

Stephanie Scull-DeArme: Testing, I'm going to have to talk loud. This is an interview for the Seafood industry museum and the University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Walter Chatagner, and it is taking place on Tuesday, April 13, 2010, at 1:10 PM in Biloxi, Mississippi. I am the interviewer, Stephanie Scull-DeArmy. First, I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chatagner, for taking time to talk with me today. I'd like to get some background information about you. So I'm going to ask you for the record, could you state your name?

Walter Chatagner: Walter Chatagner.

SSD: How do you spell it?

WC: C-H-A-T-A-G-I-N-E-R.

SSD: When were you born?

WC: 1956.

SSD: Where were you born?

WC: Biloxi, Mississippi.

SSD: What's your current title?

WC: Currently, I am the chief for marine patrol, law enforcement for the state of Mississippi, working at the Department of Marine Resources.

SSD: Could you just give us a brief description for the record?

WC: Well, the Office of Marine Patrol, we oversee the boat water safety in South Mississippi. We also regulate seafood. As well as seafood, we do boat and water safety. We do search and recovery. We are the law enforcement on the water; I guess you would say. We also check along our shorelines for wetland violations, marine litter, chemical spills, oil spills, things such as this. We regulate marine regattas, parades, and fireworks exhibits – anything that takes place on the water, it's our responsibility. We do search and recovery for victims of boat accidents, or people that jump off the bridge, or a car accident where cars go off the bridge. So we have a pretty wide spectrum of duties. Also, our officers are sworn law enforcement officers out of the Office of Law Enforcement for NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]. We go out into federal waters, and we patrol federal waters under a joint enforcement agreement with NOAA, and we reinforce federal fishing rules and violations, stranded marine mammal act [Marine Mammal Protection Act], endangered marine species, and things such as that

SSD: Sounds very interesting.

WC: It's a full-time job.

SSD: Well, we'll dive into these questions that the museum wants answered. How long do you have to do this today?

WC: I'm available until we get [inaudible].

SSD: Okay. So I'll start off with number one. What role did you play in introducing TEDs [turtle excluder devices] to the shrimping industry?

WC: Well, I can't really say that we played a role in it, other than – when the TEDs first came about, we weren't enforcing these rules inside state territorial waters, which is where we were. At that time, we really did not have an official joint enforcement agreement written with NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]. But we did do some enforcement to the certain extent that we had some federal agents on our boats. If we encountered something or we encountered a TED violation, we would contact the Coast Guard, and they would come and handle it. So, we really didn't play a role in introducing it. That was NOAA and NOAA's responsibility. They went around at public hearings and had the commission reports and all that. They're the ones that really introduced the TEDs to the shrimping industry, and it was a pretty rough introduction, too. It didn't go over well at first.

SSD: Do you know how TEDs were viewed in the early days?

WC: They weren't viewed at all in good light. Speaking to the fisherman and listening to them, they thought it was a hindrance. It was just another obstacle that the government had put upon them to reduce their catch. I mean, they're out there, working hard, trying to make a living, and here's something that didn't go over well with them. In the old days, the fishermen were known for catching turtles at times. They brought turtles home, and they ate turtles. My father did when he was shrimping back in the '40s. But the government said it had to be protected now, and this was the best device, I guess, they could come up with at that time to protect them, and it just didn't sit well with the fishermen. When you're used to doing something, it's hard to change old habits.

SSD: Yeah. One of the things I've learned in doing these interviews is that shrimpers had always known that a hole in their net was a bad thing. You don't put a hole in your net; if you get one, you repair it. Here came the government saying, "Here's a hole you have to put in your net."

WC: Exactly. I mean, they were telling them exactly what size hole they had to be and how the hole had to be. It didn't seem like the fishermen had that much input from what I understood of it upfront in trying to design this. This was a government project, and it was thrust upon a fisherman. Like you say, their purpose is to catch it, not to let it escape out of the net. There was a lot of heartburn over this when it first started.

SSD: In terms of enforcement, how did that affect you?

WC: Well, like I say, at first, we did not enforce TEDs in state waters when it first come out. TEDs were viewed in federal waters and things such as that. But if we did encounter a TED

violation, we would contact the Coast Guard, and the Coast Guard would send people out, and they would enforce the TED violation, the federal violation. Now, once we became a partner in this joint enforcement agreement, TEDs are a part of this agreement now. So it's up to us, and we do write citations for TED violations now in-state and out-of-state.

SSD: What are the penalties?

WC: That really falls upon the Office of Law Enforcement and general counsel with NOAA. It's a civil penalty; they have civil violations, and it's considered a civil penalty. They can assess a violation from, I would say, probably as low as five hundred dollars up to a hundred thousand dollars. Well, I mean, we had one guy in Mississippi that we caught with a TED that was sewed up, and there was a sea turtle in the net, and the turtle drowned. The turtle drowned. They actually fined that man twenty-thousand dollars. So it just depends on the circumstances and what the Office of Law Enforcement and General Counsel for NOAA wanted to do at the time.

SSD: Do you know how tests are viewed today by the shrimping industry? Has it changed?

WC: Yes, it's changed to a certain extent. They've accepted it. It's a part of doing business now. Do they like it? No. But it's a part of doing business. If you're going to do business, this is just something you have to put up with.

SSD: Do you have --? I thought of the question I wanted to ask you; then I lost it. Do you know of any challenges that were faced in developing TEDs?

WC: Not really. Like I say, as a state partner, we weren't involved in the development of TEDs. I know, just from talking to some of the federal people and all, it wasn't an easy thing for them to develop, too. They looked at saving the turtle, and that's what the purpose of the TED is, was to get the turtle out, so the turtle survives. But they also had to keep in mind that they had to save the seafood industry as well. You can't do one without putting the other one out of business. You're defeating your purpose of what you're there for. So I would imagine when they were in the development process, this is something that they really worked hard to say, "We got to get the turtle out, but we got to leave the shrimp in." I have seen some films where they were actually dragging a trawl underwater with divers inside the net and with turtles and stuff and watching things escape to make sure that they were able to get out, and a percentage of the shrimp could still go through. So I mean, a lot of work went into developing this.

SSD: What were the challenges that you faced actually in enforcing compliance with [inaudible]?

WC: Well, I guess, upfront, it was getting the people to accept the fact that this is here to stay. Whether you like it or not, this is how you're going to have to shrimp. This is business now. This is how it's going to be done. A lot of the people that put TEDs in said, "Okay, we got our TEDs in," but they sewed the flap shut. So even though they had a TED, if you looked at it hanging in the net -- well, yeah, you got a TED sewed up in there. It might be sewed shut where the turtle couldn't get out. They did that intentionally. That's the violations that we used to get when the TEDs were closed, or they would leave an opening in a TED. Don't quote me on the

exact measurement; I think it was twenty-something inches wide, and it had to spread twenty-something inches high, or fifteen inches high. There's a third opening on that TED, and they will sew that down, where the turtle wouldn't get out. It looked like it was still open; it would flap a little bit, but it wasn't big enough for a turtle to escape. It'd help hold some of the seafood in from escaping. Some of them used old wooden sticks, and they wove that stick through the net. There's a TED hanging there, but the flap's shut with the stick. So when we make them pick their net up for us to inspect them, the TEDs come alongside the boat; the first thing they would do is grab the flap and yank it. It would break the stick, and the TED would be open. So after once or twice that, when we would come alongside the boats and board them, just before the TED would break the surface and come up to the boat, we'd tell them, "Don't touch the TED. Leave it alone." We would look at it before they get a chance to put their hands on it and tear the – or some of them had knots tied, a slip-type knot, where they could pull a rope real quick and untie the TED before we could get on board. But those are the things – and we don't see much of that anymore. It's just an accepted practice now, a way of doing business. I think if you gave the fisherman an opportunity – keep pulling them, or you don't have to pull them – you'll see them get rid of them. But it's an accepted practice; they have to do it. So they do it.

SSD: For the record, why do they want to get rid of them?

WC: Why would they want to get rid of them? They believe – and it's their belief. I don't know how much of it is accurate or not. They say they lose a percentage of the seafood out of them. And it could be. They do cause problems. You get crab traps caught in them and things such as this. I have an old cousin in Louisiana that's a shrimper, too. He's in the oil business, but he plays around with shrimp boats and has been since he was five years old with his daddy. He put a TED on one of his trawls. On the other trawl, he didn't put a TED in there. He shrimped, and he said he caught comparable – the same amount of shrimp in both nets. Does that happen for everybody? I don't know. But it's just the concept of, you're going to be told by the government what you got to do and how you got to do it when you've been doing it this way your entire life for generations. It's just accepting that change.

SSD: It's not just [inaudible]

WC: It starts with education. You have to educate the younger generations and bring it up. Unfortunately, you're not seeing the younger generation stay in the shrimping industry. It's not that mom-and-pop business that's being passed down from family member to family member. Kids are going to college now; they're going out [for] different degrees. Making a living in the seafood industry is a tough way to make a living right now.

SSD: So, a lot of people wouldn't even encourage their children [inaudible].

WC: I don't think they are right now. I think they encourage them to get a college education and make a better way of life for themselves.

