

California Maritime Academy Library

Interview with James Dafoe

Oral History Project

Interviewee: James Dafoe
Interviewer: Joseph Slasher & Yolanda Mercado
Date: October 2, 2008

Place: Training Ship Golden Bear
Transcriber: Rev.com

Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with James Dafoe conducted by Joseph Slasher and Yolanda Mercado on October 2, 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.

James Dafoe was an alumni from the class of 1958, Engine.

Abbreviation

JD: James Dafoe
JS: Joseph Slasher
YM: Yolanda Mercado
PA: PA Announcement

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Interview Outline

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Interview

[01:07]

JS: Good morning. My name is cadet Joey Slasher, and this is cadet Yolanda Mercado. We are both actually ULI as a first-class cadet here and I'm a second-class cadet. Today is October 2nd, 2008 I'm with us. We are hosting Captain James Defoe, United States Navy retired four and on six 20 1937 so June 24th 37 and we are conducting this interview as part of the California maritime Academy library oral history project. We're recording this interview on board the library onboard the United States traineeship. So, captain, our first question is, we're just going to kind of, I guess start at the beginning as much as we can. So where, where did you grow up? Where were you born?

JD: I grew up in Michigan and my parents came to California to, my father worked for Ames laboratory because later NASA on the field in California. So basically like, and the lower barrier chose to come to California maritime Academy and an interest in things around associated with the water. I was a sea scout.

[02:01]

JS: And I guess that's what, what made you, um, you said obviously that you're interested in the maritime aspect is what drew you to the Academy in the first place, but what, what drew you to choose the major that you did, which was Marine Marine engineering?

JD: Quite simply, I thought that they should want you to have a career change. Engineering degree are more marketable in a degree as an emergency. I mean, no disrespect, but I think it was a no brainer.

[02:01]

YM: What year did you start CMA?

JD: 1955

JS: 1955, and your, your time at CMA was for three years, correct?

JD: That's true. The curriculum is split into three trimesters, one of which was a cruise. And the other two were facing role where we did academics part of the day. And then practical on-hands experience.

[02:54]

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JS: What was your life like on campus as a freshman? What were your kind of expectations? What, what expectations were met or what surprises did you mean?

JD: Well, I assumed it would be much like bootcamp and that certainly we were, uh, treated with, uh, we were not caught with, we were just like a midship any military school. We did dredge, we work, uh, we did some of the routine memorization of things simply to instill discipline. We each had a sea daddy, that another name they choose to use, that was a responsible for us individually and made sure we toed the line. So, I expected it. We got it. It was, I looked back at it. I think it was an interesting experience that partially shaped my character.

[03:57]

JS: Sea daddy would be an upper classman.

JD: Yes. The second classmen was assigned to do one second platform, assigned agent, a midshipman to nurture him along in his freshman year. And as the year progressed to the, uh, the degree of tolerance by upperclassmen relaxed. You want me to get you in shape and understand the rules and do what you're told. Do it in a smart fashion.

At revelry at 6:00 a.m., you were expected to be in formation by 6:15 a.m. and clean your teeth, take a shower, make your bed and make sure it was done right. Get your uniform for breakfast. We do play in our first year where we're treated like a typical midshipman, a typical cadet. If you had a sense of humor, it was a lot easier. And if you didn't learn or you left,

[05:01]

YM: Um, were you involved in any sports or extracurriculars?

JD: I'm sorry?

YM: Were you involved in any sports or extracurriculars?

JD: Uh, I was, uh, through the whole time I was there I was involved rowing because of my size, which is diminutive that I was perfect.

JS: Perfect, so, did the crew team have a deck, deck side team and an engine team?

JD: They did in our last year. I'm happy. I'm happy to report the engineering groups in any other company. Had a lot of early hardworking gentleman. I remember that to this day, including being thrown great regularity of race into the bay.

