club in Detroit, a social group for taller people. His wife of 44 years, Virginia, is 5-foot-11.

He also held positions with the Indiana-based Standard Oil Company. He worked his way up to captain and stayed in that role until the early 1970s. In 1973, he supervised foreign freighters as a pilot, ensuring that the voyages were safely navigated.

In his spare time, he enjoyed cross-country skiing, long-dis-

tance bicycle tours and traveling. He was a member of the International Ship Masters’ Association.

A funeral Mass will be held at 10 a.m. Wednesday at St. Hubert Catholic Church, 38775 Prentiss, Harrison Township. Visitation is 2-8 p.m. today at the Harold W. Vick Funeral Home, 140 S. Main Street, Mt. Clemens and 9:30-10 a.m. Wednesday at the church. Burial will be in the Christian Memorial Cultural Center in Rochester Hills. Donations may be sent to the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, Development Department, 18831 W. Twelve Mile Road, Lathrup Village 48076.

Besides his wife and eldest son, he is survived by sons Peter, Tadas, Andrew and Alexander; a brother, and 15 grandchildren.

Contact **CHRISTY OYAMA-ARBOSCELLO** at 586-469-8085 or [arboscello@freepress.com](mailto:arboscello@freepress.com).

# EULOGY IN HONOR OF CAPT. GUS BALANDA

I have been asked to say a few words about Gus as someone who knew him as a Great Lakes maritime pilot. A Great Lakes pilot is a ship's Captain that boards a foreign ship when it travels the Great Lakes and is the local navigation expert. He guides the ship through the lakes to its destination and safely docks the ship. He is responsible for the safety of the ship, the crew and the environment.

Gus began piloting foreign ships in 1977. I've known him since 1989. When I started as a young apprentice pilot, I was paired with an experienced pilot for the first few trips. My first experience as a pilot was with Gus. I had never met him before, and when I did – Wow! I wasn't sure what I was getting into. Here was a towering man, with a stern look walking over to me – and then, a huge smile and he said, "Hi, I'm Gus. We'll be spending some time together." He immediately put me at my ease. When we got aboard the ship, he showed me every nook and cranny, and explained everything that I needed to know as a pilot.

All of us who knew Gus were aware of one thing – Gus liked to talk, and he was especially happy when he had a captive audience. Talking to Gus was like reading a Tom Clancy novel – there were always three very complicated stories being told at the same time, switching from one to another at random. Anyway after four hours of listening, I was beat. It was time to get a few hours sleep. We bunked in the same room. Gus was explaining how to accurately calculate the time it would take to arrive at our destination, when I fell asleep. He said loudly, "Are you awake?" and I replied, "I am now" to which Gus quickly responded, "Good, then I'll finish my story." That was my introduction to this kind, intelligent, one of a kind man.

At the end of that first trip, we ended up in Milwaukee. Gus insisted that we walk to the Post Office to mail a letter – at 10 o'clock at night! My first problem was keeping up with his stride. For me, it was halfway between a fast walk and a jog. After we mailed the letter, he said that he would show me some of downtown Milwaukee. As we started to travel down the dark streets, the area began to look more and more criminal. I said to Gus, "Hey, this is not looking good – I think we might be robbed." He said, "If we get confronted, we will just tell them to leave us alone." I said, "But what if they have a gun?" He said, "Then we run like hell!" Can you imagine? That was just my first two days of knowing Gus. Well, it's been 15 years now, and I got to know him a lot better.

As some of you know, he was the regular pilot on the *C. Columbus*, a German cruise ship that has been coming into the Great Lakes for around 8 years now. This ship has resurrected cruising on the Great Lakes, and there is a reason why Gus piloted that ship every year. The Captain is a German, and very particular about his cruise ship. Years before the *Columbus* was scheduled to come into the lakes, the Captain traveled to the U.S. and rode as an observer on a cargo ship to see what the Great Lakes are like and get a feel of how things are done here. It just so happened that the pilot of that cargo ship was Gus. The observing Captain watched as Gus talked constantly to every person on the bridge of the ship. As he listened, he realized that Gus was just about everywhere, and had done just about everything on the Great Lakes. He started asking Gus questions about different ports on the lakes and after a few minutes, he decided that Gus must be their pilot on the *Columbus*. The *Columbus* requested to have Gus as their pilot every year that it has come into the lakes. That says a lot about Gus's experience and skill as a pilot.

Gus was a pilot of the highest caliber. He knew every port and every dock. If he was going to be sent to a new dock, he would drive to the dock on his own time and look it over, so that when he arrived on a ship, he would be familiar with it. Today, when someone prepares to do something that hasn't been done before, it seems to be the prevalent attitude to give 10 reasons why a task can't be done. Gus always viewed these new jobs as challenges and figured out 10 ways that it could be done.

Probably the best compliment that one pilot can give to another is to say that he is an excellent ship handler. Docking a ship is 50% science and 50% art. You have to have a feel for ship handling. Gus had that feel, and was an excellent ship handler. You could always count on Gus to get the job done, to teach a new pilot, to be relied upon to answer a question if asked, and to be there when you needed him, both professionally and personally. Gus will be sadly missed by all of the pilots and mariners who knew him. This is truly the end of an era.

Gus, you were my business partner, a fellow pilot, but above all, you were truly my friend. I salute you!

***Given at Gus Balanda's funeral service  
by Captain Donald K. Willecke, President  
Western Great Lakes Pilots Association***

Captain Balanda's Death Notice and On-Line Guest Book can be found at the following link:

<http://detroitmedia.com/deathnotices/display.php?id=60743&action=single>