

Oral History Interview

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

“The Culture of Tugs and Tugs in Culture”

Interviewee: John (Jack) Austin (J.A.)
DOB: April 14, 1949
POB:

Interviewer: Michelle Zacks (M.Z.)
Unidentified speaker (SPK)

Date: September 23, 2011

Location: Austin home
Saint Michaels, Maryland

Comments:

Documentation:

Audio:
Video:
Digital Photos:
Slides:

Transcription by:

Pearl Transcripts
P.O. Box 81
Woodford, VA 22580
410-310-5753
pearltranscripts.com
trevy@pearltranscripts.com

INDEX

NAMES

Page:

People:

Jack Austin	4
Josh	16

Businesses & Organizations:

Vane Brothers	4
Moran	6
Compass Marine	7
Taylor and Anderson	11
Interstate	11
Delaware River Barge Company	12
Fort Schuyler, SUNY, New York State	20

SITES

Page:

St. Michaels, Maryland	4
New York	4
Wilmington	7
Vietnam	8
Philadelphia	10
Tangier	20
Smith Island	20
Canada	22
Gulf of Mexico	22
Texas	22
Mississippi River	22
East Coast	22
Puerto Rico	22
Western Europe	22
Chile	22
Peru	22
Albania	22

TOPICS OF INTEREST

	<u>Audio:</u>	<u>Page:</u>
Working for Moran	1.01	4
Starting out as deckhand	2.14	5
Working as captain	2.54	6
<i>Scott Turecamo</i> , tugboat	3.23	6
Operating own tugboat	4:28	7
Starting out in the Army, Vietnam	6:40	8
Earlier experience on the water	8:01	9
Seaman's course in Army	9:46	10
Deckhand experience at Taylor and Anderson	12.46	11
<i>Delbar</i> , first vessel worked on	16.01	12
Other tugboat workers	16.20	12
Learning from experience	18.33	13
Good teachers	19.31	13
Ship safety	20.01	13
Accidents on board	22.03	14
Traits of competent tugboat workers	25.35	15
John Austin as mentor	29.40	16
Articulated tug barges (ATBs)	34:00	18
Opportunities in tugboating today	36:25	19
Deckhand jobs	40:30	20
Enjoyable aspects of tugboating	42:04	21
Places worked/visited	44:30	22
Bulk barges	45:17	22
Taking care of the vessel	46:25	22

M.Z.: Today is September 23rd, 2011. This is Michelle Zacks for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. I am in the home of Jack Austin at 102 Talbot Street in St. Michaels. Can I just ask you a couple of real basic questions, just so we have some of your details of your work experience down on paper?

J.A.: Certainly.

M.Z.: What's your date of birth?

J.A.: April 14th, 1949.

M.Z.: I'm an April girl too, April 24th. (Laughter.) You are working on a tug now. Is that right?

J.A.: That's right.

M.Z.: You're a captain?

J.A.: Yes.

M.Z.: What's the name of your tug?

J.A.: The *Scott Turecamo*.

M.Z.: The what?

J.A.: *Scott Turecamo*, and it's T-u-r-e-c-a-m-o.

M.Z.: Is that a Vane Brothers' tug?

J.A.: No, that's Moran out of New York.

M.Z.: Oh, Moran. How do you spell Moran?

J.A.: M-o-r-a-n.

M.Z.: When you go back to work, where do you go? Your port is actually in New York?

J.A.: That's the port that the boat itself is assigned to. We go to wherever the boat is. We may go to New York, or, if the boat's in Boston, or if the boat's in New Orleans – wherever the boat is, that's where we go for crew change on that day.

M.Z.: When you go back next week, where will you be going?

J.A.: That's unknown until Tuesday.

M.Z.: Oh, really? It's that kind of short-term notice?

J.A.: It's that, very much so.

M.Z.: Oh, no kidding?

J.A.: Even that gets changed around within twenty-four hours. But generally speaking, you call twenty-four hours prior to, and then go to wherever the port is.

M.Z.: Oh, I see. Wow. So you really have to always be ready for the unexpected, and so does your family. (Laughter.)

J.A.: That's very true. Yes.

M.Z.: Just a little bit more basic information. How long have you been working on tugs?

J.A.: Since 1972, '73.

M.Z.: Since '73?

J.A.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: You started out, I assume, not as a captain. You don't just jump in as a captain, right?

J.A.: No, you do not.

M.Z.: So what did you start out doing?

J.A.: I started as a deckhand.

M.Z.: How long did that continue?

J.A.: Actually, I moved up fairly quickly, because at that time you could. There were provisions that you could move up; I would say four years.

M.Z.: What came next after that?

J.A.: Then mate, first mate, and then captain.

M.Z.: How long were you first mate before you were captain?

J.A.: Two years, maybe.

