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J a m e s T . K e r n s

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Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: James L Kerns
(Signature)

Date: May 15 / 19 / 76

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Oral History Collection

James T. Kerns

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Date: May 15, 1976

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Mr. James Kerns for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 15, 1976, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Kerns in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard a motorboat in Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. Actually, Mr. Kerns was a crewman aboard the repair ship, the USS Dobbin.

Mr. Kerns, 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. Kerns: I was born on March 4, 1919, in Prescott, Arkansas. I have a fifth grade education, which isn't much good anymore. I went in the service in . . . well, I went in the CCC camp in 1935 or '36. I entered the U.S. Navy on August 13, 1937.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Kerns: Things were pretty hard outside at that time, and I thought that I would like it, and it would be a good career or a good service so I proceeded to try to join the service. They found out that I had a fifth grade education, and they didn't much want to take me. But I did make a good score on my grade and they did accept me, and so I proceeded from there into boot camp in San Diego, California.

Marcello: You know, economic reasons are probably the most numerous reasons that are given for people of your generation having entered the service. Times were tough, and the service represented a certain amount of security in terms of steady pay, good food, and things of this nature.

Kerns: It did, yes, sir, because we were working about thirty or thirty-five cents a day, daylight to dark, and then you had to do your own work at home. In the service, when I entered the Navy, it was twenty-one dollars a month which was not much, but you did gradually go up. And the next rate was seaman second class at thirty-six and fifty-four dollars, and that sounded pretty good, and I liked it.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as a part of the record? Or was it the typical Navy boot camp?

Kerns: It was a typical Navy boot camp which I believe was very firm and very fair. There was no fooling around. I mean, it was rough.

Marcello: How long was boot camp at the time that you were there?

Kerns: Three months.

Marcello: In other words, you went through boot camp before there was a state of national emergency, and boot camp time had not been cut yet?

Kerns: No, sir. In fact, I believe it was 1939 before they started the draft, so I was in prior to that a lot. So I went aboard the USS Dobbin in San Diego after boot camp, and we was there in the harbor for quite awhile. We made one trip to Hawaii, stayed a few weeks, and came back to the United States into San Diego. We were there for awhile, and then they sent a fleet over more or less, I guess you would say, as protection for Pearl Harbor, and it seems to me like that was the last part of '38 or it was '39. So I stayed there, and I had four years--better than four years and a half in--when the war started.

Marcello: How did you get aboard the Dobbin? Was this voluntary, or were you simply assigned to the Dobbin?

Kerns: They assigned me to the Dobbin.

Marcello: When you went aboard the Dobbin, what sort of rating were you striking for or hoping to strike for?

Kerns: I had no idea. I didn't because I was just a seaman second class then and had to take the examination for seaman first class, and I didn't know what I wanted, so I was in deck force, 1st Division. Consequently, I wound up as a boatswain's mate.

Marcello: In other words, you stayed in the deck force during your time on the Dobbin?

Kerns: Yes, sir.

Marcello: How would you describe the training that you received aboard the Dobbin as a member of the deck force? In other words, was it good training, poor training, fair training? How would you describe it?

Kerns: I'd say it was very good training. It was strict training, which to keep a good, strong service we need good, trained men, learned. They pounded it into your head. They stayed with you until you learned it. It was very good.

Marcello: How fast was promotion in those pre-World War II days?

Kerns: Very slow.

Marcello: I've heard it said that one really never became a chief until he had at least twelve years or three hash marks.

Kerns: You'd get at least three hash marks, I think. I had four years in before I made third class boatswain's mate.

Marcello: And that wasn't unusual?

Kerns: No, sir. That was called coxswain in those days, which is third class boatswain's mate in the Navy today. I guess I thought I had got along pretty good. I took the examination about five times and passed it with high grades two or three times, pretty low once. The next time I went up for it, I filled out the front page, and I sat there for awhile and turned in my papers. I tell it like it is. The next morning, the executive officer called me up to his cabin, and he proceeds to inform me very quick the mistake that I had made because they was wanting a rating aboard that ship for one third class, and that was for me. And I hadn't filled out the papers. He says, "You're going to take another examination Friday --special examination." I made it, but I wished I'd passed the first one, but I got a third class rate. It was hard.

