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Interview with  
Warren Thompson  
October 7, 1977

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Warren W. Thompson

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Warren Thompson for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on October 7, 1977, in Dallas, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Thompson in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the cruiser USS Helena during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Thompson, 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. Thompson: All right, doctor. I was born in Wichita, Kansas, on June 19, 1921. I went through the high school there and joined the Navy in May of 1940.

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

Mr. Thompson: In 1940, I was like many eighteen-year-olds. The economy is still somewhat difficult. My parents wanted me to start to college; I didn't feel at that time that they

could afford to send me to college. I had the natural wanderlust of an eighteen-year-old, I think. The Navy was quite appealing for adventure. I also recall a conversation with my father, indicating that I felt the rumblings from Europe indicated the possibility of a war in the future. I felt that I would probably have to go should this occur, and it'd be to my advantage to get in and get ahead of the rush should this come about.

Marcello: You've raised a number of interesting questions. First, economics is a reason a lot of people of your particular generation give for having entered the service at that time. Jobs were still relatively scarce, and even though the service didn't pay a whole lot, there was a certain amount of security involved.

Thompson: There was security, and, as I mentioned, the appeal. But at that time, you had to pass a very rigid physical examination and many times remain on a waiting list to get into the service.

Marcello: I understand it was quite difficult to get in the service at that time, especially the Navy.

Thompson: It was; it was very difficult. Many men were rejected for the slightest minor physical defect.

Marcello: You also mentioned that you were keeping fairly current with events that were unfolding in Europe. Did you ever see the possibility of a war in Asia at that particular time, however?

Thompson: No, at that time that thought never occurred to me.

Marcello: And I don't think it occurred to very many other Americans, either.

Thompson: Probably not.

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

Thompson: The appeal of travel probably--to be able to see various parts of the world. I did have one relative only that had been in the service at that time, and he had been retired several years from the Navy. He, in my younger years, was more or less an idol. I recall this uniform was outstanding, and he was quite a different kind of man than we had been accustomed to seeing and being around.

Marcello: At the same time, I get the impression that a lot of men who were born in the interior of the United States just seemed to have a natural inclination to join the Navy because it was something entirely different.

Thompson: This apparently is very true, because in going through basic training, our entire company was made up of boys from Kentucky and Kansas. . . no other states involved.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Thompson: At Great Lakes.

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

Thompson: Just the normal boot camp. Obviously, it was a period of readjustment for everyone. I recall many instances there, but it was because I was comparatively young, and these were impressionable events when they did occur.

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

Thompson: I actually don't recall the time element. I went to Great Lakes about the 1st of June and left there and went to California in the late fall of the same year. Month-wise or week-wise, I don't recall.

Marcello: Did you go directly from Great Lakes to California?

Thompson: No, I was given a so-called boot leave upon finishing training and then reassigned, in my case, for schooling.

Marcello: What particular school did you go to?

Thompson: I went to the Hospital Corps School in San Diego.

Marcello: And how long did that last?

Thompson: (Chuckle) We're talking about thirty-five years ago, doctor. My memory doesn't serve to recall too accurately in some respects. It was a course which lasted several months, as I recall.

Marcello: That was quite an honor, I guess, to be selected to go to one of the Navy schools at that particular time.

Thompson: Well, yes. The usual procedure was to graduate from boot camp and be assigned to the fleet, and many men then tried from the fleet to get back into a specialization and a school.

Marcello: And how did you eventually get assigned to the USS Helena?

Thompson: Before leaving boot camp, I was assigned to the Naval hospital at San Diego, and I was there for approximately a year. They were beginning to send many, many corpsmen to the Marine Corps, because the Marines do not have their own medical people. After a year of shore duty, you were almost assured that you would be going to sea. I was one of the, in my thinking, more fortunate. I dreaded the thought of the Marine Corps, and when my orders came through in September of 1941, it was to a cruiser, the USS Helena, and I was highly elated over it.

Marcello: Going back a minute, how would you describe the training that you received to become a corpsman at that time? Was it excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? How would you rate it?

Thompson: I would say it was excellent. It's still recognized to be that. When I hire, if I can find a man that was a Navy corpsman, I give him a lot of credits for that.

Marcello: You mentioned that you give a certain amount of priority to former corpsmen who approach for a job. I would assume, in looking around your office, that you must be some sort of pharmaceutical salesman or something.

Thompson: Yes, I'm a district manager with a prescription pharmaceutical company out of New York.

Marcello: Does your Navy background or Navy training have something to do with your present occupation?

- Thompson: Very definitely. Many, many men, upon retirement from my speciality in the Navy, actually went into this field. When I retired in 1960, a great percentage of the people with our organization were retired Navy hospital corpsmen, and a number of them still are with the company.
- Marcello: What'd you think about the idea of going aboard a cruiser? From what you said awhile ago, I gather that it beat being assigned to the Marine Corps.
- Thompson: True. Highly impressed, obviously. This was the old Navy in the sense that the tradition was still there--the spit-and-polish. This was a capital ship; it was 99 per cent regular Navy; there was just a wonderful spirit and a grand crew. These people had been with the ship, for the most part, since its commission in 1939, and they were razor sharp.
- Marcello: In other words, you had a bunch of "plank owners" aboard the Helena.
- Thompson: We had the "plank owners."
- Marcello: How would you describe your quarters aboard the Helena? Obviously, it was a fairly new cruiser.
- Thompson: Yes, it was the newest cruiser in commission at the time the war started. We had the latest and the most modern equipment available to a capital ship. Our quarters, however, were not remotely different from any other ship at that



time--comfortable but certainly not spacious (chuckle) in any respect. It was just a place to sleep primarily, and that's all anyone had in those days in the service.

