TRANSCRIPT – WHITEMARSH (WHIT) SEABROOK SMITH, III

Interviewee: WHITEMARSH SMITH

Interviewer: HADLEY WHITE

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WHITEMARSH SMITH: All right.

HADLEY WHITE: Well, good afternoon. My name's Hadley White. I'm a cadet at the Citadel, and I am part of the Charleston oral history program. I'm joined today by Whit Smith. Would you mind introducing yourself and just tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

WS: I grew up right here in Charleston. I've lived here all my life. Whenever I'm giving a talk, I'll tell people I've lived in the same zip code my entire life. So it's been fun growing up in Charleston. Staying in Charleston, working in Charleston, went to the Citadel graduate of the class of 1966. I was in business administration. I did a lot of sailing prior to getting to the Citadel. And while I was at The Citadel on the sailing team, traveling with them and it led me into the profession I'm in now, which is the harbor pilots. I started here in 1969. I've been president for the last forty years and had a wonderful career on the waterfront and I have been involved actively on the waterfront right here.

HW: Do you have any early memories of growing up in Charleston you would like to speak about?

WS: Yeah, like I said, growing up here in Charleston, involved getting involved with sailing at the age of nine, racing here in the high school years and into college. It opened up a lot of doors and activities to me. My father and mother grew up downtown, so I grew up down here and played at East Bay playground right next door. It's kind of fun to see some of the old people who grew up then and still here now. I'm very active in the Carolina Yacht Club, which is right next door. You know, I was lucky that I went to public elementary school, middle school, high school in Charleston. I didn't go the private school route that a lot of people do and, knew I was gonna stay in state for college. It was a good choice picking The Citadel.

HW: Did you have any siblings growing up down here?

WS: Yes, three sisters.

HW: Okay. What was that like living in a house full of women as the only son?

WS: Well, you know, I got a wife and three daughters now, so it's sorta, I know the drill by now, but it was fun. But I was a lot, it was five years between each of my sisters and myself. So, by the time the third sister came along and my mother would bring her up to the dress parades, I was, you know, it looked like my child almost, she was two years old and I was eighteen or nineteen. We all live within a couple of blocks of each other downtown now. So I see them all the time.

HW: Neat. Do you have any early memories of The Citadel and could you speak about, what was the attraction to The Citadel and wanting to go to school there?

WS: You know, I felt the discipline would be a good thing for me. I knew a lot about The Citadel obviously living here. So that wasn't a surprise, I was there in the heavy draft years of Vietnam. So I knew that you either stayed in school or you will leave early for Southeast Asia. From that stage, you know, I felt like while we were there, it was a pretty tough freshman program in those days. We started with, I don't even remember, sixty or seventy freshmen in our company and we graduated eleven. So we, we had a pretty high attrition rate for whatever reason. But anyway, we made it through and, you know, I won't say I enjoyed the freshman year, but it was tolerable,

HW: Did you ever think about pursuing a military commission leaving The Citadel?

WS: You know, I did. Back then they offered you either air force or army were the two choices back in the sixties. I was in the air force ROTC and they told me that if I sign the contract, I was going to flight school and then to two tours in jets in Vietnam. And I knew I wanted to try to get into the pilot organization and they had an age cutoff of twenty-eight. So, it was going to be close. I passed on the air force contract and I signed up for the National Guard. They called me my senior year, April of my senior year. And I said, I got to graduate. And they said, take it or leave it. And those appointments were like gold back in those days. And so, I passed on it and they said, we will take the number two person on the list and there's no guarantee you're going to get in. So, I graduated, I got my notice to report to Columbia, South Carolina for my pre-induction physical for

Vietnam. And a week before I was supposed to leave the National Guard called and said, we got an opening. So that's how close it came from me not working out here with the pilots. I guess at that point I would have gone to officer's candidate school is what I would have done.

HW: Yes, sir.

WS: It allowed me to stay here. I got into the pilots in ‘69, and halfway through, they shifted me into the Coast Guard reserve program over there.

HW: Could you speak a little bit about your involvement with the South Carolina National Guard and then what you did in the Coast Guard?

WS: Yeah, I mean the National Guard, you know, of course I didn't go to officer's candidate school, so I just went in as lowest ranked. The only interesting thing that happened is we had a hospital strike here in—what year was that? Probably in ‘69. So we got activated. So I was on a machine gun post on Calhoun Street by the hospital for two weeks. We were living under the stadium. We were at The Citadel's football stadium living under the thing while it was going on. We had twenty thousand National Guard troops in Charleston for two weeks with dust to dawn curfews. I mean, it was, it was kind of ready to explode, but it didn't, thank goodness. After that, the pilots decided, you know, that I wasn't doing them a lot of good up on a machine gun post on Calhoun. So, I got moved into the Coast Guard and did my reserve duty there and they counted my apprenticeship training here as a lot of that. I just continued doing what I was doing right here and didn't really have to go into the Coast Guard in a full-time way at all. I did go on

active duty with the Army up in Fort Dix, New Jersey, which is required for National Guard. And that was advanced infantry company. And everybody there was leaving for Vietnam.

HW: Well, how did it make you feel taking up arms in the same place where you grew up?

