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Berkeley, California

William Jackson

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2005

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Interview with William Jackson
Interviewed by: Jess Rigelhaupt
Transcriber: Brendan Furey
[Interview #1: March 8, 2005]
[Begin audio file Jackson, William 1 030805.wav]

1-00:00:05

Rigelhaupt:

It's the March 8, 2005. I'm doing an interview with Chief Engineer William Jackson. We're in the--

1-00:00:14

Jackson:

Red Oak Victory engine room.

1-00:00:19

Rigelhaupt:

I guess the best thing maybe we could start with is if you could explain what everything is around you.

1-00:00:26

Jackson:

Well, start here. Because this is where all and controls and observations are made right here. [long pause] This is the control station for the engine. You have your boilers up forward there. They produce the steam that drives the turbines. These two engines right here, which drives the big shaft with those reduction gears right there. Then, on your side you have your generators for your power. You've got to have that power. See? Okay, then here, the engineer can observe what's going on all over the engine room, because he's got different pumps and different things going. He's got to know what's working and what's not. When he's maneuvering, he uses this telegraph [taps] from the bridge. They tell him if they want to go ahead or if they want to go astern or they want to stop. It all comes from there. All we do, when this arrow here goes over, we move {ours?} over. That means we're answering it.

Now, all below this deck is the machinery space. You've got your feed pumps and your oil pumps and your bilge pumps and the small machinery pumps are all down there. [loud noise] Oh, there we go.

1-00:02:07

Rigelhaupt:

It's too loud.

1-00:02:05

Jackson:

Yeah. [engine noises]—and everything. [interview interruption; discussion about taping]

1-00:02:57

Rigelhaupt:

Could you talk a little bit more about the engine and perhaps how you got to be chief engineer?

1-00:03:07

Jackson:

Oh. That's a long, dirty story. Let's start back with how I got to go to sea. I'm born and raised here in the Bay Area. In Berkeley, I went to grammar school and junior high school. When I was sixteen, I used to take the ferry over to New York and walk the waterfront and sit and look at all these ships from all of these different countries. See, I guess it was wanderlust. I'd daydream about all the different countries where all of the ships went. In those days, there were lots of ships going all over the world. At the end of the school year, they had a big strike in San Francisco. The big Longshoreman's Strike of '35. There were no ships moving and they had picket lines up and down the Embarcadero. So, when I got out of school, I'd blend in with the stevedores because I was pretty tall and carried me a picket line and said I was a seaman, because they had a seamen strike along with the longshoreman. So, that way I learned what it was to be on a ship from talking to the different people as I did on the picket line. I worked in the soup kitchen and there were very nice places where the longshoremen could get their meals every day.

When the strike was over, I went to the only place that I could get a job. It was in the Marine Cooks and Stewards. At that time, I couldn't get in the deck department. I couldn't get in the engine department. I would have to be a steward all my life. So, I got into steward and I got my first ship. It was called the *H. F. Alexander* and it was a big ship. To me it was big. I was a bus boy on the ship. When I was home, I learned how to wait tables. My mother taught us all of those things. I made a few cruises on this ship, but this ship rolled too much. It's a German built ship, called a Great Northern. The *H. F. Alexander* was running for the Admiral Line up and down the coast. I got off of that and I hung around in the waterfront and I finally got on another freighter, a beat-up, old trumpy freighter. I'm surprised it held together, but I did get to see China, Japan and the Philippines as a mess boy.

So, I made these trips. I had one thing in my favor. I didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't gamble. So, when we'd get to these ports, I'd be off running, finding some young kids my age to show me around. They'd show me around, and I got to see a lot of things nobody else got to see.

Because I got to live in Berkeley and grew up with Japanese, I was aware of all their cultures. So, one day, walking through this residential area and I see this old lady, and she looked like she was so sad, so I got in front of her and I bowed, but I did it [laughs]—the Japanese don't have to go that much, but I over did it. I looked up and she smiled. And everybody comes running! This old lady had smiled. She hadn't smiled in two years, because she had just lost her son, somewhere in China, during the Japanese occupation. So, the whole residential area took me under and took me to their homes and I got along.

A couple of more cases like that and then China. I saw a lot of things. The ugly American was ugly. In them days, there was some ugly Americans. I saw some of the things that, as a boy who was brought up with good social habits and social customs, that it had offended me. But I tried to stay away and I didn't saw nothing. So, anyway, I made it to the Philippines and China. I came back to the United States and of course, my mother said, "Son, you've got to get your high school diploma." So, I had to get off the ship. I went back to high school.

This time I went to Oakland High School. I was the only little black boy in Oakland High School, three thousand kids. And there was one little girl. That's they way the Bay Area was in those days. But I'll tell you one thing. We had the best teachers. And the teachers didn't look at your face. They looked at all of us as students. They taught it what it means to be an American. They taught us to be proud. They taught us to be kind, courteous, and humble. This is what guided me all over the world. And the only reason why I'm chief engineer today is because I can overlook the hate, because some of the things that happened to me would cause an average person to hate, which it did cause the average person to hate and do things that he didn't want to do. Like, some guy called you some bad names, you'd go over and kick his ass. You kill him, you gotta go to jail. So, anyway, I held on to those virtues from when I was in school.

1-00:09:30

Washburn:

Hang on one second. This is stuff to do at home. If you want to focus more on the ship.

1-00:09:36

Rigelhaupt:

Yeah, okay, can we just talk real basic technical stuff about the engine?

1-00:09:38

Jackson:

Oh, well, you want to know about ships.

1-00:09:46

Rigelhaupt:

Were you mostly on Victory Ships?

1-00:09:44

Jackson:

I have sailed 146 ships in my career. I have sailed every type of engine, in every position—steam ships, diesel ships, oil [rotos?], oil tankers, all these, but basically the steam ships operate on the same principals. They later ones are faster and more automated. I had to spend a lot of time in school. Instead of taking a vacation, I would go to school, take a course in school, two- or three-month courses. I got a sheet full of courses I took so that I would be prepared for the automated ships. The Victory Ship was better than the Liberty Ships. That was the first ship to come out and it was badly needed, so they built the Liberty Ship so that they could build it in twenty-six days. They had a good up and down engine, but they were only built to last one year or one trip. Nobody thought they would last very long, because they were so slow, the submarines were eating them up. The ship I got torpedoed and sunk on was a World War I built ship. It was built with rivets, not welds. It took them a little while for them to sink that one. I was a mess boy on that ship.

1-00:11:22

Rigelhaupt:

Where were you?

1-00:11:18

Jackson:

In the North Atlantic, off of Norway, after we left the Orkney Islands, the convoy was—

1-00:11:32

Rigelhaupt:

This was during World War II.

1-00:11:32

Jackson:

Oh yeah, World War II.

1-00:11:31

Rigelhaupt:

And it was a dangerous--[whistle sounds]

1-00:11:29

Jackson:

That's our whistle.

1-00:11:40

Washburn:

For what?

1-00:11:41

Jackson:

Lunch. See that's a steam whistle, but my boys and I got together and we hooked it up to air so it's being blown by air. That's the way it sounds when it's with steam.

1-00:12:02

Rigelhaupt:

So it was a dangerous run in the North Atlantic?

1-00:12:02

Jackson:

Let me tell you something. The merchant seaman really took a screwing in World War II, because the North Sea, anywhere once you left New York and started across to England, you were just a sucker for them submarines. When you were on land you were a sucker for the airplanes. We lost 800 ships on that battle of the North Atlantic those first three years. I lost one in the North Atlantic and one in the South Atlantic from the submarines. But it caused me—because I was setting by my guns—when I came back off, repatriated back off the North Atlantic, the Russian Run—they called it the Mermansk Run. When I went, I come back from the Mermansk Run, I lost all my papers so I had to get new documents. I told the Coast Guard, “I don't want Steward Department, I want Engine papers.” So he's telling me, “You're a bright young man and you can be a steward and make a lot of money.” I said, “I don't want money! Money is not what I need. I want to be an engineer.” So, the captains come in and they make a dossier on every crewmember, how they did and how they act. And the captain put down there that I had helped down two planes, how I used to bring coffee up to the gunners during our GQ's every night and every morning and how I kept the young guys intact. Because I was twenty-two or twenty-three years old and those kids were sixteen-and-a-half, seventeen year-old kids sailing those ships up there. So, anyway, he gave it to me.

And that's when my worries start, because the first ship I went on, the chief engineer, a big redneck Texan said, “I don't want no blacks in my Engine Room.” So he said, “You go back to

the hull.” They had a hull where all the crew comes from. If you need a wiper, you get wipers. If you need an order, you get an order.

So, I went back, I told the official, I says, “This guy don’t want to give me this job. I want this job.” He says, “Sure, come on, let’s go over there.” So, we went over there and told the guy. Again, “I’m not taking him. I told him to go on back to the hull.” That was the custom in those days. If God come down to the ship and the engineer didn’t like him, he would have to go back, because they played footsies with each other. So, finally the Coast Guard Commissioner came. He said, “What’s the matter?” “This person don’t want to hire this man as a wiper.” He looked at my wipers papers and he recognized my numbers and he says, “Why don’t you want to hire this man?” “Because number one, we don’t have no blacks in the engineer room.” “Okay, go get your license out of the rack.” Every officer, first thing, he comes aboard, he puts his license in the rack. When that license is down, you don’t sail. So, he couldn’t sail. The commissioner says, “I’m not signing on this ship.” Every time you leave port on a merchant ship, you have to sign articles. Everybody. So, if you don’t sign the articles, the ship don’t leave, you see. He told the company, “When you people make up your mind what you’re going to do, then call me.” Right away, they twisted his arm and his ear, and he had to take me on the ship.

But then I went through four months of hell. Four and a half months of hell, crossing the North Atlantic. This time crossing the North Atlantic, they didn’t need a convoy, because we were a fast ship. We’d go from New York, straight over, zigzagging our way over coming back. That third trip, we went to the invasion of North Africa. Right where he kept me under the floor plates in the bilges, scraping the dirtiest, miserable, coldest, dampest place on the ship. That’s where I stood my time.

1-00:16:44

Rigelhaupt:

For four months?

1-00:16:45

Jackson:

For four and a half months. Now listen, there are some good [pause] people. We had these young white kids that they never had anything like this happen to them. They would just go down there and tell their oil {cycle?}, and get an oilers job. They knew what this guy was trying to do to me. They used to come down and encourage me to “Stick it out, stick it out.” I had this big tall engineer, a kid from the academy. He’d bring me a cup of coffee every once in a while. That’s how I was able to put up with that crap. I did my four and a half months but I cussed that son of a gun every day and every night. I said, “Someday, I’ll get that chief engineer license and I’ll come in and throw it in your face.” He died two months after I got my chief. I didn’t get it until way up in 1978.

1-00:17:46

Rigelhaupt:

As chief you are really high up?

1-00:17:47

Jackson:

The chief is highest next to the captain. The captain is paid five dollars more than the chief. The chief is in charge of the lights. All of its equipment was put in under my supervision. All the electrical power plans, cycles and everything. You have to—you go to sea a while and you learn all of this stuff. It's all in my head. Because I spent a lot of time on Victory Ships, it comes back to me, and I'm able to direct my guys to do these things, because they never had to do it, see. All the pump work and equipment in the engine room, I've got one guy there who's a professor, and boy, when he came aboard this ship he had never handled a tool before! But with patience and explaining and everything he wanted to know, I'd show him. Any questions, I would stop in the middle of that gangway going home, I'd stop and go back and go over these things. He's the best machinist you'll ever see.

1-00:19:00

Rigelhaupt:

And during World War II, how many people were in the engine room? What was the crew? How big was it?

