

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With
Bill Marten
Austin, Texas
February 4, 2016

Today is February the 4th, 2016. My name is John Fargo and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today I am interviewing Bill Marten concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is taking place in Mr. Marten's home in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the Educational Research Center of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to World War II.

Mr. Fargo: OK. Bill, let's talk a little bit about your early years. Where were you born and when?

Mr. Marten: I was born at Cameron, Missouri. It's a small town north of Kansas City. September 4, 1925.

Mr. Fargo: September?

Mr. Marten: September 4, 1925.

Mr. Fargo: What was your father's occupation?

Mr. Marten: He was a farmer.

Mr. Fargo: Do you have any siblings?

Mr. Marten: I have one brother and three sisters. They're all passed away now.

Mr. Fargo: What was it like growing up in Missouri?

Mr. Marten: This was in the depression of the '30s. And we were poor. And my father, although we had a 240 acre farm, uh, looking back, I would say he was a very poor manager. And we lost the farm. In 1937, moved to town. To Cameron. And he took a job as a laborer. I think he worked on the WPA. And after that he drank quite heavily. And my home life became, well it was a dysfunctional setting to say the least. And so when I was 16, I ran away from home and went to California. I was a bum. Money was so dear, that it became my soul ambition was to make some money. War came along and I heard about the merchant marine. They were, they got bonus, we got bonus, for traveling in war zone. And paid very well. A civilian occupation, as you understand. You understand that. So, uh, hey, that's for me.

Mr. Fargo: Were you out in California at that time?

Mr. Marten: Let's see, no, I bummed around. I worked in the shipyard. I worked at the filling station, the gasoline, you know service station. Back then you know, you serve a scar. It's about like today where you pump your own gas. And then I drifted up into Montana and worked on the farm as wheat harvest. And I realized, you know, I'm never gonna make any money unless I get some education. And I'm dropped out of high school, of course.

Mr. Fargo: How many years of high school did you have?

Mr. Marten: Three.

Mr. Fargo: You had three.

Mr. Marten: So I went back to finish my senior year of high school. But then, you know I've been around a lot and I didn't fit in. Then I signed up for the merchant marine. In November of 1943, I was called to the merchant marine and went to Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, New York for training. I chose to work in the engine room.

Mr. Fargo: Did you know anything about machinery at all?

Mr. Marten: No, no that was the purpose of the training in Sheepshead Bay. It was, it took about, let's see probably six months.

Mr. Fargo: Six months of training?

Mr. Marten: Yeah. Then I shipped out. And I worked for city service. Tankers were very venerable during World War II, because especially if they were carrying gasoline. Nobody gets off if they are torpedoed. It's the end

Mr. Fargo: Were you aware of the danger when you joined the merchant marines?

Mr. Marten: I suppose I was, but as I imagined the other day, a 17 year old boy doesn't have any fear, you know, he thinks he knows everything. So it was the money on tankers. You made more money on tankers, so that's where I wanted to be.

Mr. Fargo: How much did they pay about?

Mr. Marten: I started as a fireman, fireman water tender. And I think the basic pay was probably about 75 dollars a month. Or maybe it was 100 and a quarter. But then you got a bonus, a 100% bonus for travelling in the war zone. And that's what I'm looking at.

Mr. Fargo: So if you're base was 75 dollars a month, they give you-

Mr. Marten: And you have no expenses of course, we got room and board. And you're at sea, so you don't have any place to spend it if you had any.

Mr. Fargo: So you had a 100% bonus while you were at sea?

Mr. Marten: Yes. I think in certain areas it may have been less than that, but in the North Atlantic I think we got 100%.

Mr. Fargo: That was quite an inducement.

Mr. Marten: For a guy like, in my circumstances, hey, that's for me.

Mr. Fargo: You were about 17 years old at this point?

Mr. Marten: Well yeah, it was '43, so I would've been 18 then. So then March of '44, I shipped out, a city service tanker.

Mr. Fargo: City Service?

