

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
NUMBER  
270

Interview with  
John C. Parsons  
December 22, 1974

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: John C. Parsons  
(Signature)

Date: 12-22-74

COPYRIGHT © 1975 THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF NORTH TEXAS STATE  
UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF DENTON

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Coordinator of the Oral History Collection or the University Archivist, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas 76203.

Oral History Collection

John C. Parsons

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas      Date: December 22, 1974

Dr. Marcello:      This is Ron Marcello interviewing Jack Parsons for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 22, 1974, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Parsons in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the USS Ontario, a sea-going, coal-burning tug during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Parsons:      I was born in Toms Creek, Virginia, on August 20, 1915. It's a little coal mining town in the hills of Virginia. Shortly thereafter, we moved to Kentucky to the little town of Middlesboro, then shortly after that to Corbin, Kentucky, where I was raised. I went to junior high

school and high school, joined a CCC camp for a tour of duty there, and then went on to the mining camps and worked in the mines for about seven or eight months. I was fixing to run away . . . not run away, go to the merchant marines. My daddy talked me into joining the Navy, and he got me to sign up. Eventually, they called me, and I went to boot camp on May 13, 1936.

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

Parsons: Well, there were two or three old Navy men in our town of Corbin, Kentucky--a little railroad town nestled in the hills there--that I had talked to over the period of years. It seemed like the right thing to do. It was a cleaner life than the rest of the services and more exciting. You could see more places. Back in those days, it was the Army and Navy and Marines, you know. There wasn't an Air Force and all these other branches of the service. So therefore, I guess you could say it was my daddy's idea. He didn't want me to join the merchant marine because that was something that we didn't know too much about in those days. He figured if he could get me in the Navy, I'd be set (chuckle).

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Parsons: In Norfolk, Virginia.

Marcello: Is there anything exceptional that happened in boot camp that you think needs to be a part of the record?

Parsons: (Chuckle) Well, we had an old chief by the name of Zockwich. He was a swell fellow. His only problem was drinking. He was what was proverbially known as a drinking sailor, drinking Navy man, and he knew it and his wife knew it, and he tried to stay off of it. He was rough. He would fight a bear. He was small, very slender. He'd fight a bear with a switch. He taught us sailors--twenty-nine of us in Platoon Twenty-nine--if you could drink sixteen drinks of whiskey and stay on your feet and your facilities, do this. But if you couldn't drink the seventeenth one, leave it alone. That's what I followed all of my years (chuckle).

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that particular time?

Parsons: A little over three months.

Marcello: That was a fairly long boot camp, then.

Parsons: It surely was. They put us through. They taught us from A to Z about the Navy--whaleboats, guns . . . well, like I said, from A to Z.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Parsons: The USS Oklahoma came into port, and I was transferred aboard her along with twelve or thirteen other sailors out of my platoon. The USS Oklahoma had just returned from Spain where there'd been a big quake or some disturbance over there. They'd been over there on a rescue mission.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going aboard a battleship?

Parsons: Well, from talking to my friends in Corbin, Kentucky, about the Navy, that was the elite of the fleet. In other words, it was just like a big city. You didn't have too much chance of getting lonesome if you was this type of fellow. In other words, they had an ice cream parlor, what the Navy then called an ice cream man, or candy man. Well, they had everything, you know, movies, ice cream parlors, snack bars, all the goodies, you know. It was big enough that you could spend a whole year and never get acquainted with everyone aboard.

Marcello: How was the food aboard the Oklahoma?

Parsons: Excellent. We had a chief . . . doggone, I can't remember his name. He fed us extraordinarily good. After we went through the Panama Canal and got to the West Coast, he had contacts with the Japanese gardeners

up in the hills around San Pedro. I was one of the fifty-foot motor launch boat members. Every week when we were in port, we would go to the beach and pick up food--ducks, rabbits, cabbage, everything in the fresh food line--and we'd load up fifty-foot motor launches. If you can visualize a fifty-foot boat loaded with food, that's what we did. The food was excellent. At times we'd hit San Clemente Island. We'd anchor after battle practice or some type of practice. Lobstermen would come along with their boats. It looked like nothing but floating lobster, just solid. He'd buy these and feed us. Oh, it was a variety of food, excellent in fact.

Marcello: How about your living accommodations aboard that ship? What were they like?

Parsons: Spacious. Even back in '36, there were some hammocks, I believe, at that time. In the fleet elsewhere there were quite a few hammocks, but I think we all had bunks. In fact, I know I did in the third division. I started out in the deck force. Well, it was cool in the summertime. We'd shut the hatches and everything. In the wintertime when it was in cold weather, we was warm unless we was on topside. Naturally, there wasn't nothing but peacoats and clothing to keep you warm. But it was excellent living conditions.

Marcello: Now you mentioned awhile ago that you were on the deck force at this time. How would you rate or describe the on-the-job training that you received as a member of the deck force?

Parsons: Well, it was regular housekeeping just like, say, around your home. Paint work had to be kept continuously scrubbed down and repainted. Some places where the rust would creep up on you, why, you had to scrape the paint and repaint it--prime it and repaint it. The decks had to be holystoned. You had a brick with a hole in it and a stick. These decks were made out of . . . floors to most people. We called them decks. I still make a mistake after being retired for twenty years about calling a floor a deck. But we'd holystone these. They was made out of teakwood--a special wood. You could sit on it. We kept it so clean that you could take a white suit any day, unless it had been after a battle practice or something, and sit on it and you wouldn't get dirty. Then we had to hose it down and use big scrub brushes with big handles in them to clean it up further. What time we weren't doing that, we were learning how to handle the big fourteen-inch rifles of which we had two and three in a turret. I think our turret had three.

Marcello: In other words, your battle station was on one of the turrets.



Parsons: Oh, yes. Yessirree. I was a primer and I carry a twenty-nine inch scar on top of my head. This was in peacetime that one of our coxswains came aboard. We went to sea this Monday morning real early. We'd went to sea and was having a battle practice. You'd have to see it to realize it. I was the primer. In other words, I'd put a shell about the size of a .30-06 into the breech of this big fourteen-inch gun to make it fire. As the gun elevated, I'd hold onto the breech with my hand and let the gun carry me down about twenty feet, and I'd lean against the wall when it fired. Well, this character had been inebriated a little bit the night before. He had elevated the gun emergency speed. It caught me leaning against the bulkhead and dragged me over a rivet that stuck out about an inch and a half. I had sense enough to realize that if I didn't go limber, it'd crush my skull. When it dragged me over that first rivet, it dropped me. It took twenty-nine stitches to sew it. But this type of thing was an everyday occurrence. I don't remember, but they tell that I was back on the gun fifteen minutes after they sewed me up. I wouldn't go and lay down or anything because we didn't have any extras, you know. So I went back and manned my battle station.

Marcello: Generally speaking, how would you rate the training that you received aboard that Oklahoma? Was it good? Excellent? Fair? How would you consider it to have been?

Parsons: I would say it was excellent because we had good boatswain's mates. In the deck division that's the only rate you have as petty officers--boatswain's mates. We had a first class and a second class and two or three third class. Coxswains, we called them. They were all excellent men.

Marcello: I would assume that all of them probably had a good many years of service in the Navy, too.

Parsons: Yes, all of them was old salts, been to China. To be an old salt you had to be a China sailor, you know. They accused me of being a China sailor. I learned pretty fast. I've always been a quick learner. They accused me . . . in fact, I had to fight one of them because he accused me of being in China with him in a certain incident, and I'd never been out of the continental limits of the United States (chuckle). Oh, they was a bunch of characters, I'll guarantee you.

Marcello: I understand those old China hands or Asiatic sailors, I guess they were sometimes called, were really a bunch of characters.

