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Place of Interview: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: Richard E. Helmer, Jr.

Date: August 16, 1974

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Oral History Collection

Richard Helmer

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Houston, Texas Date: August 16, 1974

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Richard Helmer for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 16, 1974, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Helmer in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was stationed aboard the seaplane tender USS Tangier on December 7, 1941, during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Helmer, to begin this interview, would you just 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. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Helmer: Well, my name is Richard E. Helmer, Jr. I was born October 4, 1918. I had a high school education at

the time of Pearl Harbor. Since leaving the service, I attended the University of Texas, obtaining a B.S. degree in pharmacy.

Marcello: And you are presently a pharmacist.

Helmer: I am presently a pharmacist and have been for the past twenty-five years.

Marcello: Where were you born?

Helmer: In a small town called Dime Box, Texas.

Marcello: Where is Dime Box located?

Helmer: Dime Box is in Lee County. That is about sixty miles southeast of Austin.

Marcello: When and why did you decide to enter the service?

Helmer: Well, when the selective service was introduced into Congress, I was twenty-one years of age, and I knew was first on the list to be drafted. I wanted to get the branch of the service and the particular field, so I volunteered immediately. I began to enlist on my noon hour. I would go to the recruiting station and would take part of the physical, and it took me about two weeks to complete the physical.

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

Helmer: In World War One, my oldest brother, who was twenty-two years older than I, was a Navy man, and he had

articles that he had brought back, and I was always looking at them as a child, and I was very interested, and I just became interested in the Navy.

Marcello: At that time was it particularly difficult to get into the Navy?

Helmer: Yes, the Navy was more selective, even more so than the Army. We had to have a high school education, and I do not know what IQ was required, but it did . . . I mean, we had to have a fairly good IQ.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Helmer: I went to boot camp at San Diego, California.

Marcello: I gather that everybody in this section of the country who entered the Navy took their boot camp at San Diego.

Helmer: At that time, yes. Later on, I have heard of some Texans who went to Great Lakes, but that training station was not in operation at the time I joined.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful from your boot camp experiences that you think ought to be a part of the record?

Helmer: Well, no. I'm very fair complected, and I thought the mild climate in San Diego would be very ideal for me, but marching on that asphalt and the sun bouncing up, one day I would blister and the next day I would peel. Sometimes I would have a very sore nose.

Marcello: Did you go directly from San Diego to the Hawaiian Islands?

Helmer: No. I wanted to get into the Hospital Corps. I was interested in medicine. I did not have the money to go to school, to medical school or college, which I desired to. But I wanted to get into the Medical Corps. I knew nothing or thought nothing of becoming a conscientious objector, but as it turned out later on, I felt like I could not kill a fellow human being, and I was very glad that I had signed up for the Medical Corps. I was afraid that I wasn't going to get in the Medical Corps, but I learned later on that they were shanghaiing people into the Medical Corps, so to speak.

Marcello: Why was that? Why didn't there seem to be any rush to become a medic?

Helmer: Well, many people didn't care for medicine, and they looked upon a man taking care of another ill man as a rather effeminate job or a job for a woman to do. But I was interested in medicine.

Marcello: Where did you go to corpsman school?

Helmer: I went to the San Diego Naval Hospital Corps School.

Marcello: When did you graduate or when did you get out of that school?

Helmer: Let me see. I believe I finished there in November of 1940, and then I was shipped to Mare Island Naval Hospital. I spent just a few months tour of duty at Mare Island Naval Hospital, and then I was sent to Goat Island or in the Mexican term, Yerba Buena Island, which served as a receiving ship. I waited there month upon month wondering when my name would come up for draft. Finally, a very large list was posted on the bulletin board of a new ship going into commission, a seaplane tender which was formerly a freighter and had been converted into a seaplane tender. My name was on this list, and as we call it in the Navy, I was one of the plank owners, one of the original crew members.

Marcello: Describe what this ship was like and where did you board it?

Helmer: Well, it was, as I said, a converted freighter, and it had the appearance very much as a converted freighter, but from the smokestack aft we had a flight deck, and then we had a crane which we could lift planes out of the water and set them on the deck, and the aviation mechanics could work on the planes.

Marcello: Approximately how large a ship would this be in terms of the complement of men?

Helmer: I believe we were commissioned with approximately 300 men, give or take a few.

Marcello: In other words, it was not a very big ship, and as a result I assume this crew developed into perhaps a closely-knit outfit over a period of time.

Helmer: Yes, it could have. However, almost as soon as we were commissioned, we had our shakedown cruise, and we arrived out in Pearl Harbor about six weeks prior to the raid. So we had about three to four months together before that time.

Marcello: Where did you board the Tangier?

Helmer: I boarded the Tangier at the Oakland . . . let me see. Moore Drydock in Oakland, California.

Marcello: And then did you go from there directly over to the Hawaiian Islands?

Helmer: No, we went to Seattle, Washington--Bremerton Navy Yard. There was some armor that was required and that we had to have installed there. From Bremerton we went down to San Diego to the air station there at North Island. We departed North Island for Pearl Harbor in the latter part of October.

Marcello: Then you arrived there sometime near the end of October or the beginning of November, 1940.

