

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
201

Interview with
George J. Deckard
May 18, 1974

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: OPEN
Approved: George J. Deckard
Date: 18 MAY 74

Oral History Collection

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing George Deckard for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 18, 1974, in Austin, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Deckard in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was at Schofield Barracks during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Deckard: I was born in Mission, Texas, on August 29, 1919, and I attended school in Mission--the Woodrow Wilson High School. I enlisted in the service in 1940.

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

Mr. Deckard: Well, all my friends were getting ready to enlist in the service, and I just thought I'd follow along and go with them.

Marcello: Why did you select the Army as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Deckard: Well, to be frank with you, I wanted to go into the Navy, but my eyesight wasn't up to par, so I went into the Army with no trouble at all.

Marcello: Where did you take your basic training?

Deckard: My basic training was taken at Schofield Barracks, but I first enlisted at Fort Brown, Texas, in the 12th Cavalry, and I was there a couple of days and then was shipped over to Angel Island in California. I was there about a month, I guess, and from there I was shipped over to Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, and that's where I took my basic training.

Marcello: You know, this is something that I don't think a lot of people today particularly understand, but during that particular period, one in many cases joined the Army or one of the other branches of the service and went directly to his duty station and then took his basic training, and this is apparently what happened in your particular case.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: Was there anything that happened during your basic training at Schofield that needs to be a part of the record? Was there anything extraordinary that happened?

Deckard: I remember when I was taking basic training one of my sergeants told us that we would never get back to the States without fighting a war with Japan. I'll never forget it, and it came out to be true.

Marcello: Did you personally keep abreast with current events?

Deckard: Not really.

Marcello: In other words, at the time you entered the service, did you have any idea that the country would very shortly be going into war?

Deckard: I had a hunch they would. When I first came into the service, Hitler was gaining a lot of power in Europe, and I sort of had a hunch that we would eventually wind up in World War II.

Marcello: But nevertheless your eyes were turned toward Europe for the most part rather than toward Asia.

Deckard: Yes, sir, that's right. That's true.

Marcello: What sort of specialization were you involved in after you got out of basic training? In other words, what was your duty or function in the Army?

Deckard: Well, when I first finished my basic training, I was assigned to the 27th Infantry Regiment, and I spent a year there. Then I started thinking about the signal work. I was interested in that, and I transferred over to the 11th Signal Company, and they were in charge of

all the telephone communications for the post--Schofield Barracks--and my job was on switchboard operations. My company was responsible for the switchboard, maintenance, telephone maintenance, and light pole construction and all of the . . . well, for the whole post. My job was as a switchboard operator. I imagine we had about ten or twelve operators on duty at one time.

Marcello: When did you transfer into this signal outfit? Do you recall?

Deckard: I'm trying to think.

Marcello: You might have to estimate this.

Deckard: Well, I would say . . . I'd say about a month before Pearl Harbor. Let me see . . . I think it was sometime in November.

Marcello: Where was Schofield Barracks located with regard to Hickam Field and the Pearl Harbor Navy Base itself?

Deckard: Schofield Barracks, if I remember correctly, was . . . gosh, I believe it was about twenty or twenty-five miles from Honolulu.

Marcello: Was it located near Fort Shafter?

Deckard: No, it was away from Fort Shafter. I believe it was about three or four miles north of Wheeler Field, if I'm not mistaken.

Marcello: During this pre-Pearl Harbor Army, how would you evaluate the training that you received?

Deckard: Well, the training was very good . . . very good training. I think it was much better training than we have today in the service.

Marcello: How do you explain that?

Deckard: Well, there was much more discipline . . . rigid . . . you got up early in the morning, and you did your exercise before breakfast. We had thirty minutes of calisthenics, as a matter of fact, before breakfast, and it was really rough. The old drill sergeants were there making you go.

Marcello: Were most of the non-coms men with a great deal of experience? Had they been in the Army a long time?

Deckard: Yes, they had. Yes, sir.

Marcello: In other words, are we talking about non-coms who may have had in many cases a minimum of ten years experience, possibly more?

Deckard: I would say so, yes.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that the training that was carried on during this pre-Pearl Harbor period was steady but was not done with any sense of urgency or under any deadline or anything of that nature?

Deckard: That's true.

Marcello: In other words, you had a lot of time to learn thoroughly what you were supposed to do.

Deckard: Yes, sir, that's true.

Marcello: Generally speaking, how would you evaluate the morale of this peacetime Army?

Deckard: Oh, the morale was excellent.

Marcello: Once again, how do you explain that?

