

California Maritime Academy Library

Interview with Gordon Gimbel

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Gordon Gimbel
Interviewer: Margot Hanson
Date: October 10, 2015

Place: Cal Maritime Library
Transcriber: Rev.com

Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Raymond Wood conducted by Matthew Chamberlain on October 11, 2008. This interview is part of the Cal Maritime Oral History Project.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Gordon Gimbel is a graduate of the class of 1965, Deck

Abbreviation

GG: Gordon Gimbel
MH: Margot Hanson

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Interview Outline

- 00:50 Can you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?
- 04:25 How long were the cruises on the training ship?
- 05:00 Do you have any stories from the cruises that you'd like to share?
- 06:00 Have you kept in touch with any of your classmates?
- 08:35 How has the Academy and the campus changed since your time here?
- 10:28 How did you decide to come to school here?
- 11:30 What was your experience going to sea for the first time on your first training cruise?
- 17:30 Do you have any favorite stories from your work life?
- 21:38 Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future Cal Maritime cadets?
- 25:00 How did you get into car racing?

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Interview

MH: This is a part of the Cal Maritime Library Oral History Collection Project. And my name is Margot Hanson. I'm a librarian here at Cal Maritime. And it is Saturday, October 10th, 2015. We're in the Cal Maritime Library, and it's the Cal Maritime Homecoming Festival Day. And I'm here with.

GG: Captain Gordon Gimbel from Sacramento, California. Graduated in 1965.

[00:50]

MH: Great, so the first question I have for you is if you can give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime? Just kinda broad strokes.

GG: Okay well, after graduation, I graduated on Saturday, I got a job on a ship on Monday. And went to the Far East and worked pretty steady. It was right at the beginning of Vietnam, so there was plenty of jobs at the time. And so, I worked steady, and then, let's see, 1974, I got a permanent job as chief mate on a tanker. And then worked on tankers for a while, and got the captain's job, and then they sold my ship. And so, I went to work for SeaLand on the container ships and was captain for SeaLand for the last 15 years. So basically, that's my career. On my vacation time, I race cars. And so, two months on, two months off, so I had plenty of time to race cars and work on the ships.

MH: What kind of car racing did you do?

GG: I do sports cars. Now I'm doing vintage racing, with Cobras and Shelys and stuff.

MH: Great, that sounds like fun. Do you have any stories you'd like to share from your time as a cadet?

GG: Cadet, well cadet was hard. I managed to quit many times in the first trimester, and finally decided that I had too much time invested into school, and so I buckled down and finished the school. And it was hard, coming from a regular life to, when we were here, it was, they call pseudo-military, so there was a lot of stuff. And then the first week we were here was Hell Week. And that's where it really got, woke up in the middle of the night, and you know, they put all the pressure on you to try to get you to quit instead of wasting their time on you. So well, but it was fun. I lived in Sacramento, and so went back and forth on the weekends. It was some kind of normal, get to go home frequently.

MH: That's good, you got a little respite.

GG: Yeah, yeah.

MH: Yeah, that sounds tough.

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GG: Well when we were here, it was three years, all year round. There was no summer vacation, you got two weeks off. And so, it didn't go by fast, but it went by. And our cruises was right after the first of the year. And so, we got out of Vallejo when it was cold and miserable and got to go to some interesting places. The first cruise, we went through the Panama Canal to Trinidad and Rio de Janeiro. And the second cruise, we went down to Tahiti. And the third cruise, we went to the Far East, Hong Kong, and Japan, and the Philippines. So that was sort of nice. Somebody from Sacramento getting to see the world. That part was really, really interesting.

MH: Yeah, that sounds nice. The cruise this year went to Europe for the first time in many, many years.

GG: Oh, Yeah

MH: And it's in the summer now instead of the winter.

GG: Yeah.

[04:25]

MH: So how long were the cruises when you were on the ship?

GG: Just under three months. And the ship wasn't very fast, so it took a long time to get where you're gonna get. But then we had had all the training on putting the boats in the water almost every day, and stuff like that, which if you come up through the house pipe or anything else like that, you don't get all that, as ships don't put the boats in the water underway. It's too dangerous.

[05:00]

MH: Do you have any stories from any of the cruises that you'd like to share?

