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Leonard Davis
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Place of Interview: Arlington, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Leonard Davis

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Arlington, Texas

Date: March 23, 1977

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Leonard Davis for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 23, 1977, in Arlington, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Davis in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the cruiser USS Phoenix during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Davis, 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. Davis: I was born in Dallas, Texas, on January 9, 1923. I was a senior in high school when I left in 1940 to join in the Navy. After the service, I came back and went to SMU for a year and a half.

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

Mr. Davis: Oh, gee, I don't know. At that time, everyone was just real patriotic-minded. . . different than today, I'll say.

Marcello: From what you say, then, I gather that you were keeping abreast with world events and current affairs and things of that sort?

Davis: Well, I had a step-brother who was in the National Guard, and they mobilized about a month before I went in. I don't know. . . just one thing led to another, and I said, "Well, if I have to go anywhere, I'd like for it to be the Navy." So I joined.

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

Davis: Since I was a baby, I've liked the water. I've always liked ships and boats and things.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Davis: In San Diego.

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

Davis: (Chuckle) No, not really.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at the time you went in?

Davis: At that time, I think it was eight weeks.

Marcello: In other words, they had cut back on boot camp by about four weeks or something like that.

Davis: Right. Right. They were speeding up everything. In fact, I didn't even get a boot leave after boot camp, and this is before the war; they had cancelled all of the leaves.

Marcello: Now where did you go from San Diego?

Davis: Well, after boot camp, I went to the aviation machinist's mate school at North Island in San Diego.

Marcello: How did you manage to get that particular school?

Davis: We had some kind of a test--an aptitude test--and I was interested in aviation, and I evidently made a sufficient grade.

Marcello: How long did that school last?

Davis: It seems like it was a couple of months. Oh, wait, I can tell you exactly. I went in in November. . . I left right after boot camp; I went through the school; and I left on May 28th for Pearl Harbor after finishing school.

Marcello: Was this a rather thorough training that you received here at this school, or exactly how would you describe it?

Davis: No, it was quite thorough. You were capable of helping the chief mechanic on pulling any checks or anything on an aircraft.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you went from this school directly to Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Right.

Marcello: Was this voluntary duty, or were you simply sent there?

Davis: No, after school we all went to wherever we were being assigned, and I was assigned to the aviation division of the USS Pheonix at Pearl Harbor.

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

Davis: Oh, well, at that time, I think I was seventeen. . . no, I was eighteen; I had just turned eighteen. Well, like any eighteen-year-old kid, you tell him, "You're going to Hawaii," what would he feel?

Marcello: When you got to the Hawaiian Islands and went aboard the cruiser Pheonix, what sort of a reception did you receive from the crew that were already aboard?

Davis: I'm sorry; I didn't hear you.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you receive from the crew members that were already aboard the Pheonix when you got there?

Davis: Well, naturally, they were all old salts, and you were a boot to them. But that one particular ship. . . you see, I stayed in the Navy almost eight years . . . that one particular ship was the greatest ship in the whole Navy. I mean, the guys. . . it was a family. Of course, after the war started, that family grew to about 1,300, but they were still the same. I mean, nobody was an outsider; they were all just one.

Marcello: You mention that eventually the complement aboard the Pheonix grew to around 1,300.

Davis: I think that's what it was, yes.

Marcello: What was it at the time that you boarded the Pheonix?

Davis: Oh, gee. I don't know. Oh, I imagine 700 or 800, probably.

Marcello: You speak with fond memories of the Pheonix. Let's pursue this subject a little further. What was the morale like aboard the Pheonix during that period prior to the Pearl Harbor attack?

Davis: Well, let's see. Before the attack, I was aboard the ship maybe seven or eight months. We were a very competitive crew. See, during that eight months prior to the war, we were planning on

war. I mean, we knew that there was going to be one, and we knew it was going to be with the Japs; we didn't know when. So the crew was . . . they were a fighting bunch of guys. I mean, you pick on one of them, and, boy, you picked on the wrong crew. And they were just . . . they were a real patriotic bunch. Now there may have been some old salts that were about ready for retirement and everything was formality with them, but most of the younger guys--and by that, I mean from eighteen to thirty--they were just a darn good bunch of guys.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Phoenix?

Davis: Have you ever been in the service?

Marcello: Yes.

Davis: Well, (chuckle) I don't guess it's changed. You got to get used to eating beans on Saturday morning and stuff like that, and there's a few other things. Of course, we had names for the food, but I'm sure you wouldn't want this on your tapes (chuckle). But we got by; I mean, we were healthy.

Marcello: What were the quarters like aboard the Phoenix?

Davis: I think, under the circumstances, they were great. We moved. . . immediately after Pearl Harbor, we moved our quarters into the hangar deck. And, of course, you're sitting right above the screws. Those are the propellers, and you've got to get used to the noise. But once you're used to it, then you can't sleep in a quiet room.

Marcello: Now during that period prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, I assume the Phoenix already had bunks aboard, or were you sleeping in hammocks?

Davis: No, bunks--bunks. Now there were a few guys that slept in the mess halls in hammocks but very, very few of them. . . mostly all bunks. See, that ship is 608 feet long and about forty-two feet wide; it's a pretty good-sized ship.

Marcello: So in general, then, would you say that the food and the living quarters aboard the Phoenix were satisfactory as far as you were concerned?

