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Archie Wilkerson
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Oral History Collection

Archie Wilkerson

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Archie Wilkerson for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on January 28, 1977, in Denton, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Wilkerson in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was stationed at Ford Island during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Wilkerson, 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. Wilkerson: I was born on the 16th of January, 1924, in Oakland, Oklahoma. And went to school at Ardmore, Oklahoma. I quit school in the mid-tenth grade and went to the Navy and went on and got the GED equivalent, took correspondence courses in the Navy, finished high

school, and have taken some college courses. I remained in the Navy for twenty-six years and retired.

Marcello: When did you enter the Navy?

Wilkerson: March 29, 1941.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Wilkerson: I really don't know. I didn't have any preference. It was just. . . that's what I wanted to do.

Marcello: At the time you enlisted in the Navy, how closely were you keeping abreast with current events and world affairs?

Wilkerson: Not too close, due to my age. I just barely was seventeen.

Marcello: Now if you went in at seventeen, did you go in under a program known as the "minority cruise?"

Wilkerson: Yes, I did.

Marcello: How does that work?

Wilkerson: Well, if you enlisted anytime during your seventeenth year, before your eighteenth birthday, then you were discharged on your twenty-first birthday.

Marcello: In other words, you had a four-year enlistment rather than the usual six-year enlistment. Is that correct?

Wilkerson: Right. And theoretically, you could go in one day before you were eighteen and only do three years and one day. But as far as retirement, it was counted as four years.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Wilkerson: San Diego.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time? Now you mentioned that you went in in March of 1941. I would assume that they had cut back on boot camp, that is, in terms of the number of weeks.

Wilkerson: To the best of my recollection, it was seven weeks. We had three weeks of what we called the "South Unit," and then I think there was four weeks in the "North Unit."

Marcello: At the time that you were going through boot camp, did you notice any sense of urgency in your training? In other words, did they seem to be trying to get you out of boot camp as quickly as possible and on to the fleet?

Wilkerson: Yes. As I look back over it now, I think they knew something was wrong. As a matter of fact, my company commander made a remark. If we dropped our rifle, he made some of them stand with them over their head for an hour. He told us he wasn't going to do that. He was going to make us pay for them. He said, "You're going to take care of it and learn to use it because," he says, "one of these days, you're going to be shooting a 'slant-eye' with it." He had twenty-something years in then, and he'd done a lot of time in the Asiatic Fleet. And I believe that most

of those guys realized what was going on. They saw the build-up and so on that was taking place. I believe that our President really knew that it was going to happen, but for political reasons, very little was done about it.

Marcello: You mentioned that your company commander had served in the Asiatic Fleet. Evidently, those Asiatic sailors were a different breed by themselves, were they not?

Wilkerson: Later on, when I was in the Philippine Islands, I had a man working for me that. . . they called him. . . his last name was Forster, and they called him "Far East Forster." And he was about as squirrely as they come (chuckle). I think he had about twelve years in the Navy at the time, and it had been eight years since he'd been back in the continental United States.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that at the time you went to boot camp, you were only seventeen years of age. You'll have to estimate this, of course, but what would you say was the average age of the boot in your particular recruit unit at that time?

Wilkerson: I'd say an average of about twenty to twenty-one. We did have some older men. As I look back, there was one in particular that I remember. He must have been in his

mid-thirties. But most of them were below twenty-one, I'd say, but in that range.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Wilkerson: I went from there to Chicago, Illinois, and went through aviation machinist mate's school--aviation mechanic.

Marcello: Is this what you had applied for after you graduated from boot camp?

Wilkerson: Right. I had taken an examination in boot camp, and basically it consisted of Model-T Ford parts. I had just sold a Model-T Ford just before I went to Navy, so I scored high. There was five men out of our company that got a school, out of about 140, and I was one of them. I feel like that was the reason, because I was able to score high on that exam due to the fact that I had previously had a T-Model.

Marcello: From what you say, I gather that entrance into one of these Navy schools was quite an accomplishment.

Wilkerson: It was at that time. There weren't a whole lot of . . . they needed men in the fleet, and there weren't a whole lot of schools. We had a lot of schools in the Navy, but what I mean is, in comparison to the number of men that was going through boot camp, there just wasn't billets open for them in the schools. These tests were aptitude tests,

is what they were. I always did like to use my hands and work on machinery, so it was kind of a "breeze" to me. As I look back over it, I went through the test thinking that it was easy. But it was just because I was familiar with it.

Marcello: How long did this school last in Chicago?

Wilkerson: Sixteen weeks. And we went to . . . we lived at the Naval Armory at the foot of East Randolph, right on the lake. Buses carried us daily to East Seventh and Anthony, which was an industrial high school that was partially complete, and from what we understood about it, the Navy took it over and finished it. There was some problems with funds, and they kept half of the school for their use and turned the other half over to the City of Chicago. And they brought three or four old aircraft in there and. . . I was in one of the first classes that went through there. They set up shops and so on. In its beginning, it was a good school for what they had available. A lot of our instructors were civilian instructors that were hired out of airlines and so on. They just didn't have the people to start that school--qualified people in fleet--that had instructor's training.

Marcello: How would you rate the training that you received at this school? Was it fair? Poor? Good? Excellent?

Wilkerson: It was excellent for the time.

Marcello: And you feel that you were adequately prepared when you left there for the type of work that you would be doing in the fleet.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: Okay, did you go from this particular school to the Hawaiian Islands?

Wilkerson: Right. I went directly to San Francisco and chipped and painted one supply ship and then moved to another one and chipped and painted it on the way to Honolulu (chuckle).

Marcello: Now at that particular time, when you got out of one of these Navy schools, you weren't given a third class petty officer rating, isn't that correct?

Wilkerson: No, I was a seaman second class when I got to Honolulu.

Marcello: The procedure, of course, is different today. I think now that just about everybody comes out of one of those schools as a third class petty officer.

Wilkerson: The top group of them do, at least.

Marcello: Now was the assignment to the Hawaiian Islands a voluntary one, or were you simply sent there?

Wilkerson: No, I was assigned there.

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

Wilkerson: Well, all through my Navy career, I either had just come back from there or was just dying to go there, so it was fine with me. I was happy with the assignment.

Marcello: Why were you particularly happy with the assignment?

Wilkerson: Well, there was one group that got Alaska. I never did like cold weather, so Honolulu suited me fine.

Marcello: Okay, did you go directly to Ford Island when you got to the Hawaiian Islands?

Wilkerson: Right. In fact, we went into Pearl Harbor on the supply ship, and the boat picked us up and took us right on over to Ford Island. When we got on Ford Island, the next morning they split our school up and assigned us into the four squadrons.

Marcello: And you're referring to the patrol wings that were at Ford Island.

Wilkerson: Yes. I don't think any of our class went to anything in Hawaii except. . . well, now there was some of them that went to Kaneohe Bay. But they went to PBY squadrons over there, too.

Marcello: When did you arrive in the Hawaiian Islands?

Wilkerson: I don't know the exact date. It was in the later part of November. I was there about two and a half or three weeks before the war started.

Marcello: In other words, things were getting pretty tense by that time?

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: When you arrived there, could you sense this tenseness or this urgency or what have you?