WS: It was a little different experience. I mean, you know, I knew why we were there, but I mean, we were sitting up there with live ammunition and there were other National Guard units that were running security with the fire department. They were lighting fires and the fire department would respond and people were shooting at them. It was a little eerie being called up in the city of Charleston. I tell you what was really eye opening to me is when you hear a tank rumbling down Calhoun Street, about twenty miles an hour, and you think, what in the world is going on and what have I gotten myself into? But it sort of simmered down and ended peacefully. Nobody really got hurt. I mean, there were some skirmishes and a lot of arrests and things like that.

HW: So your reserve time in the Coast Guard, you get to spend some time on the water I'm assuming, did that kinda make you question getting into the pilot boat industry or make you want to pursue that as a job?

WS: What they did is they allowed me to have a three-year apprenticeship here. So they allowed that part of the Coast Guard to be my apprenticeship training. So I just continued doing exactly what I was doing.

HW: What was the attraction to the pilot boat industry? You know, leaving The Citadel with a business degree, were you hoping to do something else with a business degree?

WS: I actually went into business with my father. He had a glass company right here, and then three years after I finished, the opportunity came to join the Charleston pilots. I talked it over with him and he said it was something he always would have loved to have done. He thought I ought to try it. And if I didn't like it, I could always come back with him. But, like I say, doing a lot of sailboat racing all over the country opened my eyes to what pilots do. Cause a lot of pilots were involved with racing as well. So, I thought if I could end up with a career on the water it would be a lot of fun. And that sort of was the pull to do it and to come in.

HW: Was sailing something you did competitively all through grade school and high school and at The Citadel?

WS: It was, yes.

HW: Do you have any cool stories or places sailing might've taken you?

WS: The Citadel got invited every year to the Mardi Gras Regata, which is in New Orleans. And we left Christmas day for a week with a station wagon, a credit card and eight of us down there. So we were on our own without a chaperone. That was fun. We had a lot of good times down there. And then I got to go to the national intercollegiate championships on the West Coast as part of the sailing. I qualified for that. And I went out there to represent The Citadel in the collegiate nationals.

HW: Was that individual qualification?

WS: It was, yes.

HW: Heading to California, did you feel that kind of culture shock as someone who grew up in Charleston, South Carolina?

WS: I was really just at the San Diego Yacht Club sailing, so, I mean, I didn't get to experience the West Coast life. I mean, I was there with collegiate sailors from all over the country.

HW: Well, it sounds like you have a love for being on the water. Did you ever experience or try to get into any kind of fishing down here in the Charleston area?

WS: Yeah, I mean, I grew up fishing before I got into the pilots and while I'm here and the schedule that the pilots run on as a week on and a week off. So every other week you're, you're off, you have plenty of time for fishing and hunting. I was in that world for, I dunno, twelve or fifteen years before I became president. So I live that week on week off. And then once I took over as president you're in here every day. So that's when the, the business training came into running the business from a business standpoint. One of the twenty-one of us has to be in here doing it. And you know, I always enjoyed it, enjoyed the employees that I work with and I like the challenge of running the business.

HW: Do you feel like the business degree from The Citadel is what helped you once you moved into that upper level management?

WS: Yeah, I do. I mean it didn't focus on, on accounting, you know, but just every aspect of running the business from the PR part, the political part, the giving speeches, you know, just running the day-to-day operation. Like I said, we have twenty pilots and twenty employees and we run twenty-four hours a day every day of the year. So we're staffing this place and we've got turnover every twelve hours with the employees, but yeah, I definitely think The Citadel business degree helped.

HW: Going back to your apprenticeship, you talked about, how you were able to do that with the Coast Guard reserve. Could you kind of give me like a day in the life of what it was like during your apprenticeship before you officially had a job with the Pilots?

WS: The apprentices have kind of like the freshman year, like The Citadel. And a lot of what we did back then is I put you on three ships a day for three years. So you're traveling with a fully trained pilot and everything he's doing, you're doing with him, just kind of shadowing him. Like I said three ships a day will eat up a good bit of your time, day and night. You get one weekend off a month. Other than that, you're here. You're either running the boat, you're either dispatching or you arrive in ships with pilots. So it's a pretty intense program that we have. I mean, you miss every meal at home. And I think my nickname was the Phantom because my wife never knew where I was.

HW: Did you have anyone that gave you a hard time when you were the newbie during your apprenticeship?

WS: Yeah, the then president had gone to The Citadel for two years before World War II. And, I think it was just a continuation of the freshman year in his mind. But I remember asking if I could get off to go to a funeral and he said, “no, there'll be other funerals.” And I said, “okay, I know the drill. I'm just gonna do what I supposed to do and not ask for any special treatment. And let's just get through this thing.”

HW: So was there any coworkers that you really bonded with during your apprenticeship?

WS: There were three of us that went through the apprenticeship together, and one of them was a Citadel graduate as well. So we kind of knew the drill and, you know, hung around together when we had free time, but he was familiar with what we were going through.

HW: So do you feel like you were able to handle the stress and demands of that job after the knob year at The Citadel. Did you feel like you were ready for it?

WS: Yeah. I mean you sort of saw what they were doing and what was being required. And it was just suck it up and let's just get through it. And it really goes pretty quick. I even tell the guys now we don't have any apprentices now, but we just got through with some a year ago and two of them were Citadel graduates as well. So, I'd say half the group down here is Citadel graduates. So, it's, everybody kind of knows what we've been through together.

HW: Once you finished your apprenticeship and moved into a full a full-time job with the company, could you speak a little bit about what that was like, and any of the changes you might've seen?

