

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
John Guest Oral History
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Male Speaker: I'll give you the hard question first. Please say your name and spell it.

John Guest: Yes. I'm Captain John Guest, G-U-E-S-T, retired U.S. Coast Guard.

MS: What year were you born, John, and where?

JG: I was born right here in San Pedro in 1926.

MS: Great. Well, growing up in San Pedro, tell us a little bit about why were you here? Why did your parents come here? What did they do?

JG: Well, I gave you the wrong impression at first. I did not grow up here. I was born here. My father was in the Navy on a ship that was anchored out here in Harbor. We moved away before I ever remember anything about San Pedro.

MS: So, what year did you come back?

JG: We came back after I was married in – must have been 1955. My wife, who had never been here before, immediately fell in love with the place. Being a good and dutiful married husband type, I agreed to move back down here. We lived first out in Lakewood, on the Long Beach side. Then we moved into Seal Beach, where I reside now.

MS: Okay. Tell us about what the role of the Coast Guard is in the San Pedro Harbor area. What is the Coast Guard's role here?

JG: Well, I think the Coast Guard's presence is very important here in the Los Angeles Harbor. They not only maintain the aids to navigation, but they do drug interdiction. It is the home port for some of the patrol boats. They do search and rescue. They license and document merchant seamen. They have teams that board ships for inspection purposes, which is all the more important since 9/11. The Coast Guard, I think, contributes significantly to the operation of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

MS: Okay. Let's take some of that a step at a time. When you first came here, your first duty, what was your first duty when you came here for the first time with the Coast Guard?

JG: The first time I came to this port as a coast guardsman was in 1957, when I was assigned as first lieutenant of the Coast Guard Cutter *Pontchartrain*. It was tied up over on the Long Beach side.

MS: What were the duties involved in that first assignment?

JG: Actually, my duties were not much different from what I had been doing since I joined the Coast Guard directly from the Merchant Marine. As a first lieutenant, it was simply to run the deck force and maintain the ship, so it looked presentable. It was significantly different in that the military has a certain way of doing things that are at times considerably different from what the civilian way is. So, it was quite an adjustment, but I –

MS: You have any stories illustrating that?

JG: Well, as a matter of fact, I have a story. When I first joined, I perhaps was having a difficult time adjusting to military life. The captain called me up to the cabin one day, and he says, "Mr. Guest, I want to show you your fitness report before I submit it." That fitness report should have been printed on asbestos because it was certainly less than flattering. There was another ex-merchant marine officer on the ship, Lieutenant Stan Weatherall, who took me under his wing at that point in time and helped me adjust. Because it was then obvious that I was not about to change to Coast Guard

MS: Well, tell us again. What was your background before and the kind of world you were in before, and then what was your new world when you came as a Coast Guard?

JG: My background was in the Merchant Marine. I graduated high school in 1944 and immediately went to sea as a merchant seaman. Because I wanted to get in and do my part to beat the bad guys and help win the war. So, the Merchant Marine was the most rapid route to that. So, I joined the Merchant Marine and stayed in the Merchant Marine until 1957 when I joined the Coast Guard as a direct commission, lieutenant junior grade. That was based on my background in the Merchant Marine.

MS: So, what were these two cultures that were clashing when you went into the Coast Guard?

JG: Well, as I say, the culture clash came from the civilian way of doing things to the military way of doing things. For example, when entering and leaving port on a civilian merchant ship, you maybe have three people on the bridge. On a military ship, there's probably fifteen people on the bridge. Each of them has headphones on, and there's cords trailing around. It looks like spaghetti. You have to avoid that and keep from falling or tripping somebody else and ripping their earphones off. So, frankly, even to this day, I question whether all of those people are necessary, but perhaps they are. It's up to somebody much wiser than I to make that decision. So, that was just one example of the difference.

MS: So, what was it in your fitness report that was showing that you weren't necessarily getting with the program as you should?

JG: My fitness report probably showed inability to adapt to a new way of life. So, as I say, I immediately adapted because I didn't want to go back into the Merchant Marine. I had a family to raise. In the Merchant Marine, you're gone all the time. Wherein the Coast Guard, when you're stationed afloat, you're only gone half the time, which was a significant difference for me.