SSD: What are some of the things putting pressure on the shrimp industry? I mean, besides, say a TED in your net making you lose maybe ten percent of your loss – causing shrimp loss. What are some other things that are making –?

WC: Fuel prices. Fuel prices have gone outrageous in the last four or five years. There's a lot of controversy over imported seafood and the way they dump millions and millions of pounds of shrimp on our market at cheap labor prices, where you can't compete with the US labor prices and the high cost of fuel and all of that. That does have an impact. There's a lot of different things. The Mississippi Gulf Coast was a big seafood industry market. We had factories everywhere. Storms come and took factories out, and some people couldn't get back into business. Waterfront property is more valuable for the casino industry right now than it is for the shrimp industry. It just seems like it's dying out.

SSD: Right. Not only do they have high fuel prices; they're getting less money for their shrimp.

WC: Oh, yes.

SSD: They were in years that fuel prices weren't high.

WC: Exactly.

SSD: Shrimpers, the ones I've interviewed, seem to be a real independent group of people. So I can see easily how they might not like the government to tell them they have to put a hole in their net.

WC: Well, here's the way I've looked at it a long time, too. Who knows best? Some scientist who sits behind a desk with pen and a paper, and he's drawing out a design of this is going to work, or that's going to work, and this will do this, and that will do this. How much faith do you put in him compared to a seventy-year-old man that's been working on a boat since he was fourteen years old, dragging shrimp trawls and shrimping and crabbing and fishing for a living? No, he doesn't have a high school education. He doesn't have a college degree, and he doesn't have any fancy education, but the fact of the matter is he's probably more knowledgeable in that field than any scientist you could ever graduate. Does anybody stop and listen to him? No. The guy over here developed the TED; he developed it. There's all different kinds of ways to look at it, really.

SSD: The Seafood Industry Museum is interested in getting a lot of different viewpoints, so it's good to get this one. Now, for the record, you talked about a crab trap in a TED.

WC: Yes.

SSD: Is that [inaudible]. Why is that [inaudible]?

WC: Well, because of what it does. As the TED comes down to [inaudible] portion of the net where the TED [inaudible] right in front of the funnel where it goes toward the bag. A crab trap – it's a wire structure. He gets it in, and it doesn't pass through because of the TED, and it doesn't pass all the way into the net. What it does – it can cause an obstruction. What will happen is – in a conventional trawl – let's say you didn't have the TED; you have an obstruction there. You're still getting all the stuff in the net; it's just not going back into the bag of the net

because it's obstructed. Here, if you've got an obstruction right there at the TED, stuff can't get into the bag of the net; it can't go through the TED. It's got to go on out of that hole up there. So it's pushing stuff out that hole. That's where a lot of the – right after Camille – I mean, excuse me – Katrina, they got an exemption from using TEDs; there was so much trash in the Gulf that they ended up getting a federal exemption from using TEDs for a certain period of time until they could get some of this debris up. It was just clogging the nets up.

SSD: Do you know about how long the extension was for?

WC: No, I can't remember. It was during the first season, I think.

SSD: The first season? Okay. What is shrimping season?

WC: Well, in Mississippi, it usually runs from the opening, which is anywhere from the first week of June – it runs all the way around until May the first, and then it closes until it opens. So it's open pretty much year-round, and just a short period in May, it's closed. Then, usually that one month. In June, it's opened back up sometime about the first anywhere in the middle, even the end of June sometimes. [inaudible]

SSD: Do you have any idea why they close it for that month? Is it reproduction time?

WC: Actually, that's when the smaller brown shrimp are coming out of actuatories and getting out. They're trying to give the shrimp a chance to grow to a marketable size, is what it is.

SSD: Okay. Now, you talked about the net a little bit, and you talked about the bag. For the record, can you describe what the bag is?

WC: Well, the bag is just kind of like a pouch at the end of the trawl, and that's where your catch falls down into. Just kind of like the net – it's like a funnel. They go down at the end [inaudible] at the end of that funnel is a bag, and it expands as it gets bigger. Of course, your seafood is all captured in that bag, and when they hoist it up, then you'll see them under the rope at the end of the bag – all the catch [inaudible] out on the deck.

SSD: So is it like a purse at the end of the bag?

WC: Yes.

SSD: And strings that draw it [inaudible] line.

WC: Exactly. Well, strings really don't draw it tight. You don't want to [inaudible]. You draw it tight when you're picking it up. In other words, when you get the net alongside the boat, [inaudible] you wrap a line around it, right in that area, and pick it up. That way, you don't spill your catch back out the other end of the net. They'll hoist it up on the boat, and then they'll drop it.

SSD: So if a crab trap gets caught in the front, nothing goes into the bag?

WC: Well, not nothing, but it obstructs a lot of the stuff from going into the bag.

SSD: Less? Less goes in.

WC: Yes.

SSD: Because of the TED, which is a hole, the catch goes out.

WC: It can go out.

SSD: Okay.

WC: It can keep the TED and obstruct it, where nothing can go through it because that's basically what a TED does is – well, they have a soft TED, too, but they have the metal TEDs, and it's like fingers, metal fingers – an oval type shape band, and it's put in the trawl at an angle, so the smaller seafood can go through the band and back into the bag of the trawl. The turtle won't fit between the metal fingers. It hits these fingers, slides up and out of the top. So if a crab trap gets smashed up against the TED, it's like taking those fingers that are about four or five inches apart now – and now you got chicken wire that's covering that, and that gets clogged up with fish and seafood. It forms into a solid structure there now, and all the seafood is hitting that and sliding right out the top of the trawl instead of going through the fingers; the fingers are blocked by the crab trap.

SSD: There wouldn't be –?

WC: Not just crab traps, but other debris can do this.

SSD: There wouldn't be any way the fishermen would know that was happening?

WC: Not while they're dragging the trawl.

SSD: How deep is it? Do you know how deep would the trawl be at that point?

WC: Well, the trawl's going to be on the bottom. You're trawl fishing along toward the bottom. It's far enough behind the boat; there's no way to see it. The clarity we have in our water here, plus you're dragging two big heavy [inaudible] along the bottom and the tickle chain and stirring up mud. You couldn't see the trawl if you jumped in the water with it. So they have no idea there's anything in there until it's already done.

SSD: For the record here, in the Gulf of Mexico off the Mississippi Coast, our water is not as clear as, say, it is in Pensacola, Florida.

WC: No.

SSD: Which I suppose is because of the barrier islands –

WC: Exactly.

SSD: –trapping stuff would otherwise be washed away to make the water clear. We don't have very clear water here at all, and that's just for the record. Are most of your boardings at the dock, or are they at sea?

WC: No, we do a lot of boarding at sea. Most of our boardings are done at sea. We do some boardings at dock. Somebody will call in and report somebody did a violation or something or suspicious activity with a boat. We'll go to a dock and check him there. But most of our seafood boardings, shrimping, and stuff, we're out there physically on the deck of their boat. We'll signal them to pick their trawls up, and we'll put an officer up on the deck of their boat. We'll look at their nets, look at their TEDs. If the nets look like they're oversized, we'll actually measure the net to make sure it's not in violation of our state ordinances and laws on size. We'll get the catch. If we have a violation, we handle it. If we don't have a violation, we thank them, gather our information, and let them go back to work.

SSD: Okay. Just thinking ahead, say somebody is listening to this in a hundred years or two hundred years, can you paint a picture? How do you contact them? Is it by radio?

WC: No, we usually come right alongside the boat, and we'll turn a blue light on the boat. Sometimes, we might contact them by radio, but usually, when they see us coming alongside the boat – and a lot of times, we'll step right out of the cabin of our boat; they'll look right over at us, and we'll give them the thumbs up. Once they see that thumbs up, they know to get their trolls up so we can board them.

SSD: Is it at night? You have to have a light because it's at night?

WC: We do it at night and daytime.

SSD: You do both? Okay.

WC: Yes. We're out there 365 days a year – rain, snow, hail. We're just like the mailman. We're out there. If they're out there working, we're out there. Even if they aren't working – if it's during a closed season – we're really out there to make sure they're not out there working.

SSD: At another point in time, I might like to come back. You can think about this. You don't have to tell me now –and interview you about Hurricane Katrina because you guys must have had a full plate for Hurricane Katrina – before, during, and after.

WC: We did. I had nine officers [who] lost everything. I stayed here for the storm. I stayed at the Biloxi police station, a block off the beach. I stood outside during the whole storm and watched it.

SSD: [inaudible] walk on the beach. We've got some interviews with the nurses who were at Biloxi Regional Medical Center. That's a pretty dramatic story. Were you guys actually closer or about the same to the beach as they are?

WC: About the same, really.

SSD: The same? Yes. I think she said about six inches more, and the surge would have put their generators out of business.

WC: Where we were at – we were on a fairly high hill. We didn't have – Porter Avenue. The water didn't get up to the police station. It came up to the top of the hill, but it's as far as it got.

SSD: I know from talking to some of the shrimpers that Katrina made a big difference in the shrimping fishery.

WC: Oh, yes.

