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Interview with

Dale Messler

March 4, 1977

Place of Interview: Irving, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: D. D. Messler  
(Signature)

Date: Mar 4 1977

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Oral History Collection

Dale Messler

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Irving, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Dale Messler for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 4, 1977, in Irving, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Messler in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Pennsylvania during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

Now Mr. Messler, to begin this interview, would you just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Messler: I was born February, 1920, in Missouri, and I have a high school education. I joined the Navy on January 16, 1940.

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

Mr. Messler: I was in Citizen's Military Training in '38 and '39, which is Army, like the National Guard, and I didn't like it, so I went to the Navy. I thought I'd try it.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service? Did you have a particular reason why you went active?

Messler: Well, in '38 and '39, jobs were hard to get. You're . . . twenty-five cents an hour. Of course, there you got twenty-one dollars a month, but you got your food and your clothing and everything furnished, too.

Marcello: You know, this is a standard reason that a great many people of your particular generation give for having entered the service. In other words, times were tough and jobs were hard to find. The service didn't pay much, but there was a certain amount of security involved.

Messler: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Messler: Great Lakes.

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

Messler: No. It was just wintertime, and it was extremely cold. There was nothing much happening up there.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time?

Messler: Twelve weeks.

Marcello: In other words, at the time that you went through, they had really not cut down boot camp yet, or cut it back?

Messler: Oh, no, no. There wasn't any such thing as the reserves or anything like that.

Marcello: Now at the time that you entered the service, how closely were you keeping abreast with foreign affairs and world events?

Messler: Not very closely (chuckle).

Marcello: Did you think in terms of the possibility of war between the United States and either Germany or Japan, for that matter?

Messler: I might have thought about Germany, but I didn't think about Japan right then.

Marcello: Where'd you go from boot camp?

Messler: I went aboard the Pennsylvania at Long Beach, and then we stayed in Long Beach about a week and went to Honolulu and stayed out there until after Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Now was the assignment aboard the Pennsylvania voluntary duty, or were you simply assigned there?

Messler: No, you had your choice of ships, and I put in for a battleship.

Marcello: Why did you want to go aboard a battleship?

Messler: Well, I'd always heard they were bigger and better and had more facilities and everything.

Marcello: Describe the reception that you got when you initially went aboard the Pennsylvania. In other words, you were a raw

recruit straight out of boot camp. What sort of a reception did the old salts give you aboard the Pennsylvania?

Messler: Oh, we caught all the working parties and did all the dirty work for awhile.

Marcello: I assume that they let you know very quickly that you were still a "boot" so far as they were concerned.

Messler: Oh, yes.

Marcello: What were your first impressions of the Pennsylvania when you very first saw it?

Messler: It was awful big (chuckle).

Marcello: What sort of jobs were you assigned when you initially went aboard the Pennsylvania?

Messler: I was a deck hand--swabbing and painting and shining bright-work.

Marcello: Now how long did you remain in the deck force?

Messler: About eight months and then I went to turret three as a gunner's mate.

Marcello: You must have been at Pearl Harbor, then, by the time that you were striking for gunner's mate.

Messler: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Okay, how would you describe the morale aboard the Pennsylvania during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Messler: It was very high. You didn't have to worry about anything being stolen or anything like that; we didn't even own a

lock. It was small, and everybody was, you know. . . they were all volunteers, and they got along fine.

Marcello: How was the food aboard the Pennsylvania?

Messler: Better than usual because we were a flagship, Pacific Fleet. Admiral Kimmel was aboard and Richardson before him.

Marcello: I assume that you had to put in a tour of mess cooking when you went aboard the Pennsylvania.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: What was mess cooking duty like?

Messler: Well, in those days you fed family-style, and you had to go up the galley and carry them down in tureens and set them on the table. We had dishes. . . real dishes and cups and everything for each man. Each mess cook had twenty people; he had twenty people or two tables.

Marcello: Were the tables hanging from the overhead when they weren't in use at mealtime?

Messler: Right. And you had to let them down, and the benches were on top of them. You'd set up all three meals and scrub everything up and put them back. You'd carry your dishes to the scullery. . . the dishwasher.

Marcello: How long did a mess cooking tour last?

Messler: It lasted three months. I put in for a second one; I liked it.

Marcello: Why was that?

Messler: I had the admiral's orchestra.

Marcello: You mean the band?

Messler: No. The admiral had an orchestra to play at each evening meal, especially when he had any other visitors or dignitaries over. They'd play each evening. I fed early, and by the time everybody else was eating, I was ready to go on liberty. We had everynight liberty; the mess cooks did.

Marcello: Well, now this is kind of interesting. I'd never heard anybody talk about the admiral's orchestra.

Messler: They all . . . most all the big admirals. . . now some of . . . your rear admiral and all, they didn't but the four-star admirals did.

Marcello: How many people would be in one of these orchestras? You might have to estimate this.

Messler: Fourteen. There were fourteen people.

Marcello: And their function was to play at meals and so on?

Messler: Just to play at his meals and any gathering of officials and notaries that came aboard.

Marcello: How did you luck out in that you were mess cooking for the admiral and his staff rather than for the regular crew?

Messler: I don't know (chuckle). I just was told I'd have it.

Marcello: Now were you actually serving Admiral Kimmel at these meals on occasion?



- Messler: No, no. No, I just had the orchestra as a crew. See, the mess attendants, the Filipinos and all that, did his serving. All I did was serve the crew.
- Marcello: Now where would they be fed in relation to the admiral and his staff and so on?
- Messler: They had their quarters; they had their own compartments down in the ship on the second deck. Of course, the admiral was back aft on the main deck.
- Marcello: Wasn't it true, also, that if one did a good job of mess cooking that on payday the members of the mess table would usually tip the mess cook?
- Messler: Oh, yes. Usually, you got a dollar a man tip each payday, which was every two weeks. I'd get fourteen extra dollars every two weeks.
- Marcello: That almost doubled your pay, in other words, when you first went in.
- Messler: Just about, yes.
- Marcello: What were the living quarters like for you personally aboard the Pennsylvania?
- Messler: Oh, it was very good. Of course, all non-rated men slept in hammocks hanging from the overhead. Rated men had cots. Now that's how I got out of mess cooking; I made third class gunner's mate, so I didn't finish my second three months of mess cooking.