Helmer: '41. I was there approximately six weeks prior to the raid. The Sunday just preceding the raid, I went on a chartered bus trip around the island, and I saw quite a bit of the island on this chartered bus trip.

Marcello: At the time that all this was taking place, that is, around the time that you were boarding the Tangier for the first time, how closely were you keeping abreast of world events?

Helmer: I'm afraid I wasn't keeping too well abreast with current events at that time; yet I did understand and I did know that we were having trouble with Japan, and it looked like we were provoking them and they were provoking us. It was just a matter of who would provoke one far enough to take action.

Marcello: Now, of course, you mentioned that you got to the Hawaiian Islands at the beginning of November, 1941, and I would assume that this was a serious time when the fleet there was undergoing all sorts of alerts and maneuvers. What part did the Tangier play in these alerts and maneuvers that were taking place?

Helmer: We never got into any of the alerts or the maneuvers. In fact, we weren't there long enough, being a new

ship, and it was rumored that we were going to the Orient--the Philippines and Guam--and we sailed around different parts of the islands calibrating our compasses. It was just maneuvers on our own.

Marcello: In other words, at the time that you got to the Hawaiian Islands, you were still in the process of shaking down this vessel.

Helmer: It was still more or less the shaking down of the vessel.

Marcello: I gather that normally, however, when you did come in the port you were docked someplace within Pearl Harbor itself.

Helmer: We were docked in Pearl Harbor, and being an auxiliary seaplane tender, we would always dock near Ford Island, the naval air base. As you know, Ford Island is an island within the harbor of Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Why were you docked over at Ford Island? Was there any special reason for the ship being there?

Helmer: It was our designated position. We were designated to be docked at one particular area, but at that time they were dredging the channel, and we were consequently moved over to Fox Nine, just forward of the USS Utah and just across the channel from Pearl City.

Marcello: Now from where you were docked, I would assume that you were on the other side of the island from Battleship Row.

Helmer: We were just across the island from Battleship Row.

Marcello: Could you see the battleships from where you were located?

Helmer: Yes, I could.

Marcello: About how far away would they have been? You would have to estimate this, of course.

Helmer: I would estimate it would be a matter of about five to six blocks.

Marcello: In other words, you had a fairly good view of those battleships.

Helmer: I had a good view of them.

Marcello: What were your impressions of Battleship Row from what little you were able to see of it? I mean, you weren't there too long.

Helmer: No, and I was new to them, new to the Navy, and I was fascinated by them, and I was anxious to go aboard and visit one, but I never got that opportunity until later on after the war was over.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you were docked over at Ford Island. What other ships were docked around you or in the same vicinity?

Helmer: The USS Curtiss was docked over on the East Loch nearer Pearl City than we were, just across the channel. Just aft of us was the Utah, the USS Raleigh, and another light cruiser which I fail to remember at this time.

Marcello: In other words, you were docked in the vicinity of several other warships.

Helmer: That is correct. On the Saturday afternoon prior to the raid there was a carrier docked just forward of our vessel, but they got orders just before the submarine nets were closed and they left. That was the USS Enterprise.

Marcello: As I recall, the Enterprise was on its way to either Wake or Johnston Islands to do some patrolling and reconnaissance and I think also to drop off some airplanes to reinforce the Marine garrisons on those particular islands.

Helmer: That's my understanding.

Marcello: What sort of social life did a young sailor have in the Hawaiian Islands during those pre-Pearl Harbor days? I'm speaking of you personally now. What did you do in your leisure time?

Helmer: Well, in my leisure time . . . we had just gotten out there. Consequently, when we went on liberty our

curfew was twelve o'clock midnight. We had to be back by twelve o'clock, and we were on starboard and port watches, that is, we were on one night and off another night, or during the weekends we were on Saturday and Sunday and we were off Saturday and Sunday. Consequently, the weekend of the raid was my time to be on duty.

Marcello: In other words, even when you had liberty you had to be back on the ship at twelve o'clock.

Helmer: By twelve o'clock midnight. Consequently, at that time, being just a simple country boy, I would go to a movie, just walk up and down the streets looking at some of the curio shops, but as far as going into the bars, I didn't drink and I just did not go into any of the bars. I did go into one just to see, but I noticed that there were quite a few Japanese, and especially the barmaids were of Japanese origin.

Marcello: I would gather around that particular time your pay was only approximately $21 a month. You didn't have a whole lot of money to spend anyhow, did you?

Helmer: That's correct. Now we entered the Navy at $21 a month, and automatically after three months we went

to $36. However, by December 7, I had made two more promotions, and I believe at that time my salary was about $90 a month. I was paying on an insurance policy, so that was automatically deducted from my salary. So I had very little to spend other than that. But there were many, many sights to see, and you could get on streetcars or you could get on buses and see different places.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that the Tangier had a complement of approximately 300 men. I would assume from what you said, therefore, that approximately half that crew might have liberty on a weekend.

Helmer: That is correct.

Marcello: Did you have what was called the four-section liberty?

Helmer: At times under more strict . . . say if we were going into a foreign port, it would be a four-section liberty. Only one section would be allowed liberty, and three sections would remain on duty.

