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Interview with  
HERSCHEL BLACKWELL  
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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

Herschel Blackwell

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello      Date of Interview: April 26, 1986

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Herschel Blackwell for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on April 26, 1986, in Austin, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Blackwell in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was a member of VP-14 at Kaneohe Naval Air Station during the Japanese attack there and at other military installations in the Hawaiian Islands on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Blackwell, to begin this interview, just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Blackwell: Well, I was born in Houston, Texas, on November 5, 1922, and was raised in the vicinity of Houston. I went to school there until 1939, at which time I quit school and went to work. I worked as a bricklayer's helper and a few other menial things, which should've told me to get back in school but I didn't. At any rate, times were kind of hard at that time,

and I went into the CCC. I stayed there six months. I came out, and I worked for another four months, five months. Then I joined the Navy on February 14, 1941.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the service in 1941? I think you perhaps alluded to it a moment ago.

Blackwell: Well, other than the hard times, everyone kept saying that we were going to get into a war. They were saying that you were going to get drafted, anyway, so I decided that I would pick my service rather than to get drafted into the Army or something like that. Also, by joining the Navy, I wouldn't have to wear a necktie, so this swayed me that way.

Marcello: I was going to ask you why you joined the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service.

Blackwell: Well, along with that, I had a medical problem at that time. It was strictly a temporary medical problem. The Army and the Marine Corps would accept me real quick, but the Navy says, "No, we can't handle that until you get this straightened up." They gave me the remedial treatment that I needed for three or four days. I got it straightened up, and then they took me. I figured if they were that hard to get into, well, maybe that was the better organization after all. So this is it.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Blackwell: San Diego.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at the time that you went through?

Blackwell: Roughly two months. Some of them took a little longer. Some of them weren't able to swim; some of them had other difficulties. But the normal routine was about seven weeks to eight weeks.

Marcello: Evidently, then, they had already begun to cut back on the amount of time that one spent in boot camp because I think that for those who went in earlier--let's say around 1937 or 1938 or 1939--boot camp was about twelve weeks, I believe.

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Well, I think ours was originally set up for twelve weeks, but they did cut down on it. There were some companies that were in there longer than twelve weeks, actually. I think they listed us up at about 150 men per company.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as part of the record, or was it the normal Navy boot camp?

Blackwell: Oh, there were a couple of items that really were etched into my mind--some of the things that shouldn't go on in the service. Like, when I first reported in there, I think I had \$13 to my name. Others had that much or maybe more or maybe less. At any rate, the company commander who was assigned to our company asked us to turn in any valuables because there might be some thieves among us and such as that, and they would give us a receipt. He gave us a receipt for all this. He wound up being killed...he either committed

suicide or something. His car ran off of Point Loma, and all our money was gone. We never reclaimed that--anybody who had anything in there. I had \$13 in there.

Then the person who replaced him was an ex-warrant office. At this time he was a first class boatswain's mate who had been busted and court-martialed for assaulting the executive officer on a destroyer. They let him take over our company. Of course, he was a hard character.

I was on KP one morning, and I had a terrible cold. I put my dirty handkerchief right on top of my ditty bag. He took one of the old butt cans--I don't know whether you've ever seen them or not, with cigar butts and everything else in the thing--and dumped it into my ditty bag and my sea bag. When I got back from KP...of course, the company had already gone out on the grinder and was going through the training by the time I got back there and cleaned up. When I found that, of course, I had a terrible fit about that. It wound up that the gentleman had to buy me a whole new sea bag of clothes, and it was embarrassing for him. But it taught me a real valuable lesson, that there are some idiots in all walks of life. I think it's one of the lessons that I learned in my training there.

Marcello: Where did you go after you got out of boot camp?

Blackwell: I went to North Island for aviation machinist's mate's training--a four-month course there in structural aviation,

some ordnance. It involved general aviation, but mostly mechanics.

Marcello: Is this something that you had wanted to do and that you had applied for?

Blackwell: Only after I got into training. Into my boot camp there, they came around with a list of things that a person might like to be. I had a mechanical background as a kid, and I wanted to fly, also. I was told that that was probably the best route, since I had limited schooling, for me to go. So this is the way I went.

Marcello: As you look back on that four-month training course that you had to become an aviation machinist's mate, how would you rate that training? Was it good? Fair? Poor? Hurried? How would you describe it?

Blackwell: It was very good. After the first two months, they felt that I was far enough advanced that they could give me four hours training in the morning and four hours of on-the-job training at some detachment.

They asked me where I would like to work. I had been told that the test flight line was a very good place to work, that you got a lot of flying, and that you worked with different types of aircraft and such as that. So I applied for that. I learned an awful lot there. So I spent two months just going through about six weeks, I suppose, of training in the morning and then four hours of flying in

the afternoon, if I could get something that would fly.

Otherwise, I'd just work on gassing up the aircraft, servicing, maintenance, whatever. I learned an awful lot there.

Marcello: After you got out of that school, where did you go?

Blackwell: I went directly to Kaneohe Bay on October 3, 1941.

Marcello: Was this an assignment that you had applied for, or were you simply sent there?