Marcello: What was it like to swing a hammock? That always seems like an interesting experience to me.

Messler: It wasn't anything to it. You would just hang it on your billet hooks and stretch it tight and lash it and swing up in it and sleep.

Marcello: Did you have very much trouble getting used to it?

Messler: No, because in boot camp, we had . . . the first three weeks you had the four-foot level, and from then on you had the eight-foot level.

Marcello: Now what do you mean when you say "four-foot level" and "eight-foot level?"

Messler: Well, when you first start in boot camp, you started out four feet from the floor or deck. Then after you got to knowing how to get in them and stay in them. . . after detention, they called it, because any illness or anything would spread, well, then you went to eight-foot high with a four-foot poop deck in underneath where you lashed your sea bag and all. Your hammock was lashed above that, and then you'd get on it and swing up in your hammock. Aboard ship there was about seven feet of overhead.

Marcello: And then did these have to be stowed away every morning?

Messler: Oh, yes. They were stowed in what they call a hammock netting. It's just a big case. You had five minutes to

get out, make it up, lash it, and store it every morning. If not, why, you had to carry it an hour on your back out on the quarter-deck. They had one all made up with a full sea bag--116 pounds. You had to put it on your shoulder and carry it for an hour out on the quarter-deck.

Marcello: What part did athletic competition play in the life of the crew aboard the Pennsylvania during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Messler: Well, we had a lot of athletics--baseball, football, track, tennis, rowing, swimming, boxing, wrestling.

Marcello: How much were you encouraged to participate in these sports?

Messler: If you knew anything about any of them, why, they usually tried to get you.

Marcello: And I gather there was a great deal of inter-ship competition in terms of athletics.

Messler: Oh, yes, yes. All the. . . what they call 'Bat Division' and then the 'Cru Div.'

Marcello: 'Bat Division' would be battleship division, is that correct?

Messler: Battleship Division and then the Cruiser Division and then Destroyer Division. Then the winners of all those would meet later on like your final World Series or something, you know. The best of all the divisions, then, would have a play-off or would fight--boxing--whatever it was.

Marcello: Well, I think you've mentioned a lot of things that would have played a part in establishing a high degree of morale aboard the Pennsylvania. You mention that the food was fairly good; I assume your quarters weren't too bad; you had the inter-fleet competition through athletics and so on; you were all volunteers. All of these things, I think, would have played a part in determining the high morale.

Messler: In my opinion, the quarters then were better than they are now, because you had more room and they could be kept a lot cleaner. At night it was crowded because of all your hammocks and everything and your cots were on the floor. But nowadays the ships are so crowded in the daytime with the bunks that you can't clean them like they used to be. So I think it was better then than it is now.

Marcello: Describe the on-the-job training that you received aboard the Pennsylvania. Now you mentioned that when you initially went aboard you were part of the deck force.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of work did you do as a deck hand?

Messler: Well, you scrub paint work; you do fancy knots and make all kinds of lines on your stanchions and rails; you polish brightwork. You do just a little bit of everything.

Marcello: Did you ever get involved in holystoning the deck?

Messler: Oh, yes. Twice a week.

Marcello: You might talk about that process called holystoning, because a hundred years from now probably nobody will know what holystoning a deck is. I think it's really an important part of the life of the pre-Pearl Harbor Navy.

Messler: Most of your Navy now don't know what holystoning is. Well, there was a half a brick with a hole kind of chiseled in it, and you had a swab handle. . . four-foot stick. You'd wrap your arm around it and stick the end of it in the hole. It wasn't very deep--just like a socket. You would go form a line and take five or six strokes, maybe ten strokes, per board. The whole line would move up. It'd be soap and water and sand on the deck.

Marcello: Sometimes they used salt water, too, didn't they, because it would bleach out the wood?

Messler: Well, they always rinsed off with salt water. You didn't scrub. . . oh, it didn't make any difference, but if it was really dirty or it had some dirty. . . where ammunition or something got it dirty, they'd use fresh water and soap; otherwise, they'd use salt water and soap, usually. But then the decks would be just about snow-white. Of course, they're four-inch teak. You always had your same stone, and when you wore that stone out--wore the hole clear through it--you got a day's liberty.

Marcello: I didn't know that.

Messler: That was our ship. Now maybe some of the others didn't. Or maybe it was our division even. Maybe some divisions . . . I think the whole ship did that.

Marcello: Was it tough work holystoning the deck?

Messler: It was sort of tiresome right at first. Then sometimes they'd get a wild idea to whitewash the whole deck and leave a natural path for the night. . . darkened ship. They did that on darkened ship practice so the officers could find their way back to their hatches. One time they whitewashed the whole deck except the little path, and it took us about a week, eight hours a day, holystoning to get it off. They never did that again.

Marcello: What portion of the deck would actually be teak? In other words, I would assume the whole main deck. . .

Messler: The whole topside.

Marcello: The whole topside deck was teakwood.

Messler: Now some of your destroyers had partial steel and partial wood, but all the battleships were all teakwood, and all cruisers. Way up in the tops, why, they weren't.

Marcello: Where were the so-called armor decks, then?

Messler: Armored deck? You mean where the armor belt was or . . . they've got an armor deck three decks below. . .

Marcello: Okay, that's what I'm referring to.

Messler: . . .which was, on that ship, about twelve inches thick.  
That's on the bottom of the third deck.

Marcello: And I assume that's to prevent damage to the vitals of the ship--the engineering spaces and so on.

Messler: It covered all the evaporators, fire rooms, engine rooms, and magazines. It would run from turret one to turret four.

Marcello: Okay, when did the Pennsylvania move to Honolulu? Or to Pearl Harbor, I guess we should say.

