

Interviewee: Swan, Dave
Interviewer: Andrew Waber
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Note: Additional information provided by Mr. Swan after the interview in italics, with the exception of newspaper titles and ship names.

Andrew Waber: Gives us a little background information.... When were you born and where were you born?

Dave Swan: I was born in 1925 in Brooklyn, New York. I was educated in Tampa, Florida and when I was still in high school and when I was graduating that year, we were in the first year of the War: 1942.

Waber: What did your father do for a living?

Swan: My father worked in a shipyard in New York (Harbor). A ship repair yard and actually across the river in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Waber: What was it like growing up during the Depression? What were things like for you personally?

Swan: Well we didn't have (a lot but) didn't seem to need much, compared to the way people live now. We never thought of ourselves as being poor we rather thought of ourselves as rather privileged compared to (a lot of other) people. I guess by and large it was different. Most kids in high school had part time jobs. Very few of them had automobiles. Nobody had a cell phone, there was no television. It was a very different world.

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

Swan: On that Sunday, a friend of mine who had a newspaper route came by and asked me to help him sell newspapers and so that's what I did I was selling (a special edition of) the *Tampa Tribune* telling the story of Pearl Harbor.

Waber: Why did you choose the Merchant Marine?

Swan: Well basically I wanted to be in the Navy. And I had the idea that I wanted to be a Navy aviator and an officer and this was a very popular ambition in those days. A lot of my classmates were going to be naval aviators and some of them made it.

Swan: The Navy had a program called “V-7” and they (offered) an examination to all the boys in their senior year of high school. Those who passed with a high enough grade were enrolled and enlisted in the V-7 program which, after basic training, had a couple terms of college, and then specialized training to be an aviator in the Navy. I took the exam and made one of the highest grades and I was sent from Tampa to Miami, on a train, to take (the) physical examination. The physical examination rejected me because of bad eyesight and told me in addition I was color blind.—I hadn’t realized that up till that point. So anyway, I was rejected from the program. After that I tried to join all the different services and all of them turned me down for the same reason: nearsightedness and color perception. It began to look like I wasn’t going to be able to get into any of the services. At that time, those who were chosen for these programs, and even those who wanted to (just) enlist (and) dropped out of high school in their senior year were given their diplomas (just) as if they had stayed and graduated. I was one that had to stay to the point where I actually did graduate.

[pause]

Swan: After I graduated, I tried to enroll (or) enlist in all the different services, including the Navy, the Coast Guard, the Army, the Marine Corps, even the Maritime Service and (was rejected). Then I learned a little more about the Merchant Marine, I found that you could start in the Merchant Marine without going through the Maritime Service boot camp procedure by shipping on foreign flag ships that were under charter to the US Armed Forces and once you had gotten employment on these ships, you were considered a US Merchant Seaman. And this is what I did. I shipped on a Honduran flag ship that was carrying cargoes to North Africa and to Sicily and Italy. This ship was named the *Maya*—M-A-Y-A, and she was owned by the United Fruit Company. In peacetime she carried bananas from Honduras to the United States. In wartime, we never saw Honduras or any bananas. We carried military cargoes, in addition to (refrigerated provisions), we carried munitions, we carried (military) vehicles, all matter of material that was needed overseas. The ship was a little smaller and a little faster than the Liberty ships and as a result was often used by the convoy commodores—even though it was a Honduran ship it would be the flag ship of [laughs] the convoy. While on this ship, I learned a great deal about marine engineering. The engineers on the ship were very helpful and set me to work, giv(ing) me an opportunity to learn all the systems of the ship, (all the) procedures and so forth. Every time I came to an American port, I would go (to the Coast Guard Inspectors) and (take exams to) raise my seaman’s (qualifications) papers until I finally had all of the possible endorsements that you could have short of being licensed. After a year and a half, I applied for the (Maritime Service) Officer Candidate School at New London, Connecticut, was accepted and sent there. (It was) a four-month course (that) led to a license as a Unlimited Third Engineer Steam and Diesel (ships), and a commission as an ensign in the Maritime Service. Finishing this course, I was given a choice of assignments and I requested to ship out of the West Coast on a tanker. A short time after that, I joined the tanker *Cherry Valley*, in San Pedro, California. (She) departed almost immediately for the South Pacific with a cargo of aviation gasoline *and fighter planes as deck cargo*. In the Pacific, we did not run in convoys like had in the Atlantic, we generally ran singly, and we were sent to various islands where our cargoes were needed. After the first cargo from California, we went back to the Canal Zone and took the cargoes of aviation

gasoline from Balboa, the Pacific end of the Panama Canal, and carried them out to the Marianas and other islands in the South Pacific. This continued until V-J Day. The ship (then) returned through the Panama Canal to Philadelphia where the voyage was concluded and I signed off. I went to New York, where I (took the exam) to raise my license to Second Engineer. I (also) applied for and went to the Maritime Service Turboelectric School and was qualified as specialist in turboelectric propulsion. I then went to my home in Tampa for a vacation—I had not taken a vacation *or any leave* all during the War. However, I did not realize that we were subject to a possible draft—if we took longer than two weeks of vacation without shipping out again.

