

JOHN D. KOILALOUS

# CHRONICLE OF A LIFE IN SHIPPING

**KERKYRA**  
publications  
*narratives*



CHRONICLE  
OF A LIFE  
IN SHIPPING

ISBN: 978-960-9490-01-6

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1st edition, June 2010

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**Production: KERKYRA Publications - economia PUBLISHING**

**Publication Coordinator: Fani Karafylli**

**Copy Editor: Maria Adamantidis**

**Book & Cover Design: Mike Christopoulos - atelier KERKYRA**

Distribution



KERKYRA Publications S.A.

6-8 Vlahava street, 105 51 Athens-Greece

Tel.: 0030-210-3314.714, Fax: 0030-210-3252.283

**[www.economia.gr](http://www.economia.gr), [bookstore@economia.gr](mailto:bookstore@economia.gr)**

**Cover art:** Digitally-rendered image of the *Hellas Liberty* (p.115), said to be the last existing vessel of this type. Docked in Perama for repairs, it symbolises Greece's maritime achievements.

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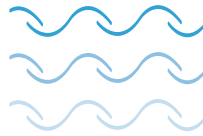
JOHN D. KOILALOUS

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To the memory  
of my lifelong friends  
Laurie Tattersall  
and Takis Boucoyiannis  
who have both  
contributed  
to my personal  
and professional  
advancement in life.

# Table of Contents



	Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.	Early childhood and life in enemy-occupied Chios.....	5
Chapter 2.	Life in post-war years.....	13
Chapter 3.	The early fifties in London.....	17
Chapter 4.	Return to Greece for military service.....	23
Chapter 5.	Back to London for a career in shipping.....	29
Chapter 6.	Life in London in ensuing years until final return home.....	35
Chapter 7.	First years of service at Piraeus.....	41
Chapter 8.	The Athenian experience.....	47
Chapter 9.	First steps in the adjusting profession.....	53
Chapter 10.	Late seventies and what the future presaged.....	63
Chapter 11.	A new adjusting firm is born.....	67
Chapter 12.	A new adjusting connection.....	73
Chapter 13.	Certain cases of particular interest.....	85
Chapter 14.	Latest cases of interest.....	93
Chapter 15.	Preparing for office closure.....	105
Chapter 16.	In the aftermath of activity.....	113
	Index.....	120

# INTRODUCTION



In the course of one's long career, one never thinks of recounting experiences for the benefit of posterity, especially when there is hardly a moment's respite, as is the case in shipping and the average adjusting sector in particular. I have carefully avoided the expression 'writing one's memoirs', as it has most certainly never been my intention to do so, because it never occurred to me that I would have to retire one day! And memoirs, of necessity, come with or after retirement!

However, all good things do come to an end, and after almost sixty years of active working life in shipping, interrupted only by two years in the army for military service, the time has come for me to call it a day. My active professional life was formally terminated at the end of December 2008, which was exactly fifty-nine years since I first embarked on a working life in the maritime field ashore.

The experiences I have gained over these long years are many and varied, but what really counts more in one's working life is the relationships one makes with colleagues in general, and in particular the friendships developed in the course of business relations. For I always recall that when I used the expression "*It pays to make friends*" in my early days in London, I was promptly corrected by an English acquaintance of mine in the City: "*John, it is nice to make friends.*" Ever since that day, this has been my motto and I have adopted his friendly advice.

The reasons why I began to recount my lifelong professional experiences for this book are twofold. To begin with, many friends have been urging me all along to start writing about my experiences. Quite a few of them have known me for some considerable time, and they felt that putting my thoughts and experiences on paper would be beneficial to people of younger generations wishing to start a professional career in shipping. Secondly, following withdrawal from Piraeus, taking a nostalgic look at one's past working life eases the comparative gloom that accompanies retirement.

In this book I have tried to classify my various experiences under separate chapters in order to coincide with the narrative applying to particular periods of time, from early childhood right through to retirement.

Whilst earlier periods of my life—the pre-war times, the occupation of my native island Chios, as well as the immediate post-war years—were indeed full of hardship, even despondency at times, including years of starvation during the occupation, I cannot help but look back at these times with a certain amount of nostalgia.

This is most probably due to the fact that my early venture into the life of the City of London paid off, for I was able to progress in a professional capacity that I had not foreseen even in my wildest dreams. Whilst I did, at times, have had



opportunities to go into shipowning, in partnership with quite a few friends, I never really liked the prospect of doing so.

