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Interview with

Leon Bennett

April 23, 1978

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Oral History Collection

Leon Bennett

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Leon Bennett for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on April 23, 1978, in San Antonio, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Bennett in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the tanker USS Neosho during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Bennett, 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. Bennett: I was born on October 24, 1918, in Kennard, Texas, which is commonly known as Hickory Creek . . . on Hickory Creek. I left home when I was sixteen. After finishing high school, I entered Texas A&M and stayed over there about thirty-five days. I didn't have enough money for books, and so I went to work for Brown and Root Construction

Company. And while working for Brown and Root Construction Company, I joined the Naval Reserves. I went in the Navy in 1939. And from Brown and Root Construction Company, I worked for a short time in the civil service for the National Youth Administration. And from there I was in Austin one weekend and decided I'd go in the Navy and make the Navy a career.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Navy?

Bennett: Well, I didn't like the walking part of the Army, and I didn't like the idea of mud and water and slush. I heard too many soldiers from World War I talking about it, and that's why . . . that's the reason.

Marcello: Well, just let me go back and ask another general question. Why did you decide to join the service to begin with, whatever branch we're talking about?

Bennett: Well, I could see that sooner or later I was going to have to go, I mean, in either the Army or something. They began talking about drafting them, you know, for six months and all that kind of crap, so I says . . . well, the Navy was my first preference, so that's the reason.

Marcello: And you mentioned that you entered the Navy when?

Bennett: In 1939. I believe it was in September or November, somewhere along in there.

Marcello: In other words, it was around the time that World War II had

begun in Europe.

Bennett: Right, it was already getting ready. They were already geared up and started over there.

Marcello: Did you keep pretty closely abreast with current events and world affairs at that particular time?

Bennett: Right. I sure did. I always have.

Marcello: But I'll bet when you thought of the country getting into war, you probably thought more in terms of our getting involved in Europe than in the Far East at that time.

Bennett: Actually, that's right. You're correct.

Marcello: What part did economic reasons play in your decision to join the service? You mentioned that you were in the old NYA and so on.

Bennett: Well, I mean, at that time everything was right during the Depression, and we had lost all of our land and everything. Well, we then turned around and were tenants on that same property, and, hell, I didn't like that at all. So really I guess to leave the farm and get of that environment, you know, really influenced me.

Marcello: Well, you know, economic reasons is one of the primary factors that many people of your generation give for having entered the service. The service didn't pay you very much, but there was a certain amount of security involved there.

Bennett: Right. We knew we had a place to sleep and a place to eat

and clothes (laughter).

Marcello: And steady pay, even though it wasn't very much.

Bennett: Yes, it wasn't very much. I'll never forget the first pay-day I drew. You know, they forced us to take out insurance. I think I drew twelve or fourteen dollars for the first month. But luckily, I had about two or three weeks of back pay coming, and it caught up with me, and I was the richest sailor on the base (laughter).

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Bennett: In San Diego, California.

Marcello: Now was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as part of the record, or was it just an ordinary Navy boot camp?

Bennett: It was the ordinary Navy boot camp, and I had a little trouble on the first liberty or two, that's all.

Marcello: Now at that particular time, I assume that you had the usual amount of time in boot camp; they hadn't cut back on boot camp yet?

Bennett: Four months (chuckle).

Marcello: Later on, I know, as we get closer and closer to war, they began to cut back on the amount of time.

Bennett: Right, right. You're right. But I had a full four months of it, sleeping with a rifle and all of that.

Marcello: I guess that was your first baptism of sleeping in a hammock,

too, was it not?

Bennett: Right, first time.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of sleeping in a hammock?

Bennett: Well, I liked it. In fact, I wish I had my old hammock back now (laughter).

Marcello: Why is that?

Bennett: That was the best rest I ever got--in the Navy.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you got into a little bit of trouble on your first liberty when you were in boot camp. Do you need to elaborate on that, or shall we just say that it was usual type of trouble that a sailor might get in?

Bennett: I'll say this. It put me on the ship real fast, that's all (laughter).

Marcello: Okay, so you get out of boot camp, and where did you go from there?

Bennett: Well, I went from there to a . . . well, they shipped me first to Shanghai, and then I came back, and . . . no, they began to pull the fleet out. They were having trouble over there, and they pulled us back, and we came back to Manila and then to Honolulu. And then they shipped me to the East Coast, and I put the Neosho in commission.

Marcello: Well, let's back up here a minute now. You said they shipped you to Shanghai. What ship were you aboard when you went to Shanghai?

Bennett: I was on a old four-stacker--the USS Gillis.

Marcello: Well, you're an Asiatic sailor of sorts.

Bennett: Just a little while--a short time.

Marcello: I noticed awhile ago on your chest you had some tattoos there. Is this something you got over in the Far East?

Bennett: A little Chinaman, about waist high (chuckle), tacked it on me.

Marcello: I think you're about the first of those Asiatic sailors that I've ever run into. You guys were a different breed of cats altogether.

Bennett: It was hard to get used to the regular Navy when we got back, right.

Marcello: What was it like serving over in the Asiatic Station?