Mr. Marten: Yeah

Mr. Fargo: That was the name of the company?

Mr. Marten: The oil company. City Service Oil Company. They're still in existence. So I sailed on their ships.

Mr. Fargo: Did you have to have some kind of a contract? Not an enlistment, but your terms of service?

Mr. Marten: Yeah, in the merchant marine, you sign on the articles, the ship's articles on each voyage.

Mr. Fargo: Each voyage?

Mr. Marten: You sign on, and of course in peace time you sign up, you know your voyage would be three months and you would be going here and there. But in war time, they don't tell you this because they don't want anybody to know where you're going. It would be form and the only information it would have it that it would be a foreign voyage. Then sometimes we would load with oil in the Caribbean or sometimes in Texas. And then go to one of the East Coast ports, New York or Philadelphia or Boston, and load deck cargo. Then cross to England and discharge there.

Mr. Fargo: So, your first assignment was below decks in the engine room?

Mr. Marten: Yeah, I was a fireman

Mr. Fargo: Tell me a little bit, what did that entail?

Mr. Marten: Well, the fireman water handler, you would fire up the boilers and the oil fire boilers would make steam to run the turbines. So seven days a week, eight hours a day, two four hour shifts each day. There was no overtime or anything. You just stood watch in the boiler room for four hours. Four hours on and eight hours off every day.

Mr. Fargo: Everyday. What were the living conditions like on board ship?

Mr. Marten: Pretty good, they were good. Especially on tankers. I sailed on, it was called the T-2 tanker. Which were turbo electric and they were state of the art at that time in marine propulsion. The quarters were very well pointed and the food was good. Sometimes the cooks were not that great. We were well fed. One of the things we missed most was reading material, there was no library or anything on the ship. When we get in to port, everybody would go ashore and buy magazines and books and stuff to read on the voyage and you read a magazine, then you reread the magazine, then you start reading the ads. One of the things you miss sometimes on multiple voyage, multiple trips with oil or gasoline or whatever, take it over and come back then sail the Caribbean and load again and go over again, so we would make multiple trips on one voyage. So we would be out for several months at a time. And the thing we'd miss most is fresh milk. And I remember the companies knew this, so when you got back to New York, you couldn't dock right away, there were anchors, and they'd send out on a launch some fresh milk and boy everybody would grab a fresh bottle. The old-timers knew better than to do this. And we learned. You know, you grab a bottle of milk and drink it right down and your body is not accustomed to that and pretty soon, up it comes again. So the old-

timers knew you'd take a little bit of this and get your body accustomed to this before you drink too much. I didn't know that. I learned.

Mr. Fargo: Learned the hard way.

Mr. Marten: Yep

Mr. Fargo: Tell me about your first voyage.

Mr. Marten: First voyage, um, I boarded the SS Balls Bluff, T-2 tanker in Philadelphia.

Mr. Fargo: Philadelphia.

Mr. Marten: And went to Kurasou in the Caribbean, loaded it with the oil, went to Free Town, West Africa. The ships during the war, they let them in in convoys with the destroyer naval escorts to protect them. But this first voyage we went alone.

Mr. Fargo: Is that right? No convoy?

Mr. Marten: No convoy. We just loaded and went all the way to Free Town, West Africa.

Mr. Fargo: So, uneventful trip, that first voyage?

Mr. Marten: Uneventful, except somewhere along the way, I believe it was coming back, we encountered a British war ship and they'd mistaken us for a...anyway, they started shooting at us until we braked. We woke up, and all I could hear was boom boom. And uh, nothing happened. I think, I think they were just shooting across the bow to stop us for searching. They identified us and went on.

Mr. Fargo: When you come back are you empty at that point?

Mr. Marten: Well in ballast, we take on a ballast of sea water in the holds to balance because, you know a ship without any cargo, a tanker without any cargo is like a corpse so you have to take on ballast to stabilize the ship and keep the screw in the water and even then, in rough seas, a screw will come out of the water.