Davis: I would say, yes.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that the crew aboard the Phoenix was highly competitive.

Davis: With other ships.

Marcello: This is the point that I was trying to make. Inter-ship competition played a very important role in that peacetime Navy, did it not?

Davis: You better believe it! You better believe it! Our turrets had the "E's" with the hash marks; that's for target competition. We were proud of those things.

Marcello: In other words, the "E's" that you're referring to were the efficiency ratings.

Davis: Efficiency, yes, sir. See, you had fleet competitions in all areas. Our shooting ability was important to us.

Marcello: And then also, I think, this competition extended to athletics, did it not?

Davis: I believe it did; but after the war started, those more or less stopped.

Marcello: I'm referring again to that period prior to Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Oh, prior to . . . yes, yes. We had boxing and . . . we had all types of sports. Of course, football, baseball, and things like that aboard ship--forget it (chuckle).

Marcello: And I gather that the crew were highly encouraged to participate in all those activities.

Davis: I think they did, yes. Yes.

Marcello: What was your particular function aboard the cruiser?

Davis: Well, I was an aviation machinist's mate. We had four . . . of course, they're obsolete now, but we had four SOC-3's. That's a scout observation plane made by Curtiss; it's a bi-plane on floats with a top speed of about 120 miles per hour.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about these planes, because this is a phase of Navy life that is no longer around. Helicopters have replaced these float planes and so on.

Davis: Oh, yes.

Marcello: And a hundred years from now, this sort of thing might be very interesting to historians, so talk a little bit about these float planes.

Davis: Well, aboard the cruiser, we had, as I said, four. We had a hangar deck; it's a huge hatch on the topside that would open and allow the planes to be stored below. We usually kept two planes on the catapults, one on each side. When you flew from the cruiser, the planes were catapulted. If you're not familiar with what that is, it's different than a flat-top.

Marcello: Okay, how were they catapulted?

Davis: Okay, you "rev" the plane up to full speed, and you get yourself in position to be shot off at sixty miles an hour. There's a huge bullet--of course, it's a blank thing--that shoots the catapult. The catapult's about, I would say . . . I could be wrong on this . . . I'd say about sixty to eighty feet long. When you're catapulted, you came off of that thing at a speed of approximately sixty knots. Now your ship rolls with the sea, and you would stand by and be ready to be fired off. There's two people in the planes--the pilot and the radioman or gunner. As the ship rolls to the opposite side of your catapult, you're catapulted as on the upside.

When you return to the ship, there's a huge net made of cable; the ship makes a ninety-degree turn, which makes a slick on the water--it's just like a calm. Regardless of the condition of the surface of the water, it will calm that area to where you can land on the sea; you taxi at a very high rate of speed until a hook under your float hooks on the net. Then the net is reeled in

close to the ship by winch, and then a crane is dropped over and the radioman or gunner hooks a hook onto the crane, and you're lifted aboard ship.

Marcello: And I assume this crane is used to lower the plane down into the hold and so on, also. Or was there an elevator aboard?

Davis: No. No, it's used to take the plane, if you have it on the catapult, from the catapult to the little dolly that you put the plane on on the elevator to lower it down.

Marcello: The cruiser did have an elevator.

Davis: Yes, from the topside down into the hanger deck.

Marcello: Was this entire operation of launching and recovering one of these planes a rather delicate task?

Davis: Well, not necessarily delicate. You had to know what you were doing. I mean, it was quite an operation. It was something to see. If you've never seen this type of launching and recovery, it would be worthwhile to see it.

Marcello: And I assume, then, that your job was the maintenance and so on of these airplanes.

Davis: Keep the plane flying. . . and fly in it.

Marcello: How would you describe the on-the-job training that you received aboard the Phoenix? Now obviously, almost that you had had up to this point was theory, but how would you describe the on-the-job training that you received?

Davis: Well, I guess you mean what duties did I have. Each plane had anywhere from two to four men in its maintenance crew--the plane

captain and then three others. The planes had to have periodical checks--thirty-hour, sixty-hour, and 120-hour. The thirty-hour, of course, was just change the plugs--just minor checks. The 120-hour check was when you go into the magnetos and so forth. Our job was keeping the plane ready to fly.

We kept the plane. . . after you bring it aboard each time, you have to clean all the salt water off; there's various parts of the plane that you have to put preservative on weekly to keep the corrosion down. Of course, there would be no rust on aluminum.

Aviation machinists, in my time in the Navy, covered what now is covered by maybe five different rates. We took care of the structure of the plane, the fabric of the plane, the engine, the ailerons--the whole bit. Now they have different people; one guy takes care of the engine, and the rest of the guys take care of the rest. It was our job to take that plane and keep it flying.

Marcello: Now I gather that the aviation machinist really had nothing to do with the maintenance and so on of the launching mechanism and things of that nature.

Davis: No, the launching was done by a special deck crew. In fact, usually the gunnery division did that because, as I said, it was fired off with a projectile. . . with a bullet, not a . . . do you know what I'm talking about (chuckle)?

Marcello: Yes, with a powder charge or something like that.

Davis: Right. Right. Right. Quite huge. . . and stink. Oh, it was horrible! It was real. . . it was just like shooting in a turret. The thing's this big around (gesture) and that long (gesture).

Marcello: In other words, it was about three feet high and about . . .

Davis: Nine to twelve inches in diameter.

