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Elmer Childress
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Oral History Collection

Elmer Childress

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Ausgin, Texas

Date: July 11, 1977

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Elmer Childress for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 11, 1977, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Childress in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the destroyer USS Reid during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Childress, 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. Childress: Well, I was born out in Scurry County in a little town, Ira, which is near Snyder.

Dr. Marcello: When were you born?

Mr. Childress: June 8, 1918. My mother died when I was a few months old. I went to live with my grandparents. When I was about two years, we moved down to the Rio Grande in Harlingen. So I grew up mainly in Harlingen. Most of my

school was in Harlingen, and I went to high school.

Then I decided I wanted to see the world. I listened to a Navy recruiter, and I went into the Navy on December 11, 1941, for a four-year enlistment. If you count, that leaves the attack on Pearl Harbor three days before my enlistment expired.

Marcello: Now let's just back up here a minute now. You didn't go into the service on December 11, 1941.

Childress: 1937.

Marcello: Yes. I was going to say, you went in in 1937. You mentioned 1941.

Childress: Oh, I did? Well, I'm old these days (chuckle). Anyway, I did. Well, they weren't letting any sailors out unless their ship was back in the States and you had less than thirty days to do at that time. But our ship was scheduled to leave Pearl on the thirteenth, bound for San Diego. And that is under ordinary circumstances a six-day trip at speeds that we ran. I was looking forward to being home that Christmas of 1941, but it wasn't to be.

Marcello: Okay, that's getting way ahead of our story. Let's back up here a little bit. Why did you decide to enter the service? You touched on this briefly.

Childress: Well, really, back then I didn't have any desire to go to college. I cooked hamburgers. I worked . . . well, I was a curb hop. Then we used all . . . we didn't have any girl curb hops. . . well, early. They finally came out with them. But I hopped curb, pumped

gas, and that sort of thing, and I just decided to . . . well, one of the Navy recruiter's pitches was that you'd learn a trade if you went in the Navy. So I decided I'd learn a trade, which I did. I learned how to make steam for marine boilers. That's really good (facetious remark) when you get back in the middle of Texas for a future (chuckle).

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Childress: San Diego.

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

Childress: Well, really not anything out of the ordinary. I met some fellows there from home that I didn't know was in the Navy. I had always heard to never volunteer for anything. However, I did volunteer to sing in a choir at the training station. The Navy has a field day every Friday when they get ready for captain's inspection, and the first time they called a field day, the fellow down there called for choir practice--this Navy chaplain did. And I was disappointed because I wanted to participate in field day. I thought it was track and field day. I was so far back in the woods that I really didn't know what field day was. And so every Friday when they would pipe--get ready--for captain's inspection on Saturday to "turn to," this man called us to the chapel, and we had choir practice. So that was one case where I volunteered, and it didn't hurt me any. I got out of a lot of work.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Childress: Well, I went directly from boot camp . . . I went to a hospital corpsman school. A friend and I decided we would go together wherever we would apply for these service schools. You'd take tests for them. So I wanted to go to a machinist's mate school, which was at Norfolk, and he wanted to go to a corpsman school located in San Diego. So we put down . . . I won the coin toss. So we put our first choice as machinist's mate school. And the way it turned out, he got the first choice, and I got our second choice, which I . . . we were reversed, really. So I stayed in that corpsman school for sixteen weeks, and then I really didn't care to be a corpsman.

And so after I finished the school, why, I went down . . . they sent me down to the old destroyer base. I went aboard an old four-stack destroyer, and I helped to decommission it. It was tied up to the dock. I never went to sea. We just put it in . . . they called it "red lead row," and we got in there and chipped all the paint and repainted. And so I left there and went aboard the Reid in September.

Marcello: Now were you simply assigned to the Reid, or did you volunteer for destroyer duty?

Childress: No, I was just assigned.

Marcello: Describe what sort of a ship the Reid was.

Childress: Well, the Reid was around 342 feet long, about--I don't know-- somewhere around forty or forty-two feet wide at the beam. So that's . . . you know, that's pretty long, and you might have heard that destroyers tend to roll a lot. They do, and they pitch. It was called a 1,500-ton class. Of course, that's--by today's standards--a real small ship, but then it was a fair-sized destroyer. At that time we had five 5-inch .38-caliber guns. And we had three torpedo mounts that could fire four torpedoes each. And we had a depth charge rack and--I don't know-- about four .50-caliber machine guns.

Marcello: Now in our pre-interview conversation, you mentioned that the Reid had actually been commissioned in 1936, so it was a relatively new destroyer, was it not?

Childress: Very new.

Marcello: And its designation was DD369.

Childress: Right.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you get when you went aboard the Reid? Now you were still relatively a boot, I'm sure, so far as they were concerned.

Childress: Well, true. There's really not much of a reception. You go on there with your orders. Of course, they knew I was coming. I guess I was the only one that went aboard at that particular time, so I was assigned to one of the deck divisions in the forward part of the ship. In fact, our destroyer only had two deck

divisions--the first and the second. The first, of course, was at the forecastle part of the ship. And so I went aboard there, and they assigned me to a bunk. At that time, I guess we had somewhere around a hundred to 110 men in the whole crew. But, like, this was, of course, in peacetime, and the Navy had been . . . during the Hoover administration, they didn't have any money to spend. So Roosevelt was getting . . . his administration was building the Navy up a little bit, and so they were recruiting a little more. When I went . . . I went down and--I think it was in June, 1937--signed all of these papers, took physicals, and I had to wait until December to get a call. You didn't go down and volunteer and they take you in a couple of days.

Marcello: I understand the Navy was highly selective in those days as to whom it would accept.

