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Interview with
WOODROW HILL
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Place of Interview: Kenner, Louisiana
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Woodrow Hill

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello Date: November 15, 1987

Place of Interview: Kenner, Louisiana

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Woodrow Hill for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on November 15, 1987, in Kenner, Louisiana. I am interviewing Mr. Hill in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the battleship USS Nevada during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Hill: I was born on October 28, 1918, in a little town in Missouri called Norborne, Missouri.

Marcello: Tell me a little bit about your education.

Hill: I went to Norborne High School and got a high school education. After high school, back in 1938, jobs were hard to find, so me and my friend said, "Let's go join the Navy." So I joined the Navy.

Marcello: And what year was that that you joined the Navy?

Hill: In 1938.

Marcello: Why was it that you selected the Navy over some other branch of the service?

Hill: Well, I'd always heard that you could see the world in the Navy, so that's why we tried the Navy. If we hadn't joined the Navy, I'd have just run across the hall and joined the Army (chuckle) because I had to get out of town because there was no jobs. My friend, when we raised our hand to say "I do," he dropped his and went home (chuckle), and I went on to the Navy. Since then he got killed in World War II landing in Germany, and I made it all the way through because I joined the Navy. The Navy didn't get near as many people killed; the average wasn't as high in the Navy as in the Army, naturally.

Marcello: You mentioned economic factors as being decisive in your decision to join the service. You know, I

think probably most people who joined the service around that time cite the hard times and the economic difficulties as being responsible for their decision to join. That was still the Depression period yet, even though, perhaps, the country was beginning to gear up a little bit toward the defense effort.

Hill: Yes, that's right. I remember the Depression days. Boy, it was really hard. You could take a dime and go to the movie, and a haircut was twenty-five cents. There just wasn't any jobs around in this small farming area, and so that's why we joined the Navy. I didn't want to live off of my folks.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Hill: In San Diego, California.

Marcello: And how long did boot camp last at that time you went through?

Hill: It was three months.

Marcello: The reason I asked you that question is because I know that later on, especially after we get up to 1940 or 1941, they cut down on boot camp to as little as six weeks.

Hill: Yes, that's right.

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

Hill: Oh, it was the ordinary Navy boot camp, but we was one of the worst divisions in the whole camp, (chuckle) so they said. We had a chief whose nickname was "Donald Duck." That was the nickname we gave him--"Donald Duck." He was only about five feet and two inches tall, and he would march us around the grinder (they called it a "grinder" where you'd march). So one day we didn't turn when he told us to, and he marched us right on into the ocean. We stopped at the water's edge, and he said, "Keep going! I didn't say stop!" (Chuckle) And so we marched up into the water right up to our hips.

Marcello: Where did you go from San Diego?

Hill: I went aboard an oil tanker. They put us aboard an oil tanker to go to Long Beach, California, where the battleships were all anchored behind a big, long breakwater there. I'd never been so sick in all my life as when I got aboard that tanker and went up there. It rolled a lot and everything, and I was *really* seasick, and I says, "Man, I wish I'd never joined the Navy!" (Chuckle) But when I got

aboard the battleship *Nevada*, it was just like walking on dry land because it was so large.

Marcello: Give me your impressions as a young "boot," if you can remember them, when you saw the battleship *Nevada* for the first time. Here's a kid out of a small farming community in Missouri, and suddenly he's going to be put aboard one of these huge battleships. Give me your impressions of it.

Hill: (Chuckle) It's hard to believe. I just never did see anything so big that could float--made out of nothing but steel. You couldn't hardly believe that something made of steel would float. I always thought steel sank (chuckle). There was about eight or nine battleships lined up in a row, and some of them were much newer than the others. I was one of the oldest. The *Nevada* was one of the oldest battleships, but it was real modern, though. It was 29,000 tons, and the rest of them were around 35,000 tons. But it was quite a sight to see that ship. You'd go from that oil tanker onto it, and you'd feel like you was on dry land.

Marcello: If you had had your preference at that time, would the battleship have been the kind of vessel that

you would have wanted to serve on? Or didn't it make any difference to you?

Hill: I don't remember. I think I put down for a battleship, but I really don't know. I don't remember what it was, but I was always glad I got aboard the *Nevada* because it was really a good ship. They called it "The Happy Ship." That was it's nickname--"The Happy Ship"--because it always seemed like we had good captains.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the life aboard the *Nevada*. You mentioned that it was referred to as a "happy ship," and you mentioned that it always seemed to have good captains. Were there any other factors that you can think of that may have made it a happy ship? Again, I'm referring to you personally. What was it that you liked about the ship?

Hill: Well, I liked it because it wasn't too crowded. We had 900 people aboard at that particular time, and that was nowhere near the complement, which in wartime was about 3,000 aboard there. You could pretty well walk all around the place and maybe not even see a guy somehow on a weekend, probably. Of course, half of the guys would be ashore, or a

third of them. Then you were in a small division. I was in a small division. I was in the communications department, in then what they called the CS Division--the signal gang--and we were up on the pilot deck where the captain would stand when the ship was underway. It was a small gang with only about twenty men in the division, and you knew each one personally. That's about it. There's a lot of people you never even knew aboard that ship, you know, because it was so large.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about your living quarters. Describe what they were like.