Marcello: Now did you feel that the old-timers aboard the Phoenix showed a willingness to teach you the ropes, so to speak? Were they willing to take time to train you to become a competent aviation machinist's mate?

Davis: Well, I think that through their old sea tales and so forth, they were trying to season us to where we could . . . anything that we did could lighten their duties. They were very anxious to make seasoned sailors out of all of us.

Marcello: Was there a great deal of experience among those crews that were maintaining these planes?

Davis: Say that again, please.

Marcello: Okay, did your senior petty officers have a great deal of time in the Navy?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: In other words, there were a great many experienced men intermingled with you "boots," so to speak, that had just come aboard the Phoenix.

Davis: Right. The older hands were more or less supervisors, you might say. In my Navy--and I call it the "old Navy," because it changed

quite a bit--your chiefs would give the orders to the first class; the first class would skip, for some reason, the second class and go right to the third class. In other words, the easy rate was the second class. Of course, I was one but (chuckle) not for that reason. But then the third class would really be the guy that had to do the job, and he had seamen to do that for him, but he was under there with them doing this thing.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit more about the training and so on that the Phoenix engaged in. Let's talk about the maneuvers and the training exercises that the Phoenix would perform after you arrived at Pearl Harbor. In other words, describe a typical training routine. When would the Phoenix go out; how long would it stay out; what would it do while it was out there; when would it come back in? Now I've given you a series of questions, and I'll let you pick it up from that point.

Davis: Okay, I went aboard the Phoenix in June of '41, which was approximately six to seven months before the war, and they had just returned from South America. For all of the time from June until the war started, we were busy doing nothing but combat training. We would go to sea, like, for two . . . maybe three weeks sometimes. . . usually a couple of weeks. The ship's turrets would fire at targets towed by another ship. We didn't have the armament aboard this ship at that time. . . no radar . . . we didn't even know what a 20-millimeter or 40-millimeter

was. We had 3-inch guns, 5-inch guns, and then our turrets, of course. But for antiaircraft guns, we had 3-inch and 5-inch. These guns would fire at sleeves that were towed by our little planes that I was referring to awhile ago. We would come in and stay . . . not over five to seven days; then we'd be right back out again. This is when we knew that we were getting ready for war.

Marcello: Now normally, was there a particular day of the week when the Phoenix would go out, or would this vary?

Davis: I never had thought about that, but it did seem like that we would come in at the end of a week, like on a Friday or Saturday. In fact, the week prior to Pearl Harbor we come in on . . . I'm not real sure. . . I think it was either Friday or Saturday. I believe it was Saturday. In fact, this is the first time that we had ever pulled into Pearl Harbor that we hadn't moored alongside of a sister ship, which would have made us a larger target. We anchored by ourselves--right across the channel from the fantail of the Arizona.

Marcello: Now you mentioned the subject awhile ago, and I'll pursue it a little bit further. You mentioned that the ship had virtually no 20-millimeter or 40-millimeter antiaircraft weapons aboard. Did anybody actually realize the role that airplanes were going to play in future wars at that particular time?

Davis: I really and truly . . . with all of our carriers and everything, I don't see why they shouldn't have. Oh, I did leave out one gun that we had, and it's not importnat. . . a .50-caliber machine gun. (Chuckle) They'll knock a plane down, but in this day and time with jets, you'd forget them.

Marcello: I'm sure that the Phoenix had a heck of a lot more antiaircraft weaponry aboard after Pearl Harbor than it had before Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Oh, you wouldn't recognize the ship! They had 20-millimeters, 40-millimeters; they had everything that we needed.

Marcello: In other words, every empty space had an antiaircraft weapon of some sort after Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Right, right. In fact, my GQ was right on the fantail on the portside on a 20-millimeter gun.

Marcello: Where was your battle station prior to the actual Pearl Harbor attack?

Davis: Just stand by the planes. I didn't go to a gun or anything; we didn't have guns. In fact, it took us a good two years to be ready to fight back.

Marcello: Now when you went out on these maneuvers, I assume that you were working with other cruisers and so on and so forth.

Davis: Oh, yes, yes. There would be . . . well, just lines of cruisers . . . this is what I was talking about when I said fleet competition. This is how we got the "E's" and the hash marks and stuff for our hits and efficiency.

Marcello: Now were you in a particular cruiser division?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: What were some of the other cruisers in the division?

Davis: I can name the cruisers . . . I don't know if they had a division name, but it was the Nashville, the Wichita, the Helena, Honolulu, Phoenix, St. Louis. There were nine; I've named six. There were three more.

Marcello: Anyhow, there were a substantial number of ships in this cruiser division.

Davis: There were nine in our division--nine sister ships. That's what they were called; they were all built just alike.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did your training routine change any? Did you notice any changes in your training?

Davis: If there were any changes, it was more practice, actually. In fact, we were so well-trained on the guns, if I can step ahead a second. . . the morning of December 7th, 1941, we had a 5-inch anti-aircraft gun just below the bridge. The communication officer was standing on this conning tower or conning deck looking down at the firing. It was rapid, continuous fire, and back near the breech the gun was swelling up to such a point that the metal was breaking away. It was ready to explode. Of course, you couldn't holler with all that noise; he sent a radioman down to grab the gunner and just pull him (gesture) away from the gun itself so

that it stopped firing. They said that if it had fired maybe three or four more times, it would have blown that whole side of the ship.