Wilkerson: Well, as I look back over it, I can understand some of the things that was going on. Being new, I really didn't realize what was going on, but my squadron--and I think the others were, too--were flying patrols daily, which pretty much before that they hadn't been. These patrols were every day--Saturday, Sunday, everyday. And for some reason, on December 7th. . . no, I think the Friday before December 7th, they stopped the weekend patrols, and we didn't fly any patrols on Saturday or Sunday that week.

Marcello: But up until that time, weekend patrols had been routine procedure?

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: Okay, before we get to that point, let's talk a little bit more about Ford Island. What did it look like from a physical standpoint at the time you arrived there? I'm referring now to the planes that were there and the buildings and the barracks and things of that nature.

Wilkerson: Well, the base itself appeared to me as being pretty modern. Our barracks was a three-story concrete structure. Naturally, in Hawaii, you don't need any heat or air conditioning, and there's very little windows. A lot of it was just screens. A lot of the other buildings were pretty new. We had two fairly new seaplane hangars. I'd just estimate they were probably five to ten years old. I don't know for sure.

Marcello: They were fairly large structures, were they not?

Wilkerson: Right. Well, they had two bays in them, and a PBW wing was 105 feet. You had about five foot clearance. So you had about 200 foot in the bays, and then you had your shops outside of those. But then there was a . . .see, in each one of the seaplane hangars, each squadron had half of it.

There was another hangar, and I forget now the term that they call the . . . what it was was the cruiser and battleship aircraft--all of your catapult float aircraft that was carried aboard the battleships and cruisers. I keep wanting to say the CASU. It was something like that, but that's not the word that they used then. Carrier Aircraft Service Unit was the designation. I forget now what the float aircraft was called. But it was a unit

primarily there to do the maintenance in the pool. As the cruisers and battleships came in, they'd set their aircraft off, or they'd fly them off if they were flyable. They'd take them in there and do a lot of the heavy maintenance and engine changes and stuff like that that they needed to do that they didn't have the equipment or the parts aboard ship. It was an older building.

We had one shop in the corner of it which was our ordnance shack, we called it, where our ordnanceman stayed and took care of all of the guns and armament.

The ramps were in good shape for launching our sea-planes.

Marcello: That PBV was quite an airplane, was it not? A very versatile plane.

Wilkerson: For its time, it was probably one of the better utility and patrol aircraft ever built. It was extremely dependable, and it could stay in the air long hours. It was too slow, but it could make open sea landings. In fact, they have never built another airplane since then that would equal it in open sea operations.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that there were four of these patrol wings at Ford Island. How many of the PBV's would there have been altogether on the island?

Wilkerson: There would be thirty-six. They had twelve-plane squadrons. Now one of them might have thirteen or fourteen for some reason, and one of them might be short a plane or two for some reason. But primarily it would be thirty-six airplanes in the squadrons. Now they were squadrons. The wing was Patrol Wing Two, which was 21, 22, 23, and 24. Those were squadron numbers. And that was Patwing Two-- Patrol Wing Two. And Patrol Wing One was over Kaneohe Bay. It was Squadrons 11, 12, 13, and 14. And they also had thirty-six aircraft, or primarily that's what they'd have.

Marcello: Maybe I missed your point.

Wilkerson: No, forty-eight, excuse me.

Marcello: I was going to say, maybe I missed your point here.

Wilkerson: Yes, forty-eight airplanes in a wing. My multiplication is bad.

Marcello: Now which one of these particular patrol wings were you assigned to?

Wilkerson: I was in Patwing Two and VP 23 . . .

Marcello: What was your particular function when you were assigned to that unit?

Wilkerson: When I first got to the squadron, I went to the beaching crew. Of course, being new and a seaman, kind of . . .

there was five or six different details that you had to go through. Beaching crew was one of them, and mess cooking was another one, and compartment cleaning was another one. Then from there you went . . . our squadron had a setup where from there, you did so much time in each shop. You went to the ordnance shack, we'd go to the structures crew and the engineering crew and make the rounds. Then we'd wind up on the flight crew after we got pretty well-locked in on how everything went. I went to the beaching crew, and then about four or five days, I guess, before the war started, I moved from the beaching crew to compartment cleaning.

So I was in the barracks and assigned to the barracks when it started. I didn't stay there but two days after the war started. I went back to the hangar.

Marcello: You mentioned that you started out on a beaching crew. For the benefit of the people who might read this interview a hundred years from now, what does a member of the beaching crew do?

Wilkerson: Well, those aircraft were seaplanes. And although they made some modifications later and put wheels on some of them, these were strictly seaplanes. The wheels that you had to have on the aircraft to get it up on the beach were called beaching gear. And you had one for each side.

They'd call them side mounts. And then you had your tail mounts.

When planes came in, they'd taxi along the beach. We had a man swim out with a line and a hook on it, and he reached up and hooked that hook in an eye on the tail.

Then there was half a dozen of the crew--the men that handled the side mounts--would throw that line around, and they'd hook it to a tractor, and the tractor would swing the tail around. Then two men on each side mount would take this side mount out into the water, and they'd stabilize the aircraft out there and would roll these side mounts out. The tires were about 75 per cent full of water so that they wouldn't be too dense or you couldn't handle them. They had just enough air in them to make them float. And I'd say one of these side mounts would weigh. . . this is just a guess, but I'd say somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 pounds. It gave two men a pretty good tussle. You rolled it out. . . rolled it out on its. . . it was dual-tired, and then had a little tire up close to the handle. And you rolled it out on there until it started to float. And from there on, you were on your own with it.

And you hooked it on the side of the plane, and then both of you got up on it and forced it down into the water. That way, you could get it down alongside of the aircraft and put two pins in it. And then once you've got all of your gear on it, they'd pull it up on the beach.

Marcello: Under normal circumstances, how long would this operation take--from the time the PBV got into position where the initial hook could be attached until you got it out of the water to where it was supposed to go?

Wilkerson: Well, our squadron. . . we were pretty good at it. By the time the plane reached the beach, we could have it up on the beach in ten minutes. We had several drills launching the aircraft, and we launched twelve airplanes in twelve minutes one time. Of course, they were all sitting there with engines running, and they went on their own power with just a man guiding the tail. And as they went down the ramp to the water, they'd hook a tail line to it and stop it when it got into the water. And there'd be two guys riding each side mount, and the minute it floated, they yanked the side mounts off of it and take the tail line loose and away it went. So we got to where we was pretty good at it. Of course, it took longer to bring them in than it did to get them out.

Marcello: And I would assume there was probably competition between the various beaching crews to see who could get a plane up on the beach as quickly as possible.

Wilkerson: Right. Well, this was part of your annual inspection. Each year, when we'd have a readiness inspection, this was part of it. They'd time you to see how long it would take you to get all of your aircraft in the water and in the air.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more about the functions and so on of these PBY's. Now just exactly how did the patrols normally work when you were there?

Wilkerson: You want to know the patterns and when we went out?

Marcello: Yes, that's correct.

Wilkerson: All right. Primarily, they flew sectors. You'd take off, and each plane had a certain sector, and each squadron had a certain group of sectors that they had to cover.

Marcello: When would one of these patrols normally start?

