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Andrew Waber: Give us a little background. Where were you born and when were you born?

Capt. John Simms: I was born in April the 24th, 1918 in Titusville, Florida.

Waber: What sort of occupation did your father have?

Simms: My father was a nurseryman.

Waber: What was it like growing up in the Depression, growing up in the late Twenties into the Depression?

Simms: I would like to make a statement in regards to that. It was not the best time. But I lived, by the time I was 18 years old I had lived in 18 different places. Tough to make a living as a nurseryman, my father had a tough time. He died at 43 years old. Of bronchial pneumonia.

Waber: Explain your educational and work experiences heading up into WWII.

Simms: I left home, ran away from home, at 15 years old. In Mankato, Minnesota, they caught me and brought me back to Florida, stayed two weeks and I hoboed to Providence, Rhode Island. They caught me and brought me back to Florida. I went back to school for a short period of time and from there I went into the CCC—Civilian Conservation Corps. And did six months. After doing six months, I came back home to Jacksonville, and got a job in the shipyard working at night and going to school, trying to finish ninth grade, in the day time. (At the) Duval Vocational School. Soon after, when there was no ships in the shipyard, I got a job on the docks working as a cooper. That's the fellow who repairs the sacks (and) cargo boxes. There was a ship, a Bull Line ship, called the *Edith*. (The ship was) fixing to sail and the ordinary seaman was missing and I asked if I could go on board and take his place. (The) chief mate gave me the job and told me he'd take me just to Baltimore. After staying on board the ship ten days, I proceeded to the Steamboat Inspector's Office, as we used to call it then, and they gave me an Ordinary Seaman's Certificate for the ten days experience I had. From then I moved up in various capacities and various ships, and ended up with a Master's License in the Merchant Marine. After tours of at least 27 different ships of all kinds, freighters, Great Lakes oil carrier, tankers, and a Trans-Atlantic cable repair ship, also one Army mine planter. So I had quite an experience. I ended up from seagoing tankers Esso Steamship Company, we called it just the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and they called it Esso. I was on a forty-one day leave from Esso after three years with them, and got an application to work (at) Cecil Field in the Fuels Operation. I became

foreman after three years, I homesteaded there, never had to work five days a week in my life, and retired there in 1978.

Waber: Where were you and what were you doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Simms: Pearl Harbor, I happened to be on the Great Lakes. And I'd like to tell about the Great Lakes. In 1939, I was on the Trans-Atlantic cable repair ship and I found out you could go to a training school for Merchant Mariners with experience, you had to have experience to attend the school, and I went to the school, and I met some fellas from the Great Lakes. And I asked them "how much money do you make as an able bodied seaman?" He says "110 dollars a month." And so I said "Well, my Lord! On the sea we don't make but 72.50 a month. So how do you get a job?" He says "You have to be hired by the captain on the Great Lakes." And he said they liked me, so they gave me the captain's name I wrote him a letter and told him I was looking for higher wages because I had to send my mother an allotment. So it must've hit him in the heart in the right place and he said I'm going to hire him and he hired me, and I was given the job the beginning of (the) sailing season at 110 dollars a month as an able seaman deckwatch. And the next year I was the wheelsman and made 129 dollars a month. I was studying for a pilot's license on the Great Lakes and I went to Duluth, MN and talked to the shipping agent there in the Steamboat Inspection Office I call it, and there was another man in there and he told me you haven't got 21 months on the Great Lakes I have had only 15 months. And he turned me down, and I went back to Cleveland, Ohio, and was going up an elevator, and the fellow had the radio on the elevator. And he said something about Pearl Harbor was attacked and that's the first time I heard about it. I immediately went to Jacksonville, Florida, (the) season was over so I was going home anyway, and when I got there I went straight down to the Naval Reserves and when I went down to the Naval Reserves when the finally got to me and interviewed me they had had a letter and said there'd be no more first class given and that's what I was looking for, first class quartermaster or bosun, and I had been both, and I just wouldn't take the second class. They had second class open but I wouldn't take it and so I went to the Union Hall and shipped out, ..., there was no jobs so I went to Savannah, no jobs. So I got on a bus and went to Baltimore and I when I went in to Baltimore, I went into the Hall, Union Hall, and there was this ship looking for able bodied seaman, and I shipped out on it. And that was the ship that went to Egypt. (On the return trip to the U.S., the ship was torpedoed by a German submarine in July 1942).

