

California Maritime Academy Library

# Interview with Harold Simmons

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Harold Simmons  
Interviewer: Rick Robinson & Margot Hanson  
Date: October 12, 2013

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

## Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Harold Simmons conducted by Rick Robinson and Margot Hanson on October 12, 2013. 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.

Harold Simmons graduated in the class of 1951, Deck.

## Abbreviation

HS: Harold Simmons

RR: Rick Robinson

MH: Margo Hanson

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## Interview Outline

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## Interview

**RR:** My name is Rick Robison. I'm the Library Dean and I am with,

**MH:** Margot Hanson, a librarian at California Maritime Academy.

**RR:** And today is October 12th, 2013 and we are in the group study room of the Cal Maritime Library and this is an oral history.

**HS:** I'm Harold Simmons. I lived in Petaluma, California, and I was born in Aztec, New Mexico, November 28, 1929. And I was in the class of 1951 Deck.

[01:02]

**RR:** Okay, great. Well, the first question we have for you is, well, first, can you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated?

**HS:** Okay. I'm going to refer to this, 'cause I can't even remember stuff. After I graduated in 1951, I had several careers. I'm retired from the Masters, Mates and Pilots Union and also, I'm retired from the US Navy. I started my career in the Merchant Marines when I graduated from the California Maritime Academy on August 18th, 1951. That was during the Korean War. And I believe it was, we graduated on a Saturday or something like that, so I ran down and joined the Masters, Mates and Pilots in San Francisco on Monday, and shipped out on the 22nd of August, just a few days after I graduated. My license ink was still wet.

[02:21]

Anyway, the first ship I was on was a ship called the Earlham Victory. She was a World War Two victory ship. No radar, no LORAN, very basic gyrocompass and intervalometer, no LORAN, nothing electronic. Anyway, I didn't know it at the time, but the captain got physically ill from stress whenever we handled the ship. And I was third mate assigned to the 12-4 watch. So, we got underway. Shortly after I got on board, at nighttime, and when we got the bar pilot aboard, and the captain said, you know, take departure and drop the bar pilot off and set a course for Saigon. Now you can imagine that's very unusual, the captain would normally stay up. So, he went down, went to bed and, I don't know where Saigon was. This was before the Vietnam era. In fact, Saigon was in French Indochina at that time. So, I asked the bar pilot, where's Saigon? And there was no charts laid out, nothing. And it was very foggy, you know. And the bar pilot, of course, followed the buoys out to we dropped him off. So, we, we stopped the ship and he said, "When I wave at you, get underway," and steer, he gave me a course to clear the fair lawns. This is a long sea story. So anyway, I steered the course and he told me, you know, in an hour or so, you can set a course for 2-7-0 until everybody gets up the next morning. I mean, this is in the middle of the night. So, you know, I did that, anyway, that

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was a very unusual beginning for my merchant marine career. And I did that until 1953. I have to back up a minute. At that time, the Masters, Mates, and Pilots had about 500 ships under contract. Then there were plenty of jobs, right? Shorthanded. So that was why I was able to get on the ship right away. And also, it was, I was able to join the union upon graduating.

[05:39]

Okay. In 1953, the aftermath of World War Two, the Navy had let go most of their line officers. So, they were very shorthanded of line officers. So, I was registered in the Vallejo draft board. And at that time, whenever I took a job, I had a professional deferment and whatnot and I was a father, and there weren't drafting fathers and the whole nine yards, anyway, they drafted my entire class, which was a small class in those days, into the army. So, we had rushed right down and joined the navy to keep from going into the army. So, I have to back up a little bit. I credit the California Maritime Academy for my ability to get the ship out of San Francisco that first night. I never ever had any problems with navigation, seamanship, rules of the road, any of the things that a professional mariner would have to know. Particularly in those days when we didn't have electronics.