Messler: April of '40.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Messler: It was fine. We originally went out for about . . . it was supposed to be six weeks and ended up about two years.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the training exercises in which the Pennsylvania engaged after it got to the Hawaiian Islands. Why don't you describe a typical training exercise or maneuver in which the Pennsylvania was engaged. Let's start with the time that the Pennsylvania would go out. When would it normally go out on one of these exercises?

Messler: Well, in those days Honolulu wasn't big enough to furnish bread, milk, and butter to the fleet and their own people,

so all the battleships had to go out. They'd go out for two weeks, and they'd come in and the cruisers would go out for two weeks. Then the cruisers. . . of course, there was a few destroyers with each one.

Marcello: So the normal exercise would be a two-week affair.

Messler: Usually two weeks and rotate--two weeks in and two weeks out.

Marcello: Would you normally go out on a particular day everytime?

Messler: Usually on Monday. And we'd stay out and we might pull in at Lahaina Roads, you know, on Maui or something on that weekend out, and then we'd come back in Thursday or Friday of the next day. Then on that weekend, why, everybody would be in. On Monday the cruisers would go out.

Marcello: Now by the time that you got to Pearl Harbor, as we mentioned earlier, you were striking for gunner's mate. Describe the type of training that you personally underwent in your training toward becoming a third class gunner's mate.

Messler: You just worked on the guns and with ammunition. The turrets were a little bit different than the small arms. These were 14-inch .50-calibers.

Marcello: You were working in one of the main batteries, then.

Messler: Yes.



Marcello: Which one of the main batteries?

Messler: Turret three.

Marcello: Which would have been aft?

Messler: Right.

Marcello: Now what particular function did you perform in turret three?

Messler: You mean as far as maintenance? Or as a battle station?

Marcello: Either or.

Messler: Well, in maintenance, you worked everywhere. . . ammunition. Maintenance of the whole turret meant inside and out, paint work and all. In battle station, why, I was gun captain for awhile, and then I was assistant turret captain--just different stations like that. I could fill in in anyplace that anybody was sick or got hurt or something. I'd go and fill in.

Marcello: This was going to be my next question. Are you saying in affect, then, that eventually you were trained in such a manner that you could man just about any position in that turret?

Messler: Yes, I could man any of them, and sometime or another, I manned every station in there.

Marcello: How many people would be in one of those main batteries?

Messler: There's eighty-three people at battle stations.

Marcello: These would include the range-finders and the ammunition handlers and everybody associated with the firing of the gun.

Messler: Yes. Down in the magazines and the shell deck, your gun rooms. Of course, the range-finders were fire controlmen in those days. We had two of them back there. You had usually two officers--turret officer and junior turret officer. You also had your turret captain and your junior turret captain, which I was most of the time. I made . . . on December 8th, I was supposed to go up to second class, so the raid stopped that, but I made it in April then. But I helped all around like that.

Marcello: Now when you went out on one of these two-week exercises, how much emphasis would be placed on the actual firing of the guns?

Messler: They didn't fire the main battery, you know, too much.

Marcello: Was it mainly a matter of expenses as much as anything?

Messler: Right, yes. Of course, we used what they called sand load or dummy ammunition, but still it takes 400 pounds for each round of the gun.

Marcello: You mean 400 pounds of powder?

Messler: Powder, yes. There's three guns to each turret and there's twelve guns on the turret, so that's a lot of powder for

one round. So they did fire the antiaircraft guns a lot and broadsides, which was 5-inch .50-caliber; but the 14-inch guns they didn't fire but about. . . oh, three times a year. . . four times a year, something like that. About every quarter, they'd fire them.

Marcello: And would these take the form of firing at a sled or something of this nature?

Messler: Yes, there was sled firing. Those 14-inch guns couldn't fire at aircraft. We got so we did fire later on for what they called the glide bombers--torpedo bombers--because we'd try to make a splash and knock them down. In those days, oh, we'd try that as an experiment.

Marcello: How much emphasis was given to antiaircraft practice aboard the Pennsylvania during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Messler: Oh, a lot of it. That was it mainly.

Marcello: In other words, even at that early date, did people realize the significance and the importance that airplanes were going to play in future wars?

Messler: Oh, I believe so. Yes, they had sleeve firing all the time. Of course, back there they used part of the dummy ammunition with the sand load. . . and, of course, that don't take much powder, and they could really shoot a lot of sleeves with that.

Marcello: Prior to December 7, 1941, did the antiaircraft armament, for the most part, consist mainly of .50-caliber machine guns rather than the 20-millimeters and the 40-millimeters?

Messler: We didn't have any 20-millimeters and 40-millimeters except right at the very. . . we had pom-poms . . . English pom-poms--1.1--right before the war started. They didn't prove out, and we took them off right away and put 20-millimeters on. We had mainly 3-inch .50-calibers of 5-inch .25-calibers for antiaircraft. We had four .50-calibers in each mainmast and foremasts and up in the crow's nest.

Marcello: I would assume that the Pennsylvania had a lot more anti-aircraft armament aboard after Pearl Harbor than it did prior to Pearl Harbor.

Messler: Yes, because we got 20-millimeters; we came back to San Francisco and got 20-millimeters put all over the topside and 40-millimeters that we didn't have then.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate, did your training routine vary any?

Messler: It just intensified. Of course, we knew it was getting "warmer," and we'd see the two-man subs outside the gates before we'd blow the ship's whistle to get in . . . oh, long before. . . a couple months before Pearl Harbor started.

Marcello: Let's just back up here a minute. You mentioned that the training intensified. How did it intensify?

Messler: Well, there was more firing and more practice. We had more GQ drills, loading drills.

Marcello: In other words, they occurred much more often.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: How about in terms of sailing under blackout conditions and things of this sort?

Messler: Oh, yes, we did that most all . . . oh, for six months before.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that on occasions when the Pennsylvania would return to Pearl that you could observe submarines outside the gates that were actually . . .

Messler: Yes, one-man subs.

Marcello: . . . observing the activities of the fleet?

Messler: Yes. And the sampans were caught with radios down in their bilges.

Marcello: Even prior to that Pearl Harbor attack?

