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Interview with  
Truett Davis  
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Place of Interview: Richardson, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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(Signature)  
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Oral History Collection

Truett L. Davis

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Richardson, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Truett Davis for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 27, 1978, in Richardson, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Davis in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the target battleship USS Utah during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Davis, to begin this interview, just tell me a little bit about yourself. In other words, tell me where you were born, when you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Davis: Okay, I was born in Raymondville, Texas, which is down in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, on June 14, 1922. I went to high school there. Just as I got out of high school, there was three or four buddies I ran around with, and we thought we'd join the Navy. We were in the process, you know, of being drafted--people at that time. So we decided we'd go ahead and join the regular Navy, and then we could pick, you know, the service that we wanted.

So we went down to Harlingen, Texas, which is about twenty-one miles from Raymondville, to join the Navy and take our examination and everything. At that time, I recall, I didn't weigh enough to get in. I passed everything except I weighed 115 pounds, I think, and 118, I believe, was minimum. So this chief recruiting officer told me to go down and buy some bananas, you know, as many as I could eat, and drink as much water as I could drink, which I did, and I came back and weighed in at 118½. So I got in.

Marcello: When was this?

Davis: This was in June . . . I can't remember the exact date, but it was in June of 1941.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you were on the verge of being drafted. I assume you didn't want any part of the Army.

Davis: We really thought we wanted to see the world and join the Navy at that time, is what we really thought.

Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast with current events and world affairs and so on at that time?

Davis: Pretty close. There was a lot of news from the radio and the newspapers at that time about things that were going on. It looked pretty much like there was going to be some kind of a world conflict, so we just thought that'd be the thing to do at that time.

Marcello: Without putting words in your mouth, however, when you thought

about the possibility of the country getting into war, were your eyes turned more toward Europe than toward the Far East?

Davis: It was not so much Japan at that time.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Davis: In San Diego.

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

Davis: Oh, not really, except that it was a real new experience for me. I forget now how many weeks of boot camp we had . . . six or seven weeks at that time. I'm not sure.

Marcello: It evidently had been cut down considerably then over what it had been in normal peacetime.

Davis: Right. When we finished boot camp, they gave you a little questionnaire as to what type of ship or branch of the Navy that you'd like to go into. For some reason or other, I put down a battleship. I thought that was kind of what I wanted. Three or four of the other guys that went through boot camp with me put down battleships. When they posted, you know, where everybody was going, they put down USS Utah, and I assumed that was a battleship, at that time (chuckle). So I was kind of thrilled about it. There was two or three of my buddies that went through boot camp and a couple of guys from my hometown that went on the Utah, too.

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

- Davis: Well, I just thought that would be . . . you know, it was just a bigger ship and you'd have more fun and get to see more of the world on one than you would a smaller ship.
- Marcello: In particular, why did you want to go aboard the Utah? It was certainly not the most glamorous of the battleships. Maybe you didn't know it at that time.
- Davis: I didn't know at that time. I didn't put down "Utah"; I just put down "battleship." When I saw they posted the USS Utah, you know, well, I assumed that was one of the front line battleships until I saw it.
- Marcello: Did you go directly from San Diego to Pearl?
- Davis: When I left San Diego, I went to Seattle, Washington, and we took a ferry over to Bremerton. The Utah had been in dry dock in Bremerton, Washington, in the Navy yard there and was being re-fitted and so forth. So I got my first look at the Utah when it was in the shipyards there and boarded it there.
- Marcello: Did you manage to get some boot leave after you got out of boot camp, or did they send you straight up to the Utah?
- Davis: I had a few days delayed orders, but I didn't have enough time to go home.
- Marcello: Again, I think that's an indication of the emergency nature of the training and so on of that time.
- Davis: Right. Right.

Marcello: Well, what did you think when you saw the Utah?

Davis: Well, I was quite disappointed, you know. Well, it was just an old, old, old ship, and it was an experimental ship, as I later found out. They were equipping the ship there--one of the reasons it was in the Navy yard, they were equipping it to be controlled by radio control. Because as I later found out, you know, it was used as a target ship.

Marcello: Now at the time that you were there, had they already removed the turrets and all that sort of thing . . . the main batteries?

