Narrator: Dermot Cruise (DC)

Company Affiliations: Canada Steamship Lines (CSL)

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Summary: Ship radio officer Dermot Cruise describes life aboard ocean-going and lake vessels carrying cargo around the world. He tells the story of his schooling in Ireland, of how the practice of flags of convenience almost prevented him gaining Canadian citizenship, and of how he came to be a relief radio officer for foreign vessels in the Great Lakes. He details what exactly a radio officer does in receiving and transmitting messages from ship to shore—including listening for callsigns, making contact for docking information, and passing along messages to the crew—as well as other duties he picked up on the ships to pass the down times. Cruise discusses his relationships with the crew and various captains, and he tells some stories of mischief that could be gotten into when docked in international ports. Other topics discussed include improvements to ship radio and satellite technology, women officers on the ships, unchanging global trade routes, climate change and unpredictable weather, the Panama Canal, and the Northwest Passage.

Keywords: Ship radio officer; Grain transportation—ships; Salties; Ocean-going vessels; Bulk carriers; Radio communications; Satellite communications; Telecommunications; The Great Lakes; St. Lawrence Seaway; Atlantic trade routes; Grain trade routes; Cargo vessels; Ship crews; Ship captains; Ship officers; Merchant navies; Flags of convenience; Canada Steamship Lines; Ship cargo unloading; Radio callsigns; Radio transmissions; Morse code; Oceanspan transmitter; Inmarsat transmitter; *MV Arctic*; Climate change; Shipping disasters; Panama Canal; Northwest Passage

Time, Speaker, Narrative
DC: It's Sunday. Yes, the 11th.
NP: This is Nancy Perozzo conducting an interview at Intercity Shopping Centre on February 11th, 2018. I'm going to have the person that I'm interviewing introduce himself and tell us a little about his connection to grain.
DC: Now, you just ask away, and I'll try and answer. Are you going to ask questions now?

NP: Sure. Yeah.

DC: Go ahead.

NP: So if you'll just introduce yourself.

DC: Okay. This is Dermot Vincent Cruise. I was a ship's radio officer for 27 years. I'm now retired. And this lovely lady, Nancy, wants me to answer a few questions for her.

NP: So people may have already picked up just from that little introduction that you gave that you are from a different part of the world than Thunder Bay. So tell us about where you grew up.

DC: I grew up in a little village to the west of Dublin called Clondalkin. We had a little market garden as they were known then. We grew fruit and veggies for the Dublin fruit market. And I lived out there, went to school out there until I was about 14 or 15. Then we moved into Dublin proper, and I continued on with my high school education until, I think, I was about 17 or so. After that, I went on to technical school to get my license as a ship's radio officer.

NP: What interested you in a ship?

DC: Well, I always had, shall we say, a mechanical mind, and it seemed like a nice job. There has always been a seaman in our family, with the exception of my father's generation, and they thought that that devil had died in the family, but then I came along.

NP: So was it because you knew some of your relatives had been seamen that you decided to--.

DC: No, not really. It was difficult to get jobs in Ireland, a good job that paid well. And at sea, we did get comparatively well paid. So since I was mechanically minded, I thought it might be a nice job to have a go at. Anyway, I did go to school, I graduated, and the next thing I know, I was off to sea.

NP: I was just checking there to make sure that the recorder was recording. [Laughing] because I have had unfortunate circumstances where I missed that little, tiny detail. So, what year did you graduate and was it easy to get a job? Were there lots of them for somebody with your training?

DC: Oh, they were looking for radio officers to beat the band, and after I went away to sea, I discovered in a very short period of time that I was sailing with the British Merchant Navy. And in that time—it was two or three years—I discovered that I had been very well trained, but not paid so well. So I decided to get out of the British Merchant Navy and become what they called at that time a mercenary officer. Go and sail for anyone who would pay you enough. So I got involved with a company in London who provided officers and crew to ships, and it was up to you to negotiate your own wages of what you thought you were worth. I went into that, and that's how I ended up on all these various ships I sailed on over the years.

NP: What were some of the names of the various shipping companies? Well, maybe before we do that, you said that your career—when we were talking before, we started interviewing—was largely on bulk carriers. So describe the bulk carriers.

DC: Well, no. It was not largely on bulk carriers. It was cargo ships in general, and these ships carried--. There was one particular ship I was on carried all kinds of arms and ammunition for the British Merchant Navy out in the Persian Gulf. That type of cargo was carried on various other ships of various flags to various countries. There was a lot of rules and regulations that were kindly pushed to one side to get this stuff delivered. To all these rebel countries of the Middle East, Africa, anywhere you had an army insurrection going, we were hauling in the ammunition.

[0:05:48]

NP: And that was as part of the British Merchant marine?

DC: No. I sailed--.

NP: This is part of your mercenary career. [Laughing]

DC: I sailed under the Israeli flag, Liberian flag, Panamanian flag, Japanese flag, and well, the British was where I started out. But these were the various ships or flags that I got jobs on. The money was very good. All you had to do was do your job, mind your own business, and don't bother about the holes in the bottom of the lifeboats.

NP: Deliberate holes in the bottom of the lifeboats? [Laughs]

DC: No. The holes were not deliberate. They were just rotten. [Laughs]

NP: Ah. So I think common wisdom—although wisdom may be not the term—is that some flags are easier to float a boat under than others.

DC: Yes. It's easier to float them under certain flags, but as I said, eventually all flags are flags of convenience depending on what you're doing with the ship. The flag didn't bother me. You were paid in pounds sterling, deutschmarks, or Yankee dollars. It varied, but I chose Yankee dollars.

NP: And why was that?

DC: Well, I thought it was an easier currency to convert into whatever else you might want to. What I did was my brother—the bank manager I told you—he set up an account for me, and every month, my balance of wages ended up in that account, and I would get a message within a day or two to say, "X-number of bucks received and deposited in your account." So I never really got done out of my money, as happened to some of the guys.

NP: Nice to have an honest family relation. [Laughing]

DC: He was good. He was good. He tried to make sure I didn't throw it all away. I threw enough of it away. [Laughs]

NP: Did you work on any Canadian flagged ships?

DC: No. Canada does not have a merchant navy. It has a merchant navy for ships that sail within the Great Lakes. They're under the Canadian flag. The other ships, lots of them, are under the Bermuda flag, the Panamanian flag, the Liberian flag. They're under all different flags. Income tax avoidance.

NP: Ah. So Canadian Steamship Lines [CSL]--.

DC: CSL, yes. Owned by Mr. Martin. Still owned by him. That was one of the outfits that I got in trouble when I went to become a Canadian citizen.

NP: Say more about that.

DC: [Laughs] Okay. After I'd been in Canada for about six or seven years, a friend of mine told me I should get my papers in order and become a Canadian citizen. So I said, "Okay. I will. I'll get the papers together." He was a legal mind, so I got the papers

together, sat down with him. He looked and said, “Yeah.” He said, “It’s all right. You now can go down to the citizenship office and file your papers.” So I went down, filed my papers. Eventually, I was called in to see the, I guess you would call him, the citizenship judge. And that was when I got in trouble because this guy told me, he said, “You have not had your physical body in Canada or on a Canadian flagged ship for four out of the last six years.” And I said, “But I’m working for the Canadian company.” “Oh, yes,” he said, “but your ship is not under the Canadian flag.” So application rejected.

[0:10:25]

So I went back to sea and forgot about the whole thing. Well, I had my leave, and then I went back to sea. And months later, the ship I was on arrived into Jacksonville, Florida, and the agent came down, had the ship’s mail, handed it to me, and in there was a letter from the Immigration Department. I looked at the outside of the envelope, and I nearly tore it up and threw it away because I thought, “This is the official word to say you’ve been rejected.” When I opened the envelope it said, “You are expected in citizenship court three days previous to become a citizen.” So of course, I got busy then, and I rang the Canadian citizenship office up in Halifax. I asked them--. Explained myself, and I said, “What do I do now?” “Oh, we know all about you. [Laughs] Your file is up here. We’ll just hold your file in abeyance, and when you get leave, come up and see us.” So the ship sailed out of Jacksonville.

