

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project  
Tony DiBernardo Oral History  
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown  
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: The hard question first, please say your name and spell it.

Tony DiBernardo: My name is Tony DiBernardo, T-O-N-Y, capital D-I, capital B-E-R-N-A-R-D-O.

MS: Terrific. Tony, what year were you born and where?

TD: 1928, Ischia, a little island off the coast of Naples, Ischia, Italy.

MS: Okay. Talk about your life growing up at Ischia. What was it like there compared to here?

TD: When I lived in Ischia, life was very different there. We lived in a very primitive island. There was no running water. There was only electricity at night, no heat and no modern conveniences like we have here today, which I found out when I came over here. I didn't realize all of this stuff existed until you come over here into the United States and see the beautiful things we have here, the up-to-date – of course, right now, in Italy, they have the same things we have here. War changed that, you know. It changed the whole world.

MS: What did your family do in Ischia before?

TD: My father was a fisherman. He fished off the coast of Africa. My father was born in 1888. He must have been a fisherman all his life. Because when his father died right off the coast of Italy there, he was fourteen years old. So, he had to support the family of five siblings and his mother. So, he came over here in 1910. He was twenty-two years old and started making a living here. Then he was sending money back home to help support the family. Eventually, all the other brothers – there was three other brothers and one sister – all the other three brothers followed him here to the land of opportunity. [laughter] Consequently, they all did very well.

MS: When did you first come here?

TD: I came to San Pedro with my mother. My father came to pick us up in Italy, and my two sisters, older than I am, November 1938. We've been here ever since.

MS: That must have been quite a surprise for you, the difference. Tell me about the trip coming here.

TD: Oh, the trip coming over, we traveled on the luxury liner of the *Rex*, which was built in 1936, I think. It was only two years old. Beautiful ship. But we were in a storm in the Atlantic. I'd never seen where a ship had to have handrails installed in various areas because of the storm. The weather was very rough. I was sick the whole time. I hate to say it, but I didn't come out of the cabin until we got closer to New York.

MS: So, you were taking a trip on a luxury liner? Were you up there in the top deck?

TD: No. Actually, they were all luxury. They had third class, second class, and first class. We were in second class. It wasn't that luxury, but it was a very beautiful ship.

MS: Now, before you came, you must have heard stories of what it was like here. What were your images of what America was before you came here?

TD: I didn't hear too much about America when we came over here. The reason of that, at the time when I was raised or being grown up, the fascists were in power at that time. They don't like to tell the people what the other side of the world looks like. So, we only heard it from our parents. We didn't hear it from our teachers. I had a very strict teacher who was a full-fledged fascist. Believe me, I still remember him. Eventually, he died during the war in Africa.

MS: So, what were your parents – did you hear anything from them? Did you have any inkling of where you're going, or what you're going to do?

TD: No. My father says we're going to go to America and meet the rest of the family over there. We were the last ones to leave from our family. All my brothers were here already. I had two of them. Then my aunts and uncles, they all were over here. My mother's sisters, my mother's brother, and my father's brothers too, they were all over here.

MS: Did the *Rex* actually come to San Pedro?

TD: No, no, no. We landed in New York. We landed in New York on November 17th, 1938. We left on the tenth.

MS: What did New York look like to you?

TD: New York? I was lost. Actually, we didn't stay in New York that long. We went to visit my mother's sister in Brooklyn. She lives out on Douglass Street. What it is right now, I don't know. I have no idea. I haven't been back since. But we stayed there about four or five days then we traveled out here. To be honest with you, it's the first time I've seen a Black person in New York because I've been a conductor on a train. We didn't have any of that in Italy. It was all White, you know. I've never seen anybody that was Black where I came from. I was kind of, you know, that person doesn't look like us. [laughter]

MS: What were your impressions of New York? It must have been overwhelming.