Marcello: I assume you had bunks rather than hammocks.

Thompson: Yes, we had hammocks only during initial training. We slept in bunks aboard ship.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Helena?

Thompson: Well (chuckle), we always laugh when we talk about Navy food. Actually, on a comparison basis, I thought it was quite good. We had good cooks; we had good bakers. Our source of supply was quite adequate, and for being able to feed a crew of 1,300 people three meals a day, I felt that they did a very good job.

Marcello: In general, then, I gather that you're saying the morale aboard the Helena was quite high during that pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Thompson: Very definitely that, because we were a good ship, and we knew we were good. The first skipper aboard the ship, Captain Demott, was quite well-known for his outstanding ship handling ability and the type of person he was in training his men. He kept them constantly in a drill status, and, as I say, we could outshoot anything. We knew this, and we were just an outstanding, sharp ship. We competed with other cruisers in the squadron, obviously, and many times this resulted in a little fracas ashore among the crews in various ports.

Marcello: I gather that athletic competition also played a pretty important role in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy.

Thompson: Yes, they were very competitive ship-to-ship, station-to-station. Of course, they had their fleet boxing championships, which attracted an awful lot of interest. There were no professional athletes there at that time, but they did compete quite strenuously in these activities.

Marcello: As a corpsman, you might want to comment on the medical facilities aboard the Helena.

Thompson: We had a complement. . . first, we had two doctors and a dentist and about twelve hospital corpsmen. We had a sick-bay which had, perhaps, ten bunks, then our administrative spaces as well, our small isolation ward, and an operating room.

Marcello: So it was quite adequate, in other words.

Thompson: Very definitely adequate.

Marcello: When did the Helena move to Pearl Harbor?

Thompson: I went aboard the Helena in Long Beach in September--latter part of September--and within a matter of less than a week, we were underway to rejoin the fleet in Pearl.

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

Thompson: Thrilled to death (chuckle)! I was still quite happy with having been in California after never seeing anything except Kansas for eighteen years.

Marcello: Now let's talk a little bit more about the activities of the Helena after it got to Pearl Harbor. Why don't we describe one of the maneuvers or training exercises in which the Helena engaged. Let's talk about a typical training exercise. For instance, when did the Helena usually go out? What did it do when it went out? How long did it stay out? When did it come back in? I've asked you a series of about four questions now.

Thompson: Well, the normal format in those days--and there was obvious increased training, and really if you wanted to say it, preparation for war--we would go out usually on a Monday morning, operate with other ships in the squadron and sometimes with parts of the battle force, which would be the battleships, of course, the destroyers, and even submarines. These would be just fleet maneuvers. Many times we had gunnery practice, various types of Navy exercises. Usually, by Friday evening, we would start to return to port and let the officers go ashore and join their ladies for the weekend, and the sailors would go ashore, if they could get liberty, and do their thing, whatever it might be.

Marcello: Now normally, would the fleet be in on a weekend?

Thompson: Normally, yes. This was quite a common procedure in those days.

Marcello: In your own case, what would you normally be doing on these training exercises?

Thompson: Well, we all had our assignments, depending on the specific type of situation. If it was just a normal situation, we all had our work assignments that kept us busy throughout the day. If we would go into a simulated exercise of combat, we would go to our battle stations and the routine that we would have followed under actual combat conditions.

Marcello: In your case, where was your battle station located?

Thompson: My battle station was in the aft part of the ship on the first deck below the main deck in the chief's quarters; it was called the after battle dressing station. We were fully equipped there, both personnel-wise and material-wise, to attend any casualties in the after part of the ship should they occur.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did the training routine of the Helena change in any way? In other words, as one approaches December 7th, conditions between the United States and Japan were obviously deteriorating, and I was wondering if the routine of the Helena, therefore, changed any.

Thompson: I can't really put it on a comparison basis, having been aboard such a short period of time, and the Helena had just come out of an overhaul situation when I went aboard in September. Our training was quite accelerated, obviously, more so than normal. We would have many nights when we were

awakened from sleep to go to battle quarters. General alarm would sound, and this could come at any time, day or night. Actually, it began to get a little bothersome to be awakened from your sleep and have to hit the deck and start running.

Marcello: Are you saying, in effect, that if you have enough of these general quarters drills, after awhile they become rather routine, and you don't take them too seriously? There's a lot of griping.

Thompson: Yes, this, of course, makes for a happy ship--a lot of griping. But it's true, and these drills are all the time. When the man on the bridge is satisfied that his crew has whipped a few seconds off a previous day's drills in having the guns manned and ready, he's quite content that he's making progress. You can never get there too fast, so the drills really never end.

Marcello: You may not know the answer to my next question, but I'll ask it anyway. Did you have very many antiaircraft drills?

Thompson: Oh, yes. Antiaircraft drills were part of our overall drill procedures. As I say, with the fleet these would vary. Many times they would send out a plane towing targets, and we would fire on the targets. Antiaircraft drills could be just as common as a drill for a contact on the surface or a submarine, as far as that's concerned.

Marcello: On the other hand, however, I would assume that the Helena had many, many more antiaircraft weapons aboard after Pearl Harbor than it did before Pearl Harbor.

Thompson: No.

Marcello: Really.

