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Interview with  
Chester Dellinger  
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Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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(Signature)  
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Oral History Collection

Chester Dellinger

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Chester Dellinger for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on February 4, 1978, in Dallas, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Dellinger in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the seaplane tender USS Thornton during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Dellinger, to begin this interview, would you 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. Dellinger: I was born in Lockesburg, Arkansas, on September 12, 1915. I didn't get much schooling--I just went to eighth grade.

Dr. Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Mr. Dellinger: I entered the service on July 1, 1941.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Mr. Dellinger: Well, for one thing I thought I was going to be drafted

in the Army, and so I thought I'd take the Navy, which I don't regret that part of it.

Marcello: Is that why you took the Navy--simply because you didn't want to go into the Army?

Dellinger: That was the mainest reason, I think. Yes, that was the mainest reason. Then I kind of always wanted to go with the Navy anyhow, so I just thought, "Well, I'll take that."

Marcello: Well, if you entered in July of 1941, a state of national emergency had been declared by that time, had it not?

Dellinger: Oh, yes, yes.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Dellinger: In San Diego, California.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time?

Dellinger: That was eight weeks then.

Marcello: In other words, they had cut boot camp down considerably over what it had been prior to that.

Dellinger: I understand it was sixteen weeks prior to that. Of course, they had already cut it down, and they were getting them through pretty fast.

Marcello: Was there anything that happened in boot camp that stands out in your mind?

Dellinger: No, not particularly. Everything was routine, pretty routine.

Marcello: Did any of your drill instructors and so on in boot camp

ever talk about the possibility of war with Japan?

Dellinger: Yes. Oh, we had lectures. They didn't actually mention Japan, but they said we were probably going to be in a war. They just, you know, left it pretty open there. These were things which everybody kind of knew, you know.

Marcello: How hard was it to get into the Navy at that time?

Dellinger: Well, it wasn't too hard for me. Of course, me and two other buddies went, so they turned both them down and I went. So I guess there might have been a little competition, but I don't know what the deal was on them--physical, something. But I went on so I kind of got lonesome there a little bit, you know, but I also made a lot of friends, too.

Marcello: Coming from a small town in Arkansas, was this very much of an adjustment for you to go through boot camp?

Dellinger: Yes, it was quite a bit--quite a bit of adjustment. I got a little homesick, but I got over that. You meet a lot . . . you meet people that, you know . . . you meet a lot of people. You think, well, if you leave your family in a small town like this that you'd never meet nobody, but you do. It don't take long. You meet somebody you like, and it seemed like you've known them all your life, so everything gets along pretty well.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Dellinger: I went from boot camp direct to Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What vessel did you take over to Pearl Harbor?

Dellinger: I can't remember the name of that vessel. It was a tanker, but I can't remember that name, either.

Marcello: Was it the Neosho?

Dellinger: It seemed like it was. I believe it was. I believe it was the Neosho; I believe it was, yes.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Dellinger: Well, I liked that pretty well, because it was peacetime . . . and I'd had a friend who'd been over. He'd been in the Navy about a year--he was already over there--and I thought that was a pretty good idea, you know. I didn't mind that at all. In fact, I was kind of proud to get over there.

Marcello: When you thought of the Hawaiian Islands, what sort of thoughts entered your mind?

Dellinger: Well, I had heard a lot about it, and I just thought it was a big beautiful place, which it was. But by the time I got there, there was nothing but servicemen, it seemed like. It was just a military town. But I made out, though; we had a pretty good liberty. We had to get off the ship right smart then, you know, because of peacetime, and, of course, there wasn't a whole lot to do because there was too many sailors there, and Marines. That's all

you could see--just white uniforms down the street. That's all you could see, you see.

Marcello: Now did you pick up the Thornton immediately after arriving in the Hawaiian Islands?

Dellinger: I was transferred temporarily to another small ship, the McFarland, and stayed on it about two weeks. The Thornton was out on duty or training, and so I stayed on the McFarland--that's temporary--for two weeks, and then I got the Thornton.

Marcello: Well, what did you do while you were on the McFarland?

Dellinger: Oh, nothing--just routine. I'd just stand a few watches, is all.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the Thornton, then. You mentioned that it was out at the time you arrived at Pearl Harbor, and then you picked it up two weeks later when it came in. What kind of a ship was the Thornton?

Dellinger: Well, it was just like . . . originally, it was a World War I destroyer--four-stacker--so they converted it when this . . . they converted it into this seaplane tender. They took one fire room out and put a big gas tank--a 100,000-gallon aviation gas tank--on it. So they went to serving these seaplanes, and we'd run plane guard. From Hawaii we'd go about half-way back to the States, so that if a plane went down between the States and Hawaii, we'd be somewhere near, you know. And we stay out there a couple of weeks and come

back in, and that's the way we'd do before the war, mostly.

Marcello: What were the quarters like aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Well, they was a little crowded. It wasn't the best of conditions, I guess. There was no air conditioning on the ships then. We slept on topside most of the time, then, down there. Down in the compartments, it'd get pretty stuffy down in there, so we'd sleep on topside. It was peacetime, and we'd had a big canvas over the deck in daytime so it was shady. So in the daytime you could lay down and sleep pretty good, but in those compartments it was pretty warm.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: I think we had good food on there; I think it was good. I've been on some other ships that wasn't as good. Like I say, again, on a small ship like that, it seemed like the conditions were a little better. I always wanted a small ship, and I stayed on that four years. It wasn't bad food, I didn't think.

Marcello: What was the morale like aboard the Thornton during that peace period prior to the war itself?

Dellinger: Before the war?