Blackwell: I was just sent there. It was just part of the shipment. There were some of our class that didn't finish on time, so they were detained and were sent to different outfits here in the States. But myself and six or seven others were sent there to Kaneohe Bay.

Marcello: What was your reaction to being sent to the Hawaiian Islands?

Blackwell: Oh, I was very pleased with it. In fact, it was very good duty before the war.

Marcello: Was it everything that you had hoped and thought it would be?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, it was. For an eighteen-year-old kid, that was paradise, actually.

Marcello: What was the function of Kaneohe Naval Air Station? What was its overall function?

Blackwell: Strictly patrol and early warning. We had three PBY squadrons there: VP-11, VP-12, and VP-14.

Marcello: And how many planes would be in each squadron?

Blackwell: Roughly twelve. Some had less. None were over twelve. The full complement was supposed to have been twelve aircraft--PBY's.



Marcello: How far was Kaneohe from, let's say, Pearl Harbor or Honolulu?

Blackwell: Roughly ten miles. It was strictly across the island, actually. We were on the windward side of the island; Pearl Harbor is on the lee side.

Marcello: I've heard it said that Kaneohe was a rather pretty site.

Blackwell: Oh, yes, sir. It was beautiful. It was a new station at that time that just had been in commission, oh, less than two years. Being new to the Navy, new to the islands, new to the service, and all this, I was just like a goose. I would wake up in a new world every day.

Marcello: Now were you assigned immediately to VP-14?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. That was my first assignment. In fact, I was assigned before I ever left the States. I knew where I was going--to what outfit. When we arrived there, they indoctrinated us for about a week or a week-and-a-half and then assigned us to the USS Curtiss for aviation seamanship training, which consisted of going aboard this tender and making a cruise with it. We had no idea where we were going, but, as it turned out, we went to Midway and Wake. I think we were probably the last resupply before the war started.

Marcello: Did you get any additional training on this vessel?

Blackwell: Oh, yes. Yes, sir.

Marcello: What kind of training did you get there?

Blackwell: Seamanship training more than anything else. They didn't put us to chipping paint or scrubbing bilges or anything like

this. It was strictly as pertained to aviation. It was a seaplane tender, but, also, it was a resupply ship.

Marcello: Can you be more specific about your aviation-related tasks and jobs and so on that you were doing aboard the Curtiss?

Blackwell: We had several types of shop machinery--lathes, drill presses, engine tear down, fuel pumps--which I had never used anywhere else. They carried a large supply of aviation fuel. They had a fuel system that just wouldn't quit on that thing. Well, I could've spent six months, probably, learning the thing, but we tried to put it all together as much as we could there.

You learned the supply and resupply type of thing where... you know, anybody can fix an engine, but you find out where all the parts come from and who fixes these things and such.

Marcello: Now would they actually make parts and so on and so forth aboard the Curtiss?

Blackwell: They couldn't make parts unless it was something simple. They could not make a piston rod or something like this. They couldn't make that. The tolerances were there, but the material wasn't there. They had spare engines in preservative for several different types of aircraft, one of them being a PBY. They would sling an engine over the side. They wouldn't bring the aircraft up on the tender. They would sling the engine over the side after they'd removed the old one and put it on there. The crew off of this aircraft would attach it. So far as I know, the crew members off the Curtiss

would never get aboard that aircraft. It was a tedious operation. Even with the refueling and everything, it was kind of ~~of~~ touchy because the aircraft is wobbling around and those old wings are flopping against the side of the ship and everything. You could ruin the aircraft pretty quick, so they had to be careful with it. I don't know how many crewmen, but it must have been at least fifty along the gunwales to keep that aircraft back from there with poles and with...I forget. I don't even remember the name of the tool that they used, but it kept that aircraft away from the body of the ship.

Marcello: How long did that cruise last aboard the Curtiss?

Blackwell: About twenty-eight days.

Marcello: And then you came back to Kaneohe?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Before I left, I had been assigned to the beach crew because I had been a pretty good swimmer in my younger days, so I had only been indoctrinated in what we did on the beach crew there at the island when I went aboard the Curtiss. I got back there, I believe, on the 28th or so of November, so I was only on Kaneohe Bay about nine days after I got back from that cruise and before they raided.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that they initially assigned you to the beach crew there at Kaneohe. That was more or less standard procedure, was it not, to put a new person on the beach crew?

Blackwell: Well, they had three categories that they used for their new

personnel. They were beach crew for three months; compartment cleaning, which was barrack detail, for three months; or the kitchen police for three months. Once in a while they would find someone with a little administrative background--clerical-type--and they would put them somewhere over in the administration building or something like that. For the most part, there were three things that you could figure on as a recruit. You were going to catch one of those, maybe two of them, before you ever got into the petty officer rank.

Marcello: What were some of the functions that one would perform as a member of the beach crew?

Blackwell: Basically, beaching and launching the PBY's. They were not an amphibious aircraft. You had to put the wheels on them to get them up out of the water, and then you had to take them off when they left. It usually took eight to ten men to launch and to beach one of those aircraft.

