

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW DRAG

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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BLAIRSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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SSH: This begins an interview with Mr. Matthew Drag, on December 3, 1999, in Blirstown, New Jersey. Mr. Drag, I'd like to take a moment to thank you for coming. The other person doing this interview with us today is Joe Ciccone. We'll begin by asking you some questions about your family.

MD: Very well.

SSH: When and where was your father born?

MD: My father was born in Poland and later on it was annexed by Austria. So, that is the background, the partitioning of Poland. Also my mother was born in Poland. They immigrated to America sometime before ... World War I, yes. Yes.

JC: So they were married in Poland?

MD: No, they met in the town of Putnam, Connecticut, [and] were married. When the people arrived from Poland, apparently, they gravitated to certain ghettos, Polish ghettos. This was a Polish ghetto in the town of Putnam, Connecticut, which was ... cotton mills, yes.

SSH: Now did any of your father's family members come to the United States before he did?

MD: No, no, he was the ... [only] immigrant from Poland.

SSH: Did he leave any brothers and sisters behind?

MD: Yes, he did ... There were some ... of his family left behind. But, that is very, very vague to me because there were so many problems of earning a living, a present living that the past, but I do remember him writing, he [was] writing every Sunday a letter to Poland. Yes.

SSH: Really?

MD: Yes.

SSH: Can you tell us when he was born?

MD: ... That I don't know. I would have to ... refer back, and if I do get that information ... Yes.

SSH: How about your mother, did she talk about her life back in Poland?

MD: [She] also immigrated about the same time from Poland, from Austria-Hungary ... Austria, which ... had partitioned Poland, but of course, they considered themselves Poles. Yes.

SSH: Now did any members of her family come with her?

MD: Not that I know of ...

SSH: As a child growing up, you did not have any aunts and uncles from Poland living anywhere around or near you?

MD: Not from Poland. The only aunts and uncles, ... our family was what was in the immediate neighborhood. Yeah.

SSH: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MD: I have one sister, and I have a brother, deceased. He was ... a Navy veteran.

SSH: When were you born?

MD: July 27, 1917.

SSH: Where?

MD: Putnam, Connecticut.

SSH: Did your father and mother live in Putnam their whole lives?

MD: Not the, well, not their whole life. In my beginning years, say through kindergarten, [we] were in Putnam Connecticut. Then the family moved to Goodyear, Connecticut, which was the company town that produced fabric for the Goodyear tire. Then later on, from Connecticut, they moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey.

SSH: What were they doing in Elizabeth?

MD: In Elizabeth, my father was a laborer working for the Exxon or Esso Oil Company in the ... tank fields and that, as a laborer.

JC: About how old were you when you and your family moved to Elizabeth?

MD: About seven years old. Elizabeth, then I went into ... say about the second year of elementary school, so I was ... I'd have to make the calculations.

SSH: Where do you fit in with your brother and sister?

MD: I was the eldest, ... yeah. One brother, my one sister, about two years younger, and a brother about two years, ... about four years younger, yeah.

JC: What were the names of your brothers and sisters?

MD: My brother's name was Henry Drag, and my sister's name was Gladys and then, of course, she married and became Mrs. Kodis, K-O-D-I-S.

SSH: How was it for your family, did your mother and father speak English right away?

MD: No, no ... Everything in the Polish community was carried on in the Polish tongue. Yes, yes. And there, in the beginning, ... as soon as kindergarten ... I was five years old. I went to kindergarten, and it was a French school. Because the French Canadians in the community they had the church and, of course, the school. So, I started out as a Pole in a French Canadian School with the French language. [Laughs] That made it ..., easy, yes. So, as ... no sooner I'm starting to pick up French, we move to Elizabeth, and I'm in the English language. Yeah.

SSH: Did you go to a parochial school or a public school?

MD: No, at that time it was ... a kindergarten, it was parochial, but then, ... in Goodyear, and that was public school, public school.

SSH: How hard was it for you to make the adjustment, from going to school and speaking French, and Polish at home?

MD: Well, you just grew into it, I guess. You just grew ... like everything else you just grow into it. And figure, " Well, this is the life. This is the way things go." Yeah.

SSH: So you went to high school in ...

MD: No, no. In Elizabeth, [I] went through grade school and then wanted to change for high school. Of course, the parents at that time, if you lived ... on the right side of the railroad tracks, you went to high school. But, we happened to live on the wrong side of the railroad tracks ... so, instead of going [and] getting working papers like everybody else, [I] did and went to work. I went to vocational school, and I took the carpentry course in the boys Vocational School in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Yeah, so either you went to, ... those that could afford it went to high school, and the others learned a trade. Yes, that was the norm in those days, and I was lucky I went to vocational school.

SSH: Did you pick carpentry as what you were interested in?

MD: Well, it was the lesser of what was being offered: machine shop, auto mechanics, paint shop, print shop, and somehow I drifted into the carpentry shop, woodworking. Yes, yes.

SSH: Now did your brother go to vocational school as well?

MD: My brother, no, he didn't go to vocational school. As soon as he was of age, he went into the Navy, yes.

SSH: How about your sister?

MD: She went to high school. She was lucky, she graduated high school, became a secretary for the Wonder Bread Company in Rockefeller Center, New York. That's where the offices were of the Wonder Bread Company.

SSH: Did your mother work outside of the home?

MD: No, no. There was no such thing as a, ... in those days, the mother had enough to do at home, yes. Yes. [Laughs]

SSH: What are some of the customs that you still keep up?

MD: Well, the customs there were, well like ... everything they taught honesty, respect the elders, you don't ... Well, that came later on through the school, Boy Scouts and then the Sea Scouts and so on, yes.

SSH: Were you involved in the Boy Scouts?

MD: Oh, I was involved. I was involved in the Boy Scouts, and then after that ... the ... of the Sea Scouts, for older ones of course. So, being inclined for the water, I was in the Sea Scouts, yes.

SSH: Well, tell us about some of your experiences as a Boy Scout and Sea Scout?

MD: Well, the Boy Scout, the experiences with the Boy Scout is having to pass the test for cooking. I remember burning the meat. And as far as the Sea Scouts, it was wonderful because we had a launch. They had provided a launch for the group that was circulated, and on weekends, we'd go to Sandy Hook and so on. And of course we had studies ... for the different grades of ordinary seamen and then quartermaster and so on. And so it very, very ... interesting, and we always looked forward to the Sea Scout meetings.

SSH: Do you remember any of your leaders, or any of your buddies that were with you?

MD: Oh, of course I remember them yes, dear. Unfortunately, most of them have passed on ... But one is still, he's with the ... as a naturalist, running a compound someplace in Vermont, for the Daughters of the American Revolution. Yes.

SSH: Do you remember his name?

MD: Joe Semanchik, yes. I remember his name, I remember the name of the leader was Joe Kelleman, he was our skipper. Joe Petrik was ... one of the officers, and Joe Semanchik the three officers, yes. [I will] never forget them.

SSH: Of the activities that you did, which was your favorite?

MD: Activities in those days, well, the ... Sea Scouts, because we went sailing. We had a lifeboat, which we reconditioned. We went rowing and so on. It was an activity outside the school, besides studies, yes.

SSH: While you were refinishing the lifeboats, did your carpentry skills come into play?

MD: In a way they did, yes. Yes.

JC: What was Elizabeth like at that time?

MD: Well, Elizabeth, we lived in the Polish section. You had different ghettos: Polish, Italian, and so on. So, we lived in the ... Polish section. It was right on Front Street. Right near the waterfront there, so you couldn't get any closer, because of the commercial aspect.

JC: Did you hang out a lot at the seaport in Elizabeth?

MD: Well, of course, there was not much of a seaport there. They had barges coming in and out, but it wasn't ... it was just a waterway. And of course, they had the recreational pier at Elizabeth, New Jersey, and then the swimming pool adjacent. So, it was an activity, yes.

SSH: What did your family do for fun on a Sunday afternoon?

MD: What did they do for fun? The family? Gosh, on Sunday afternoon. Well, of course, I remember my father writing his letters to Poland. And of course, the mother's always had something to do with ... the home so, yes.

SSH: Did you go to the movies as a kid?

MD: Yes, I went to the movies as a kid, it was a dime, and we saw Tom Mix and Hoot Gibson, and the rest of them. And we booed the bad guys, which were the Indians, yes. [Laughter] [It was] always the Indians or the Mexicans, yes, and see how they indoctrinated the children that the Indians were the bad guys, and the Mexicans were the bad guys. They already started early, yes.

SSH: Were you an avid reader?

MD: ... Whenever I could, yes, I would say [that] I was. But, you couldn't get books at that time. And other words if they wanted to ... When I went to vocational school the Depression was coming on, yes, so.

SSH: How did that affect your family?

MD: Well, it affected the family. My mother went out to work cleaning homes, and ... well, we had bread on the table and some ... and butter, so ...

