Michael Sacco, the longest-serving president in Seafarers International Union history, has retired. "I am in good health and good spirits," he stated. "But I have often heard that you simply know when it’s time to retire, and this is the time."

Sacco, 86, formalized his plan Feb. 13 during a meeting of the SIU Executive Board near Orlando, Florida. AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said, "Mike Sacco’s distinguished career in trade unionism is an inspiration to all of us. Mike’s leadership at the Seafarers International Union benefited generations of merchant mariners and all working people. Mike led his union with integrity and a fighting spirit that he learned as a rank-and-file member. It’s been an honor to have him serve on the AFL-CIO Executive Council for more than three decades, always quick to offer sage advice and guidance about the future of our movement. We wish Mike nothing but the best in retirement and know he’ll always be ready to take up any fight that boosts working people.”

SIU President David Heindel – unanimously approved to that post by the union’s executive board – described Sacco as "an inspiration to members and officials alike. Under Mike’s leadership, the SIU has become a respected powerhouse in maritime history, has retired."

Sacco served as president of the SIU’s Atlantic, Gulf, Lakes and Inland Waters (AGLAW) for nearly 35 years, beginning in June 1988. He also worked as president of both the Seafarers International Union of North America (a federation of autonomous unions that includes the SIU AGLIW) and the Maritime Trades Department (MTD) throughout the same period.

Moreover, in November 1991, at its 19th Biennial Constitutional Convention, Sacco was elected a vice president of the AFL-CIO, the federation of 60 national and international unions representing more than 14 million workers in the United States. He eventually became the senior vice president of the AFL-CIO Executive Council as its longest-serving member.

A protege of the late SIU President Paul Hall, Sacco from 1980 to 1988 directed the union’s Great Lakes and Inland Waters sector. Heindel added, "On behalf of the entire organization, I also express my heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the entire organization, I also express my heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the union’s executive board and the SIU’s executive board as well."

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The union is mourning the loss of retired SIU Assistant Vice President Chester “Chet” Wheeler, who passed away March 10 in California at age 77. He had had battling cancer.

Wheeler retired in 2019, following 22 years of service as an official. Previously, he sailed with the union for 32 years, beginning in the mid-1980s mostly as a civil service mariner with MSC.

SIU Vice President Government Services Nicholas Celona stated, “Chet was absolutely tireless in his work on behalf of the membership. He set a high standard and consistently did a great job handling issues in the often-complex sector of the industry. He will be missed.”

SIU Assistant Vice President Government Services Joe Vincenzo said Wheeler “was a friend who made a real difference in the lives of CIVMARS. Wheeler took the everyday routine of handling premium pay disputes or sorting through pending disciplinary matters to make life a little easier for our mariners, his impact can hardly be overstated. It was a privilege to observe him up close and personal and to accompany him servicing ships up at the Navy base in Bremerton, Washington, and to work with him on issues of consequence both abroad and right here at home.”

Wheeler came ashore to work for the union in 1997, first as a representative and soon thereafter as an assistant vice president. Prior to the SIU’s merger with the National Maritime Union in 2001, he handled all West Coast representational efforts for MSC and the Suisun Bay reserve fleet. Initially, since 1997, Wheeler was involved in every MSC and Suisun Bay contract negotiation and “instruction and policy” negotiation until he retired.

Colleagues described him as instrumental in ensuring the safety and health of mariners by negotiating affiliation and shore-based habitation agreements, watch hours, standards for shipboard water potability and air quality, and shipyard working conditions. He was a guiding force in the three-year negotiation of Civilian Mariner Personnel Instruction (CMI) 610, a key document for covering hours of the overtime pay. Wheeler also played leading roles in representing mariners aboard joint-high speed vessels, and in securing significant compensatory time for travel for many CIVMARS.

Retired SIU Counsel Deborah Kleiner, who was a close friend and worked with Wheeler day-to-day for 22 years, noted, “Chet was a beloved husband, father and grandfather. Chet’s life was filled with purpose and the desire to be of service. He was a natural leader and shared his vast knowledge freely. In his personal life, and over the course of his career, he helped many thousands of people. His legacy will be his having aided people through their most difficult times, his incredible generosity, integrity, and most of all, loyalty to his family, friends, and the mariners he represented throughout his lifetime and the SIU.”

