

Name of person Interviewed: Donna Cunio [DC]

Facts about this person:

Age (if known) : 51

Sex: Female

Occupation: wife of retired merchant marine captain
(husband now manager of New Bedford State Pier)

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port:

Hail Port (port fished from, which can be the same):

Residence (Town where lives): Norwell, MA

Ethnic background (if known) :

Interviewer: Janice Gadaire Fleuriel [JGF]

Transcriber: ?

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbormaster House

Date and time of interview: September 23, 2006

Keywords:

Merchant Marine; single hull vessel; communication; family; children; telephone bills; life as wife of captain; Texaco; vessel size; storms; explosion; respect for industry; New Bedford State Pier

Interviewer: Donna if you could start by just giving me a little bit of your own family background where you were born and...

D.C.: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on May 31st, 1955. Raised and schooled right in Boston. I met my husband in my late 20's and we married and he, at the time, was living in New Hampshire and we purchased a house in Norwell. We were a number of years before having children. He was a Merchant Marine that went to Mass Maritime Academy.

Interviewer: O.K.

D.C.: And then went directly to work for Texaco that was stationed out in Texas, that is where they were based. He brought mostly fuel. Once in a while he would do another type of cargo, but mostly did fuel at that time. He was with them for about 18 years and unfortunately their division went belly up. Then he went to work for Sevens, that was out of Cedar Rapids. From there he took surplus grain to third world nations, such as Russia, Africa and at one point in time he had a very interesting thing to do. What he did was he disposed of a tanker, over in Bangladesh. He rammed the boat into the mud and then it was dismantled and it was fascinating to hear how quickly and then what they do is they melt the iron down, of course, and then they sell it.

Interviewer: Wow. So the whole intent was bringing the tanker over there and have it be dismantled and uh...

D.C.: This happened during the time when they were having a problem with single hulled vessels and the United States had decided that they no longer wanted single hulled vessels. They needed to have a certain double hulled vessel just in case if they're carrying fuels to protect our waters. So they had to just get rid of these. The bad thing about is that some of these tankers are still floating around but they're flagged under different countries. So they still in fact, can come into our waters I believe. As long as they sail under a different flag, not a U.S. flag or a...

Interviewer: Hmm...interesting.

D.C.: It is interesting.

Interviewer: Yeah.

D.C.: Going around the clock to get to where they need to be.

Interviewer: Now you said something when we were outside talking about Bangladesh and goats and what was that?

D.C.: I'm not sure where he was.

Interviewer: O.K.

D.C.: But what would happen but they would have workers come onto the ship, many many workers, and they would camp onto the topside of the ship and they would bring goats and

chickens and they would set up camp right outside and they would slaughter the goats and they would feed all of these people with this goat and with these chickens.

Interviewer: Wow.

D.C.: It was a very interesting thing, the way they cooked it and of course sanitary issues, being the way they were, were not... [laughter]

Interviewer: Yeah.

D.C.: We lived very differently.

Interviewer: Eye opening. Now would your husband and them also be eating it? Or was it just the local people?

D.C.: As a courtesy, they would offer, and um...I don't know whether he accepted...um...but no they definitely had their own crew and cook and when he worked for Texaco I went with him, um...I was able to go with him many times. We were trying to conceive a child so it was very nice of Texaco. It was a very lovely lovely company to work for, they were very family based. When we would go they kept lovely ships and their steward would have lovely table clothes and um...

Interviewer: Wow.

D.C.: It was a very nice environment to...the men worked hard. They worked four hours on, four hours off. So when they came off, their food had to be ready, had to be hot. It had to be good. What else did they have to look forward to being gone out to sea for sometimes 45 days at a time?

Interviewer: Right. Right. So how many times did you go on trips? Do you remember?

D.C.: I always maintained a career but I would go occasionally when he would go to Florida or...um...I would...

Interviewer: Somewhere close?

D.C.: If he would be in Rhode Island or if there would be logical for me to go because she'd have to be put off in the middle of the night to try to make your way to fly back so you had to be very able to take care of yourself.