MS: What was the port like in 1957 when you came back and joined the Merchant Marines? What was the place like?

JG: Well, the port has changed radically in the past fifty years. We thought at that time that it had gone as far as it would go. Then a man named Mr. McLean invented the container and the container ship. That just put an impetus on a change that has been so rapid ever since, that it has

cut down on the amount of labor that's needed in the ports. Although they're more congested now than they ever have been, they're handling more cargo every year. It's almost impossible to believe that they could improve every year because it would seem that they're saturated at this point. But they just continue to go through the cooperation of the longshoremen and everybody in the marine industry.

MS: From the point of view of the Coast Guard, what was it like in [19]57, and what is it like today? How did the Coast Guard operations change and challenges change?

JG: Well, the Coast Guard had a dramatic change right after 9/11, as you know. Their emphasis is more on port security now than it had been. The other items like merchant vessel inspection and licensing and documenting of merchant seamen are not as important to the Coast Guard as they once were. Although I understand that there's some changes being brought about right now because it became obvious that change was necessary in that program. That's the program that I am most familiar with.

MS: Well, going back to [19]57 though, what were the operations and activities of the Coast Guard in [19]57 when you first came here?

JG: Well, in 1957, when I first came here, there was only probably three significant branches of the Coast Guard. They had the Coast Guard Cutter *Minnetonka* was moored here. The Coast Guard Cutter *Pontchartrain* was moored here. The Coast Guard base on Terminal Island was very active, and the district office was in Long Beach. The district office handled search and rescue cases. It was the home of the commander of the 11th Coast Guard District. That has all changed now. There is no more 11th Coast Guard District, and the district commander is in San Francisco.

MS: So, what were your activities here in San Pedro with those three cutters?

JG: Actually, the cutters were moored in Long Beach, and it was just simply a moorage place for them. At that time, weather patrol was a very significant part of the duties. We would go out to what they called the Ocean Station November halfway between this port and Honolulu. We would observe the weather and help to predict the weather here on the coast. We did some search and rescue but not very often because it took those ships so long to get underway. So, if an incident happened closer to shore, they would send out one of the smaller cutters that was capable for whatever waters the incident occurred in.

MS: Well, tell me about facilities in Terminal Island. What was there and what was going on there?

JG: The Coast Guard facility in Terminal Island actually consisted of a base which was responsible for purchasing stores for the ships. It acted as a transient location for crew members who were coming and going. It was just a place where the operations of the vessels were focused on.

MS: How many men were stationed there at Terminal Island or were working at Terminal

Island?

JG: The permanent crew at Terminal Island probably was only forty or fifty people, I'm not sure. But as the members of the crew would come and go to wait for their ship or their duty station or whatever, there was probably another fifteen or twenty there at any one time.

MS: Were there any incidents that you remember from that first duty here or even the first and second duty here that stood out in your mind of activities that you were involved with?

JG: The one humorous thing that stands out in my mind, when I was stationed aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Minnetonka* in the middle [19]60s, the district commander was having a relief of command. He wanted some big guns to fire a twenty-one-gun salute. So, the *Minnetonka* came over from Long Beach. We moored it at the Coast Guard base and very carefully counted out twenty-one rounds of five-inch ammunition and put them in the ready locker. During the relief of command, I and most of the crew were standing out on the parade grounds in our dress whites, swords. It was time for the twenty-one-gun salute, and each round went off while there was a terrific bang and big flashes and smoke. So, I counted one, two, rapidly – not that rapidly, of course. When it got up to twenty, the firing stopped, and we had what's called a pregnant pause, I guess. Everybody's standing at stiff attention, but our eyes were going back and forth saying what happened? Then finally, almost as an afterthought, pow, went the twenty-first round. As soon as the ceremony was over, I went back aboard ship like, "What happened? What happened?" Well, what happened was, very studiously, they had put twenty-one rounds in the ready locker. After the twentieth round was fired, somebody said, "That's it." They said, "No, it isn't. We still have one round left." "No, that was twenty-one." "No, it was only twenty." So, they got their heads together and finally decided that whoever was responsible for putting twenty-one rounds in the ready locker knew what they were doing. So, they fired the twenty-first round. I have never forgotten that.

