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Interview with  
G. C. Mitchell  
April 6, 1974

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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing G. C. Mitchell for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place in Arlington, Texas, on April 6, 1974. I'm interviewing Mr. Mitchell in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was on board the cruiser USS Phoenix at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Mitchell: I was born in Collinsville, Texas, October 18, 1919. I graduated from high school there and worked at various jobs for about two years, and I joined the Navy on December 8, 1939.

Dr. Marcello: In other words, it was almost two years before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Mitchell: Almost to the day.

Marcello: That's correct. Why did you join the Navy?

Mitchell: I joined the Navy . . . it was kind of three-fold. Back in those days it was hard to get a job and stay with it, and I felt the Navy might offer a career. I had no opportunity to pursue a college education, and I felt that there was going to be World War II and that I should be as prepared as I could. I could better serve myself and my country if I went ahead, and I felt that that was probably the most useful thing I could do with my life at that time.

Marcello: Why did you decide on the Navy rather than the Army or the Air Corps or the Marines?

Mitchell: Well, all of my life I had had a real desire to see the world, and I realized that ambition in the Navy. I was on every continent in the world and then most of the countries and many, many islands. I certainly got my travel in, and that's the part that I appreciated most about the Navy.

Marcello: I gather that you eventually did turn out to be a career Navy man, isn't that correct?

Mitchell: Yes, I spent twenty years in the Navy. My specialty was electrical work, and I retired as chief warrant electrician, a commissioned officer in the Navy.

Marcello: Having been an old Coast Guardsman myself, I kind of have a great deal of respect for warrant officers.

I really think that of all the people in the service they know the business about as well as anybody.

They and the chief petty officers, I think.

Mitchell: Well, we specialize and this is probably why most people got that impression, because we did specialize.

Marcello: Okay, so you entered the Navy on December 8, 1939.

Where did you take your boot training?

Mitchell: San Diego, California.

Marcello: Was there anything particularly outstanding from your boot training that you think ought to be a part of the record?

Mitchell: No, not in particular. I would say this, that there was enough in my company that when our training was over, we chartered two buses all the way to Dallas and let people off along the way. This was at a time when they weren't taking a great deal into the service, but it just happened that my company had a lot of fellows from Texas in it. We did have a lot of fun going through boot camp.

Marcello: You mentioned that they weren't taking a great many people into the service at this time. Was it because

of the limited budgets of the armed forces, or simply was it a case where the country wasn't undergoing a serious preparation for eventual war at this time?

Mitchell: I think the country was undergoing as much preparation as it could with the budget they had, and there was a waiting period of from three to nine months from the time you joined up before they would accept you into the service or into the Navy at that time. The Army didn't have quite that much of a waiting period, but that was about the schedule--anywhere from three to nine months--in the Navy.

Marcello: When did you get out of boot camp?

Mitchell: In January, 1940.

Marcello: Did you go directly from boot camp to Hawaii?

Mitchell: I'm not certain of that exact date. It might have been February or March because we had, I think, eight weeks of training then, so it might have been February or March. I went aboard the USS Phoenix in Long Beach, California, and within just a few months we went to Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What were your thoughts about being stationed at Pearl Harbor?

Mitchell: Of course, I enjoyed my first trip out there, but they had most of the fleet there, and it was too many servicemen for the number of civilians, and it didn't make an atmosphere that you really appreciated. But we had some side trips. We had made a cruise to South America and several of the countries. We were out in the Orient and the Philippines. As a matter of fact, we escorted some ships to the Philippines prior to the war, and some of those fellows were in the Bataan Death March. I have a very good friend that tells me he's never going to forgive me for taking him out there and dropping him off (laughter). He was in the Army, and he was taken prisoner-of-war by the Japanese.

Marcello: But eventually Pearl Harbor did become your home base, is that correct?

Mitchell: Yes, it was really our home base even when we'd go on these cruises. We had several cruises; we came back to the states several times for a period of time. Sometimes we'd have work done on the ship and give leave and recreation, and people could go home. But most of the time we were in Pearl Harbor right up until the attack.

Marcello: Now was the transfer of the Phoenix from Long Beach to Pearl Harbor a part of that general transfer of moving the Pacific fleet from the West Coast to Pearl Harbor, or had this taken place before?

Mitchell: No, it took place right after I went aboard in the spring of 1940. I don't remember just what month, but there was a real large transfer of ships as a temporary home base. I don't know if that's the exact phraseology or not, but our permanent home base was still Long Beach.

Marcello: Describe what the Pearl Harbor naval base looked like from a physical standpoint when you got there. Here are all these ships of the Pacific fleet congregating at Pearl.

Mitchell: Yes. I have often heard white-hats say that with all the battleships lined up and all that someday the Japanese were going to fly over and bomb the place. I have heard that expression. I certainly don't give them credit for being military strategists or anything like that, but what they did say actually happened. They caught us boxed up in there. It was kind of a pathetic thing and I have heard--and I don't have any official record of it--but I believe that the Phoenix

was the first ship to actually leave the harbor after the attack.

Marcello: I assume that in this period prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that the whole installation was just a beehive of activity of ships coming and going and this sort of thing.

Mitchell: Yes. For peacetime--it didn't compare with the war, of course, but for peacetime--it was a real beehive of activity. We had ships at sea all the time, and they were coming in and going out, and so many of them would be in port.

Marcello: How hard was it for civilians and/or other unauthorized people to gain access to Pearl Harbor and observe the fleet?

Mitchell: I don't think it was too hard. I believe the Japanese had spies, and I think that our intelligence, Navy Intelligence, knew that they had spies and the fishing fleets there. I don't think it would've been too much of a problem to get in and out the gate, but anybody just through conversation could learn what ships were coming and going to sea and things of this nature. I don't say that in criticism; I think that in view of the way that we operated it would have been almost



a physical impossibility to keep them from having all the pertinent information that they wanted.