SSH: Was your father able to keep working?

MD: Yes, my father was able to keep working. He was a hard worker, and as a laborer, there was always work, yes.

JC: Was he ever involved in any of the federally funded work projects, at all during the Depression?

MD: During the Depression, no, because, he worked ... on the ... Rockefeller Center, [which] came up during the Depression. And the building project by Rockefeller, Rockefeller Center, and as soon as the project was completed, he had his knowledge and [with] that, he got into the maintenance department in Rockefeller Center. So, he continued on in the maintenance department until his retirement.

JC: So your father worked in Rockefeller Center then?

MD: The construction.

JC: The construction.

MD: The construction, from a laborer with ... in the gas tanks and then went to the ... well, there was different, ... he worked also on repairing boilers. There was a company, they'd send him around. I remember different, wherever they were renewing the brickwork on these boilers. And then from there, they built Rockefeller Center, he managed to get into the construction work of Rockefeller Center, and then from then on he ... got into the maintenance department. And it was a very good job, desirable job, yes. But being a go-getter and not afraid of work, and of course, if Saturday or Sunday they needed somebody, or holiday, he was available. So, he had a very good record in that respect.

SSH: Was he involved in politics?

MD: Oh, no. [Laughs] You never were involved in politics in those times. That was for the ... people that were ... on the right side of the railroad track.

SSH: Did they have any opinion of Franklin Roosevelt?

MD: No, not at that time. Not at that time, no.

SSH: Did they become naturalized citizens?

MD: My father became a naturalized citizen. My mother passed away and, of course, so she [did not] ... But, my father became a naturalized citizen, yes.

SSH: How old were you when your mother passed away?

MD: I was twenty years old, yes, yes. See, I went to the, ... after graduation from vocational school, I couldn't get a job. [There were] no jobs available. So, I finally managed to get a job as an ordinary seaman in the Merchant Marine. So, I spent one year ... as a ordinary seaman in the Merchant Marine, before getting into the Merchant Marine Academy.<sup>1</sup>

SSH: How did you know about the Merchant Marines was it through the Sea Scouts?

MD: Through the, ... I think eventually it filters through, you have an inclination or a desire or a look or an interest, because, you read these books about ... about Alan Viliars and the sailing ships and so on. It was adventure, I'd say part of it, yes.<sup>2</sup>

SSH: Tell us about how someone your age, a very young man, goes about becoming part of the Merchant Marines?

MD: It was very difficult. You had to have ... document[s], papers, seaman's papers. But, you couldn't get the papers, until you had a job, and you couldn't get the job unless you had the seaman's papers. [Laughter] Well, eventually, it wasn't easy, but eventually ... it materialized, yes.

JC: How were you able to get your seaman's papers?

MD: I beg your pardon?

JC: How were you able to get your seaman's papers?

MD: How was I able to get my seaman's papers? Well, let's see. How did I get them? I remember ... it was very vague, but I know it was very difficult, because I had to travel from Elizabeth to New York. And it was a nickel ferry from Elizabeth to Staten Island there was a nickel, then you didn't have the money, so you walked across to Staten Island to the ... Stapleton Ferry, and get, and then another nickel into Manhattan. So that's the way it was. Finally, I managed, yes, yeah. Somehow it happened, sometimes they need a seaman ... in a hurry, ... and so, you get the job.

SSH: With your mother having passed away before you became a Merchant Marine, who was in charge of the kitchen?

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<sup>1</sup> See Document #1

<sup>2</sup> See Document #2

MD: No, I think ... well, I was out at sea and then I was at home. She passed away when I was at home between ... voyages, yes.

SSH: How did you become a candidate for the Merchant Academy?

MD: Competitive examination. How did I ever get ... Well, I was aboard ... [the] Merchant ship we'd get ... and I was on the twelve to four watch, and I remember you had two able seamen and an ordinary seaman that constituted the watch, because, we stood four hours duty on, eight hours off. And of course, around the clock and around ... there was no Saturdays and Sundays, it was the same. But, ... I was on the twelve to four watch, we get a call, we got to take some luggage for, bring up the luggage for the new second mate. He's on the dock. So, the AB and I, we go on the dock, there's the suitcases there. We bring up the luggage to his quarters, because we're on watch, I mean, whatever ... work, we do what we're told, we accomplish. So, it wasn't, but if several hours later, "Hey, required to take ... to help the second mate to take his luggage off." [Laughs] I go, "What is this?" And the AB says to me, "Look, this man is a naval reserve, he's been called for his naval reserve duty." In other words ... for two weeks. It just so happened that he had just come aboard ship when his call for naval service came, and then the AB says to me, he says "Kid, see, if you want to get ahead in this racket, you've got to get into the Merchant Marine ... You got to be at the Merchant Marine Academy, you've got to become a graduate." Which this young man of which we were helping take his luggage off, was a graduate, was a Merchant Marine Academy graduate, or school-ship training ship graduate.

JC: Was there more than one academy, or was there just one?

MD: Oh, at that time, the New York State Merchant Marine Academy [was the] oldest academy in the nation, started over a 124 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

JC: Wow.

MD: They trained men ... After that came the Massachusetts had a ... but wasn't as large or they didn't have the ... type of ship they had as the New York State, that was the number one ... And then they came, they had an academy on the Great Lakes, then Pennsylvania came with an academy, and on the West Coast in ... California they had a Merchant Marine Academy run by the State. The ... Navy furnished the training ship and the fuel and so on, and they were part of the curriculum. [It] was ... naval reserve training, yeah.

JC: Was the academy located in New York City, at the New York Academy?

MD: Fort Schuyler ... Bronx, New York, that's where it was. The WPA project took an old fort, Fort Schuyler, it was old, abandoned, and they reconditioned it ... I was one of the first students of the class of 1938. We entered, ... instead of living aboard a training ship, we lived on the shore-side quarters at Fort Schuyler, renovated by the WPA beautiful, nothing like it, yes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Document #3

<sup>4</sup> See Document #4

SSH: Tell us about your curriculum and what you had to do as a young academy student?

MD: Well, of course when you're a lower classman, you rated nothing ... [Laughs] Anytime an upper classmen called, one hand, you jumped, and whatever he told you to do, you saluted and, "Yes, Sir," and, "Aye, Aye, Sir." And that's the way it went, yes.<sup>5</sup>

SSH: Were you required to go through any kind of initiation or ...

MD: Well, there was some hazing, but, ... like everything else their workload was so heavy, they didn't have much time ... to haze us, yes.

SSH: How many were in your class?

MD: I think there was about ... forty-five. Forty-five in a class, and that's the deck department. And of course, you had [a] similar amount, ... about ninety or a hundred in the class, yes.<sup>6</sup>

SSH: What did your family think? Were they proud of you?

MD: Well, it was, ... of course, it was a desirable job, yes. But, as far as going into the academy, it was wonderful, that was an accomplishment, yes.

SSH: How long did it take you to finish your course work?

MD: The ... schedule at that time was two years. And of course, after the war, and during the war, they, ... or after the war, they finally upped it to three and four years, and it's part of the State of New York University system, yes.<sup>7</sup>

JC: The courses that you took, were they merely courses in the classroom, or were you training on the ships?

MD: Both. The classroom ... we had classroom courses and then the training ship was, ... it was an old World War I, ... what they called World War I Three Islander. It was very nice, yet ... it was intended for ... and when they had the training for the class before me, the ... living quarters were aboard ship, the classrooms were aboard ship and so on. But, now we drifted to the Fort ... We had classrooms and, renovated beautiful classrooms, beautiful living quarters ... We went aboard ship for part of our training that was concerned with shipboard activity. And then we took ... two or three months training cruise every summer. And so you'd practiced up on your navigation, on your seamanship, and you visited the various ports. That was nice.<sup>8</sup>

JC: What sort of subjects did you study in the classes?

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<sup>5</sup> See Document #5

<sup>6</sup> See Document #6

<sup>7</sup> See Document #7

<sup>8</sup> See Document #8

MD: Well, ... it varied from your first year and second year. But, they were navigation, signaling, seamanship, small boat handling, let's see ... First Aid, ship hygiene, ships business, [and] naval architecture, yes.

JC: What ports did you go to during your training cruises?

MD: Well, ... let's see, the first year I believe we went to ... Havana ... and then we went to Europe, to Portsmouth, England, Cherbourg, France and ... and then Pensacola, Florida, and then returned home. I have schedules of, the exact schedules of the itinerary in my little folder of them at home. If you're interested I could ... mail it to you, yeah.<sup>9</sup>

SSH: That would be great.

MD: Also the ... class schedules, I still have copies of that, yes.

JC: Great.

SSH: Did you talk at all about the politics, such as the Lend Lease, or anything like that, that was going on in this country at that time?

