

Interviewee Name: John McMillan and Don Wagner

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Matt Frassica (The Briney Podcast) and Katie Clark

(College of the Atlantic intern)

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Interview Description:

John McMillan and Don Wagner

Belfast, ME

McMillan Offshore Survival Training

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Katie Clark

John McMillan, the owner of McMillan Offshore Survival Training and resident of Belfast, ME, and Don Wagner, one of his employees, offer the Drill Conductor Course to lobstermen. Both focus on the importance of safety training in the lobster industry and include stories of the gratitude people have expressed at knowing what to do in emergency situations, particularly when their training was able to save multiple lives.

Collection Description:

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JM: John McMillan
DW: Don Wagner
MF: Matt Frassica
KC: Kaitlyn Clark

[0:00:00.0]

JM: John McMillan. J-O-H-N M-C-M-I-L-L-A-N

MF: Great, and Don.

DW: Don Wagner. D-O-N W-A-G-N-E-R

MF: Great. And John, did you have a question?

JM: That I'm not a Maine lobster fisherman. I'm involved with the training of the fishermen. Just want to make sure that we're in the right avenue. The right direction of the interview.

MF: For sure, yeah, definitely. You know, the purpose of this project is to hear the voices of the people who are here at the Fishermen's Forum, not necessarily just people who are from Maine.

JM: Okay.

MF: Yeah, so tell me about where you guys are from. And do you want to start?

JM: Well, I live in Belfast. Belfast, ME.

MF: Okay, and are you from there originally?

[0:01:00.4]

JM: No, I'm from Louisiana. Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

MF: Nice, and what about you, Don?

DW: I was born in the Midcoast area. Midcoast Maine area. The Swanville area. Typical kid, couldn't wait to get out. Got out. Got out, couldn't wait to get back. Came back.

MF: And what do you two do now?

JM: I have a company. McMillan Offshore Survival Training. And what we do is we provide safety training for the lobster industry, for the fishermen. The training we do is called the Drill Conductor Course. It's how to conduct onboard emergency drills. Abandon ship, man overboard, fire fighting, and flooding are the four primary drills. So whoever gonna conduct

these drills on board the vessel is required to come to the course to learn how to do those procedures. And so that's primarily what we do. And we travel the state of Maine. We go to the different islands, so we take the training to them. So I also teach at the Maine Maritime Academy. So I teach up in Castine to all the students who are following Coast Guard regulations.

[0:02:04.1]

MF: And what kinds of things, what are the big safety issues onboard a lobster boat?

JM: Well, just talking to a young man, you know, some of the fishermen, they never put their survival suits on. They know they have life-saving equipment but they're not familiar with it. You know, how to take a fire extinguisher off the wall. How to test the EPIRBs that they have. How to launch a life raft. How to make a distress call. You know, they know the head is the highest heat loss area of the body. And they know a little bit about cold water survival. But not being in it, you know, they don't understand, they do understand the effects, but they don't always take the precautions for it.

DW: One of the more industry-specific injuries that lobstermen have is haul over. They've got gear that's connected to ropes and ropes all get gathered up on deck. And the man overboard, they usually don't fall over. They get pulled over. Which also adds a bit of complications because now you're also tangled up in rope with a trap that's sinking.

MF: I heard a story about that yesterday.

JM: And many of them don't wear lifejackets. You know, the inflatables that they have, many of them don't have knives on them.

[0:03:12.3]

As I tell them in the class, that fire extinguisher in the back of my truck isn't meant for me. It's meant for someone else that may have a fire. Same thing with the knife that you carry on your person. That's not for me. That's for my buddy who is trapped in the rope. So, you know, we call that common sense. But sometimes they just say, "Well, it's never happened to me. And I'll figure it out if it happens. I don't know what I'll do. But I'll figure something out. I've got 20 years experience fishing." Everybody uses 20 years as an example. That seems to be the magic number. You'll never meet 19 or 21 years you know. So, I guess that says oh, well, fair enough them.