I didn’t get back to Halifax for about three months, and when I did, I went up to the immigration office. I spoke to the people there, and they said, “Oh, very good. Yes, we have everything here, and we have a citizenship court in Windsor, Nova Scotia.” And they said, “If you want to go to the citizenship court down there, we will get you a taxi that will take you there, wait for you, and bring you back to Halifax.” I thought, “My God, this government has gone mad.” So I said, “When is the next one? When is the next citizenship court in Halifax?” They said, “Next Friday.” Well, I said, “I’m on leave for two months. I’ll wait until Friday, and I’ll become a citizen here.” So I did that and became a citizen. They had applications all prepared for us for passports and all that thing. But anyway, when I got this letter down in Jacksonville, it said, “Your case has been taken into consideration under different subsections of the law and all the rest of it, and you are now eligible for Canadian citizenship.” That’s how I became a citizen.

NP: So you are now living in Thunder Bay?

DC: Yeah.

NP: How did that come about?

DC: Well, after my time spent in the States, I retired home to Ireland. The first thing I found over there was the cost of living was off the wall, and the only thing that--.

NP: What year are we talking about there?

DC: '03-'04. So I was living with my sister. Her husband's dead. She has a lovely home, so she took me in. Now if I was left on my own, I would have been out of the place in about two or three months, but I ended up staying there for about, well, about 14 or 15 months, and I decided I would go back to Canada. So came back here to Canada, and the reason I ended up here was that there were two other retired officers that I knew here in town. Two captains, one chief engineer.

NP: And who were these people?

DC: Do I have to say?

NP: No, no. You don't need to. [Laughing] Is Mr. Hudson, Captain Hudson, one of them?

DC: Anyway--. No, no. Anyway, one of the captains, he has a house that was completely finished out, and he said, "You can come and stay in the basement until we get you fixed out with a truck and an apartment and all the rest of it." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "If you're not gone by Christmas, I'm going to throw you out. The kids are coming back to visit." So I took over the basement in his home, and I stayed with them for about a month.

NP: Were you familiar with Thunder Bay before that?

DC: No.

NP: Had you ever come into the port?

DC: I'd been in here once on a ship. I'd been in here once during the year I spent up and down the Great Lakes as relief radio operator. I think I'll have to go back and tell you now how I ended up in Canada in the first place. [Laughs]

[0:15:18]

NP: Okay!

DC: I was with the Israeli Merchant navy, and I was on a ship that travelled on a regular voyage from Haifa across various ports in the Mediterranean and then over to Montreal. In Montreal, the two officers generally came down from the Radio Regulations Department, and they buttonholed the radio officer—me—and had a chat with me in English. And depending on that chat, the captain would be told, "You will have to take a relief radio officer up the lakes because your radio officer is not sufficiently well qualified in the English language, because all communications up in the lakes are by voice, and he needs to be able to speak English." So anyway, I got to know two of these officers very well, and at the end of navigation season, they said to me, "Would you like to come over here and be a relief radio officer up and down the Great Lakes? The money is good, and you might enjoy it." So I said, "Yes. I'll give it a go." So they told me, "When you go back to Ireland, you go and see the Canadian Embassy. Tell them you have a job, explain about here in Canada that you have a job, Radio Regulations Department." But they said, "To take this job, you will have to immigrate." So of course, didn't cross my mind to be a big deal, so I said, "Yes. I'll immigrate."

So I went over back home to Ireland, went to the Canadian Embassy and explained my position to them, and they said, "Oh, yes. You have a job waiting on you." "Yes." So they said, "Very well. I'll let you go and see a doctor," and a few more formalities, and one thing and the other. And then they said, "We will pay your airfare back to Canada." I said, "Great. Thank you very much." So at that time it took about six months to immigrate to Canada. I was gone in about six weeks and came over to Montreal. There was an Irish family there I stayed with, and I was on the roster with the shipping companies in Montreal to act as a radio officer on ships going up and down the lakes, ships that needed one.

NP: So lakers at that time?

DC: No. They were all foreign vessels. They were mainly Russian. And the reason I ended up on the Russian ones was they had lots of Canadian radio officers, French Canadians, but they wanted coffee and croissants for breakfast. I could stomach borscht and brown bread. [Laughs]

NP: And where did you develop the taste for borscht, did you say?

DC: Don't know.

NP: And brown bread. [Laughs]

DC: I always had a great appetite anyway. The food was good. The food was good on the ships.

NP: You know, a lot of people just have no idea what's involved in a ship—period, and certainly a radio operator. So let's take a little trip up and back. So we have a Russian ship coming in, and because of our focus on grain, let's assume the Russian ship is coming to get grain.

DC: Okay, yes. So it arrives into Montreal, and it may have cargo to discharge there. It may not. It may just go straight up the lakes after it has passed the radio inspection and various other checks and that. We'd be on our way up the Great Lakes. Then we would go to one of the grain ports. It might be Thunder Bay. I might be Toronto. It could be any port where they have a load of grain to go somewhere. So we would go to that port, and they would pour the grain into the ship, turn around, off back down the Great Lakes to Montreal. I would leave the ship in Montreal. Reporting to the office that put me onboard in the first place, they'd say, "Okay, your name is now on the bottom of the list," and you'd work your way up the list again. Sometimes you'd be gone again inside of a week. There was cargo ships. There was one Italian ship I was on. It was a floating disaster.

[0:20:00]

NP: And how would you describe a floating disaster?

DC: Well, it went up to Detroit, and it loaded a full cargo of them squashed cars. You know where they reduce to cars to a nice, neat cube of metal? So they loaded the ship with all of these cars, sailed back down the Great Lakes, and headed for Japan. When the ship eventually got to Japan, the scrapyard took the cargo and the ship. [Laughing] And they turned it all into razor blades or whatever.

NP: So what would you say in thinking about--. Well, no. I don't want to leave this because I'm sort of getting scattered here. Why did they need a radio operator? Sounds pretty easy. Just get on the ship, come up here, get on--.

DC: You had to be able to speak English, good English.

NP: Why? What would you do?

DC: Because all communications in the Great Lakes are voice.

NP: Describe the communications that takes place in that trip up to Thunder Bay.

DC: Well, it would be when you're approaching port. They want to know what time you're going to arrive there, and you'd be told what berth you're going to. You'd have to give your time of arrival, and you might be sent to anchor and then a day or two later brought into port, loaded, and on your way again. But all these communications were all in English, and they were not in Morse code, which was the general method of communications out at sea.

NP: So if you'd come into the port of Thunder Bay, then, at what point are you in contact and who are you in contact with?

DC: Harbour master. You'd be in contact with the harbour master here in Thunder Bay. He's on the radio. He's got voice communications radio, and you would call him and advise him that you're in the lakes somewhere, and you'll be arriving off the port at such-and-such a date. And you would then be told there and then that you will probably go to anchor. They may take you right in, just depending if there was a berth available for the type of grain that you were going to load.

NP: Is there any job for the radio operator, then, once you head towards the elevator?

DC: No. The radio station in port is closed officially, but they need to maintain communications with shore so they can pass messages to the agent, to the grain elevators, to God knows who else. That is the reason for the English-speaking radio operator onboard.

NP: When you think--. Was it a year that you spent in that--?

DC: A navigation season, which was about from March through to November.

NP: And as you think back on that year on the Great Lakes, first of all, what do you think about sailing on the Great Lakes?

DC: Oh, it was lovely. The ship was never--. It was always nice and steady, and you never got chucked out of your bunk in the middle of the night when heavy waves slammed into the ship. [Laughs]

NP: That was a regular occurrence, was it, out on the ocean?

DC: Well, out on the ocean. No, if the weather was bad, sometimes you didn't go to sleep because if you got too relaxed, you might end up out on the floor of your cabin. No, it was not a regular thing that happened, but there's always the possibility.

NP: And what about going through the locks? Does that create any--?

DC: No, that was all handled by the officers on the bridges and the crews on shore who handled all the lines and all that. I didn't have anything to do with that. The lock keeper, he dealt with the officers on the bridge, and that was it.

NP: Do you recall delivering grain to foreign ports?