Hill: We lived in a large compartment below the protective deck. That's a six-inch steel deck where a bomb is not supposed to penetrate. We had a trough running through our compartment there where the ammunition would go on conveyor belts. We had bunks that were two tiers high; and we had square lockers to put our clothes in, which were about a twenty-four-inch square by about eighteen inches deep, and that's what we had to keep all our clothes in, and our personal items. Of course, before then, we used to sleep in hammocks (chuckle), believe it or not. That was really something. Each morning you'd have

to get up and roll up your hammock and tie it up and throw it over in a big bin. Then they'd take down the tables to put them on the decks to feed the guys; and then after you ate, they put the tables back up on the overhead. The whole compartment was then clear. Sometimes there was a big gun in there. I'd call it a broadside--a 6-inch broadside in there. They had watertight doors, you know, and right next to us was the CR Division, which was the radio gang, and we was always kind of mad at them because they had left-arm rates, and it seemed like they got promoted faster than the right-arm rates. The Signal Division was a right-arm rate, and we was always one rate behind them, and so we didn't like them too much (chuckle).

Marcello: You mentioned the hammocks a moment ago. When you first went aboard the *Nevada*, were you sleeping in hammocks at that time?

Hill: Yes. That's what we took with us from our boot camp. We were trained to sleep in them. They had lines from one side...you'd put up a line...I forget what you call it. I don't know what they called that line, but it was a rope about a half an inch thick, and you'd put it up on one side of

this compartment and tie it up on the other side; and you'd put your hammock right along next to it, and you'd put your right arm up over the line and your left arm in the hammock, and you threw yourself up and into the hammock. Sometimes your hammock would be closed over (chuckle), and you'd have to put one leg in there to get it open so you could get in, you know. Sometimes, if you'd had too many beers, you'd roll right on over and fall down and hit that hard deck (laughter). You'd have to try it several times before you'd get in there, you know. Then in the mornings, when they'd wake you up, why, if you didn't get out at that time when the reveille went, the chief boatswain's mate would come through there, and he had a big stick, and he'd hit you right in the bottom of the rear and really knock you out of that hammock (chuckle). So you really had to go when reveille went.

Marcello: Some people said that those hammocks were rather enjoyable to sleep in in rolling seas or rough seas or something because as the boat rolled and pitched the hammocks more or less stayed stately or stationary.

Hill: Well, yes, they were put up broadside so the ship would be going bow and stern, like that, and it wouldn't roll too much because the hammock was different. It wasn't rolling like the ship; I mean, your hammock wasn't facing the way it was rolling. They were comfortable, but they were hard on your back because there was a big dip in it like that (gesture), and you was always sleeping with a dip in your back. It was not like sleeping on a bed.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the *Nevada* during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Hill: Oh, they had excellent food. But even though we were in California and Los Angeles, we got very little fruit. We had good cooks aboard there.

Marcello: Did you take a turn at mess cooking once you went aboard the *Nevada*?

Hill: I never did (chuckle). I never did. Usually, it was the deck hands that would get that.

Marcello: When you went aboard the *Nevada*, you mentioned that you went into the CS Division. What were you going to be striking for?

Hill: That's the signal gang. They called it the signal gang. It was more or less...well, it was communications. We used a blinker to send flashing

light back and forth to different ships--messages back and forth by flashing light. We also used signal hoists--different flags meant different things. Then we also used semaphore, and you could stand up on a turret and semaphore the other ship and send them messages. The reason for that was because you then didn't have to send them by radio, so people couldn't hear your messages or cut in on the radio. It was only visual, and it was usually just from ship to ship.

Marcello: Did you know, when you initially went aboard the *Nevada*, that that's what you would be striking for? Is that what you had intended to do, or were you simply assigned there?

Hill: No, when I got aboard ship, they checked your records to see if you had a high school education. Normally, you went into communications or radar or electrician or something like that. If you didn't have a high school education, you usually went in the deck force, which also manned the guns. Mostly, they were gunner's mates and boatswain's mates. That was about it.

Marcello: Did you ever have to work as part of the deck gang when you went aboard the *Nevada*?

Hill: I never did. I went right into the Signal Division.
I was lucky (chuckle).

Marcello: Describe the on-the-job training that you had there with the signal gang. First of all, talk a little bit about the petty officers who were over you and who would be teaching you what there was to be known about this particular endeavor.

Hill: Well, they already had the "old salts" on board there. Some of them had three hash marks and were only second class petty officers, you know. You'd think they'd be chiefs, but back in those days, Depression days, you didn't get another rate very fast. Officers were the same way. A lieutenant would have ten or fifteen years in, but nowadays in the Navy, in fifteen years they're captains (chuckle). But back in those days, these old old-timers taught us blinker (flashing light) and semaphore and how to read the hoist. Each morning we'd have classes on the signal bridge. We'd go down and sit on the bow of the ship, and they'd learn the Morse code that way and learn semaphore. The signalmen--the second class and first class--would do the blinking on the lights, and we'd have to learn Morse code that way. Just gradually...I

was an apprentice seaman...let's see...when I went aboard the ship, I was a second class seaman, and then I made first class seaman. Then it took me about two years to make third class petty officer. I just gradually worked my way up. When the war started, I was a second class signalman for four years.