MD: At that time, of course, Lend Lease came just at the turn of the war, Lend Lease. Well, actually, you mean as I was in the academy?

SSH: You were there for two years, until 1940?

MD: For two years, correct. From 1938, [and I] graduated in 1940 ... There was very little talk about that because we were, look, we didn't have the facilities of newspapers or radio, or TV to know what's going on. We were so busy trying to keep ahead of the ... to pass our ... test everyday in some subject. [Laughs] Trying to keep ahead of that, [trying to] keep on top of the studies, then there was no time for that, yes.

JC: While you were at the academy, were you a member of the naval reserve as well?

MD: Correct, we had to ... sign up for [the] naval reserve, ... for naval reserve training, it was one of the requirements, I'll say, for the Merchant Marine Academy, yeah.<sup>10</sup>

SSH: Did your father get any letters back from Poland?

MD: He did, yes.

SSH: So, was he aware of what was happening with Germany and Poland at that time?

MD: Well, this was before ... shall we say World War II. So ...

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<sup>9</sup> See Document #9

<sup>10</sup> See Document #10

SSH: I mean Germany invaded Poland in 1939.

MD: Oh, no ... Well, there was very little contact between, once I got into the academy, between home. Sometimes, we got home on the weekends and ... then back to the academy.

JC: When you graduated from the academy, were you immediately stationed on a ship?

MD: When I graduated?

JC: When you graduated in 1940, I'm assuming that at that point you were immediately transferred to a ship.

MD: Oh, no. I was one of the fortunate ones. At that time they had the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, which established the shipbuilding and training program. And when I graduated, I was given the opportunity for post graduate training, and this was the first one tried by the Maritime Commission. They took one member of the deck department, which was me, and one member of the engine department, for post graduate work sponsored by the Maritime Commission, for shipyard practice training at Bath Iron Works in Bath, Maine, yes. So, I was very lucky I got into a shipyard, and rotated through the various departments, paint shop, rigging loft, made the trial runs of the, they had destroyers that they had built, going out trial runs and rigging loft ... We also [did] welding and so on, on the shipways, yes.

JC: How long were you in Bath, Maine?

MD: In Bath.

JC: In Bath.

MD: In Bath, Maine, we were stationed, but we also worked at Portland down on the welding of ... the ships of the hulls that they were building for England.<sup>11</sup> How long? The course was for three months. After that course was completed, we asked for an extension for another three months, [and] they gave it. After six months we asked for another extension. I'll tell you the work was fabulous, and what it was, the Maritime Commission and the training pier they paid. We got paid the same as the shipyard workers. In fact, I was embarrassed, because, here I'm getting into the rigging loft, and my pay is the same as the man who's been there for about five years. The government is paying you to study, to learn something ... And at that time, the same time, I was taking an extension course from the US Coast Guard, in naval architecture. And then they had a high school, which was called, the evening course, Bailey Evening School. My ... companion, my ... engine companion, ... we both took a course in naval architecture, ship drafting. So, we were working during the day and studying ... on the course in the evening, there at the local high school, yeah, in ship drafting, yes, which helped very much, yeah. And after six months we asked for, I asked for another extension, and at that time they were building four ships

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<sup>11</sup> See Document #10A

for the Export line, the Four Aces is what they called it, the line merchant ships. They were the most modern ships. And they said, "We would give you the extension, provided that the company would hire you when the ships were put into place, into service." But, I guess the company was afraid that the government would be dictating to them about the personnel that they had, and they refused that. So, after six months, my good training period came to an end, yeah. But, it was wonderful, yes.

JC: By this time, was this 1941 already, or was it still 1940?

MD: No, this was 1941 already ... No 1940, September, October, into the beginning of 1941, yes ...

JC: From there, I'm assuming you transferred to a ship.

MD: Then from there, the port captain for the shipyard, the one who took the ships out on trial runs, he said, "Have you got a job when you leave here?" I said, "No." He said, "Well," he gave me a letter to the US Line ... and I got a job. They had a subsidiary called the American Pioneer Line, which was their Far East run. They ran ships ... from New York to Australia on the world trade. So, I got a job as junior third mate, at the American Pioneer Line.

JC: Do you recall what ship you were on?

MD: Yes, I was on the *West Honaker*. My first ship was the West Honaker, H-O-N-A-K-E-R. It was a diesel ship ... I think it's one of those, somehow looking back now, the Maritime Commission wanted to keep her in service for some reason. She had a cracked cylinder head, and was making the huge ... speed of four knots, so four knots. [Laughter] But, they kept it in service. She brought in the cargoes, and I had a job.<sup>12</sup>

JC: Did you take this from New York to Australia?

MD: From New York to Australia, yes.

JC: Since the fastest you were going was four knots, how long was that travel?

MD: Well, there was one, I think there was one, we had a sixty day from Australia to the next port, I think sixty-one days. So ...

SSH: To the next port?

JC: The next port, yes.

MD: Yeah, because we had to make passage through the Panama Canal, yeah.

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<sup>12</sup> See Document #11

SSH: What was your reaction to the Panama Canal?

MD: ... Very nice, something different going through the locks and so on ... A very interesting engineering feat, yes.

JC: So, you actually went to Australia by crossing the Pacific, as opposed to crossing the Atlantic?

MD: That's right ... We went to Australia by Panama Canal and across, yeah, the shortest distance.

SSH: What did you do during the eight hours that you were not on watch?

MD: Oh ... [Laughs] Well, okay. When I was junior third mate, my watch was eight to twelve. That watch is our custom-by-custom ... from eight a.m. to twelve, noon. So, you got up about seven or so, [at] seven-thirty you had breakfast, [at] eight o'clock you went on the bridge, you went on watch, and got off at twelve o'clock for noon. Then as soon as you had your dinner, your lunch, you went and relieved the man who was on the twelve to four. No, wait ... he ate before he went on watch. Okay, at one o'clock I put on my work clothes, and I turned to working on the lifeboats from one to three. The cadet and I, we overhauled lifeboats. That was the routine. So we worked 'til three o'clock. After three o'clock, I ... had some studies to do, and then at five o'clock I relieved ... the ... mate for his supper. So, ... yes, and then after I had my supper, I relieved the ... man for his supper, and then, of course, eight o'clock came after, shortly after, and I went on watch again. Eight to twelve, from eight to twelve at night. So, it was pretty, pretty well occupied time.

SSH: Did anybody play cards or gamble?

MD: There was some ... Now you're talking about when I was ... an officer, when I was eight to twelve with the ... but very little, because, either you're working, or you're sleeping, or you're resting. And the crew had their own segregated quarters [and] all. So, ... in other words, there was no co-mingling there, you know.

SSH: Did the people that were serving with you come from the East Coast? Did they have similar backgrounds to yours?

MD: Yes, because they were ... always from the New York State School Ship, and the other mates were, I remember, from the Massachusetts School Ship, yes. And of course, the captain, he was an old-timer from Norway, or whatever it was, yes. All the way from Norway, originally from Norway.

JC: The military was segregated at that time. Was the Merchant Marine segregated?

MD: No, no, no ... Colored went right in with, what's that again, with the, as a seamen, we didn't have any colored officers at that time, and deck officers. Although, (Mr. Mozac?), he got

his Masters' License ... as a young man, but he never could get a job. So, he sailed as [a] seaman, while holding ... finally, he had the time in for [the] Master Mariner's License. And finally, during World War II, he got his job as a ... Master.

JC: He was an African-American?

MD: Yes, an African, yes.

JC: How long were you on this cruise from New York to Australia? How many times did you do make this trip?

MD: I think it was ... twice, because, the second time we were returning when Pearl Harbor came ... It picked up from there, and I was told to remain ... aboard the Merchant ship. So, for some reason, or other, I change ... I drifted over ... from the American Pioneer Line, to the Alcoa Steamship Company.<sup>13</sup>

SSH: Before Pearl Harbor, on the two cruises that you made, could you see any evidence of a military buildup?

MD: In Australia?

SSH: In the Pacific.

MD: Well, let's put it this way. We're so busy with our shipboard work that we had very little time to look at the politics. But, when we did see sail, we sailed with the American flag, [which] was painted on both sides of the ship. The big floodlight was directed on that. And that was one of the duties on watch. You checked that the light was lit. That was strict orders "to make sure that the light is on." So, this was sailing before, but there was indications, already, of course, even in the Pacific of ... unrest.

SSH: Really? What do you remember?

MD: Well, I remember because, the officers were talking about, they had been on a ship before me, and they mentioned that ... well, we were going to Australia this month. The next month, the run previously, apparently they had was to the Philippines. In other words, they alternated from Australia, run to the Philippines, to New York. Then the next one Australia, to New York, then the next one Philippines. The one before that was to ... the Philippines, because, they mentioned that they had all this cargo for Corregidor, which was boxed food and that ... and they, well ... when war broke out around Corregidor they said, "Hey, don't worry, they got enough food to last them several years." Because, they had this, and it was all the ... foodstuff that was placed aboard ship, and off loaded. So, they saw the writing on there, to be used on there. They did, and so on. So, they said they had enough ... food to last a long time, yeah.