DC: The only place that I delivered grain to was a ship that loaded in Hamburg, and we carried the grain up through the Baltic to what is now St. Petersburg, what was then known as Leningrad. That was the only place I know that I was actually on a Canadian flagged ship that delivered grain. It was a very funny operation. The ship could be loaded in Hamburg in less than two days. It might take ten days to get the grain out of it at Leningrad. [Laughs]

[0:25:17]

NP: And why is that? What happens?

DC: Antiquated discharge system. They had a big clamshell grab that lifted it out and put it into railway cars. Sometimes they ran out of railway cars, so they couldn't discharge the ship. You might be there for the best part of two weeks.

NP: That sort of throws the schedule into a mess.

DC: But that was it. They hadn't got the equipment like other ports in the world where you come in with grain. They've got, the only thing I can describe it as is a bloody great big vacuum, and they vacuum the stuff out, and they probably empty a 20,000-tonne ship in two days.

NP: What, in your mind, for the ports that you visited, let's start at the top and then do the bottom. Which ports impressed you for bulk carriers the most?

DC: The local ones?

NP: Well, no. Well, you can do that, but I mean worldwide because Canada competes on a world market.

DC: I know, it does. I was impressed in the loading of ships down in Tampa, bulk carrier ships in Tampa. They had a very efficient operation there. There was some in New York where there was very efficient loading and unloading of bulk cargos. As I say, I did not serve all the time of bulk carriers. They were generally cargo ships. Other bulk carriers--.

NP: So containers? Mostly containers?

DC: Well, the whole operation of cargo now has become containers, and you could be in port at 8:00 in the morning and gone by 6:00 in the evening with a couple of hundred containers off and on. It's a very efficient operation. But other bulk carriers, these big tankers, I spent some time on those. You would load--. There was one place I loaded, Kharg Island, in the northern end of the Persian Gulf. They put a 36-inch diameter line onboard over the bow and poured the stuff into the tanks, the crude oil. And you would probably, again, be loaded in two days and off you go because the pumps run night and day until you're loaded, then they disconnect everything, and you sail. But the oil business, in general, was probably the most efficient of the lot because there's pots of money to be made, and the sooner you got the ship on its way and got it back again, the more money you made.

NP: A lot of investment in infrastructure too to get things--.

DC: There was a terrific amount of investment in infrastructure of the tankers, and of course, the world over needs fuel. They just were very well organized for loading and unloading.

NP: I'd like you to describe, let's say, a day in the life of a ship's radio person. So let's assume you're getting onto a new ship, one that you aren't familiar with. You carry on your kit bag and--?

DC: That's about it. Everything else is there on the ship. There's a radio station, and after I'd been at sea for about five years, I was quite familiar with all the gear on ships. So generally what you did, you went up, threw your kit bag in your cabin, and you went into the radio station, started up everything, checked it out, and that was it. Then the ship sailed. And the amount of radio traffic on a freighter was very little. I mainly sat in the radio room and read books.

NP: You became very educated. Or were you always reading novels?

DC: [Laughs] Well, we all try to educate ourselves a bit. How we did it on a lot of the ships I was on, we used to get the best seller list from *Time Magazine*, put it up on the notice board in the officer's bar, and every book that got three x's behind it, you would buy that book. This is how we built the ship's library. But--.

[0:30:29]

NP: How long was a shift?

DC: The ship?

NP: Shift.

DC: Oh.

NP: Shift.

DC: I worked eight hours a day. It was generally 8:00 in the morning to noon, and then any two hours between noon and 6:00 in the evening, and any two hours again between 6:00 in the evening and midnight. That was the eight-hour shift. And to try to cover the various traffic lists and all of this that you had to check on for radio traffic, you worked out your own hours.

NP: Tell me about radio traffic and radio traffic lists. What is that?

DC: These are if a station on shore has radio traffic for your ship, they broadcast your callsign. There's a list of callsigns they broadcast. If your callsign is in there, you call in, pick up your traffic that's it.

NP: What do you mean, "Pick up your traffic"?

DC: Messages. They all come in in Morse, and I was able to type fast enough to just copy them directly onto a form, and that was it. Hand it over to a master, chief engineer, crew members, whoever.

NP: So it was like your mail. Crew members would be getting a note from home, you know, "Baby's been born," or "Your mother died."

DC: [Laughs] Oh, yeah. Yeah.

NP: So you got to hear all that stuff?

DC: I knew everybody's business, but then that was part of the job too. Keep your bloody mouth shut.

NP: Were some people better at that than others?

DC: Yes. I was very good at it. I knew what the job was all about, and that was one thing I kept my mouth shut about. Whatever I got to know about our members of the crew, I passed the information on to the master of the vessel if he needed to know. Otherwise, I gave the message directly to the individual concerned.

NP: How did you learn that? Or were you born with that diplomacy?

DC: You had to learn it, or you'd be in trouble up to your ears in no time.

NP: Were you ever in trouble?

DC: No. I kept my mouth shut. I was very good at it all the time.

NP: Was that something that was taught in your radio school?

DC: No. You were told in the radio school, "You will have knowledge of everything going on in the ship, and it's not for you to start mouthing off to everyone about the master's business, the company's business, other officers' business, other officers' wives and lives. You can't do it. So you keep your mouth shut. If you have to give a personal message to the master, he'll take it, and he'll probably call up the individual. You will remain present with the master when he delivers the message to the individual."

NP: And why is that that you had to stay there?

DC: He wanted a witness. For whatever reason, I would be that witness. Also, I had received the message, so, "Keep your mouth shut and mind your own business."

NP: And when you have finished your shift--. Well, how many of you are there on a ship at once? Just you? Or one other person to fill in?

DC: No, there's only one radio officer. Me.

NP: Okay.

DC: Generally, I got on very well with all of my masters, with the exception of two of them. One of them fired me in mid-Atlantic, and I asked him, I said, "Who's going to tend communications for you?" And he went stamping out of the room. [Laughs]

NP: Do you feel comfortable talking about why you were fired in the middle of the Atlantic? You don't have to, but it sounds like a story!

DC: Every evening on the late watch—like, it might be 9:00 to 11:00, 10:00 to midnight or something like that—I would have a can of beer and a sandwich. I would be in the radio room, I'd have the radio on, and on the desk would be a sandwich and a can of beer. And one night, the old man, all I could say is he had a bee in his bonnet. He walked into the radio room, and he yelled at me, "Drinking on watch?" He was a Scot. I said, "For God's sake, you've seen me having a beer and a sandwich every night of the week since I joined this ship." "Drinking!" he went stamping out. That's when he said, "You're fired!" Switched off everything. Of course, next morning, steward comes around, says, "The old man wants to see you." "Okay." So I went down, saw him, and he didn't apologize, but he said, "You should get back on watch." "Very well, captain." You see, on ships it goes this way. First, there is the master of the vessel, then there is Jesus Christ. [Laughs] And when the master is right, he is right. When he is wrong, he is still right. [Laughing]

[0:35:53]

NP: I like that.

DC: It's just the way things have to be out there. Now, when you get to shore, you can go to court and all the rest of it.

NP: Were there any repercussions then when you got to the shore? Were you ever with that captain again?

DC: No, I left the ship, and I never said a word to anyone except the officer of the watch who knew about it. As I said, "Keep your mouth shut, mind your own business," saves an awful lot of trouble.

NP: Now, before you took a job then, did you always check who was going to be the captain of the ship?

DC: No. You just walked onboard, and you went and introduced yourself to the captain, and just said, "I'm your new radio officer, sir." He generally shook hands with you and said, "What's your name?" Well, he said, "You know where your cabin is. You've got

your cabin, you've got an office, and you've got a radio room. So go up and check it all out, meet me down in the ship's bar this evening, and we'll have a drink."

NP: You talk a lot about officer level. Lots of movies made about the officers and the crew guys, right? And the officers are usually the bad guys. [Laughing] So now's your chance to really straighten out that story.

DC: Well, generally, I found with all the officers--.

NP: Could you start that again because we have these--.

DC: Generally, I found during my years at sea, the vast majority of the officers I sailed with, they were professional seamen, and all the crazy stuff you see on the movies is not quite how it is. We're all stuck together on a ship, and it's up to you to learn to live with the guys. They had a thing that you do not discuss politics, you do not discuss his religion, and you do not discuss his personal life. This avoids an awful lot of stupid, brain-dead controversy. You stick with that, you're all right, and the majority of us did. There was always one mouthy one now and again, and you could do nothing with them. Idiots! Generally, they were all professionals, and everything worked out well.