MS: I wonder what the impression of the commander of all that was [laughter].

JG: The commander of the ship at that time was a commander in the Coast Guard named Bob Schwing. Commander Schwing was one of the type of persons who I wish I could be the same. Nothing could flutter that guy one bit. He sat up on the bridge with his feet propped up, drinking a cup of coffee, and probably didn't even notice it. Or if he did, he never said anything about it.

MS: What about the officer being honored? [laughter]

JG: That was the admiral. Of course, I was the lieutenant commander at the time. Admirals only speak to lieutenant commanders when they want to vent their wrath. So, he never spoke to me.

MS: But at twenty, you would've heard something. Had it stopped at twenty, you would've heard something.

JG: I probably would have, yes.

MS: [laughter] That's a great story. Let's talk about some of the activities you were personally involved with when you were on duty here and take all the terms that you were here. So, you didn't do much search and rescue, or did you? Tell me if there are any stories about search and rescue that you remember.

JG: Search and rescue in this port for the larger cutters was practically non-existent. At one time, we did put out from here to go to the aid of a freighter that had lost its propeller someplace off Mexico. But by the time we were underway and just out of sight of lands, we received word that somebody else was on scene and was taking care of everything. So, that was the only one thing that I can think of that transpired at this port.

MS: I heard there was a story of a man appearing to be drowning in the channel. You want to tell me that story?

JG: That occurred as a significant issue that happened while I was captain of the port.

MS: Why don't you start again from the beginning?

JG: When I was captain of the port here in Los Angeles, one of the boats under my command, a 41-foot boat, was over on the east side of a point where the Coast Guard base is in the federal prison. Just before nightfall, they saw a person swimming in the water. They stopped to pick him up and found out that it had been a prison break. The person who was in the water had gotten about halfway to the mainland. It was very obvious to him that he was not going to make it. He was going down for about the third time when our boat happened on the scene. He was very grateful to be rescued and immediately put back into prison.

MS: That's such a good story. I want you to tell me that story again from the beginning.

JG: One of the most significant things that happened while I was captain of the port here in the early 1980s was a prison break that occurred at the federal prison on Terminal Island. I had a 41-foot boat that was on patrol on the east side of the port where the prison sits. The crew saw a person swimming in the water about halfway between the port and the mainland. They stopped to pick him up and found out that one, he was going down for the third time. It was very obvious that he was never going to make it to the shore. The prison break was foiled. So, they pulled him out of the water. He was very grateful that he had been rescued, even though it meant going back to prison for him.

MS: Now, you were retired before 9/11, right?

JG: Yes.

MS: So, you didn't see any of those changes?

JG: No.

MS: But let's talk about the role of the Coast Guard during your tenure in security. What are the

kinds of things that you were involved in in the port that were security or law enforcement issues of some kind?

JG: Port security before 9/11 was handled mainly by the Coast Guard Reserve. I had very little to do with the reserves except to integrate the reserves in with the regulars insofar as possible. They were delighted to come down and take over the entire business on Friday afternoon and run everything until Monday morning. They did a fantastic job there. There's some wonderful people in the Coast Guard Reserve. If they did run across something that they felt that they were not equipped to handle, they would call in their counterpart and the regulars. We could be on scene in a matter of minutes. The reserves, before 9/11, even so, I think were very neglected. A lot of people in the regular Coast Guard looked on the reserve as being a necessary evil. But as far as I found, they were very enthusiastic, extremely competent, and wouldn't – I would have a project that I did not have the personnel to handle or the time to handle, I found that the Coast Guard Reserve, here in this port anyway, were very anxious to take over immediately. They'd just hand them the ball, and they would run with it. I would say, "Well, give me a report once a week and let me know how you're doing." The next thing I knew, the project would be accomplished in a number one fashion.

MS: What's the relationship between the Coast Guard and the cargo and the port operations? How do you relate to that? Is that part of your job, is doing that?

JG: Well, before 9/11, we were well integrated with the port police and with the customs and immigration. We would occasionally have a drill together if we could find somebody. We drilled quite a bit in preparation for the Olympic Games. We were able to borrow, if you like the word, a Texaco tanker, and put some bad guys on there who had seized the ship. We played war games with them, and we learned a lot from it. I think that everybody who participated learned a lot. That is a valuable lesson, probably helped get them started after 9/11 in their program that's much more sophisticated now, obviously.