Messler: Oh, yes. So we knew it was coming. In fact, my mother has a letter yet that I wrote, I guess, before Thanksgiving saying it'd happen any day; but she wrote back, "You're crazy!" After it happened, she said, "Why didn't anybody else know it?" We thought it'd be Thanksgiving, and it wasn't; and then we figured it'd be Christmas.

Marcello: What made you think it might be Thanksgiving when some sort of activities would occur?

Messler: Any holiday where Americans take off and do nothing. . . you know, just holiday routine.

Marcello: Did you personally ever see any of the submarines?

Messler: Oh, yes. We would track them with the guns, but we wouldn't load. We'd have the ammunition up, but we never did load.

Marcello: Of course, it was quite legitimate for those submarines to be out there observing the fleet, I gather, until they get inside territorial waters.

Messler: Well, they were pretty close to the entrance right there in the Honolulu harbor.

Marcello: Now did you perchance ever witness any of the sampans being seized, that is, those sampans that had the radios aboard and so on?

Messler: No. We knew that they had them, and the Coast Guard was getting them mainly. They'd get them out there and inspect them and find a radio and then take it out.

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

Messler: Well, I don't know. There was a lot of Japanese in Pearl Harbor then, so you didn't think too much of it. We knew they'd be hard to fight.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old salts aboard the Pennsylvania talk about the fighting capabilities of the Japanese Navy? I'm referring now to some of those people who had maybe been associated with the Asiatic Fleet at one time or another; maybe they had come into contact with the Japanese.

Messler: No, not that I remember.

Marcello: How safe and secure did you feel there at Pearl Harbor even as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate?

Messler: Well, on the ship you were at the safest place there was --as safe as anywhere, I guess.

Marcello: Did you ever discuss the possibility that the Japanese might try to attack Pearl Harbor?

Messler: Oh, yes. That was. . . you know, we had drills right in the harbor even.

Marcello: Now was it normal for all of the battleships to come in on a weekend when the two-week training period had expired?

Messler: Yes. We'd all come in, and usually the cruisers would stay in, and then they'd leave Monday.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about your liberty routine. You mentioned that the battleships would usually come in on a Friday, I assume. What sort of liberty routine was there aboard the Pennsylvania?

Messler: Well, in those days you had until midnight for all enlisted men.

Marcello: In other words, you had to be back aboard by midnight when you had liberty.

Messler: Midnight, yes. Chiefs could stay out until one o'clock, and the officers had all night. Because they didn't have the hotels they do now.

Marcello: What proportion of the crew might be on liberty on a particular weekend?

Messler: There was what they called port and starboard, half-and-half.

Marcello: In other words, half the crew could be ashore and half would be manning the ship.

Messler: Yes. Some ships ran to one out of three and some one out of four, but we were "watch-and-watch."

Marcello: Now when you had liberty in Pearl Harbor or Honolulu, what would your liberty activities consist of? What would you normally do?

Messler: Oh, usually for a weekend, you'd go in town and maybe go to Waikiki and swim or skate and have a couple or three drinks and then come on back.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Pennsylvania?

Messler: It was every two weeks; I don't know whether it was the 1st and 15th or 1st and 20th. . . 1st and 15th or 5th and 20th



or something. . . every two weeks, usually.

Marcello: A lot of people say that if the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor, the best time to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning. What these people are assuming is that Saturday nights were a time of partying and raucous behavior and so on and so forth, and consequently, the military personnel would be in no shape to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you answer this assumption?

Messler: Pretty good (chuckle). There were a lot of hangovers. . . which was. . . and then at that time. . . well, in my opinion, if the Japs had hit two hours later, they wouldn't have had near the trouble they had at eight. If they had hit a ten o'clock, why, liberty started at nine, and most of them would have been on the beach. At six o'clock, why, they'd still been in the rack.

Marcello: At the same time, is it not true that Sundays were a day of leisure?

Messler: Oh, yes. You had Sundays and. . . well, your days off were Wednesday afternoon, which was called "Rope Yarn Sunday," and on Saturday from noon on or after inspection--usually at eleven o'clock--and all day Sunday. There wasn't any weekends in those days. I mean, you didn't have all Saturday and Sunday; you had Saturday or Sunday.

Marcello: But on Sunday it was true that if one didn't have the duty, you could stay in the rack longer or lounge around and write letters or read newspapers and things of this nature.

Messler: You couldn't stay in the sack, because we still had the hammocks and all. No, you had to be up, but you could lay around and sleep on deck or write or read or play cards. . . except during church services. You couldn't smoke or play cards then. . . legally. But other than that, why, it didn't make much difference.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk next, then, about the weekend of December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point is to describe your activities and the activities of the Pennsylvania beginning on that Friday, and then we'll carry it through Saturday and, of course, through Sunday. Let's start with Friday. I assume that the Pennsylvania was coming in on that Friday?

Messler: No, we were in dry dock.

Marcello: When had you gone into dry dock?

Messler: Oh, it'd been a few days ahead of time; I guess we'd been there about a week.

Marcello: Okay, describe the dry dock routine, because I think it's kind of important to the Pennsylvania's role.

Messler: Well, the Cassin and Downes were ahead of us in the same dry dock, and then we were there. Of course, it's all dry

where they're working on the bottom scraping and painting.

Marcello: How often does a ship go into dry dock?

Messler: Every eighteen months is the normal routine. . . supposedly. We had the ship's screws off to . . . I guess they were polishing them or straightening them out or working on them. They were supposed to have been back on Saturday, and we were supposed to have moved down to Ten-Ten Dock, which was where the Oglala was. But somehow they didn't get ready, so we were still in dry dock.

Marcello: Now in this situation, describe what conditions would be like at the gun stations and so on.

Messler: Well, you couldn't train the 14-inch guns at all, because that would throw them off the blocks down in the dry dock, but the 5-inch wouldn't make any difference.

Marcello: Where would the ammunition be when you were in dry dock?

Messler: We had it aboard. When you go into a full yard period, they took it off. We weren't in for a full yard period; we had the screws to maintain mainly.

