

*The Boeing Stratocruiser was developed from the C-97 military version. Air conditioning and altitude conditioning was provided for passenger comfort. Some seats could be converted into sleeping compartments. There was a lounge on the lower deck where drinks were served.*  
 Photo: Courtesy of Bob Burnham

# AIRBORNE SHIPWRECK

An Interview with Al Kearl By Ronald and Constance Burke

J. ALTEN KEARL WAS A 29-YEAR-OLD ENGINEER WORKING AT UNITED CONTROL CORPORATION IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON. Being scheduled to make a business trip to Portland, Oregon, on April 2, 1956, he assembled his paperwork, a notebook and some company equipment in his attaché case and carried it aboard Northwest Orient Airlines Flight No. 2 at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport that morning. The plane was a luxurious double-decker Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, tail number N74608, which had just arrived following a flight from Japan. After re-fueling of the four-engine plane, and a change of crew, it was scheduled to continue on to New York City with intermediate stops at Portland and Chicago. Since the rest of the journey was to be an overland flight, all personal flotation devices had been removed. The plane had a capacity of 50-60 passengers, depending on configuration, but at this time there were 32 passengers and a crew of six.

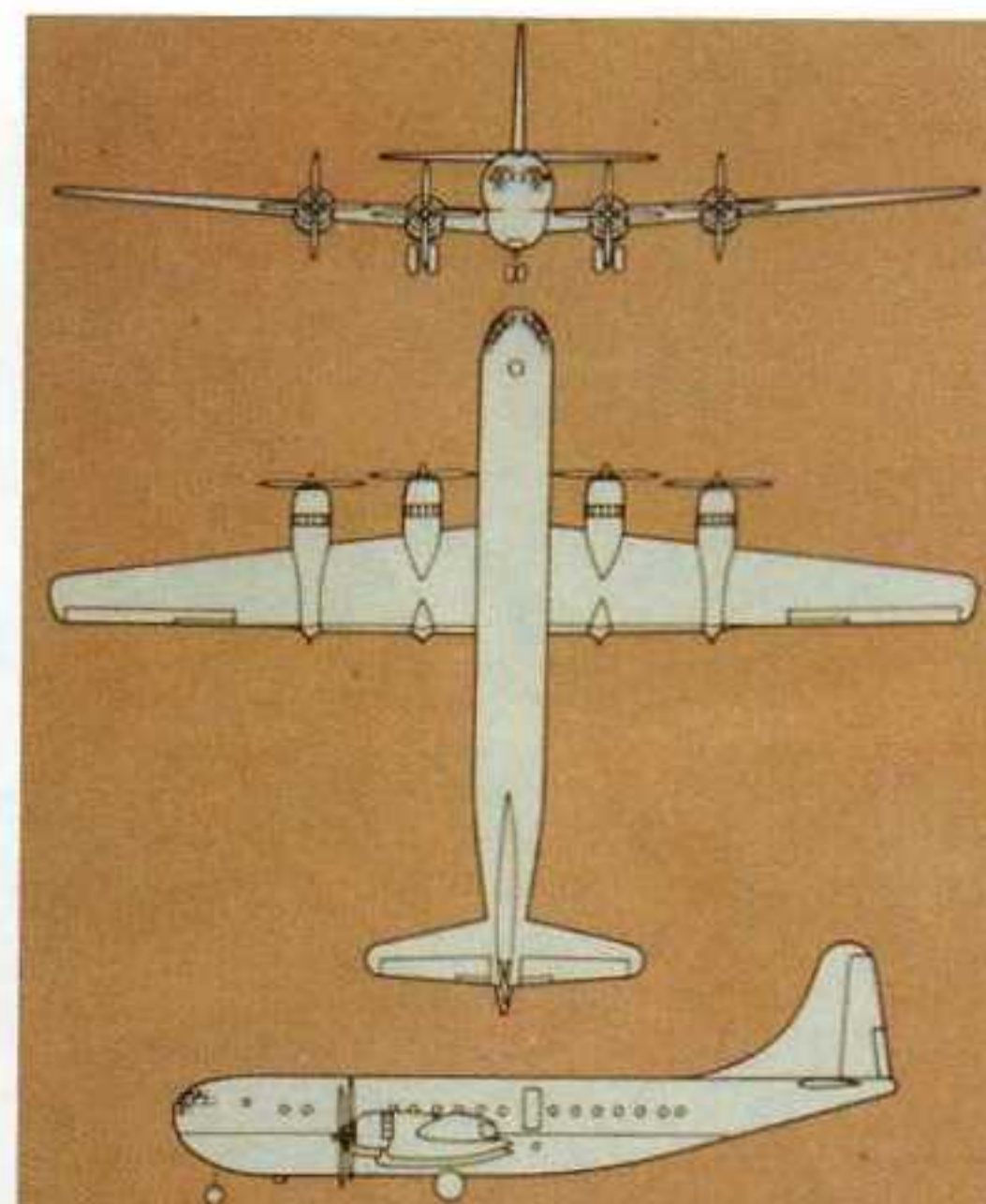
At 8:06 AM Pacific time, the plane took off and climbed to an altitude of 1,000 to 1,200 ft. Shortly after it left the ground, unusual vibration and buffeting

