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Interview with

C. N. SWAIN

April 26, 1986

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas
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Oral History Collection

C. N. Swain

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

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Charlie Swain 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. Swain in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the auxiliary repair ship USS Vestal during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Swain: Well, I was born on May 18, 1924, in a little place in East Texas called Kerns, Texas. My daddy was a farmer--sharecropper, in other words--back in those days. Over there around Kerns, there was nothing but farming. There was more farming than there was cattle raising.

Dr. Marcello: What was the extent of your education?

Mr. Swain: I went to the ninth grade, and then I went in the service.

Dr. Marcello: What prompted you to go into the service?

Swain: I just got tired of sitting around home. You couldn't hardly get a job. I'd just turned seventeen, and I was talking to my dad about the service deal. I said I'd like to go in the service, so we went over to Tyler, Texas, to see about getting into the Marine Corps, but they wouldn't take me because I had a broken arm at one time. It still wasn't set perfect. So we happened to go down to Houston later on, and I mentioned to my dad about it, so he took me over by the Navy recruiter over there. So I joined the Navy. They told me to come back down at a certain time, and that's what I did.

Marcello: And this was in 1941.

Swain: I think it was in July, 1941.

Marcello: Why did you decide to select the Navy as opposed to, let's say, the Army or something like that?

Swain: Well, I didn't want to walk too much (chuckle).

Marcello: So if you joined in 1941, you were about seventeen years old.

Swain: On May 18, I was seventeen years old.

Marcello: How long was the Navy enlistment at that time?

Swain: About that time, they called it a minority cruise until I was twenty-one years old.

Marcello: Since you were going into the Navy under the minority cruise, you had a four-year enlistment.

Swain: Well, yes. Then I extended for two.

Marcello: But, normally, if you had been over twenty-one, it would have been a six-year enlistment.

Swain: I believe it was six years at that time.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Swain: San Diego.

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

Swain: Six weeks. I think it was about seven weeks altogether.

Marcello: They cut it down considerably over what had been the normal Navy boot camp, did they not? I guess they were trying to get people out into the fleet.

Swain: If you went through and showed potentiality to go into a school, they prolonged it; but if you didn't show potentiality for going to a school, after six or five weeks, they'd send you out to a ship or whatever.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen in your boot camp experience that you think we need to get as part of the record, or was it a normal Navy boot camp?

Swain: It was the normal Navy boot camp. I remember when we had Memorial Day one time, and we had to march out there behind ...that's when we had the horses. We had to march behind the horses, and they did their thing (chuckle), and you had to walk through it.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Swain: I caught a destroyer, a four-piper, out of the San Diego harbor, and we went up to Los Angeles up to San Pedro. Then

I caught the USS Vestal.

Marcello: So you got on the Vestal right there in San Pedro, California.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: Did you volunteer for such a ship, or were simply assigned there?

Swain: I was assigned there.

Marcello: When you got aboard, where were you assigned?

Swain: All the recruits that came aboard that day were assigned to the deck force.

Marcello: And this was normal procedure.

Swain: That was normal procedure. Unless you had a specialty or something like that, everyone was assigned to the deck force. The deck force means that they were the ones that got out there and swabbed and painted and everything else.

Marcello: They were responsible for the maintenance of the ship.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: Describe what kind of a ship the Vestal was. It's referred to as an auxiliary repair ship. What kind of repairs and what kind of facilities were there aboard the Vestal? Those ships to me are amazing.

Swain: Well, I can tell you in one or two words. It was a floating Navy yard. The only thing that they couldn't do on the Vestal was to raise a ship. Other than that, they could do on the ship anything a Navy yard could do.

Marcello: What were some of the various specialties or things that you

could do there?

Swain: Well, we had an optical shop. We could go in there and repair opticals. We didn't have a torpedo shop, but we had the machine shop where they'd go in and make gears. We had the pattern-maker shop. If you had a gear, a cluster gear or any kind of gear, that was broken, you could just bring a pattern or part of that gear or a print, and they could make a gear. First, they would make it out of aluminum, and then they could make the final product. It was probably a better gear, that they made, than what it was when it first came out.

Marcello: So there were even foundries aboard that ship.

Swain: That's right. We had a foundry, a welding shop, metalsmith shop, carpenter shop, paint shop, gun shop, optical shop. Every shop that you had on land, we had on the ship. Other than raising the ship out of the water, we could do just about anything.

Marcello: How long did you remain in the deck division?

Swain: About three or four months.

Marcello: So you were in the deck division, then, for some time after you got out of boot camp.

Swain: Yes.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the life aboard that ship. First of all, describe where your quarters were and what they were like.

Swain: (Chuckle) Well, it's not like nowadays on a ship. Back in

those days, we didn't have air conditioning. They had blowers with a wind tunnel that would go down in the different sections of the ship. The first time I went aboard, they put me in a bunk room which was right above the boiler room. Of course, they had a bunch of other people there other than me. At nighttime, after a certain time of night, it was kind of cool; but during the day, you couldn't stay down in there. Later on, I got into the engineering department, and, of course, the engineering department had their own bunk room, which was in the fore part of the ship. We had a big wind tunnel up there, that they hung up through the hatch, and it was just like central air conditioning. The wind hit then, and it came down through there, and it kept the compartments kind of cool. It really wasn't like air conditioning, but it was bearable. You could live with it.

Marcello: How much space did you have?