Marcello: But this was not true at Pearl Harbor.

Helmer: No. It was half and half--that port and starboard.

Marcello: Now, again, getting back to the complement aboard that ship, did 300 men represent the full complement?

Helmer: It represented our full complement. However, later on in our operations we were equipped to take care of at

least one or two squadrons of PBY's, so we had the space to take care of that complement.

Marcello: In other words, during wartime the complement of that ship would have increased considerably.

Helmer: After the war the ship's complement went up to around 500, almost 500. That was the crew. That was not the squadrons. That was crew members.

Marcello: Now you mentioned the fact awhile ago that one of the local entertainment spots for the fleet while it was in port was Hotel Street. I don't think you mentioned Hotel Street specifically, but that was one of the hang-outs, I think, for a great many members of the fleet when it was in port. I would assume that on a Saturday night Hotel Street was a rather booming place.

Helmer: Hotel Street was a booming place, and I walked down there to see, to observe, and it was every bit of what I had heard, judging from the outside.

Marcello: In other words, were there literally lines of sailors and other servicemen waiting to get in these establishments and what have you?

Helmer: They were, and judging by the men that I treated when they came back to the ship, a lot of them made it into the houses.

Marcello: When was payday?

Helmer: We had payday twice a month in the Navy.

Marcello: The first and the fifteenth?

Helmer: I believe the first and the fifteenth, as I remember now.

Marcello: In other words, on the weekend of December 7, would most of the crew members have had very much money?

Helmer: Yes, because we would have been paid . . . you see, December 7 fell on a Sunday, so we would actually have been paid about December 2. So the men going ashore Saturday night should have all the pay that they had drawn.

Marcello: You mentioned a subject awhile ago that I think needs to be pursued further, at least for the record. I'm not sure if it has any historical significance or not, but I want to find out anyhow because it may possibly have some historical significance. You were a corpsman and you made the point awhile ago that from time to time you obviously did have to treat these sailors for various social diseases and this sort of thing. Generally speaking, what would be the condition of crew members when they came back aboard that ship after a Friday or a Saturday night in Pearl Harbor? Now you can only speak for your own ship, I gather.

Helmer: Speaking for my own ship, I would say three-fourths of them had drank. About a third of them were drunk. But there were, I would say, a fourth that probably had one drink or maybe no drinks.

Marcello: How would the condition of these men affect the readiness of that ship for action the following day?

Helmer: On our particular ship there were three men in my division . . . my division--Division H--had a complement of ten men, and three of these men went over and really got a snootful, and they were sleeping one off on Sunday morning.

Marcello: Were you able to observe whether or not this ultimately affected their efficiency on that particular morning?

Helmer: No, I don't think it did. In fact, I'm positive it did not because my first duty when the general alarm was sounded was to go and close the porthole. We were forward of the ship, and I went to the port side of the ship to close that porthole, and I looked out . . . of course, I was grumbling at the time. I said, "Why are those 'doggies' out today pulling a raid on us and having a drill at this time of day?" When I got to the porthole, I looked over and I could see where the battleships had been hit and how they were smoking and

burning. Some of the hangars on Ford Island had already been hit. I closed that porthole and ran back through the sickbay and I said, "This is no drill! We are being bombed!" The men who were drunk were immediately sober.

Marcello: The Hawaiian Islands have a relatively large population of people of Japanese ancestry. Did you or your buddies in your bull sessions ever talk about the dangers that these people might possibly represent to the military in case of a conflict with Japan?

Helmer: Yes, in a small way we did talk about that and about the number of Orientals there. However, we came to the conclusions that not only were there Japanese, but there were Chinese, Filipino, and all Asiatic peoples whom I knew we were friendly with. However, there were Japanese people we were not too confident about and that we had misgivings about. I say we. I'll have to speak for the older men who had been there before. Hawaii wasn't new to them, and Honolulu wasn't new to them. They knew more about it than I did, and they were suspicious, and I listened to them. Yes, they had suspicions about those people.

Marcello: Can you elaborate on this in any way, that is, why did they suspect these people and who were they and this sort of thing?

Helmer: Well, they felt like the Japanese embassy weren't really civilians. They were military men in civilian clothes, which I believe history will probably bear out as being true. There was a lot of picture taking, and I saw where the U. S. servicemen were more constricted on their picture taking than were the Japanese. The Japanese had greater play. They could take more pictures and of more things than which we could.

Marcello: Where did you observe this sort of thing taking place?

Helmer: In town or near the base, they'd be taking pictures, and the only cameras we were allowed to have were cameras we had rented in town and we used in town, and we returned them to the shop after we had used them.

Marcello: How difficult was it to take pictures of the activities going on at Pearl Harbor or of the facilities at Pearl Harbor?

Helmer: I found no opportunity whatsoever, and as far as I know, only the Navy photographers were taking pictures at Pearl Harbor. Now whether some enlisted men or some other men took pictures, I know that to be the case, but I think it was very few.

Marcello: How secure did you feel that you were at Pearl Harbor? In other words, did you ever feel that there was ever any liklihood that some foreign power, whether it be Japan or somebody else, was capable of mounting an attack there?