Marcello: And this actually meant getting into the water, either removing or attaching the wheels?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. The wheels, outside of having air in them, also had a lot of water because they had to almost float. They would go just below the water for ease of handling. But it took two men, two good men, on each main gear. My job, when I was first assigned there, was to swim out with what they called the tail-hook. You had a long wire with a hook on it and a rope. You put that around your neck, and you

swam out there. When the plane came by, they would make a pass, and you would try to hit that hook at the tail. Sometimes you'd make it. Most of the time you didn't, and they'd have to make another pass. Of course, you got chewed out for that, too. It was quite a reach up there because the ol' aircraft was quite a bit above the water, and you had to get on the end of the nub there, and you only had about a thirty-inch wand there to reach up and get it. Once you had done that, then you moved out of the way and swam back to the beach. The people on the beach would pull this plane in by this line that you just attached to the tail of the aircraft.

Marcello: Did they have some sort of machinery to pull this plane in?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. They had a tractor. As soon as it got in there, and you got the main gear on it and the tail steering wheel on there, then that tractor hoisted it right on out of there.

Marcello: Now this is maybe something beyond the scope of your knowledge, since you were only there for a little while, but did those PBY's in those three squadrons have a specific sector that they patrolled? In other words, they were not responsible for a complete 360-degree reconnaissance of the islands, were they?

Blackwell: Not those three squadrons. There were two squadrons on Ford Island which filled in some, but we did have south and west. We went mostly west. There was very little east surveillance.

It was mostly north and west.

Marcello: So the Kaneohe PBY's were responsible for reconnoitering to the north?

Blackwell: Mostly, yes, sir. All of the ones that I went on were to the north. In fact, I only flew on three missions before the war.

Marcello: So you actually did get to fly.

Blackwell: Oh, yes, sir.

Marcello: Describe what one of those patrols was like from the time it started until you got back.

Blackwell: Oh, golly.

Marcello: When would you usually get up to leave?

Blackwell: Usually about daylight or a little before daylight. Of course, as the junior man on the crew, you had to go to the mess hall and pick up all the lunches and the coffee jugs, and you had to empty the latrine and all of this after the mission. Basically, you were a "go-for." You'd go over there for a briefing. They would inform the crew what was expected of them and what the length of the mission was and such as that.

Then you'd go to the aircraft and start preparing it for flight. Each person had a different duty naturally. My duties, specifically, was just anything that anybody wanted--wipe up the oil; if the skipper wanted a cup of coffee, get that for him; whatever. We had a hot plate on

which we cooked bacon and eggs and such as that on during the flight. Some of them wanted to eat before we ever got the aircraft off the ramp, much less out in the water (chuckle). But at any rate, that was basically it.

After we got into the air, my job was just to see to it that everybody had whatever they wanted. It was just hours and hours of looking, wandering, and circling. Maybe you'd see something down there, and then we'd circle. Most of the missions were at 1,500 feet, something like this. Sometimes we flew a little higher, but most of the time we had a scud layer there that meant we stayed below 1,500 feet.

Marcello: Would you usually be flying one of the pie-shaped vectors?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, usually. We'd usually go as far north as we could-- usually a thousand miles. Then we'd come over 200 miles and then come back into Kaneohe.

Marcello: Now to the best of your knowledge, were these patrols carried out seven days a week?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, as far as I know, they were. In fact, we had three, that I know of, in the air on December 7. Basically, each squadron had at least one up every day. Sometimes we had night missions rather than day missions.

Marcello: Given the areas that these PBY's were patrolling, would your area have included that area from which the Japanese came on December 7?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, it sure would have.

Marcello: Do you know whether or not that particular area was being patrolled either on the 6th or the 7th? Obviously, if you're only sending up only three planes, there must be a lot of ocean out there that's not being covered.

Blackwell: Yes, sir, that's right. No, sir, I don't know that for a fact. I do think that there was prior knowledge that there was going to be something happening because we had been briefed that most likely we would have an attack. Nobody knew when, or nobody had any idea by which route or anything else. Nobody sounded an alert until that radar outfit came in and said that there was something there. Everybody said, "Go back to sleep! You're crazy!"

Marcello: Even during the short amount of time that you were there, did you ever hear any complaints by those above you that they didn't have enough planes and so on to do the kind of job that they needed to do?

Blackwell: No, sir. I think that we had plenty of planes; I think that we had plenty of equipment. It was just a case of poor management, I believe. I don't think that there was any shortage of anything. I never saw it, if there was.

Marcello: You mentioned that you had been briefed previous to December 7 that war was likely to come between Japan and the United States.

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: But did these briefings indicate that the war might possibly



start in the Hawaiian Islands?

Blackwell: Yes, and also the Philippines. They were both mentioned. Of course, the intelligence officer who was giving us these briefings mentioned both of them. He specifically stated that it would probably come on a weekend and most likely on a Sunday when the Japanese felt like we would all be at church or whatever.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that on that Sunday, to the best of your knowledge, three planes were sent out on patrol.

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: On other days of the week, would more than three planes be sent out?

Blackwell: I believe that they would. Now sometimes we had two aircraft from our own squadron, so this would indicate that maybe, if the other two squadrons did the same, we would have at least six aircraft on patrol. Then, of course, Ford Island had the two outfits over there, too.

Marcello: So is it possible that perhaps there would have been fewer planes out on Sunday than there were other days of the week?