Marcello: What was the morale like aboard the Dobbin prior to the coming of World War II? Now you mentioned that you were on the Dobbin for three or three and a half years.

Kerns: I was on the USS Dobbin from the last part of 1937 until 1942.

Marcello: So you were on it a period of five years, but again,

what was the morale like during that period prior to the coming of the war?

Kerns: I think it was alright. We had good officers. We had good men in charge of us, in other words, chiefs, first class, second class, and on down the line. Naturally, there would be some friction between one or two now and then, but morale was very well. It wasn't bad.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Dobbin?

Kerns: I thought it was very good.

Marcello: How about the living quarters? What were they like aboard the Dobbin?

Kerns: Well, I'd say that they were alright. There was just one big living quarters for us. All of our lockers were there. We'd eat in the same quarters, and we slept in the same quarters, but it was always clean. That was one thing for sure. It was white glove clean. If an officer would come along and find a little dust on something, you'd do it over. It was strict there, but it was good. It would teach you how to do something right.

Marcello: When was it that the Dobbin moved to Pearl Harbor on a more or less permanent basis?

Kerns: I think, Dr. Marcello, that it must have been the early part of '39. I don't know for sure. I can't remember, and I'm sorry.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands and being there more or less permanently?

Kerns: I wasn't married and had no family . . . well, I had my mother and daddy at home, but it didn't bother me. I was satisfied with it.

Marcello: I think most people considered it to be pretty good duty, did they not?

Kerns: Yes, sir, I think so. Most all the men seemed to enjoy it. Well, some of the married men, they couldn't take their wives. Naturally, they were a little bit disturbed about it, but that's to be expected. But there were a lot of single men, and they all anticipated pretty nice duty. We didn't know how long we would be there. We didn't know the circumstances that were coming up. That was the thing of it.

Marcello: Now when you got to the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis, did the Dobbin for the most part stay right there at Pearl Harbor?

Kerns: Yes, sir.

Marcello: In other words, you didn't go out very often on the fleet maneuvers and training exercises and things of this nature?

Kerns: No, sir. Only a very, very few times did we go out on any fleet maneuvers or any kind that way. We came back to the United States in 1940, I believe it was,

and I don't know the month. We was here about two weeks and went back, and we were moored there with the destroyers, being a destroyer tender. The destroyers could come alongside of us, and if they had any damage --which we were a repair ship--we repaired them so they could be sent back out to sea.

Marcello: In other words, you took care of the destroyers, and I would assume, therefore, that you were usually anchored or tied up over at the destroyer nests.

Kerns: Yes, sir. We were . . . well, we were just about at the dead end of Ford Island. That's opposite to the entrance to Pearl Harbor. It was between Aiea and Pearl City.

Marcello: Did you have a very good view of Battleship Row from where the Dobbin usually anchored?

Kerns: Yes, sir.

Marcello: About how far away was Battleship Row? You would have to estimate this, of course.

Kerns: I'd say a quarter of a mile.

Marcello: Was this an unobstructed view that you had of the battleships?

Kerns: Pretty much so, yes, sir. Pretty well so. See, there was the USS Solace, a hospital ship, moored closer to Battleship Row than we were. Then there was an old ship. It was an icebreaker that was out of

commission, and I do not know the name of the ship.

I can't remember it anymore.

Marcello: It couldn't have been too important if it was an icebreaker at Pearl Harbor (chuckle).

Kerns: Well, it wasn't in commission anymore, and I . . . it seems like that Gillette bought that ship for steel.

Marcello: You mean the Gillette Razor Company?

