

California Maritime Academy Library

# Interview with Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
Date: October 11, 2008

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

## Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Douglas Bretney and Norman Werner conducted by Melanie Mariotti and Matthew Godde 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.

Douglas Bretney and Norman Werner were alumni from the class of 1963, Deck.

## Abbreviation

DB: Douglas Bretney  
NW: Norman Werner  
MM: Melanie Mariotti  
MG: Matthew Godde

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## Interview Outline

- 00:46 In what year and with which degree did you graduate?
- 01:31 What sort of courses did you study?
- 02:12 What was your favorite class and favorite professor?
- 02:51 You went on three training cruises? How long did those last?
- 03:55 What kind of duties did you have on board?
- 04:50 Why did you choose to come to CMA?
- 06:12 What were your fondest memories of the training cruises?
- 07:51 I know there was a major event, a train wreck – can you describe this?
- 10:46 What did you think of your time at Cal Maritime
- 12:19 How was comradery built?
- 13:57 What activities on campus did you participate in and which was your favorite?
- 15:38 What was your daily routine like?
- 16:48 How did your time at Cal Maritime prepare you for life after?
- 20:24 In what ways has the comradery expanded beyond just your generation?
- 22:08 Can you explain your Cal Maritime nickname to us?
- 23:33 Can you talk about the structure of the battalion command?
- 25:13 Can you talk about the Dean's List?
- 27:04 Anything else to share about your time at Cal Maritime?

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
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## Interview

**MM:** Good day, today is October 11th, 2008. My name is Melanie Mariotti, and I am a cadet at the California Maritime Academy. Today, I am interviewing Douglas Bretney, born on May 5th, 1942, and Captain Norman Werner, born on August 7th, 1938, for the California Maritime Academy library oral history project. This interview is being recorded by Matthew Godde at the California Maritime Academy library. So just some general background to get us started off, what year did you graduate from CMA?

**DB:** 1963.

**MM:** And you as well?

**NW:** 1963.

[00:47]

**MM:** Okay. And then what degree did you graduate with?

**DB:** I believe it was a nautical science degree.

**NW:** Nautical science.

**MM:** Okay, and then when did you start at the California Maritime Academy?

**DB:** 1960.

**NW:** August 1960.

**MM:** August 1960? Okay. I guess there was a corps of cadets, but at the time it was known as the battalion of cadets, correct?

**DB:** That's correct.

**MM:** What division were you two part of?

**DB:** I was division one.

**NW:** And it was done by alphabetical order and my name started with W, so I was in division four.

[01:31]

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Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
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Transcriber: Rev.com

**MM:** So, you were here for three years. What sort of courses did you study?

**NW:** We studied navigation courses and as well as regular English courses and other courses that were pertinent to a seagoing career. Rules of the road was a very critical course as well.

**DB:** Yeah, those, meteorology, and then we had a government civics class. And then, of course, the naval science classes.

[02:12]

**MM:** Okay, and what was your favorite class, favorite professor?

**NW:** Aguilar, Bill Aguilar was the navigation instructor. I believe it was rules of the road. Anyway, he never made an error, never made an error. His presentations was absolutely 100% perfect and had the respect of all the cadets.

**DB:** Yeah, I'd have to say that Ags was just this important person. You looked up at him and what was tough about someone like that that you really respect, you don't want to screw up in front of 'em. You know how that is and that's some...

[02:51]

**MM:** Yeah, very important. So, you went on three training cruises, right? One for each year?

**NW:** We did. We went to Tahiti. We went down through the Panama Canal to Brazil, and went down, I believe, it was the west side of South America, the third.

**DB:** We went to Galapagos Islands.

**NW:** Galapagos Islands on the west side of South America, yes.

**DB:** And then down to the canal and then up the coast.

**MM:** And how long did these cruises last?

**DB:** They seemed to be pretty close to three months. You'd come right back after New Year's, and then we got back right around spring, right around Easter break. So, what was that, about two and a half months? Something like that.

[03:55]

**MM:** Okay. So, you're on these cruises and that was really the actual learning, right? That's where you learned how to navigate the ship and how to take the helm, et cetera. So,

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Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
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Transcriber: Rev.com

definitely a key part of your learning experience. So, what kind of duties did you have while on board?