Bennett: Oh, it was fine, you know, at first; but then it got to where we had to carry side arms when we went to shore and everything. I mean, people would crawl over you, jump on you, and all of that. I mean, especially those beggars and stuff, they would attack you right on the street. So they finally wouldn't let us go ashore unless we were armed or, you know, when they sent us over there on the detail for something . . . for supplies or something like that.

Marcello: I'm sure that you must have run into some real characters in the Asiatics, so to speak.

Bennett: Right! I did. I was on a boxing team for awhile, and I

think it was pretty good. I liked those steaks, and all I had to do is skip rope to stay in training and punch a bag around a little. I might elaborate on that a little bit. I won my first four bouts, and then I run into the guy I was supposed to fight that night . . . this was back in Honolulu. He was the welterweight champion of the Asiatic Fleet. I told my coach, I said, "Hell, I don't want to fight that cat!" I said, "He'll beat me to death!" "Oh, you can take him; you can take him!" So I got in and did pretty good. I knocked him down a couple times in the first round. About the second round, he come up and I didn't know where it come from. He paralyzed me, and that ended my boxing career.

Marcello: He literally paralyzed you?

Bennett: I mean, I lay there. I knew everything, but I couldn't move (laughter). But he made a believer out of me, anyway. I quit the boxing team over that, and I went back to the fire rooms and engine rooms.

Marcello: I gather that sports played a very important role in the life of that Navy before World War II.

Bennett: Right. We had a lot of fleet competition, you know, stuff like that . . . different ships . . . ship competition, fleet competition.

Marcello: And I gather boxing . . . the so-called smokers were very

well-attended during that period.

Bennett: Right, right. They were crowded. A lot of money changed hands in betting--you know, one ship against another.

Marcello: Let's just back up here for a minute again. I'm still interested in your assignment as part of the Asiatic Fleet. You mentioned that right after boot camp they shipped you over to Shanghai.

Bennett: That's right! They got me out of the States. I told them I came in to fight, and I didn't come in to march and to hang around a base. That's one thing that . . . when they brought me up before the captain of the base, well, that's what I told him, and he saw to it that I got out of there.

Marcello: Oh, in other words, whatever happened when you were on liberty ended up in a court-martial or a captain's mast of some sort.

Bennett: Well, it was a captain's mast, right. I mean, I ran into a boy that was going to Rice University. He was a football star down there--Donald Yeager. He wasn't old enough to buy beer, so I was buying him beer, and he knocked out a plate glass window there on Broadway in San Diego. Consequently, we wound up in the brig back on the base. Of course, he was a little luckier than I was. The captain that we went before, he was an old ex-Rice man, and they belonged to the same fraternity. So he went to North]

Island--they made a pilot out of him--and shipped me to China (chuckle).

Marcello: What sort of work did the Gillis do over in China? Was it on the river patrol?

Bennett: It was on the river patrol. It was an old four-stacker, old "tin can."

Marcello: And was this mainly a matter of showing the flag, so to speak? Or did you have specific functions that you performed?

Bennett: We just patrolled that river, that's all.

Marcello: Did you come into any contact with the Japanese during that period?

Bennett: No, no. They pulled us out before that. We came back to Manila and then from there to Honolulu. Then they brought the old four-stacker in, and they were going to put it in mothballs, but then they didn't because they sent it to the Aleutian Islands eventually. And I wound up back on it again, incidentally.

Marcello: That's really ironic.

Bennett: It had a different bunch of sailors, but it was the same old ship.

Marcello: Those Asiatic sailors fascinate me, like I mentioned awhile ago. I assume a lot of those guys were tattooed from head to toe, literally.

Bennett: They were solid. In fact, one of my friends . . . he was in

the fire room, and he just had one place left to put a tattoo, and we had to hold him down while they put it on him (laughter).

Marcello: (Chuckle) And I gather that a lot of those guys were alcoholics, also, and they had syphilis and things of that nature pretty bad.

Bennett: Right, they did. It was a rough Navy over there, and I think all during the war . . . I don't think they ever tamed them. I mean, of course, I didn't stay long enough to get as flakey as they were.

Marcello: Yes, I guess some of those guys had been over there for twenty or thirty years.

Bennett: Most of them have spent all their time over there. They didn't want to come back.

Marcello: I assume a lot of them had bought Chinese wives and so forth.

Bennett: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, you could buy . . . if one gets transferred out, you could buy a wife, and then when you bought his wife, you inherited a family. I mean, you took care of everybody. You gave five or ten dollars in gold, and that took care of the whole family. And she took care of your ironing and all your other necessities (laughter).

Marcello: And I guess that that low pay went a long way over in China during that period.

Bennett: Oh, sure. I mean, that's why everybody liked to stay over

there. I mean, that low pay over there . . . I mean, you could just take . . . they used gold mostly, you know. For five dollars in gold, why, you could live high over there, where back in the States it didn't go very far.

Marcello: Now how long did you say that you were over there altogether?

Bennett: About six months.

Marcello: And then did you request to get out of there, or did they just send you?

Bennett: They just sent us all out of there. They just moved a bunch of us out of there at that time because trouble was brewing, and they was having a lot of trouble. They were beginning to try to evacuate the people that were on the mainland of China. They just brought us all out, pulled us back.

Marcello: And as you mentioned, you picked up the Neosho in Norfolk.