SSD: In some ways, it was really good for the shrimpers who were able to survive because there's fewer shrimpers now.

WC: Exactly. It cut the field down. The pie is there; there's less people taking a piece of pie.

SSD: So they get bigger pieces of the pie.

WC: Was that the best way to do it? No, but it's the way it happened. Mother Nature took care of a lot of things. The seafood has started to make a comeback along this coast. But there, for a while, we didn't have any processing [inaudible]. It didn't matter if you caught seafood; there was nowhere to process it.

SSD: There wasn't anywhere –?

WC: Everybody got wiped out. I mean, everybody had to build back.

SSD: Was it just out of the question because of fuel prices or something for them to travel with the catch?

WC: Well, they didn't have any choice but to travel with it. There was no place to – you can go out and catch the shrimp; there was no place to bring it to. All the factories that had processed shrimp were damaged. There was no place for them to bring the shrimp to.

SSD: Even in Texas, Rita came right behind. It probably wiped out two processing plants in Texas.

WC: Sure did. Louisiana wiped out – a lot of places were wiped out from Katrina.

SSD: Right. So do you think that shrimping stopped after Katrina?

WC: It slowed way down.

SSD: Now, during that year that there was an exemption, that means that Department of – what is it? Marine resources? DMR?

WC: Yes, DMR.

SSD: Marine patrol. You guys weren't checking for TEDs at all during that time. I'm sure you had your hands full with other things.

WC: There really wasn't much people shrimping at that time, either.

SSD: Yes, I guess it was a lot of boat repairing. Did you work in conjunction with other agencies in enforcing compliance with TEDs?

WC: Just [inaudible] the Coast Guard and NOAA, Office National Marine Fisheries Law Enforcement.

SSD: How would you work with NMFS? How would you work with them?

WC: We have agents that would ride out on the boat with us. And we'd do a dual patrol. Same thing with Coast Guard – not so much the Coast Guard riding with us, but if we would encounter TED violations, we'd contact our local Coast Guard agents, and they would send crews out there to take care of the situation.

SSD: Did you ever fear for your life when you were trying to enforce compliance?

WC: No, I never have. I've been in law enforcement now – this is my thirty-first year working on it. There's a right way to do a job and a wrong way to do a job. Unfortunately, law enforcement – and sometimes it leaves a bad taste in people's mouth because nobody likes to be corrected and given a citation had to pay a fine and, but there's a right way to issue that citation. You still have to treat the people with respect. I can write a guy a ticket and try and reason with him and still go away and pretty much be a friend, or I can go there and write a ticket and leave such a bad taste in his mouth that he'll hate me and this agency and any other officer who wears this uniform as much as he hates me just because of the way I treat him. So I think if you treat the people with a little bit of respect – there're certain criminals you can't do that with. We all know that. There's certain people you have to treat that way; they're criminal. These are hardworking people. Fishermen are not criminals; they're out there trying to make a living. Of course, some of them don't agree with the rules and regulations, and when they step outside, we try to put them back inside the line. But there's a professional way to handle yourself out there with these people without just harassing them and trying to make them feel bad and trying to make them feel like you're more important to them. If you do that, I think you'll be okay. I've never feared for my life on any of the boats I've ever boarded – never. I've drank coffee with them. We've got guys that I've chased around, and I've caught them and wrote them tickets. Then we sit down when it's over with and drink a cup of coffee. When they see me out there,

they'd pull up to my boat; I'd open up my thermos bottle and pour them a cup of coffee. We'd just sit there and talk about fishing or different political things going on. After a thirty, forty-minute conversation, we both look at each other and say, "Okay, time to go back to work." They take off and go do their thing, and I take off and try to find them later on if they were violating the law. That's just the way it was.

SSD: Are there times when these shrimpers call on you for aid or protection?

WC: Oh, yes. We've had to go out and – medical emergencies, their boat sinking, boat fires, other people harassing them, boat accident with other commercial boats. We interact with him quite a bit on the water and even off the water.

SSD: What kind of harassment might shrimpers get when they're at sea?

WC: I know when the Vietnamese first started coming here, I wasn't working for the agency then when they first introduced [inaudible], but I know there was some conflict. Even after I came to work, there was still some conflicts, verbal harassment. I go back to saying this was an old family business and industry along this coast. You got these newcomers moving in and trying to take that piece of your pie. It didn't sit well at first. Of course, they intermingle a whole lot better today than they did back in the '60, '70s, and early '80s. But harassment as far as environmental groups harassing people around here Greenpeace or PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals]. We haven't seen that along this coast. We haven't seen that here. I hope we don't because men and women in this business have a right to make a living out there. They're doing it and abiding by the law.

SSD: Speaking of the Vietnamese, did you have any experiences with TED compliance with Vietnamese that stand out in your mind?

WC: Oh, yes. I'm not here to pick on them, but it's saying that there were more – it seemed like there were more Vietnamese violations in the earlier days with TEDs than there were with the American fishermen. I'm not trying to single that group out because there were just a few that did what they did. Most of the Vietnamese abided by the law, but you had a handful that didn't. They're the ones that wove chopsticks through the net and strings and different ways of trying to beat the system. But some American fishermen did the same, too.

SSD: Was there a language barrier?

WC: Well, at certain times, they would claim there were language barriers. When they were [inaudible], there was always a language barrier. "Me no understand" was a very familiar phrase. "Me no understand English." It was a stall tactic because the whole time they kept us tied up with them, the other four or five boats in that area were getting things back [inaudible]. You see what I'm saying?

SSD: Or maybe getting their TEDs where [inaudible] –?

WC: Get back into the areas that they were supposed to be in and stuff like that, if they were just over the territory line where they could and couldn't [inaudible]. Looking back on it and joking, we used to speak the universal language, I guess you would say, either comply with what I'm telling you, or I'm going to take you to jail. Once you usually mentioned the word jail, they started understanding English a whole lot better.

SSD: Did you make any arrests for TED violations?

WC: Well, it's possible I did over the years. I've made a bunch and forgot a bunch. I know we've made arrests for different-sized trawls and license violations. I'm sure there were some arrests made for TED violations.

SSD: Now, you talked about territorial lines. Tell me about territorial lines in the water.

WC: Well, if you're shrimping inside the barrier islands, we have a regulation on the size of the nets you can use. If you're pulling two nets, they can't be bigger than twenty-five-foot on the top corkline and thirty-two-foot on the lead line. That's if you're pulling two nets. If you're pulling just one net, the top line, which is what we call the corkline or the headline, it can be fifty-foot – no more. The lead line can't be any more than sixty-foot. But some of these bigger boats, like you see the one on the bay here when you came in, the bigger steel-hull boats, eighty, ninety-foot big boat, they would pull what's called quads; they would pull four nets. Regardless of what size they were, you couldn't pull four nets inside the barrier islands.

SSD: Is there a two-net limit?

WC: A two-net maximum inside the barrier islands. Outside the barrier islands, you could pull four nets. You could pull bigger-sized nets. For the inshore waters, in the barrier islands were reserved for twenty-five-foot twin nets or one fifty-foot net. You would catch boats doing that. Then there were areas that were closed to everybody shrimping – a half-mile off the beach. That's closed. We would get people up inside whatever mile, an eighth of a mile, inside the line. We would cite them for shrimping in closed area. Then there's just certain areas during certain times of the year that were closed, period. We have a season that after December 31st, you can't shrimp north of the intercoastal waterway. The intercoastal waterway is inside the barrier islands. Okay? So after December 31st, that portion, north of the intercoastal waterway up to the beach, was closed for shrimping. You could still shrimp south of the barrier island. Then, they first come along, and it shut the whole season down. So you couldn't shrimp south of the barrier islands. You had to stay three miles past the barrier islands at the state line. On the chart, it's drawn on the state boundary line.

SSD: So anything three miles out is federal waters?

WC: That was federal waters.

SSD: Do you guys ever venture out there to help the feds?

WC: We do now. At the very beginning, we weren't. We weren't part of that. Now we do. We have a joint enforcement agreement with the National Marine Fisheries Service. We go out as far as two-hundred-mile territory. We enforce federal fishing violations and laws and rules all the way out to the EEZ, which is the exclusive economic zone of the United States which is two-hundred miles offshore.

SSD: I was going to ask you something. If somebody is in federal waters, is that automatically a criminal offense with a TED and not a [inaudible]?

WC: No. It's a civil – in federal waters, under National Marine Fisheries Service, their violations are civil. Now, under our joint enforcement agreement, if it is a violation in federal waters, we can handle that back into our state court under an administrative penalty or process with us, not a criminal – going into an administrative process through our commission, we can handle that [inaudible]. Our state waters – our seafood violations in our state waters are all criminal charges, and they're handled in the justice court system. The National Marine Fisheries stuff, their seafood violations are all civil [inaudible]. If the feds do not want to hear that case, and we choose to bring that case into our realm, we handle it under an administrative penalty. Our legislatures have given us the authority to [inaudible] charges of federal waters and handle them in state – a state administrative penalty act through our commissioner. Now, this is only on vessels – remember that this is only vessels that are documented or licensed under Mississippi. So if I have a Louisiana-documented vessel and Louisiana licensed-vessel, even though I'm out there in federal waters, I cannot take that Louisiana vessel and bring it into my Mississippi administrative penalty system. I will have to take that vessel and that incident and make a case [inaudible] and send it to National Marine Fisheries for them to handle it.