Parsons: Oh, you can say that again, I'll guarantee you. But to show you now how Asiatic one of them was . . . everybody was all the time playing jokes on each other. They'd have reveille every morning about 5:15. They had fifteen or twenty minutes to drink coffee. Then you had to hit the deck and clean it up, take care of your pre-breakfast job. It got so bad that they was stealing . . . well, I'll swear. I can't remember his name. He went down on the Oklahoma that morning. "Chink" Nelson was his name. He was a little bitty pip-squeak of a man that, like I said, would fight a bear with a switch. He would get up a bunch of phlegm in his mouth and spit in his coffee cup to keep somebody else from drinking it. Now this is . . . it turns your stomach, but this is what the character done. They told tales of people doing worse out there. They'd slip some whiskey in their coffee on board ship, you know. They'd slip it back aboard, which is easy to do. But he died on the Oklahoma the morning of the . . . later on, you know. But that little monkey, he was a case.

Marcello: From what you've said, I would gather that morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy was fairly high. Is this a safe assumption?

Parsons: Excellent. They were fighting, carousing, cutting up, playing. It was just real high. I mean, there wasn't nothing greater than a U. S. Navy sailor or serviceman. There were some few of them like to fight inter-service and stuff like this, but basically we were just a bunch of people. We enjoyed life, and we lived it, see.

Marcello: How do you account for the high morale? What do you think was responsible for it?

Parsons: Well, you're getting on a touchy subject (chuckle).

Marcello: Do you think the fact that all of you were volunteers, for one thing, had something to do with the high morale?

Parsons: No, no, no. Well, it might have been. I don't think so. All of us still believed in the United States of America, what it stood for, what it stands for. Well, it was our country, you know. It's not like the people of today. They think that every damn thing is due to them and that it belongs to them without any sacrifice or effort whatever on their part. Well, damnit, they just think it should be given to them. This is not the case, not the way I look at it. They should be kicked in the butt and maybe get out and earn what they've got.

Marcello: I assume that sports played a big life in the service at that particular time. It played a big role in the life of a serviceman.

Parsons: Oh, yes, we were working for and to achieve the "man-o-war," which is in the battleship fleet. Cleanliness of the ship, the seamanship of the ship, the racing of cutters. We had a twelve-man racing crew at that time, which myself and one of my brothers who was in the Navy with me at that time were members of. The football teams, basketball, which I also played, and . . . well, every facet of sport we participated in went toward this "man-o-war." It wasn't taken lightly. You fought for every point that you got. In fact, in one instance the last year we had the twelve-man racing crew, we were in the race. We had trained real hard. I was number three oar. We were battling it out with . . . I forget what . . . one of the battleships. There was three of us in front and one . . . I believe it was the Tennessee. I wouldn't swear to it. But one of the other battleships was in third place, and we were fixing to overhaul this other ship and win the race. This other battleship rammed us in the midships and caused us to lose it. Well, we just broke oars and boarded them. We was whipping the daylights out of them, and the admiral come along. All the flag officers had a special motor launch all decorated out. They come alongside and ordered us to cease. We had to

leave there. We'd done sank their scow. Ours had done turned over when we left it. We had to ride our scull and get back aboard her and go back to the Oklahoma. All of us come near to getting court-martialed over it.

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

Parsons: In reference to what?

Marcello: Oh, in terms of obeying orders, respect for superiors-- things of that nature.

Parsons: There was no doubt in your mind. If you were given an order, you carried it out. Then if there was a doubt in your mind, you asked later. You didn't challenge him because he was the ultimate man, which is as it should be. If you're going to be in the fighting man's service, obey the order, and if you live to survive it if you're in a war, then you can ask him "how come" later because if he tells you to jump, he might be telling you to jump to save your life. They don't give these orders just to be big he-man. They didn't back in them days. I don't know. I guess it was a different breed of man. These days you can't tell, most of them, man from a woman if you're driving down the street, you know, especially some of these servicemen because they see how big they can get, how far they can go, and tell a man to go jump.

Marcello: How long were you on the Oklahoma altogether?

Parsons: Well, I left her in . . . I believe it was in the latter part of 1939.

Marcello: And what did you transfer to?

Parsons: I went to the USS Vestal. Shortly thereafter . . . I played baseball, I think, a month or two there in San Pedro, California. That's the reason I was transferred over there--to play ball. The fleet was ordered to Hawaii. I rode her out there. Some time before, I had put in for what we called "choice duty" in Samoa and the . . . really the tropics. I was apparently being transferred to the hospital out there to be a mechanic for the hospital vehicles. Just after we got to Hawaii, why, my orders came through to be transferred to Samoa. Well, I had to return to San Francisco . . . and I rode the . . . I forget what ship I rode back. Then I caught the SS Monterey back to Honolulu and on to Samoa. It took about six days to ride her out there as a civilian passenger, you know. Navy on the civilian ship.

Marcello: There are two questions I want to ask you at this point. I guess I should have asked them earlier. You said that while you were on the Oklahoma you were on this rowing crew with your brother. Was your brother on the same ship with you?

Parsons: Yes, sir.

Marcello: This was a common . . . I shouldn't say it was a common practice. But it was done in the Navy before Pearl Harbor, was it not?

Parsons: It was very common. This brother came aboard . . . this was my oldest brother. He came aboard about a year after I was in the Navy. He stayed aboard her until his time was up. He was on what they called a "Kiddy Cruise," four years, and he got out. Of course, later on when the war broke out, he come back in the service. But he was aboard there with me, I imagine, for about two or two and a half years.

Marcello: Did you all do your carousing around together?

Parsons: No, sir. I always figured that if I was going to get in trouble of any kind, I would get myself in trouble instead of . . . and my brother, he is and still does think he's a lover boy. He was always getting in trouble over some girl. I didn't like his particular type of action, so I stayed away from him. Or at least I kept him away from me. Put it that way (chuckle).

Marcello: You also mentioned awhile ago that you transferred from the Oklahoma over to the Vestal in order to play baseball. I don't understand this. Maybe you need to explain this. It sounds like an interesting story.

Parsons: Well, in those days everybody was looking for athletic prowess. They needed a versatile man. I could play



second base, third base, first base, or catch. We had a second class corpsman aboard the Oklahoma that couldn't take my position away from me. I was playing second base at the time, and he was playing third base. He did not have the arm for the third base job. He wanted me to swap with him. We had a better third baseman on the bench than he was or than I could have been, so I would not swap with him. I told him if he couldn't play the position to sit himself on the bench. But politics played a little bit . . . well, I'll say it played a heck of a lot back in them days. You had to be extra good if you made the team. If there was anybody on the ship's company that had been there a long time, they would beat you out--not on ability but on politics.

So to relieve the tension and everything, they wanted me to come over there, so they asked for me and I transferred to them. Like, if we had an excellent football player--passer or fullback or halfback--and the flagship of the fleet found out about, well, they'd get him transferred to their ship before you realized you had him. See, everybody was wanting to better their athletic pride. That old "iron man" meant a heck of a lot. It was really something to win it and get that big "E" up on your stack, you know. It was something

that we fought for literally and athletically and everything. You didn't belittle or badname the ship that you was off of.

Marcello: So that's how you got your transfer over to the Vestal.

Parsons: To play ball.

Marcello: I gather that you weren't on the Vestal too long.

Parsons: No, I don't think I was aboard over six months.

Marcello: What sort of a vessel was that? Was it a repair ship?

Parsons: A repair ship. It repaired certain units of the fleet. I believe she was a cruiser repair ship. I wouldn't swear to this. But, see, the Vestal, the Medusa, and the Argo . . . we had three of them. Three of them handled different facets of the fleet--different ships.

Marcello: Those repair ships were kind of interesting vessels because, I guess, they had so many skilled people aboard, did they not, and they could do all sorts of things.

