



A SAILOR'S SAILOR

Don Donovan makes life about others

It is just past three o'clock in the morning when the phone rings, an ungodly hour and for most people, a wholly unexpected time for receiving a call. Out of the darkness a hand reaches for the phone: "Yeah, Donny's up," a voice methodically replies before setting the phone back into the cradle.

A half hour later, 57-year-old Don Donovan has completed his wake-up routine and opens a steel door leading into a quiet, narrow hallway suffused in a yellowish-green tint of fluorescent light, embarking upon his daily commute to work. Some days, Don's path leads several floors above to a dimly lit pilothouse humming with electronic instruments. Other days, it takes him outside onto the ship's cargo deck. While he starts each day knowing where to go, he doesn't necessarily know where the ship is. Such is the life of a Great Lakes sailor.

Donovan grew up in Conneaut, Ohio the youngest of seven children between two marriages. His mother, whose first husband had sailed as a mate for U.S. Steel, encouraged Don's older brothers to sail during the summer to earn money for college. Donovan would be the only child to follow through on the offer.

After graduating from high school, Donovan decided to give sailing a try. If anything, he could earn some money until he decided upon a career path. Once he obtained

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Don Donovan continues to sail the Lakes, nearly four decades into his adventure.

a letter of commitment from the hiring hall, he was ready to go. It was July, 1972.

"Five days after my 18th birthday, my sister drove me down to the dock to catch a ship," Donovan said. He was equipped with boots, gloves and enough clothes to make it to the end of the year when he climbed up the aft ladder of the *James A. Farrell* in Conneaut.

Donovan stayed with the *Farrell* until winter lay-up and then went over to the *Sewell Avery* until that ship was laid up for the season. For good measure, he was then assigned to the *Roger Blough*, sailing that vessel until lay-up as well. Liking the cash he had in his pocket, Donovan reported the following season at fit-out to the *Eugene W. Pargny*, one of U.S. Steel's diesel-powered ships making runs up the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio. By June of his second year, Donovan had accumulated enough time to write for his AB ticket, the first step up the ladder for any young mariner.

In July, 1976, he joined the Interlake Steamship Company on the *Elton Hoyt 2nd*. For the better part of the next 30 years, he has etched out a living as a self-described "decent" wheelsman. It's a job he's com-

fortable with, knowledgeable about and thankful to have. After all these years, Donovan has worked his way into the number two spot on the non-licensed seniority roster. But truth be known, his self-effacing nature makes it difficult to keep him on track in a conversation when it comes to talking about his years on the Lakes.

Putting others first. Donovan is much more at ease talking about the abilities and accomplishments of everyone around him than about himself. The legendary football coach Vince Lombardi once said: "Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work." Donovan finds the quote to be expressive of his thoughts as he talks about the members of the crew and how they pull together on the ship. This collective sum of talents and labor making up daily shipboard operation are the hallmarks of a unity Don finds professionally satisfying.

While he has made good money, Donovan hasn't always done the best job of hanging on to it. Those who know him well say there is a spirit of creativity and generosity in him that sometimes exceeds believability.