

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DALE O. BENDER
Engineer, Navy, World War II.

2007

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Bender, Dale O., (1921-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 92 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 92 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Dale O. Bender discusses his efforts to preserve an LST as a floating museum, as well as his service on an LST during World War II. Bender talks about a group of people incorporating as the LST Ship Memorial under the leadership of Al Rager in 1988, but then discovering that LST 533, the ship they were going to buy, had been sold for scrap. Bender touches on his service aboard LST 901 during World War II and describes the crew, his ship, and his resistance to seasickness. He tells anecdotes about training new engineers, climbing the mast in rough seas, the ideal spots on the ship, and sliding down the railings during general quarters. He addresses "Operation LST Homecoming," an effort in 1990, led by Jack Goddard, to transport an LST from Formosa to Illinois. Bender describes the high cost of transportation, the monetary commitment of people who wanted to ride the ship back, and the difficulties after discovering the ship was not in good enough condition to cross the ocean. He tells anecdotes about laying smoke to hide destroyers. He describes another effort called Ship Memorial Incorporated, led by Jack Melcher, to retrieve LST 325 from Greece. Bender explains his role in planning the ship retrieval and his reasons for withdrawing from the sailing crew. He tells of the retrieval of LST 325, its time at a New Orleans dock, and its eventual conversion into a museum in Evansville (Indiana). Bender touches on the failed efforts to get the *Sphinx*, an Auxiliary Repair (Light) ship that was originally LST 963, to Texas. He details his attempts to assist the Great Lakes Naval Memorial & Museum in purchasing LST 393, which was being used by the Sand Products Corporation in Muskegon (Michigan) to transport cars to Milwaukee. He discusses the unwillingness of the private company to settle on a deal and the eventual abandonment of the project. Bender touches on riding aboard ARS 50. He describes sailing a brand-new LST down the Mississippi River in 1944, relying on the Coast Guard for navigation, having a tough shake-down cruise, and running out of oil in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. Bender talks about delivering supplies in the Pacific, difficulties caused by slippery volcanic ash at Iwo Jima, and using LCVPs as tug boats. He details heading back to the States under full throttle, modifying the engine to run with a higher RPM, and nearly running ashore in Seattle because the throttle was stuck at "forward".

Biographical Sketch:

Bender (b. 1921), served in the Navy aboard LST 901 and achieved the rank of captain. He was discharged from active duty in 1946, spent 22 years working in intelligence in the Navy Reserve, and settled in Madison, Wis. He served for a time on the board of directors of the Great Lakes Naval Memorial & Museum.

Interviewed by John Weingandt, 2007
Transcription by John P. Danish, 2008
Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

John: Well, let's see, it's Tuesday the 30th of January, barely above zero. [both laugh] Us two old goats are here, Dale Bender and I'm John Weingandt, and we'll be interviewing Dale. First on tap, he was in the Navy, retired, of course. Were you an officer?

Bender: I was an engineering officer originally. After the war I switched from engineering to Naval Intelligence.

John: Okay.

Bender: And I spent twenty-two years in the reserve in Intelligence.

John: Wow!

Bender: I am retired reserve now.

John: Okay. And you retired as—what was your rank?

Bender: Lieutenant Commander.

John: Okay. But we're going to pick up—rather we may go back to your earlier experience in the Second World War, but we're going to pick up with the fact that the war is over at this point.

Bender: Yeah. Well, actually, we're going to talk here about the attempts [cough]—excuse me.

John: Sure.

Bender: Attempts to bring an LST which I served on back for basically a floating museum.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And that really didn't start until into the '80s.

John: Oh, wow!

Bender: I'm not sure what the—yeah, 12/88 is the first date I got.

John: Okay, December of '88.

- Bender: So it was—to be bluntly honest, if we'd thought ahead, there were a thousand LSTs, but by the time somebody started thinking about gettin' one they were down to very, very few; and the first—
- John: Before you go on, Dale, whose idea was it to retrieve one?
- Bender: I was not involved at all, but there was an LST somewhere down, I think, in Texas and this guy, Al Rager, R-A-G-E-R, thought of the idea and he approached others and they incorporated as the LST Ship Memorial and got everything going and then they approached the person who had the LST and he had sold it for scrap.
- John: [laughs] Oh, no!
- Bender: And the funny thing, they rushed over to the scrap yard and the guy said, "Why the [pause] didn't you let me know? I'd a held it for you while you incorporated." But anyway, they lost that one. That was the LST-533 and I see the date I have here, 12/88.
- John: Uh-huh.
- Bender: So we were sitting on our duffs for forty years when we should have been thinkin' ahead. I served, by the way, on the 901.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: Now they were not done numerically because this shipyard would get, you know, 100-200; the next shipyard would get 201-401 and so on. Though we were high up, we were built before some of the lower number ones, except for the first fifty; if you see LST-46, that's *early*.
- John: That's really early, okay. What was your ship's name, number, again?
- Bender: 901.
- John: 901, okay. And what theatre did you—
- Bender: We were Pacific.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: Just as background, I guess, the Navy trained the crew as a whole. We had the captain; they brought back a bunch of experienced officers and experienced men, brought in a lot of new people, including new officers,

and trained the whole crew. We would go on a training LST and so on. So when we went to pick up the ship at the shipyard, it was *brand* new.

John: But you had already been on an LST as a group, as a unit?

Bender: The whole group. Right.

John: How many officers and men did you have? I'm curious.

Bender: In those days we had a hundred and forty-four men and eleven officers.

John: Wow!

Bender: Actually, you could get by with less, but the whole idea here, at this time, you carried more to compensate for the expected loses during the invasion of Japan.

John: Did you know that at the time?

Bender: We didn't know that at the time. [both laugh]

John: They weren't telling you, were they? [laughs]

Bender: And the idea was, if we lost some, we had spares; if another ship lost some and we had 'em, we could transfer over and give them—you know, we had extra personnel.

John: It sounds smart. [laughs]

Bender: Actually, as far as the operation, except—if it weren't for the gun crews you could have got by with much, much less. I was the engineering officer and I had forty-four men under me. But, I mean, that's motor machinists that did the diesel, we had a boiler man, we had a electricians, we had radar, and I don't remember what the hell else. And you know, when you're at sea you operate twenty-four hours a day.

John: That's right.

Bender: So you gotta have three of everything.

John: Shifts, yeah.

Bender: And—

John: LSTs were diesel-powered?

Bender: Diesel-powered.

John: One screw, two screws?

Bender: Two screws, yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: Which is good because they were maneuverable.

John: Yeah, I would think.

Bender: And—

John: Nice ride? [laughs]

Bender: Oh, flat bottom. Let me tell you, in rough seas you'd go up and you'd—the whole three-hundred and fifty-four feet by fifty feet would come down [smack] like that and everything on the ship would shake. I wrote in my diary one time my aftershave lotion fell down and hit the floor and broke and, of course, that room smelled of aftershave lotion.

John: Smelled like you had ladies on board. [laughs]

Bender: And so it was rough and, oh, did they roll; oh God did they roll.

John: Well it's one thing for you Navy guys—I'm sure you never get used to it, but you put some troops on there, GIs?

Bender: Oh, God, yes.

John: Those poor guys gotta be urping the whole time.

Bender: Yeah. You know the jokes: somebody throwing up and somebody else goes up and says, "Weak stomach?" And the guy says, "Weak, hell, I'm throwing it as far as I can get it." [John laughs] So, it—no, I was very lucky. I could eat anything and mix it and the ship would roll like all hell and I never got seasick except one time I think in Saipan harbor in a small boat—you know the small boat was an LCVP?

John: Oh, sure, yeah.

Bender: They were what, thirty-four feet long. And that's the only time I got sick.

John: Well, that's [laughs]—

Bender: Yeah, that's good.

John: Yeah, I mean, that's what, a tenth of the length of your ship?

Bender: Again, I'm telling sea stories, but—

John: No, that's great.

Bender: When we left the States, we picked up a bunch of passengers and there were a lot of brand new engineering officers, right out of school, being sent over for the replacement pool. And these guys were hot to learn as much as they could, which is good.

John: Yeah.

Bender: So I set it up, you know one day—and I rotated them. One day a guy would be down in the main engine room, the next time he'd be with the auxiliary, he'd go with the “oil king” as he was called, who was the guy who checked all the tanks, fuel, water, and so on; and so—which is real good, and I set this nice schedule up and I remember my oil king came back, we were about two days out, he says, “Mr. Bender,” he says, “I keep losing these guys.” [both laugh] The oil king basically opens the top of the tank and takes a measurement to see what we've got left.