occurred. Al had received some pilot training and sensed that a “stall” was apt to happen. The crew notified the airport tower that they were having difficulty and the reply was that they were clear to land on any runway. As the severe buffeting continued, the pilot felt that it was too late for that and, as in the recent incident on the Hudson River, the pilot made the decision to intentionally ditch the plane in Puget Sound. He was able to make a wide right turn and, at a northwesterly heading, glided down between 500 and 750 yards east of Point Robinson on Maury Island. The water was calm that morning and the plane landed smoothly about 8:10 AM with airspeed of around 120 knots. Upon impact, however, the lower deck split open, flooded and spilled out baggage, freight and mail sacks.

## Evacuation

It was amazing that there was little obvious panic among the passengers and all of them survived the ditching. There was no time for announcements over the PA system, other than the two stewardesses Elinor Whitacre and Dorothy Oetting, assuring them that





Specifications: Stratocruiser  
Boeing Model Number 377

Span	141 ft 3 in
Length	110 ft 4 in
Wing Area	1720 sq ft
Tail Height	38 ft 3 in
Gross Weight	145,000 pounds
Cruising Speed	300 mph
Service Ceiling	33,000 ft
Range	4600 miles
Powerplant	four 3500 hp Pratt & Whitney Wasp Majors
Capacity	50-100 passengers

the seat cushions could be used as makeshift floatation devices. Al was seated next to an emergency exit, so he grabbed the handle; the panel opened and he climbed out on the right wing. A lady passenger from Alaska handed out her 5-year-old son to him and then climbed out herself with seat cushions for the two of them. In the midst of this crisis there was a poignant moment when the little boy said excitedly "Mommy, look! It must be Easter!" as he pointed to the many little dead baby chicks that were floating on the water. They had been shipped in a live-poultry mailing box that had been part of the plane's cargo.

It soon appeared that all of the passengers and crew were standing on the wings. The pilot Captain Robert Reeve Heard, Co-pilot Gene Paul Johnson and Flight Engineer Carl Thomsen had been able to climb out the cockpit windows. Later, they found out that one person was missing, David Razey, the flight service attendant/steward who had been stranded in the lounge area of

the lower deck and did not survive.

The plane remained afloat for about 10-15 minutes after it landed. As the plane settled, they were soon knee-deep in water and it became obvious that in the next moments they would all be submerged in the cold seawater, clinging to their seat cushions. Al knew that he was a strong swimmer so he initially had no apprehension about this prospect; even considering that he could just take off and probably make it alright to shore, though it was a long way off. Others were very worried but hoped rescue help would be imminent. The accident report stated that the water temperature at that time was 42° F.

### Help on the Way

Three young men from the Coast Guard, who were keepers at the Point Robinson Lighthouse, were having breakfast at the station when they both saw and heard the plane as it crashed into the water. While one of them proceeded to put out a call for help, the other two dragged their 14-foot skiff to the beach and with a

