MMS OFFSHORE GULF OF MEXICO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Roy Murray, Jr.

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Interviewer: Jason Theriot

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Bio
Captain Roy Murray, Jr. began his maritime career with U.S. Merchant Marine before WWII. He sailed on cargo vessels during the war and became a captain at 25 years old. He came to the Port of Houston in 1947 and worked for Lykes Brothers as their Port Captain. In 1950 he joined the Houston Pilots where he retired after more than 30 years with the organization.

Tape 1, Side 1

JT: This is an interview with Roy Murray, Jr., retired captain, United States Merchant Marine, June 1st, 2006. Interviewer is Jason Theriot. This is Roy Murray's experience with Port of Houston.

All right. Talk to me about the competition between the Port of Houston and Galveston.

RM: Well, you said in the thirties. I'm not too familiar with that, but going back further than that, Galveston before Houston came into being in the early part of the twentieth century. Galveston had the only natural port for this part of Texas, and the city owned all of the docks. When the oil companies and oil business began sprouting up in Texas, Galveston wouldn't allow, didn't want any tankers

coming in their port, or didn't want any oil docks or refineries or oil terminals, so the oil industry was very much involved in establishing the Port of Houston.

Somewhere Texas City comes into being there, because the oil companies did establish a base in Texas City, which is totally oil business. The docks and the terminals and the refineries and everything is all oil industry in Texas City, and that's only an hour from transit up there. But it was still fifty miles from Houston, so the oil companies were very much involved in bringing the ship channel up to Houston.

JT: Now, I'm wondering why Galveston, what was their justification for not wanting to invest in the oil industry?

RM: Well, I guess there weren't environmentalists around in that time, but I guess it was the idea that oil was representative of being smoky, or I don't know.

JT: They wanted to keep their beach intact.

RM: Yes. Well, the beach didn't—the harbor's around behind the island, and also the Port of Galveston owned all the docks, and there were regular callers like coast-wise shipping that were there weekly, and they wouldn't give them preferential docks that they could use as their own to receive their cargos for the ships that were coming in maybe once a week, and also to discharge their cargo. Also, where most of the cargo went was up through Houston, so Houston had a good reason, the shipping companies had a good reason for wanting to go on to Houston.

JT: So it was essentially the oil industry which brought about the emergence of the ship channel.

RM: Well, they were very much involved. I wouldn't say it was essentially them, but they were very much involved, along with the shipping companies and the City of Houston. The leaders of City of Houston wanted to make a port up here.

JT: Tom Ball and Mayor Rice and some of the other people involved, Jesse Jones, certainly are a few names that I've run across.

RM: Yes. Cullinan, he was an oilman. He was much involved in that.

JT: And your experience in the Merchant Marine began in 1937.

RM: Yes.

JT: When did you begin to operate out of Port of Houston?

RM: Well, from then I went into the newly formed Merchant Marine Cadet Corps. They didn't have the academy yet at King's Point, so I was assigned to merchant ships on an agreement with the ship operators to carry the cadets, so I was running in and out of Houston from 1937 up until World War II.

JT: So what was the port like? Describe it to me during those late thirties.

RM: Well, we had docks up to City Dock 16, I think. They didn't have all of the docks on the other side all the way down to below the bridge there, the first bridge on the upper part of the channel. It was a thriving dock. There were a lot of cotton ships out of Houston, and there were no container ships at that time.

The cargo was all loaded break bulk, you know, and piece by piece, so the stevedores—you would see all of the city docks and all along would be filled with ships just be waiting turns to get to the docks to load cotton, carbon black, and

other cargos, outbound. There wasn't as much inbound then as there is now. Now you have inbound with these container ships, and very little outbound.

JT: So I take it the infrastructure for railroads had already been in place.

RM: Yes, that's another thing about Houston. Houston was a big railroad center. You know, the first radio station was KPRC, and for a while they had their slogan, "Kotton port railroad center," ignoring the fact that cotton, they're spelling cotton with a K. [laughter]

JT: That's interesting. So what type of cargo other than cotton was going out and also coming in?

RM: Well, going out was grain, besides cotton and carbon black. It was a product of the refineries, you know. They burned gas to make carbon black, and they sent a messy cargo to handle. They had the grain, rice, wheat, corn, and a lot of exports; carried lumber out. And even deck cargo, we carried whole tree trunks, you know, hardwood to Europe.

JT: And this is, I'll assume a majority of materials coming from the region?

RM: Yes, and the ships went to Europe fully loaded, and came back empty. And they went to the Far East loaded, but they came back usually from the Far East with sugar and copra and other things, some raw materials. But the trade to Europe, the ships went one way loaded, came back in ballast.