Marcello: I've heard it said that it was even possible to buy aerial photos on post cards in local drugstores of Pearl Harbor and this sort of thing.

Mitchell: I'm sure that that is probably true.

Marcello: Was it ever possible for tourist boats or anything of this nature to at least get some sort of an outside view of Pearl Harbor during this period?

Mitchell: I think that they probably could have. Anybody in a private plane could have flown around and actually taken pictures, and in my opinion I think any reasonable person would have never suspected a Japanese would've done what they did. If they would have just been spotted . . . and it's almost a miracle in my opinion that they weren't . . . and had they been spotted, we would have annihilated them before they could've ever gotten back to their own bases. It was just one of those things--it's an "iffy" thing--and we didn't do it because they gambled on the very thing that we thought that no military person would try to attempt anything like that--the surprise in it, you know.

But I do feel that--my views are probably different from some--but I feel that Admiral Kimmel and General Short should have been, without any further information from Washington, they should have been aware and ready for any eventuality, and I think probably they should have thought that they might have pulled some suicide mission like this. There were Japanese operating in our waters, and I believe that I can say that we were dropping depth charges on Japanese prior to Pearl Harbor in our operations around. I feel that they had, without the State Department and Washington giving them all the very latest information, I think they had enough information that they should have been more alert.

Now we knew, for instance, on a Saturday before the fatal Sunday morning, we knew that there was going to be an inspection on that Saturday, but we didn't know what ship it was going to be on. It was a surprise inspection. In those days, believe it or not, they opened up all the watertight integrity of these ships. It was a job to open it up and have it ready for inspection. They'd always leave them open back then until Monday morning. Here was the watertight

integrity of all these ships wide open, waiting until Monday morning, when the Japs hit on Sunday. By the way, Admiral Kimmel did inspect and the surprise was our ship, and he inspected our ship on a Saturday morning before the fatal 7th of December, on the Sunday morning.

Marcello: We'll get back and talk about that a little later. I think that's getting a little ahead of our story, but it's a very interesting subject, and I've never heard it brought up before, so I really do want to pursue it in much greater detail. Now as a young sailor at this time, how closely were you and your buddies keeping up with world events?

Mitchell: Well, of course, we were following the events in Europe much closer than we were in the Pacific. We knew . . . for instance, we were undermanned in the Pacific. We knew that the Pacific Fleet could not hold out against the Japanese Navy. We knew that the Philippines or none of those islands . . . we were aware of that by just what we could observe and talking to other fellows on ships that had been to these various places.

Marcello: In other words, then, you believed that if the United States did get involved in this war that was going on that more than likely it would occur in Europe rather than in the Pacific? In other words, did you think very much about the possibility of a Japanese attack?

Mitchell: Yes, we figured that they were going to join with Germany, and we felt--I think that I can speak for the majority--that we would be fighting the Japanese. We didn't know where or when, but I think most people thought that they would go from Japan through the Philippines and take that route that they finally did, but nobody suspected Pearl Harbor, and I think our military leaders felt the same way. That's why we were poised there to go to the attack, and I'm sure they had it planned to start in Australia and work up because they started getting supplies into Australia immediately after the war. I think people in the military just had general knowledge that this was about what would happen. I think the only real big surprise there was to it was Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What was your general opinion of the typical Japanese? When you thought of a Japanese, what was the typical

sort of a person you conjured up in your mind at this time?

Mitchell: Well, I knew that the Japanese were thrifty, intelligent, hard-working, sacrificing people. I felt that they would be real good fighters in the war. Their ships were very impressive, the ones I saw.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what the general scuttlebutt was about the capabilities of the Japanese Navy.

Mitchell: They were respected. Our Navy felt that . . . really, I thought they were better than what they proved to be. I know I was in the battle of the Surigao Straits in the Philippines, and I guess the greatest tonnage was sunk there outside of Jutland, and I was amazed how we really worked them over with less ships and less firepower. We really worked them over.

Marcello: So in December of 1941, at least among experienced Navy people, there was a great deal of respect for the Japanese Navy. It was something that wasn't to be taken lightly.

Mitchell: That's right. I think from top to bottom everybody recognized that.

Marcello: As we get closer and closer to December 7, what sort

of precautions or maneuvers did the fleet undertake for the eventuality of war?

Mitchell: We went out on maneuvers, and we would have night battles and day battles and battles under different weather conditions. We'd divide up into different fleets and fight each other in mock battles, of course. I think that they were trying--from what they knew about the Japanese Navy--to simulate what kind of war they'd be fighting at sea with the Japanese Navy, and they were taking those precautions. We had some endurance drills, you might say. We stayed on battle stations for many hours just like a simulated war would be. I think we had very good training, and I think it proved to be so during World War II, and it really paid off--that we had that training.

Marcello: With what sort of frequency did this sort of training occur? Was it a constant thing?

Mitchell: The maneuvers and the battles, the mock battles, would have to be planned out for over a period of time, and after the plans took place, we would go out. But we would plan and have gunnery exercises and damage control exercises and all these things constantly, you might say. That was just part of . . . if we

weren't cleaning and getting the ship and preserving the ship and carrying out preventative maintenance and such as this, then we were in some of these kinds of drills.

Marcello: Incidentally, what was your particular function aboard the Phoenix?

Mitchell: I was third class electrician's mate at that time, and my battle station was on the searchlights. I was in charge of the crew on the searchlights, but when there was a limited number on board, which there was on that morning of December 7, my battle station was the main generators. After the attack started, we started lighting off boilers and putting more generators on the line and such as this. There was quite a few of the engineering force helping man the guns that morning because there was so many of our people over at church or on the beach or someplace. We had passengers aboard--we had just gotten back from the Philippines just a little while before that--and we still had passengers on board that were helping man the guns.

Marcello: When you say passengers, were these civilians or military personnel?

Mitchell: They were military personnel being transferred from the Orient back to the States.