Marcello: Yes.

Dellinger: Oh, it was great. Everybody was . . . it was great.

Marcello: What makes for good morale on a ship, especially a small ship such as the Thornton?

Dellinger: Well, I don't know hardly. Everybody . . . you know everybody,



is one thing. You know everybody and everybody gets along, and it just seemed like everybody helped each other. It just seemed like a big family, is what it seemed like, on a small ship that way because you pretty near know everybody on there.

Marcello: Incidentally, how were you served your chow aboard the Thornton? Was it cafeteria-style or family-style?

Dellinger: No, it was family-style. We had what they called mess cooks. In the Army I think they called them something else, but they called them mess cooks in the Navy. Anyhow, you had one central big galley, they called it, that prepared all the meals, and this mess cook, well, he would get it and carry it back to the compartments and serve it, you know. And that's the way it was.

Marcello: Did you manage to get mess cooking while you were aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Yes. That's what I was doing when the attack come that morning. I just got through with the morning meal, and I was taking the garbage out to put it on the dock. We was tied up at the submarine base, so I went out there and was dumping this in this big container, you know. I come back . . . this chief, he had the duty, and he heard this plane. I think it was around 7:30 or something like that. I was fixing to go on liberty that evening, anyhow, so . . . planes

were always around there anyhow, and he said, "This plane is pretty close." He looked up and he said, "That looks like a . . . that's a Jap plane, isn't it?" And so he banked, and you could see the rising sun on his wing, you know, and he said, "Yes, that's a Jap plane!"

Marcello: Well, let's talk about this a little bit later on, because I have a few more preliminary questions. We obviously will come back to this particular incident.

Dellinger: Okay.

Marcello: A lot of people look forward to mess cooking, didn't they?

Dellinger: Well, no, I didn't. I didn't want it (chuckle). I don't know. Some of them, I think, liked it pretty well on account of they could get their food anytime they wanted, and there was maybe a little better choice, you know.

Marcello: Didn't they usually get tips a lot of times at the end of the month, too, if they had been a good mess cook.

Dellinger: Oh, no. I don't . . . well, maybe a little on a small ship, but I understand on a big ship they might have done a little better. Yes, they'd help them out a little bit. If they'd really, really done a good job, you know, they would.

Marcello: Now did the mess tables hang from the overhead when they weren't in use aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Right, right. They hung from the overhead--that's right, yes. And you had the lockers in the compartment where your

bunk folded up, and your lockers were used for seats on one side of the mess table, you see. So it was pretty compact, pretty well-organized.

Marcello: What sort of reception did you receive when you went aboard the Thornton? You were in essence a "boot," so to speak . . .

Dellinger: Right, that's right.

Marcello: What sort of a reception does an individual right out boot camp get when he goes aboard ship such as the Thornton?

Dellinger: Well, I don't know. I was scared a little bit, excited, you know. I was an old country boy a long ways from home, you know, and I didn't know a soul on there. Everybody seemed to be real nice; they treated me real nice. And at first I met up with a guy who was in the fire room. He was a fireman, and--I don't know--I just struck it off with him. And he said, "Would you like to get down in the fire room?" I said, "I don't know yet. I don't know where I want to go." And he said, "Well, you don't want to be up on topside on that deck force. You ought to get down in the fire room." They was campaigning for them, you know. He says, "Well, come down there with me and look it over."

So I went down in the fire room. They had two boilers down there going, and you couldn't hear nothing, and blowers are running. It was under pressure down there; the fire room was pressurized. I thought, "Well, I'll never learn nothing

about this," with all these valves and things going, you know. He said, "Yes, put in for it and get down here." And I said, "Well, I guess I will!" I did--I put in for it. In fact, that's what I was waiting for when I was a mess cook. I was going to the fire room right after that was over with, you know. So that's about it.

Marcello: When did you pick up the Thornton? What time of the year are we talking about?

Dellinger: Well, let me see here. I went through boot camp, and I went home on boot leave in September. It must have been in October, around October, last of October, I believe it was, in 1941.

Marcello: Well, when you first went aboard the Thornton, did they put you in the deck force or did you go right down in the fire room?

Dellinger: No, you automatically go to the . . . you are automatically a seaman, you see. You're automatically a seaman when you get out of boot camp, so I was in the deck force.

Marcello: What did you think about being in the deck force?

Dellinger: Well, I didn't like that at all.

Marcello: Why was that?

Dellinger: Well, they just . . . on that topside up there, you had to mop them decks all the time, and there just was too many officers around up on the topside. Down in the fire rooms, they didn't come down there much because it was hot; they

just didn't come down there.

Marcello: Describe the on-the-job training that you . . . well, I guess you wouldn't have received any training down in the fire room. You actually didn't get there until after the attack.

Dellinger: No, I hadn't had no training in the fire room at that time, no.

Marcello: In other words, right up until the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, you were still basically in the deck force.

Dellinger: Right. I was still on the deck force, right.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about a typical training routine in which the Thornton might be engaging. Normally, when would the Thornton go out; how long would it stay out; what would it do when it went out? I've asked you a series of questions there. Describe one of these training routines of the Thornton prior to December 7, 1941.

Dellinger: Well, like we'd go out on plane guard duty between the States and Pearl. We'd stay out ten days or two weeks. Okay, then we'd go out and we'd tow targets--tow surface targets for practice. And they'd go out for just routine training of towing targets mostly, and . . .

Marcello: Now when you say the Thornton would pull plane guard duty, what exactly are you talking about?