M.Z.: Sounds like you moved right along. You must have had good aptitude for it all.

J.A.: Well, I was very lucky.

M.Z.: And you've been captain for how many years?

J.A.: Seventy-five, since '75.

M.Z.: Since '75. (Laughter.) Seventy-five years. Since '75. Wow.

J.A.: Not all of that time as captain, because as you go to different companies and different boats, you're not usually going to jump over as a captain. Most of the time, they start you out as a mate and then you advance accordingly.

M.Z.: The vessel that you're on now, the *Scott Turecamo*, how long is that one?

J.A.: The tug itself? About 123 feet.

M.Z.: So it's a big one.

J.A.: It's a big tug.

M.Z.: What's the horsepower?

J.A.: Fifty-two hundred horsepower.

M.Z.: Is it one of these – I don't even know what all the terminology is. But it's one of these new, fancy tugs? Oh, so there's a photo right there.

J.A.: It is. They're called ATBs, articulated tug and barge. Basically we're pushing most of the time. We do not tow at all.

M.Z.: What is it that you're pushing?

J.A.: Petroleum products.

M.Z.: Petroleum. It seems like in the reading and talking to people that I'm doing, that's such a primary part of the whole tug and barge industry.

J.A.: It is.

M.Z.: I mean, Vane Brothers, that's how they got started in the first place. Right?

J.A.: Exactly.

M.Z.: So you work for Moran.

J.A.: Uh-huh.

M.Z.: Have you always worked for big companies like that, or –

J.A.: No.

M.Z.: – have you operated your own?

J.A.: Have. We had a small tug company out of Wilmington called Compass Marine, which is no longer in existence, but it was an experience.

M.Z.: An experience?

J.A.: Oh, yes.

M.Z.: You say that with a little smile on your face, so –

J.A.: It was an experience.

M.Z.: (Laughter.) Is it more challenging to work for a smaller company?

J.A.: Yes. Well, when you're just working, considering the boat itself, that's one thing. But when you're working as a company, then you're dealing with other people, dealing with businesses, dealing with insurance, dealing with all the aspects of the business, instead of just managing the vessel.

M.Z.: When you're with a big company, a lot of the kind of administrative stuff is taken care of by somebody else?

J.A.: Correct.

M.Z.: So do you prefer that?

J.A.: I think I'm much better at what I do as far as handling the vessel than I am in business.

M.Z.: Yeah.

J.A.: I'm not a business person. I found that out.

M.Z.: (Laughter.) You found that out from your experience with some of the smaller companies.

J.A.: Right, right.

M.Z.: How long have you been with Moran?

J.A.: I've been with Moran I think since '94. Actually, no, I've been with Moran since '02, 2002.

M.Z.: Well, that's just some of the basic details I wanted to get. There's so many questions I'm interested in. Let's maybe start and your personal story, if you don't mind. What got you into this kind of business in the first place? What attracted it to you? Is this the main career that you've always had, or have you done other things earlier in your life?

J.A.: I would say this is most definitely the main career after so many years. I got involved with it through the Army during Vietnam. I was drafted. They offered a seaman's course in the Army, which I understand is unique to some people or strange to some people. But the Army actually does have quite a few vessels.

M.Z.: I've heard that.

J.A.: Most of them are like, as I say, they're the smaller vessels. They are the tugs. They are the landing craft. So I got involved with the program with the Army, and worked on tugs over in Vietnam.

M.Z.: You were on the tugs in Vietnam?

J.A.: Correct.

M.Z.: What kind of work were you doing in Vietnam?

J.A.: Well, same thing they're doing here, basically docking ships, moving barges around, ammunition barges, supplies, docking ships.

M.Z.: Was it dangerous?

J.A.: No, compared to what some of the other ones had to go through, no. I was fortunate.

M.Z.: Those barges weren't a target?

J.A.: Oh, they could have been. But still, as I say, compared to what the rest of them went through, I was lucky.

M.Z.: So when was that? That was in the seventies, early seventies?

J.A.: Seventy, '72.

M.Z.: How many years were you there?

J.A.: Just the one year, about thirteen months.

M.Z.: Was that your first experience really working on vessels, or did you have earlier experience on the water?

J.A.: On the water, living around here, I was certainly involved with boats around here.

M.Z.: In what way? Was that kind of recreational, or do you –

J.A.: Mostly recreational.

M.Z.: Do you have watermen in your family?

J.A.: No, no.

M.Z.: When you were a young man around here or a kid around here, were you into sailing and stuff like that?

J.A.: Sailing and the usual crabbing, you know, fishing. I lived – I was fortunate, again, I lived on the water, so that was kind of like my playground.

SPK: He grew up right across from the Maritime Museum.

M.Z.: Oh.

SPK: On the mouth of Leeds Creek. That was his grandfather's house.