Marcello: Generally speaking, during this pre-attack period, the fleet was in a constant state of flux; there were ships moving in, ships moving out, constantly on maneuvers and alerts and this sort of thing.

Mitchell: Right. They were undergoing a great deal of training.

Marcello: Did there seem to be any degree of panic in undertaking this training? In other words, was there a feeling that the fleet was racing against time in getting ready for war, or was this training simply carried out in a regular steady pace?

Mitchell: It was carried out in a regular orderly manner, but there was no doubt that it was of a magnitude that you knew that the people in charge were being prepared to fight a war.

Marcello: In other words, there wasn't panic but the training was taking place at an accelerated rate.

Mitchell: Right. I'd say that's true.

Marcello: You mentioned previously that on some of these alerts or some of these maneuvers, it was your belief that actually you had spotted Japanese submarines or some



sort of Japanese vessels from time to time. Would you care to relate some of these incidents?

Mitchell: I know that there were times when our destroyers were dropping depth charges, and we weren't actually at general quarters. We weren't actually on our battle stations. The general opinion--and I never heard anyone deny it--and it seemed to be general knowledge that they were actually dropping depth charges on Japanese submarines. Now this could be that it's not an official word, and I'm not saying it is, but it's my belief and there's a lot of people that this is their belief that this was what was happening.

Marcello: Now did the dropping of these depth charges take place while you were actually on maneuvers, and did you witness the destroyers dropping the depth charges?

Mitchell: I witnessed them dropping depth charges when we were out on maneuvers, and sometimes it wasn't during a training period. I believe I know the difference when they were dropping them for training purposes and when they were after the real thing. I feel like we actually dropped depth charges prior to Pearl Harbor. I may be mistaken about that because I have no way of proving it, but it was the general knowledge

of the people--if you could call it knowledge--that this was what happened, and I never heard anyone deny it.

Marcello: Usually about how far out of Pearl Harbor were you when these particular incidents with these depth charges occurred?

Mitchell: I couldn't really say. We operated from ranges to a few hundred miles out to within sight of land. In my type of work, not being in navigation, I just didn't pay that much attention to it so I couldn't say.

Marcello: What sort of leisure activities or recreational activities were available to the fleet here at Pearl Harbor?

Mitchell: They had clubs for enlisted men and chiefs and officers-- different clubs. They had beaches around the island that you could go to. One of my favorite places, as well as a lot of the young guys, was Waikiki Beach. We'd go out and have a beer and go for a swim. I spent a lot of hours doing that and enjoying it. It was a lot of fun, but it wasn't the type of recreation you'd want to have a constant diet of (chuckle). You could go to the clubs or to the

beaches or to the movies, and they had just about any type of recreation you'd want. But, of course, there was a real imbalance between the girls and . . . they just didn't have enough girls to go around for the sailors at that time. Anybody that had a girlfriend was really lucky (chuckle).

Marcello: I assume that Hotel Street was a very popular place with the fleet, too, isn't that correct?

Mitchell: Oh, yes, it certainly was.

Marcello: How hard was it to get a pass or to get liberty during this period immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, that is, during the period of these alerts and so on? When the ship was in, was it pretty easy to get liberty in the evenings?

Mitchell: Yes. There wasn't many that wanted to go over every day. So if you had a particular day that you wanted to go over and you had the duty, it was pretty easy to get a standby. So it wasn't a great deal of trouble. Of course, there was no overnight passes except for those that had their family there. The officers and the people who had their family there, and there were some enlisted men who had their family there--they got overnight leave.

Marcello: How about on weekends? Was it pretty tough to get a weekend pass?

Mitchell: For a full Saturday and Sunday, it was. You had to have a good reason to be going someplace. You couldn't just say, "I want to go over and not come back for a day or two." You had to have a good reason for it. But if you had a logical reason, you could get it.

Marcello: On a weekend, approximately what percentage of the crew would usually go ashore on a given evening? Let's say a Friday evening or a Saturday evening or perhaps even a Sunday evening.

Mitchell: About 25 per cent, I'd say.

Marcello: In other words, about 75 per cent of the crew was on board that ship at all times, generally speaking.

Mitchell: You could say that normally, but I would say that there was probably less than that like on a Sunday morning in this particular case because the weather was beautiful. There was sightseeing and beaches, and then there was recreation at the clubs, and there was movies and all that, so there would probably be more going over on a Sunday morning or a Saturday afternoon than normal. But I'd say through the week there was 75 per cent aboard.

Marcello: Then to be more specific, what percentage was usually on board that ship on a weekend?

Mitchell: During what we call liberty hours, I would say there was something like 60 to 70 per cent aboard ship.

Marcello: Aboard ship.

Mitchell: Yes, with 30 to 40 per cent off.

Marcello: Now at this particular time, was the Navy using radar to any extent yet? I know radar was in a very, very primitive stage at this time, and the Army had a few portable radar stations on the island. How about the fleet itself?

Mitchell: They didn't depend on it too much. They didn't depend on it.

Marcello: As a third class electrician's mate, did you know too much about radar or anything at all about it?

Mitchell: Very little because that came under the radio electricians. I really don't think we had any radar installed at that time. We might have had some navigational equipment, but I don't think that we had any enemy search radar, I'll put it that way.

Marcello: Generally speaking, I think that what radar was available was usually rather inefficient and prone to break down and wasn't too reliable.

Mitchell: They relied on radar very little, if at all. As you know from what happened there, the Army there just didn't depend on it at all.

Marcello: In other words, when the fleet was out they still depended basically on the visual sighting so far as detecting aircraft or other ships were concerned.

Mitchell: Right. And sonar equipment and various radio equipment.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less brings us up, I think, to at least December 6, 1941. That would be the Saturday prior to the attack. Now as best you can, would you relate to me your routine on the day of December 6?

