

California Maritime Academy Library

# Interview with John Lunkes

Oral History Project

Interviewee: John Lunkes  
Interviewer: Margot Hanson  
Date: October 11, 2014

Place: Cal Maritime Library  
Transcriber: Rev.com

## Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with John Lunkes conducted by Margot Hanson on October 11, 2014. 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.

John Lunkes is a graduate of the class of 1964, Deck.

## Abbreviation

**JL:** John Lunkes  
**MH:** Margot Hanson

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## Interview Outline

- 00:57 Can you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?
- 02:28 How do you think your time at the California Maritime Academy influenced your life?
- 03:17 Could you say more about the opportunities for going to sea during the Vietnam war?
- 06:24 Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future California Maritime Academy cadets?
- 07:55 Do you have any favorite stories from your work life that you'd like to share?
- 10:41 What are you proudest of in your life?
- 11:11 What are some of the most important lessons you've learned in life?
- 11:31 Do you have any stories to share from your time as a cadet?
- 12:28 Can you tell us about your experience with the 1962 train wreck in Colombia?
- 16:11 What do you remember most about your training cruises?
- 22:08 How has the campus changed since your time here?
- 23:40 What do you envision for the future of Cal Maritime?
- 24:45 Is there anything else you'd like to add?

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## Interview

**MH:** Hello, this is the California Maritime Academy oral history project. We're doing an interview on Saturday October 11th, 2014 on homecoming. And it's the 50th anniversary of the class of 1964. I will be doing the interview. My name is Margo Hanson. I'm an outreach and instruction librarian here and I am with

**JL:** John Lunkes.

**MH:** And what year did you graduate?

**JL:** Class of [19]64

**MH:** And what degree did you?

**JL:** Nautical Science and Deck

[00:57]

**MH:** Okay, great. So, I have a few questions and then we can just kind of go from there. Can you give us a brief overview of your life since you graduated from Cal Maritime?

**JL:** Yeah, I sail for almost five years. Third mate, second mate, chief mate, got my master's license. And when the Vietnam Sealift started to wind down, I presumed there wouldn't be much of a future going to sea anymore. You wouldn't have the opportunities that we have because they were fantastic during the Vietnam era and that came ashore, I worked in the Stephen Oregon business for about seven years. And then I took a job with Arabian American oil company as it was called in Saudi Arabia, For five years. I was in materials, logistics, port operations for about half the five years. And I was in the Marine department which was a group that operated about a hundred oil field support vessels, pilot boats, maintenance boats, tugs, crew boats and the like. Came back to the States in 1980. Settled in Puget Sound area, spent the first 10 years in Seattle and have been in the Tacoma area since 1989. Worked for sea man for about 13 years. And during a mess and downsizing, I left and went into real estate for about about 14 years. And I retired in 2006 and have been retired since.

[02:28]

**MH:** Great, thank you. How do you think your time at the California Maritime Academy influenced your life?

**JL:** Very much. I think some of the things you come out of here, I mean, we you didn't appreciate it at the time completely but I think the quality of instruction we got in that technical and professional subjects give us confidence that, I didn't have before I came here. And when you get out in the real world unless it's another graduate from either

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CMA or from another maritime school nobody really cares where you went to school or where you're from. They just care about how you do your job. And we, I felt that I think all of us left here with the ability to do that.

[03:17]

**MH:** Yeah, you mentioned the opportunities for going to sea during the Vietnam war. Could you expand on that a little more?

**JL:** Yeah, it was practically a real, to compound it to make it more dramatic. I was sailing off the East coast when I first got out of school because there was more opportunity there, the union was less restrictive to new members of the master mates and pilots. And there was the shipping strike for East coast unions in the summer of 1985. And at the same time, Vietnam started a ramp up. President Johnson just announced he was going to wipe them up a troop buildup, that turned out to be 5,000 troops, but most of the action was coming off the West coast. And after sitting in New York stuck in this strike with, during that time I ran into several other classmates as well but after sitting in New York for six weeks waiting for this thing to, to be settled.

I came back to San Francisco and you can walk in and they had shipping boards at that time. It was a whiteboard type thing. And usually, they had one board with maybe a dozen ships with jobs to fill. They had, besides the one main board they had two auxiliary boards. And at that time, once the job had been called three times at job calls, it went open board and you could, you could just walk in and take it. And I found executive was looking for a third night permanent third mate on a around the world trip for SB in which I had heard good things about. And it was probably the best sea going job I had. I made two trips, got off to raise my license and then went back with the same company a second mate on the India run. But it was the opportunities were just they're paid bonuses for people to decide on and get the ships to sail.