Kerns: I think that's what I heard, and I thought that's what it was going to be, you know, to make razor blades and stuff. But anyway, it was still there at the time Pearl Harbor was bombed. But we were pretty close to the . . . well, the Arizona . . . see, being that we were at the end of the island, we were the closest to the Arizona. Then we would have to go on around the island, Ford Island, toward the Officers' Club landing or Ten-Ten landing to get up alongside Battleship Row.

Marcello: What sort of liberty routine did you have aboard the Dobbin during this period that you were stationed at Pearl Harbor?

Kerns: It was port and starboard liberty.

Marcello: Would it be strictly weekend liberty?

Kerns: No, sir. I can't really remember just how the days run, but we got every other weekend off and a certain amount of the days through the week.

Marcello: But if you had the liberty, you did get the entire weekend off?

Kerns: Yes, sir. Well, it was until midnight on Sunday night if you were under the rank of chief petty officer.

Marcello: When you had weekend liberty, when did it usually begin?

Kerns: Most of the times on Saturday at one o'clock.

Marcello: And then you would not have to be back aboard ship again until twelve o'clock on Sunday?

Kerns: Sunday night, yes, sir. I mess cooked for quite awhile. In fact, I liked it. When my three months were up, I asked for an extension.

Marcello: Why did you like mess cooking?

Kerns: Some of them thought I was crazy. They didn't like to stand captain's inspection, and I didn't mind it. I'd clean up all of my silverware, trays, and dishes for twenty men at my table. I got off on Friday afternoon at one o'clock until the next morning at seven, Saturday morning, and I stood captain's inspection in front of my two tables which seated twenty men. A lot of them didn't like to stand the inspection, so they would take my duty so I could do that. Then at one o'clock Saturday afternoon, I was off until Monday morning.

Marcello: Well, a lot of times when you were mess cook, the men that you were serving would also slip you a little bit of extra money, would they not, in return for more food?

Kerns: At payday, they helped us out, yes, sir. Come payday they would give you a little tip, and the better you treated them . . . you know, if you'd take care of them, they'd take care of you.

Marcello: What did you usually do when you went on liberty?

Kerns: I didn't have many places to go. I knew two or three young ladies over there. I went to movies. I went to the skating rinks. I drank a little. But most of the time we just . . . a lot of times I have just walked around the whole city to see what it was like.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Dobbin?

Kerns: First and fifteenth.

Marcello: Which meant that at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, you probably would not have had too much money because that was about midway between paydays.

Kerns: Just about midway, yes, sir. Some of them said there were Japanese and a lot of others getting men drunk the night before Pearl Harbor was bombed on Sunday morning. Well, I had liberty that night until one o'clock, and I did not see much of that going on.

Marcello: I was going to ask you about this. The impression

that a great many people have is that on a Saturday night, most of the sailors got knee-walking drunk, and consequently they wouldn't be in shape to fight on a Sunday morning. Therefore, the best time for an attack would have been on a Sunday morning. How would you answer this assertion?

Kerns: I would say that people that have that idea are definitely wrong. I'll tell you, most of them could fight at anytime, but you'd find one or two now and then that got pretty drunk, naturally. I mean, he would get more than he thought he had. As far as the--what would you say--the complement, no, sir. That is definitely a misstatement, a misconception of a lot of people's ideas. And a lot of them think the men had all night liberty. Married chiefs . . . I think the chiefs as best I can remember . . . I know the married chiefs and maybe the married first class had overnight liberty. All the rest of them had to be back aboard at one o'clock.

Marcello: In other words, even if you had weekend liberty, you had to be back aboard at one o'clock Sunday morning, and then you could still have off Sunday at whatever time liberty started again.

Kerns: Yes, sir. I've heard it said a lot of times that they were getting them drunk where they couldn't

fight the next morning, but that is wrong in my opinion.