NP: You'd mentioned two captains. One you talked about being fired in the mid-Atlantic. They didn't put you out in the lifeboat as a--.

DC: No, they're not allowed to do that. Anyway, the lifeboat might have sunk when it went out. [Laughing]

NP: So what about the other guy?

DC: He was just a bad character. He was—I won't go into the details of it—but he had screwed up his life a bit, quite a bit, and he took it out on his officers. The company--. There were officers leaving at the end of every voyage, and the company then investigated, "Why were all of these officers leaving?" Then of course, eventually, they discovered that the old man was a pain in the neck, and nobody wanted to sail with him. So just at the end of the voyage, you got off the ship. Now, you could have a contract that would last eight months, but if the ship came back to port within that eight months—English port—you could leave the ship. Generally, I stayed on and did the eight months and got a bit of extra money and all the rest of it. If the ship was nice, I might have stayed even longer. There was one ship, I stayed on it for two years.

NP: Which ship was that?

DC: It was a ship belonging to South Marine, South African Marine Corporation. It was a 12-passenger ship, and you had all the advantages of a liner without any of the horse feathers. The standard dress was a pair of shorts and a shirt with epaulets or the long pants because we sailed mainly within the tropics. We sailed from South Africa to New York, and then went down around into the Gulf discharging, came back up to New York loading, picked up your 12 passengers in New York and sailed for Cape Town. That was about a 20-day voyage from New York down to Cape Town.

[0:40:48]

NP: Now, to someone like me that has not spent much time on a ship, I see the appeal, especially of the one you were just talking about if you like hot weather.

DC: Didn't bother me.

NP: But it seems like a lonely life in a sense, even though you're with people most of the time. It seems like it's really lonely or different.

DC: I never felt lonely at it. The 12-passenger ships were great. Great fun on those. Some of the ladies and all the rest of it—we're not getting into that. [Laughs] But no, I liked it. I enjoyed the life at sea. Had girlfriends here and there around the world, as I'm sure you know.

NP: [Laughing] I do now!

DC: Oh, yes. On that one, I had a girlfriend in Dartmouth, that was where we had the longest stop because we would go to drydock there if we needed any repairs. And we'd be in Dartmouth for ten or 11 days, 12 days maybe. That was Dartmouth. The radio station was closed, nothing to do, way ashore.

NP: We were talking about movie depictions of being on the ships. How true could it be that people would have two families unknown to each other? Ever happen, or that's just silly?

DC: No, that has happened that they would have a family in New York and a family in Cape Town. [Laughs] Home at each end of a voyage. It didn't happen very often, but it did happen. There was a chief engineer, he had a home in Cape Town, and he had a home in Houston.

NP: I'm going to take just a minute here to take a look at my questions to be sure that I give you as much chance to talk as my other interviewees. What would you like people to know most about what you did? So assume 20 years from now, somebody is listening to your interview. What would you like them to know most about your career?

DC: Well, I was one of the lucky ones who went off to sea. I was very happy with it. It wasn't that I had a bad life ashore—I just enjoyed the life at sea. You got a chance--.

NP: What was it about the life at sea?

DC: It was easygoing. Well, I had what I called a gentleman's job. I got my hands dirty about once a year when I had to take down a radar scanner and put new bearing in it or something like that, but then I would have a couple of deckhands to help me get it down. When I got it down into the engine room, the engineers would help me to get the old bearings out and put the new bearings in. But that would happen maybe once a year. The rest of the time, I was more or less and office boy. I had an office. I did assist the deck officers with deck duties in port because chief officer, he worked day 9:00 to 5:00. Second officer, third officer, did the deck watches—12 hours on, 12 hours off. But I had been trained by other captains, "Would you take over deck watch?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I want to let the second officer off for a day." So he'd go ashore, tend to his own business, have a night's sleep, and come back on at 8:00 tomorrow morning. He said, "Would you take a 12-hour shift?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "Provided I'm paid." "Oh, yes. You'll be paid overtime." "Oh, thank you sir." [Laughs]

[0:45:13]

NP: So did--. Sorry.

DC: That was how I was always occupied. I wasn't one for sitting around. When the captain or chief officer got to know that I had experience behind me, they were always looking for somebody to lend a hand, and since I was good at it--. I was also taught by various captains to do the ship's paperwork because a lot of the masters hated paperwork. When they found out I could do it, "Oh!" Walk into my office, throw a bundle on my desk, and he said, "Dermot, would you go through that and do all you can with it? Not too sure of anything, leave it. When you have it all done, come down to my office." So I'd do the work, go down to his office with all the paperwork, and generally he'd say, "Get down a bottle, get some ice, and we'll have a drink while I look through this." [Laughs]

NP: So what is the standard paperwork on a--?

DC: Paperwork for arrival in port. Crew lists, bond lists. Oh, God knows. The paperwork you had to prepare, the lousier the port you were going to. It was crazy some of the things they wanted. They never checked anything. They got the paperwork, they looked at it, signed it or something. That's it. "Very good, captain."

NP: Were some countries worse for paperwork than others?

DC: Well, the worse the country, the worse they were for paperwork. I mean to say, you'd go into a German port, and they had standard forms there ready. And if you had them all filled in, they'd say, "Very good, captain. Your ship has entered into port. You can get on with the cargo loading or discharging." But some of these bloody ports down around South America, Philippines, they were messes is all you could say they were. They were a pain in the neck when they wanted paperwork for this, that, and the other. None of it meant anything.

NP: Yeah. Well, speaking of none of it meaning anything, one of the issues that we talked to shipping people about—not that we've had many shipping people—is "grease my palm."

DC: Well, you see, that was always a thing. I also ran the ship's officer's bar. I also ran that. We had an account there, an OCS account—On Ships--. No. OSC, my God. On Company Business, anyway. We had this account, and some of these guys in port—particularly the police—they'd want a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of booze. The best thing the company always said, "Give it to them," because it's not worth having the ship held up for probably $10. You see, we got all our stuff in bond for half-nothing, and a standard drink in the ships, in the officer's bar, was 50 cents a double.

NP: [Laughs] Ah!

DC: So we had a great time. And it was just that if palms had to be greased, grease them. Because what they wanted was, you know, just a bottle of booze and a carton of cigarettes, or somebody might want two bottles. Give it to them.

NP: Was that all it was? Yeah?

DC: Yeah. And then, of course, you had customs officers who were a little bit bent, and they would have a look at the list of stuff in the bond and say, "Well, I want two bottles of that, the very good stuff."

NP: So were certain areas of the world or certain countries notorious for being notorious or for being clean or, as you called it, bent?

DC: Bent.

NP: Versus order of the day.

DC: Well, you could take Central America, South America, African continent, Far East, Middle East.

NP: So that doesn't leave much.

DC: No, it doesn't. [Laughs] They all wanted something, and they knew we had it, and they knew it wasn't worth it to us to say no and have them go and get somebody—an inspector—and then there's more trouble. So, give it to them.

[0:50:11]

NP: Now the countries that you mentioned--.

DC: OCS, On Company Service.

NP: Okay. So your entertainment fund, sort of.

DC: Well, the profits from the bar was used for births, deaths, marriage--.

[Audio pauses]

NP: Let's start again at the profit.

DC: The profits from the bar were used in port or at sea for births, deaths, marriages, anniversaries, rent a car in port, something like that. That's where the profits went. I made sure that the bar was run on the up and up because it paid for all of this, and it was our money anyway. And I thought it best to run it as honestly as possible.

NP: I'm going to ask a question, and this is probably the most delicate question that I'm going to ask. And you can say, "Pass. I don't want to answer." And that's fine. I once listened to a broadcast out of Grand Marais, and there was a woman who had done a study on prostitution out of Duluth.

DC: Yeah.

NP: And her study concentrated on the ships on the Great Lakes. Any comment on that aspect of--?

DC: Prostitution, I'm afraid, is an honourable trade around the world here and there, and you're never going to get rid of it. Never. It's a way of life for some families, and it goes on in every port.

NP: Is it seen as being above board, or is it seen as illicit?