Thompson: Actually not, because when we went to the fleet in September, we had the latest and the best available to the fleet, and it's the thing that kept us alive out there for the years that we stayed afloat.

Marcello: I'm not sure, though, that before Pearl Harbor anybody really knew what role aircraft were going to play in future war.

Thompson: Apparently not. However, we did operate with the big carriers, the old carriers--Lexington, Saratoga, et cetera. They were just as busy as we were with their plane exercises. We would many times escort them, and they would be under constant training procedures as well. They apparently were more aware that aircraft was going to get into the picture should something break.

Marcello: Now as conditions between the two countries continued to worsen, how safe and secure did you feel there in the Hawaiian Islands? In other words, in your wildest dreams, did you ever--or your shipmates--forsee the possibility of an attack there?

Thompson: To the best of my knowledge, the thought never occurred to anyone; it was never mentioned. I never thought about it, personally. We felt quite secure with the thing that we had to live with and to work with. It could do anything in the world we wanted it to for us; if we got in a spot, we could get out of a spot.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old salts talk about the fighting prowess of the Japanese Navy? I'm referring now to, perhaps, some of the sailors who may have been part of the Asiatic Fleet at one time or other.

Thompson: No, not really. I do recall having seen some of the old Asiatic sailors come back from China. I had a couple of patients, as I recall, off the Panay that was sunk. No, actually Japan just never entered anyone's mind; to the best of my knowledge, it didn't.

Marcello: On the other hand, I'm not exactly sure how much credence you could give to any stories that those Asiatic sailors brought back, anyhow. That must have been some outfit!

Thompson: (Chuckle) They were definitely a different breed of cat entirely--quite interesting people.

Marcello: Would you care to elaborate on that?

Thompson: I worked under one in a hospital ward in San Diego with the nickname of "Cocky," "Cocky" Rogers--very unorthodox, different type of person. Everyone knew "Cocky," and you could

hear him for a block and a half. When he said something, that meant the people would start to move on the spot. He was typical old Asiatic Navy and crazy as hell (chuckle).

Marcello: I've heard that most of them had many tattoos, and most of them possessed something called the "Asiatic stares." I've heard that expression mentioned from time to time--like they were looking at you, but they really weren't seeing you or something.

Thompson: Well, obviously, these people were in a different world. My experience in China showed me that you couldn't spend too much time there and retain the philosophy that we had been raised under. The tattoos were very prevalent on the old Asiatic men particularly. Dragons were quite common from the neck to below the waistline on their back; a rooster and a pig tattoo went around each ankle; hanging from a chain meant that they wouldn't drown at sea and so forth. We saw a lot of this.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you conjure up in your own mind during those pre-Pearl Harbor days? Now obviously, there was a tremendous Japanese-American population in the Hawaiian Islands.

Thompson: This is the way I would think of Japanese, because I saw them frequently ashore in Honolulu--on the streets, in the restaurants, cocktail lounges. This is the only thinking



I had toward the Japanese. I would see the little old ladies still wearing their kimonos, some of them still wearing wooden clogs on the street. And then you would see the newer, more progressive mind of the young Japanese girls who were dressed quite modern, and they were all very attractive people.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine that the Helena had set up. Describe a typical liberty. In other words, when could you expect to get liberty, how much liberty would you get, and what would you do when you went on liberty?

Thompson: We were in sections depending upon seniority. Many times, we would do what would be called port-and-starboard--one day on and one day off. If the ship was in port when your watch section was off, usually you'd get liberty about five o'clock in the evening.

Very few of the enlisted men were married at that time. The typical liberty would be, if you had any money left-- and that's a big "if" in those days (chuckle)--to get a buddy, two or three together, and go ashore. Quite frankly, the favorite pastime was to go out on the beach and drink beer or go to some of the nicer beach clubs and sit around and drink beer and possibly have a good steak dinner--if you could afford a steak dinner.

Marcello: Now did you have to be back at midnight when you had liberty?

Thompson: Frankly, I don't recall in Honolulu. I think there was a curfew there, but I can't recall exactly.

Marcello: My impression is that, in most cases, one had to be back at midnight mainly because there was no place to stay in Honolulu.

Thompson: That was a thing. As I say, most of us were unmarried men. Now the officers did go ashore, and they had their ladies there and would stay the weekend if they rated the weekend. I believe that we were all back usually by midnight, because the Shore Patrol was quite active. It probably was a twelve o'clock curfew at that time.

Marcello: I gather that if you had an address ashore, then you could stay over, that is, if you were staying with somebody or something of this nature.

Thompson: This did happen. I know of a couple of our men that did have addresses. They were the senior ratings, and, yes, they could get overnight liberty under those circumstances.

Marcello: You mentioned that you normally didn't have very much money with which to go ashore. What rank were you at the time of the attack, and approximately how much were you making?

Thompson: I was a third class pharmacist's mate. The steps were, as I recall, from going in twenty-one dollars a month to thirty-six to fifty-four. I think, possibly, I might have been getting sixty dollars a month.

Marcello: Rank moved very, very slowly in this pre-Pearl Harbor Navy, did it not?

Thompson: Very slowly. We had one chief petty officer in the hospital division who had just made chief. He was an outstanding man as far as qualifications, and he had been in the Navy over sixteen years before he made chief.

Marcello: And that was not really uncommon, was it?

Thompson: That was quite routine.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, did you ever spend much time on Hotel Street or Canal Street or some of the favorite haunts of the sailors?