Anyway, back to my navy experience. I received orders as officer in charge of the branch hydrographic office in Yokohama, Japan. And they also had an office in Yokosuka, Japan. And that was, I'm sure, because of my familiarity with charts and publications that I learned here in the California Maritime Academy. And as the officer in charge of that branch office, I was responsible for the Far East area, the hydrographer was in Washington DC. And I was his personal representative. Now you have to imagine I've only been in the navy a couple of days. So anyway, we were, it was a very big distribution office because the Korean war was on. Lots of navy ships in the area, and lots of merchant marine ships. And I had two sales agents that I had to supply with charts and publications. And on the technical side, I promulgated notice to Mariners for hazards and obligations. We called it, in those days, they were called local notice to mariners. That was for the Far East only. And then I had to maintain liaison with the Japanese hydrographic office and the Korean hydrographic office, which I established. We set them up in business, anyway, basically it was in Yokosuka, and Yokohama Japan was domicile.

And after the hydrographic office, I went to flight training in Pensacola, Florida, and flew for about a year. And then I was grounded for physical reasons, I couldn't fly any longer. So, I went back to what they call the Black Suit Navy, and Black Suit Navy is the aviators. So, I went back to the Black Suit Navy. I was a first lieutenant on an ammunition ship. That was a replenishment-at-sea ship. An old, it was converted from a C2 cargo ship. Anyway, all the deck, machine-grade booms, and replenishment gear was easy for me because of my seamanship training. And also, my experience on merchant marine boom ships. Anyway, I left there, and then I went to the USS Brown, a destroyer,

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a World War Two Fletcher-class destroyer. And I was operations officer there, which was senior watch officer. And we had all kinds of evolutions, you know anti-submarine warfare, shore fire support, all kinds of very technical, evolutions. Anyway, the navy sent me to some very good schools and one of my jobs on the Brown was, I had electronic materials officers under me, and I became very familiar with electronic radar, all the communications, fire controls, and whatnot. Anyway, I decided not to make a career out of the Navy. So, I got out of the navy in 1960, and, but I stayed in the Naval Reserve and I stayed in the Naval Reserve until I retired with pay at age 60. Excuse me. Okay.

[11:48]

When I got out of the Navy, excuse me, I took a job with the Maritime Administration in San Francisco. I was the radar instructor for the radar observers' course that the Coast Guard requires for licensed deck officers. And also, I was, when I was not teaching the radar class, I also taught the gyrocompasses. When I wasn't doing that, I was a marine operations surveyor. And that was for subsidized ships and general agency agreement ships. And we were activating victory ships and whatnot for the Vietnam War. So, I got involved with the shipyards, and I learned a little bit about ship repair. And I left there to go back to sea, about 1965.

[12:53]

And I started sailing again. You know, the typical ships of that era were boom ships and I did tugboats for a while. And then in 1967, I was recruited by SeaLand container ship company to be their electronics supervisor for the, you know, radio navigation equipment and whatnot. And the point here is I would have never been recruited for that job, except they knew my background from CMA. I was at that time; I think I was the only CMA graduate there. But, the executive vice president for operations was on Kings Pointer. And anyway, I got hired for that. And it was kind of a dirty trick. If you had known anything about going to sea, they kept calling my wife, I was on a warehouse ship, a lumber ship, and they kept calling my wife and said, tell Harold to get off the ship, we need him in Oakland to start his job right away.

And I hadn't even applied for the job. Now when you tell a wife that her husband can go ashore, you're over the barrel. So, I took the job, and I did that for a year. And then I got promoted to a mid-level manager's position as a coatings and licensed supervisor for the, you know, you know, painting and whatnot, mostly dry-dock and underwater painting, and some topside painting too. And the license was for securing, you know, the methods we used to secure containers on deck. And I did that for a while. Then in 1973, I was promoted again to the Manager of Vessel Operations domiciled in Hong Kong. Okay, now, the reason that was, several reasons, I was traveling all over the world, living out of a suitcase, dry-docking ships in Germany, and on the east coast and west coast, Hong Kong and Japan, Singapore, all over the world. And so, we had a new class of ships coming out called SL-7s, large container ships. So, they needed, instead of flying me all