Marcello: And how did one go about getting promoted in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Hill: You took examinations, and, I mean, they strictly went "by the book." Some of the questions were word fill-in, and if another word fit in that thing and you didn't use a word out of the book--like it said in the book--you were wrong. It was strictly that you had to go "by the book." You couldn't deviate from that. We had what they called an "A to N" Manual, and then we had what you called a "Seaman's Manual." That "A to N" was everything about the Navy and what-have-you, and you had to study that. You got written exams over that book, and you had to pass. Up to first class seaman, they just gave out so many aboard the ship. But when you started making petty officer, there were so many in the fleet, and there was a lot of ships that you had

to be lucky. You had to make almost a 4.0--top grade--to get rated. Then, of course, along closer to Pearl Harbor, rates started loosening up because they were building up the Navy, and you got promoted a little faster.

Marcello: What role did sports play in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy? I'm referring to that period when maybe you were now out in Honolulu or out in Pearl Harbor on a more or less permanent basis.

Hill: Well, before we went to Pearl Harbor, right there in Long Beach, California, on those battleships we had baseball teams, basketball teams, and football teams. The battleships played each other in all those sports. We even played USC and UCLA in football, believe it or not. Our guys that were on board that ship, some of them, were old fellows, and they just beat the heck out of those college teams, believe it or not. It was almost like a professional team aboard those ships because some of them had been aboard there for ten or fifteen years playing nothing but football and basketball. They were really good.

Marcello: I guess this is another way of trying to keep up the morale of the people aboard that ship.

Hill: Oh, yes, they had to do that. They had football fields over in Long Beach, California, and they'd have two battleships playing each other. In one field right next to the other field, two other battleships would be playing each other in football. The *Nevada* was pretty good (chuckle).

Marcello: I understand that boxing was a big sport, too, in the Navy at that time.

Hill: Oh, yes, boxing was another big sport--very much so. A lot of the boxers came out of the Navy and would go on to the Golden Gloves or what-have-you.

Marcello: I understand that the so-called "smokers" were very, very well-attended.

Hill: That's right. I started to say that, yes--the smokers. I enjoyed that.

Marcello: There is something else along these same lines that we need to talk about. The *Nevada*, of course, had a band.

Hill: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Most of those battleships were pretty proud of their bands, were they not?

Hill: Yes, every one of them had bands.

Marcello: What would be the band's function aboard ship? What would it do?

Hill: Oh, they would handle reveille...a guy out of the band would play reveille in the mornings, you know, naturally, and they raised colors in the morning and took the colors down in the evening. They were out there doing that. Then they'd have band concerts. You'd go out and listen to them. They'd play every so often.

Marcello: Then is it not true that in Pearl there would periodically be the so-called "Battle of the Bands" over at Bloch Center. Do you remember those?

Hill: At Pearl Harbor?

Marcello: Yes.

Hill: No, I really don't remember those.

Marcello: Evidently...

Hill: Oh, they probably had them, but I never went ashore very often. I only got \$21 a month (chuckle)! I'll tell you, it wouldn't take long to spend your money. The disbursing officer used to keep \$15 a month out of my \$21, and it was drawing 4 percent interest at that time, which was pretty good interest. When the war started, I had over a thousand dollars saved up with the disbursing officer. I only lived on about five or six dollars

a month for a long while, you know, going ashore.

I went ashore maybe a couple of times a month.

Marcello: Okay, I'm going to talk about that in a minute.

When did the *Nevada* move out to Pearl Harbor on more or less a permanent basis?

Hill: I think it was 1939. We went on maneuvers, and we went out to Honolulu and everything, and we went on sightseeing tours on different islands and what-have-you. We never did leave.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands?

Hill: Well, I didn't mind because I was single, but the poor married fellows were having a hard time. They didn't like it at all because all their wives were back in Long Beach, California.

Marcello: Okay, we now have you out in Hawaii. You brought up the subject a moment ago, so let's just pursue it just a little bit further. How was liberty organized aboard the *Nevada* at that time? Again, all of my questions are referring to that period before Pearl Harbor--the attack.

Hill: Well, I believe we had three different shifts. You'd be on duty one day, and you were off two days. Or vice-versa (chuckle). I really can't

remember. But, anyway, about every third day you rated liberty. If you wanted to go ashore, you could go; and if you didn't want to, you didn't have to, naturally. You couldn't afford to go very often, anyway.

Marcello: So if you were in port for a weekend, you perhaps would get either the Saturday or the Sunday in most cases?

Hill: Yes. Sometimes you'd get both Saturday and Sunday.

Marcello: How about overnight liberty?

Hill: I think you had to be back at the ship. I believe it was at 11:00 or 12:00. I don't remember really.

Marcello: I think you're correct. I believe it was 12:00. Didn't they have something in that prewar period called the "Cinderella liberty" where you had to be back at 12:00?

Hill: Yes, something like that. I really don't exactly remember.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, what did you do?

Hill: We usually went out to the beach at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and we went swimming out there. Then we'd come back by and have a couple of beers and come on back to the ship.

Marcello: Where would you usually have your beers? Did you have a particular place that you went?

Hill: They had barrooms all around the place for the sailors (chuckle). I really don't remember.

Marcello: Of what significance were Hotel and Canal Streets at that time?

Hill: What was that?

Marcello: Of what significance were Hotel and Canal Streets at that time? Do you remember those two streets?

Hill: I really don't remember Hotel and Canal Streets.

Marcello: Well, they were the streets that, I think, were primarily designed to lift the sailors of their money. I think that's where the houses of prostitution and the tattoo parlors and curio shops were located.

Hill: Well, I know that they had plenty of those--houses of prostitution--but I don't remember the streets.