1-00:19:02

Jackson:

The crew was usually about forty-two members of the crew. It depends on the ship, but most of them was around forty-two. Then you had twenty-something gunners. We had three wipers, three oilers, three firemen, four engineers, and the chief. That's on a Liberty Ship. With the Victory Ships, you got more. You got three wipers, three oilers, three firemen, three junior engineers—because they had to have somebody to back up the third engineer. Because the ship goes so fast, you can't leave the throttle. Somebody's got to be at the throttle all the time, to maneuver, in case.

1-00:19:56

Rigelhaupt:

Can you talk about what each one of those positions does?

1-00:20:03

Jackson:

Well, let's start with the wiper. All that painting you see down below, scraping and everything looks nice and clean and dusted, that's what the wiper does. He does that for six months and he studies how the next fireman-watertender—and he learns how to fire by watching, in his off time, watching the other fireman-watertender. He learns that. He goes before the Coast Guard, takes an examination and he's a fireman-watertender. Now, the fireman-watertender's job is to keep that boiler steam up, clean those burners, those four burners every watch. Keep the right oil temperature, no smoking and the right oil pressures. Keep your steam up. That's the fireman-watertender's job.

Now the oiler, he has to come maintain temperatures. You've got lube oil temperatures; you've got main condenser temperatures; auxiliary condenser temperatures. You've got shaft alley bearings to watch for overheating. You've got main gears. You have to go around and take the record of all these bearings, so you can keep control when there's many running hot, see.

Then the junior engineer, he has to be able to do all the things in the unlicensed crew. When he does six months of that, he can go set for his engineer's license. The first license you get is the third assistant. He sits for third and he does one year as a third assistant and he goes to second assistant. One year second assistant, he can go for first assistant. But these are tough courses. You get off the ship and you go to school for about three months or so to prepare you to take these tests. Now, after you've got about five years of all this, then you can go set for chief. That is [if] somebody is going give you a job.

But right now, nobody can come from where I was to a chief engineer's job, because of all the academies. All the officers are coming from the academies: Cal State Maritime, Kings' Point Merchant Marine Academy, and Texas and Maine and Massachusetts have academies. They are merchant marines getting their officers from the academies. So it's hard to get up from the folks—but it can be done if you are clever enough and you have enough education and background.

1-00:23:03

Rigelhaupt:

What was the main cargo you were carrying in the North Atlantic?

1-00:22:52

Jackson:

Anything—tanks, airplanes, ammunition, food, jeeps, trucks. Everything you could think of, you could carry. The ship I was on, the lower hold here was ammunition. Up on this deck was more space, they could load in trucks and food and mechanical equipment and guns and stuff. Then on deck, they have a pile—they'd carry diesel oil. Airplanes on deck.

1-00:23:47

Rigelhaupt:

How did you get out when you were torpedoed? What happened?

1-00:23:50

Jackson:

It was easy. Once the ship got hit and she starts to list, you're on general quarters anyway, you know you're going down, you just follow the instructions. When the whistles ring "Abandon ship" then you go to your lifeboat station, see. If the ship was listing this way, I'd go to the life boat station over that side. If the ship was listing this way, I'd go to the life boats on this side and help lower those boats away. In the meantime, in wartime we never even slept without our life preservers.

1-00:24:25

Rigelhaupt:

But that's cold water in the North Atlantic.

1-00:24:24

Jackson:

Oh yeah. You don't want to get in that water. You wouldn't last five minutes.

1-00:24:35

Rigelhaupt:

So you are in the lifeboat. Then what happened?

1-00:24:32

Jackson:

Well, that's up to good God. Because on most of the convoys they did have small corvettes and stuff that would ride with them—they'd scour around and look for survivors when they knew the ship was hit. It took them five days to find us out there. It was good, because it was the land of the midnight sun. It was the summertime. Daylight, at two o'clock in the morning, the sun goes down. At three o'clock the sun comes up.

1-00:25:18

Rigelhaupt:

And there's food and water on the lifeboats?

1-00:25:13

Jackson:

Oh yeah. You've got hard tack there in the water. Yeah you've got water. You don't eat much and you don't drink much. You have to ration it out. If you've got your whole crew in two lifeboats, which is supposed to be four, you can't be, you know, on the food. But, we always managed and a lot of our officers were very good. A lot of the captains were pretty good men. And they would have us--we'd row a while. Everybody had a certain time to row and the next time we'd sing a while. This particular ship, the captain told us when we knew we were going over the North Atlantic. He said, "I want everybody to bring two bottles of whiskey and two cartons of cigarettes." So, we all did. We went ashore that night and we all bought two bottles of whiskey and two cartons of cigarettes. When we gave it to him in the morning, he spread them around into the four lifeboats. So twice a day, we got our little thing of grog, and that really helps you out. I didn't smoke, so I didn't care about the cigarettes. But that was wise. The British ships do that. American ships, sometimes we were backwards in a lot of things to do with the sea. Like, the Scandinavian ships, they had their women on the ships. The Russians had women on the ships all the time, as officers and crewmen. Of course, American ships, "You've got a bunch of sissies back there trying to set social rules." See, now, they're getting away from that. It took us as a union engineer for forty or fifty years—the reason why my bunk is bigger and the captain's bunk is bigger is because the captain and I are allowed to bring our wives aboard a trip every year. We had to make a rule for it. Because other wives didn't want their boyfriends bringing others. Yeah, it's fascinating going to sea. I miss it.

Now, I sailed in World War II. I was right there for the full Korean War. And, then, I went to Vietnam, but only a short stay. And then I went on a hospital ship. Oh! That was that big beautiful white hospital ship that went to eight countries in ten years. It stayed a year in each country, supplying medical teaching and surgeries for the people in these countries. It was the hardest job I ever loved. But that job, I was proud, because that American flag was flying on that ship every morning, you'd get up, our flag would be flying and these poor little Sri Lankan people would come aboard. Or Africans when we were in Conakry, the Arabs in Tunisia, Jamaicans in Jamaica. Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua and Colombia. I went to eight countries in ten years. That was the height of my service in the merchant marines. That was the best job.

Then, I later, got on one of the real new modern ships. I stayed on it three years until I got burned out. It was a {Statesline?} ship, thirty-five thousand horse power. It's used to run to the Far East and she was automated. I had a big console. I'd sit there at my console and watch the gauges and everything. If this pump is going too fast, I'd reach over here, move it a little bit. She settled

down and that telegraph well went full ahead, so I'd go over here and move this level up a little bit, check it in and off we'd go.

That was the best job, but we were a rapid deployment force in the Navy and we had to stay there. Once a month we'd go out, join the battle groups and go up to the Indian Ocean and come back.

1-00:30:12

Rigelhaupt:

What were you carrying on that ship?

1-00:30:16

Jackson:

Missiles. All those high--expensive missiles, because we were a refrigerator ship. We had a lot of refrigerated equipment. So, we were carrying all of these missiles in containers and everything for the Marines.

1-00:30:33

Rigelhaupt:

On some of these ships were there some people who were in different branches of service than the Merchant Marines or was it all Merchant Marines?

1-00:30:41

Jackson:

In the rapid deployment force, there was all civilian man crews on navy ships. The navy would charter a ship or buy a ship and put civilian crews on it. Because we can man a ship with fifty-two guys, like this ship I was on, and they would have two hundred and fifty-two guys on that ship.

1-00:31:05

Rigelhaupt:

You guys did better?

1-00:31:05

Jackson:

Oh, sure, we'd do the basic presentation for this job. If you want to move a million missiles from here to there, it don't take four hundred guys on one ship to do it, when one merchant ship can do it in four trips. That's why you find it now, the rapid deployment force—or they call it the military sea-lift command—it's all civilian crews. They take guys out of the merchant marine and the union halls and everything to man their ships.

1-00:31:51

Rigelhaupt:

Which union were you in as engine—

1-00:31:53

Jackson:

I was in MEBA, the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association.

1-00:32:04

Rigelhaupt:

Should we maybe let you get lunch because its afternoon?

1-00:32:06

Jackson:

I don't feel like eating lunch.

1-00:32:09

Washburn:

This is stuff you can cover.

1-00:32:13

Rigelhaupt:

Do you think that it's quiet enough to go back down?

1-00:32:14

Washburn:

It might be quiet enough to go back down, don't you think?

1-00:32:20

Rigelhaupt:

So, maybe we should walk around with you and you can show us what everything is while it's quiet. And then we'll call it a day. [moving around]

1-00:32:40

Jackson:

One carpenter made that room, one of our volunteers. This is the gift shop. He did all the woodwork and everything. See, whenever a ship goes to sea, you have to close these watertight doors. [voices in the background; footsteps; cross-talk about where they are going]

1-00:34:16

Jackson:

That's my sister. She's the medical officer on the ship. She's a professional RN. [more movement; silence]

1-00:35:36

Jackson:

Now, this is the fire room. This is where I tell you the fireman-watertender, he has to--that's his station there. There's his fuel pumps. [pause] These registers are placed in those holes, and then these oil lines are hooked up to them to get the oil. They got damper controls here to allow enough air for excitation. The temperature of the oil has got to be very hot. The temperature of the air has got to be hot.

1-00:36:27

Rigelhaupt:

So it's hot down here.

1-00:36:29

Jackson:

Yeah, it's hot down here. You've got a smoke indicator glass there. These two fuel pumps will give you enough steam—one pump will burn two fires to give you enough steam to turn that turbine 6,000 horse powers.

1-00:36:48

Rigelhaupt:

What kind of oil?

1-00:36:51

Jackson:

Heavy bunker sea. It's the coal dirtiest oil there is. It's the cheapest. But even now they want fifty-five dollars a barrel. When this ship used to run, we used to get it for three dollars a barrel. When I was on the hospital ship *Hope*, three dollars a barrel. Then they raised it to forty-two dollars, so the *Hope* couldn't maintain it's work as a medical ship. So, they had to give it up.

1-00:37:20

Rigelhaupt:

How far could it sail before you needed more fuel?

1-00:37:23

Jackson:

Well we store all the oil on these tanks below. Here and in each cargo hold. So you can hold 35,000 barrels of oil. That will last you quite a ways, because you figure you'll burn, to make four hundred miles a day, you'll burn about 380 barrels.

1-00:37:48

Rigelhaupt:

You can go a long ways.

1-00:37:45

Jackson:

Yeah, you can go a long ways.

1-00:37:51

Washburn:

This is a little too dark in here.

1-00:37:54

Jackson:

Yeah, it's too dark in here.

1-00:37:57

Washburn:

Let's go somewhere else.

1-00:38:03

Jackson:

This is a little lighter here. These are condensers--the steam from the engine goes into this condenser to condense it into water. Then we pump it back up to the aerated heater where we can pump it again into the boilers. Yeah. And this is the hot well. All the returns from the galley and

the kitchen, the whistle, and everything goes into these tanks here, so we don't waste too much water.

1-00:38:39

Rigelhaupt:

So you are using fresh water?

1-00:38:38

Jackson:

You're using very fresh water. You have your bilge pump. You are always going to have stuff leaking and the water leaking in the bilges. So, they have a bilge pump. Then you've got over here where there's a little more light. These are your big sea suction valves to get water. To go to that condenser, you have to have these sea suction valves open. They are all welded shut now, see, so we can't put any water in here. When we are low in the water, we burn on high suction. When we are light on the water, we burn on the low suction, see. Sometimes when we were going up to Greenland, and you get ice in here. So, you have to use steam to heat the strainer so that it won't freeze your boxes.

1-00:39:49

Rigelhaupt:

So, are we below water level where we are right now?

1-00:39:51

Jackson:

We're at water level right here. If that plate was off, we'd be sinking.