Dellinger: Well, plane guard duty was waiting for the planes that was

coming from Stateside--they called it then--to Hawaii. They were flying over, and some of them would go down occasionally. Then we'd be closer. That's what they call plane guard duty.

Marcello: Now would these be military planes or civilian planes?

Dellinger: Right, military planes--yes.

Marcello: I think we have to keep in mind that that was a pretty good flight in that day and time . . .

Dellinger: Right, right.

Marcello: . . . that is, going from the West Coast to the Hawaiian Islands.

Dellinger: Right, it was. So that was the main reason--so you'd get to them quicker. You'd be midway across.

Marcello: In other words, the Thornton would probably know the route that these planes were taking and would be cruising in the vicinity of that particular aircraft.

Dellinger: Oh, yes, they knew exactly the route they was taking. They knew exactly. They could pinpoint one if he went down; they'd know exactly where he was at, you see.

Marcello: And then while you were out there on this plane guard duty, you were also towing targets in the meantime, or would that be a separate cruise altogether?

Dellinger: No, no. That'd be a separate cruise altogether. When we was on that, that's all we did; we'd just lay out there.

We'd just anchor out there; that's all we did.

Marcello: Did any planes ever go down while you were on the Thornton during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Dellinger: Oh, yes. One in particular . . . it was a seaplane. I think it was a PBY, and we was about two days . . . no, they'd been down awhile--about twelve hours, I believe them boys told me that come off of it. It was a rough sea, and they done buckled themselves--some of them--to the wings of it. It got so rough that they couldn't stay on it, and we picked them up. That crew is the only one I remember that we picked up where the plane was lost, you know, and we couldn't tow it or do anything with it. So we just went ahead and sunk it out there. There wasn't nothing on it, because they got all the gear off of it they needed, and we sunk it because it was too badly bunged up.

Marcello: Well, describe what the target towing was like. Evidently, the Thornton also performed this mission while you were aboard it.

Dellinger: Well, it just, like I say, towed a surface target--a target with a long cable behind it--and the other ships or planes would make runs on it with bombs and so forth.

Marcello: About how far behind the Thornton would the target be towed?

Dellinger: Oh, I'd say about 200 yards, something like that--200 or 300 yards.

Marcello: Now did the Thornton itself have very much in the way of armament aboard it?

Dellinger: No, it didn't; no, it didn't.

Marcello: It probably was not designed to be a fighting ship.

Dellinger: We had a two 4-inch surface guns and some 20-millimeters and some .30-calibers which was very useless at the time then. Of course, we had depth charges for submarines, but we didn't have a lot of firepower--we sure didn't.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, did the Thornton's routine change any?

Dellinger: No, not a great deal. No, it didn't change any, as far as I can remember.

Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events at that time?

Dellinger: I wasn't. I just wasn't keeping up with things at all--you know, just taking it as it was. I was just listening on the radio and stuff like that, but I didn't give it a thought, really.

Marcello: In the scuttlebutt aboard the Thornton, did anybody ever talk about the possibility of war against Japan? I'm referring to some of the old salts that may have been aboard.

Dellinger: Yes, there were some of them. We had quite a few men on there that had retired at sixteen years. They could retire



at sixteen years, and they'd been called back in, and they were very bitter. Of course, they'd done retired, and they had to be called back in, and a lot of them would say, "Well, if we get in a war with them Japs, it'll probably last for ten or fifteen years." Some of them had been over in China back in '37 and back in there, you know, and they knew a lot about them people. They said, "Now it won't be over overnight if we do get into war with Japan."

Marcello: In other words, some of those old salts did have a certain amount of respect for the Japanese.

Dellinger: Well, some of them did, yes--you bet. But them that had been over there knew the situation better than a lot of people might think. Of course, a lot of them were just enlisted men, you know; most of them were. But they knew what was going on; some of them did, you know.

Marcello: Did you have any of the old Asiatic sailors aboard then? I'm referring now to people that had served with the Asiatic Fleet at one time or another.

Dellinger: Yes, we did. We had some of them that had been with the Asiatic Fleet over there. Some machinist's mates, the electricians, and . . . like I say, they had retired at sixteen years. We did have some of them.

Marcello: I understand those old Asiatic sailors were really characters.

- Dellinger: They were, yes. Most of them had tattoos all over them. I tell you, they were something (chuckle). And they were bitter about being called back in--every one of them. They just raised Cain all the time, yes.
- Marcello: I gather that they were rather different from the run-of-the-mill sailor in the fleet at that time.
- Dellinger: Oh, yes, they were completely different.
- Marcello: What stands out in your mind about those Asiatic sailors, other than the tattoos? Is there anything else?
- Dellinger: No, I reckon that's about all. I know we had this particular one, chief electrician, and he had this tattoo of a big eagle that covered his whole chest, and the tip of the wings come up to his shoulders. He had them all over his back, you know. He got them in China in 1937, I believe he told me. He'd go over on liberty, and they'd do some one day; and in a week or two he'd go back, and they'd do another one. He was really marked up.
- Marcello: Did you have any thoughts about getting a tattoo yourself?
- Dellinger: I thought about it once or twice, and I said, "No, I don't believe I ever want one." So I let it go.
- Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine of the Thornton. Normally, when would the Thornton come in? Did it have a specific day when it would always come in?
- Dellinger: No, it didn't. We didn't know. We didn't even know how long

we was going to be out when we went out. We really didn't even know. We might just come in, you know . . . well, sometimes we may come in at night or anything; you just couldn't tell.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Well, it was what we called port and starboard liberty then. Half the crew would go one day--on odd day; and on even days the other half would go. It was just routine, and you would get a long weekend off. You can get a weekend off.