JT: So what were some of the big companies that were operating out of the port during the late thirties?

RM: Well, they actually had passenger ships coming in. Bargain Line was a coast-wise line that went from the gulf ports to the East Coast, and Clyde Mallory Line, they had a passenger ship coming here. Lykes Lines ran a coastal service with about four ships; Southern Steamship Company; New Tex Steamship Company; Walkerman Line ran out; Luckenback was inter-coastal between the East Coast, Gulf Coast, and the West Coast.

Yes, there were a lot of ships, a lot of American lines, and, of course, all kinds of foreign lines, European, even Japanese. They had a lot of foreign ships, France, Germany, Belgian, Holland, Norwegian, lots of Norwegian ships.

JT: I noticed in looking at a recent map of the ship channel where you've got docks that belong to various companies, like Enron before it was shut down, and some of the big-name—

RM: Shell Oil. Back in the thirties and forties it was Sinclair Oil, which is now, what is that new company, starts with an L? Lyondell. Lyondell owns the refinery there, and there are all refineries up and down which Galveston wouldn't allow. They could have put them, I guess, on Pelican Island, because it's developed now. But yes, they could have their own facilities out there.

JT: Talk a little bit more about the international trade. You mentioned some of the other countries, the European nations that were here. What type of business were they involved with?

RM: Well, they had general cargo ships, same as American ships. American ships that traded in foreign, most of them were subsidized by a shipping act of 1936, which gave an operation-differential subsidy to American ships. In other words, they paid the difference between the operating cost of American ships and the operating cost of the foreign ships they were competing with.

JT: Wow, I didn't realize that.

RM: That's why the ships had to accept the cadets like me. In fact, they made it a requirement that they carry Merchant Marine Cadet Corps cadets.

JT: Is that the same situation today, sir?

RM: Yes. They don't have too many American flagships anymore, but I think the ones that are even not subsidized—I don't know if they still have that operation-differential subsidy or not. But the cadets that go to the academy now, it's a four-year course like the other military academies, and they go do one year of sea duty, and they're assigned to ships, American ships, to do that year of sea duty, so they put at least two on every ship.

JT: Is the government still subsidizing American vessels?

RM: I don't know that. Yes, I believe they are.

JT: Interesting. Now, everything changes at the end of 1941.

RM: Yes. Yes, that just about shut down the Port of Houston and Galveston. About the only things running out of here were tankers, and then they even cut that out by building the pipelines from the gulf to the East Coast, because the German submarines were operating in the gulf.

They'd run them in convoys starting in Corpus Christi. They'd run daylight hours up to Galveston, and then ships would come inside and anchor in Bolivar Roads for the night, and then go out and go on to, I guess, the Mississippi River for the next day, and then to Tampa, and then on around the Florida Keys I guess to

Miami. That's the way they'd get the ships for a while, until they got that—they called the pipelines the Big Inch and the Little Inch, pipelines that ran all the way from the gulf coast to the East Coast.

JT: I don't know a whole lot about that. When was this constructed?

RM: Well, it started, I guess, probably in '42, because the war started at the end of '41, so they didn't have time, but I imagine they might have gotten it started by the end of '42, and I don't know how long it took them, but it was some project. They apparently completed it during the war; I don't know exactly the dates.

After the first few months of the war my ships didn't come into the gulf anymore, cargo ships. We ran out of the East Coast until the war ended in Europe, and then I was transferred to the West Coast.

JT: Is it true that the Gulf of Mexico in the spring and summer of 1942 was the most dangerous place in the world?

RM: Well, it was, yes, but they didn't sink that many ships because, like I say, they protected them like I said, running daylight only, port to port. Yes, they sank quite a few ships in the gulf. Altogether we lost about 590-some ships on our coast during the war.

JT: So how did the war change business at the Port of Houston?

RM: Well, I wasn't here, but it just about shut the Port of Houston down, and just the tankers running out for a while. I imagine they even ran some tankers after they got those pipelines going. I don't know, because those pipelines couldn't carry everything, and there are all kind of products coming out of those refineries. So they still had to convoy them, and in the meantime they probably had convoys

they could run with escorts twenty-four hours. They didn't have to do that in daylight only.

JT: Are you aware of any economic impacts that shutting down the port had on the regional area?

RM: No. I wasn't here and I imagine it had some, but the whole economy was devoted to the war, you know, not like now, but just about the whole economy, and I guess the refineries were running full blast, so they didn't shut them down. I don't know about things like cotton. I imagine they still needed to carry cotton to our allies, because they'd use it for, if nothing else, making uniforms.