TD: Well, New York was very overwhelming. I mean, you go in a car. I noticed the stop signs, the signals rather. My aunt was telling me, if you go through a red light, the sirens pop up. She explained to me that you get a ticket, which I wasn't driving, but my cousin was driving. They warned us about the streetlights. We didn't walk that much. It was cold too at that time. It was November.

MS: What about all the cars and all the people?

TD: Oh, the cars and people, I couldn't believe that many people were living in this world [laughter] because we came from a small island. Like I said, Ischia only had about 35,000, 40,000 people living there. We were just in our own little niche, shall we say, and coming over

here, quite eye-opening.

MS: So, describe what you remember of the train trip across the country.

TD: The train trip, we brought our own sandwiches. We made it in New York. My aunt made them. Because if we didn't speak English, we couldn't communicate with the people helping us on the train. I know we had sleepers. So, we had food for three days. We came with a lot of salami and provolone and cheese and whatnot to keep us going for three days. When we got here in Los Angeles, somebody from the family came to pick us up. I think it was my older brother who was here. We came here living on 9th Street, which the house has been removed now. They put a parking lot for a bank, a city bank anyway. But it was a three-bedroom home. All seven of us lived in it. Shortly after that, my older brother got married in 1940, I think.

MS: This trip across the country, you're looking at deserts. You're looking at –

TD: Oh, yes, very true.

MS: Tell me about all the different sights you were seeing.

TD: I remember one time, my sister, the one older than I am, four years older, she got out the train. She started walking along the railroad track. The train was stopped at the time. It was someplace Midwest. I don't know which exactly. The train was just about ready to leave, and she had to run back. It was desolated there. But I do remember staying. We came in Chicago. We took a one-night train, an overnight train, from New York to Chicago. We had to stop over there. We had to wait, layover about two to three hours. Then we got on the train again. Then we came over here. But it was quite a scenery to see because everything was green. Towards certain areas, it was green. But it was just such vast plains that you couldn't see beyond that. It was very, very interesting to see.

MS: So, what was your first impression when you arrived to San Pedro? Did you say, "Oh, it's just like Ischia"?

[laughter]

TD: Not really. It wasn't really like Ischia, even though we are a sea town, a seaport like San Pedro. Because of the fact that I had so many friends here or people that we knew that were here already and our family members, it was like being there. But actually, it wasn't because here we had all the modern facilities that we didn't have there. The cars, we didn't have cars there. As a matter of fact, going back to Ischia (a minute?), we still had a horse and buggy there when I came – a horse and carriage, shall I say. That's how we traveled around, where you can get three or four people in a carriage, and you had your person driving the carriage with a single horse.

MS: You were nine years old, right?

TD: I was ten years old when I came.

MS: So, tell me more about the train ride.

TD: I remember very distinctly we spent Thanksgiving Day on a train coming over. My father told us at the time, "This is an American holiday today." Because he had been here, he knew about the holiday. We see people eating nice dinners on board on the train. Like I said, we had [inaudible] pulled sandwiches. [laughter]

MS: But you were thankful too.

[laughter]

TD: I was very thankful. Yes. I'm still thankful today.

MS: When you got here, you didn't speak any English.

TD: No, not at all.

MS: What was that like for you at nine years old to arrive here and not speak any English?

TD: Well, you went to school. I was admitted to Cabrillo Avenue School, enrolled there, right on 8th and Cabrillo. We had an adjustment class. It was just a lot of people coming in from different countries. I was the only Italian in there, by the way. There was Japanese people, people from Mexico. The teacher was very patient with us in teaching us how to speak the English language. I remember the first word I learned to read, and it was stop and spot. It was just one of those books they carried. The arithmetic in Italy is the same as this. Because I finished the fourth grade, I just started the fifth grade in Ischia, so I was advanced with the arithmetic. But with the English language and the literature, I was still quite behind there. As a matter of fact, when I was in ninth grade, the teacher told me, "You're doing sixth grade work on the English part of it." Sometimes I get a little tongue-tied.

MS: Well, I mean, here's this teacher. She's got Japanese kids. She's got Italian kids. Did she speak any of these languages?