Ships are tied up for lack of crew, mostly engineers any are always sailing short-handed. So, the money was good because you split the wages of the third mate that you didn't have. Plus, there was additional overtime and it put a burden on the chief mate, cause he had to stand a watch and wasn't able to, you know to actively supervise the deck work, but that, that worked out. But no, it was unbelievable opportunity. You can raise your license as fast as you get the sea time. And after hearing in school and deckies would have trouble getting jobs. And then we'd be out of work for months, that's not that's not the way it was at all. It was, it was unreal times but I could see my thinking wasn't Vietnam wasn't going to last forever. And I particularly, the companies I was sailing for containerization was starting to come into play but Vietnam, because just about everything move break bolt kind of distorted that picture of how fast containers are going to come on. And it was, I was starting to see that once Vietnam was over, they didn't need to have a need for the ships that a lot of them are just going to go by the wayside and the

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jobs with them. But yeah, it was as for job opportunity wise it was a great, it was a great time.

[06:24]

**MH:** Okay. Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to current and future California Maritime Academy cadets?

**JL:** Yeah. Take your, take your study seriously. Cause what you learn is pertinent. It's not, it's not a bunch of stuff you're, you're going to not use even some of the things you might wonder about English Naval science. I've gotten into study world war II history and particularly the Pacific and a lot of things that I have read that I'd been studying recently or reading recently. I remember having that topic covered in Naval science. So there was a lot of, to me there was a lot of good information there, and English and government were another one I've gotten somewhat very interested in, or rather interested in politics, that civics class a lot of things that were discussed there come back to mind as well. English, you have to be able to read and write. I mean, there's just no way around it. And there's nothing more of a turnoff for somebody that can't string a sentence together but I might, to sum up, I would say, take your studies seriously and don't get distracted with the fun stuff, because you can always do that later on.

[07:55]

**MH:** Do you have any favorite stories from your work life that you'd like to share?

**JL:** Yeah, one thing I always thought was the camaraderie part of being a CMA grad was running into your classmates. And those from classes at your, during your time, all over the world literally Bruce you mentioned was in earlier I ran into Bruce on the street in New York one day when I was trying to figure out what was going on with the strike. The ship I was on, it was being strike bound was undergoing the coast guard inspection at the time. Then the inspector was class of [19]62 and he said, 'Hey you're welcome to stay with me.' Cause we thought the thing was going to be over in a couple of weeks, you know, which I did. I took him up on it. And that was kind of an experience that let him get into what's now a little Italy in the South part of Manhattan. And during that time several other CMA grads from various classes came through pass through New York and we got together but we ran into people all over the world ran into one classmate that was going in the Navy and Subic Bay in Saigon. And I think it was August or September, 1965.

There must have been a half a dozen CMA grads and various ships tied up alongside the dock. And we had a good time. We got to Dara and got to do that the Saigon circuit at night and whatnot. And it's just that sense of camaraderie. And when I worked in Saudi Arabia there were two other CMA graduates with the company. One was assigned in Singapore for a tug, overseeing some, some vessel construction. And the other was

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worked with me in, in Ras Tanura. But I think running into people, you know you have a bond and again too, with graduates from other academies, there's a, there's a bond there. I worked with a group when I was overseas from from Maine maritime and a couple of King's pointers. And there's, there's a there's an understanding that there's a a meeting of the minds between Maritime Academy grads.

**MH:** So, I have a related question, which is are you still in touch with any of your classmates? And obviously you are.

**JL:** Yeah. We have a pretty good email network and some you never hear from and others you get something weekly almost every day sometimes. And, and we've, I think we have pretty, Email is great. It just works well for effective communication.

[10:41]

**MH:** Okay. Let's see. What are you proudest of in your life?

**JL:** My family, I've been, Linda and I have been married for 43 years and we have three kids all in their forties, a son, two daughters, three grandchildren, and the kids have all turned out great. Linda's been very supportive of everything I do. So what I do, and tells me when she thinks I'm doing something wrong. So yeah, I'm very proud of my family.

[11:11]

**MH:** Hmm. What are some of the most important lessons you've learned in life?

**JL:** Take responsibility and be accountable. Passing the buck, you might get away with it for awhile here and there but it's not gonna, it's not gonna get you very far it only seems to work in politics.