Wilkerson: Anytime from two o'clock in the morning until daylight. They were always dawn patrols. And we varied the time after the war started. We varied the time so that the enemy wouldn't get a pattern of actually when we were there. But we flew out about 750 miles, across fifty miles and back in in a fan-shape.

Marcello: Now were the islands being patrolled in a 360-degree circumference?

Wilkerson: Not at that time. Prior to the 7th, we patrolled more towards the Marshalls and Gilberts because they thought that that's where the attack was going to come from. As a matter of fact, during the . . . in the lull between the two attacks, my commanding officer got one of the two planes that we got airborne that day. . . he got it out and flew to toward the Marshalls and Gilberts looking for the task force. They thought that that would be where they came from.

Marcello: Of course, the Marshalls and the Gilberts were Japanese-held islands at that particular time.

Wilkerson: Yes.

Marcello: Did you actually have enough PBY's that you could have melted a 360-degree circumference to patrol the island?

Wilkerson: Yes, including what we had and what Kaneohe had. Now as to what patterns Kaneohe flew, I don't know. And I don't really know the patterns that any of the other squadrons in our own wing flew. I wasn't that familiar with their operations.

Marcello: Now prior to the war, had you actually gone out on any of these patrols yourself?

Wilkerson: No, no, because they made us go through those different shops and stuff that I explained a minute ago, prior to going on flight crew. When we got on a flight crew, we were pretty versatile as far as doing anybody else's job.

Marcello: And I would assume that being on one of the flight crews was more or less a status symbol, that is, you'd been there for a while, and you supposedly knew what was going on.

Wilkerson: Right. It took me about a month after the war started before I got on flight crew.

Marcello: How long did one of these patrols usually last?

Wilkerson: Oh, the average patrol was about twelve hours. But they'd vary anywhere from ten to eighteen hours, according to the winds and the distance you were assigned on the sector.

Marcello: Winds and distance determined how long the patrol would last.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: I would assume that these patrols could get to be quite boring.

Wilkerson: Yes.

Marcello: You know, you're just out there flying around, and there's a lot of ocean; and certainly before the war, one would not have been expecting to see any sort of enemy activity or anything of this nature.

Wilkerson: I guess. . . in my whole life, I haven't read over a dozen novels. And about eight of those were read while flying patrols (chuckle). We had three normal lookouts --one in the bow and one in each blister on the sides. Then we had another position that we called the tower. That's where the mechanics sat and recorded all of the instruments and all of that. Well, you had to make a recording every thirty minutes. During that watch, why, a lot of us would sit there and read. Of course, when you're in the blister or bow lookout, why, you were strictly a lookout.

Marcello: Getting back to the patrols again, you mentioned previously that under normal circumstances, these patrols did go on seven days a week.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: But this was not the case during that weekend of December 7th.

Wilkerson: No.

Marcello: Do you have any idea of why those patrols were called off? In other words, did your commanders or anything give you any reasons as to why there were no patrols on that weekend?

Wilkerson: No. Not knowing any more about the operation than I did, it was just a holiday routine as far as we were concerned.

Marcello: Had you come off any sort of a special alert or maneuver or anything prior to that weekend?

Wilkerson: Well, the squadron. . . from talking to the people that had been there and just the short period of time that I was on the beaching crew, the squadron had been doing training almost what we call maneuvers. They were flying their patrols carrying loaded guns and everything, just as if they were under actual wartime conditions. The only difference was that we didn't have any depth charges.

And when the war started, they used the regular destroyer-type depth charges--the cans--and they welded tail-fins on them. Now you'd have to visualize this barrel hanging from the rack. And we carried those for about two or three months before they started giving them the regular depth bombs. Later, we carried 325-pound depth bombs with the nose and tail fuse in them. If you dropped it armed, why, it would go off as a bomb; if you dropped it safe, it would go off as a depth charge. So there was a certain hazard there even carrying them on the wings. The minute the airplane would beach, you had to go put pins in the bombs. In later months. . . we never lost a plane this way, but in later months, there was some aircraft lost by the accidental dropping of their

depth charges when the plane was sitting in water tied to a buoy. Because they hadn't. . . the racks hadn't been pinned, and they were accidentally dropped off of the wing; and the water was deep enough, and it went off there as a depth charge.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that these PBY's were operating under what were virtually wartime conditions prior to that weekend of December 7th. I would assume that one can only operate under those conditions so long before it might have some sort of a detrimental effect upon morale and so on.

Wilkerson: Well, the way ours worked was that we flew a patrol every third day. And the next day was an off day. And then the next day was a stand-by day. And on the stand-by day, we flew training flights, inner-island patrols, photography flights, utility flights. And if a plane was scheduled to go on patrol, or if particularly if one went out and was out for, let's say, two or three hours and had to come back in, then the minute that they got notification by radio that he was returning to base, why, they would launch the stand-by crew. That crew had to take that sector.

Marcello: What was the morale like in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Wilkerson: It was good in our squadron.

Marcello: What do you think accounted for the high morale?

Wilkerson: Well, we had good discipline. But we also had good, intelligent officers. I personally feel like it was just pride.

Marcello: Now at that particular time that you were at Ford Island, was just about everybody there a volunteer?

Wilkerson: Yes.

Marcello: This, I'm sure, would have had something to do with the high morale, too. In other words, people were there because they wanted to be there.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: What was the food like there at Ford Island?

Wilkerson: It was good.

Marcello: This would have probably been another factor that would have contributed to the high morale.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: What were the quarters like?

Wilkerson: They were good, too. There was a three-story concrete barracks. I don't think that building was over two or three years old at the time. Now I was stationed back there. . . I was at Barbers Point in the early '60's, and I went back over to Ford Island; and other than the

fact that it looked deserted, because the base was on a caretaker status--Ford Island. . . other than the fact that it looked deserted, things hadn't changed much. The buildings were all still there, and it was still in pretty good condition.

Marcello: This is kind of beyond the scope of our interview, but did it give you a very eerie feeling when you went back in the 1960's and went to Ford Island?

Wilkerson: Right. It was like a ghost town in going back there. The only people on the island were caretaker status, and some of the quonset huts--quarters--were still in operation.

Marcello: Did your mind wander back to December 7, 1941, when you went back for that visit?

Wilkerson: Yes. You wander around and recall a lot of things that you'd forgotten.

Now shortly after the war started, we lived in tents outside of the hangar. They had wanted us close to where . . . the barracks were about five or six blocks from the hangar. They kept us down close to the hangar, so they pitched tents down in the grassy areas along around the outside of the hangars. We also had a mess tent, and we virtually stayed right there at the hangar with the aircraft twenty-four hours a day. The food wasn't very good

for a month, maybe two months; but after that, they started feeding back in the mess hall again--three meals a day. We went to two meals a day immediately after the attack. I think it was man power. I don't know whether they was worried about shortages or not. We didn't have sufficient sanitary water after the 7th. I think it came back on about three days after the 7th because some water mains were busted, and they had feared contamination from the breaks. But we ate sandwiches and things like this for several days.

Marcello: But prior to the war, the food was pretty good in your opinion.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: From what I've been told, I gather that athletics--sports --played a very important part in the life of all branches of the service during that pre-World War II period.

