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Interview with
John Hubenak
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Place of Interview: Irving, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

John Hubenak

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Irving, Texas

Date: November 3, 1976

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing John Hubenak for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on November 3, 1976 in Irving, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Hubenak in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was stationed at Ford Island during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941.

Mr. Hubenak, to begin this interview, would you 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. Hubenak: I was born on February 28, 1917 at Ellinger, Texas. I went through high school in Ellinger. I really finished the tenth grade and then finished the rest of it while I was in the service. I joined the Navy in 1934.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you enter the service?

Mr. Hubenak: I don't really know. I just used to dream about it all my younger days.

Marcello: Did economic conditions have anything to do with it? After all, this was the midst of the great depression.

Hubenak: I imagine it did, some.

Marcello: I think a lot of people went into the service during that period for economic reasons. They couldn't get a job, and the service offered a certain amount of security.

Hubenak: I could have had a job. I could have had plenty of jobs, but I just wanted the adventure of it.

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

Hubenak: I don't know. For some reason, I've always wanted to be in the Navy instead of the other services. I chose the Navy because it travels a lot. I figured I'd get to see the world.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Hubenak: San Diego.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we ought to get as part of the record?

Hubenak: No, I don't think so.

Marcello: I gather that it was just the normal Navy boot camp. Well, when did you ultimately get over to the Hawaiian Islands?

Hubenak: Well, I was on the USS Ramapo, an oil tanker, on the Station, Asiatic Station. And coming back from the Asiatic Station, they transferred me to Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What were you striking for during that particular period?

Hubenak: I was striking for a meteorologist.

Marcello: And is this what you were at the time that you were at Pearl Harbor?

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: Where did you receive your training in order to become a meteorologist?

Hubenak: In Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Marcello: In other words, after you got out of boot camp, I gather that you must have become eligible to attend one of the Navy schools.

Hubenak: I had good enough grades that I could.

Marcello: And did you go to Lakehurst right out of boot camp?

Hubenak: No, I went to Lakehurst about four or five years after I was in the Navy.

Marcello: Okay, that would be sometime around 1938 or 1939 that you were at Lakehurst.

Hubenak: Right, 1939.

Marcello: How would you describe the training that you received here at Lakehurst in order to become a meteorologist?

Hubenak: Well, it's one of the best in the country.

Marcello: How long did that particular school last at that time?

Hubenak: Six weeks.

Marcello: And what rank were you when you came out of Lakehurst?

Hubenak: I was a seaman first class.

Marcello: How long did it take you to become rated?

Hubenak: About six months after I got out of school.

Marcello: And what rating would you have had at that time?

Hubenak: Aerographer's mate third class.

Marcello: How would you describe the on-the-job training that you received in those pre-Pearl Harbor days in order to become a meteorologist?

Hubenak: Well, it was all practical work that came with the job. I took observations, plotted maps, drew maps, put out forecasts.

Marcello: Did you find that most of the senior petty officers were willing to help you with your on-the-job training and so on?

Hubenak: That was their job.

Marcello: And did they show an eagerness to help a young sailor coming out of school?

Hubenak: Yes, they did. The more help they got, the better they liked it.

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

Hubenak: Oh, the best in the world, I guess.

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

Hubenak: Good treatment and education and so forth.

Marcello: Now when did you move to Ford Island?

Hubenak: About three or four months before the attack.

Marcello: And I gather, then, that you did have a shore station at Ford Island.

Hubenak: My station was Fleet Air Wing Two. They were based on Ford Island. I worked in the office on the Air Station, but I was attached to Fleet Air Wing Two.

Marcello: What were the living accommodations or the barracks like here at Ford Island?

Hubenak: They were very good.

Marcello: What made them so good?

Hubenak: Well, I couldn't tell you that.

Marcello: What was the . . .

Hubenak: We had good petty officers, and everybody got along.

Marcello: What was the food like in this pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Hubenak: Oh, just like it ever was--the best they could get.

Marcello: I'm sure that all of these things played a part in explaining the high morale in the Navy. You mentioned that the food was fairly good. I assume the quarters were pretty good. You mentioned that the quality of the officers and senior petty officers was fairly high. Okay, go into a little bit more detail on the kind of work that you were doing after you got to Ford Island.

Hubenak: Well, the same thing--take observations and log them and plot maps and draw maps and even do some forecasting sometimes.

Marcello: Now I assume that you are working in conjunction with the PBY's that were stationed on Ford Island.