These are the fire pumps, the lube oil pump and the main circulating pump, this big one here. All that is what it takes to run the turbine. See, the circulating water goes through that condenser. See that big pipe here? This big pipe here? And it goes overboard. Whenever you see a sea suction, you are going to see an overboard. So that takes all the warm water overboard.

1-00:40:38

Washburn:

Do you have any stories about either of these mechanical parts here that you can relay, that you remember learning something about them or messing up or hurting yourself?

1-00:40:50

Jackson:

No, I never had any problem with it. Let's see, what happened one time I was on the ship that was called the [Oglethorpe?] *Victory*, and the electric power went out. So, these *Victory* ships were the only kind that had, for every steam pump, they had an electric pump. For example, when the electric power went out, we didn't have any circulating water for the condensers, so you can't do nothing. You can't get steam. So, what we did was, close of the suction here—see those plates?—drilled a hole the size of the fire main valves, and used a steam fire pump to put water into the condenser. That's how I was able to raise the {vacuum?} and steam the ship at six knots. Because we have one {condensate?} pump over there that's steam; all the feed pumps are steam. We had no electric, but we were able to come back without electric. But that's the only ship that could do that, these *Victory* ships. They were built pretty good for that. This thing here—see all them little tubes in there? Every once in a while, one of them will leak salt water.

And we can't have salt water going into our condensate. So we take this open and we pour sawdust down in here. Then we pump that sawdust into and it will get in those tube and the vacuum will suck it and hold so we won't get salt water.

1-00:42:38

Washburn:

Can you describe for someone who doesn't know anything about this at all, can you describe the difference mechanically between a Victory ship and a Liberty ship?

1-00:42:46

Jackson:

Oh!

1-00:42:49

Washburn:

I know that's a big question.

1-00:42:52

Jackson:

Well, the Liberty ship has less moving parts than a Victory ship. It's low pressure, so it only burns 250 pounds of steam, so it doesn't have all of these different high-pressure steam lines and coils. These are faster. You can have a better generator; you can have more electric. Liberty ship, you can't have too much. Only for lights. See, here we can have it to run our winches. In a Liberty, you use steam for the winches. That's one of the big advantages, that we can use all of our winches on electric, on these here.

If you want to see this over here. This is your {stop and lock of? stop block?} of fuel. My men and I went over all these valves. They're all like new, ground in, polished, and everything. [Runs motor]

Washburn:

[shouts over noise] Let's go get some lunch!

Jackson:

Alright! [more conversation inaudible due to running motor]

1-00:45:26

Jackson:

That's the low-pressure turbine here. The steam from the high-pressure turbine comes into here. It's connected with these gears that turns this shaft here. Now, if you want to go in reverse, you cut the steam from here and open the steam here, and that will give you reverse motion.

1-00:45:59

Rigelhaupt:

So, this was your office away from your office?

1-00:45:55

Jackson:

No, this is the engineer's office. This is where we keep logbooks, bell books, and all kinds of instruction manuals and stuff here for the engineers to have.

1-00:46:19

Rigelhaupt:

This board here tells you everything that's going on with the ship?

1-00:46:23

Jackson:

See this, 750 degrees Fahrenheit to run that high-pressure turbine. So that's a lot of steam, the high-steam temperature. The vacuum, the best you can get is about there. If you got that, you got perfect vacuum. These are the different pressure gauges. This is your revolution counter. Here's your engines turning ahead. This will move over. {Stern ship, will move this way.?} This let's you know you've got enough water in your DC heater. This is your lube oil. It let's you know if you have enough oil in your lube oil tank. It let's you know your boiler feed pumps are working. [yells from crew announcing a meeting, footsteps, sounds of men gathering for meeting]

Interview with William Jackson
 Interviewed by: Jess Rigelhaupt
 Transcriber: Brendan Furey
 [Interview #2: March 16, 2005]
 [Begin audio file Jackson, William 2 031605.wav]

2-00:00:11

Rigelhaupt:

It's March 16, 2005. We're on the *SS Red Oak Victory* ship in Richmond, California. We're doing an oral history interview with William Jackson, who is chief engineer--

2-00:00:25

Jackson:

William A. Jackson.

2-00:00:24

Rigelhaupt:

William A. Jackson. [pause] Normally, the way I start is if you could talk about where you were born and the early years of your childhood.

2-00:00:44

Jackson:

I'm born in San Francisco in 1918. My father had finished the army and was going to USF as a pharmacist and he was working as an elevator operator. My mother was a graduate nurse from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and also USC in Southern California. At the time, she was doing work with the admiral of the navy as a, I guess they called them nannies then, for his children. I don't remember much back that far, but that's the background.

2-00:01:52

Rigelhaupt:

What was the neighborhood you grew up in?

2-00:01:52

Jackson:

Now, you've got to move up where I can remember. First, we lived down in Monterey for a while. Then, my father moved us up to Vashon Island in Washington. He had a place for us to stay up on Vashon Island, and he was into business. He was trying to develop—or he did develop the way to take vegetables and fruit—dehydration. That's what it was. He was in that. But, of course, him and another black guy were scientists. Evidently, it didn't pan out so well. And he became very, very angry, at not being given the opportunities to do the things that he knew, because he was a very smart man. So, he left the family. He went to Africa.

Then, we were at different homes and my mother went back to Berkeley and got a job on the railroad as a maid on the Sunset Limited. It ran from San Francisco to New Orleans. So, I assume, when she got enough money, she came up and got us and brought us back home and we lived in Berkeley. I remember, we went to Longfellow Grammar School and later to Edison Junior High School until the earthquake come and we had to transfer to Burbank.

That brings me up to around fifteen years old. I was always active, had paper routes, and would always go round to—this is during the Depression. These were really hard times. But I noticed even in those years that the neighbors and the people and the kids I associated with, I didn't really realize what it was to be black. We weren't called black then, we were called colored. So, my teachers were very good. They found out that I was a wanderlust, so they had to give me a lot of extra help, but my sisters were brilliant. They were brilliant scholars. Of course, my mother being smart, my father being smart, I guess they inherited the brains.

So, anyway, I was a wanderlust, but I worked. And I'll give you an example of what the times were like during the Depression. I used to get up on Saturday morning at three o'clock and go out to a vacant lot where the Oakland Tribune brought the papers and dumped it on the corner there and each boy would get his bundle and fold them--of course, they were big--and I'd take them around and deliver them to the neighborhood. So, I had been doing this for months and months and months. But this one time, I almost finished up in one area up in North Berkeley there, and there used to be a milkman, who used to deliver milk in bottles. Six bottle carton, he would put it on the porch, you know. So it happens this morning, I don't know what got into me, but I was so thirsty and so hungry that I sat down on the porch and drank one of these bottles of milk. So, I drank the milk, I delivered the paper, and I left. But the next week I come by and the milk was sitting there, so I got a bottle of milk, you know, the door opened and here comes the lady and I froze. This nice lady, she came out and says, "Young man, were you hungry?" I says, "Yes ma'am, I was hungry." That goes back to the point where as a child we were always taught to be courteous. Regardless of what was going on, we always had to be courteous and kind to people. So, I was courteous to this lady. You know what this lady did? She grabbed me by the arm and says, "Come on, son. Come inside with us and we'll have breakfast." She brought me in her lovely home and her three kids and her husband and her mother sat down and had breakfast together. That made an impression on my mind that lived through World War II of the nice things that they people in Berkeley and the neighbors, they treated me, when I was a boy.

I had friends who later got to be a priest. But did you know that there were only 10,000 black people in the whole Bay Areas in 1940? Only 10,000! So, we were scattered around. Later, I changed. After I ran away from home and went to sea, I came back, because my mother insisted that I get a high school diploma and graduate from high school. So, I took a job with a guy I met down at Yacht Harbor. I told him that I wanted to get into ROTC, because when I came back from the Far East--I made China, Japan, and the Philippines before I was sixteen—and when I came back and told the people what I had seen over of the Japanese, the military might, I didn't know nothing, but all I know was that in Yokohama there were thousands of warships. I got with a young boys. See, over there, the Japanese had a system where if you were white, you were set in a certain neighborhood. You could only go in that neighborhood. But nobody paid any attention to me. I started walking. When I got off work, I'd start walking around the neighborhood, because I had learned Japanese—not the language a whole lot—but the customs and everything.

Here's a good example, I saw this old lady, and she looked so sad and dejected and everything. I went up to her and I did the bow. Evidently, I overdid it, because everybody started laughing, and she started laughing and smiling. Everybody was running around, "Mamasan! Mamasan! Look at--!" Because she hadn't smiled in two years, because she had lost her son over in China somewhere in the Japanese army. That made it so I had a good entry with the Japanese people

and the families there. They were all fighting on who was going to eat over here. When I'd get off the ship, they'd get their sons to come down and get me. It was beautiful.

[interview interruption for technical adjustment]

Let's see if I can recap now. [chuckles]

2-00:10:51

Rigelhaupt:

If it's okay, I'll move backwards just a little bit. What do you remember about where your parents were born and where they grew up?

2-00:11:05

Jackson:

Oh, my mother is part Indian. She's a Sioux, but I think somewhere along the line I hear mentioned in her works that she was a Blackfoot. Her old grandfather was a Native American. Her father was in Indian school in upstate New York. He got into a religious school and he got very well-educated. He was accepted into the secret service. They would assign him as butler at different places and different things. He had taken my mother from up there—her and her sister—down to Tuskegee, Alabama. Evidently, he was stationed down that way somewhere. They went to the Tuskegee Institute. They got his sisters down there who end up to be teachers in there. My father, he came from Oklahoma, somewhere in Oklahoma that they have records to show that his mother had been born a slave and given some land. It came out later that on this land, there was big oil pools in the back yard. But in them days, a black person wouldn't have no—anyway, somebody got that oil land, because we had it tracked down in later years. We had lawyers go down and check. They had swindled it good. But anyway.

Anyway, he used to work for a pharmacist as a young boy, and he learned Latin. He used to be able to do the Latin for this old pharmacist. So, when he was sixteen, some army colonel comes from Fort [Sills?] and saw this young black boy—but he was big; he was tall and everything—and told this old pharmacist, "Let me have that boy, because he's brilliant. He ain't got no business here. Let me take him in the army, and then he can advance." So, evidently my father went into the army, at sixteen. He was in there quite a while. I don't know the whole history of it, but I did know the last station he had was in the Philippines. He was stationed in the Philippines and just before the end of World War I he was sent back to the States to go to school. He got out of the army and went to the University of San Francisco. He was a very brilliant man.

Later, we'll get into it, where he passed away. He finally found me, because I had been to sea and I had been to Africa. So, that covers that part.

2-00:14:39

Rigelhaupt:

Did he ever talk about any of his experiences in the Philippines?

2-00:14:44

Jackson:

I never got to talk about it. I was just born after all in 1918, when he came back from the Philippines in 1917. I never got to talk to him at all. I can remember him up in Washington and everything. For example, I can always remember the day my sisters and I were out in the fields

on Vashon Island, and we run across a bees nest, and boy, they stung my sisters so bad. They stung me too, but I didn't know. My father, he beat the pants off of me, because I didn't get stung. The next morning, I broke out. In other words, I must have been allergic for a while and then all of the sudden it came out. I remember that.

The other thing I remember that I can never forgive him for was he was going to teach me how to swim. So, what he did—a little three or four-year-old boy—he picked me up and threw me in Lake Puget Sound. It was cold and I went into convulsions. Do you know that I am eighty-six years old and do not swim? But, I'm not afraid of water and I'm not afraid of dying. That's why when I got torpedoed, I always had my life jacket. All of us did. We always kept our life jacket. Before we eat, we have our life jacket on. But I never could learn how to swim.