Interviewer: How interesting.

D.C.: It was interesting. You really, really felt like the bell of the ball. Of course, that was when men were just starting to um...be on the ships. There was no other women on the ships. Maybe one of the cooks was a...You know one of his cooks was an old Swedish women who used to cook them all a wonderful strudel and pastry. But this was a time before the academies were having women go through.

Interviewer: Yup. Interesting. So there were many times when he was away, and you were home?

D. C.: Yes.

Interviewer: We talked a little like what it was like not being able to communicate with him except for certain ways?

D.C.: Well, when my husband shipped from Texaco there was no such thing as e-mail. There was no such thing as cell phones. And you had a telephone, um, I'm not sure what type of service it was, but it was used only for emergencies. I can remember my husband saying to me, that his mother was very ill, and he said to me, don't call me. If my mom passes away, because he had no way of moving the ship. To always wait until he came into port. Because he couldn't have come anyway, so many of the guys were called and told things, and then it killed them not to be able to, and then their nerves, you know, trying to get back and worry and what not. Which was a very logical thing so sometimes you had to be a little bit stronger than the average home front, to make decisions about what to tell, and what to not tell. If they did come into a port, and you knew that, no way they could come home, you had to make your decisions.

Interviewer: Huh.

D.C.: One of the things that I found was the communications. What I did was I kept almost a daily log of things I didn't want to forget to tell him.

Interviewer: Oh ok.

D.C.: Because I felt I had a lobotomy after having the first and the second child. [laughter]

D.C.: So what I did is I would keep a written account of, if someone called and someone passed away or someone was in the hospital. So when I did get my five minute phone call, you know every couple of weeks or whatever it would be. I would be able to tell him, you know, almost quickly what I needed to tell him.

Interviewer: Yup. So you would wait to hear from him?

D.C.: I could not call him; there was no way you could call him.

Interviewer: And how he call you? When he got into ports or something?

D.C.: When you get into ports there is usually one or two telephones at the end of the dock.[laughter] And they had to be very, very considerate because they only had only had only so much time. And many times it was freezing cold or things like that. You never knew where he was gonna call from. But I remember him saying, 'ya know, so and so is waiting and he hadn't talked to his kids and he had to talk to his kids before they went to bed. 'Ya know? This was when we had our first answering machine and I know that sounds like I'm really ancient but um...

Interviewer: Well I remember when I got my first one.

D.C.: Well it was in the early 80's when we had our first, and that's not so long ago. We had our first answering machine and I can remember him talking and talking and talking but he didn't have anything to say because he had been on the ship for so long and he had no information so he would just keep telling me he loved me he loved me he loved me. [laughter]

Interviewer: So sometimes did you get calls at all hours of the day?

D.C.: Oh absolutely, he did not know it. The telephone bills were unbelievable. Back then the long distance service was just unbelievable. The fees, if I ever pulled out some of the old fees of, some of those phone calls, you would think you were reaching out and touch someone was a million dollars.

Interviewer: Wow.

D.C.: It was a lot of money.

Interviewer: So was it lonely then for you or were you busy with careers? I mean I'm sure you missed him whether you were lonely or not.

D.C.: Being a person who married when I was a little bit older, I always planned it when he was home because we were one of the luckier couples. With Texaco he had a two month on, two month off cycle. So what I would plan to do, is I would finish taking courses or I would take a class, when I knew he was going to be gone. Then I always worked full time. And then I had responsibilities for, I had lovely nieces, that were a godsend to me because I was able to take them. One of the things that's very interesting is that when you're a merchant marine's wife and you do not have children, it's almost like a limbo state. Because you can't go out with the single girls, and you're really with your married, your friends, um...

Interviewer: The schedules didn't really, yeah.

D.C.: You really didn't click because if they were into their children, or you really were kind of a no man. So there's a lovely support group of merchant wives that, I had one lovely, lovely friend. One friend that came today, and another gal that lived up in Freyberg. If I was feeling a little blue, a little lonely I would just hop in the car and...