Mr. Fargo: How many voyages did you make from the states to Europe.

Mr. Marten: Oh, gosh.

Mr. Fargo: The book said 12, do you remember?

Mr. Marten: That's probably pretty close. I would say, you know this was 75 years ago, and I may have some records here I could look it up. See this was 1943 when I land and then I sailed after the war 'till '48 and so I sailed in peace time and of course there were no convoys then.

Mr. Fargo: But from the states to Europe or England or wherever, you sailed in convoys?

Mr. Marten: Most of the time, yes. And of course the tankers were fairly fast. I don't remember how fast they went, but they could go faster than most other cargo ships. But, in convoy, you gotta reduce the speed to the slowest ship in the convoy, so it's about, I'm gonna say a couple of weeks to get them across. At least a couple of weeks, maybe more. I don't remember.

Mr. Fargo: Any of those crossings uh, were you torpedoed or any of the other ships?

Mr. Martin: I never lost a ship. I saw some of them go down.

Mr. Fargo: You did see some of them go down?

Mr. Martin: And that's a scary sight to see. A ship is hit and it stops and you see it sinking. And gosh, get those boats in the water guys. But tankers carrying gasoline, nobody gets off.

Mr. Fargo: Nobody gets off.

Mr. Martin: Uh, and the most sobering experience I had was uh, we were in a convoy and going around North Ireland in the oh what's that channel between Ireland and England? Anyway, the convoy is breaking up right there because some ships were going, we were going to Scotland and some ships were going to Belfast and North Ireland and others going down to sail on the West Coast. And this one tanker was in the...we're going this way and he needs to go down over here and he's over here on the convoys so he pulls up and goes around behind to go down there and was out there alone. They got him.

Mr. Fargo: He was out there alone.

Mr. Martin: And uh, of course I heard the noise and ran out on deck and the ship was sunk was several miles away. But everything was red, the sky, it looked like the world was on fire.

Mr. Fargo: They were carrying gasoline?

Mr. Martin: Must've been. I never knew and I don't think a person should ever know what happened. It would have been impossible for anyone to know. It was, that made me think.

Mr. Fargo: Yeah, was that early on in your...

Mr. Martin: Oh gosh, I don't remember when that would have been. It was one of the crossings that I don't remember.

Mr. Fargo: So when you got that bonus when you were carrying gasoline or...

Mr. Martin: Well that was just for sailing in the war zone. What the cargo was, uh...

Mr. Fargo: Okay, regardless what the cargo was you got the bonus?

Mr. Martin: I believe that's the case, I couldn't be certain. But it may have been different, I don't recall it being any different.

Mr. Fargo: During the entire time you were in, during the war time, did you always sail city service? Or any other companies?

Mr. Martin: Let me see. I sailed with them, I think in the later part of the war, I sailed with a government owned entity called Pacific Tankers. And I may have made some voyages. But most of the time I was with city service. And then after the war I sailed for Atlantic Refining.

Mr. Fargo: Well tell me, did you have any navy armed guards on your ship?

Mr. Martin: Yes. Yes, and as a matter of fact they put guns on the merchant ships. The convey would have a number of destroyer escorts. Or course, they're naval vessels and operated by the navy. Anytime there's a ship sinking, they go around and drop depth charges and try to find, I don't know if they were finding if they hit anything or not. But they were there to protect the convoy, And of course the convoy doesn't stop just because a ship gets sunk. But the destroyer escorts will try to rescue the few crews that had gotten off.

Mr. Fargo: But the navy gunners attached to your...

Mr. Martin: There was, I would say about a half a dozen.

Mr. Fargo: Half a dozen sailors?

Mr. Martin: Maybe even eight or ten, I don't remember, naval personnel on board, on the ship. And they had a big gun in the stern. And, I don't know, there may have been some other guns forward. I don't remember.

Mr. Fargo: Did you have much contact with those guys?

Mr. Martin: Oh yeah, they were just...