WS: Yeah, I mean, I've been here fifty years now. I mean, we started out with all wooden boats. We now have all aluminum. We used to be in the building across the street. This is a relatively new building right here. This is ten years old. The ships are not nearly as big as they are now. A big ship back then was probably six hundred feet. A big one now is thirteen hundred and sixteen thousand containers on board. We didn't have any container ships when I started, it was all breakbulk, pretty much hand loading hand store in the ships. I was lucky to see the breakbulk years and the end of that. And then I saw the introduction of containerization. So that was kinda neat to be there on the beginning of it to see what it's grown to.

HW: So based off my understanding, the pilot boats kind of lead the larger cargo ships through the Harbor. Could you speak a little bit about in detail, kind of like what your duties and responsibilities are?

WS: Well, yeah. What happens is the pilot boats are really the transportation that gets me off shore. We're boarding ships about eighteen miles off shore. So the boats take us from this dock, eighteen miles out, and we actually go alongside and climb up a rope ladder and get on the ship. You meet the captain. He turns the ship over to you and you do everything he's been doing at sea. You're bringing the ship in, but you're telling them where to go, how fast, what courses to stay on. The bridge team totally turns everything over to you. So you're navigating the ship in. And of course the captain's there and the

mates, but what they're doing is they're hiring a local expert to get them in and get them out of the port.

HW: What is it like climbing up the ladder on the side of a boat that sits a hundred feet or more out of the water?

WS: That can get your attention. You know, on a blue bird day, it's pretty routine. You know we're on boats on about one hundred twenty hours a week, from just running back and forth. We're handling right at forty-eight hundred ship movements a year. The ladder is the tricky part. I mean, the boat, if you remember last Saturday or Sunday, when we had that, that front coming through and it was blowing, we had gale winds. We were off shore boarding in forty mile an hour plus winds off shore. That's when it could get dangerous. I mean, if we fall, the chances of survival are not going to be great. In my career, I haven't had anyone go in the water off shore, believe it or not. And during that time, we've had eight to ten pilots killed in the last ten years nationwide doing that, making that transfer.

But we put in a lot of training. That's what you do doing those apprenticeship. When you're riding with somebody and we got a lot of safety equipment that we're using, flotation coats blow up and lights come on and transponders go off. So, I mean, we've done everything we could do. If you go in to try to be able to locate you. We train with the Coast Guard, with helicopter transfer, but at the end of the day, you know, to us, it's pretty routine. I mean, it's like walking up and down the steps, but to you, it, you know, it'll get your attention because you're not used to doing it. But you know, it's kind of like climbing to the second story of your house on a rope ladder on and off of every ship.

HW: Do you feel like the longer you've been in the industry, the more safety has become a priority?

WS: Oh yeah. Yeah. Safety has really come to the forefront, but what's interesting is the rope ladders, how they did it a hundred years ago and how they're still doing it. It's just the easiest way to make that transition. And a lot of people say, well, why don't you clip on and have something connected to you? Well, I'm connected to somebody I've never met and he's from a third world country and he might not speak English. And, and I'm now tethered to him. And if I needed to do something different, you need to have the freedom to be able to do it. But every group in the country worldwide does it the same way. I mean, it isn't unique to just Charleston.

HW: What has the interaction been like with some of those deckhands that may be from a completely different country and may not speak English?

WS: You know, as far as the transfer of the boarding and disembarking, I mean, that's, that's the same worldwide. The language barrier is always a denominator of a third world country. Whichever the cheapest labor was coming from is what we're dealing with on deck. I mean, English is a universal language spoken on ships worldwide. I'd say the toughest ones still out there is China. And you'll be speaking to them and they'll just be nodding and saying yes. And in a lot of cases, they don't have a clue what the hell you're telling them. But what I always told apprentices when I was training them is as if I was going to port or if I'm going to starboard, I'm pointing the direction I'm talking and we have indicators up there to see, either you look at the guy staring and see, if you tell him to go port or to go left, you look at him and see if that's what he's doing.

WS: Or you look up at the rudder indicator. And so I find, they never teach you anything. You have to look at those instruments and double check on what's going on. Cause I can't tell you how many shifts over my career you would have been on and you say, right. And they go left. And if you're coming down the Cooper River from North Charleston, it's a series of, of left, left-hand turns that you're biting off coming down. And the first time you go right after having done all these lefts, invariably, you know, just not paying attention, he goes left again. Or if you're making that turn for the bridge, we don't have time to recover if he's putting the rudder the wrong way. We did a lot of hand signals. A lot of some of the early ships had blackboards on them and, if the course you needed to steer was three hundred, you'd write it on there. You'd get it swinging to the right. He put left rudder on to slow it up. And when you told him to steer a three hundred and when he looked at the compass, he was on three hundred. I mean you'd take the thinking away from him. But we're doing, have a lot more electronic carry on computers and things like that now with electronic charts on them. And that's totally different than what I grew up with. I mean there's a lot more advancement there and technology.

HW: So once you've finished a boarding process and you're on the bridge, are you the only person, you know, in control on the boat? Or is there a team of people assisting you?

WS: No. I mean, I can get up there and on a foreign ship, I might have a quartermaster or helmsman. That's, who's steering, you know, in other words, I don't take the wheel and drive it like an automobile. I'm speaking to him and I'm telling him what to do. And he's the one actually turning the wheel. So, I'm handling all of the speed up or

slow down, I'm talking to a mate and I'm telling him to go half ahead or slow ahead, or what have you. I got radars and all these different electronic navigation equipment available to me. But I'm the only one there from our group on board. The captain may or may not be up there. I mean, sometimes it's as many as, I mean, as little as three people, myself, the helmsman and a mate, or it could be two to three or four crew member up there to assist if I need them.