TD: No, none whatsoever. Her name was Miss (Rawlings?). I'll remember her name as long as I live.

MS: Tell me about Miss Rawlings. How did she teach you then?

TD: We read the book. The book was very early teaching reading, like preschool. They didn't have preschool in those days, but we had that. There was only one word on each page. Like stop, like it says, you see a signal with the arms saying stop. Or if there's a spot, it's a word that's almost together, and you see a spot there. That's how you learn. Actually, when you come at that age, you can pick up the language pretty fast. Within a year, you can speak pretty well and correspond. Then I had the opportunity, while I was still going to school, in grade school, grammar school, that I started shining shoes at a barbershop. All the barbers had shoeshine boys at that time. I was very fortunate to be able to learn the language from the people that were at the

barbershop. They spoke to me. He was Italian, but he spoke to me in English all the time.

MS: What about at home?

TD: At home, in the beginning, we all spoke Italian because my mother and father didn't speak any English. My father, sorry to say, he's been here since 1910. He died in [19]63 and never did learn to speak English really well to carry on a conversation. My mother, unfortunately, died in 1939. So, we never did get a chance to speak to her in English. So, we always spoke Italian.

MS: At school, everybody spoke English?

TD: I'm sorry?

MS: At school, everyone spoke English?

TD: Definitely.

MS: Now, tell me again about your father. How did he find out about this place? How did he come here?

TD: My father found out in his early years, 1910, when he came over here, that there was a fishing industry here in San Pedro. It was fishing boats. It was similar to what they had over there but – actually not similar. The fishing industry is the same but not the equipment that they have. In Italy, in Ischia, there were no motorboats, no motors on the boats. Everything was (oared?). So, it was a hard way of doing things. Here, you had propulsion, which we didn't have there. He came over here and started working as a fisherman. Then at times when the fishing was slow, he worked occasionally in the lumberyard, which I don't remember what lumberyard he worked in. But I'm sure it was a local area here, Wilmington or San Pedro.

MS: Tell me about your mother.

TD: My mother, I only knew her ten years of my life. She was a very kind woman. She's always a little bit on the sick side. They told me that after I was born, she got this illness that she probably won't shake up. We came together here, as I said before. She had a problem, a health problem with her kidneys. She died on the operating table. It's one of those unfortunate things.

MS: Then did your father raise you alone?

TD: No. I had my other two sisters with me. My older brother got married in 1940. My other sister, four years older than me, got married in [19]41. My other sister got married in [19]41 also. My brother got married in [19]46. I got married in 1950. So, I was together with my father until 1950.

MS: But he remarried.

TD: My father went back to Ischia in 1948, I believe, and he married my mother's sister. Then

he came back here, returned to San Pedro – he did with his wife – 1949, [19]49 and [19]50. We got married in 1950. I want to go back to my father a minute. My mother was not his first wife. His first wife died during the World War I Spanish Plague, the Spanish Fever they call it in those days. She died in 1915. Then he married my mother in 1920 because my sister was born in [19]21, my older sister. I want to get that out of there.

MS: That's good. So, you started to tell us about shoeshining. As you were a little boy, how did you go about doing that? Why did you do that? Something like that.

TD: I went to this barber, and I went to get a haircut. He says, "Do you want to start learning how to shine shoes?" He was an ex-Navy man. He was a barber in the service, fine gentleman. I said, "Yes." He said, "Okay. Come over here, and I'll teach you how to shine shoes." Because in the Navy, you have to be spit and polish with shiny shoes. So, he taught me how to shine shoes. I was eleven years old. My first shine I charged a fellow. I still remember his name, Albert. I charged him five cents. He says, "That's not enough money." He says, "You have to charge ten cents." I did. I worked there for three years shining shoes. Eventually, I bought my own little shoeshine stand. It was like a chair on a pedestal, shall we say, not a pedestal but a box with a chair on it. But it worked out very well. Oh, shining shoes, it was a good experience to meet the public that way. People would come in that you'd talk to. You get a chance to read some books because of magazines in the barbershop. It was very educational, I must say.