Swain: A bunk? Space? I think a bunk was a little better than six feet long and about that wide (gesture).

Marcello: About three feet wide?

Swain: About three feet wide. You had your locker space there. The locker space was about 24" x 24" and about eighteen to twenty inches deep.

Marcello: So, as usual, things were pretty crowded aboard ship.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Vestal?

Swain: The food was good. The food was real good. We had some good cooks. Of course, that's like everywhere. Everybody has got to complain. If everybody didn't complain, something was wrong. As long as everybody was grumping and going on, everything was perfect.

Marcello: Did you have to serve a tour of mess cooking?

Swain: Oh, yes, sir. I sure did. In fact, that's what I was doing on December 7. I was on mess cooking duty.

Marcello: How was food served aboard the Vestal? Cafeteria-style or family-style?

Swain: Cafeteria-style.

Marcello: Even before the war?

Swain: Yes. That's why we was alongside the Arizona. We had been out on maneuvers. In fact, all the ships was out on maneuvers at that time. We came back in, and we pulled alongside the Arizona. The Arizona was serving food family-style--with plates--and so we was alongside to remodel their cafeteria, like, to put in that little rail and everything so the steel trays could slide along. That's what they were doing when we was alongside it.

Marcello: Did you have anyother functions that you were performing other than working with the deck force?

Swain: When I first went aboard on the deck force there, they had this young coxswain called Charles M. King. He lives up in New York. He was in charge of all the young recruits. We

was chipping paint on the skylights on the hatches. The paint on them hatches was about an inch thick, maybe more. You could chip it down, and it'd break off, and you'd see all different coats of paint. They were trying to get all that paint chipped off for a fresh coat and everything. Most all the recruits that came aboard, that was in the deck force, that's what they were doing. They were using chipping hammers and paint scrapers and everything to get all that paint chipped off at that time.

Marcello: What particular specialty or rating did you hope to go into eventually?

Swain: Well, I went into engineering, which was a machinist's mate rating.

Marcello: And when did that occur?

Swain: That occurred after December 7. I don't remember exactly what date. I think we was getting ready to go on overseas. When I was talking about going overseas, we had received two hits when we was alongside the Arizona. We beached it over at Aiea Landing, which was a recreation landing at that time. We had a whole plate knocked off...a bomb went through the carpenter shop and knocked a plate off. Those big steel plates must have been about eight or ten feet across and about ten or twelve feet long.

Marcello: Let's kind of hold off in talking about that because we'll talk about it a little bit later on. It was after Pearl

Harbor, then, that you actually got into the engineering spaces. When did the Vestal move out to Pearl Harbor?

Swain: In September. I got on it one day, and in the next couple of days we went to Honolulu.

Marcello: So it was in September of 1941 that the Vestal got out to the Hawaiian Islands. What did you think about the idea of having duty in the Hawaiian Islands?

Swain: Nice, real nice. Like the Navy said, "Join the service and see the world."

Marcello: So you were looking forward to going to the Hawaiian Islands.

Swain: Yes, I was looking forward to getting out and going somewhere.

Marcello: Was it everything that you thought it would be?

Swain: Yes, it was like that and more, too.

Marcello: (Chuckle) Okay. What role did sports and athletic competition play in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Swain: Well, they had a lot of boxing, wrestling, baseball, volleyball, and everything. That ship that I was on had the champion baseball team. They won every game that they played. They called them the "Vestal Virgins." That was the name of it.

Marcello: Were those athletic events pretty well-attended?

Swain: Oh, yes. Everybody came to them.

Marcello: I understand boxing was a big thing, too, especially the smokers.

Swain: It was. During boot camp they had it...I believe it was on every Thursday night.

Marcello: Did they ever have any matches aboard the Vestal?

Swain: Yes, they sure did.

Marcello: In talking about athletic competition, wasn't there another form of competition among the various ships relative to getting the "E" for efficiency?

Swain: That's right. They had competition between each other-- who would do this the best for whatever they was competing against. Sometimes they'd have boat races. They'd get out there on a motor whaleboat and race them. Of course, that was a little before my time. That was back in, as they called it, the "Asiatic Service," back in those days.

Marcello: What were some of the various ways you could earn that "E" for efficiency aboard the Vestal?

Swain: Keeping it clean; keeping it all painted up; having nobody get in trouble and stuff like that; making sure all your compartments was clean and doing all your work and everything. The admiral would come by and give an inspection and all that stuff. Of course, I guess everyone you talk has got a different way to express it.

Marcello: Let's talk about some of the typical training exercises that the Vestal would engage in once it was out at Pearl Harbor. Would a ship such as the Vestal leave very often and go out with the fleet?

Swain: From San Diego we went out to Honolulu. We wasn't out there very long before the whole fleet--all the ships--went out on

maneuvers for about...I forget how many days, but it was for a couple of weeks, maybe a month. They was all out there on maneuvers. Regardless of what kind of a ship it was, they was out there.

Marcello: Including the Vestal.

Swain: That's right. We was included in the fleet. We was out there on maneuvers. So we did our maneuvers and everything, and when we got through with all of that, everybody came back in. We pulled our duty just like any other ship. Just because it was a repair ship, that didn't make no difference. You had your duty to do just like any of the rest of them.

Marcello: Where was your battle station aboard the Vestal?