Hence, my dedication to the service sector which I hope to have served with 'due diligence' all these years.

I consider that I have profited by so doing, not in terms of real wealth, which has never been my objective anyway, but in another form of 'wealth' that I have treasured all my life. Whilst I may not have had the means or even the time to attain any higher education, (evening classes in London were just about what I could afford time-wise), my linguistic propensities helped me to be able to understand the so-called 'Oxford' English. At the same time, my meagre knowledge of technical English, acquired over the years, assisted me in also understanding to a fair extent the so-called 'Doxford' English.\*

In conclusion, all I have to say is that my involvement in the insurance world of shipping, and the claims sector in particular, gave me immense pleasure throughout these long years. It also gave me the satisfaction that I have offered some useful service to the shipping community at large and the particular client friends I have made during this period of my life. If I had another life before me, I have no hesitation in saying that I would follow the same course again.

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*\*After the British-built engine that powered thousands of commercial ships in the 20th century. —Ed.*

C H A P T E R 1

EARLY  
CHILDHOOD  
AND LIFE  
IN ENEMY-  
OCCUPIED  
CHIOS



I was born in an agricultural section of Chios Island in the area of Campos, where besides the classic Mediterranean varieties of olive and almond trees, there were also very extensive regions of orchards, where citrus trees of all varieties were in abundance. Besides all this, there commonly grew there a kind of pistachio tree, producing a tiny nut, and this, at times, provided a very useful type of fruit.

Our humble domain, a small stone-built house built in typical peasant-style, was, and still is, located right at the edge of the plain, on an incline or kind of hillock. Here the vegetation is more of the dry Mediterranean type, with olive and almond trees predominating, and one fairly large mastic tree, just above, a reminder of the island's unique position in the world as a producer of mastic, alias chewing gum.

This location bears the name of Frangovouni, deriving its name from the Frankish ancestry of the island. The Genoese had settled on our shores for about 350 years in medieval times. In actual fact, much of the vegetation and architecture of the area bears testimony to their early presence on the island. Included in our neighbourhood is a Catholic church, which used to be attended by the island's Catholic community at least once a year, on 15th August.

From my early years of childhood I soon realised that pursuing a decent livelihood, or a profession, entailed leaving the island after secondary education. Ploughing the fairly fertile land around the Campos area was the alternative and although I did perform some of these hard tasks in later years for reasons of survival, continuing thus for a working lifetime was not a very welcome thought. Pursuing a post in the public sector was not within the Chian school of thought. Hence the only foreseeable future lay away from home. This was certainly in line with the island's seafaring tradition and the venturesome character of the Chians, who have always shown the most enterprising traits where commerce was concerned. Some reference to this can be traced in a special publication marking the 250th anniversary of the Baltic Exchange, which states: "[in 1873] The first printed list of members contained 1,164 names and included five Ionideses, six Mavrogordatoses, eleven Rallis, four Rodocanachis, six Schilizzis, and five Ziffos – these were a contingent of London Greeks whose contribution to the world shipping scene had for long been centred on Britain."\*

Not surprisingly, all these names are of Chian origin and certain architectural ancestry of these family names is still to be found in the Campos area.

They were the first Chians of the diaspora and had settled in London well before those who dealt with shipping. They indulged in a variety of businesses, trading produce, involved in merchant banking, etc. Most of them became prominent in their specific field of operations and they created commercial establishments all over the world. Chians became shipowners quite a few years later, towards the

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\* Hugh Barty-King, *The Baltic Exchange: Baltick Coffee House to Baltic Exchange, 1744-1994* (London: Quiller Press, 1994), 22 –Ed.



*My humble little abode and its rural environment in Campos, in the 1950s.*

end of the 19th century, and by the early 20th century they had established themselves in the City of London.

As a youth, I soon realised that some five members of my immediate family were away from home, having emigrated in earlier years to places such as the United States of America, Egypt and the Ivory Coast in West Africa. All the other families in our neighbourhood also had at least one or two members of their respective families in distant lands similar to the above-mentioned, even in India. Then there was the seafaring profession, which was of paramount importance to the island as a whole and attracted a large number of youngsters.

I started primary school when I was six, which entailed travelling to school on foot some three kilometres from our humble domicile. I walked through the narrow streets of the Campos area, with orchards all around, aware of some very beautiful architecture on the way, admiring the high, impressive gates bearing coats of arms.