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<sup>13</sup> See Document #12

JC: So, where were you when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

MD: I was on board ship, we had just left. I got the article here. [pause] You'll find it here, someplace in the papers ... We were about two days out of Sidney, Australia, bound for Boston when some commotion at night, "You're wanted on the bridge." We're on the bridge, entering port, "What's up?" We were diverted to Wellington, New Zealand. Wellington, I think it was ... It was a port in New Zealand for orders, because, of ... Pearl Harbor ... So, we came there, we got our orders and then we ... The orders and then the orders are the moving, because, we went headed practically right across for the tip of South America. The weather, what it was, it was good routing, because, the weather was ... just sort of ... cold, foggy, and hazy. In other words, the visibility for submarines was very poor, and in other words, we didn't go direct[ly] to Great Circle. We went for the ... and then up about two hundred miles, or a hundred miles, off the coast of South America, north for the Panama Canal, yes. Oh, yes, and we had the ... carpenter, the captain was very shrewd. He had out of planks, we had a ships' carpenter fabricated an outline, a silhouette of a gun, had it painted gray, and placed with canvas aboard it. It looked very imposing, ... it looked like the real thing. And we went through the Panama Canal, and did they laugh when they saw the wooden gun. But, the idea was [that] a submarine would not come up to shell you, if they're going, they're going to fire a torpedo, if they miss, they miss. But otherwise, they would not surface if they saw that you had a four-inch gun. They were not going to go off. Very, sure. And then when we got into Boston after, you heard about the feedback, that the captain got reprimanded because this was against the Geneva Convention. Yeah. [Laughter] It filtered back somehow. You're asking the questions, but it was, ... the wrong thing, it was against the Geneva Convention, he should have not put this up. But, look, we were alive, we weren't torpedoed.

JC: That is great. Were you in a convoy?

MD: No, this is ... all the five years I spent in the Merchant Marine, most [of it] was ... sailing independently, yeah.

JC: So, you did not have the protection of a destroyer or ...

MD: How correct you are, you are correct, you are so correct, you observed this point, yes.

JC: You were very exposed.

MD: Well, I slept with a life jacket on for five years, yes. I slept with a life jacket on. At nighttime, you had a little duffel bag with your "abandon ship kit," in case you had to abandon ship in a hurry, yeah. It had some first aid equipment, extra water, flashlight and so on.

JC: So after you did these voyage to Australia, you were transferred to Alcoa?

MD: Yeah, the Alcoa Steamship Company.

JC: Where did they send you then after that?

MD: Then after that, we were coast wide, we went to the Caribbean. The Caribbean with cargo for ... general cargo for the various islands in the Caribbean and coming, return[ing] with bauxite, which was raw material for aluminum. Bauxite, yes.

JC: Bauxite?

MD: Yes, bauxite from ... someplace, I think is Dutch Guinea, or someplace where we loaded it. Yes, bauxite, it was a very essential raw material for aluminum. Yes, very much needed, yes.

JC: What was the name of the ship?

MD: *Alcoa Pioneer*.<sup>14</sup>

JC: They called it *Alcoa Pioneer*?

MD: Yeah, yeah.

SSH: Did you move up in rank at all?

MD: Oh, yes. After you were with, the ... requirements were sailing one year on your license as third mate, then you took the examination for second mate. One year as license on your second mate, one year sea duty on your second mate's license, examination for chief mate, one year of ... duty as ... chief mate, and then you sat, ... you were eligible to sit for your Master's License, which I did. [I] finally got it in 1945, yes.

SSH: When you were going to the Caribbean and coming back with the bauxite, were there any sightings of German submarines?

MD: We had no sightings, but ... I had a chart, which I will have a copy made for you. Somehow I managed to, ... I think I used it as a separation ...

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MD: It was my job to plot this on the ... chart [that] I kept, the position. So we, in case our tract, we were routed along that area, we could avoid it.<sup>15</sup> So, the Caribbean, and the East Coast was ... very, very active as far as submarines were concerned. In fact, Captain (Hardegan?) and the submarine U 123, ... first came over, there was a group of what they call "Operation Drumbeat..." in American, (pushtar?) or something in German. Seven submarines came over, Captain Hardegan, and the U 123 with a tourists' map, instead of a chart, came to New York. Came to New York, all the lights, he was amazed. There was a Norwegian tanker or something. He dispatched her with two torpedoes and he ... came into ... off the coast so close to Coney

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<sup>14</sup> See Document #12A

<sup>15</sup> See Document #13

Island ... He says to ... he gave the crew a pep talk. He says, "Men, we're here like a pack of ... like a pack of wolves, ... among sheep. And they haven't even realized that there's a submarine in the area." So, he congratulated his crew, and it started to pick off ships as they approached the New York harbor. And they mention, the ... governmental agencies mention, that the damage done by this group of several submarines, was far greater, than the damage accomplished at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. The impact for the American industry, and so on, was far greater.<sup>16</sup>

JC: I'm curious, the supplies that you would generally transport, were they military base supplies, or did it vary?

MD: ... Military supplies, ... what they called the "Forward Areas," wherever they sent us, ... part military, part, of course, supplies to keep the civilian population and food, and so on. But everything at that time was military controlled. So they ... directed your cargo, and wherever it should be discharged.

SSH: What kind of security did you have on board the ship, such as blackouts?

MD: Well, we had blackouts right away, came blackout everyday. In other words, the ship proceeded, ... the portholes were painted black and they had the screens, the baffles in the passageways, so in case you opened the door, the watertight door to get outside ... the light that was in the passageway would not show. It was a series of baffles and that<sup>17</sup> ...

SSH: Did you have to do any kind of special drills at all?

MD: Well, yes. We had weekly fire and boat drills, and so on. And then, of course, the gun crews didn't come aboard until about six months into the war. In other words, we were running independently. No escorts, no armament ... yeah.<sup>18</sup>

JC: When you say gun crews, did you actually take ...

MD: ... There were no gun crews, because there was no guns. So, finally they put the ship in the shipyards. Came guns aboard, four inch ... on the stern, three inch gun on the bow, and about two, four, six, about eight (Arlicken?) antiaircraft guns, 20 mm aircraft guns. Because this was the ship with the Alcoa Steam Company, [it] was not a Liberty ship, it was what they called, the C3. That was one built to the Maritime Commission specifications. It was a sixteen-knot ship. So, that was one of the reasons that we sailed at that ... with this line, independently. It was considered a fast ship ...

JC: So, it was much faster than the other ship you previously had?

MD: Yes, oh, yes.

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<sup>16</sup> See Document #14

<sup>17</sup> See Document #15

<sup>18</sup> See Document #16

SSH: Now how long did this refit take?

MD: ... The refit I ... do not recall exactly, but it was before ... in other words, they placed you in the shipyard when they knew they had the equipment there for you. They were ready for you. They're not going to have you sitting idly, waiting for the hook-up. Once the equipment [arrived], ... the refit didn't take very long.

SSH: Where did they do it?

MD: In the shipyard, someplace on the East Coast. I don't recall which one, because over a period of years you've been in so many shipyards, and so much ... And we were not permitted to keep any diaries, or log books. The logs, to be ... that was a reasonable request, because if we were captured nobody would find out where you were, what you were doing, yes. So, the crew were not permitted to ... keep any record of the activity. So I, ... being a naval reservist, I complied with the law, didn't keep it. And didn't keep any private ... diaries of that.

SSH: Which service manned your gun crews?

MD: ... The Navy, they placed ... I think it was about twenty-seven. They had an officer in charge, and twenty-seven ratings ... yes. And, of course, ... what you call the former Merchant Mariners, which were now mariners serving aboard public vessels, assisted in the ... We all had schedules for ... gunnery drill[s] or air raids and so on. We had the schedule, ... the mariners had a schedule. They assisted on the guns, they assisted on the loading, and so on.

JC: It was an interesting comment, when you referred to the former merchant mariners. Could you explain that?

MD: In other words, what happened after the war, the government requisitioned all free World War II commercial ships, which was the Merchant Marine.<sup>19</sup>

JC: This was after the war had started?

MD: After the war started, yes. Of course, it took a period for them to transition to be made. But, after you say the deadline is Pearl Harbor, ships requisitioned by the War Shipping Administration, and you became government ... they became public vessels.<sup>20</sup>

JC: So, during World War II the Merchant Marine ships were no longer private vessels.

