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Interview with  
Ben L. Cummings  
December 1, 1976

Place of Interview: Royse City, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Ben L. Cummings  
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Ben Cummings

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Royse City, Texas

Date: December 1, 1976

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Ben Cummings for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 1, 1976, in Royse City, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Cummings in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was stationed close to Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Actually, Mr. Cummings was at West Loch, near the ammunition dump, when the attack occurred.

Now Mr. Cummings, 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. Cummings: I was born and raised out at Paducah, Texas, in Cottle County. I didn't get the high school education. We were poor folks back in those days. I went in the Marine Corps in May of 1941.

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

Cummings: Well, I had spent two years in the CCC camp. I enjoyed the company of the other comrades, and when I came out of the CCC camp, there wasn't any jobs. So I joined the Marine Corps.

Marcello: You know, this was a standard reason that a great many people of your generation give for having entered the service. Times were still kind of hard even in that year before the actual coming of war. Jobs were scarce.

Cummings: That's true.

Marcello: Why did you decide upon the Marine Corps as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Cummings: When I was in the CCC camp, it was up at Perryton, Texas. And we got in a young lieutenant from the Marine Corps to be one of the officers there, and I thought he was a pretty snappy guy. I believe his name was Lieutenant Skinner, and he was real sharp, and I guess that probably made me want to join the Marine Corps.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Cummings: San Diego.

Marcello: At the time that you joined the Marine Corps, how closely were you keeping abreast with current events and world affairs?

Cummings: Oh, probably. . . about the time I joined the Marine Corps, I could remember my mother and dad saying that it looks like

we're going to go into war because of radio that we did have and the news that we did get in the paper.

Marcello: However, when you thought of this country going to war, were your eyes turned mainly toward Europe rather than toward the Far East at that time?

Cummings: Oh, you bet! I thought Hitler would. . . we'd mix it up with him right away.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to talk about?

Cummings: In boot camp, I was honor man in my platoon, and first squad leader. I spent seven weeks there. And the only thing that kind of disturbed me was looking over toward North Island and seeing the white Navy ships begin to turn battleship gray.

Marcello: In other words, they were painting those white Navy ships battleship gray.

Cummings: That is correct.

Marcello: Now how long was boot camp at that particular time?

Cummings: I spent seven weeks in boot camp.

Marcello: That was short, was it not, as compared to the regular Marine Corps boot camp?

Cummings: Yes.

Marcello: What was the reason for this?

Cummings: I don't know. We spent four weeks in boot camp and then three weeks on the rifle range. And we came back in, oh, I think

the next day or so. . . well, I went in on May 15th. I was sworn in in Oklahoma City, and I left San Diego for San Pedro on July 10. We set sail at eight o'clock that morning and arrived in Pearl Harbor on the 19th of July in 1941.

Marcello: Since boot camp had been cut back, this is probably an indication that things were getting pretty tense. I guess by this time the national emergency had already been declared?

Cummings: No, not in the Pacific, no. Now I did see some reserves being pulled back, yes, in the Marine Corps at about that time because I went overseas with a few Marines that had been out for some time and had been called back in.

Marcello: How did you get to the Hawaiian Islands? In other words, did you put in specifically for duty there, or is this where you were simply sent?

Cummings: No, I was finally just kind of sent there. I was the honor man in my platoon, and I really got a choice of where I wanted to go, and I wanted to go to the Fleet Marine Force in China.

Marcello: Why did you want to go to the Fleet Marine Force in China?

Cummings: Well, I had talked to some old China Marines. It was cheap living over there, even liberty and everything else. And I had met people that had spent a lot of time in China back when I was a child. They had told me a lot about China, and I always wanted to go see China. I haven't seen it yet (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, so consequently, how did you get to the Hawaiian Islands if you wanted to go to China?

Cummings: They said that I would be going to Pearl Harbor aboard the USS Henderson. We spent nine days. . . I think of that old thing traveled about nine knots. And they called. . . I think there was nine of us that got off there, and they sent us over to West Loch, and they sent a couple, I think, up to Laulaulei, which was our headquarters. The nine of us went to West Loch.

Marcello: Now maybe I could correct myself here. When I introduced this tape, I mentioned that you were at the Marine Barracks between Pearl and Hickam. You obviously were not stationed there?

Cummings: I was not at the Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor, as we know it, no. It was all Marines. There was forty of us Marines stationed at West Loch that took care of the Naval Ammunition Depot. We were a guard unit.

Marcello: I see. Well, I'll correct that in the record.

Cummings: Right.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of having duty in the Hawaiian Islands?

Cummings: Oh, I thought it was beautiful. I had seen Texas on the way to California, but I hadn't seen anything as pretty as Hawaii.

Marcello: Describe what the quarters were like here at West Loch where these forty Marines were billeted.