Marcello: Okay, let's kind of switch away from liberty and talk about some of the training exercises in which the Nevada was involved. Let's more or less go through a typical training exercise in which the Nevada would engage during that period before December 7. First of all, when would the Nevada normally go out on one of these maneuvers or

exercises? Was there a particular day of the week when one could expect the *Nevada* to go out?

Hill: No. They pre-arranged different divisions of the battleships to go out, and you would normally know when they were going out. But we didn't go out every week. We'd sit there sometimes for six weeks or a month at a time without ever leaving the quays. We just sat there and just did exercises aboard the ship. When we did go out, why, we'd maneuver. The ships would all be out there maneuvering around and what-have-you. I remember that before Pearl Harbor, we'd be out there maneuvering around, and we'd notice Japanese submarines. We'd move the maneuvers to another area, and pretty soon here these Japanese submarines were again. We were suspicious of them then, but that's about it.

Marcello: How much attention was given to anti-aircraft practice or anti-aircraft drills on those exercises before the attack?

Hill: Oh, we had a lot of exercises like that--shooting at the planes that would carry a long sleeve way behind them and shoot at these sleeves that they were pulling through the air. Also, tugs would pull a sled, and the battleships would be over the

horizon--we couldn't even see the sleds being pulled--and they would shoot at them. The *Nevada* was excellent in the gunnery department. We got "E's" on all of our turrets. Our guns were very efficient.

Marcello: Talk a little bit about that Navy "E" for efficiency. How did that work? Did the signal gang get involved in that?

Hill: Oh, yes. All departments got involved in it.

Marcello: How would the competition take place among the signal gangs of the various ships for that "E?"

Hill: Well, they graded them. Different ships would send their signalmen over to your ship, and they would grade you. Each individual would get a grade and what-have-you. We won an "E" one time in communications--the signal gang did. The turrets, when they got an "E," well, they put a big "E" up on the turret. The next year, if you won it again, they'd put up a hash mark. If you won the thing again, they'd put a hash mark under the "E." The battleship *Nevada* was really an excellent ship. If they'd have had time at Pearl Harbor--fifteen minutes notice--the Japanese wouldn't have had many

planes returning to their aircraft carriers, I can tell you that.

Marcello: We talked about the antiaircraft drills a moment ago. What kind of antiaircraft armament did the *Nevada* have aboard before Pearl Harbor?

Hill: They only had .50-caliber machine guns and 5.25 antiaircraft guns and 5-inch broadside guns. Of course, they had the 14-inch turret guns.

Marcello: Compare that with the kind of antiaircraft armament that the *Nevada* had after Pearl Harbor, or that any ship had after Pearl Harbor.

Hill: Well, they had 40-millimeter guns then and automatic 5-inch antiaircraft guns; whereas, our boys used to have to throw each projectile into the 5-inch and shoot it one at a time, you know. Of course, they had automatic weapons after that.

Marcello: So most of those ships had a lot more antiaircraft armament after Pearl Harbor than they did before Pearl Harbor.

Hill: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Where was your battle station aboard the *Nevada*?

Hill: On the signal bridge right below the quartermaster deck--right below where the captain would be.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you--even in your position--detect any changes in the training routine aboard the *Nevada*?

Hill: Well, yes. We started training more; I mean, we were going to sea more and practicing and firing and what-have-you.

Marcello: Did you seem to be having more general quarters drills or anything of that nature?

Hill: Well, you'd have those when you was out at sea. You never had those in port. Yes, we had quite a bit of those.

Marcello: When you and your buddies sat around and talked in bull sessions, did the subject of war with Japan ever come up? Did you think about it very much?

Hill: Well, I really don't remember too much, except I remember you'd see the headlines in the newspapers where we were pretty hot at each other and what-have-you. Of course, that morning before the attack at Pearl Harbor, I was standing there reading a newspaper on my bunk. I was getting ready to go ashore. The big headlines were that peace was about to be made with Japan, and there wouldn't be any

war. The headlines were about an inch high. The next thing, why, it started.

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

Hill: Well, I'd just read the newspapers, you know, what-have-you. I guess it didn't seem like too many people was too much worried about it. I don't know. But I was too young. I was only about twenty years old and didn't pay too much attention to it, you know. I knew things were getting hot, though.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and the record seems to indicate that the Nevada was, of course, in port that weekend. In fact, it had been in port for several days before the actual attack. Isn't that correct?

Hill: Yes.

Marcello: When you're in port like that, first of all, the ship is usually wide-open, isn't it? When I say wide-open, I mean, all of the doors and hatches and so on are all open.

Hill: Yes, up above where the living quarters are, yes-- where all the living quarters were.

Marcello: And, of course, that's only natural because you have to move around aboard that ship, and it's much

more convenient if none of those doors and hatches are dogged down.

Hill: No, not unless you have general quarters or under certain conditions.

Marcello: Also, when you're in port like that, how many boilers would normally be lit?

Hill: Well, I don't know. I wasn't in the engineering gang, but I think that they always had one on line, I believe.

Marcello: This is correct. I was just wondering if you knew. At the time of Pearl Harbor, there was one of the four boilers that was lit.

Hill: Well, there must have been one lit because the Nevada was the only battleship to get underway.

Marcello: Where was the Nevada berthed or tied up that morning?

Hill: I don't remember the dock or--what do you call it--where we were tied up, but we were right directly behind the Arizona when she blew up.