Blackwell: It is possible, yes, sir. I know that there was a more lax atmosphere around there on a Sunday than there ever was on any other day. I think we were real complacent.

Marcello: Were you ever on an alert as such?

Blackwell: No, sir.

Marcello: In other words...

Blackwell: Pardon me for butting in. The only alert that we had was when we were tied up at Wake Island. A freighter came by south of us, when we were tied up there loading gas onto Wake Island, with a great big American flag painted on the side of it. When the skipper or whoever, officer-of-the-deck, challenged this thing, they threw the coals to it and took off just like Lindbergh. It turned out that it was a troop transport. You couldn't catch that thing. That was the fastest thing...the Curtiss, I think, could go about thirty knots full open, and they would've never caught that. It had a "meatball" flying from the fantail, and yet it had the American flag. This was maybe the early part of November or middle of November. It was prior to Thanksgiving. I know that much. That was the only alert that I can remember ever having.

Marcello: Did Kaneohe have any kind of protection against aircraft? In other words, were there ever any antiaircraft batteries or anything of that nature anywhere in the vicinity to protect the base?

Blackwell: No, sir. Coast artillery was the nearest thing that we had. Our air-cooled .30-caliber and .50-caliber machine guns were the only protection that we had.

Marcello: Let's kind of shift gears here a little bit and talk about a few other things. I realize you were only at Kaneohe for a short amount of time before the attack took place. What

were your barracks like there? You mentioned this was a new base. Describe what your living quarters were like.

Blackwell: Very good. They had open bays, double bunks--one above the other--and wall lockers. It seemed to me like there were probably sixty men in each bay or something like this. We were fairly close together, but they were roomy, and they were airy. They had good windows. Like I say, it was a new base. It was very nice quarters, and I appreciated it. Compared to a destroyer or something like that, it was heaven.

Marcello: Now was each squadron more or less housed in the same area?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. In fact, each squadron had their own barracks, and each squadron was responsible for that barrack. We all ate at a common mess hall which was adjacent to the barracks. There were six barracks adjoining--they're still there, by the way--and they all were adjoined by a long walkway--covered walkway--to the mess hall. They were very nice.

Marcello: How was the chow there at Kaneohe?

Blackwell: Very good. You just could get most anything you wanted, and especially if you weren't there right at the peak of mealtime. Like, in the mornings, I was usually up at 4:00 or 4:30, something like that, and I'd go to the mess hall. There'd be two or three sleepy KP's around there, and I would just fix up whatever I wanted--a steak or whatever I wanted. It was beautiful.

Marcello: During your short stay there, did you get a chance to get off the base at all and go to any of the nearby towns?

Blackwell: I did twice. I went to Kailua and into Honolulu once. But Kailua was the nearest town to us. It was on the mainland from our little ol' island. Basically, I didn't have any time to really enjoy myself for anything other than just sight-seeing. I was really involved in just seeing the wonders of that place because I'd heard so much about it. I was real proud that I was there.

Marcello: Was it easy or difficult to get from Kaneohe into either Kailua or Honolulu?

Blackwell: It was difficult because the only transportation we had was what they called the Windward Transit. It was a bus line. But you could walk to the main gate, and the people who had vehicles--or if there was an official staff car or something not carrying an officer or such--they would pick you up and take you wherever you were going there. Nobody in my status, anyway, had a vehicle. You had to depend on the transportation. The Windward Transit was...oh, every three hours or something like that, they'd make a round trip. It was a thrill in itself, especially when you went over the Pali going into Honolulu (chuckle). That was something else. It'd scrape the side of the hill and scrape the side of the bulwark that they had around it. It didn't seem to bother those drivers at all.

Marcello: You mentioned that you went into Honolulu just one time...

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: ...before the attack?

Blackwell: Before the attack, yes, sir.

Marcello: How long did it take you to get from Kaneohe into Honolulu by bus?

Blackwell: Oh, about forty-five minutes. For them to climb up the Pali there, it usually took twenty-five to thirty minutes in first gear--just winding around that thing. I don't know whether you've ever seen it or not, but it's quite a deal.

Marcello: What were the liberty policies like there at Kaneohe during that period before the war?

Blackwell: Very liberal. You had a port-and-starboard watch. If you were in duty section one or three, you had duty one day; and sections two and four had free gangway. The next day it was just reversed.

Marcello: I think this more or less brings us into that period just before the war. Of course, your whole period there was just immediately before the war (laughter), now that I think of it.

Blackwell: Yes, sir, it was (chuckle).

Marcello: But let's talk about that weekend of December 7. What did you do that Saturday?

Blackwell: I worked on the beach crew. Instead of having a regular eight-hour shift, we would launch the aircraft early in the

morning, and then we would have free time to take care of our lines and whatever we would have there in the way of beach crew equipment. Then we knew what time we would have to be back down there to retrieve these aircraft, especially on the weekends. We would be back down there to bring them in. So this gave us time to take care of our laundry and little ol' individual things during the day. Then we'd go to the beer garden at night or in the afternoon or whatever you like to do. That's basically what I did that Saturday.