## OTHER HELPING HANDS

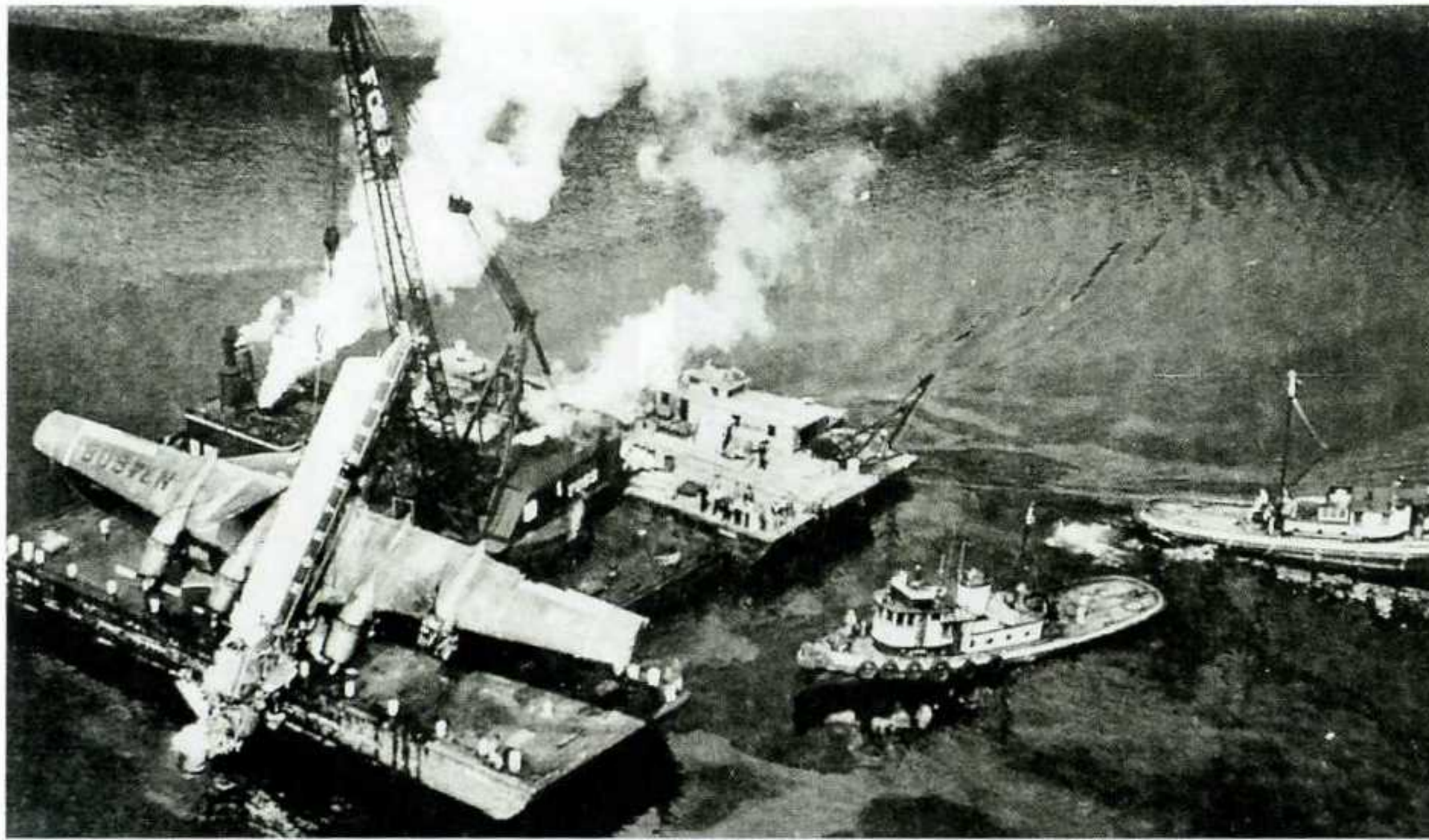
Gary Larson was a 16 year old high school student on Vashon Island and a junior member of the volunteer fire department. He had just finished building a boat in the school shop and it was mounted on a trailer in preparation for its initial launching.

On the morning of the crash, the fire department asked the principal to notify Gary and a friend of his that there was an emergency situation nearby where they might be able to help. They quickly got Gary's boat down to the beach, dragged it into the water and under oars, headed out to the scene.

Gary and his friend were able to tow a few of the victims onto the beach where by then two sport fishermen, with an outboard motor, had pulled up and assisted the people into their boat. They, in turn, took them out to the rescue fleet.

After that, Gary and his friend assisted in sorting through the floating debris that was already coming near the shore and salvaged what they thought might be important, including sacks labeled "U.S. Mail." Indeed, it certainly was a day in their lives that they will never forget.