Waber: You mentioned you were in the Merchant Marine Academy, right?

Simms: (No.) The Academy that's the Merchant Marine training school [for officers].

Waber: You mentioned you were in the Merchant Marine Training School. What do you best recall from your stay there at the training camp?

Simms: *This was off Hoffman Isle.* Well the main thing we had life boat training. And we had no guns to learn anything about guns. I understand that later training schools that they had ... on it, if you want to say that. And of course firefighting. It was a good experience.

Waber: How well prepared were you for the Merchant Marine following this training and how well prepared were you for this war?

Simms: *Life boat training was beneficial.* Well I don't think anybody was really prepared for the war but we sailed alone the ships, a lot of them had no guns at all, some had false guns, they made wooden false guns on the stern, ships were going back and forth to England and they had big flags painted on the side of the ships and lights on the flag, a wooden-type flag on running fore and aft. And a light shining on it that it was an American ship. And of course, as history shows, the Germans got tired of us helping the English and they started sinking our ships. They did sink two Navy destroyers and damaged a third ship. And I think, if I remember it right, it was six or eight merchant ships sunk at that time before before Pearl Harbor.

Waber: What was the name and nationality of your ship. You mentioned you were on the *Cranford*?

Simms: The *Cranford* was Lykes Brothers ship, that was a company (owned) down in New Orleans, and she was a freighter from WWI, an old timer ship.

Waber: What percentage of the ship's crew was American?

Simms: The war had started when we joined [the] ship. I don't remember any foreigners. Although in 1939, I was on a Trans-Atlantic cable repair ship that was mostly foreigners.

Waber: What capability did this ship possess, what sort of weaponry, what was its speed, its size...

Simms: The ship made about five to seven knots at the most. The ship had two 50 calibers and two 30 calibers on the bridge and little gun on the stern I think three or four inch. And eight armed guard. *Tonnage: 6096 gross, built 1920.*

Waber: As you mentioned early on in the war, before they had convoys, and before they had Navy Armed Guard you guys were basically making runs from port to port by yourselves. The *Cranford*, was this ship doing something similar? Was it making its own run and going from port to port?

Simms: Yes it did those ships—a lot of times ships would be what we called them “tramp ships.” In other words they'd get a load to take down to South Africa. When it Cape Town, South Africa, they'd unload their cargo and from there they'd have it shipped to India or to Turkey. And it took up another load and unload another and carry and that's how they made their living from one port to another. And where some ships had regular runs, for instance like the first company I was with when I was an ordinary seaman, it had a regular run on the coast of the United States. So you know, New York and New Jersey you know, and Baltimore and in two or

three ports in Florida. And it would run back it was called the Bull Line they also went to Puerto Rico too. And every ships had various companies who had regular runs that they made.

Waber: What was your ship hauling and what was its mission?

Simms: Its mission was to help save the Canal. The Suez Canal. The Germans were about to invade—advance into Egypt and the Canal was the lifeblood of the British in particular. And our load was tanks and planes and ammunition, various cargoes on board, and we unloaded the planes in Sudan, Port Sudan, just south of Suez. And from there we went up to, there was a deck cargo of planes in cases, and we unload them and they would assemble them and whatever they did with them. And rest of the cargo was in Suez, Port Tufik I think if I remember right.

Waber: *Cranford* was sunk at the hands of a German U-boat. What do you personally recall from that ship sinking?