Marcello: Now when it came to weekends, would one section get the entire weekend?

Dellinger: Yes.

Marcello: And then the next weekend it would be the other section.

Dellinger: Right, yes. Then we'd just keep a skeleton crew on it. Anybody could get special liberty. It didn't take a whole crew if you were running on auxiliary power. Sometimes we were running off of dock power, you see. You didn't need a whole crew.

Marcello: Do you remember if you were in the port or the starboard section?

Dellinger: I was in the starboard section.

Marcello: What did you normally do when you went on liberty?

Dellinger: Well, over there and before the war, there just wasn't much to do--maybe go to a movie or something like that, go to a

cafe and get us some good chow or some different chow, you know, and just walk around and see all the sights that we could.

Marcello: Like you say, I guess downtown Honolulu on a weekend was wall-to-wall bodies was it not?

Dellinger: It sure was; it sure was.

Marcello: And when we say wall-to-wall bodies, we mean that they were literally flowing out into the streets, and there were long lines to get into everything.

Dellinger: Everything, right--everything. The streets were completely full.

Marcello: Did you ever visit Hotel Street or Canal Street or any of those places?

Dellinger: Oh, yes; oh, yes, I've been on both those streets and all of them, I guess. I'm trying to think of some of them others, but I can't think of them Hawaiian-named streets, anyhow. They were all right down in Honolulu. I've been on a lot of them streets in there.

Marcello: Beretania Street, I think, was another one where a lot of activity took place.

Dellinger: Yes, I think that was the name of it. There was a little city park right there in downtown Honolulu, but I can't think of the street . . . but it was really there right in that downtown area around Hotel Street or those streets, you

know. That was the most popular streets--Hotel and all those common names, you know.

Marcello: Now when you had the weekend liberty, when did it usually commence?

Dellinger: Well, if you got a long weekend, you could leave on Friday night, and then you'd come back on Monday morning.

Marcello: Now aboard the Thornton could you stay over for the entire weekend if you had weekend liberty?

Dellinger: Oh, yes, yes.

Marcello: I know on some of the ships the crew had to be back at midnight even if they had liberty.

Dellinger: Now if you got a special liberty and got that stand-by liberty, is what they called it, and somebody would take your watch if you had a watch, then you could stay the whole weekend, you see. You'd leave Friday evening at 1600 and come back on Monday morning.

Marcello: How tough or easy was it to find someplace to sleep in Honolulu?

Dellinger: Well, you just couldn't hardly find a place to sleep over there if you stayed the night. There was just no way. I never did get none of them overnight liberties. Of course, I didn't know enough people to find anyplace to stay at the time.

Marcello: You probably wouldn't have had enough money to stay over,

anyway.

Dellinger: No, I was just still a boot then. I didn't know the "ropes" very well, then, you see.

Marcello: I assume you were making twenty-one dollars a month.

Dellinger: That's what I was making, twenty-one dollars a month--yes.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us up to that weekend of December 7, 1941, Mr. Dellinger, and what I want to do at this point is to go into as much detail as you can remember concerning the activities of you and the Thornton during that weekend. Let's start on Friday. Was the Thornton in Pearl on that Friday? This would be December the fifth.

Dellinger: Yes, it was in Pearl, yes.

Marcello: Had it just come in, or had it been out for a while?

Dellinger: I can't remember. I think we'd been out, and we'd served our time out on duty, and we'd . . . we was in, then, for about . . . we was going to be in about two weeks, as well as I can remember. I think that's what it was, that we'd been in and were going to be in about another week.

Marcello: And where did you tie up when you came in?

Dellinger: Well, we tied up at various places, but at that particular time we was at the submarine base. We was tied up at the submarine base then.

Marcello: Why were you berthed over there? Any particular reason?

Dellinger: Well, I don't know. No, I guess there might have not been no

other place available at the time or something. We just berthed there at the submarine base at the time. We berthed there occasionally; sometimes we'd anchor out in the bay, but we just happened to be there at the time.

Marcello: Now when you were berthed over there at the submarine base during that weekend of December 7th, what sort of state or condition of readiness would the Thornton have been in? Now you were talking awhile ago about the various places from which you would draw your power and things of that sort.

Dellinger: About our readiness for an attack or something? Is that what you mean?

Marcello: Well, for example, when you were over at the submarine base that weekend, where were you getting your power?

Dellinger: Well, we were getting our power from the dock. When we came in like that, we just hooked up the auxillary power, they called it. We'd hook up the electricity and steam for it. We didn't need no steam but only for the galley, you know, because we'd be getting . . . we didn't need to run our generators because we just used dock power, you see. That's the way we worked it.

Marcello: Now when you use dock power, do you have a limited amount of power, or would you have as much power as you have when you were at sea?

Dellinger: All you wanted. You just had all you wanted.

Marcello: At the same time, however, the Thornton would have been on "cold iron," so to speak, right?

Dellinger: Right--"cold iron."

Marcello: How long does it take for a ship such as the Thornton to get up steam and move out under normal circumstances?

Dellinger: Well, on normal circumstances from a cold start, you're supposed to warm up slowly because you'd damage the boilers. Of course, when you're in an emergency . . . we found out they didn't take that long a lot of times.

Marcello: But normally how long would it take?

Dellinger: Under normal conditions, an hour. It'd take an hour under normal conditions, after they gave us the word to get underway.

Marcello: Okay, what did you do that particular weekend? Do you recall?

Dellinger: Yes. Well, like I say, I was mess cooking, so I went out on the dock and dumped the garbage, and this plane came over.

