

Ep. 2: Torpedoing Police Boats

ADAM

After two years of high school, William Morgan joined the Navy. He served until...

WILLIAM MORGAN

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Was medically discharged from the Navy, and then about a month after I was discharged, I started going to sea. That was in 1943.

ADAM

He got married and bounced around different jobs on the water for a few years.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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Then this job on the Preston opened up, and I went aboard her in June of 1952.

ADAM

With a couple of exceptions due to funding shortages, Bill Morgan spent the rest of his career on the Preston. He started as a Deckhand.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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When I first started to work, I made \$1.45/hour. You were a little bit of a lumberjack, a choker-setter, deckhand. You had to be a little bit of everything. You, at that time, did not hire on at just one particular job. You could be taken off your job and put on flood duty or you could be sent to do anything.

ADAM

During the week, he would live on the boat.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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When I first went to work on the boat I was living south of Seattle around Redondo Beach. We did a considerable amount of work on the Skagit River. So I would go up and usually spend all week on the boat and just get home on weekends.

ADAM

On the nights the crew stayed on board, what did you guys do?

WILLIAM MORGAN

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Oh, they'd go ashore and maybe have a few beers or see a show. Sometimes maybe stay onboard and play cards. If you had friends that lived in the particular town you were in there visiting back and forth.

ADAM

During the Eisenhower administration, there was a funds shortage, and one of the programs suspended was the snagboat program.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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The Preston was laid up for a short period of time. Then I worked with the Corp out of their shop, mechanical equipment shop, until the Preston went back to work and then went back on the Preston. Other than that she worked all the time.

ADAM

Yeah, in fact, Bill Morgan talked quite a bit about one of the Preston's other responsibilities: dredging and erosion repair and prevention.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We done some work in the Fremont cut, when it was washing out behind the concrete bulkhead. We put in rock and chunks of concrete behind the existing wall to prevent the erosion underneath the wall. The wall sits up on piling, and it was eroding between the piling that the wall was sitting on. We had to do quite a bit of work there.

As far as dredging goes, most of our dredging was done in the Skagit and Snohomish rivers. Also in the Cedar River. They called us out there one year. Boeing had a bridge that went across

the Cedar River, and it was actually a Pontoon bridge. They would set it in position and sink the bridge. There was a little mill up river from the bridge. When they had to take logs up to the mill, Boeing would have to blow the water out of the pontoons to float the bridge and swing it out of the way. Well, one time the pontoons had gradually filled with sand and they couldn't raise the bridge to get it out. We went down and worked for 4 days right over a weekend. We worked 12 to 14 hours a day dredging down there to get the bridge out. The mill was shut down until the logs could get through, and quite a few people were out of work. So they deemed it necessary to dredge it out to get the logs to the mill.

ADAM

What else would the Preston respond to?

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 4)

Sometimes there would be other emergencies especially in the Skagit, there would be flooding.

ADAM

Growing up in Anacortes, I can verify that this was still a problem.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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I can remember one time, I can't remember what year it was, but we were working on the lower part of the Skagit. The river suddenly came up extremely high, and the logs on boom sticks came down and got hung up on the old wooden North Fork bridge. Then everything came down and backed up upriver from that. So they called us up there, and it was just about all the PRESTON could do, was to push up in the current because the river was running so hard.

ADAM

How did you guys end up breaking the logjam up?

WILLIAM MORGAN

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Captain Murch at that time was skipper. And he was very good. He took a few chances sometimes, but they were necessary changes. This time out we ran the boat at full steam and run it right up on top of the logs. Then we'd lower the bow spud down about 4 or 5 feet and then back up. And that's how we broke it, we'd back up hard enough so we could break the logs, the boom sticks. We kept on breaking them until everything was able to finally drift around through the draw of the bridge and head down river.

ADAM

That seems like it's kind of counter your normal operation, letting all of those snags float away.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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There was so much that we just had to let it go. There was no way in the world that we could ever catch it either, because it was going so fast down the river. But afterwards we had quite a bit of snagging to do, especially down on the Skagit flats. Big stumps and trees were hung out there on the flats, and we had to go out and clear them all. We were up there for probably 6 months afterward.