DC: No. There are certain pubs in every port in the world where you go and all the girls are bargirls, and they're "on the game" as they say. And all you have to do is ask, and you're in business.

NP: Does it happen on the ship or is it--.

DC: Oh, the passengers have a great time sometimes on the ship. [Laughing] There was this passenger ship I sailed on and some of the ladies sailed on the ship for the sake of fun with the officers.

NP: And what about the non-passenger ships?

DC: Non-passenger ships, well, the only thing we'd have on there, some of the officers might have their wives with them. One of the big tankers, I had a girlfriend with me.

NP: So if we had this woman talking about prostitution in Duluth, it wasn't the wives, it wasn't the girlfriends, and it was the ships. So are you saying you'd prefer not to talk about it?

DC: No.

NP: Or I've got the wrong idea. They didn't bring women aboard for that purpose.

DC: Oh, yes. When the ship arrived in home port, there was a whole raft of people came aboard—wives and girlfriends and all the rest of it—but in port, there was generally bars around where the girls hung out and conducted business from there. And you went to their home or the hotel that runs by the hour and all that sort of good stuff.

NP: So the preference of the ships--. Nothing, as you said, nothing gets past the captain. The captain knows what's going on.

DC: Oh, yeah. [Laughs]

NP: So the captain's preference is thing kind of thing--.

DC: Stay ashore.

NP: Stays ashore.

DC: He doesn't want it onboard ships in case of accidents, fights, this, that, and the other. He prefers it stays ashore. Like the old story, you've got Jolly Jack goes ashore in the evening time, does not return to the ship until the next morning. And of course, he's reported to the master of the vessel, and after the ship sails, there's what they call "captain's masthead" where all the ones who misbehaved in port are paraded up in front of the master. I, being the master's secretary, I'm there, the chief officer is there, and sometimes the chief engineer. Some of the guys--. Okay, they knew the crew members who were screwups anyway, and they would go ashore and mightn't come back for two or three days. And the old man would eat them alive. "You're fined three days' pay. You're logged three days' pay. You will make a deposit to the Distressed Seaman's Fund," and this, that, and the other. But to the ones he knew were okay and just went missing overnight, they'd probably tell the captain, "Sorry, captain. I went to shore. I fell in love, and I fell asleep." [Laughing]

[0:55:38]

NP: So I don't imagine they waited inshore for these guys that were coming back.

DC: Oh, no. If you are missing when the ship is ready to sail, the ship sailed. Then you were flown home at your own expense. Or they might fly you just to the next port and pick up the ship there, and eventually you'd be handed a bill for the whole lot.

NP: Aha! Who do you think makes the best--. Or what characteristics makes the best seaman? Seawomen, I imagine, there were--.

DC: Oh, they're out there now. I always found that the British captains and officers, they were the best. I got on very well with all of them. The only one who could push me around was the master of the vessel. Chief officer, second officer, third officer, anyone at all.

NP: You had the direct--.

DC: I was the old man's righthand man when it came to ship's business and all the rest of it. So he was the only one who could jump on my back, and I did my best to make sure he had no reason for it because there was no reason.

NP: And what were the characteristics of the British officers or captains that--.

DC: They were very knowledgeable in the articles that we all signed. They knew them inside out. They were very fair with the crew who fell by the wayside. It was not too often that an officer would fall by the wayside, but they were very fair with the crew. And generally, the master, he might get one of these guys up—the guy who went to shore, fell in love, fell asleep. "You didn't turn up for work. You're fined a day's pay. You didn't return to the ship, you're fined another day's pay," and various other bits and pieces and all the rest of it. "Right. Sign here." So he'd have to sign the paper. And when he left, the old man would turn to the chief officer and say, "See he gets as much overtime as you can feed him to pay for this lot." That's what I liked about the Brit captains. Now, if you got one of these screwups that didn't come back for three days, they'd say, "Forget it. And you are not to go ashore until this ship returns to England. I'm taking your card off you. Don't go ashore."

NP: I'm just going to check and see how our time is on the--. Okay. No, we're fine. I was just checking our battery life.

DC: Oh.

NP: Okay.

DC: I'll tell you an incident that happened to me. One night I was out on deck watch with my girlfriend onboard. And anyway, this guy comes back to the ship drunk as a monkey, and in a very amorous mood. [Laughs] So he starts trying to put the moves on the second officer, who is a girl, lady. I went over to him and said, "Listen." I said, "You're drunk as a skunk. Get yourself into your cabin and sleep it off." "Ah! You're only a radio officer. You're not an officer on the deck of this ship," and one thing and the other. And I said, "Listen, I'm telling you. Get off the deck, or there's going to be hell to pay for you tomorrow morning." So he turned to go, muttering to himself, and he saw a spanner lying on the hatch coaming. It's at the edge of the hatch like that. Something like that.

NP: A spanner being a wrench?

DC: A wrench. You know these ones that you adjust, and the jaws open out or closed. Something like that. So he grabbed this thing, and he swung it at me, and you could see it coming from three miles out. I put my arm up to block it. He hit my arm and lost his grip on the spanner. I got hit flat across the mouth.

[1:00:02]

NP: Who got hit across the mouth?

DC: I did.

NP: Oh, no!

DC: [Laughs] So of course, next thing, second officer calls two other deckhands, says, "Get this guy taken to his cabin and throw him in the shower. I don't want to see any more of him tonight." So then, of course, "Get the first aid kit. I'll look after the radio officer here." I was bleeding from my lips and probably my teeth and that. So anyway, I got patched up, and she said, "You go on to bed." She said, "I can take care of this for the rest of the night. No problems." So I went off to bed. Next morning, I appear for breakfast. And I'm there having breakfast, and the captain walks in. He sits down, and he looks at me. "Jesus, Dermot!" He said, "What kind of a woman got a hold of you last night?" [Laughing] So of course, the tale had to be told of what happened, and he said, "You mean that one of my crew struck one of my officers?" "Yes, sir." "Right." Immediately, the steward comes in. "Get me the bosun." Chief officer was there. "Where's the second officer?" "She's asleep." "Well, get her up for 10:00, my office. The whole lot up there."

So anyway, 10:00 in the morning comes around, and this object is marched into the captain's office by the bosun. The old man is vile mood altogether. He says, "There's the radio officer there. You hit him last night with a weapon." "Ah, I don't know, sir. I didn't do anything." Completely out of it. So he says, "Right." He says, "You will be fined for striking an officer five days' pay. You will be fined five days' pay. You will also--." This, that, and the other. [Laughs] When the bill was tallied up, he owed the company about 100 pounds, which was money in those days! Of course, he was fired, and his liberty card was taken off him. That's why my two front teeth are false.

NP: Nice front teeth! [Laughing]

DC: I think that he put infinitesimal cracks in the two of them, and years later one of them broke off, and not too long after then, the other one began to crack up as well. So that's why I have two front teeth, eh? All I want for Christmas are my two front teeth. [Laughing]

NP: You would have preferred something else.

DC: Oh, it was stupid. It was stupid what happened, that he lost his grip on the damn thing.

NP: What were the major changes that you saw? You were on as a radio operator for how long?

DC: 27 years.

NP: So what are the major changes that occurred?

DC: Well, we got better equipment. Better transmitters, better receivers. The job became easier and easier and easier.

NP: What becomes different that it becomes easier? What was tough and then became less tough?

DC: Well, we had excellent equipment. Like the first ship I went to sea on, it had what they called an Oceanspan Transmitter. You would think that you'd be able to radio from the west coast of Ireland to the east coast of the States. No. You had to be in the middle of the Atlantic to get to one stop or the other. [Laughs] That's why it was called an Oceanspan. But anyways, through quirks of the atmosphere, you could generally make out all right, but you might have to sit up half a night to get the conditions right to get a message from the southwest corner of Ireland to New York.

NP: What do you look for? Is it cloud cover? Is it wind? What do you look for?

DC: No. You listen for an incoming signal from the ground station that you want to get to, and if it's a fairly strong--. If he's giving you a fairly strong signal, you can probably get a fairly strong signal to him.

NP: Is it the equipment that makes the strong signal, or is it something about the atmosphere?

DC: No, the atmosphere. Stratosphere.

NP: Okay. So what in layperson's terms--?