M.Z.: Oh, no kidding? Well, you're the perfect person for us to be interviewing then.
(Laughter.)

J.A.: I'm not so sure about that but –

SPK: Well, you know this river better than –

J.A.: I feel very comfortable on the water.

M.Z.: When you were a young man before you were drafted, did you feel like you were going to do some kind of work on the water? Or did you have any idea?

J.A.: No.

M.Z.: Did you have a plan?

J.A.: No, did not. I was working on this when I came out. College was not a very successful maneuver. Then I was just doing the yacht deliveries, such as that, up and down the coast. That was before. I was right out of school.

M.Z.: So you did go to college?

J.A.: Very shortly.

M.Z.: It wasn't your cup of tea?

J.A.: No.

M.Z.: Then you were drafted, or did you –

J.A.: Drafted, correct.

SPK: It helped that he went to a military high school in 1968. (Laughter.)

M.Z.: When you were drafted, and you got into the seaman's course, and you were working on vessels, was that your choice? Or did they assign you there?

J.A.: Actually, it was a choice. The Army has a lot of different programs. At that time, they were selling the programs. Obviously, because when you were drafted the usual tour was only two years at that time. You could be in and out, as a draftee, in two years, and they're spending that money training you. They want a little more time. So the deal was that, if you accepted a certain schooling, you were guaranteed to work within that schooling, and not just be thrown wherever they wanted.

Commitment was another twelve months, so I made the commitment. When I committed to another twelve months of service, and they guaranteed me the schooling, or as far as I went, which was actually three different schools. I worked in the marine part of the Army, instead of wherever, instead of being an infantryman or something such as that.

M.Z.: You think your background here, your personal experiences here on the water, did that help push you in that direction?

J.A.: It made the decision for me. I certainly liked the idea, and I'm sure that they looked at my experience, too. I'm sure that it didn't hurt anything. It was a good choice. Good choice.

M.Z.: I mean, I'm sure you didn't enjoy the experience of Vietnam itself, I imagine, but you enjoyed the actual work?

J.A.: The opportunity, the opportunity for the experience, yes. I enjoyed it.

M.Z.: When you got out, you knew pretty sure that that's what you wanted to continue with or –

J.A.: That's not necessarily true. I didn't really know that much about the commercial side of it when I got out. It's like a lot of things happening. It was in a conversation with a friend, who at that time was working in Philadelphia. Through the conversation, he

happened to let me know that they were starting up a new company, and that they were looking for people. From there, I made the contact, made the phone call, and away I go.

M.Z.: What company was that?

J.A.: It was called Taylor and Anderson out of Philadelphia. It was a family-run company out of Philadelphia.

M.Z.: That's where you started as a deckhand?

J.A.: That's where I started as a deckhand.

M.Z.: It's a family company?

J.A.: It was. It's no longer in existence, but, yes, it was a well-known, very well respected family company out of Philadelphia.

M.Z.: What kind of work were they doing? What were they moving?

J.A.: Their largest part of their business was ship docking. Although when I got started, the boat I was working on when I began was contracted out to a company called Interstate, which was a major oil mover of petroleum over on the East Coast.

M.Z.: What was that like for you when you started as a deckhand? How did it compare to your previous experiences on the boats, on the vessels in Vietnam? Was it a shock? Could you kind of pick up where you left off?

J.A.: Oh, yeah. There was no question about the experience that I had with the Army. The knowledge that I gained in the Army certainly helped me. But the learning curve, I think, was much faster in the commercial side, because it was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week that you just, you're moving all the time. You're doing a lot more work. I think a lot more work, and I would say that I was exposed to much more, much more to the industry commercially than I was in the Army.

Again, the Army was very specific in what we did, so we didn't do all the different aspects of towing that's on the commercial side. At least, there's not that many chances, so it was much quicker. Learning was much quicker on the commercial side; already used to the culture. That's what truly a tugboat is. You're a small, little community. You're with the same people, same area all the time. You can't walk out the door, down the block and get away from somebody. You're right there, so you have to learn to get along with people. You don't have to learn, but it's going to help you. If you don't, you're going to have a hard time. That part was already – already involved with that.

M.Z.: Can you remember anything in particular that happened in your first experience, at immersing yourself in that new culture and having to learn to get along? Can you remember any kind of stories about that time? Or what was the most surprising or

challenging thing for you there? Were there particular personalities that were hard to deal with?

J.A.: Certainly, there's all different types of personalities. I was amazed at the broad spectrum of people, and where they were coming from, and what they had done previously also. There were truly – as I said, it's broad. People were from, and still are – they're local. They're from the Northeast. They're from the South. They're from the West, Midwest. They're from all over, end up on these boats. Some of them, as you say, came from a waterman's background, some from fishing backgrounds, and some were unbelievable.