Cummings: It was a big. . . it was like a Spanish home. We had a big lanai on the front, and on the back we had a small lanai where we had a washing machine. You'll hear about the washing machine a little bit later.

Marcello: And were all forty Marines billeted in this particular building?

Cummings: Yes. We had a small canteen in there and a small mess hall and a kind of a big den where we could spend leisure time. And then the barracks consisted of enough room for forty Marines to bunk.

Marcello: Was it a comfortable living accommodation as far as the service goes?

Cummings: Oh, very much so, very much so. I enjoyed it every minute.

Marcello: Did you have spacious quarters and things of this nature?

Cummings: Yes. It was adequate.

Marcello: What was the food like here at West Loch?

Cummings: Well, the boot camp food was the best food I ever ate in my life. Well, it was different than biscuits and cream gravy and chicken and such as that. But it was well-balanced. Over there, we had well-balanced food. I enjoyed it; I gained weight.



Marcello: In general, how would you describe the morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Marine Corps? And, of course, you would have to speak about it here at West Loch.

Cummings: Well, it was forty Marines that got along, I would say, real great. The morale was real good. We had one of the best commanding officers. I met several after that, and he was, I guess, the best one I ever knew.

Marcello: What do you think accounts for a high morale?

Cummings: Well, I think it was the men themselves. Most of us were from the . . . there was no one that was from rich families or anything like that. We were all kind of came out of a poor background, and we knew how to cope with different things. And everybody wanted to be friendly.

Marcello: Plus you mentioned the accommodations were fairly nice, and you also mentioned that the food was good. These things probably would have also contributed to the high morale. Also, you were all volunteers which, I'm sure, helped as far as morale was concerned.

Cummings: Yes, that's true.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about the sort of routine that you undertook after you arrived here at West Loch. What exactly were your specific duties as a Marine here?

Cummings: Okay, we had two or three magazines that we kept ammunition in plus a big ammo building right on the bay, West Loch Bay,

where the ammunition ships could come in, unload, and they could load other ships by truck or by ship.

Marcello: And what was your specific function here?

Cummings: The first thing, I was a guard at night. We walked post for four hours. We would walk the different posts. I think there was about four different posts. There was a dock post right on the West Loch Bay dock, and there were two posts back in the algarrobas. Of course, we had a main gate because the ammunition depot was under tight security. It was pretty tight. We would get. . . sometimes we would have four hours on and eight hours off. Then we would have a day that we could. . . well, we'd help clean up the barracks and the grounds and things like that. But our main duty was walking our posts with a loaded rifle.

Marcello: How would these shifts usually take place? In other words, what hours of the day would these shifts take place? Obviously, they were going on twenty-four hours a day, but would they be like twelve o'clock noon to four o'clock, from four to eight, eight to twelve, and so on?

Cummings: Right. That's what it was.

Marcello: Now this is kind of an interesting place, this West Loch Ammunition Dump, because I've never interviewed anybody who was here. What kind of ammunition was being stored here?

Cummings: Projectiles and depth charges and powder.

Marcello: In other words, this was all the larger types of ammunition for the fighting ships?

Cummings: Right.

Marcello: In other words, we're not talking about the small arms ammunition and things of that nature?

Cummings: Oh, we had that, too! You bet! We had every kind of ammunition.

Marcello: As conditions continued to deteriorate between the United States and Japan, were you able to notice more and more ships coming in and more and more ammunition being stored here or more being taken out or what-have-you?

Cummings: Yes. We were pretty active in getting in more ammunition. In fact, two nights before we were bombed on December 7, the USS Pyro had come in from San Francisco loaded down with black powder. The reason that I kept saying that it looked like we was going to war is because I had a friend from Dallas who was my brother-in-law's brother, who was in the Navy aboard the USS Astoria. Everytime he would come in. . . he knew I was there right after I got there with, of course, my sister and everyone writing to him. And when he would come in, he would call me, and I would go over there. And he would tell me different things that were happening. I guess

the first time, it was in August. And in September, he said . . . he had told us that they had put in--I believe it was in September--a live torpedo, no more duds. In October, they were blacking out the ship at sea. And in November when he came back in, he said, "We have orders to shoot any unidentified ship." And taking those stories that he had told me, I suspected something.

Marcello: Now as one got closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did your routine change any, that is, did security even become tighter than it normally was?

Cummings: No. The only thing. . . the Coast Artillery, I guess it would be, they came in and held maneuvers a month before, I guess, we were bombed. And those guys were really amazed because we were carrying live ammunition in our rifles.

Marcello: But you as a Marine guard here at the West Loch Ammunition Dump more or less followed the same routine right up until the attack itself?

Cummings: That's true. We added on a couple of posts, and we were building. At the time of the bombing, we had something like three or four new magazines built that were empty yet.

Marcello: Now were these magazines underground or above ground?

Cummings: They were above ground.

Marcello: How were they constructed?

Dummings: It was like the cinder blocks and with mortar on the outside.