After the war, they sent me to a convalescent home in New Jersey, and one of the therapies was to teach me how to swim. What did they do? They sent three or four of the most beautiful girls I ever saw, and me just out of the war, and all of these beautiful girls are going to teach me how to swim. I never did learn how to swim. But that was one of things that I always remember about my father. He threw me in that Lake Puget Sound.

2-00:17:03

Rigelhaupt:

Could you talk about where you are with your siblings, the birth order?

2-00:17:06

Jackson:

In the what?

2-00:17:08

Rigelhaupt:

Do you have older sisters, younger sisters?

2-00:17:09

Jackson:

I'm the oldest. I'm born in 1918 and my other sister was born in 1917. She is a widow of an army colonel. My younger sister, which is {Anita?}, that works here on the ship and who is the nurse [Com?], she's one hell of a nurse. She is three years younger than me.

2-00:17:44

Rigelhaupt:

Could you talk a little bit about what your neighborhood was like in Berkeley?

2-00:17:49

Jackson:

Oh! That neighborhood was a nice neighborhood, it was. We had maybe four or five black families. We had Japanese families. We had a Chinese family, because they owned a market. We had a few French people that I knew and some Irish and Scotch people lived next door to me in Berkeley. They were all very nice. I could walk all over Berkeley. It's nothing like today. Everybody said hello. We always greeted our neighbors. Sometimes, I'd be broke and didn't have any money and wanted to go to a movie or something and, I'd go up and ask them, "Do you have some work that I could do to earn a few cents?" I've scrubbed people's kitchen floors on

my hands and knees in these areas. And the French lady up the street, she was always polite. And then there was another lady when I was delivering papers, she would always have an apple for me. The teachers and the kids—I was invited to a lot of Japanese kids' homes. But I was the only black guy that ever took the time to be friends with them. We became very fond of the Japanese. Even today, I have the highest respect for them. Our neighbor was Japanese and when they took them to the concentration camps or internment camps, well, my mother took over their homes and rented their homes and sent them the money. They took it and bought war bonds. How you doing? [to a newcomer]

[interview interruption]

2-00:19:55

Rigelhaupt:

Now, where was your house in Berkeley?

2-00:19:46

Jackson:

1621 Oregon Street in Berkeley was our last house, but we lived on Stuart Street, we lived on Russell Street, and let's see. We lived on, I think a couple of other places.

2-00:20:14

Rigelhaupt:

What were their cross streets with--?

2-00:20:15

Jackson:

Near California. Oregon Street is between California and McGee. The Stuart Street we lived between California and McGee. Russell Street, we lived between California and Grove. That was a nice little house. But remember that was during the Depression. It was during the Depression, and people had to move around. My mother had a hard time with just the three of us, because my father left. We made it. All of us had to work. My sisters worked. They used to go work in the kitchens for people up in the hills.

2-00:21:14

Rigelhaupt:

Was there a neighborhood church?

2-00:21:09

Jackson:

There was a church. Let me explain something. In our neighborhood there was a Baptist Church. There was a Christian Science—not a Christian Science, but a Church of God and Christ and a Methodist Church, there in the neighborhood. But my mother had a vision that she wouldn't dictate what church we go to, but she says, "You must go to some church every Sunday." So as I was travelling around Berkeley, delivering papers and all that and going to school, I would go to a different church almost every Sunday. I used to go to Catholic church sometimes, because I had one of my friends who just died, he was a devout Catholic. So, I went to Catholic church with him up there near the city hall. I used to go to Presbyterian churches and Anglican.

But, one time I was on Dwight Way, above Telegraph Avenue. It was a beautiful area. I used to deliver papers up there. They had this church that looked like a garden. So, I had seen it, so I decided one Sunday, "I'm going to go to that church." I changed my clothes and I went up to that church. And I walked in and a nice lady come and ushered me in to sit me down. Nobody turned their head. Everybody was listening to the speaker. Then after a while she came over and said, "How old are you?" and what grade you had and everything. They divide the kids up into four or five groups. It was the Christian Science church, the best church I ever belonged to. I stayed with them for a while.

I began to see—even my grades in school came up. I began to see that I got tired of hearing them preachers screaming and hollering in the Baptist Church. I even hate them today, because I could learn nothing. But in our little groups we would have a subject from {Mary Baker Eddy's?} key to the scripture. We'd pull the subject and then everybody would speak and say what they thought it meant. Then, when we all got finished, then the instructor would explain to us about it. So, we learned a lot of things. But, today in my heart—oh, the lady came, she asked, "Well, where do you live?" I told her. She says, "Do you think your mother would mind you coming to this church?" I said, "No, my mother said we've got to go to some church every Sunday." So, about a week later she came down to my house and talked to my mother. Evidently, whatever she said to my mother, my mother agreed, so my sisters and I went to this church. It was way up there. Now, I lived on California and we went way up to Telegraph on Dwight Way.

Then, guess what? Two other boys whose father is famous—Walter Gordon—his two sons went there with us. It was five of us that went to that Christian Science Church. And all of us came out tops in whatever field we were in. Both of the boys are lawyers and the father, Walter Gordon, ended up being the governor of the Virgin Islands. He was a friend of Earl Warren's. So, that was my religious background.

Every once in a while I get inspired by something. I'll walk by a church—like up in Finland, one Sunday morning, it was a beautiful day, the snow, but it was sunshine and everything, and I saw this cathedral on the hill. So I said, "Gee, I think I would like to go there." Because the people had been so nice. So, I went up to the church and opened the door and went in, and I sit down. A few people turned their head, and I noticed that the pastor was—I couldn't understand what they were saying. But anyway, he kind of nodded like, and when the service was over, I walked out and everybody got by the door. And he come up to see me. He spoke to me in English. "Young man, how did it happen that you come to this church today?" I says, "Well, I was walking by and I saw this beautiful cathedral and I thought I wanted to go in." He shook my hand and everything and everybody—ah, it was so nice. It was a nice day. I met some people through that. I had a lot of friends. Another time, I went to a synagogue. I went by a synagogue and I met all these young kids. They were celebrating some kind of day. So, they accepted me in and I was celebrating with them.

So, religion, I don't go in too much, because I've seen some much dirt, killing, murder, wrong things done by the rich and the poor and the good and the bad. You kind of lose faith. You do. You lose faith after a while. Like, you read the paper today, the guy kills four people and he's snubbing his nose at the people and stuff. When you think about this big thing over there in Asia there. I've been to that place in Thailand. And in Sri Lanka, the hospital ship *Hope* was there for ten months. So, I knew it like the back of my hand. All those people dying and everything, it's

enough make anybody lose faith. The only thing you can believe in is yourself and you do the best you can and help each other and don't do anything to harm nobody else, see. So, mostly the only time I go to church is if somebody dies. [laughs] I go to funerals. But I don't condemn anybody because they are religious or over-religious, but I condemn if they are not treating people like they want to be treated.

2-00:29:26

Rigelhaupt:

So, if we could talk a little about your mother—

2-00:29:30

Jackson:

Oh, my mother. I'll tell you. My mother was a very beautiful woman. I could see why my father loved her. I remember when she was young. She was real fair, she had nice hair, a beautiful face, very intelligent, but she was strict. But, she brought us a lot. Maybe that's why Anita is such a good nurse. Because we have a throwback of Indian lore, Indian medicine, a lot of the things that come from the Indians. My mother was really deep into Native American culture. For example, in my house, no one would kill a spider. We would take that spider outside. Certain things like that that was instilled in us. During the Depression, her being so intelligent and everything, and not given the opportunity that everybody else had, that's what made her get into civil rights and joining any kind of group that were fighting for equality. Although she had some of the finest and wealthiest and most intelligent friends among the white race, amongst the Japanese race, among the Orientals, among the Irish—all the other people that were good people, they just flocked to her, see.

When somebody from Berkeley wanted to run for office, usually their senior political leaders would say, "You'd better go down and talk to Miss Albrier," see. They used to come down often and talk to her. She was on first hand relations with the mayor and the city council and the judges and all that. She was on the State Democratic Central Committee from way back, and a friend of Earl Warren's, a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary Bethune-Cookman, all these big people that she met. In fact, when Earl Warren was governor—no, not Earl Warren, it was another guy that was governor. He would send his car down from Sacramento to bring her up to state affair dinner and everything. Yeah, she was a driving force in politics. But she was just so strict and sometimes awful mean.

She was so busy in politics, trying to correct all this wrong—like she fought to get Anita into that Highland Hospital nursing course. Later she fought so I could—they had this fair practice employment argument going on up in the state capitol, the pros and cons. So, she took my case up. She says, "Look-it, my son is born and raised in Berkeley and in California, yet he had to leave his home to go back east to be able to be an engineer in the merchant marine, after all the service he served during the war. He had to do that." That helped pass that fair practice employment law. She was dynamic that way, yeah.

2-00:33:58

Rigelhaupt:

But a very long time politically active in her--

2-00:34:03

Jackson:

Oh, from all the way back when they had the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. She was into all of that. They had a thing about Marcus Garvey, and she was into that. It goes way back. I can't remember all of the things she was in. But I do remember—she was, in 1941, when war was declared. And boy, the people were packing up, leaving the Bay Area. So a bunch of politicians got together down at the auditorium there in Oakland, and they were speaking about, “No, we've got to fight, we've got to stay.” So, she stood up and she said, “Look, my children are raised here and born here, and that's my house, and I will stand with my guns on top of my house to stop any invaders!” She got a standing ovation. Because all these well-to-do white people were moving. They were going away from the coasts. And that's true and a lot of people don't know, don't realize that.

Being a nurse, she was in the Red Cross ambulance, first one accepted in the white Red Cross ambulance unit that brought the bodies from the battleships, from sailors on the battleships to the mortuaries. She drove that run from Vallejo all the time. Then she went to school to learn to be a welder. She took the course twice so she could be perfect. Then she came down to Kaiser here in Richmond and they told her she couldn't weld, because she didn't belong to their union. They wouldn't let belong to it. They said, “We've got an auxiliary union for the black people.” They were all helpers and sweepers and all that. She said, “No, no, no, I came down here to be a welder.” Then she went back in contact with her political cronies, and they got to Mr. Kaiser, and Mr. Kaiser said, “No, no, that's not going to happen,” fired the personnel guy. So they could have separate unions, but that had to weld and burn and be machinists and shipbuilders like anybody else. So, she fought for that and she stayed six months, but she says the weather was too bad. Actually the weather is terrible over here.

So then she went to the army post office and stayed there until the rest of the war.

2-00:37:16

Rigelhaupt:

Did your mother talk at all about the Garvey movement while you were growing up, or what do you remember about that?

2-00:37:18

Jackson:

I don't remember much about that Marcus Garvey. We got the books and the letters and everything. She was for it. It was something to get the black people thinking.

2-00:37:39

Rigelhaupt:

Then, in her work with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters?

2-00:37:41

Jackson:

Oh, yeah, because she married a guy, Mr. Albrier. He was a very good man. He was like a club car man, a waiter on the Pullman service there. Very nice, he was a wonderful step-father. A lot of things I owe to him. He was a very, very good man. She was really into that. In that day, all the black women—they were society. [laughs] Because the Sleeping Car Porters, even though it was a menial job, but they did elevate their—the kids had good homes and went to good schools

and got good education. All the kids that grew up with me, most of their fathers worked for the railroad. And they all went to college and got to be big sports guys and lawyers and everything. Yeah. That was the thing in them days. When you would say, “A. Phillip Randolph,” that was one of her idols. He was a Sleeping—so was the guy who won the Nobel Peace prize. Who was the black guy, the first guy to win the Nobel Peace prize? I can’t think of his name.

2-00:39:06

Washburn:

What’s his name? He was the United Nations--

2-00:39:10

Jackson:

Yeah, the United Nations under this Swedish guy.