Bennett: Yes, I put it in commission . . . well, no, I didn't put it in commission. They put it in commission, and I went aboard right after it was put in commission. It was a new ship, you know, a new oiler. In fact it was a civilian oiler, and the Navy took it over. They had built it for the Merchant Marine.

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

Bennett: Oh, I liked it. I mean, I was real crazy. I was a "tin can" sailor and a oilerman. I loved that duty on an oiler. I mean, there was no regulations, and I wasn't used to too much

regulation.

Marcello: And what were you striking for at that particular time?

Bennett: Well, I was in the engine room where I was a machinist's mate--a second class machinist's mate.

Marcello: Now when did you get to Pearl Harbor?

Bennett: Well, I was there on December 6th.

Marcello: What I'm saying, I guess, is that the Neosho was operating between the islands and the West Coast.

Bennett: That's right, we were transporting oil. That's what we were doing. We came in on the night of the 6th, and we had darkened the ship. Of course, we knew that there was an alert out and that we might go to war with Japan. We had movies on topside, and we had darkened ship coming in. As we came in that night, two of those midget submarines were in under the belly of the ship, and we bumped them. We had thought we had run aground; you know, we were heavily loaded. So they opened the net . . . they had the net closed, and as we came in, we bumped those things. I was standing throttle watch, and I said, "Oh, God! We've hit something!" We went on over and pumped out all the fuel oil that night; and I had pumping duty, too, so I had to stand and watch on the pumping.

The next morning . . . that night, we moved from there over to Ford Island on Battleship Row and tied up at Ford

Island to a little pier that run out over there. I pumped gasoline then from . . . oh, I guess I came on about around four o'clock till eight o'clock, and I got through, oh, right about eight o'clock. The ship's light was still out. Right behind us was the Oklahoma; right behind the Oklahoma was the Arizona; and ahead was the California and the Tennessee. We were lined up right in the middle.

Marcello: Okay, this is getting just a little bit ahead of our story because we'll come back and talk about these things in a minute. Let's talk about the Neosho a little bit more. What were your quarters like aboard the Neosha?

Bennett: Oh, they were fine. They were built for civilians, and we didn't have a very large crew. I think there was about sixty ✓ or seventy of us on it at that time. You know, it was peacetime. I think we had regular cabins; you know, there was about four to each cabin. It was real nice.

Marcello: You didn't have the usual crew's quarters, then.

Bennett: Oh, no, we had separate cabins--A Division, B, C, and right on down. You know, each one of us would be stationed in a division.

Marcello: Did the Neosho have a good skipper?

Bennett: Oh, yes, a fine fellow! I can't remember his name, but he was from Fort Worth.

Marcello: Well, that always makes a good ship, too, if you have a good

skipper, especially on a ship that small.

Bennett: I was real fortunate. Most all the skippers I served under were from Texas, and that helped a little bit.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Neosho?

Bennett: Fabulous! We had a good cook named Marchese; I mean, he could lay it on.

Marcello: I guess with a small crew like that, he could perhaps take a little more care in preparing the food and so on.

Bennett: Yes, and he did, too. There was no fuss about the chow; it was good.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the functions of the Neosho. Like we mentioned awhile ago, it was engaged in transporting oil and sometimes gasoline, I guess, and personnel from the West Coast to Hawaii and back again.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: Normally, how would this routine work? Describe what a typical mission would be like along these lines.

Bennett: Well, we would come in at, say, San Pedro or San Francisco or somewhere along the coast.

Marcello: And that's where you would pick up your fuel?

Bennett: We'd pick up a load of fuel. We'd be there about forty-eight hours, you know, and then we'd go to Honolulu. Then we'd be there for about forty-eight hours and then just transfer back and forth, you know, just unload and then go

back and get another load. They were storing it in those mountains there in Honolulu, you know, in the storage tanks. I guess they were preparing for this thing all the time, because that's all we did there for several . . . oh, I'd say for three or four months we just made that run, you know. That was all. About twice a month we'd be able to go ashore, and the rest of the time we were aboard.

Marcello: Now did you ever do very much actual refueling of ships and so on?

Bennett: Oh, yes, I mean, that was our main function--refueling at sea.

Marcello: In other words, maybe you would be bringing a load of fuel back from the West Coast, and you would meet some of the ships out there on their exercises, and you would top them off, so to speak, or whatever.

Bennett: Right, to get in our practice of refueling at sea, you know; we were real good at it, too, incidentally.

Marcello: That's a pretty tricky job, is it not?

Bennett: It really is. It takes some finesse, you know, to do it all. I mean, you got to have a real good crew.

Marcello: When the Neosho was fully loaded, how much fuel might it have aboard? You might have to estimate this.

Bennett: They went by barrels. I think it was 650,000 barrels or something like that. It was almost a million gallons. We

had high test aviation gasoline, and part of it was just black oil, fuel oil, you know, just for the ships.

Marcello: And now that fuel oil we're talking about is kind of a thick substance.

Bennett: Yes, just jelly-like. You had to heat it to pump it, really. We had heat lines running through the tanks.

Marcello: How long would it take you to unload all the fuel on the Neosho when you came into Pearl and put it in the tanks and so on?

Bennett: It took a full twelve hours to pump it off by the time you shipped it from one dock to the other, because you always had a mixed load, you know, gasoline forward and fuel oil behind. It takes a good twelve hours of hard pumping.