Marcello: Now the 5-inch guns, then, would have some ammunition in the ready boxes?

Messler: They didn't. . . let's see. . . yes, they did, too. They had twenty-five rounds in ready boxes.

Marcello: Now would this apply to every 5-inch gun or just certain designated 5-inch guns?

Messler: All the AA's--antiaircraft. But now the 5-inch broadsides did not have any up.

Marcello: That would all be locked in the magazines.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of power does the ship have when it's in dry dock like that?

Messler: Well, you have auxiliary power; you get it from the dock. You can't use the restrooms, heads, or anything; you had to go to a beach station to use the restrooms and showers and everything like that.

Marcello: What were you, as a gunner's mate, doing during this period when the Pennsylvania was in dry dock?

Messler: Well, we were working on our guns and. . . just general maintenance. Sometimes you can do that when we're in like that, where you can't do it at sea; there's some things you can't do, so we do stuff like that first then.

Marcello: What condition would the Pennsylvania be in to put up resistance in case there were some sort of an air attack during that period that she was in dry dock?

Messler: Well, not much. . . although we did fire. . . we fired all of our AA's. But we couldn't, of course, get underway, couldn't move. It was the first time in history a battleship fired at the enemy without a drop of water around it, which is something of a phenomenon, I guess. . . so we was told.

Marcello: Now did you have liberty at anytime during that weekend?

Messler: Oh, yes. That Sunday morning. . . no, I was going on Sunday. I had the four to eight o'clock watch Sunday morning on the dock.

Marcello: Okay, that meant you had the watch from four o'clock a.m. to eight o'clock a.m.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: Then you were going to go on liberty on Sunday.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: Now that Saturday, I assume you were aboard the ship.

Messler: Right.

Marcello: Did you notice anything extraordinary happening that night in terms of the crew members coming back aboard or anything of that nature?

Messler: No.

Marcello: What did you personally do that Saturday night?

Messler: When you've got the watch, you just go to a movie, and then you go to the bunk for them to wake you up at 3:30. You get out and watch at quarter until four, and that was it.

Marcello: What time did you go to bed that night?

Messler: Right after the movie; probably about 9:30 or ten o'clock.

Marcello: Just out of curiosity, do you remember what movie you saw that night?

Messler: No. We had a different movie every night.

Marcello: Okay, I guess this brings us into Sunday morning, then, of December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Messler, is to describe, in as much detail as you can remember, what your routine was on Sunday, December 7, 1941, from the time you . . . I was going to say from the time you woke up until all hell broke loose, but you had the four to eight o'clock watch, so why don't you pick up the story with your watch.

Messler: Well, I got relieved about 6:30 or quarter until seven for chow and went on in to eat, came back, and, of course, I'm done with the watch then; I don't go back. But the "yard birds," as we called them, wouldn't go down in the dry dock on Sunday. They would not go down, and the Marines started forcing them down. So we knew. . . had an idea, you know, that something was going to happen.

Marcello: Now who are the "yard birds?"

Messler: Well, they were the civilian workers--the Filipinos, the Japanese, the Hawaiians, whites.

Marcello: Why was it that they wouldn't go down? Did they normally work on Sundays when a ship was in dry dock?

Messler: Yes. Especially, they were trying to get us. . . being a flagship and all, they were trying to get out and get our screws on so we could get out of there.

Marcello: And you mention the Marines actually had to force them to go down?

Messler: Yes, they called some of the Marines out there, and they more or less made them go on down.

Marcello: Well, where were these "yard birds?" Had they reported there to the dock and just didn't work or what?

Messler: They were in the machine shop across the dock. . . across the dry dock. I was sitting there on the bits smoking my pipe after breakfast and saw the planes come down and drop their bombs on Ford Island. The first torpedo plane come in right by us and hit the Oglala, which was where we were supposed to have been.

Marcello: Describe the torpedo plane as it came in.

Messler: Well, it came in, of course, down the channel and turned to the right where we were and dropped its torpedo and then banked to the left and took up.

Marcello: Now how low were these planes coming in?

Messler: Oh, about twenty or thirty feet off the water.

Marcello: Were you able to distinguish the pilot?

Messler: Well, you could see him; you couldn't tell features or anything, but you could actually see him and the radioman in back of him and all.

Marcello: Were you able to recognize the plane as a Japanese plane?

Messler: Oh, definitely. In fact, the OD took his pistol out and fired at them. He got a nickname of "Pistol Pete" from then on.

Marcello: Now was this the . . . did this OD fire at the initial torpedo plane that was coming in?

Messler: Right.

Marcello: Okay, now you've mentioned that you saw these planes coming in. Did you say that you saw the first bombs drop on Ford Island?

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: What was your reaction at that point?

Messler: Well, it was customary that carriers usually would come in and practice dive on Ford Island. From a distance we saw the red rising sun, but it looked like the red stripe which . . . I don't remember now which carrier it was, but it was supposed to be in that day. Then when they dropped the first bomb, why, we said, "Boy, somebody goofed!" because they had them on, or dummies on, really.

Marcello: In other words, at this point, you were more or less a spectator.

Messler: Right. I was just sitting on the bit smoking my pipe.

Marcello: How far away was Ford Island from where the Pennsylvania was in dry dock?

Messler: About 400 yards.



Marcello: Did you have a pretty good view?

Messler: Very good (chuckle).

Marcello: What was the weather like that day in terms of climate, visibility, and so on?

Messler: Very clear and, of course, it's always clouds on top of mountains. . . most always. Down below the mountains, it was real clear and sunny.

Marcello: Okay, so you watch these planes come in over Ford Island; they drop their bombs; and at that particular point, you were still under the impression that they were planes off one of the American carriers. Then I assume very shortly after that, the torpedo plane comes in toward the Pennsylvania.

Messler: Right.

Marcello: Now was this torpedo plane actually attacking the Pennsylvania as such?

Messler: It attacked where we were supposed to have been--at berth Baker Three at Ten-Ten Dock. But we got a reprieve right at the last, because they couldn't get our screws on, so the Oglala pulled in there, which was the last of the wooden minelaying ships. So that was the first one hit, and it rolled right over.