Mitchell: Yes. We prepared for inspection. We had on a Friday what we called field day. We cleaned the ship thoroughly and did, of course, preventative maintenance. We opened up a lot of the ship's watertight integrity on Friday, and that was our primary routine for that day.

Marcello: As you mentioned awhile ago, all the ships more or less had been going through this routine because you didn't know what ship was going to be inspected.

Mitchell: Right. It was the official word that there was going to be a surprise inspection, so everybody . . . and the idea behind it was to get all the ships cleaned

up and looking their very best and all the things the admiral and his staff normally inspected for.

Marcello: This would have included every ship, let's say, from the minesweeper right up to the USS Arizona?

Mitchell: Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say a minesweeper. I have never seen it go to that small a ship (chuckle). It would go from all your fighting ships and some of your repair ships and ammunition ships and things like that.

Marcello: What particular work did you do on the ship to get it ready for this inspection?

Mitchell: Well, of course, we brought our electrical equipment up to par; that was our primary thing. Secondly, we had to clean the spaces for which we were responsible and bring all your records up to date and things of this nature.

Marcello: As you mentioned, this took place on a Saturday, and I would assume that during this period where the ship was getting ready for this inspection, most of the crew would have had to have been aboard, would they not have been?

Mitchell: Yes. You say on a Friday and then the inspection was on a Saturday. This is true but after the inspection,

then the work was knocked off on a Saturday and usually people were in the process of going over from around eleven o'clock and for several hours later, just whenever it suited them.

Marcello: You mentioned that Admiral Kimmel selected the Phoenix for the inspection on this particular Saturday. Describe his appearance on board ship.

Mitchell: Well, of course, he was in a white uniform, a very impressive uniform, an admiral's uniform. Most of us were in whites. The ships' crews . . . one of the first things they did was line up the crews to inspect the personnel, and they were in military formation, of course. Then after the dismissal of the personnel inspection, they immediately went into materiel inspection of the ship. Most of the crew manned their various stations to present the space for inspection and receive whatever criticism or comments or compliments or whatever the case might be that the inspections party had. The admiral would take one group and go to certain parts of the ship, and then there would be lesser ranking officers with their group going through other parts of the ship, and they'd cover the entire ship during the inspection.



Marcello: About how long would one of these inspections take?

Mitchell: I'd be guessing, but I'd say a couple of hours from the time they started until the time they finished and left the ship--from the time they came aboard.

Marcello: Again, just for the record, you mentioned that during one of these inspections, which obviously would take place on a weekend, the watertight integrity was kept open through the entire weekend.

Mitchell: Yes. Your big doors that went into your ammunition and engineering spaces and all below decks are all watertight doors. They're kept closed normally, but for these inspections they open up enough of them that there is access to all parts of the ship by the inspection party. It was a policy back in those days that they opened them up on a Saturday for these inspections--either Friday evening or Saturday morning--and they closed them up on a Monday.

Marcello: Why was this? Do you know?

Mitchell: It was a lot of work to close them up, and I assume, as I said before, that nobody suspected any attack in Pearl Harbor. We were there, I think, to be that far toward the Far East or the Orient in case a war started, and nobody expected any such of an attack.

I don't care who had been admiral, I don't believe they would have anticipated that sort of thing. I think this was a logical thing to do by reasonable men, but it proved out to be a terrible thing.

Marcello: Where was the Phoenix located with regard to the other fighting ships, for example, Battleship Row?

Mitchell: Well, if you were standing on one of the battleships, as I recall, if you were standing on one of the battleships facing forward on the ship, it would be to the port quarter over across the bay.

Marcello: In other words, you were actually some distance from the battleships.

Mitchell: I imagine we were--and this again is a guess and I've seen it many, many times, but I'm trying to recall from thirty years ago--I would say 300 to 500 yards.

Marcello: I'm sure that that row of battleships was a rather impressive sight, was it not?

Mitchell: They certainly were. They really were an impressive sight. It was a sad thing that they were all there together that day.

Marcello: What did it look like seeing all these battleships lined up in a rather orderly manner?

Mitchell: They were, of course, just about as clean and neat . . . everything on them worked to perfection, and every piece of brass--even though you've got that salt breeze--was shined to perfection, and the paint work . . . they were in a real state of readiness as far as a war was concerned. Knowing what I had to face, I would have certainly thought twice, but I imagine knowing this--assuming you were the enemy--knowing what you had to face, it would've given you second thoughts. I imagine this was the real reason for what to me--even today--seems like a suicide mission that they went on. But they pulled it off and got away with it.

Marcello: For the record--and this really has nothing to do with the interview--but you know that most of the Japanese high command never thought that that attack could be pulled off. The architect of the plan, Admiral Yamamoto had threatened to resign before permission was received for him to proceed with the attack. So I think it goes without saying that if the Japanese didn't think that the plan had much of a chance of success, it is in a way justifiable to understand why the American command was caught by surprise.

Mitchell: That's right. That's right. I can understand it. I think most of us were surprised.

Marcello: During this period of alert, what precautions were taken to protect that fleet while it was in Pearl?

Mitchell: We had constant patrols by, for instance, the old PBY. They were in the air all the time. There was other planes, too, but I wouldn't go into that. I'm not that familiar with them. But you could see the PBY's landing and taking off there in Pearl Harbor constantly. There was never an hour in the day or night that they weren't on patrol. Then we had ships at sea all the time. I don't suppose there was ever a time that we didn't have the ships pretty well . . . again, it goes back to how they got away with it. It's almost incredible.

Marcello: What was the antiaircraft armament like aboard these ships? Of course, you can speak primarily here for the Phoenix. I don't expect you to describe what was on board the Arizona, the Pennsylvania, the Utah, or one of those vessels.

