

California Maritime Academy Library

Interview with Laura Kovary

Oral History Project

Interviewee: Laura Kovary
Interviewer: Margot Hanson
Date: February 27, 2015

Place: Cal Maritime Library
Transcriber: Rev.com

Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Laura Kovary conducted by Margot Hanson on February 27, 2015. 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.

Laura Kovary is a graduate of the class of 1976, Deck.

Abbreviation

LK: Laura Kovary
MH: Margot Hanson

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Interview Outline

- 00:36 Can you please give us a brief overview of your life since graduating from Cal Maritime?
- 02:55 What aspects of your time at CMA contributed to your success in a male-dominated industry?
- 06:28 Do you have any favorite stories you would like to share from your work life?
- 11:46 What challenges did you overcome as a female cadet at CMA? Any stories you would like to share from your time as a cadet?
- 26:39 What are you proudest of in your life?
- 27:10 Are there any words of wisdom you would like to pass along to current and future CMA cadets?

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Interview

MH: This is Margot Hanson recording an Oral History interview at the California Maritime Academy. Today is Friday, February 27th, 2015, and I am here with?

LK: Laura Kovary, graduate of first four-year class, 1978. And I attended school here from 1974 to 1978.

[00:36]

MH: Great, thank you. Can you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?

LK: Since I graduated, I started sailing as third mate. About a month and a half out of school, I went up to Alaska on a research vessel and continued to sail on and off for 17 years. I got my unlimited masters license in 1991. I also worked for a couple of oil companies doing tanker operations. I worked for Gulf Oil in 1981 and I worked for TK Shipping In 1985 after my union lost the tanker contracts. I went back to get a master's degree from Maine Maritime in 1989, graduated from there in '88. I graduated in '89 and so I'm one of a few people around who graduated from two maritime academies.

MH: What degree was that?

LK: My undergraduate degree is in nautical industrial technology. It was one of those strange degrees they had for a couple of years here. Then my master's degree is in maritime management from Maine. Since I graduated from Maine Maritime I came back, and I taught here at California Maritime Academy for a year and a half in 1989 and '90. So, I have experiences as a student and as faculty member. Then I went back to sea, got my master's license and sailed until my daughter was born. She was born in 1995, and I told Matson, it was the company I was sailing for the time as chief mate, that I was ready to go back to sea as long as I could bring my daughter with me and someone to watch her while I was working. And they laughed so then I stayed home with her for a few years. Then I found shore side jobs after that.

[02:55]

MH: Okay going on to the next question, what aspects of your experience at Cal Maritime contributed to your success in a male-dominated industry?

LK: Yeah, that was an interesting question to answer. My initial response was that nothing in the industry was ever as bad as it was at CMA. But then I was on a ship where I had my life threatened and that was pretty difficult. What aspects contributed--

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MH: If you want to take a different direction with the question--

LK: Yeah.

MH: Feel free to do that.

LK: Yeah, I think that it's kind of good and bad. I think on the good side, it made me a lot tougher, but on the bad side it made me a lot tougher. I have been told at times that I had a chip on my shoulder because I think that my time here made me react in a way, react to things as if they were negative, always negative. So that's probably one of the downsides to being in a school that was male dominated. There was a lot of negativity toward the women.

MH: So you were in the--

LK: Second class.

MH: Third class or the second class that started?

LK: Yeah, Lynn's class was the last of the three-year class. I was the first of the four-year class. So even though I was in the second class of women, they shifted from the three-year program to the four-year program. So, there were no women in in the class of '77. The class of '77, I believe, was seven people but one of them was killed on cruise. So, I believe there were only six graduates in the class of '77. And then my class would have been the second class that had women.

MH: So, a related question that's a little different was how do you think your time at California Maritime Academy influenced your life. Did you want to talk any more about that, or do you feel like you

LK: I think

MH: Covered that?

LK: Overall my experiences were not good here, and so, you know, like I said. Sailing in the industry, it was even though there were some negative aspects of sailing overall, it was better. So you know I hear, and then going back to graduate school also helped me kind of overcome some of that because being here for four years and then being in an industry where people, I was told a lot that oh, women shouldn't be at sea, and women don't know this. And then going back to graduate school I was like the second smartest person in the class, and I thought okay, so maybe I'm not so stupid. Yeah it was good for my ego, I guess, and to reassure me that what I was doing was worthwhile.

[06:28]

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MH: Do you have any favorite stories from your work life that you'd like to share? You mentioned a very dramatic one. I don't know if you would wanna get into that or not.