JT: Well, one thing that did grow during that period was the petrochemical industry. What do you know of the emergence of that particular industry during the wartimes?

RM: I know very little. Like I say, I wasn't here during the war. I only got to Houston once in the nearly four years of the war, for a thirty-day leave, so I was only here for thirty days, and I wasn't paying any attention to what was going on. [laughs]

JT: What about after the war when you came back and settled down here, did you see any changes in the port?

RM: Oh yes. Business picked up right away. In fact, I imagine it started to pick up probably before, because by 1943 the German submarines were taking a beating. I think they were run out of the gulf. So I imagine by as late as 1943 the port was coming back, and you know, they built ships here.

They built liberty ships in Port of Houston, and they completed some ships called knot ships, that were smaller than the liberty ships, but very modern ships for the

time. The hulls were built up on the Great Lakes and they brought them down the Mississippi River with the mast and superstructure sitting on deck, and they completed them here in Houston. So shipbuilding was a big employer. I don't imagine there was any unemployment once those shipyards got started. But the shipyard, yes, I imagine they soaked up all the available labor.

JT: That's interesting. So with only a handful of U-boats the campaign, Admiral Doenitz campaign worked.

RM: Yes, just about shut down the gulf.

JT: Wow, amazing.

RM: Have you read that book *Torpedoes in the Gulf* by Melanie Wiggins?

JT: Yes, sir. So talk to me about the petrochemical industry and how it developed after the war.

RM: Well, they started making all kind of products in the refineries, even ethanol, which is like a grain alcohol, and all of these, the plastics industry, the solvents that make the plastic and all that was developed in the refineries, so the refineries were, and are still turning out all kinds of products.

They have specialized tankers. They call them drugstore ships because they carry as much as twelve or fifteen different grades of refined products, very complicated ships. Some of them have stainless steel tanks that carry products that would erode steel even, and that ethanol is a very complicated product to carry, but in these—parcel tankers is what the official name of them was.

But they had all kind of pipelines so every tank could be isolated from all the rest, to carry these products all over the world. I think the Port of Houston for a while was producing 75 percent of the chemicals coming out of refineries.

JT: Amazing. What are some of the things that you noticed that had changed from the late thirties and the post-World-War-II era at the port?

RM: Well, we still had a pretty strong Merchant Marine for a few years after the war, and a lot of trade to Europe, and like I say, most of the ships were still going loaded to Europe and coming back empty. Then the container ships started. I don't even remember the year they started, around in the sixties I guess.

The container business got started, and now the container business has taken over at Barber's Cut, and the new container terminal down in Bayport are going to take over some more of that, and the city docks and Long Reach, and those terminals up in Houston are nearly empty most of the time, a ship here and there.

JT: Is that right. So what you're saying is there was a lot of imports, international imports coming in—

RM: Yes, now.

JT: —after the war.

RM: No, not for a long time. Imports, well, they started importing cars in the late forties and fifties from Europe, and even England was exporting cars here, and then Japan started. All of those foreign cars were kind of dinky and unreliable in the beginning, but they kept at it.

JT: What about changes in technology? We know of some of the amazing technologies that change as a result of the war, in particular with radar and radio communications. How did some of these technologies impact the port in post-World War II?

RM: Well, the biggest thing was the bridge-to-bridge communication. You know, Houston is a long, narrow, twisting channel, and there were some bends that you couldn't see around. When I first started as a pilot you had only a vague idea of what you might meet. We used to blow a long whistle and listen if there was another ship, because there was a place you couldn't pass, couldn't meet. And after we got two-way radio, that solved a lot of—what they called bridge-to-bridge communication, that solved a lot problems for the pilots.

Then in later years they put in this vessel-traffic system that gave you information on all ship movements and barge movements in the channel. And they're getting the GPS now, where they can tell where they are in the channel in a matter of a few yards.

JT: That's right. Let's jump past a couple of questions and talk about the pilots. What do you know about the pilots, and what is your experience with that organization?

RM: Well, they had to have pilots from the very beginning. The pilot laws require that all foreign ships and American ships in foreign trade, which is what they call registered ships, have to have a state-commissioned Houston pilot. In the beginning the Chamber of Commerce of Houston furnished the pilots for free to encourage ships to come here.

JT: That's something.

RM: Yes, but then I think they had about first two and then four pilots, but in 1921 the Houston Pilots Association was formed. So I don't know at what point the ships had to pay for the pilots, but for the first few years the Chamber of Commerce employed the pilots and furnished them free to the ships.

When I came here I was number twenty-eight on the list of pilots, and it has just grown about every decade, about ten, to where there's, I think, something like eighty-five or eighty-three or something like that, pilots now.