Mitchell: Yes, well, our primary antiaircraft fire was the 5-inch batteries. We had four on either side of the ship. We had eight and they had what you call a fuse

setting mechanism. You'd throw the shell in the fuse setter, and they'd crank it in, set the fuse . . . Of course, that morning we didn't have but very few experienced fuse setters aboard and the thing was exploding . . . and then, too, it was such close range. I know we fired a lot of ammunition; we burned the barrel out on one of our guns firing.

Marcello: What sort of other antiaircraft protection was aboard that cruiser? The thing I think we need to get in the record here is that we need to keep in mind that attacks by airplanes upon ships was still more or less in its infancy.

Mitchell: Yes.

Marcello: Were these ships adequately armed for some sort of an air attack?

Mitchell: At that particular time they didn't have adequate means anywhere. They had some 40-millimeters that was pretty good, but even with well-trained crews they just weren't good enough against planes coming in. As time went by, they developed better ammunition that we called "black magic" where a fuse could blow up automatically by coming close enough to an object, and it would scatter shrapnel over a large area. It

was just not adequate; our antiaircraft batteries and things just weren't adequate at all.

Marcello: This was especially true, I think, in terms of numbers. For example, you were aboard ship throughout most of World War II, and I would assume that there was many more antiaircraft guns aboard that ship in 1944 or 1945 than there were in 1941.

Mitchell: Yes.

Marcello: Just in terms of sheer numbers, I'm sure there were a lot more antiaircraft guns.

Mitchell: That's right. We put on quite a few after that.

Marcello: I'm sure that virtually every space above deck that could mount a gun would have one mounted there, would it not?

Mitchell: That's right--20-millimeters, 40-millimeters, machine guns, and, of course, the 5-inch batteries and 3-inch batteries. A lot of them had 3-inch batteries on them.

Marcello: You know, this is something that I don't think a lot of people realize also, but if that fleet had been caught at sea with that inadequate antiaircraft protection, the damage even could have been a lot greater because most of those ships at Pearl that were sunk were eventually raised, were they not, with the exception of the Arizona and two or three others?

Mitchell: I don't agree with you. If we'd have been caught at sea, a ship can maneuver and it gives them a lot of protection. If a plane is coming at the side of a ship and they see him in time, they can maneuver and it's harder to maneuver the plane to hit it. I think that there would have been considerably less damage if they'd have been at sea and had had a full crew aboard. I say a full crew--if we had all that we had--because we were undermanned in those days. We didn't have a full crew; we didn't have enough sailors to go around. But I think that we would've had our damage control people on the station, we would've had all the watertight integrity set aboard ship, we would've had the trained crews aboard the anti-aircraft batteries. We would have gotten considerably more planes than we did. So I would disagree with that. I'd say we would have been much better off at sea.

Marcello: That's an interesting point, and I think it is something that we need to get into the record.

Mitchell: Yes.

Marcello: So the inspection was held on Saturday.

Mitchell: Saturday, December 6.

Marcello: That is correct. The inspection was over by approximately eleven o'clock, and at the end of the inspection a certain percentage of the crew went ashore, the watertight integrity was open, and the ship was obviously not at full strength. Certainly it was in no fighting condition. There is something else here with regard to protection. I know that in some cases, at least for the battleships, there were some sort of anti-torpedo nets that protected those ships, were there not?

Mitchell: Yes.

Marcello: Was there anything like this on the cruisers or the lesser ships?

Mitchell: No, there wasn't, not to my knowledge. They could have been somewhere in the harbor where they were fairly well submerged or something. Now at the entrance of the harbor, you had submarine nets. How they operated those and kept them closed or open and things, I don't know. As you know, some of the midget submarines and two-man submarines or whatever they were got into the harbor, and they caught them in there.

Marcello: What was the purpose of lining those battleships up



in those rows two-by-two? Was there a special reason why it was done in that manner?

Mitchell: I feel that it was a matter of several things. It was a matter of convenience for one thing. Had anything happened in the Far East or in the Orient, I'll say, that we needed to deploy the ships, they could have been deployed pretty fast. Other than that, I don't know any real logical reason that they would have them so close. But, of course, captains and their staff and the admirals were constantly meeting and analyzing new battle strategy and new equipment and news that they would receive of what was going on in the world and orders and correspondence. So naturally it was a matter of convenience an awful lot in my opinion.

Marcello: Also, I would assume that in case there had been some sort of attack by torpedo bombers, only the outboard ship would have been hit. It would have been pretty tough to get the inboard ship.

Mitchell: Yes, this might have been true.

Marcello: What particular ships were located around the Phoenix at this time? And how close were they to your ship?

Mitchell: Of course, we had cruisers that we would tie up

together. I really don't remember what cruisers were in at that particular time with us.

Marcello: But there were cruisers around your particular vessel?

Mitchell: There were cruisers around us, and there were so many times we were tied up side by side, and it seems to me like there was another cruiser on our left at the time. There might not have been. Different ships would be at sea, in and out. Probably we were by ourselves, and it was just a little ways over, and we weren't actually tied up to another ship. This is probably one of the reasons we left the harbor as soon as we did because we were able to get enough people back and get underway.

Marcello: What did you do personally on the afternoon and evening of December 6, 1941, after the inspection? Do you recall what your routine was?

Mitchell: I think on that particular day I went over to Honolulu and out to Waikiki Beach for awhile and came back early in the evening and saw the movie aboard ship that night. I don't remember what it was (chuckle), but I think that was about my routine.

Marcello: About what time did you get aboard that ship, do you recall?

Mitchell: That night?

Marcello: Yes.

Mitchell: I think around ten or eleven o'clock.

Marcello: Generally speaking--now you're going to have to generalize on this question--what was the general condition of the crewmen who came back aboard that ship on a Saturday evening at whatever time they came back?

Mitchell: Oh, you'd find one occasionally that would've had a little too much to drink, but normally they were in pretty good shape.

Marcello: In other words, on a Sunday morning, any Sunday morning, was the state of the crew as such that they were in some sort of physical condition that they could adequately man the guns and this sort of thing?