Swain: Well, at one time, when I was on the deck force, I was on a 5-inch bag gun. A 5-inch bag gun is not an anti-aircraft gun. It's a regular 5-inch gun. In other words, you put your projectile in, and you put your bag in. That's what you call a bag gun. It was on the port side of the ship.

Marcello: And was that your battle station on December 7?

Swain: No, on December 7, I was mess cooking.

Marcello: I see. But normally that would have been where your battle station was.

Swain: That's where it was.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you, even though you had not been in the Navy very long, detect

any changes at all in your training routine?

Swain: From what I seen at Pearl, the individual couldn't tell too much. They was trying to push it away. But you could tell that they beefed up the patrols around certain places. Other people used to come onto the base, but they didn't let them come in no more. The train, the "Pineapple Express," used to come through the base there. It used to run right down through the base there. They kind of stopped that for the simple reason there might have been saboteurs or something like that on board. When the train came into the base, they had guards down there at the other end of the base. Up on the other end, like, going into town, they had the guards up there, too. They made sure nobody could come on it.

Marcello: When the Vestal was in port, where did it usually dock? Where did it usually tie up?

Swain: It used to tie up at a buoy. I can't remember the name of the buoy. If it was a big ship, we'd go alongside of it; but if it was a small one, they'd come alongside us. It was over there right off Pearl City, but I can't remember the name of the buoy.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine as it developed aboard the Vestal. How did the liberty routine work?

Swain: Sometimes it would be port-and-starboard, and sometimes you worked so many days, and you got off on liberty every

other day or every third day. It depended on what you were doing.

Marcello: For the benefit of somebody who reads this later on, what is meant by port-and-starboard liberty?

Swain: If you had port-and-star-board liberty...in other words, one side of the ship is port, and one side is starboard. If you was on the port side and had liberty, then the starboard side would have the duty. They'd be the ones that would be on duty, and you'd be on the beach. In other words, that was half of the crew.

Marcello: Half the crew would be aboard at all times.

Swain: Right. That's the way it was supposed to have been.

Marcello: When you had liberty on a weekend, would you get either a Saturday or a Sunday as opposed to the whole weekend?

Swain: Well, some of them got from Friday until Monday. You had to be back Monday. Some of them there only got off Saturday and Sunday. It depended on what section that you was in.

Marcello: In other words, if the port section had liberty, the port section would have off the entire weekend?

Swain: Some of them would have the whole weekend off, but it depended on how your watch section was set up. If you had a watch section...if you had to come back on watch at 8:00 in the morning--say, on a Monday morning--you couldn't get the whole weekend off. You'd have to come back. If your watch section was scheduled to come on at midnight, something like that

there, naturally you'd have to come back early.

Marcello: When you went ashore, what did you usually do?

Swain: I went to the movies and to the beach. Of course, I wasn't old enough to go into the beer joints. Back then they was pretty strict on that over there. I remember one time I was going down the street there, and these boatswain's mates all seen me and dragged me in the beer joint. I never was much for drinking, anyhow. I took a nip now and then, but I just didn't make a habit of it. I usually went to the movies and went to the beaches and places like that there.

Marcello: What special significance did Hotel and Canal Streets have?

Swain: (Chuckle) You'd see a lot of activity out there--without me saying too much.

Marcello: I guess there were all sorts of places on those streets to take the serviceman's money.

Swain: That's right. If I can say it, I remember one time when I came down. It was the first time I made a liberty. I was on a streetcar, and I'd seen a big line of service personnel out there. I said, "Doggone! What is this?" One of them said, "Well, that's the cathouse there." They said it was legal there, and the line was clean around the block.

Marcello: That was common practice, was it not, to have those long lines to get into those cathouses?

Swain: That's right, especially around payday. Well, after payday,

after the money runs away, there wasn't too many lines.

Marcello: I noticed that you have a tattoo. Did you get your tattoo in Honolulu?

Swain: Yes, I sure did.

Marcello: Did you get it around that time?

Swain: Yes.

Marcello: Describe how that all came about.

Swain: I wasn't drunk. Everbody else had one, so I decided to get this one here (gesture).

Marcello: That one on your forearm.

Swain: Notice that I don't have nothing in it.

Marcello: Yes.

Swain: I got that, and I figured that when I got a chance, if I finally got married, I'd put my wife's name in it. But I didn't get married to the one I was going out with. Later on, I had my initials put up here (gesture). Then after I got married, I had my wife's initials put down here (gesture). I had this tattoo put on over in Virginia (gesture).

Marcello: So you initially started with the tattoo in the Hawaiian Islands, and you added the other portions later on. Those are all on your forearm. I guess one wasn't very salty until one got a tattoo. I noticed that you have one on your leg, too.

Swain: Yes. That was put on out in San Diego.

Marcello: Was that before you went to the Hawaiian Islands?

Swain: No, this was after I came back. This was out there in San Diego.

Marcello: So you have tattoos on both your legs and also on your arm.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: I guess you were really salty then.

Swain: Well, (chuckle), if they want to say it that way. Somebody asked me once if they hurt. I said, "Well, anything hurts. You don't want to to get drunk and go out and get it because you'd be sober." (chuckle)

Marcello: Seeing those tattoos reminds me of something else. Did you have any sailors from the old Asiatic Fleet aboard the Vestal?

Swain: About 80 percent.

Marcello: Is that right?

Swain: About 80 percent.

Marcello: Describe what kind of characters they were.