Parsons: Oh, yes, they had . . . well, right at the moment I can't recall them, but they had a man to do everything--say, woodwork, or metalwork or build complete units. Some of them had even furnaces, you know, to repair most anything. In fact, if need be they could put a ship back in commission and get them underway to go to where they could really get repaired. They were wonderful, well-built, well-put-together vessels that took care of the fleet very well.

Marcello: Was there much of an adjustment that you had to make in switching from a battleship over to this repair ship?

Parsons: No, sir, because, as I said before, I believe, I could . . . I don't meet a stranger, and I can fit in real well. I can talk to anyone. I always have been able to for some reason. Well, I'm a ball player, and once you're in with something like this, everybody tends to make it easier for you, you know, to show you. Usually, if you come aboard and you're a smart aleck or a smart mouth or something like that, they just leave you alone, and you're in trouble. But if you're with the boys, well, they tend to help you. Say, if you stumble here, one of them says, "Do this, Parsons" or "Do this, Red." I've had every nickname in the world tagged on me and most of them knew them. So they would give you a helping hand. They don't wait until you fall and break a leg before they help you.

Marcello: I would assume . . . well, in fact, I know that the crew aboard one of those repair ships is a lot smaller than the crew aboard a battleship.

Parsons: Well, yes, but not too much because you had to have a bunch of men to do this. If something happened that they really needed the hands, why, they had to have

them there, see. They didn't carry too big a complement, but they carried . . . see, the battleships back before Pearl Harbor, we always thought, and I think today, that we carried about 1,200 men, sometimes less, just enough to run the ship and stand the watches. You know, there were no extra men because still and all we weren't expanding or anything until the middle or late '40's. Then we started picking up more men.

Marcello: Well, you mentioned that after being on the Vestal for only about six months, you then got that choice tropical duty that you were looking for in Samoa. Is this where you ultimately went aboard the USS Ontario?

Parsons: Yes. This is a funny thing, too. I said before about this politics. I was transferred to the Naval Hospital at Tutuila, Samoa, as a serviceman for the hospital vehicles. They had the ambulances and stuff like that. I was second class when I was transferred out there. By the way, somewhere along this line I became a machinist's mate in the black gang. I was transferred out there to take care of these hospital vehicles. But on the way out there, this first class that was on board the USS Ontario shoveling coal for the boilers politicked me out of the hospital job and he got that. When I got there, I went to the hospital, and they immediately sent me to the USS Ontario.

I found myself . . . instead of on a choice duty station, I was scheduled to man a shovel and fire eight boilers on board this sea-going, coal-burning tugboat.

Marcello: Describe what this tugboat looked like.

Parsons: Well, it was the normal tug size of the smaller ones. It had one three-inch rifle on it--big gun. Well, it was just a typical tugboat.

Marcello: What was the function of it there on the island of Samoa?

Parsons: To maintain the American governorship of the island and the outlying islands and to provide transportation for the island kings and princesses and this and that and to bring . . . I don't know whether it's official or not, but we hauled many a load of copra from the outer islands into the main island and hauled personnel or people . . . civilian people from one island to the other. We searched for downed craft out around the island in the distance of our range. This Samoan firm there built a big fishing boat, and they went out and got in a storm and got lost. We searched for him for two weeks--stuff like this. A coaling vessel brought us coal on an average of, oh, I'd say, once a year, maybe longer. It was according to how much steaming we had done.

Marcello: Now did you mention before we turned on the tape recorder that this ship was also rigged with sails or could be rigged with sails?

Parsons: Well, it was rigged for sails. In case we ran out of water or coal or both, to maintain our headway we had . . . I guess you'd call it a jib sail--one on the stern and one on the bow--and then a mainsail. We couldn't . . . I guess we could make . . . if we had good wind, we could make a couple or three knots. We never had the opportunity to try it, but we had them up. I've got a picture at my house where we was laying in on the lever to one of these islands that we visited periodically out there where we raised two of our sails to dry out. For some reason or another they'd got wet, and we had them flying--I took a picture of it--for them to dry out. You would tell people this when we'd come into Pearl that we could sail. We were a laughing stock, they thought, though. Some of them come aboard and saw them. We stretched one of them for them, and then they put it in the paper. They didn't laugh no more.

Marcello: Well, how old was that vessel?

Parsons: Well, she was built in, I believe, 1916 or 1909. I was reading the history of it here the other day. But she's a real "oldie." As far as I know she's still afloat. After the war she was sold to a man by the name of Heindon in Long Beach or San Pedro, California. But she was the

pride of the fleet when she was built, though. They said that she was one of the most modern (chuckle). But she was a bugger.

Marcello: What sort of a crew did the Ontario have aboard in terms of numbers?

Parsons: I'd say fifteen or twenty. I've got the Christmas dinner list in this same magazine at the house on December . . . I mean of '41.

Marcello: How did you like life aboard a ship that small?

Parsons: Well, it was alright when we were in port. When we were at sea, especially in my job, it was pure hell because the modern-day sailors of that day were complaining about firing an oil burner in the fire room at 150 or 140 to 160 degrees. We were firing this ship underway at . . . the best we could do was about seven knots with a good tail wind at 210 degrees with no forced draft, no cool air coming on us at all. What draft we had was natural draft, and it came over the stern boiler. It was hot when it hit us. As long as we could stay down was fifteen minutes. We had to walk back across the engine room and then crawl up the ladder, and somebody'd pull us out on the deck and hose us down with salt water, and he'd go down. I'd do the same to him for four hours. This was four hours on and

four hours off. But outside of that, when we hit port-- good duty. I mean, you took the good with the bad. The only thing, it took away all of my curly hair and made me a skin head (chuckle).

Marcello: When did you finally get to the Hawaiian Islands?

Parsons: Well, we left . . . you mean before Pearl Harbor?

Marcello: Yes.

Parsons: We left Samoa in November--the first part of November. I can't recall the exact date. It took us about twelve or thirteen days to steam to Pearl. There was a big fanfare when we got in there because the word was out this was the last coal-burner coming in, you know, and they could see all this smoke flying and blowing and all these goodies. We were coming to Pearl this time . . . I'd fired her one other trip in my nineteen months' duty in Samoa up to Pearl. We dreaded it when we started out, but we knew we was going to be changed into an oil-burner. So it wasn't so bad.

Marcello: Is that basically why you went to Pearl Harbor, for an overhaul?

Parsons: Yes, to change the ship to an oil-burner.

Marcello: This would have been in November of 1941?

Parsons: Yes, sir. We got in in the later part of November, around the twenty-seventh, I think, twenty-sixth or something



like this. In fact, we weren't in there two weeks, I don't believe, till the Japs hit us. But in the meantime we were preparing her for conversion. We had taken what little coal we had left off. The Saturday before we had taken all of her guns off. We had a bunch of rifles and her three-inch. As far as I know, we didn't have a gun with the exception of one .45 aboard the ship. This chief had it. He was the executive officer, by the way. We had one lieutenant that was a commanding officer, named Myers.

Marcello: While you were out there sailing around Samoa and the adjoining islands, did you have a chance to keep very much abreast with world events and what was going on between the United States and Japan?

Parsons: Oh, yes. There was all kinds of rumors. The ordinary sailor or serviceman or officer had no way of knowing because, like the aristocrats of old, they kept most of it to themselves. An officer was an officer. You saluted the man and the uniform. Basically, the officers were all good men. That's the reason they wore the uniform . . . had the uniform, I would say. They didn't pass it out on political setup. They had to go through the Academy, most of them, and they had to prove themselves to become an officer. Then you respected, I'd

say, 90 per cent of them because they were good men. But they were a caste-type, I guess you would say. The ordinary sailor--you knew what they wanted you to know. We could suspect and we could talk. We could do all we wanted to like this, but there wasn't nothing for sure that we knew.