Marcello: Did you notice that you had more general quarters drills being sounded as one gets closer and closer to December 7th?

Davis: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. We sure did. Seems to me like . . . of course, now I'm trying to remember something a long time ago. It seems like we did, because this was why everybody in the crew knew we were going to war. We knew this. I mean, we didn't think "maybe." We knew; we just didn't know when.

Marcello: Was the ship sailing under blacked out conditions and so on and so forth as one gets closer and closer to December 7th?

Davis: I don't think it did. Now I could be wrong, but I don't remember that part. I know after December 7th, we definitely did. But prior to that. . . I beg your pardon. At night prior to Pearl Harbor, we did have blackouts. We sure did. I don't know how close. I may be wrong.

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

Davis: You wouldn't want that on tape.

Marcello: Yes, I would (chuckle).

Davis: No, I'd have to use profanity if you wanted it the way that the Navy talked! No, we didn't like them. You said prior to Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Yes.

Davis: Well, no, I'm sorry. It's after Pearl Harbor when we really got an opinion of them. Because, you see, at Pearl Harbor they were so close we could see. . . if I'd had a .22-caliber rifle, I could have got some of them. You could see their teeth.

Marcello: But now prior to Pearl Harbor, when you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually think of? Obviously, there were many of them in the Hawaiian Islands.

Davis: Right, right. We didn't have the bitter taste against them that we did after Pearl Harbor because . . . well, up until that time we hadn't had combat; we'd only had rumors that we were going to. We didn't think that they were going to attack us; we thought that we were going to have to build up and hit them for some reason.

Marcello: In other words, did you feel rather safe and secure there at Pearl Harbor, even if hostilities did break out between the two countries?

Davis: Yes. Oh, yes. Because we . . . you see, we, in our Navy and Army and Marines and so forth, had way overestimated ourselves, and we had underestimated the Japs. The Japs were. . . well, they were so far superior to us at the time that the war broke out, they could have taken anything they wanted over here. But we didn't know that. We thought we were great.

- Marcello: In other words, there was a certain amount of overconfidence prevalent among the crew members of the Phoenix and all the other ships.
- Davis: We had no idea we'd even get hit near as bad as we . . . we thought, boy, we were the kings.
- Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old salts talk about the fighting prowess of the Japanese Navy? In other words, maybe you had some old salts that had served in the Asiatic Fleet or something of that nature.
- Davis: We had some that served in the Asiatic Fleet, but even they had underestimated the Japanese government. See, they had . . . that Zero topped anything that we had at the time. I think the P-40F was about the hottest thing we had, and it couldn't compete with it. They just . . . well, the thing that hurt us so bad. . . for, I'd say, ten years prior to Pearl Harbor's being attacked, they had people out there working right there in Pearl. They knew more about our Navy than we did. The ammunition we fired at them was target ammunition; fuses weren't even set. We got into our ammunition lockers with axes; the keys were ashore. See, officers could stay overnight in the hotels, and I was a "white hat"; we didn't do that.
- Marcello: Okay, well, we're getting into the next phase of questioning that I wish to pursue. Let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine that you had here at Pearl Harbor. When would the Phoenix normally come in after having been on maneuvers?

Davis: I don't think they had a set time, but as I said before, it was usually just prior to a weekend.

Marcello: Okay, let's assume that the Phoenix did come in just prior to a weekend. How would the liberty routine work for you as a "white hat?"

Davis: Well, we had what we called port and starboard liberty. Every other day you'd get to go ashore.

Marcello: In other words, half the crew would have liberty one day, and half the crew would have liberty the other day?

Davis: Right, right. Now I don't recall, but I think later on it was about one out of four; this was after the war. But prior to the war, I think it was every other day.

Marcello: When you went ashore, what would you normally do?

Davis: Well, I suppose you're speaking of Honolulu. I would say that there were--oh, I wouldn't even compare the number--fifty, maybe, sailors to every one girl in Pearl Harbor. When a sailor goes ashore, he looks for a good time. . . someone to dance with or, you know, some companionship that he doesn't have at sea. Of course, we weren't at sea prior to the war as much as we were after the war started. There was times when we didn't see anything for six months. But I would go, believe it or not (chuckle), to Nanakuli, which was the Navy recreation center. They had the best beach of all, and they always had dances, good music, and things like that.

Marcello: I assume that as tensions continued to build and as there was a greater and greater influx of sailors into Pearl Harbor, downtown Honolulu on a weekend was simply wall-to-wall bodies. They were spilling out into the streets.

Davis: Oh, yes. Looking back at it now, it looked like a bunch of dummies out there. We were. . . have you ever gone into a tourist town where people were somewhere for the first time in their life? You could pick them out. They could go in civilian clothes even, and you could pick them out. It's just like a bunch of little ants.

Marcello: Now a great many people assume that if the Japanese were ever going to attack Pearl Harbor, the best time for them to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning, the theory being that Saturday nights in Honolulu were times of heavy drinking and things of this nature. Consequently, sailors would not be in shape to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you answer that particular assertion?

Davis: Well, on a weekend, they did pick the day they would need. It was 7:55, which was just prior to church. In fact, some of the services had started. Most of your officers, most of the people who were running the outfits, were still ashore, because they had the weekend. They could go ashore like Saturday morning and come back Monday morning. So I assume that they knew that all of our . . . they figured that if the head guys were gone, we wouldn't

know what to do. See, the Japs were a little different than us. If the leader wasn't there, they had a bunch of people scrambling. If our leader wasn't there, the next guy down could take over--all the way down to the very last man.