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over the world they moved me to Hong Kong, and I had a fleet of container ships, SeaLand-owned container ships. C-2s and C-4 conversions. And I had ports, Oh, also I had the transpacific ships. The line ships would be, come sailing from the west coast to the far east. And they would call in, in Japan at Yokohama and Kobe, then Hong Kong, and then Kaohsiung. Those were the transpacific ports. And then I had shuttle ships running out of Kobe to Korea.

I had one American flag and two Korean flag charter ships. And then out of Hong Kong, I had shuttle ships going to Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, all of the ports from Japan to Thailand. Anyway, in Hong Kong, I had, all of the SL-7 transpacific ports, I had 360 ship calls a year. One a day. Generally, that would be Yokohama and those other ports, transpacific ports and shuttle ship ports. I had the shuttle ships. I had one Norwegian, one Chinese Nationalist, and one Japanese charter ship off at Hong Kong. And they were calling their out ports once a week. And it was, it was a 24-7 job. When I wasn't, the job was like being a port captain. Okay. But I wore two hats. I'd be port captain until the ship needed repair. And then now I turn my hat around, I would be a port engineer. And I would, was dry-docking ships all over the far east again, and doing buoys repairs in all of these different ports. So, I ended up, I was still living out of a suitcase, traveling all over the far east. Anyway, the moral to that story is you have to have, to get a good job locked down you have to continue your education. You have to, like, I had to learn how to be a port engineer, which is very, very complex.

Fortunately, the guy, Captain Leback, was the executive vice president for operations. He was a deck officer from Kevin's Point and well-versed in engineering, way far more than I was. So, he made sure that I was trained properly before I tried to do those things. Anyway, like I said, the moral of the story is CMA was like a bootcamp. It just prepares you for something in the future, but you have to continue your education. You have to take every advantage of schools that you can attend. And I know I believe it's important. Whether you want to be and admiralty attorney or be a port captain. I never aspired to be a port captain, I was just promoted mainly because of my CMA background and also my experience. All right, then I, they reorganized the company and I was out of the job, so I went back to sea again. And I continued sailing until 1994 when I retired from the Masters, Mates, and Pilots. Now, let me look for my notes here.

[20:55]

Okay, I sailed on many different kinds of ships, the old boom ships, you know, I even sailed on a Liberty, like the Jeremiah O'Brien, I'm one of probably the few that are still alive that sailed on those things. But I sailed on many of those old ships that had absolutely no navigation equipment. Really. And then when radar came along, and of course, I got familiar with radar a little bit in the merchant marines. But very heavy in the navy because of the different types of radars we had. Anyway, I sailed on boom ships, you know, dry cargo, break bulk ships, tankers, passenger ships, Ro-Ros, LASH, I even sailed on an aircraft carrier that was used to ferry aircraft during the Vietnam war.

[22:11]

Anyway, let me look at my notes, Oh, my proudest achievement is I had a ship when I was with SeaLand called the St. Louis, a pull containment ship and she ran aground in Manila Bay. And she ran hard aground. And she was 22 feet aground. In other words, the 22 feet was the difference between her draft before and after she went aground. Anyway, of course the, she was fully loaded, and Luzon Stevedoring saw a gold mine there, to discharge the ship onto barges and whatnot. Be there forever. Anyway, I flew over from Hong Kong and the chief engineer, the previous chief engineer I had sailed with when I was sailing, and he was on a ship that was in Hong Kong at the time. And so, he told me he was the original chief engineer on the St. Louis when she was converted. And he told me how the tanks had been modified. So, ballast, freshwater tanks and ballast tanks had been merged. And so I knew that I had blueprints of them, the ship and whatnot, so anyway, I emailed or communicated to the ship to dump the boiler feed tank, and the forward deep tanks, and, and that's a long process, you know, to pump that ballast out. So, I, when I got there, I stopped Luzon Stevedore from trying to discharge the ship. They actually never took anything out, and anyway, I was, I managed by using the ship's cranes to ship the cargo to about, and removing ballast, I got the ship off without any damage. That was the number one achievement. And I've always been proud of that because it was a very difficult thing to do, cause it's very easy to damage the ship. And I had heard of other SeaLand ships that had gone aground and they had damaged them severely by using those cargo cranes and whatnot.