GG: Well, the last cruise was sort of fun. Going into Hong Kong, it's just, it was a fantastic place. And when my division had the duty, I ran the 36-foot Liberty Launch for 24 hours straight. Every hour I left the ship, and every half hour, I left the dock, and in Hong Kong Bay with all the ferry boats, the tug boats, the ships, everything it was just, it was a madhouse, but it was so much fun. I just really enjoyed it. I was dragging towards the end, after 24 hours, but I really, really enjoyed that. And I got pretty good at driving the boat.

MH: Yeah, that's a lot of experience.

GG: Yeah.

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[06:00]

MH: Okay, next question is, have you kept in touch with any of your classmates?

GG: Once in a while, not a whole lot. I used to see them at the Union Hall when I was clearing or getting a job or whatever, and there's not too many from Sacramento, so I didn't, you know, don't hang around with them. But we did a reunion here a couple of years ago, and so I got to hook up. And then we just finished two days up in Reno with the class of 1965. And that was a lot of fun. I got to see guys I hadn't seen for 50 years, and only recognized a few. But we had a good time up there.

MH: So, was that, that was this week?

GG: Yes.

MH: Oh, okay.

GG: Yeah. Then we had the dinner last night, and a few more people showed up that didn't go up to Reno. So, but most of them went up to Reno. We started, originally, we started with a hundred and, I think it was 115 or something like that. Cadets, engineers, and deck. And we graduated 66. In the deck department, we started with 56, and when we graduated 21. And of that 21, on the deck side, six of them have died. So, there isn't many of us left.

MH: Wow, that's a big reduction from the beginning to the end.

GG: Yeah.

MH: So, the efforts during Hell Week were successful, right?

GG: Well yeah, and then people flunked out, got tired, kicked out, whatever. Discipline or lack thereof. And so, attrition rate was pretty high. It was, it wasn't easy to get through here.

MH: So, the classmates that you didn't recognize on sight, did you remember them after you

GG: Oh yeah.

MH: Exchanged names?

GG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was fun. Most of them were engineers, which didn't hang out with too much when we were at school, but we had a lot of fun this last week. So that was good. And so, they made me honorary engineer because they race cars and build engines and stuff like that. So that was fun.

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[08:35]

MH: Yep, so I don't know how much time you spent on campus since you graduated, but I was curious how the campus has changed since your time here, or how the Academy has changed.

GG: Well from my understanding, the Academy's changed a lot. As far as the students, there's no more, you know, marching and naval science inspections, and that's type of stuff. You still have the cruises, have a lot more students than what we did, and buildings have changed. There's only a few buildings left when I was here, the four big classrooms over here and the old mess hall. I don't know what it's used for now, but a lot of neat places. The ship-handling simulator which is just really fantastic. And of course, you got a new ship from when I was here. In fact, I think this is a third one after I graduated. It's changed a lot.

MH: Yeah. Okay, how do you think that your time at the California Maritime Academy influenced your life?

GG: Oh, big time. Touch of discipline, hard work'll get you where you wanna go and it's proved out. It was, like I said, it was hard at the Academy, but it's proved, I've done very well, working my way up to captain. And so that part was really good. And without the Academy, and distilling discipline in you, you know, it's a kid from Sacramento. I never even seen the ocean. It had a big influence.

[10:28]

MH: So how did you decide to come to school here?

GG: Well, my dad was an engineer on ships for American President Lines. And so, my dad and mother were divorced when I was one, but, so I didn't see him too often, but he was in San Francisco. So, I went down to see him on the ship and in the engine room went in the engine room and it was, I'd say 300 degrees, it wasn't, but it was hot, miserable, filthy dirty. And you had wrenches that you had to pick up with a forklift. And so, I said, there's no way that I'm gonna be down here. I wanna see where I'm going. So, I signed up for the deck department. I didn't know, before that, I didn't know what I was going to do for sure. You know, I figured just go to college in Sacramento, and you know, whatever came along. But then after coming here, it was different.

[11:30]

MH: So, you hadn't been to sea before your first training cruise? No, that was the first time. So was that, 'cause I know that for some students here, once they go out on their first training cruise, they realize that they don't want to have a career at sea. So, you didn't have that experience obviously.