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

Parsons: Well, we knew them very well from Honolulu. See, they were flooding the islands. They were all over Hawaii. In fact . . . well, I'd say half the population is a mixture of Japanese, you know. The whole Hawaiian Islands are a mixture of Hawaiians and Japanese and Korean and just a race mixture of the whole world. We didn't particularly care for them. A lot of the guys went for the women because if the women would play they were wonderful playmates. But, basically, we just stayed away from them. The Chinaman was a better person to associate with because they were friendlier and they were more worldly. I don't know. They were just a better people to mess with or play with or to know. But the Jap has always been to me a sneaky-type of an individual, and you just stayed away from them.

Marcello: When you and your buddies or any of the old salts ever got into any bull sessions, did any of you ever talk about the capabilities of the Japanese Navy, that is, the quality of the Japanese Navy?

Parsons: It never entered our minds. I don't believe that I ever . . . after they hit us, naturally. But before this, no, because you didn't hear too much about it because they didn't publicize it. As it turned out, they had more Navy than I ever thought about. Of course, I never thought about it too much, but as it turned out they had more ships than I'd ever dreamed they'd have after we found out what they had--after they hit us. I know one thing. They were the dumbest bunch of people that ever walked the face of the earth!

Marcello: Do you mean so far as their Navy was concerned?

Parsons: Well, as concerns their planning ability. They could have taken Hawaii with less than a thousand men because we didn't have nothing to fight them with. They had us to our knees. They could have brought a thousand men aboard, I do believe--and I've heard thousands of others say the same thing--directly after they hit us. If they'd had any smarts at all they'd have hit us and then come in with a landing force.

We'd have never taken it back because all of our fleet was sunk--battleships. And all we had left was cruisers and two or three aircraft carriers. Where would we have had any place to rally the fleet? They just were stupid.

Of course, they're smart. Now don't get me wrong. They're one of the smartest races of people in the world because they can look at anything and mimic it. They can look at this tape recorder, and they'll build one as well or a better one, see. But, I mean, as far as something like Pearl Harbor, they planned so well, and then they dropped it. I don't know. You see a pass catcher playing football. You'd bet \$999,000,000 that he'd catch every ball that was throwed to him, but then he missed just one and lost the ball game. That's what they done. They let us live at Hawaii, and for that they suffered. They made us mad.

Marcello: What was your liberty routine like when you were in Pearl Harbor? Let's say this last time when you went in for a conversion, what kind of a liberty routine did you have?

Parsons: Well, as best as I can remember, I believe they'd come in to something like . . . liberty was good. I believe liberty had a curfew on at midnight unless you was married or could come up with a good excuse or a good friend to

spend the night with. In other words, the facilities was . . . in other words . . . we knew that there was something in the wind for them doing this. But we did not know. We did not know what was going on in Washington or anyplace else. We knew that . . . we figured . . . well, later we saw this. Later, we figured that the Japs that were in Hawaii had become cool for some reason or another. And after they hit us we knew, see. We just . . . boom! It was like turning on the damn light. We knew what the reason was, see.

Marcello: Did you ever think about those Japanese in the Hawaiian Islands acting as saboteurs or fifth columnists or anything of that nature?

Parsons: Not until they hit us. Well, there was talk about it, yes, but we figured that the people in the know had them curtailed or had them checked because . . . I'd seen a sign on a window, and quite a few other people saw it. We talked about it after they hit us, to the effect that . . . it was in Japanese. But you could read enough of it--"7th of December." This was all we could . . . we remembered this after they hit us, see. But it was put on the windows in downtown Honolulu that they were going to hit us or something to that effect. The 7th of December was the day, but we didn't know what it was.

I doubt if anybody paid any attention to it, see. Everything was depending on Roosevelt in Washington and their spies and everything.

By the way, before I leave I want to bring up a good story. I want to give it to you and let you read it. Then you can understand something of what we were going through out there. This turned up . . . well, the date's on the magazine. It's a true story.

Marcello: Now what did a young, single sailor do when he went on liberty in Pearl Harbor on in Honolulu?

Parsons: Whatever you desired and had the money to do because it was all there. Myself, after the Japs hit us, I ran across a little Chinese-Hawaiian. She had had a baby boy by a sailor off the Salt Lake City, and he had went to sea. Her sister was married to a white fellow. He was a manager of a paint store out there. I knew him from somewhere, and he introduced me to her. I was gambling and winning. I didn't care because money didn't mean nothing. We didn't know whether we was going to live tomorrow or the next day. The best gamblers don't care, you know. I mean, if they've got it to gamble with, they've got it to lose, see. So, therefore, I was winning--not today but every-day. I'm getting ahead of myself. But I met her.

You could do anything you wanted to. Like, she had six brothers and seven sisters, and the whiskey was rationed. On a whiskey card you could get a jug of whiskey and a bottle of rum. I got thirteen of them every week. We had a ball. I mean, everybody was my friend. I had bought a '41 Plymouth convertible and a '38 Dodge. Shoot, I was a wheel, see.

Marcello: Now before Pearl Harbor did you frequent most of the places down on Hotel Street and Beretania Street and Canal Street that most sailors went to at one time or another?

Parsons: Quite a few times, yes.

Marcello: I gather that when a fleet was in there on a weekend the streets and the sidewalks were overrun with sailors.

Parsons: Hectic, hectic! Like in the houses, they'd be lined up to the corner, down to the corner, and down to the corner, you know. This was an accepted thing. The police didn't bother them. They were sanctioned and stuff like this, see. After you was there awhile . . . after you had been there and come back, well, you know . . . you had different outlets, you know. You didn't always participate. And you could get in trouble awful easily hanging around these places in one of these lines.

I tried my best to stay out of them because I found enough of it without looking for it. I tried to stay away. That's the reason . . . like you asked, did I run with my brother too much. Trouble guys and trouble spots, you try to stay away from them, see. I tried to stay away from them mostly. I had enough as it was without looking.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Ontario? Do you recall?

Parsons: Well, it was every two weeks. I believe it changed periodically--say, the first and the fifth or the fifth and the twentieth. It was according to when the money was allocated or sent to wherever we were at, so they could make the payday, see.

Marcello: And as I recall, you were paid in cash, is that correct?

Parsons: Oh, yes, yes, sir. There were no checks. It was hard cash on the barrel.

Marcello: You mentioned you were a second class petty officer at this time. How much were you pulling down as second class petty officer?

Parsons: Oh, Lord! Man, I was rich! I . . . let's see. We started out as seaman second at \$21, \$26, \$36. I guess I might have been making \$89 or \$90 a month. Even in those days we were still buying our clothes. Today that second class is making \$700. You know, that's fantastic.



The pay scale didn't change till after I retired in '55, I don't think. It started coming up because they needed to keep people in the service. The hierarchy has been awful . . . the civilian control of the service has been awful rough on the serviceman because they never paid him enough to keep him, you know. You get a man trained for a skilled job, and he's not going to stay for \$300. More than likely, he isn't going to stay for \$600. They need to bring these skills or other rates up to where that they can keep a man in the service if they want to maintain a service. But the way things are going, we ain't going to need it because they're going to whip us one of these days, and we ain't going to need no damn service. We're going to be controlled by Russia, you know.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less brings us up, I think, to the days immediately prior to Pearl Harbor itself. What I want you to do at this point, Jack, is to give me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941. After you give me your routine on the 6th, then we'll go through the same procedure for the 7th. But let's start with Saturday, first of all, December 6, 1941. Do you recall what your routine was on that particular day?

