

California Maritime Academy Library

# Interview with Denny McLeod

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Denny McLeod  
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 Denny McLeod 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.

Denny McLeod is a graduate of the class of 1946, Engine.

## Abbreviation

**DL:** Danny McLeod  
**RR:** Rick Robinson  
**MH:** Margot Hanson

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## Interview Outline

- 00:55 *Distinguished Alumni Award*
- 01:47 Would you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?
- 05:10 What was Cal Maritime like when you arrived on campus?
- 09:19 How do you think your experience at the California Maritime Academy influenced your life?
- 11:10 Do you have any stories you'd like to share from your time as a cadet here?
- 11:37 *Rowing competition: third class vs. first class*
- 13:33 *Classmate Bill Ezell's involvement in Run Silent, Run Deep technology for nuclear submarines*
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- 15:57 Have you kept in touch with your classmates over the years?
- 17:36 What would you say you're proudest of in your life?
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- 19:39 Would you tell us about some special projects from your career?
- 20:08 *Building a refinery in Libya*
- 20:58 *Salvaging Japan Airlines plane from San Francisco Bay in 1968*
- 22:13 *Repairing the Bay Bridge after Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989*
- 24:36 What do you envision for the future of Cal Maritime?
- 26:38 How long were you working on the refinery in Libya?

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## Interview

**RR:** This is Rick Robinson, Dean of the Library. And I'm here with..

**MH:** I'm Margot Hanson, librarian at California Maritime Academy.

**RR:** And we are doing an oral history on October 12th, 2013. And we are in the group study room of Cal Maritime library.

**DL:** And I am Denny McLeod, a class of '46 here at the California Maritime Academy and was very, I'm a very happy alumnus to be a part of this system. And I think you're doing very well. And I'm interested in why you're doing the oral history and I don't-- but I'll respond to you in any way I can.

**RR:** Okay.

[00:55]

**DL:** Today, I'm wearing a medal. And I'm very proud of the medal. It was awarded to me by the California Maritime Academy as part of their Distinguished Alumni Award System started about, about eight or 10 years ago. And they awarded me the medal in 2006 as a Distinguished Alumnus of that year. And so, I have had no opportunity to wear it except for today. I'm pleased at have it on. Well, I don't know exactly how to start, but--

**MH:** Well, we can start you off with some questions if you want.

**DL:** Okay.

[01:47]

**MH:** And this is, this is listed on your, on your sheet that you gave us here as well, but can you just verbally give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?

**DL:** Yeah. So, I'll even start a little bit before that, you know it was war time. And I was living in San Diego with my family, and it was in those war year which was encompassing almost everything we were anybody was doing in the United States. My father was active in the US Marine Corps as an officer, and he was very close to the war time scene in the Pacific. And so, all of my classmates were wondering where am I going to go when I graduated from high school because I'm going to serve in my country some way. And so that was the subject matter that was all over our minds. And that's what attracted me to the California Maritime Academy because it was a competitive exam entrance system. And they were trying to attract top people from the high schools.

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And I was lucky enough to be selected on that selected selective examination basis but imagine a young man like myself, 18 years of age leaving home for the first time in their life going into a war time training situation, it was a growing up situation that accelerated your growth very, very, very rapidly. And I, I found the California Maritime Academy to be a very, very good spot for me as an engineer, because I decided on the Marine Engineering Course study that was offered here alongside of the Deck Officer Training.

And here was a ship that was part of the program and here were experienced Marine Engineer. On the staff, many of them, U.S. Navy officers because the school was training for the U.S. Naval Reserve as well as for the Merchant Marine Service. As you could imagine at that time in their early 40's, the United States was fighting two major fronts of the World War II, in the Pacific against Japan and in Europe against Hitler and his allies. And we were the supply depot for that war effort and all that stuff had to go on ships to the battlefield and sort of the personnel have to be transported both ways. And so, there was an enormous strain on the United States to furnish the goods and supply the officers to run the ships. And that's where I was. And it was a very interesting time.