Wilkerson: That's correct. We had. . . well, we had compulsory athletics. Most of the time, right after quarters, morning quarters, why, they'd have calisthenics. They had things set up right in the hangar just almost like in a gymnasium. Down through the center of the hangar, we had punching bags, and they had a wrestling mat and weights--different things there that possibly you could use.

Marcello: Talk a little bit about your liberty routine that you had here at Ford Island after you arrived. Describe how the liberty routine would work for you.

Wilkerson: We had four-section liberty. In other words, every fourth day, your section had the duty. That's when you stood your watches and whatever had to be done at night. I'd been there just a short time. I hadn't had any liberty up until December 7th. And then for . . . oh, I can't remember when they started it again. . . it was about two or three months after Pearl Harbor before. . . now the men that were married and living ashore were allowed to go home as much as they possibly could let them. But the single men were really kept on the station until about a month or two months, maybe three months. I don't remember now. But we were never allowed to go into Honolulu.

Marcello: So you never did get any liberty in Honolulu prior to the actual start of the war?

Wilkerson: No.

Marcello: Was it true on Ford Island that when one did have liberty, he had to be back aboard by midnight?

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: Well, it was eight o'clock when they first started giving this liberty. We had to be back. And so that meant that

you had to leave Honolulu about six o'clock.

Marcello: It took about two hours to get back to Ford Island from Honolulu.

Wilkerson: Now when I started flying and actually got on a crew and when the liberty started again, the Navy took over the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. And the flight crews and submarine crews, primarily, could stay in the Royal Hawaiian for twenty-five cents a night (chuckle). Of course, it's a ridiculous price, but there was the attitude of no tourist trade in the hotels. Whoever it belonged to at that time probably was glad for the Navy to take it over and keep it up, which they did.

Marcello: And I'm sure the owners were being compensated rather handsomely by the Navy, anyhow.

Wilkerson: Right. I don't know what the agreement was, but if they did no more than maintain it and pay the taxes and so on, why, they did them a favor probably. But it was kept up in excellent condition.

Marcello: Generally speaking, during this period prior to the war, what would be the condition of the men when they would come back aboard after a Saturday night in Honolulu? I'm asking this question for a very important reason. Many people assume that the best time that the Japanese

could have selected for an attack would have been on a Sunday morning. What these people assume is that Saturday nights in Pearl Harbor were a time of drunkenness and things of this nature. How would you reply to thoughts along this line?

Wilkerson: Well, when sailors get ashore, most of them at that time . . . there were more who wanted to drink than would go in there because even then things were expensive. On our pay, you could have about two good liberties a month.

Marcello: What were you making at that particular time? Now I know that they started out at twenty-one dollars a month.

Wilkerson: Yes, thirty-six dollars was my pay then. I was a seaman second class. When I made third class, and was on the flight status, my pay got up to . . . well, they had come out with sea pay. . . now I'm talking about five or six months after Pearl Harbor. Flight pay and sea pay and my base pay all came to about \$140, and I felt like I had more money than I could spend (chuckle).

Marcello: But like you say, even at that time, prices were high in Honolulu.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: And I assume what you're inferring is that because prices were so high and the pay was so low, that sailors just didn't have a whole lot of money to get drunk on.

Wilkerson: That's right. There wasn't money enough to be drunk every Saturday night. You had just about enough to pull two liberties a month, and that was about it. But there was a lot of us. We would go to places. . . well, particularly after the war started, when the Navy took over the Royal Hawaiian and so on, we could buy beer and things at the service club at a reasonable price.

Marcello: Well, in your particular case, prior to December 7th, you probably couldn't have frequented those bars, anyhow.

Wilkerson: No.

Marcello: What was the drinking age there in Honolulu?

Wilkerson: It was twenty-one just like anyplace else.

Marcello: And did they enforce that law fairly rigidly or not?

Wilkerson: Well, they tried to, but after the war started, there was a little bit of laxity. They kind of turned their heads the other way. They considered if you were old enough to be in uniform, you were old enough to take a drink.

Marcello: But prior to the war, the enforcement was much more rigid.

Wilkerson: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Well, this in itself. . .

Wilkerson: And everywhere.

Marcello: Well, this in itself, it seems to me, would have limited the amount of mischief that a seventeen or eighteen-year-old sailor could have gotten into.

Wilkerson: Well, you could get your buddy to buy a bottle or a case of beer like that. It could be gotten if you wanted it.

Marcello: When was payday in the service at that time?

Wilkerson: On the first and fifteenth.

Marcello: Which would have meant that you would have had not too much money, perhaps, on the weekend of December 7th.

Wilkerson: I don't even remember, really, what my financial situation was at that time.

Marcello: As conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate, how safe and secure did you feel in the Hawaiian Islands? In other words, had you and your buddies in your bull sessions ever talked about the possibility that the islands would come under attack if war broke out between the two countries?

Wilkerson: In our limited knowledge, I don't think we thought much about it. I think some of the older people--some of the chiefs and officers--I think they did. Just from the association of the company commander in boot camp, he was well aware of it. But I don't think we did. I don't think we even thought about it, really.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Wilkerson: Well, they were all villains to us simply because. . . I remember seeing some newsreels back prior to World War II, and they showed Japanese street executions over in China. So we pretty well knew that if we got into a war with them, it was going to be tough.

Marcello: In other words, even in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, you did have a certain respect for the military capabilities of the Japanese.

Wilkerson: Right. They had actual combat experience for ten years prior to World War II when they were fighting in China.

Marcello: And was this sort of thing discussed in your bull sessions and so on and so forth?

Wilkerson: A little. But what amount of talking we did about Japan, I think we all knew that sooner or later we were going to enter the war. But we hadn't really discussed the attack on Pearl.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us up to those days immediately prior to the Japanese attack. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Wilkerson, is to describe in as much detail as you can remember your activities

during that weekend of December 7, 1941. Should we start on Friday, or would it be best to start on Saturday?

Wilkerson: Well, I can start on Friday. On Friday, I was compartment cleaning in the barracks, and I had the duty that weekend. When you have the duty in the barracks on the weekend, it's simply a matter of dumping all of the trash cans two or three times a day, particularly prior to ten o'clock prior to lights out. All of the ashtrays and everything had to be dumped because of fire, hazard of fire. And we swept the barracks. You didn't do any primary cleaning on Saturday and Sunday. We just did what was necessary. You had to sweep the barracks twice a day and empty all the trash cans. So it's kind of a leisure day; there's not a whole lot to do. You work maybe three or four hours during that day, but . . . on Saturday it was a holiday routine. I hung around the barracks. I think I probably went down . . . they had a Navy Exchange or Ship's Store, they called it, in the barracks as part of that building. I probably went down there a time or two over the weekend. But on Sunday morning. . . I always was a fairly early riser. When I open my eyes and it's daylight, why, I get up.

Marcello: Now did you notice anything out of the ordinary happening

that Saturday night? In other words, did you notice any more drunks than usual coming in or anything of that nature?

Wilkerson: No.

Marcello: Do you recall when you turned in?

Wilkerson: Well, probably around 10:30. I got up . . . oh, I don't know. . . it might have been six o'clock on Sunday morning.

