

California Maritime Academy Library

Interview with Lynn Korwatch

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Lynn Korwatch
Interviewer: Margot Hanson
Date: February 27, 2015

Place: Cal Maritime Library
Transcriber: Rev.com

Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lynn Korwatch conducted by Margot Hanson on February 27, 2015. 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.

Lynn Korwatch is a graduate of the class of 1976, Deck.

Abbreviation

LK: Lynn Korwatch
MH: Margot Hanson

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Interview Outline

- 00:37 Can you please give us a brief overview of your life since graduating from CMA?
- 02:02 What aspects of your time at CMA contributed to your success in a male-dominated industry?
- 03:41 Do you have any favorite stories you would like to share from your work life?
- 06:55 What challenges did you overcome as a female cadet at CMA?
- 12:26 Are there any stories you would like to share from your time as a cadet?
- 14:03 Are there any words of wisdom you would like to pass along to current and future CMA cadets?
- 15:01 What are you proudest of in your life?

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Interview

MH: Hello, this is Margot Hanson interviewing behind the camera Instruction and Outreach Librarian at the California Maritime Academy. And today is Friday, February 27th 2015, the first day of the POP conference, and I am here with.

LK: My name is Lynn Korwatch and I am a graduate of California Maritime Academy in the class of 1976.

[00:37]

MH: So, Lynn Can you please give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?

LK: Well, I was in the first class of women that graduated from the academy and when I graduated on a Saturday, the Monday afterwards, I reported to my first ship, which was a Mobil oil tanker down in the Los Angeles area, and sailed on tankers for about two years and then decided I really wanted to work into different aspects of the maritime industry. So, I went to work on every kind of ship I could possibly manage.

I joined the Master, Mates and Pilots Union and sailed on various ships and working my way up to Master. And once I had been sailing Master for a number of years, I said, "well, maybe it's time to kind of do something else." And I was offered an opportunity to come ashore. So, I worked for a company called Matson Navigation Company as their General Manager and ran operations for about 10 years. And another opportunity came my way. And now I'm the Executive Director of an organization called The Marine Exchange at the San Francisco Bay region. And what we do is track all of the commercial vessels as they arrive and depart within our Bay Area on behalf of our membership, and we provide them real time vessel arrival and departure information.

[02:02]

MH: Great, thank you. That's very impressive. Okay, so, what aspects of your experience at Cal Maritime do you think contributed to your success in a male dominated industry?

LK: When I was here, being in that first class of women was certainly a challenge. I had never had any experience in the maritime world. In fact, I had never even knew that the American Maritime Academy existed for my whole I'm born and raised here in the Bay Area and never really thought about Vallejo as being a place where there would be a ship tied up. So, it took me a while to kind of get acclimated here. I think what my situation was, is being in that first class.

Certainly, there were challenges, but I think what it also did was kind of gave me the confidence to know that if I could succeed here, I could succeed any place. That was sort

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of my reality, and I think it gave me the confidence, it gave me a little bit of toughened hide, to be able to kinda compete. I also was very surprised, and very pleasantly surprised is when I worked on my first ship, how much I knew. I'd always kind of felt like, gee, these men who grew up as sea scouts or sailing and done all of these, kind of hands on training thing, are gonna be so much more knowledgeable, and so much better educated, and so much more confident. But when I worked on that first ship, and I stood my first watch, it was like, it all fell into place. And I said, "I know this, I can do this." And it really was very like I said pleasantly surprised at how successful I really was, and how well trained I really was, which was definitely a confidence builder.

[03:41]

MH: Yeah, I just realized I forgot to test the audio and stuff. So, I'm just gonna do that before we go any further. Okay, next question. Do you have any favorite stories that you'd like to share from your work life?

LK: Probably the one that sort of gets the most visibility in my work life was the fact that, when I was working my way up as a junior officer into the senior ranks, there were not a lot of opportunities for women. There were not a lot of opportunities for men. I mean, the fact is, on every ship, you may have a number of sailors, and you may have a number of officers, but you only have one captain. So that when an opportunity was coming my way to be captain, I never wasn't even thinking that I was gonna be saying no to this opportunity, because I never knew if I'd get another opportunity again.