SSD: You can still intervene, but the –

WC: And I'm not going to get into all the fancy legal terms, but under the Magnuson Stevens Act, if that vessel is permitted or documented in your state and registered in your state, you hold control over it, even in federal waters, as far as enforcement goes in fisheries.

SSD: On number five, the challenges faced in getting the shrimping industry to use TEDs. We touched on that a little bit. Is there anything else you can think of that [inaudible]?

WC: Most of the challenge was just trying to change old habits.

SSD: You never had anybody blockade the port?

WC: No, we didn't have that problem then. People are too busy trying to make a living.

SSD: Do you know how early TED models compared to later models?

WC: Well, I think some of the earlier models are still the later ones that are being used. I know when they first started, they had one of the things called a Morrison soft-TED; you don't see that one that often. They had one that Noah Saunders invented. I can't remember the name of that. They had one called a Georgia. One of them was a square TED; one was a round one; one was

an oval shape. They were all acceptable to National Marine Fisheries, so it really didn't matter what they used, as long as they used one that was acceptable. The ones that they're using today are still acceptable. Are they still evolving? I'm sure somebody's still doing research on them, trying to find a more adequate one.

SSD: That's what I hear. That's always changing. Do you have any experience with protests against TEDs?

WC: No, we really didn't have that problem along the coast here.

SSD: I know that you've been involved in enforcing compliance.

WC: We still enforce compliance.

SSD: How has that changed over the years?

WC: We still enforce it. We're having less issues with it. Like I say, people come to accept the fact that this is what I have to do to do business. Our TED violations are way down. Maybe one year, if that.

SSD: That's great.

WC: I think the TED chat violation we had was the one that – it was an inshore boat, and he had the turtle – that was a few years.

SSD: I lost something I was going to ask you. I lost it. We've talked about how your agency engages with other agencies. How do you think TEDs have affected the shrimp industry?

WC: I don't think it's put anybody out of business. People are still making a living. It's hard to make a living in the shrimp industry, but there's other factors in it that are far more compelling than the use of a TED. I could say people just accept it as a method of how they have to do business now.

SSD: I remember what I was going to ask you. Just a ballpark figure – about how many times, say in a month, do you check for TEDs?

WC: Every day.

SSD: Every day?

WC: I'll tell you, we don't necessarily have to check on the water. This is one thing we can do dockside because National Marine Fisheries and the rules say if that shrimp trawl is hanging in the rigging, and it's connected to the doors, your big wooden or metal boards that help pull the net along. If it's hooked up and prepared to go, it has to have a TED in it, even if it's not working, even if it's just hanging there. Now, if the net is disconnected from the doors, disconnected and not shackled to the cables it's pulling, it doesn't have to have a TED in it. So

you see, you take one of these big offshore boats; he might have a dozen different nets on his boat – he might only have four TEDs. What they do is they take the TED out of one net, and if they switch nets, they just cut the TED out of it and sew it in the next net. They all carry extra nets. I've never seen a boat carry an extra TED.

SSD: [laughter] Interesting. Do you have any idea how TEDs have affected the sea turtle population?

WC: I really don't. We use TEDs. [inaudible] have sea turtles killed. But sea turtles are living creatures. They die every day just like every other living creature does, too. I don't know if it saves the sea turtle. I don't know if it saved the sea turtle from going extinct. It's hard for me to understand sometimes why the United States goes through so much effort to protect something that our neighboring countries eat. The attitude about it has changed some too. I can't tell you it's saved the sea turtles, and I can't tell you it would have wiped them out if they wouldn't have done it.

SSD: We were talking before the interview. I grew up in Gulfport and stayed on the beach as a kid – never saw a sea turtle until a couple of years ago. I guess it was around 2000, 2001. I was walking on the beach. A big turtle – found a big turtle about, I guess, five feet wide. But I'd never seen one before in years and years. Do you see very many turtle strandings?

WC: Over my career here, I've seen a few turtles, some of the leatherback, big leatherbacks, loggerheads. I've seen some of the Kemp ridley's that are so protected. I've seen some of them wash up. We've had cases – usually one or two cases in the summertime, where people catch sea turtles off the piers. They'll call us, and we'll go out. On rod and reel, they caught them. We'll go out and get the sea turtle from them. At that time, we were bringing them over to Marine Life [Oceanarium], and they were removing the hook from them and nursing them back to health and getting them back released.

SSD: For the record, what was Marine Life?

WC: The Marine Life center down here in Gulfport, where they had the dancing dolphins and all that kind of stuff. It was like a rehab center for sea turtles. They had the expertise to do it. We call them over – in Pascagoula, there's a station in Pascagoula we can call and turn things over to them. We have a guy at work here at the DMR that handles stranded marine mammals and things such as that. That's part of his job, too.

SSD: But Marine Life was wiped out by Katrina, right? They're gone.

WC: Well, the same doctor has his research facility opened up on the Industrial Seaway in Gulfport. There's dolphins and stuff.

SSD: Is it open to the public?

WC: I believe it is. I think they do tours and stuff there. As a matter of fact, my son's going on a field trip there tomorrow.

SSD: Wow. Do you know that doctor's name?

WC: I'm going to try and tell you his name; I hope I don't butcher it. [Solangi] or something like that. They're just fixing to open this marine education center right here in D'Iberville. They were just talking about – D'Iberville won the location for it to be reconstructed at?

SSD: Was that the one that was on Point [inaudible]?

WC: No, no. That was USM, University of Southern Mississippi. Southern had that.

SSD: This is a marine education center run by the state?

WC: No, this guy's a private business.

SSD: That's interesting. I didn't know anything.

WC: It's in the paper. It's been in the news, in the paper here recently. They're fixing to build. I forget how many millions of dollars. It's going to be like the Aquarium of the Americas.

SSD: Wow, that's great.

WC: It's going to be built right here in D'Iberville.

SSD: That's fantastic.

WC: Yes.

SSD: That's what we need for tourism. Really good. But it's not built yet.

WC: No, no.

SSD: It sounds like a big project that will take a while.

WC: It is. It will be a couple years down the road if they complete it.

SSD: Why do you think sea turtles are important?

WC: Well, I guess, like everything else, it's important. It's all part of the ecosystem. I guess it's like little building blocks; you start pulling a block out here and block out there and a block out here; before you know it, the whole ecosystem's liable to crash in on itself and collapse. I'm not a scientist. I'm not a biologist. I don't claim to be one, but they were put here for a reason. I guess it's our responsibility to make sure they stick around as long as we possibly can.

SSD: Yes. I have heard from scientists I've interviewed that the numbers are coming back in Mexico and around our continent, for sure. There are some measures to get other countries to

come on board and offer some protection, too. Unfortunately, there's a lot of corruption along the line.

WC: Oh, sure.

SSD: Not every country has law enforcement like we do, who will really enforce, I guess, in other parts of the world where people eat them.

WC: Well, yes, Mexico. I've been to Mexico a couple times and seen turtle shell jewelry, turtle skin wallets, whole turtle shells shellacked and varnished. It's all pretty stuff, but it's an endangered species. Plus, they ate them as well. My understanding now is they've taken it serious in a certain part of the beach down there, where some of the turtles nest; they have the military out there watching the nest and keep people from robbing them. That's all good. It's all good. It's all part of the system. Like I say, who knows what the purpose of the gnat is? But if we took gnat away, what would it do? What would happen?

SSD: Yes. Somebody also mentioned that maybe someday the turtles will rebound so much that there'll be a fishery for them, and they can be taken off the endangered list. How does the Endangered Species Act affect you as a law enforcement officer?

WC: Well, it's just something like these turtles that we have to protect and regulate. Back in the late '70s or early '80s or '90s, when Paul Prudhomme, Chef Paul with the blackened redfish – the redfish got wiped out, overly fished. The federal government decided, "Well, listen, we can't have any redfish taken and possessed in federal water there. It's endangered." They're still on that list, and we're still trying to get them to lighten up on that because they've made such a good comeback. But it's just another thing that we look at. We have multi roles when we board a shrimp boat. We're looking [inaudible] safety equipment. We look at license requirements. We look at citizenship papers and stuff. We look at the shrimp. We look at the crab. We check for endangered species. We look for EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] or environmental problems, like with oil in the bilge, if it's going to get pumped overboard and holding tanks or marine sanitation devices. So when we board a boat, people say, "Well, you only check for shrimp." We check for a dozen things. It all takes place the same time we're checking for shrimp, but we look at everything. That's all part of it, even with the Endangered Species Act and Marine Stranded Mammal Act. These are things that we look at. We look at everything every time we're on board that boat.

SSD: You probably have a checklist.

