

Capt. Morgan is at the helm

The rough passage from Bermuda to New York in October 1979 will be forever etched in sailor Morgan Freeman's mind.

"Everyone has a survival story and that one is mine," the famous actor and film director said last November while working on the production set of the latest Batman movie in New York. "We were headed back from Bermuda. Eleven days at sea. Big storm.



The new chairman of the National Sailing Center, Morgan Freeman, sails his Shannon 43 *Afrodesia*.

And when we got within 100 miles of New York, it was snowing. That was the first time it snowed in October in New York in 100 years. It was a very rough time."

Last October, the 74-year-old celebrity was named chairman of the National Sailing Center & Hall of Fame's Honorary Advisory Board, filling the position left vacant following the death of broadcast journalist Walter Cronkite in 2009. The widely-respected television anchorman was the honorary board's first chairman.

"It's quite an honor," Freeman said. "But it's mainly an honorary position. I'm not going to be going around giving speeches."

Freeman, who lives in Charleston, Mississippi, did not begin sailing until he was 30 years old. While in Stowe, Vermont, where he and other thespians like Meryl Streep were active in the Stowe Playhouse summer stock during the late 1960s, he was invited to set sail in the local reservoir aboard an 18-foot Lightning.

"The head of the Stowe theater dropped in on us one morning and asked if anybody wanted to go sailing. Right away I said, 'I do,' so he brought us down to the shore and we swam out to the boat," Freeman said.

Their impromptu instructor boarded the dinghy, set the rudder and hoisted the sails. "Then he asked us, 'Who's gonna skipper?' Well, I said, 'I will' and he said, 'Do you know anything about sailing?' I told him I didn't. He looked at me and said, 'You will,'" Freeman said. "We were in an estuary. I spent the day running into trees and pushing off sandbars, but by the end of the summer I was hooked."

Morgan bought his first boat in 1971, a compact Holiday sloop. He eventually moved up to an Alberg 30, a boat he and his ex-wife sailed along the East Coast from Nova Scotia to Bermuda. According to Freeman, the Alberg was an ideal boat, but more ambitious blue-water plans prompted him to consider buying a larger vessel.

"After going to Bermuda, I thought I needed a bigger boat with more storage space, one that could carry more fuel and water, and of course for stability," he said, explaining the purchase of *Sojourner*, a Shannon 38.

These days, Freeman sails a Shannon 43 ketch, which he keeps in Virgin Gorda in the British Virgin Islands. "I used to spend most of my time down there. I lived on the boat in the BVI, but now I go down after Thanksgiving and stay for a month or so," he said. "When I go out sailing, I go down to the Grenadines. I love the Grenadines."

Freeman also has sailed from West Palm Beach, Florida, to New York, and from Miami to the Virgin Islands.

"There's so many things I like about sailing," he said. "I guess the most salient thing is the quiet, the solitude, and how it brings you in touch with yourself. You're going to meet yourself out there one day. Sailing the open ocean is a challenge. You can't just stop and call for help."

As honorary chairman, Freeman oversees the National Sailing Center & Hall of Fame, a nonprofit educational facility and virtual institution dedicated to preserving the history of sailing and its impact on our culture.

Freeman, who was once referred to by comedian Jimmy Fallon as Capt. Morgan, is best known for his roles in such films as "Driving Miss Daisy," "Glory," and for his 2005 Academy Award-winning performance in "Million Dollar Baby." --David Liscio