[05:10]

**RR:** So, what was Cal Maritime like when you arrived on the campus in those days?

**DL:** Well, it was, you know, it was, it had been in existence for quite some time, and it was a training ship that was birthed in Tiburon, California. And the cadets were bunked on the ship and they studied on the ship and lived on the ship. Strictly maritime operation at that time and then the Navy was not involved. And then they, that was a coaling station and then they had to move because the coaling station was being taken over for other war time stuff. And the ship went to the different locations along the San Francisco waterfront and continued their schooling on the school ship. Until they were awarded enough money to have a permanent base ashore. And that's when the state of California bought property here in Morrow Cove. And we were the second class to come here after that moved, it was pretty primitive. The barracks were pretty primitive, but we had a big school ship and that the Navy had given us to work with. So, it was the beginning of California Maritime Academy here in Vallejo. And it has prospered ever since. I don't know what your academic head count is or your, your student head count is, but I know it's getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Maybe you know.

**RR:** We're at 1,050 this semester. So, it's the largest class for Cal Maritime.

**DL:** Okay. Well, I think there was 46 in my Engineering class.

**RR:** So, we have grown by a thousand.

**DL:** You're growing up okay.

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**RR:** But the campus hasn't gotten any larger, geographically. It's still..

**DL:** No. You did a good job though. And you've had, you've had the choice of amazing commandants where you called them different things, your president or or superintendent or commandant.

**RR:** Superintendents.

**DL:** And one of the outstanding officers you had was Bill Eisenhardt, who is the predecessor to Vice Admiral...

**RR:** Tom Cropper

**DL:** Tom Cropper. And I've just met him and talk with him and his wife and I think you've got another winner but Eisenhardt served for 10 or more years. And was, he was the smart plug. They've got the California Maritime Academy to be a part of the state college system. He was a savior. He was the savior of the academy in my opinion. And he was very good, and he was very influential, politically. I was working politically in Sacramento at that time, and he was really in there pitching for Cal, for the maritime and he finally won. And that was, that's the beginning of the big-time expansion to me in academic programs, that it was tied to our admittance, to the California State College System. I don't know your curriculum now, but I know it's broad. And, and I'm pleased that it is broad. Well, I graduated finally in the class of [19]46 and I was earned a Merchant Marine license from the US Coast Guard and started assistant engineer. That was a classification. And also, I was qualified to earn a commission in the US Naval reserve. So that was pretty good too, at that time. And I used both of those certifications in my life as a Naval Reserve Officer and as a Merchant Marine engineer.

[09:19]

**RR:** Do you think there are other qualities that the California Maritime Academy instilled in you or other aspects that influenced your life in?

**DL:** Well, I consider it to be an amazing trade school, the engineering side. The Marine Deck officer side also is a training school for those that are going to aspire to be a captain of a ship of some kind. But the Marine Engineering side is an amazing trade school for anything engineering that has to do with the maintenance and operation of any mechanical equipment. And later in, after I left the sea, I sailed for quite some time after I graduated. And then I entered the construction business as a construction engineer. And I can't tell you how many times I reached back for the experiences that I learned as a practical Marine operating engineer. As you can imagine, when you're at sea on a ship you have to be able to fix and run everything on that ship because there's nowhere else to go. And so, you came out as a what I call a mechanical training course as well as one qualifying you to be the engineer of a record on a big ship, any ship, any size electrical or

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steam or whatever it was it was the final license requirement of the US Coast Guard.  
Pretty good.

**RR:** Okay.

**DL:** Yeah.

[11:10]

**MH:** Do you have any stories you'd like to share with us from your time as a cadet here?

**DL:** Well, they're funny stories.

**RR:** We'd like funny stories.

[11:37]

**DL:** The ones you remember, funny stories. Well, I thought that the class I was associated with was a pretty good class and we had a lot of competitive athletes who were here at that time. And we formed a ship rowing crew that was part of the academy, sport activities. And the first class always won because they'd been rowing for three years or two years. I should say that the four-year course that we now have at the California Maritime Academy we're squeezed down to 26 months in the war time 'cause they needed officers at sea everywhere.

Okay. So, the first class where there were rowing champions always our class came in, this is a third class. We thought, "Let's beat them." So, we, you can imagine the training we went through I was a port stroke and one of my fellow classmates, Bill Schill was the starboard stroke and a cadet named Vandegrift was the coxswain. And we beat the first class. It had never been done before. We still talk about it when we all get together. So that was one of our achievements aside from being students and trainees. Well, let's see, I graduated and, in my class,, I was appointed the Cadet Chief Engineer. Now that was a big job that had a lot of responsibility. And there was an indication of my efforts to be the best and not try to be the best always.