Mr. Fargo: Part of the crew?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, they were just part of it. And we played poker together in the off time.

Mr. Fargo: On the typical tanker that you were on, how many crew members were there?

Mr. Martin: 46.

Mr. Fargo: 46? Plus the navy?

Mr. Martin: Plus the navy guys. I mean 46 give or take two or three maybe, I don't know. As I recall I've been asked that question a number of times, as best I can recall it had 46. Now the navy, they had tankers as well. And they had crews of a hundred because they had different duties, you know.

Mr. Fargo: Did you ever carry troops?

Mr. Martin: After the war, I sailed after the war and I did sail on dry cargo ships then. And we'd take grain and stuff over to France and Germany and bring troops. They were equipped with bunks in the hold. We hauled troops then coming back.

Mr. Fargo: How many would the ship hold?

Mr. Martin: Oh gosh, a lot. They were all over the place.

Mr. Fargo: Piled 'em up?

Mr. Martin: Yeah. They had bunks about six bunks high in the holds. They had rough conditions, but you know it was only for a short time. And we also brought German soldiers home.

Mr. Fargo: Prisoners?

Mr. Martin: No, captured POWs. German POWs. And that must have been during the war because I know we came back in a convoy.

Mr. Fargo: You came back in a convoy?

Mr. Martin: Oh yeah. You were venerable going both ways. So you need to be in a convoy going both ways. There was a British troop ship, big ship, that was

carrying German POWs back to the United States. And in the convoy, that ship was positioned just ahead and to the left of the one I was on. And we followed all the time. I could see the Germans over there. They give them a shower, they'd put them out on deck with a hose and hose them down. I remember that.

Mr. Fargo: With sea water?

Mr. Martin: I suppose, I don't know. I don't think they'd waste fresh water on them. Nut on that particular voyage, I remember we were a day out of New York and hit a hurricane.

Mr. Fargo: Wow.

Mr. Martin: And of course, that made the ships have to disperse then because you couldn't, you know, when you get in a hurricane, I remember, off duty, a buddy and I started looking out on the Leeward side of the ship and there was a life raft that had come off a ship, and when it comes of the ship there's an automatic flashlight that comes on so people can see it. And uh, the waves, oh gosh, 30 feet high, we were up and down like this all day.

Mr. Fargo: What were you carrying at that time?

Mr. Martin: We were empty, we were coming back.

Mr. Fargo: You were coming back?

Mr. Martin: In ballast. And I saw one of those life rafts on top of a wave down there and I turned to him and said, "Look at that! Look it's up there!". It's a scary thing.

Mr. Fargo: Yeah, I would say. So you got through the hurricane?

Mr. Martin: We got through the hurricane. The next day we couldn't see a ship anywhere.

Mr. Fargo: Really? They really dispersed.

Mr. Martin: Because they scattered them out. You are not in danger of being torpedoed during a hurricane.

Mr. Fargo: You're not?

Mr. Martin: No, well how could a submarine accurately aim a torpedo at you when there are 30 feet waves?

Mr. Fargo: True. So really, you went about your duties during this time, during the wages. And you must have come to the conclusion that if the ship is gonna get hit, it's gonna get hit regardless of what I do. So you can't think about it, correct?

Mr. Martin: Unconsciously, I suppose, you'd have to have that attitude. Because otherwise you wouldn't be able to sleep at night.

Mr. Fargo: And you couldn't function.

Mr. Martin: Yeah, I don't recall exactly that feeling, but I suppose that would be the way it was.

Mr. Fargo: Yeah. Looking back at it, what was the eeriest voyage that you ever encountered?

Mr. Martin: Well I suppose the one I just described with the tanker.

Mr. Fargo: With the hurricane?

Mr. Martin: The one that got hit off the Irish coast.

Mr. Fargo: Oh, okay.

Mr. Martin: I probably didn't sleep that night.