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GG: No, no, no, that was fun, I loved it. But I can see where, you know, some people, when I graduated from here, I got the job as third mate. A third mate, all you do is just stand your watch. And back in '65 they didn't have VCRs and DVDs and all that stuff. And so, it was just totally boring between watches. And so then second mate, you got to do all the charts, and correcting the charts and navigation and stuff like that. And so that was much better. Then chief mate, you were in charge of the loading and discharging of the ship. And that was, I really enjoyed that. Then of course, captain, you were head of everything. And that was just a lot of fun for me. Plus, the piloting. I got pilotage for San Francisco Bay, Long Beach, LA, and most of Alaska. So, I did my own docking and piloting on the tankers. And we docked at Oleum just across the straits here. And so, I got to come up every two weeks and dock there and look at the Academy.

MH: So how unusual is that to do your own docking?

GG: Very.

MH: It's really unusual, right?

GG: Yeah, the only, I think two companies that did that was Chevron, some of the captains did their own, and West Coast Shipping, which was owned by Unical, and the tankers, and they really insisted on the captains doing their own piloting and docking. I was a little leery about that for a while, because it's a lot of responsibility. And if you screw up, you lose your job. And so, I, they loaned me to another company that needed a relief captain. So, my first captain's job was on Louisiana Brimstone. Molten sulfur. Running from Tampa to pour sulfur in the Mississippi. And so, the first time up there, it was foggy, and the pilot that was taking us up, and we were gonna pass another ship. And I said, yeah, let's pass him. And so anyway, the down-bound ship was much faster than the pilot thought. He couldn't see the down-bound ship it was so foggy. You couldn't see our bow. And it was really scary. And the ship that we're overtaking, I had to go out on the bridge wing, and keep telling the pilot he could come over. So, he just went into the flare of the bow and just barely missed everybody. And so, after that, I says, I want to do my own piloting, because I would've been fired if he would've screwed up and we would of hit another ship. And so, I would rather take the chance of if I'm going to make a mistake and lose my job, I want it to be my fault, not somebody else's fault. So anyway, I changed my whole attitude about it and then got all the pilotage. And when a job came available, I started piloting. So, first day I got the captain's job I took the ship out of Oleum here, took it out to sea. And then my first time in by myself was opening day of boating season. And come in the Bay, and the radar looked like measles. And so, I had an, I asked for permission to go north of Alcatraz, which is usually the outbound route but there was no ships going out. And so that eliminated a lot of traffic. And then after I got out on the Carquinez bridge, then the traffic died down. But there was a million boats out there. That was sort of spooky the first time I ever got to do it by myself.

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MH: You have that. So, are there any, I asked you about changes in the campus and the Academy since you were here, but do you wanna mention any overarching changes that you noticed in the industry during your career?

GG: Oh, the industry has changed tremendously. When I graduated it was all breakbulk. You know, you spent three days, four days in a port and the longshoreman brought down, you know on the booms, sling cargo in the hold, and then they did it. Now it's all containerization. And so, you're in port 6 hours, 12 hours, and the old days, the crews put four or five days in port, and they all went ashore and got drunk, and nowadays you don't have the time. And most people have families and everything now and licensed. And so, the whole attitude has changed tremendously. People going to sea, it's a lot more professional and a lot less derelicts.

MH: And there's much smaller crews, right, on ships?

GG: Oh yes, they eliminated a lot of crews. We used to have like almost 40 people on a ship. And now a steamship has about 23, and diesel has 18, you know. And that's an American flag, some of the foreign flags, they have even less. And it's just, unfortunately it's a lot of hours and I don't think that that's good, but that's the way it is.

[17:30]

MH: Okay. Let's see. Do you have any, we've talked a little bit about your work life, but do you have any other favorite stories that you'd like to share from your career?

GG: Well, it can be dangerous out there. I was chief mate on the tanker, and running up to Alaska, and seas get really rough in the Gulf of Alaska. So, we had waves come aboard and we had a boom that we picked up the hoses with, and it laid in the cradle when we were at sea, and seas came aboard and broke the cradle off. And the boom was swinging back and forth just missing the headers. If it would have hit the headers and broke them, we would have had to went in the shipyard, clean up the ship, and it would have been a very expensive and time-consuming deal. So, we went out on deck and the, I had a radio in my back pocket, and the captain changed course and slowed down, and to get the seas to come aboard less. But every time one had come aboard, he tells me, and I'd yell out, and I had four or five people out there and we'd hold on. And one big wave came over and I couldn't hold on. And I got washed, knocked down. And as the ship rolled, I was heading for the railing, which was really scary. And you couldn't believe how much, how heavy the water was on you. And then as the ship rolled this way, I started rolling back to center line. I felt a lot better about that. And as the water got off me and got lighter and lighter, finally I got to hold onto something, but that was scary. We had took out turnbuckles and lines and everything to try to lasso this boom and tie it down. That was the whole purpose of it, prevent any further damage. But it was, that was scary. A guy asked me the day before, the AB on it, he says, do I ever get scared driving a race car? And so, the next day I told him, I said I was never as scared in the race car as I was out