[13:33]

We had some real fun guys in the class too. One of them was named Bill Ezell we call him "doc". He later, and he exercised upon graduation his entrance into the US Naval Reserve, and he sailed with the US Navy for quite a while. And he was a very, very brilliant man. And he was recruited and recruited by Admiral Rickover to be a part of the nuclear submarine group. And he developed the Run Silent, Run Deep technology for US submarines. It's really something, you know. 'Cause submarines were up an amazing war tool, but they made a lot of noise when they went through the water and the enemy could

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detect that. And so being quiet as they called it being silent was very important. And in the nuclear subs, they ran so fast. They made a terrible lot of noise with their machinery. And my classmate, Bill Ezell, managed the quieting process for Admiral Rickover. I thought that was pretty special. I don't know what else I could tell you.

[14:51]

**MH:** Oh no. How about we have a question? Are there any words of wisdom that you'd like to pass on to current or future cadets of the California Maritime Academy?

**DL:** Well, come here, work hard. Do your studies and be a good ship mate. One of rewards of having a class, having an education environment where you live together you work together, eat together and you study together develops amazingly strong relationships, and that's what you have here. And it was very much so when I was here because we were on an, a speed out program, everything was going fast, fast, fast that attended to wash out some classes with classmates. And I suppose that happens here too. It washed them out because this is a serious school program. And it requires attention to your responsibilities.

[15:57]

**MH:** So, related to that, are you still, have you kept in touch with classmates that you attended school?

**DL:** Oh, we did. Well, we're getting fewer and fewer. I think we've got less than a dozen that are still able to move and talk. We get together almost every year at a class reunion and I think there was 10 or 12. We were there at the last class reunion and we hold them in different cities throughout the state because most of those classmates ended up living in California somewhere so we could get together fairly easily. And I always enjoy those those reunions where we get together and swap stories. Two of the classmates of mine, advanced to senior positions in the maritime industry, Bill Schill, who was the cadet captain when I was a cadet chief engineer ended up as the port captain for Mattson for, for Chevron Marine the biggest ship operator in the United States and very big job. And my other classmate, Paul Akolach, who was the engineering side ended up as the port engineer for that same company for Chevron Marine. And they were the, they were the boss of that enormous marine tanker fleet that says a lot about the academy, instead a lot about my classmates too.

[17:36]

**RR:** Absolutely. Well, what would you say you are most, you're proudest of in your life?

**DL:** Proudest time in my life? Well, the accomplishments here as a young, young man were significant, but I went on to organize and run a big construction company and

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engineering construction around the world. And I'm very proud of that as a businessman running a big organization and as a, a contractor who had an excellent reputation in the field, but I'll add that at that time in that time, the education I had here the practical education I had here as a Marine engineer was very important to me as a mechanical structural engineer. So, I'm very proud of what I did as an engineer. I'm very proud of what I did as a Navy reservist I served for a while on submarines and I'm very proud of the business life I had as an international contractor in the engineering business. And I put a lot of thank you into the box for what I learned here when I went forward into the engineering construction business. That's in a way that's emphasizing what I said earlier about this is an amazing trade school.

[19:14]

**RR:** Did you receive training after Cal Maritime as well?

**DL:** I spent four years at University of California. Yeah.

**RR:** In Berkeley?

**DL:** Yeah, in Berkeley. And of course, that's, that's a higher level of academic standards with the practical side was here.

**RR:** Right.

[19:39]

**MH:** And I do have some special projects listed on, on what you gave me. Are there any that you want to elaborate on or talk about?

**DL:** Well, I carried my engineering construction business overseas. I did work course in United States, that was my home base, but I tackled some amazing projects overseas and I listed them in there for you.

[20:08]

And the craziest one of all, was building a refinery in Libya, okay? With Muammar Gaddafi was running the country. It's hard to even talk about it. It's so difficult. And, and in that instance, Ruth McLeod, my wife went to Libya with me on one of my inspection trips. You have to ask her what Libya was like, unusual. And then here domestically, I did some amazing rescue jobs just because of my talents as a structural engineer.

[20:58]

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You may, you probably don't remember it, but Japan Airlines had a big passenger airplane DC-8 stretch jet land in San Francisco Bay, short on the runway.

**MH:** What, what year that was? Can you remember?

**DL:** That was-- can you help me with that year?

**RL:** 1970's. Early 70's.

**DL:** Early 70's. And here's a giant passenger plane in the water, the Bay area in front of the landing strip at San Francisco International Airport is about half water and half soft mud. And that plane went "whooshhh" into that soft mud and landed, and nobody was hurt. And the insurance industry said, "You think we can think that could be salvaged?" And they gave me the job to salvage, and we did. We lifted that plane out of the Bay, very, very carefully. Put it on a barge and took it to United Airlines maintenance base right there. And six months later that plane flew again. That's never been done before. Never been done.