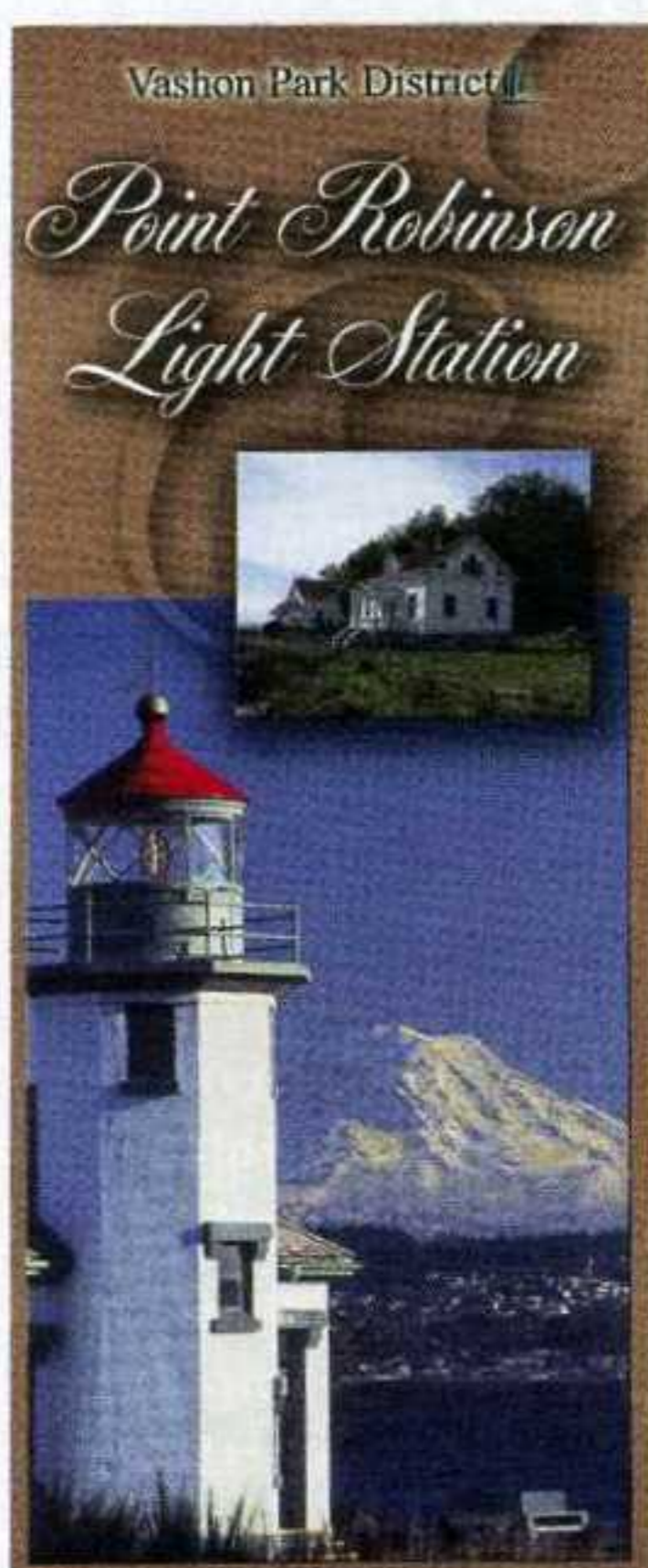




5-horsepower motor set out to the crash site. The crew of an 83-foot Coast Guard cutter, based in Tacoma, was summoned, quickly readied itself and left at 20 knots to come to help.

As the plane was sinking, nose first with the remaining part of the tail sticking up in the air, the Coast Guard skiff gave some of the people something to hang on to, the boat being weighed down until the gunnels were only about two inches above water. Meanwhile two amphibious air-sea rescue planes from McChord Air Force Base were diverted from a training flight after they had heard the first officer's "Mayday" appeal for help and routed to the scene for a real-life rescue. They landed nearby and the flight crews started pulling people aboard. Also a Northwest Airlines DC-3 cargo plane flew over and dropped a 12-man inflated life raft. The raft hit the water about an arms' length from Al, who was now swimming.

As some of the people started swimming out to the life raft, Al noticed that one of the cabin attendants was struggling and did not still have a seat cushion to assist her, so he found one for her to help her keep her head above water. Then with all his strength he was able to boost her up into the raft. However, hypothermia was already at work and he discovered that he was then too weak to get himself into the raft. He was grateful that about this time CUTTER No. CG83527 arrived and 23 year old sailor Myron "Tike" Hillman assisted Al on board. The tug BRYNN FOSS from Tacoma also arrived to help. Al estimates that the total time to rescue everyone from the water took about 30 to 35 minutes. He was informed that a few of his fellow passengers were lying on the floor of one of the amphibians, unconscious. The crews tried to help in every way possible until the survivors were hospitalized, but four of them died nonetheless, probably



ABOVE: Foss 300 crane lifts the 60-ton plane after it was dragged into water of 45 ft. depth. Note the open engine cooling flaps. She was placed on a barge and towed to Tacoma by the tug Foss 18. Photo: Courtesy of Foss Maritime.

LEFT: Three Coast Guard sailors from the Point Robinson Lighthouse were among the early rescuers. A light was first installed there in 1887 and the present lighthouse was built in 1914. It was automated in 1978 and now maintained by the Vashon Park District. The keeper's house has been restored and is available for vacation rental by calling (206) 463-9602. Illustration: Courtesy of Vashon Park District.