WC: No, we don't really have a checklist. It's just our officers know the job. We know what we're looking for. We know fish have different sizes, how many you can keep of this, how many you can keep of that, [inaudible] you can keep them. That's just something that these officers know. They have a law book, several different books that they bring that they keep on the boat with them. Some of them know it all by memory. They sit there – we got these fish. We need to measure them. We'll measure for sharks and lemonfish and king mackerel and amberjack. We have fish that have size limits. We don't have anything that has a pound or a weight limit, but they do have a length, and they have to be a certain length. You're allowed to

possess so many fish over the certain length. There's a slot limit they have to be in. That's just part of the officer's training and knowledge. Not only for what we do in state, but officers have to know what the limits are in federal waters for the federal species. Officers have to know what Alabama's limit is and Louisiana's limit is and what their sizes are because we have people that live in Mississippi and go fish in their waters and come back, you see? We have an agreement with Louisiana; if you fish in Louisiana waters and you hold a Louisiana fishing license, you can come back into Mississippi, as long as you don't stop and fish with Louisiana size limit and a Creole limit.

SSD: Just for transporting, they can't stop and fish? But they can come through.

WC: Yes, just transport.

SSD: I keep thinking of questions and forgetting them. I should jot them down. Shoot. I lost it. Well, we've talked some about the penalty for having sea turtles. Is there anything you want to add to that? You'd said it can go up to a hundred thousand dollars.

WC: It's up to what they assess the fine. It's out of our control. It's out of our control.

SSD: Now, if I had been doing an interview for the Center for Oral History, which is where I work, I would have started with question number sixteen. We like to get on the record a little bit about your early life because we feel that in years to come, what seems ordinary to you today will be interesting to researchers. So, if you don't mind, tell me just a little bit about what it was like for you growing up? What was Biloxi like when you were growing?

WC: A whole lot quieter. More laid back. There wasn't the casino industry here at that time. Like I say, I grew up right – actually, the first year of my life, I lived down on the point, what they called Point Cadet. I lived in a house behind my grandmother and grandfather's house on Oak Street. My grandfather was a carpenter; my grandmother was a housewife that didn't speak in English. My grandfather spoke a very little bit of English. They were Cajun French from Louisiana. My dad, at that time, when I was born, my dad worked in the oil business. He was an engineer on oil rigs; he was head mechanic for the rigs. Then after a year old, I moved just around the corner from where we're speaking at today, right here, along Back Bay, and grew up there, was raised there, until I moved out of the house. The people can't tell, but up here on the fifth floor is the old Biloxi Hospital. This is the old Biloxi Hospital we're sitting in.

SSD: This is?

WC: This is here on the fifth floor; I got one of the most beautiful views, overlooking Back Bay. When I was a kid, I played in that water down there. I swam in it. Just as a young kid, stood in it with a fishing pole and fished and caught croakers and catfish. Man, I just thought I was the biggest – biggest catch I could ever catch when you're seven, eight years old, fishing in that water. We called it wade fishing. Life was simple, and it was easy down here. The seafood industry was, I guess you'd say, "King Cotton" – it was the seafood that was king down here then. We [inaudible] tourism, too, but it wasn't as big as the seafood industry was at that time. It was trying to be developed. There [inaudible] being developed. My uncle was in the restaurant

business. He also was in the seafood business. He had a little shrimp boat. Summertime, I would work on the shrimp boat with him. I'll tell you; he was just an old Cajun. Life was simple for him, too. He wasn't a fancy man. I'll never forget. I was just a teenager and a young teenager, but I was always a big fellow. Those little shrimp boats, the little [inaudible] – he pulled a thirty-foot trawl. They had steel cables on them that would pull for this trawl. The (friction broke?), and we had no way to get the cables and the net back in the boat. My uncle was a very strong person, too. He said, "Come on, [inaudible]. We're going to have to pull this net in by hand." Sure enough, I was a young teenager, but I was strong as a bull then. We got this net in, and we got alongside the boat. We got the bag of shrimp up on the deck. You got the heavy boards up on the back of the boat. As a youngster, I was huffing and puffing. It was just a sigh of relief to finally get this net on the boat. My hand was bleeding from pulling these steel cables in. He was tough. He didn't have a scratch on him. He was just tough as nails. We dumped the shrimp out. He looked over at me, and he said, "Man, why don't you get you one of them cold root beers and take a break and pick them shrimp out while you're resting." These fish are flopping on the deck and shrimp kicking around and crab running. He looked at the shrimp; we had a pretty catch of shrimp. "Man," he says, "that's pretty good shrimp right now. You think we could put that net over and make one more drag." I almost had tears in my eyes. Here I was, a young guy, and I didn't want to disappoint him. Finally, I looked at him, and I said, "You put the net over; you're going to have to get it back in by yourself. I'm going on strike. I can't do it." He started laughing. He said, "We wouldn't put it over anyway." We went on back in and got the boat fixed. We used to get up early in the morning and leave his house on Oak Street. I'd stay with him on the weekends when I'd shrimp with him. We'd get up at 4:30, four o'clock in the morning. For a young guy – most of these young kids, I was like them, too – I liked to sleep late. We get down there about ten o'clock. He'd be starting to get hungry. "Man, do we have anything to eat?" "Oh, yeah," he says, "go down there in the little cabin. I got you a bag of food in there." I'd open the bag; there'd be a fresh loaf of colonial bread and four or five cans of potted meat, and a plastic spoon. Every day, we ate that potted meat. Finally, I just said to him, "They got other things to eat besides potted meat." He said, "Would you like something different?" I said, "I sure would." He said, "Tomorrow, we're going to have something different." So I couldn't wait. I could just see peanut butter sandwiches or ham and cheese sandwiches with some good fresh bed. Man, that next morning, I got hungry again. He said, "Well, I brought you some new food. So go down that bag in the little cabin, get it out, and we'll eat." I opened that bag; there was a loaf of bread, and he had about four or five cans of Vienna sausage. I just shook my head. I said, "Lord, man, this ain't nothing but rolled up potted meat." That's all we ever ate on that boat was Vienna sausage and potted meat. He was a simple man.

SSD: How long did he stay out?

WC: We were only out for the day. He had a little bitty old boat. The boat was probably only thirty-five-foot long, a little [inaudible]. He was a character.

SSD: How long did he live?

WC: He died. He was about sixty-two years old when he died.

SSD: That's young.

WC: Yeah, he was young.

SSD: Potted meat is not that good for you. It's not a good diet.

WC: Yes. Well, neither was cigarettes. That was his problem. He smoked all his life. My grandpa had emphysema, and he did it. My dad ended up succumbing to it, too. I finally quit smoking myself. I've been smoke-free for about six years now after thirty years of smoking.

SSD: Yes. It's never too late to quit.

WC: Life was simple. Thinking back, we didn't catch a bunch of shrimp, and you didn't get a bunch of money for shrimp back then. I remember I peddled shrimp for him. Sometimes, we'd get fifty cents a pound for them, seventy-five cents a pound for the big shrimp.

SSD: That was what year?

WC: That was back in the '70s.

SSD: That's not very much for shrimp, is it?

WC: No. He didn't make a bunch. He was never a wealthy man. They lived from paycheck to paycheck; well, we all did back then. My uncle might catch forty, fifty pounds of shrimp in his little boat that morning, and he'd always take [inaudible] drive back, we'd drive through the neighborhood. I'll never forget. There's an old guy who was sitting on his porch one day. My uncle stopped and said, "I'll be right back." He opened his ice chest. He got a big old bucket of shrimp out. He brought it up to that man, gave it to that old-timer sitting on that porch, shook his hand, came back in the truck, and I said, "You sold him shrimp? I didn't see the guy give you any money?" He said, "No, that's just an old fisherman. He's retired, and he can't go fish anymore. I just thought I'd bring him some seafood."

SSD: He was feeding him.

WC: Yes. He did that to several people in the neighborhood. That's the way things worked back then.

SSD: Did he have to buy ice to ice the shrimp down on the boat?

WC: Yes. He had to pay for fuel. We had to pay for ice.

SSD: The '70s is when gas started increasing in price.

WC: Yeah. He had an old boat, and it was a gasoline-engine boat. He didn't make any money with it.

SSD: Didn't get him rich.

WC: No.

SSD: Did he wholesale the shrimp?

WC: No.

SSD: Did he have a restaurant [inaudible]?

WC: We sold them at the factories [inaudible] West Seafood down there [inaudible]. He'd sell them to [inaudible] West. He'd sell them to other people, too. I lived out here and lived around all these military houses and grew up around these military housing projects. I'd peddle shrimp for them in the neighborhood and door-to-door, and people would buy them. They'd want to buy five pounds and ten pounds.

SSD: Can you just paint a picture of that? Were you riding on a bicycle or in a car?

WC: No, only walking distance to the neighbor, right around, within walking distance of the house.

SSD: Did you have an ice chest they were in?

WC: No, I'd go and knock on their door and say, "You want to buy some shrimp? We got some shrimp." They said, "Yeah, we'd like to buy some." My uncle would be right there at the house, drinking coffee with my dad and mom. I'd come back and say, "These people down the road here want ten pounds of shrimp. They want the heads off of them. Okay. So we got them, head the shrimps real quick, and we run over there and sell it to them.

SSD: How do you head shrimp?

WC: You just [inaudible] the head off them.

SSD: What did you all do with the heads?