Swain: They were real nice guys, but all of them was boozers. All of them had twenty and twenty-five years and more. In other words, they had a arm full of hashmarks. All of them knew what they was supposed to do. Regardless of what he was in--machine shop or on the deck force, a boatswain's mate or whatever--he knew his job.

I remember one time they was giving us some tests. Normally, you only had a certain length of time to take these tests. These tests went on for about two or three days because they were trying to get these people rated to a chief. Of course, this is a long time ago. I know it's all changed now. Back in those days, people went in the

service, and a lot of them couldn't even read or write. They'd just make their "X." Of course, it don't make any difference if you can read or write or not as long as you can still do your job--which was what they were looing for back in those days.

Marcello: So those Asiatic sailors did have a lot of skills.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: They also had a lot of tattoos, didn't they?

Swain: That's right. They got most of them in China and different places. The old Vestal was an Asiatic ship. When we went over to Honolulu from San Pedro, most of them brought their automobiles, carried them back with them. All the older boys that was Asiatic people, when they was still aboard, they had their family out in Honolulu and everything, so when they came back to the States, they picked up their automobiles and carried them all back over on the ship. This included the captain and the executive officer and everybody else who was able to have a car back in those days. Like I say, most of them was Asiatic sailors, especially most of the chiefs and stuff like that there and maybe some of the first class. Back in those days, it was hard to get a rate. You spent more than a tour of duty to make you a rate back in those days. They were hard to come by.

Marcello: All promotions were pretty slow back in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, weren't they?

- Swain: That's right. You really had to know what your rate was before you could get it. I really don't know what kind of test they gave back in the thirties, whether they gave it out of a book or not, but from what I heard some of them say, it was pretty tough. If you passed it, you knew what you was doing.
- Marcello: This brings us into those days immediately prior to the Pearl Harbor attack. When you and your buddies sat around in bull sessions, did you ever talk about the possibility of the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor?
- Swain: Not me. At my age I didn't realize it that much at that time. Of course, I remember some of the old guys was talking about it. Something was said about it several times, but I never paid much attention to it.
- Marcello: Is it safe to say that there was a feeling that perhaps war might break out between the United States and Japan, but it probably wouldn't break out in the Hawaiian Islands?
- Swain: Well, I remember some of the people was talking about it, that the President was wanting to get in the war to help out England, stuff like that there, but they didn't think anything about it on the Pacific side.
- Marcello: Let's talk about that weekend of December 7, 1941. Let's talk first of all about the activities of the Vestal. I'm assuming that it had been in the harbor for some time.
- Swain: We had been back in the harbor after those maneuvers only

for a couple of days. When we came in off maneuvers, we were right alongside the Arizona. Most of the crew on the Vestal were in the maintenance department. The maintenance department is the people who go aboard other ships to do work. That's what this repair ship is. You don't have a ship's company, but they're the people who take care of the ship itself. Your maintenance department are the people who are the shipfitters, welders, carpenters, and all that. They're the ones that go aboard the other ships to do work and make things.

Most of them, including the ship's company, was on the beach. They went home—those that had families there and that lived over there. Half of the ship was still on the ship.

Marcello: In other words, you tied up alongside the Arizona in order to do some maintenance work aboard that ship.

Swain: Do that work to make that cafeteria.

Marcello: Was that basically why you were there--to remodel their cafeteria?

Swain: That's right. That's why we was alongside the Arizona.

Marcello: You did not get involved in any of that work, did you?

Swain: No.

Marcello: You were on mess cooking.

Swain: That's right. Back in those days, you was allowed to sleep in to about 8:00 or 9:00.

Marcello: On Sunday mornings?

Swain: On weekends. On Sunday mornings. They served breakfast up until about 8:00. That's what we was doing. We was getting everything prepared so we could have breakfast.

Marcello: Let me back up a little bit and talk some more about that weekend. What did you do that Saturday of December 6, 1941?

Swain: I was on the beach. I went out and picked up some glasses. They were like a fine, fancy glass, you know, glasswork. I bought a dozen of those glasses, and I was going to send them home to my mother. They never did get there.

Marcello: This was for a Christmas present?

Swain: Yes, that was for a Christmas present. Crystal glasses is what they were.

Marcello: What else did you do that Saturday when you were on liberty?

Swain: We went out by Waikiki out there. I was going to go swimming, but I never did go. Then I went to a movie, and I came on back to the ship.

Marcello: About what time did you come back to the ship that night?

Swain: It was early, before dark.

Marcello: What was happening back aboard ship?

Swain: Nothing. The movies and stuff like that. Guys were playing cards--playing acey-deucey. Back in those days, acey-deucey was a good game. Everybody used to do that and play pinochle, stuff like that. Some of the guys would be down there by the engineering quarters where they had, like, a recreation

hall, and you could sit down and write a letter or...they had a piano down there, and some of the guys would play the piano. You could read a magazine or something like that. Of course, they had the post office down there, too. They also had the sailmaker's shop. The sailmaker's shop was where you did the work on your clothes, stuff like that. If you wanted a badge put on your jacket, you'd take it down to the sailormaker. He was, in other words, the ship's tailor.

Marcello: So when you went back aboard the ship that Saturday evening, it was pretty routine.

Swain: Just routine.

Marcello: This brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, and, of course, we want to go into a great deal of detail on this. Give me your routine as it unfolded on Sunday, December 7. You mentioned on several occasions that you had mess cooking that day. Pick up the story at that point. When did you begin that work and so on and so forth?