DC: It's just the stratosphere's a bit stronger. And the radio waves kind of go from the antenna on the ship up to the stratosphere and down again, up again, and down to the station. Something like that. Or it might just need one skip to get there, but that's what the stratosphere did.

[1:05:18]

NP: And what does it bounce off of the stratosphere? Like what's up there that it comes back down?

DC: Oh, there's a big drum. I have no idea. [Laughing] It's just stratosphere is what bends the wave back.

NP: Okay. Good! [Laughing]

DC: Don't ask me these highly technical questions. [Laughs]

NP: No, no. Okay. Just curious! So then satellite technology came into being. Is that one of the main improvements?

DC: That was why I lost my job.

NP: Tell us about that.

DC: Ship went into Amsterdam one day, and the old man came to see me. And he said, "Dermot, you're going to school." I said, "What the hell for?" He said, "They're going to install an Inmarsat satellite station on the ship here, and you're going to have to learn how to drive it." Oh, God! So anyway, I was sent off to school in Amsterdam to learn to operate this station. Now, I had to learn to start it up from dead, get it locked onto satellite, and then check out that you had a good signal for this, that, and the other, and check out the safety equipment and all the rest of it. But I knew after a year of operating this station, I knew the writing was on the wall, and the writing said, "You're screwed." [Laughs] Because I ran this gear for two years. It never even blew a fuse. It was fantastic. Japanese equipment, Inmarsat. Of course, as happened in the end, I was called up. I was on the *MV Arctic* at the time, which was the Canadian icebreaking vessel.

NP: On the what?

DC: The *MV Arctic*, which was supposed to be the forerunner in a fleet of cargo ships able to travel in the arctic without icebreaker assistance. We were our own icebreaker. So anyway, the writing was on the wall, and the ship came back to, I think, it came back to Montreal. And I was invited up to Ottawa. I was told there and then, "Your contract is not going to be renewed, Dermot." I said, "Why?" They said, "We're going to teach the officers on the bridge how to operate the Inmarsat station. We don't need you anymore. Bye-bye." [Laughs]

NP: Was that horribly disappointing or were you ready for a change?

DC: Oh, I'd seen the writing on the wall. That was when I got dumped on the beach.

NP: How old were you at that time?

DC: Oh, God. I went away when I was about 20. 27--. I was up around the 50 mark.

NP: But not ready to leave?

DC: No. It was a lovely job, and I thought it would go on until I was ready to retire instead of me being told, "Go home, sucker. Don't need you anymore." [Laughs]

NP: Were there other ships that you could have worked for that were using the other technology or--?

DC: No. They were throwing us all out. Within two years, all of the big land stations were closed. Halifax Radio was a major station for the western-north Atlantic for Canada. That's gone. And all the other stations around the world, they're all gone. Because now you can get out on the bridge with your satellite telephone and dial about 18 to 20 numbers into it, and you're straight off the bridge of the ship into the office ashore.

NP: Well, in the grain industry, there have been—as probably in every industry other than people, service industries—so many technological changes that cause downsizing.

DC: Well, this is what all this technology is all about. Like they say, if we give it enough time, there'll be robots looking after you in the supermarket. You won't be able to punch them out. [Laughing]

NP: Our jails will get fewer people in them! Now, I don't know if I ever let you answer the question about "What did you want people to know about your career?" So 20 years from now, they're listening to this interview and--.

[1:10:11]

DC: Oh, they'll probably be saying, "That crazy old bastard!" [Laughing] No, I enjoyed it. I was very sorry when it all came to an end. To me, it was a gentleman's job, and you were expected to do the job that you were given and mind your own business because you knew everyone's business onboard ship. I really had no objections to any of it. I liked it. I was probably a sailor at heart.

NP: The people who were unhappy with it, were there some?

DC: Well, there were some who were only there for the money because the money was good, and they weren't too happy with themselves. Generally, they'd pack it in after a few years and say, "This is an awful bloody life altogether." I was single, you see, and I had a few girlfriends here and there in port, and I was quite happy with that. There was the one ship where I got hit in the face. The second officer and myself played Mr. and Mrs. Cruise on that ship. [Laughs] The big tanker that I was on, there was another girlfriend I brought onboard there. She had nursing experience behind her. They signed her on as the ship's nurse and paid her!

NP: So that worked out well.

DC: Worked out very well for me! [Laughs]

NP: Would you suggest that career—I mean, obviously not the radio operator now because that's--.

DC: They're gone.

NP: But a ship's career for people?

DC: Well, if you had a yearn to go to sea, but go as a deck officer. I think you'd have a better job as a deck officer than down in the stinking hot engine room, although now they have air-conditioned control rooms in the engine room, and half the time the engineer on watch, he goes down, puts his feet up on the big console, and he just reads dials. An alarm might go off or a buzzer or

something, and he'd go down in the engine room and have a look at whatever is complaining, sort it out, and back up on his perch in the air-conditioned control room.

NP: Am I making a wrong assumption by saying you really did enjoy visiting the world?

DC: I did, but as time went by, the view of the world that you got was a bit on the superficial side because turnaround in port became very fast. The companies all, they knew that when the ship stops, it stops earning money. So the big thing is get it into port, get it loaded or unloaded, and get it back out to sea. It didn't matter if the ship came in at 6:00 on Christmas morning. There's a squad of men on the dock, get it unloaded or loaded, get it out again. That was the thing that I found was a change. Like, my God, there were times you went into port, and we'd be there for ten days. You had time to go around drinking and chasing girls and all this stuff. [Laughs]

NP: So that was the upside of not having a steady family. [Laughing]

DC: Well, as far as I know, I have no children. As far as I know. [Laughs] I don't think so. I stay away from home on Father's Day in case. [Laughing]

NP: Do you watch the ships in harbour here in Thunder Bay and wonder why they're sitting there for any length of time?

DC: Oh, I know they're just there to load grain and shove off again. The only one's I'd be interested in are what they call heavy-lift ships that bring in these, you know, the windmills for the electrical generation. Now those heavy-lift ships, they're a different beast altogether. The heavy-lift ships.

NP: In what way?

DC: Well, they have to have special cranes. They have to have a special ballast system in it because when the crane swings out over one side, if you don't have ballast to put in the other side, the next thing is the ship rolls over onto the dock.

[1:15:07]

NP: And I've actually seen that. Well, actually, I saw the crane swing out too and hit--.

DC: Yeah. They're all kinds of trouble, but now again, that's all automated. If the ship begins to roll, the ballast system will begin to pump in the opposite direction. They remain remarkable stable. Of course, you don't lift this thing and swing it out like hell. Slowly. Give the ballast system a chance to work.

NP: Did you ever have any close calls?

DC: No. But the worst that I ever ended up in was this *Arctic*, the *MV Arctic*, in a storm of unbelievable conditions off Cape Farewell, which is the southern tip of Greenland.

NP: What is the name of it?

DC: Southern tip of Greenland.

NP: And the name of the Cape?

DC: Cape Farewell.

NP: Farewell.

DC: That was where the Airforce in the Second World War was able to escort the convoys. At that, they just had sufficient view to turn around and go back. That's how it got the name Cape Farewell. That was where the Airforce waved farewell to the ships and said, "Good luck." But it was a bit peculiar in the way that the ocean current was going, I think, east to west, and the wind was west to east. The waves were about 30-feet high and about 1,500 feet apart. So you went sliding down the back of the wave into the trough, and of course, the ship did not start up immediately. It slammed into this wall of water, and the wall of water came sweeping down the deck, and the ship staggered up through this lot. This went on for about 36 hours. That was the worst I was ever in.

We also lost two men overboard. We had this big clamshell for loading stuff on and off the ship. The clamshell broke loose. This thing weighed about seven tonnes, and it's sliding down the deck towards what we called the bunkering station. This is where we take on fuel, all this sort of thing. If it slides down and slams into this thing, there's a good bet there's going to be a fire. So we had to get men out on deck, and things went a bit wrong. Two of them were washed overboard. There was not a hope in hell of getting them back onboard. We went through all of the procedures for firing the rocket lines at them and all of it. They were gone in half an

hour. They were wearing the yellow oil skins, and when they filled with water, that was it. So a very sad ship arrived up in port in the Arctic.