**NW:** Well, the ship part about it was the practical aspect of it, as opposed to the academic classes. And we would actually participate in the navigation of the vessel and the running of the vessel and all the things connected with moving a ship throughout the world.

**DB:** Well, it was a real hands-on experience. Now they call it an internship, and it was a truly supervised internship. But that also includes sweeping up all the decks, cleaning up in the galley, shitting and peeing. And then there's a lot of great ship handling and seamanship that's being taught there and seeing and doing. So, it was really kind of an impressive experience if you really look at it.

[04:50]

**MM:** So, why did you choose to come to CMA? I mean, back then it was kind of known as like a maritime trade school. I mean, you're looking to go to sea, obviously, I would hope.

**NW:** Well, my father was involved in the maritime field in Alaska, and I had actually worked on vessels in Alaska during my summer vacations when I was in high school. And when I learned about the Maritime Academy, I felt it was a natural continuation of working on the sea, which I found that I enjoyed immensely.

**DB:** Well, I dunno, it kinda came to me. I've always liked boats and ships. And then at the same time, I grew up in an era when they were developing the Atlas missile and all that in San Diego and jet planes and everything. Everything was engineering and science was just totally pushed, and I wasn't that great. I was okay at math, but up to the level. So, I remember reading about some book, novel, about some guy being rescued by maritime people and then a kind of boy scout troop went to CMA. So, when the ship came into San Diego, I went down there and talked to 'em and I figured that's what I'd want to do and that's kinda how I ended up choosing. It was a great choice.

[06:12]

**MM:** So then back to the training cruises, what was your fondest memory of them?

**NW:** Well, every cruise had a specific situation that you took back with you. One of the things that I enjoyed and would later play a major role in my career, was transiting the Panama Canal because of its unique situation in the world and the difficulty of a vessel, even today, transiting the Panama Canal. And that was one of the things that I remembered from the cruise.

**DB:** Actually, my most memorable, a lot of its frozen in your mind, your first cruise and everything. But one of things was a ship was rolling off a lot and I was kind of, you

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know... But anyways, they had this movie on there called "Johnny Dark" and it wasn't one of the greatest plots in the world, but they showed a lot of these front end shots of the race car going around the curves and everybody just watched that movie three or four times. And every so often the ship, sometimes when it would roll it wouldn't roll the right way, it'd roll the wrong way. But it was just the most thrilling thing ever, watching that. And I don't know, myself, I saw that movie at least three times, just for the thrill of the front-end shots and the ship rolling. I don't know how Hollywood, or these entertainment people must have been on a ship that figured out bump ride stuff around and jockey and knock ya around. So that's probably the most memorable.

[07:51]

**MM:** I know that there was a major event that occurred on one of your cruises. There was a train wreck. Could you describe this in more detail? I mean, what role were you on the train? Did you assist with that?

**DB:** Yeah, I was on the train. First of all, the train was this bumpy thing all the time and sitting in the dining car kind of looking out. And all of the sudden, you saw these people jumping off the train. And all of the sudden, you saw this car come off, and then we had this sudden jolt and it felt like any other jolt. And what had happened, these two collided and the steel baggage car got compressed into the wooden car. That had to have been the most traumatic thing I've ever seen in my life, to be part of that. And crushed people and organs and it was just... I mainly helped out with hauling stuff, hauling people back and forth in the stretcher there. And a lot of the guys who have the higher grades just completed advanced first aid, they were all diving in and doing things they could, first aid. I don't know, I have to say that had to have been my most, I don't know, shocking day of my life. I tell ya, I got back to the ship that evening, late that afternoon, that was the best thing I ever saw. I was so happy to see that ship. I never really thought the ship was that great, but boy, bygone, that particular day, it was the greatest.

**NW:** Well, we were at Buenaventura, Colombia, and part of the seagoing experience was to enjoy the cultures of these foreign countries and Buenaventura had very little culture. So, they split the cadet corps in two and the first part went up to Cali, Colombia, which was a very interesting and exciting city. And I was in that group, and we came back safe and sound and left the second transit to the remainder of the cadets that experienced the train collision.

**MM:** I mean, I suppose you've heard of it.

**NW:** Oh, we heard about it. We heard all kinds of results where some of the Colombian citizens on board the train started looting victims and things like that. Cadets would step in and break it up because that's what we were told. That was our culture. We just don't take advantage of a person's disability. And a good friend of mine was riding on the engine, the front of the engine, the cowcatcher, I believe it's called, and taking pictures.