Marcello: Now there was usually a holiday routine on Sundays, too, isn't that correct? In other words, if you didn't have the duty, any specific duties, you could stay in the sack quite a bit longer.

Wilkerson: Right. You could lay around the barracks and . . . during the week, you had to be out of your bunks unless you were in a section where they were working nights and were so-labeled. You had to be out of your bunks by eight o'clock because usually you had to be at quarters at eight o'clock.

But this Sunday morning, I got up and had already completed what I needed to do that morning and had gone to breakfast, which the mess hall was also in the barracks. It was one huge building, really, and it was three floors; and the mess hall and the "gedunk" or Ship's Store or Navy Exchange or whatever you want to call it was on the first

floor. And there was some offices. . . I really don't know what those offices were for, but they were on the first floor. They were probably commissary offices. But our floor was the second floor. I was out on the back lanai.

Marcello: What sort of a day was it climate-wise?

Wilkerson: It was a beautiful day, really. It was clear--no clouds, just scattered. . . well, really sprasely scattered clouds, practically no clouds at all.

Marcello: A good day for an air attack.

Wilkerson: Right. I was standing out there looking out the window, looking out through the screen, and there was, oh, maybe a dozen guys in their bunks dressed, but laying in their bunk reading a magazine or talking.

I heard some aircraft go over, and this was not uncommon on the weekends. Sometimes pilots from Hickam would come up, and two or three of the Navy pilots and their fighter aircraft would get up and "dog fight" on Sunday mornings. So it wasn't something to run out and look when an airplane went over. You could tell the planes. . .you know, you could tell from the sound of an aircraft when it's in a dive or in a stress. And that wasn't uncommon either because we thought that they were just aircraft "dogfighting."

When we heard the first bomb drop, our first reaction was that the plane crashed. We looked on down toward the hangars, and one of them had turned, was pulling up. And I made the remark to an older sailor, a first class radioman who was laying down in his bunk, I said, "Hell, that's a Jap plane!"

Marcello: You did know what the rising sun on the wing meant?

Wilkerson: We had. . . when we went through boot camp, when we went through "A School" in Chicago, we had a lot of recognition for ships and aircraft, and we had to study flags and radio and blinkers. But he said, "Oh, hell! They wouldn't be here!" And I said, "What the hell is that red circle on the side of that?" And when I said that, he come out of his bunk.

Marcello: Now how far were you from the hangars?

Wilkerson: I was just about five or six blocks.

Marcello: Did you have a good view of the hangars?

Wilkerson: No, there was some other buildings, supply buildings, between us and they were like a hangar. They were big buildings. They were between us and the hangars. Now when that first bomb. . . I don't remember whether the first bomb hit the seaplane hangar or whether it was one of those that fell on the ramp, but it was in that area.

And I think that that was the first bomb that fell on Pearl Harbor. I don't have any first-hand information on that, but it was the first one that we heard--first aircraft we heard--and the first bomb.

Marcello: Now could you only hear the bomb explode, or did you actually feel vibrations or anything of that nature?

Wilkerson: We could feel the vibrations, too.

Marcello: Okay, so what do you do at that point, that is, after you had recognized that it was a Japanese airplane?

Wilkerson: Well, everybody started helter-skeltering, grabbing stuff out of their lockers that they needed. Some of them went to the hangar. My job was at the barracks, so I didn't go to the hangar. But during the attack, as it continued . . . my recollection is that it must have went on about twenty minutes. I went out of the barracks, across the street to the Administration Building, and I went up on the . . . it was two stories, and it had a stairway that went out on the roof. I went up and went out on the roof of it, and you could throw a stone to the deck of the California from the Administration Building.

Marcello: Okay, let's back here a minute. Now you mentioned that you were in the barracks for about twenty minutes, or however long the first attack lasted.

Wilkerson: Well, I didn't stay there that long. I went on over. . .I was over on top of the Administration Building before that attack quit.

Marcello: What did you do while you were in the barracks, before you went over to the Administration Building?

Wilkerson: Well. . .

Marcello: Were you sort of watching the show, so to speak?

Wilkerson: Yes, yes. There was a lot of confusion. I didn't really have a job to do there in the barracks, and I didn't want to stay enclosed in the building, so I got out of the building and went across the street.

Marcello: And this would have happened within a couple of minutes?

Wilkerson: Right. A very few minutes.

Marcello: Okay.

Wilkerson: And they said that they were needing volunteers for work details, and I didn't have anything to do in the barracks, so. . .looking back over it, what I should have done was went to the hangar with my own squadron. But the age and inexperience that I had at that time, I went across the street, and they had some trucks, and we loaded up during the lull between the two attacks and went over to the Luke Field side. That's on Ford Island, the other side of Ford Island, the old side of Ford Island. Over there, they

had some ammunition hangars and bomb dumps. What we went over there for was to pick up a bunch of ammunition, small arms ammunition.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up one more time. Now you identified the Japanese plane. There was confusion in the barracks. In other words, people were not acting in a professional manner, at least initially.

Wilkerson: Not initially but a lot of this was just . . . the older fellows, the ones that had been there awhile, most of them left the barracks immediately and went to the hangar.

Marcello: Now when you're at a station such as Ford Island, do you have a battle station? Obviously, when you're on a ship, you know, general quarters sounds and you know exactly where to go. What is the case at a place like Ford Island?

Wilkerson: You had battle stations there, depending on what shop and so on you're in as to where it is. Some of them-- the flight crews naturally--go to the hangars and to the aircraft. The shop personnel go and man their shops, so anything that's needed, they can take care of immediately. The primary thing is to equip the aircraft and launch them. In my job at that time, my battle station really was the barracks--to control fires or whatever.

Marcello: Now you mention that you did very shortly go over to the Administration Building, and it was. . . was it just next door to the barracks?

Wilkerson: It was across the street.

Marcello: And I assume that you encountered no hazards in going across to the Administration Building.

Wilkerson: No. The planes were everywhere. There was smoke, explosions, and strafing going on, but I don't know. . . when you're young, you don't think as much about hazards as you do when you get older.

Marcello: Now why did you go over to the Administration Building? Was there any reason for you having decided to go over there?

Wilkerson: They were announcing on the speaker through the barracks that they needed working parties. So I decided that I didn't have anything to do there. There wasn't anything I could do there, so if they needed me somewhere else, I'd go.

So I went on over there and then we went to the other side of the field and picked up. . . and the second attack started while we were on the other side of the field. We started to run into a bomb dump for shelter.

Marcello: Now were attacks actually taking place over at Luke Field?

Wilkerson: Right. See, the Utah. . .and there was another battleship that was tied up over on that side. And, in fact, the Utah had already started to settle, and there were personnel

off the Utah coming over there and going into these ammunition hangars. We started to go into a bomb dump, and the Marine there on that says, "You don't want to go in here!" (chuckle) Because it's like a celler you know, just a mound covered up with dirt. We went on into this ammunition hangar and. . . went back into it. We'd been in there taking. . . I call it an ammunition hangar. It was a building 50 feet-by-150 feet. They had just rows of small arms ammunition in boxes, and we had loaded up the truck with that. And then when the attack started, for a minute they were going to stay there, and we went in this hangar.