Mitchell: Yes, even if a person that had been pretty intoxicated when he came back that night, he would have been able to man his gun because young people are able to recoup pretty fast (chuckle). I would say that had everybody been aboard and had had any inkling of this thing, it would've been altogether a different show. But I don't believe that would have been a major factor as to

whether they had a hangover. There might have been a few, but very few.

Marcello: You mentioned you got back aboard the ship relatively early on the night of December 6. You apparently turned in rather early. This brings us up to December 7. Why don't you discuss the routine that you personally involved yourself in on December 7 from the time you got up until everything happened.

Mitchell: Of course, we had breakfast. The next thing that's very vivid in my mind . . . I know that I was back by number five turret. That's kind of on the stern of the ship. I had this Sunday newspaper, and I was reading the newspaper.

Marcello: You were outside the ship or inside the ship?

Mitchell: I was on the main deck. It was sunshiny and back in those days you kept those decks so scrubbed that you could lay down with your whites on anywhere. I was probably there in the shade of the turret--I don't remember the exact place--and the first inkling I had of the attack was when one guy standing near the catapult says, "I wish you'd look at those stupid Army guys over there diving on those ships like that."

Then you could hear the roar of the planes, so it was about that time that several of us got up at the same time and saw one of the planes coming out of the dive and saw the rising sun on the bottom. You just couldn't hardly believe your own eyes. I think everybody stood there for a second just stunned.

We immediately went to the quarter deck where the officers of the deck was to tell him that the Japanese were bombing the battleships. He didn't believe us. Nobody could believe it. You hesitated even telling it. Finally, as I recall, one of the men in the group just manned the public address system or the general alarm where the speakers are throughout the ship. He said, "All hands man your battle stations; the Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor!"

Marcello: About how much time had passed from the moment you first observed the planes until the alarm was sounded over the public address system? Again, things were happening very fast here, and I'm sure that you didn't go around looking at your watch.

Mitchell: It seemed longer, but I'm sure it couldn't have been over five minutes.

Marcello: What happened at that point then? The alarm was given . . .

Mitchell: People actually manned their battle stations. Some men thought it was a drill. I know that many of them couldn't hardly believe what they were hearing. Everybody was trying to direct people--everybody of any authority were trying to direct people--to places where they could best serve and to the most important places. I knew that, for instance in my own case, there was going to be a period of time before they could start getting steam up on the boilers, so I manned a 5-inch antiaircraft battery for a while because at one time when I first went aboard ship that was my battle station. I helped there for a while because they were short-handed.

Then about the time I felt that the engineering department could start getting steam up and I could get another generator on the line, I went to the engine room and started putting generators on the line as fast as they could get steam up for them. Of course, you put all your gyros and your boilers and everything on as fast as you can, and as the people started coming back aboard, they could get in touch with our people. Of course, there were a few of them we left in the harbor without. But as soon

as they got back aboard, we already had steam that was ready to go. We could have left the harbor sooner, but they waited a little bit for some of the people to get aboard.

Marcello: What sort of actual attacks occurred on the Phoenix itself? In other words, did you come under direct Japanese attack during this raid?

Mitchell: The only thing--there might have been more--but the only thing I'm certain of was one run on us with machine guns from a plane. I imagine he had dropped his bombs and saw the fire coming from those ships and he . . . now there may have been more, but there was only one that I'm certain of. And we got a few machine gun bullets around on the ship, but nobody was injured by bullets, anyway, although I don't know if there was anybody injured or not.

Marcello: I assume that the Phoenix could not claim any Japanese planes being shot down.

Mitchell: I don't think they could. If they did, probably nobody knew about it. I don't believe it's in the record that they shot any down, and I haven't seen the official record of it.

Marcello: At the same time, you weren't really close enough to

the battleships to afford them any sort of protection either, were you?

Mitchell: Well, in a sense we were a little bit too close, the way the planes were coming in. If we could've gotten a little better range and had we had experienced crews on our . . . and then we could've studied the range and the speed they were coming in and set our fuses on our anti-aircraft weapons so that they would burst right in the pattern of flight. But when they're coming in so close and so low, that type of gun is not much help, especially when you've got to take into consideration that there's a civilian population over there. Some people said they bombed Waikiki Beach and places over there. I think it was probably our shells falling from some of our ships (chuckle).

Marcello: Describe in general what the resistance was like that the Phoenix put up. I think you mentioned this in an earlier sequence of the interview. Did you hit back with everything you had?

Mitchell: Oh, we gave them everything we had, but we didn't have much. We had our machine guns, and as I recall, it was either the 20 or the 40-millimeters on the deck at that time, and a few of those were manned. But



nothing was working at top efficiency because there wasn't enough people aboard. One thing you have to understand is that in a time of peace they're undermanned anyway--the ships are. I think we had five or six hundred people aboard and the complement is about 1,200. There were five or six hundred if everyone was aboard, and when you take about 30 per cent of those people . . . we were really short-handed. We weren't very effective.

Marcello: But you did mention awhile ago that one of the 5-inchers was fired so fast and furiously that the barrel was burned out.

Mitchell: We threw a lot of steel in the air, believe me (chuckle). We unloaded a lot of steel (laughter), but it wasn't very effective. I'm sure that we didn't do much damage. We could have shot down a half dozen planes, and it might have been that we didn't even scratch one (laughter). There was so much steel that went in the air, but not having our fuses set right and everything like that, we were helpless. It was almost useless.

Marcello: To recapitulate then, I suppose it's accurate to say that the Phoenix was unprepared in the sense that the

full complement was not aboard the ship, there were inexperienced people handling the guns, and the Japanese were too close for the guns to be effective anyhow--especially the 5-inch guns.

Mitchell: Yes, because of being unable to set the fuses to fire. I don't even know if you can set them to fire within four or five hundred yards from the ship. I doubt it very seriously.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the reaction of the men when this attack took place? Was there panic, perplexity, confusion, bravery, cowardice? Maybe you saw a little bit of each.