Davis: The smaller guns were covered over with the steel deck houses. The big guns . . . the turrets were still there, but there wasn't any guns on them. In fact, they used them as living quarters. Some of the chiefs and so forth aboard used those big gun turrets as living quarters.

Marcello: How about the deck?

Davis: (Chuckle) We had, I guess, twelve-by-twelve, like railroad ties, you know. There was a layer of them on the topside, and then they had them strapped up around the superstructure and so forth with cables around them to hold them on.

Marcello: Of course, I guess all this was done because the ship was used for bombing practice and things of that nature by airplanes, was it not?

Davis: Right. But I was on the . . . gosh, I guess I was on the ship about two or three weeks there in the Navy yard on the

ship, and I was doing painting and chipping and stuff like that, you know. Just the day before the ship sailed for Pearl Harbor, well, I came down with one of the childhood diseases--scarlet fever. So they took me off and put me in the Navy yard there in the Naval hospital the day the ship sailed. So after I got out of the hospital there, I was several weeks waiting for some transportation to my ship in Pearl Harbor.

It so happened that the USS Lexington was in there, and it was scheduled to depart for Pearl Harbor, so they put me on the Lexington--aircraft carrier--as a passenger. We left Bremerton and went into the shipyards in San Francisco, Mare Island, and they put it in dry dock there. I had to help them scrape the bottom on that big ship (chuckle) and paint it. Then we left there and went on to Pearl Harbor.

As kind of an interesting thing, I think, I was assigned to one of the deck crews there on that ship just as a passenger. But the chief--it was the day before we got into Pearl--asked me if I would rather stay on the Lexington rather than go ahead and go on the Utah, that he could arrange my transfer to the Lexington if I would stay. I thought about it quite a bit, because I did like the ship. But I had two or three good buddies on the Utah, so I told him that I'd rather go to the Utah.



Marcello: So you finally did get to Pearl Harbor, but you kind of got there by a rather hard method, shall we say.

Davis: Yes. When I got there, then I really found out, what it was all about as far as the Utah, I guess. We operated out of Pearl Harbor, and the ship would leave Pearl Harbor every Monday morning, and we'd go out, you know, just out around the islands. They would come and bomb us--our own planes--with Navy carrier planes and Army-based planes starting at ten o'clock in the morning and up until ten o'clock at night. So when they would sound general quarters on the Utah, well, that meant that we had to get down below the second deck. Everybody had their own area, own compartments, down below decks where they're supposed to stay during bombing quarters.

Marcello: Even though you are relatively well-protected, is it rather a frightening experience the first time or two that you're on a target battleship and these planes are practicing their bombing runs and so on?

Davis: Yes, because the bombs that they used were, I think, fifty-pound water bombs, and they had a little two-and-a-half-pound bomb with a powder charge in them that they dropped on us. Quite often these fifty-pound water bombs would go through these twelve-by-twelves and down through the first deck to the second deck. That happened quite often.

Of course, when they hit the side of the ship, it made

quite a bit of noise. Usually, I was down in the double bottoms, scraping and painting down there. It made it sound pretty loud down there.

But you didn't get too much topside duty during the day except during lunch, and you'd get to come up and breathe a little bit. They'd bomb you until ten o'clock at night, and then you'd go to bed and get up and get to do it again the next day.

Marcello: When did you pick up the Utah at Pearl?

Davis: Well, let's see. This must have been about September, I guess.

Marcello: So you actually would not have been on it too long, then, before the actual attack occurred.

Davis: Not too long, no.

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

Davis: Oh, I loved it. I really thought that was going to be great, and it was--when I got over there. The Utah . . . the last week we went out to sea . . . of course, I told you we went out on every Monday morning; we'd come back in Friday afternoon; and we'd stay the weekend in Pearl and have liberty. But the last week that we were out at sea before Pearl Harbor, we were scheduled to come into the Navy yard and go into Ten-Ten Dock (1010) there, and they were going to remove all these twelve-by-twelves, and we were scheduled to come back to the

States on Monday morning, December the 8th.

But the last week, to give you some indication that something was brewing, you know, I mean, the last week we were out at sea, they did not bomb us to my knowledge. Maybe the first couple of days they might have. But then we were told to patrol the islands, and they posted lookouts all over the ship. All they told us was to report any submarine activity. Foreign submarines was what they was looking for.