I think the majority would go along with that idea--
officers and men.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese during this pre-World War II period, what sort of an individual did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Kerns: Dr. Marcello, I had not really thought too much of the Japanese or about them, what they were like, the strength they had. I guess I was by then like a lot of people were about Pearl Harbor or Hawaii. A lot of people in the United States didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. When they heard Pearl Harbor was bombed, "Well, where is that?" That's the first time they had heard of it even to my understanding.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to the days immediately prior to the Japanese attack itself, and what I want you to do at this point, Mr. Kerns, is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, from the time you got up until the time you went to bed that night. Now you talked about this a little bit, but I want you to go into as much detail as you can remember about that Saturday.

Kerns: If I'm not mistaken, I had duty all Saturday afternoon, and we ran one boat--one trip every hour--to the Officers' Club landing until one o'clock.

Marcello: In other words, you were on one of the small boats that was ferrying officers over to the Officers' Club landing?

Kerns: It's a motorboat which is the same thing as they would call a captain's gig. It was built the same and even had the same color. Admirals' barges are the same only it's painted a different color, thirty-five foot with a 105 horsepower diesel motor in it.

Marcello: Now this is what you were doing on Saturday?

Kerns: Saturday afternoon and Saturday night.

Marcello: But didn't you say you had liberty Saturday night?

Kerns: That's right. The night before Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was off until one o'clock.

Marcello: Again, let's just backtrack here.

Kerns: I messed myself up back there on that.

Marcello: Okay, let's go back and backtrack once more and talk about your routine on Saturday from the time you get up until you got back into bed that evening. Now obviously, somewhere in there you had liberty.

Kerns: On that Saturday, no, sir. I didn't have it until one o'clock. Saturday morning, we got up, we swabbed down the decks, shined the bright work and polished up, cleaned everything. Well, we usually had coffee the first thing and cleaned up, had our breakfast, finished cleaning up the ship. Sometimes there was an

inspection, sometimes not. The liberty party, ones that had liberty that day, whether it be port of starboard, got off at one o'clock.

Marcello: And you were on the liberty party that day?

Kerns: Yes, I had that liberty party that day. That is why I say while ago that I messed myself up. I know those men were not getting all soused up that night because I was over there until one o'clock myself.

Marcello: Okay, what did you do when you went on liberty that evening? Or I can ask about that day and into the evening since you had liberty beginning at one o'clock.

Kerns: I went to a show that afternoon and saw a girl there. Well, she was part Irish and part Hawaiian. I decided I would come on back to the ship. We just didn't do anything really, just enjoyed each other's company for the evening, and we walked around town a lot that night. And that's why I say I didn't see a bunch of them getting drunk.

Marcello: Were you downtown in Honolulu where most of the action usually took place?

Kerns: Yes, sir. I didn't get down in those back bars and back streets, but we were down in the main part of town where you could see everything that was going on.

Marcello: So what time did you get back aboard the Dobbin that night?

Kerns: One o'clock.

Marcello: Okay, so did you go directly to bed at that point?

Kerns: Yes, I went directly to bed and got up the next morning at six because I had duty that morning and got breakfast. The crew and I got aboard the boat, and about ten minutes until eight, we received our orders from the officer of the day to report to the Officers' Club landing and pick up the chaplain, whose name I do not remember, and a party of guests that he was bringing back for Sunday services.

Marcello: In other words, you were going to bring the chaplain and his guests back aboard the Dobbin?

Kerns: Yes, sir, bring them back to our own ship. So it must have been at five or maybe six minutes or between five and six minutes till eight o'clock when . . . I was . . . I had went around the end of Ford Island and was going up alongside the battleships, and I saw five planes. It looked like they had just dived in on the end of Ford Island and down at the hangars. When one of them pulled out, I saw it had a zero on it. To me, I was a little bit dumb about insignias because we hadn't brushed up on it. None of us really knew too much about it. I told Dutter, R. E. Dutter-- he was my engineer--I told him, I said, "R.E., that's Japanese planes!" He looked at them, and he said,

"No, it couldn't be." About that time torpedo planes were all over us.