Thompson: Oh, yes, we all did. The names come back and are quite familiar. This was a big part of the routine. I always liked in addition, if possible, to get out around Waikiki and the beach areas because of the atmosphere there. They used to have a program broadcast from the beach on Saturday morning, "Hawaii Calls." There was a large banyon tree there. I had heard it back in the States before going in the Navy, and I would like to see things like this if I had the time and could get there.

Marcello: I gather that on a weekend downtown Honolulu was virtually wall-to-wall bodies when the fleet was in.

Thompson: (Chuckle) When the fleet was in, yes, and, of course, they did come in on the weekends quite routinely. That was the

big industry, obviously. Tourist attractions were limited. We were choked with military, not only Navy but Marine Corps, the old Army boys, and the Army Air Corps boys. Put them all together on the streets and they pretty well filled up all the cafes, the cocktail lounges, the beer joints, the brothels--anything that gave you an opportunity to spend your money and have a good time.

Marcello: And I gather a lot of times there were actually long lines outside some of the bars and the restaurants and so on to get in.

Thompson: This is quite common knowledge, true.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the actual attack itself, Mr. Thompson. What I want you to do at this stage is to go into as much detail as you can remember concerning your activities and the activities of the Helena during that weekend of December 7, 1941. Let's start with that Friday, which would make it the 5th. Am I correct in assuming that the Helena would have been coming in on that Friday?

Thompson: I can't actually say that this is true, but it probably did happen; we were in the weekend and probably did come in on Friday.

Marcello: Where did you normally tie up? I know the answer to this, but I want to test your memory.

Thompson: Well, here again, there was a group of piers inside the Navy yard across from Battleship Row, and the ships of our size and class normally would go into the piers. However, on this particular weekend, we did not. The fleet was in preparation for an annual admiral's inspection on the following inspection on the following Monday morning. There had been much preparation for this; it was the one big inspection. The ships, when they went in, were actually deployed. . . or we were deployed in a different manner than was customary for us. The flagship for the battle fleet, the USS Pennsylvania, had been moved into the big dry dock, and having the admiral on board, they normally tied up at 1010 Dock. Possibly due to the fact that we had a more senior captain, on the Friday --probably the Friday--that we went in prior to Pearl Harbor, we went to 1010 Dock in place of the Pennsylvania.

Marcello: You have a very good memory. Do you recall what ship was that that was tied up outboard of you there?

Thompson: The Oglala, the flagship of the minelaying fleet, and it also had an admiral aboard.

Marcello: How did an admiral's inspection differ or vary from the normal inspection?

Thompson: The type of Navy that we were operating with, normally every Saturday morning we'd have a full dress inspection topside. These were . . . remember that all of our officers at this

point were . . . I'd say that 99 per cent, 98 per cent, were Annapolis graduates. The old tradition was very much in evidence. Following our topside full dress inspection--in Honolulu, it'd be in whites--we'd have a lower decks inspection; it was white-glove, spit-and-polish--reaching for dust type of situation in white gloves. Now in the annual admiral's inspection, which we were due on Monday morning, the ship was not buttoned up as normal. We had our voids open for inspection. The guns were not ready to be fired; they were in preparation for being inspected. This was a maintenance-type inspection, and they went from A to Z. Everything was checked for operational readiness and efficiency and so forth. It was a big occasion.

Marcello: Am I to assume that during this period most of the ships were not in a state of readiness for combat? You mentioned, for example, that the voids were open and all this sort of thing.

Thompson: This is true, and to the best of my knowledge, this pretty well pertains throughout the fleet that was in Pearl. This was the big thing for all the fleet.

Marcello: Did you get any liberty that particular weekend?

Thompson: Yes, I did, yes.

Marcello: Do you recall when and what you did when you were on liberty?

Thompson: This was the weekend that I was off. . . I couldn't stay ashore at night. On Saturday night a group of us from the ship met at Waikiki Tavern, and I recall there were probably four or five of us. There was one female who may or may not have been attached, I mean, married; but one of the fellows had a girl with him. The group of us had a steak dinner and drank lots of beer at Waikiki Tavern on Saturday night. On Sunday morning my plans had been to meet with a buddy, who was a corpsman friend from corps school, aboard the Oglala. He was also a third class pharmacist's mate. We had made arrangements to rent a car and take a driving trip around the entire Island of Oahu. I was to have met him at eight o'clock that morning.

Marcello: What time did you get in that night?

Thompson: I don't recall. Obviously, it was before midnight. As I recall, in those days there was a little train that ran from Honolulu back to the Navy yard at Pearl, and there was always a wild, wild scramble for buses and taxicabs as well. As you recall to my memory (chuckle), this was a kind of a Cinderella-type operation around midnight in Honolulu.

Marcello: Now what sort of shape or condition were you in when you went back that night?

Thompson: I was a young, healthy boy. I had probably drank about as much beer as a twenty-year-old needed to drink and still be

able to navigate and keep out of trouble, clean, so forth. I would say I was probably in reasonably good shape when I went back.

Marcello: The next question I'm going to ask you, Mr. Thompson, is a relatively important one, and I want you to think very carefully before you answer. Many people like to assume that Sunday would have represented a good time for an attack, because everybody had been partying and carousing, so on and so forth, on a Saturday night. Consequently, the personnel would be in no shape to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you answer an assertion of that sort?

Thompson: Well, if they were to pick a night. . . if they were to pick a day for starting a war under these circumstances with the ships all present and all, I would say Sunday morning would probably be the most logical morning as far as personnel readiness was concerned. Because many of the officers were off the ship, had stayed overnight, and a few of the enlisted men--the ones that had liberty--had undoubtedly had the bigger night, because having operated with the fleet five days out, if they had liberty and they had money, they were going to take advantage of it. Obviously this was the ideal time to catch a situation in the state of unreadiness..