JT: So that essentially was your post-war career, you were a pilot?

RM: Yes. I came ashore in 1947. I was captain on Lykes Lines' ships, and I came ashore as a port captain, Port of Houston. I worked out of the office and liaisoned with the ships for three years, and then I went to the Houston pilots the next thirty, forty years.

JT: And you were a young fellow then, weren't you?

RM: Yes. I was twenty-five when I was first captain, which was really young for a captain, but that was during World War II.

JT: Now, I know about how the whole transfer of the ship captain came to be. Tell that story right quick about your captain at the time, who was sick on the voyage.

RM: Oh yes. I was chief officer on a ship down—we had taken a lot of consumer goods and other goods to South America, just like peacetime trade, really, but during the war, and we brought back nitrate, sodium nitrate, which is used in making fertilizer and also in making gunpowder.

So we made that trip and I was chief mate, and we got down to Valparaiso, Chile, and the captain came down sick and had to be removed from the ship, so although I didn't have a master's license, the word came from the States for me to bring the ship back. Otherwise they would have had to hold the ship while they sent a captain down from the States.

So I was actually a captain before I had a master's license. [laughs] Yes, it was fun because most captains I'd sail with were at least twice that old. I think we had 5,000 ships at the end of the war, and there were three or four of us captains in my age group. All the rest were much older.

JT: Were you nervous about that voyage back?

RM: No. I already had about seven years training and experience. I also had a navy commission, and the navy couldn't call me up, because they needed me more in the Merchant Marine. My talents would have been wasted in the navy. I mean, what I was trained for was about seven things. In the navy there would have been seven guys doing what I did on a merchant ship. [laughs] I was a watch stander, a navigator, a signalman, a cargo supervisor, ship maintenance, ship handling; all those are different categories in the navy.

JT: I think that speaks volumes about the contributions of the Merchant Marines.

RM: Yes.

JT: The sixth branch of the military service during the war, so deserved, I think.

RM: Yes, yes. But we were ignored when the war ended, sort of like the Vietnam veterans. We just sort of took off our uniforms and went about our business.

JT: A shame.

RM: It was all-volunteer service. Anybody who—we had a lot of people who maybe the military services turned down that the navy and the Merchant Marine would accept. And if you're like me, that's why I had to stay on ships nearly the whole war. I only had two thirty-day leaves during the whole war, because I had to stay active in the Merchant Marine. Otherwise they would call me into the navy. [laughs]

JT: You didn't want that.

RM: Well, it would have been all right, but I felt I could do more in the Merchant Marine. With all my training, I'm liable to have gone in the navy and they'd made me gunnery officer or something. The navy, they're like specialists. They've got a different guy for every little job.

JT: And you were all seven or eight, a man with many hats.

RM: Yes.

JT: Let's talk about the postwar impact on the port from the respects of the oilfield industry, and mainly from the oilfield in the Gulf of Mexico.

RM: Well, Houston bloomed in all the postwar years. It went up to second-biggest, second-busiest port in the nation, mostly behind New York. And then New Orleans, they were kind of in there vying for that second spot, too, but they counted grain coming down the Mississippi River as tonnage coming in, and then grain as tonnage going out.

JT: A little asterisk, huh?

RM: Yes. But I think Houston is claiming first now, I'm not sure.

JT: But it was the oilfield industry during the fifties and sixties that really brought about this emergence.

RM: Yes. Yes, we had several new terminals come in way down the river, big grain elevators down at Equity, and a number of refineries had docks on the channel that weren't there before the war. So yes, Houston was booming. Like I say, the pilots went from twenty-eight when I went in—I went in the pilots in '51—to eighty-five now.

JT: Tell me a little bit about the Port Authority.

RM: Well, Houston is a navigation district. Galveston, I think, the city controls the docks as far as I know, and Houston is a navigation district. In other words, I think it's 1500 feet each side of the Houston Ship Channel is property of the Harris County-Houston Ship Channel Navigation District, and they control everything in there.

They control the pilots and they own the decks, up the city docks, and they own Barber's Cut and the new container terminal down there at Barber's Cut. They have commissioners that are reporting—I think City of Houston appoints three or something, and then the county appoints three, and all the small cities, Pasadena, Baytown, and other entities down the channel appoint another two or three. I don't know how many they have, eight or nine I think.

JT: And so it's the Port Authority which essentially runs and operates and controls that area, the channel area.

RM: Yes. I guess they have a say about who can build a refinery and build docks on the other privately owned property. I don't know. They don't own all the property.