2-00:39:14

Washburn:

[] had a thing up the other day. Bunche.

2-00:39:17

Jackson:

Ralph Bunche, yeah. He was also a Sleeping Car. So, just riding the train doing manual work, we had guys with degrees in education. I remember a lot of those guys. They couldn’t get nothing down south, they couldn’t get nothing out here, so they went on the railroad. That way they could make enough money. They were clever and sharp enough. They got lots of tips and everything and they didn’t put it in bars and whiskey; they put it in their families. So, their kids grew up leaders. Because we had better homes, a better environment. Not like it is down there in Oakland and Richmond now. It’s not like that.

2-00:40:12

Rigelhaupt:

And your mother worked with C.L. Dellums?

2-00:40:15

Jackson:

Oh yeah, she was one of his staunch supporters. Yeah, with Ron Dellums and Barbara Lee. Yeah! Before that, there were others around that time. Do you know what? One year, I was at sea and I came home for a couple of days and a Chinese guy had a meat market on Sacramento and Ashby. It was where we all went to buy our meat. Well, later he decided he was going to make a supermarket. So, he buys the building and expands it and makes a supermarket. But he didn’t hire anybody but Chinese. So, my mother and all the thinkers, even the Japanese and the Mexicans—she got them together and said, “Now, this can’t happen.” She put up a sign and put a desk out in front of the store and got a picket line and everybody, white, black, Oriental, and everything, walked this picket line and said, “Do not buy where you can’t work.” Shut him down! Right there in Berkeley. She was out there. I just happened to come through one day and saw. Anyway, he found out that he couldn’t win.

So, what he did—he hired a Japanese, he hired a white girl, he hired a real fair black girl, because we had a lot of the girls from Louisiana that were very fair, and one little colored boy. So, my mother said, “That ain’t going to happen. You going to hire you a black girl. You can

keep this other girl, and you are going to hire a Japanese and you're going to hire a Mexican." So, he finally had to do it. The store right now is the same thing. He moved across the street at King's Market. He's dead and gone, but he was bringing all these Chinese in that couldn't even speak English. And they're taking the neighborhood's money and not contributing nothing. Of course, she got famous over that.

She organized a lot of young men's clubs and young students' clubs and everything. Also, she was a mentor for the University of California foreign students. They used to have their club. I guess they still got it, the foreign students' club. She kind of adopted a boy from Ceylon, Sri Lanka, named [Basanaki?]. She used to wash his clothes, help him have dinner parties, like a foster mother, like. Years later, I'm on the hospital ship *Hope*, and we go into Sri Lanka. So, I call my mother and told her I'm going to Sri Lanka. She called [laughs] young [Basanaki?], and boy, when that ship hit the dock in Colombo, his father was setting right there! And been there for ten hours waiting for that ship, so he wouldn't miss me. His father and his mother and his brothers and sisters, they took a house and reconverted it into a nice home, so that my wife and daughter could go there, but they didn't come, so I end up divorcing her. Yeah, they renovated this nice house! My kid was going to go to this very private school there. That same family said, "You are our son." They were the highest society of Colombo, of Sri Lanka. It wasn't called Sri Lanka then; it was called Ceylon. So, I had a wonderful ten-month stay there, because I'd have to go report to them.

2-00:44:59

Rigelhaupt:

Did you mother talk about her involvement at all with the National Negro Congress that A. Phillip Randolph was involved with?

2-00:45:06

Jackson:

Anything that Phillip Randolph was in, she was in. A lot of other things. She was the president, one time, of the National Negro Women's Club. That was another big club they had for all the women. Oh, I can't think of the names of all those clubs she belonged to. But all those national clubs she was in—NAACP, anything. She could put her finger on a number and say, "Call this number," and you'd get redress. Yep. How are you doing?

2-00:45:59

Rigelhaupt:

Great. If you could just start talking generally about the 1934 Strike in San Francisco.

2-00:46:09

Jackson:

The strike actually started in 1935. Maybe it was in '34, but in 1935, that's when I got involved. I decided that—my mother was putting too much pressure on me, so I ran away from home. I used to take jobs in San Francisco. I went to the CCC camp for three months. Then I come back and start doing picket duty along the waterfront in San Francisco and listening to what all of the old salts had to say and making up a story about I was a messman. That was my job on the ship. Anyway, nobody cared as long as somebody's carrying a picket {burden? Buoy?}. But they had places for you to eat where the strikers could eat and everything. They had the Evans Hotel where you could sleep for eight hours, the longshoremen and the strikers and everything. So, I

used to work, at this particular time, I worked in the soup kitchen on 84 Embarcadero, right between Mission and Market, the upstairs, they had all of the farmers, they'd bring in all the food, and they had all these black cooks to help prepare food.

So, one morning, I'm coming down the street there and all of the sudden the waterfront is just loaded with these policemen. It wasn't troops, but it was a lot of policemen riding horseback and they were shooting and everything. They had a hotel where the seamen used to stay called the Seaboard Hotel. I ran into the Seaboard Hotel, and they had some cops come and chase me in on a horse in the front door. I'm only sixteen. Anyway, I get out of that and I ran down to the Embarcadero and just as I turn the corner, I hear all hell break loose. And that's when they shot and killed those four or five longshoremen. I ran up to the soup kitchen and that was all hell all along the waterfront then.

I come out of there later and just in front of the Ferry Building, near the corner there was a Greek shoe shop. As I go by, somebody shot a tear gas thing at me, and I ran into this Greek shoe store. When I get inside, that miserable son of a bitch, he made me go back out in that tear gas. That never left me. I went years—anytime until they closed that guy down, anytime I'd go back and open that door and call him a bunch of son of a bitches. I really hated. He said, "Well know...I was scared." Here I am, just a kid. And you know what was odd about it? I was wearing a boy-scout uniform shirt! Yeah.

Later, they picked me up in front of the Cook's and Stewards' hall, and they took me to jail, up on Kearney Street! I was in there for two days, and I had what was called a kangaroo court. The judge came down to the jail to talk. He looked at me, he says, "Son are you a boy scout?" I said, "Yes sir." He says, "Repeat the scout oath." I said, "On my honor I'll do my best. I'll do my duty to God and country and to help other people at all times, and keep myself—" He said, "What's this boy doing in here." He said, "Son, are you on the--?" I said, "Yeah, I was on the picket line, coming from the cook's union." He says, "All right, take this five dollars and go home." I didn't go home, but that was what—it was so odd that he had me recite the Boy Scout oath in front of all the prisoners there. That was one time I was lucky. I didn't get harmed or anything, because everybody was strikers, everybody was poor, everybody was hungry.

2-00:51:16

Rigelhaupt:

So, you are describing the tear gas and all this, but then there was a general strike, right?

2-00:51:27

Jackson:

That was the general strike. When they had been striking for over three or four months. It got so that in San Francisco, if you had a picket tag on you, you could ride the streetcar, and the conductors wouldn't charge you. I used to go up Market Street, ride the streetcar around, or if you go in and you told somebody you were hungry, somebody would give you something to eat. It looked like the people were on the side of the strikers. Because we weren't violent. They didn't do any violence. But what they did was that they hired all them rednecks from Oklahoma and shipped them out there and give them jobs, and give them a badge and give them a gun. See. That started it. That broke their back. After that, the strike was over. I got my first ship.

2-00:52:28

Rigelhaupt:

How do you think witnessing that general strike in San Francisco affected your political outlook?

2-00:52:34

Jackson:

Well, at that age—well, let's go back to when I was going to school. We learned a lot of civics, all about the government and how the government runs and our obligations to be a citizen and all that, see. So, in my little mind at that time, I believed what the union officials were saying. Why should all these big rich people be getting all the money and making slaves out of the poor seamen and the longshoreman? And everybody's getting the money, and we had no way to redress! For example, if I went down for a job, at that time, you go down to the waterfront—this has happened a little after, the reason why I've got any experience, this happened a little after the strike, before the unions got control of hiring—these harbormasters, they controlled who got hired. So, if the captain wanted, he would send the mate out and say, "Get me three or four AB's." The mate would stand out on the dock like he was God, and there would be fifty men out there, veteran seamen, and trying to get a job, holding up for the job, and he'd pick one or two. But, then, in the palm of your hand, you had to piece them off. The same way with the engine department, the same way with the steward department. That was the way it was before the strike. Even a little after, until the unions said, "This can't work. You've got to have the job on a rotation basis. The oldest man gets the job. Seniority gets the job."

So, I believed in that. I came up under that. But, during the war, there were so many jobs, you didn't even worry about where you got it from, unless you belonged to a union. And by that time the war come on, I was deep into the unions. When I left the West Coast and went to the East Coast, shoot, man, I was at the union hall every meeting. I never missed a meeting.

I'd wait my turn, but what used to piss me off was you'd look at this board—now we are still no black in the deck department and no black in the engine department. But then they had five white messmen, three black messmen, or colored messmen or whatever they want to call it, see. In the same department, this ship had an all white steward department, the next ship had an all black steward department. This is the way they wanted it. They had the {Clyde-Mowry?} line which ran down to Jacksonville in Florida and Texas and everything. They were mostly all black. All the ships that run to Puerto Rico were all Puerto Rican, see. And all the ships than run to Vera Cruz in Mexico, they were white or Mexican. Or if they had a few U.S. line ships that went to Europe, half of them would be white and the other half would be black. It's the same thing. But a little better than they had out in the West Coast.

But when the war come on, buddy, I was in the steward department. And after I went to that Battle of the North Atlantic and I seen what was going on, and the way our seamen were dying and everything, I was listening to my mother. She says, "You can be anything you want to be." So, when I come back, I told them, "If I'm going to die in this war, I ain't going to die serving food." And that, in 1942, was the big change. It spread all over. It took me three or four days before I could get my job secured, but good people down at the Coast Guard and the shipping commissioner and the union stood up and said, "If he can fight and he can die, he can work." That was what I held on to. But, like before, during the other day, you had to play it by ear, because you were so few anyway. But in the war, we had voice. Just like our fighter pilots and our tank battalions that finally got recognized.

You'd be surprised by the things that went on on the ships and we didn't get recognized. I stayed four and a half months at a hospital in Trinidad. I had been torpedoed down there. This is the second time. And you know when a merchant seaman, when he got torpedoed, he didn't get paid. You don't get paid when you lose your ship. So, I'm four and a half months in the hospital down there in Trinidad. Lucky, I got word to my mother where I was and she sent me some pajamas and some sheets, because they had canvas sheets and I had been suffering from burns from fuel oil and my skin was all raw and everything, had a couple of broken ribs and everything. That's the way it was. When I came back and I went down there and got my fireman's job, and from then on, I went on, but then I had to take a lot of crap, too. A lot of it wasn't from the big guys, it was from the little guys.

Imagine, I'm twenty-two or twenty-three years old. I'm the oldest guy on the crew on the ship. Everybody's sixteen and seventeen and eighteen and nineteen years old, right off the farm and everything. And here's this little old boy, he's got a fireman ticket and I've got a fireman ticket, but I got over him, so I got the 48 watch. Every time I go down to the fire room, that ship was smoking like a sun of a gun. Normally, well you'd say, "Well the burners are dirty." So, you go on watch at four and you eat at five, so you've got an hour to change all the burners. Boy, I go down there and I'm meticulous, boy, I mean like I am on this ship. Everything is just so. I change those burners and I change—he comes down to relieve me at twenty minutes to five to go eat. So I goes up and it's smoking, but when I come down it's not smoking. This is a sixteen or seventeen year old boy. So, after two days of watching that smoke, every time I'd come down, that smoke, I refused to go eat. I stayed down there.

