

California Maritime Academy Library

Interview with Richard Hill

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Richard Hill
Interviewer: Jared Jawad & Jordan Baldock
Date: October 9, 2010

Place: Cal Maritime
Transcriber: Rev.com

Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Richard Hill conducted by Jared Jawad and Jordan Baldock on October 9, 2010. 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.

Richard Hill is a graduate of the class of 1955, Deck

Abbreviation

RH: Richard Hill
JJ: Jared Jawad
JB: Jordan Baldock

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Interview Outline

- 00:22 What made you decide to come to the California Maritime Academy?
- 01:39 What were some of the things that made it like a military type of school back then?
- 02:42 What were the academics like when you were here?
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- 05:15 Can you tell us about the place listed in your yearbook as Pneumonia Gulch?
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- 28:42 Were there any other memories that you'd like to share with us?

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Interview

JJ: My name is Jared Jawad.

JB: My name is Jordan Baldacci. Today's date is October 9th, 2010.

[00:22]

JJ: And we are interviewing Mr. Richard Hill, who graduated CMA in 1955. So, Mr. Hill, what made you decide to come to California Maritime Academy?

RH: Well, I was a terrible student in high school. My father worked here. He was one of the engineering, permanent crew. He was a retired chief machinist mate from the Navy, and he said, why don't you come here to CMA? And I was familiar with it, of course, because he did work here. And I said, sure, why not? And the next thing I knew, I took the exam, passed it. I was an alternate because they had a full class. And then I got a letter saying you're accepted. And I entered a CMA, main reason I came, I suppose, because my dad mentioned it and it was convenient. And I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I thought I might go in the Navy. Of course, back then we all had obligated to the service two years under the draft laws. And so, this was a good of place as any.

JB: So, when you, when you got to CMA for the first time did you, did you know what you're getting yourself into?

RH: Not really. I knew it was somewhat of a military school and, you know, again was a place to go. My dad mentioned it. That was about it. I'd never given any thought before that.

[01:39]

JJ: So, about the military, about the military type of the school, what was some of the things that the Corps Cadets did back then?

RH: Well, everything was by bell, of course, in reveille at 0600, another bell, 10 minutes or five minutes later. And we fell out for formation and roll call. And then another bell and we went back in and shaved and got squared away and squared away our rooms. And just everything was done by bell. I mean, everything, you went to class, went to meals by bell. You went to class by bell, went to bed by bell, study hall. There was a definite study period from 1900 to 2130 or somewhere in there. And so just everything by bell, marched everywhere. We marched down to the ship in the afternoon, marched back. We marched to formation, mess hall and that type of thing.

[02:42]

JB: So, your, your academics here, when, when you were here you didn't have any of the general education that we have, it was just all-

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RH: No, it was, it was very, very much a trade school. I mean the bare minimum to get a degree from the state of California. And it was a Bachelor of Science degree, in my case was deck and literally quote, Navigation and Nautical Astronomy. And then 20, some years later I found out that it was not an accredited school at the time. And so, the degree, the only thing that the degree got me when I did go back to school is, I had a bunch of credit. And I registered early yet when I went back to school after the Navy.

JB: Okay.

RH: But yeah, strictly a trade school. I mean, we had two and a half years of navigation classes. Two and a half years of rules of the road, cargo handling course, there really wasn't anything in the way of ship handling. Let's see, had a first aid class. Took, had a trig class, basic math, basic English. Yeah, and everything else, rules and regulations for tankers, cargo ships, passenger ships, and so forth. Everything was right down the line to prepare you to take that coast guard examination.

[04:09]

JJ: Much like today. What were the, what were some of the instructors like during your era? Were they fun? Were they super into your education or are they old sailors?

RH: All sailors, just about every one of them was a CMA graduate going back. I can remember what, in fact, I just looked, a guy by the name of Pedersen was a 1933 graduate. I think that was the first class when it was maybe still over, down there in Morin, before it moved up here. I'm not sure what year it moved here, but he was a [19]33 graduate and all the rest were also CMA graduates. The superintendent was a commodore I rank. He was retired Navy, a full Commodore from World War II. Dean of Education was a fellow named Captain Bonnie, who was maybe retired. But the rest were, other than the Naval science department, were all CMA graduates.