During the winter months our daily journey to school sometimes involved negotiating narrow muddy streets that had become water channels after heavy rain. On such days my father would come out to school to fetch me and my sister home on his mule, as galoshes were a very rare commodity in the pre-war years on the island.

\* \* \*

Whilst in those days walking such a considerable distance to school was no problem at all for a six year old boy from the point of view of personal safety, my father made absolutely sure that I would be accompanied by an older boy of his

# INDEX

## A

Adams, Roland 33  
*Adonis* 76  
Aggersbury, Robin 74  
*Aghios Georgios* 111  
American Military Mission 24, 25  
*Anastasia* 110, 111  
Andreadakis, George 59, 69, 72,  
76, 78  
*Anna S.* 94, 98  
*Anna Z.* 38-39  
*Anson* 55  
*Anthippi Michalos* 40, 44  
*Antonis A.* 98  
Apesakis, D. 76  
Apodiakos: Evgenia 119; Nick 22,  
30, 118, 119  
Artillery School 24  
*Azure* 76, 95

## B

Babcock (Major) 25  
Baker, Timothy 87, 98  
Baltic Exchange 6  
Bartley, Roy 33, 42  
Bartsokas, Takis 59, 109  
Berketis, John 69  
Black Sea & Baltic Insurance Co. 43  
BMT Group 60, 103; Hellas 103  
Boucoyiannis, Takis 40, 43, 44, 55,  
57, 59, 60, 68  
Brown, James 58, 66  
Brown, Maurice 50, 58, 64  
Buck, Roy 31  
Butler, Frank 20

## C

C. M. Lemos 61  
C. Michalos & Co. 16, 19, 22, 30, 32  
*Calliopi Michalos* 59

Camarados, Dimitris 64, 68, 87, 90,  
94, 95, 96, 114, 116 (ph)  
Campos 6, 7, 76  
*Cape Maleas* 70, 76  
*Captain Nicholas* 76  
Carivalis, Isidore 19  
'caustic embrittlement' 31  
Chios Harbour 11  
Chios (Island) 6, 14, 30  
Clancey, Robert 31  
Clancey Sons & Co. 31  
Colburn, Bud 32  
Commercial School of Chios 8, 14  
Constantinidis, Fondas 102  
Coscoros, John 43, 55, 57  
Cosmoship Management S. A. 77  
Costalas, Nicos 48  
*Costas Michalos* 31  
Cubitt, James (Jim) 60, 103

## D

Daifas, Stavros 59  
Det Norske Veritas 101  
Diakopoulos, George 95  
Diana Shipping 51  
*Dionissis L.* 54  
direct reduced iron (DRI) 70, 87, 88

## E

Edmunds, John 60, 103  
Efshipping Company (S.A.) 95  
Efstathiou: Angelos 59, 110;  
Theodore 59  
Efthymiadis Lines 59  
Eleusis Shipyards 60  
*Endeavour* 77, 98, 109  
*Enterprise I* 76  
*Esperanza III* 76  
Eurobank 48  
*Europa Palace* 91, 100

Evdemon & Partners 61

*Evgenia* 99

*Express Pioneer* 86, 94

## F

*Fidelity* 55

Fotinou, Chryssa 77

*Fotiy Krilov* 94

Francis & Arnold 50, 61, 66, 75, 76

Frangos: (family) 76, 100; John 57,  
72, 75; Nick 57, 72, 75, 76, 108

Frangou, Angela 57, 75, 76, 100

Frangovouni 6, 111

## G

Gardiner, Barry 74

Georgakopoulos, Vassilis 96

Gerapetritis, Costas 75, 103

German-occupied Chios (life in)

8-11 passim

*Gilian* 98

*Golden Sky* 102

Golden Union 51

Good Faith Shipping Co. 57, 59, 70,  
75, 95

*Gran Canaria* 76

## H

Halcoussis, George 42, 51, 54

Halkidon Shipping Co. 91

*Happiness II* 76

Hayalides: George 91; Kedros 91

Hayler, Eddie 32, 69

*Hellas Liberty* 115 (ph), 116 (ph),  
117

High Officers School 27

Hobbs, Savill & Co. (Ltd.) 32

## I

Ince & Co. 20, 33, 42, 78

Innes, Robert 20, 22

*Indonesia Star* 98

Ionides (family) 6

## K

Kallimasia, Nikolas 16

Kardizis, George 76

*Kanaris* 55

Katsouris, Vassilis 59, 72, 75

Kavadas (families) 76

Kekridis, Nick 109

Kent, Duncan 55 (ph), 60, 103

King, Maurice 33, 42

*Knossos Palace* 91

Koilalous: Dimitris 44, 49 (ph), 64,  
109 (ph); Eftymia 37, 37 (ph),  
39, 40, 44, 44 (ph), 61; Smaro 50,  
65, 109 (ph); Takis 37, 58, 106

