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Interview with

Leo Kurmadas

July 8, 1978

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Leo J. Kurmadas  
(Signature)

Date: 7-8-78

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Oral History Collection

Leo Kurmadas

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Date: July 8, 1978

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Leo Kurmadas for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 8, 1978, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Kurmadas in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the auxiliary repair ship USS Medusa during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Kurmadas, to begin this interview, 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.

Mr. Kurmadas: Well, I was born on August 27, 1922, in Little Rock, Arkansas. At the age of two, we moved to Houston, Texas, and I lived in Houston, Texas, until the time I joined the Navy in 1940.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service in 1940?

Mr. Kurmadas: My father had passed away, and my mother and my two sisters and my brother were prisoners-of-war in Greece during the

war--World War II. I had gone there myself in 1935 after my father had passed away, and I didn't like it so I came back in 1937. I finished my high school, and since my mother and my sisters and brother were prisoners-of-war in Greece due to the occupation by the Germans and the Italians, I joined the Navy after finishing high school.

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

Kurmadas: I was partial in behalf of the Navy. They always said that the people that was able to join the Navy at that time prior to the war--if they were picked to go into the Navy--if they would pass a physical, they was supposed to be better men--the Navy and the Marines.

Marcello: And when did you say that you entered the Navy?

Kurmadas: August 27, 1940, on the day of my birthday.

Marcello: I assume that from what you have said previously, you were keeping very closely abreast of current events and world affairs, being that your mother, sisters, and brother had already been interned in Greece.

Kurmadas: That is correct, sir.

Marcello: When you thought of this country getting into war at that time, I assume that your eyes were turned toward Europe rather than toward Asia?

Kurmadas: That is correct, because there was more activity, more fighting,

being done in Europe than any other place at that particular time.

Marcello: Why did your mother and your two sisters and brother decide to go back to Greece after your father's death?

Kurmadas: We figured that we could get a better education, being that she had some sisters and some brothers and her mother over there. She did not have any kinfolks here at the time; and she figured that the kids could be better disciplined and could get a better education over there at the time because the schools were strict over there compared to our schools in America.

Marcello: Just to go ahead several years, were you able to be reunited with your mother and your sisters and brother after the war?

Kurmadas: Well, yes, sir. I had permission from my commanding officer on the USS Hailey, DD 556, to write a letter. I wanted to get out of the Navy to go and participate in Europe--to go to Greece and fight there. Of course, they turned me down. They told me that the United States was at war . . . well, it was before 1944. Actually, it was before the United States was at war that I had written a letter to get out of the Navy to go to Europe and fight--volunteer to go to Europe and fight. Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused me at the time. He said that the United States was going to be needing all the American-born boys for our services.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Kurmadas: In San Diego, California.

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

Kurmadas: Well, at the time when I was in South Unit and they got transferred to the North Unit, they had a promotional deal. They had Rita Hayworth, the movie star, come to San Diego, and I was picked out of over 10,000 men to be her chaperon. We went through both boot camps--the North and South Unit--and then we went through the chow line and mess halls and everything else. And then we went to Pacific Square on Pacific Boulevard, and we danced the samba, the conga, and various types of dances which I wasn't very good at, but I made an attempt at it as a young man at the time. Bob Crosby's--brother of Bing Crosby--orchestra, the big band, was playing at the time.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time? Had it been cut back to six weeks yet?

Kurmadas: I think it was ninety days. It was around three months. It seemed to me it was around three months. I could be mistaken, but I think it was around three months.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Kurmadas: I went to the "T" Unit in San Diego--that's what you call the transfer unit. When they transferred me from "T" Unit, I was supposed to go aboard the battleship Pennsylvania. She was

in dry dock in Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack. But by the time I got to Pearl Harbor, the Navy had transferred me to the Medusa. My papers were transferred from the Pennsylvania to the Medusa.

Marcello: What sort of feelings did you have about this? In other words, the Medusa, at least in terms of physical appearance, was not nearly so impressive as the battleship Pennsylvania.

Kurmadass: Well, as a young man at the time, I wasn't too impressed about the Medusa; but being as the Navy wanted me to go aboard that, there was nothing I could do about it, and I was going to do what they told me to do. And after the attack of Pearl Harbor, of course, I got aboard destroyers and APA's with James Roosevelt and the 1st Marine Raiders that had gone to Guadalcanal and other places.

Marcello: Describe what the Medusa was like in terms of physical appearance and its functions.

Kurmadass: Well, the Medusa had the largest hull as far as repair ships were concerned. It had a lot of machine shops.. It had skillful mechanics of all types, of all sorts. It had different types of machinery that could be used aboard the Medusa for the battleships, cruisers, and whatever the Navy needed for us to repair a ship. It had a big hull, big ship, but it was not for fighting purposes.

Marcello: Those repair ships are fascinating to me because of all the

various specialists that they have aboard them. I understand they have foundries and blacksmith shops and optical sections and all that sort of thing.