We launched the aircraft--I don't remember how many that we did send out--and brought them back in that afternoon. Then I went to the beer garden. Back in those days, I'd have one or two beers at the most. That's all I could afford, actually. Then I'd go to the barracks and read. We had a very nice day room with a large radio-record player and some very fine records in there. So we'd sit around there and read. We'd play checkers, sometimes a poker game if the master-at-arms wasn't around or something (chuckle). Basically, that was our weekend.

Marcello: So was it a pretty quiet Saturday then?

Blackwell: Oh, yes. For me, anyway. A lot of people--the older fellows--would go into town on a weekend. They would stay overnight. They'd just flat go in and make a weekend of it. For the most part, the younger ones were back in because they just couldn't afford that wild life.

Marcello: What time did you turn in that night?

Blackwell: Honestly, I can't say. I would say 9:00. Usually, I was in bed long before lights out. If I couldn't go to sleep, I would read until the lights went out, and then I would go to sleep. Normally, like I said, I was up at 4:30 or so in the morning, anyway, so I'd get to be early. That had been my habit all my life, actually--still is (chuckle).

Marcello: Is that right? Okay, that brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941. Of course, we want to go into this day in a great deal of detail, so I'll let you pick up the story at this point. Describe for me what happened from the time you get up until all hell broke loose.

Blackwell: Well, I got up probably at 4:30 or so. I got to the mess hall, I imagine, about 5:30 and had my breakfast. I came back to the ready room probably at 6:30. Usually, I spent an hour down there drinking coffee and talking. I went to the day room because most everyone was still asleep. Some of them were still moving around. For some reason or another, I had got a paper--a Honolulu paper--at the mess hall, and I brought it back there and started the record player to playing and listened to the radio. I did this up until the time I noticed the attack.

Our barracks was directly across the parade ground from the administration building. It was basically less than 150 yards. At first, I thought it was the Army playing games

again. Sometimes they would do that. But this was no Army at all. They were actually shooting bullets. I ran into the barracks and tried to wake everybody up, and they started throwing shoes at me and everything: "Get out of here, boy! You've been reading too many comic books!" They yelled things like that.

I had a friend, Hunter, who was just coming back from the mess hall. He came running in there and said, "Hey, do you know what's going on out there?" I said, "Yeah, let's get over here to the administration building and see what's happening over there." That was the nearest place I knew to run. We ran across the parade ground to the administration building, and we found a rifle in one case and a tripod-mounted .30-caliber air-cooled machine gun. We broke into the case and got that and the ammunition. We set it up on the front sidewalk going into the administration building--on the north side of the administration building. We started firing at the aircraft as they were coming in strafing.

Marcello: What was happening over where the airplanes were parked?

Blackwell: At that time, the only thing that we saw burning at all was the fuel dump--the big fuel tank. That's the only thing at that time that they had hit. Of course, later on, the bombers came in, but these fighters were the first things to come in.

Marcello: At this point they were simply strafing.



Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Were they trying to strafe the planes and so on, or were they more interested in personnel?

Blackwell: I think mostly they were after the planes because there were very few people killed there on that day. I think a total of seventeen were killed.

Marcello: How were those planes parked over there where they were located?

Blackwell: Just like ducks in a pond--wing-tip to wing-tip right down the ramp.

Marcello: They were all lined up?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. We made it real easy.

Marcello: Would there be any of them floating in the water?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, we had several out there in the water. They were so-called "on alert," but they didn't have a full crew. There was no officer aboard; it was all an enlisted crew.

Marcello: So the vast majority of these planes were simply lined up in nice, neat rows.

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: How many rows were there?

Blackwell: Two--one next to the water, one next to the hangars. There were some in the hangars. There were three hangars there.

Marcello: So was it more or less simply a matter of these fighter planes coming down and just strafing in a straight line on this row of planes?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Of course, they were going from all angles. It

didn't seem to matter them. They didn't care whether they ran a row or what.

Marcello: Okay, so you set up this machine gun, and you begin firing at these planes.

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Ray Mack Hunter was on the machine gun, and I was on the automatic rifle. This was the first time I'd ever fired that darn thing. It about drove me into the ground the first time it had a clip on it. I think there were seven or eight rounds in it. It just kept climbing with me. I had a heck of a time learning what I was doing there (chuckle).

Marcello: How many rounds do you figure you fired?

Blackwell: Oh, probably six clips. I don't know how many he fired on that machine gun. He had four belts that I know of, that had probably fifty rounds each in it or something like that.

Marcello: I gather that you must have been among the first to have seen these planes come in.

Blackwell: I suppose so, because it was a good ten minutes until the officer-of-the-day or anyone else came around the building there to find out what was happening. I don't know where they all were or what their problem was, but we just walked into the administration building and busted into the gun case and got what we needed. I guess anybody could've done the same thing.

Marcello: Was there any hesitation about doing what you did?

Blackwell: I don't recall any. It seemed like it was all reflex rather than worrying about, "Oh, my goodness, I wonder if we should break this glass." We just broke it.

Marcello: Approximately how long were you firing at those planes?

Blackwell: Probably ten minutes, like I say. Then the officer-of-the-day or his assistant came in. Two or three other people started showing up around there, and by that time we decided it was time for us to get down to the flight line because by that time everything was burning. One hangar was also on fire.

Marcello: Had the bombing started yet?