ADAM

Did you spend most of your time on the Skagit River?

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We used to spend 4 to 6 months of our year in the Skagit when I first came on. We did that for about 5 or 6 years. Then our primary work started changing until we were working more in the Sound and in Lake Washington.

ADAM

That's interesting, I don't think of Lake Washington as having as many snags to pull out of the water.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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I think people were a little more relaxed than they are now. If they didn't want something anymore they would just turn them loose and they would be floating out there in the lake. We'd get calls from the public, particularly people who lived right on the lake about hazards to navigation. Then we'd go in and take care of it.

ADAM

So, people would be dumping junk in the lake?

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 5)

Well, generally it was deadheads and logs. But then there was a considerable amount of derelict docks that were torn apart. Sometimes the contractors would probably not do it on purpose, but suddenly everything would be loose. So we would have to go out and chase them down and pick them up.

ADAM

Ah, I see, what else would you guys pull up?

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We picked up barges, anywhere from 100 to 130 feet long. We'd raise them off the bottom and then push them into shallow ground at high tide. Then we'd work on them at low tide when we could actually get out there with chainsaws. There have been times when we have used drilling and dynamite and actually blew barges apart. We picked up 3 of them in the waterway in Tacoma at one time. We done something then that they wouldn't allow us to do now. We took the barges that had sunk and sunk them again out at the mouth of the Puyallup River, which is extremely deep. They'd never bother a thing out there anyway. We picked up fishing boats. We picked up one that went around and hit the retaining wall in the Fremont cut. It was about a 30-foot fishing boat. Then we picked up another boat in Blaine. It had had a collision with another fishing boat. This was about a 75-foot bottom trawler. We raised it, and got a permit from one of

the canneries down there to put it on their beach. We pushed it in as far as we could, and then they brought a cat in from Seattle. They pulled the debris all up and pushed it into a big pile. The interesting thing about that was that when we picked the boat up, some divers had already been down. They had literally cut the screw off at the shaft. There was no propeller on it, and you could see where the shaft had actually been cut with a hacksaw. It would have taken quite a bit of time; the divers must have wanted that prop pretty bad.

ADAM

How did you go about getting one of those sunken boats up?

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We would take a large cable with an eye on each end and then we would drag. We'd try first off to try and determine how the barge was laying, the position. Find out where it dropped off here and dropped off there, where the bow and stern were at. Then we would drag with a cable, get the cable underneath as far as we could, and then raise it. Then slide another cable further back and raise some more. We'd never take it up out of the water. We'd just raise it up to the surface, to where we could push it in to shallow water and then work on it. We would raise the barge high enough that we could get it against the bow, and then we could push it, actually drive it right up on the beach. The further up the beach we could get it, the easier it was to work on. The only thing is, the one in Blaine was in about 70 feet of water. So they contracted a couple of divers to go down and hook it up so that we could raise it.

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One interesting job that we had, we raised a minesweeper. I forget how long she was. She was sunk in Lake Union. We didn't have no problem raising her. They brought in 4 big gasoline pumps and then with them and our big steam siphon we actually pumped her out. When we got through, she was floating again. Kind of in sorry looking shape, but she was floating.

ADAM

It sounds like these were the sort of techniques you'd learn on the job.

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 6)

Well it takes a little know-how, yes. You can't actually explain how things were done. It just, well you have to see it done and then do it yourself to really understand it. In a lot of cases it's trial and error. You couldn't say, well we'll do this job this way. In a lot of cases, it wouldn't work that way. We would start out with one idea and then have to come up with something else to finish the job. And I had some very good techniques, extremely good. Captain Murch and particularly Captain Hamburg, I worked under him for a lot of years and he's a very good friend of mine. Probably one of the finest I've ever worked for.

ADAM

I've been really pleased to hear about the respect the crew has had for each other, you wonder, being in such close quarters if a crew might begin to grate on each other, but these men have made the effort to be supportive and respectful.

