CHAPTER 8
CAPTAIN QUINN'S PULLING BOAT LEGACY

IN 1951, WHEN HE JOINED THE BAR PILOTS, Captain Edgar A. Quinn epitomized the ideal recruit for the world's most dangerous pilotage ground. He was 40 and had over 20 years of experience as a seagoing mariner, including 11 as a master with Matson Navigation Co. His work as a ship captain for Matson was interrupted by World War II, when Captain Quinn commanded troop ships in every theater except the Mediterranean.

Once a bar pilot, Captain Quinn served as president of the organization for five years, as secretary for three years, and as pilot boat manager. He was also active in local civil affairs, serving as a member and later chairman of the Clatsop County Library Board, as a founder and director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, and was active in his church and other organizations.

An excellent athlete, Captain Quinn excelled in rugby, soccer, and cricket during his London boyhood. Like most bar pilots, he maintained a high level of fitness, which provided an important margin of safety for boarding and disembarking ships in rough conditions.

Captain Quinn's fitness and skills as a bar pilot were put to a well-publicized test in the fall of 1962. On September 28, rain squalls blanketed the face of the Pacific just before midnight when Captain Quinn, then 51, descended the pilot ladder lashed to the steel hull of the Japanese freighter Olympia Maru and jumped into the waiting 16-foot pulling boat. Crewing the pulling boat that day were seamen Don Nelson, 34, and William Wells, 35.

By this time, the traditional pulling boat was fiberglass, made from a mold of the traditional wooden hull, and fitted with a 10-horsepower outboard motor. But two pair of oars remained standard equipment, lashed just inboard of the two rowing stations.

Quinn took his seat at the stern of the small craft, wiping from his face the cold spray that whipped across the ocean as a 60-knot gale began to sweep ashore. He was looking forward to a hot cup of tea aboard the Peacock, which was just a few hundred yards away with her bow facing into the oncoming storm.

A sudden freak wave caught the pulling boat, juggled it up to the top of its crest and then turned the small craft “turtle” or upside down and slammed her into the trough. “We righted the boat finally by hauling on the keel line, which had been rigged for just such a disaster,” Quinn recalled later. The pulling boats used by the bar pilots were designed to be righted after capsizing, but it was no easy task at sea. On this stormy night, Quinn, Nelson, and Wells swam to the same side of the pulling boat, positioned themselves from bow to stern and then grabbed the line laced through the keel and jerked the boat upright.

Once aboard, the sheet metal bailing can that could double as a sea anchor was put to work and Captain Quinn surveyed the scene. “We were awash and I could not see the Maru or the Peacock and I knew then that we were on our own,” he recalled.

Just like what happened to the Iowa more than two decades earlier (see Chapter 9), the gale-force winds out of the southwest and the strong northerly set of the current drove the pulling boat north all through the night. The capsizing fouled the outboard motor so Don Nelson rowed for three or four hours to keep the boat
running into the wind and sea. Bill Wells had started the day with a touch of the flu that worsened in the terrible conditions and rendered him too weak to help with the rowing. Captain Quinn shouted encouragement often to seaman Wells, who seemed to be growing weaker.

As Nelson began to tire from rowing, he was able to rig the bailer as a sea anchor that kept the boat headed into the seas. But when the handle broke and the sea anchor disappeared, Nelson went back to his oars until daybreak. As morning light emerged, the three could make out the Washington shore through the driving spray, but the huge storm-driven swells made the idea of heading ashore suicidal.

Bill Wells grew weaker throughout the night and into the morning. At about 10 o’clock, he crawled forward to the bow where he shivered in the swirling seawater. Wells died at approximately 10:30 a.m. Using the piece of rope that had been tied to the sea anchor, Nelson lashed Wells’ body tightly to the transom while the storm continued to drive the boat north for another 18 hours under rainy gray skies.

With no food or water, Quinn and Nelson began to suffer from exposure and became ravenously thirsty. “We stuck out our tongues to catch rainwater and we kept telling each other we were going to make it,” said Quinn.

As another September night began to fall upon them, the swells had moderated and the pair headed toward the lines of breakers along the shore, rowing frantically. Once in the breaking waves, which extended over several hundred yards, the pulling boat rolled over multiple times and had to be repeatedly righted and reboarded. Finally, after yet another capsizing, their feet touched bottom while trying to re-right the craft and they started to wade ashore. Incredibly, the pair had spent more than two hours working their way through the breakers, riding and reboarding their capsized craft over a dozen times. But their journey was not over.

Quinn and Nelson were so weak that neither could make it on his own and they had to wrap their arms around each other to make that last distance through the surf zone. Once ashore, they supported each other through a three-mile hike to a motel which was emitting a bit of light. It was tough going. Nelson had lost his boots in the ordeal at sea and nearly broke his ankle in one of the collisions with the pulling boat. It was nearly midnight when Quinn and Nelson knocked on the door of the motel. “A woman opened the door with eyes as big as half dollars looking at us beach rats,” said Nelson. She had heard about their plight on the radio, brought them inside, sat them down by her fire and covered them with blankets. She brewed a pot of coffee, but neither man was able to hold up a coffee cup and so she spoon-fed it to them.

During one of the multiple capsizings while coming ashore, William Wells’ body had broken loose from its lashing and had drifted away. Several days later, the body washed ashore on a beach north of the spot where the pulling boat was later recovered.

A massive search for the three missing men had been launched from Astoria, and the Olympia Maru had turned back from the start of her return voyage to Japan to join the freighter Michigan in the search. These vessels teamed up with the pilot boats Peacock and Columbia and the Coast Guard Cutter Yocona in a desperate search for the three.

Quinn and Nelson had come ashore near Grayland, Washington, some 25 miles north of where the pulling boat had originally capsized. The woman who was tending to them at the motel called the local sheriff, and a deputy soon arrived to deliver the two men to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Aberdeen. Sitting in the back seat, Don Nelson became concerned for his safety as the police cruiser reached speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour. Nelson tapped the deputy on the shoulder and said, “Sir, I don’t mean to tell you your business,
but I didn’t survive this boat wreck to be killed by a car wreck.” The deputy sheriff slowed down and Nelson sighed to himself in relief, “We’re not dying.”

Quinn and Nelson spent two days in Aberdeen and then were transferred to St. Mary’s Hospital in Astoria. While there, one of Don Nelson’s friends snuck two quarts of Canadian Club into his room. When an elderly nun discovered his stash, Nelson thought it was sure to be confiscated. Instead, she smiled broadly and said with a wink, “This is fine medicine if it is used right.”

Incredibly, Nelson was back on the bar within a week after his discharge from the hospital. Captain Quinn, however, who had been wearing the then-standard pilot uniform whipcord trousers and matching jacket, lost most of the skin on his upper legs down to his knees from the combination of the abrasive fabric and salt water. He was off for several months as he grew back that skin.

Bill Wells’ wife was pregnant with twins when he died. Don Nelson had nightmares about the loss of his shipmate and his own close call with death for several years.