Marcello: And at the same time, is it not true that Sundays were normally a day of leisure.

Davis: Right, right. Sunday's the best time of all that they could have done this, because no one would be prepared to . . . everybody was off. There was no kind of duty. . . well, there were deck watches and things, but, I mean, they caught us at our very weakest time of the week.

Marcello: In other words, you could be lounging around, reading the newspaper, writing letters, and so on and so forth; you didn't have to go to breakfast if you didn't want to and things of that nature.

Davis: Right, right. You didn't have to do anything on Sunday.

Marcello: Was there a lot of heavy drinking done on a Saturday night in Honolulu, or would you say that the service was nothing more than a mirror of civilian life?

Davis: There was some heavy drinking done anytime that a sailor was ashore, really, but you might say Saturday night was a biggest. See, it wasn't like in civilian life where the weekends were the big thing. Any night you were ashore in the service was a Saturday night to you. You didn't have to have a certain day for that. The reason I said Sunday would have been the weakest is because

know what to do. See, the Japs were a little different than us. If the leader wasn't there, they had a bunch of people scrambling. If our leader wasn't there, the next guy down could take over--all the way down to the very last man.

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all of your "top brass" was ashore and would remain ashore; they wouldn't be on duty the next morning, or even aboard ship.

Marcello: Now you personally had to be back aboard ship at midnight, isn't that correct?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: Why was that?

Davis: I don't know. You know, back in those days, if you were an officer, you were a gentleman. But if you were a "white hat," you weren't. Of course, we might go a little farther and say it took an act of Congress to make you a gentleman. But I think we were all gentlemen in our own respect.

Marcello: I also have heard it said that there simply wasn't enough hotel space and so on ashore to accommodate that many people, and they didn't want those sailors sleeping in parks or whatever and things of this nature.

Davis: That could have very well been the reason for that. Because of course, there were always more "white hats" than "brass" . . . more Indians than chiefs.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Phoenix?

Davis: You know, you got me. I believe it was the 5th and 20th. I know it was twenty-one dollars a month; I remember that part (chuckle).

Marcello: But, of course, by the time of Pearl Harbor, you would have been at least a third class petty officer perhaps?

Davis: No. No, because I had been in the service one year and eight days. I was a seaman first class, I believe.

- Marcello: I gather that rank moved very, very slowly in that pre-World War II Navy.
- Davis: It sure was. There's a fleet competition there, also. You may go up and pass the test for an examination, but then they have to take the highest grades. If there's only so many openings in the fleet, not aboard your ship but the whole fleet . . .you weren't competing with people aboard your own units; you were competing with the Pacific Fleet.
- Marcello: And I've heard it said that the typical first class petty officer, for example, might have had to have at least twelve years of service.
- Davis: That's right. That's right. He sure would. Or a chief may have had sixteen. Now it's nothing for a guy to go up for chief in five years. Like I said, it's not the same Navy. Some of the fellows that we have. . . God love them, I love them; they're good men, but they would have had a hard time getting where they are back in the old fleet.
- Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the actual Japanese attack. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Davis, is to describe what your activities were during that weekend of December 7, 1941. Do you recall, first of all, when the Phoenix came in? What day?
- Davis: I would say we hadn't been in over two days. I think we came in the night before. It could have been a Friday night, but I keep thinking it was Saturday. Let's say Friday just to be safe.

Marcello: Okay, do you recall what your routine was from the time that the Phoenix did come in until all hell broke loose?

Davis: That particular week I was on mess cooking. Each division has to send people to the galley. I was on mess cooking. You're talking about what I was doing at the time of the attack?

Marcello: Well, let's even go back a little bit farther. Let's pick up the story from the time the Phoenix comes in. First of all, you mention that the Phoenix did not dock where it normally docked, isn't that correct?

Davis: Right, right.

Marcello: Where did it dock?

Davis: Okay, it pulled up along. . . and my directions may be wrong, but we came into Pearl, went around Ford Island to the south side. In other words, our bow was facing Pearl City--now not Pearl Harbor --Pearl City; this is another part of Honolulu. In fact, the Nanakuli I talked about is even beyond that. Our bow faced Pearl City. We anchored. We didn't moor; we anchored. To the best of my knowledge, we anchored. Our portside was probably 300 yards from the USS Solace, which is the hospital ship. Our fantail was across the channel. Pearl Harbor's a man-made harbor; the channel is not all that wide. Our fantail faced the fantail of the Arizona, which was the first ship in Battleship Row. There was a ship next to the Arizona called the USS Vestal; it was a repair ship. Now on Battleship Row, the Arizona for some reason was

around. . . not the Arizona, I'm sorry; the Oklahoma. . . she was. . . even behind the Arizona going around Ford Island, she was turned over.

Marcello: Of course, when you say the Oklahoma was turned over, you're referring to . . .

Davis: She was laying on her side.

Marcello: . . . the period when the attack first occurred.

Davis: Yes. She had been hit, and her bottom was up. There were men still in there; we got them out three days later. They were still in good shape.

Marcello: Okay, this is getting a little bit ahead of our story. We were talking about the location of the Phoenix.

Davis: Okay. I'm sorry, okay. Now we got the location down.

Marcello: Did you have a good view of Battleship Row from where the Phoenix was located?