MF: But the dangers, the risks of something bad happening, are always the same every day you go out, no matter how many days have gone before probably?

[0:03:57.5]

DW: No matter what the weather. There are complicating factors of course. Yeah, the new guy, he's got just as much chances of getting hurt as the guy with experience that maybe gets a little

lax. A little tired. Maybe not get it, your first hour on deck you might not get it, but when you start getting that fatigue that compounds the factors as well.

MF: So do you find that people are, the more experienced fishermen, are more resistant to what you have to teach them?

JM: Well, at the beginning of the introduction. Because they say, "What're you gonna teach me? Probably nothing. Probably we'll just show him how to hook up a life raft." But you know, we always have, and I think Donnie can agree, that after the program they always leave learning something that they can put in their survival plan or their survival strategy. Even if it's just to make a mayday call or to cancel it or to take deep breaths of air to reduce stress. A lot of these guys are physically fit. We're not worried about physical capabilities. You know, they're strong enough to survive. It's just a matter of being able to mentally overcome the discomforts.

[0:05:04.3]

And the thing that I always tell them, and they always use the, "Well, I fish with my brother and my cousin and they're only 10 minutes, you know, 5 minutes from me. Never get out of the sight of land." But still, being in the water for a half hour or something of that nature, you've got to take a look at what's going to be the cause of death in that short period of time. So you know you're not going to die of dehydration or starvation. So that's not going to be a cause of death. So you have to train your crew for short-term survival. We're lucky here cause we got Coast Guard bases everywhere, we've got fishermen in the area, we've got international airports, we've got cruise ships, we've got recreational boaters. We've got an active waterway and an active airway. So, you know, the survival time is really limited. But we here about, like Donnie said, they get pulled over, and if you get caught in the rope, that's a different type of scenario there. So they've got to be prepared for that.

MF: Yeah, so, just to shift gears a little bit, what do you guys see that concerns you in your communities?

[0:06:00.9]

MF: What are the issues that are facing the waterfront?

DM: Does it have to deal with fishermen? With the fishing industry?

MF: Not necessarily.

DW: Well, the biggest thing, and it's been this way for a very, very long time: commercial access. Obviously the cost of Maine is very beautiful. It's very attractive. For people to come up from away, so to speak. And you see the fishermen getting pushed further and further offshore, off onto the land. And you see their access getting more and more limited. And it's been an age

old problem, and they've been trying to address it, but it's, it seems to be getting worse, not better.

JM: I would say another issue would be the drug epidemic that's occurring on the coast of Maine and in the fishing industry and throughout the New England area. When you hear about people providing, what's the pen they give them.

MF: Narcan?

DW: And actually even down in the southern states, I haven't heard about Maine, but they're actually, the outreach program is giving it to captains, Narcan. Because they know that they may have some of their crew that may get themselves into trouble offshore. And that's more the offshore boats, not the day boats, but still. It's becoming a huge issue.

[0:07:19.7]

MF: And you've seen, relatively recently, this changing?

DW: 10 years. I saw an uptick in the last 10 years, that I've noticed.

JM: And when you get into fishing communities, take the Downeast area, where fishing is the industry. You know, you could if you do lumber or if you do farming. But that's about it, that's seasonal. But, you know, that's where the sellers of the product hit because they know these young men have money to spend. And I've been up in that area and talked to some of these kids. And they say, you know, they've got friends who've had issues, overdose and such. So that's something I would like to see available for training or available help for these individuals, you know.

[0:08:05.2]

MF: Do you see that as potentially a safety issue? Part of what you guys do?

JM: Oh there's no doubt.

DW: Of course, yeah, if you're fishing in an altered state, you're a hazard to yourself and to the people around you.

MF: What about what you like about the communities you live in? What keeps you there? What are the features of the community that you really value?