Parsons: Well, as previously stated, we were preparing the ship to be converted to an oil-burner. Basically, we were cleaning . . . my job was to clean out the boilers and scrape the tubes and get them ready for dismantling because this type-boiler . . . see, we had four boilers on each side of . . . you had a space of about ten or twelve feet between the two boilers. They had opposed boilers. They had a high one and a low one and a low one and a high one. The high ones were on the outboard part of the ship. We were cleaning these up and cleaning every facet of it getting ready to remove them, you know. So when they moved the deck out . . . when they took all of the superstructure off and lifted the deck out over the boilers, they could lift them out. I was just cleaning the fire room quarters up for this procedure.

I can't for the life of me recall exactly what was going on. I believe . . . I'm trying to think whether my brother had gotten down in his . . . see, I had a brother come aboard the USS Ontario . . . another brother come aboard the USS Ontario. He had rode the USS Oglala, which was sank out there with a load of ammunition. He was coming to me, like all of my brothers did, for the first tour of duty. I don't remember whether he was in

the fire room helping me or whether he was on deck doing a job. But basically I was cleaning the boiler rooms up for the preparation for conversion.

Marcello: Do you remember what time you knocked off that day?

Parsons: We usually knocked off about 1600--four o'clock. Not necessarily, but it was around four o'clock because usually we'd get a job done before we'd start another one. On a small ship like that, we more or less had our own initiative because nobody was pushing us. I don't think we had a first class in the fire room. I was second class. I believe I was leading petty officer in there. We more or less worked at a lazy schedule because, knowing how the Navy Yard worked and everything, why, we weren't in too big a hurry. If they were in a hurry, they'd have come and brought us a schedule down. You know, later on, we just . . . we hadn't been there too long. We were more or less doing a prior clean-up to the main job of getting everything ready.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did that particular evening?

Parsons: No, sir. This has bothered me over the years because I do not understand why I was not ashore because usually every available time I was on the beach. But I do know that after cleaning up . . . the Oklahoma was across the bay. I cleaned up. I don't know where my brother went

to or what happened. He must have went ashore. But I went aboard the USS Oklahoma that evening to see a fellow by the name of West.

Marcello: In other words, you still had a lot of friends aboard the Oklahoma.

Parsons: Oh, yes. I knew the complete ship, just about. Of course, I knew about 50 per cent of them because 50 per cent had been transferred off. But this West . . . sailor . . . Bill West was aboard it. He was from my home town. He had married a Morman girl out of Utah. She had sent him two big boxes of food. He was a butcher. We went in the butcher shop and sat there on that thing until about two o'clock or 2:30 in the morning shooting the bull. I had brought a jug over there with me. We sat over there and ate cold turkey and ham and all kinds of goodies and just talking about our high school days and about this and about that. He tried his best to get me to spend the night with him. I came so close to spending the night on the Oklahoma, which I'm glad I didn't now. But then I went back aboard the Ontario about two o'clock or 2:30 in the morning.

Marcello: Incidentally, when people came back aboard ship after a Saturday night in Pearl Harbor or Honolulu, what sort of condition would they usually be in?

Parsons: Well, it's according to the individual. I could drink a bunch of whiskey and still navigate. Many a time I'd come back, and people said, "Man, you was blasted last night!" But I'd fold my clothes neatly, brush them off. You kept a clothes brush for your blues. I'd fold them up and put them in my locker and put everything away neat. A lot of people would come in drunk and, you know . . . typical person. Some of them came in raising hell, and some of them came in quiet. I don't know. It's just like one time I went . . . this brother of mine, he talked me into going ashore with him. Well, he was about six-foot-four. You can look at me today. I'm an ugly old man. But he was ugly even in his seventeens--just a big, awkward hillbilly. I went ashore . . . let him go ashore with me. I was drinking my normal round of drinks, and he was trying to stay with me and maybe drink one more. There was no way the kid could do it. I tried to slow him down. He wouldn't be slowed down.

So we got to one joint out close to Waikiki and out came the bartender with a sailor in tow, throwing him out. He done called the law on him. I said, "What are you doing?" "The law was coming to get him." I

said, "I'll take him." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Just what I said, man. I told you I'd take him. I know him and you're not going to turn him over to the law." "Yes, I am." I said, "Well, that is after you get whipped. Now the best you can do is get back inside." So he proceeded . . . he saw the wisdom of his ways, and he went back in. This cat says, "Thanks, Parsons." I said, "No thanks to it. Get in the car. I don't want no trouble out of you. You know that I can trounce your tail because I've done it before." He said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, get in the car." And he gave me a little bit more guff.

My brother spoke up and says, "Brother, let me have him. I'll take care of him for you." I said, "No, ain't nobody going to have him. He's going to get in the car, and that's all there is to it." My brother said a little more, and I just tapped him on the chest, and I said, "I ain't going to tell you no more." But he said, "Let me have him." I said, "Now Glen, no way. Now get in the car yourself." He called me a bad name. When he did I gave it to him-- my brother, see. I mean, I started to hit him with

my fist, and I opened it up like that. He proceeds to try to fight me. I whipped the young monkey down to his knees open-handed, and then I bodily picked him up. He weighed about 185 pounds. I just reached down and . . . I'm mad, see, because he had the guts to call me that dirty name, is what he called me.

I threw him in the car, and I proceeded to head for Pearl Harbor. Well, we got to downtown Honolulu . . . we've got this '41 convertible. Man, it's a beautiful Plymouth, see. I had another guy with me and my brother and this other guy, and they was in the back seat. I told this guy I had a baseball bat laying in the car, so if they started to crawl out or anything he was to conk them one, see, on the head. My brother was mad now, and he's not going to speak to me anymore because I done whipped him.

We get right down in the middle of Honolulu, and there's two drunk sailors out in the street with a quart bottle in the hand, and there's a Kanaka--Hawaiian police-man--heading for them. I beat him to them. I put them in the back end of the car, and they come up, "We're going to take these guys." I said, "No, you ain't going to take nothing, friend." "What do you mean?" I said, "Just exactly what I said. You've got a fight on your hands.

I've got six people here against you two. Before you can get help, we've done got you, so you'd better think this thing over because I'm taking these fellows back to Pearl Harbor, and they're going back aboard ship, and they're not going to give you no trouble." I said, "Sergeant, think about this." "Well, I'm going to take them." I said, "You are not going to take them. That is for sure now. So if you want to let us go and let me take care of them and not cause you no trouble--I'm doing you a favor, in fact--this is the way it's going to be, either with or without your consent." Well, he very reluctantly backed off.

I headed for Pearl Harbor about seven or eight miles away. By the time we got there now . . . these cats were already about half drunk or maybe a little bit more. They had drank these two fifths of whiskey they had. I'd had a couple of snorts out of it myself. I pulled my car right up by the USS Ontario by the docks there. I knew the guard up there, and they let me down in there. I told him I had a bunch of drunks. I just dumped this brother of mine down on the dock and went around and dropped these other guys off at these other ships. Then I come back and picked him up and carried him down and throwed him in his bunk.



But stuff like this, you know, it's everyday life. I mean, you do it. You don't do it if you can keep from it, but if you've got to . . . we'd fight for each other. There's no doubt about it. I've seen it happen lots and lots. It's . . . I don't know . . . it's just a funny damn setup.

Marcello: Okay, so on the night of December 6, you had been up rather late talking with your buddy over on the Oklahoma. Like you mentioned, you'd come back fairly . . . well, actually, in the early hours of the morning to get back aboard the Ontario. Okay, pick up the story from that point. I assume that you flopped into bed at that point.

Parsons: Yes, Well, reveille went normally--I imagine it still is; it's hard to remember--around 5:15 or 5:30, something like that. I got up and had coffee. The cooks had been up. We had eaten breakfast. We were just sauntering down on deck.

Marcello: Now Sunday is a day of leisure, right? Or light duty?