NP: Hm. I am just checking my notes here.

DC: Go ahead. I hope you can hear all of this. [Laughing]

NP: I should hope so too!

DC: If you want to bring me back, I will come back sometime.

NP: Well, we'll hope because you've been very good. You obviously are used to obeying orders because you've kept that right to your--. [Laughing]

DC: Do what you're told, Dermot.

NP: Right to your mouth, yeah. [Laughing] You'd mentioned earlier that there was one female second officer. How would you describe the transition of bringing more women into the officer class and shipping?

DC: Well, it generally did not do the ship any harm. The boys learned to change their shirts a bit more often. [Laughs] They learned to watch their language a bit more, and generally kind of observe the ordinary decencies of life when she was around. You didn't swear like hell. Sometimes I went down on the deck of the ship, and the language got quite blue at times. They did improve the ships. I thought so anyway.

NP: A civilizing effect.

DC: Something like that, yes. We were a bit better—sometimes a lot better—behaved. It was always nice if we had a nurse onboard or a wife who had nursing experience, like the girlfriend I had. She had nursing experience in her background, and she was the ship's nurse. She was signed on, paid as the ship's nurse.

[1:20:18]

NP: Any resentment on the part of--? You know, one of the things that in interviews with people at the grain elevators, same kind of thing. In the '70s, there started to be more encouragement of women to take on non-traditional, and unfortunately, it was also at a time—once you headed into the '80s—where there was a shrinking of the jobs available.

DC: Yeah. Well, you see, they kept the best of the men or women. Like when it came to empty out some guy, well, if he was a bad egg, you threw him out, but they would keep the girls or something like that. I can understand that. I'm afraid I always had an understanding that you're paid there to do a job. You're not paid to act a maggot. And if the girl is better behaved than you are—but equally qualified to do the job—don't look at me. There was an awful lot of lady radio officers in the Swedish and Norwegian merchant navies, and I think Holland as well. They had a lot of ladies as radio officers. And you know, they got on pretty well with the crew. It was an accepted thing. Your radio officer could be a man or woman.

NP: Did you have radio officer conventions?

DC: No, no. [Laughs] One story I'll tell you about that. There was a merchant navy's officers' dinner in London way back. This thing has gone by the board by now. But held in a particular hotel. Merchant navy officers were supposed to show up in uniform for this great dinner in the evening. Of course, a lot of the merchant navy officers arrived at noon and went to the bar. [Laughs] So anyway, there was this rather twit of an officer who got up to give a speech after dinner. We were all merchant navy officers, and this guy gets up, and the opening remarks of the speech were, "Gentlemen of the P&O, officers of the merchant navy, and men of the British Tanker Company." [Laughs] Someone threw a bottle at him.

NP: And why was that?

DC: We were all merchant navy officers. "Gentlemen of the P&O, officers of the merchant navy, and men of the British Tanker Company." He got it across the head. Whoever the guy was, I'm sure he was drunk, but he had a good arm. [Laughing]

NP: And accurate aim.

DC: Probably more luck than anything else.

NP: Now, Rebecca said, "You have to ask him about the KGB." [Note: Rebecca had recommended that we interview Dermot.]

DC: Oh, that was my captain that got involved with the KBG. One of the captains I sailed with who was on the *MV Arctic* with me running on that grain run up and down to Hamburg, Hamburg up to--. I forgot.

NP: Leningrad.

DC: My sometimers moments are getting longer. Leningrad.

NP: Start that again, because I interrupted you.

DC: This master who was on the *MV Arctic* with me became rather enamoured of a lady in Leningrad. Anyway, we spent six months on this particular charter hauling grain, and they got along very well together. He asked her to get engaged, and she said, "Yes." So then time went on a bit, and he decided he would ask her to marry him. Now, she was the perfect Russian blonde that you would see in a movie, spoke English with very little accent, and very well presented, very well spoken--lovely lady altogether. Anyway, he went out and he bought two wedding bands. That's them. On the next voyage up to Leningrad, he went out, and they met and had dinner, and at dinner, he asked her, "Would you marry me?" Apparently, she said, "Yes, but they will never let me out of the country. I'm a member of the KBG." [Laughs]

[1:25:20]

NP: KGB?

DC: This is the secret police in Russia. What KBG means, I don't know, but it's the initials of a Russian phrase. So anyway, he was very disappointed and upset and all the rest of it, and he went on a drinking jag. So there was nobody coming from the office to visit the ship in Hamburg because it was freezing cold. It was the winter and all that. There's no such thing as having a jolly time, so nobody came. So the chief officer said, "We're going to have to take over and run the ship, and let the old man do his thing." So anyway, the chief officer said to me, he said, "I will play captain. You get radio traffic for the old man. I'll take care of it. You will send the answers back." I said, "Yes." He's a good master. He was one of the best masters I ever had, so we decided we'd cover for him, and we did. We got through two voyages with him drunk as a monkey.

Anyway, he came out of it in the end, and he called us all up to his dayroom. Like, the captain has a bedroom, a dayroom, a bathroom, and an office and all this sort of stuff. He called the deck officers up to his dayroom one evening. He said, "Sit down. A few bottles there, have a drink." And he said, "I'm sorry for the mess I dropped you in." He said, "I see you all managed." "Well, captain." The chief officer spoke up on behalf of all of us, and he said, "We look on you as a good master." And he said, "We looked on you as a very good master. You've been very fair to all of us, so we thought we'd carry the load for a while and see what happened." [Laughs] And all he could do is say, "Thank you very, very much for what you did, and I'm all straight now."

Then he wanted to get rid of the wedding bands. He was going to throw them in the ocean. I talked to him. I said, "Listen, cap." I said, "You can't throw those in the ocean." I was with him when he bought them. They're 18 karat gold, and they're, you know, a desperate thing to do with them, throw them in. He got them in bond, so he got them for half-nothing, but if you went to buy them in a jewellery store up town, my God, it would cost you a fortune. So I said, "I know what you paid for them. I'll give you that, and you give me the rings." "No," he said, "Bloody awful what happened." So in the end, there was an argument went on for about a week back and forth. He was in the officer's bar, and he had the porthole open and the two rings on the little shelf inside. And he said, "Give me a cheque for $300, or I'll throw them out the window." I said, "I can't do that yet." He said, "I am the master of this vessel. Do you want them or not?" "Wait a moment, captain. I'll be back down." Gave him the cheque, he gave them, I had them melted down. So there's a bit of history to the rings I have.

That one. The little one my mother gave me when I went off to sea. The other one is my father's wedding band, which was pretty battered when I got it, so I got it rebuilt. That one is a thing I got at an auction. There was a girlfriend down there in Clearwater who said, "You should buy that, Dermot. It's well worth the money." Paid a couple hundred bucks for it. Then this is real sentimental value. I hope I've given you enough information here. [Laughs]

NP: Yes. And if you remind me, I'll take a picture of your hands.

DC: Oh, my God! [Laughs]

NP: So we can have it to go with the words. You know, I think that just one question about shipping routes. Did they change much over the time of your--?

[1:30:11]

DC: No, well they cannot change the shipping routes. If you're going to run--.

NP: Let's say the busyness of them.

DC: Oh, yeah. They're more busy now, but the real trade routes as they're called, the ships still travel the same way. Because Cape Town to New York, what can you do? It's just a straight line straight up the ocean. Around England and Ireland, you've got ferries running around all over the place, but they're not international trade really. But the main trade routes of the world—if you ever get a map that gives you the main trade routes of the world—you will see they are all within the tropics generally.

NP: Is that because it's easier sailing?

DC: No, it's just that's where the main business goes on.

NP: Okay. In the tropics?

DC: Well, it's just that--. That is a broad statement that. The journeys are generally within the tropics. Like the north Atlantic in the summer, you've got all kinds of space in the water up there. Just travel along and the weather is generally good. That run from New York to South Africa, that was a lovely run. Very little bad weather. Of course, we had weather reports provided by yours truly as to what was happening ahead of you. You could alter course as needed to avoid the worst of it anyway.

NP: You would have been off the ocean with the coming of climate change, or it had already started?