Marcello: How resistant would they have been to any sort of an aerial attack if one had occurred there?

Cummings: Well, I don't know. I have no idea.

Marcello: How large an area were these Marines responsible for guarding? In other words, how large was this West Loch Ammunition Dump? You would probably have to estimate this, of course.

Cummings: Yes. Well, let's see. . . we probably had 100 acres in there.

Marcello: So this was a substantial amount of ground for forty Marines to cover.

Cummings: Yes. It was concentrated. The buildings were pretty well concentrated--maybe a city block apart or something.

Marcello: Was there some sort of a barbed wire fence or something around this dump?

Cummings: No, it was just kind of like a chain-link fence-type with barbed wire stuck up to forty-five-degree angle, and it adjoined cane fields.

Marcello: What sort of a view did you have of Pearl Harbor and the Naval activity down there from West Loch where your barracks and so on were located?

Cummings: Well, now from the barracks, we could see over into Pearl Harbor. It was probably straight across. It was probably not over a half of a mile. To get to it by boat was probably maybe three-quarters of a mile.

Marcello: Now there were a lot of people of Japanese ancestry on the islands. Was there ever any discussion or action that might be taken in case any of these people committed sabotage or became fifth columnists or anything like that? In other words, were these people considered a danger to an area such as the West Loch Ammunition Dump?

Cummings: Not before the war, no. Not before we were bombed. Not at all.

Marcello: In those pre-Pearl Harbor days, when you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Cummings: Oh, before the war, I thought. . . you know, I looked upon them just like I did the Filipinos. I had never seen that many different types of people in my life. I just considered them the same as the Chinese or the Filipinos.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old veteran Marines talk about the capabilities of the Japanese Army or the Japanese Navy? In other words, did you come in contact with any Marines who had served in North China and had perhaps had some contact with the Japanese there?

Cummings: No, I never did.

Marcello: What was the liberty routine like here at West Loch?

Cummings: It was good. But when I first went there, I was on twenty-one dollars a month. We had more liberty than we had money (chuckle).

Marcello: How did the liberty routine usually run?

Cummings: You would catch a ride into Honolulu and maybe see a movie or go to a bar. They had. . . taxi dances were real famous back in those days. There wasn't too much. After you went into Honolulu a few times, you had seen everything. Our biggest liberty, I guess, was to get maybe fifteen or twenty of us from West Loch and get the big station wagon we had. It was a kind of a panel wagon, and we'd go to Nanakuli Beach and swim for the afternoon.

Marcello: Now how often would you have liberty?

Cummings: Oh, back in those days, we had it two or three times a week.

Marcello: On a weekend, what sort of liberty might you expect to get?

Cummings: Well, always for church on Sunday. You could go to church on Sunday. If you didn't have the duty, you could have liberty.

Marcello: And normally, how many people would usually have the duty on a weekend? What percentage of the base?

Cummings: Probably at least half of the base would be there at all times.

Marcello: Now a lot of people make the assertion that the best time the Japanese could have possibly selected for an attack would have been on a Sunday morning. And what these people are usually implying is that Saturday nights in Honolulu and so on and so forth were times of drunken debaucheries and things of this nature. Consequently, the servicemen would be in no

shape to fight on a Sunday morning. Now how would you answer that assertion?

Cummings: Well, of course, I wasn't in that shape. I don't know. There were about six or seven of my buddies that had went to Honolulu that Saturday evening, and they didn't get in until about two o'clock the next morning. But I'll guarantee you that they were doing their duty at eight o'clock! I never did hear them say where they couldn't hardly stand it or not. But I know they woke me up when they come in around two o'clock, and they were all happy.

Marcello: Okay, We'll talk about this a little bit later on. Getting back to the assertion that I was talking about awhile ago, would it actually be more accurate to say that Sunday was a good time to attack because, in fact, it was a day of leisure?

Cummings: That's correct.

Marcello: How did the Sunday routine work for the Marines here at West Loch? I know, for example, that at a lot of the other posts, if one didn't have the duty, he didn't have to get up at any particular time.

Cummings: That's true.

Marcello: How did the routine work here at West Loch on the weekends?

Cummings: Well, on a Sunday morning we could go in, and the mess sergeant would. . . between seven and eight o'clock, he would cook you what you wanted. But the rest of the times, it was



a scheduled chow time. But on Sunday morning, you had from seven to eight o'clock to eat your breakfast.

Marcello: Or you could stay in bed past eight o'clock if you wanted to?

Cummings: Oh, yes. You could miss breakfast. You sure could. And there was some of them still in the sack when the Japs started.

Marcello: We were talking about the liberty routine just awhile ago, and you were mentioning that at that particular time, you were only making twenty-one dollars a month. I assume that rank was pretty slow in that pre-Pearl Harbor Marine Corps, was it not?

Cummings: Oh, very much so. I knew Marines that had been in four and five years who were PFC's.