Marcello: On the other hand, is it not true that Sundays were normally a day of leisure under any circumstances?



Thompson: Oh, yes, this is true. However, at sea you still have your full crew on a Sunday. It's not a work day per se; you still maintain your watch sections, and depending on the circumstances, you might run into drills on a Sunday as well as any other day.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into the Sunday morning of December 7th. As you mentioned, you had planned to rent a car with your buddy off the Oglala, and you were going to make a tour around the island. So why don't you pick up the story, then, on that Sunday morning.

Thompson: Well, as I recall, it was a normal Sunday morning. I was not in a watch section; I didn't have to be up and on duty, obviously. So I went through a normal routine of getting up, cleaning up--by this I mean shower, shave--going to breakfast, and having returned from breakfast, I went to the sickbay. We kind of had a little extra privilege there, because we had our own showers for the sickbay. Normally, our patient load was quite small, and we just had a little better way of life. We kept many of our personal belongings in the sickbay, and this is where we could take care of our final preparation for going ashore--dressing and so forth.

I had finished my breakfast, had gone back to sickbay. The uniform in those days was whites, undress whites, and I had on my trousers and my shoes and skivvy shirt. I was

just getting ready to put on my jumper, my neckerchief, and meet Shaw off the Oglala. And you want to know what happened?

Marcello: We might as well get into that part of the story.

Thompson: (Chuckle) While I was getting ready to put on my jumper, the general alarm sounded--this being approximately five minutes to eight. My first thought was, "What a helluva time for a drill!" But naturally, everybody headed in the direction of their battle station, and that's the way I proceeded as well.

Marcello: Now when general alarm sounded, were you getting to your battle station as quickly as you could, or were you just half-heartedly moving toward your battle station?

Thompson: No, I was part of a crew that got there as fast as possible. This was a little different in the respect that the man that sounded the alarm on the Helena . . . first, we had our general alarm, which was a sound system; we had a bugler and then the voice alert. This man made the statement, "This is no drill! We are being attacked by Japanese aircraft!"

Marcello: Up until this time, you had heard no noise, no concussions, or anything of that nature?

Thompson: Nothing. The sickbay was on the second deck, forward part of the ship on the starboard side. My normal course to follow in going to battle station from sickbay was to . . . everybody went forward starboard, port on aft . . . and I

crossed the living spaces of the Marines, which is right behind the sickbay. We were between number two and number three barbette. I went around number three barbette to the portside and started to go aft.

I went through a living compartment and was just stepping over a hatch combing, which went alongside of the trunks from the engine and fire rooms, when there was a tremendous explosion. Fire or a flash shot out of the engine room trunk, oh, six or eight feet in front of me, which obviously was undogged; it was open. Being on one foot to go over the combing and with the tremendous explosion involving the ship, I was knocked back several feet into the berthing compartment and blown against the stanchion.

Marcello: Now what compartment were you blown back into? The Marine compartment?

Thompson: No, this was the living compartment, and it was somewhat aft of the Marine compartment.

Marcello: All this must have taken place within less than a minute, that is, from the time general quarters sounded until the torpedo hit. And, of course, we are talking about a torpedo hit, are we not?

Thompson: We are talking about a torpedo hit, yes. Probably a minute or less, because I wasn't far from the sickbay at the time that the ship was hit. The thing that happened to me, as I

mentioned, was that I was blown against the stanchion and apparently was somewhat dazed. The lights went out in the ship; we lost power. The first thing I recall seeing was two or three men coming toward me out of the passageway--coming forward with their hair on fire. That was the only light that was visible. Apparently, this kind of snapped me back to my senses. The first one was coming into the living compartment, and I grabbed a blanket off of the foot of one of the bunks and threw it over a man's head. I noticed that there was a couple of more back farther down the passageway that also had been . . . their hair had been ablaze.

Marcello: Now were these men coming from the engine room?

Thompson: No, they could not have been coming from the engine room, because everyone in the engine room, where the blast occurred just in front of me, was killed. Apparently, these men were in the area of the barber shop or, as we called it, the "geedunk" stand, which was at the after portion of this passageway. At that point, we had an athwart ship passageway joining.

Marcello: So what happened at that point? Did you go about trying to take care of these men as best as you could?

Thompson: Only, as I say, throw a blanket over their head of the ones that were close to me that had their hair aflame. The ship

was full of smoke, there was no light, and I knew that I couldn't go to my battle station from that point in total darkness.

Now the first thought that occurred to me . . . I still didn't realize the ship was under attack nor had been hit. The first thought that came to my mind was that somebody in the fire room had thrown some cold water into a hot boiler, and we had had an explosion in the engine room. At this point, I turned, retraced my steps back through the living compartment, around the barbette, up to the ladder which goes next to the wardroom--"officer's country."

The hatch was still open, and there I got to the main deck and the daylight, of course. We had canvas out covering the bow and the stern over the main deck. As I went over to the portside on the main deck, obviously I could hear and see the activity across the channel. But I turned in the other direction toward the Navy yard to go to the portside. As I went forward to go around the superstructure, I saw a Japanese plane, oh, perhaps a couple of hundred feet from the ground in flames getting ready to crash, and I saw the "meatball" on the wing. This is the plane that crashed next to the Naval hospital at the edge of the tennis court. For the first time, I realized that we were actually under enemy attack.