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
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And at that time, he was taking pictures of the train coming straight down the track. And he realized that there was only one track and put his arm back to jump off the cowcatcher as the trains collided and injured his arm and his leg, and actually had to drop out of school for one year before he was totally healed and came back and completed his degree at California Maritime.

[10:46]

**MM:** So, what did you think of your time at Cal Maritime? I mean, was it like the best experience of your life? Did you absolutely hate it?

**DB:** In a sense, I think if you had asked me as we graduated, I was so anxious to get outta dodge. But reflecting on it, it was kind of the best of the times and it was not so great. And it was the perfect school for me. I learn better by hearing and seeing things than I do by reading ahead of time and they covered an awful lot. Also, it was the hands-on. It's something I kind of thought I wanted to do. I didn't quite do that, but it's still something that did appeal to you. It was kinda neat. And I got to go to some places I probably would have never gone to.

**NW:** Well, I went to university two years prior to going to Cal Maritime Academy, and I felt that the discipline at Cal Maritime Academy and the courses that inspired me were far more beneficial than what I experienced in the previous two years at other major universities. And the comradery, as well, that we made during our times together and tribulations together remains to this day. It very well prepared me for my seagoing career, which spanned a period of 45 years.

[12:19]

**MM:** Okay, so you spoke about the comradery. How was that built? I spoke with one of your classmates earlier today about orientation week. Could you go into some depth about that, please?

**NW:** Well, the discipline of a semi-military school was rather hard to adjust to for a young person, and we all had to adjust. We were forced to adjust, and that created a common bond among us where we viewed our survival of the discipline at the school as something that strengthened us. And since we had common interest in the maritime field and we all went to different routes in the maritime field, for the most part, it always made coming back and comparing what others had accomplished very interesting to me.

**DB:** Well, the comradery. It's kind of hard to... It's like no other. First of all, you're around each other all the time. You get up in the morning, guess what? We had to sweep up and we had to go to classes. We ate meals together and you're in classes together, you're down on the ship working. And then on the cruise, you stood watches together, you're up in the morning, working and doing that. So, you're around each other all the time. In fact,



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Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
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Transcriber: Rev.com

to me, it has a tendency to really develop a closeness that you get. I mean, these guys, when we meet each other years later, even other people that graduated in different years, we have instant conversation with them and it's amazing. We haven't seen each other for, I don't know, but it's instantly we're talking to each other about a lot of interesting things. So, it's that around each other, I think, that's probably a lot to do with it.

[13:57]

**MM:** So, what activities on campus did you participate in and which was your favorite?

**NW:** I enjoyed recreational sports quite a bit, I still do. There was so much to manage during our regular classes schedule that, once we were not going to school, weekends for example, we would really enjoy going into San Francisco or some places of that nature. Just the accomplishment, as well, being able to survive the rigors of a military, highly disciplined situation and come out with an excellent career.

**DB:** One of the most memorable things I did is playing water polo. And being a small school, I got a chance to play. If I had gone to one of the big ones, forget it. And it was kind of fun, I really enjoyed that. It really took a diversion away. Also, it puts you rather closely around another group of people. It's just like, I ran into Doug Finley out there. Man, that guy was tough to cover. Man, he could maneuver the water. As soon as I saw him, I just instantly remember trying to cover him. So, that was that additional thing I enjoyed the most. Also, we got to travel and go to different places, so you got a little away time. We were a little more restricted to campus in those days than probably today, so it was nice getting away a bit.

[15:38]

**MM:** So, what was your daily routine like? I mean, you woke up, then what?

**NW:** Well, we had to organize our room and then formations, and then we would be dismissed and go to our various classes and meals, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And then in the evening, if there were any organized situations that we were involved in, we'd take part in that. And then, of course, return to our rooms and study and prepare for the next day's classes.

**DB:** It was certainly a busy, hectic time, I tell ya. But one of my most interesting memories about life at CMA was in the beginning of my second year, and a bunch of us were in there talking and a guy made a comment. "Hey, we get to sleep in to 6:30." "This is not all that bad." So, that kinda says it all.