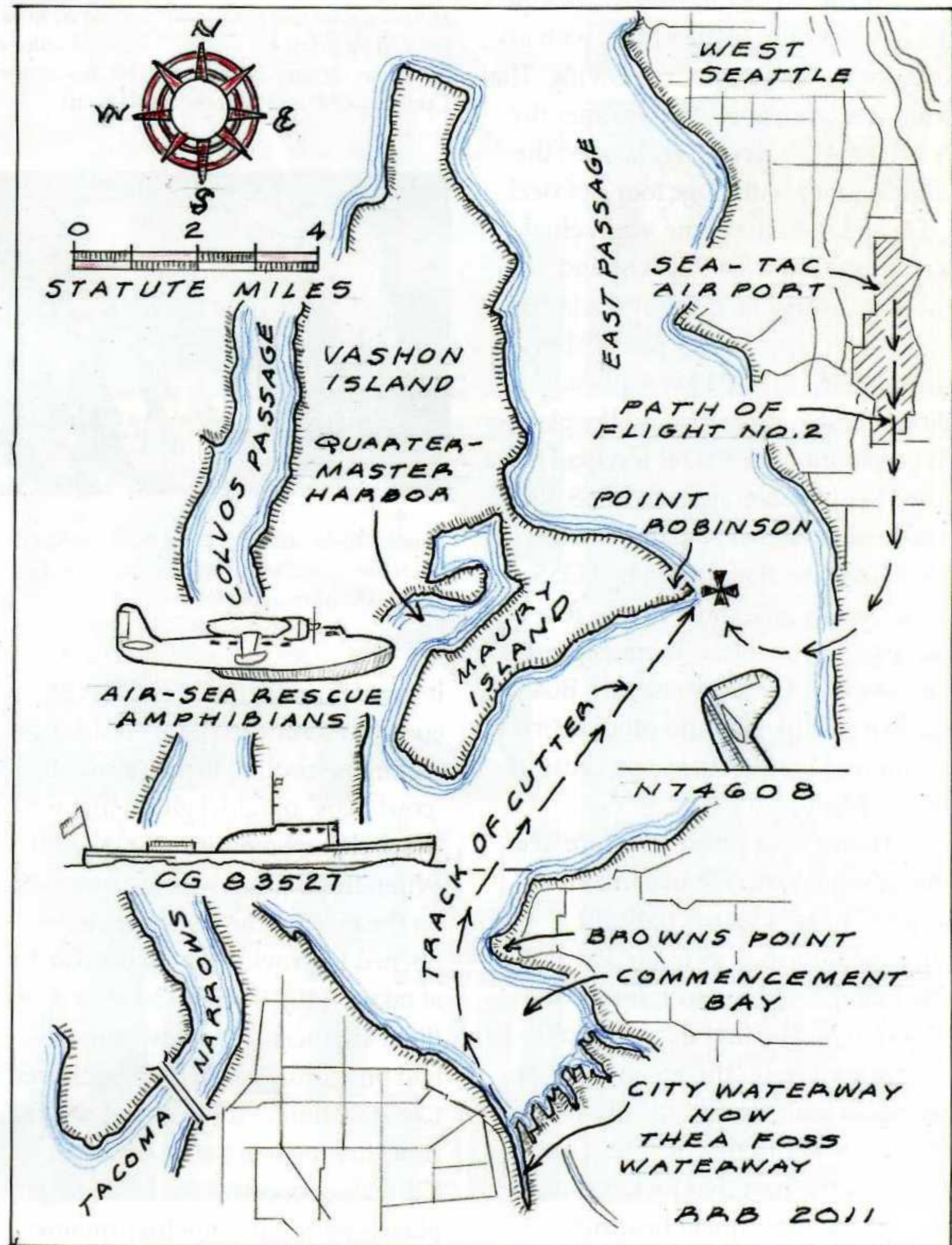


CG-83527 is an 83 ft., 1944 model, wood Coast Guard Cutter. She participated in the D-Day invasion, was stationed at Tacoma after the war and sold to a private owner in 1962. PSMHS members Dan and Roxane Withers found her in California and cruised her back to Puget Sound. With volunteers from the Combatant Craft of America Organization, a long restoration process began. Photo from the collection of Dan Withers

largely due to exposure.

Aboard all the rescue vessels, the crews helped to remove wet clothing and each passenger was wrapped in a warm blanket to help ward off the effects of hypothermia. One of the amphibians flew to Boeing Field where survivors were taken to the Renton Hospital. The other amphibian was too loaded to fly and taxied to Tacoma accompanied by CG83527, the Coast Guard cutter. They landed at the Government Dock where the rest of the survivors were taken to Tacoma hospitals.

Al felt that he was able to walk and exit the cutter on his own, holding the blanket around himself, but he remembers that as he did, he experienced a spasm of shivering. He lost his grip on the blanket and it fell off as he faced distant TV cameras, clad only in what he was born with. At the hospital he called his wife Corky as soon as he could get to a phone, to tell her he was safe. She had been frantic because she had heard the erroneous announcement over the radio that there were no survivors from the Northwest crash that morning. He then called his father-in-law so he could bring him some clothing to wear when he checked out of the hospital a short time later.





When Al went to the airline ticket counter to jokingly request a refund on his ticket, he was interviewed by two attorneys who were preparing to defend against potential lawsuits. Several weeks later, he nonetheless got his refund and a check for \$326.95 to cover the cost of his clothing and his attaché case with its contents. His own company's lawyer informed him that he could easily have held out for a lifetime pass for any future flights. Al was just thankful to have survived.

### Recovery

The sunken Stratocruiser was located at a depth of 396 feet by the Honeywell Research Vessel "NEPER". Northwest Airlines contracted the Foss Launch and Tug Company to attempt the delicate salvage operation, with assistance by Walter McCray Diving. The work was completed 10 days after the crash. Divers successfully lassoed the sunken plane with huge loops of steel cable and then the plane was inched along the bottom of Puget Sound three-quarters of a mile until it lay in only 45-50 feet of water just offshore from Maury Island. Divers put additional cable slings around the plane in preparation for the 60-ton load to be lifted by the steam derrick FOSS 300 and loaded on to a Foss deck barge. The barge was then towed by FOSS TUG No. 18 on a short voyage to a US Navy pier in Tacoma. There, representatives of the Civil Aeronautics Board studied the fuselage and other debris in an attempt to learn the exact cause of the accident

Henry Foss personally directed the salvage work. He was inclined to give "luck" a lot of credit for a successful raising, as quoted in the March 2008 issue of *Tow Bitts Quarterly*: "The first day we could do nothing right; the second day we could do nothing wrong." He added, "I was born into this business, and I've seen the part that luck can play."

At the subsequent hearings,



TOP: Al Kearl and Dan Withers, as work continues on CG-83527.