Kurmadas: That is correct. The Medusa did have all those different shops and trades aboard that ship.

Marcello: What particular area did you get into after you went aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: I went aboard first in the supply department, thinking that I might like to be a storekeeper. But when I got aboard . . . when I got into the storekeeper department, it was mostly bookkeeping work and storing various parts in various bins and stuff like that. Being I was a very active athlete in high school--football, track, and everything else--I particularly didn't like the supply department. They transferred me later on into the deck department, which I became a boatswain's mate later--not aboard the Medusa but on other ships.

Marcello: But you were in the deck department a great deal of time aboard the Medusa, though?

Kurmadas: Yes, I was.

Marcello: What sort of reception does a "boot" right out of basic training get when he goes aboard a ship?

Kurmadas: Well, when I went aboard the Medusa, most of the oldtimers were very receptive. They treated us real nice; they didn't abuse us, because we didn't have any experience on anything in



reference to ships. Nor did we know how to wear our uniforms very good at the time, but we learned real quick. They were very helpful. The only one that would once in awhile give you a little lip service--he had a arrogant attitude--was the boatswain's mate--the master-at-arms. But the rest of the departments always helped the recruits that went aboard the ship. They were very accommodating.

Marcello: Did you find that most of the senior petty officers aboard the Medusa in the deck division appeared to be quite willing to learn you the ropes of becoming a deck hand aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: Yes. When I went aboard the Medusa, the boatswain's mate and the coxswains--which is third class--were all very helpful; they wanted to show you things; they wanted to let you know that they knew their jobs, and they expected you to do yours. As far as the seamanship work, they expected you to learn it, and they made every effort to teach you damage control, etc. We had fire fighting schools and everything else; we had all of that. I went to fire fighting school . . . damage control. They taught us how to splice cable and how to splice the hawsers; which are made out of manila, and other things like knots and damage control in case you got a hole in the ship. Of course, the boatswain's mates or damage control people would teach you that.

- Marcello: I gather that most of those senior petty officers had quite a few years in the service. Rank moved very, very slowly in the pre-Pearl Harbor Navy.
- Kurmadas: Especially the boatswain's mates--the right-arm rate at that time. You might be second class or first class for a period of many years--seven, eight, or ten or twelve years. It was a very competitive rate, because you was a jack-of-all-trades and a master-of-none. You had to know a little bit about everything, but that's not so, as I understand, nowadays.
- Marcello: What were your quarters like aboard the Medusa, that is, your living spaces.
- Kurmadas: Well, to the best of my recollection, they was pretty large, and they had in some places two and three bunks. In the deck department, of course, if you were a chief petty officer, you had your own private room. But they were nice and clean. You had to get up early in the morning for reveille and everything else.
- Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Medusa?
- Kurmadas: The Medusa had fairly good food. It was not as good as the "airedales," you know, the pilots and stuff at the bases like North Island, where they had the best food of all. But it was edible, and it was wholesome--good food.
- Marcello: I should have asked you this earlier. What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands?

Kurmadas: Well, I had never been in the Far East--in the Hawaiian Islands. They were beautiful from what I had read in the magazines and pictures and what. They were beautiful. The people were real nice; the climate is real nice all year round. I enjoyed it very much.

Marcello: Did you manage to get involved in athletics after you went aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: We tried to play a little baseball, but the war didn't permit us to play very much. After coming back, I put another ship in commission in San Francisco, but they shipped us back to San Diego, California. I worked out with a destroyer base baseball team which had professional baseball players like Bob Lemon and others.

Marcello: Now this was later on into the war itself.

Kurmadas: Yes.

Marcello: I understand, though, that athletics and sports competition played a very important part in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy. There was a great deal of emphasis on athletics.

Kurmadas: Yes, sir. But I wasn't fortunate enough at the time . . .well, from 1940 it wasn't very long before the attack of Pearl Harbor. I couldn't participate in as many sports as I would have liked. But if you was real good in any sporting event, you more or less got some special privileges.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale aboard the Medusa during

that pre-Pearl Harbor period, that is, prior to the actual attack? What was the morale like?

Kurmadas: The morale on the Medusa was real high. The men were loyal to the Navy, with the exception of the times when maybe they'd want to go ashore when they wasn't supposed to go. But the morale was real high, and most men loved the Navy and was willing to do anything--fight or anything else--for our country. I would think the morale was much higher before the war than it is at the present time. I'm referring to the men.

Marcello: Let's talk about a typical day for you as a boatswain's mate striker aboard the Medusa. I assume that the Medusa never left Pearl Harbor too often; it normally stayed there most of the time.

Kurmadas: Yes, sir. From the time I went aboard it, she never did leave Pearl Harbor. But prior to that she was at San Pedro, California, or Long Beach for many years. She had gone to Pearl Harbor, I think, in '38 or '39, because the Blackhawk was the oldest "black" tender. She was in the Far East in China--Shanghai. No, the Medusa stayed in Pearl Harbor most of the time.