MS: Where was this barbershop?

TD: Right there on 9th Street. We lived right across the street from each other. The barbershop is not there now. It's a restaurant, a cafe restaurant.

MS: Now, what about this Beacon Street area? Tell me about that.

TD: Well, actually, the Beacon Street area, at that time, we were young. We weren't allowed to come down on Beacon Street. It was one of the roughest streets, tougher than the Barbary Coast, they say, up in San Francisco. So, we didn't spend too much time on Beacon Street. Later years, I didn't spend too much time on Beacon Street, even in my older years, because it was different kind of people down there, different clientele. We're not that clientele.

MS: What's the difference?

TD: Well, there was a lot of bars. We didn't go to bars. [laughter] We had our nose to the grindstone and working hard to raise our family.

MS: When you were going to school, what were the activities in the school that you remember?

TD: In grammar school, we had softball. We had soccer. In junior high school, we had softball and soccer – they called it speedball at that time – and baseball. Then in high school, we had the same thing, only it was more. We had basketball there. We had track. We didn't have that in grammar school. But I enjoyed tremendously the high school. As a matter of fact, this Saturday, we're having our sixtieth anniversary of our high school graduation. It's going to be held here at

Sheraton, which is the Crowne Plaza now.

MS: Why did you like high school so much?

TD: Oh, I enjoyed it tremendously, I tell you. I like high school because it was – you've been with these people for 6, 12 years of your life, and you're part of each other. I really was sad when we left high school because you want that to continue, such good friends. The unfortunate thing when I was in high school though, during the high school years, the war. In a way, fortunately, it did end. So, we had a lot of good memories of that. One class I remember very distinctly, in the science class, our teacher, she read to us the book *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, which we all know what that is. It was a beautiful book to read. The movie came out eventually later on. So, it was really educational for us to hear something like that.

MS: What in particular did you like about it?

TD: The *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*? You know what that was, don't you?

MS: Yes.

TD: Okay. What I like about it is how they survived when they went to land in China. That was the most amazing thing that ever happened. Whatever happened [inaudible], I really don't know.

MS: A lot of them didn't survive.

TD: I beg your pardon.

MS: A lot of them didn't survive.

TD: Oh, a lot of them didn't survive. You're absolutely right, yes. A lot of them did not survive. But the ones who did survive, I have to give them so much credit, and a lot of help from the Chinese people also.

MS: What did you do for fun when you were growing up here?

TD: I hate to say it, but I went to school. I went to school and worked all the time. Oh, we had fun. We went to the movies. There were four theaters in San Pedro. Do you mind if I mention them?

MS: Sure.

TD: There was Cabrillo Theater right on 7th Street. There was Strand Theater on Pacific. There was the Warner Brothers, which is still existing, the Warner Brothers on 6th Street. There was the Globe Theater, which was probably sitting in the same spot on 6th Street, the Globe Theater sitting in this vicinity. Actually, there was another one. The Barton Hill was on Pacific Avenue. We went to the movies every night almost. A different movie we went to see. A roller derby, a skating rink opened up in 1946, I think, right here on 8th Street. It was for the young kids to



gather on. It was very nice to have something like that for the younger ones. We didn't have too much activities for our age group. Now they have softball. They have a lot of kids playing ball. We didn't have that in those days.

MS: Tell me about the roller rink. What was that like?

TD: The roller rink, you meet a lot of nice people there, young people you make friends with. That's the only one we had. We never had anything like that in San Pedro when I was a teenager.

MS: What went on there? What would happen there?

TD: We just went there, and we just skated around the rink. [laughter]

MS: Did you ever go into Los Angeles?

TD: Very seldom. In my next segment of what I did in later years, I'll say about Los Angeles.

MS: Okay. So, now, you weren't shining shoes all the way through high school?