You know, some were ex-students. Some were business people. Some were involved in law. They were involved in all kinds of other aspects. Why they ended up on the boats, I'm not sure. There was an allure to it. They liked it. It was just amazing what you would find, people you would meet, ex-ministers. Not even ex – former, present ministers. Why they would be on a tugboat, I have no idea.

M.Z.: What was the name of the first vessel you were on? Do you remember?

J.A.: Yeah. I do. It was called the *Delbar* (ph).

M.Z.: The *Delbar*?

J.A.: *Delbar*, and that was short for Delaware River Barge Company. So that was out of Philadelphia.

M.Z.: There was a minister on that boat?

J.A.: Not particularly on that boat itself. I met him much later. Actually, you know, I met somebody in the Army. He was also drafted, same as myself. He had been to, what's it called, divinity school? That was what he wanted to do, and he ended up on tugs. Another guy was an ex-lawyer. One of the truly unique guys I met was a young man, who was – he was Scandinavian. I don't remember if he was Swedish, Norwegian, or what.

Somehow, he ended up being drafted in the Army, either because the status in owning land in the country or someplace, but anyway, I think he was, like, twenty-three years old. He was within months of sitting for his country's master's unlimited license at that age. That was just unheard of. I think he'd been involved in their maritime school since he was pre- or mid-teenager. I think I learned as much from him as I did some of the instructors who were twice his age.

M.Z.: That's fascinating.

J.A.: I was surprised when I met him, surprised in that where he was coming from. But truly, he's taught me some things that I've never forgotten. That was just one of those people who I met that I felt was just very fortunate in meeting.

M.Z.: It really broadened your horizons, it sounds like.

J.A.: Oh, it did, certainly did. Sure. He's an instructor. He's twenty-three years old. He's in the United States Army, and he's from a Scandinavian country. So how he ended up being drafted, I have no idea. But I do know what he taught me (laughs), which was quite a bit. I enjoyed it.

M.Z.: That's a question that I've had is, when you're doing this kind of work, to what degree are you learning stuff? I'm sure there's exams you have to take, and you have to study, and you have to know a lot of very specific technical kind of things, numerical things, engineering things. So there's that kind of book learning, I'm sure, that must be involved. But on the other hand, there must be a lot of experiential learning.

J.A.: Oh, it certainly is.

M.Z.: You learn by doing. You learn from other people. Can you talk about that?

J.A.: Certainly. When you're first coming up, when I say first coming up, most people start out as deckhands, unless they're coming out of the maritime school, which a lot of people are at this time in the industry. But most of the time, everybody worked on deck, if that's where you wanted to go. If you were an engineer, you worked as an assistant engineer, same, but what you're asking is the same thing.

A lot of your experience came from those people you were working under. They were the ones that taught you what you needed to know. Here again, in saying that, so you were either fortunate or unfortunate to be with somebody who could teach you, who did have the experience, or maybe it's the other way around.

Sometimes, you were with somebody who didn't actually have the knowledge themselves, or were not capable of teaching. Not everybody's a teacher. Sometimes, the same way around, some people that know the most about things, and have the most talent are not necessarily good teachers.

M.Z.: What makes the difference, somebody who's a good teacher? What does it take, do you think?

J.A.: Patience. (Laughter.) Very much so, patience, I think. I'm not blessed with patience, but I was blessed with being with some people that did have patience. Truly, you have to be shown, I think, and somebody has to watch over you, because that industry is not the safest. Much safer now than it was when I started, but you could get hurt very quickly.

If somebody wasn't looking after you, chances are you'd most likely end up getting hurt. So that was always a plus to have somebody – and again, you had people that were in charge. You had captains and mates that would look after their crews. Then you had

some that would not, who just thought it was up to you to figure it out. That's not a good way to learn.

Yeah, you get hurt, and people did. People still do get hurt on the boats. It's gonna happen. It's an industry that you're subject to being hurt, but less now than I think before. It's safer equipment, but I think people are watching out more for the people on deck, your crew. People in the wheelhouse are watching out for the crew, I believe; I feel more so now than they did previously.

M.Z.: Why would you guess that is, that it's more now than previously? Does it have anything to do with regulations and that sort of thing?

J.A.: Some with regulations, but it's some with attitude, I think.

M.Z.: How has the attitude changed, or why has it changed?

J.A.: I guess the best way to say that is if you, yourself, realize how lucky you were in not getting hurt, and how you were helped, you certainly remember that. Outside that, I'm not sure I can explain it, but I feel that more people are looking out for the crew than previously. That's not true on all boats. There were cases where you had some boats that you didn't want to be on.