[11:31]

**MH:** Do you have any stories to share from your time as a cadet?

**JL:** Yeah. The training cruises were absolutely great when I was here. and the living conditions on board the golden bear, the second, were very Spartan to say the least but when you're in your early twenties or late teens that doesn't really bother you. It's the opportunity to get to the foreign ports and experience the various cultures. And you get to places that are off the beaten track. There aren't too many merchant ships anymore that go to Tahiti or the Galapagos or Acapulco or Lima, Peru, Trinidad, and getting to Rio, to me, that was, that was definitely one of the highlights of my life. And of course the train wreck in Columbia in 1962, that's, that's something that's stays with you.

[12:28]

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**MH:** Yeah. I heard a little bit about that from Bruce. Can you tell me about your experience with that?

**JL:** Yeah. What had happened was that the train had steel coaches and it was a, I think it was a Thursday and it was a start of a holiday weekend. So, they added wooden coaches for the additional passengers that, we weren't in them. And, but they put a bar car on at the end of the train and or somewhere on the train and we left at seven o'clock and we all thought, we didn't even at 20 years old or whatever, it's all cool to go back and drink beer at seven in the morning. But the two locomotives hit head on, and the steel coaches just telescope like a piston right through the wooden coaches. And that's what caused the fatalities and the injuries.

In addition to that, while Paul Murphy was injured some of the engineers were riding up on it. It was a switcher, like you see out now it had the catwalks around the outside of the engine and Paul got his arm caught between the two, but the fatalities were all locals. And I think it wound up in the eighties, I've heard various figures and I left the newspaper that I local Colombian newspaper I'd had with Larry Stephens when I was down five years ago. But we, like they said last night at the dinner to everybody just knew what to do.

Nobody stood around and waited for directions and and you know, they just pitched in and here you're out in the jungle, it's it sticks. It's hot, it's humid. But they talk about the smell of death. And if there's, that's very real and we're pulling people out of the, the the cars or what's left of them, stacking them on flat cars and once everything thing settled down. And then the initial work was done. I think just about everybody to a man turned around and threw up, but there was no help. And it was obvious the fire department had to go through that jungle on a road across the river from the railroad tracks and get to the scene and they were hours away. So it was, it was, you know, us or nobody. When this thing all said and done, they brought up some school buses to haul us back. Everybody, the locals in the, at that time midshipman and Ed from the class of [19]63 and I were sitting in the back of the bus and they just pack people in there.

They were standing up; everybody was sweaty and stunk. It was hot. There was no air conditioning. So, he and I looked at each other and looked at the escape door at the back of the bus that jumped out went over and took a taxi into town and parked in some bar for a period of time. I forget how long and the, I don't know if it was the American consulate or the Graceland port captain on a motor scooter started combing the town, looking for the missing midshipman to get him back to them, to head back a headcount on the golden bear. And they, they roused us out and sent us back. And I think one of us had to use a shirt or a t-shirt for a band-aid. And we had, some of our belts were used as tourniquets and we came back missing various pieces of uniform. And, and, but I guess that was a grief counseling session was a parking in a bar in Columbia and, and, and drinking beer for an hour or whatever it was.



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**MH:** Yeah. So, you mentioned that the cruises were a big important part of your class.

**JL:** Yeah, it was something that you'd would look forward too.

[16:11]

**MH:** So, do you want to share a little bit more about what you remember about the training ship in particular and what years you sailed, where you sailed what you remember most about the cruises.

**JL:** All right. The cruises at that time were January through March. So, you came back after Christmas break and they had what they called Dockside Steaming, and for the engineers that was getting the plant up and they'd fire it up in the morning and shut it down at night and then fire it up or leave it going. Making sure all the systems are all in an order. And the, the decades, as we recall them, loaded stores, and did ships work as best they could with all the activity going on. And that went on for about 10 days. And we usually leave about the middle at the end of the second week or towards the middle of January make a stop somewhere around here for fuel in the Bay. And then head out, they always went South.

We did, first cruise was down the West coast of South America, as far as Lima, Peru, Galapagos islands. We spent a week there and it was a good location for ships work and various drills, lifeboat training and that type of thing. There wasn't much ashore. I think you could get homemade liquor and maybe beer, but it was great for the skin divers. They loved it. I think we, we spent about a week there then over to Lima, Buenaventura, when they had the Columbia where they had the train wreck, up to Acapulco, and then back San Diego. And that was about, we were gone about two months.

Second year cruise was through the Panama Canal. We tied up at the, what was then the Naval station and, in the canal, I think for two days and then went to Trinidad for two days. A lot of us bought our sextants duty free in the canal. Plus, sextons at that time sold for about \$200 there versus 400 or whatever in the States, Trinidad then around, around the Northeast tip of South America to Rio. And that was, that was great. That was everything every I've ever read or heard about it at that time, it was fantastic. Then return voyage back right from Rio to these, I remember right to the Panama Canal and I don't think we made a stop.