Childress: Well, I know they accepted me, so they couldn't have been tough (chuckle).

Marcello: What were your quarters like aboard the Reid?

Childress: Well, of course, all of your doors, hatches, and everything are watertight; there was no air conditioning. You had portholes for air, and there were some little scoops that would stick out about twelve or fourteen inches that you could stick in the . . . that was when you were in port, because when you're at sea, if you had one of those things open, you were liable to get plenty of sea

water in. But there were about . . . well, they were really, for what it became later, spacious when I went aboard. The bunks were generally about three tiers high, and everyone had an upright locker because we had so many fellows aboard. A footlocker. . . well, is like an Army footlocker--you can throw things around until you find what you're looking for. You had a washroom--a head. There were very few times that we had water rationing on our ship; we always managed to have our evaporators functioning. A few times we'd have to take salt water showers and then get a little fresh water to rinse the salt water off. But it was . . . well, pretty comfortable, I'll put it that way. There were times, like when we were in the more temperate climate, that we'd take our mattress and put it up on deck and sleep out there; it'd be too warm down in the compartment. Particularly after we got out in the Pearl Harbor area, we bought straw mats that we'd fit underneath your mattress and just roll that thing up and take that and dump it on the deck and keep your mattress cover from getting dirty.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Reid?

Childress: Well, that's like one of the favorites, I guess. They call it "bum chow."

Marcello: "Bum chow?"

Childress: "Bum chow."

Marcello: I've never heard that expression.

Childress: Is that right?

Marcello: Yes.

Childress: Well, one of the fellows that I buddied around with quite a bit was a cook. Well, I never had beans for breakfast until I got in the Navy, but eventually I got to look forward to beans for breakfast. I never did learn to like their cornbread, because they always put sugar in it. I grew up eating cornbread without sugar. I guess all in all, they fed us all right.

Of course, your fresh vegetables and that sort of thing took a long time; it had to be shipped. Having come from the valley, I used to tell this cook that when they were shipping vegetables from the valley, why, they culled and threw away better stuff than he got to cook, which is probably true by the time . . . it'd be in cold storage, and by the time that we got it, why, it would be . . . it'd been there awhile.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the morale aboard the Reid?

Childress: Well, like in peacetime, you're referring to?

Marcello: Yes, I'm referring to the period before Pearl Harbor.

Childress: Well, I'd say we had a real good attitude. Well, we had . . . there are, like in any group, of course . . . as I've mentioned, we had, say, a hundred to 110, somewhere in that area, when I went aboard. Gradually, we built the crew up to, I'd say, 150 or 160. It was . . . well, there were a few fellows in there that were "stinkers," but most everyone was congenial, and everybody got along real well.

- Marcello: Would the fact that everybody was a volunteer have played a significant part in the high morale?
- Childress: Well, possibly, yes.
- Marcello: How much emphasis was placed upon athletic competition aboard the Reid?
- Childress: Well, not a great deal. When we were in San Diego . . . we operated from San Diego for . . . oh, about . . . I suppose the ship was there about three years maybe, and we did have a basketball team that took part in a league. It was just whoever you could get to go . . . had the time. But after we went to Pearl Harbor in 1940, we had softball team, and they were always willing to turn the ballplayers loose. Everybody had the . . . every individual had a cleaning station that he had to . . . regardless of what division he was in, he had one area that he had to keep clean. So as long as you made a little effort to do your job, why, they were always ready to turn us loose and go play ball. We liked that baseball, anyway. We could go to an area there called Aiea. They had a . . . a small sugar plantation over there and a small gym and a baseball diamond. We'd go over there in the afternoon. Like, we'd leave the ship at one o'clock or 1:30 in the afternoon, and we'd go play a baseball game. They wouldn't send the boat after us until about five o'clock . . . 4:30 five o'clock in the afternoon, and after that ball game was over, we had a little beer joint and a pool hall. We'd all stop by,

and those that wanted to shoot pool would shoot pool, and most of us were ready for a cold beer after getting hot from playing that ball. Of course, I've not been there . . . since 1944, I haven't passed through Honolulu, but they tell me that all that area in there--that plantation area--is all houses now. They tore that all up.

Marcello: Let's talk about the ship's routine. Now you mentioned that you were on the deck force when you went aboard the Reid. First of all, what'd you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Childress: When we went . . . well, I was ready, because I'd never been there. There was what was known as a Hawaiian Detachment, which was I don't know how many ships, but it was a lot of ships. We were supposed to go out for a six-month tour; the Hawaiian Detachment was to last six months. We went out there about in . . . I think it was April of 1940, and that six months became a long time.

Marcello: So you were looking forward to going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Childress: Most everyone. . . all of us were, and we were eager to go. Some of the older fellows on there had been out there before. And, of course, then the Hawaiian Islands was a territory; it wasn't a state. Oh, I enjoyed it very much.

Marcello: Now when the Reid docked at Pearl Harbor, where was it docked? Where, specifically, did it tie up?

Childress: Well, let's see. It was between Ford Island and Aiea area, which was back on the backside from the mouth of the harbor.

Marcello: I assume it was with a nest of destroyers.

Childress: Right. We usually tied up to a destroyer tender, or we had a buoy that would have to be picked up. You may be familiar with the fact that you tie with your own division normally. Of course, each officer is rated, you know, as to . . . like, he may be a lieutenant commander. . . he may be the junior; he may have just gotten lieutenant commander. Well, the other fellows . . . whoever the junior ship captain might be, they always designated him to go in and pick up the buoy, and the others would come along and moor alongside. We had a junior captain a lot of times.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the daily routine of the Reid. Why don't we describe what a typical exercise or maneuver was like for the Reid. In other words, when did it go out? What did it do when it went out? How long did it stay out? When would it come in? Now I've asked you about four different questions.