Hubenak: Right. In fact, I flew some PBY missions.

Marcello: Well, describe what you would do on these PBY missions?

Hubenak: Well, I'd take observations every hour. See, we didn't have any observations out there over the Pacific where it was wide open, and we used to take those observations from the aircraft and send them in. That's the only thing that they had to go by.

Marcello: Do you have any idea of the type of patrol schedule that these PBY's undertook during this pre-Pearl Harbor period? Let me just be a little bit more specific. Normally, when would one of these patrols go out?

Hubenak: It would go out about six o'clock in the morning and come in about four in the afternoon.

Marcello: Would they usually have a pie-shaped vector that they would patrol, or just exactly how would that patrol work?

Hubenak: It would go out on a certain bearing and then come back maybe five or six degrees difference.

Marcello: Now would these patrols usually cover a 360-degree circumference of the islands when they went out on patrol?

Hubenak: No, they would cover about a 10-degree element.

Marcello: In other words, there were not enough planes to go out so that the islands would be patrolled in a 360-degree circumference.

Hubenak: Oh, that could be. But, of course, they were flying those in the daytime, from six in the morning until about four in the evening.

Marcello: And I assume that they wouldn't go out if your weather reports indicated that there were going to be storms or things of that nature?

Hubenak: No, that didn't have anything to do with it. They'd fly out anyhow, unless, of course, it was too bad, like, they had a typhoon or something like that.

Marcello: Okay, now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did your routine as a meteorologist change any?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: In other words, it was business as usual?

Hubenak: Right. We didn't know what was going to happen, so business went on as usual.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work here at Ford Island, that is, for you personally?

Hubenak: Oh, the regular liberties. The port and starboard watches were set up, so we had liberty every second day.

Marcello: In other words, you would have liberty every other day?

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: Okay, normally, when would you get off? At what time?

Hubenak: Four o'clock.

Marcello: And what time would you have to be back aboard station again?

Hubenak: Well, by eight o'clock the next morning.

Marcello: That was a little bit unusual, especially when one considers that the people aboard ships had to be back at midnight in most cases. Isn't that the way the liberty worked for them?

Hubenak: I don't think so. I think they had the same type of liberty that we did--port and starboard watches.

Marcello: On a weekend, what sort of liberty would you usually receive?

Hubenak: Well, one weekend we would have liberty, and then the next weekend, we wouldn't.

Marcello: But you would have off a full weekend when you had liberty?

Hubenak: Yes.

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

Hubenak: Oh, I made most of the bars, I guess, and go out sight-seeing and so forth.

Marcello: Now . . .

Hubenak: The day before the attack on Pearl Harbor, I went to see a football game between the University of Hawaii and Williamette University from Oregon.

Marcello: Okay, we'll get to that in a minute when we get up to these days immediately prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor. Let me just ask you a little bit more about your liberty routine. Normally, on a Friday or a Saturday night when the sailors came back aboard station, what sort of condition would they usually be in?

Hubenak: Oh, most of them would be in fairly good condition. Some of them would be inebriated, but not all of them.

Marcello: The reason I asked that question is because a lot of people say that a Sunday morning would have been the best time for a Japanese attack because these people assume that everybody would have been hungover and so on from a wild Saturday night. And I don't think that's really the case. What would be your observation?

Hubenak: No, I don't think so because some came on back early and some come back later. There might have been some of them that would be in that condition, but not all of them. Some of them were sober when they came back. In fact, some of them didn't drink at all.

Marcello: And I would assume that it would be more accurate to say that Sunday was a good time for an attack mainly because it was a day of leisure.

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: For example, how would the Sunday routine usually work at Ford Island if you didn't have the duty? Could you stay in bed as long as you wished?

Hubenak: Yes. In fact, when the attack started and people started screaming about being attacked, I told them, I said, "Oh, go on back to bed!" I said, "I want to sleep! I was out last night!" And then I looked out the window, and I saw

these Jap planes coming down, and since I had just come back from the Orient, I knew what they were right away.

Marcello: Okay, that, again, is getting a little bit ahead of our story, but we'll get to that in a minute. As relations continue to get worse and worse between the United States and Japan, did your liberty routine change any?

Hubenak: No, not until after the attack.

Marcello: At the same time, how safe and secure did you feel being stationed there in the Hawaiian Islands?

Hubenak: There wasn't nobody there that ever dreamed that they would attack. Everybody felt as safe as they could be.