ABOVE: Al Kearl had a reunion with Tike Hillman, who had personally assisted Al to be rescued that day. He was a 23 year old sailor at that time, serving on the cutter. Photos above: Courtesy of Dan Withers and Al Kearl



Ronald Burke, author/editor, shown with Al Kearl during the interview on August 4, 2009. Photo: Constance Burke

it was determined that the loss of control was due to the air resistance of "engine cooling flaps" (also called "cowl flaps" or "cowl gills") that were left in the open position at take-off. When the engines were warming up on the ground the flaps were to be opened to provide air circulation, but at take-off they were to be closed. The flight engineer was a new-hire who had previously worked on Lockheed Constellations. At Lockheed, at that time, flap switches were operated in a direction opposite to the Boeing planes, so in a perfunctory manner,

when instructed before takeoff "Cowl flaps set for takeoff" he replied "Set for takeoff", noting that the switch was in the position he was used to previously – but not correctly set for the Boeing plane. Hence, the flaps remained open on the four engines and with air turbulence the plane had a loss of lift that caused the aircraft to partially stall. In their investigation, the Civil Air Patrol found that the captain had incorrectly identified the cause of the aircraft's control and stability problems, assuming they were due to asymmetric wing flaps or something. They acknowledged that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him to have correctly identified the problem given the information he had and the nature of the emergency he was faced with. Also, they considered the limited time in which he had to make the decision as to whether to ditch, attempt a landing at McChord AFB or return to Sea-Tac.

It certainly was an avoidable accident. Al had heard that since this incident, Lockheed and Boeing sought to make their flap switches operate the same way; in an effort to help avoid such mistakes happening again. In our interview, we agreed that it was too bad that one of the crew didn't happen to glance out a side window and notice that the flaps were still open. If they had, they could have quickly closed them to rectify the situation. In fact, a short time after the crash, to check this out, another Stratocruiser was flown by Boeing on a test flight. The cowl flaps were deliberately left open and shortly after takeoff produced the buffeting, which disappeared after the flaps were closed.

### Reunion

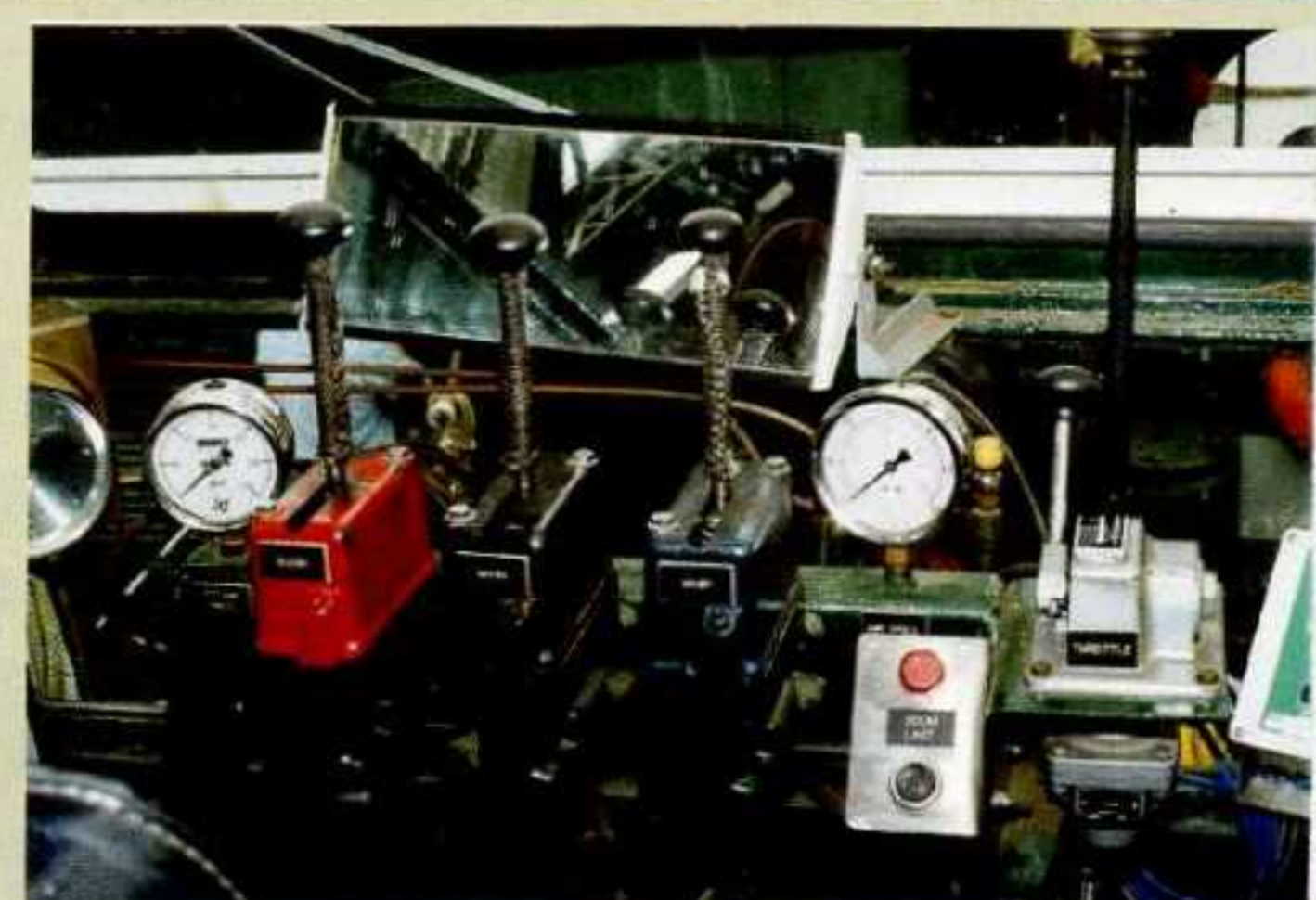
At the time and over the years, Al Kearl has collected a huge notebook of pictures, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia from the Northwest flight that fateful morning. Certain things