MD: Correct, everything was [in] government[al] control. But, apparently the reason, that's how I surmise. Well, in fact, I've got an article in there, you will find out why didn't the government take over the whole crews. Of course, a lot of the crews did not want to be. But they said they couldn't pass the Navy physical examination, so what is the use? What is the use? In other words, they said bad teeth and that. But, as I mention, that could have been avoided. They could

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<sup>19</sup> See Document #17

<sup>20</sup> See Document #18

have given a waiver on that. But what they said, they couldn't, one of the reasons the Navy didn't take over the merchant's ships, because they couldn't pass the ... physical examination. So, you're back ... back to square one. And yet the ships, the cargoes were needed. The ships had to run.<sup>21</sup>

JC: Interesting. Now during this time was your homeport New York City?

MD: I was fortunate enough, it was New York City, yeah.

JC: Did you have a lot of time off between voyages?

MD: Well, time off, it all depends. Sometimes you came into a port, the cargo was waiting for you. So, you were loaded and went out again. Yes, it varied.

SSH: How long did it take to re-supply your ship when you came into port, and off-load what you had? Did you have to take on supplies for the men?

MD: Yes, yeah. Well, as I say, it varied ... At that time, I would say sometimes, I would say a week, say a week to off-load, and out again, yes.

SSH: They call that turn-around time?

MD: Turn-around, yes.

SSH: How were the unions affecting any of the work that was being done?

MD: How were the unions affecting any work being done? Well, when I received my license, and they had ... the master mates and pilots for the deck officers, so I knew that it would be best for me to ... join ... a professional organization. So, I became a member of the Master Mates and Pilots. Of course, I hadn't completed a trip, when the war came. So, I still maintained my ... standing with the Master Mates and Pilots, yes.

SSH: Were there any problems with the unions?

MD: Not ... that I know of, because everybody knew we had a war to win, yes. But, I did hear there was some problem with the ... coal industry, that they were going to call a strike or something ... But that, ... we were, ... it did not involve us. We were not involved. I saw a headline in a paper, and then it went away, yes.

JC: So how long were you involved in the cruising from New York to the Caribbean? Were you there for the rest of the war?

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<sup>21</sup> See Document #19

MD: No ... The Caribbean, so that went on until they put the guns on. As soon as they put the guns on, our first trip was to Liverpool, England.

JC: What was that about?

MD: That was about six months, I'd have to check, ... because, we got discharges when we finished a, what's that again, our cruise shall we say, yes. When we finished a cruise, then they gave you a discharge, and then you signed on for another, for another ... Shall we say, yes. So, I still have them, I'd have to refer. I could get the information for you, but since it's varied and look after a span of five years, and this is over fifty-five years ago.

JC: Sure, it is okay.

MD: But I can get the information for you. And whatever you want, give me a note. In fact, whatever, I will send you additional information.

JC: So, your next cruise then was to Liverpool?

MD: To Liverpool, England, yeah. Mostly ... bombs for the Air Force. I remember that, a bomb ammunition. I remember that, because, I was in a ... my job when I was on watch, was to go into the ... to the hold, and we had to brace anything, so it don't shift around. And of course, the longshoremen, if you didn't watch them, they'd slack off and then they'd have a bomb rolling around when the ship was rolling at sea. So, ... as soon as they saw you were attentive, and making the inspection, they were more careful. They weren't going to put over, because they'd be called back to redo it. You kept a little notebook and whatever deficiencies, and so on. So, it was Liverpool, England, and I remember that precisely, because ... promptly at 9:00 p.m., Gerry would come over and drop his bombs. So, the deck officers, we said, "Well, we're four on and eight off, let's double up on the watch." In other words, to get so you're away from the ship for a while. In other words, I would let an officer, ... you'd stand his watch, he'd stand your watch. So, that'd give you instead of eight hours off, it would give you a spell of sixteen hours off. So, there was a disaster. Arrangements were made, I left the ship, got into town, of course, you went into a pub. And getting back, getting back was a problem. You had to get a cab, try to get a cab, you know. Well, I finally got a cab, and as soon as [I] got into the cab, [I] didn't go very far, air raid, "Governor, out. This is the end of the stop. Out you go." So, out I went. I don't know how I managed to get back to the ship. But, finally one of the longshoremen says to me, he says, "I see you've gotten off the ship. Mate, ..." he says, "you're foolish, Gerry aims for the ship. They ... blast the surrounding area, but they always miss." He says, "You stay here and you're safest ride is aboard ship." And there we are a ship full of bombs. And true enough, every night not probably a night, air raids and that and [Mr. Drag makes a gun noise] the guns and fire and the blasting and that, and we managed and survived. One thing about this was interesting. When we left ... Liverpool, we were routed instead of across the Atlantic, we were routed down for the tip of South America, through the Magellan Straights, up the Pacific Coast, through the Panama Canal, and to New York. A very, I don't know why, but, look, we arrived safely. Yeah, that ... ship arrived safely in port. That's the main thing, yes.

SSH: How much interaction, on your ship, was there between the regular Navy gun crew and yourselves?

MD: I beg your pardon?

SSH: How much interaction was there between the Navy?

MD: Well ... very little ... oh, with the gunnery officer, with the gunnery officer I ... some of them, we got along good. And when I became Master I got along, very fine, yeah, interaction. Here's the gunnery officer, here's myself, here's the part of the gun crew. This is, of course, when the ship, this is after, when the war was over, the ship comes into Portland, Oregon and for the publicity for the local ... public interest they took some pictures so I thought I'd managed to hold onto this.

SSH: It's from the Oregon newspapers?

MD: Yeah. But that was Lieutenant Johnson, he and I, we got along fine. We'd each ... each day talk over circumstances and so on. Yeah, yeah. No, we had, sometimes, there were some friction, it all depends.

SSH: What would be the friction over, what were the issues?

MD: Well, I think authority. Authority and orders, and this and so on, yes, because the main thing ... the Master was still in charge of the ship. The gunnery officer was in charge of his crew and the guns. And then, of course, there was routing. We had routing instructions, and sometimes you had to depart from the routing. I ... would receive, before you left port, you called at naval. That was the last, the last place ... call. You call it the Navy headquarters. They gave you a Navy code, [a] secret code-book. It was about two or three inches in thickness. And the first pages were the orders, [which] were outlined in detail. But, you could depart if you considered it essential. You could depart from these orders. In other words, you're on your own. So, sometimes depending on the submarine areas and so on, you felt that, "Well, look instead of adhering to the ... prescribed route, we're going to depart." So therefore, sometimes the gunnery officer didn't think it was good, but I've never had that trouble. But ... somehow it filters back to you that others had it, when I was sailing as a junior officer.

SSH: When you were in ports of call and had any kind of liberty, like in Liverpool, were you under the authority of the military police the MPs?

MD: Absolutely, yeah, absolutely. It was all military areas, you know, it was all military. You were under the military police, yes.

SSH: How was, the interaction you had with the native populations in your ports of call, how did they treat someone like yourself?

MD: Very good, very good. I had no trouble, because I had already been sailing as an ordinary seaman through the Caribbean, and on the west coast of Mexico and so on, Panama Canal ... You would, you respected everybody, you went about your own business, never had any trouble. [I] never had any trouble.

SSH: Did you ever have to go and rescue some of your crew?

MD: ... What do you mean rescue some of crew, do you ...

SSH: If they were not behaving themselves.

MD: Well, bailing them out of jail ... sometimes, but ... very, very little, because usually they were very attentive and they were, shall we say, mostly young. But later on, they were ... very well seasoned, yes.

SSH: Now were there court-martials in the Merchant Marines?

MD: Well, there were court martials held by the military jurisdiction ashore. But, I do not recall any ... court martials being, have firsthand knowledge of because, look, we behaved ourselves, all right. Nobody's going to bother you if you behave yourself, and the crew behaves themselves, [and] so on, yes. But mainly they were petty. In other words, somebody trying to smuggle some cigarettes ashore, because at that time cigarettes aboard ship were ninety ... cents a carton. That's twelve packs. So, you could see what they would bring ashore. So, somebody tried to smuggle some cigarettes ashore, and he got nabbed and so on. And so that ... everything petty.<sup>22</sup>

SSH: Did you ever have any exotic cargo?

MD: Exotic cargo? Let me see.

SSH: Well, I think the bombs were pretty ...

MD: Bombs were ... oh, yes, you know, something like ninety-seven, ... or sixty miles of cable. It was about two inch cable for the Russian government ... We discharged in the Persian Gulf, and that was, I believe, they said was going to be a submarine cable in the Caspian Sea ... So, we discharged it in the Persian Gulf. It was for the Russian government. They accepted it, of course, it was taken off by native ... workers, yeah.

JC: So, I am assuming you were in the Persian Gulf after you'd been to England?

MD: Oh, yes. You had different runs, wherever the government, you came into New York or whatever port, ... New Orleans, or whatever port they directed you to. The cargo was there, and then you picked up the cargo, and carried out the orders.

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<sup>22</sup> See Document #20

JC: How many times did you go to England? Was it just the one time?