Marcello: And where normally would you be unloading this fuel over at Pearl?

Bennett: Well, we would tie up at Ford Island, and I can't think of the other little dock over there on the other side of the island.

Marcello: Was it Aiea?

Bennett: Aiea, yes, that's where it was. I couldn't think of it.

Marcello: And it would be pumped off at either one of those two places. The aviation gasoline would be pumped off at Ford Island.

Bennett: Ford Island, that's where we pumped the aviation gasoline.

Marcello: And, of course, that was for the Naval air station and the carrier planes and all that sort of thing, I suppose.

Bennett: Yes. Sometimes we would pump some black oil over there for the . . . you know, the submarine fleet was right there, too.

Marcello: You know, as we look back upon the Pearl Harbor attack and retrospect, probably one of the biggest mistakes that the Japanese made was not hitting those tank farms and so on.

Bennett: Right, and not having an invasion force, because they could have taken those islands with just very few men, really, because we were not prepared; there was no way. That ship I was on, I mean, we had one old obsolete 3-inch gun and a bunch of .30 and .50-caliber guns, and that was it as far as armament went.

Marcello: And as you mentioned, the Neosho simply was plying this route back and forth between Hawaii and the West Coast, and this was a routine thing, on a regular schedule.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: In other words, it didn't take a genius to have a pretty good idea when the Neosho would be leaving and when it would be coming in and things of that nature.

Bennett: That's right, and that's the way they slipped in those midget submarines. They went in under our ship, and they were caught later on in the harbor.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to

get worse, did you or your buddies in your scuttlebutt ever talk about the possibility of an attack at Pearl Harbor? Did this thought ever come up in your conversations?

Bennett: Yes, it did. I mean, we were half-way kind of expecting trouble, you know, especially during the last two trips, because the captain had been . . . we thought he was overly cautious, and we knew it was for some reason or other. So we weren't really too surprised.

Marcello: When you thought of typical Japanese during that pre-Pearl Harbor period, what sort of an individual did you usually conjure up in your mind?

Bennett: Well, I had met a lot of them in Hawaii and on Honolulu . . . and then on the West Coast, there were a lot of Japanese. And I knew . . . I thought they were nice people; the ones I met were.

Marcello: If it ever came to a showdown between the two countries, did you feel that the United States Navy could take care of the Japanese Navy in short order?

Bennett: Well, not after Pearl Harbor. I did before that, but then after that, I mean, I had some doubts--a whole lot of doubts, really.

Marcello: But before Pearl Harbor, most of you were pretty confident that you could whip them just about anytime.

Bennett: Oh, yes, anytime. But we weren't planning on what they did

to us, really; that hadn't crossed our minds.

Marcello: Okay, now you came into the Hawaiian Islands with a load of fuel, either fuel oil or aviation gasoline or both, and you unloaded. Could you expect to get some liberty at that point?

Bennett: No, because our orders were to unload and then sail out the next morning. At ten o'clock we were supposed to leave.

Marcello: Did you ever have very much liberty in Honolulu?

Bennett: Oh, usually we'd manage to split up. You know, the port side would go one time and the starboard side the next time. I mean, it was half and half. We were all aboard ship at that time, because they didn't give us any liberty. We knew we had to go back, and they knew they couldn't round us all up and get us back on ship.

Marcello: Now you're referring to that weekend of December 7th.

Bennett: Yes, December 7th.

Marcello: What did you normally do when you went on liberty in Honolulu?

Bennett: Oh, we had a ball! We made Hotel Street and . . . of course, there was a lot of cane patches between the base--Ford Island--and town. You could catch a little narrow gauge train and ride through the cane patch all the way through there. It's not like it is today. And, of course, they had a lot of little native bars--thatched huts and stuff--and that's mostly all we did.

Marcello: And I guess on weekends, downtown Honolulu was wall-to-wall white hats, was it not?

Bennett: Right, mostly white hats.

Marcello: And there were lines for everything.

Bennett: Yes, lines for all of it (chuckle), especially after they shipped the ladies back home.

Marcello: After they shipped the ladies back home?

Bennett: There were lines everywhere.

Marcello: Oh, yes, right (chuckle). Okay, I think this kind of brings us up to that period right before the actual attack itself, Mr. Bennett. Now you mentioned that as conditions continued to get worse, and as we get closer and closer to December 7th, that the routine of the Neosho began to change somewhat. Just repeat again how the routine changed?

Bennett: In what way?

Marcello: Well, you were mentioning how you were sailing with darkened ship and things of that nature, were you not?

Bennett: Well, after that, well, from then on it was darkened ship. Then we took on a lot of extra crew. We doubled our crew; I mean, where we had normally sixty-five, why, we had right at 200 . . . 150, I think, was what the crew was whenever we finally got the full crew. From then on, that's all we did; we carried supplies out and met the fleet and stuff like that. I mean, it changed. We didn't get to go back except

for about twice--back to the States--and that was to arm-- you know, to get pom-pom guns and to get a 5-inch antiaircraft mounted on the tail.

Marcello: Did this all occur after the attack?