Marcello: Okay, so the torpedo plane, then, comes over the Pennsylvania. What is your reaction at this point?

Messler: Well, then, of course, two other dive bombers. . . two or three other dive bombers had dropped bombs, so we knew then that there wasn't any mistake or anything.

Marcello: Now did these dive bombers drop bombs directly on the Pennsylvania or they were just. . .

Messler: No, on Ford Island; just on Ford Island. They got them first because all our planes. . . to ground them. By that time, well, we'd sounded GQ and were hollering, "This is no drill!" and all that.

Marcello: Now was it at this point, then, that you saw the OD shoot at the Japanese torpedo plane with the .45-caliber pistol?

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: Discuss that particular episode.

Messler: Well, he just. . . he saw it about the same time as the rest of us, and he just whipped out his .45-caliber. He did have a clip, and he slipped it in there and shot. Of course, it was too far for a .45-caliber to do any good. But we called him "Pistol Pete" from then in. He was an ensign.

Marcello: Now when GQ sounded, how would you describe the initial reaction of the crew members aboard the Pennsylvania? Was it one of panic? Professionalism? Confusion?

Messler: No. They'd heard the bombs go off and all, and then they hollered, "This is no drill! This is no drill!"

Marcello: Where was your specific battle station?

Messler: Right in turret three.

Marcello: And what would you be doing in turret three?

Messler: Well, we got all the . . . of course, we weren't really thinking either. . . but we got all the practice slugs out, so we could fire if we had to. Of course, we couldn't fire in dry dock. They'd have had to push us clear out of the dry dock.

Marcello: And even if you had been out of dry dock, the 14-inch rifles would have been of no use at all against airplanes.

Messler: No, not in the harbor either (chuckle). But anyway, why, we just manned the guns. Of course, I was in the turret booth, and I watched through the periscopes--we had two periscopes in the turret--and I did see the Arizona blow . . . go down.

Marcello: Okay, you might describe some of the action that you saw. Was the Arizona one of the first things that you saw?

Messler: Yes, it was first, and then we saw the "Okie" roll over and the California settle down. I had the periscope, and, of course, they'd turn all around; we was just looking all over the place.

Marcello: In looking through one of those periscopes, did you have a pretty good view of what was going on outside?

Messler: Well, it's just about like binoculars. It magnifies a little bit. It hasn't got a wide field but probably a couple hundred yards of field at half a mile.

Marcello: How would you describe the conduct of the men inside the turret while all this was taking place? Now obviously, they couldn't see what was going on.

Messler: No. I had the 21-MC, which is the inter-turret intercom, and I was giving them information like a sportscast, you know, a blow-by-blow account, so that the guys in the handling room and the shell decks could know what was going on. They could hear it, but they couldn't see nothing.

Marcello: In other words, everybody was strictly standing by their guns or their positions or whatever stations they had.

Messler: Yes, they were at their battle stations.

Marcello: Okay, now describe the action that you saw when looking through the periscope. Let's talk about the Arizona blowing.

Messler: Well, we just saw, you know, a big explosion, and you could see bodies flying and material flying.

Marcello: You could see bodies flying?

Messler: Oh, yes. Through a periscope, sure. And she just settled right straight down. . . just one big hell of a fire. Then we turned off Battleship Row and saw the "Okie" roll over and some of the people trying. . . walking on the hull as

they was rolling. . . running, you know, trying to keep on top. Of course, we was still watching. . . looking over at Ford Island, which, of course, is right back of them then. . . of the Oklahoma and the California.

Marcello: Did you have a good view of the Arizona and the Oklahoma and the California from where you were in dry dock?

Messler: Yes. Well, yes, we had a real good view, because we were off by ourself, and we could look down Battleship Row.

Marcello: In other words, there were no obstructions between the Pennsylvania and the rest of the battleships.

Messler: No. Not a bit. Just open water.

Marcello: Okay, let's get back to the Arizona once again, because you said you did see it blow up. Describe what the explosion and so on looked like.

Messler: Well, it was just a mass of explosion, and it looked like three or four. . . the whole insides blew at once.

Marcello: Did it shake the Pennsylvania at all?

Messler: I wouldn't know, because we were getting shock waves from the other bombs and torpedoes and everything, too, so I wouldn't know about that. Of course, we didn't get too much, and, of course, they started flooding our dry docks right away.

Marcello: Why were they flooding your dry docks, since you had the screws off?

Messler: Well, in case we got hit, we wouldn't roll over or . . . and if we had a fire, we could have water around us anyway.

Marcello: How about the Oklahoma? Is there anything else you remember from the Oklahoma turning over?

Messler: No, it just. . . I didn't see it get hit. It was just rolling slowly, and we just watched them. Then the California just settled straight down. Of course, they didn't go too deep when they hit ground; they just settled just the way it was, I mean, down in the mud.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you experience or feel when you saw all of these things taking place?

Messler: Well, it happened so quick that I don't think you have too much time to think of that.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you were describing these things to the rest of the members of the gun crew. Do you recall whether you were doing this in a calm, collected, and professional manner, or were you doing it in an excited manner?

Messler: Probably excited (chuckle). But I did that a lot. During the war later on and all, I'd give a description of what I could see through a periscope in all the other raids later on during the war.

Marcello: What else were you able to view out in the harbor as all this action was taking place?

Messler: Just that and just mass confusion on the ships that were blown and people swimming everywhere and oil burning on the water. . . the hangars blowing and planes blowing at times.

Marcello: How shortly after the raid started did the rest of the ships begin to put up resistance in terms of anti-aircraft fire and things of that nature?

Messler: Oh, I'd say we started firing in two or three minutes. Of course, the magazines were locked. . . or ready boxes. A lot of them broke the locks. . . just broke them. . . took dog wrenches and broke them. Then finally, the gunner came by with the key and got those open that weren't broke. So it wasn't too long when we started firing.

Marcello: And during this whole raid, your crew was actually just standing by; that was about all they could do.

