

Ep. 5: Thrown Into the Deep End

ADAM

Who do we have this episode?

SANDY WELSH

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Virgil Vernon Welsh, Jr. commonly known as Sandy which was given to me by a doctor right after I was born and has stayed with me all my life. I was born in Dallas in 1940. From there I grew up all along the Columbia river from the Dallas, to Portland, to Astoria. Most of my schooling was in Astoria.

ADAM

Sandy went on to join the military.

SANDY WELSH

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It was the National Guard 6 month active duty plan that I was under.

ADAM

It's a common theme with most of the Preston crew to have served in the military, but Sandy, after a brief hiatus working in plywood plants went back to the military.

SANDY WELSH

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I decided to go back into the service, ended up in the paratroopers. Stayed 3 years with them.

ADAM

Sandy has a fascinating life before the Preston, he worked many interesting jobs, including a stint on a ship funded by the University of Washington.

SANDY WELSH

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I was primarily on the Thomas G. Thomson which was a 209', 1200 gross ton research vessel. I've been half way around the world with it. I never thought that I would ever leave really, because I had so much time invested with the university.

ADAM

So what happened? How did you end up back in the Northwest?

SANDY WELSH

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What happened was that I came home on vacation. I came home to be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas. While I was in Portland, I stopped by the corps office to see what they had going on down there. I ended up going to work right away for them. So instead of having Christmas off, I ended up working Christmas in Portland. Then I extended my leave of absence from the University. I talked to my skipper, which was Captain Jarvis on the Harding, and he kind of persuaded me to stay with the corp. I was 3rd mate. So I turned in my resignation to the University and remained onboard the Harding for that year.

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I was, at the University, spending 10 or 11 months away from home a year. So, I was really looking for something where I could be home a little bit more after than I had been.

ADAM

Sandy worked for many years on the Harding and then the Pacific, doing dredging in Washington, Oregon, and California. But, early on, another boat caught his attention.

SANDY WELSH

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When I first started going out to sea back with the University of Washington, we were in port one time. The PRESTON went by and it was pushing a barge up on Portage Bay. I said, "Now that would be interesting to work on something like that." I went down to the office, and they said they weren't even taking names or anything else. There wasn't any turnover on the vessel.

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Then once again, after I got my mate's license, I went to the PRESTON once again and the same

thing happened. They still weren't taking any names or anything. In fact this was when the office was on pier 36, and I talked to Al Hall then. He said no, he wouldn't even waste my time to take my name because there wasn't any turnover. Each time I came in I might have called, or just gone down to see if the situation changed any, but it never had.

ADAM

Sandy's break came when one of the crew members passed away.

SANDY WELSH

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And it's a sad thing to say but it's the truth, it was a good job and people stayed forever. The only way you could get on the PRESTON is if someone retired or someone passed away. It just happened with me. Poor John, he passed away-I never did meet the fellow. I came onboard as 2nd mate.

ADAM

Sandy didn't stay as 2nd mate for long.

SANDY WELSH

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I was here about 4 months, and Captain Ronning had told me back then that I was that I was the youngest 2nd mate that the PRESTON had ever had. Well in about 4 months after I came onboard, Captain Ronning retired. So that moved Bill Morgan up to skipper and me up to 1st mate.

ADAM

You'll remember from episode 2, that Bill Morgan served as captain for a year before stepping back to first mate.

SANDY WELSH

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The paperwork and the strain of command was bothering him too much. So Bill Morgan went back to chief mate and I went to skipper. All this time waiting to get on the boat where they wouldn't even take my name and that, I went

from 2nd mate to Skipper in a year and 4 days.

ADAM

That's a tight turn around. Sandy had only been on-board the Preston for a year or so, and he was only thirty six.

SANDY WELSH

(SWelsh_02.pdf, page 8)

I might have been just 35 because my birthday's in July and I took over skipper in January. So I was either 35 or '6. I was just about the youngest man in the crew. And very possibly I was the youngest skipper of the 7 skippers.

ADAM

That's a lot on top of suddenly being thrown into the deep end.

SANDY WELSH

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I either jumped in and said I accepted the job as skipper and hoped that I could make everyone else happy and do the job. What kind of hurt afterwards was that Bill was under a lot of strain anyway. That's why he took a lot of sick leave, he was gone a lot that first year that I was skipper. So I turned to Stan Nelson, he was my big asset, he helped me with everything. Robichaux was my mate. But see, he had only been on there a very short time. So, I had to break him in, or he had to break into where we could work as a team. The engineer was new. Al Becker The chief engineer was thinking of retiring. So, Al Engler came onboard, and Al was a good man-Al was probably the finest engineer in answering bells of the other engineers that I had. He was a good throttle man. In fact, he was with me when I even had a few problems with the vessel.