Well, when that opportunity came my way, I was eight months pregnant. And that's not a debilitating event. But I was eight months pregnant. And while I was running back and forth to Hawaii, and my doctor had given me clearance to go and do what I was gonna do. I was eight months pregnant. And so, when I pulled into Hawaii for the very first time as being skipper of this very large container ship. Here I was very pregnant in a very pregnant uniform. And it was kind of like, oh, okay, now what? So, it was an interesting experience. I'm very pleased to say that my son who was, the one I was pregnant with, is a graduate of the Maritime Academy. And probably sort of got his sea training in utero because he was exposed to the maritime world at a very pre-birth age. So, it's kind of a good experience that I had. I certainly had dealt with storms and kind of scary nights when you're not sure if the ship was gonna be upright in the morning, but probably being pregnant at eight and a half months. This, probably the one that kind of gets the most visibility in my life.

MH: So, how long was that after you graduated?

LK: 10 years, I graduated in [19]76. Well, that was 12 years 'cause I was my first skippers' job was in 88. And it takes a long time. I mean if you're familiar with sort of the promotion chain. At the time, you had to have one full year of sea time, before you could upgrade to the next license. You had to have another year of sea time to graduate to the

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license after that. So, there was from third mate, to second mate, to chief mate, to Master each one of those took a full sea year. In our industry, you generally only work six months a year. So, it took, all of those times to kind of even get the time to even sit for the next license, much less get the opportunity to actually sail as skipper. So, it took time, but that's okay. I mean, it kind of allowed me the opportunity to gain some experience and gain some comfort level. And so, when it actually happened, I felt ready. I felt like I had paid my dues and earned my stripes and managed to be a success at it.

[06:55]

MH: Yeah, that sounds very fast to me. You kind of alluded to this earlier, and you mentioned it before we started the interview, I was wondering what challenges you overcame as a female cadet at Cal Maritime?

LK: It was interesting, because when we first arrived, there were five of us in that first class. And the upper class, was like real excited about the fact that there were these women there, and we were kind of treated as this novelty. Our classmates were a little bit more competitive, because, they wanted to ensure that they were going to, be smarter, braver, more skilled, than we were. But we were generally in kind of included. What I found sort of fascinating was the underclass, the class that came in years behind us, were more resentful of our presence than our peers or our upper class. And it was surprising to me because they knew we were here. It's not like the upper class who started at the academy and now women are part of their ranks.

The underclass knew we were here. And it was, they were just very kind of, they were the most challenging to deal with for sure. I think probably that we did not deal with as much harassment as probably subsequent classes, because everybody was watching us. They were watching every move that we made every move that somebody else made, so that I don't think we were quite as vulnerable, if you will, as other classes because by that time sort of the interest had died down and now in theory, the women were supposed to be assimilated into the core, and not really quite as visible 'cause when we started, here's every, you've been around the campus, all the men were in khaki.

We were in navy blue, so we stood out, even just from a uniform perspective. We wore navy blue slacks and light blue shirt. So, we didn't even match. So, we stood out there we were these five women, out on the quad, all by ourselves, not all by ourselves, but in the sea of khaki. And it wasn't until about a year later that they finally said, "okay, there's no reason these women can't be in khaki as well." And then we kind of changed our uniform from the blue to the khaki, and then we kind of at least blended in, at least from that perspective.

My personality is such that, you kind of pick your battles, I didn't really feel like I had too many battles. Other cadets and other women had much, different perspectives and probably different challenges, than I felt that I had. I was, sort of rambled very fortunate

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that a number of the professors were not terribly excited about women here. And you could definitely sort of sense their unhappiness. For example, I had this one professor, one instructor who was kind of famous for telling these fabulous sea stories. And the men were like, "oh, we just love his sea stories." Well, when women were in the room, he would announce to the men, "well, I'd be happy to tell you a sea story, but with the women here, it's not appropriate."