Mr. Fargo: I can imagine. Okay, uh, you indicated that you continued to work as a seaman after the war ended?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, after the war ended, I had enough time in that I could go to Officer Candidate school in New London, Connecticut. That's operated by the U.S.

maritime service. So I took the examination and got qualified for that. In 1946, I went to, uh what do they call it...well anyways, New London, Connecticut at the maritime base there and it was school. I took the engineering course. I went there in I believe it was November and graduated sometime in the spring.

Mr. Fargo: So you got an engineer's license? Six month course?

Mr. Martin: Something like that. Maybe not even that long.

Mr. Fargo: And you got an engineering license?

Mr. Martin: Yes. As a third assistant engineer so then I sailed on with my engineering's license for I guess, for a couple of years. And again all on tankers. Then I was working for Atlantic Refining.

Mr. Fargo: Atlantic Refining, huh. Now, in this book that you have given me, it was written that you were drafted?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, well that's one of the interesting things. When I got my license, my engineering's license, the Navy offered graduates evanescence rating in the Reserve if you sign up for that. Well I knew some guys that went for that and they were called for active duty. And the Navy Reserve, well the Navy didn't pay near as well as the merchant marine. Money, money.

Mr. Fargo: Right, right.

Mr. Martin: So no, I didn't think I wanted to do that. Well then in 1949, I had come ashore by then because assailant tankers, you know it takes eight hours to load a tanker and then about twelve hours to pump haul and then you're back out at sea. So, for a young single guy, that ain't much fun. So I sailed for a couple of years on that and then I said I'm going ashore. So I quit.

Mr. Fargo: So you quit Atlantic Refining?

Mr. Martin: Yeah. And I went ashore and took odd jobs.

Mr. Fargo: You must have had a nice little nest egg.

Mr. Martin: Well I had saved some money. Then I had not served because I was draft exempt all during the war because essential, yeah I was important.

Mr. Fargo: Absolutely.

Mr. Martin: Manning those merchant ships had to be done, so I was exempt. Then I hadn't served. And here I am a single guy, 24 years old and they initiated the draft again. After the war they had discontinued the draft.

Mr. Fargo: They did?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, and until 1949 they reinstated it because I guess the concern about the action in the far East. So I was drafted into the army.

Mr. Fargo: What year was that?

Mr. Martin: '49.

Mr. Fargo: '49, huh.

Mr. Martin: And I was drafted, I don't know how long, but after I served about a year they decided they were gonna let the draftees go home.

Mr. Fargo: Where did they station you?

Mr. Martin: Camp Chevy, Arkansas.

Mr. Fargo: So you went through basic training and everything?

Mr. Martin: Yes.

Mr. Fargo: And what was your job?

Mr. Martin: Well I got into a classification of assignment in the administration of the camp. I was keeping track of the soldiers, how many soldiers there were, where they were, where they're going, and all that. It was a desk job.

Mr. Fargo: So you were in active duty for the army for one year?

Mr. Martin: Yes.

Mr. Fargo: And then they discharged you?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, then they let me go.

Mr. Fargo: So 1950 they let you go?

Mr. Martin: Yeah, so then I went to St. Louis and enrolled in a telegraph school and learned telegraphy. Then went to work for the Frisco railroad after that as a telegraph operator. Then I could say you know, radios coming in, telegraphies, not long. So I took the correspondence course and I'm a high school dropout, you understand, all this time. So I took the correspondence course at Shirley-Hill Traffic college in Fort Worth. I learned railroad pricing which at that time and through 1980, the transportation industry was rigidly regulated. Finding a free rate for instance was not as easy as, not a simple matter of opening a book and saying that this is what it is. You had formulas that were very complex and subject to different to different interpretations. So I got into railroad pricing then. First I was sent to Fort Smith, Arkansas, stayed there for a year as rate clerk. Then I moved to Chicago.

Mr. Fargo: What company was that?

Mr. Martin: Frisco.

Mr. Fargo: Frisco?