Bennett: After the attack, because we had to take that load back on after the attack and then go out and meet what was left of our fleet, which was the Lexington and, I believe, the Saratoga and a few light destroyers and "tin cans." Of course, we chased around out there for about six weeks hoping that we didn't catch anything, because we weren't prepared. But when we came back, why, they sent us on in to Bremerton to take on all the new armament. We looked like a battleship when we came out of there--that tanker did.

Marcello: Now again, getting back to that change in the ship's routine, did you seem to be having more general quarters drills and things of that nature?

Bennett: Oh, yes, yes! We had those regularly so that we would know what to do.

Marcello: Where was your battle station?

Bennett: I was in the pump room--the midship pump room.

Marcello: And what would you be doing there?

Bennett: Well, running the steam smothering system in case we got bombed or something. So the tanker wouldn't blow up and catch fire, I would turn on the steam smothering system and

all that.

Marcello: Of course, fire and safety precautions are a major part of any ship, but I assume it is even more so in case of the tanker.

Bennett: Right! It's real important for somebody to get that valve-- that steam valve--to smother that stuff down, you know, so it won't explode.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, Mr. Bennett, so let's talk about this last trip of the Neosho prior to the actual bombing. Now you mentioned that you come into Honolulu. When did you come in?

Bennett: It was about eight o'clock at night.

Marcello: On what day?

Bennett: On the 6th.

Marcello: You came in on Saturday, December 6th.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: Okay, so you come in and you are fully loaded with fuel. What happens at that point then?

Bennett: Well, that's when the little subs came in, and then we went over to . . . you called it awhile ago.

Marcello: Aiea Landing,

Bennett: Aiea Landing. And we pumped off a bunch . . . well, we unloaded all the fuel oil there. And then we moved over to Ford Island and tied up along side that dock, and then we

pumped all that aviation gasoline up into those hills there.

Marcello: So by the time of Sunday morning, had you pumped most of the fuel out of the Neosho?

Bennett: Right, I had secured . . . I was the last pumper on duty, and I had secured everything. I had walked out on the dock to smoke a cigarette because the smoking lamp was still out, and so that's when it all took place--while I was standing on the dock. And I thought they were . . . I saw the planes coming in, and they were diving over there on the hangars and stuff like that. I said, "I wonder what those bastards are doing drilling this morning!" I thought they were dropping sandbags; that was what they had been dropping. And then all of a sudden smoke boiled up and "BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!" I looked up and one fish-tailed, and I could see that plane's rising sun insignia. I said, "Oh, hell! This is it!"

By the time I got back, why, the torpedo planes were coming in, and they were machine-gunning the decks and everything. They were chipping paint right behind me while I was running across the deck, you know, to get to my midship pump room.

Marcello: Okay, so you just finished unloading the fuel, and I assume that the Neosho by this time was riding pretty high on the

water.

Bennett: It was high.

Marcello: And you're out on deck smoking a cigarette, and this is when you first spot these Japanese planes.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: Where were they heading for? Were these planes heading for Ford Island?

Bennett: Yes, sir, they were heading for Battleship Row.

Marcello: Oh, I see. These were probably torpedo bombers.

Bennett: They were torpedo bombers. One flight was taking care of the hangars, and the planes in the other flight were torpedo bombers.

Marcello: Describe the ascent of those torpedo bombers. In other words, how were they coming in? Describe their actions.

Bennett: Well, they were coming in over a little mountain, right down through the harbor there, and you could see them. Well, you could chuck potatoes at them really, and some of the guys were chucking potatoes at them. They were just coming right in direct, and there was no way you could avoid them except . . . I mean, luckily, either a destroyer or somebody with that old 3-inch peashooter that we had lobbed one over and hit a torpedo right on the nose, and the plane just disintegrated. Otherwise, we would have got hit, too, and probably would have been blown up there. From the Japanese intelligence and

everything, they thought we were an aircraft carrier, because we were setting so high out of the water.

Marcello: Okay, so as these planes were coming in at a very low altitude, could you distinguish the pilots in them?

Bennett: Oh, yes, you could see them grinning, you know. I mean, really, they were all smiles; they were having a field day-- a ball. It was a regular ball for them.

Marcello: And I gather that these planes weren't really coming in at that high a rate of speed.

Bennett: No, they were coming in deliberately; they were taking their time, because there was nothing going on much--no firing. They had a field day, really.

Marcello: What sort of day was this in terms of whether and climate?

Bennett: Oh, it was a beautiful morning.

Marcello: A nice atmosphere for an airplane attack?

Bennett: Oh, yes, just right (chuckle). You couldn't ask for better weather; it was just perfect.

Marcello: Now refresh my memory once again. Where did you say the Neosho was tied up with regard to the other battleships?

Bennett: Well, we were tied up right at that pier. There is a pier that extends out right in front of the Arizona memorial today. We were tied to that. Right behind our ship was the Oklahoma, and right behind it was the Arizona; and I watched them both turn over. You know, I mean, I watched the Oklahoma roll over

on its side and the Arizona blow up. I stuck my head out and got out there where I could see what was going on. The water was on fire, and guys were jumping off the Oklahoma and the California. You know, they were abandoning ship. The water was on fire, and they were swimming around out there, and we lowered some whale boats and were picking up some of the survivors.

Marcello: Now while you were up there on deck observing that initial attack, how long were you watching these planes before general quarters sounded and you got to your battle stations?