[06:00]

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JS: Okay. Your training cruise is as we kind of progressed through, I guess, your career here at the Academy. Uh, when, when did you cruise, how many times?

JD: We, every year, right after Christmas when the ship had moved on to one of the repair facilities, shipyards, sandwich barrier, we would be there approximately six weeks and times are tough in terms of money in those days. A year before it got here, they went to the South Pacific. Our first two cruises were so charged on the West coast of California to Panama. And I stopped one year, first Acapulco with another state and we chose to paint the ship, which was kind of comical endeavor.

We uh, we anchored in May in Acapulco, which is a nice Harbor, and the deck division was assigned to paint most of the upper works of the ship, the engineers were assigned to paint the sides of the ship. And that was kind of nice because of the water in Acapulco is warm and many of us unfortunately, would fall from the scaffolds water that was always in trouble. But on our senior year, we were a little more fluent at school and so we went to the Galapagos islands, into Peru and back to Panama, that was a far more enjoyable experience.

JS: How long were your training cruises?

JD: I can't not be precise, but I'm going to say on average we were about two months.

JS: But that's the same. We're still, yeah, we're actually heading back down to South America this cruise.

JD: I strongly recommend it. My wife and I were in Acapulco for a month earlier this year. Nice place

JS: Were there any, um, more than memorable moments from cruise? I know. Did you have your shell backing.

JD: Oh yes, I saw some pictures a couple of days ago. That was interesting. I think that being on a school ship that we were able to participate in all of the, the honors and traditions of it, I have crossed that line

[08:29]

JS: Being on board the Golden Bear right now, the most modern Golden Bear. What is your comparison to, I know you pointed out that that was the, the ship you sailed on and the ship?

JD: Now all I can do is say I look at it and aesthetically and give you an answer. I, uh, I've been on the ship for a half an hour and the other one, uh, one of the things that I, when I look at the silhouette of the ship that I thought, that we probably had a better deal as an

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engineer because we had two engine rooms. That meant that when we were underway you have the opportunity, you twice as much training. You didn't have to stand in line so to speak. We split quite evenly, one of the engineers led program in the forward engineer room, the other in the aft engine room. So, if you're taking a period of time and you got one training device must do a training device, I think we got a better deal. It has nothing to do with the aesthetics. Even just from my observation, we did not have a jail, nobody had a state room.

We lived in vast bays. And then uh, so, uh, the uh, the creature comforts you have here today are far greater than we did. And I'm not saying that out of anger or anything like that. Those were the times. So obviously then the Marine industry offices are deeply ingrained with technology. So, what you got on that ship today is suitable for this time. I think what we had before we were, as you mentioned earlier, that told me that our ship was steam and that was a prevalent propulsive power in those days. In fact, you're licensed would say either limitation, steamed and diesel I think would be one or the other or both. And it would indicate horsepower, much like the term Tommy just used the deck often say that when we graduated, we all had a steam and diesel. So, we got to go to education. Uh, our education today looking at the curriculum is that you have any option. So was a far more of a hands-on education.

Which again, was suitable for the times compared to what you're facing today. We were in a much simpler world, so I would say looking at the peripheral view, both ships, were right for the tie period?

JS: So, you're training cruises, you did one every year,

JD: Every year.

JS: Oh, for your three years here.

JD: And then shipyard every year, which again is a, remember we had no disciplines except you were here to be a deck officer, or you're here to be an engineer. You made that you made that decision on day one. It was an hour of lockable decision. It's the same way now. Uh, so, uh, it was, uh, it was again, a simpler way of life and it was appropriate for the time. That was 50 years ago once this happened.