Waber: So were saying you faced possible draft trouble?

Swan: (Yes), I was vulnerable for induction. At that point, the Coast Guard was aware of my having a license as Second Engineer. (They) called me and (said) that they would like me to ship out on a ship (whose) First Engineer had fallen down a ladder and the Second and Third Engineer only had Third Engineers licenses. They needed a higher license. And they told me (I could) sail First Engineer on my Second Engineer's license. I didn't particularly want to do this but they mentioned my vulnerability to the draft at that point and I decided that this was the thing to do. I signed on a ship called the *Alcoa Trader*, this was a World War One Hog Island Ship, which was the Emergency Design Ship in World War One, I made a voyage on that ship that went (to almost) all of the small islands (of the) Caribbean, (then) to the British and Dutch Guiana for bauxite cargoes. We carried the bauxite cargoes to Mobile and to Halifax in Nova Scotia. In the dead of the winter there, we found ourselves in Halifax in snow and ice and what have you, and with (only) summer clothes. We made a passage from there to Bermuda, where suddenly it was balmy sunshine.

Waber: And you guys had winter clothes on right [laughs]?

Swan: We never did get winter clothes [laughter]

Waber: As you know, the Merchant Marine remained under private control but it still had to deal with a lot of Navy and Coast Guard restrictions. For instance, the Navy Armed Guard, they had their own officers, they had their own mess. Did you ever witness any friction with these types of regulations between Merchant Marine and Navy and Coast Guard?

Swan: On some ships, the Merchant crew and the Navy Armed Guard crew didn't get along or so I heard but I don't remember any of this on my ships. We got along pretty well with the Navy Armed Guard gunners. Actually, on my voyage in the Atlantic, the Armed Guards crews were always shorthanded and the additional men that they needed to man the guns and pass the ammunition were part of the Merchant crew that were not on watch. To this end, I was assigned to a 20 millimeter gun with one Navy gunner. My job was to pick up the magazines, which were quite heavy weighed about 40 pounds I think, and (load them) on the gun. This magazine was in

the shape like a *spiral* drum. While the gunner actually aimed and fired the gun, if we needed the gun raised or lowered, I did this with a hand wheel.

Waber: I showed you this article before, but in this December 21st article of *Time Magazine* [shows article], it summed up well many of the misconceptions people had about the Merchant Marine. It labeled them as quote “draft dodgers,” “slackers,” and “profiteers.” What do you make of this? Did you ever have to deal with this sort of characterization personally?

Swan: Oh definitely the Merchant Marine personnel were looked down upon by just about everybody. Possibly some of this might have been deserved, but by and large the Merchant Marine—which was [an] all volunteer organization, nobody was drafted into the Merchant Marine. During World War Two, the Merchant Marine had the highest casualty rate, men killed in action, of any of the Armed Services. Higher by far than some of them. One man in every 25 men in Merchant crews was a casualty killed in action during WWII. This was (even higher than) the casualty rate of the US Marines, which I understand had one casualty in 35 men. The Army was the next highest, then the Navy and finally the Coast Guard.

Waber: Many people accuse the government of understating the casualties suffered by the Merchant Marine out of fear that it would be a morale booster for the enemy and deter enlistees. Did you have any idea what you were getting yourself into when you became involved with the Merchant Marine?

Swan: To tell you the truth I didn't care much I was 17 years old, and I considered myself a (potential) hero, and was afraid that the War would be over before I could get in my licks. But it was true that the Merchant Marine initially was unprotected when the War broke out, and it took (the Navy) quite a while to get the convoy system into operation and escorts for the convoys and so forth. The German U-boats were having it all their way. They were sinking more Allied cargo ships than could be replaced by construction. This continued until much later in the War, when the convoy systems and the escort systems and anti-submarine techniques had been improved, and construction of the Liberty ships, which came out in vast numbers about this time, turned the situation around. Now more ships were able to get through and this actually won the War for the Allies. In WWII, the Allies had to have almost everything brought from America. Material, munitions, weapons, food, fuel, everything was brought to England and to the various theaters of operation by Merchant ships. Initially the Germans were sinking these ships faster than they could be replaced. Had they continued to do so, the Armed Forces in overseas positions would be handicapped by not having the equipment and munitions and so forth, fuel. In fact, the population of the British Isles would have been starved into submission. So it was critical that all of this material and all of the troops got through. And basically that's what happened, they did get through and eventually overwhelmed the German U-boats. So basically, that was the Battle of the Atlantic and while we started out way behind, we eventually pulled ahead and won the Battle of the Atlantic.