M.Z.: Do you remember any particular stories? I mean, not naming any names, but something that happened that was really irresponsible or –

J.A.: Sure. I mean, there was – well, no. I say sure. I'm not going to repeat those, but I mean people got hurt all the time. That's –

M.Z.: What kind of injuries? What kind of accidents would happen?

J.A.: Inherently, the lines that you're using are under some pressure, and the material they're made out of, with the advancement of nylon and synthetics, they've – great for the industry. Great, very strong, abrasive resistant, chemical resistant, they last a long time. They're also very elastic, and when they snap, they have a tremendous amount of load on them, and when they come back and hit somebody, they truly are gonna hurt you.

They'll hurt anybody, not just you. I mean they'll dent metal. They'll break wood. They will hurt. So again, you know, some of that was a learning curve also with the people that were operating the boats. They weren't aware of all that. They didn't know that these lines would hurt them. Didn't take them long to figure it out, but meanwhile, everybody else was learning, so people got hurt.

M.Z.: So previously, they were using more natural fibers, ropes, hemp or cotton or whatever.

J.A.: Exactly. Hemp manila lines, and they were old, heavy, but when they broke they just fell apart.

M.Z.: So the older guys would have had experience with that.

J.A.: Correct.

M.Z.: Those materials.

J.A.: Correct, right. Nylon was great. You know, it's was a great product when it was introduced, but dangerous. You had to be careful. And to tell somebody that sometimes, when you told someone, that was the thing. You could tell a deckhand, or you could tell an individual, "Now, be careful of that line. If it breaks, you know, it's gonna hurt you." Some of them just thought, that's ridiculous, look how heavy this line is. It can't possibly go anywhere. Well, that's a mistake because it will. I'm not sure of the, you know, the technical part of it.

Basically, nylon can be stretched out under a steady load to maybe around 150 percent of its length. It would retract back that same, my point is, when it came back, it's like a rubber band. It would hurt people, and that happened a lot. The other side was a wire. When the bigger boats started using wires, well, those wires are heavy. If you got in the way of that wire, you could get seriously hurt. People did and still do.

M.Z.: Did anything ever happen to you, any major injuries?

J.A.: Not major, no. Again, I was extremely lucky. I sometimes look back on some (laughs) incidents and thought, "Oh, my. Whew."

M.Z.: Can you remember any particular stories, a close call?

J.A.: Close call. Actually, I was in the Army and had a very close call with a piece of wire that was under pressure. I was handling a shackle, and the wire was inside the shackle, and the wire came out. My finger was in the way, and it actually sliced off part of my finger where the wire trapped it in between the shackle itself. I realized very quickly, I could have had my whole hand in that same position, and it would not have been pretty.

The light bulb went on very, very quickly. (Laughter.) You do learn. You learn from your own experiences, as in any aspect, and others too. But it's an industry that you have to pay attention to what's going on or you're going to get hurt. No question about it. There's an awful lot going on out there.

M.Z.: So how would you describe, I don't know, like a really competent person on a tug? What does it take to be a really good, either crewmember or captain? I mean, I guess that's two different things, but two different sets of skills.

J.A.: It is, but also, captains are crewmembers. They can't be thinking that they're just up there by themselves. They are definitely part of the crew. The social aspect of it on a tug was much different than ships. Ships, very stressful. You had the officers, and you had

the deck hands, and you have the people in the steward's department. They were almost like little communities themselves within the ship. That's not the case with the tugs. It's much more informal. Good or bad, it's much more informal, so that part of it was – that's just the way it is. That's the industry.

You asked me about competence. Obviously, the more knowledge somebody has and can bring to the table, well obviously, it's better off for the crew. It's better off for the vessels, better off for the owners. The whole idea is you're basically representing somebody who's invested money, and you've got to make him money. One of the ways in making money for the person is to make sure that it's run right. You take care of the vessel. You take care of the crew and not get anybody hurt, and so competency.

M.Z.: I guess I'm just thinking about reputation. When you think back on all your past experiences, and the people that you've worked with, and the people you think, "Oh, they were really good." What is it that makes somebody good and respectable, and you want to work with him or her, for that matter?

J.A.: Let's put it around the other way. One of the hardest ways to work on the vessel was somebody with the attitude that he was chosen for some reason. Just because granddad did something or his father did something or whatever else, that he automatically thought that he was good at it. That attitude, I think, was sometimes the hardest to get around. Sometimes, I think, it was dangerous, you know?

Again, the person that was taking his time, willing to work with people, willing to show people, and have patience, ended up being the best guy, best people to work with. Nobody was born with a tugboat in their hand. But you'd be surprised how sometimes people thought they were. That's a bad attitude, and that prevailed some. It prevailed.

M.Z.: Does that tend to be people who come from many generations of –

J.A.: Yes, some. Some people, I mean again, we're speaking of characteristics of people, not necessarily the industry. You know, sometimes people think that because they come from a certain area, it gives them knowledge.