Marcello: So you were tied up alone, is that correct, behind the Arizona?

Hill: Yes, there was nobody beside us.

Marcello: And you were over the on Battleship Row near Ford Island?

Hill: Yes, yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that Saturday, December 6, 1941. Do you remember what you did that day? For instance, do you remember if you had liberty or if you stayed aboard ship?

Hill: Nothing, just a routine day. I stayed aboard ship. Like I say, I was getting ready to go ashore.

Marcello: What would most of the guys do on a Saturday night if they were aboard ship?

Hill: Well, we had movies on the afterdeck of the ship. Down in the eating compartment, why, you could go down there and play games like acey-deucey and what-have-you.

Marcello: Acey-deucey was one of the big games at that time, wasn't it?

Hill: Oh, yes (chuckle). Acey-deucey, (chuckle) that was it.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941. I'm assuming that you were aboard ship, so what I want you to do at this point is to talk about your routine on Sunday morning from the time you woke up until all hell broke loose. You mentioned a moment ago that you had gotten up and

were reading the newspaper. What time had you gotten up? Do you recall?

Hill: Oh, probably, like, 6:00. I got up and went and took a shower--got all cleaned up. There were two bunks. My bunk was the lower one, and the bunk was down. I had the newspaper spread out there, and I was reading it, you know, about whether there was going to be war and what-have-you.

All of a sudden I felt the ship kind of shake a little, and I wondered, "What was that?" The next thing, I felt it shake again. The next thing I heard was the boatswain's mate passing the word: "Man your battle station on the double, and this is no shit!" That's the actual words he used: "Man your battle station on the double, and this is no shit!" And that's exactly it.

Marcello: And this came over the PA system?

Hill: This came over the PA system.

Marcello: And what did you do then?

Hill: I finished putting on my clothes and everything, and I ran up to the top deck and ran along the deck and up some ladders, went right past some 5.25s. These Japanese planes were coming in and machine-gunning all the guys. They were laying all over the

place and everything. They was just machine-gunning, and they just went right down along my feet--about five yards from my feet. The bullets just missed me.

I got up to the signal bridge, and when we got up there, of course, we had no guns; and the guys on the top deck didn't have any guns, didn't have any ammunition. They were at their stations, but they could do nothing. The Japanese--the dive-bombers--would come down on one side, and we'd run to the other side; and we'd see them coming down this side, and we'd run to the other side.

One time one bomb came right down through the signal bridge. You could hear it go PLUNK! PLUNK! It blew up on the protective deck, which is five inches thick. That's where it blew up, and it killed a bunch of Marines in the casemate down there where they were manning their battle stations.

Then the signal tower over there gave us the word to get underway, and this battleship, believe it or not, was the only one that backed away. Of course, the *Arizona* got hit, and it blew up. We got underway and was going down the channel, and we got

torpedoed by several Japanese torpedoes, and the ship started listing to port.

The chief quartermaster aboard...there was a lieutenant commander who was the senior officer aboard, but the chief quartermaster was the one running the ship, really. He ran it aground because we were going to turn upside down, evidently, right in the harbor. He ran it aground over on the point over there just before we went out in the ocean, and we sat right there sinking. The ship just gradually went down and down, and just the top deck was out of the water.

I'd just been paid on December 1, you know, (chuckle) and my money in my locker got all wet and everything. I never did get it back, in fact, because I left the ship shortly thereafter. So I lost my whole payday there, and all my clothes. They had to give us all new clothes and everything else.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and fill in some details. So General Quarters is sounded in a rather peculiar way (chuckle), and you go to your battle station. What can you do at your battle station other than stand by and dodge bombs and bullets?

Hill: That's all you could do at that time. We didn't have any time to...the gunner's mates didn't have any time to get ammunition to the guns and what-have-you.

Marcello: How shortly after the attack started did the *Nevada* start to put up some sort of resistance, at least from the .50-caliber machine guns?

Hill: Well, I can't really say. Maybe it was half an hour. I really don't know; I don't really remember.

Marcello: Describe what you saw. You evidently were more or less an observer, albeit an excited observer, as to what was taking place. First of all, describe the tactics being used by those Japanese planes as best as you can remember them. Describe their movement and conduct--what they were doing and how they were coming in.

Hill: About the only thing that I remember is those torpedo planes. You could see them coming in real low. You could see the pilot as they went back up over us; you could see them in the plane when they let their torpedoes loose. The dive-bombers were coming down from one side, and we'd run to the other when you'd see them coming down from over there. You saw all the other ships getting hit and

everything. It was just an unbelievable day. It was unbelievable. I was just twenty-three when it happened. It was unbelievable.

Marcello: Do you have any recollection of the *Arizona* blowing up?

Hill: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Describe what you saw or heard.

Hill: I just heard a big explosion and looked over there, and the thing was just...I saw a big battleship starting to go down, and it was unbelievable. They had another ship sitting right beside them. I think it was the *Vestal* that was sitting beside it. It didn't get hurt. The *Arizona* just got a lucky hit right down the smokestack with an armor-piercing shell--what they said was that an armor-piercing bullet from a battleship. It went right on down through the whole thing and blew up in the insides and just broke it in half, and it just went down.

Marcello: Evidently, one of the things that the Japanese did was, they rigged armor-piercing shells with fins and used them as bombs.