WC: We take them; use them for fish bait. In the old days, and I still do it too, I boil mine down and just simmer them down and make seafood stock out of them for gumbo and things such as that. But a lot of times, [inaudible] bury them out around the fig tree, throw them in the garden [inaudible].

SSD: Wow. So they weren't just fertilizer – as bait, to make fish stock, for say, gumbo or some other seafood dish.

WC: Throw them in the bay; feed the fish. That way, I'd have a place to catch fish.

SSD: Yes, a lot of recycling going on. Does anything else come to mind when you think of your childhood?

WC: No. Like I say, we weren't rich people. We wanted to get somewhere, we get up and walk. It's funny. I have two kids today, and they live in the electronic age. I actually have three children. One's in college right now, fixing to graduate, and he grew up in the electronic age. My two children, my own, are growing up in the electronic age, and they don't – a whole weekend, they might stay inside the house. When we grew up here, we were up and out of the house at sunrise, and we didn't come back in until sunset.

SSD: Couldn't wait to get outside.

WC: If we were in the neighborhood, all the kids ate lunch at our house. If we were around their house, well, we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drank Kool-Aid at their house [inaudible] we get back to play some more. Just different times that we grew up in and different people. People used to look out for everybody else. I don't see that as much anymore. That's not a good thing.

SSD: Nobody's home.

WC: Exactly. My mother stayed there and raised us. My dad worked offshore. He would be gone for ten days and home for five, working in the oilfield. He did that all the way up until I got out of high school. He finally retired out of there and then worked around the house and worked in the neighborhood here doing carpenter work when the company he was working for started going under. But my mother was always there to raise us. In the summertime, when we were old enough to fend for ourselves, she went back to work with the factories to make extra money picking crab and heading shrimp and stuff at the factories, something she did when she was a little girl, raised on the Point. She'd get up before it was time to go to school and go work in the factories. It's just a whole different environment here now. We have casinos. They brought a lot of good to this coast, and there's some negative stuff that goes along with it. But they've been good neighbors and brought a lot of good. I've always said I'd hate to see what Biloxi would look like right now if it weren't for the casinos. We were in pretty economic tough times back when the casinos come along and lifted the city out of the hole. I worked for the city at one time; I know how tough it was. But this is a good –

SSD: About what year did the first casinos come to Biloxi?

WC: Oh, lord. Let's see. It was in the '90s. '92, I think. '93. Somewhere in there, maybe.

SSD: Was it [inaudible]?

WC: They've been here about sixteen or seventeen years.

SSD: That was the first one?

WC: No.

SSD: No?

WC: No. The first one to come in, I believe, was the Isle of Capri, and then the Biloxi Belle came in, and then the Broadwater came, the President Casino. But that was early '90s.

SSD: How many kids were in your family?

WC: I had three. I had two older sisters and an older brother.

SSD: So there were four of you all together?

WC: Yes, four together.

SSD: That's a handful. What do you remember about Hurricane Camille? 1969, you would have been how old?

WC: It was very inconvenient. [laughter] I was in junior high school in 1969. Actually, we lived right here, a block off the beach – excuse me – a block up off the bay on [inaudible] Avenue. My dad was always proud of the lot he lived on, the house we had. The lot's thirty-two-foot above sea level. He was never scared of any hurricanes, the water coming up. He said, "Son, there's no way the water could ever get up here. If the water ever gets up this far, everybody in Biloxi's in trouble." Well, we stayed, and we stayed until the last possible minute. The house was moving. We had a house that was built up off of blocks, and it was shaking. Finally, my mother and I – and I think my dad got a little worried, too. He said, "Come on, we're going to go to the shelter." So the shelter, at that time, was Mary L. Michel Junior High School [inaudible], where I was going to junior high school. We went and stayed there for the hurricane. Camille came through really at nighttime. I was a young kid and excited. I'd been through a hurricane before. I remember well. It was '65, I think, or '63 – Hurricane Betsy. We stayed at one of the [inaudible] on the corner of [inaudible], and I remember that big fiasco. I was standing outside at Michel under the awning there, and you would see cars go flying down the road – looked like somebody shot them out of cannons, and cars in the parking lot were being picked up and twirled around. I'm thinking, "This is some serious stuff." Of course, it looked like Keesler [Air Force Base] was just exploding from all the transformers and power stations blowing up. Finally, I just got tired of watching. I said, "Well, I'm going inside to go to sleep." I did end up getting quite a bit of sleep that night. The school had skylights on top of the school, and they had gravel roofs up there. Well, the hurricane was taking the gravel and then blowing it so hard; it was like hitting the skylights with shotguns and shattering them. The rain was coming in. But we managed to survive. The next morning, we left, and we didn't get a block from the school, and there was a wooden frame house turned upside down in the middle of the road. I said, "This is some bad stuff." Then we got a little weepy-eyed, didn't know if we'd have a house left. We got down to about where the hospital is, and we couldn't go by vehicle anymore. We had to walk and climb over trees and debris. We finally got home, and our house survived. The only thing we had was a [inaudible] in the backyard that was probably about four-foot across and about sixty to seventy-foot long, and it fell right between our neighbor's fence and the back of our house.

SSD: Missed your house.

WC: Just missed it. Didn't even knock a shingle off the roof. We had these old asbestos shingles on the side. It didn't even crack a shingle on the side of the house.

SSD: Just luck. You were lucky.

WC: Just beautiful. A tree cutter couldn't lay that tree down. Well, me and my brother looked at that tree, and my dad looked at us, and he said, "Son, you all know we got to cut this tree up." I'm thinking, "Well, we're not rich people. We don't have a chain saw." My old neighbor [inaudible] – he told my dad, "Murphy, I got a cross [inaudible] two-man crosscut saw. Them boys can use it to cut that tree down." Man, it was hot and miserable. I'll never forget that. We ate good for about the first four or five days. We had a freezer full of seafood and meat, and all the neighbors in the neighborhood – we'd have big campfires in the yard and cookout and grill. Everybody just ate everybody else's food. You had to. It was going to waste. There was no way to preserve it.

SSD: You didn't have electricity.

WC: No, didn't have any electricity. As a matter of fact, in Camille, we didn't get electricity until thirty-something days later. Our electrical feed came from this underwater cable that's buried across the bay. Well, it got destroyed. But we were one of the last groups of people in the city to get electricity. I know it was a month later before we ever got it. My dad was pretty ingenious. So he had some twelve-volt batteries, and he hooked some wires up and run them through the house with some twelve-volt light bulbs and stuff. He'd go out there and crank the car and run it for a little while at night. We'd have lights in the house. We rigged up a little twelve-volt fan. But we had that two-man saw. I'll never forget this. It took me and my brother about two weeks to cut that tree up like them old-time lumberjacks in pieces small enough that we could get it out to the road. The last day, we rolled the last piece out, one of them big deuce and a half Army trucks come pulling up. About twenty airmen get out with chainsaws and said, "Do you all have any trees that need cutting up?"

SSD: [laughter]

WC: Me and my brother almost started weeping. I know they probably didn't think about what they'd said when they saw that massive pile of logs out by the end of the road. We just looked at that old saw. We wanted to bury that saw; we were so tired of looking at it. It was dull to start with. And said, "No, sir. We just cut the last tree we had up." It didn't kill us. I kept us out of trouble, I guess.

SSD: It was good for you.

WC: Well, it probably was looking back on it, but it wasn't any fun at that point in time. It felt like it was two hundred degrees outside. It was one of the hottest summers we ever had.

SSD: Yes, hot and humid in Mississippi. Well, where did you go back to school?

WC: I went to Biloxi High School. I went to Michel. They fixed the school up. It took a couple of weeks for them to get the school back up.

SSD: So you all started a little late?

WC: We ended up waiting for the school to start back. We made it up going on the weekends and things such as that. We all survived.

SSD: Is there anything else memorable about Hurricane Camille that you want to put on record?

WC: Well, just going down to the Point – my grandparents had both [inaudible] then, and my uncle was living in my grandparents' house. We went down there; he had about four-foot of water in his house. I remember going down there. They had an old brace and bit. We'd drill holes in the wooden floor, and take buckets of water and hoses, and wash the mud out and let it go out underneath the house. That was a mess helping them get cleaned up and getting them back going again, remodeling their house, too.

SSD: That's really brilliant, though, because then you just repair the drill holes.

WC: Just fix the drill holes and plug them back up.

SSD: Wow. That's ingenious, really good idea. What about the house that you grew up in? Was it still around when Katrina came through?

WC: No. Well yeah – my grandparents. Now, the house that I actually grew up in – yes, the family home – my parents both had died before Katrina, and my brother had the house. He was in the process of remodeling the house.

SSD: Is that Kensington?

WC: That's the one on Yorkshire, right off of Kensington.

SSD: Did it make it through Katrina?

WC: That was the one that my dad was so proud of and said that if water ever got in his house, the city of Biloxi would be in trouble. Well, his house was built two-foot off the ground. Water come within a quarter of an inch of going inside that house. Sure enough, everybody else in Biloxi was in trouble.

SSD: Yes, but the house stood.