Deckard: Well, it was excellent because I don't remember anyone going AWOL, I sure don't, and the pay was low. Our pay was only \$21 a month, and, of course, we got plenty to eat, and had a place to sleep. I only recall one AWOL incident in my whole time I was there.

Marcello: Describe what living conditions were like there at Schofield Barracks?

Deckard: They were good. We had good barracks . . . a place to sleep. Of course, that was to be expected. We'd live out in tents. We usually would have these little pup tents and slept in those. Shelter-halves--that's what it was called. We put two of those shelter-halves together, and we slept on those. It was rough, but we enjoyed it. We sure did.

Marcello: About how many people were there at Schofield Barracks altogether? Again, you probably have to estimate this.

Deckard: To be frank with you, I really don't know.

Marcello: Was it several thousand or several hundred?

Deckard: Yes. Oh, several hundred, I would say. We had the 24th Division, the 25th Division.

Marcello: The entire 24th and 25th Divisions were there?

Deckard: Yes, sir. They were. Both of them, yes.

Marcello: That would probably have accounted for more than a couple of hundred people, would it not?

Deckard: Certainly. Yes, sir.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago the alerts and maneuvers and things of this nature. How often would you have maneuvers?

Deckard: Well, back in those days usually maneuvers were just once a year or every six months, I suppose, if I remember correctly. We had one big maneuver once a year. That's true. And we went on the beach and fired at the tow targets. Yes, that's true--tow targets on the beach with .30 caliber machine guns.

Marcello: How about alerts? How often did you have alerts here at Schofield Barracks? I would assume that as diplomatic relations worsened between Washington and Tokyo that the number of alerts increased.

Deckard: I don't recall many alerts.

Marcello: But you did have them.

Deckard: I think I remember about one alert. That's all that I remember.

Marcello: Do you remember approximately when this alert took place?

Deckard: I believe it was about a month before Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: And that was the only one that you had as far as you recall?

Deckard: Yes, sir.

Marcello: What form did this alert take? What did you have to do?

Deckard: Well, we moved out lock, stock, and barrel--trucks, gear, and everything--and camped out and did guard duty at certain points of the island, you know, strategic points.

Marcello: Do you recall exactly why that alert was undertaken? Was this simply a part of your training, or did the people in command seem to feel that there was a real danger somewhere at the time?

Deckard: Well, it was just part of the training, but there must have been something besides that.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did your routine vary to any great degree?

Deckard: No, it didn't. No.

Marcello: What sort of liberty did you have here at Schofield?

Deckard: Oh, when we finished basic training, why, we were free to go most anywhere--go downtown as long as we were off duty. The biggest day was payday, and, of course, there wasn't much money, but still \$21 in those days was quite a bit of money. We had a lot of enjoyment, had a lot of fun.

Marcello: How often did you usually get liberty?

Deckard: Well, we had liberty . . . well, I'm speaking for myself, but I usually went to town just about once a month around

payday, and I went with the rest of the boys. But liberty . . . in my company we had liberty just about any time we wanted it.

Marcello: You mean like every evening you could get liberty?

Deckard: Yes, sir.

Marcello: How about on the weekends? What sort of liberty did you get on the weekends?

Deckard: Well, once in a while you could apply for a weekend pass or a three-day pass and go to town, and as far as liberty goes, we could leave the barracks and go down to the PX, snack bar, beer garden. No trouble at all.

Marcello: How far did you say Schofield was located from Honolulu?

Deckard: I'm just guessing now, but I believe it was about twenty-five or thirty miles.

Marcello: In other words, even if you had liberty every day you probably couldn't go into Honolulu that often because of the distance involved.

Deckard: That's true, no.

Marcello: How difficult was it to get transportation from Schofield Barracks into Honolulu?

Deckard: It wasn't difficult at all. We had taxis, busses--no problem at all. Of course, like I said a few minutes ago, we only got . . . our pay was \$21 a month, and making a distance like that to Honolulu and back and getting back before nine o'clock--that was the time we was supposed to have been in bed--and we couldn't do it.

Marcello: You had to be in bed by nine o'clock every night?

Deckard: Yes, sir, sure did.

Marcello: You mentioned that you could apply for a weekend pass into Honolulu.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: About how often would you be able to get a weekend pass?

Deckard: I only took one three-day pass while I was there.

Marcello: The whole time you were at Schofield Barracks you only took one three-day pass?

Deckard: Yes, one three-day pass, right.

Marcello: Why was that?

Deckard: Well, I don't know. Everything we needed was right there on the post, and right outside the town was a little village, Wahiawa, and all the recreation and everything you needed . . . there was no point, really, to go into town, I mean Honolulu, except once a month on payday, you know, to change the routine. But that was the only reason.