Hill: That's right. That's why they was going all the way through. They'd hit the armored deck and blow up.

Marcello: Describe the fire and the smoke that you saw over there around the *Arizona*.

Hill: I don't know. Sometimes you couldn't even see it, you know, for the smoke and what-have-you. A lot of the ships you couldn't see because there was so much smoke and everything. There was shooting all over the place. Golly! Those other ships in the outlying areas, which weren't getting attacked like us. See, they concentrated on Battleship Row. All those other ships--light cruisers and destroyers--on the outside could get their guns and everything ready to go, finally. But half their crews wasn't aboard, so they really weren't very efficient. But we practically got nothing going in the gunnery department of the battleships.

Marcello: Evidently, some of the machine guns on the foretop aboard the *Nevada* did get into operation pretty quickly, and, in fact, did they not shoot down one of these planes? Do you recall that?

Hill: I really can't tell you.

Marcello: Well, I guess the *Nevada* had already started to get out of the harbor when it took its first torpedo. Describe what it was like when the *Nevada* took that

torpedo. You're basically outside, are you not?
You're not really inside.

Hill: I'm outside on the signal bridge, yes.

Marcello: Describe that first torpedo hit and how it affected you and what you remember about it.

Hill: Well, a torpedo hitting that battleship, you really couldn't tell much about it. It didn't shake the ship too much. I don't know how many torpedoes we got hit with, but all I know is that the ship started leaning to the port.

Marcello: That's right. When it took that first torpedo, it started to list to the port. That's right. When the torpedo hits, is it kind of like a jolt or a jarring effect, or how would you describe it?

Hill: (Chuckle) Well, I got hit on a smaller ship in the Mediterranean, and I know it shook that ship. It just goes up in the air. It seems like it went up and came back down. But not on the Nevada. You couldn't even hardly tell it because it was too large a ship.

Marcello: Incidentally, we talk about the Nevada getting up steam and getting out of there, and it sounds like we're talking about somebody getting up in the morning and going out and starting their car

(chuckle). Normally, under normal circumstances, how long does it take to get a ship fired up and ready to move out of port?

Hill: I guess you'd have to ask those guys in the engineering gang that question because I really don't know.

Marcello: But it takes several hours normally, doesn't it?

Hill: Yes, yes.

Marcello: And how long was it that day before the *Nevada* got underway?

Hill: Well, evidently, we had that one on line, and they cut another engine in pretty quick, just enough to get underway. Of course, you couldn't go very fast because it didn't have enough steam up.

Marcello: And, of course, the whole purpose is to get out of that harbor. You take that one torpedo, and you list to port. Very shortly after that, then, you caught a bomb by the starboard anti-aircraft director. Do you remember that bomb?

Hill: I don't know. We got hit by plenty of bombs--four or five, I think.

Marcello: Yes, you had several bombs hit the *Nevada*. Do you remember when the horizontal bombers came over? I

think by that time the Nevada seems to be a particular target of those horizontal bombers.

Hill: Yes, they tried to sink us right in the harbor as we were going out. We were getting it from all around the place--bombs dropping. They wanted to block the harbor. That's why they ran it aground.

Marcello: In essence, through all of this, about all you can do is just watch and observe and duck and dodge.

Hill: That's all you can do (chuckle).

Marcello: Do you and your buddies talk about anything while all of this is going on?

Hill: Well, I guess we were cussing and raising all kinds of cane and shoving each other around to try and keep from getting hit and what-have-you (chuckle).

Marcello: According to the records, it normally takes about two-and-a-half hours to get one of those battleships moving, and on that day you started in forty-five minutes. You made your movement out in about forty-five minutes after the attack took place. As you move out of that harbor, by this time it evidently seemed as though virtually every Japanese plane was converging on the Nevada. What do you remember about that?

Hill: I really can't tell you too much about it.

Marcello: What kind of an effect does one of those near misses have? Now they're dropping every bomb, I guess, they have left at you guys. Does the near miss bring a big spout of water up in the air, or what does it do?

Hill: Yes, there was water splashing all over the place. I don't know how many bombs we got hit with. We only lost about 280 or 300 people aboard the ship. I guess we were lucky compared to some of them.

Marcello: Now your captain wasn't aboard, was he?

Hill: I don't believe so, no. The senior officer aboard was the lieutenant commander there. Everybody was ashore, and who wasn't ashore was preparing to go ashore.

Marcello: Okay, the *Nevada* is moving in a course that it's quite clear that it probably wouldn't succeed in getting out of that harbor and that it probably would block the entrance. Consequently, the decision was made to beach it or to ground it.

Hill: Right.

Marcello: Where was it grounded, or where was it beached? Do you recall?

Hill: Well, it was just as you turn to go out of the entrance--to go out into the ocean. It was right

off that point. I forget what they call that point. They've got a name for it. But that's where they ran it aground.

Marcello: Now I'm assuming that the *Nevada* has been hit so many times that it's already taking on water and so on. Is it getting a little low in the bow at this point?

Hill: Oh, yes, sure. It was listing real much to the port, and it would have turned over right there in the harbor--in the channel--if they hadn't of grounded it.

Marcello: So it did have that much of a list, and it was taking on that much water that it would have either sunk or turned over.

Hill: Sure, yes.

Marcello: Okay (chuckle), here's this huge battleship heading toward land. Again, did you have a pretty good view of what was happening in front of you?