[24:57]

Anyway, my next claim to fame was I was the port captain for the SS Mayaguez, the ship that was captured by the Cambodian army. And because my, the navy never told me what was going on, but the ship had been towed to Cambodia and anchored, and the crew had been removed. And the Navy in Subic Bay asked me for the ship's characteristic card. Okay. Now having been in the navy, I knew what a ship's characteristic card was, but a merchant ship doesn't have a ship's characteristics card. And I knew that the, when the ship was captured, I don't know whether you're familiar with the story or not. It was an army lieutenant, and some Cambodian sailors on a small swift boat, and a radio operator sent out a distress message. They boarded the ship, and the radio operator sent out an SOS type of message, and said he had been fired on, the ship had been fired on. That they fired at the ship. Anyway, in the translation, I got the message that the ship was on fire. Anyway, so I got the information, or the request for the ship's characteristic card from the navy in Subic Bay and navy P2P had flown down alongside the ship, and they, they were shooting at it. So, you know, the story changed, and they had anchored it in a safe harbor or safe anchorage. And I knew that they had taken the crew off. I can't remember how I found that out. So anyway, I told him that if he, the light went on, I said, those guys are going to try to get, go in there and get that ship out. So, I told our port manager in Subic Bay, tell them to take a cutting torch, and cut the anchor chain because the ship was dead. There was no power. And they did that. And a small naval vessel hooked onto her anchor



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chain and towed her up. Meanwhile, the navy had sent some aircraft and they released the crew, and they spotted him going back to the ship. And so, they slowed down. A lot of them rebound, joined. And in the meantime, they just, B-52s just destroyed that little Cambodian town.

[28:15]

Okay, my third third claim to fame was I had a ship called the Beauregard. She was arrested in Saigon for smuggling. And it was a very serious matter because of those that were involved, I think it was 18 or 19 of them were executed. Not the American crew, but the people at shore that were involved with the smuggling, it was scrap brass from the, you know, from army's guns and whatnot, the empty shell cases. And the Beauregard had been arrested in Saigon. And it was kind of a complicated situation, a lot of corruption in Vietnam. When I was with the Maritime Administration, they used to loan me to the U.S. Justice Department as an expert witness for collisions and groundings and whatnot. So, I became acquainted with the head of the Admiralty section of the Justice Department because he was the one, I was, would be working for directly. So, when the ship was arrested, his name was John Meadows and he was, he's in San Francisco, probably the, and he's in private practice now, anyway, he's probably the best admiralty attorney in the whole world. And he gave me the clues on what to do and what not to do. I got the ship released and their crew, all except the captain. And the captain was in jail in Saigon, scheduled to be executed. Anyway, like I said, it was very corrupt in those days. And, I shouldn't say this, I better not say it, but anyway, he owes me his life. And to sum up, I can only repeat that if you want to succeed in life, treat CMA as a bootcamp and go from there. You can, many, many different avenues you can follow. But the basic training has really done wonders for me throughout my life. Actually almost, you see, when I was hired by the Maritime Administration, I was hired because of my CMA background. The guy that hired me was a Pennsylvania School ship guy. And he snatched me up based on my CMA background. Anyway, that's the end of my story.

**RR:** Okay, great. Well thank you very much.

**MH:** Thank you.

**HS:** Any good?

**RR:** That was perfect.

[End of interview]