Waber: Emory Land, Admiral Emory Land—I believe that was his name, he was the admiral of the War Shipping Administration. He often had to deal with a lot of government bureaucracy, a lot of Navy admirals wanted the Merchant Marine to be completely government controlled, and so he had to act as a liaison between the commercial interests and government interests. What do you make of the War Shipping Administration's accomplishments during the War?

Swan: I think they did a very good job I think Admiral Land really was one of the heroes of that situation. Initially, the Navy did not want to even be involved in the shipping of cargoes and merchant ships. They were interested in getting a lot of warships and whipping the German navy or the Japanese navy. It took a while before we were able to protect the cargo ships. Initially, when we first got into the War, cargo ships moving along the coast from one American sea port to another were endangered by German U-boats, and many of these cargo ships were sunk along our coast. One was sunk here almost within the city limits of Jacksonville [Florida] on April 19th of 1942. The *Gulfamerica* was torpedoed off Jacksonville Beach [Florida] and sunk with the loss of twenty men.

Waber: Were you ever part of any of the unions?

Swan: Yes after I got my license I (joined the) MEBA—Marine Engineers Beneficial Association, and basically this was for me a formality. It was something that was required on American ships because the union had contracts with various of the shipping companies. As far as the War Shipping Administration, or Maritime Administration, in effect they were a government agency and in effect the government did operate the ships and the shipping companies were basically required to provide the crews through their union contracts and they were also required to sort of husband the ships and deal with provisioning the ships and supplying the things that were needed for the ships. [When] the ships were damaged, they were required to put these ships into shipyards and repair them and get them back into service. These were the things that the companies had to do but basically it was the government, the Armed Forces, and in particular the Navy, that was able to say where the ships would go and when they would go and what they would carry. And all of the crews of the ships were actually subjected to military discipline to the extent that once in the forward areas, they were under the same discipline that the Armed Forces were.

Waber: Are there any particular ports that stand out in your memory that you visited during the War?

Swan: Oh yeah. I visited Algiers and Oran in North Africa and Sicily, Palermo, and Naples, in Italy and of course I went to England a couple of times—went to Iceland once. In the Pacific, instead of coming back to the United States we came back to the Canal Zone and in the South Pacific there was various islands: the Marianas Islands, we went to Guam.

Waber: What was the most unusual cargo that you remember hauling during the War? There are lots of stories, a lot of Merchant Marine stories, that I have heard and read about. They're always

talking about one particular cargo that's really odd like some hauled a cargo of beer or a cargo of baseball gloves. What was the most unusual cargo that you remember hauling during the War?

Swan: Well I can remember the cargo that we took from Palermo. Basically, this was the back haul we had unloaded our cargo of munitions and weapons and food and to return to the states, we took aboard, among other things, a cargo of wine in barrels. And this was something else again. These large barrels of wine had to be lifted by the derricks and lowered into the hold. The cargo handling was being done by a crew of Army longshoreman, and I was on watch as a junior engineer in the engine room (but) was responsible for (the cargo winches) on deck. I was told that I could have liberty in the morning at 8 o'clock when my watch was over and through the night I was looking forward to that. I noticed that the oiler who had gone up on deck to oil the deck machinery, the winches on the derrick, was getting a little tipsy. And so I took over his job and went up on deck to oil the winches and I saw what was happening. Lowering the kegs into the hold, some of the kegs would swing against the side of the hatch, combing of the hatch, and that would spring the keg. The wine would pour out between the staves. The soldiers were taking their helmets off and filling (them) with wine and you know it was not just going to go to waste [laughter].

Waber: So that made you a very popular ship I take it—free alcohol [laughter]

Swan: This was a very bad situation there. I...

Waber: Did you help yourself to some of the wine?

Swan: [laughs] No, not really I had to get through the watch. I had liberty coming up. And the other junior engineer who was going to relieve me at 8 o'clock, I was afraid that he would find out about this and he would be drunk too in the morning [laughter]. So I locked him in his room [laughter]. And at the end of my watch, I let him out, turned over the watch to him, and got to my shore clothes and, down the gangway. As I headed out, I saw the captain who had been ashore coming back. I knew that there was going to be hell to pay when he got aboard and so what a mess there was on deck [laughs] with all these longshoreman *and some of the crew* drunk. So I stepped behind some cargo stacks in this warehouse that I was in and he didn't see me and I was able to bypass it. But what I heard later, immediately he got aboard he shut down liberty—I couldn't have gotten away if I had waited another 15 minutes. [laughter]

Waber: So did you experience any difficulties adjusting to civilian life when the War was over?