Blackwell: Yes, the bombing had started.

Marcello: Describe the bombing portion of the raid. Were these high-level bombers or dive-bombers?

Blackwell: Well, I'd say high-level. They were at least 5,000 feet, 6,000 feet, something like that. They came in from the north, and it looked like they were just about on a due south course. The ones that dropped their bombs dropped them on the flight line down there and in the hangar area. Then they continued on south, like they were going to Pearl Harbor, which they probably finally did. The fighter planes were still around during all this time, and then they seemed to disperse. We didn't have anything going.

By that time, the fire truck driver...the fire station was a portion of the administration building. We only had

one fire truck on the base there. By that time, the guy had come down there to fire it up and go down there and start fighting some of those fires. The only one man there was the driver. There was nothing for me to do there, so I told Ray Mack I was heading for the flight line, and I jumped on the back-end of this fire truck.

The fire truck got to VP-12's hangar and just kept driving right into the hangar there. The truck went in, and it was burned up, too. I jumped off the back-end of it, naturally (chuckle). I got out of there. We were being strafed, and I don't know whether the driver was decapitated there or whether it happened when he went into the hangar there. They say that he had lost his head there.

Marcello: So what happens at that point?

Blackwell: Well, I ran...there were some cars parked on the north side of the hangars, and the shrapnel was falling around pretty fast there. I got between two cars until the bombs stopped bursting. The first thing I know, I went to the next hangar, which is VP-14's hangar and which was my duty station. When I got there, everything was in turmoil. Nobody seemed to know what to do.

Marcello: Were there many officers around?

Blackwell: Yes, there were quite a few. Our executive officer for VP-14 was there. VP-12 had a lot of their officers down there. We had a punitive-type disciplinary problem over

there where they had a raunchy squadron-type thing. Whoever didn't fulfill their training missions or whoever was the sloppiest barracks or whatever, their squadron was the raunchy one, and so they would punish them by having inspections on Sunday morning, such as this. This is what happened to VP-12. They happened to be the bad ones that week. The officers were down there in full dress uniform, and I think they lost eight or nine of them that were burned to death in the hangar there.

Marcello: With what kind of accuracy were the Japanese bombing those planes and the installations down there?

Blackwell: I would say very good. I think most of the aircraft were destroyed by strafing. But the fuel tank apparently was hit by a bomb. The map that they recovered from one of the Japanese showed that one of the fuel cells was empty, and the other was full. Of course, they hit the one that was full, so I'd say they knew pretty well just what they were doing. Apparently, they carried it out pretty well.

Marcello: So you got over to your squadron's hangar. What happens at that point? You mentioned there's mass confusion. What happens next?

Blackwell: Well, by that time the aircraft out in the water were burned down pretty much to the waterline, and the people were swimming in from there. They couldn't fire anymore, so they had to get out of there.

Marcello: Had they been firing the machine guns that the planes normally carried?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Oh, yes. They'd been doing all they could. Of course, the only guns that we had for protection were the ones in the aircraft, so the people who were available down there got into the aircraft and were firing from the aircraft. But when they caught on fire and started exploding, well, naturally, the people abandoned ship.

Marcello: Eventually, then, the strafers got most of those planes.

Blackwell: I think they did, yes, sir.

Marcello: They did more damage than the bombers, actually.

Blackwell: I think so, yes. I think the bombs probably had more psychological effect than anything else because it was a chilling experience.

Marcello: Okay, is anybody giving any orders or anything after a while there at the hangar?

Blackwell: Yes, there were a couple of chiefs who were really in charge of things. They really tried to handle things. For the most part, the officers were running around more like the enlisted men were--really not too sure of what they should have been doing. We had some people that were trying to hide behind two-by-fours on that ramp there--silly things like that, you know. Now, it's laughable. But at that time, it was pathetic.

Marcello: Did you see any resistance being put up, other than what you

and your buddy put up, by people firing rifles and pistols and things of that nature at the planes?

Blackwell: Yes, there was one second class boatswain's mate who had a .45-caliber pistol. He was standing out in the middle of the parade ground when I got on the back-end of that fire truck. He was out there firing at these things with that .45-caliber pistol.

Marcello: What had possessed you to jump on the back of that fire truck? Was it just something to do or...

Blackwell: Well, no, they had stopped strafing at that time there. We were just standing there, and he was heading to the hangar area. I knew I should head there, also, so that's why I jumped on the back of it. It was, oh, a good quarter-of-a mile to the hangar area.

Marcello: Did either of these chiefs assign you any specific tasks?

Blackwell: No, sir.

Marcello: What did you do during the rest of the raid?

Blackwell: I just ran around trying to help people or do what I could to put out fires. We salvaged whatever we could from the aircraft. The whole thing probably only lasted about, oh, twenty-five minutes, I suppose, at the most. I had spent ten or fifteen minutes before I ever got to the flight line, so I only had about ten minutes down there before the whole darn thing was over with, as far as Kaneohe Bay was over with.

Marcello: Let me see if I get the sequence right. First of all, the

base is strafed.

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Then you have the horizontal bombers coming in, and then was it strafed again?

Blackwell: It was more or less strafed continuously.

Marcello: I see.