Parsons: Light duty or actual duties that have to be done. Somebody's on duty. Somebody's got to stand watch, these things. We were sauntering around on deck. Everybody finished at different times. Some people was faster . . . some people are . . .

Marcello: What was the uniform of the day? Was it the white shorts and skivvy shirts? Or what was it aboard the Ontario?

Parsons: Well, it was the fleet headquarters . . . it was all the same. It was skivvy shirt and whites. Well, wait a minute. This is December. Dungarees, I think, aboard the smaller ships, and then on the bigger ships it was blues and . . . undress blues. But I believe on board the Ontario we had on dungarees on the Sunday because the ship was dirty. There's no way that you could clean it up to where that you could wear whites. We could saunter around the deck, and I believe that I had sat down on a bit. Glen was standing somewhere close to me and a couple of other guys . . . Glen D. Parsons. He died December a year ago in Hamilton, Ohio-- cancer and whiskey. But we was all sitting there shooting the bull, and the first explosion went off. So we casually got up and started towards the stern of the ship to see what we could see.

Marcello: Incidentally, where was the Ontario docked at this point?

Parsons: Oh, I believe that's what they called Pier Nineteen. I wouldn't swear to that, but to the best of my knowledge you had to look from the stern of the ship, sternward and to the right, to see Battleship Row.

Marcello: Did you have a pretty good view of Battleship Row from where you were?

Parsons: No. The picture would show today that we did, but I've been in argument with them the way they draw these pictures. I'm going out there, I believe, in '76 just to make . . . get it straight in my mind because I believe there was a building obstructing our view because with these ships . . . these airplanes coming in, after we got situated and found out what was going on--that the Japs had hit us--my main concern was trailing this brother of mine, seventeen-year-old brother, seeing that he didn't get hurt. To the best of my knowledge, I followed him around like a mother hen after a chick, you know, all during the attacks because this chief would not let no one have this .45. I recollect that I tried to get it because they was coming right over us, no more than twenty-five or thirty feet. If I'd had a handfull of rocks the size of baseballs, I could have knocked down two or three of them myself because of the wooden props they had in those days. Why, it would have busted them, in which it would have killed the airplane. But he wouldn't let me have the .45 because he said they would start shooting at us.

Marcello: Okay, so anyhow, you're sauntering around on the deck. You hear the explosions, and you go back toward the stern to see what was happening. Pick up the story from that point.

Parsons: We wanted to get a better view. Then we saw that the planes were flying towards Battleship Row, and we . . . there was no way that you could comprehend in the first twenty minutes, it seemed like, what was going on because it was uncomprehensible that anyone would jump the United States of America, see.

Marcello: Was the first reaction that these were Navy planes on maneuvers or something?

Parsons: No, that thought never entered my mind because you don't maneuver on Sunday morning, you know. A lot of people come up with this because they believe that's what people want them to say. We had never maneuvered on Sunday morning. The ordinary seaman was so far away from thinking that anyone would attack us that if we'd have known what was going on we might have figured right away that the Japs were hitting us. But we didn't know till we saw the red balls. A plane turned the right angle, and we could see the red balls. Then we knew that they was Japanese that was hitting us, see. So there wasn't nothing that we could do and no comprehension of anything

till we saw them blow, you know. They were, like I say, coming down like this (gesture) at us and then angling and leveling off and getting real low in the water. They had to because they didn't have but, say, thirty-five, or say, forty foot of water in which to drop a fish. They had to drop them so they'd stay on the top of the water to hit the ships because if they went deep like they normally did and then come back to a certain level, why, they never would go off, see. I don't know. I guess the first ship that we saw the explosion and stuff and smoke come up was the Oklahoma.

Marcello: Well, were a lot of these planes coming right over your particular ship?

Parsons: Yes. But it seems to me, the best I can remember, there was a long building off . . . we were sitting in the dock like this (gesture). Over here's a pier and over here's a pier, and over here's the end of the dock (gesture). There was a square-stern cruiser on my left, and there was a building next to them. They were coming down over the mountain over our ship and then angling in like this (gesture) to the Battleship Row. We could see the explosions and stuff. Then they got the Arizona. Man, that damn ball of flame went sky high.

Marcello: What kind of thoughts were going through your mind when you saw all of this happening, and you really could do nothing about it?

Parsons: Well, dumbfounded and so damn mad and futility because we didn't have nothing to do and didn't know where to even start to get anything to fight with. But who in the heck could we fight, you know, if we didn't have no machine guns. A rifle . . . you had to be awful good with a rifle that . . . if you'd had a rifle to hit one of them, unless you caught him coming right towards you, and then you could . . . of course, no one had ever been trained to shoot with a rifle at a fast-flying airplane. But if we'd had a machine gun or anything like that to fight with then, you know . . . we were just futile. We were pawns that couldn't do nothing.

Marcello: Were there any planes that dropped bombs or strafed in your immediate vicinity?

Parsons: Yes, it's a funny thing. All these . . . there was four I believe, in there--four of these square-stern cruisers tied up there. They hadn't been there too long. But three of them had got away and had gone. This one . . . they had big bow hawsers about this big (gesture), rope. They couldn't get nobody on the dock to cut it loose.

They'd cut it about half in two when word flashed down from control to tie back up, stay put. It wasn't very long about that that they got another line out on the bow to replace this one that was just about cut in two. It must have been a high-level bomb from ten thousand feet. It come down and hit between the dock and the bow of the ship. That danged cruiser . . . have you ever seen a heavy cruiser?

Marcello: Yes.

Parsons: You know how big they are. It bounced, I'll bet you, forty foot in the air about four or five times and busted four of her plates. Well, naturally, that shook us up over here--this bow with the water being stirred.

Marcello: About how far were you from this cruiser?

Parsons: Oh, I'd say forty feet, fifty feet, maybe more or less.

Marcello: In the meantime are you just standing on the deck watching the show?

Parsons: Watching the show, following my brother. About this time I noticed and heard a "squash, squash" (sound). I didn't know what it was. I felt of my own feet. It sounded like something in my shoe, see. So I finally made this boy sit down on the bit and pull his left shoe off. Nothing. "Now pull your right one off." And it was full of blood. We found on the inside of his leg, about two

inches above his ankle, a pinpoint where blood had been just seeping out. We don't know where it come from, and there was nothing in it. But his shoe was full of blood. He was the only one aboard ship that got anything. Now where it come from, no one knows, see.

Marcello: But now you mentioned that you were ordered to stay aboard that ship.

Parsons: Oh, yes. They would not let us leave. The chief of the boat or . . . well, the executive officer, actually he was, would not let us leave the ship for anything because where could we go, you know? Because all the ships were supposed to have their complement, and none of them that was around us was going anywhere. If you went off of one somewhere, one of these bombs might . . . I could see his point there, but he should have pulled that .45 and used every damn shell he had, as far as I'm concerned.

Marcello: So what did the surface of the water and so on look like?

Parsons: Well, around us it wasn't too bad, but out in the channel where the ships had been hit and some of it was coming, it was all oily and the water was afire and smoke was billowing up all over. Actually, we didn't have too clear a view.

The fleet landing had been strafed. There was dead bodies all in the water. I wouldn't say there was too many



because, actually, I don't think I saw a body. But shipmates of mine and others that I run into after it was all over with was talking about the bodies around the fleet landing, and some of that had dove off the battleships that had been hit and got out in the oil burning and died in the oil. Maybe the concussion, too, had knocked them off into the water from the ships when the bombs went off. So there was quite a few bodies, I believe, out in the water and the burning oil. Some of them had swam and tried to come up. They hadn't been taught how to come up through burning oil--you know, splash and then stick you head up and get a breath of air and then go back and try to swim for safety again. But some of them escaped this way.