Swan: No. Actually after the War was over I *made several more voyages, went to Legorno, Italy, also thru the Suez Canal and Persian Gulf to Iran and Kuwait. I got my First Engineer License before I came ashore and then went to college.*

Waber: I was just about to ask you about that. What do you remember-- you mentioned that you went to TBUF, which was a branch campus of UF that eventually merged with FSCW.

Swan: Well I enrolled in the University of Florida at Gainesville. At that time it was very difficult to get into college everybody in the Armed Services was taking advantage of the GI Bill and going to college. The colleges were filling up. The fortunate thing for me was that Florida had a law that said anybody who was a bona fide resident of Florida and had been in the service would be accepted for college, assuming they could pass the entrance examination, (they) could not be rejected. This applied to me. What didn't apply to me was the GI Bill. The Merchant Marine did not get a GI Bill and there was no money provided for (their) education or tuition or anything like that. So anyway, the fortunate thing was that I worked. The first year, Gainesville was so crowded that they could not accommodate all of us and so they sent 300 of us to Tallahassee, where the Florida State College for Women's campus was, this contingent was called the Tallahassee Branch of the University of Florida, or TBUF, and we were housed at Dale Mabry Field, an Army air base that was closed up. We were living in empty wooden temporary buildings there and being bused to the woman's college on yellow school buses for our daily classes. This was not such a bad detail because the counting the girls at Tallahassee, there were 27 girls I think for every one of the fellas.

Waber: That's a good girl to guy ratio right [laughs]

Swan: Yeah [laughter] it wasn't too hard to get a date. Unfortunately, this only went on for a year and then I had to transfer back to Gainesville because I had run out of (available required) subjects. I was going for a degree in mechanical engineering.

Waber: When the military personnel—when the men started coming onto the campus, there was a lot of shortage of accommodations. One of the shortage of accommodations was student life activities such as swimming pools, bowling, that they sort of thing, they were oriented towards the smaller all woman's college. Did you notice any sort of difficulties in them adjusting to the number of men coming in on top of the women when you were there in regards to student life activities?

Swan: Well I'm sure it shook them up. I think having been a woman's college for so many years, strictly a woman's college, but no there didn't seem to be any real hardships or anything like that attached to the social life. You can bet with that kind of a ratio, that you can have some pretty good parties. But on the other hand, we were a different generation in a different time and we probably were a little more responsible. Most of us had been out of high school for three or four years and with the result that we were probably not as wild as some of the students who came directly from high school and were turned loose for the first time.

Waber: Are there any particular faculty member that you had a lot of contact with and that you remember well?

Swan: I can remember several of them, unfortunately I'm now at 81 years old. I don't remember names very well. I can picture these people, but I'm sorry I don't have any names I can think of. *Dr. Richards, my physics professor.*

Waber: Does the name Katherine Montgomery, she was in charge of the Physical Education Department, and she made it a requirement at the time for every student at FSCW and eventually FSU for several years to have a physical education requirement, did you ever have face this kind of requirement?

Swan: No. The year that the University of Florida contingent was over there, there was no requirement for physical education for the men.

Waber: Going to your post-TBUF experience, the big controversy since the ending of WWII has been veteran's status of Merchant Mariners as you full well know. Although non-military and reserve personnel received full benefits, Merchant seamen only received partial veteran's status in 1988 after a long fight. What is your stand on this. And also I wanted to know, in your opinion, what was the most important benefit that Merchant seamen missed out on?

Swan: I would say the most important benefit was the GI Bill. And the educational benefits of the GI Bill as well as the housing benefits that enabled many of the military veterans to buy small houses of their own. I was probably one of the only students in the University of Florida at that time who was not on the GI Bill, of the men who had been to war. I know I was the only student at the Tallahassee Branch of the University of Florida who was not on the GI Bill. I had a number of part time jobs during that year at Tallahassee. When I got back to Gainesville...

[end of side one]

Waber: [As you were saying on the other side], at TBUF who wasn't on the GI Bill?