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It was blowing like a son-of-a- gun. I made my approach coming through here sideways. I was coming down the channel all the way sideways. I'd only been skipper about 4 months then. It was blowing a gale out there. I wanted to stay at the fuel dock because the storm had come up just as we were finishing fueling. But they said, "no." that it was against the rules for me to stay at the

fueling dock there.

ADAM

While this was incredible frustrating to the crew, it make sense that a boat can't stay at the fuel dock for more than a length of time. But, the weather was getting worse, and as almost every crew member has mentioned, the Preston does not handle well in bad weather.

SANDY WELSH

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I couldn't even get away from the dock. A fishing boat pulled me away from the dock, and I blew for the bridge. The bridge answered me right away and gave me a good opening because when I came through the bridge I didn't know if I was going to make it through there either. I went through there sideways. So, I was heading for the moorage here, I wanted to get moored up. Like I said we were coming down here sideways. I rang up full astern, but it was just a little bit too late, and of course that bulkhead doesn't give out there. I guess we did about \$2000.00 damage to the bow. I really got pretty lucky because we were really just about stopped, but it was that sudden final stop.

ADAM

Sandy was telling this story in the pilot house on the Preston, so when he says "here", that's where he's referring to.

SANDY WELSH

(SWelsh_01.pdf, page 6)

All these drawers here come out and hit me in the back. Pinned me up against the wheel and everything.

ADAM

Oof, that sounds harrowing, were you shook up?

SANDY WELSH

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I was really, well I guess I was more mad then shook up. I was mad at myself that I didn't make a better landing than what I had.

ADAM

I can imagine that given how new Captain Welsh was on the Preston, he was probably feeling a bit overwhelmed.

SANDY WELSH

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I was really feeling kind of bad because I hadn't been everywhere with the boat yet. And I was really up in the air about everything. So Ray Latta came down to see me. He was chief of operations. And he kind of gave me a pep talk and let me know that things weren't as bad as what they seemed for me. That things happen and it's not always a nice smooth road. That kind of changed my life. And things started to smooth out or I started to grasp what I needed to know then. Saying well this is just the way it's going to have to be then. What happens on the boat is my responsibility, and what everyone does onboard is also my responsibility. So, I guess I kind of turned myself around then, and I said, "Well, this here is what the Skipper's got to do."

ADAM

In listening to these interviews I've noticed that Captain Welsh's rise is out of the ordinary, most captains spent years working their way up the ladder. Without those experiences, Sandy didn't know that he didn't know some things.

SANDY WELSH

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I guess at first I was ready to accept the responsibility, but I really didn't know what all the responsibilities were.

ADAM

That's what I was trying to say.

SANDY WELSH

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I could really appreciate what happened with Morgan because after 6 months he stepped back. He didn't want the responsibility. And here he had been on the boat 20-some years.

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there was a change in my own personal attitude that I had to accept. To just grab hold of myself and say, "Hey! This is your life now. What are you going to do with it?"

ADAM

Captain Welsh goes on to say that he sat down with Captain Norm Hamburg, who we heard from in episode 1, and found quite a bit of relief that Hamburg had many of the same issues he was running into himself.

SANDY WELSH

(SWelsh_01.pdf, page 7)

It's just the boat itself. It's a beautiful boat, it's a wonderful boat to work with, but it will do the most unexpected things that you can ever. If you expect something, it's probably not going to work that way. That's the nature of the boat. It's a flat-bottomed barge. There's no keel. It handles completely different than any other ship, boat, anything else that I've ever been on-so there's just a lot that had to be taken into consideration.

ADAM

This is a large part of the reason Captain Welsh rarely delegated steering the Preston.

SANDY WELSH

(SWelsh_01.pdf, page 11)

Most of the time I would run the vessel. If it were fairly nice weather or we weren't in heavy traffic or anything like this here, I would put a mate up here to steer. In fact, if we were traveling and it was heavy weather, I would never leave the bridge. I'd even eat my lunch there, the cooks would deliver my lunch to me. I know there were a few times when the cooks would get upset because they would have to prepare the meal and bring it up here, but that was part of their job, just like it's my job to run the vessel. You know my own feelings from what I've seen from other skippers, they're always going to put in more time than what they actually get paid for. It's just part of the responsibility. That's just it.

ADAM

That is just it. Sandy, and all the captains I've listened to during this process, understood that ultimately, the buck stopped with them. They trusted and respected their crews, but when push came to shove, they responsibility for the ship, the men, and the job was on their shoulders. This podcast was created by Adam Farnsworth and Sonic Bazaar, with sponsorship by the Anacortes Museum Foundation, in conjunction with the Anacortes Museum and The Maritime Heritage Center. The W. T. Preston is an active museum boat and can be visited and toured. To find out more about the Preston, please visit: [www dot Anacortes W A dot gov slash 379 slash W T hyphen Preston hyphen Maritime hyphen Center](http://www.dotAnacortesWA.gov/slash379/slashWT-hyphenPreston-hyphenMaritime-hyphenCenter). Thank you.