But there was an awful . . . not an awful lot, but quite a few motor launches and stuff out cruising the water and trying to break up the oil fires and picking up the sailors and this and that in the water and oil. They done a pretty good work.

Marcello: Did you see the Oklahoma turn over?

Parsons: Well, like I said, we couldn't actually see her. We could see the stern. Yes, I saw it. I imagine we could see about this much (gesture) of her stern from our angle. But she was one of the first ones . . . I

think she got two torpedoes about the same time. The thought entered my mind that I was sure as hell glad that I was off of her because on a battleship like that, just a lot of them didn't get up on Sunday morning because the day . . . they just lay there and slept, see, because they could do anything they wanted to do.

Marcello: I'm sure that it must have been a rather sickening sight when the Arizona blew up.

Parsons: Oh, Lord! Like I say, it was four or five or six hundred yards on farther on down from the Oklahoma. The Oklahoma was on this end, and the Arizona . . . and the Vestal was outboard of her, and she done moved out. But it was a helluva sight to see. Well, it looked something like that picture of that nuclear bomb that they put off in Japan. You can imagine the ammunition and stuff she had in her magazines. An explosion big enough to blow a battleship half in two, why, it's got to be a helluva bomb, you know, a helluva explosion to watch.

Marcello: Did you observe any of the other damage being done to any of the other ships there in Pearl Harbor?

Parsons: No. Like I say, the Oklahoma . . . you could see them making the runs on them, and you could see . . . in the short interval from the time they made their run till the bomb hit and exploded, you could hear them, man.

They were going off just like popcorn, you know--awful lot of shooting, A-A guns going off when they finally did get them going. But, hell, they were shooting at noises. Even at night . . . you ought to have seen that harbor at night.

Marcello: I would assume that that night there were a lot of trigger-happy servicemen around.

Parsons: Oh, everything! The sky was . . . at every interval there was just bright red, you know.

Marcello: Today we believe that there were two waves of Japanese planes that came over on December 7. At that time could you distinguish the fact that there were two waves, or did it just seem like one continuous attack from down below?

Parsons: No, it was definitely two. There was a lull. In fact, in my opinion there was a third one, and so does history say this. Their report of the thing states this, and I thought so at the time. We had a helluva argument about this, you know, out there afterwards. Was it one continuous attack, or was it two or was it three? Well, to me there was definitely a lull between the bombing and strafing and their torpedo runs. There was three different shifts. But the third one was a lighter one. It must have been . . . maybe it wasn't three. Maybe it was that some of them had gotten lost and finally

found themselves and come in and made a late run, see.

But there was definitely two and possibly three.

Marcello: Did you do anything between the lulls, or did you . . .  
you were still ordered to remain aboard that ship.

Parsons: We still stayed aboard her till . . . well, the best I  
recollect we didn't leave the ship until the next day  
sometime because they had set up guns and dug foxholes  
all over the island because they had every kind of  
rumor in the world going.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that you heard that night  
and the next day and so on?

Parsons: Oh, Lord! They were coming ashore to get us. We didn't  
know what in the hell we was going to do. Personally,  
I scoffed at it because if they was coming ashore they'd  
have done been ashore in daylight, and they wouldn't  
have waited till dark if it was something they was  
unfamiliar with. They would have done had us and gobbled  
us up just like you eating a sandwich, see, because that's  
all they would have had to have done.

Marcello: What did you do that night, that is, the night after the  
attack?

Parsons: I don't recall. "Boy, let's go to bed." After lights  
there was . . . there was a blackout, naturally. There  
wasn't nothing you could do.

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

Parsons: I don't recall. I think we . . . the best I remember, I think we had a meal that evening put to us. I don't think there was anything around noon because, hell, everything was too hectic, see. But, hell, I had more fun or more trouble after they hit us because we really got to work after that.

Marcello: What did you do in the aftermath of the attack, that is, let's say, the next day? You mentioned that you didn't do anything that particular night.

Parsons: Well, there wasn't nothing . . . we just went back to work on the ship. I immediately put in for a transfer to aviation. I wanted to get into this war and fight it. I wanted to become a pilot, see, so I put in for a transfer to aviation. I'd known a couple of guys in DJ Two, and I put in for that outfit just to wait to get into aviation, see, so that I'd have a little bit of background. I'd know something about these aircraft before I went to flight school. In January, February, March . . . about April I got transferred to DJ Two, a PBY outfit, and left my brother aboard the Ontario. They proceeded to change her into an oil-burner. But somewhere along the line he got transferred to the USS Salt Lake City and rode her all out during the war and

played in every damn battle. He came back from the war a nervous wreck.

But I put in for flight school. I stayed in the DJ Two patrol all year. Man, we was out at five o'clock in the morning and come back at six o'clock at night. One morning we took off, and just as we got leveled out, about, oh, I'd say three to five hundred feet, there sat a Jap sub on the surface. I charged my .50-caliber machine gun. I was on the starboard wing. "Permission to open fire. Jap sub on the surface." "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!" I should have cut him in two and then asked permission, see. But they had had so many incidents where we had opened fire on our own submarines without identification, so they had an order out to make positive identification before you fired. Well, I didn't know this order. This lieutenant . . . there was a plane commander of this PBY who misinterpreted, and he wouldn't let me fire. Man, this whole crew was excited because everybody come running to my wing, see. It had a bubble on it. You've seen a picture of that PBY.

Marcello: Yes.

Parsons: Well, it was open--both of them on both sides. I had my .50-caliber swung out a little bit, see, and I'm

looking. Hell, by the time he said "Hold your fire," this bugger'd done went under. Well, we went on out for about an hour. We were flying about under 1,000 feet and "Permission to open fire. Jap sub on surface," and that son-of-a-billy goat held me up again. I mean, he was sitting there charging his batteries. I could have cut him in two. I was never so mad. Well, we like to got him a court-martial, but he wouldn't let us fire.

This day we got lost because him and the navigator was playing grab-ass. We got out there, and about three o'clock he asked the navigator, "Do you know where we're at, John?" or whatever his name was. I forgot now. He says, "No." "Well, by God, you better find out right fast because we're lost!" It took them about fifteen or twenty minutes to get a sight and try to figure it out. He said, "Well, the best I can figure we're right here." So we set a course back to Hawaii. I'm in the tower now. We're coming home. We're not looking for anything to sight, and I'm in the tower. I leaned them engines back so damn thin, so lean, that they would get hot and I'd have to put a charge to them to cool them back down. We came in to about twenty-five miles directly port side of our plane, and then we just veered in because we was

close enough in to get a radio signal, and we went in on the beam. We had less than a bucketful of gas when we pulled up to the ramp. And there this man really caught hell this time.

But I finally got . . . after pulling patrol, I finally went over and threatened to whip this chief that was allocating these . . . I knew he was being bought, and I finally had to go to town and buy him a pen set and a . . . a ballpoint pen set and something else and put them on his desk. This was Friday afternoon. Would you believe that on Monday morning I got my orders for flight school? I come back to Athens, Georgia, spent three months there in pre-flight school, went into the airfield between Dallas and Fort Worth. There's where one of the Navy's . . . well, one of the flight schools was there. I busted out of flight school there in 1943. Then I went back to war.

Marcello: In the aftermath of the attack, how was your attitude toward the Japanese changed?

Parsons: Well, it didn't change. It just got worse. They're just sneaky little this, sneaky little that. I never . . . when they were flying over us that day, why, they were looking out their cockpit at the ship--you know, just



like you driving by in a car--grinning at you and them big buckteeth.

Marcello: You could actually see them that well?