[11:51]

JS: So, moving off of senior cruising your senior year, how would you have, compared to your senior year, actually, we have a photocopy of your senior year, had some fun photo right here. How would you have, compared to your freshman year and the Academy to the pinnacle, which would have been your senior year, your third and final year here, what were some of the things you did really, you made that

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JD: Uh, let's break that into two things. Uh, personal and social, it was far better. You know, first off, you're on the top of the heat instead of the bottom right. I was lucky enough to be a deputy company commander, so I had privileges and that particular year was the first time in the Academy's history where they granted Liberty during the week to a small segment. If you were a company officer, you had Liberty, you could take, liberty from the conclusion of workday to 2200. You could leave, you could leave the campus. And that was something that had not been done before. And that was a real privilege. But it was a novelty to most folks. I didn't leave campus very often, but it was just the idea that I know is I had something you didn't have some space and that they had had before.

Um, the living conditions were still the same. One of the trimesters my senior year, my company was aboard the ship. We lived in vast bays and bumps box company commander had a, uh, the rest of us and when we were surely reading the barracks at the various rebuilt during WWII and, uh, there were, uh, two bucks, three bucks in a room, but usually two cadets. Uh, the living conditions as a, we're not much different. It was the personal, of course she proceeded on academic stuff that you were taking were far more interesting and far more diverse.

For instance, I remember a couple of, we did American, we had a semester of American law. We had a semester at shipboard medicine. In addition to that, I don't know if you knew that. No, we still, we still go down to the base thing. We're giving the shots and all that and now that was a lot of fun. You were at the pinnacle of the, of the defendant, you're just going to your studies, study thermal dynamics. So, there's a lot more fun. And besides your, where you were at the end of the road, you could see it coming.

YM: See the white light

JD: It was at the end of the tunnel. Starting to think of, wow, I just start thinking about tomorrow. I like that better. I like being a second class better. I bumped into him and sometime yesterday I bumped into somebody with that classmate, and he looked at me and said [inaudible] pardon me, but you're really a tough guy.

Six months later I realized there was a reason for, and looking back in hindsight, I had a great time. I'm not sure I felt that way at first, but certainly by my first-class year I was joining the classes I was going, we didn't have any of the opposite sex. So that's unfortunate. And it was lights out at 10:00 p.m. at night. You could get an opportunity to study to do late study, but, our life we regimented.

[15:45]

JS: On, on our photocopy of your yearbook page you're quoted as having, your nickname is Daffy.

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JD: Well that's a derivative of Dafoe, and it's probably because my, uh, my generalist would be a prankster, I guess you could say, I continue that to this day, I don't take myself of the world too seriously.

JS: And then each, we noticed in your yearbook as well each graduating first class and then had a little drawing done theirs and if you could kind of explain about

JD: It was 1944, and it was a very fast 1944, long before I got there and to this day, I am an enthusiast of fast cars, that was very fast. And one of my classmates with Alan Mellon, who was also a second-class year had a [inaudible] they go fast. That was a hobby of mine. [inaudible].

[16:59]

YM: And then taking a step back for a moment, I just had a question. What were some of your duties as the Deputy sub-commander?

Speaker 1 ([17:10](#)):

JD: You understand the term XO?

YM: Yes.

JS: Yes.

JD: Okay. That's what your job was basically. Yeah. Yeah. You made sure that the mustards were done, and people turned in on time. Somebody had a problem and depending on the severity, I would have went up to the company commander. Good order and discipline was your responsibility, if a report had to be written, you write the report give it to the company commander, he would tear it up, rewrite it or put a stamp on it.

YM: Sounds about right

[17:43]

JS: Kevin we had made mentioned of, and your senior year was kind of the pinnacle, you were seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Um, what made you, at the conclusion of your senior year, obviously you went through your Naval officer. What, when and where, after you left the Academy, did you make that decision to

JD: Let's back up, and it's kind of an, uh, we took our thirds examinations, of course, with the coast guard, just go. And then it was, I think it was about two weeks for graduation and it was free time, you know, we went and we wanted to do, my parents asked what did I want for graduation? [inaudible] and that time it was one month, \$450. So, they gave me

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the money and during the Slack trip, between the completion of our exams and graduation, I went to the coast guard and asked for my car, I have my license. And I said, no, no, you're going to get your license. Of course, with graduation. And I explained you just want the license to go down to join the union. So, they gave that to me. I marched down, maybe it was the Embarcadero, and joined the MEBA, paid him \$50 and basically, we got a number, if you will, or took the license back.