WS: But at the end of the day, they're listening to everything I'm telling them. They're not saying, "I don't think that's right. I think we need to do this." You just tell the captain "listen, either we could do it my way. We could do it your way. And if we doing it your way, you put it in the log that I do not have the control anymore." I'm going to call the US Coast Guard and say, "we got a hazardous condition going on. We got a master who now wants to be the pilot," and they're going to shut it down. I mean, it just, isn't going to be a problem, but they really look forward to having you aboard. They look forward to giving you the control. In a lot of cases they have never been here before. So I know what kind of volume of traffic we have going on. I know where the dredges are we gotta pass. We have sort of a master pilot exchange where we exchanged information when I first get aboard and he tells me if there's any, any navigational problems that I need to know about with the ship, if the engines, for some reason, we can't slow down, we've got to give them ten minutes notice. You know, he tells me some things, I tell him some things, but at the end of the day, he turns it over to me and I bring the ship in.

HW: Do you feel the stress of that moment when you take control and you're driving a ship that's worth millions of dollars and has millions of dollars of cargo on it?

WS: You know, I think I probably did on that first week, I was with somebody else. I was always with a senior pilot for three years. And then all of a sudden you've taken all your license exams. I mean, all your exams with the Coast Guard and the State of South Carolina. And the first time we assign you on your own, I mean, you don't have somebody else to say, “well, what do you think about this? Or how does this look?” I mean it just starts, it starts sinking in pretty quick. I mean you start in the first of the year and we were in folk season and the first couple of jobs you get on a zero visibility, I mean it can be an eye-opener for that young pilot. Then we try to help them and work with them as much as we can. But at the end of the day, that the way we are set up is we're individually licensed from the State of South Carolina. So if one of my pilots is bringing a ship in this afternoon and had a mechanical problem and ran aground or hit the bridge or ran into another vessel, why should Whit Smith's career be ended because of his accident? So you're individually licensed, and we've associated those individual licenses into a group. But at the end of the day, it's your license on the line.

HW: Did you ever have any issues that scared you a little bit moving into the port?

WS: You know, I was aground twice in my career, both times were due to a mechanical failure. One time was on a Chinese ship and zero visibility and the radar went out and they didn't understand enough English to help me try to get it through. And so we were aground for two days till we could get it off, but it wasn't deemed that I really caused the thing.

HW: So there was no repercussions for you for that situation?

WS: Well, I mean, there was a lot of writing letters and going to hearings and things like that, but at the end of the day, nothing happened to me.

HW: Technology is constantly growing in the world. Do you feel like that's implemented in the cargo ships as well to help you with your navigation moving into the port?

WS: Yeah. I mean, you know, of course, you don't even know what a lot of these things, I mean, I grew up in the era of when the Navy was here and I had a secret clearance and we did all the nuclear submarines, all the attacks subs. We worked in codes every day and it was kind of fun having that part of the business that we don't have anymore. I mean, growing up, getting to drive submarines. But like I say, we don't know what's in a lot of the containers as far as hazardous cargo. There's been some talk about us carrying nuclear detection devices in case if Homeland Security wanted to know what's, what potentially could be on board before you get that ship into port. So, you know, we can be on the forefront of helping with some of that, but we worked closely with the Coast Guard, Homeland Security, and people like that. I go to a lot of meetings and make decisions for the group. And a lot of times the group doesn't even know that I've made these, you know, if we have a situation going on and they want to keep it quiet. I mean like a handful of times a year, we're bringing ships in with spent nuclear waste on them. And everybody knows the drill when it happens, but we'll put a fake name on the list in there. So if you look at the list, you could log onto our site and see what ships are moving, but you can't see the name of the nuclear one we're moving, there is a lot of security around something like that.

HW: Have you ever been boarded by the Coast Guard or found out later that you were maybe bringing a ship in that had something illegal or something it wasn't supposed to have in there?

WS: Yeah, I'd say in the eighties and even into the nineties when drugs were really big and moving in ships a lot, it wouldn't be uncommon for the DEA or Coast Guard to be boarding with me. We'd actually take them with us on boats. You know, they're in full combat gear and weapons. And, you know, I said, listen, guys, let me get up the ladder first. And if there's going to be a shootout, I don't need to be in the middle of this. So I'd get to the top of the ladder. And the crew said, “what's going on or who is this?” And I just said, “these are some other people that need to be here.” And they go to the engine room, they come to the bridge with me, they'd round up the crew. In other words, they had a tip that there was something on that ship. Dogs are waiting at the dock, but they weren't going to leave here until they found what they were looking for. So on foreign arrivals, I'm the only one on and off before customs clears it. So, you know, we get to the dock, customs is going to kind of come aboard and clear that ship before they can start work, but we were allowed on and off and they might be with us sometimes, sometimes they weren't. I mean, the Coast Guard will just call and say, “we need to board with you tomorrow morning at three in the morning,” or what have you. And we don't go into, “what is it,” I mean, we've just been through that drill so many times. We'll get you out there. We'll get you on, y'all do your own thing and everything will be fine.

HW: So when they start that search of the boat, is it a container-by-container search? I mean, that can take a long time.