Simms: Well of course personal thing I would say this that I was prepared to some extent and that was to have my jumper and my seaman's papers, in a waterproof packet in the pocket. And a life jacket hanging on one hook and I had also my new Tom Mican shoes under the bunk so when I got down I got in those shoes right quick 'cause I felt if this ship was lost I'm going to save my shoes. And so it was a terrific explosion, and we all run out on deck I happened to be—I was on the four to eight watch and I happened to be taking a little nap. And we ran out on deck and up on the boat deck, and I noticed that the boat that I was assigned to was filled with people. And I said "well I'm not going to get in that boat with all that many people." So I hesitated a moment, and took my life jacket off, and put the jumper under, and then put the life jacket on top of it. Lashed it real quick, only took a minute or two. And I saw the captain go to the wing of the bridge and waved his hand to three or four fellas on the stern, Navy boys, to get off of it. Then I saw him turn in and go towards the radio shack with a piece of paper in his hands, and I saw the radio operator was at the door and they went into the radio shack and that was where they died. I myself turned and instead of getting into the one life boat that was being launched, I remembered there were two ordinary seamen in it and the two men were slacking off the falls, and Navy fellas started coming up the ladder and I stopped them, and I told them "Jump overboard." And I kind of forced them down, I jumped on the bulwarks and over the side I went. I saw that I was drifting into the propeller, as it was coming out of the water, and I put a full speed ahead and I got the hell out of there. So when I turned around, I saw a submarine come up, and when the submarine come up, I was afraid they might machine gun us we didn't know what they were going to do. And I headed for a bale of cotton. We had picked up long-fibered cotton, in Alexandria, Egypt, and put it on top (the) chromium ore that we had from Turkey. We were well-ladened over the plemsol mark. And so I headed over to the bale of cotton and I helped a fella, he had a bad shoulder, he must've wrenched his shoulder must've been in one of the boats, or one boat that went down with the men in it, I helped him and turned around and I saw that the submarine crew was looking towards the one life boat with a few men in it, and they said what was the name of the ship and they told him, *Cranford*, and he says I have to torpedo you. That was his duty that's what he meant I have to torpedo you. And he says was there anybody injured? Two men were injured and in this book here [points to book on shelf] (it was reported they went on board the

submarine) but I myself remember that the older man wouldn't go on the submarine but the younger man did. When he come out he had a sandwich in his hand, he had a piece of paper with a (compass) course to Barbados. And then when I found out he wasn't going to harm us, I went out on a life raft with ten men. There was seven on one life raft, three on another and another life raft drifting off. And (the) life raft drifted against the submarine and I had my feet against the submarine holding the life raft off of the submarine. I don't know whether I heard a bell or anything down below in the engine room or just all of the sudden they all just disappeared and the ship went down. And in two hours time, a Spanish tanker came along, *Castillo Alemenara*, and that's in the book there [points to book in shelf] and he come along side, come up on us, we were rescued, taken on board the Spanish tanker, it was a neutral tanker now. After I got on the tanker, I looked off out in the sea and I saw two submarines. And then I saw the sharks. One other thing that it brings to my memory, the Navy crew of eight, had two brothers. Their name was Kiser/Kaiser/Ciser. And the dark-haired one died up on the bridge he didn't come down from the bridge there was two of them on duty up there. Anyway, the brother was lost and I was sitting along side of him on the tanker, and he was crying and I just put my hand on over his shoulder I didn't know how to comfort anybody at that age.

Waber: You don't really know what to really say to someone...

Simms: Yeah, and I... being a teenager you know. Being in the CC Camp. So, I remember that.

Waber: What was the ship's crew's morale before, during and after the sinking?

Simms: Just ordinary. Nothing outstanding. We all were like everybody else looking for something to eat and to talk with the B-girls and you know and get a little drunk.

[laughter]

Waber: Unlike the Navy, when the Merchant Marine, when the ship was sunk, they stopped getting paid the moment the ship goes under...

Simms: Oh yes, I will say this. To go back to the rescue, the ship sailed us to Willemstad, Curacao, that's the port, Willemstadt. All I had was just a pair of light skinned trousers on, no shirt and no shoes. And I said because the Red Cross gave me a new little white sheet suit and a pair of shoes, and they flew us back—first they flew us from Willemstad to Aruba and from Aruba to Maricaibo and then in Maricaibo we caught a Pan-American clipper. Eight or ten men at a time would go on this ship at the time. And they flew us back to the United States. When I got back to the United States, I had to pay for the new suit and the pair of shoes, they took it out of my pay. And of course, when the ship went down, the pay was stopped. So that's the way it was.

Waber: How did you keep afloat during this time? Did you have to borrow money from relatives or did you find odd jobs?

Simms: No you ain't got no money at home you know [laughs]. I never sent for any money in my life from home. I was always being asked for money. You have to, if you go to raise become a licensed officer why you have to spend two maybe three weeks ashore, you have to pay your own way, pay for a little school. Now if you go into a training school, officer's training school, why then of course your room and board and everything is paid. So that's the way it is. Until you get another ship, you don't have any income. (To raise your grade from the third mate to second mate or others you pay your way).