John: Yeah.

Bender: And, of course, you can smell the fuel oil and that's all that he needed, right, so it was sort of funny that way. And the main engine room, which is—actually, you've got a lot of fresh air in the main engine room, 'cause you've got big fans pushing the air down 'cause the engines used the air.

John: I'm curious; where on an LST don't you want to be and where would you want to be for the best ride? Or isn't there a good place? [laughs]

Bender: Well, if it's rolling—

John: Do you want to be up high or low? I'm an Army guy.

Bender: In the main engine room, I mean, you're only that far from the water, you know.

John: Yeah.

Bender: So to speak. So you want to be down there, you won't roll.

John: Okay, so being lower?

Bender: Yeah.

John: But you've got the diesel fuel?

Bender: Well, you couldn't smell the fuel really, but the heat—

John: Okay.

Bender: I mean, an engine gives off heat.

John: Right.

Bender: You're down in the tropics and no matter how much air is being brought in, I mean, you feel the heat. You're talking about height; when you're young and foolish, I had to send my radar man up to fix the radar at the top of the eighty-foot mast and in those days if I'm gonna send him there I go up with him, and let me tell you, when you're on an eighty-five foot mast set on top of—twenty-four-feet above the water to start with and it's rolling—

John: Uh-huh. You're over the water, I imagine?

Bender: You're over the water on one side and—

John: Oh, God! [laughs]

Bender: And if you've ever climbed something like that, climbing is not bad, you know, you're looking—the tough thing is coming down. You're, you know, where's that next step, or the worst thing is when you leave the radar deck there you got this nice secure thing where you're working but you've got to leave that to come down that mast, and it's something.

John: Oh, I see; the top is secure but you come down the skinny mast and—

Bender: That mast is damn skinny.

John: And it might be wet. It might be wet, too?

Bender: Yeah. So no, it's—I guess I'm gonna be interrupting with a lot of sea stories, maybe.

John: Dale, that's just fine; that's just fine. Whatever you're comfortable with. Go back to my original question: Where do you want to be on an LST? Is there a good place? I've heard of two bad places.

Bender: You want to be not in the engine room because if anything hits you you're too close to the water.

John: Yeah.

Bender: And, ah, really, I guess, being alongside the captain—the ideal enlisted man the captain's talker.

John: Oh?

Bender: Who's the guy with the big phones on and relays all the messages and the captain's going crosswise on the bridge.

John: The bridge? Is there a bridge on an LST?

Bender: There is a—he's up on the weather deck, which is exposed, and all his messages are going to the guy at the wheel and the guy at the speed controls who's inside.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And if you're going into battle all the portholes are covered with steel plate; there's just a little opening about two-inches by eight-inches in the covering of the portholes type of thing.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: But me, I'm down in the engine room, which is four decks down. Incidentally, one of the sea stories I'll leave with you is when you go down to the engine room in a hurry, which is when you're going—when you're under attack, you go to what's called “general quarters.”

John: Right.

Bender: And if you ever gone to a movie: “Now hear this. General quarters, all men take your battle stations.”

John: Whoop, whoop, whoop. [laughs]

Bender: You don't use the ladder. There's a railing and you put the railing right next to your heel and you slide down four decks using your feet to control your speed because they're on the railing not on the steps.

John: Sure, okay. Railing on each side?

Bender: Hmm?

John: A railing on each side, so your feet are spread apart and you're hanging on with your hands?

Bender: Yup. And you're hanging on with your hands.

John: So you use it much like a fireman would use a pole coming down?

Bender: Almost. And then as soon as you get—

John: Except there's two of them.

Bender: You hit bottom and get the hell out of there.

John: Yeah, because somebody else is coming. [laughs]

Bender: Down, right, and you get down there in a hurry and then of course, every compartment is water-tight doors and the bosun is the last guy through and he checks every door to make sure it's water-tight, so when you do go into battle if you take damage in one part, hopefully the rest stays afloat.

John: I'm jumping way ahead here; I assume 901 survived the war, did it not?

Bender: Beg pardon?

John: Your ship survived the war?

Bender: Yes. Yes, it did.

John: Go ahead. Let's go back to December of '88.

Bender: Anyway this Al Regar lost that one.

John: Right. He didn't—okay.

Bender: Then the next thing was a guy by the name of Goddard, G-O-D-D-A-R-D.

John: G-O-G-G?

Bender: D-D.

John: D-D; Goddard, okay.

Bender: And what I've got here and I will give to you or to Gayle is stuff from him.

John: Okay.

Bender: He called it "Operation LST Homecoming."

John: Let's keep that aside. Okay. Holy cow! The cost to tow her back is a million three hundred thousand dollars! [laughs]

Bender: Oh, yeah. I'm trying to remember now, the diesel engines used—well, let's say that they use maybe fifty gallons of fuel an hour for everything

John: That wouldn't surprise me, yeah.

Bender: But even when the Navy's buying it, and this is back in the '40s, that's still some money there. You've gotta feed the crew.

John: Yeah.

Bender: The ship is slow; it does about ten-knots, which is about twelve miles an hour.

John: Yeah

Bender: And you're coming back from, what, three thousand miles? Anyway you've got a big crew to feed and, ah, so—

John: Well, I can assume that Goddard was the next guy that's going to be—

Bender: He was an ex-LST captain.

John: Okay.

Bender: And he had this thing called “Operation LST Homecoming” and that ship was built in what they called the Prairie Shipyard; it was built in Seneca, Illinois.

John: No.

Bender: On the Chicago River or the Illinois River.

John: Okay, so they’d get it out.

Bender: And the idea was to bring it all the way back there.

John: Where is it? Where did he locate the ship?

Bender: The ship was in China. No, not China but Formosa.

John: Okay. It might as well be China.

Bender: Yeah.

John: And he wants to bring it back through the Panama Canal.

Bender: Yeah, up the Mississippi.

John: Up the Mississippi, Rock River.

Bender: Not the Rock River, but the Illinois River.

John: Illinois River. Okay, yeah.

Bender: And so on. And what he did, if you’re interested you signed up and you’re gonna have to pay you own way, by the way, so that was going to be—

John: What year are we into, ’90 or so?

Bender: 1990.

John: Okay.

Bender: And, ah, anyway, he took a whole bunch of people for about a thousand bucks each. I was very interested but I did not chip in the money. I was holding off and it was lucky I did, ‘cause the other guys, they got taken. And what I didn’t bring, and I will bring, is the regular visored cap that says, “Seneca Navy.” Because he had those made; that’s where he used

them. Anyway, he was sued later on, but they never got anything out of him.

John: You're telling me this was a hoax?

Bender: No, no, he was very serious, but he just—let's put it this way, he's not a businessman and he sent over a warrant officer in the Navy to check the ship that was supposedly to come and, ah, this guy rejected it because the hull was too thin.

John: Because of rust?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Yeah. It wasn't safe, in other words?

Bender: Oh, and the other thing he wanted to do, he wanted to go in reverse of what that ship had done all through the Pacific; in other words, he wanted to go to Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Saipan, Guam, Eniwetok, Kwajalein, Tarawa, Pearl Harbor.

John: Just to visit these places?

Bender: Yeah, which, of course—

John: The ship hasn't been repaired or restored at all?

Bender: No, this is—

John: And this is 1990?

Bender: 1990. And, so anyway—

John: I'm glad you held your money back.

Bender: But he had it all down and here's costs and so on, that kind of thing.

John: Is this for Gayle?

Bender: This is for Gayle, yeah.

John: Okay. It'll go on the stack.

Bender: I've got it all pretty much.

- John: It says “Operation LST Homecoming” proposed itinerary. Oh, my! Oh my. These costs here, Dale—
- Bender: Yeah.
- John: I’m just looking here real quick here. Fifteen, you’ve got twenty thousand dollars; is that a cost to you that you’re supposed to pay or what?
- Bender: No, that’s the cost for the ship.
- John: Okay, just to get the ship there?
- Bender: Yeah, to bring it back.
- John: He’s gonna get that all for only twenty thousand dollars? And he’s up to Seneca from Taiwan? [laughs] Okay.
- Bender: This is—now, we’re diverting, but I just have a little note here that notes among people that were on LSTs, which were Lee Dreyfus, who was governor of Wisconsin.
- John: A very good one.
- Bender: Sid Caesar was on an LST and, ah, together with—since there were a thousand LSTs and roughly a hundred and fifty people on each, there must have been about fifteen thousand people on LSTs. Anyway, he took a lot of people; this is Jack Goddard.
- John: Go casual, be hungry; okay.
- Bender: And he realized, by the way, that a bunch of old guys like us might have a little problem, so he was gonna bring a bunch of, literally, Boy Scouts or Sea Scouts or some who did a lot of legwork, which meant a whole batch more mouths to feed.
- John: And cost.
- Bender: And cost. Anyway, there was Operation LST Homecoming.
- John: LST-859. Okay.
- Bender: Well, here’s one of his early sheets. “Are you interested in an ocean cruise other than a love boat?” [John laughs] “Would you like to be a member of

the crew of a World War II Navy LST on a journey halfway around the world?" And then he goes on; this was part of the spiel that I saved. Anyway, that was the second attempt but that failed completely, and as I said, a whole bunch of people lost some money.