Messler: No, well, we . . . our 3-inch .50-caliber right below us was hit--magazine and all--so we were pulled out of it to replace them. The 5-inch .25-caliber up on the boat deck and 5-inch .50-caliber, which was a Marine gun, most of them were wiped out by one hit.

Marcello: Okay, now how many hits did the Pennsylvania take?

Messler: I think it took two direct hits and one or two near misses, which was right at the edge of the dry dock.

Marcello: Okay, describe the effects of having been hit by these bombs. Evidently, that one bomb hit fairly close to where your turret was.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: Describe that particular incident. When did it take place with regard to the initiation of the attack?

Messler: Oh, I imagine ten minutes later.

Marcello: Okay, describe it.

Messler: Well, we just felt a shock in the turret, and we knew we'd been hit because it was a lot more than the rest of it.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you were in the number three turret.

Messler: Yes.

Marcello: Would this be the upper turret as opposed to the number four turret aft?

Messler: Yes, it's a high one on the aft.

Marcello: And where was this 3-inch gun crew that was wiped out?

Messler: It was right on the starboard side right below us.

Marcello: And I assume that this particular crew would have been out in the open.

Messler: They are.

Marcello: And were they handling one of the machine guns?



Messler: A 3-inch .50-caliber.

Marcello: Okay, so the bomb hits close to the turret; it wipes out that 3-inch gun crew. You mentioned that you're able to feel at least the shock. You're fairly well-protected in that turret.

Messler: Sure. There was lots of steel around us.

Marcello: Okay, now describe what happens at that particular point in terms of what you personally did.

Messler: Well, they asked for . . . told us to go out and replace . . . because the gun wasn't hurt; it was just that the crew was wiped out.

Marcello: Now was this an armor-piercing bomb that hit, or was it an anti-personnel bomb or what?

Messler: Probably armor-piercing, because it went through the boat deck and the casement deck and then went off in the Marine compartment and main deck.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story.

Messler: So we went out and replaced a lot of the crew.

Marcello: Were you capable of handling that 3-inch gun mount?

Messler: Oh, yes. But all of them weren't wiped out. Mainly it was the ammunition handlers from the magazine. So I helped with that. Then we had another hit.

Marcello: Now what were you specifically doing?

Messler: We were just passing ammunition.

Marcello: Now were you out in the open at this point?

Messler: Right. We were doing that for I don't know how long--five minutes maybe, ten minutes--and we had another hit. It knocked me down.

Marcello: How close was this second hit?

Messler: Fairly close. It was a little bit farther forward, but it was close enough to knock me down. . . and it killed some more.

Marcello: Were you injured in any way?

Messler: Yes, I had my middle finger shot up by shrapnel.

Marcello: When you say you had it "shot up," it was shot off?

Messler: No. Just a knuckle was broke all to pieces from shrapnel. I had a 3-inch gun shell in my arms; it ripped it open. I had gloves on, and it hit my finger and I had a big metal ring on and didn't know I'd been hit, really. . . just shock and all; it was numb. Of course, it was minor.

Marcello: Did it actually knock you off your feet?

Messler: Yes, it knocked me down about twenty feet backwards. I got back up, and they hollered at me because my powder case was leaking powder, and I threw it over the side.

Marcello: I was going to ask you if it shattered. . . you had a powder case rather than the actual shell itself.

Messler: Well, the 3-inch projectile is all one piece--just like your small rifles. Yes, it shattered. . . ripped the case open, and I was spilling powder out, so I took it and threw it over the side in the water. The Cassin and Downes, of course, were hit right ahead of us, and they fused together. Our bow was about like a sieve from their shrapnel and all from them. We had fifty. . . I think it was fifty-two killed and 250-some-odd wounded. . . went to the hospital.

Marcello: Now after you were injured, did you still continue to perform there at the gun?

Messler: Oh, yes.

Marcello: And were you still handling ammunition?

Messler: No, I was more or less directing then, you know, helping keep the other guys busy and all and passing it.

Marcello: Was everybody still acting in a professional manner, or how would you describe the activities here at this time?

Messler: Oh, I think they were more so then than they were during the first couple of minutes, because the shock had rolled off and we knew what was going on then.

Marcello: Now by the time this is all taking place, has the second wave come over?

Messler: No. No, this was on the first wave. Of course, by the time the second wave came over, we had ammunition up, and

all the ready boxes were reloaded and the crews down below were, of course, working.

Marcello: How much of a lull was there, or could you distinguish one between the first and second wave?

Messler: I don't know off-hand; I'd say about twenty minutes. . . fifteen or twenty minutes, it seemed like to me.

Marcello: And during this lull, the crew was working feverishly to replenish the supply of ammunition and so on.

Messler: Ammunition, yes, and getting the wounded out of the way and the dead picked up and get them out.

Marcello: Now while all this is taking place, is there still a lot of noise and so on around you?

Messler: Oh, yes. There's. . . of course, the magazines in the Arizona and all that was still going, and on some of the other ships the magazines were going, and their oil was burning. We had a ruptured oil line on third deck, and they were watching it so it wouldn't catch fire and all. We did have a little fire but not much. But you had that all over the harbor. You could see fires and everything. They were. . . just everything was going on.

Marcello: Were you able to observe the Cassin and the Downes being hit?

Messler: No, that was forward of us, and I didn't see them.

Marcello: In other words, there was all sorts of superstructure between you and those two ships.

Messler: Right. But we knew we were hit up forward; we didn't know whether it was us or them or what, because we were back aft.

Marcello: Okay, now describe your activities during the second attack. At this point, maybe I should ask you this--did you receive any treatment yet for the injury that you'd received?

Messler: No, I waited until afterwards, because it was more or less just cut and broken. They thought it was broken; afterwards, they put tongue compressors on there and taped it and let it go.

Marcello: Okay, so describe the activities that took place during the second attack.

Messler: Well, it was just a little more. . . we settled down, and, of course, everybody had more ammunition and everything. Of course, some of our ammunition was so old that it never did go off, and it was landing in Honolulu. I guess you've heard that before, too, because they had some duds that went on up there and never did explode.