Marcello: Was this mainly because of the distance between the Hawaiian Islands and Japan and the fact that there was this very powerful fleet, the Pacific Fleet, there at Pearl Harbor?

Hubenak: Mainly the reason was because we felt we were strong enough to repel anything that came our way.

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

Hubenak: Well, they weren't much different than us. I was on the Asiatic Station, and I always considered them to be good people.

Marcello: Did you ever have very much of an opportunity to observe the Japanese Navy in action while you were on the Asiatic Station?

Hubenak: No. There wasn't anybody that they had to work on because they were all at peace.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to the days immediately prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor. And what I want you to do at this point, Mr. Hubenak, is to describe what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, from the time you got up until the time you went to bed that night. I want you to go into as much detail as you can possibly remember concerning your routine that Saturday.

Hubenak: Well, as I said, I went to that football game between Williamette University and the University of Hawaii. And after the game, I went over to Trader Vic's, and I stayed at Trader Vic's until they closed up. Then I went back to the station, and I went to bed.

Marcello: About how long would you have been at Trader Vic's altogether?

Hubenak: About four hours.

Marcello: What did you do while you were there?

Hubenak: Oh, drank and danced and talked with the other guys.

Marcello: Did you notice any tensions or anything that particular night, or was it just a routine Saturday night at Pearl Harbor?

Hubenak: Just a routine Saturday night.

Marcello: What time did you get back to Ford Island?

Hubenak: About two o'clock in the morning.

Marcello: What sort of condition were you in?

Hubenak: Oh, I was sober.

Marcello: And from your observations, did this seem to be the condition of just about everybody else that was coming in?

Hubenak: Oh, no. Some were sober, and some were not.

Marcello: Okay, so Saturday night was more or less a routine liberty for you.

Hubenak: Just like any other Saturday night.

Marcello: What I want you to do now is to describe events as they unfolded on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, from the time you got up until all hell broke loose.

Hubenak: Well, I was sleeping when the attack came. The guys started screaming about being attacked and I said, "Oh, shut up and go to bed! I want to get some sleep!" Then a guy said, "Well, the Japanese are attacking us!" And I looked out the window, and I saw these Jap planes coming down, and like I said, I just came back from the Asiatic Station, and I knew what they were right away. So I got up and got everybody out of bed. I was the senior petty officer there, and I got them out of bed and dressed and headed for the operations building where we worked.

Marcello: What was your rank at that time?

Hubenak: I was a second class petty officer.

Marcello: Now from where your barracks was located, what sort of a view did you have of Battleship Row?

Hubenak: I could see it in plain view.

Marcello: It was an unobstructed view of Battleship Row?

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: Before you left the barracks to go to your usual station, what sort of activity did you observe out there at Battleship Row?

Hubenak: Well, I noticed the Arizona had been sunk. And they were all just trying to get underway rather than just stay at anchor or tied down. They were just tied to the dock.

Marcello: How low were these Japanese planes coming in?

Hubenak: Oh, I'd say a couple of thousand feet, and some of them less than that.

Marcello: Were you able to clearly distinguish the pilots?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: Now during this initial period, that is, when you first observed that these were Japanese planes, did your barracks come under direct attack at that time?

Hubenak: No, not the barracks. They hit the sickbay. There was a sickbay out in front of our barracks. It was sort of enclosed with a garden in the middle, and they hit that.

Marcello: Now I know they also hit the big hangar there at Ford Island, did they not?

Hubenak: Oh, yes, they hit the big hangar there.

Marcello: Now are you familiar with that particular phase of the attack?

Hubenak: Well, no. I was in the barracks at that time.

Marcello: In other words, the hangar was one of the very first things that was hit?

Hubenak: I think one of the battleships was hit first.

Marcello: Well, I'm referring to Ford Island.

Hubenak: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned that you saw these Japanese planes, and your immediate reaction was to get everybody up and to head to your particular station. How would you describe the initial reaction of the men in the barracks? Was it one of professionalism? Confusion? Panic? How would you describe their reaction?

Hubenak: I'd say professionalism. They all headed for their duty stations the minute they found out what was going on.

Marcello: About how long did it take you to get to your duty station after you observed that they were Japanese planes?

Hubenak: About fifteen minutes.

Marcello: How far was the duty station from the barracks?

Hubenak: Oh, I'd say three or four blocks.

Marcello: And did you come under any direct attack or anything while you were heading to your duty station?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: What sort of action did you observe around you as you were going to your duty station?

Hubenak: Well, all of the men were doing the same thing--going to their duty station.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened then when you got to your duty station?