Marcello: Now you are out on deck still trying to find an alternate route to get to your battle station.

Thompson: This is why I had gone to the main deck--so I could see and to get out of the mess down below so I could get to my battle station.

Marcello: What activity was going on out on the main deck when you arrived there? Or didn't you stick around too long because you were still trying to get to your station?

Thompson: No, I was moving all the time; I didn't hesitate. Everyone was moving. I only wanted to get to the portside and head aft, which I did.

Marcello: Now I gather you are cognizant of everything that's going on. You had not been hurt very badly from that concussion.

Thompson: I had been hurt a lot more than I realized. I found out later to what degree I'd been hurt; I wasn't aware of any part of this at the time.

I proceeded aft and got back by the . . . between number four and number five turrets, cut across to the starboard side--main deck. The hatch was closed, but there was a scuttle that would take me down close to the entrance to the battle dressing station.

As I started through the scuttle, I got a good, but short, look at the Battleship Row. I could see the tremendous smoke that was already over there. One plane went over

the ship at a very low altitude and headed for toward the island. After he had cleared us--and he was extremely low; I'm saying perhaps fifty feet--he dropped a torpedo, and I watched the torpedo hit the water and could see from its wake that it was headed toward one of the battleships. I went on through the scuttle and got in my battle dressing station.

Marcello: Was topside already a shambles more or less when you were going to your battle station?

Thompson: No, the topside actually was not a shambles. We had apparently been receiving some flak. They had tried to bomb; there was some machine gun activity. One of the fellows that was raising the . . . on the bow getting ready for eight o'clock colors, I recall, was shot through the throat with a machine gun slug. The shambles, apparently any that I was aware of, had come from the Oglala. The torpedo that hit us in the forward fire and engine room was set at a depth to get below battleship armor plate. The Oglala was a shallow draft wooden hull ship; the concussion from contact with our hull collapsed the wooden hull of the Oglala, and she was starting to sink. As I recall, the bridge was leaning toward our forward 5-inch mount.

Marcello: That's correct. In other words, that torpedo had actually passed under the Oglala, which was outboard of the Helena.

Thompson: Right.

Marcello: And looking back on it, is it not true that many of you said that the Oglala actually "sank from fright." Have you ever heard that expression?

Thompson: (Chuckle) Probably that's pretty much true, but she was not hit as such. But I recall we had a gunner's mate that had responsibility of the forward twin 5-inch .38-caliber mount. He was trying to get his mount trained out to fire--they were passing ammunition up there at that time--and he was screaming. . . the old admiral was on the bridge of the Oglala in his bathrobe, and he was screaming, "Get the old man off there! I'm firing through your birdge!" This, of course, I didn't actually observe but became aware of it after the attack had started.

Marcello: Now up until this time, would it be your observation that everybody was acting in a professional manner?

Thompson: There's no questions in my mind about that. By the time that I got to battle station, we already had casualties, and we already had corpsmen there, and our chief, the only chief pharmacist's mate we had, was already attending the casualties. But this was his living quarters as well as his battle dressing station.

Marcello: How many corpsmen would normally be at that battle dressing station?



Thompson: I think usually we'd have about three--Charlie--the chief--myself. . . usually, we had another, depending upon our complement. We had hospital corpsmen that were assigned to other stations. Several, and the majority, were forward in the sickbay and around the operating room, and then we had other stations on the ship that were manned by corpsmen. But we normally would have the junior doctor, the chief, myself, and probably one more or a striker if we had a striker at that time.

Marcello: Now I would assume that the Helena, even though it had been hit, really couldn't list too much, because it was pinned in by the dock on one side and the Oglala on the other side. Am I correct in this, or did the Helena take a list?

Thompson: I don't recall, actually, whether the Helena did or did not list. She couldn't have listed very much, as you say, in one direction, because she was tied up. Whether or not the Oglala was clear. . . they did hook on the Oglala with a tug and pull her aft of us, and she sank behind us, because they didn't want her to sink alongside of us.

Marcello: But this occurred later on.

Thompson: This occurred later on, right. There was no tug activity at the time I was going to my battle dressing station.

Marcello: Okay, describe the activity that was taking place at the battle dressing station, and describe what you did when you got there.

Thompson: Well, I have no concept of the passage of time. We had a number of burn casualties. The undress, the leisure uniform in those days, was a skivvy shirt and white shorts. Many of these fellows apparently came from the general area where I had been, and they had received flash burns. Any uncovered portion of their body could be burned from slightly to a very serious situation. A number of them came in with . . . the skin on their arms had just dropped down, like you would start to remove a rubber glove, possibly to the fingers, and the skin would be hanging below their fingers from having been shed from their arms. We had some bad facial burns, obviously, and then, of course, leg burns as well.

As far as other trauma was concerned, I don't actually recall. Quite possibly we did have, but our main objective was to treat the burned ones. For those cases in those days, we used morphine syrettes for pain; they contained a quarter grain of morphine. We had aboard the Helena a burn preparation that had been prepared and put into the old pump guns such as you used to spray insecticides in those days. This consisted of a mixture of sulfanilamide powder, mineral oil, various other ingredients, plus a base, which is parafin. They had to be heated; we used instrument sterilizers to heat them to liquification point, and we'd spray these on burns to cover them. We also used an awful lot of tannic acid

jelly, and unfortunately this produced some horrible scar tissues in the fellows that it had been used on, depending on the degree of the burn, of course.