TD: No. I hope to tell you. I was shining shoes up until I was in the seventh or eighth grade. Then I went to work in a shoe shop where they repair shoes, a training shoe shop here on 7th Street. They're not open anymore now. The boys, they sailed out. Everybody got old, and they locked up the shop. But it was very interesting at the time, during the war, that you bring in your shoes for repair. You have to wait a month to get your shoes repaired because we had so many shoes to repair. It was unbelievable. At that time, shoes were not readily available as they are now. The shoes had to go to the servicemen for the military. So, I worked there for about six months to a year. Then I went to work in the produce section of a market. I learned the business there. I was in it until 1950, 1949, when we bought our own section of the produce section.

MS: Tell me about the family who had the shoe store and the family –

TD: The family that had the shoe store is a training shoe shop. The family had been here for years. They had three or four brothers who were all shoemakers. Two had a store here in San Pedro. One had a store in Long Beach. It was very well-known in San Pedro in the [19]30s and the [19]40s as a training shoe shop. They sold new shoes, and they rebuilt shoes like they were new. They did a fine job with them.

MS: The produce market?

TD: The price, I'm trying to remember the price.

MS: Tell me the price.

TD: The price at that time, I don't remember what they were. But maybe for a dollar and a half you could get the whole sole and heel changed on a shoe because it was better than buying new

shoes. They were not available.

MS: What about the produce? Who was the family involved with that?

TD: The produce, there was a gentleman that took a liking to me. He said, "Tony, come and work with me." He was an Italian fellow. His name was (Dominic Castagnolo?). Then he sold the business, and I went to work for someone else. I went to work for him in 1944 because I was still there when the war ended in [19]44. Yes. We were there with him until 1947, until I graduated. I was with him until 1949, until we bought our own place, 1949.

MS: What was it like in San Pedro during the war years? That must have been an exciting time.

TD: Yes. We have a lot of beautiful memories here at San Pedro. We were very fortunate we never got hit by the war here of anything. There was at one time an alert. But I think somebody got their wires crossed and shot some guns up here at the fort. But it was very quiet in a sense, we say. Talking about since we were immigrants, we were not American citizens, we were not allowed to be out of our house at night. We had a curfew. After 8:00 p.m., you could not leave the house. One time, my sister, who was pregnant at the time, she was visiting us that night. The FBI came over, whoever they were. They came over and checked up on us to make sure that we were staying home. She happened to be there. "Where do you live at?" "Well, I live someplace else, but I came here." She was expecting at the time. The gentleman said, "Well, it's a good thing we're not gathering up pregnant people tonight. Otherwise, we put you in jail because you're out of your house." Because she was not an American citizen but her husband was. But she didn't become an American citizen until later on, until after the war sometime.

MS: But the port must have been bustling with activity.

TD: The port was bustling with commerce. We had the Navy here. We had the Army. We had the Coast Guard, and then, of course, all the ships. The ship building was going full bore here.

MS: So, as a kid, did you ever just sort of hang around there?

TD: No, not as a kid, no. As a matter of fact, we went down to Fisherman's Wharf or should we say on the boats with our parents occasionally. But we didn't go too much toward the ship building industry. Later on – which I became later on.

MS: Do you remember when you heard the World War II had started? Do you remember any of that?

TD: Yes. We were just going to the Warner Brothers Theater. I forgot what movie we were going to see. They announced at that time, which was about noon here, that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor at the time. Yes, very distinctly, I remember.

MS: What was the response from the people?

TD: Everybody was scared and frightened because they thought maybe the Japanese were going

to come over here too, which was in everybody's mind. We talked about lights before, lights on Pacific Avenue, which was the main drag of San Pedro at the time. All the lights – there were globes like this – the south side of the lights were all painted black. That way, the reflection would not be in the water. They can see that the city was not lit up or anything. They couldn't see it was a city. This is what they told us. Only the north side of the lights were not painted, so they can give you some light. So, that was interesting at that. We had a full contingent of Army personnel here at Fort MacArthur. We remember going to the beach. There was a little pillbox that we used to pass right by there. There was a guy guarding it, doing his duty, guarding the town of San Pedro. At times during the day, balloons used to be lifted in the air. The whole area was just hundreds of balloons out there to make sure no airplanes were coming in to do any damage in here. Then, of course, after the war was over; the balloons came down.