Marcello: Generally speaking, did very many people go into Honolulu on the weekend?

Deckard: I don't think so, unless it was on a payday weekend.

Marcello: You see, there's a reason that I'm asking this question because I think it's a very important one. What I'm trying to do is to establish how many people were on that base on December 7, 1941, when the attack took place. I

think it's important, if possible, to get into the record what percentage of the people were on the base and off during that period. Quite obviously, the more people that were off that base, the less able that base would be to defend itself in case of an attack.

Deckard: I don't think there were too many people off that base at that particular day. I say that because, if I remember correctly, all the personnel in my company were on duty on the base.

Marcello: When was payday usually?

Deckard: It was at the end of the month--once a month.

Marcello: So during the weekend of December 7, that would not have been a payday, and consequently most of the personnel would have been at the base.

Deckard: That's true.

Marcello: What sort of defenses did Schofield have in order to guard against the possibility of an attack? Did you have any antiaircraft defenses or anything of this nature?

Deckard: Well, I can only speak for my own company, my former company--the 27th Infantry. We had our bases where we would go out and patrol at certain times, and then when I first went over to the 11th Signal Company, why, our job was communications, and that was our number one job--communications.

Marcello: Were there any antiaircraft defenses around the base?

Deckard: Yes, there were. Yes, there were. I don't know exactly where they were located, but they were there.

Marcello: However, speaking for yourself and trying to place yourself back in that particular period, what chances did you think there were of anybody pulling off a surprise attack on the military installations there?

Deckard: I didn't think that it would happen, personally. It was quite a surprise when it did happen.

Marcello: Did you feel relatively secure on the Hawaiian Islands?

Deckard: Yes, I did.

Marcello: Was it mainly because of the distances involved?

Deckard: I believe so. The distance, that's true, yes.

Marcello: Did you or your buddies ever talk about the possibility of a surprise attack during your spare time or during your bull sessions?

Deckard: No, we sure didn't. But like I said, when I was taking my basic training, one of the drill sergeants said, "Before you ever get back home to the States, you're going to be fighting a war with Japan."

Marcello: Did you take him seriously, or did you think much about it at the time?

Deckard: I sure didn't. No, I didn't think much about it until it actually happened, and then I started thinking about it. How true it was!

Marcello: Now the Hawaiian Islands had, and still has, a relatively large Japanese population. Did you or your buddies ever talk about the possibilities of sabotage or any fifth columnist activities being carried out by these Japanese on the island?

Deckard: Well, it was rumored and talked about, but I couldn't pinpoint that it was true, but just rumors.

Marcello: Did you have very many civilian employees on the base itself, and if so, very many Japanese?

Deckard: I don't remember any civilian employees. There must have been some civilian employees on the base. Well, yes, there were some at the Post Exchange. They had civilian employees.

Marcello: Probably the laundry had civilian employees.

Deckard: Right. True, true. The laundry, the beer garden and the Post Exchange.

Marcello: In other words, as far as you and your buddies were concerned, you didn't think very much about the Japanese-Americans who perhaps even lived in that village that was close to the base. I'm sure there were probably some Japanese-Americans who lived there.

Deckard: Yes, there were.

Marcello: Did you ever have much contact with these Japanese civilians when you went into the village--perhaps in a local cafe or something of this nature?

Deckard: No, I didn't. I sure didn't, although some of my buddies knew them personally in the little village.

Marcello: During that period when you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you conjure up in your own mind?

Deckard: Well, they were small, wore glasses, beady-eyed, slant-eyed, beady-eyed, very polite.

Marcello: What did you think about their military capabilities?

Deckard: I didn't think much about it.

Marcello: How strict was the security around the base? In other words, how easy would it have been for a civilian to get on the base during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Deckard: I don't think it would have been very easy.

Marcello: In other words, they would have had to have the proper identification and this sort of thing.

Deckard: That's true, because even the military personnel, as they came through the gate, had to show their identification as they came through. As a matter of fact, on payday they usually shook you down, but that was to make sure you didn't bring any liquor, I imagine, or something like that, you know. But it was pretty strict.

Marcello: Now in the weeks immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, there was an influx of reserves on the island. In other words, the islands were filling up with new recruits or reserves

or what have you. Were there ever very many of these who came into Schofield Barracks?

Deckard: I don't remember any reserves until after the attack.

Marcello: So in other words, right up until Pearl Harbor itself, the daily routine of the base didn't vary very much.

Deckard: That's true, yes.