Marcello: Now normally, if the battleships or cruisers and so on needed repairs, would the Medusa go to them? Would it go up alongside one of the battleships or cruisers, or just how would the procedure work?

- Kurmadas: In most cases, the battleship would go alongside the Medusa.
- Marcello: The Medusa really didn't move that much at all.
- Kurmadas: No, she didn't--just like the rest of them. The Vestal, the Whitney . . . of course, some of them might be smaller repair ships and supply ships at the same time. The Medusa would move to another port if there was a large ship in a centrally-located area where they might have a lot of repairs to be done. In other words, they would move the Medusa to, say, Guadalcanal or the Ulithi or the Admiralty Islands, if there is going to be maybe fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five ships repaired instead of trying to bring all the ships back to Pearl.
- Marcello: This, of course, would have occurred after war had begun.
- Kurmadas: Yes, sir.
- Marcello: Where did the Medusa normally tie up?
- Kurmadas: She anchored. She anchored in Pearl Harbor, and she would be on the port side of Ford Island. From Battleship Row we would be on the port side where the Curtiss was anchored--seaplane tender. From Battleship Row on your port side was the Raleigh, the Detroit--cruisers--and it's possible that the Helena was there. The Utah was docked at the docks where she was hit--she was a bomb target ship. The Curtiss was hit on the after deck.

Marcello: Did you notice any change in your routine at all as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries worsened? Did you detect any changes in your routine aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: The only change that I did notice is that the men were closer knitted together. The officers and men were willing to sacrifice their lives, to do anything to whip the Japanese or any other enemy of the United States. There wasn't much bickering; there was much hollering with reference to being relieved at that particular time because the war had just begun. Later on, a lot of us didn't get relieved, you know, after two or three years in the front lines.

Marcello: But again, I'm referring to the period prior to the actual attack. All my questions are going to be dealing with the period prior to the attack. Did you detect any changes in your routine prior to the attack, that is, as one does get closer and closer to December 7th? For example, were there more general quarters drills and things of that nature? I would assume that aboard a ship like the Medusa, you normally would not have very many general quarters drills.

Kurmadas: We had general quarters at all times, but I don't think there was any great change. I don't think there was any increase of general quarters, fire drills, air attack drills, or anything else that I can recollect. We didn't think we were going to

be attacked at any time. As far as we were concerned, we didn't think anybody would attack us like they did.

Marcello: Now again, in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, when you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Kurmadas: As far as the Japanese are concerned?

Marcello: Yes.

Kurmadas: We thought that they were shrewd, small but physically fit, knowing how to use karate or other types of defense to defend themselves, sneaky, cunning, very patriotic for their country, very intelligent, quick as a cat.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine aboard the Medusa. How did the liberty routine work for you?

Kurmadas: Well, for all of us--everybody--officers and enlisted personnel-- it was Condition Three; every third day we had liberty. Sometimes we would have "48's:"

Marcello: That's a forty-eight-hour pass?

Kurmadas: Yes, on a Saturday and a Sunday. Once in awhile we'd get a seventy-two-hour pass.

Marcello: But you did not have port and starboard liberty aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: No.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, when did it usually commence? When did liberty usually begin?

Kurmadas: To be honest with you, I don't remember the exact hour.

Marcello: Would it be perhaps about 1600 if it were during the week or something like that . . . probably earlier on weekends?

Kurmadas: Earlier, earlier. I would think it would be a little earlier. You had to report back before eight o'clock in the morning. The thing is, we normally didn't take our liberty--all of it--because we didn't make very much money at that time (chuckle).

Marcello: In other words, most of you came back aboard ship at night?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir, unless you got hot in a crap game and made some money. Then you could stay at the Royal Hawaiian or the Ala Moana. I was very fortunate a couple of times to win two or three hundred dollars or a little bit more in a dice game, so then I would go where the captains and admirals were.

Marcello: Those were the only two major hotels in the islands at the time.

Kurmadas: The Royal Hawaiian and the Ala Moana.

Marcello: In other words, there weren't all the tourist traps there at that time that there are now?

Kurmadas: No, sir, there was not.

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

Kurmadas: Well, I liked to dance. I used to go watch at Waikiki Beach and watch those Kanakas surfing with those deals. I'd go to ball games once in awhile and have a few drinks--"toddy for the body," as the English would say it.



Marcello: Many people say that if the Japanese were going to stage an attack at Pearl Harbor, the best time that they could possibly have selected would have been a Sunday morning. How do you feel about that?

Kurmadas: Well, a Sunday morning would be a good time, because most of the seamen prior to the war drank quite a bit for one reason or another. I would think the best time to attack would be on a holiday; I mean, that's my opinion. They would go ashore and possibly get one or two too many drinks, and they wouldn't perform their duties very good the next morning. They might oversleep or something like that.