Helmer: I felt nothing of that because I felt that we were very secure there and because we were, I thought, so very isolated. We were way out in the Pacific a long ways from any foreign territory.

Marcello: In other words, would it be safe to say that if the United States did get into a conflict with Japan, the consensus was that most of the action would take place in the Philippines or in that general vicinity?

Helmer: I anticipated it and I believe I read news accounts. I'm not positive about that, but I anticipated they would try the Philippines first, and they made a ruse to that effect, going towards the Philippines before they struck us. But that was my opinion, that they would go that way first.

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

Helmer: Well, being a native Texan, I had never seen any Japanese until I had gone to California when I signed up in the Navy, and really I hadn't formulated too much of an opinion of them. I don't think I knew enough about them to . . . I was always slow about formulating opinions of someone. I wanted to know definitely before I came to any concrete conclusion about a person. But I will state that there were some that smiled if you walked in their shops or if you saw them on the street. They'd smile and they would greet you, and they would be very polite. But I felt underneath that hatred was there. I did not feel that this was true friendship.

Marcello: Was this more or less of a gut feeling that you had rather than because of any overt actions on their part?

Helmer: It was strictly a gut feeling from my observing human beings.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to the day of the actual Japanese attack itself, did your routine ever change in any way? In other words, were there alerts

or anything of this nature that took place, that is, so far as your particular vessel itself is concerned?

Helmer: We had general quarters, yes. We had drills both in port and out of port.

Marcello: But were these of a relatively routine nature?

Helmer: Of a routine nature, strictly routine.

Marcello: Now I do know that it was true that the ships of the line, that is, the battle fleet itself, usually underwent an inspection on a Friday or a Saturday after they had come into port from maneuvers. Did a ship such as the Tangier also undergo an inspection on the weekend?

Helmer: In the U. S. Navy at that time--and I suppose it is the same now--every Saturday morning there was an inspection, and we had inspection that Saturday morning. The uniform of the day for enlisted men were white walking shorts and white T-shirts.

Marcello: I would assume that during one of these inspections the ship's watertight integrity was at a bare minimum. Is that a safe assumption?

Helmer: A very safe assumption.

Marcello: But at the same time I would also assume that whenever a ship was in port the watertight integrity was at a relative minimum.

Helmer: It was almost nil.

Marcello: Would there be any places on the ship where watertight integrity would still be maintained even when a ship was in port?

Helmer: On our particular ship, yes. You see, we had placed about the ship several large tanks of high-test aviation gasoline, and these places were sealed off and were protected at all time.

Marcello: I would assume that this was perhaps where you had some of that armor that the ship had placed on it at Bremerton, Washington.

Helmer: That was one of them, and at the time I did not know it but the sickbay where I was, we were sitting right on top of one of those tanks.

Marcello: What sort of armament did the Tangier have aboard? Now obviously it wasn't a ship of the line, so its defenses or offensive weaponry would be rather minimal, I guess.

Helmer: It was minimal. We had two three-inch guns forward. We had one five-inch gun on the aft which, due to the construction of the ship and the placement of the gun, had only a play of about sixty degrees.

Marcello: Sixty degrees vertically or sixty degrees horizontally?

Helmer: Horizontally. So somebody would have to be coming at us from the rear for us to fire that particular gun. We had some antiaircraft guns.

Marcello: Well, the reason I asked you that question awhile ago about the watertight integrity is that it's quite obvious that ships in port are usually in a highly vulnerable state.

Helmer: Yes, we were.

Marcello: After all, men had to move from one compartment to another during this period, and obviously those hatches and doors would normally be open.

Helmer: That's right.

Marcello: Except for some very, very critical compartments like the gasoline storage areas that you mentioned and probably the armory and things of that nature.

Helmer: Well, the armories were all locked. We were one of the few ships that had some ready ammunition at each gun.

Marcello: Why was this? In other words, why did you have some ready ammunition at your guns?

Helmer: That I don't . . . we had been out to sea about two weeks prior to that, and we had some target practice. I don't know. I think it was just the practice of

our commanding officer to have something up there at all times.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Helmer: I think it was very fine.

Marcello: How do you account for this?

Helmer: Well, we were just a happy-go-lucky sort of people, most of them were. We had time to ourselves. We had time to ourselves. We didn't have to spend too much time on duty. Specifically, I met a man from Chicago who was studying for his master's degree, and he interested me in going to college after I got out of school. He recommended books for me to read. There's another instance where I visited libraries and I visited bookstores with this particular man because he instilled into me the need, the necessity, of reading and keeping oneself informed.

Marcello: How would you describe the training that you received in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy? Do you think that your training was adequate, and do you believe that your shipmates was adequate also for the particular jobs that they had?

Helmer: In the medical corps I believe that all of us were adequately trained, and I also believe that the other men were adequately trained because when you make up a new ship like that, the complement of the ship is composed mostly of seasoned old salts or veterans, as you might say. We called them old salts in the Navy, and they knew what they were doing, and they knew what was expected of them.

Marcello: And I would assume that there was a great deal of time and a great many opportunities to get on-the-job training. In other words, training aboard ship wasn't rushed. There was no sense of urgency or anything of that nature.