I don't know how many casualties we had. We had quite a number there that passed through the sickbay, and, of course, if they were using tannic acid--we were using whatever we could get our hands on, quite frankly, as fast as possible--we'd get them dressed, give them morphine and dressings. We would use roller dressings, and this takes a little bit of time to cover arms and legs with roller dressings. As I say, I have no concept of time. We were extremely busy; it seemed like a matter of minutes and actually covered a period of several hours.

There was one lull . . . now our guns were firing at this time. We had four twin 5-inch .38-caliber mounts; they were active. We had four quadruple . . . and I could be in error here. They were either 1.1's from the British which we had had, or they could be quadruple 40-millimeters. At this time, I don't recall, but one of these 4-inch mounts was on the main deck just over our head bolted into the steel, and it made a tremendous noise to us in the battle dressing station when it was operating. And it was operating.

Marcello: It didn't take the Helena too long to being putting up resistance, did it not?

Thompson: No, apparently remarkably fast. Even though we were prepared for the annual inspection the following day, our guns fired quite rapidly. History indicates that we accounted for six aircraft at Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Now you really were not cognizant of anything that was going on outside other than what you could observe from the resulting casualties that were coming in.

Thompson: Only what I could actually see and the tremendous noise from the firing on our own ship just over our heads.

Marcello: Could you actually determine a lull in the attack itself? In other words, could you tell when one wave had finished its work and then when the other wave of Japanese planes had come in?

Thompson: No, not as such. But I do recall that it'd be extremely noisy, and then it would apparently slow down for awhile, and then the guns would start again. You really weren't aware of this so much, because you were busy and your mind was occupied.

I do recall one lull. We had pretty well taken care of our casualties at least at this point, and things had been somewhat quiet. It did start again, and two or three of us--we had no casualties--crawled under a table. Because they do shake . . . in spite of the spit-and-polish Navy, they shake a little bit of dust out of inaccessible areas, and

light bulbs do break et cetera. And maybe it was just the false security of that little bit of a tabletop over your head, but we did sit under a table for awhile during some of this later activity.

Marcello: What did you do while you were sitting under that table? Were you talking, or were you kind of thinking to yourselves? What occurred?

Thompson: This is going on paper (chuckle)?

Marcello: Yes.

Thompson: I recall only one thought. "If I ever get out of this alive and I'm able to live a happy, normal life, there'll be as many women in it as possible." That just came back; I'd almost forgotten that, as a matter of fact.

Marcello: Now I gather that the destroyer Shaw wasn't too far from the Helena, was it.

Thompson: No, actually there was two destroyers. As I mentioned earlier, the Pennsylvania was in the big dry dock just ahead of us. There was another dry dock outboard, as I would express it, and it had two destroyers forward. Then there was a floating dock outboard of that. And I'm sure, as I recall, that there was a destroyer in this dry dock. These ships, as history indicates, were pretty badly. . . close to complete destruction.

Marcello: I mentioned the Shaw because of the rather spectacular explosion that evidently occurred aboard it. I was under

the impression that the Helena felt some of the effects of the Shaw's exploding.

Thompson: Quite possibly this is true. I don't recall any one explosion as such, other than when the ship was hit with a torpedo, but we did have some damage topside. As I say, they had bombed the pier. We'd gotten shrapnel, and we could have gotten some debris from the Shaw. There were people that were hit with various types of fragments, in addition to the fellow that I know was machine-gunned through the throat. Quite possibly we were close enough that it could have come from the Shaw, yes.

Marcello: When did you finally get out on deck and were able to observe the destruction that had taken place?

Thompson: Time-wise, I can't tell you. It was a matter of hours. We did manage to load our casualties--those who could not walk. The ones that . . . well, what it amounted to briefly, the chief herded them into a bunch, and we got stretcher-bearers, which were assigned to us. They headed them toward the dock and ambulances from the hospitals. I didn't go with this group. When my work was completed, the casualties were removed from the battle dressing station, and I went topside and couldn't believe the irony of what . . . the contrast of what I saw at that point and what I had seen as I went down through the scuttle. The harbor was completely

quiet. As I recall, there was very little wind that day. I couldn't believe the tremendous amount of smoke and damage when I looked toward Battleship Row. As I say, the contrast there was . . . it just left a very deep impression in my mind. I can still close my eyes and see it today.

Marcello: What sort of thoughts went through your mind? Do you recall?

Thompson: No, I don't recall, frankly. Everybody was in various states of shock, obviously. We had taken one helluva licking. I don't recall my thoughts. They were just one of disbelief, though, when I saw Battleship Row and the smoke and the sunken ships there,

Marcello: Like you say, I'm sure there was quite a contrast. Battleship Row had been a rather impressive sight for anyone to have seen prior to the actual attack,

Thompson: Yes, true. This was the pride of the fleet, actually.

Marcello: What did the surface of the water look like?

Thompson: There was a tremendous amount of oil, obviously much of it our own, because our forward fire and engine room had been knocked out. There was all kinds of debris in the oil as well. This being fuel oil, it was heavy black oil. It was not unusual to see life jackets and all types of wood debris floating in this oil. It was quite a mess around there.

Marcello: What did you do that evening?

Thompson: Well, we stayed pretty close to . . . I don't recall which point in the day that they relaxed the situation we were in as far as watches. I know we stayed aboard, obviously. Prior to evening, the word went through the ship--the loud-speaker--to be on the alert for a Navy yard workman who was Japanese and that they thought was on the ship and that he was a commander in the Japanese Navy. This word we received, and obviously everybody was being careful about any civilians at this point. Many of the civilian employees in the yard at that time were Asians. I don't recall what I had other than a knife, but I knew that I wanted to keep it handy at that time.