Bennett: Oh, general quarters sounded on our ship as I was running to . . . because all of our crew was there, but some of the others were late getting started, getting into action. We were doing all we could with .30-caliber machine guns and .50-caliber machine guns.

Marcello: But what I am saying is, how long were you observing those planes before general quarters actually sounded aboard the Neosho?

Bennett: Oh, I guess about five minutes maybe. I mean, I watched them come in, and I thought they were regular Navy or Air Force maneuvers or something. I didn't know or have any idea that they were Jap planes. I just couldn't believe, you know, that they could get that close in or to get a task force in that close.

Marcello: What ships were hit during this five-minute period? That is, which ones did you observe being hit?

Bennett: Well, I saw, like I say, the Oklahoma, the Arizona, the Utah, and I believe the Tennessee, and a bunch of the destroyers that were over there in the destroyer base. Some of them were in dry dock. Of course, we refueled and everything, and we took all the fuel back and then went out to meet the fleet. So I had a chance, while we were maneuvering around, to see all of them that had been hit.

Marcello: Now when you were standing up on deck, however, during that five-minute period, did you see the Oklahoma being hit at that point?

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: Describe how these torpedoes came in and hit the Oklahoma.

Bennett: They came right down at a low altitude. In fact, I don't guess they were fifty feet above, and then they came in two in a line. They were right close together. I saw them release the torpedoes; I saw them go into the ship.

Marcello: What effect did these torpedoes have upon the ship when they hit?

Bennett: Oh, it was a terrific explosion. You know, you could see it jump out of the water, almost. You know, I mean, even for a battleship that was something unusual. I never dreamed that they could do that much damage, you know, really.

Marcello: Evidently, one of those torpedoes can leave a hole that you can drive a freight car through.

Bennett: Right. You can drive a truck through it. Well, it was just hard to believe unless you were there to see what they did in the hour or thirty minutes, actually.

Marcello: Now while you were out on the deck, I assume that the Arizona had not blown at this point yet.

Bennett: No, I was out there when it blew up.

Marcello: Oh, you were?

Bennett: Yes, I had already opened up my valve, and I was out there watching. You know, I had smothered down the steam system, and that was my main job--to turn it on--and then I was an observer from then on.

Marcello: You came back out on deck again?

Bennett: Oh, yes, I stayed out on deck.

Marcello: Okay, so in other words, you probably weren't at your battle station very long, then.

Bennett: Well, there was just a hatch there, and I was standing right by the hatch. You know, there was a little shed out right in the middle--right in the center part of the tanker.

Marcello: Oh, I see . . .

Bennett: I was in a little house there, protected. I mean, I just opened the door . . . the door was open, and I just went down and turned the valve on, and I came on up because that's

all I could do, anyway. And then I was an observer; I had a ringside seat, so to speak.

Marcello: Describe the Arizona's destruction.

Bennett: Well, they came in with torpedoes, and they hit with those. But what really got it was a dive bomber that came in and dropped what looked like two bombs right down the stack. And it just hit an ammunition storage area, and, heck, it just exploded. I mean, it just . . . "WHAM!" and everything. I mean, in just a few minutes it was down.

Marcello: Did the Arizona just kind of come out of the water, too?

Bennett: Right. Whenever the ammunition magazines blew up, well, that was it.

Marcello: Did any of the debris off the Arizona fall over on the Neosho?

Bennett: Right. I got a piece of shrapnel . . . the only wound got through that whole thing was a little shrapnel cut. I think I stuck a band-aid on or wrapped it up, and that was all. You know, it was not even enough to . . . well, I was real lucky, I thought.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you also not only saw the Oklahoma being hit, but you saw it roll over.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: Describe the Oklahoma's rolling over.

Bennett: Well, it just did a slow roll, and the guys were jumping off into the water. And, of course, the water had caught on fire,

and it was drifting on down the harbor out toward the sea. There was a bunch of boats and stuff out there trying to pick up the survivors. Some of them had got burnt real bad, and then they were . . . the ones that got killed, they were pulling them out and stacking them up, and the medics were working on them, you know. I could just see all that from where I was tied up there.

Marcello: I gather that it must have been a rather sickening sight to see the Arizona blow and then also to see the Oklahoma turn over.

Bennett: Right. And then I think another thing in the back of all of our minds was, "Oh, hell! They are going to land!" There was no way we could have kept a landing force from invading and taking the thing over. We were so disorganized, really; not only the Navy, but the Army, the Marines, and all were totally disorganized. They were shooting their own planes down and everything else.

Marcello: Now in its condition, I guess the Neosho really didn't pose a danger to the other ships, did it?

Bennett: No, it really didn't because it was empty and the steam smothering system was on. All it could have done was blow up, and chances are the torpedo or bomb would have gone right on through without exploding, you know, and then exploded underneath the ship. In fact, that's what it did do when-

ever it was finally sunk. I mean, we took fifteen 500-pound bomb hits, and they all went right through the ship and exploded underneath it.

Marcello: This was in the battle of the Coral Sea.

Bennett: In the Coral Sea battle. It just turned over; it never did sink. I mean, we were sitting high in the water and took on ballast. That was my job--to take on ballast and level the ship up before we took off. We were waiting for some Australian or British ship--the Canberra and some other ship--to refuel them, and that's why we got caught. We stayed out there an extra couple of days, you know. We were waiting on them, and we come to find out they had gone to Auckland, New Zealand, for recreation and liberty.

