



Captain Peter M. Skrmetta, Sr.

February 24, 1930 — June 16, 2024

Biloxi

We are sad to announce the death of Captain Peter M. Skrmetta Sr., who passed away in his home on Father's Day after a brief illness. Captain Pete was owner of Ship Island Excursions and a beloved icon in the Gulf Coast hospitality industry. He was 94.

Pete was born on February 24, 1930 on Point Cadet in East Biloxi, the heart of the city's Croatian immigrant community. His childhood in the neighborhood universally known as "The Point" left him with a profound love for the city and the

Mississippi Coast. Captain Pete was the son of a successful, first-generation Croatian oyster and shrimp fisherman, Peter Martin Skrmetta. While the lives of most young boys of his generation were dominated by their fathers, Pete's mother, Lovinia Saput of Bay St. Louis, exerted a profound influence on the compassionate, gentle man he would become.

In 1926, Captain Pete's father began ferrying passengers to Mississippi's barrier islands, establishing the family business that he would later carry on and expand. He worked on his father's boats from an early age and developed the incredible work ethic that would define his career. Pete often recalled working on local oyster reefs during the winter months, when dredging and freighting oysters was one of the toughest jobs for a Gulf Coast waterman. He spent even longer nights shrimping in the summer while also working on Ship Island.

Even while crewing on his father's boats, Pete graduated on schedule from Notre Dame High School in 1946. He continued earning sea time while working on the 65-foot Pan American Clipper. He acquired his captain's license in 1948, after which he became affectionately known as "Captain Pete". He began piloting the Biloxi to Ship Island excursion ferry in the same year.

In 1951 Pete enlisted in the Marine Corp at the height of the Korean War. After two years of frontline combat duty with the Marine 1st Division along the 38th Parallel, he was honorably discharged from the Corps. Pete often talked about his time in the Marines. He fought in the battle for "Hook Hill", and always credited his deep Catholic faith and his close relationship with our Blessed Mother Mary with allowing him to survive the hellish experience of the trench lines and outposts along the Parallel.

Following his military service Captain Pete immediately returned to Biloxi to pilot the family's Ship Island excursion boat. He also managed and maintained the Ship Island snack bar, along with a host of other related island operations, including repairs to Fort Massachusetts and the island ferry dock.

Pete's deep faith led him to consider a vocation in the priesthood, but as he often said, that changed as soon as he was introduced to the love of his life, Jacqueline Wentzell. They were married in 1955, and Jackie would eventually provide Pete with four sons, and a future boat crew. They were inseparable until Jackie's death in 2023.

In 1963, Captain Pete expanded the Biloxi ferry service to include a second location in the Gulfport Yacht Harbor. In the late 1960s, he sounded the alarm that coastal erosion was undermining the foundation of Fort Massachusetts, the historic Civil War era fort on Ship Island, leaving the structure in danger of falling into the Mississippi Sound. In 1967 he was a principal of the "Save the Fort" committee which successfully secured funding to place a protective concrete riprap breakwater around the fort. However, Hurricane Camille [1969] amply demonstrated that this make-do barrier was just a stop-gap measure, and a more permanent solution was needed. Captain Pete worked alongside multiple Coastal organizations in successfully lobbying Congress to include Ship Island and Fort Massachusetts in the soon to be formed Gulf Islands National Seashore [1971].

After Ship Island became a part of the National Park system, the family business was awarded the first in a series of National Park contracts to ferry passengers and provide

visitor services on Ship Island. The business, now operating as Ship Island Excursions, has held the contract ever since.

Under Captain Pete's direction in the next decades, the visitor services on the island were updated and an improved boat schedule was introduced. Although the historic 1937 Pan American Clipper remained in service, the company expanded to include two larger/faster vessels to transport visitors to Ship Island. Ridership on the ferries increased from just a few thousand passengers in the early days to an average of over 50 thousand customers a season currently. Over the course of Pete's career, he personally piloted over one million visitors to Ship Island, a feat which may never be surpassed. While his business demands left little time for activities beyond his family, he was an active member of the Gulfport American Legion and Slavonian Benevolent Association of Biloxi.

Captain Pete loved people and took great pride in offering tourists and locals a safe, dependable, and affordable boat service to Fort Massachusetts and Ship Island. He was admired for his honesty, gentle nature, and kindness to all. He was loved beyond words and will be greatly missed.

Pete was preceded in death by his wife of 69 years, Jacqueline Skrmetta, his son Peter Matthew Skrmetta Jr., his grandson Peter Joseph Skrmetta, his mother Lavinia Saput Skrmetta, and his father Peter Martin Skrmetta, brother Jimmie Skrmetta, sisters Vincenzia Skrmetta, Mandeline "Manda" Langlinois, Perina Bills, Catherine Schwark, Mary Skrmetta, Genevieve Creel, and Dorothy Skrmetta.

Pete leaves behind his sons Louis (Tina), Steven (Michelle) and Kenneth (Crystal), grandsons Robert (Hannah), John, Timothy, Luke and Kadin Snow (Maridane) and

granddaughters Jacqueline Davis (Reed) and Kaitlynn Claret (Nathan), along with great grand children Christian and Juliette Davis and numerous nieces, nephews, and cousins.

Funeral Mass will be celebrated for both Captain Pete and his loving wife, Jacqueline at 11 am on Monday, July 8, 2024 at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral, 870 Howard Avenue in Biloxi. Family visitation 8:30-9:00 am and public visitation 9 -11 am. A private burial will take place at a later date.