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there yesterday. So, it's could be dangerous. I got injured once. And, but that has been it. So, pretty lucky. Plus, I, the other thing that was really lucky on my careers, my last trip, when I rang Finished with Engines, I thought, man, this is pretty good, a 42-year career and I didn't bend up a ship. And so that was very satisfying.

MH: Yeah. Okay. What are you proudest of in your life?

GG: I guess, docking, the tanker that I docked was 70,000-ton deadweight, and ship weighed 14,500, so it was 84,500 tons. I had to go alongside the dock. Anybody can go through the dock, but the talent's going alongside. So, I think that was my most, being able to pilot that successfully and dock and undock without hurting the ship, or the dock was the biggest achievement. I really enjoyed that a lot.

MH: And what are some of the most important lessons you've learned in your life?

GG: Pay attention. You have to, and especially when you're piloting a ship, you have to think ahead and anticipate what the ship is gonna do with the wind, the current, and everything, so that you can plan for any contingencies. It's just, you have to be very meticulous, and very careful, and have a lot of confidence that you can do it otherwise you're in trouble.

[21:38]

MH: And related to that, are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future Cal Maritime Academy cadets?

GG: Yeah, just keep working hard. You know, when you get your education when you leave here is second to none, and you just have to apply yourself once you get out and, you know, keep working and keep up with your studies. That was the one thing that every time I had an opportunity to go get a class, or a different certificate or something I did, and then also go get the piloting, because if I didn't have the pilotage before I would have never got the job as captain. So, I took the effort, made the effort to go get the licenses and certificates and all that stuff when I was on vacation and it proved pretty good. But the tanker that I was on, they sold it because the single-hull thing in the Exxon-Valdez deal. And so, by being a pilotage and deriving and docking my own ships, I got on with SeaLand as captain. And so that was, you know, if I hadn't done that, I would have never got onto SeaLand as captain. So, take all the opportunities you can, and get all the education you can.

MH: And this is the last question. What do you envision for the future of Cal Maritime? Or if you want to extrapolate that to the industry also you can go where you want with it.

GG: I worry about the American Merchant Marine. We're shrinking ships, and they're trying to eliminate the Jones Act, which is what keeps most American ships going. And if they ever do that, then the American Merchant Marine is not going to be there. So, the people

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coming out of the Academy might have trouble getting the jobs on ships. But with the education that you get here, it seems like the employment rate is really high for graduates. And so that part is really good, even though it may not be as third engineer, or third mate on ships, but I just hope that it keeps going because it's a good school.

MH: Yep, okay, that's the last of my questions. Is there anything else you want to share or mention?

GG: No, except for the one thing about going to sea, as you know, like I said, I worked two months on, two months off, or sometimes I worked four months on, four months off. And so, you had a lot of downtime, and so my hobby was racing cars and I still do. And I'm 71. And so that's been a very good opportunity for me for doing something when I was off the ship and kept me busy and out of trouble.

MH: Yep.

GG: So, you gotta have a hobby on your time off. And, or go to back to school, and get all the certificates like I mentioned before.

[25:00]

MH: So how did you get into the car racing?

GG: I've always been a car enthusiast. And so, when I graduated, graduated [19]65, January 3rd, [19]66 I bought a Cobra. And made it in, streetcar, and made it into a race car. And then in [19]75 I bought the factory team, one of the factory team race cars, and I raced that car for 38 years. Now I've still race, but I race what's called a Trans-Am car which is a BOSS 302. And keep going at it. It keeps me going.

MH: Where do you take your cars to race?

GG: Well, Monterey, anywhere from Seattle or Kent, Washington, down to Coronado. And I've raced at Lime Rock, Connecticut, and Watkins Glen, New York. And all over California and Nevada. So, I got a nice little motor home and trailer, and we load them up and go.

MH: Great.

GG: It's been a lot of fun, a lot of work, and a lot of money.

MH: Okay, so that's the end of, unless that there's something else that you thought of that you want to mention, okay? All right, thank you so much for your time today. It was really great talking with you.

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[End of interview]