bring it to mind again such as the ditching of the plane on the Hudson River recently – then Al can say “been there, done that”. Since he was rescued by the former Cutter CG83527, he was pleased to learn that it is being restored and is now owned by PSMHS members Dan and Roxane Withers. Besides having the opportunity to board the ship again, he was pleased to meet the Withers a few years ago. Not only that, it turns out that one of the volunteers involved in the restoration process is the former crew member who pulled him to safety in 1956, “Tike” Hillman. How special it was for Al, after all these years, to have the chance to thank him and have his picture taken with him. Even though it was sad about those who lost their lives, without the reasonably favorable weather conditions and prompt assistance it could have been drastically different for all involved. This “airborne shipwreck” was a big event in Al’s life and he was glad at 82, to tell the details again to willing listeners. 📷

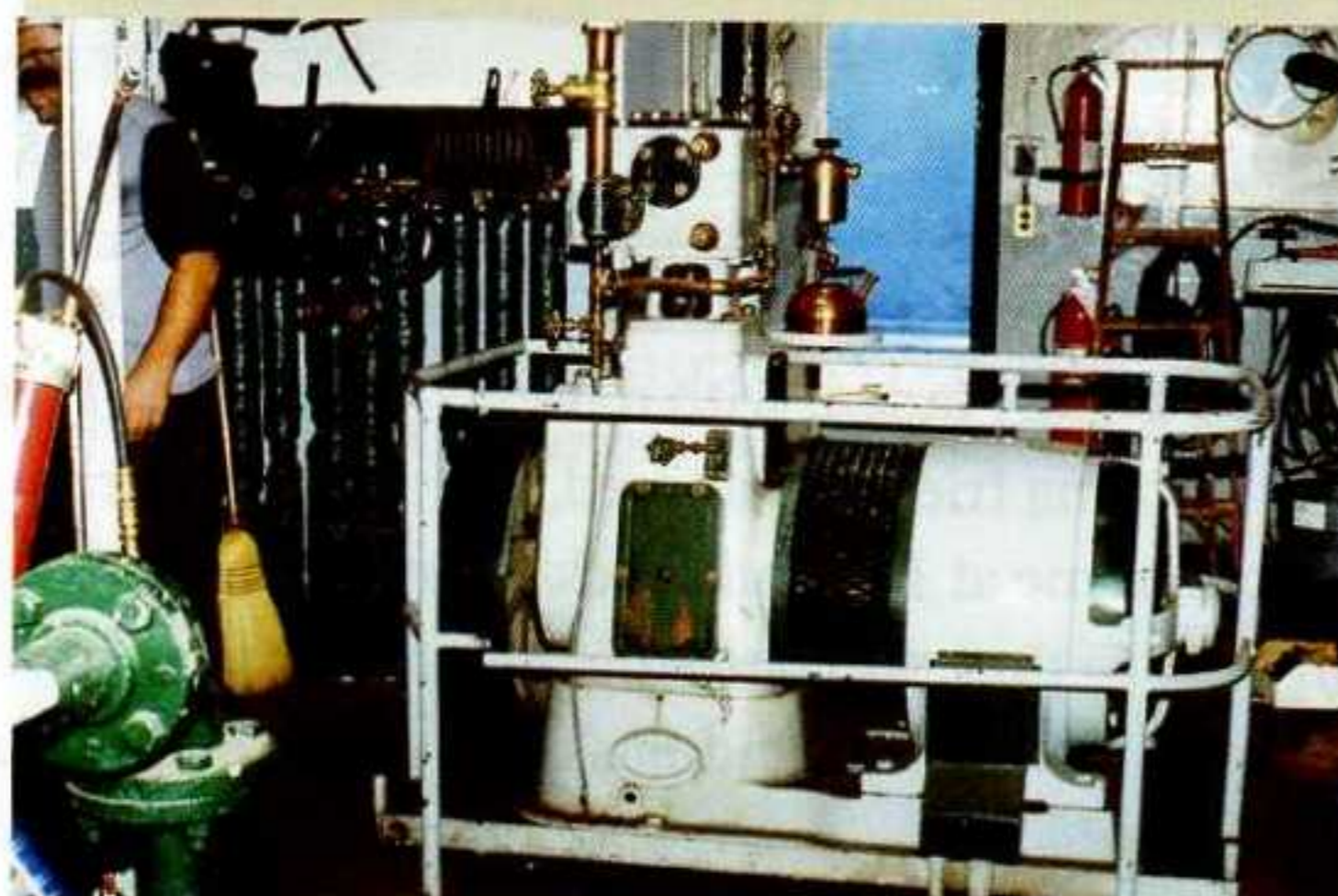
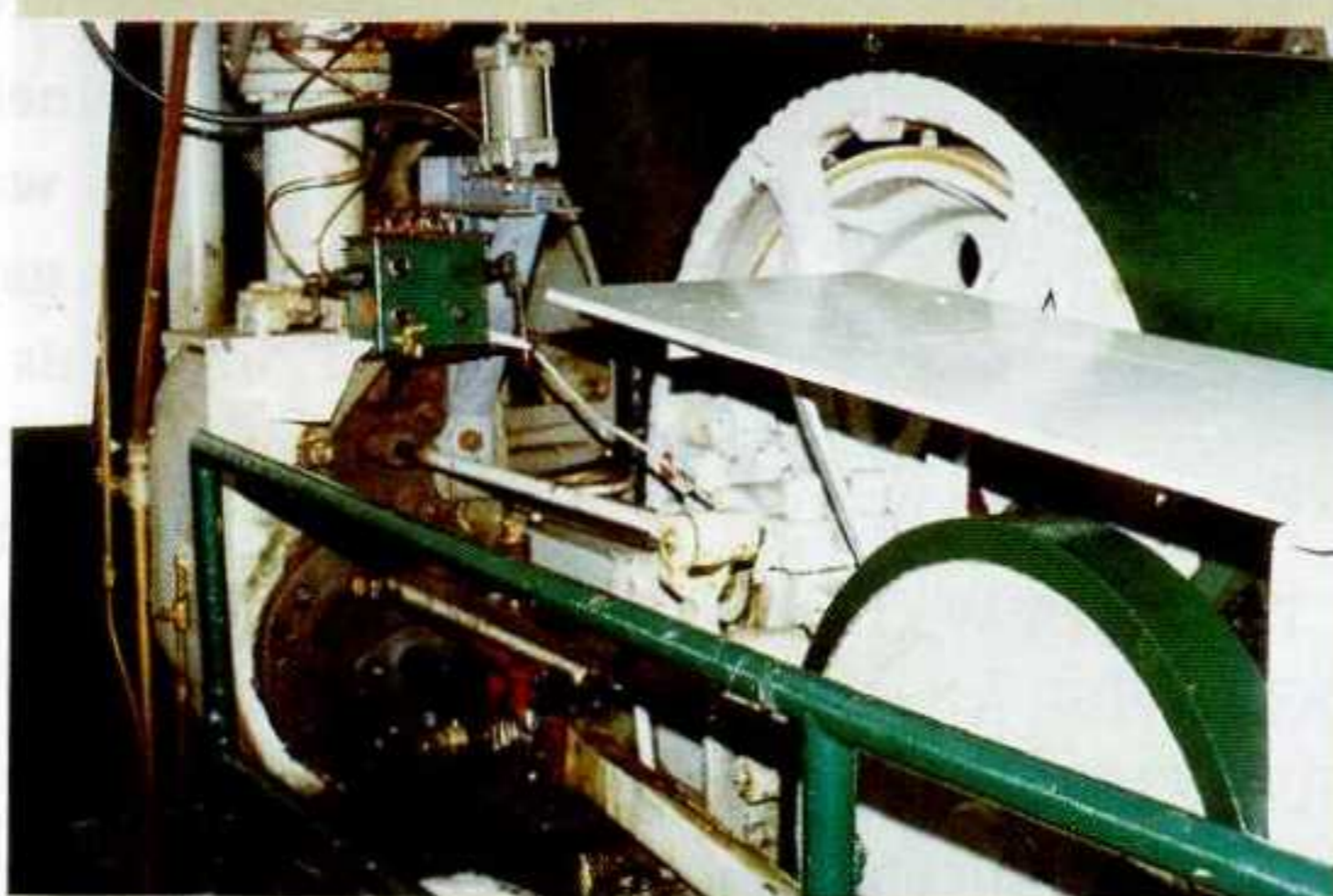


*The Foss 300 floating crane was built for the US Army in 1943. She is shown about to lift a large yacht. Photo courtesy of Mark Freeman*



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*ABOVE-LEFT: The present crew includes operator John Tarabochia, left; with 23 years of service with Foss; and engineer-oiler Jim Mosman, right, with 35 years.*

*ABOVE: Operating controls in the cab – though she is powered by steam, the controls are pneumatic.*

*LEFT: Her steam powered 3 drum draw-works has a lifting capacity of 75 tons. She operates with a steam pressure of 150 psi generated by 2 vertical fire tube boilers.*

*A steam powered generator set provides electrical power including the air compressor to run her pneumatic controls. With the possible exception of VIRGINIA V, Foss 300 is probably the last working steam equipment in the local maritime industry.*

*Photos by Ronald R. Burke, October 2010*