We had a Norwegian first engineer. He'd come out to the fire room and he said, "Bill, what's the matter?" I says, "Chief, it's smoking, and I can't understand why it's smoking. I just changed all the burners. Everything is looking right." So, he says, "Try it again. Go on up and eat." I said, "No, I'm not going up until I find out what's the matter." He went up to the mess and the chief was a German. So, this old German guy left his food. He told the messmen, "Leave my food there, I'll be back." So, he comes down below and he's quiet. He says, "Bill what's the matter?" I said, "I just changed all these burners." He says "Will you do it again?" I says, "Yes, sir." By that time, I'm weak, because I'm sweating like a hog and we're off the coast of South America. I change all the burners. In the meantime, it's still smoking, but he's looking. He's watching.

Finally, we have three fuel service pumps and they're stacked and they're steam-driven duplex pumps. Not modern, like we got now. There's three of them. So what happened was—he noticed that one of the lines that lead to the steam gauge line was hooked up to the fuel oil. In other words, hot steam was going into the fuel oil and the fuel oil was putting it into the burners, causing it to smoke. He picked it up right away. He called me over and says, "Bill, did you change anything here?"

Begin Jackson, William 3 031605.wav

3-00:00:11

Rigelhaupt:

So you were in the Marine Cooks and Stewards from about 1934 to 1940?

3-00:00:18

Jackson:

1935 to past 1937 when I went to the East Coast. In 1937, I went to the East Coast and joined [NMU?].

3-00:00:32

Rigelhaupt:

Before getting there, what do you remember about the Marine Cooks and Stewards union?

3-00:00:38

Jackson:

Not too much. I was on this passenger ship. The first ship I was on was a passenger ship called the *H.F. Alexander*. That was one of the coast wide passenger ships that ran from Los Angeles, San Francisco, to Seattle. It was a very fast ship and it was like the queen of the sea at that time. But she rolled too much. It was a German ship called the *Northeastern*. The U.S. had taken it from Germany after World War I. I stayed on that a while, but on that ship, all the steward department was black, except the chief steward and the second steward. They all had quarters aft, what they call the "glory hole." I was busboy. I worked twelve hours a day. You served your meal, you'd finish serving your meal, you'd clean up. Then you'd have to come and polish the stairway and all kinds of stuff like that, for thirty dollars a month. That was your base.

I was at a table where the waiter had a big party from Hollywood. It was the first time I ever saw a hundred-dollar bill. When that party left, the guy left the tip for a hundred-dollar bill for a waiter. So you could see where those sleeping car porters and the people who worked on passenger ships, they made a lot of extra money. It was the reason why they were able to give their families a lot more than a guy out there digging ditches or sweeping the street.

So anyway, I couldn't stand on it because I didn't gamble. If you were to go finish your work up in the passenger quarters and go down in that hole, all you smelled was smoke. There was three things going on down there: gambling, smoking, and drinking. I couldn't put up with that. Even though I was young, I was only sixteen. So, anyway, I got off of there and that's when I caught the freighter that went to China, Japan, and the Philippines.

3-00:03:12

Rigelhaupt:

Were you in the union when you were working on that freighter that went to Japan?

3-00:03:18

Jackson:

Oh yeah, that was a union freighter. I got that out of the Marine Cooks and Stewards union hall. What had happened was—something, I wasn't doing nothing in May, and I happened to go over to the hall and see how many jobs to see my chances of getting a job when I get out of school. So I looked up and there was this job on the board and nobody was taking. So, man, I got to thinking and I got to thinking, "Man, if I let this job go, I may not get none." So, I took the job and left school ahead of time. Boy, my parents never forgave me for that. That's when I took the job and went over. It was an old beat up freighter, ancient, not very well kept, but a bunch of good sturdy seamen on it. We went to Japan first and then China. Then we came back and load copper from the Philippines. In those days, you go in the port, you stayed ten, twelve, fourteen days. So you had a chance to see. I spent all my young years going to sea. Even when I got older,

man, like when I went to Desert Storm and we were sent back down to Singapore for repairs and we was there six weeks at the shipyard there in Singapore and put up in a first class hotel and an air-conditioned bus to take us to the ship every morning. And the weekends off. [claps hands] I was gone, boy. On the weekends, I made every tour of that island they had to see what Singapore was like.

When I come away from Singapore, boy, nothing but respect for what can be done, if people work together. But you have to have laws. You have to be strict with your laws. You do not throw gum on the street. You do not commit a crime. If you do, you go to jail. And when you go to jail, you will get those lashes. You hurt somebody, you will get those lashes see. We baby our convicts. Over there, they don't! They caught a Nigerian guy and a Dutch woman, when I was there, with dope. Six weeks later, off went their head. Nobody said nothing. The papers don't make a big deal out of it. They don't give a sob story or nothing. That was it. If you were to go in there with one stick of marijuana that might get you twenty or thirty lashes. Remember, not long ago about that little old boy was spraying the graffiti around there. He got his lashes. That guy told President Clinton to go jump over the side. You can walk in that area any time you want and nobody bothers you. Everything is clean. Everybody is working. There ain't no homeless. You don't see that, because everybody can work. You see a sixty-year-old women out there sweeping the street every morning. You don't see graffiti on these nice developments. You don't see nothing like that, and they go real high. Everybody owns his own apartment.

So, I know, when you talk about the bible and you talk about justice. We've corrupted justice so bad that now we can't even straighten it out. But they straightened theirs out before and now they don't have any problem.

3-00:07:45

Rigelhaupt:

While you were still on the West Coast, do you remember any of the union leaders who were from the Marine Cooks and Stewards?

3-00:08:01

Jackson:

No, I only remember one. Rutherford, that was the only one I know. He was a descendent of a black politician from Mississippi. It was young Rutherford. He was a patrolman. There was another guy but I can't remember the name. I've run across him once in a while. I mean that I've run across the name.

3-00:08:34

Rigelhaupt:

Was that gentleman perhaps [Revels Catton?]?

3-00:08:37

Jackson:

[Revels Catton?!] That was the guy. I thought of Rutherford, no. [Revels Catton?], yeah, he was the patrolmen for the Marine Cooks and Stewards when I left.

3-00:08:55

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get to know him at all?

3-00:08:55

Jackson:

No, no, he was too big. [chuckles] All I could do was go to the meetings. At that time, you had to go to a meeting before you could ship.

3-00:09:11

Rigelhaupt:

Did he uphold the union principles?

3-00:09:13

Jackson:

Oh, yeah! Yeah. He did. He brought fairness and justice in the union. He was a good leader. I don't know whether he got to be president of or not. Yeah, I guess he got to be. No, I don't think so, because there was somebody else. The big guy, [Harry Lundberg], he was the deck department. I don't remember the guy who was {MFOW?}. I don't remember the guy who was in the Cooks and Stewards either, no. Because I didn't stay around there that long. And then when I went to the East Coast, it was [Joe Kern?]. Everything was [Joe Kern?], but they had a lot of black leaders there too that I got to know pretty well. I knew [Joe Kern?]. I went to his wedding one time.

3-00:10:13

Rigelhaupt:

You described things as far as racial tension--there was less of it in the unions on the East Coast.

3-00:10:23

Jackson:

Yeah, it was a lot less on the—well, there wasn't tension on the West Coast. It was, you knew where you were and that's where you were That's what you did. You did follow whatever the custom was. On the East Coast, they had it kind of a little bit different, because remember on the East Coast, you have all those thousands of black seamen from the West Indies! And some from Africa. They all had different ideas. They were veteran seaman. You couldn't deny a sailor if he was black and he was from the West Indies, he could sail around the world, and nobody could stop him. They were sailors in them days, see. But they did try to keep us out of the engine room. That's where I run up against it, because they tried to keep us out of the engine room. They wanted us to stay in the steward department. So, that's where I stayed until 1942.

3-00:11:36

Rigelhaupt:

Could you talk a little bit about that experience you had while you were sailing up—I think it's called the Mermansk Run? The ship was sunk and you took the guns. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

3-00:11:57

Jackson:

This is an old ship that I'm sailing on. We have pretty much a young crew. We came out of New York. When I came aboard the ship, I talked with the steward. Of course I was smarter than the steward half the time. Anybody could be steward if you knew how to cook. But I just didn't like to cook. I didn't like being near no oven, so I always took a messmen's job. I was pretty literate. I knew how to read and write and everything. Everybody was, I could say, we were all disorientated. Anyway, you did what you thought was best. We had this captain, kind of a young

guy. He was a pretty nice old guy. He'd come around and he'd talk to the crew when they're working on deck. He said, "Son, we're going north." You didn't really know where you were going unless you were clever enough to read the markings on the cargo on the big boxes on the deck. So, anyway the captain says, "I guess you know we're going north." I said, "Wow." He says, "Well, look it, I've got an idea. You talk it up."

See, I was twenty-something. I was more savvy about ships than most of the guys that just come aboard the ship. I had been to sea. I had been from '35 and then I went back. In '37, I started steady and had been all over Africa. In 1940, I was one of the first ships to leave the United States to help the British over in Suez. I took cargo over there and back. And then in '41, on the biggest freighter in the world, we went down to Australia with all these supplies, the first American troop supplies landed, in Australia. When I come back from there, we stopped in South America and we took a load of nitrate. A whole eight hatches of nitrate to Savannah Georgia! Then when I went to New York and got on this ship, the *Courageous*.

So, anyway, he said, "Listen, I want everybody to donate two bottles of whiskey and two cartons of cigarettes." He explained to us, "We're going where it's cold and we may just need it." So sure enough, I was the delegate. I went down to the crew and told the crew what the old man said. Sure enough, the next morning, everybody come by with their two bottles of booze and two cartons of cigarettes. So they divided them up in the four lifeboats, secured them good, wrapped them good. It would have been nice if they had had that plastic like they come now. So, anyway we had them secured.

We finally left port and started out on the Atlantic. All you could see for miles and miles is ships, these convoys for-- We head up the coast of Newfoundland. So we pull into Halifax. There was another port where some of the ships would be here, some of the ships would lay anchor. Of course, they were trying to avoid the submarines. So, finally they get to convoy and they got all of the escorts together, all the cruisers and the destroyers and stuff. Finally, we leave there and start for England. We're zigzagging and every once in a while, whoom! You'd see a big ball of fire and there goes another ship. Then we head up around the Orkney Islands in Northern Scotland, there. That's when hell broke loose, because we are starting over in Norway where the Germans had all those airbases.

For days in and days out, we're fighting. We're general quarters. At general quarters, you do you watch down below or in the steward department, wherever you are and then you go on deck to your battle station. Somebody's battle station may be down in the ammunition locker for the big anti-aircraft guns. If you were qualified, like mine, you had an anti-aircraft gun. Assistant. I was a loader. The navy gun crew was really in charge. So, I'd be up there from dawn to sunset, you'd be in general quarters. So you never really got any sleep. You dozed and you would wake up and by the time you'd wake up, it was time for you to go to work. And when you'd get finish with work, and you'd want to doze, it would be time for general quarters again. So planes, after all, they made mercy. Imagine, seventy three ships in my convoy went up. And they got twenty-three ships, including the one I'm on, off of Norway, way up north in the cold. But we had one thing in our favor—it was daylight. It was in July.