[22:13]

Another locally job America, was after the Loma Prieta earthquake. You probably remember what it was. And the Bay bridge failed in one section. And the upper, upper deck of the Bay bridge came unhinged from its eastern anchorage. And it fell down like a big hinge door on the lower deck and wrecked the upper deck and did a pretty good job on the lower deck too. And Caltrans gave me the job of repairing the bridge. And I can remember that. I can remember that conference where the Caltrans officials and several other contractors that had the same skills that I did and Caltrans officials were asking, "Well, what what do you, what do you think about this?" "What do you think about that?" And then they said, "Mr. McLeod, what do you think?" I said, "Your bridge is in a lot of trouble. And I thought it was going to come down." And they said, "Can you fix it?" I said, "Yes. I think I can." And they awarded me a contract. You know what it said? Fix the bridge. And we did it in 30 days. And the mayor of San Francisco at the time was so appreciative of the quick repair that we did, because it was so important for the City of San Francisco next to the Thanksgiving and Christmas time. And he awarded me a key to the city. So, I got a badge, I got this badge and I have a key to the city that came out of my work, working time. There are other signature jobs that are of significance. I ended up mainly a great engineering difficulty that we were able to do were we're very proud of. I just mentioned a few.

**MH:** Thank you.

[24:36]

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**RR:** Well, let's see. Okay. So, you've experienced Cal Maritime in the past. And so now you've come back to the campus. What do you envision the future of Cal maritime to be?

**DL:** I, I hope they stick with their specialty. I hope they don't become a general education system because they can't compete with the University of California when it comes right down to it, on that score. But they hold a very, very special position in the industry in the maritime industry. And they shouldn't never vary completely from that subject. I know the curriculum has broadened quite a bit because marine sciences and all that sort of thing that sound good to me, but I hope that the California Maritime Academy stays the course and becomes upholds their their esteemed position as the best in the business. The leadership here has been very good. And the fact that we're now a part of the state college system, very, very, very good move. I think you've got a great, great future here.

**MH:** Great.

**RR:** Great. Is there anything you would like to add in closing?

**DL:** Well, I don't know. I'll just take a note. You know, I took some notes just to make sure.

**RR:** Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay.

**DL:** Well, I appraised Bill Eisenhardt, who was the commandant that preceded the Admiral..

**RR:** Yes.

**DL:** And he's the guy that got us into the state college system. And I, I think that was a huge, huge move. Well, have I missed anything really?

**RL:** Well, you've done very well.

**RR:** Yeah. I think you've done, you've done great. There's just some..

**MH:** Yeah.

[26:38]

**RR:** You have some amazing life experiences with fixing the Bay Bridge. How long were you in Libya?

**DL:** Well, the job took about a year and a half and I went and out, as I had to, the place was unsafe. Muammar Gaddafi was a bandit. You remember that, that he was part of that Pan-American plane that was blown up. That bomb originated in Libya. And President Reagan was incensed. When they finally found out who, who would, who and he tried to get him, you know he said a bomber fleet in from England and tried to they thought they

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knew where he was and they tried to get him but they missed him about four or five hours. So here I come as an American contractor into Libya and relationships weren't all that great. Every cross street had a 16-year-old kid with a semi-automatic rifle in a uniform. It was a little scary, but I was there because I had the skills and maybe one of the skills of US contractors. And I was just part of that team, but it was uncomfortable, but we got through and we got paid and we made a lot of money. So, it was okay for us too.

**RR:** Were there any concerns on the State Department about..?

**DL:** State Department wouldn't issue anything. No help, no help. We were, we were, we were not friendly with Libya because of the incidence with the Pan-American flight but that was a situation where the talent, the know-how and the equipment to do this major grassroots refinery and Marcell Briga in Italy in Libya was all less talent was to the United States and he wanted to be refinery. So here we came and in a way he protected us.

**MH:** Well, you've cover-- in everything you've said you've covered the questions that we have. So, unless there's anything else you want to add I think that we can call it done.

**DL:** Okay. Fine.

**RR:** Thank you very much.

**MH:** Yeah. Thank you very much.

**DL:** And congratulations to you and the academy.

**RR:** Thank you.

**MH:** Thank you.

[End of Interview]