Marcello: Now how close were you to the battleships at this point? In other words, were you on the other side of Ford Island from the battleships, or were you on the same side of Ford Island where the battleships were anchored.

Kerns: I was on the side to the battlewagons because some of the torpedoes that they dropped . . . I saw two of them that definitely went under my boat. They hit the battleships. I was wondering if I was going to be able to . . . if I had a high enough draft or shallow enough draft to not be hit by one of them.

Marcello: What did it feel like to have those torpedo pass underneath your boat?

Kerns: It didn't make me feel too good because those pilots were low enough that you could see them grinning at you. If a person had of had a .30-30 rifle or anything like that that morning, he could have brought down some of them himself right there in the position I was in.

Marcello: Okay, so you're out here in the harbor, and you see these torpedo planes coming in. You see them drop their torpedoes, and they pass under your boat, and they proceed on to the battleships. What do you do at this point?

Kerns: I continued on to the Officers' Club landing, ducking and zigging and zagging because there were a few of them trying to get a few shots at us.

Marcello: Were they strafing you?

Kerns: They wanted to, tried to, but we were lucky. We got over to the Officers' Club landing, and the chaplain was not there.

Marcello: Where was this Officers' Club landing located?

Kerns: I am trying to think approximately . . . it would be across the bay from the submarine base and about halfway between Ten-Ten Dock and the enlisted men's landing. I think it was roughly in that position.

Marcello: So how long did it take you to get over there from the time that you initially saw the Japanese planes attacking the battleships?

Kerns: Eight or ten minutes possibly. And we tied up alongside the landing. We were to wait for the chaplain, and he didn't show up, and we knew then he wouldn't show up.

Something happened there. I didn't see it happen. It was either a plane shot down or a torpedo shot out from under one of those planes that went crazy out there in the water. It dived, it would go around and around in a circle, and it headed towards the beach right there by our motorboat. And I mean, we ducked

for cover! We thought it was going to hit the beach, but the warhead was blown off of it. It either broke off when the pilot dropped it, broke it in two, and the warhead, I guess, just went down, but the mechanism was still driving and drove it up on the beach. There was a few sighs of relief, I tell you.

Marcello: How far was this from you?

Kerns: About a hundred feet. So if it would have been a torpedo and it had went off, it would have been pretty rough.

So there were a lot of officers there needing to get back to the ship. We had two or three of our own, and there were other ships' officers needing to get back. I guess I took it on myself. The chaplain hadn't shown up, and the other officers were there, so we made a run for it.

Marcello: In other words, you gathered up all of these officers, and you were going to take them to wherever their ships were?

Kerns: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Did most of these officers seem to be rather calm and composed? Did they seem to know what they were supposed to do? How would you describe their reactions?

Kerns: They were about as--how would you call it--horrified and mixed up and wondering what was happening as I

was. We all wondered what was happening. It happened too soon. And one of them says, "I've got to get back to my ship! I'm the gunnery officer, and I've got the keys to the ammunition lockers in my pocket!" And the others had to get back to their ships for various reasons, so I tried to take them all back to their ships. We went to one cruiser on the opposite side of the . . . well, we went back down alongside of the battleships, but we cut across the bay, and we were right close to the Arizona. We could see it. By then, they were in terrible condition. The outside ships had sunk, the inside ships were getting it. The Arizona was moored by itself, and we were about, well, a few hundred yards from it. I know these was high altitude planes dropping bombs right down Battle-ship Row, and it must have got them right down the magazines and the stack because when that Arizona blew up, it blew all to pieces.

Marcello: What effect did the blowing up of the Arizona have upon you while you were out in the water in this small boat? Could you feel any of the after effects?

Kerns: Well, no, at the time it didn't bother me. I mean, I could still keep a reasonable head on me. We all did.

Marcello: Now were you the coxswain of this boat?

Kerns: Yes, sir.

Marcello: And did you continue to deliver the officers to their respective ships?