M.Z.: Like what kind of areas? Are there big centers of the tug boating world? Would that be the big ports, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York? Is that what you mean?

J.A.: Oh, it's all the same, that, all of that, all included, all included. Some areas that do have a lot of people working within the industry, sometimes there was an attitude. Sometimes even cities, it's amazing how provincial sometimes places can be. They think that if you're not from a certain area, well, "You don't know anything about a tugboat or you don't know anything about whatever." But that's – I'm getting its attitude. So competency, having the right attitude.

M.Z.: You said earlier that one of the things that makes a good teacher in this industry is having patience, that's the main thing. Then I think you said, "Not that I have any patience."

Yet, when I talked to Josh, he said – I mean I haven't done an interview with him yet, but just speaking to him on the phone, he said that you've been a mentor for a lot of people around here, which would make me think that maybe you are a good teacher. There must be something you're doing that's guiding people or helping them.

J.A.: I might be able to guide him towards a direction better than I can teach him. I'm not so sure I'm a good teacher. I have spoken to people that have gotten involved in the industry. I just try and let them know up front some of the pitfalls that they might encounter. What they do with it, it's up to them.

M.Z.: What are some of those pitfalls that you explain to people?

J.A.: Well, it's not necessarily the tugging industry, but I think any place, usually. I think when you start out in an industry, you have a goal of either who you want to work for, or where you want to go, or where you want to work, or what you want to work with, or work for, what you want to do. I think sometimes a mistake is made with some people, especially in the industry. They want to work for what they consider the top company or the top positions immediately. They don't want to pay their dues unless – and again, I don't think this is unique to just the tugboat industry.

A lot of times, people, I think they want to jump right in. Well, that's very nice if you can do that. But at the same time, you may not want to work right to start with, some place where you know – you don't know, but when you making mistakes, you want to make your mistakes someplace else. You understand what I'm saying? And then end up going to where you want to be eventually. I'm not making myself very clear.

M.Z.: No, I think I understand what you mean. There's going to be a learning curve.

J.A.: Absolutely.

M.Z.: And you have to take that into account in your whole –

J.A.: It's very fortunate, the people who get involved in the industry, and never have a problem, never have an accident, never run aground, never lose a barge, never have anybody hurt. They're very fortunate people, and I'm sure there are those. But for most of us, no, we've stubbed our toes. We've paid our dues. You know, anything that you can do in the industry as far as experience goes, I think helps you.

So don't look down on somebody who's working on boats that carries trash. At one time up in New York that was a really great training ground. That was a fantastic training ground. You were using single-screw vessels. You were doing multiple tows, multiple barges. You worked all day long. You worked fair tide. You worked head tide, opposing. You were flipping barges around. You were working constantly all day long.

Yes, they were garbage barges, but the experience you gained from that, oh, man. It was just, you learned so fast how to handle a boat and handle lines. It was a great training ground. That's not available anymore, unfortunately, but it was just great.

M.Z.: Did you do that?

J.A.: You know what? I didn't. I worked with sand and gravel barges and deck barges, and even lash barges. I don't know if you're familiar with lash barges, was the maritime industry's supposedly the answer or counterpart to containerized cargo on the ships, where containerized cargo is just basically a truck body. Well, the lash barge was the same idea, but it was floating. It was the same idea.

All the barges were the same size. You rented the barge, filled it with material and then, through the various agencies, this barge was loaded onto a ship. These ships would have hundreds of barges on them. When a ship came in, all these barges were dropped down one at a time, so you've got to move around. You made up tows maybe with six or seven barges for this tow, and seven or eight barges for another tow.

Anyway, repetition was great, and do it, it's great experience. You learn how to handle a boat. For a deckhand, you learn how to handle lines. It's just, it's great experience. That's unfortunate today, where the new tugs, the ATBs, that they're called, they're articulated tug barges, fantastic technology for what it's doing for the industry. We're a ship. All said and done, we're a ship. We happen to have a hinge in the middle of the hull where we can move, but we're a ship.

Well, the people who are coming into the industry who immediately go onto these vessels as deckhands are really not gaining any experience. They don't know how to handle lines. They don't know what to do with a barge. This is not to discredit them. They're just not exposed to that part of the industry. If they ever have to – they could work five years, ten years on an ATB, and then go to a conventional tug. They're going to be lost. They're going to be lost. No experience.

M.Z.: What proportion of the industry now is this ATB, and are there still those opportunities to work on the older tugs?

J.A.: Oh, yes. There's still the opportunity.

M.Z.: So how does that break down? Does it break down by the kinds of materials that's being moved? I'm sorry. I'm so ignorant. If you can describe how the industry is kind of structured.