Marcello: When was payday?

Cummings: I guess it was the first of every month.

Marcello: So normally, then, would the typical Marine have had very much money a week later?

Cummings: Not as a rule. Within a week or so, he was watching his pennies.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us up to the days immediately prior to the Japanese attack. What I want you to do at this point is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941. I'm referring now from the time you got up until the time you went to bed that night. What was your routine on Saturday, December 6, 1941?

Cummings: Okay. Could I just say something before?

Marcello: Sure.

Cummings: About a month before, I had been more or less promoted. I believe I had made PFC. And I was put on. . . we had a forty-foot motor launch, and I was made engineer of that-- motorman. And each morning we would get up, and at seven o'clock we would go into Pearl Harbor and pick up civilian workers and bring them back into West Loch. And at 4:30 that afternoon, we would carry them back. Plus during the day, we would run any messages that the skipper would have to go to Pearl Harbor or . . . just odds and ends. And we could haul a little ammunition, and did. Then there was a bow hook, me as the engineer, and the coxswain. The three of us handled that forty-foot boat, and it was a gasoline engine. Saturday morning, a friend of mine from Chicago named Howard Burns went into Honolulu and did our Christmas shopping because they were saying, "Do it early and mail it." It was expensive. I think a stamp was at that time twenty cents. Boy, that was high to mail a letter!

Marcello: Just out of curiosity, do you recall what you bought when you went Christmas shopping that Saturday?

Cummings: Gee whiz! I bought me a guitar, a fifteen-dollar guitar. But I don't recall. . . I bought my mother and my dad and my

sister and my brother that was at home. . . I bought them little souvenir-type deals, and they were wrapped and mailed from the store. We didn't have to worry about that. We got back, I guess, around three o'clock in the afternoon to West Loch on December 6th.

Another buddy of mine wanted to play a game of tennis, and he had been teaching me. We had a beautiful tennis court. His name was Laverne Jones and was from Springfield, Illinois. He and I played three or four sets of tennis. And we went in and showered, and a bunch of the guys were getting ready to go into Honolulu on liberty. They wanted us to go back with them.

Marcello: Was it a very difficult journey to get from West Loch into Honolulu for liberty?

Cummings: Yes, it was because we were. . . if you could go right straight across the water, the bay and what-have-you, it wouldn't have been that bad. Most of the time we could walk out West Loch to a little town called Ewa and then maybe hitch hike a ride over to Waipahu and maybe catch a bus there or at Pearl City and catch a ride into Honolulu that way. And you could get a taxi if you were rich enough to pay for a taxi.

Marcello: I'm sorry for getting off the track. Get back to the story you were telling.

Cummings: Well, that evening, these men take off to Honolulu on their liberty. I later on went down to the dock, and I talked to a few sailors off of the USS Pyro that was tied up at our dock. Then I retired early because I was going to go to church the next morning.

Marcello: About what time did you go to bed?

Cummings: It was probably before ten o'clock. It was before Taps. About two o'clock I was awakened by these bunch of happy guys that were coming in off of liberty (chuckle).

Marcello: Would you assume that they were drunk?

Cummings: Well . . .

Marcello: High?

Cummings: They were "high as a kite," yes. Most of those guys. . .I would say not over three or four would really get soused, and that would be very seldom. I got up that morning about . . . I guess it was around 6:30, and I wandered into the mess hall.

Marcello: Was most of the rest of the barracks stirring by that time, or were most people still in the sack?

Cummings: No, they had begun to stir. They would all be up around 7:30 or by eight o'clock on Sunday. But I'm sure there was at least four or five still in the sack. I went in and ate breakfast. I was always a big breakfast eater. That morning,

I wanted a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. I didn't drink much coffee back in those days, and even the mess sergeant said, "What's wrong with you, boy?" I told him that I just didn't feel good. I don't know what was wrong. I wasn't really sick. I just didn't feel good that morning.

I went back and laid down on my bunk and decided that I had better get up and wash one of my blankets. I got the dirty blanket. Oh, I read part of a magazine there, and . . . anyway, I went out on the lanai to the washing machine with my blanket about probably seven minutes until eight o'clock. And I put my blanket in the machine, and before I turned it on, I heard all of this bombing. Well, it was five minutes until eight o'clock.

Marcello: Did you see anything, or did you just hear the noises?

Cummings: No, I didn't see anything. It was just the bombing. Of course, I didn't know what it was.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what your initial reaction was when you heard that.

Cummings: I thought, "Well, there's some explosions going on somewhere." But anyway, I turned the machine on, and about that time, a stray bullet went into the machine and in through my blanket. The glass fell out on the floor, and the machine started to smoke because the motor was in the back of the machine.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that glass fell out.

Cummings: From the door of the washing machine.

Marcello: I see.

Cummings: And it started smoking, and I reached up and pulled the cord out. I was really wondering, "What in the hell is going on?"