JT: Let's talk about the containerization which came to Houston in the 1960s. How did that transform the port?

RM: Well, it reduced the amount of labor, stevedore labor. They fought it, you know. But yes, it made a big difference. It made it a whole lot quicker. Ships nowadays—when I was sailing on ships with break-bulk ships we were two or three weeks around gulf ports loading cargo, and when we got to Europe we were saved two or three weeks unloading. These container ships come in one day and sail the next, and offload the same amount of cargo in containers. I don't know if you've been down to Barber's Cut and seen those container yards. Have you been down there?

JT: No, sir.

RM: You should go down and take a look. These things are stacked up six high. I don't know how they get them up that high. Must be the empty ones or something. They've got acres and acres of them. It must be some logistics keeping track of where these containers all go, and how they get them back. I don't think they could do it without computers. [laughs]

JT: The things always came first. So the massive cranes that unload, you've got one man operating a crane, whereas in the late thirties you probably had a whole crew.

RM: Oh, a stevedore gang I think was eleven men on the ship, and maybe an equal number on the dock, and if you had a ship with five hatches and you're working five hatches you had a couple of hundred men working that one ship.

JT: Shovels, or whatever.

RM: No, they didn't do much of that, but cotton, the cotton they had to—they'd run it on dollies, and they would have gangs—well, I don't know how to explain it to you. The old ships had single booms, a pair of booms at each of the five hatches, so they'd what they call single width. They'd put one high and one low at end of the hatch, and they put a skid up to the ship, and then they had a guy that grabbed a hook and ran out and hooked it onto a sling that had three bales of cotton on it, jerked it up and down the hold, so they had two guys running that hook back and forth at each hatch, so there's ten men right there.

And if you went to Long Reach, which you could look down the dock, it looked like cotton bales just jumping on the ship. I don't know how they move the cotton now. I guess they put it in containers, I don't know. I don't see any cotton docks.

They had cotton compresses. The cotton bales come from the cotton gins out in the farmland. They're big bales, and they have what they call a cotton compress, and the compress the machine, the bales down to real tight, and then they have to put all new metal straps around them. And they call that—and before they could do that they'd use screws to kind of screw the cotton into the holds, and you know, could mash it together.

I think the ships, one of Lykes ships going to Europe, going up the East Coast had a fire and had to go into port in one of the northern ports, and unload the cotton to put the fire out, and then they couldn't get the cotton back in because they didn't know how to, what they call screw the cotton in. They couldn't get it all back on the ship. [laughs] But then when they got these compress bales, then they'd just have to stack them in there, because they couldn't mash them any more.

JT: That takes me to another side question. In your experience at the port, did you ever encounter major accidents or collisions or oil spills?

RM: Yes. Well, we had a big fire down at what they called the Noise-worthy Dock then. I don't know what they call it now. A gasoline tanker had an explosion and burned. Yes, we had several collisions. We had two ships collide down at what they call five-mile beacon, which is five miles below Morgan's Point. The *Union Alliance* collided with one of those Norwegian parcel tankers called the *Marine,* and several men, including a pilot, were killed in that collision.

But mostly we had—Houston has a pretty fair safety record, even though it's a narrow channel. There's a lot of maybe side swipings or something, but they didn't really amount.

JT: And one of the best environmental ratings and statistics of the ports in the country.

RM: I don't know, I guess so.

JT: Interesting. So just touch briefly on the last fifty years of the port. What are some of the major advances and the major milestones that you've seen?

RM: Well, the bridge-to-bridge communication was major, and following that they had the vessel-traffic system, which is improving all the time. I think they have radar covering a lot of the area, and they can tell you just about where any ship is at any time. And, of course, the containerization, that's the big move, and ships have gotten more modern. They have a GPS system now that they can also track ships with. I don't know how much operating with that GPS in the fog. Fog pretty

much shuts the Houston Ship Channel down. If it's a real thick fog they don't run, because it's too close meeting other ships.

I did a little of it in my time. I had a passenger ship that really needed to get in, and all the traffic was shut down, so I was able to bring it through the fog, but they didn't like to do that too much, because also you had these towboats in the channel with you, and it's hard to tell where they are sometimes.

JT: What about the most recent project to widen and deepen the channel; how has that impacted the port?

RM: Yes, well, I'm not out there so I don't know, but I guess it makes it easier for the pilots, but they didn't widen it a whole lot. I still don't know if they can maintain, each ship maintain his side of the channel, whether they still have to head for each other and then brake as they go around each other. Because you can't get out of the middle of a channel with a deep ship. As soon as you get fifty or a hundred feet off the center line you start feeling the effect of the bank, and a ship tries to shear back into the channel. That's why they stay in the middle till they meet and then go around each other, brake around.