JM: Well, you know Belfast is not what you would classify as a fishing community. You know, Belfast, we've kind of come into Camden, competing with Camden to be the arts, to be that type of thing. So fishing isn't really big in that area. But we do have boat-builders, we have some boats, we do have some fishermen that go out of Belfast. Parts of what I like about, you know,

you say the people. You know, I run with a good group of people. And they're all crafty people, art, with carpenters and electricians and these types of things. You know, I'm also involved with the church, and we've got a lot of good church members there who've got good ethics in life. And, you know, it's a good, safe community that we live in. And the people help you when you need. We're a town of about what 8,500, 9,000 people. So, like that size community. You know, they help each other out, you see that.

[0:09:29.1]

MF: What about you, Don?

DW: Oh, about the same I'd say. I grew up in the area. Actually, I had this conversation with my wife recently. She's from Charlestown, South Carolina, and she said, "Why are we here? It's zero. Why are we here?" We're here because of, well, 1) it's a comfort factor. You, like you say, got the opportunity to get out and travel, and you just don't meet people like you meet, for better and for worse, in Maine. Especially in the Midcoast area. You know, familiarity, comfort. And it's just the quality of people that you meet.

[0:10:06.2]

JM: It's nice to leave, but it's always better to get back.

DW: Yeah, exactly.

MF: You mentioned that you got out and you traveled around. Where did you go?

DW: Oh, Central and South America a little bit. Up and down the U.S. a little bit. Did a lot in the mid-Atlantic. Worked out of Rhode Island briefly for a little while fishing. Just bounced around. I wanted to get out and see what the rest of the world looked like. Did go to Europe or Scandinavia for a little bit. Very brief times out, but just enough to realize that okay, that was nice to see. Time to go home. When you're on a tropical island and you're craving McDonald's, you know it's time to go home.

MF: But all the same, you could get McDonalds anywhere.

DW: Oh, trust me, it doesn't taste the same. I don't care, water buffalo doesn't taste like a Big Mac, I'm sorry.

[0:11:01.4]

JM: It tastes like bush meat, doesn't it?

DW: Basically, yeah. There's no Big Macs in Fiji.

MF: And what is it particularly about Maine that made you want to come back?

DW: I don't know, maybe just because I grew up here. They do say we are a little different. And it just feels like home. You go somewhere, and it's nice. But Maine is definitely unique. And I think the people in it are what make it unique.

JM: Well, you know, being from Louisiana, I get down there and my buddy says, "When're you gonna be moving back?" And it's October and it's 88 degrees. And I say, I'm not coming back. I think the weather has a lot to do with it up here as well. You know, the coastline, it's a beautiful state. The only problem is that just being able to make an income. You know, something I know that you can pay the bills that everybody has. You know, enough steady income. It's sad to see, but we're losing a lot of our young kids. They're leaving just because of that fact.

[0:12:00.9]

Jobs aren't available. The economy isn't. But, then once again I say that, but the jobs are out there. A lot of people just want to get on government programs if they can. They try to get on that and they don't really want to put in that effort. But I think the weather has a lot to do with it. You know, the state of Maine is beautiful. And, you know, we don't realize how pretty it is until you start going inland and travel the coast. I'm fortunate because with the work we do, we travel from Eastport to all the Coast Guard bases. So we get to get out to Swan's Island and Vinalhaven and North Haven and Boothbay Harbor and all these areas. So there's just something to it. When my friends say, "When are you going to move back?" I always say, "Well when are you going to come up and visit me and see why I don't move back?" So I have a lot of reasons why I always stay here. Where are you from by the way?

MF: I'm from Massachusetts.

JM: Massachusetts, aye?

MF: Yeah, but I like it here better.

JM: So they let you escape did they?

[0:12:58.2]

MF: So in the time that you've been doing this work, what have you seen change in those communities that you travel around to?

