

U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of Ship's Cook Third Class Jack Samuels, USCGR

World War II Coast Guard Veteran

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Ship's Cook Third Class Jack Samuels, USCGR

Jack Samuels was born in Los Angeles, California on 22 February 1927. He grew up in a small Jewish community in East Los Angeles, attending grammar school there. He began junior high school in the nearby barrio of East Los Angeles and then attended Woodrow Wilson Junior/Senior High School for one year before transferring to Roosevelt High School. In the spring of 1945, while a senior in high school, he enlisted in the Coast Guard and attended Recruit Training at Government Island in Alameda, California. While temporarily assigned to the manning section after completing recruit training, he bunked with Gus Lesnevich, the world light-heavy-weight boxing champion of 1941 who served in the U.S. Coast Guard from 1943-45. Samuels' first assignment was in the Coast Guard manned USS *Grand Island* (PF-14). He reported aboard while it was in San Diego, California. The *Grand Island* was based in San Francisco and performed air-sea rescue duty as well as anti-submarine duty in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Due to chronic sea-sickness, he volunteered for

duty in the ship's galley, where he would have a better selection of food. In March of 1946 he transferred from the *Grand Island* to the Coast Guard manned USS *New Bedford* (PF-71) which had recently been reassigned to San Francisco from Guam. The *New Bedford* was assigned to weather patrol duty in the Pacific. While aboard the *New Bedford* he was advanced from cook striker to ship's cook third class. He would soon be designated acting chief ship's cook, in charge of feeding the 250 officers and crewmembers. He held that position until the *New Bedford* was decommissioned in Seattle on 24 May 1946.

After returning to East Los Angeles and to civilian life he worked in a local grocery store for three years. In 1949 he joined the Los Angeles County Sheriff's department. He was assigned to East Los Angeles where he served until 1983, retiring as a Lieutenant. In June 1951 he married Barbara Suskin. They had two children, Karen and Robert. She died in 2006. He married Evelyn Lovely in September of 2007. He now makes his retirement home in Palm Desert.



SC3 Jack Samuels, USCGR

INTERVIEWER: Where and when were you born?

SAMUELS: In Los Angeles in 1927.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me briefly about your childhood and how you came to join the Coast Guard?

SAMUELS: My childhood was very tranquil in grammar school. It was composed of all Anglo-Saxons---twelve in my graduation class. Then when I left there I went into East Los Angeles, into the barrio, and I was educated with 95% Mexicans. That was quite trying for me, but I learned quickly that my peers, Mexican kids, had a good sense of humor and as a consequence I utilized what I could to minimize the confrontations. The teachers at that school were the throw-offs from the Los Angeles district. They were just hanging on, waiting to retire and there was nothing but [discord] in the classes. I was compelled to take a music course, and they assigned me an instrument, whatever I wanted. My family was poor, and I knew if I lost it, or someone took it

away from me, that would be detrimental to my family. So I picked the flute. About a week later I was leaving the school grounds and a gang surrounded me and started asking me why I picked a flute, and not a trombone or a drum. I said, "I picked this flute so that I could run faster when you chased me." They just broke up laughing and that gang and I had no problems with them from then on. A few months later another gang stopped me as I was leaving school, walking home. That smallest one said "That's him." The leader then said "My brother (who wasn't really his brother) says you beat him up." I replied, "Yes, I beat him up because he hit my little sister." They cracked up, especially since I spoke with their accent. They opened up and I walked on home.