John: Is Jack Goddard still around?

Bender: No.

John: Okay.

Bender: In 1990 he would have been—

John: He was seventy-five in '93.

Bender: '93, so, yeah. Well, I'm eighty-five.

John: Oh, sure.

Bender: But I don't think so.

John: It sounds like he ran off with some—just a poor businessman or what?

Bender: Yeah, yeah. I don't think he—

John: I'm looking at this stuff and I'm sure he's very sincere about what he wanted to do.

Bender: Yeah. He came to the Wisconsin LST meeting in 1990.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Well, he flew out here and had a hotel and so on. Matter of fact, I guess he had to go to the hospital here. The meeting was in Milwaukee that year and he spoke to the group, but then he, he went to the hospital for some damn thing.

John: And he was from San Diego, I noticed.

Bender: Yeah.

John: A lot of Navy people seem to retire there.

Bender: Oh, yeah.

John: It's a great town.

Bender: I like San Diego.

John: I do too. So anyway, we strike 859. What happened to it, do you know? Here's an LST in Taiwan and—

Bender: As far as I know—oh then it began to warm up between Taiwan and—

John: Mainland China.

Bender: So I guess they didn't want to—they wanted to keep any warship that they had. You know, an LST is used in invasions, it's not an attack type. Though I gotta tell you a sea story. An LST can lay smoke, which is good for hiding people in the smoke.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And if you have ever seen a movie, you've got a destroyer, you know, real fast.

John: Usually a Fletcher-class destroyer.

Bender: Yeah, going through lane smoke behind him.

John: Yeah, you're only going eight, ten knots at best.

Bender: Yeah. Besides which, most of the time we were at anchor. Now, if you're at anchor, you've got your bow into the wind; the smoke generator is on the stern.

John: Sure.

Bender: Now everybody behind you is hidden, but you're sticking out.

John: You stick out like a sore thumb. [laughs]

Bender: Three-hundred feet out in the clear. And, yeah, I never liked when we laid smoke because, as I said, it helped everybody else.

John: You became the target.

Bender: Yeah. And we were at one edge and if the wind was from the north, we laid smoke, and if the wind was from the south, somebody at the other end laid smoke for us. Anyway, that's one of the sea stories I'll give you is about making smoke, which we did, and a matter of fact, in Okinawa I swear we must have made smoke three times a day because there were a lot of kamikazes.

John: Kamikazes coming in?

Bender: Yeah. But the Kamikazes went after the destroyers; they went after the carriers.

John: Yeah, you're small change; you're just a third the length of a carrier.

Bender: If they had, if they were on the way back and they hadn't gotten anything big and they happened to see an LST, then they would come in at the LST. An LST had a lot of anti-aircraft guns and they could put down a pretty good thing, but, ah, not that much. The interesting thing is the guy that Goddard hired to go over and check out the LST was a warrant officer by the name of Melcher.

John: M-E-L-C-H-E-R?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: And that was the next guy that I heard from.

John: Is he retired or active duty? Melcher?

Bender: He was retired Navy but he was working for the Air Force at the time.
[both laugh]

John: That's okay.

Bender: Melcher incorporated his as Ship Memorial Incorporated and as I said, I was always, I got involved. This guy, Melcher, would call up and if any conversation I had with him was less than a half-an-hour it was unusual.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: It would normally go forty-five minutes or an hour, and I originally volunteered, and then I got to know this guy and this is just between you and me and the recording—[both laugh]

John: Yeah, this is not a secret anymore.

Bender: I got to wondering, is this guy psychotic maybe because he had such an emphasis on, he would spend time telling me about the uniform we were all gonna wear, including the insignia on your hat and all that. But he was real good at organizing, getting together all the manuals that you need, 'cause let's face it, if you hadn't been on an LST for forty years you're not gonna remember all the little minute details.

John: It's not intuitive, I'm sure, and you've done a lot of things since then.

Bender: You better believe it.

John: Yeah, sure. So Melcher is now the third guy to, in your experience put together an LST retrieval, so he spots one someplace? He spots an LST someplace?

Bender: Yeah. He's been checking China.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Or Taiwan.

John: Taiwan.

Bender: Oh, incidentally, he called it the United Services Navy. Now if you take the initials from that, it says U-S-N.

John: Yeah.

Bender: Which, of course, looks like U-S, United States Navy, but it's their group.

John: United Services, what?

Bender: United Services Navy.

John: Navy. Now that became part of your insignia on you caps?

Bender: Oh, he had us, he designed an insignia and separate—

John: It said U-S-N, I'll bet?

Bender: Yeah.

John: [laughs] I'm starting to like this guy already.

Bender: Anyway, the more I got to know him—he had pretty much signed me up to be the engineering officer.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: But as I got to know him, I don't want to go over with this guy. And as it turned out, by the way, he did finally put together a crew, found this ship in Greece and went over to get it. The crew that went over there got so irritated with him, frustrated with him, they threatened to all leave unless he left. So they were over there working on this ship in Greece that—the one that actually came back, and he had to leave because they literally forced him out. He used to—I mean, here's a bunch of seventy-year-olds and what is he doing, he's holding drills and so on.

John: He was treating you like you're twenty-year-olds on active duty, and this is not that sort of thing?

Bender: Yeah. So he left and the guy that finally brought it over—I don't know where they got him, but he seemed to have done a good job.

John: Who was that?

Bender: Oh, what the hell is his name?

John: Well, it's going to come to you, I'm sure.

Bender: Yeah. So, but that was—

John: Are you on this crew, Dale?

Bender: No. I was gonna go but I backed out.

John: You said something, that this Melcher doesn't have both feet on the deck?

Bender: Right.

John: Okay.

- Bender: And, incidentally, it was sort of interesting because just before they went over the US LST Association held their meeting in Chicago and I went down there and—I could take the bus down, by the way.
- John: Uh-huh.
- Bender: And he wanted me to come to the meeting of the crew and I said, no, I had to get back ‘cause my wife was still convalescing and—oh, that was another reason for backing out; my wife was convalescing. To be bluntly honest, I think he was going to move me up from engineering officer to executive officer, which would have been interesting because if they forced him out as captain—
- John: That would have been you!
- Bender: Yeah.
- John: And I’ll bet you wouldn’t have the drills. [laughs]
- Bender: You better believe it! And incidentally, you know, I did end up the war as the captain of an LST.
- John: So you would not be in unfamiliar areas?
- Bender: Right.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: But I said, “No, I can’t make that meeting.” So I never did—but he was losing crew members, people who had signed up because of his—**[End of Tape 1 – Side A]**
- Bender: Part of the reason for this is Gayle and I decided for somebody to look at this material, you know, they need a little—
- John: Somebody to tie it together? That’s exactly what this is.
- Bender: And what this is, is a three-ring binder—
- John: It’s a red binder. Okay.
- Bender: —of my conversations with Warrant Officer Melcher. [laughs] As you can see—

John: Oh, boy! You've got a lot of notes in there.

Bender: Well, no.

John: Well, you're organized well; I see a lot of tabs.

Bender: He would send out mailings like you can't believe and so on. Oh, here are some of his costs, estimated costs: days at sea, fifty-three days.

John: This is coming from Greece?

Bender: Yeah.

John: So you're going through the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic, okay?

Bender: Yeah.

John: At ten-knots; is that ten knots or ten miles an hour?

Bender: You don't do ten knots; that's wide open!

John: [laughs] Oh, I see.

Bender: This is based on seven knots; that's eight miles an hour.

John: Okay.

Bender: We came back from Okinawa doing eleven knots but that is because we were coming back home after the end of the war and that was because I had personally adjusted the governor, which is supposed to limit the speed, to do better than the 10.7 knots.

John: Well, that's a ten percent increase. If I remember LSTs, they aren't built for speed; they're a great big tub.