Upon his retirement, Wheeler offered the following advice for those entering the industry: “Get as much out of it as you can. It’s an adventure; make this your adventure. The other thing is, learn everything you can. We have a great school (the union-affiliated Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education). Look out for your fellow shipmates. It’s a wonderful occupation and I’m really glad I did it.”

Donations in Wheeler’s memory may be made to: Hospice Services of Lake County, 1862 Parallel Drive, Lakeport, California 95453, Phone: (707) 263-6222.

Retired SIU Government Services Asst. VP ‘Chet’ Wheeler Dies at 77

SIU CIVMARS Assist with Rescue at Sea

The 746-foot Lewis is the first of the new John Lewis-class of fleet replenishment oilers, and one of MSC’s newest ships, having been christened in 2021 and accepted into MSC’s fleet in 2022. It has the ability to carry 162,000 barrels of diesel ship fuel, aviation fuel and dry stores cargo. The upgraded oiler is built with double hulls to protect against oil spills, and it features strengthened cargo and ballast tanks.

The crew of the USNS John Lewis includes members of the SIU Government Services Division.

SIU CIVMARS from the fleet replenishment oiler USNS John Lewis helped give an early holiday gift to a boater stranded at sea, when the ship answered a distress call off the coast of Southern California, the U.S. Military Sealift Command (MSC) reported. The Lewis received a distress call from a man whose sailboat had been damaged in a storm that tore the sails and caused the boat to take on water. Once the boat was located, the ship maneuvered next to the damaged sailboat. The man on the sailboat then climbed the Lewis’ pilot ladder. After boarding the ship, he was given a security check, a medical examination, a shower, a hot meal, clothes and a ride to San Diego.

“Once we got this poor guy on board, we found out that he had been stranded for five days!” said Capt. Dan Glazer, the John Lewis’ civil service master. “I’m glad we were in the area and were able to help. Everything has a purpose, and now this guy can make it home for the holidays rather than theotive, snatch on the ocean.”

How to Become an SIU Member

Joining the SIU is easy and an important step in protecting your workplace rights. The union’s website — www.seafarers.org — includes printable PDF versions of forms that mariners may use to request and authorize payroll deductions for labor organization dues. The forms are posted at: https://www.seafarers.org/news/labor-mari- time-news/civmar-news/

Form are also available under “SIU Forms” in the ABOUT tab.

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Members Team Up Aboard NOAA Ship Ronald Brown

When Recertified Bosun Greg Jackson earlier this year took a temporary job aboard a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) vessel, he didn’t know what to expect.

It turned out that working side-by-side with members of the SIU Government Services Division aboard the Ronald H. Brown agreed with him.

“It was a pleasant experience,” Jackson stated. “It reinforced that we are all just merchant seamen and never too old to learn new things.”

The Brown is NOAA’s largest vessel. Its missions include collecting and assessing scientific data above and below the ocean surface, “allowing us to simultaneously measure the atmosphere and the ocean and increase our understanding of global climatic changes and other issues,” the agency noted. Some of the crew members are represented by the SIU.

“The food was great,” Jackson added. “Just working alongside the NOAA crew was enjoyable. No matter where we come from or where we work for, we’re all seamen and all here for a reason.”

All John Hampton – like Jackson a member of the SIU’s Atlantic, Gulf, Lakes and Inland Waters – was part of the same voyage and came away with a similar outlook.

“The NOAA crew were some of the most generous, fun-loving people I’ve ever sailed with,” he said. “We took the ship from Rhode Island to Brazil and it was a really good experience. We had guys from all walks of life when it comes to sailing. We all shared our experiences and our knowledge with one another. I enjoyed my time and learned a lot.”

Gen. Van Ovost Emphasizes Nation’s Reliance on U.S. Merchant Marine

The commanding officer of the United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) recently provided a powerful, detailed description of why the nation must maintain a strong U.S. Merchant Marine.

Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost gave her remarks via recorded video that was shown Feb. 16, during the first day of the winter meeting of the Maritime Trades Department (MTD) Executive Board meeting near Orlando, Florida. She briefly reviewed the American maritime industry’s centuries-old reliability before underscoring the ongoing need to boost the mariner pool and U.S. shipbuilding capacity.

“The video also included remarks from U.S. Army Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, Supreme Allied Command Europe, and from Ukrainian government official Oleksandra Azarkhina (the nation’s deputy administrator of infrastructure). Both thanked MTD-affiliated unions for their support.

Van Ovost said that USTRANSCOM leaders “recognize that your success drives our own.” She continued, “Our country’s heritage as a maritime power has endured since the very founding of this great union. Our ability to protect our coasts, sustain our industries, support our allies, and project power abroad is a national strength built on the water. Because it wasn’t just the coasts that enabled our increased integration with the world, it was due in large part to the companies, unions, and workers who created a thriving maritime ecosystem.”

The general noted the wartime service of civilian mariners throughout the country’s history along with their ongoing service in times of peace. “This is the legacy that your organization carries forward – one of dedication, hard work, professionalism, and patriotism,” she stated. “This remains true today as your efforts continue to support commercial partners’ ships and those of the Maritime Administration that USTRANSCOM employs to fulfill our global mission. Defending potential adversaries and projecting America’s military power abroad just isn’t feasible without you.”

After describing the U.S. Merchant Marine’s service in “every major operation and humanitarian event [which] enabled the achievement of our national objectives” since the middle of the last century, she underscored the reduced number of domestic shipyards and the drop in shipboard manpower. Van Ovost summarized the situation with this stark comment: “From the supply chain to the dry docks, we have the reduced margins of monetary risk at the cost of our national security.”

Nevertheless, current developments have returned a spotlight to maritime’s importance.

“Recent global events have once again invigorated the focus and support for the business of deployment, maintenance, and maneuver that only you can provide, and together we deliver,” Van Ovost said. “This includes our current endeavors to support our NATO allies and supply Ukraine with the materials needed to defend their country against Russia’s unprovoked war. With your help, we’ve delivered millions of pounds of ammunition, weapons, vehicles, and artillery systems at a volume that only surface shipping can facilitate. Ukraine’s success on the battlefield is a direct reflection of your support and something we’ll need even more in the future.”

“In the complexities of today’s global competition, the fundamental need to retain this advantage has not changed,” she continued. “Neither has the impact of those who labor to ensure its vitality. I argue their importance has only grown, which is why I am such a strong advocate for those involved with the maritime industry. … This is something we cannot afford to get wrong; the stakes are too high and countries like China are leveraging their capacity to produce a manner of ships to evade our once-clear strategic advantage.”

She then pointed out recent components of the National Defense Authorization Act that support the Jones Act, the new Tanker Security Program and other maritime staples that signal “positive changes…. This focus on your industry is a renewed recognition of just how critical your contributions are to the success of our nation. They also represent an increased opportunity for employment, growth for our economy, and decreased risk to national security.”

Finally, she thanked outgoing SIU MTD President Michael Sacco for his many years of dedicated, effective leadership and support.

Immediately after the video was shown, Sacco recalled the SIU’s involvement with USTRANSCOM’s earliest operations after its founding in 1989. He credited SIU Executive Vice President Augie Tellez for his work with the agency.

January - March 2023
Federal Mariner
At Sea and Ashore with the SIU

SIU Government Services Division Representative Sam Spain (third from left) meets with CIVMARS in Norfolk, Virginia, aboard the Robert E. Peary.

OS Jermaine Ivory (above) waits to load additional stores on the William McLean in Norfolk, Virginia, while AB Diaz Lopez (directly below) gets ready to pick up the next cargo aboard the ship.

Promoting the interests of SIU Government Services Division members at the most recent Maritime Trades Department meeting are (from left) SIU Asst. VP Joe Vincenzo, VP Nicholas Celona and Representative Sam Spain.

Crew members are pictured aboard the Army Corps dredges Yaquina (above) and Essayons (below). Thanks to SIU Assistant VP Joe Vincenzo for the photos.

SIU Government Services Division Representative Sam Spain (right) meets with CIVMARS in Norfolk, Virginia, as part of new-employee orientation.