Swain: The watch commander woke up all the mess cooks early in the morning. Everybody that was mess cooking--in fact, other than the quarter-deck watch and the messenger and the cooks--was the only ones that was up.

Marcello: What time did they get you out of the sack?

Swain: On weekdays it was about 4:30 in the morning or 5:30, something like that. On a weekend it was around 6:00. I was

up in the galley, which was up right behind the captain's quarters on that ship, amidships. I was getting everything squared away so we could take it down to the mess hall, which was down by the quarter-deck. All of a sudden, we heard a lot of racket. All of a sudden, the ship started moving, shaking. We couldn't figure what it was. I thought maybe somebody hit us, you know, run into us. I walked out on the other side by the captain's quarters, and I looked and I couldn't see nothing at that time.

Marcello: What kind of a day was it in terms of weather and climate?

Swain: It was a nice day, real nice.

Marcello: Was it a good day for an air attack?

Swain: Well, if you want to call it that, it was a good day. Of course, over in the mountains, it was kind of hazy. Right there on the harbor, it was real nice. The way we were setting, the Arizona was looking straight toward the Fleet Landing, where we used to go to go to town. It was like an opening going through that way. That's the way the torpedo planes came in—right that way.

Marcello: So you hear this racket, and you go outside. Describe what you see and what takes place.

Swain: Well, I walked down...see, this ship was made so that we had a tunnel so you wouldn't have to go over the top. You go through this tunnel--go from one end of the ship to the other end of the ship--through amidships. I walked to the

quarter-deck back there, where they had the gangplank and everything. In the meantime, they was strafing and dropping bombs and everything, so I walked over by the quarter-deck, and this Japanese plane was coming in—a torpedo bomber. He dropped his "fish" under...I seen him drop his "fish," and it went right under the Vestal and hit the Arizona. When it blew up, the Arizona shook. The next thing I remember, I was in the water—down by the boats.

Marcello: So how low was this torpedo plane coming in?

Swain: I guess he wasn't about twenty feet off the water. By the time he dropped the bomb, he was...he dropped his bomb, and he went up in the air, made a circle, and came back around. By the time the torpedo got there, he'd come back around and was smiling at us.

Marcello: He was flying so low that you could see him smiling.

Swain: I could see his teeth. He wasn't twenty feet from the ship. Well, I guess with the wings, more than that. I'll say thirty feet, forty feet—something like that—from the ship.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that you were almost hypnotized in the sense that you were simply watching this torpedo plane coming in and dropping his torpedo and so on?

Swain: That's right. I believe, if I had a rock, I could not have hit him.

Marcello: I assume, then, that General Quarters had not sounded

aboard the Vestal.

Swain: Yes, it did.

Marcello: How come you hadn't gone to your battle station?

Swain: Well, let me take that back. It may have sounded, but I don't remember it. But everybody was going to their battle stations even without General Quarters sounding.

The captain--if I can bring that up now--got blew off the ship the same time that I did. I was told later on that he was proceeding to climb back up the gangplank, and people started coming down the gangplank, and he wanted to know where they was going. They said that the executive officer had given orders to abandon ship. He said, "I'm the captain of this goddamned ship! I'll tell you when to abandon ship! Let's get this thing underway!" So that's what they did.

Marcello: So the torpedo slams into the Arizona, and the concussion knocks you into the water.

Swain: Not only me, but the captain and a bunch of other people.

Marcello: What happens at that point, then?

Swain: They proceeded to get the ship underway.

Marcello: Let's talk about you. You're in the water.

Swain: I was in the water. Well, I got aboard the captain's gig. The captain had this gig tied up down there. A bunch of the boats were tied up. I went aboard the captain's gig, and they carried me on over. They picked a bunch of people

out of the water and took them over to the recreation landing.

Marcello: By this time has the Arizona blown up yet?

Swain: It was blowing up. It was blowing up.

Marcello: Describe the blowing up of the Arizona.

Swain: All I could see was a big flash and smoke. It was burning.

Marcello: Were you in the water at that point?

Swain: I was in the water at that point.

Marcello: About how far were you from the Arizona?

Swain: Well, the ship was right here, and the Arizona was right here (gestures). Across my ship was about twenty feet, fifty feet, something like that there. I was about sixty or seventy feet from the Arizona.

Marcello: How did the blowing up of the Arizona affect you in the water?

Swain: By the shock on my ship. It was just a big jolt.

Marcello: So your ship was between you and the Arizona.

Swain: Yes.

Marcello: What else did you see, relative to the Arizona?

Swain: Blowing up, you mean? I seen the ship turning over behind us. People was in the water. Some of them was on the ship already, climbing up the side. People on my ship, the Vestal, was out already trying to rescue people. Even during the shooting, all that was going on. The emergency people was out there trying to save people on the other ships.

Marcello: Approximately how long were you in the water?

Swain: About five minutes. I was just in the water, and then I climbed up on the boat.

Marcello: Were you hurt in any way at all?

Swain: Just pride.

Marcello: (Chuckle) About how far had you fallen, let's say, when you fell in the water?

Swain: About thirty feet. About thirty feet off the side.

Marcello: Okay, by the time you get in the captain's gig, the action is still taking place.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: What do you do at that point?

Swain: Well, the coxswain got in there...he was down there, and he was getting everything squared away. He let the lines loose, and he picked up a bunch of guys out there in the water. He was taking them over to the recreation landing. He let everybody off over there, and then he'd come back and pick up other people, other than the ship I was on.