Bender: Yeah, it's a great big tub. So anyway, food, fuel, and lube oil, okay. See, you've got not only the main engines, the auxiliary engines, you've got a boiler and so on. Underway uses a thousand gallons a day at fifty cents per gallon, so, it's plus oil and so on, that's six hundred-twenty dollars a day.

John: What year is this? We're not in '93?

Bender: '93.

John: We are still in '93, okay. Oh, this is Melcher?

Bender: This is Melcher.

John: Okay.

Bender: He did a lot of good jobs. Oh, he and I used to argue because he had one idea and I'd say "You're wrong" because I'd spent too much time down in the engine room, "you ain't right on that," and I usually won those, too, by the way. Oh, manning; here's how many men he needed and so on. Oh, he really did a lot of time—

John: Is he really proposing to man the LST coming back with veterans like yourself?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay, not the youngsters.

Bender: Youngsters and men, yeah.

John: Yeah, but these are all retired people who have an interest in bringing an LST back?

Bender: That ship that came back, the average age of the personnel on that ship that came back from Greece was seventy-three.

John: Wow! Wow!

Bender: So some were older and a few were younger.

John: I'm seventy-three; I don't think I'd want to be doing that [laughs] at this point in my life.

Bender: Right.

John: It might be fun to be out on the deck, but that's not what you have in mind; you want an active crew. I was just wondering: can an active crew, age seventy-three average, can they man a ship of that size?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Handle the physical?

- Bender: If they're in good shape they can handle the physical, yeah. Now they had one guy who, um, became quite ill over there, so he went back and somebody that was over in Greece went back with this guy. As it turned out, he died on the way home.
- John: Umm.
- Bender: Yeah. But generally speaking, ah—and I don't know where the captain that they got, if he was the exec or what, but anyway, this is the stuff that I'm donating and this is the stuff that—what I would do, “summary of phone conversation with Chief Warrant Officer Melcher, April 20th 1994.” How long is this one? I don't know; forty-five minutes maybe?
- John: Give me a sense of who's where. The ship is in Greece; Melcher's been over there, he's examined it and he's qualified to tell if the hull is rusted away or not?
- Bender: Yeah. And he's in the Greek—
- John: And where are you and where is he when he comes back to the States?
- Bender: He is out in—
- John: San Diego?
- Bender: Not in San Diego; I think he's somewhere in California. Let's see what's this—
- John: Well, you guys are spread all over the United States now and he's trying to bring together a crew for a ship that's over in Greece.
- Bender: Yeah, right.
- John: Do you guys get together before you leave?
- Bender: They got together at the US LST Association meetings, which are held once a year, by the way.
- John: Okay. Are they always in Chicago?
- Bender: No. They vary, all over the map.
- John: Okay. So you guys probably know each other?

Bender: No, I'd never met him. Yeah, I'm reading from my notes.

John: Okay.

Bender: I was very—I am an engineer and I'm also an attorney, so whenever I talk to somebody—

John: You keep notes. [laughs]

Bender: I kept notes and then I immediately typed them.

John: Okay.

Bender: Because I knew if you don't—Melcher has a background in tugs [John laughs] and in Air Force rescue boats. He is in a retained status; i.e., he's not active but he's on the payroll of the Air Force. He has an 800-number which is an Army transportation museum; he pays them for use and so on.

John: He has never served on an LST?

Bender: No. [laughs]

John: Now I'm not blaming you for not jumping on this. [laughs]

Bender: Yeah. Oh, and what happened, of course, is originally he had a retired shipmaster who was Coast Guard approved to basically be the captain, but this guy backed out also before they ever went over there.

John: Okay. Okay.

Bender: When they had the captain, I was sort of willing, but when he backed out—

John: When he bailed—

Bender: Yeah, 'cause—

John: I got a feeling that Melcher's kind of looking at you to be captain?

Bender: I'm not a navigator.

John: Yeah.

Bender: And incidentally, when they brought that ship over from Greece, there was a Navy group over in Greece that helped them a lot and what the Navy group did is they put a signal device at the top of the mast so they knew where that ship was.

John: GPS-type thing, yeah, so they could keep track of it.

Bender: Yeah, all the time.

John: Well, I'd feel very good about that. [laughs]

Bender: Yeah, I felt a little better, too.

John: Well, give me a sense now of what's going to happen or what's happening. He's getting a crowd together—I'll call it a crowd—

Bender: Yeah.

John: —or crew. When do you jump in?

Bender: Hmm?

John: When do you jump into this thing?

Bender: I jumped out of it. [laughs]

John: Yeah, you're out.

Bender: I had volunteered and then I was assigned as engineering officer.

John: Right.

Bender: But then I backed down and gave as an excuse my wife's convalescing.

John: Well.

Bender: Which is true.

John: It was true.

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay. What was the number of this ship?

Bender: The 9-0—oh, the number of this one was the—

John: 951?

Bender: No, no, no; this was the—ah, what the hell.

John: I just want to keep these ships straight. [laughs]

Bender: It's the one that came over.

John: It's the one that we have in the—

Bender: It's now here in the United States and has been. That's the 325.

John: 325 is Melcher's?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay, LST-325. So Melcher has a ship lined up but no crew, or some of you guys have been—

Bender: Well, he's working on the idea. He had—oh, then the Coast Guard refuses to give permission, by the way, and the Department of State wants to stay out of it because they have to negotiate with Greece for the transportation.

John: It's owned by the Greek Navy?

Bender: Yup.

John: Ah.

Bender: So then they have to go political [laughs] and they finally get somebody in Congress who does the pushing and gets the approval from the Department of State to negotiate with the Greek Navy, and so on. But it ran into all sorts of delays, by the way.

John: What in the world would the Greek Navy want with an LST?

Bender: Oh! See, at the end of the war, the United States Navy gave LSTs to China, to Japan, Taiwan, Greece. There was one down in Mexico; I don't know if it's still down there now or not. But they gave them 'cause it's really a multi-use type of ship and you can—

John: Would it work as a ferry?

Bender: Sure.

John: Yeah. I would think it would be ideal.

Bender: We'll talk a little later about the one that's up in Muskegon, what's left of it anyway, and that was used as a ferry bringing new cars from Muskegon to Milwaukee.

John: Hmm.

Bender: So I was deeply involved in that one. That's another, a whole 'nother story.

John: Well, let's go with 325 here; what's happening with that?

Bender: Ah, they finally went over there; they got all the approvals.

John: Right.

Bender: And they went over there and I think they were there several months getting it ready to bring back. And here's a bunch of guys that— incidentally, there are cockroaches to the eyebrows on that ship, it is dirty as all hell, and the heat is tremendous. But they got a lot of help, really, from a bunch of Navy guys that are at a U.S. Navy facility in Athens or whatever; it's not Athens, it's one of the other, one of the seaports.

John: Same place that the 325 was?

Bender: This is the 325.

John: So Melcher is still on board, right? He negotiates to get some active duty guys to come over and help clean it up?

Bender: When the crew gets over there, these Navy people help out a lot.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Here, again, the—you know, if you haven't worked on a main engine like that, basically that main engine is the same locomotive in diesel-powered locomotives; that's another reason Melcher wanted me. When I left the Navy I went to work for General Motors Locomotives.

John: Ah, okay, natural.

Bender: Same engines.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: I put some of the first diesel locomotives into service. Remember the 20th Century Limited?

John: Sure do.

Bender: I put the first diesel locomotive on the 20th Century Limited.

John: I remember the old Hiawatha Line used to come down from Minneapolis, Milwaukee, et cetera; that was a part of your—

Bender: I didn't deliver that one.

John: But it was that type of equipment?

Bender: Right, and I delivered to the Union Pacific and I took switch engines down all over because I knew the engine.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Okay. Technically when they were bringing it back, they were going to home port it at the D-Day Museum, which is down in New Orleans.

John: Of course, Steve Ambrose's museum?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: But that—I don't know, somehow or other that fell through, too, by the way. By the way, the 325 now is down in Indiana on the Ohio River.

John: Okay. I think you mentioned that on the phone with me, yeah.

Bender: I can't remember the little city, but I intend to go down there.

John: Evansville, or—

Bender: Evansville.

John: It is Evansville. Okay.

Bender: I'm looking at my notes here. He spent a lot of time talking about the fact that some of the people had not crossed the Equator or crossed the Dateline, so he was going to have that done as we came back from, if it was brought back from Taiwan.

John: Then you'd do the Dateline, yeah.