So now we were the bad guys because we were dampening this fabulous sea story. On the other hand, I had a number of professors who were delighted that women were here. And one gentleman in particular, I sort of viewed as my mentor, and definitely kind of coached me and said, "here's what I think you should do in order to be successful at the Academy, as well as in life." And I just, he was the most fabulous man that I could ever have as an instructor and as a mentor. And to this day, I think about, what he gave me, and the way of confidence, and education and just a man who I truly admired for years and years and years.

MH: And there were some things that you were showing me. Some documents that you were showing me before we started the interview, so I was wondering if you could repeat some of what you shared with me.

LK: So, when we graduated again, first class of women, we started with five, three of us graduated to deck. Myself and one other woman and there was one engineer. And we got our diplomas, and it wasn't until after graduation that I'm looking at my diploma, discovering the fact that on the diploma, it says that, "this degree is bestowed upon him." There were only three of us, and yet they didn't take the time to customize that diploma to say her. And I find that kind of it wasn't a deal breaker, my diploma is pretty good, and I'm very proud of it. But it was just sort of odd. Same thing, when we got our acceptance letter, there were only five of us accepted into the Academy, and yet, the President, for whatever reason, didn't take the time to customize that letter to say we are pleased that your daughter that she is going to be joining us. Instead it was this generic letter that went out to all of the incoming first We were called third class, second class, first class. All of the third class to say welcome, we're glad that he is gonna be there that, him is gonna be there, that your son is gonna be there. I just found it kind of interesting. But again, I got a lot out of the academy and that was not one battle that I was gonna go fight. I know they've made a lot of progress over the years, so I'm sure that doesn't happen any longer.

[12:26]

MH: Yes, I'm they've changed that. Are there any stories that you'd like to share from your time as a cadet?

LK: Just it was an interesting period of time. We had been birthed into kind of a special area up at the, I know that there's now three residence halls, what is big brick building up on the hill, the old old residence hall. And again, it was challenges. It was, we were very

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visible. We were treated sort of as a unique little group. I think that the women were so closely thrown together. The expectation is you guys will all operate as a group. And sometimes, that sort of proximity and just sort of ended up that we were not very close, which is unfortunate. But overall, I think my education and my experience was pretty okay. I think that I value everything I learned here, and unlike probably some of my other alums, because I valued that and I really feel like that's what made me who I am today. I've given back to the Academy. I mean, I was president of the Alumni Association. I was willing to send my only son here because I felt that it was a wonderful education that he was gonna get. And, it's been a good place for me and I have no regrets. And there are challenges of course, but sometimes that makes you stronger and better suited to deal with adversity going forward.

[14:03]

MH: Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future Cal Maritime cadets?

LK: Hang in there, girl, it's a good place to be from. It's a challenge, no question. It's a tough academic load, but the opportunities and the doors that it opens is second to none. I mean I really feel that I'm strongly believe that that the women that I've seen graduate from here have been successes, that they've developed their own confidence, and it's a great place and the fact that it is so small and so unique, really opens up the doors for a lot of opportunities going forward.

[15:01]

MH: Okay, I think that is all the main questions that I was gonna ask. I have some other ones. What are you proudest of in your life? I was gonna ask that one. That's kind of a tough question sometimes. So do you feel--

LK: I'm proudest of the fact that I did succeed. I think that, I sailed as Captain, I'm proud of that. I think that was not an easy achievement. I'm proud of the life I've led, again, my ability to give back to the campus. I've had some very interesting experiences. I'm proud of the fact that I met my husband here. I'm proud of the fact that I was alumni of the year. I'm proud of the fact that my son graduated from this academy and now has a fabulous job. I'm proud of all of those things, and I'm proud to be able to call this my school that I went to, matriculated from. So all those things I'm proud of.

MH: Great, thank you so much.

LK: It'll be interesting enough that, I mean one of the reasons, Are you turned off?

[End of interview]