I was there about a year, and we had no shower at home, but the school had showers in its gym. So I said, "Mom, why don't we have a chower?" She said, "You mean a shower." "Yes" I replied. That moment my mother realized I should be taken out of that school. We had an option from our grammar school to attend Woodrow Wilson Jr. High. That school was comprised of primarily Germanic students. My grammar school was 95% Jewish. When you go to a junior high and you hadn't comeingled at the grammar school level, you're an oddity, and you are a worse oddity if you are bussed. We were bussed four miles to the school. After summer, I got on the bus for the first time, and the bus took off. I noticed my peer group was pleased to see me because I was a scrapper. I didn't take anything from anybody. The closer we got to the school, they became sullen and sad. I sensed this. There waiting at the school were about one hundred students and I heard them say "Here's comes the Jew bus," "Kike" and all kinds of crap. This is 1941. I didn't take the bus after that. I walked the four miles and I could see the anti-Semitism throughout the school. One little Jewish kid was taking a drink at a fountain, and one blond, blue-eyed student rammed his head into the fountain. He came back with two teeth missing and bleeding. I knew this kid couldn't take care of himself. I talked to my group who I played football with in my community---Jewish with three or four gentiles. I said "Let's play those guys on a Saturday football game. Maybe we could develop some rapport." We beat them. There was a long bench, actually three benches, and we were all sitting there. I was the last one in the line sitting on the end of the bench. Some of those fellows probably wanted to fight with me, figuring they could beat me. Anyway, Richard Trainer, I remember him, a poster boy for Adolph Hitler, went from one end to the other, making detrimental comments. Even the gentiles on our team cowered away from him. Finally he came to me, and he said "Do you eat fish, Jew boy?" I stood up and he pushed me over the bench. I could see the other big, star quarterback smiling because he egged this younger player on to us. I stood up and we went at it for a few punches and down he went. None of my friends congratulated me, we just walked back to our community. The next Monday, I walked to school and I looked around for my friends and they weren't around, understandably. I was persona non grata. So I go through the school and midway through the main building, here comes Richard Trainer with four of his click. I decided to walk right through them. I did and they parted like Moses going through the Red Sea, so I knew I made my point. Later on I went out for track, I wasn't fast, so I was shot putting. One afternoon a gentile fellow and I were horsing around when here comes this jerk, making some comments to me, not to the gentile. He wanted to fight me to make a name for himself. So I asked him, "Do you want to fight?" He said "Yeah!" Everyone was busy doing their thing so I suggested we go behind the bleachers. By the time we got behind the bleachers everyone was up on the bleachers looking down and surrounding us, both football teams, and track teams. I knew if I, "the Jew boy", hit him first it would be a real negative. So he hit me in the chin and that's the first time and only time I saw black---like that---but I came right out of it. I took him on. I beat the hell out of him. He went down and said "He hit me in the balls." I worked out in the gym class with Jim Myers, he was another poster boy for Adolph Hitler, blond, six-foot tall who did the iron rings on the gymnastic team. He came over and I thought he was going to be sympathetic to the guy I had just beaten up. But I had some rapport with him---he liked me. He picked the guy up, pulled his jogging pants down and said "Here's the red mark where Samuels hit him fair and square," and then drops him. Here I thought he was going to be on the side of the other guy, but he wasn't. This was a classic. The crowd all disappeared and the guy I had beaten up walked away downtrodden.

After a year I transferred to Roosevelt High School which was three-quarters Jewish and had no discrimination or anti-Semitism. I was about to graduate. I had to submit three or four term papers and I wasn't that academically inclined at that time. I was on the beach in Santa Monica, bathing in the sun, when I saw a Coast Guardsman walking by with a rifle and a dog. I was contemplating going into the Navy but I got sea sick. And the Army, who wants to go in the Army? I said the Coast Guard is for me, patrolling the coasts. I enlisted and found out you had to be seventeen years of age at that time. My boot camp class was all seventeen year olds. Most of them were from Salt Lake City---nice clean cut Mormon kids. They didn't even want to go on liberty. They stayed around the base, reading in the library or other activities.

INTERVIEWER: Did they give you your high school diploma after you enlisted?

SAMUELS: That was the condition. Anyone who went straight into the service during their senior year---you got your diploma and I didn't have to hand in the three reports. I was a coward. A lot of people took advantage of this.

INTERVIEWER: Boot camp was only two weeks long?

SAMUELS: Two weeks, wooden guns, singing, that's it.

INTERVIEWER: So you didn't have actual rifles, just wooden guns?

SAMUELS: Wooden guns and singing. We learned to march and sing. We took a little practice on the rifle range, but never set foot on a boat during recruit training.

INTERVIEWER: Did boot camp prepare you for your first duty station?

SAMUELS: No. It just made us uniform and taught us how to march to cadence. You really can't accomplish much in two weeks.

Afterwards they put me in the manning section. I got a two tier cot. I got in one and put my gear there and then some bully comes by, older than me and said, "I want that cot, it's close to the door. Get your gear off of it." I had introduced myself to the guy on the top cot when I put my gear on the bottom cot and he said "O.K." About twenty minutes later this bully comes by, and when he started harassing me, this guy on the upper cot, swings around and said to the bully, get your hands off that guy. The bully looks up and says "O.K., Gus." This was Gus Lumovitch [Lesnevich], the light-heavy-weight champion of the world.

The third day they put me on a mail truck to transfer me to San Diego, with instructions to go on the USS *Grand Island*. The *Grand Island* was based in San Francisco and patrolled air-sea rescue from California to Hawaii.