Davis: Yes, I could look right down Battleship Row. Okay, at this time our quarters were three decks below. Later after the war started, we moved back to the hanger deck. Okay, I was on mess cooking. Our mess hall was three decks down, also. When the Japs attacked, some guys come down the ladder, and they was telling us, "The Japs are attacking! We're being attacked," and this and that. I said, "Oh, man, you're drunk! Get in bed!" I was busy, you know. In fact, the deck was wet, and I didn't want them on the deck (chuckle). So finally, I could even hear a rumble even that far down, so I went topside.

Marcello: But general quarters had not sounded yet on the Phoenix.

Davis: No. No, because we . . . this is the very beginning. I went topside, and I looked, and I said, "Boy, I tell you one thing! They're really getting it to look real!" I thought it was a practice thing, you know. Then I saw this smoke boiling out of the Arizona, and I could see the tracer bullets. Then I knew it was for real. At that time GQ sounded.

Marcello: What was the day like in terms of climate and weather?

Davis: Well, it's always pleasant there. In fact, the water stays around eighty degrees. You can swim the year around.

Marcello: What was the visibility like?

Davis: Real good. Real good.

Marcello: A good day for an air attack.

Davis: Oh, fantastic! It worked out perfect for them. You always have clouds hanging back in the mountainous areas around the island, but over Pearl you could see a canary at 10,000 feet.

Marcello: So you mention now that you go up onto the deck, and you see smoke already billowing out of the Arizona; you at first think it's another practice run, and then general quarters sounds. What happens at that point?

Davis: Right. Well, at that point, we just got word that the Helena, one of our sister ships, had taken a "fish" down the stack--that's a torpedo. There was . . . I don't know how many people . . .

Marcello: Had it taken a torpedo down the stack?

Davis: They dropped it, and it hit the stack instead of hitting the target, and it blew. Now this is what we heard; I didn't see this. But there were several men who got flash burns. Our uniform of the day at this particular time was T-shirts and white shorts. Well, everywhere that you're not covered, you burn.

Marcello: You were that close to the Helena?

Davis: Oh, no, no. No, but there was so many ships going up all over. Our ship somehow got the word; I guess all of the communications was wide open. So I wanted to go back down below deck. We were closing hatches and doors; if they was closed you couldn't come through.

Marcello: Okay, general quarters sounds. How would you describe the reaction of the crew? Was it one of professionalism? Panic? Confusion? How would you describe it?

Davis: Confusion would be a good word, really, because we were expecting this all the time, but we didn't really believe it, you know. And when it happened, it was so unreal. We'd never seen anything like this in our life. And as far as fear, I don't think there was a man aboard the ship who was scared. You don't get scared during an attack; you get scared after the attack . . . when you finally wake up to the fact that's what happened. Because you had trained so long and so hard, and you knew what was going on; you just stuck with you gun until . . . you didn't have time to think.

Marcello: So general quarters sounds. Do you go immediately to your battle station?

Davis: Regardless of what you're doing, you go to your battle station then.

Marcello: Is this what you did on that day?

Davis: Well, my battle station was to get ready to launch planes. But after we heard of the flash burns, they wanted every man that could to go and get his blue jeans on. . . dungarees, we called them. Well, my things were three decks down, and they were closing hatches. So I had to go right then, or I would have never gotten them. And I did manage to get some dungarees to put on. Then we went back, and, of course, as I said, our armament was none. But we had .30-caliber machine guns that fit on a gun rack on the back of our plane, so there were two or three of us who grabbed a whole slew of .30-caliber ammunition; we grabbed these .30-caliber machine guns. Along your ship there's . . . your life lines are on stanchions--that's a post to some landlubber--and they're about, oh, maybe three inches high-deep. They're hollow. Well, the thing that mounts the .30-caliber machine gun on a . . . a gun rack on a plane is probably an inch or inch and a half. It's a little stud that sticks out. So what we did--these planes were so close--we took the machine guns and just stuck them down in the stanchion. Well, there's all kind of movement, and we'd fire at a plane, and the gun'd just go up in the air like . . . we could have killed all the guys on our own ship. So we had to quit that.

Marcello: In the meantime, where did you get this ammunition? Was it right there at the guns?

Davis: At the hanger deck. See, we had our gunnery locker for our planes.

Marcello: And you had no trouble getting to your ammunition and so on.

Davis: No, no, because it was ammunition that shouldn't have been used at that time (chuckle). It was strictly for in-flight firing.

Marcello: Okay, describe the tactics and the methods used by these Japanese planes. Obviously, you have a good view of what was taking place.

Davis: Right. You know, awhile ago I mentioned a place called Pearl City. There's a white house that sits right up in the hill in Pearl City. On Saturday night it was just like it had always been, but on Sunday morning there was an arrow pointed. . . painted. . . completely across the roof. All you had to do was get in line, come down across that arrow, and start dropping bombs, because you were going right down Battleship Row. Of course, we had some things in Battleship Row. . . like, for instance, the USS Utah was a target ship. I imagine there was a couple of million dollars worth of shells dropped in her, and she was just a hull. Fortunately, every heavy cruiser and every aircraft carrier that we had in our Pacific Fleet was at sea. This the Japs had goofed up on; they weren't supposed to be at sea. So they went down in areas not looking at the ships, really. They knew what was supposed to be in those spots, so they'd just drop some bombs. You could have had an old barge out there, and they'd have loaded it up if it was sitting where an aircraft carrier was supposed to sit.