WC: The house stood it, didn't lose a shingle off of it.

SSD: That's amazing. It was one of the few that's around the –

WC: We lost an oak tree. We had two massive oak trees in the yard. They were about two hundred years old. They overshadowed the house. We lost one of those oak trees in a hurricane. Both of them survived Camille. We lost one of them in Hurricane George. What happened is the tree shook enough that it pulled the water pipe up and broke the water pipe under the ground. The water-saturated around a tree so bad that the wind just blew the tree over. We had to cut that tree down. There was no way to save it. In Katrina, the other tree – it had taken some damage in George, too, but it was cut back, and it did good. In Katrina, I said, "You know, the house is probably going. The old oak tree is going. Both of them [inaudible]."

SSD: Great.

WC: They're both still there.

SSD: That's great.

WC: We finished a remodeling on it. My brother is living in it right now.

SSD: The trees on the Gulf Coast, the live oaks are a resource for us. They're beautiful. They make oxygen. They make shade.

WC: Well, they are.

SSD: Hurricane Katrina took out a lot of those oak trees.

WC: They're beautiful trees. They're nice. I love them to death. I tell you, I grew up with them. I hate raking those leaves. I hate the pollen. I hate acorns. They cause a lot of damage if they're close to your house for moisture and termites and stuff. Where I live at now, I've got one at my house. I just finished raking the leaves. I cuss them, and I love them. It's something that – when you lose one; you won't get it back. Not even my kids want them. Some of these trees are two-hundred, three-hundred years old. You got to realize it'll be five generations down the road before they ever see that oak tree.

SSD: If it gets planted.

WC: If you planted one today, there will be six generations before it's ever to that size if it makes it. So when you lose one, it's just like losing a treasure. It's nothing you can replace. You can replant another one, but you can't replace that one.

SSD: That's right. It's a treasure. Treasure lost. Well, tell me a little bit about why you chose your career path and how you got here.

WC: Well, I don't know. I guess I've always wanted to try and help or help people. That's why I started my career at Biloxi Police Department in law enforcement there, stayed there for nine and a half years, and then moved over into the environmental section of law enforcement, what we're doing now. There's a bunch of factors, all part of my heritage, my grandparents and parents, and the seafood business. I knew I wasn't going to get into the shrimping business. I

knew that up front. But this is another way to work in the same industry, just on the other side of the fence, I guess you'd say. Stability. It's not the best-paying job in the world, but I had great benefits from the state. Pretty much that. The excitement, too. I mean, who wouldn't want a job like I have? Of course, now, I'm behind the desk more than I am in the boat, but when I first started here, it was twenty-two years ago. They gave me the keys to a boat and gave me the keys to a truck, and gave me a credit card, so I didn't have to buy the gas. I said, "Listen, your job's out there on that water, riding around, investigating things, and checking people and doing this and doing that. I'm thinking, "And you're going to pay me, too?" They said, "Yeah, you'll get paid." I said, "Well, I'll see you when it's pay time." I get to the water, and I was out there. I'm on the boat every day. It's great. My job then – and it is today, even with the officers I have working for me today – it's funny. I've got, I think, one or two of them that I started my law enforcement career about six months before one of them was born. I think my law enforcement career started about six months after the other one was born. I've been doing law enforcement before they were born, and they work for me now. But you have to like the environment; you have to like the outdoors. This is a full-time job. It can be a hundred and five degrees out there on the water, and there's no roof over your head, no breeze blowing, and you have to stay there and wait for something. Or it could be twenty degrees out there on the water, and we don't have boats with heaters in them. Most of the boats don't have cabins on them; they're open-air boats. You've got to like the environment. It's a harsh job. Rewarding to me. But you better like the outdoors, if you don't. They're setting the place on fire.

SSD: Well, there's [inaudible] –

WC: I've always been an outdoors person.

SSD: Some dangers at sea, even that you wouldn't have if you're outdoors on the land.

WC: This Gulf out here has taken – it's taken many a life along this Gulf. This weather – it could be sunny and beautiful, and five minutes later – I described one time in the press. It's like being in a beautiful park, and the next thing you know, in fifteen minutes, you're riding the rollercoaster through hell trying to hold on and keep from sinking and flipping over. The wind's gusts will come up to sixty miles an hour out of nowhere, and seas will build up from one-foot to six-foot, seven-foot seas. You're out there on a small boat to start with because the weather conditions were perfect for the small boat, and that's the boat you're in. These fronts move through here in the summertime and the wintertime. It's beautiful one minute and holding on [inaudible].

SSD: Yes, weather moves fast on the water.

WC: Sure does. It seems to pop up out of nowhere. You got to have the experience and the knowledge, and the guts to hold on and don't panic. Do what you're training and experience has taught you over the years to survive.

SSD: There are mistakes you can make on land that won't cost you much. If you make that mistake on the water, it could cost you your life.

WC: It's the last mistake you make.

SSD: Well, it sounds like a very interesting job, especially over the years that you've been in it. We talked about your title in your current position, a brief explanation of what you do. But just for the record, for somebody who might be listening to this a hundred or two-hundred years from now, can you paint a picture of what a typical day of work is for you?

WC: Well, for me today, it starts – getting up and reading the paper. I have a BlackBerry cell phone that stays on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My phone might ring at two o'clock in the morning, telling me of a bad boat accident. It might not. Hopefully, it never rings at that time or any time for that reason, for those purposes, but it does often. Okay? I get up. Some mornings, I go have breakfast. I go meet with some guys and some old law enforcement fellows. One or two of them happen to be retired chiefs from this agency. We discuss old times and some current events, but a lot of times, it's just nostalgia about the old things that happened here, what might could have done better to make it a better place, or what we're doing now to make it a better place and just fellowship with them. One day a week, we'll do that. But generally, it's coming in the office, checking my email – we're in the electronic age. I check email on the BlackBerry. Of course, the phone starts ringing. This fisherman's got a problem. I got to call him back. His problem is he got a ticket. "The officer was a nice guy, but he should have gave me a break. This is what I did. I didn't know I was doing something wrong." I'm sitting there trying to mediate this thing. I finally tell him, "Listen, I can't be the judge in this thing. There's a court system that we have to go through. You need to get with that officer to [inaudible]. You all talk it out and work it out. If I can help you, I will, but it's not my job to get in between you and the guy that wrote you the ticket. [inaudible] "This guy's a good guy. Let's make his ticket go away." That's not my job. I don't do that. But basically, it ain't [inaudible]. This is a political position, as well. We have different things – laws that we constantly review and then see what we can do to make it better. We'll sit here and have discussions with some of my lieutenants or my assistant chief or just some of the officers that can bring up things that's happening out in the field and saying, "You know what? Maybe we ought to work on getting this law changed." So we might jot down notes and talk to them – administration people and our legal. Pretty soon, "Hey, that's a good idea." Now, we got that on paper. The next step is trying to get it changed in the legislature. So I handle that aspect of it. This morning, I went to a meeting with the Harrison County Development Commission, the sheriffs, and Gulfport Police Chiefs, the Coast Guard, and we discuss upcoming events that's going to be coming along the coast. That's going to happen on the water. I got finished with that meeting and went to lunch. Ran into a couple of people at lunch that I knew, and they wanted to talk about fishing and what activities were going along the coast. We spoke to them for a little bit about that. I got back here and had just settled in, read my email when you called. We had this appointment. My BlackBerry is on vibrate right now, and it's going off as I speak right now. It's probably gone off a dozen times during this interview. We'll get to it when I get to it, and I'll put out those little fires. I work until five o'clock this evening when one of my lieutenants, weather-permitting, we're going to do some extra work this evening doing some federal work, some creel surveys, and stuff.

SSD: Creel surveys?

WC: Creel surveys and boat inspections for our joint enforcement agreement.

SSD: C-R-E-E-L?

WC: Yes.

SSD: What is that?

WC: We check the fish, the size of the fish, and how many fish they caught, and just basically do the same thing we do with the state, but we're doing it as the federal program at dockside. Like I say, the phone is quiet right now, but I told my secretary to hold calls, so we didn't interrupt the interview.

SSD: I appreciate that.

WC: Like I say, this BlackBerry's been vibrating off the hook, and some of it could just be emails. Some of it could have been missed phone calls. I'll get to it. Just looking here, I got one email from one of our sanitation people here that – she handles oysters and sanitation end of it. The other guy here, he's the office director for the oysters. He's just telling me about oyster areas that's going to open up. So I got to make sure we got people there. Here's an email from our office director telling me about the meeting we're going to have with the architect, trying to get our building replaced at Pass Christian we've been trying to get replaced since.

SSD: Since Katrina?

WC: Since Katrina. My day could be just simply sitting here at this desk, waiting on the phone to ring, checking email, doing some reviewing of different cases that were made. I could be on the phone with somebody from National Marine Fisheries or Florida or Louisiana or Alabama, or somebody from Washington, DC. It's different sitting in this office. Everything that goes out on that water – the guys are out there patrolling all day, but there's something that's sitting here that has to buy that boat for them, have to get that money to get that gas paid for, have to buy that truck. He needs a new piece of equipment. I got to figure out what he needs, how much I can afford to spend for it because I have more than one officer I have to buy stuff for. People from coastal ecology will come in and say, "Listen, one of our people's out checking. We think we got a serious violation. Can you send an officer with him to check on it?" So we do just everything. I try my best not to stay in this office that much, not to avoid things; it's just I work better outside. That's the only drawback for my job is I don't get to go step on that boat first thing every morning and get back off when the sun goes down.