I got aboard about six p.m. and we got underway and the water was like glass. I asked a crewmember where we were going. He said that we were going out to sea to escort a submarine. Submarines had to be escorted into the harbor when they got within three miles of the coast. I became seasick almost immediately. When I asked where I was to sleep, the boatswain mate assigned me to a top rack. I climbed in my rack and before I knew it I was asleep. At about midnight a crew member woke me up and said, "Are you Samuels?" "You got watch." I showed him the watch on my wrist. "No, it's up on the bow. You have a watch up there. " He handed me foul-weather gear and I'm trying to get it on. He leads me out to the bow, and the water is coming over the bow whenever it went down in the trough of a wave. The guy I relieved said for me to watch for signals. We were escorting Navy ships into the harbor. I had to lay down flat on the deck to keep from getting washed over the side. I lay on my stomach whenever I could and had to do a push up to keep my head from going under water. It was cold. The water inundated me. For whatever reason, about twenty minutes later, this fellow came back and relieved me. When I became a cook I told my helpers that whenever this fellow came back from liberty or even if he was on the ship, if he wanted a filet mignon, they were to make it for him! He was an "Okie" from Arkansas, a nice guy. Because I was sea sick most of the time the ship gave me a bucket to carry around, instead of puking all over. They said I was a "Bucket Man Third Class." Whenever I went by where they were eating they would wave pork chops and bacon in front of me. There was no sympathy!

During my time on the *Grand Island* I started losing weight. Finally someone told me to go see the ship's doctor. When I got there, the doctor was lying in the cot, I told him that I was chronically sea sick and asked if he could write me up for a transfer. He said that he had been aboard the ship for over a year, and if he couldn't get off, there was no way I was going to get off.

After about six months on the *Grand Island*, I transferred to the USS *New Bedford*. At that point I decided I had to survive. I am a very finicky eater. I don't like mustard, mayonnaise, vinegar, ketchup and all that. I went to the chief boatswain mate and asked him if I could work in the galley. He asked me what I wanted to do. I told him anything. He told me that we had two ship's cooks, a chief, a third class, a cook striker and a spud coxswain. I asked if I could be a dishwasher. He told me that dishwashers were screw-ups. I told him I wasn't a screw-up but if he put me there I would appreciate it. He gave me a job washing dishes and I was helping the spud coxswain so I could make a salad for myself with crackers which I could hold down. About a month later the chief cook had a serious operation that took him off the ship. The spud coxswain then became the cook striker, the cook striker became the third class and I became the spud coxswain. Sometime later the first class cook went AWOL and I moved up to cook striker. A couple of months later the third class was charged with taking steaks to his girl friend off the base. He was removed and I became the ship's cook. After a month the executive officer told me that they were going to give me ship's cook stripes, and that I was in charge. I asked him if I was the acting chief cook and he told me that I was the acting chief. The enlisted men on the ship had troughs in their head [toilets], but the three chiefs on board had conventional flush toilets. I decided since I was an acting chief I was going to start using the chief's toilets. The other two chiefs weren't happy about it and questioned me on using their toilets. I told them to see the captain and they never did anything.

Sometime later the executive officer came by and asked me where I had learned to cook. I told him right there aboard ship. I had a cook book and two good assistants. We baked and cooked. The executive officer told me that the officers liked my service and the officers were tired of paying a dollar and a quarter a day to the stewards. They wanted to eat out of the general mess and the commanding officer had okayed it. I realized then I had good rapport with the officers on board and had free gangway every night. I had head of line privileges on the ship as well.

We had a flour bin in the galley and I kept some Schenleys and some Jack Daniels in there and whenever the officers had their wives aboard to eat while we were in port I would send it up on the dumbwaiter to the officers' wardroom.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get the news that the war was over with Japan?

SAMUELS: Once the atomic bomb was dropped we knew it was over with. We went up to Bremerton with a skeleton crew, maybe fifty men. We were to prepare the ship for turnover to a Russian crew. We were going to decommission it and give it to the Russians. Across the pier from us was an aircraft carrier. At that point we were baking eighty pies a night and I see a pie company driving down the pier to the aircraft carrier and deliver to them five hundred pies. I went down the next day when they came and asked them to leave eighty pies on the *New Bedford*. That next day eighty pies came and I signed for them but don't know if the pie company ever got paid for them.

INTERVIEWER: Did the Russians start coming aboard while you were there?