DC: Climate change had started before I came ashore, and we didn't know it was climate change. Generally, when I was done near Clearwater, you made sure you were in a pub about 4:30 in the afternoon.

NP: You were in a--?

DC: A pub.

NP: Oh, a pub!

DC: Because within the next hour, all hell was going to break loose.

NP: Okay. If you could start again, because I asked for that clarification. [Laughs] I hadn't quite tuned into your accent.

DC: Climate change, it happened before we knew what climate change was. What happened down in Florida was that generally you made sure you were in a pub at 4:30 in the afternoon because for the next hour, all hell was going to break loose with fantastic thunder and lightning storms and buckets of rain. Of course, that was all right. That was normal. And then we noticed it began to happen at any time of the day—dawn, middle of the day, middle of the night. Fantastic thunderstorms, lightning, and buckets of rain. To me, when I look back, that was the beginning of the climate change thing, and that would be, oh God, somewhere around 1980.

NP: You might not feel qualified to answer that--.

DC: Probably not. [Laughs]

NP: But that never stops anybody anyway. Go right ahead, just suppose. Is shipping in danger with climate change? Or so you have to have to have five more storms than you normally do, big deal?

DC: Well, you see what happened with that ship that left Jacksonville headed to Puerto Rico and got rolled over in the storm. Oh, that was all in the news there some years back. Captain decided to sail the ship for Puerto Rico, got into one of these desperate storms, altogether the ship rolled over and went down. So there is always a danger in any of these storms at sea because Mother Nature—God bless her—can beat anything that man has built into rubbish, and that's what happened. There was nobody saved. The ship rolled over, and everybody went with it. It was a big ship too.

NP: Shades of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

DC: That broke in half. Okay, the ship is that long, but what happens is, the two ends end up on the top of this wave and the top of this wave, and it goes the middle drops. It'll only stand that strain for so long, and then the ship snaps in half. And since they are wide open for the whole length, they got conveyor belts down each side in the bottom, and there's no way to seal those off. So the ship fills with water instantly, and it's loaded with iron ore as well. So talk about an express elevator gone.

[1:35:45]

NP: I was telling you a little earlier before we went on tape about a little bit about our project and that we're trying to preserve the history of the grain industry—and obviously ships out of Thunder Bay being a really important part of it.

DC: Yeah.

NP: What do you think would be the pieces to preserve related to the shipping?

DC: Oh, my God. To be honest with you, I don't really know because the ships are probably not under the Canadian flag, so they just leave here, and God knows what happens to them. If you want to get them back, it would cost you a fortune. A king's ransom, probably. The little ones, they do bring back. Like, there's a tug that they hope to bring in somewhere here to preserve.

NP: They did. The *Alexander Henry*, I believe, which is the--.

DC: Yeah, that's one of them.

NP: Is the icebreaker.

DC: Yeah. There's another one too that they want to preserve.

NP: *Whalen*.

DC: *Whalen*, yeah. No, you see, the ships that come in here to load grain generally are headed out overseas. If not, they're generally headed for Montreal where the grain is transshipped. They dump it in the silos in Montreal, and they can get a really big bulk carrier into Montreal and load it there in Montreal. So these--.

NP: Do you think the days of the Seaway are numbered?

DC: They may want to build a bigger one. I don't know. I've heard rumblings that they want to widen it or something like that. They have begun to widen the Panama Canal. They're going to do a great job on that where they'll really be able to get big ships through it because it saves an awful lot of money for a ship to go through the Panama Canal instead of having to go all the way down to the tip of South America and back up the other side. That Cape down there is a notorious rough place for ships. I think Cape Horn. Cape of Good Hope is South Africa. But Cape Horn down there is a notoriously rough place for ships.

NP: Did you have a favourite ship and a favourite run?

DC: The favourite ship I had was that 12-passenger 22,000-tonne cargo ship that I sailed on out of Cape Town. I was on it for two years. It was great.

NP: And that's your favourite run too then?

DC: It was a lovely run. Sunshine the whole way.

NP: Have you been on many ships since you left your job?

DC: No. I've never been on any of any consequence.

NP: Have you missed it then?

DC: Oh, to me it was a lovely life and a lovely job. I do miss it, but then times and people change.

NP: So you don't go on winter cruises?

DC: No, no, no. My, God. The floating city. For God's sake. If I was to go on anything, I'd like to find a small one with about 100 passengers, but not one of these, "Oh, we've got 5,000 passengers onboard." Mother of God Almighty! No.

NP: And Thunder Bay, in the middle of a country, doesn't that sort of take you away from the sea?

DC: Well, they have the big pond out there that I like to look at every now and again. The sea, it is, as I say, a lovely life. I loved it.

NP: Any questions I should have asked you that I haven't?

DC: Oh, God. I don't know.

NP: Any stories you would've liked to have told that--?

[1:40:02]

DC: Well, as I say, the only interesting one was the one where I got hit in the face, and that one off Cape Farewell was about the worst storm I was ever in. Really bad. And the only reason that the ship held together was it was built as an A-1, first-class icebreaker. That was the only reason it held together. It was built for plowing through the ice. It was supposed to be able to maintain the speed of three noughts through three feet of ice.

NP: Wow.

DC: It's quite a ship.

NP: Whose ship was it?

DC: The Gouvernement du Canada.

NP: Ah.

DC: They built it. It was supposed to be a forerunner of a whole fleet, but the next thing is the Arctic began to melt. So they said, "No,' and scrapped that idea.

NP: So scrap it because with icebergs floating here and there, it's going to be dangerous?

DC: No.

NP: Or you won't need it because there's no ice?

DC: We're not going to need it because of the lack of ice.

NP: What difference is that going to make in the overall, do you see? The Northwest Passage becomes better than the Panama Canal for cutting off distance?

DC: [Laughs] Could be. Could be. The only thing is the Northwest Passage is not a simple thing of putting a ship into it and off you go like going through the Panama Canal. It's a treacherous thing to get through, and you've got to have a very good navigator and very good information about all the rocks and currents and eddies, and if it's plugged with ice, and all this sort of thing.

NP: And that will be new because those have not been plotted, given that it's been mostly ice.

DC: Well, they're still working on plotting the accuracy of that passage.

NP: What is an accracy?

DC: The accuracy.

NP: Accuracy. [Laughs]

DC: Probably me Irish brogue, me Irish brogue.

NP: Would you like to repeat that again? [Laughing]

DC: They're still working on plotting the accuracy of the Northwest Channel. They have to get a better picture of the bottom and all that sort of good stuff because the nasty little rocks down there will tear the bottom out of your ship.

NP: You've been to Churchill?

DC: Yes. We went in there one time, and I'm not too sure. I think we took cargo in. I don't think we took anything out. But the government should have that railway line fixed, keep that port open.

NP: And why do you say that?

DC: Well, it's necessary for the harvests in Manitoba. It's necessary for the people who live up there. They're keeping the Arctic open. You know, there's all kinds of reasons. They could have a rescue station up there. You never know. I think they should next year—well, this year—they should have a plan in hand to get stuck into that railway and fix it. It's the only link. Otherwise, you fly or go by ship. Flying is terribly expensive, to fly in supplies. Ships, you'd have to let the last ship go in probably somewhere in November or something like that, and then they're left for the winter. If anything goes wrong, something goes on fire, and half of your supplies go with it. That's why I think they should get that railway line repaired and back open again. But they'll talk about that now for ten years before they do anything, I'm sure.

NP: Well, I think we're running low on battery probably. Oh. We're not that much in danger. So this has been a wonderful conversation. Almost two hours, if you can believe it.

DC: Oh, the Irish.

NP: And I would like to thank you so much.

DC: Oh, that's all right. I hope that some of the information makes sense to you.

NP: It does. And we have not interviewed a lot of sailors, so it fills in pieces that we're very weak on. And it was extremely enjoyable listening to you. So, I'll just--.

DC: Well, if you want to get into this again, give me a call. Oh, yes. I can see the battery is way down.

NP: But we're okay. You can say your goodbyes. [Laughs]

[1:45:01]

DC: I hope you have enjoyed the bit of information that I gave you, that it made sense to you, and that you can make use of it in the project that you're working on. Thank you for your patience. [Laughing]

NP: Thank you very much!

DC: Like I say, if you want to--.

End of interview.