And it was Friday afternoon, we had graduation here and uh, that afternoon, uh, my family and my girlfriend and all that, instead of joining a festivity, so, we went back home and I stopped on the way in San Francisco, my through my union card and the two juicy, I put my number on there that I want to say, this is a Friday. I got a call Saturday morning, and I sailed the following Monday.

Most of my classmates were still partying on, I said I was sailing on the Mattson ship and we did what was called a [inaudible], we went from San Francisco to Los Angeles to Hawaii to San Francisco, but it was, it was a great experience. And a big thing was I wouldn't make a lot of money, a lot of money. Six months before that, I worked in the ship's laundry room on the shift here, I'd make 25 cents an hours and you're nowhere to go and pour it. I'd go up with all everybody else, all the officers and all that and people that done did job. Now I get my \$10 pocket change, \$10 is \$10 and I talked to somebody in the day and I said, now the going rate is \$8 an hour, shh, that probably the same as a quarter. But anyway, all of a sudden, I, I'm making \$2,000 a month the job is easy, it's fun. It's a real practical experience. I was living in Iowa state. My own food was superb, we ate the same food as the passengers, we just didn't eat with the passengers and life was good and I really liked that.

Unfortunately, I had a commitment because I've been in the Naval reserve and the Navy wanted me, so they sent letters to my home and my mom had sent it back and that didn't last very long. Yeah. One of my classmates was being inducted into the Navy over there and then they happened to sit as they spill it anyway, ah he works for Mattson navigation-

JS: They tracked you down

JD: --and I was in the engine room getting ready, we were going to sell the next morning, for Hawaii and then I had a phone which was patched down to the engine room. They said, "are you Dafoe", I said "yes" [inaudible]. The induction center was in San Francisco at the time, more and that's why I can't do that because I have a job. I said, you don't understand young man. So, I went in the Navy and fully intending to return, had a two-year commitment. They put me on an amphibious ship in the injury department, which was a smart move, and I enjoyed that except for the money. And one of the officers in the injury department was a warrant officer who had been suffering and he uh, he said, you know, you really understand machine and stuff, at sometimes it cheats us not the right way. And you know, that's a bad thing to do in the Navy. [inaudible] and he kept that up

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and [inaudible] so I went to submarine school and was assigned to a submarine and about six months after that I said [inaudible] so I did. I had a wonderful career.

And then when I retired from the Navy I worked for [inaudible] after 35 year in submarine associated efforts [inaudible].

[22:51]

JS: I know with the submarine fleet something where you guys can't necessarily discuss exactly discuss—

JD: Yeah, I'll have to shoot you

JS: -- but um, I believe you were on diesel submarines.

JD: That's correct.

JS: Um, was there any that you can talk about? Anything very cool missions? Are the appointments that you went on with those that were, you know—

JS: Well, I made many, I was principally in the Pacific or your deploy would be gone for six months. The Western Pacific. Generally during that time a submariner would do something called special operations, and we'll just leave it at. That would be gone for 50 to 60 days, um, watching and I show you, you know, you had the fun of being in different ports and all that and see had the world when something was important.

I was lucky enough to have a string of superb commanding officers and I learned something from every one of them. Some good, some bad and I just tried to take what I could and put it together and because at the Navy record, I had command of three submarines. So, one of them was home for it was in the Phillippines, I had my family in the Philippines, and they lived well, very well, got to travel a lot which was a great experience for them.

JS: What submarines were they sir?