MS: Tell me that again about the war games that were involved with the Olympics and why you were doing that. There were security concerns then.

JG: In preparation for the Olympic Games, we asked and received permission to play war games on this Texaco tanker that was in port. The scenario was that the ship had been seized by terrorists and were holding the crew as hostage. So, the Coast Guard was involved with the FBI, the customs, the port police, state police were in on that too. Almost every law enforcement agency in the local area was involved. We learned a lot from that. We learned enough to get us through the Olympic Games. I'm sure that what we did learn was a significant contribution to the efforts that went in after 9/11.

MS: So, how did that scenario play out? Tell me the scenario in the game. How did it play out, or what did you do? What did they do? The end results.

JG: The most significant thing that we found out is that it's not wise to shoot guns on a tanker for obvious reasons. But it is one of those things you don't think of until the time. We found that it's extremely difficult for law enforcement people because of narrow passageways, narrow

doors, small rooms, and steel bulkheads, small portholes. It's a whole new world for law enforcement people.

MS: So, did you storm the ship? How did the game play out?

JG: Yes. The law enforcement people stormed the ship. We found that we needed to go back to the drawing board and start from square one on shipboard rescues and hostage incidents. The results were not really significant until we recognized the problem. We did the best that we could. It escapes me right now exactly what we did, but we did beef up the security, particularly on tankers. But we put a boarding crew on each ship coming into port. We required each ship to moor with its bow facing toward the sea so it would be easier and quicker to get underway in the event of a situation involving any terrorist activity. We paid special attention to passenger ships. But that was the lesson that we learned. As I say, it's significantly different today, but the basics remain the same.

MS: Was that the most elaborate training operation you went through during your term here, or was there something else that was a –

JG: No. Our training for the Olympics started out in 1980. When I first arrived here, I found that a lot of our people could not run a mile without stopping. So, we started out on a very, very strenuous physical training program that I still have to go keep on with today. I am a firm believer in a lot of physical activity. We trained everybody with the pistols and with rifles. We called in reserves from all over the country and asked specifically for people in law enforcement. We put them in strategic locations throughout the harbor, including in boats. We involved the Coast Guard Auxiliary in that. They came around periodically and fed our crews in the boats and let them have a brief rest period on a bigger boat.

MS: So, did you breathe a bit of a sigh of relief when the Olympics were over?

JG: I heaved a tremendous sigh of relief when the Olympics were over. There's one thing that I – it's humorous. Can I tell you? One thing very humorous occurred during the Olympic Games. The first night of the games, there was a lady who was staying at the hotel on the *Queen Mary*. She called security and said she saw a diver on the breakwater. Well, the *Queen Mary* was one of our targets that, if anything had happened, we suspected it would be on the *Queen Mary*. So, I called the Navy Seal team in, and they swept the hull but found nothing. This lady proved to be quite intoxicated. So, we put it off as being intoxicated. But we held a meeting down at my office immediately with all of the people at 3:00 a.m., I might add. So, finding nothing, we decided that the lady was hallucinating. But the following week, which was right at the end of the Olympic Games, one of the guards on the *Queen Mary* saw a person in a wetsuit. We called the Navy Seal Team again and really pushed the panic button that time because we were positive that something was going to happen. But in the end, nothing had happened. But the yeoman in my office was a skin diver. He said, "Captain, you know what that is? I think that it's a poacher down there because the biggest lobsters and the biggest scallops in the harbor live underneath the *Queen Mary*." I'm sure to this day that that yeoman knew a little bit more than he cared to tell.

MS: He may have experienced that directly. [laughter] So, what are the characteristics of the

San Pedro Harbor for a Coast Guard officer? I mean, is this easy duty, hard duty, average duty? What is special about it?