JM: Well, the state of Maine has become a lobster li—excuse me, to get your lobster license you have to go through an apprentice program, a waiting list, okay. And what the state has said is that before you get this license, before you get this commercial license, you have to complete the Drill Conductor Course. And in our industry we call it blood money. Because you got to kill someone and then regulations begin to happen. You know if you kill a Brad Pitt or a Chelsea Clinton in a whale watching boat accident, you're going to see regulations happen. Well in Maine, when Angus King was governor, back in 1999, we lost 14 fishermen in a 14-month

period. And Angus says, "What do we do about this?" And he pulled in Coast Guard and Marine Patrol and fishermen. And said, "We got to stop these tragedies from happening." And the Coast Guard said, "Well there's this requirement for federally-documented vessels to conduct onboard drills." So Angus says, "Well why don't we do something like that." And that's how it all came into play. So what I see with communities is that some of these young kids that are now fishing with their fathers and their uncles and their grandfathers.

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They're now taking this course. So we're developing a safety culture in the state of Maine. So these kids know how to don a survival suit in a timely manner. They can make a distress call. They know the essential elements. You know, if they were fishing in Norway or Scotland, they'd still need to know how to do this. It's not just something particular to the state of Maine. So I think that we're developing a, like I said, a safety culture. Which is the only state in the United States that has taken it to that level. Most states have just said, well once you have your federal permit, then you take the Drill Conductor Course. So I think we've seen that coming in. And the people that like that are the parents, especially the mothers. They'll call and say, "Well my son is reading his manual about fire-fighting." So I think there's that awareness level that we're increasing. The level of safety here. That's how regulations start.

[0:15:08.6]

DW: And we've become more and more welcome in the community as when we show up. Yeah, we're fairly likeable people I think.

JM: Once you get to know us.

DW: Yeah, exactly. Now that we were there, it's, "Oh yeah, my uncle took that class. Oh yeah, my brother took that class." I think, hopefully, that we're starting to create a better safety culture by being persistent and showing up and giving away fun prizes and making the training enjoyable. Not just dreary, hodrum, read this, kind of stuff. So hopefully, we're kind of, the culture's changing to a much more safety-oriented culture.

MF: Yeah, you think that people are less resistant to the idea of doing it?

JM: Yeah, because it's never happened to them. And the thing that I tell them, is like Donnie has mentioned, we don't use war stories as far as the learning curve. We all know fishermen who've died and they were young men. You know, 22-years-old, had a small child and all these kinda stories that we read about all the time. You don't really learn anything from that. You know, you learn that you can die, but you got to learn that you can survive too. And it all deals with accident prevention.

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You know, take the time to fix the piece of equipment or inspect it or, you know, clean up after so that the fire doesn't happen. Those kinds of things. You know, basic stuff that they all should put in their strategy.

MF: Yeah, so now, Don, before you went away and did your world traveling, were you involved in fishing in Maine?

DW: A little bit, not much. I had a, like, one of my best friends growing up, he was heavily involved in fishing. I was in more agriculture, forestry, two other very safe occupations by the way. You look at like the National Bureau of Statistics puts out a list of the top 10 deadliest occupations.

JM: You've do three of them?

DW: I've done 7.

[0:17:04.3]

JM: Oh, you've done 7. Well, I know first aid and CPR. I can help you.

DW: I appreciate that, thanks. Yeah, don't worry, I've been trained. Actually, I basically found a good way to make fast money, so I basically fished my way through college so I wouldn't have to fish anymore. Is how I looked—that was my thought. And did a little fishing after college. It was just, I enjoyed it. And, like I said, well one of my best friends growing up, he was a captain, so whenever I needed to get out and make a little extra money. He's, "Oh yeah, I've got a site for you, jump on." So that was kind of introduction to fishing, commercial fishing, was through a friend.

MF: And what do you see as the differences between fishing here versus like in Rhode Island?