Bender: Yeah. And, who the hell gives a—

John: What's that got to do with anything? You're not going to do either one coming from Greece. [laughs]

Bender: Anyway, as I say, I have all these notes. I saved my original notes, which I made at the time, and then I saved the typed version.

John: Okay.

Bender: And these were originally done coming back from the Far East.

John: Well I'm still with Melcher and he gets bumped by his crew over in Greece before they even come back, but that ship, the 325 gets back; it's in Evansville, Indiana on the Ohio River?

Bender: Yeah. Incidentally, it was stored just north of New Orleans for a long time. And it made two trips up the Mississippi, docking at various places and so on. And I got another, extra story; in New Orleans it was tied up at the Bender Shipyard.

John: [laughs] I'm impressed.

Bender: I have no idea who this person is; I've never met him, I didn't even know that, but it's not that usual a name.

John: Yeah.

Bender: So even more unusual is that it had it as shipyard in New Orleans.

John: Yeah, and the LST goes there.

Bender: Yeah, and it's docked there.

John: But you weren't on it?

Bender: I'm not on it.

John: Okay.

Bender: Incidentally, usually when you tie up they charge you by the foot; the bigger the ship the more it costs to tie up.

John: Uh-huh, makes sense.

Bender: And that can add up to a lot, a lot of cost if you're a big ship. And so on and so on; if anybody ever works with this—

John: You're talking about the manuscripts here?

Bender: Yeah. For example, here's some correspondence with the captain, the ship's master who was to bring it over but backed out.

John: May I see it?

Bender: Sure.

John: Just so we can identify it. Well, Gayle will go through these with you and catalog these. Okay, this guy's name is Bowling.

Bender: Yup.

John: And now we're up to 1995. Okay. So then the final straw, this doesn't sound like it's—[laughs]

Bender: Well, this was another guy who volunteered. This guy from Madison, lived out, actually, in Monona, and he was in the Marines and Walt was his name.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Lived here in Madison and I knew him quite well. But Bowling was—

John: Yeah, what was Bowling?

Bender: Bowling was the ship's master.

John: Okay.

Bender: He's a master mariner, unlimited, any ocean, and a fellow of the Nautical Institute, also a Ph.D. in history. [laughs] It's all in here.

John: Okay. Now, we're still talking about Melcher's ship, the 325, but he doesn't bring it back.

Bender: Hmm?

John: He does not bring it back?

Bender: No. He goes over there and he's there the first little bit but that's it. And, oh, the guy that brings it back is Jornlin, J-O-R-N-L-I-N, and he is a farmer—

John: Unusual name.

Bender: —down in Illinois. But he evidently had been in the Navy and he was evidently on the crew.

John: Jornlin?

Bender: Yeah.

John: First name?

Bender: I'll have to look it up.

John: That's okay. But he's the guy who became captain and brought it back?

Bender: Brought it back. And I never met him, but he seems to have done a job, and a good job, 'cause he took over this problem ship. Okay. Incidentally, at the same time Melcher was trying to bring it back there was a group that were going to take an LST that was stored in one of the—on the east coast and make a museum out of it and moor it down or tie it up down in Texas.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And LSTs were such a multi-use ship; a lot of them were converted into ship repair ships—that big tank deck.

John: Yeah.

Bender: A whole bunch of machine tools and so on. They were called ARLs, Auxiliary Repair (Light); they could do small repairs.

John: On a ship that's broken down at sea? Is that what you're suggesting?

Bender: You could do—yeah, or do small boat repairs.

John: Or on rivers?

Bender: Repair PT boats.

John: Okay.

Bender: And even some work on a submarine that happened to be tied up there.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And, ah, these were called ARLs and there was one, the Spinx, S-P-I-N-X, and I got involved a little bit with that one.

John: Spinx, is the one that's on the east coast?

Bender: Right.

John: Okay.

Bender: But that's—they fell flat; they ran into problems. Where they wanted to put it they would have had to dig out, dredge it, enough to get it in there.

John: Wow. [laughs] It must have been really shallow.

Bender: It was, yeah. Then they ran into a problem when they were gonna dredge it, which would have taken money. The EPA wouldn't let 'em pick up the stuff that they were dredging and put it anywhere, [laughs] so they didn't know what—they didn't do it, but if they had done it, where would they have put the crud they—anyway, it fell flat after a fair amount of problems. And so it was, finally, really, that the 325 was the one that came over.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Now I got involved.

John: I'm jumping ahead here. Was the 325 the ship that you ultimately became involved with?

- Bender: No, that was the one that came back from Greece.
- John: Yeah, I know that.
- Bender: The one I got really deeply involved in was in Muskegon, and at one time that had been the LST-393.
- John: I don't want to get ahead of things here if you have more you want to do about the 325?
- Bender: That's why I'm going—
- John: I want you to go at your speed.
- Bender: And so here's an LST right here in Lake Michigan, and so on. You'll find a whole batch of stuff that I have on that one. I learned about it and another guy and I from the Wisconsin LST Association drove over there.
- John: This is way too close to home. [laughs]
- Bender: And we met with the owners.
- John: Help me with this, Dale. The 393 has seen service carrying cars between Muskegon and Milwaukee?
- Bender: That's right, that's right.
- John: Okay; I just want to get the right ship.
- Bender: So we meet with the owners, who—and I can't remember the—is it, I think the Sand Products Corporation, and it's a private corporation; they're worth probably about five hundred million and nobody knows about them.
- John: I've never heard of them.
- Bender: No. And they probably own a third of Muskegon. [John laughs] When they finally took this—this LST ran strictly from Muskegon to Milwaukee with new cars. When they finally took it out of service because the trucks were delivering it cheaper, they had a dock there, so they just tied it up. As I said, normally tying up at a dock would cost an arm and a leg.
- John: Three hundred-fifty feet times whatever.

Bender: Yeah.

John: Per month?

Bender: But they owned the dock, so—and I tried to get them to donate it and they weren't agreeable. Now in Muskegon is a nautical museum that owns a submarine. Now we have a submarine also in Manitowoc, but there's one in Muskegon.

John: Okay.

Bender: And I'm saying to myself, incorporating, going through all this thing; here is a nautical museum right next to it, literally, so I talked to the guy who has that and he takes over and starts negotiations with Sand Products to—

John: To acquire the 393 and leave it right in Muskegon at the museum?

Bender: Right, yeah. The guy won't donate it; he should have donated it, took a tax deduction.

John: Why sure.

Bender: And every time they try and tie this guy down he agrees to something and they go and prepare an agreement and by that time he changed his mind; he always wants a little more. Now you know why they're worth five hundred million dollars, because that's—and anyway.

John: Five hundred million dollars—

Bender: Is what the Sand Products—

John: Oh, Sand Products.

Bender: —is worth, yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: Anyway, they finally reach an agreement and they go ahead and then I'm—because I've been involved somewhat, I'm appointed to the board of the Muskegon museum.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Which is a pain in the ass. Every time there's a meeting; I got to drive all the way around—

John: Oh, wrong side of the pond.

Bender: Or I take the ferry.

John: The high-speed ferry.

Bender: The ferry that goes from Manitowoc to Ludington.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Well, anyway, and after a while I think, can I see this agreement? And I read the agreement and I'm saying to myself, "Oh, my God! What did they sign?"

John: They being the museum?

Bender: Uh-huh. What did the museum sign? And it seemed their lawyer had approved it. I said, "Please take this to another attorney and get it reviewed." I said I'm—

John: For the record, you are an attorney?

Bender: I'm an attorney.

John: And you can spot—

Bender: But this is not—

John: Something doesn't smell good, okay.

Bender: This is not my specialty.

John: Yeah.

Bender: They take it to another attorney and he throws up his hands in horror; he says, "All you have here is an agreement to reach an agreement." [laughs] So, in the mean time they have sunk a hundred thousand bucks—to which I contributed a thousand, by the way—painting it and doing a lot of repairs on it.

John: But they don't own it?

- Bender: They don't own it. They're sort of going to pay the guy rent for the use.
- John: Why does this guy want to retain ownership?
- Bender: I don't—because he is—again, I don't like to use the term, but he must be psychotic. He's a bachelor, his grandfather made all the money and he has never accomplished anything to speak of, so he wants to show how good he can get more and more out of it. And the museum is caught in the middle. So, anyway, there's a—
- John: Between Melcher and this guy you've got some fruitcakes working in your—[laughs]
- Bender: Anyway, so they—and about this time the attorney that the museum had leaves them and he goes to work for the guy who owns the LST. So you—
- John: It's not smelling good.
- Bender: No. They have this new attorney and finally I guess they decide, the museum decides to quit putting any money into it. So then the owners take back the LST.
- John: The Sand people?
- Bender: The Sand Products Corporation that owns it takes the LST back. So it is the God-damnedest confusion.
- John: '95 now? Are we in 1995? Just give me a sense of time.
- Bender: '95 or so.
- John: Okay, yeah.
- Bender: No, it might even be a little later and—this is all in here.
- John: Right.
- Bender: If anybody is a historian and ten years from now is going to write this up, this is the whole purpose of this talk, to get this—
- John: Tie all this information.