**MM:** Yeah, it does.

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
Date: October 11, 2008

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

**DB:** Sleep in at 6:30, I thought that was such a privilege, 'cause in your first year, you're up at 6:00 a.m. cleaning up, and those extra Zzz's meant something.

[16:48]

**MM:** So, you've both talked about your time sort of after Cal Maritime and how you felt that your time here prepared you. In what sort of way would you say?

**DB:** Well, my career, I was in the Navy for four years, and then I went on to San Diego State and got a degree in accounting. When I was in the Navy, I was a navigator on the ship and this guy's making a comment, doing columns and numbers there. And he said, "You gotta think about being an accountant." So anyways, well, it prepared me. I did a lot; I gained an awful lot from the Navy. I was a deck division officer. On the Destroyer, I was a first lieutenant, then later I was a navigator. Well, without this training, sure, you have a chief or a first-class quartermaster, but it's still nice to be able to do it yourself. And of course, the ship handling that we got to do and prepare. We got to do those things. You had great lectures on ship handling. A little bit different in the Navy, so that prepared me for that. My later years so much, really, was just an academic step along the way when I got into accounting. Other than personal life, sailing the sailboat for a number of years. You know, sailing, navigation on the ship. Except for going up on the mast of the boat, I wasn't really fond of that.

**NW:** Well, we were very well prepared for the emergent marine where I started my career. I found that I was on other vessels with people from other schools, and sometimes I would have a better background than they did in certain aspects of navigation and rules of the road. So, we would check on each other and I always felt that the academic situation at Cal Maritime had prepared me very well. Actually, at one point in my career, I was chosen to be the first marine officer to be involved in GPS navigation and had a secret clearance to go back to Silver Springs, Maryland, to John Hopkins' applied physics lab. And we taught in what was then called satellite navigation by the individuals who had discovered it from the Russian Sputnik that was put in orbit in 1957. That was the reason that it was required that I have a secret clearance. It's because, even though the Russians had put up the Sputnik, they didn't know how to use it to navigate at that time. But that was quite a thrill for me to be in the ground floor of what is now the principle system of navigation, both at sea and on land.

[20:24]

**MG:** Good day. Today is October 11th, 2008. My name is Matthew Godde and I'm a cadet at the California Maritime Academy. Today, I'm interviewing Douglas Bretney, third mate from the California Maritime Academy, and he was born on May 22nd, 1942, a correction from previously, and Captain Norman Werner, born on August 7th, 1938, for the California Maritime Academy library oral history project. This interview is being recorded by Melanie Mariotti at the California Maritime Academy. So, getting back to

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indoc [indoctrination a.k.a. orientation] week, because I've found that kind of interesting. In what way would you say the comradery has expanded beyond just your generation? Do you have more of a comradery throughout all of the alumni association and working with all of the alumni, or just particularly your class?

**NW:** Primarily our class because we have so much history together. However, I see there are organizations now that meet on scheduled bases in the area I live, Seattle. California Maritime Academy have a monthly get-together, which I find to be very interesting and I attend. Although there's nobody of my era at Cal Maritime at these meetings, we still have very much in common. And most of these people that are in the maritime feel that it's always great to compare fields and see where they have gone and give them any advice that they might seek from me.

**BD:** Well, yeah, I think, obviously, we have the most comradery with our own class, but still with everybody else. It's amazing, you run into people graduated in different years and it's a great conversation. Probably the best conversation I had is this guy served on the [Training Ship] Golden State during World War 2 and lives right near where I live, and I talked with him about, you know, you had to take cruises in the bay. You couldn't go out in the ocean 'cause somebody might shoot ya. And it's amazing, you run into people and these great discussions that we have with different years. So, I don't know, it's interesting.

[22:08]

**MG:** Okay, thank you. So, I wanna kinda get into a little bit of an interesting fact I found in the yearbook. You both have nicknames. Could you kind of explain your Cal Maritime nicknames to us? If you would like to. You don't have to.

**NW:** I don't recall my nickname.

**MG:** Norm. Norm, oh, right. That's a derivative of Norman, which is my given name, and that's how I came by that name.

Okay, and Mr. Bretney? Aran?

**DB:** My mother was born in Lebanon, so I'm of Arabic descent. And in navigation, they wanted to recognize that excellence 'cause notice we use Arabic numerals. Forgot about the Roman numerals a long time ago. So, it was kind of a recognition of that. I'm exaggerating a little bit, but that's what it was.