JT: Kind of a hairy there.

RM: Yes. I like to use the word, we call it the Texas chicken. [laughter]

JT: So what do you see for the future of the port in this twenty-first century?

RM: That's a tough one. I don't know, the area continues to grow, and we're the entry port for all this part of the United States. I mean, there's nothing much west of us. You have Corpus Christi that handles some, but Houston's the main railroad center, so everything going, I guess, up into the middle of the country and up into

Colorado and the western part of the States probably comes through here, if it doesn't come through the West Coast.

JT: Do you see them trying to widen or deepen the channel to bring in bigger ships?

RM: Well, I think it took forever. We had a 400-foot channel all the way back to 1936, and we just now in the past couple of years got it widened, I think to 550 or something like that.

I guess it helps some, especially the barges can get more out of your way. Used to be if you were overhauling a barge and a ship was coming, you couldn't get around that barge while you were meeting that ship. You had to cut back to the barge's speed and stay behind, one ship or the other, whichever was closest, sort of like a car when the street's narrow. [laughs] First one gets there gets to go first.

JT: You know, Captain Roy, I've been living here for six years, and only because of my experience with Merchant Marine veterans with this particular project have I become aware of the importance of the Port of Houston to this region. Why do you think most people don't understand the importance of it?

RM: Oh, that's over the whole United States. I think people don't even know we have a Merchant Marine, didn't back when our Merchant Marine was much more viable, when we had a thousand ships. Americans just for some reason don't understand that. In Europe they're very aware of their coast and their ports, and the people that run the ships and like that, where in the United States people are just not aware of it. A lot of people in Houston probably don't even know we have a port.

JT: A shame.

RM: Yes. Yes, in Europe they're a lot more aware, especially England, you know, where they've got so much coastline and a small country. But they don't even know, like, the Merchant Marine Academy. I mean, people don't even know it's one of the five federal academies. First, before the war—I don't know about the Coast Guard—you had Annapolis and West Point, army and navy. I don't know the history of the Coast Guard Academy. Anyhow, it was the third. I don't know if it was ahead of the Merchant Marine Academy. Then it was the Merchant Marine Academy, and then the air force academy, so there are five federal academies.

But most people—and it's a great deal for a guy coming out of high school. I mean, he gets a full college education, and he gets paid. I think they get paid full time at the air force and at the other federal academies, but the Merchant Marine only get paid that year that they're on a ship. But then everything else is paid, you know, for them there, everything, uniforms, books. They all have to have a computer now, so it's a great deal. It's an education worth about $150,000.

JT: And the living is not too bad as a pilot.

RM: Well, the pilots, that's way after they come out of the academy. The academy only trains them to work to be on ships. But most of them, there's not enough ships, really, to give them all jobs, but you have the offshore industry. They have all kind of boats now, and I think they have to have on some of these drill ships, they have to have a licensed master, and they go into the shipping industry. They come out of the academy with a license later, engineer and a navy commission, and they have to devote I don't know how many years, to either go in the Merchant Marine, or to work in the marine industry, or to go in the navy. I mean,

if they don't do that, they can go active duty in the navy, which isn't a bad job either, as an officer.

JT: For a young man to become an officer and travel the world, which is essentially what you did. So when you came back from the war, we're talking '46—

RM: War ended in '45, in September of '45, and I sailed for about two or three years after that, and then I came ashore as a port captain in a shore job for Lykes.

JT: And how long did your career span working out of the port?

RM: Well, on the ships actually going to sea, ten years. Then I was three years as a port captain, and thirty-four years as a pilot.

JT: And what year did you retire, Captain Ron?

RM: Eighty-four, 1984. I wish I'd of worked longer. If I'd known I was going to last this long I would have worked longer. [laughs] I'm getting tired of this retirement.

JT: Running out of things to do.

RM: Yes.

JT: I'm going to press Stop for just a minute.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

JT: So we're looking at a diagram of the ship channel. Tell me what you know about this map.

RM: Well, the docks were just here, and nearly all of this down on the north side of the channel was new since World War II, since 1940.

JT: So a quarter of what it is today, roughly.

RM: Well, city docks were, but some of these were private docks. This was Long Reach, which I guess, was that Anderson Clayton? Anderson Clayton Cotton Company, I guess, owned long-reach docks, and then you had some docks right here called Sprunts, which were private docks. But the city docks were here in the Turning Basin, well, starting just below the entrance and around here and here; that was city docks, and then these city docks were all added.

JT: Now, when you say city docks do you mean docks owned by Harris County?