I don't know whether they hit the hangar or whether they hit close to it, but about half the roof off this building disappeared. Of course, there was debris and everything flying everywhere. And we left there and went out and jumped back into the truck. And the truck took off and went back to the Ford Island side--the new side over there--with the ammunition.

Marcello: Now while you were loading this truck with the ammunition and so on, was this being done in a rather routine or professional manner or was there still panic?

Wilkerson: As fast as you could get it out of there. We picked up those boxes of ammunition, and, oh, I imagine those boxes

would weigh seventy-five or a hundred pounds. And you'd just pick them up and run with them like they were a brick.

Marcello: In other words, the adrenalin was really flowing.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: Are you doing any talking or speculating or anything of that nature while you're doing this?

Wilkerson: I sat in the. . . in the hangar, when we went back in there, I sat and was telling jokes to . . . there was a guy sitting in there, and he was off of the Utah. He was pretty shell-shocked. He didn't think the joke was funny at all (chuckle).

Marcello: What did these guys look like that were coming off of the Utah? I'm referring now to the type of casualties and their general condition and so on.

Wilkerson: A lot of them. . . they were pretty much in a daze. The explosions and noise and everything that had been going on. . . I guess it was preying on them pretty heavy because they were scared. I'd call them quick, you know, and the least little thing would excite them.

Marcello: They were very jumpy.

Wilkerson: Right.

Marcello: Were they covered with oil and things of this nature?

Wilkerson: Most of them had some oil, and their clothes were dirty. Most of them were in whites, because on Saturdays and Sundays in the holiday routine aboard ships at that time, the uniform of the day was whites. Now in the squadrons, we wore dungarees on the holiday routines because a lot of times we were down around the planes. We were more lax, really, than the ships were as far as uniforms. But most of them were in shorts, white shorts, and T-shirts, and a few of them had their hats. And they had oil on them.

Marcello: Was there anything that you could do for them?

Wilkerson: Not a whole lot. They had ambulances and stuff. Now when we went back to the other side of the field, the barracks and mess hall had been turned into an aid station. They had large mess tables, and there were one or two men laying on every table. It was pretty much of a mess.

Marcello: Did that make an impression on you as a seventeen-year-old sailor, that is, the casualties and so on that you observed there in the mess hall?

Wilkerson: It made an impression, but still I hadn't yet been scared.

Marcello: And I assume that you really did not realize the full extent of the damage at this point. You had not been down near the hangars or where the PBY's were parked or things of that nature.

Wilkerson: Right. Now while I was up on that building, over on the Administration Building, they were abandoning ship off of the California.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about that because there's a blank in here someplace. When you initially went from the barracks over to the Administration Building, you mentioned that you actually did go into the building and on upstairs.

Wilkerson: I went out on the roof.

Marcello: How long were you there?

Wilkerson: Oh, five minutes.

Marcello: Why did you do that? Was it simply a matter of curiosity?

Wilkerson: Right. It was an excellent observation platform, really. You could see the entire harbor.

Marcello: What did you see when you got up there?

Wilkerson: Well, the California was already sinking, already sitting on the bottom, maybe. I don't know but it was already down quite a bit. And I remember there was a warrant officer on it. . . like I told you, you could throw a stone on the deck of the ship from the Administration Building. The Administration Building was right on the waterfront. And the warrant officer was running along kicking them off of the ship. They had already sounded

to abandon ship, and he was getting them off of there, trying to get them to jump, go down the lines, jump in the water, swim to beach. Of course, the bay was three-quarters full of oil already. And in certain places in the harbor, it was on fire. The water was burning. And I can understand why some of them was a little reluctant to go into that oil. But still, the fire hadn't reached the California yet. Now the ship itself was afire; it had some fires on it and with heavy smoke coming out of it. But the fire hadn't actually got into the water. What this warrant officer was trying to do was to get them off of there. Some of them were confused, probably shell-shocked, and he was trying to get them off of there and get them on the beach.

The Shaw, which was a destroyer in the dry dock over in the Navy Yard, which was just right across the bay, it blew up.

Marcello: That was perhaps one of the most spectacular explosions that was captured on photograph during that whole Pearl Harbor business. Describe the Shaw blowing up.

Wilkerson: Well, it was. . . I don't know whether a torpedo dropped in there. . . of course, it was in dry dock. I don't know whether it was bombs or whether it was a torpedo dropped

in--right in the dry dock--but it actually blew the bow off of it plumb back to the gun turrets. And it was a pretty sizable explosion and fire. The Oglala, which was a minelayer in the water right close to the dry dock . . . if I remember right, it took two or three "fish" and rolled over. And there was also a cruiser over there that took some hits, and I don't remember which one that one was.

Marcello: Of course, the Pennsylvania was in dry dock over there, also.

Wilkerson: Well, I didn't remember that it was in dry dock. The Nevada tried to get out of the harbor, and we saw it trying to go out.

Marcello: Now were you able to see all of this when you were up on the top of the Administration Building?

Wilkerson: Well, I saw part of it there and part of it in the minutes that followed. Now when the Nevada was going around, I saw it when I was over on the Luke Field side.

Marcello: Yes. That would have been later on.

Wilkerson: Yes. It was going around the island trying to get out. Of course, there was. . . I think that I saw two destroyers leave the harbor.

Marcello: Now this would have all been later on, also.

Wilkerson: That was during the attack.

Marcello: While you were up on top of the Administration Building?

Wilkerson: There was one of the destroyers trying to go out of the harbor then. It got underway in probably five minutes after the battle started.

Marcello: Is there anything else that you saw during that five-minute period when you were initially on top of the Administration Building?

Wilkerson: There were motor launches and whale boats, which was your lifeboats. . . several of those were in the harbor picking up survivors and trying to go from one side to the other for various reasons.

Marcello: Was resistance being put up by the ships rather quickly?

Wilkerson: They had practically no resistance in the first attack simply because of the amount of time that it took to man the guns and get the ammunition lockers unlocked. This was a common practice--to keep the ammunition lockers locked up--and they just took that much time to get them opened and get the guns loaded and start firing.

Marcello: Were you able to observe the tactics being used by the Japanese planes? In other words, how were they coming in, and what was the method of attack, and things of that nature?

Wilkerson: In the first attack, they primarily came in from over Pearl City, which was. . . the Luke Field side was over on the Pearl City side, too. The mainland from our side where the barracks was was the Navy Yard and Submarine Base. But they came in low, down through that cut in the mountains. The dive bombers were first--this is to my recollection--and the torpedo planes came in second.

Marcello: Were you able to distinguish the pilots?

Wilkerson: Yes, you could actually see the guys in the planes.

Marcello: What did they look like? What were they doing?

Wilkerson: All you could see was their heads. They were skilled aviators. Of course, they proved that from the damage that they did. In all the stuff that's been written on Pearl Harbor, I don't think that they knew that they could have possibly come on in and took the Hawaiian Islands. They weren't equipped for it; they didn't come believing that to start with. But we thought they were going to come on in and. . . I may be getting ahead of the story, but most of that night was spent sleeping in ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

Marcello: We'll talk a little bit more about that later on. Was there anything else that you observed while you were on top of the Administration Building?