Marcello: Were you still using a lot of World War I ammunition?

Messler: No, I don't think it was World War I ammunition, but it was old. Some of the shells didn't. . . they were the old

fusesetter-type that just wasn't set; a lot of them wasn't. The guys was firing so fast they didn't set them; they just . . . if they hit, the bullet itself would knock the plane down whether it went off or not. That's, I think, a lot of it.

Marcello: Was this gun actually doing a great deal of firing, that is, the one that you were manning or helping to man?

Messler: Oh, yes. All the AA's were firing all they could. We had two 5-inch .25-calibers knocked out.

Marcello: Did you hit anything?

Messler: Oh, yes. We got some planes; I know that we got one that landed up by the hospital. It was just about point blank, and it went down.

Marcello: What sort of a reaction did this bring from the crew when you knew that you had actually shot down one of these Japanese planes?

Messler: Well, right then nobody paid any attention; they just were shooting and trying to hit everything. We probably hit a lot more than I saw, too, because there was ten or fourteen guns. . . ten 5-inch and four 3-inch and then there was twelve .50-calibers up in the tops firing. So there was eight .50-caliber machine guns, and then there was four more up there, so there was twelve .50-caliber machine guns

up on the top masts firing. Then there were our ten 5-inch .25-calibers and four 3-inch .50-calibers. So they probably all maybe got a plane or think they got them or something, but I just saw one or two hit.

Marcello: You mentioned that you saw that OD initially fire at the Japanese plane with a .45. Did you see any more futile actions or activities of that nature?

Messler: No, I didn't see any; I'd heard some more. Some was throwing potatoes and all, but I didn't see them or anything.

Marcello: How long would you say that the second attack actually lasted?

Messler: I'd say fifteen minutes; it wasn't near as long as the first one.

Marcello: Did the Pennsylvania sustain any further damage?

Messler: I don't believe so; I don't remember. I don't believe so. Mainly, we got ours during the first wave.

Marcello: So what did you do, then, in the aftermath of the second attack?

Messler: Well, then we just started getting excess gear out of the way and getting more ammunition ready and manning all guns. Of course, we manned them continuous from then on. We also got the wounded and the dead up to the hospital. . . off the ship, anyway.

Marcello: Was it at this point that you received medical attention?

Messler: Yes, then I just went down and got a splint put on my finger, and that was it.

Marcello: In other words, you were treated by one of the corpsmen right there on the Pennsylvania?

Messler: Yes. Yes, I didn't leave. We did all that and got excess gear off. . . you know, lots of boats and the fancy work . . . , some of the stuff that we didn't need in wartime, so we got it off the ship. It was just a general clean-up, stuff like that, and trying to repair any gun. . . if anything, magazines and all, were hit. . . the couple we did have. . . got the bad ammunition out and tried and make them serviceable for later on.

Marcello: What were you personally doing?

Messler: Just helping everywhere with ordnance. We couldn't do nothing else, so we were on the AA's helping. All the gunners were doing that. . . and the deck force. You just helped wherever you needed help that day.

Marcello: What sort of scene did you see out in the harbor when you had time to observe what was going on in the harbor?

Messler: Boats were going everywhere trying to pick up people, and they were fighting oil fires, and there were oil slicks on the water. Just lots of motor launches were out there



picking up survivors. Some were still swimming and some were dead and floating and whatever. They were dragging, too, with hooks trying to get to any bodies that'd sunk.

Marcello: How thick was the oil on the water?

Messler: Oh, I don't know exactly how thick. It was pretty heavy, because there was a lot of it around there from all the ships. A lot of them had ruptured lines where it didn't catch on fire and all. It just got out.

Marcello: In the aftermath of the attack, what sort of rumors were floating around aboard the Pennsylvania? I'm referring now to future Japanese intentions and things of that nature.

Messler: Well, not too much of that then, but that night I guess the Japs had set the. . . Hawaiian Japs had set the cane fields on fire across the bay from us. First we thought the Army had landed and all and was coming in that way. I believe if they had've, they'd have taken it with no problems, because it was mass confusion.

Marcello: Now where were you positioned that particular night?

Messler: I was on gun watch. . . on the 5-inch .25-caliber.

Marcello: Were you able to observe the unfortunate planes that came off one of the American carrier that night?

Messler: No.

Marcello: I'm referring to the ones that were shot down accidentally.

Messler: No, we could see the hangars and all, and we could see just burnt planes over there. I don't know whether they came into Ford Island or if they went to one of these Army bases, or they may have stayed aboard their own carriers then.

Marcello: What sort of an appetite or a thirst did you have in the aftermath of the attack?

Messler: All we got was an apple and a ham sandwich. This was because part of our galley was blown up--half of it--which was . . . we had a big galley, so they fixed ham sandwiches and apples. Mess cooks would bring this around and give everybody a sandwich and an apple.

Marcello: I assume that there were a great many trigger-happy servicemen around that night.

Messler: Yes, the safest place was aboard ship. Like I say, our heads and all were on the beach, on the dock. We had to go if we had to go. Of course, the Marines were over there always checking, no lights whatsoever. The safest place was aboard ship that night.

Marcello: What activities did you engage in in the days or weeks immediately following the attack?

Messler: Well, we just fixed up more of the guns--what we could repair--and got out any excess gear that we had in the

turrets and got them ready and lubricated and greased them and made sure that our hoist and everything was working in tip-top shape and all that.

Marcello: How long was it before the Pennsylvania was seaworthy again?

Messler: We left about nine days after that. We escorted the Mississippi and Maryland, I think it was, up to Bremerton to the yards, and then we went back to Hunter's Point in San Francisco. We got there. . . we pulled in New Year's Eve in San Francisco. We escorted them up to what they call the "Y," where it was just half-way, and they went to Bremerton and we went to San Francisco.

Marcello: Is there anything else relative to the Pearl Harbor attack that we need to talk about?

Messler: No, not that I know of. I think that's about it.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Messler, I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project. You've said a lot of interesting things, and I'm sure that scholars are going to find this very valuable when they use the material to write about Pearl Harbor at some future date.