LK: Yeah, I've had a few dramatic ones, but I think that one of the positive ones that I had was on an APL ship and I was sailing as second mate, I believe, and when I was getting off the ship one of my ABs came up to me and he shook my hand, and he said, "Mate, I swore I'd never sail with a woman "but I hope I sail with you when you're captain." And so that that was a really positive thing and my work with Matson. I was a regular chief mate for Matson for five years.

And that, to me, it was a real positive experience, and like I said, when my daughter was born, I wanted to go back. I was ready to go back to work. I had the best job in the US Merchant Marines, and I knew it and I wanted to keep it, but I wasn't prepared to leave my daughter. So, I had to make that choice. Yeah so that was probably my favorite story from my work life. And then I had a good time on the research vessel, my first job. I had my 21st birthday in offshore, the Pribilof Islands, and of course it was a dry ship so there was no alcohol for my 21st birthday. But I had a great AB. His name was Rufus, and he was the oldest guy on the ship, and everybody thought he was so old, and I think he was all of 55 or 56 years old.

He would call me little one, and he knew that I loved to see the the puffins so every time he'd see a puffin he'd go, "There's one of your birds, little one." And I saw a walrus up there. I mean there were so many things I saw. We were above the Arctic Circle, and it was just amazing. And I learned a lot from the captain who had been a CMA grad I believe. And also, he had taught here for a while too, Terry Ruff. And he was great. He had been a Panama Canal pilot, and so he would show all the mates. But he was really great with me, and he'd talk about how to get through the ice and when you saw an iceberg. And he showed me how to gauge rate of turn on the ship and all sorts of things. And I really appreciated that, and that was a great experience too.

MH: So, what kind of research were they doing with that ship?

LK: It was USGS, a US Geological Survey so we were doing seismic research, so we had air guns going off and little things tweeting and things knocking on the hull. And it was a lot of noise. We went through the water making a lot of noise. But it was great. We also had a crew of about 20, and then we had a scientific crew of about 20. So, it was it was nice. We had that balance of not all seafarers, but we had scientists as well. So, it was great. I enjoyed that. And great food. I've been a vegetarian since my first training cruise. That's a whole 'nother story. But there were other vegetarians on the research vessel, so the food was great.

MH: So, were there any female scientists that were with that scientist group?

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LK: Yep, there were. And one of the geologists I'm still friends with. So yeah, it's funny. That was 1978, and yeah this is, what year is this, 2015. But yeah, we still talk a couple of times a year. And so that's really nice. So that made it a lot more normal as well. We had our chief cook was a woman. Our radio officer was a woman. I think I was the only mate who was a woman, and none of the engineers were. They were all male, but we had scientific crew as well, so it was great.

MH: Yeah that sound like fun.

LK: Much more normal.

MH: Any other stories from your work life that you want to share?

LK: Work life? No, I think you know, I had some good and some bad. I had to abandon ship once, which was pretty dramatic. I had my life threatened. That was very dramatic. I wrote two letters before we sailed from Korea. And we were going from Korea to the Philippines, and I knew that it was a lot of open ocean and it wouldn't take much to go overboard and never be heard from again so.

MH: Wow.

LK: Yeah.

[11:46]

MH: Okay so this is kind of a two-part question. You can take it either direction you want. You mentioned a little bit about this already, but what challenges did you overcome as a female cadet at Cal Maritime? Or do you have any stories that you want to share from your time as a cadet?

LK: I think one of the one of the hardest things for me to deal with when I first got here, I came from a family where my father was actually the one who showed me the article in the paper about the Academy allowing women. And both my parents were 100% for my going to the Academy. My father was in the Navy in World War II. My mother was in the Coast Guard in World War II. She came out and learned to fly. My father supported her. She flew in a couple of cross-country air races, even after she was married, and one of them when she had a child. And my dad took care of my sister.

So, I came from a very, a relatively enlightened family for the 1950s and '60s. But coming here was like a huge step backwards for me. I remember the first day at school and we lined up, and in the yearbook there's a picture of all of us from that first day. And then we tried to get in the same places again for the end of school, for the last yearbook. And there were huge gaps. So many people were gone. But I remember that first day. I looked around, and there were some nice young men. They had manners, and they were

saying please and thank you. Within a week, they were throwing food across the mess deck and screaming obscenities. And it was just like what happened.