[05:15]

JB: Now campus life from then to now has changed dramatically. Like you see our residence halls, and we were looking through your book and we saw a place called pneumonia gulch. Can you tell us about that?

RH: Well, I think it was just, this is kind of a gulch going up the hill and the wind just blew down through there. There were three barracks up there as you were. It's all grass now. And three companies in the barracks and at the end of one was a little store sold cigarettes and items and so forth. And there was a sick bay there, a few other offices. And there was another home, I guess it was at one time, that had become the library, was also where we stored civilian clothes. Because we couldn't wear civilian clothes. Right there, at the far end, that way of the barracks. That's what I know about pneumonia gulch that

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the wind just blew up and down this place, probably still does, or funneled, or channeled from the wind coming off the Bay.

[06:19]

JJ: Can you tell us what the Havey House was?

RH: The what?

JJ: The Havey House.

RH: Havey House. You must have got that from my biography there. When we were second classmen, we went to Sperry Gyro School in San Francisco and it was a three-week course. And we had the, the ship was in the shipyard in San Francisco prior to going on the annual cruise. And this was strictly for the deck, deck people. And we had the option of either living on the ship or living in town. Well, three of us opted to live in town. We managed to get the money from our parents and the Havey House was a room and boarding place. I think it was 14 bucks a week for a room and two meals, breakfast, and dinner. And so, three of us there and it was really party time. And we bought booze when we first moved in and we kept booze in the room all the time. Luckily there were a bunch of nice-looking young ladies living there. So, it was party time. That's really what the Havey House. There was a bar next to it that had an oxygen machine. And for two bits you could go down in the morning and get a shot of oxygen. And I, I avail myself of that sometimes. It helped get through the day. That was the Havey House.

[07:46]

JB: All right. So, on weekends here as a freshman, I don't know how historically accurate this is, but I guess you had to stay on campus all the time. And then as you progressed in your education you got more-

RH: Yes okay, when we first entered, they shaved our head. We were restricted for 30 days, no liberty. And then when we did get liberty, it commenced about noontime after drill Saturday morning and we marched for competition. And if you were a third classmen, and there were only three years when I went through, if you were third classmen, you had to be in, you didn't have the weekend duty. We also had weekend duties. You had to be back at 2200 on Sunday night. And you, if you came back in civvies, you change back into your uniform at this house, it was up there at the beginning of the barracks. You were second classmen, liberty expired at 2300. First classmen at midnight. And then also first classmen got liberty Friday night. And, but had to be back at midnight Friday night and then do the drill Saturday morning. So, we, yeah, we had no liberty during the week, only on the weekends. Again, if you didn't have the duty.

[09:06]

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JB: So, with your liberty would you go to San Francisco or Sacramento or what?

RH: Yeah, generally if we had the money, we might go over to San Francisco but for the most part, it was just locally. Vallejo, Vallejo, was an entirely different town back then. Mare Island was going, a lot of sailors in town. Lower Georgia street had had a reputation and all the sleeves, places, tattoos, cat houses, et cetera, et cetera.

[09:39]

JJ: Can you, can you, can you describe the surrounding area of Vallejo in the Bay Area while you were going here and what the Academy's involvement in it was?

RH: The Academy's involvement really wasn't great. We participated in sporting events locally. There wasn't any competition outside the area, basketball and softball and no football. That was strictly intermural as were the other sports. In addition to playing teams locally, the Bay Area was, I think, much, much more conservative then than it is now. San Francisco had no reputation like it does now. There was no gay community in San Francisco. There were a couple of bars off Broadway that catered to the gays. There was a place called Fenocchio's. It was, I don't know if it's still there, that had a good show of female impersonators.

I grew up in Rodeo right across the Bay, lived there for 10 years. It was a housing project there from World War II. It was a small community. Again, working class people. Crockett was pretty much working class, CNH, California Hawaiian Sugar Company opened, the same thing, Richmond and all the towns along. They were pretty much working-class people, just a much more conservative area than it is than it is today. Walnut Creek and area out in the Valley, there was just nothing there.