Marcello: This is very interesting, and we'll come back and talk about this later on because we are getting just a little bit ahead of our story. I gather that when you went aboard both the Lexington and the Utah, you were treated as the typical raw "boot." You were put on the deck crew, and you were chipping paint, swabbing decks, and things of that nature.

Davis: Right. (Chuckle) Right. I was doing all of those things.

Marcello: To some extent, is it almost like going through boot camp again? In other words, are you harassed for an indefinite period of time by the old salts and so on aboard immediately after you get there?

Davis: I wouldn't really say I was harassed, except I had a lot of respect for seniority and people in authority, because, I guess, I was a raw recruit. I usually jumped when they asked me to do something; I jumped and did it. But I won't say that

they really harassed me to that extent,

Marcello: Most of the petty officers had quite a bit of time in the Navy at that particular time, did they not?

Davis: Right. They were old-timers.

Marcello: In other words, rank moved very, very slowly . . .

Davis: Very slow.

Marcello: . . . certainly as compared to the way it was after Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Right.

Marcello: During your entire stay aboard the Utah, did you remain in the deck force?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: What were your quarters like aboard the Utah?

Davis: Terrible (chuckle)! We slept in hammocks, most of us. You'd just sling them; they didn't have bunks like the modern-day ships had. You'd just swing your hammock every night and sleep in your hammock, or else in some cases you'd carry them topside, and you'd spread them out topside and sleep at night where it was cooler.

Marcello: Did you ever get used to sleeping in a hammock?

Davis: Yes, I kind of got used to it, I guess. It was a lot of trouble, because you had to lash them back up every morning and get them put away and then do the same thing at night--taking it all loose and putting them up again.

Marcello: Did you use the hammock in boot camp, also? Or were you in bunks there?

Davis: We had bunks.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Utah?

Davis: Well, it wasn't what I'd call bad. I mean, there was plenty of it. I'd say it was nourishing food. Some of it was kind of strange to me (chuckle)--what they would give you for breakfast and things like that. All in all, it wasn't too bad.

The big thing is that we didn't have too much fresh water aboard, and we used salt water to wash our clothes and things like that. I think we only got one or two buckets of fresh water a day. We took showers in salt water, using soap that would lather a little bit. We could rinse off with the fresh water. It was pretty rough living conditions aboard.

Marcello: I assume you didn't have very much locker space and things of that sort, either.

Davis: Very, very little. In fact, I lived out of my sea bag on the Utah.

Marcello: After awhile, however, you do get somewhat used to living out of a sea bag, I guess, do you not? You know what articles you're going to be using the most, and you usually place those on top and things of that sort.

Davis: Right.

Marcello: What part did athletic activity play in the part of the Pacific Fleet at that particular time? Was there a great deal of athletic competition and activity and things of that sort?

Davis: Well, I didn't notice it so much while I was on the Utah, because really we was out at sea five days a week. We'd come in on weekends, and we'd usually go on liberty when we could--when we weren't on watch. I didn't really get involved in too much sports, but there was a lot, particularly in boxing. I did kind of get involved in it afterwards, when I was stationed there in Pearl.

Marcello: As you look back upon that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy, what comments could you make about the morale? Was the morale high? Indifferent? How would you describe the morale?

Davis: Well, my morale, I guess, was probably pretty good. I think most of the people that joined the Navy about the same time I did . . . I think their morale was pretty good. Some of them were highly disappointed. Having been away from home probably the first time, it was pretty hard on them. Of course, the old-timers that had been in awhile, I'd say their morale was pretty good.

Marcello: Now at this time, are we talking about strictly volunteers?

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: You were not getting any draftees aboard the Utah?

Davis: No, not at that time--no.

Marcello: Okay, awhile ago you were describing the daily routine of the Utah, and let's return to that subject once again. As you mentioned, the Utah would normally go out on a Monday morning, and it would stay out all week.

Davis: Yes.

Marcello: Probably it would come back on a Friday.

Davis: Friday afternoons.

Marcello: Was this a standard routine? In other words, could you set your clock by it, so to speak?

Davis: You really could. Yes, just every Monday morning about eight o'clock or 8:30, we'd get underway and leave Pearl Harbor and just meander around the islands out there for five days and go through that same routine every day.