Waber: You stayed on in the Merchant Marine after the sinking. A lot of guys backed out of the Merchant Marine after they survived that...

Simms: Oh yes, like Dave Swisher [Merchant seaman who transferred to the Navy during WWII] did

Waber: Was there a particular reason why you decided to stay on board the Merchant Marine instead of transferring?

Simms: Well I will say this that I was on two ships as bosun, liberty ships, and I was on one liberty ship as an able bodied seaman. And carried a load to the back door of Russia on that ship. You just have to go from one ship to another, to keep employed the best you can. But I will say—I'll regress a little bit. Between ships, when I got in Jacksonville, Florida, I worked for one thirty days in the Saint Johns Shipyard (in a) trial crew, and I kept them tied up at the wet docks and I didn't like it because you had to kind of hide around if you wasn't doing nothing you know. And I didn't like that so I stayed thirty days then I shipped out again. That helped bring income. So when I got back from another trip after being bosun, I went to the Gibbs Shipyard. First was the Saint Johns Shipyard. I went to the Gibbs Shipyard, but I didn't work in the trial crew, I worked as a rigger in the rigging loft.

Waber: So what further experience did you gain during World War II in the Merchant Marine?

Simms: None other than being handler of fuel because on tankers, I was officer and loaded the tankers. And the last company I was with (was Esso). During the war, I was an able bodied seaman and I hated cleaning tanks. I had to go down in the tanks and clean them. And I didn't like that. I (was on) two tankers (during the War).

Waber: You stated your career goals when you came into the Merchant Marine. How did your service during World War II change your career goals in the shipping industry?

Simms: Well I don't think it changed it changed when you become an officer you didn't have to work [laughter] and get dirty. On tankers, to give you—for instance, a freighter an officer on a freighter was clean all the time. But not on a tanker. A tanker man has to get the dungarees on and he sometimes, if he takes temperatures of tanks, and loading them while turning valves and

things that just sort of sometimes relieving the pump operator down below in the pump room. You had a mirror in your pocket and for the day time and a flashlight in your pocket for nighttime. All the time. Just filling the ships and emptying them too you know you had to wear dungarees to see if the ship was empty. So it was little different job being an officer on a tanker.

Waber: Was there any particular theater or any particular ship that you preferred to serve on or other guys preferred to serve on?

Simms: Well I liked the fast Victory ships [laughs]. And I was chief mate for seventeen months with American Hawaiian Steamship Company. And I left them, ... cause I had enough time to go and stand examinations for a master's license. And I went back to Baltimore, and stayed there for approximately a month. And instead of going back to the American Hawaiian Steamship Company, which I'd been—might've moved up, I met some men from Standard Oil Company of New Jersey in Baltimore. They told me that they were beginning to give—tankers began giving ten days off for every month you were out. Giving them credit for ten days. And if they could relieve them in three months they would. Although it didn't turn out that way sometimes you had 43 days, 58 days off you know, it depends upon your runs that you made and things like that. But you would get relieved and you were a company man. And good pay. But some people don't realize that tanker crews could load in four hours and they let go. They don't wait around for six months ashore or two years ashore like the Navy does. They have to move its how they make their living. And when the ship isn't unloading, you go to down the coast of South America or back to the United States or whatever, or to England, and you would unload in eight to twelve hours. Particularly if you unloaded while you had two hours to ballast so that would be included during that period of time. Well they had to do something to keep those men on board. And so they decide—and the officers got together and they made a union of their own and they got some good things for it. I stayed with Esso, I got a job with them, and I never went back. That's why I never commanded a ship, although I'm called captain because that's the honor I guess—honorable way to pronounce your name that showed that you have passed the test. So I am not sorry about that because it has led me finally to get a job ashore and settle down and get married.

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Simms: I don't think so I guess I was so glad to leave the ships and I got married in ten months after I left the sea and my wife had two children and we're still married 55 years. I don't give myself credit [tape damaged]

Waber: What has your WWII experience meant to you and how has it affected the rest of your life?

Simms: Well the only thing that it has affected my way of life is because that's the main subject that I can talk about I can't talk about much of anything else. Everything affects you life and whatever you do and I think that people do a lot of reminiscing when they get older. Especially if you join a maritime museum society [laughter].