Hill: Well, we was turned sideways, and we could see it all then back there. All over the place it was just smoke and fire everyplace.

Marcello: Well, the ship is grounded over at Hospital Point. What happens at that point now that you are stopped?

Hill: Well, they gave us all rifles and had us all over the topside of the deck for about a day, expecting the Japanese to invade the place, and we was going to fire from there with rifles.

Marcello: Describe what you see as you look back. What do you see over toward Pearl Harbor itself at this point after the Nevada has now been beached? What do you see as you look back over there?

Hill: Nothing but disaster, and that was it. Smoke, fire. There was nothing you could do about it.

Marcello: What do you think about? Do you have time to think about anything?

Hill: Then?

Marcello: Yes.

Hill: Well, it just makes you wonder: "What's going on?" You just can't believe it; it's unbelievable. You know that you've never been in a war before, and now you're in a real war.

Marcello: At that time--at that immediate time--what kind of an attitude did you develop toward the Japanese?

Hill: Oh, it was nothing but hate, naturally. They could have come on in and probably taken the place, but they didn't have that in mind in the first place. But we didn't know.

Marcello: You mentioned this a moment ago, but let's talk a little bit more about it. How low was the Nevada? In other words, it was in the process of sinking when it was beached over there, and I think you mentioned just how far down it had gone.

Hill: The water was about up to the main deck--top deck.

Marcello: Normally, how much freeboard would you have? You'd have to estimate this, but how much freeboard would you have?

Hill: Oh, ten or twelve feet, yes.

Marcello: What kind of an appetite did you have that afternoon and that evening?

Hill: Not much (chuckle). You didn't feel like eating; you didn't feel like much of anything.

Marcello: You're beached and you are now armed, and I suspect you're awaiting the expected invasion. What kind of rumors were going around in the aftermath of the attack? I'm sure the whole ship had already become one big rumor mill. What were some of the rumors going around?

Hill: Well, that was it. They thought they was going to invade the place, and after about four hours, I guess, all the planes that were coming in we'd

shoot at our own planes and knock our own planes down. They thought maybe they were Japanese.

Marcello: You're, of course, referring to the planes that came in that Sunday night from the *Enterprise*, which was outside the harbor.

Hill: Yes. Those poor guys got shot up coming in.

Marcello: Describe that scene that developed when those two planes were coming in.

Hill: I really don't remember about those planes coming in. I just know that they were shooting at planes all night long, you know, and all day.

Marcello: So you could hear firing throughout the night.

Hill: Oh, yes, all that time. If I was those pilots, I wouldn't have wanted to come in, (chuckle) I'll tell you. You know darn good and well that they're going to shoot at you. All those guys are trigger-happy, and they are going to shoot at anything.

Marcello: Did the word get around to be on the lookout for possible saboteurs? After all, the islands had a large Japanese population.

Hill: Yes, yes, that's right. I guess they just took them all in. I really don't know because two days later they put us on another ship and we were gone. I don't know what else went on.

Marcello: You mentioned that you did observe that action, and you heard gunfire all evening, not only when those planes came in but at other times, too. I'm sure that it wasn't too safe to walk around either at the ship or over there on that beach that evening.

Hill: That's right (chuckle). On the beach, I wouldn't want to walk around over there. You were liable to get shot at, yes.

Marcello: Did you get much sleep that night?

Hill: I don't think I went to sleep, I don't believe.

Marcello: For the most part, did you remain there at your battle station?

Hill: Yes. We just ate canned stuff--whatever you could get. We couldn't get anything because all the stuff was under water, and they had to bring it aboard ship.

Marcello: I guess the ship didn't have too much power, did it, in terms of light and so on and so forth?

Hill: Oh, none after they got everything out under water. They didn't have anything. It was strictly out.

Marcello: And then things would have probably been blacked out that night, anyhow.

Hill: Yes. You couldn't even go down inside the ship, because there were no lights, unless you had flashlights.

Marcello: What did you do the next day?

Hill: Well, we stayed aboard the ship all that day, and then the following day they took us all off whenever they figured they wasn't going to invade the place. Just that day and then the next day, we went over to a big football field. They took everybody off the ship and all the other guys from other ships and what-have-you, and they called out my name to go aboard the aircraft carrier *Lexington*. I didn't hear them, and so I ended up by getting put on the cruiser *Louisville*. I missed the *Lexington*, so I got aboard the cruiser *Louisville*.

Marcello: Now at this point, how much thought had you been giving to all of your clothing and your personal items and your money back aboard the *Nevada*? Had that thought crossed your mind that it was still back there?

Hill: Yes! I didn't have anything! I didn't have anything but the clothes I had on! When we went aboard the

cruiser *Louisville*, why, they gave us more clothes and what-have-you then. That was it.

There was our cruiser and an aircraft carrier--I believe it was the *Enterprise*--and about five destroyers that attacked the Japanese within five days after Pearl Harbor at the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and knocked the heck out of them. We surprised them, really surprised them. In five days we attacked them back. I was aboard there about three or four months, and then they sent me to the East Coast.

Marcello: And then from that point on, were you over in the European Theater of Operations?

Hill: Yes, I was aboard a troopship carrying troops back and forth to England, and there, why, we had a couple of "jeep" aircraft carriers and about thirteen destroyers escorting the troopships. We'd have about ten or twelve troopships in a convoy. They were sinking German submarines all around us. The submarines were trying to get into the troopships, but they never did. They sunk a lot of German submarines.