WS: You know, as my recollection, they will be looking for stuff that a crew member might've brought a board and had in his state room, or it could very well be in the containers, but if they had a tip that that ship was coming from Colombia, South America, or one of the South American countries, and they had a tip that the drug could be on board, they will go find it before it left here. I never, we don't stay around to watch the search go on, we're leaving to go to another job. But I mean, they might know it's on a container on board or it's in the number two hatch or something, but it's usually a tip is how they get the information, how they find the stuff,

HW: Oh, working with the Coast Guard that much, do you feel like he had a pretty good relationship with the Coast Guard and the guys stationed down here in Charleston?

WS: Yeah. My executive assistant is the ex-captain of the port who ran the Coast Guard here in Charleston. So we have a close relationship, and anything that's sticky, I can just turn it over to him. They all talk the same language and he can help get to the bottom of it. But yeah I've had a Coast Guard or ex Coast Guard captain in here since 1982, working with us on a daily basis. You know, and those days I had a contract with the Navy. So the Coast Guard, retired Coast Guard captain would either, he would help on the Navy contract side or whatever government agency we were working with. But yeah, we talked to the Coast Guard every day about something, buoys out of position or things they can help us with. And if we got a hurricane coming, I mean, I'm in meetings all day long, every day, planning it until it gets here and through, and then getting back open again. But they looked to us for a lot of information.

HW: When hurricanes roll in, what's a contingency plan for that? You guys don't have to bring the ships in and when you know that there's going to be a lot of chop out there?

WS: Everything that's in has got to go, every ship that's in port is going to, they're going to get it out ahead of time. And so, you know, we got sixteen or eighteen ships in here, we're going to have to get them out. They want to stay until the last minute unloading, which puts us a little behind the eight ball because we're the last people to come back in before it hits. And now the employees that have been around in the boats got to get home. We moved the boats up the river and keep people on them. We gotta round up the cause, we had to close up the office. If it's bad enough, we're going to change the telephones to somewhere else so you can still find out what's going on. I stay in town. My executive assistant and we'll be in town and we'll be in a command center sometimes with the Coast Guard, just calling the shots and then as soon as it's over, they want to get it rolling as quickly as they can.

HW: Well, obviously you were down there in the eighties. Could you speak a little bit about hurricane Hugo and some of the effects that had on you?

WS: Yeah, I mean it was a mess. My wife and the children stayed, we lived downtown and it felt like the houses would come apart because you know, we thought it was coming ashore at one o'clock in the morning and it sped it up. It came in early at 11:30 or something like that. And the house felt like it was going to come apart. And then I'm thinking, "oh my God, if we got two more hours of this, it's not going to end well." And she said, "the record's going to show we drowned but right before we drowned, you

were strangled for making me stay". You know, I was able to walk down to the office the next day, we still had a building. The boats were up the river and they came back and were telling me what they saw on the way back down.

And we had no electricity for three weeks, either at home or here at the office. And we were running on generators, portable generators in the van. We got the built-in generators that run everything now. If you've never been through one there's two or three things you need, you need a lot of cash because the ATM machines don't work. You go to the grocery store, the credit cards don't work. So, unless you have cash, you are kind of dead in the water. You need water, you need ice. It's helpful if you've got a generator. If you have a generator you need fuel, you need to have gas. I mean, we got diesel one here that's all tied in, so that isn't a problem. But it's the things you take for granted, to me, it's one thing to go to the grocery store.

But if you can't pay for anything, they're not interested in work, they're like next. All the buoys in the harbor were out of place. You know, I had twenty-eight Navy ships that wanted to get back in here cause they had seventy-five hundred people on board and they needed to get home to check on their family. So we had to figure out how to get them back in without any buoys. Then we went daybreak daylight only for the next two weeks until we could get buoys in place with lights on them. You just sort of struggle back and do the best you can and open up a terminal at a time.

HW: You feel like the government's response was appropriate and helpful after everything that happened with Hugo?

WS: I think it was a learning curve for them. I lived two doors away from Joe Riley, the mayor. I always figured that we were either gonna be first with electricity or last. And of course we were last. I could walk next to him and talk to him if we needed to get us a special thing done or assistance or things like that. It helped us prepare more going forward having been through a major hurricane. We sorta had sister associations identified that if we needed them to handle something. You know, whether it would be Norfolk for a call somewhere in Florida, depending on what places had or hadn't been hit by the same storm. I'm using a thousand gallons of fuel a day.

So I mean, we have to pre put all that kind of stuff in place. So when it's over, we gonna have a week's worth of fuel before we can get a delivery made back down here. But all my employees know what they need to do. In other words, everyone can go do their thing, getting ready for hurricane, whether it's moving the boats or cars or bringing containers in to fill up with stuff that we can't leave here. And this building's built to a category three hurricane, so it can withstand 125 mile an hour winds. I mean, I've been here during a hurricane. We had two feet of water across the parking lot. It was coming ashore midday. So, I got here early in the morning and by late that afternoon, the tide was down. But you know, we didn't have any calls here, but you could just stand here and watch the parking lot. And it was kind of cool to be down here and see the harbor with all that going on.

HW: Well, living down here in Charleston, it sounds like you've experienced a lot of different historical events and earlier you had mentioned submarines. Do you

remember when they pulled the Hunley up out of the water and could you speak about that?