Interviewer: Good for you. So you really took it in your hands.

D.C.: Alright. So we had a vice versa, if the ship came into Boston, I got a phone call one particular time from a woman one time who hadn't seen her husband in quite some time and my husband said so and so is coming, he's got three kids and they haven't seen each other in a long time. And they're only 'gonna come into Boston for so many hours, do you think you could babysit the kids? [laughter]So I had the time of my life, while they went off and they had a little private time.

Interviewer: Huh. That's really fascinating. You had said something outside about having a difficult pregnancy? And having to get in touch with him?

D.C.: Yes I had a very difficult pregnancy, my first pregnancy, we had, ya know, tried many years to have a child. In vitro at that time was a very difficult thing; it was really experimental, much of it, and having a husband that was away much of the time, made it even more difficult. So I had a problem with the pregnancy and I had to talk to him and I did call him. The poor man almost killed himself, getting down the decks thinking that something happened. So, you know, basically, I should never have called him 'cause then he couldn't do anything.

Interviewer: Right.

D.C.: And it really caused him more anxiety, then I should have been able to bear the brunt, but sometimes those emotional rollercoasters kind of, you don't handle things well. [laughter]

Interviewer: No and I'm sure not. And from what you had said outside, it sounded like, at least being able to loop him into the fact that you had this issue, um...

D.C.: Right, right. And the amnio, it was not a healthy thing that went on, but um... 'ya know, he's a wonderful, healthy, baby boy and he's 16 now, and then, we were actually preparing to go through to try to have a second child and um... I met my husband in um... the ship came in for three hours, and I met him in New Jersey and came home and forgot about it, and I had no idea I was almost five months pregnant with my second child and I had no idea.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

D.C.: So I thought it was a virgin birth. [laughter] That lobotomy from the first child. So it was different, we have different memories of how much he was away. I'm going to be honest with you, but with the first child, he was coming in, a month before. And I went to the doctor first, and I was eight months pregnant, and then I was going to the airport to pick him up, and the doctor said, no you're going into the hospital now. So I went and picked my husband up at the airport, and then he drove me back to the airport, and I didn't see him until... You know I stayed in the hospital for a while. But with the second child, he came home the night before, and the baby came a month early. And the water broke and I was off, you know. He said well, I guess that one came a month early too so he was there for both births which was much nicer, you know? For both of them, and because of his being away for most of the pregnancy, he was able to stay home for nine months with my first child. While I went back to work and finished, I had nine more months of contract to finish.

Interviewer: Oh O.K.

D.C.: And um... he was able to bond and um...

Interviewer: You made a comment outside earlier, about God making it all work out or something along those lines. It sounds like...

D.C.: For what I do for a living, God is the person whom we both depend on and um... one of the things that if you ever watch on the news, they'll say, "and the storm went safely out to sea."

Interviewer: Oh my goodness I never thought about that. Safe for who?

D.C.: That's right, that's exactly right. You would see, um... being on the ship, during a storm and realizing that, the only thing I could compare to was the front porches of a three-decker from Boston. That's how high some of the waves, hit. I was never on the ship for a storm quite that violent but he had taken video of that, and it was just like. So whenever someone on T.V. where the meteorologist would say, "And it's gone safely out to sea," then you would really, have to soul search yourself and you'd have to really psych yourself up and really put your faith in God that he was 'gonna be fine and that you know...

Interviewer: Did the size of his ships, like 900 feet I think...

D.C.: That was the largest ship he was ever on. Over 900 feet, yup.

Interviewer: Did it make him feel, like I know with the fishing boats, people are very concerned, was there any less concern because the ships were bigger or were you still just...

D.C.: For one summer the cargos that he was carrying, um... highly volatile at one point in time he was in St. Petersburg and this was one of the times that I have to say that I lost it and picked up the phone.

Interviewer: Yeah.