- Bender: —information here, 'cause you can look at all of this and there is just too God-damn much stuff.
- John: I sense we're supplying some sort of an outline for the people going through the materials that you're donating here?
- Bender: Right.
- John: Okay. So now we're in Muskegon, it's 1995 or so and 393 still isn't in the hands of anybody that's going to treat it historically?
- Bender: Anyway, the guy, the previous owner, takes it back and that's it. And the museum has a submarine, they have a Coast Guard cutter, and I forget what else.
- John: Hmm.
- Bender: And now they're involved. They're going to build a museum on land, by the way, but they have sort of given up on the LST, and it's what should have been done originally. They would take it if the guy would contribute it.
- John: And why wouldn't he? I mean, he has no use for it.
- Bender: Yeah. I guess since he took it back, he's had a couple events on it, like, I think, a high school graduation class had their dance down on the tank deck, [laughs] that kind of thing.
- John: So 393 never materializes?
- Bender: No.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: Though it was in the hands of the museum for long enough—
- John: To put a lot of money in it?
- Bender: —for the LST-901 to hold their reunion there.
- John: That's your ship?
- Bender: That's my ship.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: In the year 2000. I set that up and made all the arrangements.

John: So it must be restored to some extent?

Bender: It was cleaned up, let's put it that way.

John: Okay.

Bender: A lot of paint going into it.

John: Is it still in the hands of the Sand Corporation?

Bender: Yeah.

John: And it's painted to the original Navy colors? Or if I drove up to it, what would it look like now?

Bender: I think he's repainted it again, but I'm not sure what, if he put it back into camouflage or it's a Navy gray.

John: Well, either one is okay. But it's not the corporate?

Bender: Right.

John: Okay.

Bender: Now incidentally, related to that, there is now a high-speed ferry that runs from Milwaukee to Muskegon; you're familiar with that?

John: Um-hmm. I'm looking forward to taking it.—**[End of Tape One – Side B]**

John: Okay, we're starting the next tape and we're on the first side; go ahead Dale.

Bender: The guy who set up the high-speed ferry from Milwaukee to Muskegon was negotiating for a place to put the landing in Muskegon and he started negotiating with Sand Products Corp 'cause they've got a pier there and everything.

John: Uh-huh.

- Bender: And he ran into the same problem the museum did; every time the guy would agree to something before they could get him to sign it—
- John: Before it gets typed up, he'd change his mind?
- Bender: So finally that high-speed ferry made arrangements with a different guy who has a shipyard in Muskegon and who, incidentally, sits on the board of the museum.
- John: Uh-huh.
- Bender: And he and the high-speed ferry reached an agreement in about thirty-six hours [John laughs] and they started building it and—yeah. So the high-speed ferry now runs to this shipyard, and, incidentally, runs right past the museum's submarine that's tied up.
- John: Oh, submarine, okay. If I took that ferry—we have friends that live over in the Travis City, Michigan area, personal thing, but if I take the high-speed ferry will I see the LST-393?
- Bender: Yeah, yeah.
- John: At dock, okay.
- Bender: And pretty soon you'll see a museum building going up on the shore because they're going to have this museum there.
- John: Okay. Do you remain on the board of directors with that museum?
- Bender: Yeah.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: I've tried to resign and they wouldn't take my—I haven't gone to a meeting now for about a year and a half, mainly because it's such hell to get there.
- John: Uh-huh. They pay your way?
- Bender: Hmm?
- John: Will they pay your way?
- Bender: Oh, yeah, yeah.

John: Take the high-speed ferry; I think that would be a blast.

Bender: Well, it takes a day to get there and a day to get back.

John: Oh, yeah.

Bender: For a one day meeting, so I'm gone three days really.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: So anyway, we are now up to the—we've covered the 393 and we've covered the 325. Well, the 325 is now tied up in Evansville, Illinois, which was another shipyard that built LSTs during the war.

John: Oh, so there is a historical reason for it to be there?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Good. Is that a museum area? Can you, if I drove down—

Bender: Yeah. You can go through that LST.

John: Interesting. That's the one that Jornlin finally brought across, right?

Bender: Right.

John: Okay. Okay, moving along.

Bender: Well that really covers all the attempts to bring an LST over and the one that finally succeeded.

John: Well, the one really to go see is the 325 down in Evansville, correct?

Bender: Right.

John: Ah, 393 would probably not be as close. You can drive to Evansville.

Bender: Quicker than you can drive to Muskegon.

John: Probably, or about a toss-up. Yeah. Hmm. Okay, what else we got here, Dale?

Bender: That is pretty much back to the history of the attempts to bring an LST here.

John: Well, we've got three of them, really? We got the 859, LST-8-5-9 we talked about initially.

Bender: Oh.

John: Jack Goddard's ship, right?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Then 325, that's the one that really cooked, everything cooked on that?

Bender: Yeah.

John: And, sadly, 393 just hasn't materialized.

Bender: No, and that's the one I spent a lot of time and a lot of money—

John: There's one guy that's really being an obstacle on it. Might that still happen?

Bender: Only if the guy who now owns Sand Products dies and his heirs decide to make a tax thing out of it.

John: You just don't see any hope with this guy, huh?

Bender: No.

John: It sounds to me like he's a younger guy, though? [chuckle]

Bender: Okay. Oh—

John: You've got more materials here? Okay.

Bender: This—remember, I talked about the ARL, the Spinx?

John: Yes, yes.

Bender: And there's some stuff here; this is what the Spinx looked like. Here again, for some damn reason, the—look at the money they spent—

John: Wow!

Bender: —on advertising this and when of course they didn't get anything out of it; but that was—

John: I've got the Spinx down while we were talking about the 393; what's the tie there?

Bender: The Spinx is an ARL, Auxiliary Repair Light.

John: Yeah.

Bender: The ARL-24, you can see there.

John: Where's the Spinx? You lost me.

Bender: Oh, it's tied up in an anchorage on the east coast and I can't remember, probably not too far from—

John: From the Norfolk area?

Bender: The Norfolk area is my guess. Anyway, the ARL is there and here is stuff on the ARL.

John: So that's really a fourth LST?

Bender: Yeah. It was originally the LST-393; it was converted to an ARL during the war and they would have anchored in Rio Grande in Texas.

John: Okay. Now help me with this. The 393 is in Muskegon; you said the Spinx was originally commissioned as the 393?

Bender: No, I'm sorry, the 963.

John: Ah, there we go. So 9-6-3, the ARL, is the Spinx, somewhere in the Norfolk area. That's fully restored; that's a beautiful ship.

Bender: No, that's what it looked like before. [laughs]

John: Oh, before it fell into ruin; it's not restored?

Bender: It's not restored at all.

John: Oh, I see, okay.

Bender: As a matter of fact, by now it may have been junked for all we know.

John: Well, Dale, if I want to see an LST, I can't probably get on it, but Muskegon's got one.

Bender: You can look at it.

John: That's the 393; I can take a picture of it, right?

Bender: Yeah.

John: But if I want to be on one, I'm going down to Evansville, the Ohio River, and see the 325. Okay.

Bender: When I was trying to get something going, there is an aircraft carrier, the Intrepid, that has a whole bunch of other—it's a museum—a bunch of other ships, and I tried to get them to make an effort to have an LST. But the guy said no, he said we're having trouble financing these.

John: They're booked, huh?

Bender: Yeah. So they didn't want them.

John: It's got to be terribly expensive to keep a ship at a dock whether you're talking about a carrier or an LST or anything in between.

Bender: Right. And this has nothing to do with LSTs, but this is a ship built in Manitowoc and—

John: I'm looking at the RS-50; that's an ARS; what's that mean?

Bender: Auxiliary Repair Ship.

John: Okay. But this is built as a repair ship as opposed to converting an LST; it looks very different.

Bender: We went into the commission, which was sometime in the '90s.

John: It looks like a very small destroyer without the armament.

Bender: What it is, this ship has so much power it can tow an aircraft carrier.

John: Wow!

Bender: So.