I mean, in the early fifties they were just starting to build homes out there. When I was, before I came here and in high school, I worked for a small trucking company and we moved people from Rodeo out in this housing area out into Walnut Creek and out there. And again, there was highway four in the end or through the Hills. Now it's a freeway, a freeway system. Of course, what was not in existence, highway 40 which is the one that runs along the bay, right across the way here and goes through Oleum. But the refinery over there, that was the main East West highway. 45 mile an hour speed limit. The old bridge was there. They didn't have the second bridge, or of course now they've built the third one's in existence now. So much more conservative areas.

[12:16]

JB: Well, that's good to know. Back to campus. Was there any, when you first came here, you said they shaved your heads and they put you on lock down for three days. Was there any physical requirements or physical training that they put you through?

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RH: No, and it was very strict discipline for the first, we came in in August of [19]52, and for the first three months or so it was very strict discipline. I mean, if an upperclassman walked by you slammed against the wall and braced and upperclassmen said, who are you? You said, midshipman, hill, deck [19]55 or something like that. I can't remember exactly. And then it slacked off and I tell a story. There was a second classmen named John Ryan, really a nice guy. And then we had hell week. We didn't realize it was hell week at the time. And it went on, I think maybe for a couple of weeks where they roused us out of bed at one in the morning. Get your blues on and get out in five minutes. And I mean, I had French cuffs and I'm trying to get cuff links in, and I can't get a shirt on button, get a tie on, and get out. And then they'd scream at us to go back and put our khakis on. And it just, this was a two-week period. And then there was kind of an ending climax where we turned against the upper classmen, and then got our revenge. And of course, it was just for a short period of time, a couple of hours and we took it seriously, our revenge.

[13:53]

JJ: How close was the faculty here and faculty and command staff to the students on the campus here while you're here?

RH: I don't think very close. There was no mentoring type of environment that I remember. Yeah, I don't think they were very close. Was pretty much a professional relationship between the midshipman. We were midshipman then, and not cadets.

JB: We saw that you were class coordinator of your graduating class. Is that correct?

RH: Well not then, I am now.

JB: Oh, you are now?

RH: Yeah. There wasn't anything like that when we graduated, we all just, yeah.

[14:35]

JB: Okay, well looking, looking through the yearbooks from 1950 to 1955, we saw significant growth throughout the campus. I mean like noticeable changes, like the classroom building, for example, I think that was erected in 1954. Is that, is that correct? That one right over there.

RH: I don't think so.

JB: Really?

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RH: Yeah. Classrooms were attached to the admin building up here. The only thing I remember being built new while I was here was the mess hall, and it's over here somewhere. That's the only thing new I remember. The mess hall was a building up up here right alongside the road coming in. The admin was here, and the mess hall was here and the road, entry road was here. Yeah, the only thing I remember is the new mess hall. And then the old mess hall became a library. The barracks were built up on the hill, where sometime after I left, I remember admin and the original barracks, admin building, classrooms, old mess hall, new mess hall, mail hall, the swimming pool over there, the boat house down on the waterfront and the pier. And that's about it. I just don't remember anything other than the new mess hall, but I'm 77 years old. And the memory is what was, I wouldn't bet my life. What you're saying is true, I just, yeah.

JJ: Talking about the open space here, how did you guys capitalize on so much open space?

RH: This was a ball field down here. Everybody parked right along the, the road here. And then there was a ball field here and there was a another field up on, up on the hill. And we didn't use this one much up on the hill, used it for intermural football and this for softball. And that was really other than parking and softball down here on the flat, that's about all it was used for now.

[16:53]

JB: Onto the, onto the Golden Bear, the training ship. Were your day-to-day activities centered around that, were you constantly on the ship doing work?