Waber: There has been a big controversy after WWII about the veterans status of Merchant Mariners...

Simms: Mariners [mare-iners]. I would like to say about that we do have a Just Compensation Law before, haven't been brought before Congress they're trying to introduce it, and it may give us some little reward I'm not hopeful about that, but in 1988 they finally recognized us as veterans. And the Merchant Marine has always been a part of the Navy, supported the Navy and the soldiers, the fighting men, and with all the casualties and ships lost people didn't know much about that. And they their reasons for the censorship. But after Roosevelt died, it looked like the ... forgot all about us. And so that's where it stands we got a war, we had all the hurricanes, and Uncle Sam got a lot of expenses. But I'm lucky to be alive and I'm thankful for that.

Waber: The Canadian government they have given reimbursement and basically full veterans status to their merchant navy...

Simms: Yes, the British too.

Waber: Does that give you hope about things changing here in the United States?

Simms: [laughs] Well I guess it's some hope. You don't want to give up you want to let them know, and I think that is one of the reasons why I always talk about the Merchant Marines is because I was there. I actually was only there 14 years at the time.

Waber: There's also been a lot of controversy over who decides who gets veterans status. There's been for a long time, the Air Force was heavily involved with who got veterans status.

Simms: Yes I have no idea and I can't explain why the Air Force had anything to do about it. I do know that-- I saw the Air Force and I saw the British and saw the German planes and the Japanese planes. I could not have said but I do know that to see the planes come out, you know and circle the convoy, because they got good eyesight, the submarines—the planes were a nemesis for the German submarines.

Waber: So how do you feel about public remembrances of WWII over 60 years after the fact?

Simms: You mean the way it was and things like that?

Waber: How do you feel about the public perception today. How do they remember it. Do you want to have more or do you think it's sufficient...

Simms: Well one of the things I say about it is I'm aware of some things that a lot of people are not of. For instance, Pearl Harbor to the Navy man of course they think that was the greatest thing that ever happened, you know the most terrible thing. It was a terrible thing I agree to that.

But there was other places, for instance, Bari, Italy, was practically wiped out. And the ships in there, one of the ships ended up exploding, and blowing up and also the people, the civilians, men, women and children, killed by poisonous gas. People didn't know that we carried poisonous gas. We carried gas on merchant ships. I happened to have not been on one of them. A lot of people just don't know and it's forgotten to some extent. Except to the men. And to people who lost their husbands and wives.

Waber: In your opinion, what would be the biggest difference between society back during WWII and society today.

Simms: Well society today for one thing got tired of things like Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War and things like that but I think that some people realize that that's the kind of wars we're going to have to fight. Whereas WWII, Hitler and Stalin and Mussolini and all those fellas, they just wanted to beat the hell out of each other [laughs] it was a terrible thing. Everybody was in the War, and I think they gathered together and did the job. That's about all I can tell you, I don't know why or anything like that. Even Napoleon tried to take the Russians [laughter] a couple times I think but people, and of course Uncle Sam, has to come in there and help too. These people here, there's so many different people that people from WWII are almost all gone. There's a lot of people that remember it but... so that's really all I can say.

Waber: What do you hope that we learned from WWII so that something like that will never happen again?

Simms: Well I may not be a real religious person, I belong to the Christian church, and I live right next to it and I joined when I was a kid. And I myself think that there should be more understanding between faiths. And I myself wondered why there was so many damn—I don't mean to use the word damn—that there was so many different religions, especially Protestant religions. There was so many different kinds that church still got 30 to 80 people hanging in there, a nice well-built church, and across the street over there and down on Edgewood Avenue, at different at places, they got these little places with 10, 12, 15 people and they're preaching again. And they don't respect the other church. We see that everyday—youths doing something to the Seventh Day Adventist because they're different than the Baptists, or whatever, and Catholics got their problems. Presbyterians too. I think that if people have a little more respect for their faiths, and other faiths, that we'd be better off.

Waber: How would you compare the Merchant Navy today and the Merchant Navy in WWII. Would you think that it is going in a positive or negative direction?