Marcello: Now you were aboard the Thornton the entire weekend? You did not get any liberty at all?

Dellinger: No, I didn't. No, I didn't get no liberty. I didn't get no liberty that weekend, no.

Marcello: Well, do you recall anything extraordinary happening that weekend, and I'm referring now to the period prior to the attack. Maybe we ought to talk about Friday and Saturday.

Dellinger: Well, not in particular. We had an inspection nearly every



week. They had inspection on . . . I believe it was Friday --regular inspection. It happened to everybody every week. Then on Saturday, I was mess cooking, and I was supposed to go on liberty that Sunday at noon.

Marcello: Were you planning to go ashore?

Dellinger: Yes, me and my buddy was going over that evening to go to a movie. We was going over at noon, you know. He was in the fire room at the time, and I hadn't got in the fire room yet, and we was going over.

Marcello: Do you recall anything out of the ordinary happening that Saturday night? What was the condition of the various crew members that were coming back aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Everything seemed normal. Everybody, you know, was happy and some of them coming back like always; some of them come back drunk, you know, and every other way. It just didn't seem like nothing would ever happen, you know. Everybody was just going along.

Marcello: Well, now on a normal Saturday night, would there be a lot of drunks coming back aboard the Thornton?

Dellinger: Oh, yes. On most any ship there is going to be some drunks coming back, you know. They'd be drinking. Maybe you'd not call them drunk, but a lot of them would have a little too much.

Marcello: Would they have been in pretty good condition to fight the

next morning, however?

Dellinger: Not hardly, I wouldn't think.

Marcello: A lot of people believe that if the Japanese or any other enemy for that matter were going to stage an attack at Pearl Harbor, the best time to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning. And what many people like to assume is that Saturday nights were times of a great deal of partying and drinking and things of that nature.

Dellinger: Well, I think it would have been ideal, because over half the people was ashore, and then, like I say, sailors do drink and servicemen do drink; so everybody was just in a . . . if the ones that were on liberty, say, went over on Friday . . . of course, when the attack started, everybody had to come back, you know. They was coming back, you know, all during . . . some of them was until noon getting back, you see, because they was all messed up. Everything was messed up--totally disorganized--so there was nobody who knew what to do or anything. And like I say, a lot of them was over there, and if they'd have carried on and followed up with that attack, I don't . . . well, we'd probably not be here talking about it today.

Marcello: Now it is true, also, isn't it, that Sundays were kind of a day of leisure if you didn't have specific duties to do?

Dellinger: That's right. If you didn't go ashore, you didn't have

anything to do. Of course, you could go ashore to church if you wanted to, but we didn't have chaplain on the ship. On a small ship that way, you didn't . . . if you was out with some more ships or close to some more ships and wasn't into shore somewhere, you could go to another ship and go to church, you know. They'd provide you with some way to go to church, or you could get special liberty to go to church if you wanted to; they wouldn't deny you from that. I could have went over to the submarine base and went to church, you know, if I'd have wanted to, but I didn't go. I have went on special liberty and go to church, but I just didn't that particular Sunday because I was going to get that mess cooking over with and go to shore myself that evening.

Marcello: Well, let's talk a little bit then in more detail about that Sunday morning, and what I want you to do is to describe your routine from the time you got up in the morning until the attack actually began. As a mess cook, did you have a specific time that you had to get up that morning?

Dellinger: Yes, I had to get up pretty earlier than the regular crew to help the cook and everything get stuff together and get the mess down there for them. Of course, on Sunday it was light on the mess cooks because there was a lot of weekend liberties. It was real light on the mess cooks.

Marcello: I would assume there would not have been very many officers

aboard, either.

Dellinger: No, not on a weekend. There were very few. Our skipper wasn't aboard. But I was going to get the Sunday morning mess over, and then I could go ashore at noon. Well, like I say, there wasn't even a half a crew aboard, so there wasn't very much for me to do, and I was fixing to get it over with when the attack started. Everybody got running around there, you know, and nobody knew what to do.

Marcello: Well, you mentioned that you were outside when you got the first news of the attack.

Dellinger: Well, general quarters hadn't sounded at the time I saw my first plane--that me and this chief out there saw. He had the dock watch out there. General quarters hadn't sounded at the time.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up a minute. Even though you mentioned it awhile ago, how did you get from the ship out to the dock? In other words, why were you on the dock at this time?

Dellinger: Well, they had the gangplank that goes to the dock, and when we was in that way, we was always taking our stuff right onto the dock, you see. We didn't have to throw it over the side or have a barge come along there to pick it up. It was pretty convenient that way; you just had a gangplank, and you went to the dock and do all your work out there on that, you see.

Marcello: You're referring to the garbage.

Dellinger: Garbage, that's right. We had the big containers there, and all the other ships would dump it in, you know. When you was in, you couldn't dump it in the harbor like you could out at sea, so you dumped it in a container.

Marcello: Okay, so you're taking the garbage out to the dock. Pick up the story at this point.

Dellinger: Well, I'd already taken it out to the container and dumped it and was coming back in, you know. This chief there was talking. I mean, we stopped there and talked that Sunday morning. There wasn't nobody up; there wasn't nobody even stirring. I didn't see nobody but me and him out there. There was planes flying around; they were doing that all the time, anyhow. This here one was real close, and he banked. The chief said, "I believe that's a Japanese plane!" And so he banked a little bit more, and we could see it. And so he kept standing there looking, and he says, "That's a damn Jap plane!"

Marcello: Now up to this time, had you heard any explosions or noises or anything?

Dellinger: No, I hadn't--no.