Parsons: Oh, yes. They was just plain as I can see you sitting here, see. They were grinning at you. They've got on a dungaree shirt just like they sell in Honolulu. We all figured that some of these cats had been in Hawaii and got their clothes there, see, because some of them that were shot down had Hawaiian shoes and stuff on. But that's as close as I'd ever gotten to one of them that was fighting us until, like I said, I went back to war after busting out of flight school. They talk about these sailors and soldiers and stuff shooting these Vietnamese. I saw a Marine on Tinian shoot about three of them one time because they jumped him with shovels. They had them on a work detail on the side of the road. Hell, he just cut them to pieces with a .30-caliber machine gun he was carrying, see. But they were treacherous, and they were dedicated. They're one of the most dedicated fighting people in the world with the exception of the . . . there's one other race that was greater fighters than they were. They were fighters. There's no doubt about that.

Marcello: Is there anything else that you think we need to get as a part of the record about your experiences at Pearl Harbor, or have we covered just about everything?

Parsons: I think we've covered just about all . . . well, explosions behind us . . . behind and to the right of us when the Cassin and the Shaw and the Pennsylvania and Downes were hit and that dry dock sank and all that. That was behind us, and it was unbelievable that the explosions and the fires and everything was raging all around us. We were more or less like in a point of a pyramid or something behind us. Behind to the right and behind to the left was Battleship Row. Behind and to the right was the Pennsylvania and the Cassin and the Downes and the Shaw in the floating dry dock. They were all to the right of us more or less. Everything was happening behind us. Nothing happened out where we could see it. We could see a PT boat and these motor launches cruising around trying to run these little Jap subs into the ground. There are different stories. I think there was two or three inside the harbor because we got two of them out. They seemed to think that maybe there was one still down there. Of course, the figures in history doesn't always pan up with what . . .

Marcello: Did you actually see the Shaw when it exploded?

Parsons: No. Well, I just saw the explosion. I mean, you couldn't . . . it was back in where you couldn't see the ship, you know, because that dry dock was so much bigger than the

Shaw. I believe it would hold a cruiser. Now it wouldn't hold a battleship, but I believe it was big enough to hold a cruiser. See, the Shaw was a destroyer, and a small one, see. But you could see all them explosions. If you didn't actually see the explosion, you seen the fires afterward, see, because you had to keep turning your head. If you're just a spectator, why, you can see almost everything in the aftermath of it.

Marcello: The next day, after you had a chance to calm down a little bit perhaps, what did that harbor look like?

Parsons: A shambles. It was a flat shambles. Well, it was for a year or so afterwards. It was still a shambles. But the next day they got all of the fires out--a few smoldering just a little--but oil was all over everything. It was miserable-looking. You would think it never would come out of anything like this. I went back aboard.

A bunch of the Oklahoma sailors went aboard the USS Blue, which was later on lost in the war. I'd say there were ten or fifteen of them off the Oklahoma. I don't remember now what period this was. They must have went to sea and come back because these . . . when they came back, I don't know whether I got a call or what, but I went aboard the Blue to see these cats. They

didn't have a damn rag on them. They had their skivvy drawers and undershirts. These other people on board ship had either given theirs to somebody or something, but they didn't have nothing for them. I went back aboard the Ontario, and I didn't . . . I just told these cats to break out all the clothes but what they had on. I put them in a bag and took them back aboard the Blue and gave them to these Oklahoma sailors. I don't know how long she stayed in port. I'll remember stuff that I should have told after I leave here and everything, see--real goodies.

But stuff like that I think is important because these cats left the Oklahoma without a rag, and while I was aboard the Blue to see . . . Archie West. This was that boy's name. He had six hundred and some dollars in his locker. This ship now . . . just picture a battleship on its side. They'd cut a hole in it on top. He asked me to go in that and get his money out of his locker and keep it for him. Well, there was a chief aboard the USS Oklahoma that I knew very well. They made him an ensign right after the war broke out and put him in charge of the Oklahoma salvage party. I went and asked him if I could go down and in the ship. He said, "Hell, Parsons, I can't give you permission to go down inside that ship. It's too dangerous." I said,

"Bullfroggy!" He says, "Well, you can't go." I says, "Okay" and I went on around just . . . he knew where I was going. I went on down in the ship and searched Archie's locker. Somebody'd done been in there and stole it.

Marcello: You actually got down in the Oklahoma?

Parsons: Oh, yes, I went right down in the Oklahoma.

Marcello: Well, how did you see around down in there? Did you have a light or something?

Parsons: No. You could . . . there was a hole. There was enough light that you could . . . in the daylight. I mean, you didn't need lights aboard a ship like that, see.

Marcello: But this ship was already turned over.

Parsons: Oh, yes, it was over. It was on its side. I went down in there and searched his locker thoroughly. He had one other locker, and to somebody there off the Oklahoma I said, "Where is Archie West's other locker?" He pointed to a smaller one. I went over and kicked it open and searched it. I brought out what clothes he had in there in case he ever came back. But I never did see him no more for, oh, a long time. He wrote me one time and wanted to know if I got his money. I said, "Archie, somebody done robbed you. In fact, somebody aboard ship told me where your other locker was--your little one." He said, "You found that, too?" I said,

"Yes, sure. I kicked the damn thing open and got your clothes out. I kept them aboard ship for a long time."

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. In fact, I saw him one time back home before he died. He died of a heart attack or something. But, see, I was about to forget my going down in there, see.

Marcello: How long after the attack was this that you went back down in there?

Parsons: Oh, it had to be anywhere from two weeks to maybe a month or a month and a half. Well, they'd already started . . . they'd already got two or three people that was trapped and pounding on the side of the ship. They'd done cut holes in there and pulled them out, see.

Oh, hey. Wait a minute, shoot. Somewhere along the line in all of this activity I got blood poisoning in both arms. I went to the hospital.

Marcello: But you don't know how you got it?

Parsons: I don't know how I got it, and I don't recollect anything to it. They put a temporary hospital up on Red Hill. I was up there, and they had a helluva time saving me. Boy, I like to lost both arms! These nurses, they called me "Red." I was full of the devil and all the time kidding them. I said, "How in the hell am I going to hug you or play with you with these arms . . . if I lose these?" I

said, "You better get busy here, woman." They kept them all doctored. They finally . . . I've still got scars here on . . . where they . . .

But then they were bringing bodies out of these ships. So this had to be two or three months afterwards. They put me on a work detail. I'm still weak as a cat, but I don't never refuse to do a damn job in my life. I would go down inside the ship. They'd furnish an ordinary gas mask. Well, we found out a gas mask does not filter the ordinary smells. Like I said, I was weak and just out of the hospital. They were putting individual bones and what have you in sacks and tying them. Some had dog tags on them and some didn't. I was carrying them back up to the gangway, and they was just dropping them in the motor launch. After about four or five of these trips, why, this stuff got to me, and I just couldn't take no more. I told this guy in charge, I said, "I can't go back." "What do you mean, you can't go back?" "Well, just what I said, sir. I just got out of the hospital. I'm not looking for an excuse." I said, "Sir, let me tell you something right now. You can take this job and jam it because I am not going back! If I could go back I wouldn't be standing here talking to you. I'd be back all the way down there. But I'm not going back. Do

your damnest. I will man this motor launch between here and the beach. I can stand that because I can put my head out in the wind. But I'm not going back down in the hole." So the rest of the day I worked . . . and he decided precaution was the better part of valor, I guess, because I worked the rest of the day carrying the bodies to the beach in this motor launch.

Marcello: And this was occurring actually more than a month after the actual attack itself.

Parsons: Yes, when you started cleaning up and started trying to get the bodies and things out of the ships.

Marcello: Well, for something that occurred over thirty-three years ago, you've done a pretty good job in remembering things.

Parsons: Like I say, I come near forgetting that burial detail. But, you know, you could probably stay there and talk to me all day, and we could get some goodies.

Marcello: I think we've done a pretty good job, though.