Simms: Well I think they're going in a positive direction because, for one thing, they don't get out there and stay that long on ships anymore. But you see with the Merchant Marine is so small now, it's also in England as well, that foreign companies have taken over and they're having to give work for other merchant mariners that don't have a job so they put them on ships three months at a time. And I guess you could say that Esso was one of those starters, and giving the

man—you can have some of those fellas are married now and they have families. And they get a chance to see their families more often. They're accomplishing the same thing, but like I said, the foreign ships have taken over our workload.

Waber: What would be the biggest technological advancement in shipping technology that has occurred since the end of WWII in your opinion?

Simms: Well for one thing, container ships. Because I have been on freighters where they had many, many booms on them and that's a kind of a workhorse for a seaman, and nowadays those containers, they can bring a ship in there and I don't think they stay in there any more than about in 8 hours time. I can say that they later loaded container ships. Whereas before, a freighter, using booms to load and to unload, it would be 8 to 10 days in port. Whereas, as I said before, tankers, 4 to 6 hours, they're gone. That's to load; to unload, 8 to 12. But now the tankers are much larger. Tankers are five times as large as the tankers in those days. So they do have a little bit longer in port to load and unload. So that's stretched out there. So to keep them onboard, and to give other people a chance, while they're trying to relieve them of their three months.

Waber: I hate to backtrack, but the government, during WWII, they underreported the number of merchant ships that were being sunk. To what extent were you personally misled by the numbers and did you have a better idea...

Simms: Well, I didn't know what they were putting in the newspaper but what they did they would say that there were two ships lost on the east coast of the United States and that wasn't right. They lost 34 ships a month on the east coast of the United States from Nova Scotia to Key West, Florida. And I have not shown in this talk that we were going to copy here if you wanted to, the censorship was the reason. For one thing, they didn't want the Germans to know how they had accomplished but the Germans knew that they went down. They knew how many ships they were sinking. And all nationalities. And also, they wanted to be able to recruit the young men who come from school and had never been on ships before, and they would put them in training, they didn't want it interfering with the recruiting of the Merchant Mariners. Because there was so many of them did die. That's all I know of it.

Waber: Given what you knew now about the extent of Merchant Marine casualties do you think you would've made the decision to go to the Merchant Marines

[end side A]

Waber: Picking back up where we left off from the last side, given the extent of the damages you know now would you have made that same decision...

Simms: To join the Merchant Marine?

Waber: Yeah

Simms: There's many reasons why people go to sea. Before [the war], the men who went to sea, there were all kinds: there were men who could not hack it in the Navy, Coast Guard or the Army, or the Marines. They were rough characters. They didn't like the discipline, and they ran away, you know, got dishonorable discharges, and they became seamen, they liked the idea of being on the ships. There were alcoholics, there were fellas who ran away because he got a girl pregnant, young fellas, and not all of them, youngstaff(?), well some of them had a true desire because my uncle used to go to sea I'm gonna get me a job on a ship they do pretty good. You don't have to walk but 300 foot to get something to eat. You work, you know go into foreign ports.

Waber: So what would they be the preferential shipmates that you would like on your ship? [laughs] In a hypothetical situation.

Simms: Well, for one thing, yes you like fellas that didn't get bad, they wanna fight and things like that and getting cuts and scrapes. And I've been in some scraps and things, even as small as I am, and there are some fellas [who] are pretty bad men. And then the War comes, they took some of these men from the prisons, that were in there for short periods of time, and they said "well if you go into the Merchant Marine—sign up for the Merchant Marine-- we will ship you out." And they shipped them out as well. But when they started having young college and high school boys come on board those ships that went into the training schools and so forth, it changed things completely in the Merchant Marine. The camaraderie between the young fellas who was in the Armed Guard, and the young fellas in the Merchant Marine, they come together as friends and made friends. In the Merchant Marine [before the arrival of the younger men] you didn't bother, if you were in the deck department, you didn't loan money to someone in the steward department or the engine room. Back and forth, everybody—you stick to your people. There wasn't much getting together too much, it's kind of a dull thing on ships to some extent. But when they put those young fellas on board, the Armed Guard and the new fellas, you know, you couldn't help but enjoy them and it changed things quite a bit. Not all the fellas were—but a lot of them were runaways. I'm talking about from the responsibilities ashore, it's a little bit easier to get out of here and, you know.

End