Marcello: How come you didn't get back on the Vestal again?

Swain: I just didn't go back on it. I didn't go back on it until a couple of days later.

Marcello: What do you do once you get over on the landing?

Swain: We went over there and...the Army had brought a bunch of guns in, and we manned the guns.

Marcello: What kind of guns were these?

Swain: Antiaircraft. They were 40-millimeters, I believe. I wouldn't swear to it.

Marcello: When did all of this take place? Was this later on in the afternoon.

Swain: This was about an hour or two hours later.

Marcello: In the meantime, what are you doing over there on the beach?

Swain: We was down there...they had this here building that had a big cellar down there. It was where the showers and everything were located. Everybody was down there. It was like a fallout shelter.

Marcello: Were you able to see anything while you were down there?

Swain: No.

Marcello: What thoughts were going through your mind while all this was taking place?

Swain: I was just wondering if I was going to make it back home.

Marcello: What did you guys talk about?

Swain: You didn't do much talking back in there, that I remember. Later on, during the evening, people finally got their wits back and everything and were wondering what the President was going to do and stuff like that.

Marcello: What was the condition of your clothing and so on after you had been knocked into the water?

Swain: Nothing but oily.

Marcello: Already?

Swain: Already.

Marcello: The water was already full of oil.

Swain: Oh, yes. And it was burning. Of course, it wasn't burning where I was at. In a period of time, it would have been burning if they hadn't moved the ship out.

Marcello: Describe what that oil was like on your clothing.

Swain: It was real gooey, and my skin was oil and kind of greenish-looking. Wherever you touched yourself, you got oil on you. They finally got some stuff over there at that landing, and we all took a bath. The only kind of soap we had to take a bath with was salt-water soap, which is good at taking the oil off. We spent the night over there, and I believe it was the next day that they took us back to the ship. If somebody had a ship, they'd take them back to that ship.

Marcello: Let's talk some more about activities that afternoon of December 7. You mentioned that about an hour after you got on the beach, the Army came down, and it set up some anti-aircraft weapons. At that point, did you just stay wherever you were assigned, and that was about it?

Swain: We stayed right there. They told us to stay there, and everyone was issued a weapon, or they gave you something to do. Either it was to be an ammo handler, or they gave you a hand gun or a rifle or something like that. During the day everybody was up, but during the night you had so many to a gun. The rest of them was asleep. Then after a certain length of time, they would relieve them, and they

would take over so everybody would have their rest and everything.

There was a lot of shooting during that time. Any racket...it was dangerous to walk around. Anything that shook the weeds over there...right across the highway was a cane field. All that chain fence was chopped up from bullets when they shot into the cane out there. They'd hear a noise, and they'd start shooting.

Marcello: What kind of an appetite did you have that day?

Swain: Not much. I drank more water than anything else.

Marcello: Is this pretty common when you're going into battle?

Swain: That's right. You're pretty tight. Of course, I guess if you're a veteran, you're a little different.

Marcello: Most everything I have read indicates that there were two waves. First, you have the torpedo planes and the dive-bombers, and then you have the high-level bombers coming in.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: Could you distinguish two waves of attacking planes that day or not?

Swain: I couldn't, no. Of course, it's possible that there were two waves, but I couldn't tell.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors going around in the aftermath of the attack?

Swain: The Japanese were going to invade, be prepared, and shoot anything that crawls.

Marcello: Did you believe all those rumors?

Swain: Sometimes. Well, like I told you, you don't know what to believe. Later on, you got to where you didn't believe anything. You just protected yourself and stuff like that.

Marcello: How would you describe your emotions that afternoon and that evening? Would it be anger? Fear? Frustration? How would you describe your emotions?

Swain: I was scared, I can tell you that. I don't care who he was, and he could've been in the service forty years, and if he wasn't scared that day, something was wrong. There had to be something wrong if he wasn't scared that day.

Marcello: What was your attitude toward the Japanese?

Swain: To me they were just like anybody else. They do what they're told to do.

Marcello: Did you think that way, however, on December 7, relative to the Japanese?

Swain: No. No, I really didn't. I really thought that it was terrible and no good--shoot anyone that walks, stuff like that there. But you really can't do that. They're just like the United States people. They do what they're told, and the Japanese did what they were told. I figure that 80 or 90 percent of the Japanese people didn't want the war to start with. That was the same way it was here.

Marcello: What did you do in the days following the attack?

Swain: I was still a mess cook until my three months was up.

Marcello: The next day you went back aboard the Vestal again.

Swain: I went back aboard the ship and went on with my duties, what I was supposed to be doing. I finished up my three months of mess cooking. We repaired our own ship.

Marcello: What kind of damage had been done to the Vestal?

Swain: We got a plate knocked off in the carpenter's shop in the back. They put thirty tons of cement...they made a blister and welded it on the bottom of the ship. They put thirty tons of cement in that hole so we could get it into dry dock. While we was working on our ship, we was also out working on other ships out there, getting them fixed up where they could go and stuff like that.

Marcello: There's something I should've asked you earlier, and I'll ask it now. That evening, several planes off the carrier Enterprise were coming in, and they were accidentally fired upon. Do you remember that?

Swain: I remember them talking about it, but I don't know whether any of them got hit or not. I remember them saying some planes was coming in, and all of a sudden they started shooting.