Kokkinakis, Basil 9, 14, 19 (ph), 50

*Kountouriotis* 55

Kouroutis, John 57, 69, 78

*Krateros* 100-102

*Kydon* 71

Kyriakides, Michael 20, 21, 30, 33

Kyrris, Andreas 77, 100

## L

*La Paix* 76

Laios: family 87; Manolis 76

Lalis family 54, 58

Lambert Brothers 32

Larissa 24, 25

Latsis family 48

Lelakis: family 71; Anthony 58

letter of recommendation 21, 22

Lever Brothers 9

Liberty-type ships 31, 36, 114

*Lissos* 70, 71, 87

*Litohoro* 103

*Lloyd's List* 79

*Lombardia* 91

Loukas Matsas & Sons 20, 33, 42,  
51, 54

Luly, Colin 58

*Lydia* 97

**M**

Madge, Tim 74, 90, 98, 102  
 Maloney, David 69  
 Mamidakis: (family) 54, 55, 70, 71, 72, 88; Katerina 90; Kyriakos 55, 71; Manolis 71, 90; Nicos 55, 71  
*Mani P.* 78, 94  
 Margaronis: Dimitris 32; family 18, 31, 32; Isidore 18 (ph)  
 Maritime Enterprises 76  
 Mathews, Terry 90, 102, 103  
 Mathioudis: Marcos 11; Miltos 11  
 Matsas: family 38, 51; Loukas G. 42, 54  
 Mavrogordatos (family) 6  
 Mazarakis, Nicos 90  
 McMenamin, George 59, 110  
 Mediterranean Average Adjusting Co. 74, 109  
 Melis, Nicolas 76  
 Mellstrom, Stuart 21, 30, 31, 32, 37, 37 (ph), 38, 118  
*Miaoulis* 55  
 Michalinos & Co. 42, 50, 57  
 Michalos: brothers 21, 30, 39, 40, 43, 48, 50; Costas 22; family 15, 16, 22, 44, 119; Leonidas (Leo) 40, 43; Lily 22; Nicos 18, 42, 88  
 Military Interpreters' School 25, 48  
 Millers 78  
 Minoan Lines 71, 91, 100  
 Moundreas, Nicos 57  
*Mount Athos* 76

**N**

N. Michalos & Sons 40, 42, 49, 50, 55, 57  
 Nanopoulos: (father) 48; (son) 48  
*Navios Achilles* 100, 102  
*Navios Apollon* 102  
*Navios Hios* 100  
*Navios Kypros* 100  
*Navios Libra II* 102

Navios ShipManagement (Inc.) 76, 100, 103, 110  
 Neamonitos brothers 48, 49  
*Nelson* 55  
 Neorion Shipyard 60  
 Nereus Marine Services 72, 76  
*Nicholas M.* 89  
*Nikos M.* 71  
*Nobility* 94

**O**

*Olympia Palace* 100

**P**

P. Wigham Richardson 32, 33  
 Pacific & Atlantic 75, 86, 103  
 Palios, Paul 36, 37  
 Palios, Simon 51  
 Panayotopoulos, Miltos 48, 66, 68  
 Panayotou, Nick 59, 72, 77  
*Pancarani Sinar* 98  
 Papageorgiou, Elias 54  
 Parios, Mathew 60  
*Pasiphae* 91  
 Pateras, Nick 75  
 Pavlidis, Alex 77  
*Pearl C.* 98  
 Pegasus Adjusting Services Ltd. 66, 74, 76, 110  
 Petropoulos, Ted 76, 94  
 Philippino crew/engineer 70  
 Philippotis, Costas 42, 51, 54  
 Pielstick (engine) 86, 94  
 Pimplis, Achilleas 71  
 Piraeus Marine Consultants 43  
*Polyxeni* 31  
 Poseidon Adjusters 66  
 Prodromos Lines 59, 72, 77, 97  
 Prokopakis, Heraklis 71  
*Prosperity* 98  
 Psarras, Giannis 59