MD: I remember that one time, yes, that one time. That was about it, because the other trips were in the Pacific.

JC: Oh, okay.

MD: Yeah, in the Pacific. So, that was the islands, Eniwetok, Ulithi, Saipan, Tinian and so on. Follow through, mainly where the battles were.

SSH: Now were you coming in ahead or behind?

MD: Behind, behind, mostly yes. Yes, yes.

SSH: What kind of devastation did you see as far as the ...

MD: Oh, terrific devastation ... It made your heart wrench, yes.

SSH: Did you ever have a call to transport other military personnel?

MD: Yes, oh, yes. We, oh, yes ... carried military personnel off and on, yes, yes.

SSH: How many would you carry at one time?

MD: I think at one time, I have a record about it, thirty-three or so, yes. Well, in fact, after peace was declared, we took UNRAR, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation, a cargo of grain to Shanghai, China. That was discharged, and then the ship was requisitioned by the government to carry coal for the Shanghai Power Company, to keep the utilities in force. In other words, they had a power plant that the city required electricity and that. So, our job was to, we alternated between Formosa one trip to Formosa ... and then Shanghai discharge ... Then the next trip was to a place up in North China called Ch'in-huang-tao. They had a coal mine there, we loaded the coal back to Shanghai, then to (Quilong?), back and forth. And any interval between the coal cargoes, the military would take over. They had a cargo to move from (Taquba?), from Shanghai to (Chinsin?). So, we moved the cargo there. Then they required a cargo from (Chinsin?) to ... some place way up north in the (Huludao?). You had no charts, but you got there somehow.<sup>23</sup>  
[Laughs]

SSH: [Laughs] How long did you spend over in that part of China then?

MD: In China, I spent about nine months. Nine months, yeah. What had happened ... the crew for medical reasons started to, because it wasn't a desirable place, sanitary conditions and so on, right after the war, see. So they started, you had to pay them all discharge, and you took whatever was [available] stateless persons, or native personnel aboard to fill in. And of course,

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<sup>23</sup> See Document #21

you had the language barrier and so on. So, it became ... a problem. Yeah, it became a problem, to try to promptly execute your duties, yes ...

JC: Now during the war, I think you said on your pre-interview survey, that you had one encounter with a submarine in the Persian Gulf.

MD: Oh, yes. In the Persian Gulf, we ... I was, torpedoed in the Persian Gulf, yes.<sup>24</sup>

JC: Was that the same trip you were delivering the cable for the Russians?

MD: No, no, no. This was, this was an entirely different one. This was a different, a different program altogether. I was chief mate at that time. Yeah, I was chief mate at that time, and we went to the Persian Gulf, discharged our cargo, I was very happy. The chief made us very happy, because he's in charge of the loading and discharging, and that's the main ... The second mate is navigating officer, and, of course, you have the master, he's in overall operations. And I had discharged the cargo, we're in convoy, a beautiful sunny day, smooth sea, when we caught a ... torpedo from a Japanese submarine. We were in convoy, yeah.

JC: So you did not have any forewarning?

MD: No forewarning, nothing, no. No. I was ... no. I was leaning over the rail on the boat deck, feeling very happy, and all of a sudden "boom," hatch covers and hatch swirling about me, fuel oil. And I remember the fuel oil, because I was covered with fuel oil.

JC: What were your thoughts at the time, did you realize what had happened?

MD: Well, I realized something. I realized what had happened. Something that shouldn't have happened, yes. But we, [an] order came to "abandon ship." We lowered a boat, we abandoned the ship, started to pull away and oh, very embarrassing moment. We're pulling away, and here's the gun crew on the after-gun. So, we came back.

JC: Oh, you left the gun crew on the ship by mistake.

MD: Yeah. Well, the orders were to, the captain says, "Lower away, abandon ship." So, we're follow[ing] orders, yeah. Then we came back.

JC: What was the name of the ship?

MD: The name of the, *Alcoa Prospector*.

SSH: Did it, in fact, sink?

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<sup>24</sup> See Document #22

MD: No. Just ... water came to the main deck, and when we got back, sounded, and we found out it ... The torpedo hit number four hold, and it lifted the shaft, the propeller shaft, where it entered the bulkhead to the engine room. There was leakage there. But, we caught it in time, and with a jury rig we stopped ... well, most of the leakage, shall we say. There was a slight leakage there from the hold into the engine room, but with the pumps they had, it was controlled.

SSH: So, how did you get back into port, were you towed?

MD: We were towed, yeah, we were towed.

SSH: What port did you ...

MD: We were towed first to, ... the one in Pakistan ... To Pakistan and then we went to Bombay. Then we were going to Bombay for repairs. That's when they put us in dry dock.

SSH: So, you stayed right with that ship?

MD: I stayed with the ship, yes.

SSH: How long did that take to repair?

MD: Well, that took about, after about six months, since I was signing papers and rupees, the bills were staggering. Everyday I'd get, I was acting master, and I'm signing all this, I have, "Hey, look something's wrong here. I shouldn't be doing this." But, somebody had to sign. I was like, so I ... was repatriated, yes.

SSH: Where were you quartered when your ship was at dry dock?

MD: A hotel, ashore.

SSH: With the whole crew?

MD: Well, at that time we didn't have any crew, because the crew was removed after we got into port.

SSH: They became like replacements.

MD: Replacements, yeah.

SSH: So how many of your crew were left?

MD: Just myself.

SSH: Oh, just yourself.

MD: Yeah, just myself. Yeah, just myself. I was chief mate at that time.

SSH: Were there any other Americans in the hotel?

MD: Off and on. Yeah, ... transient.

SSH: Was it kind of lonely?

MD: Well, no, I was busy. I was busy. Well, keeping track of what was going on board ship, because I submitted a report to the company office, every weekly report and so on.

JC: What was the average size of the crew on a typical ship like this?

MD: The wartime, was about forty.

JC: Forty.

MD: Forty merchant, shall we say, mariners serving on public vessels. Yeah, about forty. And they had about twenty-seven, it varied, about twenty-seven in the gun crew, yeah.

JC: What was the year when the ship was torpedoed?

MD: That was 1944, because ... when I got ashore, I got my masters' license and that was in 1944, yeah.

SSH: So, you were stationed in India, and then did you go right back to service, or did you have to do ...

MD: No, I got right back into the States, [to] head for my masters' license, and went right out again, yeah.

SSH: What did you go out on this time?

MD: The Pacific, again, Pacific.

SSH: Which ship were you on?

MD: I was on the first ship, was the *John G. Todd* and then the *Granville S. Hall*. I was aboard the *Granville S. Hall*, when we were in Naha, Okinawa, awaiting the invasion of Japan. Somebody was smart, they had an atom bomb and that was something. The best news we received, that the war was over, yeah.

JC: Do you recall where you were when you heard that the war was over?

MD: Naha, Okinawa, awaiting the invasion of Japan.

SSH: Were you aware that you were a part of the invasion?

MD: Oh, of course, of course, yes.

SSH: Were there any other incidents that you would like to tell us about?

MD: Well, the incidents was what they called "friendly fire." When we found out that the war was over, ships at the anchorage opened up with their antiaircraft guns. They opened up. So, [we] got to the radio operator to find out what's going on, we thought it was an air attack, you know, because this was Pearl Harbor, and now the Japanese kamikazes were pretty ... active. No, what it was, the war was over, the war was over, so I don't know, because it's hard to get information. But, as you know, from friendly fire, I know I heard of some casualties from the shrapnel that come down from the air, because the antiaircraft, because you had a group of ships firing and, of course, whatever goes up, comes down, so, yeah. So, twenty millimeter antiaircraft guns, that's ... if it hits you on the head, it's going to do some damage, yeah. But, at Naha, Okinawa, when the war was over, they were getting from the Philippines, these huge troop transport planes. And it was already past sunset, [and] they're still coming in. They're lumbering in low, you know. And then, look, already, the sun's down, and, look, it's getting dark. These planes are still coming, first thing you know, we'd see a flash. What had happened here, somehow they had missed a runway and exploded. So here they are, they're GIs, the war is over, they're very happy, they'll be going home soon. And there they go. So, after about the second flash, I went down below, I couldn't watch anymore, yeah. So, in other words the war is over and these poor fellows, somehow, well, look, they didn't have the facilities for the landing strips for that, and so on to bring them in, yeah. There was a lot of casualties after the war ... Well, that's wartime for you.

SSH: Of all the different ports that you went into, what was your most memorable?

MD: Well, one was Liverpool, England with the ... blitz on. And as I say, staying aboard the ship full of bombs, because it was the safest place, [Laughs] yes. Others were to one on the West Coast [of Africa] for when we came ... Some of the officers and that, they went out on a safari, because you had to wait for your next scheduled departure, and so on. And they went looking for wild game, and I'm not a huntsman, so it didn't interest me. But, I remember they, see they had, during peacetime, they had regular units that specialize in taking ... crews out to hunting wild animals. So, they kept on doing it.