DW: Rhode Island is usually a big boat, multi-day. The big boats, they're, the lobster fishing is really not there. Lobsters are more further up the coast. So, the type of fishery is different. It's dragners, it's net boats, it's gill-netters, it's long-liners. Different culture, different type of people.
[0:18:18.4]

The commercial fishermen down there, this is making generalizations of course, but they're the multi-day, go out for 6, 7, 8 days, come back. These guys are home every night your average lobsterman. They're raising a family. Lot more community-oriented. I mean, when you got off fishing for 7, 8, 9, 10 days, it really doesn't facilitate having a family life. And it doesn't really track that type of person. So definitely a different class of people.

MF: So is it something here where people can do it for more of their lives? Because they can have both that family life and work life?

[0:19:07.7]

DW: Yeah, you don't find the attrition rate and the burn-out rate of the multi-day fisheries is very high. Where, you have the guy that has the opportunity, yeah, they get up early. They get up at 3:00. But they're usually off the water by 2:00 in the afternoon, 3:00 in the afternoon. Do a little

gear work, they're home for dinner. They can catch their kid's basketball game. The opportunity to do that in the offshore fishery is not there.

JM: So it's hard to take a fisherman off the water here. You know, I've got guys who come in and they've had surgeries and they've had issues. But, you know, when you gonna retire? And, you know, they love the job they do.

MF: Yeah. So can you guys tell me, can you think of any, do you have any stories that you can tell me from something that you've seen or something that you've heard in your travels? Just tell me a story that you think is representative maybe of the kinds of places where you guys work.

[0:20:15.3]

JM: Well, from here, coming to the Fishermen's Forum. When I first moved up here, I came to house building school. Okay? And it brought me down to Bath Shelter Institute, okay? And I'd just moved up here, and I heard about the Fishermen's Forum. This was 1980. And as I've told my friends here, I didn't know anybody when I came up here. And on Saturday night when they had the dinner, they had a round table, every has round tables. And the announcer gets up and he goes, "Well, as everybody knows, we've lost another fisherman. And he had a wife and two small children so we're gonna pass the hat around." And a man looked at me and he goes, "Have you done this before?" And I said, "No, sir." I says, "This is the first time I've been here." And he says, "Well what we do is we pass a baseball cap around each table and you put your largest denomination in there for the family."

[0:21:06.9]

And I had just moved up here and I didn't have a job and I had \$23 in cash and \$12 in the checking account. And I knew I had a \$20 bill. So I put that \$20 bill in the hat thinking, one day McMillan you may make a difference here in this state. And now I find myself, well, do the math, 1980, you know going around doing training for these fishermen. You know, but when I come here I'll always see someone that says. Well, a couple years ago out of Northeast Harbor there, there was a lady who signed up her husband and her son. And she came up to me and says, "You're John McMillan? You're the one that taught that class?" And I said, "Oh, yes, ma'am, I am." And she says, "My husband had a fire on his boat, and when they saw it, my husband was getting ready to go down to fight the fire. But my son, said, 'Dad, we're not going to be able to fight the fire. We're gonna have to leave the ship. Abandon ship.' So my husband was going down there to fight the fire and my son grabbed him before he went down there and told him to put his survival suit on." She said, "I want to thank you, cause is my husband would have gone down there, my son would have gone down there with him. I could have lost both of them." She said, "So my son knew better than to fight that fire."

[0:22:20.0]

Another woman comes up to me, she says, "You know, my son took your course." She says, "He doesn't like to read." She says, "He's got ADD." Or whatever. So, she says, "He just hates reading. But the other night, he said, 'Mom, I know how to fight a fire now because I'm reading this manual.'" So she says, "I want to thank you for having my son start reading," you know. And who would have thought that, you know. I mean, there's been many times where you talk to

people who, they've said, you know we took your course years ago, but we had to use it somehow or another. And many times in a recreational situation, you know, it's not on the boat. You know, you may have a fire in your deer camp. You may go canoeing and fall out of your boat, and you still know cold water survival skills. So the training can carry on to personal lives as well. So most of the stories that I hear, they come from people that I see at the Forum, you know. That's what I have.