**MG:** Whatever works. So it says here, in your yearbook, Norman, something about crew HMCS Athabaskan. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
Date: October 11, 2008

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

**NW:** Vaguely remember that vessel named HM...

**MG:** Athabaskan?

**NW:** Athabaskan. I don't recall the details, I'm sorry.

[23:33]

**MG:** Oh, that's okay. So Captain Ashemeyer had pointed out previously that with the way that the battalion command was structured, one through four was, I believe, deck, and four through eight was engineering. Or two, the division commander for division four? So, wouldn't that make you a engineer technically?

**NW:** No, actually, I think the engineering division started with division five.

**MG:** Oh, five.

**NW:** Yeah.

**MG:** Sorry about that. As for you being a sub commander for division one, what was that like?

**DB:** See, they had this three-part leadership thing for the first semester, and we had a part of it. So, I was only really division commander for a short period of time, and then the permanent ones were selected for the last semester. It was like, I didn't really do much, as I recall.

**MG:** Okay, was there much rivalry between the divisions?

**NW:** Oh, we'd get together for sports. Of course, there's always rivalry at that point. I don't think as far as trying to achieve more than the other divisions, I don't recall any outstanding rivalry.

**DB:** Yeah, I don't recall any either, other than the athletic competition. It was kind of a soft rivalry, even that.

[25:13]

**MG:** Okay, thank you. It says both of you, actually, are on the Dean's List. We still have the Dean's List as an award for students. I believe it's three point...

**MM:** 2-5.

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
Date: October 11, 2008

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

**MG:** 3.25 and above. Captain had said previously that, regardless if you were an A student all throughout, if you fail one class, you are gone. Could you kind of shed some more light on that detail?

**NW:** I never experienced that, so I cannot talk directly to it. However, it was allowed to get less than an A on certain courses. It just would negatively impact your grade point. They were strict. They were strict not only academically, but conduct-wise as well. And usually, it was one strike and you're out.

**MG:** Do you know anything about it?

**DB:** Well, I did well one semester. The rest of 'em, I was kind of in the middle of things. The only one I had serious problems with was flashing light, and I'd struggle and struggle and struggle with that. Even to take my coastguard license, I had to go down there a third time down there to take it. The last two guys, it was Merle Schultz and me, and the guy made the comment. He flashed it really slow. Dip, thaw, dip, that type of thing. You know, the flashing light. And he says, "Well, you know, you guys "are gonna be the best signaler in the world." The rest of the academic class, I did reasonably well. Some of them I did well. Some of 'em I didn't apply myself the way I should've. Being a little bit younger, sometimes you don't have your act together. Norm came in. He had a lot of people, well a few, who came in a couple of years on. It's amazing, just the one year, what a difference it made, versus those of us who were right out of high school. It's how things go.

[27:04]

**MG:** Do you have anything else to share? Anything about your time at Cal Maritime?

**NW:** Well, I look back at it fondly, of course, and the bond will be with me my entire life. I worked in the industry. I worked primarily as a pilot in the Panama Canal, and also in the state of Washington. There are always other Cal Maritime graduates who had become pilots. In fact, in Panama, we actually had Panama Canal pilots who were CMAs. We'd have our own get-together down there, CMA get-together. Graduates. It prepared me well. It was a close bond. I think it strengthened me quite a bit, and I look back at it fondly.

**DB:** Yeah, it was good at the best of times and it wasn't so great on some issues. But it was still a great school. I never regret going. It's perfect for me in terms of the way the education was, the type of things that we were doing. I never got a chance to play water polo at a big college. Forget it. And some of the places we got to go. I mean, I never got the chance to go crawling around the Galapagos Islands or seeing Tahiti and some of those places. So those are just extremely memorable. They had some great instructors, they had some that weren't so good. But you have that at every place. I liked it. It was fun and it was the right thing. The right thing for me, anyway.

Interviewee: Douglas Bretney & Norman Werner  
Interviewer: Melanie Mariotti & Matthew Godde  
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**MG:** Well, thank you both for coming. I appreciate it. Both Melanie and I have both appreciated your time coming out, and we hope to look forward from both of you in the future. Thank you very much.

**NW:** My pleasure.

[End of interview]