Marcello: In other words, if the Japanese did have any agents on the Hawaiian Islands, which they obviously did, they could have very easily clocked your routine.

Davis: Oh, yes, very, very well.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that when you went on these exercises, it mainly consisted of the airplanes making bombing runs and things of that sort. You mentioned that when one of these bombing missions was to commence that general quarters would be sounded. Where were your general quarters aboard the Utah?

Davis: My general quarters was down below the second deck, which happened to be in the area where my living quarters were. It was right next to the brig below the second deck in a pretty large compartment area there. I had to be there, report in there, and then eventually during the day they'd assign me to some particular area to chip and paint (chuckle) and wire-brush and so forth. A lot of that time was down in the double bottoms of the ship or various compartments, you know, that needed chipping and painting. It seemed like there was always those things to do.

Marcello: What'd you think about the idea of being in the deck force?

Davis: Well, I didn't exactly like it too much, but at that particular time, I didn't really know anything else to do, you know. I wasn't skilled as an electrician or an engineer or anything like that, and I had done very little studying for anything else other than just seamanship. Primarily in boot camp, that's all they taught you at that time, was seamanship.

Marcello: Did you have any of the old Asiatic sailors aboard the Utah at that time?

Davis: Yes, we did have. In fact, the chief that was in charge of the deck force was an old Asiatic sailor.

Marcello: They were quite a colorful crew, were they not?

Davis: They really were.

Marcello: Describe what those Asiatic sailors were like .



Davis: Oh, he was a pretty boisterous-type, you know, and he was really built kind of like an ape; he looked like an ape, really (chuckle). But he was a pretty nice guy. I got along with him real good, I guess, because I always did what he wanted me to do. But I kind of liked him. He was just one of those colorful guys that you don't really meet too often.

Marcello: Did he have a lot of tattoos?

Davis: All over him (chuckle).

Marcello: Evidently, this was a characteristic of those Asiatic sailors.

Davis: Right. It really was. They'd been around.

Marcello: I'm sure that they probably kept you young "boots" in awe when they started spinning some of their sea stories and so on.

Davis: Yes. Right.

Marcello: Did you have any desire to go to the Asiatic Station?

Davis: No, not really. Of course, I wanted to see as much of the world as I could. Of course, I liked it in Pearl Harbor and Honolulu. But I was kind of homesick, too, you know, wanting to go home, which I didn't get a chance to do for quite some time.

Marcello: Let's talk about your liberty routine aboard the Utah. How would it normally work when the Utah came in on a Friday?

Davis: Well, if you didn't have the watch . . . now, of course, the watches were broke down, and if you didn't have a watch, you

could go on liberty and just be back in the next morning by . . . I believe it was eight o'clock.

Marcello: Oh, you did not have to be back at twelve o'clock.

Davis: No.

Marcello: I know on a lot of ships they had what they called a "Cinderella" liberty, did they not?

Davis: Yes . . . well, I may be getting ahead of myself. Now this is after I got into the salvage unit and was stationed there in Pearl; we didn't have to be back until eight o'clock. I guess we did have a midnight curfew at that time when we was aboard the Utah, yes.

Marcello: Do you know why there would have been a midnight curfew? Was it mainly a matter of a lack of sleeping space ashore?

Davis: No, I don't think so. I think it was just trying to get them all back--the drunks--(chuckle) maybe to keep them out of trouble more than anything else.

Marcello: Where did the Utah normally dock when it came in?

Davis: We usually moored out from Ford Island, which was where the Naval air station was, and we just took whatever mooring was vacant normally there.

Marcello: Were you tied up anywhere near the regular battleships?

Davis: Battleship Row was kind of on the other side of the island, and we were on the carrier side of the island, which was just the other side. Normally, the carriers moored there. Some

of the battleships, though, did moor on past where we were.

Marcello: Battleship Row was a rather impressive sight, I gather.

Davis: Yes, it was.

Marcello: So on a weekend, normally how much liberty could you get?  
Either a Saturday or a Sunday?

Davis: You'd get either a Saturday or a Sunday and maybe a Friday in  
there, too--Friday night.

Marcello: I assume if you got Friday, then you probably had duty on  
Saturday and then could have liberty again on Sunday.

Davis: Right. Have it again on Sunday, yes.