Childress: Well, normally, under normal circumstances, we would go . . . like, Monday morning we'd go to sea. That was our common expression: "We'd go to sea."

Marcello: Now were you part of a regular . . . would you go with your division?

Childress: Right. Go out with our division. Sometimes. . . well, we had various exercises. We'd go and operate. . . we'd have maybe torpedo exercises at some time. We'd go and work on that maybe all week. They would fire torpedoes with dummy heads on them.

Then other exercises we had would be antiaircraft. Then we had . . . the ship would tow a surf target, and we'd shoot at that target. They were just wartime exercises.

Marcello: Now would you work in conjunction with the cruisers or the battleships or the carriers?

Childress: On these, like our torpedo runs, we very seldom were out with any other than just our destroyers. We had, like, our whole squadron, which was two divisions plus a squadron leader, which was a little larger destroyer. Now we worked with the carriers some. They would assign two destroyers to a carrier, and we called . . . I don't know what they officially called it, but we called it plane guard duty. When the planes were being launched, a destroyer was off of each bow. In case one of those planes crashed, we had a crash boat that was above the water, about the main deck level on our ship, with a stand-by crew. All they had to do was hop in and lower that boat and try to pick up the pilot, or some of those planes carried two-men crews. Then we'd run around exercising with the carriers. We did this with the old Enterprise, Saratoga, and the Lexington--all the older ones. We never operated with any of the newer ones.

Marcello: And did you say that one of these training exercises would normally last about a week?

Childress: Well, usually we'd go out on Monday mornings, and we'd come in like at noon Friday or sometimes in the early Friday afternoon. That was the general routine.

Marcello: What was your particular battle station aboard the Reid?

Childress: Well, you might say I would have been a man of many faces there, because I . . . well, I was in a gun crew when I first went aboard. I was in a . . . the guns that we used used what was known as semi-fixed ammunition, which was a powder case about two feet long, I guess, and then a projectile that weighed fifty-four pounds. We had a first powderman who dropped the powder in, and we had a loader who jerked these projectiles out of the fuse box and put them in. Then there was a fellow that rammed it home, and we had a pointer and a trainer. I guess I was in a powder line coming from your ammunition ready box. We just had . . . well, just from one fellow to another by hand. Then I was later in a gun director crew, which was the highest point on the . . . well, not the highest point but the highest deck, which was a very small deck, and had a gun director up there, and they'd synchronize our guns. We would operate from up there.

Marcello: Now where was your battle station at the time of the actual Pearl Harbor attack?

Childress: Well, I was in the fire room by then.

Marcello: In other words, you'd gotten off the deck force and now were working down in the black gang.

Childress: Well, that was a round-about way. About 1939, I went into the visual signal gang with the signalmen and quartermasters. When

we were on a fleet problem down in the Caribbean, one of the fellows got sick, and like I mentioned earlier, they wouldn't give you . . . I didn't say this earlier, but they wouldn't give you a rate, but they'd give you the responsibility. We had seamen . . . they were rated as seamen, but they were qualified to stand signal watches and radio watches, and they called them seamen signalmen and seamen radiomen.

Then I went to visual signal school. Then I got . . . before I ever got a rating or ever got rated, I was a qualified watchstander up there, and the captain personally kicked me off of the bridge, because I ran up a flag hoist incorrectly. There was really no damage other than to his ego. In peacetime you're striving for efficiency, and we were in hot competition for a "C" painted on our bridge, which the ship that made the least number of mistakes would get the "C" for a whole year.

Marcello: I never knew they got the "C"; I knew they used to get the "E" for efficiency.

Childress: That was engineers.

Marcello: I see.

Childress: That's a red "E" for engineering efficiency. If you get a white "E," that's for the whole ship. Well, on the bridge, you had a small "c," and that included visual signals and radio. The captain could read a little bit of signals. I don't know about flags . . . I mean, I'm sure he couldn't . . . some flag hoists he could.

Like, he could read the one which means "you are incorrectly repeating flag hoists." He knew that, because we'd had that before. So he wanted to know what was wrong with our signal, and we told him it had already been corrected, and . . . well, he ran me off the bridge and told me not to ever come on his bridge again.

But we were so short-handed that I was a first class seaman, but I had a second class quartermaster's billet. The second class quartermaster we had had the chief quartermaster's billet. Anyway, we really put them in the hole. We were short to begin with, and he kicked me off.

Then later . . . I'd say maybe six weeks or maybe two months after that event, our communications officer at that time became the chief engineer, and I persuaded him that I should be in the engineers. So I had every intention of getting to the engine room, but a watertender befriended me . . . and, well, he wanted to get out of standing auxiliary watches when we were in port. The quicker he could get someone to take the watch, then he wouldn't have to take those watches. So he took a personal interest in another fellow and me. We went down at the same time. So we learned that plant. It was good for us, and it was also good for him. So you then normally would spend six months in a fire room, which in layman's language they'd call it a boiler room. In the Navy we called it a fire room. Then

you could apply to go back to the engine room. But when my time was up, why, I didn't go; I stayed and became a watertender.

Marcello: How would you describe the on-the-job training that you received in order to become a watertender? Was it good? Fair? Poor? Excellent?

Childress: Well, I'd say I had an excellent instructor for on-the-job training. Like I had mentioned there, I guess he was a second class watertender . . . possibly . . . no, I think he was still a second class at that time, but he had charge of the fire room. He had to make up watch lists, and he had to stake auxiliary watches. Well, that is really a boring job--standing auxiliary watch in a fire room. You just watch your steam pressure and your oil pressure, and everything is routine. So anyway, I learned the plant, and he helped me a lot.