Helmer: That is correct because I was interested in surgery. Consequently, I became an operating room technician. I was also interested in pharmacy, and the pharmacy and lab were combined. I spent a tour of duty in the pharmacy and lab. One of our senior medical officers came aboard ship, and he particularly liked the way that one other man and myself worked the operating rooms, and we would generally, almost always, be called upon to assist him in surgery.

Marcello: I would gather that most of the petty officers in the Navy during that period had a great deal of experience. They had been in the Navy for a long time.

Helmer: That is correct because promotions did not come very often at that time because they had more volunteers. When I went in they had more volunteers than they would accept. Consequently, most of them were going in as career men, and I would say that I was a rookie because I hadn't been in too long. It was my first time out of the States, but these other men were well-seasoned in their jobs--the gunner's mates, the boatswain's mates, aviation machinist's mates. I think all of them performed very good, magnificently.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less takes care of the preliminary phase of the interview, and I think from this point we can talk about those days immediately prior to the actual Japanese attack itself. What I want you to do at this point is to relate to me as best you can and in as much detail as you can remember exactly what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and then from that point we'll talk about the following Sunday.

Helmer: On Saturday, December 6, we had our regular reveille and breakfast. Most important of all, I believe it was at nine o'clock a.m. that we would have our inspection of officers and men on the white deck.

Marcello: Was this inspection usually begun the day before? In other words, were preparations for the inspection usually started on Friday?

Helmer: No, we generally got our uniforms, the uniform we were going to wear during inspection . . . take for instance the one I wore on Saturday, December 6. I had washed that particular pair of shorts, and at the time of the raid I was ironing that pair of shorts which I was going to put away for the next Saturday's inspection.

Marcello: In other words, this inspection was a personnel inspection rather than a ship's inspection.

Helmer: It was a personnel inspection. We did not have too many ship's inspections. That came about once a month.

Marcello: Okay, continue with your routine on Saturday.

Helmer: Well, after inspection we who had to remain aboard ship on duty went back and changed into our working uniforms, and the men who had liberty and decided to go ashore put on their dress whites and went ashore. That was from just prior to noon when the first liberty launch left. But many of them--I say many of them because we were very lowly paid at that time--would wait until the noon meal was served, and they

would go over around two o'clock. After two o'clock was when they would almost abandon ship, everybody who could.

Marcello: Generally speaking, during the weekend, how many officers would be aboard that ship? Would it be safe to say that you never saw your skipper there on weekends?

Helmer: Not on our ship at this time because of our circumstances. We had been out there only five to six weeks. The executive officer is the only officer who had his wife out there. Our commanding officer was aboard ship, and I believe at the time of the raid, I think 100 per cent of the officers were aboard. With the exception of the executive officer, all of the officers were aboard ship.

Marcello: That's very interesting and I believe that is the exception rather than the rule on that particular day.

Helmer: It is an exception because of the fact that we had just arrived there, and it was rumored that we weren't going to be there long. Consequently, no one had sent for their wives except the executive officer. I believe she was waiting in Honolulu when we

arrived, but that's just surmising on my part. I don't know.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do personally after the inspection was completed and after you had had your lunch?

Helmer: Well, after I had my lunch . . . let me see . . . at that time my duty was in the dressing room. I stayed near the dressing room in case someone came up there with a cut finger or any wound or anything like that. But mostly it was just waiting around. We didn't have to do any strenuous work on Saturday.

Marcello: What time did you turn in that night?

Helmer: I turned in about nine o'clock. Lights were out at nine. I generally turned in at nine o'clock at that time.

Marcello: Do you remember anything about the activity or conduct of your shipmates who were coming in that night? Was there anything unusual or exceptional that happened, or was it simply a typical Saturday night in port?

Helmer: It was a typical Saturday night in port. It was nothing unusual.

Marcello: In other words, you had some people who came in loud and perhaps a little bit obnoxious, and there were a great many people who came in and minded their own business and went to bed.

Helmer: That is true.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us up then to Sunday, December 7, 1941, and again I'll ask you to go into as much detail as you can remember about what happened that Sunday from the time you got up until the attack itself was completed.

Helmer: Well, being a farm boy, I was always up early and Sunday morning was one morning that the people who did not have the duty could remain in the sack, as we called it in the Navy. But I was up, I had my breakfast, and I was back up in the sickbay, and I was ironing a uniform when the general alarm sounded. As is very typical of a Navy man, I began to grumble because of the drill. As I said before, when I went to the porthole in the port side of the ship and looked out and saw the Battleship Row afire, I knew it was no drill. So I went back into the sickbay proper and yelled, "This is no drill! We are being bombed!"

Marcello: Now at this initial stage had any of the bombs landed close to the Tangier?

Helmer: No, they hit the fighting ships first, and most of the fighting ships were across the island, across Ford Island, Battleship Row, or over in the dry docks.

Marcello: When you proceeded to close the porthole on the port side of the ship, how long did you observe the activity that was taking place outside?

Helmer: Well, I was stunned at what I saw. I could see the planes, and I could see the fires and see the explosions. To me it felt like a lifetime, but I would say it couldn't have been over twenty seconds because I knew I had to get busy. We had not set up any of our battle stations, and we were supposed to have had three battle stations.