Marcello: Did you know that it was a bullet that had, in fact, struck the machine?

Cummings: I did not. So I ran out off of the lanai into this. . . and as I went off of the lanai onto the grass, I looked over and I seen two of my buddies fixing to. . . they go out at five minutes until eight o'clock to raise the flag, and they were standing there. When the big whistle goes off at eight o'clock, everybody raised the flag on the island. There was a guy by the name of Gupta, who was from Wyoming, I believe, and a guy by the name of Miller from Louisiana. I remember them there. And as I looked back towards Pearl Harbor, there was smoke and airplanes like flies, and they were bombing. The noise then was getting greater.

Marcello: Now this would have been about five minutes later.

Cummings: Yes.

Marcello: In the meantime, are the people here at West Loch becoming active or anything of this nature?

Cummings: Well, I looked up back towards Gupta and Miller, and here comes a plane strafing. And he was strafing at those two

guys. Well, it mowed the lawn for us, but he went on. And I got myself back in the barracks, and I got my two bandoleers of ammunition, my belt of ammunition, my rifle, and my helmet, and the mess sergeant--I can't remember his name-- come running through and said, "The damned Japs are bombing us!"

Marcello: Why did you grab your helmet and rifle and the ammunition? Was this simply the reflexive response of a professional soldier, or what made you do it?

Cummings: Just reaction from the training and everything that I had had. A Sergeant Rudder from the State of Washington, I believe, did the same thing. And he and I went out the front door, or the back door to the lanai, at the same time, and we went down past the Pyro, and the Pyro had their .50-calibers going already, shooting at the low planes.

Then we ran for about a quarter of a mile, I guess, back over as close to Pearl Harbor as we could get, just right across the channel. And they had cleared out a whole bunch of algarroba trees to put in a new magazine there. And shrapnel was real bad.

Marcello: In other words, this was shrapnel that was falling from the ships in the harbor?

Cummings: That's true. And we got under these logs, and, of course, we were already shooting at the low-flying planes. And the Japanese

dropped two bombs at the USS Pyro. One hit the dock, and the other hit in the water. It wasn't damaged.

Marcello: Did you get the impression, however, that the Japanese had not made the West Loch Ammunition Dump one of their primary targets?

Cummings: That is correct. You bet. We could see the concentration into Pearl Harbor, and we knew that they were after the ships. And they got them.

Marcello: So how many rounds of ammunition would you estimate that you fired?

Cummings: Probably around forty with a bolt action '03 rifle.

Marcello: This is a Springfield?

Cummings: A Springfield rifle.

Marcello: Do you figure or think that you hit any of these Japanese planes?

Cummings: I don't know. Rudder and I talked about it several times. He would say, "I believe I hit that guy!" You know, I don't know. But they would wave at us.

Marcello: You might describe this. First of all, describe the method of attack that these planes were using.

Cummings: Well, they were all low. It seemed like they would come into Pearl Harbor in a uniform manner. But once they made their attack, they were on their own. They were just like wild flies before they had to return to their aircraft carrier.



Marcello: In other words, they were looking for targets of opportunity.

Cummings: That's right. You bet. But we didn't get strafed anymore.

Marcello: How low were they coming over West Loch?

Cummings: Well, a lot of them was. . . like the torpedo planes would come out kind of over us when they were pulling out of their dive.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that one of these pilots did wave at you?

Cummings: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Describe the incident.

Cummings: Well, I seen him drop the bomb on the Pyro, and I heard it go off. It hit the dock--the one that I seen go. And the Pyro . . . I could see the tracers going in behind the airplane. The pilot had his hood back, and he was waving back at everybody on the ground. He knew, I guess, that the Pyro was shooting at him.

Marcello: What was your reaction when you saw this. . . I guess we could call it arrogance on the part of this Japanese pilot?

Cummings: I thought, "Well, boy, they're awful friendly!" Being young like that, I really didn't want to say, you know, "We're in war!" I wanted that to be the last thing, but we were.

Marcello: In the meantime, what were the other people at West Loch doing? Were they getting into action also?

Cummings: They went to their posts. Now Chief Marine Gunner Black sent after me--to find me to take off. The Coast Artillery started

coming in. They had no ammunition. He got in contact with me and told me to get in that lead truck and take them to Lualualei, which was about fourteen or fifteen miles out there, I believe, where they could get ammunition. We didn't have ammunition of their caliber right there. It was all at our headquarters, which was a large ammunition depot.

Marcello: Were you following all of the usual bureaucratic red tape in getting this ammunition out to the Coast Artillery, or in an emergency of this nature, do you just get it there?

Cummings: No paperwork. None whatsoever. We went up . . . as quick as our truck was loaded. . . everyone knew how to get back. We came back.

Marcello: Now by this time, is the attack over?

Cummings: No! No! We pulled off under some trees before we got back to Ewa.