And at one trip if it was either the first day, that first year cruise the second year cruise, we stopped at a place called Cocos Island it's, it's Costa Rican territory. And there's absolutely nothing there. I'm not sure why they stopped. I think we made it overnight or maybe a two day. And I think it was to kind of prep the ship for arrival in San Diego.

And then the first-class cruise was Galapagos. We carried a group of scientists for the, to the Galapagos islands for a, the hundred, the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of

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Darwin's research and, it goes from they established a research facility and that's one of the things I regret. Some of these people were very outstanding in their fields. It was an international group. There were Europeans, Japanese, Americans, and they ate with us. They had a separate birthing area, and but they offered to Duke they did classes and lectures and that type of thing. And to us, it was kind of a, a bit of an imposition because our original cruise itinerary it had us go to Tahiti and Australia.

And this apparently, I had been told, that came down from very high in the government national science foundation or maybe even the white house that, oh you're going to take this group to the Galapagos. So, I think the government paid for the fuel versus the state, or there had some cash incentive there and then go on to do, go about your cruise and come back and pick them up, which we did. But it was a very, years, over the years you want to hear names of people and some of them were the ones in that delegation, but we carried their equipment, loaded their equipment on board. Got it off in the Galapagos onto a landing craft which is a bit of a challenge. And then we went on to, we did go on to Tahiti and then came back to pick them up. And the Galapagos went over to the South American mainland Guayaquil, Ecuador excuse me. And then, and then returned to the States.

Our first port of call was always San Diego in the U S and a lot of parents came down there. They lived in the area, came out from outside the area to meet the ship. A board of governors always had a meeting on board in San Diego, and then we'd go to usually the long beach and then possibly do I think one year we stopped in Monterey for a, a day and then back to the Bay area. But now they were great experiences. I still recall. I have, I kept my, I have the slides. I took them. And every once in a while, take a look at them, memories.

[22:08]

**MH:** Okay. How has the campus changed since your time here?

**JL:** Oh, tremendously. We had the residence hall had just been finished. That was brand new. And there was always a, a segment one division at that time, which was about 20, 25 I guess that lived on the golden bear. And like I said, the birthing quarters were very smart and there was steel decks and tiered box. You had more space instead of having one locker like you had a cruise, you could have, you know just about as many as you needed but the heating and ventilating system was a little iffy. There was no air conditioning on board at the time, but the original classroom building, the administration building, the dining hall, the gym and pool, they had just finished the engineering building. And then there was a string of world war II vintage wooden classrooms on the road coming in across from the tennis courts, this side of the tennis courts. And that was basically the extent of it. There was a seamanship building down at the waterfront and then the boat house. So, it's, it's yeah, it's the library was up in the residence hall and that was probably 60 foot by 30-foot room. So, it's, it's grown exponentially from my time.

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[23:40]

**MH:** What do you envision for the future of Cal maritime?

**JL:** Well, they seem to be on the right track program wise and the fact that from what I've, what I've read in or what I've seen on the the information that school puts out is there there's a good hiring ratio for graduates and that's in this environment. That's, that's good. I think that says something about the type of instruction people, people are. I think there's more confidence to hire somebody with a specific degree. And I'm glad to see that, because I think a lot of times we were looked down upon by people, by people from other colleges because of the technical nature of our instruction, but you could always get a job. And that seems to be, that situation seems to be reversed now. That they realize there's no point in funding somebody for four years of college. If I going to have a degree that has absolutely no value or very limited value in the job market

[24:45]

**MH:** Is there that about covers the questions that I had in mind. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**JL:** Just for what I've seen here on campus? I think the school has done a real great job and I I remember very, very distinctly in the mid-seventies and legislature wanted to close it down. There was a very strong block in the legislature that and I think, that, the one, that it was too expensive on a per student basis. It was a very expensive school primarily because of the size and the training ship. And that's when they started expanding programs. And then when they came on the state university system, I think a lot of us had had our druthers, you know is this going to work. It appears that was the way to go and to ensure survival and offer up meaningful programs and locally where I'm from, one of the newspapers had a quotation from somebody that oversees youth Marine programs that it's called the Harvard of the West coast for, for maritime education. And it's been known, when I came here you had to know, you had to find out yourself. It wasn't well publicized at all.

**MH:** Okay.

**JL:** Alrighty.

**MH:** Thank you so much.

**JL:** Well, I hope that helps.

[End of Interview]