Marcello: Where was your particular battle station?

Helmer: My battle station was in and around the operating room. But I was in charge, along with a man . . . I wasn't in charge. A man over me was in charge of the medical stores, and consequently he gave me orders. So I took the key to the medical storeroom and began to carry medical supplies to all our medical stations where they should have been in the first place--we had never set up--and during the course of going to these battle stations and taking supplies, as curious as I was, I would always find my way up on the topside to see how things were going.

Marcello: Now after the alarm was sounded and you closed your porthole and you proceeded to your battle station, I

assume that you did not know that you were under attack by Japanese planes, or had the word already been yelled down to you or passed to you that these were Japanese planes?

Helmer: No word had been passed down. I just hadn't assumed any nationality. I just knew that we were being bombed, and I believe the first thought that entered my mind was Russia. I don't know why, but I've always had a fear of Russia. But I knew by reading the newspapers that Japan was the one that we were most likely to be entangled with. But what amazed me was that when I ran back to the sickbay and yelled, "This is no drill! We are being bombed!" every foot hit that floor, and to put it in Navy terminology, "Every foot hit the deck," and they were off to their battle stations.

Marcello: In those first moments of the attack, how would you describe the reaction of the men? Was it one of panic? Fear? Perplexity? Professionalism? How would you describe the initial reaction of the men? I think you perhaps have answered this question in part already, but let's try and bring it together here.

Helmer: I saw no panic. I can't say that I saw any special heroism, but I was amazed . . . later on in analyzing the situation I was amazed at the methodic way that the men went about their business, about what had to

be done. Some of the younger men had to be told, but the older men knew what had to be done and knew how to lead. So I think we were very well led, and I think they followed very well.

But I don't know . . . I think it was mostly a shock. That would describe my feeling. I heard only one other comment, and that was from one particular man, and he made the statement, "I didn't join this man's Navy to fight any war." I said, "Well, this is a fighting organization," but I got no answer. But that is the only remark of that kind that I ever heard in my entire life in the Navy.

Marcello: Now did the Tangier ever become a target, a specific target, either accidentally or on purpose, of the Japanese attack? In other words, was the Tangier itself specifically or directly attacked by any of the Japanese planes?

Helmer: Yes, one bomb struck our bridge just a very glancing blow. It just made a dent in the bridge and just went on down into the water and exploded in the water, and that's what we called a near miss. When it exploded the ship went up into the air.

Marcello: Can you describe what it felt like to experience a near miss?

Helmer: Well, I didn't know what was going on at the time, but I knew the ship raised up our ot the water and came down all of a sudden. Then these midget submarines, one of them was just fired one of its torpedoes, and evidently it was fired at us because it buried up in the mud just forward of us as it struck Ford Island. But the little midget sub itself was sunk, I would say, not more than fifteen yards from the bow of our ship.

Marcello: Was it sunk by your ship, or was it sunk by another ship?

Helmer: We'll never know.

Marcello: Everybody likes to claim it, I'm sure.

Helmer: Our men claimed that we did it, and the USS Curtiss, which was another seaplane tender, claimed they did it.

Marcello: Were you anywhere near the Medusa?

Helmer: The Medusa?

Marcello: The Medusa, I know, claims a midget submarine, too, I think.

Helmer: No, I was not near the Medusa. I could see the Medusa from where we were sitting, but, no, I wasn't near the Medusa.

Marcello: I gather that the sinking of that submarine was like the shooting down of a German fighter plane in Europe during the Second World War. Two or three different bombers may have been shooting at the same fighter plane that might have gone down, so therefore three fighter planes were shot down or something of this nature.

Helmer: That's the way I feel about this particular sub. I don't know who put it out of commission. I'm glad it was put out of commission.

Marcello: Did you actually witness the submarine being put out of commission?

Helmer: No. My duty was below deck and setting up medical supplies from one battle station to another.

Marcello: On what deck were these medical stations?

Helmer: Medical stations were on the second deck.

Marcello: Second deck down.

Helmer: Second deck down. But I always found myself up on the first deck going from one . . . well, it was easier to get back to the medical storeroom by going to the topside. You had a freeway. You didn't have to go through all the hatches, and that was the easiest way to get back, and the fastest way.

Marcello: And consequently then, during the actual attack itself, your specific activities involved these medical stations and making sure that these stations had the proper medical supplies and this sort of thing.

Helmer: When I set them up and they had the proper medical supplies, then I was stationed right around the operating room and the temporary dressing room.

Marcello: What sort of resistance was the Tangier putting up against these Japanese planes?

Helmer: Well, they were firing every antiaircraft gun we had, and we didn't have too many. But approximately, not quite a year later, maybe a year later, we went into a Navy yard and they increased our antiaircraft fire. In fact, they increased our firepower about 90 per cent.

Marcello: I gather from everything that I've read that after the Japanese attack every available space aboard those fighting ships had some sort of an antiaircraft weapon placed upon it.

Helmer: Correct.

Marcello: There were a lot more antiaircraft guns aboard those ships after Pearl Harbor than there were before Pearl Harbor.

Helmer: That's right.