Then when I was down there, I guess, for nine months, I took an exam for the next rating, and he helped me to study and asked questions. I stood . . . when we were underway, I had his watch--steaming section, we called them--and he was always asking me questions about, "What is this? What's that line for?" and various things about your engineering plant. I'd say that I was led by the hand, you might say. So I have to say he was excellent.

Marcello: Again, in going back to the question that I had previously asked. At the time of Pearl Harbor, where was your battle station?

Childress: (Chuckle) Yes, well, we got a long around for that one. It was down in the forward fire room.

Marcello: And what was your specific job at this battle station?

Childress: Well, I was . . . well, I was what they called a check man. They have these large valves that feed water into the boilers, and then they call them feed checks, because it's the boiler feed which is the water that goes in them. So I was up there on these feed checks; that was my main duty. You have a water gauge glass, and you have to maintain this water level. On your express-type boilers, the water may go out of sight both ways--over or under. Of course, it's bad if it goes out of sight under. If you get too much water in there, well, it's bad, also. So you have to . . . with express-type boilers, you're going along, say, at ten knots and they suddenly give you a flank speed signal, and they say, "Turn on all your burners in that fire box," well, it causes your water to rise. It takes someone with a little experience to . . . when it goes out of sight, you have to know where it went and have to know, too, that you need to be feeding that boiler. As it comes back in sight, you have to be sure you maintain the level. If they shut down quickly, you have to shut your water off. Well, I was a feed check man.

Marcello: Now we were talking awhile ago about your training exercises and things of this nature. Did the routine change any as one gets

closer and closer to December 7th and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate?

Childress: I don't really remember the date, but I believe that about the time selective service started, in the Hawaiian area we started running our ships at night with the lights out--darkened ship. Also, we had some patrol duties where . . . and we had a boarding party selected from men on our ship, that if we saw . . . I don't know what they would call a suspicious-looking ship; I don't know how they would determine this, but if they'd see a fishing boat . . . and I guess they had the authority, because we would go out there sometimes and challenge these fishing boats. We'd put a boarding party aboard them, and they'd search to see if they had powerful radio equipment or just what they had aboard. I was never in a boarding party. But we took a lot of . . . more intense training before Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Were you going to general quarters more often?

Childress: I imagine we were. You know, that's pretty hazy. But the main thing I remember the most . . . I was still in my general quarters station when that . . . I think they call it a national emergency . . . I'm not sure. But I was still in this gun director crew. When we had general quarters, we had binoculars with the rubber eye-pieces on them that were blinders that would fit over the side of our eyes. We had a sector that we sat, and we had to

sit with these binoculars, and this was our sector of so many degrees. The fellow sitting next to us . . . we had it clockwise all the way—or I say clockwise—we had it 360-degree watch for . . . we were looking basically on the surface. But we were really . . . it seemed to me that we were doing something out of the ordinary. I was young and not taking things too seriously. I was thinking about going home.

Marcello: Were you keeping a very close watch in the local news media so far as current events and so on were concerned?

Childress: I wasn't, no. There was one thing I do remember of a little . . . about a one-paragraph news item before the Pearl Harbor attack . . . like, a few days before the attack. There was a Russian envoy that came through Pearl, and they attributed a little statement to him that he said there was a Japanese task force out there somewhere in the Pacific. . . in that general area. But it really . . . I've never seen that mentioned in anything I've ever read about Pearl Harbor. But I imagine if they would look in the old Honolulu Bulletin, they probably could locate that little news item.

Marcello: How safe and secure did you feel in the Hawaiian Islands?

Childress: Well, I felt just as safe and secure there as I would have been in Texas, really.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your mind? Now I'm referring to that pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Childress: Pre-Pearl Harbor? Well, I really never gave them much thought. We had a gunnery officer that was anti-Japanese, and he was always preaching to us about the Japanese. He said, "You couldn't trust them," and "They ought to shoot Japanese women, because that's where Japanese men come from." He was really . . . I called it the "gung-ho"-type fellow.

Marcello: Did you ever run across any of the old sailors from the Asiatic Fleet while you were aboard the Reid?

Childress: Right. I sure did.

Marcello: What did they have to say about the Japanese or the Japanese Navy?

Childress: Well, one of my good friends said he had been out in the Asiatic Station, and he said, "Oh, we'll whip those Japs in six months!" He said, "I've seen them. Their dive bombers, I've seen them practicing, and they're sorry!"

As I mentioned earlier, my enlistment was expiring on the 10th of December of 1941. Along the 8th of December, I was pretty upset with the Japanese. Another fellow and I . . . his enlistment was expiring on the 8th, I think . . . we went up and extended our enlistment two years. At the time, I was a little apprehensive because of the rumors that I'd heard from these Asiatic sailors that we'd whip them, you know, in six months, and then I'd be stuck with another year and a half to do. Of course, it didn't turn out that way.

Marcello: Those Asiatic sailors were a rather strange outfit, anyway. I'm not sure how much credence you could put on anything they said.

Childress: (Chuckle) Well, they were something all right; I'll go along with that.

Marcello: How fast or how slow was promotion in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Childress: Well, it was . . . most ratings were pretty slow. There were some ratings, of course, that were more open than others. Our electricians were pretty fast, and the machinist's mates were pretty fast.

But I don't know if you are aware that back in those days we had left arm rates and right arm rates. That goes back to your chain of command. . . your . . . I don't know what sequence they really are. I do know that . . . you know, you can go from an admiral on down to an ensign in the officer line. The warrant officer is next and then a chief boatswain's mate. His emblem was on the right sleeve--the upper arm. Then I think the gunner's mate was next, then the torpedomen or fire controlmen. I don't know of their sequence, but all of those were right arm rates. All of your engineers were left arm rates . . . radioman. Signalmen quartermasters were also right arm rates, but they have them all on the left sleeves now.