Marcello: I assume that that evening everybody was jittery, trigger-happy, and that there were all sorts of rumors floating around.

Thompson: Obviously, the rumors were there. We didn't know. . . we could see pretty well what had happened; we didn't know, really, to what degree the fleet had been damaged other than what we could see. Because there was many ships there that had been damaged that we weren't aware of.

We had four or possibly five SOC's, which were scout observation Curtiss pontoon planes aboard, and an aviation detachment. Our flying officers were sent out, and they actually participated in search operations in SOC's. I



recall that we did have our guns manned throughout the entire day and a watch section on.

Just shortly following dusk, some of the SOC's were coming back in to land in the harbor. It was pretty close to dark, and someone far in the harbor opened fire on these low-flying SOC's. We again went to general quarters, and there was quite a considerable amount of firing throughout the fleet at that time at our own planes coming back from search operations.

Marcello: From what I gather, the sky simply lit up like the Fourth of July when those planes were coming back in.

Thompson: I didn't actually see this; I was below decks at the time. I was scared to death, obviously, completely worn out emotionally like everyone. I could hear the firing, and I thought, "We're going to get it again."

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that you personally heard in the aftermath of the attack?

Thompson: I don't recall personally the rumors. The one thing that was foremost in my mind was the fact that we may have a Japanese commander aboard ship bent on maybe trying to complete a sinking of this ship. We never knew--if he was there--what he was trying to do.

Rumors as such . . . everybody's mind . . . my mind, I know, must have been filled with thoughts, "Are they going

to come ashore on the island? Are we going to have actual . . . end up in a hand-to-hand situation?" We could not move on our own power at this point, and I could see that many of the ships couldn't move. However, I did see some of the ships later in the day that were making their way out the channel, past one of the battleships that was nosed up on the beach, and heading out to sea; but we couldn't have done that.

Marcello: Now where was the Helena ultimately repaired? Did the repairs take place there at Pearl, or did they send you back to the West Coast again?

Thompson: They pulled the Pennsylvania out of dry dock, and we were the first ship in the dry dock. We were still trying to get our casualties out of the fire and engine room, and due to the tremendous debris down there, it was inaccessible to us. They did get us into dry dock, removed the water, and started cutting . . . we had a tremendous hole just above the keel. They started cutting the plates away and removing much of the debris through that opening. At this point several days later, we were able to get the remains out of the fire and engine room. Then they reapplied a temporary plating, welded it to the hull. After a period of . . . I don't recall accurately. It could have been close to two weeks. We were taken out of dry dock and were headed back to Mare Island Navy Yard where we underwent

repairs and a complete new forward fire and engine room.

Marcello: I don't think most people realize the tremendous destructive force that a torpedo has. How big a hole was blown in the Helena? Were you able to see it.

Thompson: (Chuckle) Oh, yes. After the dry dock was drained, we could see it. It was just one helluva big hole. It measured in numbers of feet. It was below our armor belt and extended almost from the keel. You could have driven some pretty good-sized trucks in and out of there.

Marcello: This is what I've heard from other people who have observed the destructive results of torpedo hits.

Thompson: I'm quite well aware of the destruction of torpedoes, because I stayed with the Helena until it was sunk on July 7, 1943. We were sunk by three Japanese torpedoes. The first knocked the bow completely off the ship; the other two hit amidships almost simultaneously and broke the ship in two, and we sunk. They do a tremendous amount of damage. The Japanese torpedoes were outstanding in this respect; they were big, and they were powerful.

Marcello: In our pre-interview conference, I gather that you have a very, very warm spot in your heart for the USS Helena.

Thompson: No question about it. I think the words that I attach to the Helena is "my first love." It was an outstanding ship, and we had an outstanding crew, and consequently we had an

outstanding war record. The Helena actually had thirteen engagements in the Pacific, and with the exception of the damage at Pearl Harbor and the night the San Francisco was sunk, we were only really hit and damaged on one occasion. That was from a 16-inch battlewagon shell that had skipped across the main deck and tore quite a lot of the forward part of the ship up. On the thirteenth engagement, we finally got the thing that we knew would come in time if we stayed with it long enough.

But the ship, in the meantime, had a tremendous and an outstanding record, and we were attributed with many, many, aircraft and many, many Japanese ships. This is quite well-documented, obviously. As a matter of fact, the Japanese were quite complimentary on an occasion or two. We had the capability of putting from our main battery more weight in the air in a minute than any ship in the battle fleet because of the rapidity of the firing. We could fire fifteen 6-inch rounds at the same time. We would go into a bombardment situation against Japanese installations and could put out a thousand rounds of ammunition and be on our way in just a matter of minutes. The Japanese couldn't believe this; neither could the Navy Department.

Marcello: Now you mentioned you could put out fifteen 6-inch rounds?

Thompson: Fifteen 6-inch rounds at the same time.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Thompson, I think this is probably a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project. Your knowledge of detail was outstanding, and, of course, this is what we're looking for. I'm sure that scholars will find this material quite useful when they use it to write about Pearl Harbor.

Thompson: I hope they do. I hope someone can make good use of this. I do think you, and I've enjoyed it. Very much of this can still be seen in closing your eyes, and very much of it is very vivid. Times kind of get away after thirty-five years, and names, but the overall picture is still back there, and it will be with me the rest of my life.