SAMUELS: Yes, twelve of them. I had a beautiful Russian woman come aboard. She had broad shoulders, about five foot eight inches tall, beautiful figure and I had to explain to her how all of our kitchen equipment worked. She was aboard for about a week and a half before the rest of us got removed. When I left she gave me a hug that almost broke my ribs. None of them wore uniforms.

At the base I got a flight on a small plane to take me back to Los Angeles. I got air sick and luckily had my hat to puke in. That was my career.

INTERVIEWER: How would you compare the two different patrol frigates you served in?

SAMUELS: One had a crew from the east coast but the other one was built in a shipyard in the San Francisco Bay area and had mostly a west coast crew. On the first ship we're in a canvas locker out at sea because it was cold. Six of us were on gun duty and they didn't know I was Jewish and they were talking about what Hitler was doing to the Jews and four of them agreed that that was good. But the big Irishman from New York told these four that they were crazy. After what I went through in junior high school, their comments just destroyed my morale.

INTERVIEWER: When you were on liberty in San Diego, San Francisco or Bremerton what were relations between the Coast Guard and the other armed forces? Rivalries? Animosity? Did you get along?

SAMUELS: We had a couple of Navy sailors aboard our patrol frigates. I didn't hit the bar scenes so I didn't encounter any rivalries or animosities. Most people accepted us as a sailor not as a Coast Guardsman.

INTERVIEWER: How were the relations between the enlisted force, the petty officers and the chief petty officers in your two ships?

SAMUELS: The chiefs were all old and wise, obviously. It was like the tail wagging the dog. A chief would be foolish to take on 250 men and get their hostilities. They played it low profile isolation and no confrontations. The stewards amused me. Most people didn't have much contact with them, except for the officers. I did because I was a minority, too. I felt sorry for them. There were about six of them. They made the beds for the officers. They were all blacks.

INTERVIEWER: Were the stewards the only blacks on the ship or were there others?

SAMUELS: My chief cook on the *Grand Island* was black and that poor guy, I could see him sweating most of the time. He was very conscious of being a minority, and scared of this and that. He was always under stress, always worried about criticism. The crew probably treated him terribly. There was a lot of prejudice.

INTERVIEWER: How did the Americans look at the Russians that they were turning their ship over to?

SAMUELS: They were pleased because as soon as they got there it meant we would be relieved of our duties. We looked at them as an oddity because many of them were women, strong women. We were deprived of contact with women.

INTERVIEWER: Did all of them speak some English?

SAMUELS: No, there was a language barrier. It was just point at different things. One or two of them could explain to them after the fundamentals were pointed out.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say was your most memorable experience in the Coast Guard during World War II?

SAMUELS: I was ship's cook up in Bremerton and we pulled in there and I saw all these young girls, all very light complexions because there is no sun in that part of the country. One of the crew members, who had a reputation for having a girl in every port, invited me to join him and two sisters for dinner that night. I asked how old they were and he said twenty-three and twenty-four. I told him that I was only eighteen. He told me that I would have a good time and to bring four steaks and some pepper and butter. They made a delicious dinner for us and said they wanted to go dancing at Indian Island. We got on a ferry and went to Indian Island where they had tourist attractions and a band. I'm not a drinker but I drank a scotch and I danced. It's time to go home so we got on the ferry and I'm puking my guts out. The last thing I want is to go to bed with a woman. I went back to the ship downtrodden. Is that something you would say was the most memorable thing?

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever get your sea legs? Was there ever a time when you didn't get sea sick.

SAMUELS: Yes, the time we went to Johnson Island. The waves were small and they were behind us. We didn't have the bobbing. We just coasted along. I got my sea legs then. I was also very careful what I ate: no sugar, don't over indulge in liquids. I ate peanut butter and crackers.

INTERVIEWER: How did your time in the Coast Guard change your life?

SAMUELS: It gave me confidence. That if I strove and worked hard enough I could accomplish a lot. Nothing comes easy.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever seen the film "Onion Head" about a WWII ship's cook in the Coast Guard starring Andy Griffith? If so, what did you think of it?

SAMUELS: I could relate to it. There was a lot of reality to it. The cook's staff was usually happy. They had the best to eat and that was very important.

INTERVIEWER: What comments, impressions, or thoughts would you like to share? Are there any areas that I have missed and that you think are important for future generations to know?

SAMUELS: Surround yourself with wholesome, healthy, strong friends. Watch out for losers, because you go down with them. You have to be careful who you associate with.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