MS: Better than if they came down after being shot at.

TD: [laughter] That's right. Then we used to have an air raid siren too and a test every Friday. The last Friday of the month was an air raid siren that they used to do. Then the air raid wardens used to come around and make sure that your lights were out at night, that you didn't have any lights creeping through your windows. Of course, that was nothing compared to what the rest of the world went through the war. We really never did see the war out here. Thank God for that.

MS: So, after the war was over, do you remember VE Day and things like that?

TD: Oh, yes, definitely. Yes. We were all in jubilation. I remember one time when the war was over – but I have to go back to 1944, the landing of Normandy. I think it was in June 6th, if I remember right. One of the comments that was made on the radio at the time, this lady said, "Oh, good. Now that they invaded France, now the war will be over." The war will be over. Well, as you well know, the war lasted a lot longer than that. But I remember very distinctly on that day. Of course, I remember distinctly that people were in jubilation when the war was over. Everybody was happy. I was in high school at the time. It was just a happy day for us.

MS: Did you go on the street? Or whatever happened there?

TD: I don't remember if we went on the street or not. The town was still a small town. People in small towns, sometimes they don't do that. But I'm sure that they honked the horn, which we didn't have a car at the time. People older than us did a lot of celebrating, which we did not.

MS: Did you know any Japanese kids who had to go away during the war?

TD: Yes, I did. Funny thing you should mention that. In grammar school, I remember a fellow by the name of Roy Ono. Whatever happened to him, I never know. They were put in an internment camp, as you well know, but never came back. Now that I remember, they were here but never came back to San Pedro again. There were two or three people that I was friendly with, yes, in grammar school. In junior high school, there weren't any because I got there in [19]44. They were all gone by that time. But in 1942, they were taken away into an internment camp. It was very sad, but that's war.

MS: You were drafted in the Korean War.

TD: Yes, I was.

MS: Where were you stationed?

TD: I was drafted in January 17th, 1951. I was stationed in Fort Ord, California. I took my basic training there. I was there until June. Then we were shipped overseas. I got in Tokyo, Japan. We traveled on a troop transport across the Pacific. It took us eleven days to get across. We got there on Father's Day 1951. During the Korean conflict, I was assigned to artillery, frontline unit artillery. I was very fortunate that I never got hit, never got overrun by the enemy, which they did overrun a lot of our positions at the time. My outfit was completely wiped out almost after I came back in 1953. It's unfortunate.

MS: Yes. When you returned to San Pedro, what did you feel when you came back home again?

TD: When I returned back to San Pedro from Korea, I was the happiest person in the world because being back – I was married at the time. My wife had to go to work to make ends meet. Because at that time, the Army didn't give you much money. I'm trying to remember right what I was getting. I forgot. It's \$65 or something like that a month. That's not very much money.

MS: So, what did you do for a job when you got back?

TD: I went to work as a truck driver, driving as a salesperson, driving a truck out of Long Beach, Long Beach Banana Company, which eventually closed up after some years later. But we would deliver bananas to stores, which I was familiar with the business. I worked there for four years. I traveled mostly Orange County. I started at Los Alamitos, Garden Grove. Then I went to Buena Park, Norwalk, Southgate, Downey, Southeast L.A.

MS: Then you started working in the shipyard.

TD: Yes.

MS: Tell me how you got started in doing that.

TD: In 1956, I hurt my back by lifting a box of banana the wrong way, and I was off a job for a whole year. I had three kids at the time and needed a job. So, my brother-in-law was working at Todd Shipyards. He asked if they needed help up there. They said yes. He said, "We need somebody that has a high school education, is buying a house, and his wife is pregnant." So, I got the job.