Marcello: Were you a pretty good distance from Battleship Row?

Dellinger: Not too far.

Marcello: Could you see them?

Dellinger: I could see the battleships, yes. We could see them. But we stood there and talked, I guess . . . I don't imagine it was over a minute, maybe might have been a half a minute-- I don't know. But then we heard the explosions. So it was a little while before the . . . we heard the explosions over there, and then general quarters sounded.

Marcello: About how much time elapsed from the time you and the chief initially saw the airplane until general quarters sounded?

Dellinger: I'd say it was at least ten minutes, after we saw that first plane. But it was three or four or five minutes before the explosions ever started in after we saw that plane. I don't know whether he was just trying to locate something or what he was doing now. Of course, he was close enough that I imagine I could have shot him down with a .30-06. That's how close he was there. He didn't try to bother us at all.

Marcello: In other words, during that ten-minute period, is it safe to say that you and the chief were more or less just spectators there at the dock watching what was going on?

Dellinger: That's right.

Marcello: What were you doing? Were you speculating as to why this Japanese plane was there at that time?

Dellinger: Yes, that's what we were doing. You couldn't imagine . . . Of course, he'd been in, like I say, sixteen years, and he

knew more about it than I did. He couldn't imagine it either; he just kept looking, you know, just kind of dumbfounded, you know. In just a few more minutes, then the explosions started, and then general quarters; and everything went to burning over there, and we knew right then, even before general quarters, when that explosion came that something bad was happening.

Marcello: What sort of a day was it in terms of climate, visibility and things of that nature?

Dellinger: Well, as I remember, of course, I believe it was a little foggy that morning, but it was cleared off and pretty then.

Marcello: And did you have a good view and an unobstructed view of Battleship Row?

Dellinger: We could see Battleship Row good from where we were at.

Marcello: Okay, so general quarters sounds. What happens at that point now?

Dellinger: Everybody goes to his battle station.

Marcello: Where was yours?

Dellinger: Mine was on the number one gun. I was a hot-shell handler, they called it then. They saved them cases and reloaded them. Of course, like I say, at that time we only had the 4-inch surface guns on the ship--one forward and one aft.

Marcello: And you were on the forward gun.

Dellinger: I was on the forward gun.

Marcello: Okay, so general quarters sounds; you go directly to your battle station. Describe the initial reaction of the crew. Is it one of professionalism? Panic? Confusion? How would you describe it?

Dellinger: Well, our crew didn't seem to be panicking any; everybody got to the stations there. Of course, we were still short-handed. Sailors hadn't had time to get from over in Honolulu back out, and we were even shorthanded on the gun. If we'd had a lot of firepower, we'd have been shorthanded on them because there wasn't enough crew to man all the guns.

Marcello: Now what can you on a 4-inch gun aboard the Thornton do during the attack? In other words, was this gun of such type that it could be used for antiaircraft fire?

Dellinger: If could be used as . . . we were firing it as an antiaircraft gun, but it was designed as a surface gun because it wouldn't elevate enough for antiaircraft fire, you see. It wouldn't elevate but about maybe forty degrees, but they did do some firing at low aircraft.

Marcello: Okay, you get to your battle station. How long is it before the gun begins to fire?

Dellinger: It's a matter of a few seconds. If they need to, if they give the word to fire, it don't take but a matter of a few seconds, and it's ready to fire.

Marcello: How many men are on this crew?



Dellinger: Oh, I'd say five.

Marcello: Were there five there shortly after general quarters sounded?

Dellinger: I believe we were a couple men short on our gun, on the forward gun, but we could make out with less, you know. You can let some of it go. Like handling them shells, you can just let them hit the deck and forget about passing them, you see, and that's what we did.

Marcello: So what did you do, then, since obviously you had been a hot-shell handler?

Dellinger: Well, I went to handling the live ammunition then and let the hot shells just drop on the deck. They fired fairly fast.

Marcello: How heavy did one of these projectiles weigh?

Dellinger: I can't remember. They was pretty heavy, though. I don't know exactly what them things weighed at the time.

Marcello: Now in your particular case at this 4-inch gun, do you have the entire projectile there?

Dellinger: Right. It was fixed ammunition.

Marcello: Where was the ammunition coming from?

Dellinger: Well, it's coming from the . . . initially, it comes from down below. They have a hatch there close, you see, and they have guys down in the hatches that bring it on up in the cases and another one that undoes it and another one that feeds the muzzle. It's chain work, you see.

Marcello: In other words, there's nothing electrically operated here at

this gun. All the ammunition is brought up by hand and so on and so forth.

Dellinger: Right, right. That's right. Everything was manual on that gun. It fired manually and everything.

Marcello: Okay, describe the actual firing at these planes and so on.

Dellinger: Well, we couldn't see what they were doing at that other gun. All I could tell is the ones that we could get on, you know, some of the low-flying aircraft. We was firing at them, but we never hit one.

Marcello: Now is this gun out in the open? It's not in a turret as such.

Dellinger: Not in a turret, no. That type gun wasn't in a turret, no, not at all--just up on the deck.

Marcello: Possibly how many rounds do you think you fired? You'd have to estimate this, of course.

Dellinger: Oh, I'd say fifty or sixty rounds. There was a good many rounds fired there.

Marcello: In a situation like this, do you have a chance to observe the "big picture," so to speak, or do you only see the things that are going on in your immediate vicinity?

Dellinger: Well, you only see the things going on in your vicinity at the time, because you're concentrating on everything right there and trying to do your job good. So you don't have time to look around too much.

Marcello: In the movies, we see and observe a lot of shouting and yelling and things of this nature on a gun mount. Is this actually the case under battle conditions?