One friend of mine, he didn't stay very long, but we got back in touch through Facebook, I think. And he emailed me how he was kind of surprised that I had made it through because he thought that I was so nice. And he said he just didn't think that I could make it through. And he said after less than a year he quit because he said it was just too much like "Lord of the Flies." And I had to agree. It was very much like that. It was just a crazy atmosphere and even though I survived, I had a male classmate who was bullied out of school. Every time they were, somebody would shout, "Get Brandenburger out," and they wrote GBO on every black board. You know there was black boards then. We didn't have white boards. They would shout it from the Res Hall, and you'd hear this and just go, "How can this be, how can this happen?" He stayed for, I think, over two years, but it just got to be too much. And I remember talking to him and saying, "Mark, why do you do this, why do you act this way?" Because he'd act goofy. And he goes, "Well they expect it." But it was such a strange campus. It was very strange.

MH: Yeah.

LK: And then, oh okay, so another story. How long do we have?

MH: I think we've got about five, 10 more minutes.

LK: Okay, one other story that I think is very telling about the atmosphere that I walked into, I turned 17 three weeks before I came up here. So, I was very young, although I was not the youngest in my class. But one of the instructors came up to me toward the end of my first year, and I was still 17. And I didn't know that he knew my name. I had never had a class with him, but he confronted me. He said, "Laura have you heard the terrible news?" And I looked at him and I said, "What's that Mr. Burke?" And he goes, "There's supposed to be 12 more women here next year." And then he goes "Ha ha ha," and he walked off. And I was standing there, just stunned that an authority figure would come up to me, somebody he didn't know, and make a comment like that. At the end of my four years I remember sitting in the, there was a licensed prep class, and Mr. Burke, Cal Burke, was teaching it.

Actually, after I graduated, we actually became friends. But a couple of things happened. He taught the T-boat classes, and he had told some of my classmates that I was one of the best boat handlers in the class. I heard about that roundabout, and I thought "Oh, wow, interesting!" Of course, he never told me, but I guess it was probably more effective if he told others anyway. So, I was sitting in his class, and he had asked me a question about anchors. He was going around the room, asking people questions. He asked a question, and then he called on me.

And everybody in my class, they called me Little Lulu because I didn't sleep around. Little Lulu, I don't know if you remember, was a cartoon character with a lollipop. So, they made fun of me, and I remember somebody telling me that there was something written about me in one of the bathroom stalls, that somebody wrote something about me and then somebody else wrote, "What's the matter with you guys? "They're damned if they do and damned if they don't." And that's stuck with me all these years.

So, Mr. Burke was asking me this question about anchors, and I remember thinking oh shoot, I don't know the answer, and I'm gonna get harassed over that. But everybody in the class started chanting, "Lulu, Lulu," and I just sat there. And it was obvious I couldn't talk over it. So, Mr. Burke goes "Okay, okay, guys," and they kept going. And he goes, "Okay, enough!" He finally stopped it, and he looked at me and he said, he looked me square in the eye, and he said, "You mean you've been putting up with this for four years?" And I looked at him and I said, "Yeah". And it was kind of a justification for me that he could finally see what I had put up with in order to be where I was. So, it was kind of a lot of mixed emotions there. Even today, you can kind of feel it. I feel it. So that was kind of good and kind of bad.

MH: - Yeah, he could at least-

LK: Yeah.

MH: - have a different perspective eventually.

LK: Another thing I remember was when we were trying to get class rings, and I think it was Lynn's class, but the first class of women had wanted class rings. And so, we kind of got together, and they were signing the guys up for their class rings. And we said, "Can we get a woman's ring?" And the saleswoman, it was a woman, and she said, "Oh no, we don't make women's rings." What if we paid for the mold? We'll all get together, and we'll split the cost of the mold. And she said, "No, we're not gonna make women's rings." So, they never did. And after when they were available, it was like nah, I don't need it anymore. That was another thing. And the school wouldn't step in. We even asked the Commandant, "Would you please step in and talk to them?" so we could have a class ring. No, they wouldn't do it, and my degree and Lynn's degree, I think ours were the only two classes of women that got this degree. I think that they really thought that they could get rid of us and not have any more women. Because they refused to change our degrees, but it shows our name and then it says that "the state of California confers upon him a degree of" and then you type the degree in. So, they kept the the male gender in our degrees. And there's some people who go, "Oh, that can't be." Yeah, it's true.

MH: Lynn brought it and showed me a copy.

LK: Oh, did she?

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MH: So, I can verify.