JD: Uh, they were the Rockadoor, the Achivo and the Greyback. Interestingly enough the Greyback was built right over there at Mare Island. I did not know it at the time, but in 1957 when we were second classmen the first nuclear power submarine [inaudible] was there are Mare Island, in the silo, was on a launch way over at Mare Island and our classmen got to watch the launching of the ship. There were two ships being built in that, that time, and one of them was the Greyback. [inaudible] that was kind of nice.

I was a great time. My last tour was in Washington, D.C. in the Pentagon, and most people dread going to the Pentagon and I left thinking it was a perk job, it was a job of

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influence. I was on the Capital Hill a lot, I basically had pockets full of money. And so, there all of a sudden, I'm finding myself in an entirely different environment, dealing with the Senate, dealing with the financing ways, and I liked my life as I had the opportunity to [inaudible]

When I left the Navy, I went to work for a defense contractor working separate security business. I retired to Florida vacation ever since, vacation every day. Every day's a holiday, every meal, a bank.

[26:14]

JS: But how would you say, Gavin, I know you had mentioned that one of your warrant officers had noticed that you knew your way around the machine by long. You have been understanding. Besides that, what else do you contribute to the Academy has prepared you well for your life, your career, or did it

JD: Yes, it absolutely did. It goes back to the discipline that was instilled into us. Do your job, do it right. Can we right the first time you make mistakes, say I screwed up. Somebody asks you a question you don't know, don't blow it just I don't know, but I'll find out and find out the answer to that. Be responsible for your actions, all those things. So many of those are questions, as a child, you come into there, but they're their grip on them home. When you go to an institution that has disciplined military unpopular thing, probably just say today in this environment, it helps build character and we were more hands on than you are. You could really say went to a trade school and also was lucky enough to get an academic degree, open stores. [inaudible] and I'm very happy that I went here. I didn't probably appreciate that at first, it's the kind of thing when you're busy and you're running through life and you're knocking down walls and you're done, but as you get older and you sit back and think what made that engine run along with [inaudible] and yesterday when I was listening to Bill Mae his presentation about worth it, where the school is.

PA: Ryan handler muster boring.

JD: It's still a good place to be and I would encourage young people to look at as a potential opportunity, it besides the small, small things sometimes, if you've got good leaders are mad at you. The student [inaudible] came right here and obviously I'm happy.

[28:47]

JS: You're making your life out of Florida. It's kind of including your family too. You obviously settled sir, um, do you have kids?

JD: I do, I have a daughter and I have a son. My son was a carrier pilot for the Marines for a number of years and now he's a pilot for Southwest Airways. I have four granddaughters,

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and I faun on them as my wife does. And I have a daughter that is in Connecticut that is, uh, trainer enforcement. We, uh, we have, my wife and I, I've been married five years. We both lost previous spouses unexpectedly, travel extensively. [inaudible]

We have a home in North Carolina that we went to [inaudible]. pretty much my life. Well structured, professional, productive education, all similar path, doing your job, doing good. We're writing that way.

[30:07]

JS: Is there any, I mean that was a great, that was a great chaplain advice, but is there anything for cadets at the Academy now that you would say would be in solid sound advice that would help anybody?

JD: Exactly the same thing I just said. I talked to a couple of young men last time. Remember a couple of things. There's no such thing as there may be your job if you're working for somebody to something, unless it's illegal, immoral, or fattening, it is your responsibility to carry out with done to you. You're not going to change the person. It's about what you can change is your attitude and [inaudible] how can I work around that.

So, listen to what you're being asked to do. Charter, do the best you can, and don't make excuses when you make a mistake. Part of the reason I was successful saying two things wrong will happen again. Everybody's entitled to make a mistake. Don't ever make the same mistake twice. Two sec. Outside audit, be respectful, integrity. [inaudible] Kevin, we'd like to thank you for taking your time to join as a pleasure and good luck to you, young lady. It's a big life out there in the world and it's a whole lot of fun, but that depends on the lens in your eyes.

YM: Thank you

JS: Hopefully you enjoyed the blue angels today.

JD: Oh, sure will.

[End of Interview]