RM: Harris County Navigation. We call them city docks, but they're actually owned by the navigation district.

JT: And then so the district would lease these docks to companies?

RM: No. Ships pay a docking fee for each day they're alongside the dock, and I don't know how much preference they give them to—I don't think they gave them too much preference. Even Long Reach docks, I don't think they didn't give preference to individual steamship companies. And Long Reach, they had the cotton compress there, and this Sprunts docks, I think they had a cotton compress, and I believe the city docks had a compress on one of their docks; I don't remember which one.

JT: So if you were a new cotton company and you wanted to get access to the channel, what are some of the processes that would be involved in getting a dock?

RM: Well, you ask for a dock. Each dock has a—

Tape 2, Side 1

JT: This is continuation of Roy Murray, Jr., June 1st, 2006. This is tape two.

The process involved in getting access to the open docks.

RM: Yes, well, I guess they apply for a berth in advance, and tell them, I've got so much cargo coming in there, I want to accumulate it, or trucks bring it in, or however they receive it. At that time it had to be offloaded from the truck or the train and into the warehouse, and then when the ship came in it had to be loaded from the warehouse into the ship, and vice versa on the other hand. Now it's all in the container. It just rolls in on a container, they lift it up, put it on the ship, that's it. So the docks are all open in the warehouses at the container docks.

JT: Interesting. So if a ship was coming in from the gulf and into Galveston, he would need to, of course, be in constant communication with everything that's going on in front of him.

RM: Yes.

JT: Where would the pilots begin to maneuver out to go and meet with the ship?

RM: Well, we have a base at Galveston. Our boats are in Galveston, and now they have four multimillion-dollar boats on some of the big ones. They have these twin-hull catamarans that have very good sea-keeping qualities and very maneuverable, and they've got all the latest—they're in constant communication

with the office. I guess they have computers onboard, too, you know, and they have radar, and they stay out in the gulf.

That's seven miles off the beach, seven or eight miles off the beach at what they call the number-one buoy, the entrance buoy, the sea buoy. They stay out there day and night, because they've got ships, must have thirty or forty ships a day each ways, and they stay out there. And they have a dispatch boat that will bring pilots in and out, and bring stores when they need it, and stuff like that. So the big-bar boat stays out there just about all the time.

JT: So as a ship would come in—

RM: A ship comes in and goes alongside, the pilot climbs up a pilot ladder and goes on up to the ship and takes over for the captain. Technically the captain is still in charge. The pilot is just guiding the ship for him, and you get to the dock, you get off the dock and go home until your turn comes up again, and then you go out. If they have more inbound ships in one day than outbound, they have to send pilots to Galveston. If they have more outbound ships, they send those extra pilots home. They just keep enough on the ship to do the next few hours.

JT: So you needed to know this channel like the back of your hand.

RM: Oh yes, yes. We've got to know every beacon and where the deep water is, and where the shoals are. But we don't have a lot of shoals, though, like it's like the Mississippi River. And across Galveston Bay you can't see the banks. But outside of the channel you've only got about ten or twelve feet of water. You've got beacons sitting out there, and in hazy weather when you can't see too far, you can tell how close you are to the bank by watching the rudder indicator, because the helmsman is putting counter rudder towards the bank. You get near a bank, the ship starts—has to—so you can watch.

JT: So you need to memorize this.

RM: Yes, yes. Like I say, when you take the examination you have to draw it.

JT: You have to draw this map?

RM: Yes. You have to get it pretty close, too. If you don't they won't accept it.

JT: What's the running distance here? We're talking about, what, [unclear] miles?

RM: I think it's—they've moved the sea buoy out since I retired. It was fifty-two miles, and I think maybe it's out a couple of miles, I don't know, maybe fifty-four miles from the sea buoy to the turning basin. But most of the ships don't come up this far anymore. When you go down here to Brady's Landing, to Brady Island, like to the restaurant down there, Brady's Landing—is it this far down? Anyway, when you're at Brady's you can look up and see all these—you're about here someplace. I think it's right in here, yes, right here, yes, Brady's Bayou. Well, that's Sim's Bayou. That's below—that's at Manchester. That's further down.

Anyhow, when you're at Brady's Landing you can see all of these docks up and down here and here, and they're empty. In fact, the navy has a ready-reserve fleet that they keep. They have about six ships here, and they have one crew, and they take one of those ships out on a cruise to shake it down and make sure it's working, and then bring it back, and they just have a skeleton crew. And then they take another ship.

JT: Essentially defending the ship channel.

RM: No, they're what they call ready reserves. They're military cargo ships that carry—incidentally, this is off the subject, but the big part of the navy ships now are manned by Merchant Marine.