Marcello: Did you see the shooting?

Swain: I seen the shooting.

Marcello: What did the sky look like?

Swain: It looked like a bunch of tracers going up, you know, like them Roman candles shooting. It was just like that with the

tracers going up and then exploding way up there.

Marcello: Is that when you thought the invasion was occurring?

Swain: That's right. That's when I thought it.

Marcello: The next day things had calmed down a little bit, and you had a chance to look at the damage. Describe what you saw. For instance, describe the damage that you saw to the Arizona. What was its appearance like?

Swain: It was terrible. All over it was real terrible, but the Arizona was something you couldn't really...you really can't say too much because it was nothing there. In a way, if it had been like when a ship turned over, you could have just turned them over, raised it, or something like that there. But the Arizona was just terrible. It made me real, real, real sick.

Marcello: Was it still smoking and smouldering?

Swain: It was still burning. You could still see smoke coming from different places there. The Arizona didn't burn all that much because it sunk down. What really messed them up...actually, it does burn prior to the sinking. But the rest of them was still smoking. Where there was oil in the water, that's what ruined a lot of them. The California was sitting down there, and if they hadn't used the fire hose to keep the oil washed away, they would probably have burnt. It could have been worse.

Marcello: What else did you see that kind of got your attention?

How about the Oklahoma? Do you remember seeing it?

Swain: It was behind us. Like I said before, the oil was terrible. It made me kind of feel bad.

Marcello: Now the Oklahoma had turned over.

Swain: There was two of them that turned over.

Marcello: The Oklahoma and the Utah.

Swain: No, the Utah was on the other side.

Marcello: I see.

Swain: The Utah was a target ship. We had two battleships behind us. They used to have a couple of them tied together.

Marcello: Yes.

Swain: A couple of them had turned over. The only thing that was holding them up was the mast on the other ship.

Marcello: But they had not turned completely over like the Oklahoma had.

Swain: No.

Marcello: In your wildest dreams, could you ever have imagined one of those battleships turning over?

Swain: No, I sure couldn't. The only reason they turned over like that is that they get water-logged on one side because they had a hole in it. That's the reason it turned over like that.

Marcello: What did the water itself look like--the surface of the water?

Swain: Dirty, real dirty. The oil and trash and bodies, debris

and all that, were floating around.

Marcello: What kind of rescue efforts were taking place the next day and so on and in the days following?

Swain: Everything that could float was out there picking up bodies, debris, and everything. Anything that they could use to haul stuff in, it was out there picking it up. Over where my ship was beached at--Aiea Landing--that's where they brought the bodies.

Marcello: Aiea Landing?

Swain: Yes, Aiea Landing--the recreation landing. It was a big pier out there about seventy, eighty feet, maybe even further than that. They had all them boxes up there, and that's where they put all the bodies. Even weeks after it happened, you was still finding bodies floating around. It was a real terrible smell.

Marcello: I'm assuming that you never had to get in on any of those kind of activities.

Swain: No.

Marcello: I guess you're glad you didn't.

Swain: I'm glad.

Marcello: What kind of an impression can that sort of thing make or have on a seventeen-year-old kid?

Swain: Well, I was glad I was there in a way, but still in a way I wish I wouldn't have been there. If I hadn't been there, I'd have been drafted. Otherwise, I would have been in the

Army or something like that. It might have been worse, more devastating, for me. In a way I was glad I was there. I just hoped nothing else happened like that.

Marcello: How long did the Vestal remain there at Pearl Harbor?

Swain: I don't know exactly what date we left, but it was in 1942 after we got everything fixed up. After we got the ship fixed up, we went on over and made the rounds through the islands out there. Of course, they didn't advertise when we was going to leave, since we were a repair ship. I think the first island we stopped at was--if I can remember correctly --Suva, Fijis. I believe that was the first. Yes, it might have been Suva, Fijis. We stayed there for...I think it was a week or two weeks. Then from there, we went over to a place that was a French island, a leper island--New Caledonia. There was a harbor that was made like a big "U," and as you go into it, they got high walls on the banks. The French tried to sink their fleet there. We went in there and stayed a week or two. Then we got word to go somewhere else, and as we was leaving--of course, we did some work on some ships in that time--the carrier came in. It wanted us to do some work on their ship. You could see clean through the bow. A torpedo went clean through it. The captain told them that we couldn't do it, that we had orders to go, so we went on. The ship went on to wherever we was supposed to go. I don't remember that island, but I think

it was...

Marcello: Espiritu Santo?

Swain: I think that's where we went--Espiritu Santo. We stayed over there for several months doing repair work on destroyers --whichever one that was necessary.

Marcello: So in those months following the Pearl Harbor attack, the Vestal was doing what it was supposed to be doing, that is, repairing ships and so on.

Swain: That's right. We repaired a bunch of English ships and some of the ships from Australia, New Zealand. We repaired the Achilles and...I can't think of the name of the rest of them. Some of the ships came in, and we did work on them.

Marcello: Incidentally, following the attack at Pearl Harbor, how were you able to notify your parents that you were still alive and well and all that sort of thing?

Swain: I finally got a letter out to tell them I was okay. I remember my dad saying later on that it looked like a cheese cloth.

Marcello: The censor had taken things out?

Swain: That's right. He had got to it. After he seen that, he said, "Well, I guess everything's okay."