Marcello: Was there very much of a problem with drunkenness and so on in the Navy during a weekend in that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Kurmadas: Yes, there was. Yes, there was.

Marcello: In other words, there would be quite a few people that would come back aboard rather inebriated on a Saturday night?

Kurmadas: That's correct. That's correct.

Marcello: What sort of shape would these people be in to fight on a Sunday morning?

Kurmadas: The ones that were aboard were able to do the best they could, because we were short of help to man the guns. You're going to say why. Well, a lot of people went ashore that was not entitled to go ashore. In other words, they sneaked ashore; they got their liberty cards from a yeoman or something, and

they went ashore. We didn't have enough guys to man a 5-inch .51-caliber..

Marcello: Also, Sundays are a day of leisure, are they not?

Kurmadas: That is correct. Most of the time, yes. We would either play cards all night and sleep all day or you had the duty.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that weekend of December 7, 1941, and we'll go into a great deal of detail concerning events of that weekend. Describe for me as best as you can what your routine was. In other words, let's take Saturday, December 6th. Do you recall what you did on Saturday?

Kurmadas: Well, I was off on that Saturday and Sunday. I had a forty-eight-hour pass.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday?

Kurmadas: I was playing poker and shooting dice.

Marcello: Whereabouts?

Kurmadas: In the rigging loft.

Marcello: The rigging loft?

Kurmadas: The rigging loft, yes. It was aboard the ship where they do various things in there for the deck department. Of course, if we'd got caught, we'd be court-martialed.

Marcello: Gambling was not allowed aboard ship.

Kurmadas: It was not tolerated.

Marcello: When did the game start?

Kurmadas: Well, it started Saturday morning.

Marcello: And how long did it go on?

Kurmadas: Until the person had a lot of money and he quit or until the time of the attack,

Marcello: How long did you play?

Kurmadas: I played until about four o'clock in the morning . . . 4:30. I won a couple hundred dollars, and I went and shaved and showered and was getting ready to go ashore.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story . . . in other words, you never went to bed at all that night.

Kurmadas: I hadn't been to bed.

Marcello: Okay, so you shave and shower. What happens at that point?

Kurmadas: Well, I fooled around until it was time to go to the yeoman's office and get my liberty card.

Marcello: How did you get from Medusa to shore? Did they have a liberty boat?

Kurmadas: Motor launch from the Medusa. They'd go every hour . . . every half an hour.

Marcello: Okay, so you went to get your liberty card.

Kurmadas: When I got on the well deck . . . chief warrant machinist, Mr. Foley--he's chief warrant and he had approximately twenty-eight to thirty years in the Navy at the time--was officer of the day at that particular time. And the boatswain at that time-- I think his name was Alexander--and I heard some roaring and some bombs, and I turned around and looked, and I says, "Mr.

Foley, them's some Japanese planes!" The planes had dived over Pearl Harbor and Battleship Row. You could see them when they were tapering off; you could see the insignia on the bottom of the planes, so we knew we was in for trouble.

Marcello: So what happens at that point, then?

Kurmadas: Well, they rang the general alarm.

Marcello: How was general alarm sounded aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: Well, it was a continuous gong--a continuous gong that wouldn't stop at all. I don't think it stopped (chuckle) for half an hour or an hour or so, it seemed to me.

Marcello: Where was your battle station?

Kurmadas: At the 5-inch .51 caliber on the port side of the upper deck.

Marcello: Seeing those Japanese planes, you knew right away that this was the real thing.

Kurmadas: There was no question about it.

Marcello: There was no hesitation on your part?

Kurmadas: No hesitation about it.

Marcello: Okay, so obviously you were going to your battle station as fast as you could.

Kurmadas: Immediately. But the boatswain and Mr. Foley hollered at me when I was going to my battle station . . . there was a few other guys on the well deck going to get their liberty cards, and they were going to break out the BAR's--Browning Automatic Rifles. I grabbed . . . they gave me a BAR because the planes

got down to about seventy-five to a hundred feet.

Marcello: In other words, you couldn't fire at them with that 5-inch gun.

Kurmadas: Well, I hadn't gotten to the 5-inch gun at that particular time.

Marcello: But it would have been pretty hard to fire at them, anyhow.

Kurmadas: They were surface craft guns; in other words, you fired at a distance. But they gave me the BAR, which we had practiced with in boot camp at Camp Pendleton, the Marine base in San Diego. Incidentally, prior to the war, they would send you with the Marines while you were in boot camp to teach you how to fire pistols and rifles and other types of guns and ammunition--you know, teach you about it.

Marcello: But that is the last time you ever fired a weapon probably.

Kurmasas: No, I usually go hunting once in a while for four-legged deer (chuckle).

Marcello: But I meant, from the time you got out of boot camp until you got hold of that BAR, had you done any firing at all?