Swan: As far as I knew. After working in (a Tampa) shipyard for the summer, I had a little more money and was able to continue. Actually, the expenses of living in college in those days were not that great. When I got to Gainesville, I was offered a deal where I was hired by the city electric utilities of Gainesville as a power plant operator. Working a (full) shift from 4 PM until midnight, and this enabled me to have a full time job, full employment. This was basically because the power plant was essentially similar to the turboelectric ships that I had been operating in the Merchant Marine. What I would do was go to classes during the day, and at night, at the power plant, myself and other operators who were also taking advantage of this deal, engineering students, were allowed to do a certain amount of our homework while we were on watch at the power plant, which was a help. This went on for a couple years, and then the head of the mechanical engineering department was re-writing his text book, and hired me to illustrate it. He set up a drawing board in his outer office and I *proofread his draft and* made all the illustrations for a book on thermodynamics. I can remember his name: Professor Ebaugh.

Waber: The Canadian government gave full reimbursement to their merchant navy in 2000, something that the US government has yet to do. Does this give any hope that things would change here in the United States?

Swan: It became very evident after the War that the American Merchant Marine, because they were not actually an Armed Service, did not receive any of the special remuneration (the Armed Forces received). Their wartime remuneration did not actually exceed that of the Armed Forces). Overall, when all of the benefits of veteran's status in the Armed Services are considered, it became evident that the deal that the Merchant seamen had was nowhere near as good. Nonetheless, the Merchant seamen were not considered as veterans of the War although, by definition, they were. So, it was 40 years later, in 1988, when the Congress passed the bill (retroactively giving) all of the surviving WWII Merchant seamen who had been actually in the war zones of the Atlantic and Pacific areas official veteran's status. This allows them to have certain benefits that the Armed Forces veterans have had. Unfortunately, the GI Bill, the educational benefits, the housing benefits, had long ago expired. And so the benefits that the Merchant seamen got were medical and burial benefits. They could be buried with a military funeral, honors. And that was about it.

Waber: How do you feel about public remembrances of WWII 60 years later? Do you think it's sufficient or insufficient?

Swan: Unfortunately I have run across younger people who have no concept of how it was in WWII. I think that is definitely insufficient there should be more effort in schools and colleges but unfortunately the trend is to ignore a lot of history. History is no longer a required subject in many schools.

Waber: How do feel about the Merchant Marine today? Do you feel that it's going in a good or a bad direction?

Swan: Well what's happened after the War, mainly after the Cold War, which incidentally we haven't even seemed to touch? We had the largest merchant marine in the world after the end of WWII and I think now we're way down on the list, surpassed by many, many smaller countries. The biggest problem of course is that we also have had the highest standard of living for all these years and our Merchant Marine labor costs were higher than those of many, many emerging nations. And with lower labor costs, they found it much easier to compete with us and their merchant marines increased and ours dwindled. For years, there were not even any new (US flag) ships constructed. So our Merchant Marine is now relatively small. It's protected in regard to, for example, the Jones Act which basically says that only American-built merchant ships can carry cargoes between one US port and another. But it doesn't provide any protection at all for the merchant marine to destinations in other countries than our own. There's been a number of changes to our Merchant Marine. The Merchant Marine standards of construction and maintenance of our ships was the highest in the world at one time and nowadays the United Nations has moved into this area is calling the shots and we are accommodating and adopting their procedures rather than sticking to our own.

Waber: So what do you hope that the world would learn from the Second World War so that it never repeats itself? It's just a general philosophical question [laughs]. If you look back at the

United States back in the mid to late 30's and look at the United States now what do you hope that we would learn from that time period so that something like this would never happen again?

Swan: Well in the mid 30s I was like ten years old [laughs].

Waber: Oh [laughs] the late 30's early 40's then.

Swan: Actually in those days, the country went from isolationist just before the war to a very resolved and patriotic country that was all of one mind. It's hard to imagine now, but everybody in the country was in favor of winning the War, victory over the Axis, the Axis Powers were basically everybody's enemy, even the people who were on the home front. It (is) nowadays a situation where the entire country (is) actually divided on supporting the war and many, many people in this country right now see nothing wrong with our backing out of this conflict [Iraq] and leaving all the people in the Middle East to their own devices and if this happens, we'll probably see a repeat of what happened after the withdrawal from Vietnam when the East Indian Island countries and Thailand and Cambodia and Vietnam (engaged in) the massive killings of (their) civilians for political purposes, which happened almost immediately after we withdrew.

For what its worth: after graduating from the University of Florida I went on active duty as a Naval Reservist and was trained and qualified as a ship salvage officer. I served in that capacity in Korea in 1950 and 1951. Coming off active duty in '52 I became a commercial marine surveyor for the next 46 years. During that time I continued my Naval Reserve career, finally retiring in 1985 in the rank of captain. I am now the volunteer curator of the Jacksonville Maritime Museum.

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