Marcello: I know that some of the guys mentioned that they were able to send home little postcards where they would check a particular statement, such as, "I am well," "I am in the hospital," or whatever the case might be .

- Swain: Some of them had a little code fixed up like that. That's the ones that they sent when the censors wasn't all that strict. On a lot of the ships, if you didn't come out and state names, the censors didn't say too much. The ship I was on, they was really strict. My dad said that he got one letter one time, and there was nothing on it (chuckle).
- Marcello: Incidentally, when you were back aboard the Vestal immediately after the attack, you mentioned that you were mess cooking. What else did you do during that period besides mess cooking, or did that take all of your time?
- Swain: That took all my time. I was there three months doing mess cooking. After that, I went down to the engineering space. First place I went in the engineering space was the fire room. I stayed there about a month, and then they had a space opening up in the engine room. I went up there for a couple of months, and I did my work up there. I was oiler, messenger, and different things. Then a job came up on the power deck. In other words, the power deck on that ship consisted of the ice machines, the generators, the air compressors, and stuff like that. That's where I spent most of my duty all the rest of the war.
- Marcello: So this is the beginnings of your experiences and work toward becoming a machinist's mate.
- Swain: Yes. I was a second class machinist's mate when I was about eighteen-and-a-half or nineteen years old.

Marcello: I guess rank moved a lot more quickly after Pearl Harbor than before Pearl Harbor, didn't it?

Swain: Yes, it did. It still didn't move all that quick. You still had to wait a little, but it wasn't as tight and wasn't as strict as it was before. When you had openings, they had to fill them regardless whether they wanted to or not. They had to fill them.

Marcello: I'm assuming that the Vestal also got quite an influx of personnel after the war started.

Swain: Yes. Most of them were specialists, like, welders, ship-fitters, carpenters, boilermakers, patternmakers, and stuff like that. We also got our share of the ship's company, like, machinists, engineering, watertenders. Machinist's mate covered two different things. They had the machinist's mates back in the repair section. They had the machinist's mates there. They also had machinist's mates that ran the ship, too. That was the shipboard engineering. You had your watertenders, and you had your electricians. Of course, you had your repair electricians, and you had your shipboard electricians. Radiomen would be the same way. You had your people that worked in radio on the ship and also the people who worked on radios on other ships.

Marcello: Something that we should've talked about just a little bit more was the actual damage done to the Vestal. How serious was the damage that was done to the Vestal?

Swain: This ship--the Vestal--had two hits. The first hit was in the forward part of the ship and through the mess hall. It went down right down through the recreation hall and into the steel hold.

Marcello: Was this a bomb hit?

Swain: A bomb hit. It blew up down in the steel hold. We had all kinds of steel down there--pipe, plate steel. We had decking. In other words, it was for the armor plate for these big ships. We had some of that down in there. We also had that thin steel that they used to repair other stuff.

Marcello: And this was called the steel hold?

Swain: Yes, that's where we kept the steel at. You had some laying down, some setting up on the racks. You had pipe down in there. If it hadn't been for that, I think the whole front end wouldn't've been blowed off. That steel was almost like a wad of paper when it blowed up. When that bomb went up there in the mess hall, we had several people in the mess hall that got killed. One of them was chief master-at-arms. I think we lost about six to seven people up there, but I'm not sure. When that bomb went through the carpenter's shop...

Marcello: This is the second bomb.

Swain: The second bomb went through the carpenter's shop, and it dropped right on down through and knocked a plate off. It didn't blow up; it just knocked a plate off. From what I understand, those bombs was projectiles with fins welded

on them. They said that when they was doing that work, they found them. We didn't have nobody get killed back there. Some almost got killed.

Marcello: All this took place after you had been blown off the ship and was over on shore.

Swain: That's right.

Marcello: How long did it take to get the Vestal shipshape again?

Swain: It must have been about three or four months, I imagine. I don't know offhand, but I figure three or four months.

Marcello: Were they working around-the-clock?

Swain: Night and day. Night and day. And while I'm talking about that work, the Vestal was the first ship that welded under water without the regular stuff. They made special equipment to weld and burn under water.

Marcello: Was this when it was working on its own ship?

Swain: That's right. Other ships, too. The welder went down there with the regular...all he had was a hard deal. They didn't use the diving gear. They rigged up a gas mask, and they put on an air hose coming down to the gas mask where you could get air. They fixed it where it'd be around your face. They would go down on the Jacob's ladder to go down on the side of the ship to do some work on the hole that ruptured or whatever. They taped that electrode up on the welding rod with that rubber tape. As long as he wasn't touching the ship, it was all right. If you touched it, you'd a got a

shock. As long as he wasn't touching it, as long as that there deal had him blocked away, he did his work.

The same thing took place with the cutting. They would light the torch up on topside, and then they would drop it to him--send it down to him in the water--but they had it going full steam. They couldn't let it be going just a little bit. It had to be going like he was going to cut right then. That's the way they sent it down to him. It would still work under the water even.

Marcello: I guess you saw a lot of those kind of things being done in a situation like that.

Swain: When you don't have it to do it with, you...

Marcello: Improvise.

Swain: Right. You do it the best way you can.

Marcello: Well, I think that's probably a pretty good place to end this interview, Mr. Swain. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You've said a lot of interesting and very important things.

Swain: I'm hoping everything comes out okay.

Marcello: It will. I'm sure the scholars and students are going to find your comments most interesting.

Swain: Thank you, sir.