Kerns: Yes, sir. I had to get away out from under that because some of those bombs were still falling on past the Arizona which we were then in the path of. We got out of the way of it, and we went back in towards Pearl City and let some officers off at some destroyers.

I think it was Lieutenant Commander . . . I was trying to think of the name of that one cruiser sitting there on the side of the island opposite to the battlegroups. He was the gunnery officer that had the keys to the ammunition depot. We knew that they had already knocked the locks off the ammunition lockers, but we let him off and started backing down.

And this one plane . . . the pilot saw that I had two or three officers in the cockpit with me, and he decided that he would drop a 500-pound bomb on us. He dropped one and it went off, delayed action, right underneath us. It's a good thing it was delayed action. It knocked us out for, I guess, a few seconds. I come to . . . I remember grabbing for one officer's legs. I thought he was going over the side, and by that time. . . I don't know what then happened because I was out.

Marcello: But now the bomb had not exploded?

Kerns: It exploded, but it was deep. Just the concussion of it underneath a thirty-five-foot boat that way, you know, it was pretty rough.

Marcello: But it didn't knock you out of the boat or anything of that nature?

Kerns: That one officer, I grabbed his legs. He would have went over the side if I hadn't caught his legs, and I don't know then how I caught his legs because it looks like it would have knocked me out as quick as it did him. Maybe he was going over and was not knocked out completely yet, but we was stunned for a few minutes. The boat was still running, so we started trying to get away and deliver the officers to the ships.

I got back aboard my ship. I pulled up alongside the gangway, and I had two officers for it, and the O.D. told me, he says, "Let your engineer tie up, and you get on your guns! Man your battle station!" I was first pointer on the number-four gun that was on fantail. It was a three-inch fifty-one dual purpose antiaircraft gun. It had fixed ammunition.

When I got back there, the second pointer had taken my place. We had a near miss. He got a hunk of shrapnel through his back, tore out the complete

front. I guess if I'd been aboard that morning . . . that was my battle station. I was first pointer. I would have been there. You might think maybe . . . well, a few of them had been training in different positions, so I wouldn't have been there. Maybe I would have. I don't know.

Marcello: Now had this guy already been killed by the time that you got there?

Kerns: Yes, sir. There was three of them killed there. One had a leg blown off, and one had been hit in the buttocks, just a chunk out of it about as big as a saucer. It wasn't hardly bleeding. It just cauterized as it hit because it was so hot. I know the next day he was laughing about it in the sickbay. He was laying on his stomach. He said, "What am I going to tell my kids and grandkids?" He says, "I wasn't running." Well, he took it with a pretty good sense of humor, and that kind of helped the morale of all the rest of us around. They heard it.

Marcello: Well, getting back to you at the gun, you obviously had taken the place of the second pointer.

Kerns: I had taken the place of the second pointer, yes, sir.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened at that point?

Kerns: Well, I'll tell you, it was just about over by that time.

Marcello: I was going to say you had been out in the water delivering officers for some time.

Kerns: Quite some time, yes, sir. It seemed like it went on for half a day, but it must have been about an hour and thirty or forty minutes, maybe two hours. I don't think it lasted two hours. I didn't have a timepiece, and I don't know for sure.

Marcello: So what did you do in the aftermath of the attack then? By this time now you were at your battle station?

Kerns: We stayed put. I was in white sneakers and white uniform, and other men's blood around there . . . I'm telling you, it was pretty pathetic. They brought up sandwiches to us. We just stayed with our gun mounts, gun stations.

Marcello: Did you have very much of an appetite or a thirst at that time?

Kerns: No, sir, not too much of an appetite. It knocked the appetite out of you. You naturally get thirsty.

Marcello: How long did you stay at that gun before you were relieved?

Kerns: I was on there until midnight. I stayed with it until midnight.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen that night?

Kerns: Yes, sir. There were some planes coming in, and I'm pretty sure they were our own planes coming in from

California. They hadn't received all the word that was put out, and we hadn't received all the word that they were coming in, and they were fired on.