Marcello: I think if the Japanese didn't do anything else, they certainly proved to us that the days of the battleship were over and that the aircraft was about to become the principal offensive weapon of the fighting Navy.

Helmer: Yes, for that generation. For this generation, who knows? It might be the atomic submarine, but for that generation, yes, the plane was the offensive weapon, and the aircraft carrier and the destroyers which protected the aircraft carriers were very essential. Of course, the cruisers were good. But it proved that the days of the battleship were over.

Marcello: Well, I think that the battleship really served basically a support function in World War Two. Either they were usually used for offshore bombardment during the invasions or else, here again, they served as anti-aircraft protection for the carriers, I think, did they not?

Helmer: They did, especially so during the winding down of the war when we had the kamikaze pilots. I joined a destroyer . . . I went to Saipan to join this destroyer in late '44, and she had been hit by a kamikaze, and it went back down to Ulithi. So I was put aboard an Army plane and sent out to Ulithi to join the destroyer.

Consequently, it never did get back into action before the war was over.

Marcello: How long did it seem to you that the entire Pearl Harbor attack lasted?

Helmer: Well, in a way it seemed like it seemed endless. It seemed like it lasted ten or twelve hours. But the first wave was very short-lived. But the second wave, I believe . . . to me, I think the second wave was more intense. The first one was more surprise.

Marcello: Did the Tangier ever attempt to get up steam and get out of port?

Helmer: No. We had orders to sit still. One ship . . . well, several destroyers got out. One battleship, the Nevada, started out and we saw that it was hit, and we saw it beached and the tugboats pushed it out of the channel or all of us would have been boxed in the harbor.

Marcello: Now prior to the interview itself, you mentioned that the Tangier was tied up close to the Utah.

Helmer: Just forward of the Utah.

Marcello: Well, now the Utah was one of the prime targets during that attack. Were you able to observe any of the action that took place over there?

Helmer: Yes. The Utah was a prime target because it had all of its guns removed and it had railroad ties on its deck,

and from the air it appeared to be an aircraft carrier. It took two torpedoes and it capsized. I was up on the topside when it capsized, and I saw men in the water and the railroad ties falling off the ship and hitting the men in the water and some of them trying to get into boats. The Japanese planes came by and strafed the men in the water, completely ignoring the Tangier, and we were standing there watching them. But they were strafing the men in the water struggling to get . . . we were just a short distance from Ford Island.

Marcello: What sort of feelings did you have when you saw this taking place?

Helmer: I was very angry to see them shooting at someone so helpless, where we did have some antiaircraft fire on our ship, yet they completely ignored us. During the lull, between the first and the second wave, there was what I would perceive to be a reconnaisaance plane that flew down very low right down the channel. No ship could shoot at the plane because it could hit the other ships. But he was so close to me I could see his facial features, and I know he wasn't shooting, he wasn't strafing, so I know he must have been a reconnaissance plane taking pictures.

Marcello: I was going to ask you awhile ago, and you partially answered this question. How low were these Japanese planes coming in?

Helmer: Well, they flew down over the mountains to the north of us, and they swept down and came in very extremely low.

Marcello: About how high off the water were they, generally speaking, when they came in to attack the ships in the harbor?

Helmer: Well, it was such a complete surprise that they came down, I would say, within a hundred yards of the battlewagons before they fired because they hit the Arizona, and by luck for the Japanese, but very bad luck for us, one of the bombs went down the smokestack on the Arizona which caused such a terrific fire and so many deaths on the Arizona.

Marcello: Were the cruisers around you subject to any specific Japanese attack? You mentioned you had a couple of them--I guess they were light cruisers--around you.

Helmer: Yes, one of them took a torpedo on the starboard side and began to list on the starboard side, so the skipper flooded . . .

Marcello: Counterflooded.

Helmer: . . . the port side and she just settled down in the mud, just sitting there in the mud. The ship between that cruiser and the battleship Utah was hit, but she maintained erect at all times. Of course, the Utah was hit and capsized, as I said.

Marcello: Now did the Utah turn turtle, or did it simply sink to the bottom?

Helmer: No, it turned over and at approximately noon or shortly after noon the admiral and some of these officers were making an inspection of the harbor, and as they passed the Utah they heard a knocking on the Utah. One of the men was down in the double bottom of that battleship when she capsized. He didn't know what happened. He didn't know anything about it, but he was there for several hours. So they heard that tapping, so they crawled up on the hulk of the ship and tapped, and he returned the tap. So they sent, I know, one metalsmith from our ship, and two other metalsmiths went over with acetylene torches, and they cut out a big hole. But when they cut it out with an acetylene torch, it leaves the metal red hot, so someone had to stand there and keep kicking him in the face until it cooled off well enough for him to get out. This man was released from the Utah.

Marcello: That's interesting. I hadn't heard of that being done aboard the Utah. I know it had happened aboard the Oklahoma when it turned over, but I hadn't realized that the same procedure had taken place on the Utah.

Helmer: I'm positive that in Mr. Lord's book Day of Infamy it does mention the man's name and mentions the fact that he was rescued by cutting a hole in the bottom of the ship.

Marcello: Did the Tangier sustain any casualties during the attack?