Marcello: Well, let's just back up here a minute and try and get these things in some sort of a chronological order. Approximately how long were you firing at the Japanese planes from the cover of those logs?

Cummings: Oh, not over maybe forty minutes, forty-five minutes.

Marcello: Okay, and it was the end of that forty-five minutes, then, that word came down to you that you were needed in order to transport ammunition.

Cummings: Right.

Marcello: Okay. Now where did you go from that point?

Cummings: We stopped because they were strafing some little fishing boats out in the ocean. We thought they'd see our truck. But they went on. It was just a couple of lonely Japanese planes--alone. We came on back to West Loch, and the high-altitude bombers were coming over Pearl Harbor then.

Marcello: In other words, this is the second wave coming in?

Cummings: Right. There weren't too many low-flying planes around at that time. It was the high ones. We got back to the West Loch, and Chief Marine Gunner Black told me to go get on the boat. They were waiting for me. Well, Gunner Rutherford was the Naval officer that was stationed on our post there, and he was in charge of ammunition for the Navy. He got with us three and said, "Go into Pearl Harbor!" Well, this was after the bombing was completed.

Marcello: Now did you only make this one trip while the attack was going on?

Cummings: After ammunition?

Marcello: Yes.

Cummings: Yes, just that one trip. I don't know how many more they made.

Marcello: And I assume that nothing eventful happened during that trip.

Cummings: No.

Cummings: I asked the truck driver, who was an Army truck driver, I asked him, "How can you tear that governor off of this thing?" It would do at least forty-five miles per hour, I think. Forty-eight. . . I think it was doing that. They had a governor on it. All of them did. And he said, "Oh, no, we wouldn't tear those off!" But it was a fast trip.

Marcello: About how long did it take altogether?

Cummings: Probably about. . . we were gone less than an hour.

Marcello: And you picked up a load of ammunition?

Cummings: Yes.

Marcello: And brought it back to West Loch?

Cummings: Well, in his truck, which wasn't a big truck. We had very little. . . these bigger trucks were behind us.

Marcello: Oh, I see. In other words, there was a convoy of trucks that went there.

Cummings: Right. Right. They followed us up there.

Marcello: How many trucks were there altogether?

Cummings: Oh, gee, I don't know. Maybe eight, nine--something like that.

Marcello: And for the most part, other than the fact that it was a rather speedy trip, nothing eventful happened?

Cummings: No.

Marcello: Okay. So now what happens when you get back to West Loch?

Cummings: Gunner Rutherford wanted me to go to the forty-foot motor launch with the other two guys. They had had another guy

work in my place, but they were just standing by. They had the motor cranked and full of gas and everything. And he told us to go into Pearl Harbor and see what help we could give.

Marcello: In the meantime, has West Loch suffered any casualties or damage?

Cummings: None whatsoever, except to the dock. And that was all of the damage that was done.

Marcello: Okay, so describe your trip into Pearl Harbor.

Cummings: We were asked to go over and help pick up bodies, debris, or anything that we could do.

Marcello: What did the surface of the water look like when you went through it?

Cummings: Black with oil.

Marcello: How thick was the oil?

Cummings: Oh, gee, I don't know, but it was. . . that pretty, shiny boat that we kept was a mess when we got back. Oh, boy!

Marcello: I've heard it said that the oil was so thick in places that one could throw a Coke bottle into it, and it would just stick in the oil.

Cummings: It would take awhile to sink probably. I know they were. . . debris was laying around and floating on top, and a lot of oil would build up under it.

Marcello: How long did it take you to make this trip from West Loch over to Pearl?

Cummings: Maybe ten minutes.

Marcello: Where did you go when you got over to Pearl?

Cummings: Well, we hit the main. . . as we come out of our channel, we hit the main channel into Pearl Harbor. We made a left. Then the first thing you run into is Ford Island. We beared to the right where all the activity or most of the activity is. Because if we go to the left, it's around where there's just anchored destroyers. Well, in fact, the USS Utah was around to the left.

Marcello: Describe the scene that you saw before you as you were making this trip into Pearl, that is, in terms of the damage and destruction to the ships.

Cummings: As we entered Pearl Harbor, of course, we could see the smoke all the way. And, of course, tears were in all of our eyes to see such beautiful ships destroyed. The first ship we seen was the USS Nevada, which was sunk right in the channel on the beach, which the old boy did a good job getting it out of the channel. We passed it and we went around.

There was a few other motor launches out. They had picked up what bodies that they could find. We didn't pick up any bodies. We didn't pick up any debris. We decided . . .

the coxswain said, "You know, we ought to go to some of these ships that's not hurt and see if they need any ammunition."  
So we did.

Marcello: In the meantime, did you see the Arizona or the Oklahoma or any of those ships?

Cummings: Oh, yes, yes.

Marcello: Describe what they looked like. Describe what the Arizona looked like as you remember it.