D.C.: I was watching on noontime news, and the children were young, and there was a bomb that went off in St. Petersburg, and um...I knew that he was carrying a highly volatile cargo. And I knew that he was due to go into St. Petersburg and so I called to the company. The company at this time was not Texaco. It was another company and they were very, very considerate and I said you, there's a bomb that just went off in St. Petersburg, do you have contact with the ship? Do you know that they're all right? And she said, lady if something happened, we would know by now and she hung up on me. And so here I was just very concerned.

Interviewer: Did they know you were the wife of the captain?

D.C.: I introduced myself but they just didn't care. It was a unique company that was not, um...human. Um...but he was fine. If your husband was going and, you know, carrying liquefied natural gas, or grains that you knew were, you know, highly volatile, or some of the other things. You know some of my other girlfriends whose husbands are carrying some of these cargos, one of the things that I did realize, that my husband was very highly trained as a fireman and went to school. Every single person was very educated but the fact of the matter is that, if there was a fire on one of the ships, there would be no survival. Um...one of our friends was the lone, um, person who survived. The ship actually um...wasn't right and it broke. [Microphone problems] The ship actually snapped in half and um...he tells a terrible story about how, God bless, they were all holding him on a life ring, and as each one of them passed, they had to survival, and there's a movie out and he's a wonderful man who has two great children. And his daughter used to babysit for us.

Interviewer: Wow.

D.C.: And um...I always get upset when I think that, you know, people don't realize what the merchant marine has done for this country and how, you know, they are what makes the world go round.

Interviewer: Yeah.

D.C.: You know, I think it's a very unappreciated field.

Interviewer: It's probably like a longshoreman, last year I interviewed a longshoreman and he said the same thing, it's...

D.C.: The longshoreman don't realize, I mean this is a...

Interviewer: If it came from anyone not near you, then a longshoreman helped you get it there.

D.C.: That's exactly right, people don't appreciate and you know, it's just like any tradesman, I think that, you know, yes we talk high tech and we talk, you know, the wiz kids and all that. But it's the grunt people, the doers and the movers that are really keeping, you know, the United States to be a viable, working location. So God bless, you know, in God we trust, it says it everywhere.

Interviewer: So my only other question for now, would be, um...what he's doing now.

D.C.: He's the manager of the New Bedford State Pier here and he's been here, I believe just about six years. And um...it's been wonderful to have him home every night but he comes down here. He loves the people and um...we talk about the politics that go along with um...the pier here and New Bedford and the fishermen and you know, the fishing boats, and space. How people don't realize the jockeying of...They all work together, these fishermen are awesome. Um...I've been told about how considerate and kind they are to each other. And I think that's such a big because they're all feeding their families, you know, and they're self-policing, um...it's a wonderful thing to hear that you know, it's where, here once and a while, yes, you know, you do have one of those, I mean there's always going to be one slip up here and there. And that's the one you hear about but you don't hear about all the other ones that make it work and you know.

Interviewer: This boat came into today that was full of a load that wasn't over its catch and didn't go into a closed area and... [laughter]

D.C.: But I think that it's interesting, he recently compiled some information to saying that in the last five years, you know, how much this port has grown. And what a viable resource it is to revitalize this area. It was just such a terrific area. So...

Interviewer: Well I don't know if there's anything else I can ask, but this is a great start for if someone contacts him. I know you said you'd be willing to sit in and gather if people interview him about the work he's done.

D.C.: Well I talk too much I'm sorry. [laughter] My uncle owned a fleet of boats, um...fishing boats out of Boston. Um...being raised, although I'm not a Catholic, the fish would come in on Wednesdays, and then we would get, me and my Uncle, would the fish and then we would eat fish and fish and fish and fish and fish. My sister still don't like fish. I like fish. But, as I said, my family wasn't raised near the water, but my husband, from the time that he was a young boy, he lived on Paddock Island in Boston, in the summer time. So um...great...very interesting historic location...it's a very interesting place if you ever get a chance to go over there, it's like a forgotten place, it's frozen in time.

Interviewer: Well thank you very much.

(end of interview)