So this day we knew something was going wrong, because we were zigzagging and we had to break the convoy to dodge these Wolfpack submarines. Finally, one hit. I heard this noise and

Jesus Christ, the ship shuddered and then stopped. Of course, I'm all ready. We didn't have general quarters at that time, because there was no airplanes, this was just submarines. So, I put my gear on and everything, of course. In conditions like that you are just numb. But having been in convoys and battles before, I was a little cooler than the younger guys, and knowing that I can't swim. [chuckles]

Orders came down to abandon ship. The ship started to roll like this. List like this. Everything went to one side. We had to crawl along the bulkheads and get out on deck and try to lower those lifeboats on the side. So, we're just laying there, but the ship is gradually going down. When we got as much of our guys in the boats as we can and we was able to push away. The ship had still settled a little more, but it hadn't gone down. And she didn't take a steep climb like that, because we were hit in the midship. If we were hit by the bow or something, we probably would have went down. So, anyway, we were able to get away from the ship and drift over. We had our lines together holding the two lifeboats together and drifted away. And then we saw this submarine come up. The submarine came up and cruised over by where we were and this old German skipper asked, "Is anybody hurt, do you need any medical care, anything?" Our captain said, "No," and cussed him out. [chuckles] So, this submarine said, "Okay." Then he changed his sub around. Phew! [Torpedoed simulated noise] Two more torpedoes and sunk it. Now that ship lasted so long, because she was a riveted ship. She wasn't a welded like a Liberty. She was an old World War I ship. Excuse me a minute, will you?

[interview interruption]

3-00:21:28

Washburn:

So, it just sank and it was a riveted ship.

3-00:21:31

Jackson:

Yeah, and the water was cold. And he was lucky that he didn't hit the hatches where we had the ammunition. So, anyway, we saw the ship blow. That's the saddest feeling you ever want to see, when you see a ship go down. That's your home, your food, your energy, everything is gone. The submarine, all of the sudden, he took off. They were afraid a plane would pick them up. Anyway, we're setting there in the water and trying to get ourselves together. I had the special jacket the navy gave us for cold weather, but I had smart enough sewed an extra scarf inside, an extra pair of gloves, a pair of wool socks, all my papers, identification and everything, all in this.

But we had this little kid, and one day before we got sunk, I walked by his room and he's laying up there with no clothes on. He said, "I can't sleep with no clothes on." Of course, the ship was warm, because we got steam in the quarters. So, he's laying there with no clothes on. I says, "Boy, you don't do that, son. This is war!" So, I just went by. After we got hit, I was leaving my quarters, and I see this guy running out standing there frozen. He couldn't move! With no clothes on! So went up to him and [smack sound] popped him a couple of times and then I got a blanket off the bed and put it on him and threw some clothes in his arms and pushed him out and somebody else got him to the lifeboat.

Now, when I'm in the lifeboat, this guy is really freezing. He's really in trouble, because the blanket is not keeping him warm and his hands are freezing and all that. So, the captain seen that

I had my extra gloves. And they're dry, see. So, the captain says, "Well, hey, you give him your gloves and that scarf you got. Otherwise he's going to freeze to death." In the meantime somebody is trying to dry some pants that he could put on. I told him no! The captain pulled his gun out and says, "Bill don't make me do it. You've got to do it." Anyway, I had to give them. I cussed that guy every morning, until we got back to the States. Yeah. Because my hands had got wet, see. While I was working and moving and handling lines and everything and rolling, I didn't bother too much until I would stop and then my hands started getting cold, and I was going in to put my own dry gloves on, and I didn't have them.

So, we survived by a set of rules that the mariners have. We got so much hard tack, so much water you'd drink a day. You'd row a while. You'd sing. Of course you can't poo-poo no more, because you're not eating nothing. But every twice a day, we'd get our little two shots of grog, you know. That alcohol really helped out. It helped our stomachs. It really helped us survive. So, we are out there for five days, just rowing. We're heading toward Norway, but we see all these bodies floating by, and life boats upturned and all this debris all over and everything, so you knew there had been a lot of sinking going on.

Finally after about five days, we looked up one day and we saw a spot coming along the horizon and it was one of those Canadian corvettes. You ever saw a fishing trawler like they have on the East Coast, those big fishing trawlers? Well, that's what this was. It had a little three-inch gun, sitting on the bow there, and a steam engine on it. And they picked us up. They said they had been warned that there were some survivors in the area. I guess a plane must have spotted us or something and given them the message. So, they picked us up and they ran. About two days later we joined a convoy and they had this British passenger ship. They had it all cemented and blocked and full of guns. They called it an armed merchant cruiser. She was a survival ship. These survivor ships would pick you up and bring you and put you on there. That's where you rode.

Everything was rationed though. You got a little food and you worked and you stood watches and all that, and manned your guns until you were taken off. So, I finally got back to England. They sent us to this Charing Cross hospital in London. Boy, that was some place. That was something to see. All these wounded people, those soldiers and sailors and marines. Oh. Everybody was—they weren't crazy or acting crazy. They were so helpful and courteous and kind! All of the women and young kids that are helping, and the old grandfathers and grandmothers. Everybody is so willing to help give you a hand.

So this day, I remember the doctor came in the interrogation room. You have to be interrogated when you go through something like that. He was telling us, he says, "Now, you men, your resistance is very low and you've been through a trauma. Now, what I want you to do is lay off of booze for a while. A beer now and then is okay, but don't get into drinking hard whiskey and all that Scotch and everything." But he didn't get out the door, when these guys are pulling these bottles out from under the bed! They had done bribed the orderlies to bring them some whiskey. So the captain--I always hung around where the captain was, because I was one of the older guys and sane guys. We looked at them guys, just shake our head, boy. Do you know I tracked those guys after the war and ain't none of them living? The last time I saw one of them was in about '79, and he was an old dealer. He was all shot. When the war was over, they were all alcoholics. They never advanced or never did anything.

3-00:29:36

Washburn:

Can I ask you real quick though—wasn't that thing with the merchant marines, when every time you got sunk, you'd get paid a certain amount for getting sunk.

3-00:29:44

Jackson:

No.

3-00:29:41

Rigelhaupt:

I've interviewed another merchant marine where he said if you get sunk, you get paid a certain amount of money.

3-00:29:51

Jackson:

No, we never got one—

3-00:29:53

Washburn:

And that was the whole jealousy between—

3-00:29:53

Jackson:

The Armed Forces.

3-00:29:58

Washburn:

You've got the navy guys on the ship and they're not getting paid anything, but they got their pensions afterwards. The merchant marines didn't. But when they got sunk, the navy guys who were on there manning the guns didn't get paid for getting sunk. This guy was, "Every time we got paid a certain amount of money, and we're getting paid—"

3-00:30:17

Jackson:

I've got all kinds of things in there to tell you. A merchant seaman, when he signed on an article, got his base pay plus a war bonus. It wasn't too much. Like, when I was a junior engineer, I made seventy-three dollars a month and I'd get a 100 and something dollar war bonus, when I was in a war area. But when the ship was sunk, our pay stopped! We did not get one penny. I got it down here. Somewhere, I have it here.

3-00:31:06

Washburn:

Maybe that's what he was explaining.

3-00:31:08

Jackson:

The armed guard, their pay went on! But they didn't get that bonus. But that bonus was only about thirty-five dollars for being in that zone.

3-00:31:21

Washburn:

Well, talk briefly about the relationship between those navy guys who were on the boat. There were about a dozen of them or something?

3-00:31:26

Jackson:

Twenty-seven. You usually had twenty-seven.

3-00:31:26

Washburn:

And the merchant marines. Because the merchant marines were getting paid more but they didn't have all the perks. They didn't have the USO.

3-00:31:35

Jackson:

They didn't have uniforms. We didn't get any benefits the armed forces got.

3-00:31:46

Washburn:

Was that talked about on the boat?

3-00:31:47

Jackson:

No, nobody paid no attention to that. You'd see the armed guard everyday. You got to know them. You get friends with them, but they kind of stayed to themselves, because they got their gunnery officer or the chief petty officer that tried to keep them navy. They tried to explain to them that they were navy and they were gunners. Half of them were so damned young you didn't have nothing in common with the merchant men! We had a lot of young ones in the merchant marines, but we had a lot of old salts in the merchant marines. But you wanted to train those young salts. When the chips was down and the ships were sinking, it was the old salts that brought the navy out. When they couldn't fire their guns no more, they're useless. No, but the navy does take care of its own. At the merchant marines, we didn't have nobody to take care of us.

3-00:32:45

Washburn:

You guys had tons of young kids on there though. [crosstalk] How did they deal with—they knew that they had a whole cadre of kids who were lying about their age to get on the merchant marines.

3-00:33:00

Jackson:

As long as they did their job!

3-00:33:03

Washburn:

Can you describe that? For people who don't know who might listen to this, can you explain that kids did lie about their age? And why did they do that? Why didn't they want to just stay at home? Can you tell that story?

3-00:33:19

Jackson:

I can tell you my own position, when I was sixteen and went to sea. I wanted to get away from home. I wanted to do something. I wanted to see something. I wanted to be a part of something. The kids that joined the merchant marines, they had heard stories about these merchant ships and what they'd been doing and where they go and all that. Most of them couldn't even get in the armed forces. Lots of them couldn't get in there! So they joined the merchant marine! At that time, they had all kinds of banners of "Join the Merchant Marine" and all that. It encouraged the kids that if they couldn't get in the armed forces, they'd go in the merchant marines. They were doing the same thing that the navy was doing, carrying them damned supplies on these ships, but under a civilian kind of a—less military. That's the reason why a lot of them went in, because it was less military, see. If you signed in the navy, like my son is down there at Miramar now, but I might wake tomorrow and he may be over there in Afghanistan or something, you know. But he's a marine, that's what he wants. He don't want to go to Afghanistan, because he signed to go to the Pacific, to Japan.

3-00:34:50

Washburn:

But the merchant marines, they knew kids were lying about their age.

3-00:34:54

Jackson:

Sure they knew, but they needed bodies. They needed men. So, they would take anything to come along. It's the same way right now. Now, on account of the war, they don't want to go into the army no more. The marine recruiters aren't having much of a problem getting marines. There's just some kids that want to be something or get away from home. Most of these guys come from back in the Midwest. All in Kansas and Iowa and all those places. I'm in Pearl Harbor there, and I'm taking fuel for my ship, and here comes this big barge, almost as big as the ship and here comes this little old girl on it. She's a Navy seaman, must have been a pumpman for the petroleum park. We're bunking fuel together and she's telling me about she's from Iowa. It's a national phenomenon where if they were to call for the merchant marine today, I bet you'd get a whole lot of people. Half of them don't know what the merchant marine is.

For example, I was retired down there in Costa Rica there in 1990. And I belonged to the American Legion down there. We had an American Legion post down there. One of the guys from the post came down, and he says, "Bill, they need you mad back in the states for Desert Storm. They have all these ships and they don't have nobody who has the steam experience that can run one of the ships like you can." So, I said, "Well hell, I'm going back too." Same mentality as that sixteen-year-old you are talking about that wanted to go to sea. I reverted right back. They needed me, I went. It's the same thing. There's some things you've got to do. I moved my family back to the United States. We had been down there for five years; I'm moving them back to the United States. I went down to the union hall and in one hour, I had a ticket for my plane to leave the next day to go to the Persian Gulf. In one hour, that's how bad they needed engineers. But it's the same thing as that kid you're talking about at sixteen, getting in the merchant marine. Only I knew what to expect, because we were waiting—all we were watching for was those Scud missiles. When I arrived there in Jeddah, boy, we were waiting for one of those Scuds to come over. That's how that works.

3-00:38:02

Rigelhaupt:

Could you talk about the first job you got in the engine room?

3-00:38:10

Jackson:

That is one I could never forget. After going through the Coast Guard and going through where this first engineer refused to hire me for this *Excelsior*—American Export Line ship. They told him that if I didn't sail the ship, he couldn't sail. So anyway, He'd come around, and I got signed on articles on his ship. And we were going to the North Atlantic. In the engine room this time, not in the steward department. This guy had this hard-on for me so bad, it must have ate him, ate all the hate in him more, heated all the hate in him. Because he tried to make my life miserable. And he did make my life miserable for four and a half months. There wasn't a dirty job, cold miserable job that was assigned to anybody but me.

