

We have many of the names of those who were there when Pan Am first took flight in 1927, but not many of their words. Now thanks to the efforts of Charles D. Morgan and publisher Jacque Hillman, we're able to share part of the story of Charles "Gunner" Morgan. His extraordinary life is told in their new book, "Captain of the Tides: Gunner Morgan." He had already lived a very full and exciting life when he crossed paths with a just-about-to-be-airborne Pan American Airways in Key West.

CAPTAIN OF THE TIDES: GUNNER MORGAN



Charles D. Morgan
With Jacque Hillman

Gunner Morgan: Present at the Beginning

*By Jacque Hillman
The HillHelen Group Publishers*

In 1926, Gunner Morgan of Key West, Florida, heard that an investor wanted to start an airline for mail and passengers and sought someone with connections in Cuba and South America.

“I’m the man you need,” he said in his interview with Pan American Airways. He was right. He became marine inspector, checking land for potential airports and easing the way with local governments.

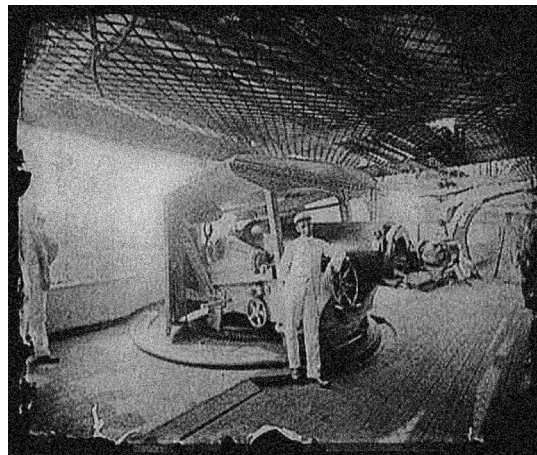
His intriguing life is retold in the historical novel, “Captain of the Tides: Gunner Morgan,” co-authored by Charles D. Morgan, Gunner’s grandson, and Jacque Hillman. The book will be available in late September.

“I began researching my grandfather because I grew up hearing stories of his strange and interesting life. Born in 1865, the year the Civil War ended, he lived in a different time, a different world. His amazing life from age 17 to 93 is centered on the U.S. Navy, Cuba and Key West,” said Charles Morgan.

“I carried his documents with me for more than 45 years, desperately wanting to tell his story. I have his 1881 scrapbook, his passport, his lucky rabbit’s foot, his pardon from President Theodore Roosevelt and a copy of a personal letter from Thomas Edison, among other papers,” Morgan added. “He grew up in New Orleans in the 1870s, when the family name was Morgani, later changed to Morgan. He fought in three wars.”



Gunner in 1902 (Courtesy Charles D. Morgan).



*Chief Gunner's Mate Charles Morgan, 1899
(Courtesy Charles D. Morgan).*

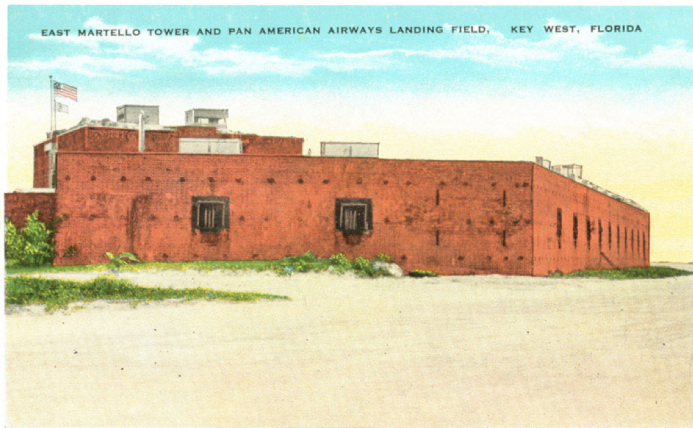
By age 62, Gunner Morgan, the first enlisted man promoted to officer in the Navy, had sailed the seas and won the title of “Man Behind the Gun” because of his prowess shooting the big guns for the Navy. He was known as the “Man Who Started the Spanish-American War” because he led the divers who dived onto the USS Maine after it exploded in Havana Harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, killing 266 men. He reported to the Naval Board of Inquiry that the explosion blasted inward, meaning it was a Spanish mine, and war was declared.