Wilkerson: Well, of course, you could see Battleship Row. The Oklahoma had already started to list. I don't think that the West Virginia was damaged very much. The Arizona was already afire. Of course, the California was afire and settling. Most of the cruisers were way down at the end of the island. Most of the battlewagons were tied up right along the side of Ford Island up there where our barracks was. From there on down close to the quarters was private quarters. Then on the other side was the Utah, and there was another battleship over there. But I don't remember which battleship it was. The Utah was a target ship at that time. The common belief is that the Japanese thought it was an aircraft carrier because it had decking all over some of their main part of the deck and everything to protect it. And the aircraft used to drop water-filled bombs on it for practice.

Marcello: Now when you were observing what was taking place at Battleship Row, was the full impact beginning to hit you now? Or were you still more or less playing the role of a spectator, so to speak?

Wilkerson: I think most of us, particularly myself. . . I don't think I gathered the full impact until days later.

Marcello: How many of you were there up there on that Administration Building?

Wilkerson: Maybe ten. There was three or four officers and several enlisted men up there.

Marcello: Were you simply standing out in the open watching the show, so to speak?

Wilkerson: Yes. There had been a truck that pulled out just before I went up on the roof, and they said they had another truck on its way. So two or three of us. . . and I don't know who suggested that we go up on the roof, but somebody did and we went on up there and looked until another truck came. When the other truck came, we came down and got in the truck and went on to the ammunition detail.

Marcello: Okay, now when you went over and went on that ammunition detail and you had filled up the truck, where were you taking that ammunition?

Wilkerson: We brought it back to the Administration Building, in that area. They needed small arms ammunition over there. They had rifles and stuff in the supply buildings down there, but no ammunition.

Marcello: What sort of resistance did the people there at Ford Island ultimately put up?

Wilkerson: Well, it was a disorganized resistance, but they did put up quite a bit of resistance. And during the second attack, there was quite a bit of fire from the ships.

And our aircraft down on the ramps. . . a bunch of sailors manned the guns that was in the aircraft and fired back from the aircraft sitting still. Some of the planes were damaged and not flyable. We got two planes off during the second attack.

Marcello: Did you ever see anybody firing at the Japanese planes with rifles and pistols and things of this nature?

Wilkerson: We shot at them.

Marcello: When you say "we," were you ultimately issued a pistol or rifle?

Wilkerson: Yes, that night. Of course, during the first and second attacks, there were very few small arms guns fired as far as I knew because they didn't have any ammunition. We brought it over there during the second attack.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do then after you had brought over that first load of ammunition? What happened at that point?

Wilkerson: I believe that as soon as we unloaded that ammunition, we took it over to the supply building and set it off. They had the rifles there, so I took one of them. And I had a . . . it was a .30-06 Springfield. And I took a bandoleer of ammunition, and then I went to the hangar. There, we did various details. The second attack was over then, and we didn't know whether they was going to come back or not.

Marcello: What shape was the hangar in when you arrived there?

Wilkerson: My hangar was in good shape. Now the one on the point, the hangar that Squadrons 21 and 22 was in, was destroyed. But the hangar that my squadron and VP 24 was in was still intact. And the VOS squadrons--that's a term that they used for those cruiser and battleship planes--that hangar took one bomb and did very little damage to it. I think the explosion went straight out the top of it, and there was very little damage. They lost a bunch of their aircraft out on the ramp. There were several of them that blew up and damaged and. . .

Marcello: Well, I guess the Japanese got just about everyone of those PBY's that were parked there with the exception of the two that you mentioned that got off.

Wilkerson: There was one Dutch PBY there. It was a brand new aircraft. They had gone to San Diego and picked it up, and they were ferrying it back to Java. And one of the hangar doors. . . when that hangar blew up, one of the hangar doors lifted out and fell right on top of that PBY. And, of course, that hangar door weighed as much as the airplane, or more, and pretty well demolished it. But Squadrons 21 and 22, I don't know whether they salvaged any of their planes or not. We eventually salvaged eight

of our planes, I think, out of twelve.

Marcello: What sort of activity was taking place at your hangar when you finally arrived down there?

Wilkerson: Well, there was a lot of running around and confusion, and they were still checking aircraft trying to determine whether some of them could fly or not. Two of them had already gone down the ramp and were in the process of taking off.

Marcello: Were these from your squadron?

Wilkerson: Right. The captain and the executive officer took the airplanes out. And those were the only two that we determined that morning that were flyable.

Marcello: So what did you do personally when you got to the hangar?

Wilkerson: The chief that I used to work for on the beaching crew thought I was still assigned to the barracks; and in all of the confusion, he got on me and he wanted to know where the hell I'd been (chuckle). And I told him and explained it to him, and he put me to work getting beaching equipment ready. And the whole squadron started physically doing things.

Marcello: I assume you were trying to cannibalize parts to put a couple of planes together.

Wilkerson: Yes. We had one plane in the hangar. It was on skids. We had taken it and set it on skids and had taken the

beaching gear off so we could work on the side of the plane. It needed some corrosion controls, you know, right there where the beaching gear went. And, of course, corrosion was one of our bad problems with the salt water and aluminum aircraft. And we got under that airplane . . . this was later on in the day, but we got under that airplane and physically lifted that airplane.

Marcello: How many of you did it take?

Wilkerson: There must have been fifty of us or better under it, with just our backs up against the hull. We'd raise it enough to set the beaching gear under it and move the skids out from under it. We actually got it back on the beaching gear and out of the hangar.

But I know there was constantly sirens going off, false alarms, all throughout the afternoon and evening. But after dark, I spent the night sleeping part of the time under a wing of a plane. It rained some that night, and I had a slicker. I had wrapped the rifle up in the slicker to keep from getting it wet.

About nine or ten o'clock that night, there was five planes off of the Enterprise that came in. Now it may have been earlier than that--I don't know--but it was dark and had been dark for sometime. We had a limited amount

of communications, and the information we got was that we was to watch the tower. And if we got a red light, we should fire; and if we got a green light, we should let them go through. And what I think. . . what we were told that happened, and what I think happened, was that these planes was supposed to come in over Barbers Point Lighthouse and make their recognition turn and proceed straight into Ford Island. What they did is they came in toward Hickam. When they saw their mistake, instead of turning around and going back out and finding the lighthouse and making their recognition turn, they made a left turn towards Ford Island; and when they did, that brought them right up the channel coming into Ford Island, coming into Pearl Harbor. The red light went on on the tower, and all hell broke loose.

Marcello: Describe what the scene looked like.

Wilkerson: Well, you could read a newspaper by tracers. The air was just completely filled with gunfire and sirens and . . .

Marcello: Did you fire?

Wilkerson: Yes. Of course, with that rifle, I don't know whether I did any good or not.

Marcello: How many rounds did you get off?

Wilkerson: Two or three was all I tried to fire. But two of the planes went back to the Enterprise. But one. . . well, two of them were shot down--one over the Pearl City channel and one over in the channel between us and the Navy Yard or us and the submarine base. The one that went into Pearl City crashed into a house; and from the information we got, that pilot was killed.