Kurmadas: No, sir, I had not.

Marcello: Okay, so you're issued a BAR. What happens at that point?

Kurmadas: He told us to fire any time we saw a plane. In the meantime, I was going to my battle station with the BAR. It was hard for them to pass the ammunition up because we didn't have enough men to go through the regular procedure in order to

fire the 5-inch .51-caliber. What was you going to hit with a 5-inch .51-caliber? There was a two-man sub that came in between the Curtiss and the Medusa. We leveled the gun down as far as it could go, and we hit the conning tower of the two-man sub. And we was told later that that two-man sub . . . our divers from the Medusa had gone down and got it, and they put it back together, and they sent it back to the United States for bond purposes, you know, to get money.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up a minute. Now, you were issued the BAR. After you received it, you then still headed toward your battle station.

Kurmadas: That's correct.

Marcello: So were you handling the BAR and firing the 5-inch gun?

Kurmadas: I just sat the BAR down after I got to the 5-inch .51-caliber. Of course, I couldn't use both of them. I went aboard as a trainer--that's what my station was--but in the event that I had left the 5-inch .51 caliber, I would take the BAR with me anyplace where I would be. If a plane would come over, I would shoot it, you know, try to hit it.

Marcello: Up until that time, had you actually fired the BAR at all?

Kurmadas: No, sir; no, sir.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens then when you get to your 5-inch .51-caliber? You mentioned that there's not a whole crew there. How do you compensate?

- Kurmadas: What was the hardest part is the people passing the ammunition and putting into loading the gun. Just one man would do two men's job.
- Marcello: Is this fixed ammunition that you are using?
- Kurmadas: Yes, sir. And we hit this two-man sub, and the Monaghan, a two-stacker, had passed up, and then she backed up and rammed it after we had hit the conning tower.
- Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more in detail about that particular two-man submarine. Describe this whole affair in as much detail as you can remember. Here you are, at the 5-inch gun. Have you actually fired at any airplanes at all with that 5-inch gun?
- Kurmadas: No, sir.
- Marcello: Were they coming in too low for you to fire that gun? Was there danger of hitting other ships?
- Kurmadas: It didn't make any difference to us. We would fire at anything; we was all excited. If there was any planes up there, we would fire regardless.
- Marcello: But you did fire that 5-inch .51-caliber.
- Kurmadas: Later, after the two-man sub had been fired on. Later, and especially at night, we fired at our own planes coming in from San Francisco. They was bringing the mail to go to Pearl City. We fired at our own planes.
- Marcello: How are these Japanese planes coming in? Describe their

tactics during that day. I guess you could probably only see them coming out of their dives and so on, is that correct, as they were coming into Ford Island? The battleships were on the other side.

Kurmadas: On the other side of Ford Island. Of course, they had docking facilities on the starboard side of Ford Island, and they had docking facilities on the port side of Ford Island.

Marcello: How low were these Japanese planes coming in?

Kurmadas: I would say seventy-five to a hundred feet.

Marcello: Could you distinguish the pilots in the planes?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir, a lot of times.

Marcello: What did they look like? Could you see anything?

Kurmadas: Well, they had wide teeth, big teeth, and their eyes were slanted . . . small, olive-complected.

Marcello: I guess most of them had goggles on, did they not?

Kurmadas: Most of them did have goggles . . . goggles or glasses of some sort.

Marcello: Okay, let's describe the incident involving the two-man submarine. I'll let you pick up the story at that point.

Kurmadas: Well, at about seventy-five to 125 feet, one of the officers spotted this two-man sub coming up the channel. Of course, we had seen pictures of a two-man sub before, and the thing was moving. It was a two-man sub, and they had fired their torpedoes already. There was supposed to have been several



that sneaked in and got by the net from Diamond Head, and they was coming in between the Curtiss and the Medusa.

Marcello: What portions of that submarine could you see?

Kurmadas: Just the conning tower. We just opened fire on it, hoping to hit it. If a shell ricocheted off something, it might hit something else; but the thing is, we took a chance. We didn't know if she had fired her torpedoes or not.

Marcello: How many shots did you fire at the conning tower?

Kurmadas: Twice.

Marcello: And you did hit it?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir.

Marcello: What happened at that point?

Kurmadas: We ceased firing, and the Monaghan, 354, two-stacker, had passed the sub; then they spotted it, and they backed up and rammed it. It took about a week or so for our divers to get it up.

Marcello: I'm sure this did quite a bit for your morale when you saw that you destroyed this submarine.

Kurmadas: Very much so. We thought we was superior at that time--at that moment.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that afterwards, that is, after having fired at that two-man submarine, that you did resume firing at air-planes with the 5-inch gun.

Kurmadas: Yes, sir, we did. But I don't think we hit anything, because the 5-inch .51-caliber is a very difficult gun to fire at

airplanes. It was for surface craft mainly; it's not like a 5-inch .38-caliber.