WS: Yeah. Senator McConnell called us and asked us to take one of the pilot boats off shore and we did. And they raised that spar, that long pole attached to the front of the Hunley, which was the detonation piece. And they brought that up and put it on the boat and we brought that back and I got invited to go out the next morning and watch him raise it. And you know, they were leaving at like three or four o'clock in the morning. And I said, “I just don't need to do that.” But I was up there when they brought the Hunley ashore from the barge when it got up to the Navy base, that was kind of neat to be there when that happened. It stopped, you know, all traffic in the river. And it was kind of funny on the bridges. All the automobiles stopped and the people got out when the Hunley went under the bridge, going up the river.

HW: So you got to play a kind of a first-hand role in recovering pieces of the Hunley?

WS: Yeah. You know, it was funny. I mean, they, they broke that spar in half bringing it up to put it on our deck and you know, the guys were kind of freaking out, they go, “oh my God, what are we going to tell Senator McConnell?” I said, the things you have to tell him you broke it. I mean, we're not gonna be able to fix it. It looked like a steel pipe that had just broken in half. I mean, you wouldn't have known what it was if somebody didn't tell you, I mean it has been underwater for a hundred years. But it was kind of cool that it was right there on the boat and we just sort of took it for granted, I guess.

HW: Yes, sir. Such a big piece of history. Yeah.

WS: Yeah.

HW: Moving away from that, after you finished your apprenticeship, and you were working full time here at the Pilots Association, what happened that you moved you into the role of the president of the Pilots Association?

WS: You know, I was fairly young. I was like thirty-six or so when I took over as president and, you know, we had a lot older pilots here because seventy is the age you got to retire. We had two family factions, you know, they were fine as long as you didn't get it. And he, you know, sort of like this and I was kind of the compromise in the middle. Both of them would support me as long as it wasn't the other. So I got kinda thrown into it early and I did it for two years and they'd burned me out. And I said, I'm going back in the river and handling shifts, which was what I was trained to do. And after two years they said, no, you're going back in the office to run the office. So I came back in and you know, like a fool I've been doing that, that ever since for them as president for the last forty years But like I say, one of the twenty of us has to come in here and run the business. And if there's not a lot of interest in somebody doing that, I guess they keep electing the one they have. I've already told them that the end of next year I'm going to retire for good. So they are gonna have to come up with a solution.

HW: If it were up to you, would you still be on the river?

WS: Well you know, I'm seventy-seven now, so I had to give up my licenses seven years ago, the State of South Carolina requires it. And so you do miss that part of

it. I mean, I can go with another pilot now and rider the ship and climb up and down the side and do all that, but it is, it is really rewarding to be out there handling ships. I mean, I was looking, I mean, we will probably see one or one will be going by before you leave, but I'll take you to dispatch in and show you, we probably have moved fifteen ships today already. And we probably have another fifteen lined up for tomorrow. I mean, it's just crazy the way it just continually flows like that. But yeah, I do miss being out on the river.

HW: Could you speak a little bit about your working relationship with the South Carolina Ports Authority and what that's been like as a president of the Pilots Association?

WS: I've been lucky enough to be on the State Port Authority board. I've been on there for the last twenty-two years. That's the governor's appointment that I got put on under Jim Hodges and I've served four other governors since. So, I've been on the board of planning of, you know, purchasing these big things that we need, whether it's terminals and cranes and making decisions of helping grow the South Carolina Port Authority. So I was there when they got BMW and when the plant first opened and any major thing that's come online in the last twenty-two years, I've been there to see that happen.

HW: Well, could you speak a little bit about how COVID-19 has affected the supply chain issues around the world and within the United States?

WS: Yeah, I mean, I think we were extremely lucky here. As far as the Charleston pilots are concerned. I called Henry McMaster and I said, “Henry, I need a favor.” And

he said, “what's that?” And I said, “we're on ships every day with positive cases. And if, if it starts in this group being a small group, we could shut down the State of South Carolina because there's not twenty other people you can send out there to do it.” And he said, “I agree with you. How about tomorrow?” So he moved us up, up into the January timeframe last year with the doctors and the nurses. And we got all the pilots vaccinated. We got all the employees vaccinated. We continued to wear a mask. You probably saw the note on the door. Well, we didn't let anyone in that didn't have official business in the building.

Any other UPS, FedEx, they are all dropping stuff down at the bottom of the steps. We've kept everybody out of the building except for the pilots and employees. And we've had two positive cases. Quarantine kept them away. I mean two of them, well, I guess one of them wasn't, was a spouse of a pilot and one was a pilot, but he was on his time off. So it never got into the office. We continue to see positive cases on ships every day. You know, I know the port authority is vaccinating all of their people. I got about 650 people over there with the port. The Seafarers’ Ministry is doing free vaccinations for foreign seaman when the ships get to the dock. I don't think our industry has been hit as hard as other industries have. I mean, you know, the airlines all pretty much have lost a lot of people they're just starting to come back. But as far as pilots, we were probably the first pilot group in the United States to be fully vaccinated. And that was thanks to the governor. I'm not aware of any massive problem and other pilot groups. I think everyone kind of locked down as much as we did.

HW: In May of this year in 2021, did the ship blocking the Suez Canal have any effects down here in the Charleston Harbor?