JG: Speaking for myself, I liked to be stationed here because it has always been my home. I liked the people here. I certainly enjoy the people in the marine industry here. I found them to be very pleasant to work with and very honest. I think that the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are one of the better kept secrets in the Coast Guard. Because whenever some stranger wants to be stationed here, and there's only one billet available, we'll tell them, "You don't want to be stationed there. It's shaky-quaky. Earthquakes all the time, high cost of living. You don't want to be stationed there. I'll go instead." So, I've used that logic more than once, and it's worked.

MS: Well, does the proximity, even though it's a distant proximity to Hollywood, have any appeal to people wanting to come here and be stationed here?

JG: I think not. Hollywood hardly enters into the picture. When Hollywood makes a movie of the Coast Guard, sometimes it's not exactly authentic. So, they're the subject of derision a lot of times. I think that the main reason that people like to be stationed here is the number of things that we can do in our leisure time, the friendly people that are here, and pleasant working conditions.

MS: But they do shoot movies down here a lot, it seems. At least they used to. Does the Coast Guard get involved in that? I know the police department is directing traffic and doing all kinds of stuff when they're shooting movies in the streets down here. Do you get involved at all when there's movies being shot in the harbor?

JG: Oh, yes. The Coast Guard gets involved when they do a local shoot. We frequently have to establish a safety zone around the area where they're shooting. That means just an area where no other boat is permitted to enter. Otherwise, the site seers would get in the way and, possibly, hurt themselves. Hollywood is doing a better job, I think. That movie of the coast guard rescue swimmer, what was the name of it? I thought was an excellent movie. The love story behind it was not exactly what I would imagine true life to be. But if it sold tickets, I'm not about to criticize it.

MS: Of all your years stationed here, what's your proudest moment? What's the moment that you remember most fondly?

JG: My proudest moment during the time I was stationed here was with Admiral Higbee. Admiral Higbee was the first captain of the port. He was made captain of the port during the World War. He was notorious for being a curmudgeon. He was impossible to get along with. As soon as I arrived, I got a phone call from Admiral Higbee. He said, "Captain Guest, what's that tanker doing out there?" The obvious response to that is, "Admiral, what tanker?" That was exactly what he had hoped that I would say because he berated me for several minutes then concluding with, "You're the captain of the port. You're supposed to know what every tanker is doing out there." So, I said, "Well, give me your phone number, Admiral, and I'll call you back." So, he admonished me that I had better not forget under penalty of death. So, I went into our

operation center and just raised Cain with everybody there. I said, "What's that tanker doing out there?" Every tanker that was in the port was doing exactly as they were supposed to be doing. So, I called the Admiral again and said, "Admiral, every tanker out there is doing exactly as it's supposed to be doing." He said, "Oh, okay. I'm looking through my telescope now, and I think it's cooling water coming over the side." So, to make a long story short, this went on for a couple of weeks. Almost every day, he would call me up and just raise Cain with me. So, I called my boss in the district office and said, "Captain, Admiral Higbee is driving me crazy. I push the panic button around here routinely. He interrupts everybody's work while we try to figure out what's going on, and it turns out to be nothing." My boss laughed, and he said, "Jack, when he's after you, he's leaving us alone." So, I said to my crew, "Guys, we have to do something with Admiral Higbee." Somebody looked in the register of Coast Guard officers and found out that his birthday was one day in June. I don't recall the exact date. So, I said, "Let's get the old man down here. We'll line up the crew muster and let him have a personnel inspection. Then we'll take him out to lunch." So, they thought that was a grand idea. On this particular day, I even drove over to San Pedro to his home, picked him up, brought him over. He inspected the crew and just was ready to criticize anything that he saw that wasn't absolutely perfect. We took him out to lunch at the Navy base on Terminal Island and fed him. On the way back to San Pedro, he was sitting in the front seat of the car with me, and I addressed him, "Admiral Higbee, this – "he put his hand on my arm, and he said, "Jack, call me Frank." That was my greatest victory while I was here. I had a friend then until the day I retired.

MS: [laughter] Terrific story. Any other story you want to share before we bring this to an end?

JG: Well, I think not. We pretty well covered everything. I perhaps would like to say that I still am one of the Coast Guard's greatest admirers. I feel that the Coast Guard people are some of the finest people in the whole United States, and they're justifiably proud of themselves as I'm proud of them.

MS: Perfect ending. Thank you.

[end of transcript]