I remember just before we left to go to the North Atlantic, the after peek had to be scaled--that's where you keep the domestic water—had to be scaled and recemented. The stern of the ship is right in the East River, cold as hell. I had to climb through that manhole, down in that tack by myself with the bucket and a scraper and a scoop and scoop up all the loose cement from the side of the tank. Somebody else was outside hauling it out. I had to take buckets of cement in paint form and a brush and paint all the insides, about as big as this room, paint all the inside of that. I come up numb.

Okay. The next day, we're leaving. So he decides he wants the tank tops scraped. We couldn't chip, but we could scrape, what we call mucking. That's under the floor plate, all around the bed place of the engine room. I showed you under the floor there, under the turbine. That's where I was, four and a half months, every day. He would stand at that ladder—that ladder over here—at twelve o'clock, I better not be out of that room until after twelve o'clock. At one o'clock, he was standing at that ladder to make sure I was down. Anything to have an excuse to fire me and give me a bad rap. This went on for four and a half months.

I laid under that floor plate sometime and we were going in the invasion of North Africa in the Orient, going into the Med, by Gibraltar. They spotted a submarine or the sounded a submarine and a destroyer come, boy, and emptied every one of her depth charges right around our ship. We were loaded with a tank battalion. They had their guns, they had their equipment. Everything was just so that as soon as they hit the beach, they were gone. In other words, they were loaded with their diesel oil and all that. We had all their trucks and everything in it. Boy, you see how flimsy those rods are down there. And I'm just holding on, boy. Them floor plates are shaking and the ship is shaking. I'm worried about one of them steam lines letting go. That's what I went through.

But there were some good things that come about. I seen this big handsome young third engineer, right out of the academy. His hands was tied, he can't say nothing. But you know what he did. He'd walk over to that coffee stand and get a cup of coffee for me and hand it down to me. When I come up ready to knock off at five o'clock, "Hang in there." [patting sound] All the other crew in the engine room did the same thing. That's how I was able to put that four and a half months behind, see. So when I went up to the Coast Guard, and took the exam, they helped me study for the exam and everything, and I passed that exam real high, and the Coast Guard

said, “Boy you really been studying.” I said, “Yes, sir!” [whispers] But I earned it. I earned this piece of paper. That was the hardest trip I ever made on any ship, anywhere. The torpedoing wasn’t bad. At least I know why we were torpedoed. I was waiting, I was waiting. I’m sorry that I wasn’t smart enough to get my license about four or five years before, because I wanted to take that chief engineers license and rub it in his nose. Because he sailed a while and he died a couple of years before I was able to do that.

But that was the hardest. After that, and the time I was telling you about the kid with the—they put the silent cure on him, and boy, he almost went crazy. I had to go to the captain and the chief engineer and the crew and ask them to knock it off, because the kid was going crazy. He had learned his lesson but, you know. That was the second thing. After going through with that first engineer, then going through with this young kid after I got my fireman’s ticket. Then after that, my wife was in the {wax WACHS?} and she got stationed in Walla Walla, Washington. So, I went to the Maritime and asked for a transfer to the West Coast.

I come out to the West Coast, and I got with an old Scotch engineer. He was like a daddy, because he found out how hard I wanted to be an engineer. He took me under his wing, and whenever he walked into that engine room, I walked with him. We tore boilers apart, we did everything. He showed me everything about that engine room and about that ship, and after one year, he said, “Son, I can’t teach you anymore. I want you to go down there to Oregon where they are building those new Victory ships, and get one of those new ships,” because this ship was built in 1902. It was ancient. They didn’t have Scotch boilers anymore. So that’s when I went on my first Victory Ship.

So, every time I got kicked around, somewhere along the line I got a reward for it. But, I never forget the people that give me that hand when I needed it most. Like, the young officers that come on this ship, I tell them this story and they cannot believe it. Like the tanker I was on over there in Desert Storm, we had some young kids from the academy there. And once we get into the mess with some of the old-timers--like the captain was sixty-five, the radio operator was sixty-seven and I was seventy-two. So, they’d get in and the captain would say, “Bill, tell these young guys what you went through to get to be an engineer.” Because almost every ship I went on as an officer and in the crew and in engine department, I was the only black guy. I never backed down because I was the only black guy. That is the secret. I could have went on ships that had a black crew on it, black steward department or black deck department, but all the ships that I went on, I took the ship because I wanted that ship or that run and I didn’t care who was on it, see. So, that’s how I get along on this ship so great. Every guy on this ship—deck, engine, captain, mates, anything—they all think I’m a pretty good guy, because I know they are good guys. We rap a lot, you know and I’ll tell them stories and they’ll say, “Yeah, I know, I saw this.” Especially these old West Coast seamen.

The best friend of mine is Captain {Knowland?}. And the next best friend is the Aussie, what’s his name? [Dick Gephart?] He’s an Australian. I’ve been down in Australia from ’42. Then I went back again in ’45. We share a lot of things in common, because we’ve been on different ships that run out there in Australia. And I know a lot of Australian people that I met during World War, in 1940 over in Egypt. I hung out with a bunch of Aussies over there. We used to steal beer. The old ship I was on had an ammonia system, so we’d steal the beer and bring it aboard and I’d take it down to where the liquefied ammonia, and we’d dump it in there and bring

it out nice and cold. [laughing] One day, we drank so much, the captain woke up and walked down the deck and there are all these Aussies laid out on the ship where we got the beer. Yeah, I get along good with a lot of foreigners, the Scandinavians and the Finns were all nice.

3-00:49:27

Rigelhaupt:

You said the favorite ship you were on was the *S.S. Hope* hospital ship. Is that right?

3-00:49:32

Jackson:

Yeah. That was the one I spent the longest time on. It was the ship that I work the hardest on, the ship I was most gratified to be serving, because I was serving the country as well as helping all those people with these other Americans. These doctors and nurses were fabulous. I observed the best that America produced was on that hospital ship *Hope*, them doctors and them nurses and the lab technicians and everything. Boy, you couldn't have a mean bone in your body and serve on that ship. No. They treated everybody. It was so nice, every once in a while, I'd be walking around the deck in the evening and you'd see this beautiful nurse with this poor little black African baby, walking him around. She wasn't even a pediatrics nurse, but they used to come off of their wards and take care of these kids, these little Indian kids, little African kids.

And I was in Conakry. Do you know where Conakry is? That's West Africa. The President was Sekou Toure and the name of the country was Guinea. They've got another Guinea, too, but not that one. This one is below Senegal, see. We had nurses come from Senegal and from Freetown, African nurses. These nurses—before we left, some person donated about thirty bicycles, because there is nothing over there for the people to do, for the *Hope* people to do, for the nurses to do, and this is kind of a small town. In the evening, they'd get their bikes and they'd ride all around, you know.

So here comes one day, there's a Polish ship in there and here come these big old Pollacks and they walked down the street and a couple of the girls are riding their bikes and they get near the corner and they stop and they are intimidated by these big Poles! Out of nowhere come the biggest, tallest, blackest guys you ever seen and point the finger at your. "No, no, no, no." Boy them guys took off, boy. They took off.

One of them got so bold, he's going to make something of it. We had a club on the dock for the seamen, for the merchant seamen on the ship. See, because the merchant seamen could not fraternize with the medical staff, only the officers. If you were an officer, then you were accepted as a medical staff. But, the crew had a club. The nurses used to come over and have hot dogs and hamburgers and cold beer in this crew club, the seamen's club there. One day, one of these Polish guys comes in, because we would usually invite them in, you know. This guy started manhandling one of the nurses. We had a black able-bodied seaman, second to none, an ex-marine, got a plate in his head. He could fight! He let into four of them. And two of them ended in the hospital, because they insulted one of our girls. Yeah. That's the way it was. So that's some ship.

3-00:53:47

Rigelhaupt:

Usually the way I end, I ask if there is anything I should have asked or you would like to add.

3-00:53:57

Jackson:

Let's see, let's add about how I come on to this ship. Always Victory ships have a soft spot in my heart, because I was on that first one, the *{Escanalva?} Victory*. And she went from Portland to Hawaii and Hawaii and back. She made twenty-one knots and then the navy took it. They decided they had to have it. But after that I was on dozens of these Victory ships. I moved back home in 1997, and I went to my tax office. My tax guy said, I had a merchant marine hat on, he said, "Were you in the merchant marine?" I said, "Yeah." So, he said, "You want to come and help us restore this Victory ship.?" So, boy, I couldn't get over there fast enough over there to Suisun Bay. So, in 1997, I started going over there every Tuesday and Thursday and working on the ship to get it over here.

In the meantime, I learned the history. But what is so profound about my experience here is that the guys that are working with you, they don't look at my face when I do something. I never give an order. I always suggest or ask, can we do this. These same guys, thirty years ago, wouldn't be allowed to even sail with me, see. The Chevron Oil never had any black engineers. The SUP didn't have any black sailors. The MFOW didn't have any black engine-men. But these guys come from that era, and look how they changed. It's inspiring. And I don't know whether my mother helped build this ship or not. But once I told her, I asked her, "Mom, which one of those Liberties were you on?" She'd give me some name of some ship. I said, "Man, I ain't going to sail on that." She hit me up side the head. [laughs]

Anyway, I'm inspired by the people that I work with. They're loyal. I had my heart attack and had open surgery and everything. I was gone for about six months. They all came out to see me. They did everything--I don't know how they knew what I wanted to do and the order I wanted to do it, but when I came back they had everything done just like I wanted. I must have made a suggestion about this or that, but they did it.

So, I'm inspired by this ship. I want my grandchildren—I got some grandchildren right here in Richmond, too. They're a little young yet, but some day they are going to grow up and they are going to look out there and see this ship and they are going to see my name on it and my sister's name on it. In fact, our picture is up in the city hall for the crew of the ship. We are the original crew of the ship.

So, anyway, I'm glad to be a part of this. I'm proud of my city, Berkeley and Oakland where I went to school. I'm loyal to my government. If I was physically fit, I'd be over there now, manning one of those ships that is carrying supplies. And I'm proud of the time I had on that *Hope*. I'm proud of the people that give me the opportunity—the people for the bull lines that I worked for. The first ones that give me a steady job after the war, where they chose their engineer. I was the only black guy there for about eight of the ten years. They finally found a young black guy to be mate, a deck officer. They gave him the opportunity, because they said, "Well look at Mr. Jackson, he's been with us eight years." So, it was a good company.

I went up, one day, to the superintendent of engineers said, "Hey they want to see you up topside there." I said, "Topside?" He said, "Yeah." "Man, that's the president." He said, "No, that's Mr. Keegan. He's the next guy to the president." I went up there, and he looked at me, and he says, "Bill, how come you don't have a first license?" I said, "Sir, I didn't think I could get a first job."

Which was the atmosphere at that time. They're lucky to hire us as thirds and seconds, but I never thought I could be first. He said, "I don't want no excuses! Put a first license there and you've got a first job." He says, "All this time you've got, twelve years as second engineer. Put a chief license in there and you've got a chief engineer in there and you've got a chief's job." Now that was something. That was the day that really I got my reward. This is a private company, seventeen ships they had, and their ships went all over the world. *Puerto Rico* was the trade, but three other ships were always chartered to state's marine and we went anywhere.

I made the whole world on a lot of those ships. All those crews. India, China, Africa, Scandinavia, Germany, Holland, Finland, Norway, all those places I got to go. I got good captains, and all of them were from down South. Believe it or not. Matthews County, Virginia, is where most of those captains came from. But they all treated me right.

[End of interview]