Some of those ratings were fairly slow. I was on a list. We took exams in the summertime of '41, and I took the examination for second class watertender, and one of my friends took

it for first class. I think we were supposed to get our rates in September . . . they were supposed to be effective. About two or three days before they were supposed to be effective, we got a letter down saying "Did not rate those men. They are going to be retained on a waiting list," and we would get our ratings as they became available. So at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, I was still on the waiting list to become a second class petty officer.

This friend of mine and I had been over to Honolulu, and since I was only going to stay in until December, well, I just ordered one suit of whites with a new "crow"; you know, they call a rating badge a "crow." He had ordered some; he was a career sailor. Since I was going to get out, I just ordered one suit of whites. I still had them, of course, when the war started.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine here at Pearl Harbor while you were aboard the Reid. Again, I'm referring to that period prior to December 7, 1941. How did the liberty routine work for you when the Reid was docked?

Childress: Well, our ship used a three-section duty section, we called it. You'd have the duty every third day, so you had two days if you were . . . so-called if your nose was clean. If you didn't have any restrictions, well, you were eligible to go ashore, which is what a lot of the married fellows did.

Marcello: In fact, most of the married men usually lived ashore, did they not?

- Childress: Right. They all . . .well, I say . . . of course, all of them that had their wives there lived ashore. This fellow that I mentioned that befriended me when I went in the engineering force had his wife out there and his little boy. Of course, that meant that you had two weekends free and duty on one. Usually, these married fellows that had their families out there, they could trade out . . . get someone to do their weekend duty for them so they could go ashore.
- Marcello: Now for you aboard the Reid, were you able to stay overnight when you had liberty?
- Childress: The only time you could stay overnight. . . yes, we could stay overnight.
- Marcello: Didn't you have to have a specific place to go, though?
- Childress: You had to have an address, yes. Like, I did do that a couple of times. I'd go and spend a weekend out at some friend's who had his family out there. But if you didn't have a permanent address, or, you know, if you were not living over there, you had to have special permission.
- Marcello: Otherwise, you had to be back aboard at midnight, isn't that correct?
- Childress: I think it was midnight, yes. I believe so. Or one o'clock. I really don't remember.
- Marcello: Normally, when the Reid was in on a weekend therefore, you would be guaranteed at least one day and possibly two days liberty.

Childress: Yes. Usually, you'd have a Saturday and a Sunday.

Marcello: Okay, what would you normally do when you went on liberty?

Childress: Well, I was a member of the "bar hops," I guess, because we'd just bar hop. Well, there was one place that had an open-air dance pavillion that I liked real well. There was always a lot of girls there, and they had this good big band-type music, and it was, as I mentioned, open-air; they had one little area that was covered. But there was always plenty to drink, and that's one of the things I was interested in.

Marcello: Did you frequent Hotel Street and Canal Street?

Childress: I've been on Hotel Street, and I've been in those cat houses where you'd leave your hat laying down there; when you came back out, it'd be full of matches and girls' names on business cards. In fact, I never thought about this, but I do have a scrapbook at home, and a lot of that stuff, I've put it in a scrapbook. So occasionally, I get that thing out, and I look at it. I have one that I remember. It was the first that I'd ever seen this little clear sheet of paper, and you draw something on it, and when you lift it up, it disappears. Well, I got that from the New Senator Hotel. I guess . . . I don't know, it's probably on Hotel Street.

Marcello: Now how would this routine work? When you went into one of the cat houses, you left your hat down in the lobby, so to speak.

Childress: Well, I don't know if you left it in the lobby or take it to her room. But anyway, you'd lay your hat down, and when you'd come

back, it'd have matches--book matches--and little trinkets. They were really applying their trade.

Marcello: In other words, they were soliciting additional business.

Childress: Right.

Marcello: Okay, now the next question I'm going to ask you is kind of an important one, and I want you to think about it before you answer it. Many people say that if the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor, the best time to have done so would be on a Sunday morning. What these people are implying is that Saturday nights in Pearl Harbor were times of heavy drinking, partying, and things of this nature. Consequently, the sailors would be in no condition to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you reply to that observation or to that assertion?

Childress: Well, I don't know . . . I'd think that'd probably be just about as good of an answer, because a lot of fellows went to town on Saturday night. I think you'd find that true in most anywhere . . . I mean, with the service people. They'd be out on Saturday nights, because they're usually . . . whatever duty you have on Sunday would be light. When the Navy . . . or on my ship . . . when I speak of the Navy, I'm very limited, because all I know is a very small area. We always slept in on Sunday mornings. I'd think that'd probably hold true. I don't know. . . I wouldn't know about the officers. I've heard that they had a lot of their socials on Saturday nights, and that the social life the old white-hat sailor had was a lot of times on Saturday nights, too.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Reid?

Childress: Well, we had payday twice a month. It would be . . . oh, I think around the 5th and 20th. I think they could pay you anytime between the 1st and the 5th and 15th and 20th.

Marcello: Which means that if you had gotten paid on the 5th, you would have a substantial amount of money during that weekend of the 7th.

Childress: Well (chuckle), I wouldn't have, because I made . . . my base pay was sixty dollars a month in those days. Well, back in those days, that was a third class petty officer's pay, but in the engineers we didn't have any third class petty officers. You went from a fireman first to second class, and second class made seventy-two dollars. But it really wasn't . . . we didn't have a lot of money to burn—I didn't.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the actual attack itself. Let's limit ourselves to that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I'm referring now to the period of December 5th through December 7th. In as much detail as you can reconstruct, describe what your routine was during that weekend.