He married Vivian Warren, daughter of Jerry Warren, the millionaire sugar king of Havana, and became involved in Warren’s many investments, such as Pin-Ap-Ola, a pineapple soda. World War I brought an end to that enterprise. Ships were needed for men and armaments, not pineapples.

He had signed on with the Navy in 1882, but Gunner managed to get back into active service at the Navy Yard in Key West during the war. In 1917-1918, he worked on smoke bombs and depth charges with Thomas Edison in his secret Navy lab in Key West. One day, the Edison experimental shell exploded, killing volunteer seamen. Gunner survived, although his uniform was in tatters and his hair singed.

He worked for Warren Enterprises again after the war ended while Miami was a boomtown, running wide open with gambling and booze available. Then the 1926 hurricane swept through Miami, leaving a long path to restoration.

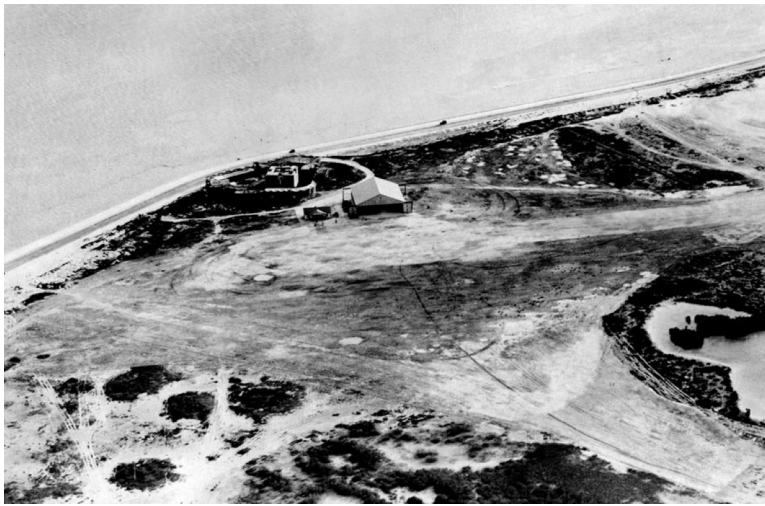
That’s when Gunner decided to interview with Pan Am. His family documents reveal how that went:



Postcard image of the old fort adjacent to Meacham Field on Key West. This is visible just above the Pan Am hangar in the next photo (PAHF Photo/Zavada Collection).

“My job was to secure airfields in Cuba and South America and help get airmail and passenger service operating between Key West and Havana for Pan American Airways.

“I did pretty much anything that needed doing. And after I finished in Cuba, I was transferred to Key West to get that operation up and going. We had located a flat spot of sandy brush on the outskirts of the city to create a landing field.”



Early Aerial View of Meacham Field, Key West – Pan American's first airport, circa 1928 (PAHF Collection).

Crews set to work on Oct. 3, 1927, with construction engineer F.J. Gelhaus and Capt. J.E. Whitbeck watching.

“I knew we had two weeks before we were scheduled to make the first airmail flight between Key West and Havana,” Gunner wrote. “Anthony Fokker’s tri-motor plane was going to land with U.S. mail. We had to work harder and faster.”

Gunner wrote: “We had a contract with the United States Post Office to fly the mail to Havana, and we had put up a bond to guarantee that we’d start on or before October 19th, 1927. I knew we were in a bind. We kept waiting on the plane from the Fokker factory in New Jersey.