But the one that went into the bay over there, he bailed out. And the third one, he got over Ewa, which is Barbers Point now, and dropped his gear and flaps. What we heard was that he said his aircraft was damaged so bad that he didn't think he could make it back to the ship. So he got as low as he could and come in just over the treetops there at Ewa. There's a tree out there that . . . in fact, I think it is a type of mesquite tree; it looked just like a mesquite tree. But it had the same type of leaves and thorns and everything. But it came just over those treetops, and when he started to cross the channel there, he dropped it right on down. He must not have been twenty feet off of the water. And they picked him up and started shooting at him when he was coming across the channel.

And they had two searchlight trucks that were sitting on the end of the runway, shining down on the runway for

some lights for the planes to land. They knew the planes were coming, but they didn't know the exact time. They evidently had no radio communications, or else they was told to maintain radio silence. But the minute he dropped in over those searchlights, everybody quit shooting at him because we recognized the aircraft the minute he dropped in there. The other two went on back.

But all through the night, there would be somebody who would clear their guns. Whether there was an accident or what the intention, the guys would fire a short burst, and the other would shoot at his tracers. He'd return two short bursts. Then, well, I guess a half a dozen times, all hell would break loose. Sometimes it would get to be a short episode of gunfire, and then it would stop; people would realize what it was. But there was one star out there that if it had been close enough, they'd have got it for sure, (chuckle) because they shot at it all night.

Marcello: Did you sleep very well that night?

Wilkerson: No, no. It was quite noisy and rainy and muddy. There was a ditch about six or eight feet deep that was right alongside that hangar that was VP 24's side. They was laying some kind of pipeline or something. I don't know

what they was doing. But anyway, that ditch had been there for several days. I suppose during the first and second attack, it probably saved fifty men's lives because they used that ditch. Half of the people who were out on the ramps and the hangars got in that ditch. The stories that the ones told me that was down there. . . of course, I spent the night right there by that ditch. And everytime the gunfire would start, why, we'd all hit the ditch and see what the hell was going on. Really, nothing happened. The only planes that tried to come in was those five planes off the Enterprise.

Marcello: Did you have very much of an appetite or a thirst that day?

Wilkerson: No, not really. I think. . . of course, I ate breakfast early that morning. But that night I had some cheese and crackers and a half a can of Vienna sausage; and I didn't have that until after dark sometime. And they brought that around in a truck, kind of like a canteen.

Marcello: I'm sure there was nothing but cold cuts being served that night.

Wilkerson: Yes. In fact, the mess hall still had men laying all over the tables up there. Doctors were working on them.

Marcello: But during that particular day, after you got down to the hangar, you were engaged in various types of activities right there at the hangar.

Wilkerson: Correct.

Marcello: What did the area look like from the standpoint of the damage?

Wilkerson: Well, it had pieces of airplanes and equipment and stuff strewn everywhere. It was just a mass of junk. That hangar, when it blew up, it strew metal and parts of airplanes and stuff everywhere. To my knowledge, there was nobody killed in that hangar. The only reason I think there wasn't was because it was a holiday, and there was just absolutely nobody in there. The watches and stuff were on the outside.

Marcello: Normally, was there a lot of activity in that hangar?

Wilkerson: Yes, and even in my hangar. But, of course, on Sunday mornings at eight o'clock, you wouldn't have anybody but the watch standers there during a holiday routine.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors or speculation that you heard that night in the aftermath of the attack?

Wilkerson: Well, several times during the day, we heard that transports were on their way in and that troops were coming, and that was why they freely issued rifles to everybody. There was no accounting for them or anything. I think I kept that rifle five or six days, and then they made me turn it in.

Marcello: In other words, there were none of the usual forms and bureaucratic red tape that had to be filled out in order to be issued a rifle.

Wilkerson: No, they freely issued them. They still had the cosmo-line on them. They freely shoved them to you right out of the crates and issued you a bandoleer of ammunition, and that was it. I don't know what kind of a fight we would have put up. We weren't trained soldiers, really. We had had rifle range practice and knew how to handle the guns and all, but really, as far as tactics was concerned, we had no experience.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that by the time that the second wave came over, that the ships were putting up quite a bit of resistance. And I'm sure the air must have been filled with flak and so on.

Wilkerson: Right, it was. In my squadron, I'm sure that. . . there were more than ordnancemen. . . and the reason I remember him is because he got a piece of shrapnel in the right cheek. I believe it was his right cheek. But later when it healed up, scarred, it was like a red scar there-- almost as big as a half a dollar--in his cheek. I believe that he was the only one that even got a piece of shrapnel. We were fortunate. They didn't even drop a bomb on our

hangar. They were after the patrol aircraft, naturally, and they got them--most of them. We heard that over at the Kaneohe Bay that the airplanes were lined up in two rows, and they got them all.

Marcello: Now were your planes scattered?

Wilkerson: Yes, to a certain extent.

Marcello: Yes, as much as they could be in that confined area.

Wilkerson: Yes. We had some sort of a pattern. In other words, each squadron had their area to park their planes, but we had two planes in the hangar. One of those was one of them that flew. The other one was under maintenance, and we couldn't get it ready. It was the one that we had to lift off those skids. One of the other planes out on the ramp, the executive officer took it. I remember one of the guys talking about the captain coming down there in his pajamas. I don't know whether he got a flight jacket after he got down there or if he got one from somebody there at the hangar; but he got in the plane, and as they was towing him out, he hollered to one of the kids in the beaching crew to get him a pair of socks. But he later became admiral. Massey Hughes was his name.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Wilkerson, is there anything else relative to the Pearl Harbor attack that you think we need to get as

part of the record? I have exhausted my questions, but I have plenty of tape left, so do you have any further comments you'd like to make?

Wilkerson: Oh, none that I can think of. During the days following the attack, there was no liberty, and we were working constantly trying to get the planes back up. I think that in a matter of three or four days we had five or six that would fly. And like I say, I think we finally salvaged eight. And I believe VP 24 salvaged six of their twelve airplanes. And 21 and 22, I don't know whether they salvaged any of theirs or not.

But it was twenty-four hours a day operation from there on. What aircraft we had, we flew constantly. In a matter of a month or so--it was less than a month, I believe. . . VP 21 and 22 did salvage some of their planes because we had the five, PBY-5, and VP 21 and 22 basically had the PBY-2's and PBY-3's. And we gave them all our PBY-5's and I think 24 gave them all their PBY-5's. Either VP 21 or 22 went on and. . . started towards the Philippines. And I think they finally caught up with Patwing Ten, which was in the Philippines, somewhere down in Java.

But we went back to . . . we took their old PBY-2's

and PBY-3's and flew down there on patrol until they sent about 25 per cent of our squadron back to San Diego. They outfitted them with new PBY-5's, and they came back to Honolulu. Then as quick as we got them back there and did what maintenance we needed to do to them, we started flying full twelve-aircraft. We didn't get back into full three meals a day for six weeks or two months. It was about that long before we went back to eating in the mess hall.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Wilkerson, I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk to me. You've said a lot of very important and interesting things, and I'm sure that scholars are going to be able to make use of this material when they write about Pearl Harbor.

Wilkerson: Well, I hope it will be of some use. I realize at my age that I may not have taken the time to have tried to document a lot of things that I probably have that I would have now.

Marcello: Well, a seventeen-year-old doesn't have very much of a sense of history.

Wilkerson: No.