Helmer: Our coxwain for the captain's gig was sent to the Navy landing to pick up the executive officer and bring him back to the ship. He brought the executive officer back to the ship, and then he picked up other people in the water, and he was strafed and he caught shrapnel in his leg and his groin, and he was the only man that sustained any injury aboard our ship.

Marcello: Did you treat any casualties aboard your ship? In other words, did they bring personnel from other ships aboard the Tangier for treatment?

Helmer: No, that is one thing I could not understand. We treated this one man. We had this one man in the sickbay, and we had ten medical men standing there,

plus three doctors and a dentist. They took two of our doctors over to the hospital ship after the second wave and helped treat people, but they took none of us pharmacist's mates to the hospital or to the hospital ship. I often wondered why they didn't use us, too, in caring for these people.

Marcello: What did the harbor look like in the aftermath of the attack?

Helmer: In the aftermath of the attack the harbor looked like just a body of oil, black oil, and debris was floating around. Each vessel had a little whaleboat, and they had their little launches and those that capsized . . . and some were sunk and some of the ships and boats were shot up. It was just debris and oil floating. I believe the last time I went to Pearl Harbor was in the early part of 1945, and this oil was still lingering there. Of course, the debris had been eliminated. I went back to Pearl Harbor last June, and I was amazed to see such blue-green clean water in Pearl Harbor now, with what muddy, murky water it was when we were there and then after the raid all the oil that was on it. What a transformation!

Marcello: In other words, the harbor looked better in recent years than it did in even those before the attack itself.

Helmer: Right.

Marcello: That's interesting.

Helmer: Yes, I wanted to go back and see what it all looked like again, so we went back this past summer.

Marcello: During your jaunts from one medical station to another--and you mentioned that to get from one to another you actually went out on the main deck--were you ever subject to strafing or anything of this nature from Japanese planes?

Helmer: No.

Marcello: Of course, probably when you're out on deck like that, you think every plane's aiming at you.

Helmer: I guess I could have been. However, when some came close it came close to me while I was near the superstructure, so I backed up under the superstructure and remained until the plane left. But they were shooting . . . but our ship took a few shrapnel hits but very little.

Marcello: Were there individuals on your ship firing back with pistols or BAR's or anything of this nature?

Helmer: Yes, they fired back with any and everything they had, and even with .45's.

Marcello: You actually witnessed this aboard your ship?

Helmer: I witnessed it.

Marcello: After the attack how did your attitude toward the Japanese change?

Helmer: Well, immediately after the attack I was very angered, yes. I didn't hate them, but I felt it was a very dastardly thing to do, and yet I was very angry. But later on in the war, when I learned of their many atrocities, I lost all respect for them as a people, and it has taken quite awhile to relieve myself of those feelings against Japan as a nation.

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

Helmer: Oh, we heard that paratroops had landed on Ewa Beach. In fact, we heard that paratroopers were landing, and there were several troopships lying off the coast that were coming in and that they had landed in Honolulu, also. I heard that. But there was scuttlebutt going everywhere.

Marcello: I assumed that you believed all of these rumors, too.

Helmer: Yes, after seeing what we did see, not thinking that anything like that could happen, I would believe almost anything.

Marcello: Well, I guess you almost had to believe these rumors.

Helmer: Yes, that's true. I guess we did have to believe them because we couldn't believe that an attack like this

could occur, and it had. But there again, the Japs failed miserably by not having a transport ship with them because they could have taken us and prolonged the war so much longer.

Marcello: I'll give you a chance to use a little bit of hindsight in this question. How do you believe that the Japanese were able to pull off that attack? To what do you attribute their success, in other words?

Helmer: I believe that our administration at that time wanted us involved in the war with Germany and, consequently, Japan. I believe that some of the things that we did provoked the Japanese to make the attack. My feelings towards the Japanese have mellowed somewhat. However, I saw so many Japanese when I was back in Honolulu this summer, visiting Japanese. I was up at a restaurant on the tower--one of the revolving towers at Waikiki Beach--and there was a Japanese maitre-d' who came to my wife and me and said, "I'm sorry these Japanese people all come back here." He was Japanese himself. "They take up all our space and we're sorry your service is so slow." I said, "These men look to be like my age or men from World War Two." He said, "Yes, they mostly are." I was amazed to see them

carrying little American Brownie cameras around, and most of the American tourists had a Japanese camera hung around our necks.

Marcello: Did you ever look for any scapegoat in the aftermath of the attack, that is, did you blame either Admiral Kimmel or General Short or any of the other military leaders at Pearl?

Helmer: I felt Kimmel and Short were to blame for a long time. But then I found out later that we did not have enough oil. Admiral Kimmel wanted to keep the fleet out of Pearl because he felt it was a trap, but he did not have the oil to do so. So the fleet had to sit in harbor. So I believe Kimmel and Short were made scapegoats.

The blame, I think, lies in Washington. According to a book that I've read recently--and I forget what the title of it is--but I read this book and it brought out a lot of facts. And judging from things that I had read that had transpired before the war and what has transpired since the war--I've done a lot more reading since then--I came to the conclusion that we were brought into the war by the administration, and Kimmel and Short were made scapegoats. They were as innocent as we are.