Childress: Well, we were tied up alongside the destroyer tender.

Marcello: Did you come in on a Friday?

Childress: I don't really remember exactly when we came in. I do know . . . I would say . . . I really don't know when we tied up alongside that tender, but I'd say we must have been there before that

Friday. Because we were going to have this tender overhaul, and the only power that we had on our ship was being supplied by the tender. Our electricity was coming from them; our steam was coming from them; our boilers were wide open.

Marcello: Which means that they were inoperative.

Childress: That's right, they were inoperable. They had . . . the type of boilers on the Reid was what is called an "A"-type. You have a fire box that's shaped like an "A," and the steam drum is directly at the top, at the apex. Down at the bottom of the "A" was a mud drum, and they have manhole covers on all of them. Those manhole covers were open; everything was dry as a bone.

There's a . . . well, it's a wire brush, really . . . we operated them by . . . you could use electric or air, whatever you had available. You'd get in . . . these little tubes were about . . . some of them were a half-inch inside in diameter; some of them were three-quarters, some an inch. We had to get the right-size wire brush and get into that steam drum and run that brush all the way through those things, and we called it "punching tubes." So that's what we were in the process of doing. We had maybe . . . I couldn't be specific. . . but it was a normal routine when you were having a tender overhaul if you had a pump maybe . . . a fuel oil pump . . . maybe a water pump that might be leaking a little bit, you took all these times to overhaul your equipment.

Some valves that we had removed from the steam line. . .and they were just . . . the valves, we took them over to the tender. That's why I say we must have been there before that Friday, because we had this . . . it was a three-inch valve, which is a pretty good-size, it was over on the tender. They were going to do some welding on it and then put it in a lathe and turn it. So we were busy . . . just general overhaul.

Marcello: I gather, then, that the Reid was in no condition to fight.

Childress: Not at all. We were in no shape at all.

Marcello: Now was this overhaul taking place on Saturday?

Childress: Yes.

Marcello: And would most of the crew have been aboard taking part in this overhaul?

Childress: Well, I would say a normal Saturday probably . . . we'd have a . . . liberty would start like 11:30 or twelve o'clock, and the fellows who did not go ashore would maybe go play baseball. If they didn't leave the ship . . . see, by then they had a recreation center built over there, and they had some bowling alleys. You could go over and have a few beers and bowl some. But I'd say those who did not go ashore for some reason would just lay around and play cards.

Marcello: Now when the ship is in that condition, are you still maintaining the three-section liberty?

Childress: Yes, because you still have to have someone . . . you have to have a gangway watch, a messenger. You have to maintain your visual signals and . . . well, your engineers would be getting our water . . . well, we had water in our own tanks, but they'd have to have someone there to . . . it was really a routine thing, not anything out of the ordinary. But we got all of our power. . . we'd have electric lines over from the tender for auxiliary power. Also, we had a little . . . I guess, thirty-five pounds of steam pressure we'd get to put in the galley. Of course, all of those . . . our ship was . . . you would run it from steam to make electricity and turn the propellers. When you don't have steam, you can't run anything. You can't train your guns; you can't . . . it's like . . . would be similar to having an automobile with power steering and your power steering is suddenly out. You could turn your car, and you could turn those torpedo mounts, but it'd really be a struggle . . . and your guns, also.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday night? Do you recall?

Childress: I really don't remember. I feel sure I stayed on the ship, because I don't remember being ashore.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that Sunday, then, of December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point is describe your routine from the time you get up that morning until all hell broke loose. Then we'll talk about events that happened thereafter.

Childress: Well, I was asleep along with a lot of fellows on the ship. We have our general alarm system was an old klaxon horn. One of the routines is that at eight o'clock every morning when you're at port that klaxon horn goes off, and that was a signal to go to quarters--not general quarters but just our quarters--and they'd have a muster.

Well, this same general alarm went off--the old klaxon horn--so I sat up on the edge of my bunk complaining like the rest of the guys around there, "What are they having quarters for on Sunday morning?"

Well, there was a ship tied up right next to us. I don't remember the name of the ship, but there was a gunner's mate up there working on a .50-caliber machine gun. He started firing that thing, and we couldn't imagine--or I couldn't imagine--what was happening.

Then our messenger boy that worked at the gangway, he came running in there, and he hit our ladder. . . and an experienced sailor doesn't need to use the treads on a ladder; you just slide down. Well, he slid down on the hand rails, and he was hollering, "General quarters and no shit! General quarters and no shit!" to emphasize the fact that there was a real emergency.

We had to go to general quarters, so we got in a hurry then. Up until that time, we were just grumbling. When I got out on the main deck and looked around to see what had happened, well,

I could see this smoke going up from the Arizona; they'd already hit that Battleship Row.

Marcello: Now did you have to go out on the main deck in order to get to your battle station?

Childress: Right. Our sleeping quarters were in the back toward the fan-tail part of the ship, and my general quarters station was up in the fire room, which is a little bit past amidships. So I rushed on down there.

Marcello: I assume you did not take time or have time to gawk and look at the action while it was taking place.

Childress: Well, not really. I could see all this smoke from the Arizona. Well, there was the Oklahoma and California and Tennessee; there all these battleships were tied up . . . would be . . . from the way our ship was facing, I'd be looking off of our starboard after quarter, you might say.

Marcello: Now by this time, is everybody acting in a rather professional manner, or is there a great deal of confusion and chaos?