Marcello: Did you fire?

Kerns: I'm afraid I fired one round, yes, sir.

Marcello: Evidently, every gun in the harbor opened up on those planes?

Kerns: I think they all did, and I think the planes made it through. I'm hoping they did, and I really do not know because we couldn't find out. We honestly couldn't find out whether we had shot down any of our planes that night or not.

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

Kerns: Well, we'd shot down all of our own planes that was coming in and that we could whip the Japanese in two weeks' time. Well, that was a long two weeks.

Marcello: Did you ever hear the rumors of the Japanese having landed or anything of this nature?

Kerns: We heard some that they had landed on opposite side of the island, but it didn't go over very well with us because we knew that they hadn't. By that time, they would have been on us.

Marcello: Did you manage to get any sleep that night?

Kerns: Yes, sir, I got some sleep after midnight--a little bit.

Marcello: What did you do the next day?

Kerns: We turned to and started scrubbing up and cleaning down. Well, all the time this was going on, see, we didn't have any .50-calibers or anything like that mounted. During the attack, they were mounting .50-caliber machine guns, but that took so long to do that that they were of no use to us. But we had four destroyers tied up alongside of us which put up pretty good firepower itself.

Marcello: But they got underway very shortly after the attack started, did they not?

Kerns: No, sir, they stay with us. They were in there for repairs, and they stayed alongside.

Marcello: Some of the destroyers that were there did get underway, though.

Kerns: Yes, sir, there were some that did get underway. I believe it was the Helena, a cruiser, that got underway as well, and I don't remember which ship it was, but it was one of the ships that was hit pretty heavy that got into . . . see, that's a very narrow channel coming in. These little two-man subs were getting in there, and they said, "If they come in, they will have to run over us first." And I think they grounded it right . . . they got it right there at the narrow part of the island and then grounded the ship. They

had a broadside to them. Could we go back a short ways, a few months?

Marcello: Sure.

Kerns: We lost a captain over there. I have never been able to find out anything about it.

Marcello: Do you want to describe this incident? I think I have heard it before. Nevertheless, I'd like to get your version of the story.

Kerns: My version of it would be . . . I think it was Captain Lattimer. We had Commander Womble. Commander Womble was our executive officer. If I had my continuous service record here, which has been signed many times. . . it's a green folder about every phase of my Navy career. As each page fills up, they add pages to it--so many years, so many months.

But Captain Lattimer . . . every day at one o'clock I took him to the Officers' Club landing, and I think the last time was, I'll say, the latter part of October, somewhere about then. I cannot remember the dates. That's been too far past, but for months I took him to the Officers' Club landing. Five, 5:30, six o'clock, I'd pick him up at Aiea Landing.

Marcello: What was he doing in the meantime?

Kerns: He dressed in khakis and took him just a straight walking stick. It wasn't a curved handle; it was just a straight walking stick. He said he was going hiking, and I understand he hiked back up in those hills there an awful lot. He carried a short, sharp machete with him.

One night, he came in late. I could not see what the three men in the car looked like that were with him. I don't know what nationality they were or anything. They brought him down to Aiea Landing.

Marcello: What time was this?

Kerns: It was after dark. I think somewhere around eight o'clock.

Marcello: What time would you normally pick him up?

Kerns: About 5:30.

Marcello: In other words, you waited there all that time on him?

Kerns: Yes, sir. Our orders were to report to Aiea Landing and wait for the captain to show up and bring him back to the ship, and that was the orders you carried out, too. That was the last orders . . . you always carry out the last orders you received first, and that was the last orders we received from the officer of the day.

He had his khaki shirt off and wrapped around his

left wrist and arm, and it was blood-soaked. His pants were soaked in blood, and I saw he was in trouble, and I ran up to the end of the dock to meet him.

Marcello: Meanwhile, what happened to his car with the other people in it?