JC: You mention in your pre-interview survey that you received a number of medals.

MD: Oh, service medals from the US Navy, yes.<sup>25</sup>

JC: How many of those were you awarded?

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<sup>25</sup> See Document #23

MD: Four, four.

JC: What were those medals?

MD: Well, they were ... for, I think North Atlantic area, Pacific area, Mediterranean area, and so on, yes.

JC: You also received some Merchant Marine Service Medals?

MD: Yes, Merchant Marine Service Medals, too, but you had to pay for the medals so<sup>26</sup> ...  
[Laughs]

JC: Pay for the medals?

MD: Yeah, so I didn't receive them. I got the paperwork that I'm entitled if I give so much money. I said, "Look, I served our nation and I'm not going to buy any Merchant Marine medals. I'm not going to pay for them." [Laughter]

JC: Are the medals awarded by the government?

MD: Government, yes.

JC: The government was going to charge you for the medals?

MD: Yeah, yeah.

SSH: Where was your brother? Was he in the regular Navy?

MD: My brother was, and this was before Pearl Harbor, my brother was stationed aboard what they called one of their supply ships, was *The Pollux*. She was a merchant ship taken over by the Navy and full naval crew, *The Pollux*. They were on the coast of Newfoundland, in foggy stormy weather they ran aground. Something like two or three hundred of the crew were lost.<sup>27</sup>

JC: Oh, wow.

MD: My brother managed, there was a cliff. Up the cliff they had to go, from the ship, on the rocks to the cliff, up the cliff somehow, and then there was a hospital run by ... a mining unit. He carried one of the officers on his back to the place there. Of course, after that, he was discharged with a disability, because my sister used to say he used to get up at night and try to walk through the windows, and got all cut up. And so, there was a lot of casualties of that, from the stress, yes, the stress. But on his ship, it became a total loss, they lost about two or three hundred men. The ... name, I have the book. A book was written about the incident after, *Standing Into Danger* ...

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<sup>26</sup> See Document #24

<sup>27</sup> See Document #25

JC: *Standing Into Danger?*

MD: Yes, was the name of the book. It gave a full account of the [incident], ... before and after. Plenty, many of the officers were court martialed. But in those days, radar wasn't what it was in post-war, and so on, it wasn't very effective. It wasn't very effective. So ...

SSH: As a Merchant Marine, tell us some of the changes you have seen, in the technology and the crafting of the ships.

MD: Oh, the crafting of the ships was remarkable. I was on a ... and I, now this is well post war, I was on ... the government built four ships for Sea Land. Well, they were operated by Sea Land. But, they were faster than any other, what they called passenger ship for the North Atlantic trade. I think we, and in heavy weather, bucking the storms, we made thirty-four knots.

JC: Wow.

MD: Very few passenger ships [could go that fast] ...

JC: Yes.

MD: Hundred and fifteen thousand horsepower. There were four ships built, they were operated by Sea Land. I think it was mainly built by the government. They were experimenting. In one case, they had to ... in distance ports get material to military airports, yes. But that was one of the, as I say, that was a very fast ship. I was on two of them of this company. And then I ... got back, I got into the tanker trade ... maritime overseas we ran. It was on the Alaska run, the same one ... where Captain ... was *Exxon Valdez* ... the same run. We hauled crude oil from Alaska to ... a port in Costa Rica. They pumped it over the mountain, and to a port down on the east coast, and then they had ships that picked it up and brought it to the refineries.

SSH: To back up a little bit to the time after the war, when you were off the coast of China, chronologically where did you go from there?

MD: Well, we were hauling coal from, ... these ports, what I said, up North China, Ch'in-huang-tao and (Quilong?) in Formosa, for the Shanghai Power Company back and forth. And then we came back to the United States, and was discharged. Discharged. In other words, the Navy took over the ship for tracking this astronaut, the Apollo Project, for tracking the missiles and so on, ... yeah.

JC: So, after the war, did you stay on in the Merchant Marines?

MD: Yeah, I remained on, yes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Document #26

JC: And how long were you in the Merchant Marines after the war?

MD: After the war, until I got a forced retirement, in about 1984.

JC: 1984, wow.

MD: Yeah, yeah. So, I spent roughly fifty years with the mermaids out there. [Laughter]

SSH: How did you meet Mrs. Drag?

MD: How did I meet Mrs. Drag? Okay, we brought, after the war in 1946, brought over a cargo of coal to Amsterdam, Holland.<sup>29</sup> Now, this was a very severe winter. Coal, it's not a very exotic product, but was necessary again for the utilities. They had to get the power-plant going, and coal was the thing that gives electrical power. So, I brought, ... we brought the cargo into ... Amsterdam. And Ina's father has a craft of about two hundred tons, the small ones they off loaded the coal went into them, and they transferred it to the various places that were needed. And Ina was a, ... at that time, working as a reporter for the ... for the local newspapers. She made a trip with her father, and a Liberty ship she heard so much about the Germans saying that the Liberty ships, that they're going to lose the war because the Liberty ships were no good, they cracked, and so on. She wanted some firsthand information. So, she came aboard for an interview and like you are doing now, I was interviewed, yes. So, then of course, I was interviewed. The article appeared in the local newspaper, that the ships were good, they served the purpose, and so on. She sent me a copy of it. So, didn't I have to write to her to thank her for the newspaper article? And that time, we're going around the world several times. So, finally we're going back into ... Germany. And since it's just across the border of Germany, Holland I said, "Well, why don't you come down for a visit?" Well, if you come down for a visit ... you have the American sector, the British sector, the Russian sector, and the French sector. All these sectors, you had to get past these four. And she ... guess who she got the final okay from? He was ambassador to Holland, the financier, ... he finally managed to get her a pass to make all these ... border crossings. And she came aboard and, ... then I figured, look, "Instead of sending all these letters and it's cheaper to get married." [Laughter] So, it's lasted over fifty years. So ...

SSH: So, did you marry her while you were in Germany?

MD: No, we corresponded for over a year, and then I finally got married. I went to Holland, met the family, got married, and then she came to the United States in 1950.

SSH: Oh, okay. Now when you were doing all of your sailing, where did you homeport your wife?

MD: Oh, ... we had a nice apartment in Staten Island. We started out in Staten Island, beautiful apartment overlooking the water. But, then they were talking about, mentioning the atomic bomb and a fifty-mile radius. So fifty-mile radius, I came, I drew a circle from New York, and

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<sup>29</sup> See Document #27

looking for a place then on the fifty mile radius. I exhausted all the possibilities in New Jersey around the, a certain part, around the southern end of it. Connecticut, of course, I avoided, New York, because of the huge taxes. They'd tax you to death there. So, I decided New Jersey and outside the circle, was Newton. So, I did aboard the tankers, we worked a period of three months at sea. [I] worked one month paid vacation, in lieu of overtime. In other words, we didn't have overtime, but in lieu of overtime, we got paid, we got a one-month's paid vacation. So, I was, during my one-month's paid vacation at home, I'd look around for a place, found a place in Newton, New Jersey and here we are. Still here, a beautiful place, I tell you. [Laughter]

JC: And when did you move to Newton?

MD: When, in about, let's see, 1950.

JC: Oh, wow.

MD: Yeah.

JC: Do you and your wife have any children?

MD: I have a son. A son, he's a meteorologist for the National Weather Service up in, stationed in the Boston area, yeah.

JC: What's his name?

MD: Walter.

JC: Walter.

MD: Yeah.

SSH: So, how accurate are his forecasts?<sup>30</sup> [Laughs]

MD: Well, here it is, when the American Meteorologist Society have their meetings in various places, one was in some place in Houston, or that area. He got a one thousand dollar certificate for accuracy and weather forecasting, yes. So, when the government pays you for being accurate, that's quite a compliment, [Laughter] yes. But he takes pride in his work, yeah.

SSH: I was just going to say though, as a seaman I would have thought that weather predictions must have been very important to you?

MD: Correct, correct. In fact, some of the books that when he took his meteorology course at St. Louis University, ... he used some of my books on meteorology ...

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<sup>30</sup> See Document #28

SSH: This continues an interview with Mr. Matthew Drag on December 3, 1999, in Blairstown, New Jersey. We wanted to have you tell us some of the stories about your experiences after the war.

