

Salute to M/V *Salvage Chief* (ex-LSM 380)

by Jim Mockford

Astoria, Oregon, is the home of the legendary ship M/V *Salvage Chief*, which carries a history dating back to World War II, when it was built as a Landing Ship Medium (LSM) to sail into the Pacific in the war against Japan. The *Salvage Chief* has long been connected to Astoria, and to a community of hundreds of people who served onboard as crew and ashore managing operations from her homeport over the span of more than six decades. *Salvage Chief* has recently embarked on a third career since her maiden voyage seventy-three years ago. After service in the US Navy and years conducting salvage operations on the West Coast, *Salvage Chief* will serve as a working educational platform honoring and preserving the memory of the ship and those who worked onboard, and as a working vessel, training future generations of mariners, engineers, and salvors.

The ship was built as a landing craft for the US Navy at Brown Ship Building Company in Houston, Texas, one of 558 LSMs built by the Navy between 1944 and 1945. Laid down on 23 December 1944, the vessel was launched just three weeks later on 13 January 1945 and commissioned as USS *LSM-380* on 10 February, assigned to the Asia-Pacific theater. The LSM-1 class (Landing Ship, Medium) would prove to be vital to the Allies' success in Iwo Jima and the Japanese home islands. *LSM-380* had an overall length of 203'6" and beam of 34'6", but a light draft of just 6'4" forward and 8'3" aft when fully loaded—that translated to carrying five medium or three heavy tanks, or up to nine DUKW's, the military amphibious vehicles (popularly known as Duck boats) designed by famed yacht designer Rod Stephens Jr. of Sparkman and Stephens.

The ship's first commander, LT. John K. Ullrich, USNR, sailed with a complement of five officers and fifty-four enlisted sailors. Propelled by two Fairbanks Morse 1,440 horsepower (BHP) diesel engines driving the 720-rpm twin screws, *LSM-380* had a range of 4,900 miles (at twelve knots with 928 tons displacement). *LSM-380* sailed from San Francisco for its maiden voyage carrying pontoon bridges to join



LSM-380 at anchor in San Francisco Bay, 1945/46.

the fleet then assembling in the western Pacific. The ship was staged at Minami-Tori-shima (Marcus Island) for the planned invasion of Japan: the pilothouse and conning tower were protected by armored plates, 10-pound STS splinter shields were fitted on the gun mounts, a 40mm gun was mounted on the bow, and four 20mm guns were mounted to defend against attacks during landing operations. It was anticipated that the LSMs would be harassed by Japanese Special Attack Units, kamikaze aircraft, or even *shinyo* (Japanese motorized suicide boats), as they were landing troops and tanks on the beach.

Just six months after *LSM-380* set off from California for the Pacific theater, Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan in a radio broadcast on 15 August 1945 and the war was over. Instead of battle duty, *LSM-380* headed for China with Marines onboard charged with managing the repatriation of thousands of surrendered Japanese military troops and civilians to Japan. *LSM-380* left China and sailed to Guam in December 1946, and on to Pearl Harbor in January 1947 before making her final leg across the Pacific to San Francisco, where she would join the mothball fleet at Suisan Bay and await the



In 1949, the first year Salvage Chief began operations after her conversion, Fred Devine and his crew aboard Salvage Chief refloated SS Pine Bluff Victory, which had run aground in the Columbia River.

scrapyard, or so it appeared. Just after *LSM-380* was decommissioned on 19 February 1948, a Portland-based salvage expert named Fred Devine came up with a new idea of how to repurpose an LSM for shallow-water salvage work, and he purchased *380* with plans to convert the wartime vessel for commercial use.

George Thomas Frederick Devine was born in 1898 and began working as a gill-net diver at the age of eleven, at a time when steam power and newer technologies in the fisheries began to replace the older sail-driven gillnetters that comprised Astoria's "Butterfly Fleet." At fifteen years of age, Devine established his own diving company; thirty-four years later, he was ready to develop a new ship for the maritime salvage industry. Fred Devine returned to Portland with *LSM-380* and began her transformation by welding shut the bow doors and cutting away part of the stern. He scavenged gear and equipment from other decommissioned ships, including six LST anchor winches with a 60-ton pull, which were installed on deck—three facing forward and three aft. He added four 3,000-pound Danforth anchors and six huge 12,000-pound Eells anchors. He built a helipad on the aft deck. Helicopters had been contracted by the military from Sikorsky in 1939, and the first production R-4 was deployed in April 1944 in Burma, where the rugged terrain made it impossible to land a plane. For marine salvage work, helicopters were ideal for transporting people and equipment between ships or from ship to shore. Devine made a deal with Wes Lematta of Columbia Helicopters to work with *Salvage Chief* on recovery missions when needed, and the relationship lasted over many years and through many epic salvage operations.¹