Marcello: What kinds of airplanes were you firing at with that 5-inch .51-caliber?

Kurmadas: It looked like they were dive bombers and torpedo planes.

Marcello: You were not firing at high-level bombers?

Kurmadas: No, sir.

Marcello: About how many rounds did you fire?

Kurmadas: I would say around eight or nine. I can't remember exactly.

Marcello: Now, were you firing that gun until the end of the attack itself?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Again, I would assume that you had to be very, very careful how you did fire that gun since, as you mentioned, it was a surface gun rather than a dual-purpose gun.

Kurmadas: That's right. That is correct--like a 5-inch .38-caliber. But we had no alternative.

Marcello: In a situation like this, is there any conversation or anything going on at the gun itself?

Kurmadas: The only conversation going on is that we felt that our officers or officials in Washington--the admirals--were negligent in their duties in order for them to sneak in on us at Pearl Harbor. Some of us thought it was deliberately done in order to wake up America.

Marcello: Did you have a chance to be scared at that particular time, that is, while the attack was actually going on?

Kurmadas: We didn't have a chance to get scared. No, sir, not at that time. Later on, around six or seven o'clock, we began to make an analysis of what happened, and we realized our lives were in danger and everything else.

Marcello: I assume that everything is going by fast and furious. This is a fast-moving operation--the whole thing.

Kurmadas: Yes, sir.

Marcello: How much of a hindrance was all the smoke and the fire and so on to your actually firing the gun, that is, from the destruction that had already been done at Pearl Harbor?

Kurmadas: Our gun firing?

Marcello: Right. Did this cut down on your visibility and therefore prevent you from firing the gun as much as you normally would have?

Kurmadas: No, sir, not on the Medusa . . . not on the Medusa. But some planes came in around 10:30 or eleven o'clock at night; they came in from San Francisco to bring some mail, and they usually landed at Pearl City. We started firing at our own planes. We thought they were enemy planes. Later on, the word was that they wasn't, and how many were knocked down or what, I don't know. Of course, later on, in the later part of that night, we went in motor launches with rifles and stuff and

went to Pearl City looking for Japs for sabotage--the Medusa and other ships, I presume. But I know the Medusa sent some men in the motor launches with guns to go look for Japs.

Marcello: Let's back up just a minute. What did you do that afternoon, that is, after the attack had been completed? Were you still standing by your guns and so on?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Marcello: In other words, general quarters was continuous.

Kurmadas: It was continuous, I mean, as far as myself was concerned. Of course, there was others that went in motor launches and went aboard some ships in order to try to get some men out, but I went the next day to relieve some of the crew.

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

Kurmadas: Well, the rumor was that England caused us to get into the war because we was staying out of the war and England was getting battered. That was the main thing, as far as I can remember. There were other rumors, but I don't recollect them right off-hand.

Marcello: Were you fully expecting the Japanese to land?

Kurmadas: That rumor, yes. There were rumors that they were going to land.

Marcello: Had you ever heard the one about the paratroopers having been dropped up in the hills or something of that nature?

- Kurmadas: No, sir, we didn't hear that. The only thing was that they would follow up with transports with troops coming in in various places in the Hawaiian Islands. If they did, we could not have stopped them.
- Marcello: Did you have very much of an appetite that afternoon?
- Kurmadas: No, sir, I didn't have no appetite (chuckle). You drink coffee.
- Marcello: When did the full impact of the attack really hit you? That is, when did you first have a chance to sit down and analyze it and be scared, so to speak?
- Kurmadas: Oh, I would say five or six o'clock in the afternoon, something like that.
- Marcello: What were some of your thoughts at that time?
- Kurmadas: My thoughts were just to get my hands on the Japs.
- Marcello: In other words, anger was the type emotion that was perhaps most prevalent among the people at that time?
- Kurmadas: Among all people at that time.
- Marcello: It was anger rather than fear?
- Kurmadas: Anger, not fear. We wasn't afraid for our lives, I mean, right there at the time when they was having the attack. We weren't scared. None of the men were scared on my ship . . . on the ship I was on.
- Marcello: Now, you mentioned that that night you were sent ashore with one of the parties looking for Japanese saboteurs?
- Kurmadas: Yes, sir. After the planes came in that were bringing the

mail . . . actually it was after midnight, probably around one, two, three o'clock in the morning.

Marcello: Well, let's talk about those planes coming in. Describe what happened.

Kurmadas: Well, the rumor was that the Japs were going to hit us again, and we started hearing some roars, and they were flying at high altitudes. But the truth of the matter was, it was planes coming in from San Francisco.

Marcello: I assume that one gun opened up, and then everybody opened up.

Kurmadas: Everybody opened up.

Marcello: Evidently, the air was just filled with tracer bullets, and it looked like the Fourth of July.

Kurmadas: With the 40-millimeters and .50-caliber water-cooled machine guns from the cruisers and whatever ship was still up and able to man a gun.