Cummings: The Arizona was. . . well, it was just a mast sticking out. I don't believe it had gone. I still believe that the Arizona, some of it, was still out of the water, but going down. The Oklahoma looked like a big whale. It had already capsized. And all of our planes such as those old PBV's, they were all wrecked right there on Ford Island, right by the ships.

Marcello: You had a good view of that?

Cummings: Oh, yes, you could see that. I knew the USS Shaw was in dry dock. I believe it was in Ten-Ten Dock. I'm not for sure. But it has the bow blown off of it. It sure did look awful.

Marcello: I've seen photographs of the Shaw exploding, and it's amazing to me how there was anything left of that ship. But evidently, they put a temporary bow on it, towed it back to the West Coast, and it lived to fight another day.

Cummings: I was in Pearl Harbor when it left. And to see that stubby bow on that thing, it sure looked funny. It sure did.

Marcello: Was there any other parts of the damage that stood out in your mind as you were proceeding over to the undamaged ships?

Cummings: No, it was all. . . well, I was pinching myself to see if it wasn't a dream because I couldn't realize that that much damage could be done.

Marcello: Was it difficult to navigate that small motor launch through all of that debris and oil and so on and so forth?

Cummings: It wasn't that difficult. Of course, the coxswain. . . I don't remember where he. . . of course, he was the one that was steering it from the back there. But as far as the engine running all right, it was okay. And we were going so slow anyhow, they're harder to move at a slow speed.

Marcello: Okay, so you were proceeding to the undamaged ships. Which ships did you go to?

Cummings: I can't remember them. I can remember some a little later on that we went to while we were hauling ammunition over a period of about two months. But the first ship we went to was. . . oh, it was a tender-type. And they wanted some projectiles for their 5-inch or. . . I forget what they were wanting right then. We went and got some depth charges. We went back then to West Loch, and Gunner Rutherford said, "Just keep loading ammunition. As you go over there, you can take orders if you want to and write it down and come back and get it and load it up and here we go again."



Marcello: Now you couldn't get very much on that little motor launch, could you?

Cummings: No, not too much because that thing. . . oh, I'll bet the sides wouldn't stick out of the water a foot when we were loaded down. That's right. And we would take depth charges over, and we would take a package of detonators, and I would take the lifejackets, pull them out of the box, put the detonators about halfway down in that box, and put the lifejackets back on them because they were sensitive.

Marcello: Well, about eight o'clock that night, we pulled back into our dock after, I guess, we had carried. . . we had made four or five trips with ammunition. And we would just go up and holler to anyone on the deck, "Do you need any ammunition?" And just as it was getting dark, we came back in and Gunner Rutherford said, "Okay, you guys rest awhile. One of you stand guard. The other two sleep." He went on. I stayed awake because I wasn't about to go to sleep.

Gene Wade, who was born and raised around Houston. . . in fact, he lives in Irving right now. He and I were stationed together. He was walking the dock post, and he came down, and he and I were standing there talking when all hell broke loose. We had shot down five of our own planes before we realized what we'd done. We didn't. I mean, they did in Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Describe what the harbor looked like when all of those guns opened up.

Cummings: You know, if it would have been on a Christmas around here, it would be the most beautiful thing you ever seen in your life. But to see it under those circumstances was the most scary things I ever witnessed in my life. Tracers, one right after the other. Exploding shells. And the airplane was . . . we seen a couple of them go down. One of them was on fire and went over in back of our place in a cane field. I had heard that they lost three of the pilots, and two pilots survived. I don't know whether that was true or not. But after that, a little bit later, Gunner Rutherford came down and said that he'd got orders. They were getting calls. We loaded up with ammunition and carried it over to this one ship. I don't know the name of that ship that I carried it to.

Marcello: Now were you still using this little motor launch?

Cummings: Oh, yes.

Marcello: You must have made numerous trips then because it simply could not have held very much ammunition.

Cummings: No, it doesn't hold too much. I forget how many depth charges we could put on that thing. But we decided we'd take some . . . oh, we went to this one ship, and they said, "We have two torpedo heads. They're duds. They just look like torpedo

heads. We want you to take them back over to your place and just set them out on the bank or destroy them. Get rid of them." We said, "Okay." So we set them, and, boy, those things were heavy!

And we went around taking orders from different ships. I never will forget when we pulled up to the USS Blue that night. And, oh, every now and then you would see a tracer. "Ahoy, there! Who goes there?" We would holler, "Naval ammunition boat!" And it would surprise some of the sailors to see three Marines working an ammunition boat. But anyway, we got to the Blue, and they needed some depth charges. Well, we had a couple, and we said, "We'll go get you more." And we asked them if they take these torpedo duds and dump them over into the bay there. They said, "Sure." They ran their hoist out there. We put a rope through the eye-loop on the head of this dud, moved it out over the water, and cut the rope, and phosphorus shot, I do believe, four and five feet out of the water. I had never seen nothing like that in my life coming up from there. I thought the thing was going to explode. And I made a jump for. . . the motor launch had a canopy, a canvas canopy over the engine part, and I slipped and I fell flat on top of that thing. But I didn't get hurt. But I was down and backing that motor out right away. And the other dud that we had, we took it off and got the hoist to

take it off over at West Loch. I didn't look for it in 1966 when I was over there, but it sat there all during the war-time in that one place where we set it off.