Mr. Martin: Frisco Railroad. They're now part of the Burlington Northern. So that job in Chicago, I was still essentially a rate clerk even though I was called chief clerk. I was essentially a rate clerk. People would call and wonder, "What's the oil rate from Houston to wherever?". And sometimes it would take me a half hour to calculate the rate. And the calls were so numerous, there's always a call waiting for me. When I would get ready to go to lunch, I would tell the girl, "Shut them off, I'm going to lunch after this call.". Then come back, you never got a chance to call people back because there was always a call waiting. As a consequence, I got pretty good at calculating these rates. It was a very difficult job. But I had a lot of experience on it. Grain and lumber rates were the most difficult to do. So then one day, my boss called me in and says, "Mel Power over at General Portland wants to talk to you." General Portland Cement called and...

Mr. Fargo: Where was this?

Mr. Martin: In Chicago.

Mr. Fargo: In Chicago.

Mr. Martin: So, he was looking for an assistant traffic manager, and what an opportunity that is. So I went to the library and studied all that I could, that was on a Friday. I had an appointment to see him on Monday, so I spent all of Saturday in the library studying the cement industry so I could talk intelligently about it. And he hired me.

Mr. Fargo: Oh, good.

Mr. Martin: There's a professional society at that time, regulated industry, you know, called American Society of Traffic and Transportation that was formed. They offered certification if you qualified. So thanks to the Chicago Public Library, I got an education in economics, marketing, and commerce law. And I studied like the dickens to get that certification. So Mel Power was my boss there. Or really my mentor and he was a remarkable guy. It was often said that he enriched the lives of everybody he touched. And he certainly enriched mine.

Mr. Fargo: And this was Portland Cement?

Mr. Martin: General Portland Cement.

Mr. Fargo: General Portland Cement.

Mr. Martin: So I was the assistant traffic manager. There were three. There was a general traffic manager, a traffic manager, and an assistant traffic manager in that corporate office there, and I was the assistant. The traffic manager retired, and I was promoted. And then Mel retired and I got his job. So here is a high school dropout...

Mr. Fargo: Traffic manager of...

Mr. Martin: Of a major corporation.

Mr. Fargo: Well that's great. That's great.

Mr. Martin: I feel like that's worth mentioning.

Mr. Fargo: High school dropout?

Mr. Martin: Yep.

Mr. Fargo: Well that is wonderful. That's a great career. Let me ask you though, looking back on your wartime experience, how do you think that affected you in your adult life?

Mr. Martin: Well, for anyone to travel nationwide, worldwide is educational. You'll learn a lot just from being in different countries, customs. I dare say that if the war hadn't come along, I would probably have been pumping gas at a filling station for the rest of my life.

Mr. Fargo: So that matured you?

Mr. Martin: Broadened me.

Mr. Fargo: Gave you some motivation to make something of yourself.

Mr. Martin: Well, yeah, I've always enjoyed working with numbers and that is essentially what I did. I like math. And even today, I wake up at night and I think about numbers, calculations, percentages, investments. What an investment if I

invested \$28,000 at six and a half percent, that's how much? That's how I spend my nights. I think about things like that.

Mr. Fargo: Well, your wartime experience didn't really give you any background in that kind of work.

Mr. Martin: No, it didn't, not really. Although, operating the propulsion machinery on the ship, there was some mathematical equations done there that I practiced. But, I like numbers.

Mr. Fargo: Well, sailing during the war on those vessels was certainly a very very important job to the war effort. And you were in harm's way every time you left the harbor in New York or Philadelphia or wherever. So I want to thank you for your service.

Mr. Martin: I was only one of millions.

Mr. Fargo: Well from what I read, I did a little research before coming to talk to you today, there were 290,000 men doing that job. Okay, and one out of twenty-seven of them died in the line of duty.

Mr. Martin: Well I was lucky. Pure luck there.

Mr. Fargo: Well again, I thank you for your service and I thank you for your time today. This was extremely interesting.

Mr. Martin: Well, as I say, I don't have any claim to heroism during the war. I just had a job to do, and I did it.