RH: Okay, when we were in port here at the campus, morning was strictly for class. I think we had four classes and then at one o'clock formation and we marched down for practical instruction aboard the ship, which for the deckies, for the deck, wasn't really, didn't take a rocket scientist. You were chipping and painting, and you know doing some splicing work and other things. And so, yeah, there was afternoon from one 'til three down on the ship, just doing practical work. I can't speak for the engineers. They were probably more real hands on, instructional type of work than we were. When we were first classmen, we rotated through being first Lieutenant for a week or two weeks or something like that, making the assignments. Or a second classmen, somebody in charge of the paint locker. And again, it didn't take a rocket scientist to do that, but we did all the, all the surface maintenance on the ship. We didn't do any really heavy-duty stuff that required a shipyard. We, we did all, all the maintenance.

[18:22]

JJ: Talking about the two different majors, were their inner, inner major rivalries that went on?

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RH: No, not really other than, you know, the, the back and forth, the wisecracking. No, not really, because it really was two, two distinct schools, engineering, and deck. And they just, there was no interface anywhere in that. Other than when we were third classmen, on the first cruise that required us to go down and stand I think one, at least one watch in the engine room and vice versa, the engineers and stood up on deck. And I think that was just primarily to see if you wanted to change your major after or your department after, after the first, after the first cruise.

[19:10]

JB: Training periods, your first one, tell us about that.

RH: We went from here to Hilo, and then from liberty and Hilo, and liberty was every other. We spent port and starboard watches. So, we got liberty every other, every other day. And the same rules about expiration, third classmen back at 2200, second 2300, and first classmen at midnight. And we went to Samoa and I'm probably one of the, I may be the only person in the world that remembers that were three bars in Pago Pago. And they sold Lucky Lager beer. And it was the Moonlight, The Tuna and The Pago Pago.

And I think they opened those only because the training ship came in, because Samoa is a very Baptist, Baptist area, a lot of missionaries down there. And so, they did open Lucky Lager beer. I remember that. I remember the Samoans had very large feet. I'm sure that's politically incorrect. Nevertheless, they had big feet. And from Samoa, we went back to an anchor behind the roads, painted the ship. And again, all the deckies got involved in painting the whole ship because we'd been going back to San Diego and it'd become a showboat going up the coast. So, taxpayers could say, oh, this nice white looking ship.

And that was it, that was first class cruise, yeah. And then training purposes, we rotated a period of where we were deck watch standers up on the bridge. And when you were a third classmen, we were just the lookout to the helmsmen. And then the, okay we did our time on the bridge. And then we had a period where we were navigation training, shooting LAN and a few other odds and ends of sun line. And then the third time was deck, where we just worked on deck and so forth. God, what was I gonna say? Nice thing about being a watch stander or navigator, when you weren't on watch, you didn't have to do anything else. So, a lot of good sleeping time and reading time. We had a cruise notebook that we had to complete, quite extensive, and that of course was a major part of your grade on the, on the training cruise.

[21:54]

JJ: I believe it's the same way today. Which was your most memorable cruise. And can you tell us about it?

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RH: Yeah, probably, probably the second-class cruise. We went from from here down to Lima, Peru, and then to Valparaiso, and then came back up, stopped at Panama, and then stopped at Acapulco. And Acapulco's where we painted the ship again. The engineers are out water skiing around, and we're all hanging over the side painting the damn ship whites so it can be a showboat once it got back to San Diego, but that was probably the most memorable yeah. Third class. My final cruise was to Tahiti. We went to Honolulu first then to Tahiti, and then a long, long run from Tahiti up to Acapulco where we, again, painted the ship.

[22:53]

JB: So, your third class, your, or I guess your second class, where you went down to Peru, you had to cross the equator.

RH: Yes, well, we did when we went to Samoa and they beat the hell out of us. I mean guys with pieces of fire hose and we were in our skivvies and had a royal barber with a pair of pliers that would pluck some hair out of your chest or under your arm, that was some fiction. And then they had the royal baby, who was from my memory, was one of the cooks and he was on the heavy side. And I don't know if they still do this, but they make up some concoction, and put it on the royal baby's belly, and you kneel in front and he grabbed your head, and pulled it into his stomach and mixed all this stuff. And you kiss the royal baby's belly. And that was part of crossing the equator. But that, that piece of fire hose hurt.

JB: I imagine.

[23:53]

JJ: How dramatic do you think the growth in the campus, or in the school at all has been since you graduated?