[0:23:13.2]

MF: Yeah. What about you, Don? Anything come to mind?

DW: Yeah, very, very similar. I remember distinctly, we were doing a training in Massachusetts. We get back late, when we get back in to try to get all the gear and all everything unpacked, the first thing he has to do is check his voicemail on his house phone. And this was years ago, and the woman, who I think was from Stonington, called and left an incredible message on his voicemail. Same thing about how she had had to thank him because the training that her husband and son received is probably the reason why they're going home. So, just, something like that really makes you say, oh yeah, this is why we do it. Because, like John says, we all, if you're in the fishing community, we all know people that didn't come home. And to be part of something that can maybe aid people into coming home every night is kind of big.

[0:24:09.6]

JM: Only until it hits your family do you really start thinking about it. And that's a problem. We are a reactive community, we're not proactive. Well, why do I need to learn how to swim? Well, I almost drowned out there, take a swimming lesson. Or I had a house fire, I better learn about fire-fighting. We just, we wait until it happens and then try to figure out a plan. And that's where the training comes in. Like I tell them, if you ever find yourself in a life raft or you find making a mayday call or in a survival suit. This is a refresher course for you because you've done this before. So the other thing we look at is everybody talks about dying of hypothermia. You know, well as long as you've got a survival suit on, that's one thing. But also, you'll drown before you die of hypothermia. So people just throw that word out there too quickly. You know, our body's a lot stronger than we think it is. That's why it's so important for these men to wear lifejackets when they're hauling and when the seas conditions get bad or when the deck gets a little bit more slippery or when they lose their balance like Donnie said when fatigue starts setting in. Put that lifejacket on, you know?

[0:25:12.7]

The other thing we think about, is I tell the class, you know, this is a survival situation. But really what's gonna be a cause of death for you? You know, you're not hungry, you're not thirsty, you're not cold, you're not injured. You made your mayday call, you've got your EPIRB going out there. But most people throw that survival word out there because they're unfamiliar with the territory. Once they've become familiar with it, then it's just a momentary discomfort. Like that guy [Bear Grills], you know, he gets thrown out into all kinds of stuff, but it's not survival to him. He enjoys it because he knows what berries to eat and how to start a fire with wet wood and

escape and evade enemy territories and that kind of stuff. So that's why it's so important for these individuals to get some basic training. There going to be a Rambo at the end of the day, but just get something. You know, get a little more encouragement for the emotional side. Like I said, they're physically fit, but they've got to get that emotional strength.

[0:26:03.8]

MF: Sometimes it seems like in an emergency, just having, knowing the steps to take so that you don't have to think about it can make a big difference.

JM: It could make the difference. You know, and nothing that we teach or is taught in the Coast Guard guidelines are over the heads of fishermen. You know, they know the procedures. It's meant to be meant for everyone, not just a chosen few. And the steps are there, but yet they don't realize how important that is.

DW: It kind of offers a mental reset. Like we tell people, and actually got a logo on the back of our t-shirts that says, "I've been trained." And if you, get into an emergency situation, you ask the person next to you, even if you took the training with that person last week and they were right in the class, you ask them, so you've been trained. Have you been trained? What that does, is it gives them a pause and it gives them that mental reset of oh yeah, that's right. It keeps that panic from creeping in.

[0:26:59.9]

JM: They've done it before.

DW: Yeah, you've done it before. This is just practicing now.

JM: So we're looking for a woman to jump overboard today. Over there.

DW: On the breakwater!

JM: Yeah!

DW: It's beautiful weather out.

JM: You want to volunteer? Can you scream and shot and panic, help, help, something like that?

KC: I'll pass on that one.

JM: Just wanted to make sure, if you wanted to get involved, you've got a little help here.

[0:27:28.2]

End