Dellinger: No, it wasn't. There wasn't no shouting going on. We trained on this deal, and everybody knows their job pretty well. Everybody knows their job pretty well, and you do your job and somebody else hollers, "Fire!" You just have a routine, you know. There's not a lot of hollering going on about it.

Marcello: How would you describe your emotions while the attack is going on and while you were firing and while you were able to hear the explosions and the noise and so on?

Dellinger: Well, I'll tell you, I was scared. Because them shells . . . like I say, we were letting those empty hulls hit that steel deck, and them things were making a lot of noise. I didn't know if we was getting hit or what was going on there, but I was scared.

Marcello: Did the Thornton come under any direct attack?

Dellinger: No, we didn't.

Marcello: I guess the Japanese planes were looking for bigger targets.

Dellinger: Right, they were looking for the bigger target, because that plane that come close to us could have blew us completely out of the water. I figure he just said . . . well, we were just such a small ship, and he went on around to Battleship

Row probably. I don't know. I lost track of him when me and the chief went aboard. About that time general quarters sounded, and I don't know where he ever went. But they claimed one of our forward guns shot one down, but I don't know. I think they got credit for it, but I don't know for sure whether they did shoot it down or not.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that the first plane that you saw was flying so low that you believe you could have hit with a .30-06 rifle. How low were they flying? Again, you would probably have to estimate their altitude.

Dellinger: I'd say he was as low as eighty feet; he was real low, and you could just see the plane real well. You could just see it; it was just as plain as it could be.

Marcello: Was this plane coming over at a fast rate of speed . . .

Dellinger: No.

Marcello: . . . or at a slow rate?

Dellinger: He wasn't going very fast either, no. He just cruised around, and he banked up, and you could see that wing when he banked there. He made it just a routine deal.

Marcello: Did you get a glimpse at the pilot?

Dellinger: No, I couldn't see him because he banked about that time, and that throwed the wing . . . you know, I couldn't see him very well.

Marcello: Approximately how long was your particular gun firing?

- Dellinger: Well, again, I'll just have to do a lot of guesswork here. Like I say, there was a lot of confusion going on. I'd say we overall probably fired forty-five minutes to an hour.
- Marcello: And was this a continual thing, or could you detect a lull in the attack or a . . .
- Dellinger: Well, it was a lull in us firing because there wasn't nothing getting in our range, you see. One would come by, and they'd think they could get a shot at it, and they would shoot. Sometimes it was pretty rapid, and sometimes there'd be a lull in it, and then we'd fire again, you know.
- Marcello: I assume that all the firing that you were doing was being done at either torpedo planes or dive bombers perhaps.
- Dellinger: Yes, yes.
- Marcello: Can you remember when the high-level bombers came over?
- Dellinger: No, I don't know when those high-level bombers came over. All I saw was the ones that was coming in making those low runs on them ships; that's the ones that I saw.
- Marcello: Now in the meantime, is the Thornton trying to get up steam to get out of there?
- Dellinger: No, they didn't give us orders to get out of there until about noon. They gave us orders to get underway, as well as I remember. Then they told us to come back, and we fooled around there for until about dark that evening--getting

underway and securing, getting underway and securing. They didn't know what to do.

Marcello: Did you ever leave the harbor?

Dellinger: We didn't leave the harbor that day.

Marcello: But you did actually leave the berthing area.

Dellinger: We left the berthing area, and we went out in the harbor.

Marcello: Now when you left the berthing area, would you have gone down below to the fire room, or were you still on the gun?

Dellinger: No, I hadn't actually been assigned to the fire room at the time.

Marcello: That's right. I forgot.

Dellinger: I hadn't actually been assigned there yet. I just had my . . . I was trying to get it . . . was going to get in it when my mess cooking was over.

Marcello: Well, when the Thornton finally did move out that afternoon, even just to cruise around the harbor, what did you observe? What did you see?

Dellinger: Well, there wasn't much to see. Them battleships and everything was still smoking, and the oil and stuff was on the water. A lot of that was still burning, and, oh, everything was covered with oil. I guess four inches of oil was on top of that water. It was just a mess--just awful.

Marcello: Now did the Thornton have very much of that aviation gasoline aboard at that time?

- Dellinger: No, we didn't have a lot of gasoline. Usually, when we'd come in that berth until we got to go back . . . they wouldn't fill that tank until we got ready to go back out. I guess it was for a safety precaution for one thing. I doubt if we had very much on there.
- Marcello: What did you do while you were cruising around in the harbor, that is, before you were called back to the dock again? Were you engaging in search and rescue, or were you more or less just churning around out there?
- Dellinger: I think they just moved away from the harbor there . . . I really don't know why they gave us orders to get away from there. We just cruised around there in the harbor for a while and anchored out there in the harbor and just kept ready all the rest of the night, you know--kept steam up and everything.
- Marcello: Did you have any submarine scares while you were cruising around in the harbor?
- Dellinger: No, we didn't.
- Marcello: I was, of course, referring to those two-man submarines.
- Dellinger: I think that's the only ones that came in the harbor, was those little ones--those little one-man or two-man or whichever way they was operating them.
- Marcello: Are you able to detect how quiet things get when the attack is finally over? You know, during the attack there's a great deal of noise and explosions and so on. Is there a contrast?