It's also worth noting that Bill Morgan's stamp of approval is significant, he worked his way up to be captain, which is served as for a year, but then chose to step down.

He had high-blood pressure, and he realized he was much happier a chief mate, so he voluntarily stepped back to that position.

I think that shows all kinds of character, knowing yourself enough to step back from a deserved promotion is incredibly hard.

Bill Morgan told a fun story about an interaction he had with Captain Hamburg, when he was still chief mate, and Captain Ronning:

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We had just come in from Lake Washington. Captain Hamburg was chief mate, Ronning was 2nd mate and I was deckhand. We had all these logs lashed alongside. There was one outboard log that was lashed singly. I got down and I was going to slip the line off it. Captain Hamburg, he let the other line go. Down I went, ended up in mud almost up to my waist. Captain Ronning turned and looked at me, said, "What are you doing down there?" Hamburg was laughing so hard he had to go back into the boat because he was afraid he'd hurt my feelings, particularly since he'd done it to me.

ADAM

I think this shows the kind of working relationship these men had, they were hard working, but also had fun with each other. In thinking back to the first couple episodes, we heard Norman Hamburg talk about the giant snags they dealt with, and I wonder if there was a bit of a rivalry amongst the former captains. If so, I think Bill Morgan might have the winning haul:

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 7)

Oh, I'd say the largest snag as far as stump or log goes was probably a huge, old hemlock that was floating in the water at just about water level. It was about 9' at one end and 8' at the other end and about 35' long. As I remember it, we figured it must have weighed in close to 30 ton.

ADAM

30 ton, that's insane. For comparison, that's about the same weight as an adult Humpback Whale.

While the Preston was mostly used for snags and debris clearing, occasionally they'd be roped into controlled burns of derelict houseboats on Lake Union in Seattle.

WILLIAM MORGAN

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We used to do quite a bit of work in conjunction

with the Seattle Harbor Patrol. We were burning a considerable amount of houseboats, and they were the ones that were towing the boats down to Montlake across from the old canoe house at the UW. There were times when we would have ½ dozen houses. We would burn them right down to the logs, then pick the logs up and set them on the beach. This one particular time: We'd gone through this one house and broke a few lines, opened all the valves we could see. We used to go in and open the valves or break the water lines so there was no water remaining to cause any possible explosions. Then we set our fire. Well, it was really burning pretty good. The old tar paper roofs-everything was really going strong. Here comes a harbor police boat heading toward the shore-must have been an emergency. We were all standing on our deck, watching this houseboat burn when all of the sudden there's this terrific explosion. Here goes this hot water tank, shooting out across the water, landing right in front of this police boat coming full out towards it.

ADAM

Oh no! That would have been incredible!

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 8)

It was pretty funny at the time, but could have been extremely serious.

ADAM

Those policemen in the boat must have been terrified!

WILLIAM MORGAN

(WMorgan_01.pdf, page 8)

Very shocked. I don't know this particular harbor policeman. Some of the others were making comments about it. They all thought it was really funny.

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One of them that I knew quite well, he said, "Wouldn't that look good on the front page of the PI, PRESTON torpedoes Seattle police boat with hot water tank."

ADAM

I love the image of the crew on the Preston, the houseboat ablaze, maybe boredom is beginning to set in, they've done this a few times, each time uneventful. Their minds beginning to drift when suddenly: BANG! WOOSH! Fight or flight kicks in before they really know what's going on. Then they see it, a white cylinder rocketing towards the police boat, their minds doing physics calculations, like a little league player their first time at bat: what's the angle between the boat and the tank? How fast is the tank traveling? Do their paths intersect? Then the relief when they don't. It's interesting how great stories always come for terrifying moments.

The interview with Captain Morgan had many more good stories, so his episode has been broken up into two parts. You can hear part two elsewhere on the tour.

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. Our theme song is Dill Pickles by Heftone Banjo Orchestra, and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike License. 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.dot-anacortes.wa.gov/slash379/slashWT-hyphenPreston-hyphenMaritime-hyphenCenter).

Thank you.