Marcello: How many rounds from that 5-inch did you fire?

Kurmadas: Well, I thought it was around eight . . . seven or eight.

Marcello: At those planes coming in? I'm referring to those planes coming in that evening.

Kurmadas: That night?

Marcello: Yes. You mentioned that your gun did fire at them.

Kurmadas: Yes, sir. I imagine around six, seven, or eight. They were high-altitude planes.

Marcello: Did you see any of them go down?

Kurmadas: No, sir. If they were hit, the mountains were very close, and you couldn't see them, anyway.

Marcello: I guess everybody was jumpy and trigger-happy.

Kurmadas: We were jumpy; we were trigger-happy. We had never experienced anything like that. As young men--as we were---we were very fortunate even to man our guns.

Marcello: It was after that that you were sent ashore with that group looking for Japanese saboteurs.

Kurmadas: Saboteurs, that is correct. That was in Pearl City.

Marcello: Describe this incident.

Kurmadas: They gave us .38's, and we had rifles . . .they weren't rifles; they were submachine guns. They wasn't M-16's because we didn't have the M-16's then, but they were similar to them. We was going from house to house and business to business, and we were going through the doors forcefully or otherwise to see if there was any Japanese or saboteurs or whatnot.

Marcello: Did you find any?

Kurmadas: We didn't, but there was others that did. But the group I was with, we didn't find any because they had gone up to the hills.

Marcello: How long did you continue this particular search?

Kurmadas: We got back by 5:30 or six o'clock in the morning.

Marcello: You hadn't had much sleep, then, for two days.

Kurmadas: No, sir! I ain't had no sleep at all, and I wasn't sleepy,

either (chuckle).

Marcello: What did you do with all that money you had won? Did you still have it in your pocket?

Kurmadas: (Chuckle) Oh, yes. I had my money in my pocket, yes, sir. I didn't put it in my locker (chuckle).

Marcello: You probably hadn't had a chance to go to your locker.

Kurmadas: No. I wouldn't have put it in my locker. I had it on me-- in my dungarees.

Marcello: I assume that the Medusa did not take any hits itself . . . any bomb hits.

Kurmadas: Close hits. The Nevada ran aground behind us; she ran aground behind us about sixty to eighty feet. We furnished her with food from our stores.. We used to put bread in garbage cans and stuff and various foods until such time she was able to prepare food for herself. The Nevada, the battlewagon, tried to get out, and she got hit; and in order not to sink, she ran aground. The Vestal did likewise--the repair ship.

Marcello: Did you see the Nevada trying to break out of the harbor and then run aground?

Kurmadas: Yes, we saw her run aground because she was just right behind us.

Marcello: Describe that as best you can remember.

Kurmadas: Well, we didn't see it get hit, but we saw it as she was trying to head out from Battleship Row toward Diamond Head. We knew



that something was wrong, because she had turned around and was coming back in and going toward Pearl City. We were anchored quite close to there, maybe two or three thousand yards away. We knew something was wrong, and a message came over the mike that the Nevada had been hit and that she was running aground to the port side of us.

Marcello: I assume that since Ford Island was between you and Battleship Row, you really couldn't see too much of what had been going on over there.

Kurmadas: On Ford Island, no, sir, other than that we could see the smoke. There was black smoke, and we could hear the bombs hit.

Marcello: So you couldn't see anything that really happened on Ford Island or over on Battleship Row.

Kurmadas: No, sir, not directly.

Marcello: Okay, what did you do the next day?

Kurmadas: Well, the next day there was no sleep yet. This was the third day, as far as I was concerned. They sent us as working crews aboard the Utah looking for men. I worked a little bit aboard the Raleigh and the Detroit.

Marcello: Let's go back and talk about the Utah, first of all. Were you sent aboard the Utah?

Kurmadas: Yes, I was aboard the Utah.

Marcello: What did you do when you went aboard there?

Kurmadas: We went down below decks looking for men . . . to see if we

could find any live men or dead men.

Marcello: Was this a rather eerie experience?

Kurmadas: It was my first experience, and it was a very hectic experience.

Marcello: Hectic in what way?

Kurmadas: Well, I had never experienced anything like that, and it was kind of a funny feeling. It was kind of a funny feeling to be going down where there was no lights or nothing, and you was afraid somebody was going to get you. We kind of had a little fear after the next day.

Marcello: Did you discover any bodies and so on down there?

Kurmadas: Injured men . . . their legs broke or their arms broke. Yes, we did, but I never did get any dead men out of the Utah. I went aboard the Oklahoma.

Marcello: The Oklahoma had turned over.

Kurmadas: It had turned over and sank, and our welders had cut holes where they could hear bangs or noises or something. Being that I wasn't a welder--I was just a young recruit aboard the ship--we were just kind of a flunky, a helping hand. We'd do what they'd tell us to do.