John: Well, I see it underway here, yeah.

Bender: And what's also interesting, [laughs] it was my first time I ever made contact with a ship that had women aboard.

John: [laughs] Whoa! I see the—Dale, I'm looking at the engineering department here.

Bender: Yeah.

John: You got a whole bunch of the young women; is this the *new* Navy, that wasn't it?

Bender: That wasn't my—

John: Not in the same World War was it?

Bender: No.

John: Yeah.

Bender: Well, I don't know why I put this in; this is—

John: I don't want to get this mixed up.

Bender: Oh, I guess if I go to Gayle I've got, I've been giving her copies of the *Wisconsin LST Association Newsletter* and that's what this is, so this is stuff that really doesn't tie in; well, I'm giving all of this stuff to her.

John: Sure, I understand that.

Bender: This is what the rest of this looks like. [John laughs] So now I'm gonna put all this back.

John: Okay. Then we'll have a few minutes to spend, probably more than a few minutes with Gayle.

Bender: Yeah.

John: And hopefully the transcript of what we've talked about here today will be a guideline to get she and the rest of the people up in the archives through all the materials you have here.

Bender: Now, what the—I already gave Gayle a lot of stuff, what I call sea stories.

John: She said you had a lot of good stories.

Bender: And I don't know if you want to put them down on this, or do you want me to go—I served in the Navy on an LST and, as I mentioned earlier, we picked up a brand new ship.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: I mean sparkling new at the shipyard in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

John: There's water there but you're not on a—[laughs]

Bender: We took it down the Ohio and the Mississippi.

John: Yeah, you had to come out the Ohio River, Mississippi, okay.

Bender: Left New Orleans, through the canal and out to the Pacific.

John: This is 1940—

Bender: '44. Incidentally, we left Pittsburgh, January 1st, 1944.

John: Good God! All I can think of is, that's cold. [laughs]

Bender: No, no. We picked it up in '44; we didn't leave until '45.

John: Okay, January 1st '45, the war is still going.

Bender: A brand new ship.

John: Yeah.

Bender: And actually we did not take it down the rivers. We had our whole crew on but there was a small group of Coast Guard people who specialized in this and all my men were in the engine room, but topside it was Coast Guard people.

John: Navigation is Coast Guard?

Bender: Right.

John: Okay. Did you have locks to go through, any locks?

Bender: No, no.

John: I didn't think so.

Bender: By the time the Ohio empties into the Mississippi you're beyond the locks.

John: Okay.

Bender: But we went down at a high level, 'cause I can remember—oh, incidentally, the mast is not on the ship; it's lying flat on the deck.

John: Yeah, you got bridges to—yeah.

Bender: Yeah, but I can remember standing on the top with the con and literally going under a bridge [John laughs] and the bridge is maybe as high above me as the ceiling of this room. That's how it was.

John: You're really glad the Coast Guard is running this show, aren't you? [laughs]

Bender: Right. They know what they're doing!

John: [laughs] Yeah!

Bender: And then after we got to New Orleans they put the mast on, and then the Navy had what's called a "shake-down" cruise.

John: Okay, yeah, I've heard the term.

Bender: And we went into the Gulf and these bunch of old seadogs come aboard and they grill you like you won't believe and they make us run drills like you won't believe, and I kept a diary and my notes say, *Oh, God!* I mean, *We were up this morning at three and I got to bed at one, you know, and drill, drill, drill.* But this is good; you're going—

John: You're in a wartime situation, yeah.

Bender: And so it went; it went good though.

John: So you took them back to New Orleans, the shakedown group?

Bender: Yup—well, no, we picked 'em up—

John: Or they get off.

Bender: —actually, in Panama City, Florida.

John: Oh, okay.

Bender: And we came back to New Orleans. Incidentally, whatever you did because the Navy knew some of the skippers were inexperienced, they would have pilots.

John: Um.

Bender: So our captain, no problem, the whole Gulf, that's alright, but if you approach New Orleans you pick up a pilot.

John: Yeah.

Bender: And he takes you in, ties you up, that type of thing. Or if you have to be moved from one side of the Mississippi River to the other side, a pilot takes you over, 'cause he knows the currents and all the little problems. But in New Orleans the mast went up, we took on food like you can't believe, we took on oil, fuel oil.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: A tremendous amount of it. And then finally we leave New Orleans and head out, we're on our own. And this is interesting because the German subs are in the Gulf of Mexico and we're traveling on our own, basically, and when the ship is going it rocks and you feel the vibrations in the engine and I can remember I'm sleeping and all of a sudden I wake up [BANG]! No vibration; the ship has stopped.

John: Not good! [laughs]

Bender: And you know you pour out of bed and head for the engine room. Because a diesel injects the fuel and has pressure nozzles, very small, so you super clean the fuel.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And that's done by a guy in the engineering gang who's called the "oil can."

John: Huh.

Bender: And he takes, draws from a big tank, runs it through and puts it into the daily tank. Well, when you're tying up each night, you know, you don't use that much, but when you're going twenty-four-hours a day?

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: He had neglected to keep the daily service tank filled and so basically we ran dry.

John: Hmm.

Bender: [laughs] And we're right in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico.

John: You have oil on board but it's in the big storage tank?

Bender: Oh, we've got two hundred thousand gallons.

John: Yeah. But this tank that he's servicing?

Bender: Is only, ah—

John: A cleaning tank?

Bender: Three or four hundred [unintelligible] gallons.

John: Right, and it goes through filters or something?

Bender: Actually, you centrifuge it.

John: Oh, my. Wow!

Bender: Anyway, well, that's what—

John: He didn't keep that up, so you're dead in the water? Plenty of oil but it's not clean.

Bender: Somebody makes the decision and takes the responsibility. So I say, draw from the main tank; if it screws up the injectors, that's it, but—

John: Uh-huh. You've gotta keep moving.

Bender: The decision is mine, so we go ahead and immediately [laughs] we're on the way again and everybody feels a little better. But basically, we, as I said, went through the canal, up the coast, and then we actually left the States from 'Frisco.

John: At what, about seven or eight knots? That's going to take a long time.

Bender: Oh, yeah, yeah. We didn't get out to Pearl Harbor until probably pushing March. [both laugh]

John: The war's only got a few more months to go here.

Bender: Yeah.

John: You weren't dragging your feet, were you? [laughs]

Bender: We didn't go direct though, we went through Eniwetok.

John: Yeah.

Bender: Incidentally, at Eniwetok, I have never seen so many Navy warships at one time.

John: Hmm.

Bender: It's a beautiful big, big, big, big harbor and there were carriers, battleships, destroyers, LSTs.

John: Hmm.

Bender: And I did tell you we picked up a batch of training officers; they all got seasick.

John: [laughs] Help me with my geography here, Eniwetok, where is that?

Bender: It's actually—

John: South and west of Pearl Harbor or the Hawaiian Islands?

Bender: Actually, it's south, but I'm not sure if it's west. I think it's really almost east of them.

John: But definitely south of the Hawaiian Islands?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: Anyway, we went into Pearl Harbor; from Pearl Harbor we went to Guam, Saipan, Tinian, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and we came back from Okinawa.

John: Now, you're into 1945 here, Dale. Were you involved in any amphibious landings or were you more of a supply ship?

Bender: We're more of a supply ship.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: Now, I mentioned Iwo Jima. You know the reason it was taken is for an emergency landing field.

John: Right! Yeah, for the Air Force.

Bender: Right. But when those planes land they need air, they need gas and there's no piers, no nothing, so how do you get gas?

John: So you run right up to the beach; that's why they want you?

Bender: Right. We run right up to the beach, the trucks back right into the LST, they fuel up.

John: Aviation fuel?

Bender: The gas is in fifty-five gallon drums. You load them on the truck, the truck runs off the LST and takes it to the airport.

John: You know, you're a great big lighter fluid [laughs] when you're transporting that stuff. I'll bet you're glad to get that off the boat.

Bender: You are so right! [both laugh] I would much rather have been carrying beer, which we did at one time, too.

John: Did you?

Bender: Yeah. But Iwo Jima, by the way, is volcanic ash.

John: Right.