Marcello: Now somewhere in the midst of this interview, you mentioned that you ended up in the Mediterranean

and that you were on a ship that got torpedoed there.

Hill: Yes (chuckle). Yes, after being on this troopship coming back and forth carrying troops, they sent me up to Boston and put me on another ship, and it carried soldiers and tanks and what-have-you--half soldiers and half materials and equipment and everything. I was aboard it, and we were in a convoy. We got all the way over to the Mediterranean, and then the British took us over. They had nothing but little corvettes, and they escorted us in the Mediterranean there.

We got torpedoed. Three of us right in a row got torpedoed. And that's the way I know (chuckle) how a torpedo feels on a ship. It wasn't near as big as the Nevada, but when that torpedo hit, the ship just went up about a foot, and then you'd feel a drop. I said, "Oh, boy! Here we go!" I was eating breakfast at the time. Of course, there you had your life jacket with you at all times. You either wore it or had it by your side. So I just took that life jacket and put it on. Everybody ran out to one side trying to get out, and I just walked out to the other side (chuckle) where no one was going. I

walked right out, and the bow of the ship was going down like that (gesture). I just walked up to the bow of the ship and just stepped out into the Mediterranean. I saw a bunch of life rafts and everything, and I just swam to a life raft, and the British picked us up. Then we helped them pick up a bunch of South African troops that they had got torpedoed. They had troopships with South Africans--all black fellows--and they was going in there to help run Rommel back. We helped pick them up. These British guy really took good care of us. They had booze aboard their ship (chuckle).

Marcello: Where did you finish your Navy career then?

Hill: I finished up right here in New Orleans. I got my last two years in the Navy here in New Orleans. From the Mediterranean and that troopship, I went aboard the cruiser up in San Francisco. I went aboard the cruiser *New Orleans*, by the way (chuckle). We went out into the Pacific to Okinawa. We weren't in the invasion of Okinawa. We got there about a month afterwards, and we stayed there for two months, doing just nothing but bombarding for the Army on Okinawa. We could see the Japanese jumping off of the end of the island. With

binoculars you could look up there and see them committing *hara-kiri*--just going over like flies. Well, then we knew that it was about all over at Okinawa.

But the admiral told us to go back to the Philippine Islands for rest and recreation, and on the way back we saw this fleet heading toward Japan. With long glasses as far as you could see, there was nothing but ships over the ocean, and we knew they was going to invade Japan. We told them, "We want to go with you. We don't want to go back to rest and recreation. We'd like to go with you." And the admiral said, "We won't be needing you." The next day, they dropped the atom bomb. I guess he knew they was going to drop it, so that's why he told us to go back on to the Philippines. So we went to the Philippines for rest and recreation. Then we patrolled the China Sea for six months after that. I was aboard that ship for nine months without touching land (chuckle).

Marcello: Is that right?

Hill: Aboard the *New Orleans*, yes, from San Francisco to the invasion of Okinawa there and six months

patrolling the China Sea. Nine months I was on board (chuckle) without even hitting the land!

Then we brought it back as part of "Magic Carpet." The cruiser *New Orleans* was part of "Magic Carpet, carrying troops back and forth to the States. When we came back to the States, it was Christmas Eve. We dumped off a bunch of troops that we picked up at Guam, and they told us to go back to Guam that evening--turn around and go right back. Boy, we almost had mutiny aboard the ship. Everybody had booze all over the place, and everybody was drunk. They wouldn't let us stay in San Francisco for Christmas and New Year. They sent us right back to Guam to pick up more troops for "Magic Carpet" and bring them back. Boy, we were really mad! Everybody aboard the ship was (chuckle)!

After we got through running that "Magic Carpet" for about three months, why, then they sent the cruiser *New Orleans* around to Philadelphia to be put out of commission. As we was going through Panama Canal, we heard about Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and so we all got together and all signed

our names to a big long list, saying, "We want to stop in New Orleans for Mardi Gras."

Sure enough, we got word from Washington. I was in communications at the time, and I broke the code that told us to stop in New Orleans seven days for Mardi Gras. You talk about a time we had in New Orleans for Mardi Gras! And the cruiser's name was *New Orleans*! You couldn't do anything. You spent no money. Everybody spent money on you. Of course, that was a long, long time ago.

Marcello: Is that essentially how you got to live in this area?

Hill: Well, I was out in the Philippine Islands. I was on two years duty out there in the Philippine Islands, and for my last two years of the Navy, they sent me to New Orleans here. So I stayed here. I liked New Orleans so much. As far as I'm concerned, New Orleans is *the* place.

Marcello: Did you make the Navy a career?

Hill: Oh, yes, I stayed in twenty-one years. After the war was over, I had nine years in the Navy, and I says, "Well, for eleven more years where can I go and retire on a chief petty officer's pay?" This would be \$450 a month, which was good money back

in those days. During then, though, I got a commission during the war, and I got up to lieutenant, and I retired as a lieutenant in the Navy. So I was lucky. I retired at the end of twenty-one years and got credit for it. If you do twenty years, six months, and one day, they give you credit for twenty-one years, you know. So I retired after twenty-one years.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Hill, I think that's probably a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You've said a lot of interesting and, I think, important things, and I'm sure that scholars will find your comments most valuable when they are able to read them.

Hill: I don't think I contributed too much (chuckle).
Mostly just living.

[End of interview]