MS: Connection.

[laughter]

TD: Connection.

MS: Well, for people who don't know Todd Shipyards, how important it is, what was Todd Shipyards? What were they doing there? What were you doing there?

TD: In 1957, I started working there. I started as a helper. We were just converting a cargo ship to a troop transport ship. The cargo ship, the name of the ship was *Diamond Mariner*. But the ship eventually became the *Paul Revere*, which is a troop transport. It was delivered about six months or a year after I started working there. But while I was there, I started learning the business. I got interested in learning the business. The ship building business was a very intriguing business, very interesting. You get a bunch of steel together. Then all of a sudden, you've got a ship. It's a lot of hard work and a lot of dedication. I enjoyed it tremendously. Later on in 1958, we got a contract to start building some cargo ships, the Mooremack line. It was the ships to be used in the canal – not the canal but the Great Lakes. We built two of those. Then we built three more for the American Mail Line, three more of those. Then we got into the new construction for the Navy ship, Navy work. We built DLGs, which is destroyer leader guided missile. They're about 5,000-ton gross weight at the time. Beautiful ships. The first one we built was USS *England*, which I gave you a list of all the ships we built.

MS: Building a ship can't be an easy job.

TD: No. It is not an easy job, believe me. Building a ship is not an easy job. It takes a group of people put together in building it. It takes a ship designer and then the engineers to put these plans together to put a product like that out. In the starting of a ship, I would say the designing side of it, it takes a good year and a half, two years to get it on paper. Then it takes you another two or three years to build it. So, it's not an easy task. It just takes a bunch of people working hard at it, and knowledgeable people. It's the most interesting work, in my opinion, there ever was.

MS: I bet you the day that ship is done and it's launched is a pretty big day. Why don't you tell me about that?

TD: Yes. As a matter of fact, the department that I was involved in – I later became department head – that was our responsibility, to launch a ship. Preparation would start a week before in doing the final preparation to get the ship ready to go into the water. The ship is in a cradle. You have to get that ship from the cradle into the water. Well, it's not an easy task to do. So, this preparation is done prior of the last day. You have to remove all the shores that's supporting the ship before it goes into the water. That's done about three or four days before. Then the last day, the ship is sitting on the skidways itself. Then you have to ram the ship up, take the difference of the slack between the waves and the ship, that you have to tighten up all the wedges underneath. When this is done, then the ship will go into the water. But before the ship goes in the water, there's a trigger that has to be released. So, that way, the ship can be launched. We had two triggers at the time when I was working there. The FFG that we built was a burn-off plate. In other words, the burn-off plate consisted of a plate about 24 inches wide and bolted to the groundways and bolted to the sliding ways. Well, across this plate, there's a series of holes. This plate, by the way, is a half inch thick by 24 inches wide and 4-foot long. So, these holes are

burnt. As you're burning the holes, you're eliminating the holes. You're down to maybe the two and a half holes that are of solid steel holding that ship. So, when you're down to the third hole, then the plate breaks, and the ship slides down the ways. It's a very interesting thing. It's very simple in a way, but it's very intriguing the way it works. We had another system there where we had a trigger. It was a mechanical trigger that would hold the sliding ways in position. Once that mechanical trigger was disengaged, shall we say, it came away from the sliding ways. Then the ship would slide down the ways. The ship goes down the ways about 35 miles an hour, the skidways.

MS: So, you're telling me that when a woman hits it with the champagne, that's not what makes it go down the ways?

[laughter]

TD: No.

MS: In really simple terms, how do they build the ship, and how do they launch it?