Marcello: Well, I guess it's just like if you had been hit by an armor-piercing shell. It would have went right on through.

Bennett: That's all. It went right on through. The only thing we had was a couple of kamikazes planes, and there was one that we had hit. We shot down, I think, maybe eight or ten of the planes. They would turn around, and they would try to dive on to the ship. They would see that they were going down, and one was lucky. I mean, he hit on the fantail. That was the only fire that we had, really. I mean, the steam smothering system was on. We had plenty of time to be prepared. They came over and dropped three high-altitude

bombs--500-pound bombs. Then general quarters sounded, and we knew that they would be back. But we had the USS Sims, and we thought we had plenty of firepower; you know, we could take care of anything they could hand out. Well, the Sims . . . three bombs got it--one in the bow, one in the stern, and one right down the stack. And I think they had six survivors, was all.

Marcello: But again, we are talking about the Battle of the Coral Sea, and this really doesn't tie in with Pearl Harbor. You mentioned that you also saw some of the other battleships being hit--the California, the West Virginia, and so on. Describe what you saw over there.

Bennett: Well, they beached one of them. I don't remember . . .

Marcello: That was the Nevada.

Bennett: The Nevada, yes. They beached it.

Marcello: Did you observe it trying to leave the harbor?

Bennett: Yes.

Marcello: Describe this action.

Bennett: Well, I saw it pull out, and then all of a sudden . . . well, they were way ahead of us there, and I saw them beach it. I mean, they run it aground so that it wouldn't sink.

Marcello: Was it being . . .

Bennett: It was trying to get out of the harbor.

Marcello: Was it being peppered by Japanese planes all the way?

Bennett: Oh, yes, they were following it all the way. And, of course, after they had dropped their bombs, then they sent what looked like five or six waves. Some of them were just machine-gunning, especially the fighter planes; they were just strafing, that's all. Then they would go back, and they had time to go back and reload and then come back. You know, they made three or four runs on that.

Marcello: Did you see any of the action taking place over on Ford Island? Were you in a position where you could observe what was taking place there?

Bennett: Not really, other than seeing them bombing the hangars and stuff like that. That's all I could see. I mean, I think they hit every hangar over there, really, because I could see the smoke and the bombs exploding and stuff like that.

Marcello: What sort of thoughts were going through your mind at this particular time? Do you recall?

Bennett: Well, I said, "We're in a helluva shape!" That's all I could say. Like I say, I thought the cat's eye was out for us unless we could get out of this thing. I was so afraid that they would land somebody. They could capture the whole fleet. All we had was a few out there on maneuvers, and there wasn't very much of a fleet left.

Marcello: Is it very frustrating to watch all this action, and you know that you personally can't do anything about it?

Bennett: Oh, it would tear you up; it would tear you down, man.

Yes; sure.

Marcello: In other words, even if you could have had some of those potatoes to chuck (chuckle) . . .

Bennett: To chuck. I would have felt better (chuckle). Right.

Marcello: And did you say you actually saw people . . .

Bennett: Yes, on the fantail, the cooks were chucking potatoes--all the mess crew (laughter). Yes, they would just rare back and throw potatoes at them, you know, because they were coming that close.

Marcello: Again, I guess this is just simply a way of getting rid of frustration so to speak.

Bennett: Right. And the Japs were laughing about it. You could see them, you know. Of course, they didn't have much armament; they just had a plate in front of them, you know. Their planes were very flimsy, but they were fast and maneuverable, and that's what it took.

Marcello: Now what sort of armament did the Neosho have aboard? You mentioned this earlier, I think.

Bennett: (Chuckle) We didn't have any armament, really. I mean, we had an old obsolete 3-inch gun, and we had some .30-caliber and .50-caliber machine guns, and that was it. And they weren't even in . . . I mean, two of them, I think, were up there on the bridge, but most of them had them on their

shoulders. I don't think we shot down anything except what we lobbed over and hit that torpedo. It was that old 3-inch gun, and somebody finally got it to fire. It fired right on that one plane.

Marcello: Talk about this instance, because it sounds like a rather important one--the one where the shell evidently hit the torpedo.

Bennett: Right. I was watching that. I mean, as that plane came in, it was coming right at my general quarters station, right at midship, and I said, "Oh, god! I'm in for it!" About that time, you could see that old 3-inch shell lob over there and hit that torpedo right on the nose, and that plane just wasn't there anymore. I mean, it just blew it up right before he was going to drop the torpedo.

Marcello: And this 3-inch gun was on your ship?

Bennett: It was on our ship, yes.

Marcello: I'm sure that must have done something for your morale.

Bennett: Oh, yes, that raised the morale of the crew. They thought they could tackle anything then, you know, after that.

Marcello: Okay, so what do you do in the aftermath of the attack? Let's assume now that the action is all over.

Bennett: Well, the first thing I had to do is take on all the gasoline I had pumped over; we filled it back full of aviation gasoline.

Marcello: And how long did it take to refill it?

Bennett: It took us about three-and-a-half hours, I guess. And then we moved over and got the fuel oil back.

Marcello: Now when this procedure is taking place, I assume that everybody on the ship is busy.

Bennett: Right.