LK: I think ours were the only two classes that had the male degree but kind of an interesting thing. Yeah, there were some other crazy stuff. Like I said, I could probably go on for hours. Our cruise, we got stuck in the Panama Canal because the turbine wasn't warmed up properly, and so we spent seven days sitting at anchor in Gatun lake with trash piling up on the stern. And it got pretty nasty, maggots and stuff. They took what they called the special cases out to dump the trash once we got into the Caribbean, and I don't know how I managed not being a special case, but I was not a special case. So I didn't have to do that one, thank goodness. Okay here was a good one. I've got two more good stories. One was that my division XO had caught up with me one evening. How long do we have?

MH: I think we've got like five more minutes, and then it'll be two o'clock.

LK: Okay. So, my division XO had caught up with me one night, and he goes, "Oh, let's go for a walk." And so, we went for a walk up on what was Bonner Field then. And he made a pass at me. And I said no and then he said, "Well, you know, if you ever want to, "my room is on the ship and come down to the ship." Well I didn't, and so a few weeks went by and I think he realized that I was not interested. So, during ship stops one afternoon he came and found me, and I was chipping and scraping and painting fish plate on the second Golden Bear. So, he walked up to me and he said, "You see your classmates over the side?" And I said "Oh, yeah. "Yeah, I see 'em." I said, "It looks like fun." He says, "You think it looks like fun?" I said, "Well yeah." They were over the side in a Bosun's chair. So, he goes okay, come with me.

And he took me right down on the main deck, pulled somebody else out of the Bosun's chair, put me over this side, and made me paint over the side for the rest of ship's ops. So, there was definitely repercussions for not participating, I guess. And then I changed divisions. I had started in Division 1D. I changed over to division 2D. I think in my, I don't know if it was my second class or first class here. But on my first-class cruise, my division commander, who is actually a faculty member here now, he handed me a work card, and he said, he handed it to me, and I was looking at it on cruise. I saw it. It said, "Paint 2Ds first-class area light fixture." And I looked at it, I went over to him, and I said, "Dan, I don't have any workers." And he looks and he says, "That's right, you do it yourself." And of course, we were both first-class. And I thought about it, and I thought about complaining. And I thought oh the hell with it.

So, I went back to the paint locker, I got my paint can and went up to 2D's first-class area. I didn't live there because I lived in the women's area. So, all of my classmates were in their racks. They were all around, staring at me, while I painted this light fixture. And one guy puts his hands behind his head while he's sleeping and he said, "Isn't it great being first-class? "You've got all these underclassmen "to do your work for you?" I stopped and I looked at him, and I picked up the can of paint, white paint, and I started to lift it up. And then all these thoughts are going through my head. No, you'll get kicked

out of school. No, you've only got a couple months left. And so, I just said okay, forget it! And I set it down, and I finished painting. And I got up, I left, I cleaned my paintbrush, and I had the rest of the day off. But it was obviously meant to get me to do something or put me in my place, and it was tough. It was a tough four years. I actually almost quit right before cruise. I went to one of my classmates, who was an engineer. His father was the head of hiring for Mobil. And I went and talked to him right before cruise, and I said, "I don't think I can make this cruise." And he said, "Oh Laura, you're so close. "You're so close. "Just finish and then I'll hire you as third mate." And I said, "I don't know." I said, "If I can't make it will you hire me as a navy?" And he said, "Absolutely!" So, I made it, I got through, and I actually did not end up going to work for Mobil. But it was nice to know, for my own preservation, that I did have an option, that I wasn't gonna be throwing away three and a half years of my life if I did quit. But it was tough.

[26:39]

MH: And what are you proudest of in your life?

LK: I am the most proud of my daughter. She is wonderful. She is now a sophomore at Cal State Long Beach, and she is a wonderful human being. I'm just so happy that I took the couple years off to spend with her when she was little, and I don't regret any of that. So, I'm very proud of her.

[27:10]

MH: Great, thank you. Did you wanna quickly say any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future Cal Maritime cadets?

LK: That was an interesting one. The only thing that I could say, and again I know that things are not the same as they were when I was here. Although I do get word of some situations that are still very difficult for the female students and some of the male students too. I think that I've had some dealings with male students as interns and at California Maritime Leadership Symposium. And I think it's very difficult for them to still see some of the harassment, some of the issues that still go on. And though my words of wisdom would be persevere. Because the industry, it's got its good and its bad. But if it's what you wanna do then keep going and make the most of it. So, persevere.

MH: Great, thank you so much.

LK: Thank you.

[End of interview]