J.A.: The petroleum industry, moving of petroleum products, that's where the ATBs are making their big play. There's a very few that are working outside of that, cement bulk products. That's a very small part of it, but the ATB part is growing all the time, and it just makes sense. You don't have to tow, work faster, much more maneuverable. Faster is the big thing, work quicker, quicker turnaround.

M.Z.: That goes back to what you were saying earlier, that kind of your job is to make money for these people.

J.A.: Absolutely.

M.Z.: The more efficiently you can move things around, the better it is.

J.A.: Absolutely. Now, the technology has taken care of that. (Laughter.) I'm certainly not responsible for the new technology. But I certainly think it's great that I'm involved in it. There's no question about it. It is changing the industry. I would say, from my view, the industry is as strong now as it most likely ever was because of the ATBs. They're moving. They're moving product.

M.Z.: So that part of the industry is really growing, and there are lots of opportunities, job opportunities?

J.A.: That's where some of them are. That's where some of them are. Yes, that's where I would say the vast majority of the job opportunities are in the industry is right there with the ATBs. I think it's going to be more so. But conventional towing is not going to go away. I mean, there's still an awful lot going on that is always going to come down to conventional, traditional tug work.

M.Z.: Can you describe that, the conventional tug work? In what capacities does that still operate and it's still important?

J.A.: Mostly in bulk barges, your container barges, dredge work, dredge barges, sand and gravel aggregate, marine construction and then salvage. Salvage is something; I know nothing about salvage, but it's always going to be around. There's still gonna be vessels that break down or gonna need a tow. There'll always be someone's running aground or that's gonna be, you know, in need of help. Right? So that's still going. That's always going to be.

Again, until something changes, it's the dollar that's running the show to a certain degree. That's why they have the ATBs. It's very efficient. They cost money to build, but in the long run they make money for people. Hence, that's why you do it. The industry is not going through any other changes that other industries go through.

I think the automobile industry; they're still building cars for less people. So jobs have been lost. Those jobs aren't coming back. Why would you pay for twenty people to build a vehicle or vessel if you can get it done with fifteen? That's just the way it is. In our industry though, the tugboat industry, yes, there are jobs and there are opportunities. It's maybe not the way it was when I started. Certainly it's not, as far as the advancement into the wheelhouse. I think that's extremely hard to do now from deck. Because of regulations, that is hard to do.

M.Z.: It used to be you could just work your way up through experience?

J.A.: Yeah, you could. I think the vast majority of the industry, that's exactly what they did.

M.Z.: Now for somebody like Josh, who, I understand, he's working in the Gulf. He was, I think, with Vane Brothers, and now he's in the Gulf.

J.A.: True.

M.Z.: I don't know what his role is exactly.

J.A.: Oh, no. He graduated from SUNY, which was at New York State; it's called Fort Schuyler.

M.Z.: Will he have a hard time moving up, if he wants to?

J.A.: No, he'll have a lot easier time than anybody trying to come up through the deck. No, he's, I'm sure, spending –

M.Z.: Because he has that marine academy experience.

J.A.: Certainly, correct, right. He's already jumped through some of the hoops, and he's already met some of the requirements. So as he gains practical knowledge in the industry, he's going to be in a much better position than those who don't, from those who have not gone to the school. He's in much better position.

M.Z.: I'm hearing that some of the watermen who are feeling kind of crunched by the way the industry is going, the crabbing industry and whatnot, are turning to tug work, like in Tangier and Smith Island. They're working for Vane Brothers, I understand.

J.A.: Right.

M.Z.: I imagine those guys, for the most part, probably are not going to these marine academies.

J.A.: Oh, no.

M.Z.: So they may not have many opportunities to move up?

J.A.: It's just gonna be, I don't think they will have as many opportunities. No, I may be wrong, but they're gonna have a harder time.

M.Z.: But I suppose there's nothing wrong with being a deckhand. I mean –

J.A.: Oh, no.

M.Z.: It's good work and I understand the money's not too bad.

J.A.: It's not, but there again, when I was a deckhand myself, I was meeting people that are deckhands that had license that they had previously worked in a wheelhouse. For whatever reason, they decided – a lot of it was because they had reached a certain age and didn't want the responsibility. They didn't want the stress, but they still wanted to work, and they were still capable, physically capable of working on deck, and they did. No, I'm not saying there was a load of them, but there were the people who I'd met that were doing that.

M.Z.: They could leave all the headache, give the headaches to somebody else.

J.A.: They'd had enough. They'd been there and they made a personal decision that they didn't care for that anymore. Nothing wrong with that. And they were – you know, they were – they were excellent too, because they were – we consider them professional deckhands. Well, they truly understood. They knew both sides of it. They knew what it took to work on a deck correctly and safely, and they knew what shouldn't take place up in the wheelhouse too.