- Dellinger: Yes, it gets pretty quiet, you know. People don't do much talking or anything. It seems like they just stand around and look at each other, and nobody knows what to say or what to do, it seems like.
- Marcello: Were you speculating as to what would happen next?
- Dellinger: Well, then I knew we was in war, which everybody else did, and some of them says . . . I heard one man remark, one of the sailors, "It won't last long. We'll get them Japs in six months." Again, one of these Asiatic sailors said, "Don't fool yourself. This war will be going ten years from now. Them Japs ain't nobody's fools. This will be a long deal." They thought they was going to get out--them sixteen-year ones, you know--pretty soon, and he just knew then he was going to be stuck for another ten years until it's over, you see. And he said, "No, it won't be over in no six months. It won't be over in no six years."
- Marcello: What sort of an appetite did you have during the aftermath of the attack?
- Dellinger: Well, it didn't affect my appetite.
- Marcello: What sort of food did you get?
- Dellinger: After the attack that day?
- Marcello: Yes.
- Dellinger: Well, on Sunday we always had cold cuts. We had routine food. We kept a pretty good supply of food there; it didn't



affect us any that way, you see, not then.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors you heard in the aftermath of the attack? I'm sure the ship must have been one big rumor mill.

Dellinger: Oh, there was a lot . . . I don't know in particular, but just a lot. Some of them said it would be over in six months, and a lot of them said it would be ten years or six years and whatnot, you know. There was all kinds of rumors. And that's about all I remember in particular.

Marcello: Do you remember anybody speculating as to whether the Japanese were going to follow up with an invasion? Or that they had, in fact, already invaded the islands or anything of that nature?

Dellinger: No, I didn't hear no rumor . . . we didn't hear no rumor about that they had invaded. Some of them said, "Well, they'll probably invade it tonight or something." That's what some of them thought; that was just some of the sailors, you know. That's just what you would call scuttlebutt, I guess. Some of them thought maybe they might invade. Again, like I say, you don't mingle around with the officers; we would just get in a scuttlebutt; we'd get our information from the old salts, you know, mostly. That's the ones we kind of believed in--us "boots" especially, you know. Of course, we didn't have nobody else to go to for information,

you know (chuckle).

Marcello: What did you do that night?

Dellinger: Well, that night we was just still standing-by, you know. We stayed at general quarters, as well as I remember, until after dark. Then they finally secured from general quarters, but it was just kind of stand-by with everything kept in a ready position, you know, in case we had to get out of the harbor. We could have got underway in a minute's notice. We had a full head of steam, and we could have went anytime then, you see.

Marcello: Do you remember the firing that took place that night when the planes off the Enterprise were coming in?

Dellinger: Yes, I do.

Marcello: Describe that incident.

Dellinger: Well, again, we was out in the harbor at the time then, and they sounded general quarters again, and I went . . . the whole harbor lit up again--what firepower was left. I don't know if this was true or not, but they all told us the Enterprise had launched them planes, and they went to shooting them planes down. Now whether that's true, I don't know. That's just the scuttlebutt we heard.

Marcello: Was there any firing that took place at your gun mount?

Dellinger: No, we didn't shoot that . . . they didn't fire that 4-inch gun any that night. Like I say, they wasn't elevated enough

to do any good in something like that.

Marcello: Did you get any sleep that night?

Dellinger: Well, as I can remember, I didn't sleep very much that night, because it kind of shakes you up.

Marcello: Incidentally, when you're in port like that, do you have very much ammunition right at the gun, or do you have any ammunition right at the gun?

Dellinger: No, at the particular time, we didn't have any. Of course, it was in peacetime, and all the ammunition was down below, and you don't have any ready ammunition right then. I mean, it would have taken a few minutes. If they'd have sounded general quarters on the first plane that I saw, he could have been out of the way before we could have got ready.

Marcello: What did you do the next day, that is, on Monday?

Dellinger: Well, on Monday we went back over to . . . I don't remember whether it was the submarine base of the Navy air station and loaded up on fuel and everything and provisions and went out to sea for a day or two. Then we come back in.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen while you were out at sea?

Dellinger: Nothing happened.

Marcello: What did the harbor look like on Monday?

Dellinger: It looked terrible. There was still a lot of smoke and still a lot of fires going on. A lot of the oil was still burning, and oil drums and everything else was in that harbor

. . . lumber and everything.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you have when you saw this?

Dellinger: Well, it's just kind of hard to explain. I don't think anybody else really could explain it, either. You just thought, well, maybe they might attack again. That's the thing I was thinking about--they might come back over and attack again and wipe the whole thing out, you know. Because we was crippled; all them ships were down; and we didn't have a lot of firepower left. Now this still may be a rumor, but they had this inspection. They had these inspections, and they'd move everything below deck, you know, make everything look good, and in them big ships, they may take that ammunition down three or four decks, you see. It would take a while. Of course, they had conveyers and everything to get theirs out; their ship was more modern than ours. But there wasn't nothing in shape to start fighting right then.

Marcello: And when did the Thornton go out again?

Dellinger: After Sunday, you mean?

Marcello: You mentioned that it went out on Monday and stayed out for --what--a day or two?

Dellinger: We stayed out a day or two and we . . . I don't remember, but then we came back in. Of course, I can't remember the days; you couldn't keep diaries or anything anyhow. In the

next deal we went to Midway or Coral Sea. I forgot which one was first, but we went to Midway, I think it was; we went down there.

Marcello: Oh, in other words, you stayed back in Pearl most of the time then.

Dellinger: Right. That's right.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Dellinger, is there anything else relative to the Pearl Harbor attack that we have failed to cover?

Dellinger: No, that's about all that I can remember about it.

Marcello: Okay, well, I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that scholars are going to find your comments valuable when they use them to write about Pearl Harbor.

Dellinger: Well I hope so.