**Q**

*Queen Evi* 71

**R**

Raissis family 97  
 Rallis: Brothers 9; (family) 6  
 Redhead, Clive 69, 78  
 Richards Hogg International 110  
*RM Everaim* 90  
 Rodocanachis (family) 6  
*Rova* 72  
 Russian Insurance Co. 43

**S**

*Safmarine Narmada* 98  
 Salonika 26  
 Salvage Association 60, 61, 103  
 Samios Shipping Co. 102  
 Saunders, John 60  
 Savvas, Nick 59, 72, 76, 98, 109  
 Scaramanga Shipyards 60  
 Schilizzis (family) 6  
 Scott, Carlisle 60, 103  
 Scuffalos, Mark 49, 51, 54  
*Sea Cresta* 87  
*Sea Dream* 76  
*Sea Energy* 76  
*Sea Spirit* 76  
*Sea Star IX* 76  
 Second World War. *See* German-occupied Chios  
*Shipbroker* 76  
 Simpson, Spence & Young 15  
*Sinar Nusa* 98  
 Smith, Chris 74  
*Steel Trader* 96  
 Stephens, Fred 20, 30  
 Stroumbis, Mimis 8  
 Sun Enterprises 78

**T**

Tattersall, Laurie (Lawrence) 20, 30, 32, 44 (ph), 45, 48, 50, 66, 68, 71,

72, 74, 106, 108, 119  
 Tattos, George 43, 55, 56 (ph), 60  
*The Daily Telegraph* 27  
*Theofilos* 109, 114  
*Thia Chryssoula* 95  
 Townley, Keith 60, 103  
 Tsakos, Vassilis 110  
 Tsakou, Lika 110  
 Tsavlis: (brothers) 94, 98; Tsavlis  
     Salvage Co. 102  
 Tsolakis, Dimitris 76, 103  
 Turner, Alan 64, 66

**U**

Unilever. *See* Lever Brothers  
 Union Commercial Company 49

**V**

Veniamis family 51  
 Ventouris family 109  
 Victoria Steamship Co. (Ltd.) 30, 32, 33, 42, 48, 91, 118, 119  
 Vlachodimitris, Heraklis 91  
 Vrontados 22, 48

**W**

West of England (WOE) Club 102, 110  
 Willcox, John 60  
 Williams & Deacon's Bank 24  
 Willis 110  
 Woodcock, Kenneth 31  
 work permit: (1949) 15 (ph), 16; (1956) 30, 30 (ph)

**X**

Xylopodis, Nick 22, 50, 54

**Z**

Zannaras, Nakis 37, 99  
 Ziffos (family) 6



A personal narrative spanning close to sixty years of a career in shipping – from the author’s humble beginnings in Chios Island in the 1930s, to apprenticeship and early work in London in the 1950s, and further to the establishment of a highly respected practice in Piraeus from the 1960s onwards until the early years of the 21st century.

Interspersed with a wide spectrum of business personalities from the Piraeus and London markets, illustrated by numerous cases of vessels in distress, underlining the importance of personal relationships as an oft-neglected but valuable by-product of one’s career, and further enriched with the wisdom of someone with a long-lasting involvement in Greek shipping matters, John D. Koulalou’s *Chronicle of a Life in Shipping* is a must-read for those just entering the maritime sector, as well as veterans.

In the author’s own words: “All I have to say is that my involvement in the insurance world of shipping, and the claims sector in particular, gave me immense pleasure throughout these long years. It also gave me the satisfaction that I have offered some useful service to the shipping community at large and the particular client friends I have made during this period of my life. If I had another life before me, I have no hesitation in saying that I would follow the same course again.”

\* \* \*

*My liaison with John Koulalou goes back to quite some time and his constructive approach to matters involving issues of insurance claims and other relative shipping aspects in general, will be long cherished. I am sure that his book on such matters will prove a most valuable guide to all concerned in the service sector of shipping and, as such, it can be highly recommended.*

Angeliki Frangou, Chairman & C.E.O. of Navios Maritime Holdings Inc.

*I have known John Koulalou from my very early years in shipping and I have had the opportunity to work with him on quite a number of cases involving his own particular sector. I was one of his friends to prompt him into writing his experiences and I have no hesitation in recommending his book which, I’m sure, will prove most valuable to future generations.*

N. Savvas, Cosmship Management S.A.

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