Marcello: Okay. This more or less brings us up to the actual attack itself. As best you can, I want you to describe in as much detail as you can exactly what your daily routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941.

Deckard: Well, I was doing midnight shift work. I reported in for duty at midnight and about 7:45, we heard the commotion of bombs and things like that, and fifteen minutes more, at eight o'clock, we were supposed to have been relieved.

Marcello: In other words, you had the duty all night.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: From midnight until eight o'clock in the morning.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: I gather, then, that on that Saturday you stuck by the base and didn't do too much of anything.

Deckard: No, I sure didn't.

Marcello: When did you sleep--during that afternoon or that day or something? Or did you plan to sleep once you got off duty on Sunday morning?

Deckard: I planned to sleep once I got off duty, but after the attack, I didn't get much sleep.

Marcello: Actually then, you were waiting to be relieved on Sunday morning when the attack actually occurred. Pick up the story from that point.

Deckard: Well, like I said, about 7:45 we heard a lot of noise outside--bombs were falling--and we didn't know what was going on.

Marcello: Whwer were you at the time?

Deckard: I was on switchboard with the rest of the crew, and when the attack started, the switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree. Our relief was getting ready to relieve us. I believe there were . . . our barracks must have been about four blocks away, and as they were coming to relieve us, some of the boys were actually strafed by these planes. Luckily enough, though, no one was hit.

Marcello: Okay, so at approximately 7:55 you heard noises or explosions outside.

Deckard: 7:45.

Marcello: 7:45 then. What did you think these explosions were?

Deckard: I had no idea until someone went outside and saw one of these Japanese Zeros real low and saw the rising sun on the side of the plane. Well, we knew right away we were being attacked.

Marcello: What did you do from that point?

Deckard: I just remained on the switchboard for almost another tour off duty.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that the switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: What sort of messages were you receiving?

Deckard: Well, everyone wanted to know what was going on, and we didn't know either, so we just hooked them up with whoever they wanted to talk to. Some of the people wanted to make calls to Washington. It was just routine duty, but we were very busy.

Marcello: In other words, during the entire attack, you stayed right there on duty at the switchboard?

Deckard: Yes, sir. I sure did, with the exception of a break down there.

Marcello: Did you actually get outside at any time to see first hand exactly what was taking place?

Deckard: No, I didn't.

Marcello: How close were the bombs falling to where you were located?

Deckard: I'd say the closest one must have been about a block away. They dropped one near the flagpole. It was about a block, I believe.

Marcello: Did most of the attack take the form of bombing or strafing?

Deckard: Both. Well, I would say mostly strafing in my area.

Marcello: About how long did the attack last?

Deckard: I believe . . . well, in my particular area it must have lasted, I would say, about fifty minutes, sixty minutes.

Marcello: Did the base seem to be putting up any resistance at all?

Deckard: Yes, they did.

Marcello: What sort of resistance did you see the personnel putting up?

Deckard: Well, I didn't see anything because I was inside, but the infantry companies mounted machine guns on top of the buildings-- .30 caliber machine guns, .50 caliber-- and from a distance I could hear the artillery shells . . . the coast artillery guns were going, and some of the planes from Wheeler Field, I think, managed to get off in the air, but not many.

Marcello: How far was Wheeler Field from Schofield Barracks?

Deckard: I believe it was about two or three miles. Just right next . . . the next base over.

Marcello: Did the Japanese seem to be concentrating more upon Wheeler Field than they were upon Schofield Barracks?

Deckard: I believe they did. Yes, the planes and the shipyard and the Navy docks.

Marcello: What sort of emotions were going through your mind while this attack was taking place? Here you were more or less

glued to the switchboard. What were you thinking about while all this activity was going on outside?

Deckard: I really wasn't too worried until it was all over. Then I got a little scared after it was all over. But I didn't think too much about it. I just kept right on working and really didn't think much about it until after it was all over.

Marcello: How do you explain this? Do you think it was a result of your Army training and discipline?

Deckard: That's probably so. Yes, sir.

Marcello: Were you receiving orders from anybody that you were to remain at the switchboard or that you were to do other things?

Deckard: Well, we had to remain on switchboard because there was no relief. We weren't relieved because our relief were immediately assigned to man some machine guns outside. We had a .30 caliber machine gun mounted outside, and the rest of the men started pulling perimeter duty, and so we had to remain on the switchboard.

Marcello: Were there any important messages that came over the switchboard that you think should be mentioned as part of the record?

Deckard: Not to my knowledge.

Marcello: Generally speaking, were most of the calls that you were receiving the type of calls that were concerned with what

what was going on?

