

INAUGURATION SPEECH

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

If I attempted, for the purposes of tonight's gathering, to paraphrase the opening verses of Homer's *Odyssey*, I would call upon the Muse to sing to me of ingenious men at the ends of the earth, who knew many faraway places and learned from the counsel of many people, and lived many hardships out on the open sea, responsible for themselves and the lives of their comrades.

The Muse heard and the Muse responded. And so, thousands of years after Homer's epic tale, come we, his descendants and descents of those men, to recognize, honour and acclaim these sea-thirsty, sea-conquering, sea-living, eternally seafaring compatriots of ours for their epic shipping achievements. Their deeds were accomplished in a field that it is highly competitive and in many ways ruthless; in an industry whose limits are as wide and as narrow as the planet we live on. We now gather to distinguish, among those eternal Greek mariners, the men who most excelled. The men who walked beyond the beaten path and, opening up new avenues and widening known horizons, became legends, examples to follow and icons to inspire whole generations. The men who turned the whole world into their own field to plow and used the sea as a tool and a place to excel. In other words, we gather to honour those Greeks whose achievements cannot be measured by common standards. When one views these Greeks in the context of the global environment in which they ventured, aware of the dangers lying in wait, and in which, with hard work and sacrifices, they learned to move with ease and awareness of their own worth, one could paraphrase, without fear of exaggeration, Churchill's words: "Hence we will not say that the Greeks are like the best seafaring people of the world but that the best seafaring people of the world are like the Greeks."

These Greeks, such Greeks, had to find a home somewhere: not so much to prevent their names from being forgotten (their achievements and their contribution to Shipping and to Greece are so great there is no danger of that happening) but as an example for their compatriots of today and as a guiding light to the next generations: for the present Greeks to remember them and future Greeks to learn from and admire them.

This need and this gap, for honouring titans for extraordinary deeds and for preserving the myth and the example for generations to come, will now be met and filled by the institution we inaugurate this evening, with the creation of the Hall of Fame - in other words, the creation of a *Libro d' Oro* for the giants of Greek Shipping, an institution that may, *prima facie*, seem like equivalent institutions abroad but is unique in that the names it honours are known not only in their country of origin but throughout the world, as wide as the sea that the compatriots we honour today served with consistency, devotion, honesty, integrity and faith for their entire lives.

The sea-struggle (as Andreas G. Lemos wrote almost half a century ago in his famed book *The Greeks and the Sea*) "chooses its warriors from among the bravest and tests their powers by the constant strain of survival that exercises them, bodily and spiritually, and as a natural consequence makes them capable of even greater achievements." Today, we have gathered to honour precisely men who, it is widely acknowledged, have excelled and surpassed their peers in the sea-struggle.

So today is a great and significant day, just as the initiative to honour these men and establish this institution on a strong and lasting basis is a great and significant initiative. For, as Herodotus, another great Greek, urged us thousands of years ago: "great and marvelous deeds (and consequently their creators) must not be forgotten with the passing of time."

And if, still paraphrasing, I were to marry the verses of the legendary Homer with those of another great Greek poet, Constantine Cavafis, I would say of the men we honour tonight, that, as they set out for Ithaka, they hoped that the voyage would be long, full of adventures and experiences. The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops, angry Poseidon, they feared not. They kept their thoughts high and allowed a select emotion stir their spirit and their body. And when, in time, they reached their island, wise from so much experience, they did not find their Ithaka poor. For their pains and their struggles had brought wealth and knowledge to their islands (Chios, Agnoussa, Andros, Kasos, Syros, Cephallonia and Ithaka) and to the whole of Greece.

The Greek Shipping Hall of Fame has been created as an independent, not-for-profit organization, whose mission is to pay tribute to exceptional personalities of the shipping pantheon that have contributed greatly in the development of Greek shipping, past and present.

To date, 18 tycoons of our industry have been inducted into the Greek Shipping Hall of Fame - eminent Greek personalities, chosen every year, through democratic procedures. Originally this was done by a committee. With the recent establishment of an Academy of the same name, this role has passed on to this new body, which has been founded as an independent organization consisting of the most influential members of the Greek shipping industry. Detailed rules govern the workings of the Academy, and the cooperation of a prestigious international audit firm has been enlisted to ensure the complete integrity and transparency of the procedure for choosing the persons to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

I consider this a very happy day for shipping and for Greece generally. Because, by paying tribute, via their induction into the Greek Shipping Hall of Fame, to highly esteemed and widely admired compatriots of ours, we give the opportunity, to those who wish to ponder on their lives and achievements, to understand why maritime Greece has managed to survive through difficult times, has prevailed and thrived in a highly competitive world and has been able to accomplish great things - while Greece ashore could not overcome its own difficulties.

In the titanic effort to financially reconstruct this country (in which we all have a duty to participate), a substantial role can be assigned to our shipping industry - the one and only world 'first' of duration our country has achieved, for which every Greek should feel extremely proud. With the right policies to tighten and strengthen the bond that ties shipping to the national economy and the wise and balanced use of it as a foreign policy tool, our shipping - recognized, respected and honoured throughout the world - has the potential to contribute much to the economy and the general recovery of the country.

I personally believe, without reservation, in the scope and purposes of the institution we inaugurate this evening and I see it as, among other things, a means to educate and inspire Greeks, particularly young people, to follow the example of those who made Greek shipping great. Enthusiastically embracing the Greek Shipping Hall of Fame, let us help it take root and grow well so as to become the epic Muse of Homer that will speak of the great and mighty of Greek shipping. Let us wish it fair sailing and good luck!