The ship worked out of Astoria, near the mouth of the Columbia River, ready at all times to get underway when a call for help was received. Rescue and recovery missions were recorded in the ship's salvage log, and they include all kinds of rescued vessels since operations began in 1949: Liberty ships, bulk freighters, barges, oil tankers, dredges, cruise ships, a Japanese troop ship, a US Coast Guard cutter. A review of *Salvage Chief's* log reveals the names of ships that have become famous



M/V Salvage Chief refloating SS Yorkmar, near the entrance to Grays Harbor on the Washington coast in December 1952. After their first attempt failed, the salvage crew gave it another go. They set three massive anchors seaward, backed their vessel into the breakers, sent three tow lines over to the grounded ship, and succeeded in pulling the 10,000-ton Liberty ship into deeper water.

in the history of shipwrecks, strandings, and other maritime misfortunes, including the call to stabilize and eventually assist in the transit of the crippled supertanker *Exxon Valdez* from Prince William Sound to San Diego in 1989. *Salvage Chief* was already well known for its work in rescuing large ships in hazardous and dire situations. Back in December 1952, *Salvage Chief* received a call that the freighter *SS Yorkmar*, a 10,000-ton Liberty ship, had gone ashore on the beach north of Grays Harbor, now known as Ocean Shores, Washington. *Salvage Chief* arrived on the scene and began to lay out three of its giant anchors and get its tow lines to the *Yorkmar* as the surf pounded the stranded vessel. No ship of this size had ever been refloated, but *Salvage Chief* succeeded. Within view of the shore, where media crews were filming, the rescue was broadcast on the local news; the Universal Newsreel was distributed up and

down the West Coast, bringing Devine and *Salvage Chief's* captain, Vince Miller, national acclaim. The *Yorkmar* job was also the first mission of a new hire, chief mate Reino Mattila, who would take over as captain after the *Yorkmar* operation and serve in this position for the next fifty years. Mattila retired in 2002 at the age of eighty, with a record of more than 200 successful salvage missions and just three losses. Mattila died in 2011; his obituary in *The Daily Astorian* noted that his last salvage mission in *Salvage Chief* was the 1999 rescue of a barge named *Mr. Chips*, which had beached at Ocean Shores, the very location where his first mission took place in 1952.² Today there is a Yorkmar Street in Ocean Shores, Washington.

I was interested to find an entry about a Japanese troop transport *Nozima Maru*, which had been abandoned at Kiska Island during the 1942 Japanese invasion of the

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(left) The Salvage Chief crew celebrating their success after refloating the Yorkmar.

(below) Fred Devine and Captain Reino Mattila. It was Devine's idea to convert a decommissioned WWII naval landing ship to a salvage vessel. He equipped Salvage Chief with six 100-ton winches below deck (out of the weather): the forward three winches led to 8,000-pound or 12,000-pound Eells anchors, while the aft winches provided tow lines to the stranded vessel. Originally designed to land troops and tanks on the beach, the vessel could lay in heavy surf conditions, where other vessels could not maneuver without risk of becoming stranded themselves. Captain Mattila came onboard as chief mate for the Yorkmar job before taking over as captain shortly afterwards. He would go on to serve as Salvage Chief's captain for the next fifty years, finally retiring in 2002 at the age of 80.

Aleutian Islands and was still beached over a decade later when *Salvage Chief* was hired to refloat the ship and tow it to Japan for scrapping. It was during this mission that Chief Engineer Dick Floyd suffered a heart attack and died on board. It was the only time in its long history that *Salvage Chief* lost a man during a salvage operation. The *Nozima Maru* was in tow when a heavy storm sank it off the coast of Japan and it was lost at sea, while hearts on board felt the loss of Dick Floyd and family at home received the sad news by telegram. Dick Floyd's legacy lived on in his sons Dave and Don, who later joined the crew of *Salvage Chief*.