Blackwell: They would let up and then come back again. They would come in from the north, overfly the base, and then they would come around by Bellows Point, which had the coast artillery over there. By that time, the coast artillery was trying to break out their long guns and put them on the beach, and they had them lined up along the road, and these planes were strafing them. Apparently, that was just a diversion to give us a reprieve to start moving around over there on the base.

Marcello: Did Kaneohe account for shooting down any Japanese planes that day?

Blackwell: Just that one. Just the one that crashed there. They have a monument there to him.

Marcello: Did you see it go down?

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Describe that.

Blackwell: Well, he just came in smoking, and he was firing his gun all the way. He hit the hillside and busted up into a big ball of flames. They brought him back over, piled him up in front



of the hospital there, and I guess he laid there--I don't know--all that day, I know. I don't know how much longer. I was busy down at the flight line after that initial day.

Marcello: How low were those planes coming in when they were strafing?

Blackwell: Oh, very low. Treetop or lower.

Marcello: Could you distinguish the pilots and so on in the planes?

Blackwell: You could see them, naturally, but I couldn't tell whether they were Japanese or just what they were. Of course, they had the "meatball" on the side of their aircraft. You could definitely see them.

Marcello: When to your knowledge was the attack over there at Kaneohe?

Blackwell: Well, I'd say it lasted no longer than twenty-five minutes from the time it started. I'd say that by 8:15 or 8:20 at the latest, it was all over there.

Marcello: And no planes ever came back after that.

Blackwell: We did have two waves of bombers that I know of for sure that came over there. For the most part, they seemed to be ineffective other than knocking out that one hangar and the fuel dump. The rest of it seemed to be a nuisance--small-type bombs, hundred-pound bombs, such as that.

Marcello: In other words, by 9:30, so far as you know, the attack was long over.

Blackwell: Yes, sir, it was. It sure was. By that time, we were counting our toes and fingers and starting to dig gun revetments. We started digging holes in the coral out there

and putting in gun mounts for our .50-caliber air-cooled guns.

Marcello: If you had to describe your emotions during the attack, how would you do it? Was it fear? Frustration? Helplessness?

Blackwell: More frustration than anything else because I had not been trained for that. At that time, I had no fear. When I got down on the flight line there, I got a piece of shrapnel or something here in my face [points to side of mouth]. I felt it, but it didn't bother me. It didn't hurt me; it didn't knock me down; it didn't phase me any. Then when I got over between those cars, a bomb concussion started my nose and my ears to bleeding, which didn't bother me until after the whole thing was over with and I got to recapping it. Then I felt about half-sick at my stomach. It just seemed like the whole thing was a nightmare or such as that.

Marcello: Did you require medical attention for these injuries?

Blackwell: No. I did go to the sickbay, and they put some methylate and such as that on this thing here. The nurse fixed it up.

Marcello: That is, the cut that you had on your mouth.

Blackwell: Yes. Apparently, what they claimed, this thing runs into a gland here which runs into another one on this side here. It caused a big cyst to come up on this side, and they had to lance it later. So I've got two scars there. They claimed that this one became infected, which it possibly could have because we went for, I guess, two days there without a bath.

Marcello: When you mentioned the two scars, you're referring to two scars more or less at the corners of your mouth.

Blackwell: Yes, down here, right here (gesture).

Marcello: Just a little bit below the corner of the mouth.

Blackwell: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Basically, then, you were fit for duty.

Blackwell: Oh, yes, sir! Yes, sir! It never incapacitated me in any way.

Marcello: This is something that I found in doing research for this interview, and you can either confirm it or deny it or say that you have no knowledge of it. Was there an order given that you had to take your whites and dip them in vats of strong black coffee to give you some sort of camouflage?

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Yes, sir, it was. In fact, I still have a set of them at home. We went to the mess hall on the back dock and stripped down. The reason for this was that they claimed a Japanese had bailed out of an aircraft, and the only difference between his dungarees and our dungarees was that he had a "meatball" over his left or right pocket. I don't remember which one they said. At any rate, they forbade anybody to wear dungarees. They had to wear their whites, and they had to be dyed. We didn't have any dye, so they went to the mess hall, and everybody lined up in their uniform. They took them off, dipped them in there, got back into them soaking wet, and then went back to work (chuckle).

That was in the afternoon of the 7th.

Marcello: I just wanted to confirm that that actually happened.

Blackwell: It did happen. I have a set of them at home.

Marcello: What did you do that evening?

Blackwell: After we got the holes dug and the guns mounted, then we sat there. We had three men to each revetment. Of course, we didn't have any idea whether there was going to be a land invasion or another raid or just what might take place, so we just stayed right there with that gun position.

Marcello: What did you guys talk about?

Blackwell: Oh, gosh. We told jokes. There were some real strange things that happened. (Chuckle) The officer-of-the-day, I suppose he was, came around on a Cushman scooter. Somebody hollered, "Halt" at him. Of course, he didn't hear him on that noisy darn scooter, so they lowered the boom on him with a .45-caliber and hit him in the heel (chuckle). That put him out of commission.

There was another one. In the revetment right next to us, a kid by the name of Callahan, a radio operator, decided there was something moving out there. It wasn't very far out there, and, of course, we were in a fairly brushy area, anyway. We had some horses and such as that prowling loose on the base. He walked out there and walked right into one of those horses. Of course, the horse started, and he hollered (chuckle).

