

# Lloyd's List

magazine focus

October 1999



## Cyprus

**Cruising towards  
EU membership**

# Pioneer comes full circle

*If there is ever a 'hall of fame' for Cyprus shipping, one of the first names elected is likely to be that of passenger shipping entrepreneur Takis Solomonides*

**T**AKIS Solomonides' career has followed a circuitous path, which started and has ended up in the shipping agency business, first as a humble clerk and eventually at the helm of his own longstanding company, T Solomonides & Son Ltd.

Nowadays, he is also active as Limasol managing director for Mediterranean Logistic Services Ltd, a coalition of port agents in the Mediterranean that holds a long-term contract to cater for the regional 'R&R' needs of US servicemen with the Sixth Fleet.

For a lengthy period, however, Mr Solomonides was the country's foremost shipping entrepreneur and, over a decade lasting from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, a total of seven vessels passed through his hands. He was thus an early user of the national flag at a time when Cyprus hardly merited the faintest of blips on the sonar of international shipping.

His Sol Lines, established in 1977 with a view to maintaining year-round links between Cyprus and Greece, adopted the epithet 'the Cyprus liners' and for a while there was no company that had an equal claim to being considered the island's unofficial national carrier.

Mr Solomonides' first ship, the passenger-vehicle ferry *Sol Phryne*, was indeed put on to the Cyprus-Greece line and also regularly called at Lattakia to assist truck-trailer traffic from the island to Arab importing countries. After the first six years, the commercial traffic slumped and, with no passenger movement through Lattakia to fall back on, the call in Syria was abandoned and Haifa was added to the vessel's itinerary instead.

Unfortunately, Mr Solomonides' efforts to expand the fleet with more ships were mostly ill-starred. None of the various stable-mates acquired for *Sol Phryne* lasted more than a couple of years, a tale of misfortune that the shipowner himself puts down to a combination of ruthless competition and plain bad luck.

Other vessels that passed under the

Sol banner included: a 35-knot passenger hydrofoil for a service to the Near East, which was jinxed by the closure of Beirut; the ro-ro vessel *Sol Georgios*, which was acquired for the Syria service but was undermined by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war; and the *Sol Olympia*, which operated what was described as the first genuine cruise-ferry service in the eastern Mediterranean, linking Israel and Italy via Cyprus and Greece. But the latter fell foul of Greek rules, which classed the itinerary as a long, international voyage – which severely curtailed the carrying capacity and made the operation unviable.

## Vessel fire

Perhaps the biggest blow Sol Lines sustained came in 1985 after acquiring a pair of ferries from Spain for its Israel-Cyprus-Greece operation. The same year, it was decided to sell one of the new ships but two days before her delivery to the buyers, she caught fire while drydocked at Elefsis Shipyards, leaving Mr Solomonides an estimated \$1.5m out of pocket.

Despite the saga of problems, the *Sol Phryne* was in service for over 10 years, ending up in the 1986-87 season by pioneering mini-cruises from Cyprus to Israel. Before the cruises had become sufficiently established to start making profits, though, a second Cypriot ship was introduced in direct competition and Sol felt obliged to withdraw. According to Mr Solomonides, the same fate had also befallen an earlier experiment in linking Israel with Italy, using another of the company's ships, *Sol Express*.

"We were the forerunners," recalled the entrepreneur. "But in that role whatever we did seemed to be quickly copied by someone else.

"I never did things purely for the money," he said. "As a company, we always

experimented with a view to what would be in the general interests of Cyprus. I was always prepared to take a risk."

Fondly recalling each of the vessels he has owned with the familiarity you might expect of their masters, Mr Solomonides said: "I was a hands-on shipping man. The present generation has managed to commercially exploit some of our ideas, but are not as personally involved with their ships."

While he is rueful about Sol's demise, the company had its proud moments. One highlight was its role in the evacuation of PLO fighters from Lebanon in 1982, for which its then three-vessel fleet was chartered by the UK Department of Trade on behalf of the International Red Cross. The manner in which the operation was undertaken won Mr Solomonides a fistful of plaudits, including praise from the State Department and British armed forces.

His contribution to the island's shipping industry extends well beyond Sol Lines. In the early 1960s, when Cyprus had no more than 30 ships on its registry, Mr Solomonides had visualised the possibility of developing a merchant shipping industry for the island and claims a chunk of the credit for establishing Cyprus Maritime Law.

Today, he is inclined to complain that the island could have made better use of his extensive shipping know-how. But at least on the home front his legacy is being fruitfully exploited, as 35-year-old son Georgios Solomonides has entered the industry – and, after five years working at Columbia Shipmanagement, is currently in a senior managerial position

with Lisbon-based Classic International Cruises. ■