They usually made good hands. Sometimes, they could be a little cranky, you know, because they, again, might know it all. But still, overall, they made excellent – and you had – they were truly what we considered then stable professional deckhands. Great. You know, great people. A lot of knowledge.

M.Z.: Overall, would you say you like this work, you're happy with it?

J.A.: I do. Yeah.

M.Z.: What is it that you like most about it?

J.A.: You have to like to handle the vessel. I love handling vessels. I love making a vessel do what it's supposed to do. I love putting a boat through its paces. That's really. I think that's the attraction. It's boring, running, you know, seven days or eight days, running up and down the coast. Yeah. You do it and that's part of the job. But to me, with the electronics today, we kid, but we'd say you could take a trained monkey on it, and you damn near could. You know, put him out on the coast, and he can get a vessel from A to B. It's when you get into congested areas, and you start doing maneuvering, you have to deal with traffic, yeah, then you're going to and from docks. To me, that's where you make or break it.

Again, if you put it in relationship that if you spend fourteen days running from one port to another, and yet from either inexperience or inability, it takes you four hours to get to a dock and get settled in, that's not very efficient. So anyway, I like handling vessels. I think it's a lot of fun. I enjoy it. And you do meet an awful lot of different people. So that's part of it, too.

M.Z.: It's a way to kind of see the world, but sort of the world comes to you, in a sense, on the deck.

J.A.: Exactly.

M.Z.: Of course, you are traveling to all these different areas, as well.

J.A.: Yeah. And I must say, earlier part of the industry, when we were going to different ports, you really were capable of getting off the boat and going to see what port, and that was a lot of fun. You learned things; you saw things. Harder today because of security and what's taken place. You don't leave the vessel that much anymore. You're usually there. I mean, I go to work even now, three weeks. Other than maybe getting off the vessel for the necessity of securing groceries and grub, I sometimes never walk off the boat for three weeks. It gets old, you know.

M.Z.: What are some of the places you've been? How far afield do you go?

J.A.: Well, anywheres from east side of Canada to Gulf of Mexico, Texas, Mississippi River, anywheres up and down the East Coast, capable of going to the islands. We don't do it that much. If we were to go to Puerto Rico or some place like that, sure. The vessel itself is capable of going wherever. I mean, if they wanted to go to, you know, Western Europe or something, be no problem doing it. It's just that we're not contracted to do that. So that's not gonna happen. But the vessel certainly is capable of going anywheres.

Not what I'm doing, mainly because who contracts the vessel just doesn't have that work. Some of our barges that work for Moran that are involved with the bulk – what we call bulk, which would be grain or something like that. They go to Chile or Peru. They've gone to Albania. You know, they'll go anywhere. They're very capable vessels.

M.Z.: They're delivering grain to those places?

J.A.: Yes. It doesn't have to be grain. It can be anything. But my point is that you're a 120-foot vessel, and you can go. You can go wherever you need to go. It's just keep enough fuel in it, and you can go where you want to go. They're very seaworthy. Most times, tugs are seaworthy. I'm not saying they're very fun to ride, because they're small and you get tossed around sometimes.

With some competency and somebody who understands what's going on, and handles the vessel correctly, you can go through an awful lot of weather, and you'll be all right. You know, you're not gonna be comfortable, but you'll be all right. You know, we like to say, "If you take care of the vessel, it'll take care of you." That's pretty much very true.

You know, you take a car and run it down the road full of potholes at sixty miles, seventy miles an hour, you're gonna beat the car up. You can do the same thing with a vessel, with a ship or tug. You take it and run it out there with Mother Nature being rough,

you're gonna beat it up. But if you take care of the boat most of the time, it'll take care of you.

It can be very interesting out there sometime with the weather. That's the main thing for us, I think, is the weather. It's, again, I think easier now than it was when we first started, mainly because of, technology, the advancement on the weather forecasting. Sometimes, it gets a little bit too much but, for the most part, it's great. You can turn the radio on, or you can turn a TV on, and you can get a report.

You know what's coming, most of the time. Well, that wasn't necessarily true all the time before. (Laughter.) They make the best educated guess they can make. Well, the weather people are certainly much better educated now on what's going on than they were previously. So you don't see the risks being taken today, I think, that were taken earlier because of weather.

That's part of the industry, good part of the industry, because there have been some problems. When you look back on it that, you know, that were weather related, and you think, what in the world was somebody doing? Why were they there? Why did they go out in it, or why did they try and, you know, make a move with pending weather coming? But you never second-guess somebody. They run their boat. You run your boat.

M.Z.: It's those kind of economic pressures, I'm sure, that makes people sometimes do things that might not be the wisest.

J.A.: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, and inexperience. When you're younger, I dare say, with most of us, when, you know, in our younger years, and if we were –

[End of interview.]