WS: No. That ship was a little bit bigger than the biggest ones we have, you know, coming into Charleston. I can understand exactly how it happened. The canal is, I don't know, five or six hundred feet wide, and they have a sandstorm coming across hitting the ship on the side. And when that happens, it starts pushing it sideways. And so you start fighting up into it, and when you do that, the tendency is you got to increase speed to get more water over the rudder. I would've guessed that ship probably grounded by the stern and then the bow ran aground and it ran aground going full ahead because he was trying to compensate for the sandstorm. He shouldn't have been there in the middle of a sandstorm. And he'd probably tell you, well, I didn't have a sandstorm when it, I mean, it was kind of a catch 22 type thing.

And with something that big aground on both ends, I mean, you gotta dig it out on one end or the other to get it out of there, but there was cargo I'm sure on there for the Southeast. That ship was bound for Rotterdam or somewhere in the Mediterranean, you know, somewhere in Northern Europe, that cargo, one of them got put on another ship to come to the East Coast. Cause that ship was too big to get into anybody on the East Coast. So directly or indirectly, it probably had effect on people clearly that had stuff in those containers. I can't say that there were fifty containers or two hundred containers bound for Charleston because it would have been further down the supply chain.

HW: Could you speak a little bit about any of the labor strikes that have gone on in the Charleston Port?

WS: We had one when I was an apprentice fifty years ago. We got a label situation going on right now with the terminal where the longshoremen are refusing to work ships at that one. And they just want to grab a bigger share of the labor aspect on the docks and South Carolina had a model where the South Carolina employees are running the cranes and a lot of the shoreside operations, the longshoremen have been doing the loading and unloading of the ships. They want the crane jobs and the state doesn't want to give up the crane jobs. There's a contract between the longshoreman and the shipping lines. The foreign shipping lines have a contract with labor. So the port authority really doesn't have a say, they weren't party to that contract. But the master contract said from the shipper's standpoint, the ILA should run the cranes.

And the port authority said, “well, we built this terminal. We had a permit before you put that in the master contract.” So a federal judge ruled in favor of the port's authority. The union is probably gonna appeal that as kind of a stalemate or a standoff. Savannah, Charleston and Norfolk have the model where the state runs the cranes and the ILA runs the rest of the labor. New York, the West Coast, other places, the ILA does all of that work. That just has to be worked out. From where I sit, we're going to still bring the ships in whether they're going to the Wando, the Leatherman, North Charleston. Would it be better if we had that terminal fully operational? It would be, but at the end of the day, I don't think we're turning any ships away right now.

HW: Could you speak a little bit about the construction of the Ravenel bridge? Did that have any effect on your day-to-day operations in the industry?

WS: It would have, if we hadn't replaced it though, the old Cooper River bridges, there were two bridges. I don't know whether you remember them, you know, before the Ravenel. They had a height of one hundred fifty feet of clearance, right now this bridge is just shy of two hundred feet. So had we not replaced it, a large majority of what we got coming in now wouldn't have fit underneath it. The Don Holt Bridge, which goes across North Charleston up there on 526, that bridge is right at one hundred fifty feet. And we'll go under it with two feet of clearance, two feet underneath the ship, on the river at the bottom of the river and two feet on the top going through. And we got an air gap sensor that tells us what the space is between the steel and the top of the water. There were a lot of ships we can't take up there or we have to bring them in on low water to get them under the bridge up there. So, we're working out calculations as to when you can move up and down, but to answer your question is without having replaced it, it would have had a major impact on Charleston. So, I think there's plans in the future to replace the Don Holt Bridge up there.

HW: So the construction just made your life a little bit easier?

WS: It did, except when it was going on. You know, taking the old bridges down while, the new bridge was finished before they took the old bridges down. It took a lot of coordination with the Coast Guard and things like that.

HW: Was there a lot of boats and construction equipment on the water during that time period that was in your way?

WS: Yeah, but we always sorta had half the channel to work with. It was tight at times, but we're kind of used to that. I mean, we probably have eight dredges right now working in Charleston with the deepening. I mean, it's kind of like a slaw and run up there trying to get around them all. But I mean, we work closely with the dredge companies in the Coast Guard and the Corps of engineers and people like that.

HW: So is dredging something that's constantly going on here in the Harbor?

WS: Mhm. They are deepening right now to fifty-two feet inside fifty-five off shore, right now we're at forty-five. So we're going seven feet deeper inside ten feet, deeper off shore. So you take thirty something miles and go down seven to ten feet. That's a lots of mud they've got to move and we're probably, I don't know, two thirds of the way through right now. And then once they finish, they probably spend, I don't know, sixteen, eighteen million dollars a year doing maintenance to keep it at that depth.

HW: Is that tax dollars from the state that's covering that?

WS: It's the state and the federal government. Yep.

HW: Okay. Could you speak a little bit about your debate at Congress on the governance of maritime issues?

WS: You know, we have a national organization in Washington, the American Pilots Association, and we're a member of, and they're really the ones that are up there fighting or talking for all the different pilot groups in the country. So they are the ones on the forefront. I mean, if a particular issue is going on and they need help from [Jim]

Clyburn or Lindsey Graham, or Tim Scott or somebody like that, then we get involved. Or because those politicians know us better than they know the national organization. So we get brought in, but we're not up there individually. I mean, I was with the governor and Tim Scott two nights ago at a fundraiser down here. So I mean, we know them personally, they know us and, we have supported all of them throughout the time, but to answer your question on the federal level, we don't do that. Occasionally we have some involvement in Columbia at the state level, you know, we try to keep our heads down and just do what we were trained to do and not get in the middle of whatever the fight is going on.

HW: Could you speak a little bit about your time as a secretary treasurer of the American Pilots Association?