SSD: You had too many promotions?

WC: Well, and in another way, it's nice. It's nice sitting here in this air conditioning right now. It's nice sitting in here when it's raining. It's nice sitting here when it's cold. It's nice sitting in here, not bouncing around when your body gets old. I'm still young, but my body's taken a lot of abuse bouncing around on the boats in this rough water out here over the years. Like I say, we don't – it's different when you're riding in a shrimp boat, going four or five miles an hour in

rough water. The boat just rolls. But when you're riding in a speed boat, going thirty-five or forty miles an hour, hitting those waves trying to get somewhere, it takes a toll on your joints, and mine's about wore out. So, I do enjoy this chair [inaudible].

SSD: Well, I'm not going to keep you a long time. I know you've got a lot to do. Most of these questions that follow are scientific kinds of questions. They've been answered in other interviews. So there's no need to really belabor them. I might just ask you three more questions. One is something that occurred to me when you're talking about sanitation and oysters. Just in your personal opinion, what kind of pollution problems do we have in our waters and around this area?

WC: Well, our waters are a whole lot cleaner than, I would say, Louisiana. But Louisiana's a different type of environment. They have more chemical, oil plants, and things such as that. We have some here. Well, they're not here anymore, but the paper mill and things such as that, and Dupont, but these are all companies that have been good neighbors. They've worked hard to keep the environment clean. As far as I know, they're doing a good job at what they do. I'm not complaining about them, but those are just some of the things that people look at. Human waste – along the coast – and let's take Graveline Bayou area – used to be [inaudible], and it still is. They've come online. They're getting on sanitation systems, but it all used to be septic tank systems even along in the coastline in Biloxi and Gulfport and Mississippi City and Long Beach [inaudible] and Hancock County and even up here in the bays and the river. Everybody had septic tanks at that time. Then you have rainfall and saturation, and the sewage runs out into the Gulf at times. There are things that clean it up, and the tides move it in and out. The level of it – I'm not a scientist, by no means. I don't work for DEQ [Department of Environmental Quality]; they keep a good close eye on it.

SSD: What's DEQ?

WC: Department of Environmental Quality. They keep an eye on our water around here. They closed sections of the beach because of bacteria and different reasons. When it's safe, they open it back up, just like we do with oysters. They're constantly sampling the water quality, sample the meat sample to make sure that they fall in the acceptable ranges for human consumption. But that's just something that's gotten a whole lot better. Will it ever be perfect? I doubt it. As long as man's going to coexist with the environment, there's always going to be something wrong with it. Accidents do happen.

SSD: Yes. Are there any lessons learned from using TEDs that you'd like to share with people?

WC: Well, I have seen – let me rephrase that. I haven't heard or seen turtle violations or turtle death – well, I'm trying to find the best way to phrase this. Let's just say I don't think there's as many turtles eating on the coast now as there used to be. Now, had the government not stepped in and instituted this thing with TEDs and protecting the turtles, people along the coast would still be eating turtles. Bottom line. They'd still be eating them. Are as many being eaten today as there was forty years ago? No, nowhere close. So, is there a lesson there? Do I see as many turtles today that I saw four years ago? I didn't see turtles four years ago. But then, I don't see that many turtles today other than the reports we get of a dead turtle washed up here, a dead

turtle washed up there. [inaudible] report of someone catching one on rod and reel. Now, I have seen a few offshore fishing.

SSD: Swimming?

WC: Yes. Forty years ago, I wasn't fishing offshore. They might have been there; they might not have been. I think it's everybody's responsibility to try their best to save something for the next generation. When I first got this job, I thought I was going to save the world. I was a young officer. I'll never forget. There was an old white-headed fellow fishing on the Bay Saint Louis Bridge. They and another officer over there stopped on the bridge and checked his fish. At that time, you could keep five speckled trout under twelve inches. The limit was twelve inches. You're allowed five under twelve. This old man had some trout that might have been seven, eight inches long. I looked at him. I said, "Are you going to eat those little bitty fish?" He said, "You eat peanuts, don't you?" I stopped and thought about it. I said, "Well, yes, sir, I do. But peanuts are just naturally that small." He said, "These fish are naturally that small right now when I'm fixing to eat them. If I left them alone, they'd have been bigger, but I want to eat them now. They taste just as good now as they will if they get bigger." I said, "But if you're not willing to put something back and leave something for the next generation, what are they going to have?" This old man looked me straight in the face, as serious as he could be. He looked at me, and he said, "When was the last time you went buffalo hunting?" I thought, "Nobody left me any buffalo to hunt. Nobody left him any buffalo to hunt." So it was his mentality that he was going to take what he wanted when he wanted and how he wanted and as much as he wanted. This man was up in his seventies, late seventies. I got my ticket book [inaudible] write this man a ticket. It's just going to take money out of his pocket that he don't have, evidently. He's keeping these little fish to get something to eat. But I'm not going to change this man's attitude or his mind. I figure, "You know what? Maybe I need to start working on the younger crowd?" I think a lot of it – if we get the younger people and teach them that there's a reason why we do this – I don't always agree with the reason, but I do see that it works in some cases. I think sometimes there's other methods that can be better utilized, but if we teach this generation that this is what we need to do to try and preserve this, then when [inaudible]. This is the way I've done it all my life, and it seems to work. Let me teach my children the same [inaudible]. That's where you have to start. I think you have to start down here because the people that are seventy, eighty years old, you might get one in ten to change, but the rest of them will say, "Son, I've been doing this way all my life; I'm going to keep doing it this way." You've heard that before.

SSD: Especially when you're younger. You're used to "whippersnapper."

WC: That's the way it's going to be. But just getting the younger people involved in the environment, getting them fishing and outdoors and whatever it is – let them take an interest in it and realize, hey, this was put here for you. You have to be a good steward of it. We have to share it with other people. That's what gets me so upset with PETA and some of these other different groups. I believe that some of their concept – but it's for everybody. We have to share it with everybody. We don't want to destroy it. I get so upset with some of these groups, especially PETA, and all them with hunting and fishing and all this. You know what? They

[inaudible] everybody from fishing, and they want to stop everybody from hunting. It's the sportsmen that do most of the regulating to protect the species than the other group.

SSD: That's good to know.

WC: It is. We cannot harness the deer population. Let's just let it grow wild. What'll happen?

SSD: They starve.

WC: They starve to death. They get chronic wasting disease, blue tongue, and they're gone. It's over with. Okay. So we screwed up. Let's start over. Hey, you can't start over. They're gone. The sportsmen do more to protect the resources by harvesting animals than they do not harvesting animals.

SSD: If they're responsible.

WC: Exactly. Responsible people do. Poachers – there's nobody that hates a poacher worse than a sportsman because he's making us look bad, bringing that – and he's hurting the resource.

SSD: That's right. Yes.

WC: It's out there. I always say I don't know if we regulate the species as much as we regulate the user groups nowadays and just trying to find that medium to keep everybody happy and still everybody gets to use the resources. You want to look at your share of the resource? That's fine. I want to eat my share of the resource.

SSD: Make sure the stakeholders all get a say.

WC: Yes.

SSD: Well, is there anything that you want to put on the record that we haven't talked about?

WC: Well, hopefully, the seafood industry will never go completely under. It's a history. It's a way of life. It's a culture. It needs to be preserved. I know it's a dying breed. Like I say, people are sending their kids to get educations and work in other fields. You don't see as many young people coming up in the business as you did years ago. I'm hoping that it won't vanish. I think the economic impact on the country is probably going to dwindle and dwindle and dwindle. I think you're going to see things like aquaculture come into play. That's going to take up the slack on the supply and demand. It's going to be the way of the future, actually. I believe that. It's coming. It might not happen today, but in the next twenty, twenty-five years or sooner, it will be here. It's going to be here.

SSD: Yes. I think especially if we can find maybe solar power and wind power because oil is going to run out. It's going to be more and more expensive.

WC: Well, I don't believe it's going to run out any time soon. My dad was in the oil industry. There are flares that are burning – let's just take natural gas, for instance. There's flares that are burning in Timbalier Bay, Louisiana. He started working down there in the '50s, right after he got back from the war, and they're still burning. Those flares burn – I forget how much at one time they said. It was one hour's worth of that flare would supply enough gas for half of a large city.

SSD: Why are they burning?

WC: It's just burning the gas [inaudible].

SSD: Why would they do that?

WC: They just did it. Some of them are burning, and they won't stop it. They just burn them. We have abundant resources in this country.

SSD: Well, I wish we had to pay a little less for it a tank.

WC: This is off the record.

SSD: Should I turn it off?

WC: Yes, [inaudible].

SSD: Let me say thank you to you, and I'll go ahead and turn off the recorder.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----
Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/14/2021