Hubenak: Well, I went upstairs, and there wasn't anybody there. They were all down below somewhere. So I went down below. I started out the building, and I saw a piece of shrapnel skipping towards me. I got out of the way, and it hit the wall and knocked a big chunk out of the wall. And then I stayed inside after that.

Marcello: Now did you know where this piece of shrapnel came from?

Hubenak: No. It was just some stuff that had been shot in the air, I guess. I don't know whether it was ours or whether it was theirs.

Marcello: In other words, it was spent antiaircraft ammunition probably?

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do at that point then?

Hubenak: I got back inside of the building.

Marcello: The same building that you just came out of? Your duty station?

Hubenak: Right.

Marcello: Okay, how long did you stay in the building?

Hubenak: Oh, don't remember now. About ten minutes, I guess.

Marcello: Okay, and did you simply stay under cover during that ten-minute period?

Hubenak: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, what did you do after that?

Hubenak: I went back upstairs, and then some of the guys were back in the office.

Marcello: Were there any officers around?

Hubenak: Oh, I imagine there were.

Marcello: Were you receiving any sort of directions or orders?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: What did you talk about while this was taking place, since you obviously must have felt rather helpless.

Hubenak: It's too far back to remember now.

Marcello: So how long did you stay there at the office, then, while the attack was going on?

Hubenak: All the while. Two or three hours or until noon. By that time, it had subsided, and things were beginning to get back to normal.

Marcello: In the meantime, did you observe anything as to what was happening?

Hubenak: Well, I saw one of our destroyers going down the channel and shooting. Then they shot down a couple of Jap zeroes.

Marcello: What normally can a meteorologist do under these circumstances? Is there really anything that you can do?

Hubenak: Do you mean in my line of work?

Marcello: Yes, while the attack was going on. There's really not too much you can do, I don't think.

Hubenak: Well, they all had battle stations stood.

Marcello: And I assume that your duty battle station was right here at the office. But, again, during the attack, there's not

too much that you can really do there.

Hubenak: No. Some of them had machine gun stations. I didn't.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do in the aftermath of the attack?

Hubenak: I don't know. The normal routine, I guess--plot maps and take observations.

Marcello: Did you assist with any of the wounded or anything of that nature?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: As a weatherman, as a meteorologist, describe what sort of a day December 7, 1941, was in terms of weather.

Hubenak: I don't think I can do that. It is just too far back to remember.

Marcello: Was it a clear day or overcast?

Hubenak: I don't remember.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that you heard in the aftermath of the attack? I'm sure that that island must have been one big rumor mill.

Hubenak: Yes, and I don't remember any of them. They just said that our forces were out after the Japs, and that's all.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the rumors that the Japanese had possibly landed someplace?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: From what I've read and from what I've been told, there were a lot of trigger-happy sailors around that night. Did you remember hearing any sporadic gunfire?

Hubenak: No.

Marcello: Mr. Hubenak, describe as best you can remember what the damage looked like at Ford Island in the immediate aftermath of the attack and after you had a chance to look at it.

Hubenak: Well, you could see that the Arizona was sunk and the Utah had been overturned. There was a lot of damage on the ships.

Marcello: How about on Ford Island?

Hubenak: Not too much. On the hangars, I think, there was damage.

Marcello: And I think most of the planes were destroyed at Ford Island, too, were they not?

Hubenak: No, I don't think so. There was a lot of PBY's, and I don't think they hit the planes too bad.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you have when you looked out and saw all of the damage that was done?

Hubenak: Well, I had a feeling of helplessness, and that's about all.

Marcello: How did your attitude toward the Japanese change?

Hubenak: Well, they were dirty Japs as far as I was concerned.

Marcello: I have one last question, Mr. Hubenak. What sort of lasting impressions has the Pearl Harbor attack had on you? In other words, what did you learn from the attack? What lessons should have been learned from that attack and so on?

Hubenak: Well, in a case like that, diplomacy just failed to work, and we were caught in the middle.

Marcello: Okay, well, Mr. Hubenak, I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk with me. You've said some very interesting and very important things, and I'm sure that historians are going to find this valuable when they use the material to write about Pearl Harbor.

Hubenak: As I said, it's been quite a while, and it's kind of hard to remember some of those things. My memory is getting back anyhow. I'm getting old (chuckle).

Marcello: Well, of course, every little contribution that the Pearl Harbor survivors make just gets us that much closer to the way things actually were on December 7, 1941.