RH: Oh, it's fantastic. A classmate of mine reminded me the other day that we came in with 90 and we graduated 44, and I think a lot were here. Korean war was still going on, I think in [19]52. And so, a lot had come in to, some had come in to avoid the draft and understandably so. And they dropped out when the draft kind of died off. But the growth is phenomenal.

I don't think at that time, the core of midshipman, when I was a third classmen was probably 150 or 175 at the most. And I doubt if the school could take many more than that. Three companies were living in the barracks up here. And I think there were two, two for sure. And maybe a third company living on the ship at the time, because they just didn't have the room in the barracks up here. A little note of interest. I came in in August of [19]52 when the election was in November, presidential election and Eisenhower ran. And there was, when Eisenhower won, there was a big sign put up on Company A

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outside the barracks that said, As Company A goes, so goes the nation because they were evidently a bunch of conservatives wanted Eisenhower to win the election. But yeah, all of the growth is phenomenal. It's, you know, the campus looks nothing like what it was in August of [19]52.

[25:45]

JB: Yeah, I bet. And with that growth comes, you know, obviously more kids, more money, and the expansion of the majors. What do you think about there's this new business, business, and logistics major and maritime affairs majors, or what, what do you think about those?

RH: Well, I really haven't given it much thought. I know it's an, I know it's an entirely different school than when I went through, and I'm not sure there's a place here for a kid like me anymore, that was terrible student and needed that military regimen to get through. I don't think there's a place here for a kid like me anymore. 'Cause I know you don't march everywhere, and you don't do everything by bell. And I think that's the, the sad part of it. That there isn't. You know, from a straight educational point of view and going to sea, I'm not, I don't know everything you have to do. Do you still work towards a mate's license or an engineer's license?

JB: Yeh

RH: Okay, so you're probably just as qualified as we were to take a ship to sea, but my main concern is there's no place here for a kid like me. And some of my classmates have said the same thing. It was a perfect place for us.

JB: So, you were, you were a fan of the whole military style. Were you planning on going into-

RH: Yeah, my dad was a retired chief petty officer. I've mentioned he worked on the ship. I thought I would go into the Navy and stay. And again, we all had two years of obligated service when we did graduate and I wasn't a hundred percent sure that I'd stay in the Navy, but I got in and I liked it. And I did stay in the Navy.

[27:42]

JJ: After you got out of the Navy, did you go on to do any other-

RH: I graduated school at San Diego State and got a degree in accounting of all things. And that's what I worked at for 19 years. And I retired fully in '97.

JJ: So, you didn't, you didn't go back to sea?

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RH: No, I never sailed under the license. I kept the license current up through '85. It was to renew it; it was just an open book test on rules of the road and maybe something about radar. And so, I did keep it active until [19]85. And I thought once about using it and contacted Scripps Institute, they were advertising for a mate in San Diego in late seventies and I contacted them, and they had a job, but I really didn't want to go back to sea.

[28:42]

JJ: Was there anything else that you wanted to share with us that we didn't ask you?

JB: Any memories or certain things that have stayed with you throughout the years?

RH: Well, again, I can only repeat that it was the perfect place for me. It made, I can't, I don't think I can fully describe the difference it made in my life. I became an officer. I went in the Navy. I doubt if I would've met my wife, had I not been an officer and progressed as I did. Met her in Hawaii, she was teaching, and I was on a destroyer, Pearl Harbor. It was a good place.

One of the things I haven't thought about in a long time is I had the opportunity to go to sea with my father because he was on the ship and made the cruises. And although he was an engineer and I was deck, we'd get together in the evening and shoot the breeze. And crew would assemble back on the fantail and I'd wander back there and talk to them. Most of them retired chiefs from the Navy back then. And that was a great experience that I could go to sea with my dad three times.

JB: Yeah, absolutely.

RH: Good school. Just again, I keep repeating myself, perfect place for a kid like me. I mean, I was lousy high school student, C's D's, a F here and there, but great place. Great place.

JJ: Well, thank you so much.

RH: You're welcome, it was very interesting. Glad to do it.

JB: Yeah, thank you so much.

RH: Good questions, good questions, it brought me back, made me think.

[End of interview]