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

Davis: Oh, I caroused around like most of the sailors did. Back in  
those days, Honolulu was a pretty wide open town. There was  
a lot of things to see and a lot of things to do. Of course,  
a lot of times we went out to the beach and spent the day  
out on Waikiki and at night just kind of, you know, make  
the rounds and carouse around.

Marcello: I assume that you did on occasion go to some of the real  
swinging streets, so to speak. I'm referring to Hotel Street  
or Canal Street or Beretania Street.

Davis: Oh, yes. It was quite a thing (chuckle) . . . kind of  
unbelievable, you know, really.

Marcello: Well, I guess during that period, downtown Honolulu would  
have just been overflowing with sailors, would it not, on

the weekend?

Davis: Sailors, soldiers, Marines. The servicemen had just about taken it over. There was quite a few on the island at that time.

Marcello: What sort of money were you making at that time?

Davis: Well, if I'm not mistaken, it was twenty-one dollars a month.

Marcello: In other words, you were still a seamen recruit at the time of the attack.

Davis: I was, I guess, a seaman second class. I had just gotten out of the apprentice seaman stage and was a seaman second class. I was making twenty-one dollars as an apprentice seaman, so as a seaman second class, I had to be making more than that but not a whole lot more.

Marcello: How often were you paid?

Davis: I think it was every two weeks.

Marcello: Like on the 1st and the 15th?

Davis: Something like that, yes.

Marcello: So therefore, at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, that is, on December 7, 1941, would you have had very much money?

Davis: Very little. Probably two or three dollars, something like that.

Marcello: Now as relations between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate, how much thought did you and your buddies in your bull sessions ever give to the possibility of an attack

there at Pearl Harbor?

Davis: None whatsoever. I don't think anybody anticipated it at that time. But going back to what I'd said earlier about the week before we were scheduled to come back into Pearl . . . I mean, to take all the stuff off and go back to the States on the following Monday, the fact that we spent all this time out there that week with twenty-four-hour lookouts posted all over the ship and with just the instructions, you know, to report anything that looked like a submarine, that kind of got everybody to thinking a little bit and talking and rumors and so forth. However, there was nothing, as I recall, pinpointing the Japanese . . . just foreign submarines.

Marcello: As you mentioned, this increased security was somewhat different from your standard routine.

Davis: Yes, it was.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old salts talk about the fighting prowess of the Japanese Navy? Was this subject ever discussed any?

Davis: No. I don't recall any conversation like that. A lot of them had spent a lot of time there. I say a lot of them. There was two or three aboard that had spent a lot of time over in China back in their conflict with Japan and so forth. But I don't recall anything that was discussed as far as the Japanese Navy at that time.

Marcello: Even though, as you mentioned, the planes were not practicing their bombing during that last week, were you still going to general quarters with any degree of frequency while you were out there?

Davis: No.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us then to that weekend of December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Davis, is to talk about your routine as it unfolded during that weekend of December 7th. Let's start with Friday, December 5th, because I assume that's when you came in.

Davis: Okay. Right. I read an article just the other day that this friend of mine had sent me. That particular article said that we came in on Thursday of that week--the Utah did--but I recall it being a Friday. Our routine on the way in on that particular trip . . . we were gathering up all these twelve-by-twelves and stacking them up on topside, you know, just in stacks kind of like you would cordwood. Then as we came into Pearl, we were supposed to go right to the Navy yard and Ten-Ten (1010) Dock there where they were going to start unloading all this timber we had aboard so that we would be prepared to leave Monday morning to come back to the States.

But for some reason or other, they could not take us in the Navy yard at that time, so they moored us over on the side of Ford Island where we normally moored out there. They

put us in the Enterprise's berth, because the Enterprise was not in and was out at sea. So they put us there, and we were going to leave their mooring early Sunday morning and go over into the Navy yard because the Enterprise was supposed to come in and moor there Sunday morning. So we were there moored up for the weekend.

This buddy of mine that I went through boot camp with-- he was from Corpus Christi, Texas, and also went aboard the Utah--he and I had the same cleaning station. Our cleaning station on the ship was in the junior officers' passageway to their wardrooms that goes from the wardrooms into the junior officers' dining area. That's where we would go clean every morning.