Marcello: Awhile ago you mention that these Japanese planes were coming in extremely low.

Davis: Very low.

Marcello: How low?

Davis: The USS Pheonix's deck was probably thirty feet above the water level. The planes were that high again above the deck. I could look . . . I wouldn't even have to tilt my head back . . . I could look straight out the side of the ship, and, man, that big old ball of fire on that plane was as big as this house!

Marcello: Did you have a good view of the Japanese pilots themselves?

Davis: You could see their faces. For some reason, they must have been taught to smile when they come through there, because I could see their teeth, even the gold. That's a fact; that's not fiction. They were that close. Like I said awhile ago, if I'd had a .22-caliber, I could have got some of them.

Marcello: How were they dressed?

Davis: Oh, man . . . I didn't notice, really. They had on their goggles and their old-timey head sets.

Marcello: About how long did it take the machine guns that you were operating to get into action from the time that general quarters sounded?

Davis: I would say . . . man, this is thirty-five years ago! By the time we went below and got them off the planes and grabbed some ammunition and got back up, I'd say ten minutes. . . maybe fifteen . . . ten minutes. Yes, I'll say ten minutes, because we . . . aboard our ship, usually when we would get underway, we'd light off,

and about an hour later we'd get a tug to turn us around and all these things. We lit off, backed into this man-made harbor, got underway in nineteen minutes from lighting off. We had started out around the south end of Ford Island, and we didn't have radar or sonar at that time. The destroyers in that area signaled us that there was a Japanese sub somewhere in that area, "Turn around!" In this man-made harbor with this 608-foot long ship, we turned around--you could see the mud coming up from the bottom--and went all the way around Ford Island going out the other side. We were hitting full speed when we went through the net, and the water was going up like on the beach. In fact, guys were along the beach cheering us.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you got the boilers fired and got underway in nineteen minutes. Normally, how long would it take?

Davis: One hour. One hour. You wouldn't think of moving a ship in less than an hour. Now I wasn't a machinist--by that I mean in the ship's crew--but you wouldn't ever think of it working properly. You can take a chance on blowing head gaskets and everything else doing that that fast.

Marcello: Well, it's just like starting an automobile on a very, very cold morning.

Davis: Right. And taking off at a hundred miles an hour.

Marcello: Okay, so you get to the guns, and you mentioned something awhile ago that I don't think you had mentioned previously. You had actually obtained these machine guns off the planes.

- Davis: Yes, they're on the racks in the planes, yes.
- Marcello: And these are the machine guns that that second crew member aboard the plane would normally be operating.
- Davis: Right, right.
- Marcello: Okay, so you set up these machine guns in a make-shift fashion, and you begin firing at these planes.
- Davis: Right.
- Marcello: Describe what takes place at this point.
- Davis: Well, like I said, they were on the stanchions, and they weren't secure. The guns would just jump out, and you'd be in free air with the gun, so we had to discontinue that. Pardon me, we probably fired 300 or 400 or 500 rounds and just quit. You had no accuracy, because you had no way of holding that gun on target. I imagine we put a few holes in some planes, but as far as doing really damage, we didn't.
- Marcello: Okay, so when you saw that it was futile to fire at those planes with the machine guns, what did you do next then?
- Davis: At that point, the word come out to destroy anything made of wood. So we started throwing anything that could burn over the side, because a lot of the ships had been hit were burning. Well, if you've just got metal, it's not going to burn. In fact, not that morning, but at the very earliest possible date, we even stripped our wooden decks. We had metal decks.
- Marcello: How long were you engaged in this process of throwing all wooden articles overboard?

Davis: I think we were still throwing things over when we went through the net. I don't know. Like, this thing. . . I don't know how it affects everybody, but some of these things you can remember; you can't ever forget them. Then other times it seems like, "What was going on at that particular time?" You don't know. You were so busy doing the thing you were taught to do.

Marcello: I think you just brought up a very important point. In this situation, you really don't have a chance to see the so-called "big picture." You know what your particular function is, and you're hoping that everybody else is doing their function and that the whole thing kind of fits together.

Davis: Right. That's what this six months of training prior to Pearl Harbor was all about. Like the guy they had to pull off the gun to keep from blowing up, his job was shooting. That's all he had on his mind. He didn't even see this thing; it was red hot. He didn't see it or feel it.

Marcello: Were you able to observe any of the action that was taking place over at the other ships? In other words, did you see the Arizona blow or the Oklahoma turn over or anything of this nature?

Davis: I didn't see the Oklahoma hit; I saw her as she rolled over. The Arizona--you couldn't hardly see the ship for the smoke, but you could see the tracers come out. We saw. . . as far as seeing what went on somewhere else, we saw that after we got underway, really. We were so busy doing our thing that once we got underway we were

going out hoping to find the ships these planes were coming from. I think they were up around Midway or somewhere. We figured they were just out of Pearl somewhere.

Marcello: Well, if you got underway that quickly, would you have been there when the high-level bombers came over?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: You were still there when they came over. Now the attack was initially started by the torpedo planes and probably some of the dive-bombers.

Davis: Yes. No, wait a minute. Dive-bombers. . . I was there. High-level bomber, no, I was probably at sea. We stayed at general quarters for thirty-six hours.