Childress: Well, I'd say there's a lot of confusion. In the peacetime, we had awnings, canvas awnings, that we had rigged up to knock the sun off the deck. So there was a fellow cutting those awnings down rather than taking them down the way we ordinarily did, and he was back there cutting on them. And this man with this .50-caliber on the next ship, he was shooting. So I had to hurry on to my battle station.

Marcello: How much time has elapsed? How much time did it take you to reach this state of readiness?

Childress: Oh, I really don't remember. We were the first ship out of that nest, and I think that we got out of there like at about a quarter after eleven that morning. We were busy to do that.

Anyway, as I started to say, he sent me . . . well, you didn't need this valve in that line in order to get your steam pressure up, but in order to use it, we had to have that valve back there, because the main steam valve at the boiler would remain closed until you got everything ready to go. This ship had . . . your whole space is under an air pressure; you have to go through an air lock when you've got fire in the boilers, because the air is being forced in there by these steam-powered blowers. I got up to this air lock, and I opened the hatch--this inside hatch to that air lock--and as I . . . it had regular dogs, you know, several of them around . . . and as I got that last one loose, standing aside to pull it back, well, there was a concussion that blew that door out of my hand . . . blew it all the way back to the bulkhead.

I don't know if I wanted to go out of there or not after that. So I stood there for a moment and debated, "Should I go up or not?" because it sounded like there was action up there to me. So I finally decided. . . well, I thought we'd been hit, really. So I decided, "Well, if my time's come, there's not anything I can do about it."

Marcello: Now while you were down there in the engineering spaces putting the ship back together again, you might say, were you able to hear any of the noise or feel any of the concussions or anything of this sort?

Childress: We could hear the guns; we could hear them. Some of those . . . they were being able to fire within our nest. So this was really what happened when I got to that air lock.

Marcello: How do you concentrate on doing your work down there when all this is happening outside and there's a great deal of uncertainty in your own mind?

Childress: Well, like I said here, I decided if my time was up, well, there was nothing I could do about it, so I might just as well get after what I was supposed to do.

But I went on out, and I went over to the tender. When I got up to the top of that hatch, then I realized that this was a gun on the next ship that had fired antiaircraft rounds over the top of us, and this was a concussion that came down through there. So I went ahead and got that valve.

Marcello: What sort of a scene did you witness on deck when you were going after that valve?

Childress: Well, gosh, I really don't remember. Well, really, guys were busy, you know. I can't recall seeing what the fellows were doing. I think the torpedomen were fitting warheads on the torpedoes, but that would be . . . they were located right near our

gangway, would be the only reason that I'd see them. I'm sure the gunner's mates were getting their guns ready to fire. But I just . . . I really can't say that I saw any particular thing.

Marcello: Did you have any problems getting that valve?

Childress: No, no problems. I got it and got back with it.

Marcello: Did you have to sign for it or anything of that nature?

Childress: No. It had a tag on it. Ordinarily, you would have to do that, but that morning I went over there and told this man in their machine shop, "I've got to have that valve!" It had our tag on it, and the darn thing . . . they had welded . . . on the disc that sits on the seat, they had welded it, and it was rough. They had never put it in a lathe, so we couldn't close that valve all . . . we could put it in line and open it, which we did. I found out that morning that some . . . I worked on this particular job. . . see, we already had the boilers fired off, and it was hot back there; there was no circulation of air behind the boiler.

A friend of mine, he was a little younger, but he was a real husky, muscular fellow. But he . . . oh, he wasn't fat by any means, but he was just heavy. I found out I could outlast him by being skinny. He had to give up before we got that in; he had to get out and get him some air, and I finished that job, and we did get underway.

Marcello: Now under normal circumstances, how long does it take for a destroyer. . . or more specifically, how long would it take the Reid to get up steam to get underway?

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Marcello: Now under normal circumstances, how long does it take for a destroyer. . . or more specifically, how long would it take the Reid to get up steam to get underway?

- Childress: Well, usually, you'd have to bring those boilers on real slow. You'd light them off and . . . well, normally, under normal conditions, we would have 300 pounds of steam pressure on one boiler. The other would be . . . we had four boilers on the ship; three of them would be cold. We'd light one off and bring it up very slow so as, you know, not to harm anything. It probably . . . I don't remember the exact time that we'd start warming up. But you'd start off in the morning, and I'd say it'd probably take you around three or four hours to . . . you know, just normally do it.
- Marcello: How long did it take you that Sunday morning of December 7th?
- Childress: Well, I'd say probably about three hours. Of course, under your normal conditions, everything is in order.
- Marcello: Yes, of course, you're putting everything back together.
- Childress: We put it all back together.
- Marcello: But so far as the actual firing of the boilers and getting the ship underway, how long did it take you?
- Childress: I think we were probably underway probably a little over three hours, because I think that attack was officially at 7:55. I'd say we were underway by a quarter after eleven.
- Marcello: Okay, but again, I don't think you're answering the question. After you had put all of this machinery back together again, then you would actually fire the boilers.
- Childress: Oh, the machinery back together. Yes, we got fire in the boilers.

Marcello: Okay, from the time you fired the boilers until you got underway, about how much time elapsed?

Childress: Oh, I'd say . . . well, it'd be a guess. I'd say probably an hour maybe, because we didn't fool around. We had . . . you know, we had to go. They wanted it in a hurry.

Marcello: And you mentioned that the Reid was one of the first ships out of there. That's kind of amazing, isn't it, since I would assume the other destroyers were not in the same condition that you were in?

Childress: Well, I don't know what the others were. We were right next to the repair ship. So they had to let us out . . . we were the first one out of that nest.

Marcello: So what did you see . . . well, I guess you didn't see anything on the way out, because you'd have been down in the engineering spaces.