Marcello: Could you yourself actually hear these men tapping on the side of the ship?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir.

Marcello: Was it so loud that you could really hear it?

Kurmadas: It was a thump; it was a thump. You knew somebody was there.

The noise wasn't just by accident; somebody was pounding and trying to get somebody to cut a hole or to get out some kind of way.

Marcello: How long did it take them to cut a hole in the bottom to get those men out?

Kurmadas: Well, when the welders got on it, it wouldn't take fifteen minutes or twenty minutes to cut a hole. They had torches, big torches, like a welder, and they cut them real quick.

Marcello: What did those men look like when they came out of the Oklahoma?

Kurmadas: Their eyes were twice as big as they would normally be, and it looked like they had frog eyes.

Marcello: I guess they were shaken up quite a bit.

Kurmadas: Yes, shaken up quite a bit, shocked . . . disgusted because they pulled an attack on us, and we didn't know anything about it. They felt that our officers let us down.

Marcello: I guess at the same time, however, they were rather grateful to get out of that ship.

Kurmadas: Oh, definitely grateful . . . very much. They were very fortunate, and they thanked God they was still alive.

Marcello: How many men came out of there altogether?

Kurmadas: I don't remember. I'd be lying if I told you, because I don't remember.

Marcello: Did you say you also went aboard the Detroit?

Kurmadas: Yes, the Detroit.

Marcello: What did you find aboard there?

Kurmadas: The only thing we done aboard the Detroit was to operate pontoons . . . help the men try to straighten the ship up, because she was tilted to the side.

Marcello: Had she been hit?

Kurmadas: I believe she was. Yes, she was hit.

Marcello: How long did it take you to put her on an even keel again?

Kurmadas: I think it took us three or four hours--partial even keel, not perfect--until they could pump the water out of the compartments or wherever the water was.

Marcello: So did you visit any of the other ships at this time?

Kurmadas: We went aboard the West Virginia, the Tennessee.

Marcello: The West Virginia, in particular, had been hit pretty hard, had it not?

Kurmadas: Yes, sir, she was.

Marcello: The Tennessee was fortunate because she had been inboard of the West Virginia.

Kurmadas: That's correct. We went aboard just like we did on the other ships, looking for men. I was always kind of frightened of dead people (chuckle). I don't like to go to funeral homes. At that time, I was a young kid.

Marcello: Did you discover any bodies in the West Virginia?

Kurmadas: No, sir, I didn't.

Marcello: I guess that harbor was one helluva mess in the aftermath of

the attack..

Kurmadas: Well, there was some fires; oil was burning. It was very bad. There was a lot of confusion . . . a lot of confusion during the day of the attack and the next day, likewise.

Marcello: Like you pointed out, since you were a rookie seaman, so to speak, you were just a general flunky; they used you wherever they needed you.

Kurmadas: That's correct, sir. All seamen second class and all seamen first class were basically used for flunkies if they were only in the service about a year or a year-and-a-half, two years.

Marcello: In other words, you performed clean-up work and things of that nature.

Kurmadas: That is correct.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Kurmadas, is there anything else relative to the attack that we haven't talked about and that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Kurmadas: Well, I believe I mentioned that the Curtiss was hit on the fantail where they--I don't know what you call it--where they shoot the planes off. She was hit; a bomb hit her. We had fired at that plane, but I don't think we hit it.

Marcello: When was the first time you managed to get any sleep?

Kurmadas: Tuesday. I got about two or three hours of sleep. I was dead; my head was numb like needles in it--not like being drunk

because being drunk ain't nothing compared to lack of sleep. Of course, later on, during the war, I'd stayed up five days and five nights--not only me but other men, too.

Marcello: How long did you stay in Pearl Harbor before you left there?

Kurmadas: I left there on February 2, 1942.

Marcello: Aboard the Medusa?

Kurmadas: From the Medusa. I came back to the States to put the APA, the old President McKinley . . . they renamed it the J. Franklin Bell. J. B. McGovern was the captain of that ship. He used to be the repair officer on the Medusa prior to the attack of Pearl Harbor. Then he finally made commodore aboard the J. Franklin Bell. And the first thing we done is pick up the James Roosevelt--Franklin Delano Roosevelt's son--and the 1st Marine Raiders, and we trained together prior to going into Guadalcanal.

Before going to Guadalcanal, they transferred me to the . . . after all the training, I came back to Honolulu from the States. They wanted some regular Navy men to put the Haley in commission--the 556. It was a "tin can," and I stayed aboard her after the war--2,100.

Marcello: It was 2,100 tons?

Kurmadas: Yes, 2,100 tons.

Marcello: Okay, well, I think that's probably a good place to end this interview, Mr. Kurmadas. I want to thank you very much for

having taken time to talk with me. You have said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that the scholars will find your comments very valuable when they use them to write about Pearl Harbor.

Kurmadas: Thank you very much.