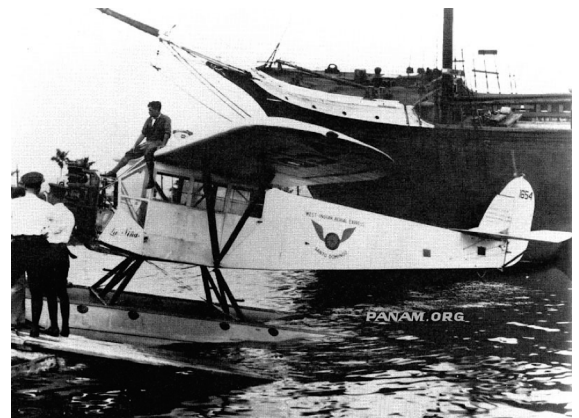


It was an open secret in Key West that Pan Am was working to get the airmail service going by October 19th.

“But we made it. We made a deal with Cy Caldwell, who was flying a little single-engine Fairchild on pontoons — the “Nina” — for the West Indies Aerial Express, to take the mail over to Havana. On the morning of Oct. 19th, we got the mail from the railroad station, and I had a U.S. Coast Guard boat ready to take the mail to the “Nina” — out in the harbor.

“That evening, I dined with Vivian and Jerry and told them Cy took off from Key West at 6:30 in the morning and traveled the 90 miles to Havana in 2 hours and 42 minutes. That saved the contract.

“Then we got the next mail over 9 days later, on Oct. 28. (Ed) Musick came in from New York with the Fokker F-7, the General Machado, on Oct. 26. I had my photo taken next to the plane with some of our crew. Musick made the first regular flight for a Pan American plane two days later on Oct. 28th, 1927, and did it regularly for 30 days.”



Cy Caldwell and “La Nina” (PAHF Collection).

“Sometimes Vic Chenea, the traffic manager, had to go all the way to Jacksonville to find someone to fly over with Pan Am.”



Fokker F-VII

Gunner and his Pan Am colleagues posing next to the General Machado. He's in the center, wearing a light-colored suit and fedora (PAHF Collection).

“Stephen Whalton and Angel Alfonso, both mechanics, kept the planes running, and “she’s been running along pretty well ever since,” Gunner added when he talked to a reporter.

Gunner received a letter of commendation in 1930 from Col. J.R. Sanguilly, chief of Air Corps, from Cuba.

From: Cuban Army Air Corps

To: Chief of Bureau of Navigation

Subject: Lieutenant Charles Morgan, USN, retired; official record of.

- 1. Lieutenant Chas. Morgan, USN has been for the past three years employed by the Pan American Airways, Inc. During this period he had done valuable work on the building of landing fields throughout the country which has been of considerable assistance to the development of aviation in Cuba and to his organization.***
- 2. It is considered that these activities Lieut Morgan indicates commendable initiative and cooperation and it is requested that a copy of this letter be attached to his official record.***

***J.R. Sanguilly
Col. Chief of Air Corps***

Gunner retired in 1937 at age 72. He said he was ready to sit on his front porch. "It's time for someone else to run the show," he said.



Charles "Gunner" Morgan, in Key West, February 1927, about to launch a new career with Pan American Airways. (Courtesy Charles D. Morgan)

Yet on June 6, 1942, he was in Washington, D.C., with his longtime friend Henry Tresselt, asking for active duty to fight in World War II.

"I knew I could lead a patrol off the coast of Florida," he said. "I sat there looking at that pasty-faced board of flabby bureaucrats and thought that none of them had ever climbed a ship's rigging in a gale or fought to bring a big gun into target range as the ship plunges through heavy swells. What do they know?"

The Navy said no.

In 1956, Gunner came to live with his son Jerry Morgan, daughter-in-law Mary and three grandsons — Gary, Jerry and Charlie. "We called him 'Cap,' short for 'Captain,'" said Charles Morgan. "Every day, at 92 years of age, he donned a white suit, tie and white straw hat and walked the two miles to town and back."

Gunner Morgan died in May 1959 and was buried in Somerville, Tennessee, with full military honors.