Marcello: In other words, you don't have time to rescue people when they were in the water or anything like that.

Bennett: No. We were trying to get that thing filled up and get back underway, because we had orders to meet . . . the Lexington and all of them had been out on maneuvers, and we had orders to fuel up and meet with them and to try to make contact with the enemy. That was our orders, so we didn't have time to do much rescuing.

Marcello: And how long did it take you to fill up again?

Bennett: It took us about . . . well, it was all over . . . by about 9:30 or ten o'clock, why, we began to take on oil--fuel oil--and we left out of there just about dusk-dark. We had filled it back with just with what we had and eased back on out. They opened the net and let us go out. We had a destroyer . . . I don't remember which "can" was with us, but, anyway, it was our escort taking us back out to catch the fleet.

Marcello: Okay, did you meet up with some ships out there?

Bennett: Oh, yes, the Lexington and the . . .

Marcello: Was the Enterprise out there?

Bennett: The Enterprise and the . . . I am trying to think of some of the cruisers and destroyers . . . the Blue, and the . . . I think maybe the Ward and two or three others that, you know, that had got out of there. Some of the destroyers got out, and a tanker, but not very many ships got out of there.

Marcello: And then like you say, it was just a matter of refueling them or topping them off.

Bennett: Right. That next day, we fueled the whole fleet, and then we floated around out there for about six weeks before we came back.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors going around in that six-week period? I'm sure that ship must have been one big rumor mill.

Bennett: Well . . .

Marcello: Were you all fully expecting an invasion to occur?

Bennett: Really, yes. We were hunting them really. We thought that if maybe they could slip in and bomb us from that close to us, they would surely have a landing force. But that's where they goofed. If they had brought one, they could have taken those islands.

Marcello: Even in all the excitement, you knew that that base had been crippled pretty well.

Bennett: I mean, I knew it would take a while to get it back in shape, because they really did a thorough job on it. I don't think there was ever any doubt in our minds that we couldn't whip

them, and would eventually whip them. I mean, I never had any doubts, because I had that much confidence in the Navy and the Navy personnel. You had to be a real good man to get into the Navy at that time. I mean, you had to pass that intelligence test and the aptitude test and all that, and you had to be perfect physically or they'd kick you out. They wouldn't accept you.

I think whenever I went in, maybe out of about twenty that was there, there was about three or four of us that passed it. And the other boys went down to . . . I think the Army, the Navy, the Marines, and all were there, and they were lined up down there. They put me in charge of a detail . . . I was in the Naval Reserves at the time. Back in the Depression times, well, anything you could get to make a buck, why, you joined it, and so I was in the Naval Reserves. So I stayed over that night, and by seven o'clock I was on my way to San Diego with about twelve or fourteen other Navy personnel that had enlisted at the same time. I was in charge of them till we got to San Diego. Of course, that's when I lost my authority (chuckle)--when I got there.

Marcello: We mentioned awhile ago, when we were describing life aboard the Neosho, that morale was pretty high during that period prior to the war. Now what was it like after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7th?

Bennett: Well, we were a little low there at first, but, I mean, everybody's morale was high. We had a bunch of boys that could play guitars, and we sang at night. I can't say that our morale was ever really down--not on that particular ship. I understand that some of the others had morale problems, but not on ours.

Marcello: Okay, there's something else I guess I probably need to cover in just a little more detail, Mr. Bennett. You mentioned that that night of December 6th, when you were going into Pearl Harbor, you scrapped a couple of the midget submarines that were trying to sneak in under the Neosho as it went in. And you mentioned that you were on watch at this time. Describe this incident.

Bennett: Well, when they opened the gates, I was standing . . . Anthony and I were down in the engine room--the main engine room--standing throttle watch. We thought maybe we were running aground. And I said, "God Almighty, Anthony, we hit something! Somebody can't drive up there or something!" He said, "Well, I guess we are loaded a little heavier than usual." But actually, the next day they figured out that that was how the subs got in, because we were the last ship to come in that night. They were there ready to come in right there under us, and they came on in.

Marcello: And you never did observe any of those submarines in action

the next day, did you?

Bennett: The only one that I saw was the one that they had beached. You know, they had beached one, and I did see it. One of the destroyers sunk maybe the mother submarine outside the harbor. Well, that was a rumor that they sunk one on Sunday outside the harbor.

Marcello: And you mentioned that you were out there running around in the open seas for about six weeks looking for the Japanese fleet but hoping that you wouldn't find it.

Bennett: Not really wanting to catch up with them (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, when that particular duty was finished, where did you go from there?

Bennett: Well, then we followed them on into Guadalcanal. Of course, we would then meet civilian tankers--Merchant Marine--and take their fuel, and then we would go on into Guadalcanal. We were taking Henderson Field and landing the boys there then. They had the P.T. Crews, the P.T. boats, and all of that there. And so that's where we spent the rest of our time--in the islands out there, you know, from New Hebrides, Espirito Santo, and others.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Bennett, I think that's probably a good place to end this interview. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and even though you personally didn't do a whole lot on the day of the attack, you certainly were an

eye-witness to most everything that did take place. And that's the sort of information that we need to get as part of the record. I want to thank you again for taking time to speak with me.

Bennett: Well, it has been my pleasure. I've enjoyed every minute of it.