Marcello: Okay, let's come up to the point, then, where the Phoenix is getting underway. Describe what takes place as the Phoenix gets underway and is leaving the harbor. You talked a little bit about this a little while ago.

Davis: Well, as I say, we started out the shortest way, and that's where the little Jap sub. . . incidentally, they picked it up and brought it back to the States and toured it for bond sales. The sub was in there, so we couldn't continue that way. We had to turn around. An engineer would tell you it's impossible to turn a cruiser around on its own power in that little harbor--we did it.

As we came out, that's when we really saw what else was going on everywhere else. As we went by the Arizona--and I showed you a

picture of the ship going by it--you could see tracer bullets coming up out of that smoke. The guys. . . this goes back to your training. They couldn't possibly see what they were firing at; they were just locked on their guns until the ammunition was expended. They were that well-trained. Some people would say they were "brain-washed"; that's hogwash. They were trained; they had a job to do; they knew how to do it; they were professionals. After we got through the net, we just went all over looking to find ships. We stayed, as I said, at general quarters for about thirty-six hours.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you have as you were clearing the channel and you were able to observe some of this damage around you?

Davis: Well, the water itself was just covered with all types of debris . . . oil and people . . . not dead. . . alive. . . both. In fact, my buddy that I joined the Navy with from Dallas, he was in that water, too, at the time. We didn't know it. . . because the Dallas Morning News in Dallas came out with a big article. He was the first man killed in Pearl Harbor on December 7th. He's now a retired lieutenant commander in the United States Navy. Another ship picked him up and took him to sea.

But it just . . . you know, I mentioned awhile ago that during a battle--I'm thinking, I think, for everybody--you're not afraid. As we went through the net, we still weren't afraid. We were so

full of courage, we could have walked through a ship. But just a very few hours after that when it was all settled down and there was no more battle and we couldn't see any ships, then we started getting scared. You could see it in their faces.

Marcello: And, of course, I assume that while the battle was actually taking place, there was all sorts of noise and smoke and shouting and so on and so forth.

Davis: You couldn't hear for the noise. In fact, our own ship . . . there was reports that Honolulu was being bombed. Your battleships had . . . oh, one-pounders; they were broad-side guns. And as I said, our armament was very insufficient in all of our fleet. They were using these one-pounders to fire at these aircraft; they were that low. So here again, the fuses weren't set; it's thirteen miles over to Pearl; the projectiles would go over, and they . . . no fuse was set, so they wouldn't go off until they hit. So that's the bombs that. . . I don't think the Japs actually bombed Honolulu because that's where their colleagues were. That's where their people that gave them their information were; they wouldn't try to hurt them.

Marcello: Okay, what did the Phoenix do, then, after it cleared the channel and hit the open sea?

Davis: We spent three days searching for the Jap fleet that had brought the planes in. When we didn't find them, then we returned to Pearl.

Marcello: What sort of rumors did you hear in the aftermath of the attack?

I'm sure the ship must have been one big rumor mill.

Davis: The first rumor was that we'd lost our entire Pacific fleet, which was almost true, I mean, as far as seapower. Of course, they hit Hickam, Schofield, and Ford Island; our aircraft was way, way down. There were bombs dropped that were duds with some type of poison on them, because a bunch of the guys would burn their hands right to the bone. These were put there, I guess, for the survivors to get hurt by trying to handle.

There were two of the SOC's, the type planes that were flew . . . immediately after Pearl Harbor was attacked, there was a word put out that "Anything flying directly over Pearl Harbor is enemy," because IFF, I think they called it, we didn't have that so much then. So anything that flew in over the harbor was enemy. So that night after darkness, two SOC's that had been out scouting, just like we were, were coming home. They flew directly over Pearl Harbor, and they never hit the ground again. They said it was like the Fourth of July . . . the tracers. . . I've seen pictures of this. All over Pearl Harbor tracers were going up to a point and they just kept hitting and hitting and hitting the planes to where there was just little pieces that fell. Which it was horrible, but you couldn't take a chance.

Marcello: Did you actually hear the rumors that the Japanese had landed on the Hawaiian Islands and this sort of thing?

Davis: Yes, yes. We heard that they had landed. . . a lot of them, after blowing up the airfields, had landed their planes, and they were actually taking over.

Marcello: Did you believe all these rumors?

Davis: Not really. I was still, at that point, confident that we were the . . . even though we'd just got the fire knocked out of us, I still felt like we were the greatest.

Marcello: When you finally came in, what did the scene look like in Pearl Harbor?

Davis: Well, it looked horrible. It just looked like we didn't have anything left. I don't know how to describe that. Well, the beautiful fleet that we'd had the week before wasn't there; it was just a bunch of junk iron.

Marcello: Battleship Row, evidently, had been a rather impressive sight for one to have seen it.

Davis: Yes. It seems like that they concentrated their fire more on that than anything else. Now why, I don't know, because actually, even in 1941, battleships were really an obsolete war weapon, because so far superior to anything else that you could knock out anybody's battleships. I think England had one that was unsinkable; it got sunk, I think, in '42.

Marcello: Okay, well, Mr. Davis, is there anything else that you think we need to get as a part of the record? I have plenty of tape, and if there is anything that you would like to add, well, we can continue.

Davis: I tell you, that far back without your asking questions, it would be hard for me to come up with something. After you leave, I may think of a dozen things.

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

Davis: Well, I hope so.