TD: In building the ship, the last end of it right now where we're working, we used to build them in modules. There are pictures that I have brought that show you the modules. They're probably about 40 feet wide and 40 feet long and about 40 feet high. They're cubes, and they're erected in modules. A ship like the size of an FFG, we had thirteen modules that made up the whole ship. They put it together. Then it becomes a ship. But in launching the ship is a very intricate part of the ship, of course. The ship is built on the slipways. We had two groundways. They're 4-foot wide. This is what makes the ship go down the skid, skidways, they call it. Let's see. It's built on a declivity. They call it declivity. It's on (1930 seconds?) per foot. So, in other words, for every length of length, you raise it up 1930 seconds. That's what makes the ship go down and slip into the water by itself – not by itself, but it helps it slip into the water. You couldn't build a ship on flat ground and expect it to go into the water. So, it has to be built on declivity, like I said.

MS: So, how do you make it start sliding?

TD: Actually, we put a base coat of wax on the groundways even before the ship is built. We do that to facilitate the job later on when the ship is built, when the ship is ready to go down. We put this wax. It's half-inch thick wax. It's melted wax that we spread the whole ways of the groundways on both sides, port and starboard. Then we put wax, and we put grease on it. Then we put the sliding ways on top of that, which goes with the ship when the ship goes down. The sliding ways go with the cradle of the ship. Then we have to hold it in position while they're in the construction of the ship to make sure the ship does not move. So, we put creep-preventing shores at a thirty-degree angle going uphill to make sure the ship does not launch itself. I bet it won't, but it's still quite a possibility. One time, I remember, we went on a strike for eight weeks. The ship we had in the ways at the time did start slipping. So, we put these creep-preventing shores to prevent the ship from slipping while it's on the ways. Then when the time comes for the ship to be launched, there's a certain amount of preparation for that day. There's a whole list of things that I've handed you at the time that you can look at it. It's minute-by-minute almost of

the last-minute preparation.

MS: Well, your career and your life in San Pedro has obviously been full of all kinds of things. When you look back at that life that you've lived here in San Pedro, what do you feel about this town? What do you feel about the harbor and its activities? What do you want people to know about this place?

TD: Well, it certainly is a good town to talk about. That's all I've got to say. Lately, it's been more in the limelight because of the activity going on here. Unfortunately, we have no more shipyard in San Pedro. I'm sorry to say that. It's a lost industry almost. It makes me feel sad in that respect. But we're inundated with tankers, or not tankers but cargo ships.

MS: Containers.

TD: Container ships. Thank you. We did some work on some container ship. I'd like to cover that if you don't mind.

MS: Sure.

TD: You've got time?

MS: We're almost done, but go ahead.

TD: Okay. We actually were one of the first shipyards to start modifying cargo ships into container ships. In 1959, we had Hawaiian ships, Hawaiian builders, Hawaiian – the Matson line ships came over here. We converted two of those ships into carrying containers, which was very interesting work. We did a lot of other work too for Sea-Land, in the container ship.

MS: What was the challenge of that conversion?

TD: Oh, quite a challenge. You had to get a certain amount of work done in a short period of time. It was quite a challenge. It was. Nothing but hard work. But you get good people together, you can do it. Anything can be done if you get the right people together to do it.

MS: That's terrific.

Female Speaker: I have a note here that was in June of 1989 that the Todd Shipyards delivered its last Navy ship. Then after that was launched and announced, it was closed in three months. Do you remember what it was? Were you there at the time in [19]89

TD: I retired in 1988. I had an offer from the company. If I retired at a certain time, they would cover my insurance anyway. So, they did. They're still doing it today, health insurance. But in 1988, I went to work for Larson Boat, which they were doing the guarantee work for the last ship being delivered by Todd's. So, I went to work for them and being a coordinator for the yard over there to help deliver the ship, ready for commissioning at the time.

MS: When you heard that Todd Shipyards was not going to make any ships anymore, how did you learn about that?

TD: I was very sad. I was retired already. At the time when I heard about that, I was retired already. I had been retired nine months. I was very sad about it because I hated to see this yard closed up. It was a beautiful yard to work at, good people working there. It's unfortunate that they had to close up.

MS: Good. That's it.

FS: Okay. Good.

MS: Terrific.

[end of transcript]