Marcello: Now during this entire period, did you have any appetite or thirst?

Cummings: Not until about two o'clock the next morning. And we pulled up by a ship, and they wanted. . . let's see, was it the Ward or. . . it was one of those that was a destroyer, and they wanted some depth charges. We loaded them, and we said, "We're hungry!" Boy, they brought us up those Spam sandwiches--they were good--and coffee. You know, I don't recall eating at all until about two o'clock the next morning. I sure don't.

Marcello: In general, would you say that most of the people that you observed acted in a professional manner, or was there panic? Confusion? How would you describe the action of the people that you saw?

Cummings: Well, they were a little. . . well, like one guy picks up a . . . finds a bullet, a stray bullet, you know, from a Japanese plane. He said, "Look, a real bullet!" The first sergeant says, "Don't shoot at the airplanes!" This one guy tells him to go to hell. He said, "They're shooting at us!"

Marcello: Why would the first sergeant not want you to shoot the airplanes?

- Cummings: Because we're not in declared war. But it didn't last long. I think he was shooting at them, too. He was a tough old cuss.
- Marcello: From what you said awhile ago, I gather that there were quite a few trigger-happy servicemen around that night?
- Cummings: Yes. We had gotten word that. . . of course, there were rumors that the Japanese were coming back. Everybody was tense. Now I'll tell you what we did that afternoon at one time. Everytime we would come back in for ammunition, we would get us something--us three men. We made it up that if the Japanese did come back into the Islands, we were going to take off in that boat, in that forty-foot motor launch, and head for the States under night cover.
- Marcello: What were some of the things that you were stowing away in that motor launch?
- Cummings: Well, our rifles and a case of .30-caliber. Then a big tarp and a long pole that we had found.
- Marcello: In other words, you were going to try and rig a sail?
- Cummings: Right. And then extra gasoline. We had it set down under the bank of the bay there. We had it hid because we were going to take off. We wasn't going to stay there. And the rumors were, you know, that the Japs were coming. You could hear anything.

Marcello: I'm sure the base was one big rumor mill that night.

Cummings: Oh, yes. Very much so. And we just knew that they were back when we shot down those planes. We knew the Japanese were here.

Marcello: How much sleep did you get that night?

Cummings: Not any. I never did sleep that night. I dozed the next day and slept the next night. But I would. . . maybe. . . loaded down with ammunition, it would probably take twenty-five minutes or thirty minutes to get around. And after we would get going, I would doze that way. We worked pretty steady the first two weeks. The first two weeks, we worked day and night. Then we were on call at night. If any ship came in that needed ammunition, we were sent over there.

Marcello: And during most of this period, were you, in fact, mainly loading ammunition, that is, taking ammunition to the ships and so on?

Cummings: That's correct. That is correct--taking ammunition to the ships that would come in.

Marcello: There's a question that I forgot to ask earlier, and it's one that I always try and get as a part of the record: What was the weather like that day when you got up?

Cummings: As far as I can remember, it was clear. You know, the rain squalls would come through there quire a bit, but I believe that morning was quite clear. I just don't really remember.

Marcello: What lasting impressions has the Pearl Harbor attack left upon your mind? This is more or less a last question that I usually always ask.

Cummings: I really don't know. Over the years of just being there at the time that the war started. . . of just being there and seeing something that, of course, I hoped that I would never see. The burning, the sinking, and the looking at those ships were really something that really stands out in my mind--knowing that there was death all in them and around them. . . I had two good buddies that were still on the Ari-zona.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Cummings, I can't think of any other questions. I think you've done a very good job in answering the questions that I've already asked, and I'm sure that scholars are going to find your comments most valuable when they use this information to write about Pearl Harbor.

Cummings: Well, it was nice. I'm glad you did. I was going to get in touch with you earlier, and I said, "No, I really don't want to." And my son, Bob, who lives in Garland, he told me, he said, "Dad, now I've got a little son. He may hear about you, and his kids may hear about you someday. Maybe they'll write a book about Pearl Harbor." And it was in Life magazine back in the 1950's--the three Marines giving out ammunition, kind

of like the man on the street corner handing out hotdogs or something. I forget exactly what that article said. But that was about the three of us Marines. We were the only Marines that were giving out ammunition.

Marcello: Well, again, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Cummings, for having participated in our project.

Cummings: Thank you. It was nice for you to come.