JT: Really?

RM: Some of the biggest ships, 900-foot-long ships have got a Merchant Marine captain and officers and crew. [laughs]

JT: Wow, I wonder why that is.

RM: Well, because they can do it so much more efficiently.

JT: Better trained.

RM: Yes. They have—

[Tape recorder turned off.]

RM: —recognize her New York accent. Yes. At any rate, these docks used to be full of ships, but no more. It's all container on the cargo side. Of course the tankers are still the same. Some tankers, well, inbound foreign tankers are carrying crude oil, so they have one cargo, but the outgoing ships have refined products, and a lot of them, some of them are gasoline mostly. But some of these parcel tankers, quite a few of them, and they carry up to fifteen grades of product.

JT: Now, this is a manmade channel?

RM: No, it's the Buffalo Bayou.

JT: This is the original Buffalo Bayou.

RM: All Buffalo Bayou. It's all following natural streams.

JT: It's just been widened and dredged over the years.

RM: Yes. Before 1914 you had some small vessels that came up here, came all the way up to Allen's Landing, and they ran passengers and cargo from Galveston. They even went across Galveston Bay and up Trinity River for a while, until it silted up from all the farming. But, you know, these were clear streams around here. When they started farming on them all around here and then all that cutting up the land, then the rains would come and wash silt into the thing, and it silted most of our streams, silted them up.

JT: We had mentioned this in the early part of the interview, about the involvement of the federal government. How big of a part did the federal government play in establishing partnership with Harris County in developing the port?

RM: Well, the corps of engineers did all of the drilling, dredging of the channel. They had nothing to do with the docks and the shore installation. The corps of engineers still maintains and deepens and widens the channel when they get appropriations to do it, so the Army Corps of Engineers doe it, and now the Coast Guard maintains the aids to navigation, the beacons and whatnot. The Coast Guard handles that.

Before the Coast Guard it was handled under, I think, the lighthouse service. I don't know what they called it, but it was a government agency under the Department of Commerce, I think, and they handled the aids to navigation.

JT: Let's talk about this. This is something that I just thought of. How important has the port and the ship channel been with respects to deploying troops and materials for foreign wars, particularly the Korean War, Vietnam, Gulf War and so forth.

RM: Yes, well, quite a bit. During the Korean War, that was in the late forties and early fifties, and we readied ships for this. We brought ships out of the laid-up fleet over in Beaumont and brought them over here and put them in the shipyard, and made them ready for sea, for carrying cargos to Korea. And during the Vietnam War, too, I think they sent some out. There were no troop movements out of here that I know of. It was all cargo and army vehicles. I think even for these Gulf Wars we've had quite a bit of stuff transported out of here and other gulf ports. They kind of spread it around, I think.

JT: What caught my attention was about ten days after 9/11 my wife and I were traveling back to Louisiana for a wedding, and there wasn't many cars on the road. It was an early Saturday morning, and we came up to an overhead railroad—

RM: And you saw a train with all the army vehicles.

JT: All the Fourth Infantry Division's, all their vehicles, and as far as the eye could see from east to west was military cargo. And my wife said, "Where's it going?"

I said, "It's going to the ship channel to be loaded onto vessels and sent to the Middle East." And sure enough, it took them a while to get there, but that's essentially their destination.

RM: Yes.

JT: So I guess in an emergency it's very beneficial to have a fully functioning major port in place to be able to provide that type of deployment of heavy infantry divisions.

RM: Yes. Yes, I kind of miss it now that I didn't get to handle any of these cruise ships that are coming in.

JT: Yes. I guess that's the next big thing, right, the emergence of the cruise-ship industry.

RM: Yes. It's kind of touchy for those cruise ships to come up here, because the fog can shut them down, you know. There they are sitting with a load of passengers, trying to get in and get them out and make their next commitment, and then the fog catches them. So I think they make special provisions for them to shut down other traffic, maybe, to let those cruise ships in.

JT: That might rub a few people the wrong way.

RM: Right. [laughs] I don't know if they do, I just would guess they would.

JT: But there's terminals and they're now running cruise ships.

RM: Yes, they've got the cruise—they come up to Bayport, I think. I believe Barber's Cut has a cruise terminal too, but it'll probably move down, too, because the closer they get it to the gulf the better off they are.

JT: And that'll be the next way of traveling, you know, drive thirty minutes down to the ship channel and catch a cruise to the Caribbean.

RM: Yes.

JT: All right, Captain Roy. I'm going to say thank you.

RM: Okay, you're welcome.

[End of interview] [edited by Jason Theriot, 21 November 2006]