- Bender: And it's just like glass, and the bad thing is, we would run up on the beach but you couldn't stay there. You had to keep—normally on the beach you don't run your engines, but we have to keep the props turning over to stay on the beach or we'd slide right out.
- John: For Heaven's sake!
- Bender: Matter of fact—
- John: You say it's very slippery?
- Bender: Yeah.
- John: How did they drive the trucks down there? Did they have some kind sort of decking?
- Bender: They would drive off our bow ramp and they would have a big Caterpillar tractor hook on and pull them across the beach to where there was something that the trucks could get traction on. We tried tying onto one of these big Cats, Caterpillars, big, big one.
- John: Uh-huh.
- Bender: But we gradually pulled them into the water, so we—
- John: [laughs] Not a good idea?
- Bender: Matter of fact, what we would have to do is, we'd run up, unload a couple of loads, and by that time we were sliding back so far we'd have to back out.
- John: Hit it again?
- Bender: Hit it again, wide open, which you don't normally do, and drive up as far as we can and immediately start unloading again.
- John: That's an interesting thing to know.
- Bender: Yeah. But that's how you got aviation gas to Iwo Jima.
- John: So you're saying any landing-type ship, whether it's an LST or whatever, really couldn't dock at the beach at Iwo Jima, you're going to slide back?
- Bender: Yeah.

John: Have you seen the Iwo Jima movies?

Bender: No, I haven't.

John: Eastwood's?

Bender: An LCVP, which is the actual attack ship, you know, the one that brings the troops—

John: Yeah.

Bender: —now that's something else again. Now we carried a couple of those LCVPs on our ship.

John: Okay.

Bender: They were basically our small boats, as they were called; they ain't very small.

John: Would they act as, ah, ferrying back and forth for you?

Bender: From the ship to the shore.

John: Okay, I see. So you kept them as kind of a tender?

Bender: Hmm?

John: You kept the smaller ships, or boats, as more like tenders?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Okay.

Bender: And we used them as tugs sometimes.

John: Huh.

Bender: If there wasn't a tug at one time, we'd put our own LST alongside and they could push us in.

John: That's amazing.

Bender: Yeah.

John: Huh.

Bender: And the LCVPs, which is the attack craft, were, I think, thirty-four feet long and they weighed twenty-two thousand pounds.

John: Okay, that's pretty small.

Bender: Yeah, but it had a bus engine for power.

John: You mentioned Okinawa. What did you do there?

Bender: We came in with, what? I think we came in with building equipment.

John: The 901, now we're on that?

Bender: Yeah. By the time we came in they had a pier built, or repaired, really, and we could unload.

John: The war's gotta be winding down by now?

Bender: Oh, Okinawa is still not.

John: Pretty hot? You've got kamikazes right up 'til the end, right?

Bender: Right. To the day before the peace thing is signed a ship was sunk not too far from us.

John: I interviewed one gentleman that spent eight hours in the water; he was on the *USS Bush*.

Bender: Uh-huh.

John: Which was a Fletcher-class destroyer and they were kamikazed, three of 'em, three hits; they were out on radar duty and nobody knew they went down.

Bender: Uh.

John: That's not good.

Bender: No.

- John: But Okinawa was actively involved as a war site right up 'til the armistice, or the signing of the papers, right?
- Bender: Right. And as I told you, the smoke generator—
- John: Yeah.
- Bender: We were—sometimes we made smoke, as I said.
- John: Better you had somebody upwind doing it though?
- Bender: Yeah, I preferred that. But then I wrote a little anecdote. The engine, to reverse it you had basically what's called an air-clutch, and when we left Okinawa to come back to the States we just put it right down to the floorboard so to speak, wide open the whole damn trip.
- John: You were motivated. [laughs]
- Bender: Yeah. And we only, we paused in Pearl Harbor, and then we were assigned to Seattle, Washington.
- John: Uh-huh.
- Bender: And we ran wide open all the way back. We picked up a pilot at the entrance to the straights that go to Seattle.
- John: San Juan?
- Bender: San Juan. [Strait of Juan de Fuca] We didn't even stop for him, we just sort of slowed down. [John laughs] He climbed aboard.
- John: You guys wanted to get your feet on soil. [laughs]
- Bender: But basically this is the story. As I said, when you're underway you run twenty-four hours a day so you have to split your crew, but when you come into port you set what's called special sea detail. You put more men everywhere and you put your best men on it. Normally, you gotta split 'em between three shifts. The captain did not set the special sea detail and we came into Seattle with a pilot. So I don't know where the hell I am; I'm somewhere down in the tank deck and I hear the PA blares out: "Mr. Bender lay down to the engine room, on the double, on the double!" I go like hell and, as I told you—
- John: You come down the railings?

Bender: You come down.

John: Yeah.

Bender: With a well-trained crew, and by that time we were functioning well, you say, "Oh! If he has to be there, maybe I'd better check?" So everybody's pouring down into the main engine room and here's the speed control it says "Full Astern." And here's the man at the throttle pulling and it says "Forward." [laughs] It's at "Forward;" it's stuck!

John: That's not good?

Bender: That's not good!

John: Not coming into port especially.

Bender: No.

John: Yeah.

Bender: Well, we'd gone through this drill fifty times; you don't talk 'cause it's too noisy.

John: Yeah.

Bender: That puts my number one chief on the starboard engine. I go to the port engine, grab a couple guys and he grabs a couple guys, because we've done this, and we shift by hand into reverse. And then you pour the coal[?] to it.

John: If I'm up on the bridge I'm not real happy at this point?

Bender: No.

John: [laughs] 'Cause you're out of control, mostly?

Bender: Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Bender: Anyway, when you throw an LST into full reverse and she's moving forward she shakes like you won't believe!

John: I believe it.

Bender: 'Cause the engine, and—here's the prop turning backwards and the [unintelligible] going forward. And I don't know how the pilot did it, but we did not run ashore in Seattle.

John: [laughs] Welcome home, huh?

Bender: Welcome home! And the captain, if we'd run ashore, the captain would have been court marshaled.

John: Oh, I'm sure.

Bender: He forgot to set the special sea detail.

John: Didn't have the crews?

Bender: Right.

John: Yeah. Well, again, what happened? The guy up on the bridge he's saying "Reverse"?

Bender: But the engine man, the reversing mechanism is clogged.

John: Okay.

Bender: It uses compressed air to shift it. There's always water in compressed air and the water had blocked the valve or something.

John: So you guys, manually, you said you grabbed some guys and both engines.

Bender: You shift it by hand, which doesn't take long!

John: Yeah, but if you're going [laughs] full steam ahead and you're up on the bridge and here's the dock.

Bender: Yeah.

John: I assume that you're coming into some sort of docking facility?

Bender: Yeah. Anyway, so we're okay; we tie up, you secure the main engines and so on. And by the time I got topside, the captain was eligible for discharge and this is 12 o'clock, noon, by the way, December 24th.

John: Aw.

Bender: He has grabbed his papers and he's over ashore; he never even said "Thank you," you know.

John: 'Cause he's that close to a court-martial?

Bender: Yeah. Matter of fact; I never talked to him again, got a Christmas card.

John: [laughs] That's it, huh?

Bender: And we were really—the engine room really saved him.

John: From—or the ship, too.

Bender: Yeah. But as I say, we made it on December 24th, 12 o'clock noon, and we only did that because I had adjusted the governors that control the speed; see you're supposed to be—

John: Yeah, that's right; you juiced it up a little.

Bender: Right. There's full speed and then there's what's called flank speed.

John: I've heard the term.

Bender: Yeah; and we had run flank speed from Pearl Harbor all the way home.

John: [laughs] You guys wanted to get home!

Bender: And we had also modified the governor a little bit so—

John: More RPMs?

Bender: Yup.

John: Uh-huh.

Bender: And we did do it.

John: I'll bet that engine was pretty well strained by the time you got to Seattle, wasn't it?

Bender: No; it's the same engine used in a locomotive.

- John: Yeah.
- Bender: And the locomotive runs from Chicago to LA wide open.
- John: Do they really?
- Bender: Oh, yeah. Well, actually, what the Navy called wide open was about three-fourths of what the commercial people call wide open.
- John: Uh-huh. You're measuring wide open by RPM?
- Bender: Yeah.
- John: Okay. I'm curious; what's maximum RPM on those? It must be pretty low.
- Bender: I can't remember any of this; it seems to me wide open was something like nine hundred RPM on the engine.
- John: Oh, that's really slow-turning. Yeah.
- Bender: And then the speed is reduced to the propeller, of course.
- John: Right.
- Bender: But on a diesel locomotive a wide, wide open is maybe eleven hundred and fifty RPMs.
- John: Okay.
- Bender: So I really didn't worry about it.
- John: Yeah, you weren't straining that thing where it would have gone through a bearing or something. Yeah.
- Bender: Though I can tell you, it turned out we had a fresh water leak in the cooling system. [tape ends abruptly]

[End of Interview]