There were other voyages that took the ship and her crew to the far side of the Pacific, including a mission at Wake Island and an aircraft carrier tow from Seattle to an Osaka scrapyard. Work in Alaskan waters took the former LSM as far as remote Barter Island on the Arctic Ocean. A little more than a decade after the *Yorkmar* recovery, *Salvage Chief* was getting contracts to tow supply barges as far away as Vietnam's Vung Tau Bay. In 1967 Captain Mattila and a young salvage master, Mick Leitz, worked the rescue of SS *Captyan-nis*—Leitz is Devine's son-in-law, and he would eventually take over the operations from Devine. *Salvage Chief* successfully pulled the Greek freighter off the Clatsop Spit in an operation described by writer



Dick Barney in his December 1971 *Popular Mechanics* article, "In the Salvage Business You Don't Go Out to See Men Against the Sea." Barney quoted Mick Leitz, "You don't go out there to see if a job can be done. You go out there to do it."³ It was this kind of can-do attitude and the experience he gained while working for his father-in-law that made Leitz a natural

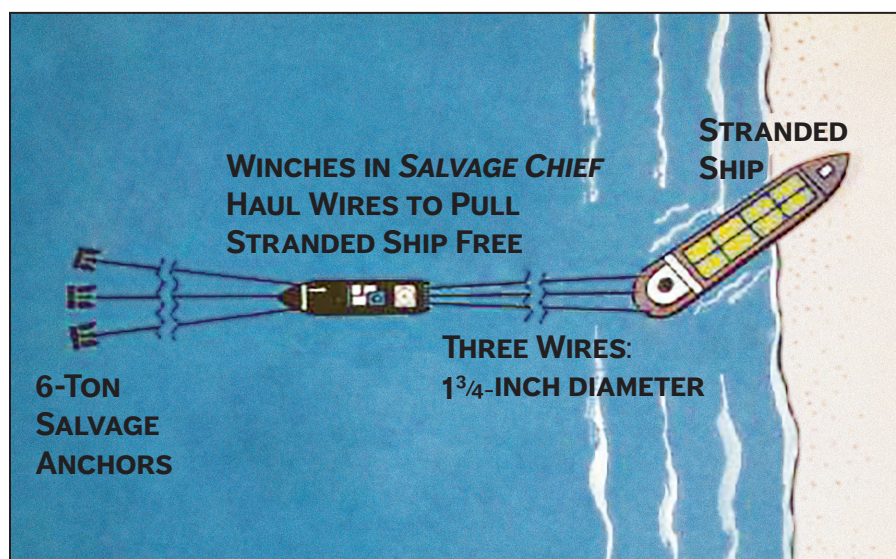
successor to Devine in the salvage business.

Mick's sister-in-law Marilyn Leitz, who worked in the business for more than two decades, recalled how calls for a salvage project were received, inevitably at late hours, but that Astorians were routinely ready and willing to assist. In the case of the *Captyan-nis* rescue, when the call came in, she went out and bought every pump

available in Astoria to send out by helicopter to the ship. *Salvage Chief* was the talk of the town and brought a sense of community beyond just those employed by *Salvage Chief*. It was Astoria's ship!

Fred Devine died in 1971, and it seems appropriate that the man who had spent so much of his life facing the challenging sea should be returned to the sea. It was Devine's request that his family sail with him on *Salvage Chief* one more time for the burial at sea. A granddaughter, Julie Leitz, drove the ship as her father, Mick, oversaw the ceremony on deck. With that, the legacy of the *Salvage Chief* passed on to another generation with Mick Leitz at the helm, until 1980 when he founded his own salvage contract business under the name J. H. Leitz and Associates, Inc., in association with *Salvage Chief* for specific projects.

Salvage Chief was employed to recover the wreckage after the sensational explosion of the 810-foot Liberian oil tanker SS *Sansinena* occurred at Berth 46 in San Pedro, Los Angeles, in 1976. About 30,000



barrels of bunker oil had to be pumped from the tanker during a job that lasted 104 working days and included sending divers to cut the ship's mid-section in pieces before patching and refloating the parts of the hull.

Salvage Chief continued with steady work, rescuing and salvaging dozens of

vessels. A particularly challenging operation came in 1999, when a 600-foot wood-chip carrier named *New Carissa* went aground in southern Oregon near Coos Bay. Extremely bad weather exacerbated the physical work at hand, plus the logistics were made more complicated by a new unified command approach taken by the State of



On 17 December 1976, the 810-foot oil tanker *Sansinena* exploded at the dock at the Port of Los Angeles, Berth 46 in San Pedro, California. *Salvage Chief* was called in to recover the wreckage, pump the remaining oil from the tanker, and patch sections of the hull.