MD: Yes. After the war I continued in the Merchant Marine until I had a forced retirement in 1984 ... As you know, after the war, under the GI Bill there was free college education, free or low interest home loans for all GIs. And although I had served under my commission as an Ensign in the Navy and in the Naval Reserves and I had reported for duty ... immediately after Pearl Harbor for duty and I was told to stay aboard the merchant ship I was on, "Because this is where we need you." So, after the war was finished, the mariners were told that they were not entitled to any benefits, because they were civilians. Now here I was under the impression, they looked, they told me "You stay." I was not the only one. In these papers you will find others were told the same thing. They were naval reserve, "Stay where you are." And they didn't fare as well as I did. For me that I was alive was a reward in itself. So, I didn't pressure anything. But, after about ... twenty years ago, I started getting letters from organizations, volunteer organizations of mariners ... to assist and I didn't pay much attention until they appointed me as a, for veterans work. And I started getting these pitiful letters from widows of mariners who were lost and got nothing. And they were told, "Hey, look, the government's going to take care of this." They received no compensation, no help, no help. So, I started being active and looking for ways to, through the legal system, because, look, as I told them before, you cannot abandon a dog, as the government did do to two hundred and twenty thousand mariners that served their nation ... So, I took the course and I got the Associate of Applied Science in Legal Studies from the ... Sussex County Community College.<sup>31</sup> Spent five miserable years there trying to find out the background. Just what ... recourse do we have? I took the constitutional law course three times, to make sure I didn't miss anything. So, with the little paper, the Constitution, we've come knocking on the door of the ... veterans, the military, the defense department, the navy department, ... the Air Force, and so on. What they did, they turned around in 1977, now this is so many years after the war, they passed a law ... for compensation of civilians who had contracted their services to the military. Because, they had many civilians, you know, during, they have them now. In fact, now you go aboard a Navy ship, a Navy ship, the electronics and that is mostly farmed out. It's taken care of by civilians. And so, they called it, it fit in civilians. And ... the Army Department one day recruited for ... their merchant, for their cargo ships. They recruited under civil service, under the civil service plan. So, in other words here they said, "Look civil service civilians, they tried to slip it in. "Look, hey, you people were civilians, you're civil service, you're ..." I said, "No, look, my commission, I served as Ensign." Now look, there was fifteen thousand of us from the various training ships, and that, who were caught in the same boat, who were caught in the same boat. And, ... so now we're in-enacted. With ... I'm presently taking a course at the Sussex County Community College, here at Newton, it's run by the University by the Paterson University ...

SSH: William Paterson.

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<sup>31</sup> See Document #29

MD: I'm studying sociology of law, very, very, very productive there. Oh, that course is going to help me very much. And ... we're, and I require a DD214 which shows you, which records your service in the Navy. The Navy discharges shows you that you served in the Navy. But the other shows your service. So, I need a DD214 to get credit for ... naval reserve courses that I took. It's been taking me over, well, since I ... over five years and I still haven't got it. Can you imagine? A piece of paper, yeah, that's all I want, so I could get credit for certain naval reserve courses, for this project with the University of Paterson ...

SSH: It's William Paterson University.

MD: Yeah, William Paterson University. So that's where it stands now, everything is on hold. Everything is on hold. We've lobbied all the congressmen, well, most of the congressmen. ... All the agencies, federal agencies and that. There's, you talk about an "iron curtain" there's a "stone-wall curtain." Nobody knows anything, about anything, yes.

SSH: Have there been any concessions made to the Merchant Mariners and their service to the country?

MD: Well, there's some. They'll give you a flag, and I believe they've got some burial benefits, for burial, yeah.

SSH: What other organizations are you involved with, to put your plea before the country?

MD: The what?

SSH: What other organizations were you involved with?

MD: Well, one was our legislators, our legislators. Oh, I found out that "Look, let's work it this way." I'll use the New Jersey Constitution to force the federal government to provide recognition for ... the naval work, the work done, as I say, under my commission as Ensign in the USNR. And that ran against a stone wall here in Trenton. Yes, I got ... stacks, twelve feet of correspondence. This is some of it. You got through it, yes.

SSH: Now is there an official organization of former Merchant Marines that you are a part of?

MD: There is, but it's very ineffective, because it takes money. It takes money to run an organization. And one of them, is the groups that are against us. Now do we have ... in this organization, the New Jersey organization, which I was one of the founders, The American Merchant Marine Veterans, in ... Newark, New Jersey. We have, it grew to over five hundred members. But it's mostly a social, a social unit. They have dinners and Christmas parties, and so on. But as far as the, you would imagine that the one group that is against us is the Veterans of Foreign Wars, could you imagine that? They do not recognize, they do not recognize the mariners' service as military, although our percentage casualty rate is one tenth of a percent point higher than the Marine Corps. And they do not recognize the mariners as being military.

JC: Why is that?

MD: ... You'll have to find out from them. Why is that? Because, ... they'd have to recognize that once we're military, we're entitled to military compensation.

JC: Oh, okay.

MD: Then you'd have to go back. You'd have to go back fifty years and compound the interest on that, on what they failed to do. They failed to recognize what was going to happen. Of course, everybody was, all the Navy was interested in was delivering the cargo, where it was to be. Every agency was making their own rules, directives, executive orders were coming out. You couldn't keep track of them. And then, now they found out that the ones that they should have done, is the ones when the government took over the ... merchant ships, the pre-World War II, were commercial ships, they made them public vessels. They became, they did not process the papers properly. In other words, they shouldn't have deducted social security from my wages, I shouldn't have belonged to a labor organization, and so on. Yeah, see. It all starts so, then the first one that sees that something was wrong was the one who, the man who signed my Naval Reserve Commission, acting ... Secretary of Navy, Mr. Forestal. They named, of course, an aircraft carrier, a nuclear aircraft carrier after him. He saw something was wrong. In other words, after the war the merchant mariners weren't getting any recognition. For some reason, now I don't know, I'm just trying to, now I'm trying like a jigsaw puzzle, I'm trying to find out why and how certain things happened. He took his own life. He jumped out of the window in a naval hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. Because he saw, these men, down the line they're going to [do], what we're doing now. Knock on the door. Now I'm using the Constitution to obtain the rights that I earned ... I ... don't want anything I did not earn. So then after that, things became very slow. And then you heard the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral (Borda?), he came up through the ranks. For some reason he took his life. And they said because he wore the wrong, the wrong stripe or the wrong service button. No, he saw the mess. And somehow all the letters for fifteen years, I've actively been writing letters to legislatures, different ... agencies and that. Just like now I'm writing, I want my DD214, because I earned it. It's filtering up somebody's saying, "Why aren't these men getting it? What's keeping 'em? Why should they be denied this?" So they found out that there's a lot of items which they did not properly attend to, yes. And now, as I say, I'm using the Constitution of the State to have the federal government recognize my service.

JC: That sounds wonderful.

MD: Yeah. Well, wonderful, but it comes up as I say, against a stone-wall. So, I wrote to the ... to the, let's see the department that Reno is in charge of ...

JC: The Department of Justice?

MD: The Department of Justice, no answer.<sup>32</sup> I wrote to the, there's another Department of Justice, I wrote to them. No answer. So now, I've got to write to the FBI to find out, why I, as a former officer in a Navy, am not receiving a reply from the Justice Department. We have all this electronic equipment, ... billion dollar, ... multi-billion dollar budget and that, why can't they give me a reply, a civil reply? So, I've got the next one is going to be to the FBI. Oh, and now also, I'm going to make representation to the New York Education Department. Look, you people made us, ... provided that we should take naval reserve courses. I ... diligently and honestly performed my duties, now all I want is this paper. So, I have got to write. I wrote to the admiral in charge of the academy, and I got no proper reply. So, now I'm going to write to the Board of Trustees to find out. So, that's where it stands.

SSH: Well, we wish you well.

MD: Thank you very much. Yeah, we're going to keep on making efforts. And ... I'm very disappointed that Rutgers did not take with their association, which I hope there was some interlocking with the Sussex County Community College, because I had hoped to transfer from the community college to the Rutgers Legal Department, legal courses ... I got to find out now, if they have any tele-courses. If not, I may have to go to Seton Hall, to Seton Hall, yeah. But, ... it's travel to Morristown and at my age, it's not very pleasant, because ... nighttime driving I avoid. And some of the, a lot of the classes are night-work. Yeah ...

JC: Sure.

MD: So what I shall do, any questions now, that I could help you with?

SSH: Well, I have really no more questions on my list to ask. Do you have any more Joe?

JC: No, I think you have answered all the questions that I have put together.

SSH: We thank you very much for taking the time for us to interview you.

MD: Well, we thank you very much for listening to a former merchant mariner, now, mariners serving aboard public vessels, yes. And I shall try to clarify, if you go through these papers if you find anything, any questions I shall be very happy to answer and to clarify any items of, that you're not clear on, yeah.

SSH: I think for the tape that we should say that Mr. Drag has provided us with a nice folder full of documents, a briefcase full.

MD: Well, I've got another folder, in my briefcase.

SSH: This concludes an interview with Mr. Matthew Drag.

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<sup>32</sup> See Document #30

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Reviewed by Bojan Stefanovic 11/26/00  
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/29/00  
Reviewed by Matthew Drag 12/00