WS: Yeah. I mean it's more of an administrative thing. I attend all of the office meetings across the country. I know all the pilot groups in the country. When you've done it for twenty plus years you get to know a lot of people, not a lot of different pilot groups. So when somebody says, “do you know so-and-so?” Well, yeah, I do know so-and-so and we're actually having a national convention here in next year in Charleston. So we'll probably have two hundred fifty pilots from all over the country here.

HW: Wow. Have you made some pretty good friendships through the people you've met in the APA?

WS: Yeah. Yeah. I mean we have some friends that we met, you know, back in the eighties and we've kept up with them and exchange Christmas cards and going to

their weddings and kid's weddings and yeah, that's been, it's fun to know people all over the country.

HW: Well, you mentioned earlier having several children, have any of your kids thought about moving into this industry?

WS: No, I got three daughters and they really didn't want to pursue that path. You know, right now everybody in the world wants to be a Charleston Harbor pilot. The last time around we had sixty something applications and took three. So it's, it's very, very competitive. So whether one of my kids would be interested or one of the other pilots, I mean, they got to rise to the top and compete against the best of the best from all over the country. You gotta be a South Carolina resident by state law. Doesn't take much to do that. Other than you just got to shift your residency into South Carolina, but that just helped slow up applications is what it does. I had a boy that six years ago we brought in that was like number two at The Citadel. I don't know whether you know him, George Campsen, he won every damn award you could win over there. He came in, that was kinda neat. His father's a state senator. They own the concession to go to Fort Sumter with the tour boat. So, I mean, he grew up on the water and a family business right here. So he had a lot of local experience that helped him, that got him through the process.

HW: What would you say is so attractive about being a Charleston Harbor pilot?

WS: You know, I think you gotta have a real strong pull to work, want to work on the water, be on the water. If you grew up on the water your whole life, you'd like to continue doing something along those lines. Some people are pulled to want to drive one

of those big ships. I tell people, if they're interested, they really need to go, in their undergraduate, if they don't go to the Merchant Marine Academy or one of the service academies, they got to go there and get a post-graduate degree. We don't have anybody here that either didn't go to a maritime college or go to one for postgraduate work that's working here now. We also tell them that if you're interested in being a pilot, you gotta be interested in being a pilot wherever that opportunity comes.

So don't just focus on Charleston. I can't tell you the number of people that focused on it. It didn't happen, but the ones that had an open mind, I helped them get into Virginia and Mobile and the Brunswick, into Sabine, Texas, just because we know all those people. If you want to drive ships for a living, you gotta be able to drive them wherever the opportunity opens up. There's only twelve hundred people in the United States that are doing what I do. So, you know, there are fewer NFL football players, I mean, that's the kind of complement you're working against. So when you think about who gets into the NFL it isn't a lot of people, but we have a lot of people that will focus on Charleston. We take three out of the sixty and you know, fifty seven others, and now I've got to figure out what they're going to do. You know, and a lot of them go to sea and get a sea going license and become a captain or chief mate, or, you know, work on container ships or tankers or what have you. And if it opens up to be a pilot's job and stay in one location, then you know, that's, that's what they strive for.

HW: Well, you've had a really successful career based off of what I've heard and the research I've done about you. Do you have any plans once you retire next year?

WS: My group sort of left it open that I could stay as president as long as I wanted to. And I wanted to leave when I still was in good shape and could travel and enjoy some things rather than the day-to-day. I hated to hang on and say, you know, we should have done this three years ago. My wife and I enjoy traveling, we've had to cancel some trips in the last year or so because of COVID. We were going to Antarctica and we had to put that on the back burner. We have been to the Arctic, out of Norway, been to Africa. I've been to the Galapagos, been to Machu Picchu. I mean, we've really been to neat places and it would be fun to continue. We're going to Russia this coming summer. So, you know, I just think it's time. I'll be seventy-eight. Somebody else needs to step up and run things. Will I miss it? I'm sure I will miss it. But I've got some wonderful people here helping me and I hope somebody comes in and treats them the same way.

HW: If you could do anything differently, would you change anything about the career decisions you made?

WS: No, I feel very, very fortunate and lucky to some degree that all the stars lined up the way they did. I could have real easy ended up in Vietnam, either flying an airplane or being on the ground and, you know, the life expectancy wasn't real great back in those years, even for a second lieutenant, they were probably right there with a private. So yeah, I felt very fortunate that I got in when I did, I didn't have any family in the business. I was probably the first non-family member that came in and we had to work hard to get past that stigma. Cause everybody thinks you gotta be a son or a first cousin or a relative or something. And we haven't done any of that in the last fifteen years or more. We have brought in the best and the brightest all over that we could find.

HW: Are there any aspects of the interview or anything you'd like to speak about more that I didn't ask you about earlier?

WS: No, you've done a wonderful job. I can tell preparing before you got here and the interview. So feel proud about that, but no, I think you, you were very thorough. I'll take you here and show you what dispatching is like right next door. It is what we do minute by minute. If there's a follow up or something you need to do that, we didn't cover, I'm usually here every day or they know where I am anyway.

HW: All right. Well, that's that great. If you feel satisfied.

WS: Very satisfied.

HW: I'll go ahead and conclude the interview, but thank you so much for joining me today, sir. And Happy Veterans Day!

WS: Same to you. Well, let's walk in here and let me show you how dispatch works.

MLL 8/18/2022