Kerns: They came up, leaned out, talked a minute or so, and drove off and left him. And I saw that there was something wrong. I could see his undershirt . . . there was not but two or three little buildings up there at the end of the dock. There was one little beer joint, and I don't know what the other was. The reason I said beer joint was because he would say, "If I'm late and you fellas want a beer, get one." Well, we wouldn't do it, not on duty, so I ran up to meet him. Many a time he had come down to the highway where we could see him, and he would hit a pretty fast trot all the way down to Aiea Landing, to our boat. He wasn't puffing. He was in good shape.

But this time he asked me, he says, "Kerns, can you and the engineer handle the boat?" I said, "Certainly." He says, "Come down here in the rear cockpit with me." I went down with him, and he says, "Sit down," and he was pretty quiet. I guess he

lost quite a bit of blood. He didn't look too strong. He was still standing up under it good. He said, "Just stay down here with me until we get to the ship." I says, "Well, what happened, if I may ask?" He said, "I got into some sleeper vines up there, and I was chopping my way out, and I missed and got tangled up, and I cut my arm with the machete." He says, "I like to have never got out of there." So that was the last word we got on that.

A couple of weeks later, he was ready to go again. Same thing all over. Sometime--I think it was the latter part of October--I went over to pick him up at five o'clock in the evening. He didn't show up. About eight o'clock, one of the liberty boats from our ship was going into the enlisted man's landing to pick up enlisted men and take them back and take some others ashore. They says, "The captain hasn't shown up yet?" I said, "No. Tell the O.D. we will still be here until he does." I said, "Did he give you any different orders?" He said, "No." I said, "Alright." At one o'clock the liberty boat came by. That was the last liberty boat. "The captain still hasn't shown up?" I told him, "No." I says, "I don't know where he is, but we're going to stay here." Boy, the mosquitoes were having a feast. Anyway, we waited. I told him, "Just tell the O.D.

that we will be here until the captain returns or we hear otherwise."

The next morning at seven o'clock, this liberty boat came by going in to pick up enlisted men, and he says, "What is going on?" I says, "I don't know. The captain hasn't shown up yet." I said, "He hasn't been here. The captain's still not here."

I asked if I could change his orders. It's not right, but I knew under certain circumstances they would possibly overlook it. And he says, "I think so. What is it?" I said, "Well, you stay here at the landing until we can get to the ship and me report to the O.D. and get back." He says, "Yes, we'll both take responsibility, especially if they want to get bad about it." His orders were to pick up the enlisted men, but he was also to come by and see why we were not back over there.

So I reported back aboard the ship. The O.D. had them pipe all hands. The boatswain's mate piped all hands and told them the captain had not returned aboard ship yet, and all hands not in the duty section were to go on a searching party looking for him and report topside. Those on the duty section couldn't go.

He was a good captain. I mean, he was one of those

good captain's that you liked. They all reported topside. We didn't have anybody left to take care of anything. They all wanted to go.

I said, "Well, the liberty boat is still over at the Officers' Club landing." I said, "We'll go back and relieve them." He said, "No, we'll send another boat in after the liberty party. You just get some rest." I says, "No, we'll just go on the searching party with them." They searched for days--Marines, Army, Air Corps, by planes, and everything we had.

We have never seen the captain since. I wish someone could tell me where he is at, what has happened to him, what did happen to him.

Marcello: Well, I think that's perhaps a good way to end this interview because it does remain a mystery to this day. This is the second time that I've heard this particular story, and it's one of those mysteries that nobody has ever found the answer to. Mr. Kerns, I want to thank you very much for participating in our project. You have said some very interesting and some very important things, and I think scholars are going to find it very useful when they use this material.

Kerns: Well, I hope so, but I'm not much of a talker. Oh, I can talk plenty, but I don't say much. I guess that's the thing of it. But if there is anything I have said

that can help in any way, I'm glad I have been able to have this interview with you.

Marcello: Well, you've given me a lot of very important information.