Deckard: Well, that was a nine-position switchboard, and I never listened in on any call. Whenever we picked up a call and the party wanted a certain number, well, I'd place it in and pick up another call. I never listened in on any call unless I was told to listen in. Sometimes someone would ask me to listen in to make sure that I got the other party on the line. But that was all.

Marcello: How long did you remain on the switchboard before you were relieved?

Deckard: I think I was on the switchboard another six hours.

Marcello: During this time had you been able to get any chow or anything of this nature?

Deckard: Oh, we managed to get some coffee, a little sandwich.

Marcello: Was it brought to you or did you have to go out and get it during the attack itself?

Deckard: No, they brought it to us.

Marcello: Generally speaking, from what you could gather, how would you evaluate the reaction of the men around you? Was it one of panic, fear, confusion, professionalism, anger? How would you describe their reaction?

Deckard: Well, I would say it was professionalism. There was no panic, not in my company. It was well-organized.

Marcello: When you finally were relieved and went outside, describe

what damage had been done to the base. Describe it as you saw it.

Deckard: Well, in my particular area the damage was very light outside of the bomb crater within a block from the exchange. But Wheeler Field was badly torn up.

Marcello: Actually, there wasn't too much damage done to Schofield Barracks itself?

Deckard: No, no, there wasn't.

Marcello: I think there were quite a few shell holes and that sort of thing in the barracks. They'd been shot up a little bit, had they not?

Deckard: Yes, that's true.

Marcello: Were there very many personnel who were killed or wounded at Schofield?

Deckard: I don't believe there were. Most of the casualties were at the airfield and around the Pearl Harbor area.

Marcello: What were you assigned to do in the aftermath of the attack, that is, after you were relieved at the switchboard?

Deckard: Well, we managed to get a little sleep, and then we started pulling guard duty and then back on the switchboard, guard duty again, back on the switchboard, a little sleep.

Marcello: Did this continue for several days?

Deckard: Yes, it did until everything got back to normal.

Marcello: I'm sure that in the aftermath of the attack there were all sorts of rumors floating around. What were some of the rumors that you heard?

Deckard: Well, that's true. There were a lot of rumors, especially during the night. The rumors were that the Japanese had been dropped by parachute, the island was being invaded. And I happened to be on guard duty at that time, and I could hear a lot of firing going on. Actually, the boys were trigger-happy and were shooting at almost anything that moved, but there were no invasions, and no paratroops were dropped.

Marcello: I'm sure that everybody was edgy, and I'm sure that at the time you believed every one of those rumors that you heard.

Deckard: Right.

Marcello: I'm sure that every one of your buddies did, too.

Deckard: That's true. Yes, sir.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that during the pre-Pearl Harbor period, you didn't think very much about the Japanese or the Japanese that were living on the Hawaiian Islands. How did your thoughts change in the aftermath of the attack?

Deckard: Well, I knew I'd been wrong (chuckle). I knew I'd been wrong for one thing.

Marcello: Did you have blackouts and this sort of thing immediately following the attack?

Deckard: Oh, yes! Yes, sir! Oh, yes!

Marcello: What blackout measures were taken?

Deckard: Oh, it was a complete blackout--completely. No lights at all, no smoking outside. We started carrying gas masks--afraid there might be a gas attack. Everywhere you went you carried your gas mask. We'd have alerts. We'd have . . . well, we had quite a few alerts, but there were no more bombs dropped. Whenever the alert would sound, we would go outside and fall in one of those shelters or a hole--foxhole--and wait until we got all clear. But like I said before, we always carried our gas masks. We never had to use it, thank goodness.

Marcello: As you look back on that period of history in retrospect, how do you think that the Japanese were able to pull off this attack?

Deckard: Well, it was by surprise--complete surprise.

Marcello: Did you at the time blame any individual for what happened?

Deckard: Well, someone had to be at fault. That's true, yes.

Marcello: But at the time did you give very much thought to this particular question?

Deckard: No, I didn't. No, sir. If we had been on guard, why, I don't think it would have happened. But being Sunday

morning, why, most of the men were asleep, getting ready to go to church. A lot of them had hangovers from the night before. We were just completely off-guard.

Marcello: Of course, if you didn't have duty on Sunday morning, you could stay in bed as long as you wanted. Isn't that true?

Deckard: That's true. Yes, sir.

Marcello: Now you weren't in the barracks at that particular time, but do you feel that there were quite a few men who were caught either in the process of sobering up from Saturday night's drunk or who were sleeping in late?

Deckard: That's right, yes.