Childress: I sure did. No, when we got underway—I don't remember for what reason that I was on the deck—but I witnessed depth charges being dropped off of motor launches right inside the harbor—300-pound depth charges. There were . . . these little two-man submarines were inside our harbor. I saw one motor launch . . . like about a forty or fifty-foot motor launch off the battleship had . . . they got depth charges off of a destroyer—300-pounders --and they were rolling them off of there. (Chuckle) I tell you, when a destroyer drops a depth charge, they're moving on! Of

course, a 300-pounder won't lift you up so much. We got 600-pounders on to roll off, and we used the 300-pounders . . . I called them a K-gun; I don't know what they're officially called, but they spotted them around on the decks. We could shoot them off of the sides and roll those big ones off the back. But I saw those things being dropped off of a motor launch, because we were going right in the harbor.

Marcello: That's rather dangerous in a way, because there were actually people out in that water and so on.

Childress: Well, not where we were. See, back in that area where my ship was, there was really . . . I think they finally said that there was one plane that strafed a little back there. But there was no bombing or anything back on that side of Ford Island. They hit the airfield; they hit the Battleship Row. On the opposite side of Ford Island from the Battleship Row was where the carriers tied up. The old battleship Utah, which was being used as a target ship—it towed targets—it was turned upside down. We heard later that the Japanese claimed that they sunk the Enterprise, because that's where the Enterprise normally berthed.

Marcello: What else did you see when you went out on deck as the Reid was getting underway?

Childress: Well, there was a lot of firing going on yet.

Marcello: In other words, the second attack had already started at that point?

- Childress: Yes, I'm sure. I could see them; dive bombers were working the air base over. On the way out, well, we passed the Nevada, which I heard that an ensign and a boatswain's mate ran it aground to get it out of the channel.
- Marcello: What did the surface of the water look like?
- Childress: Well, back when we got around there where the old Utah was, there was quite a bit of oil. But back in our area, there was . . . I didn't notice any oil.
- Marcello: Do you hear a lot of noise--the so-called noise of battle and so on?
- Childress: There was some of that, yes. There were, of course. . .there were antiaircraft bursts in the air, too.
- Marcello: I assume there was all sorts of smoke and so on.
- Childress: Lot of smoke. . . lot of smoke, yes. Buildings were afire over there in Pearl, and then you had oil from Battleship Row--that was terrific.
- Marcello: What sort of thoughts and feelings were going through your mind when you saw this?
- Childress: Well, I was pretty upset with the Japanese. We were . . . they said we were going to go out and find them. We rendezvoused outside with, I guess, a couple of other destroyers and a couple of cruisers. We went out and ran around like mad for a couple of days. I don't know what . . . the weather was kind of bad. Anyway, I was upset; I wanted to retaliate.

Marcello: As you were out there maneuvering around, what sort of rumors did you hear?

Childress: Well . . . just . . . I don't really remember. Just that, you know, the Japanese had slipped in and put it to us.

Marcello: Had you heard the rumors to the effect that the Japanese had landed or anything of that sort?

Childress: Well, we were expecting them to land. But we, as I say, got out of there pretty fast. So it was . . . no, we didn't have a lot of rumors.

Marcello: Did you have any submarine scares while you were out maneuvering around?

Childress: I don't remember that we did. We had sonar gear; we had a man operating it all the time.

Marcello: Did you ever drop any depth charges at real or imaginary submarines?

Childress: Not then. Not at the attack at Pearl. Of course, under those conditions, everybody is on edge anyway, and the least little thing out of the ordinary with sonar, why, everybody's up in arms, and you run to your battle stations.

Marcello: What sort of appetite did you have that day of December 7 after the attack was over?

Childress: Well, gosh, I don't know. I'm pretty sure that I did away with my share of the chow when we had it. But I really don't remember that.

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

Childress: Well . . .

Marcello: I'm referring now to that morning.

Childress: Yes. I think the morning was sunshiny. I think it was a clear day, you know, like in central Texas. There may have been some clouds, but you could see a lot of blue, and it was sunshiny. I didn't spend much time up there where I could see it, but I'd say it was clear.

Marcello: When did the Reid return to Pearl Harbor?

Childress: Well, I don't know. I don't know just how many days we were out. Three or four days, I guess, before we came back.

Marcello: What did the harbor look like when you came back in?

Childress: Well, it was a mess. You know, all these ships were still turned over. Two of the ships in our division were in the dry dock in front of the Pennsylvania.

Marcello: The Cassin and the Downes?

Childress: The Cassin carried our division commander, and the Downes was a member of our division. . . and the Cummings had the bow blown off of it. It was over in a floating dry dock, and that was where the Reid was scheduled to have been--in that floating dry dock. But our squadron had left, and . . . I guess it was September or October, somewhere . . . for the States. We got out--I don't know--a few miles, and one of our seams ruptured, and we had to turn around and go back to Pearl. So we missed going to the

States with our squadron. So since it was so near to our regular dry docking period, well, they went ahead and we went through that being dry docked and got this seam repaired. We stayed rather than go back to the States with our buddies. So we were sort of doing independent-type stuff; we weren't doing it with our squadron, and our operations had been out there. So we were sort of detached because of that rapture that we had.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Childress, that's probably a good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having taken the time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that scholars are going to find your comments most valuable when they use this material to write about Pearl Harbor.

Childress: Well, I was asked one time by a scout leader to come down and talk to his Boy Scouts on Pearl Harbor Day. I had worked with the . . . I knew all the kids anyway, and I'd worked with them; I used to help them with their semaphore and their dots and dashes and what-have-you, since I still remember that stuff even today. So I told him that he couldn't expect a big hero's tale from me, because I fought all that war mostly with a monkey wrench.