Oregon, the Coast Guard, and the US Navy, the latter of which dispatched the destroyer USS *David R. Ray* and the submarine USS *Bremerton* to the scene. The decision was made for the submarine to fire a Mark 48 torpedo to complete the sinking of a portion of the wrecked ship after it had been declared a total loss by the insurer. *Salvage Chief*, although mobilized to work on the wreck, had been called off the job following a series of unified command decisions still considered controversial today. Although the *New Carissa* is not one of the favorite stories to be told among the “Chieftains,” it was the ship’s last mobilization in the public eye. The salvage business had changed over the decades; for today’s readers, it is important to know that Fred Devine had established a reputation that “a man’s word and a handshake” was good enough to secure a multimillion-dollar deal. It was also a time when “No Cure—No Pay” was the business model under Lloyd’s Open Form arbitration of insurance settlement, established by Lloyd’s of London. This business model worked well for *Salvage Chief* during most of her career, but, as Mick Leitz ex-



Salvage Chief in dry dock. With full lines forward and a relatively shallow draft, the former World War II landing craft is particularly suited for salvage work, which often requires maneuvering in surf zones and other hazardous locations.

plained, the case of the *New Carissa* job made it obvious that complexities of the modern age had changed the model.

The vessel is now owned by Salvage Chief, LLC, whose partners are working

to transition the ship to its new role, preparing the ship for training and emergency response, in the latter case specifically to serve as an asset for local disaster response—primarily a predicted Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, which projects potential for a 9.0-magnitude earthquake resulting in a 22-foot tsunami.

When I visited *Salvage Chief* for her first public tour on 21 February 2016 at the Maritime Environmental Research and Technology Station (MERTS) near Astoria, two veteran Chieftains were on board as guides: Dean Lackey and Don Floyd, a second-generation Chieftain who told stories going back to the mid-1970s when he joined the crew. The organization’s senior partner, Floyd Holcom, met with visitors and talked about the vessel’s future. During the summer of 2017, Tongue Point Job Corps students painted the ship’s helipad and got some preliminary training in the engine room, the kind of experiences and training the *Salvage Chief* (LSM 380)



Salvage Chief was equipped with a large helicopter deck to support flight operations. The helicopter was used to transport salvage equipment and run tow lines to stranded vessels. Portable equipment included: hydraulic-powered oil transfer pumps, dewatering pumps, firefighting equipment, air compressors, high-volume low-pressure blowers, welders, and supplies for the personnel onboard.

Foundation would like to pursue through partnerships with Clatsop Community College's seamanship program and other institutions looking for instruction and hands-on training opportunities. The Salvage Chief Foundation publications and Facebook site continue to post photos and news of renovations and projects that are bringing the historic vessel to life for a new generation and pay tribute to the ship and her owners and crewmembers for their contribution to American maritime history.⁴ ⚓

NOTES

¹"Columbia Helicopters: 50 Years of Excellence," *Rotor Magazine*, Winter 2006–07 (Helicopter Association International).

²Capt. Reino Mattila obituary in *The Daily Astorian*, 1 December 2011.

³Barney, Dick. "In the Salvage Business You Don't Go Out to See Men Against the Sea," *Popular Mechanics*, December 1971, p. 92.

⁴*The Salvage Chief: Rescue Ship by Those Who Were There*, compiled by Sunnie Bell and published by Salvage Chief Foundation 2015.

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You can follow *Salvage Chief* in her new role through the organization's Facebook page under "Salvage Chief (LSM380, WWII) Foundation" or on their new website at www.readythechief.com. Salvage Chief LLC Senior Partner Floyd Holcom explains that, in addition to its educational and training mission, *Salvage Chief* has a valuable contribution to make in local disaster response. "Currently, there is nothing on the West Coast with the *Salvage Chief's* capabilities." Estimated dry docking and shipyard repairs are projected to cost \$1.5 million, for which they are actively seeking donations. All contributions go directly to the ship's needs.

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Salvage Chief alongside Exxon Valdez in Prince William Sound.

(below) View from Salvage Chief as Exxon Valdez entered San Diego Harbor, bound for the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company yard, where the tanker was built (launched in 1986).



On 24 March 1989, the 987-foot oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Until the BP oil spill, it was the biggest oil spill in American history. Exxon hired Salvage Master Mick Leitz, who requested Fred Devine Diving & Salvage Co. divers and portable salvage equipment be flown to the scene. M/V Salvage Chief was dispatched from Astoria and would serve as the primary salvage support vessel. The crew performed the work to refloat and prepare the vessel for the 2,500-mile voyage (under tow) to a dry dock in San Diego, California. During the transit to San Diego, Salvage Chief served as an escort vessel and provided helicopter support. Salvage Chief divers were part of the riding crew aboard Exxon Valdez during the transit, monitoring and maintaining the proper gas pressures that kept the vessel afloat. When Exxon Valdez entered the harbor on 30 July 1989, Salvage Chief's third mate, Charlie Hayward, was the helmsman aboard the tanker. (Description provided by Salvage Chief Bosun D. Floyd)