Mitchell: Of course, I was in a lot of battles after that, and I would say that it pertained here, too--and I think this is true of all men--that under those circumstances you don't think about being scared. You've got a job to do, and you're doing your best to do it. I think people under those circumstances will do things that they probably feel they are not capable of ordinarily. They throw caution to the wind and really get with it. They were really mad and the general attitude was, "Just wait, boy, we'll get you yet! We're going to win this thing." This was the real attitude of the men, and I think the whole country felt this way about it.

Marcello: During the period of the attack did you observe any particularly funny things that occurred? Usually under even these serious circumstances, there are usually some funny things that occur.

Mitchell: Yes. One thing I noticed . . . we had a torpedoman aboard, and, of course, we didn't have any use for him at all, but he was manning one of the guns. He served as a first-loader. With these particular 5-inch batteries, the projectile and the powder didn't come separate. It was just like a .22 cartridge, you might say, only it was big and it was heavy. He was grabbing those things out of there . . . as fast as they loaded them in those fuse boxes, he was grabbing them and throwing them in that gun. The rammerman who rammed those things home . . . and then you had the people sitting on either side that was focusing the guns in. They were pulling that trigger anytime anything was in there. They fired it. It's the rammerman's job to see to it that that gun didn't get too hot. This torpedoman, why, when that rammer wasn't going, he'd just take his hand and shove it home (chuckle), and that's what burned the barrel out. Of course, he wanted to see that thing shooting. He thought we was shooting too slow. This was a very comical thing.

I think that there was many things that you heard about . . . people being in the shower, and there were people at their battle stations, and all they had on was a towel around them (laughter), and some of them lost their towel (laughter). Things of this nature, we had a lot of laughs about later.

Marcello: Were all of the men in whites, that is, the ones that were fully clothed? On a Sunday morning of this nature did they have to be in whites?

Mitchell: Yes. They had shorts. They had what we called kind of a T-shirt. It was a light undershirt with sleeves that just came out over the shoulder, and short trousers and white shoes . . . no, we wore black shoes, I'm sorry. We did at that time, we wore black shoes. That was the general uniform throughout the ship.

Marcello: The Japanese planes came back a second time, too, did they not?

Mitchell: Right. They came back in waves. I don't know how many times they came back. It seems to me like . . . it was too long.

Marcello: How long was it, or how long did it seem to you, between the first wave and the second wave? Between the first attack and the second attack?

Mitchell: Well, of course, I've heard this discussed. I've never really looked at the record, but it seemed to me like this lasted a couple of hours, but I'm sure it didn't. I'm sure it was probably over much sooner.

Marcello: What happened during the second attack? Was it simply more of the same, generally speaking?

Mitchell: More of the same. We got a few of our people back because the word was put out on the beach, and everybody got back as fast as they could. We had boats coming back as fast as they could. It was a pretty tragic thing there. A lot of bodies were in the water, and boats were trying to get back. People didn't know what to do . . . whether to try to pull somebody out of the water or get back to your ship . . . of course, if it had been somebody alive that was in the water, they would have pulled them out. For the most part they were just trying to get back to their ship as soon as they could to do whatever they could. They knew that was where they'd be most effective--on the ship.

Marcello: I would assume that during this second wave, once again the Phoenix was more or less unscathed. The Japanese weren't necessarily after the Phoenix.

Mitchell: No, they weren't after the cruisers. They were concentrating on the planes on Hickam Field and the battleships.

Marcello: Incidentally, I think we ought to mention that there was simply a chain link fence between Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor, isn't that correct?

Mitchell: Yes, that's about what it amounts to. They could just go right on and take their choice of whatever target they wanted when they got ready to go into a dive. They were that close to Hickam.

Marcello: Describe in your own words what Pearl Harbor looked like after these two attacks took place.

Mitchell: Of course, there were burning ships and terrible smoke from the burning . . . actually, some of those ships took the bombs in such a way that it got their fuel oil on fire, and that's a real black, heavy smoke. I saw the Oklahoma turn over . . .

Marcello: What were your thoughts when that happened?

Mitchell: Oh, my God! You just don't know what to think. It's terrible; it's a terrible thing to see! Hickam Field was just destroyed. We felt that . . . just everything in flames. We felt that our whole fleet was crippled, and as you know it was.

Marcello: You might go back and describe again the overturning of the USS Oklahoma. I think it would be kind of important to get your particular description of what happened to the Oklahoma.

Mitchell: Yes. There was so much that happened that there is nothing you can recall exactly like it was. I'm satisfied that if you had ten different people who saw it, they'd describe it ten different ways. But I remember the ship leaning, and it appeared to me, as I recall now, that it turned to port and then just gradually rolled on over. It was very slow at first  
. . .

Marcello: Do they call that "turning turtle" or something of that nature?

Mitchell: They have different phrases for it, but that's about what happened. The bottom of it was just sticking just right straight up.

Marcello: Is this a fast process, the ship turning over, or does it take place rather slowly?

Mitchell: No, it takes place rather slowly until it gets more than to the point to where the main deck is vertical-- at right angles with the water--and after it gets a little over there, more than that, a few degrees more

that that, it turns much faster then. It would be like something huge just leisurely turning over.

Marcello: Were you ever able to witness the destruction of the Arizona at all?

Mitchell: Oh, I saw the Arizona hit! That was one of the first ships that was hit.

Marcello: You might describe that particular incident, also.

Mitchell: I saw it burning very much. It was our impression that one of the bombs actually went down the stack, and this is what many people have said. I've read that, too. This is the way it looked to us. The Arizona was just a mass of flames, and people were jumping from the ship. You could still see men manning their guns . . . I don't see how they stayed in that smoke. Many of them perished there at their guns. They just didn't leave them; they wouldn't leave them. They were burned to death right there at their guns.