There's another one. "Duck" Mallard...he lives in Corpus Christi now. He made a charge on a stump--a bayonet charge on a stump--because he saw it move. He just kept watching that thing, and it kept moving on him and moving on him. He ran out there, and, of course, it flipped him for a loop, and he was about a 220-pound man at that time. Now I understand, he weighs about 300 pounds (chuckle).

Marcello: I guess everybody must have been jumpy then that night, from what you say.

Blackwell: Oh, sure. I think a lack of supervision more than anything else was responsible. We didn't know what to expect, and nobody else did apparently because they sure didn't pass it on down to us. Basically, all we needed was a little bit of "old head" around--somebody with a little more experience than most of us had.

Marcello: What rumors were going around that night?

Blackwell: Really, I don't recall any rumors. We talked about whether they were going to make another invasion. We were told the next morning that we would be sending a detail over to Ford Island to help them police up over there and recover bodies and such as that from Pearl Harbor.

The next morning, shortly after daylight, well, they did come around, and they picked three or four people from each area to go over to Pearl Harbor. At noon they came around and got some more, and I was among those. We went over and

worked until dark, and then they brought us back over there and gave a us--as I remember--a sandwich of some sort and some milk. They let us go to bed, and then they got us up about midnight, if I remember right. They brought us back down to the hangar, and we relieved somebody and let them get a little sleep. It went on like this for about three days, until things kind of simmered down, and then we got back into a routine. Of course, in the meantime, we were picking up all the pieces and trying to salvage all the salvageable parts of the aircraft and such that because it was a total disaster.

Marcello: Describe the destruction that you saw there at Kaneohe once you had a chance to calm down and kind of see what it had done.

Blackwell: Well, it was really unbelievable, the amount of damage that they did to our aircraft and to the one hangar. The other hangars were relatively unscathed, but VP-12's hangar was a total loss. It was completely gutted out by fire.

Marcello: Did that hangar have planes in it?

Blackwell: If I remember right, it had one, but I just can't say for sure that it did have any. I know they were having an inspection in there. They had the whole squadron down there--enlisted and officers--and they were all in dress white uniform. I don't remember for sure whether it had a...it seemed to me that in the south end of the hangar they did

have an aircraft, or maybe two--they could only take two in each bay--but I couldn't swear on that.

Otherwise, the aircraft out at the buoys had all burned to the waterline and sunk. The ones on the beach were just piles of rubble. Most of them had all the tires burned off of them and were just melted down to the ground. The engines were just laying on the ground.

Marcello: What were your feelings when you saw this at the time?

Blackwell: I guess I was angry, but I think I was more angry that our own leadership would sit around and tell us that we're probably going to be attacked and then not be prepared for it. It just seemed to me that there was something missing there somewhere, and it still does. There's something that I can't put together yet. I still believe that there was more known about it than was ever told to us.

Marcello: How long did you stay in the islands before you moved out?

Blackwell: Oh, as soon as we got our replacement aircraft. They were short of air crews, so they pulled me off of the beach crew and put me on a crew. We went to Johnston Island, Palmyra Island, the Fijis, and Midway. We were gone all the time, trying to find out where anything was, you know. Lord, we didn't know what we were looking for or anything else, but we knew there was something out there--there had to be.

Marcello: When did you get those replacement aircraft?

Blackwell: Probably at the end of that week. In other words, around

the 15th, somewhere in there, we started getting them.

Marcello: So you got them pretty quickly.

Blackwell: Yes, sir. Of course, they only dribbled in two or three at a time, but that was enough to let us keep moving out and patrolling the area to make sure they didn't come back in.

Marcello: That PBV was a real workhorse, wasn't it?

Blackwell: Yes, sir, it was. We used it an awful lot. I guess our squadron was active all over the Pacific out there for the next eight months or so until we got the B-24's. Our squadron reverted from PBV's to B-24's. But up until that time, we pretty well covered the Pacific out there.

Marcello: So when you left on that PBV to get Palmyra and Johnston and go to the Fijis, did you ever come back to Kaneohe?

Blackwell: Oh, yes. Our main base was there. We were just temporary duty. We'd go down there and patrol for a week, and then we would move over to Palmyra and patrol for a week. We had certain sectors that we were to patrol everyday. Of course, we had to maintain our aircraft, too. The flight crew did the maintenance and such on there. Some of our outfit went down into the Solomons, but I only made two trips down there, mostly on night reconnaissance. That was in the middle of 1942.

Then when we came back to Kaneohe, we went into B-24's in November and December of 1942. We trained in the B-24



and flew missions out of there to different places--kind of like the PBY did, only we were longer range--until March of 1943. Then we went down to Guadalcanal and operated out of there until the latter part of November of 1943, when the squadron came back to the States. From the time I went over there until I came back was twenty-six months.

Marcello: Well, that's probably a good place to end this interview.

Blackwell: All right.

Marcello: I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk with me. You've said a lot of interesting and important things, and I'm sure that researchers and students are going to find your comments most valuable, Mr. Blackwell.

Blackwell: I appreciate it, sir.