Marcello: Are there any other vivid impressions of any of the ships that you witnessed at the time that need to be a part of the record? Now the Nevada was the one that got up steam and headed for the entrance of the harbor, was it not?



Mitchell: Yes. As I understand, there was a chief petty officer that was navigator of her. They were going out; they were trying to get out to sea. Of course, we were trying to get ships at sea that were manned well enough that they could fight, hoping that we could contact the Japanese fleet or any portion of it out there. We didn't know what was out there, of course. We could see that ship being bombed to prevent it from getting out. They tried to sink it in the channel. That was their hope. This chief petty officer that was the navigator, so I'm told by members of that crew, was smart enough to beach that ship to keep it from blocking the channel.

Marcello: One of the most vivid pictures that I have come across of the Pearl Harbor attack was the explosion--the huge explosion--aboard the destroyer Shaw. Did you witness the Shaw exploding?

Mitchell: No, I didn't. I was aware that it did, but I didn't witness it.

Marcello: That, to me, is one of the most impressive sights of the whole Pearl Harbor attack because when you see the pictures of the Shaw exploding, you can't possibly see how there would be anything left of that ship.

I gather what happened was, they put a plyboard bow on the thing and either towed it or got it back to the West Coast under its own power, and they put a new bow on it, and I think it fought the rest of the war.

Mitchell: Yes. Well, too, you can knock big holes in ships, and their watertight integrity will hold the rest of them. You can actually travel.

Marcello: But if you've seen that picture of the Shaw, you'd think the whole ship was blown apart.

Mitchell: I saw a cruiser . . . it seems to me like it was the Helena . . . come into, I believe it was Hollandia, where we had some drydocks one time. Boy, that bow had been hit, and they had an explosion in the bow, and it was hit by one of the suicide planes and knocked it off. But they rebuilt it in a drydock there. They had what they called a floating drydock. They'd pump water in around the sides of it and sink it down, let the ship go in, close the gate, pump the water out, and then raise it back up.

Marcello: Were there any other particular ships that you noted at Pearl Harbor that were destroyed or damaged to any great extent? Are there any that we need to mention for the record?

Mitchell: All the battleships that were there were destroyed, I guess. All of them were pretty severely damaged. I'd have to refresh my memory. At the time, I could have named them all, but I'd have to refresh my memory on it. There were several of them that sustained an awful lot of damage. This is where, as I said before, the concentration of the attack was-- on the battleships.

Marcello: I would assume that the water was full of debris and bodies and burning oil and things of this nature.

Mitchell: This is true. It was a real mess. It was several years before they ever got even the oil all cleaned out of there. When we did leave the harbor we went out to sea.

Marcello: By the way, when did you leave the harbor with regard to the attack or relative to the time of the attack?

Mitchell: I would say we were leaving the harbor within three to four hours after the attack. This would be my guess. We went out overnight trying to locate the Japanese Fleet, and by then they had determined that the ships were on their way back to Japan or wherever they went. But they were out of range for us. We came back in, and they were picking up bodies out of

the harbor. That was the first thing, of course. We got the remaining members of our crew and went back to San Francisco and brought back a convoy to Pearl Harbor then, after getting some repair work done, replacing that burned out gun barrel. Then we left Pearl Harbor and went back to the States, picked up a convoy headed for Australia.

Marcello: I would assume that there were all sorts of rumors aboard ship as to where the Japanese Fleet was and as to what was going to happen next. What were some of the rumors that you can recall floating around at the time?

Mitchell: I don't really recall anything. Everybody was very anxiously listening for news. There was a lot of apprehension that this was going to be followed up by an invasion force, and I think, now looking back, that the Japanese probably made a mistake. They didn't bring in an invasion force. They probably could have landed and took over the island. They might have just had done it if they'd followed through on it. I think that many of their military men have said that this could have been done, and many of our military men have said it could've been done.

Marcello: By the way, where was your skipper when the attack took place? Was he aboard the ship?

Mitchell: I don't really know. To be truthful about it, as I recall--the best I can remember--he was back aboard during the first part of the attack. Now I don't know where he was, but it seems to me that that's what happened now that I recall. You get so busy and so involved with your own problems and trying to do your job that you don't have time to think these things out as to what really did happen. There is so many people that are so involved with their own particular job and doing their own thing, and I'm sure this is why you are interviewing so many different people. When you get different versions, it's the way they see it, from their point of view. I'm sure that the admiral over on the fleet would have an entirely different point of view in telling the story exactly as he saw it. It might sound like two different battles. This is just so huge a thing with so much destruction and so much confusion, and it would be almost impossible for any one person to have a good picture of the whole thing unless they do just what you're doing here--to get all the impressions

you can and then have a summary of the whole thing.

Marcello: Did the crew look for any scapegoats? As you look back, who did you blame for what took place?

Mitchell: I feel this, and I disagree with a lot of public opinion. They blame the President. I'm not as much of a Roosevelt fan as some people were, but I feel that military men that had the information knowing . . . they had . . . many times it was knowledge that war was unavoidable with Japan. I think that they would have been much smarter to have had a smaller fleet in Pearl Harbor. Of course, all these things are hindsight, and you heard all of these different things, different opinions by different people. These were human errors that could be made. I think that even with the mistakes that were made and everything that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were very competent men. I think they were. I had a great deal of respect for the military officers that were running our armed forces during those days. There were probably some weak links in the chain, but it's my opinion that we had . . . with all our faults, anytime the odds were anything like even, we raked them over the coals. We beat them anyway they wanted to fight. If we had anything like an even break . . .

Marcello: Unless you met them at nighttime. Japanese were tough at night (laughter).

Mitchell: Yes (laughter). We've often said, "When you consider how fouled up we are, they must really be fouled up!" Because we beat them everywhere, and that's not a matter of pride. I think it's just a matter of fact that we had the superior forces ship for ship or man for man. I really do. That's all.