So we had gotten up pretty early on Sunday morning, December the 7th, and we were up on the bow of the ship and we had our swabs over the side, you know, with rope on them. We were washing them out and just shooting the bull. About that time, we saw all these planes coming in. I mentioned to my buddy, I said, "Well, I guess we better get going, because the Enterprise's planes are coming in, and she'll be coming in. We'll be getting underway pretty quick.

Marcello: In other words, the Enterprise usually unloaded its planes over to Ford Island, did it not?

Davis: Right. I understand that all of the carriers do that. When

they're coming into port, they'll fly off all the planes that they got pilots for, and they'll land at the Naval air station or wherever, but they do fly them off.

Marcello: Did you have any liberty that weekend?

Davis: Yes, I think I did. I think I went ashore Friday night, and I think I was on board all day Saturday and Saturday night.

Marcello: Now on a Saturday night, when sailors came off liberty after having been out at sea all week, what sort of condition or shape are they in?

Davis: Generally, pretty bad (chuckle). There were a lot of drunks and some of them had to be hauled aboard. The Shore Patrol brought some, and many of them had been in fights, you know, and things like that. I'll say there was a lot of that, and, of course, there was a lot of them that came back in pretty decent shape, too.

Marcello: I would assume that half the ship would have liberty on any given night. Is that the way it usually operated?

Davis: Yes, I think about half the ship, maybe a little bit more.

Marcello: However, would these drunks more or less be in shape to fight on a Sunday morning?

Davis: Not generally. The ones that was in real bad shape, I wouldn't say they'd be in too good a shape to fight.

Marcello: On that Saturday night of December 6th, did you notice anything out of the ordinary happening aboard ship?



Davis: No.

Marcello: Did you watch a movie or anything of that sort, do you recall?

Davis: I don't recall. I could have; we had shipboard movies. I probably did.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned that on that Sunday morning you were cleaning your swabs over the side of the ship, and you saw these planes coming in. Pick up the story at that point.

Davis: Okay. We saw these planes, and, of course, we assume they were the Enterprise's planes and that we'd be getting underway very shortly, so we were going to get with it and get our cleaning station cleaned up. So the ladder going down into the junior officers' wardroom area was right close by. We just got down the ladder, I guess, to the first deck, and it had started for maybe in three or four minutes, you know.

It wasn't very long, anyway, until we heard this loud explosion, you know, and it just kind of knocked us down and against the bulkhead. At that point, well, we thought some garbage scow or something had rammed us, you know; that was the first thought.

About the time we got up, well, then there was another one, you know, with about the same amount of noise, and it knocked us down again. About the time we got up then, really wondering, you know, what was happening, well, there was a

little lieutenant junior grade who came running out of his wardroom and was screaming, you know, that we were being attacked by Japanese planes.

Marcello: But general quarters had really not sounded yet.

Davis: It was just about this time that they did sound general quarters. Now general quarters, again, to us was, you know, get down below the second deck of the ship to your station. So we started running down the corridor there and going through the junior officers' mess room there, and we were going to try to get down to where we was supposed to go. But by this time, there was already other explosions and so forth, and the ship was already about on this kind of an angle (gesture).

Marcello: In other words, it was listing at about forty-five degrees, perhaps?

Davis: Right. So we just ran on up out of the boathouse, which is about midship on the Utah. By that time, all these twelve-by-twelves that we had stacked up, they were just sweeping the topside, and the lines to the moorings were snapping, and . . . just bedlam, you know. I mean, it was just mass confusion and bedlam and noise and explosions. When I got kind of up on the side of the Utah, it was about like this, you know (gesture).

Marcello: Again at about a forty-five degree angle?

Davis: Yes. The planes were machine-gunning the topside of the ship and everything. At this point, I don't even know whether they sounded abandon ship or not, because everybody was just going over the side. It was about 150 yards probably, maybe 200, to Ford Island from where we was moored.

Marcello: Now why did you not keep going to your battle station? Did the list prevent you from getting there?

Davis: Yes. Well, they say that we capsized completely in seven and a half minutes from the time the first torpedo hit us.

Marcello: Now when that lieutenant came down there and indicated that the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor, was he doing it in a calm, cool, professional manner, or was he rather panicky?

Davis: No, he was pretty panicky (chuckle). He's really the only person that I recall, you know, seeing and recognizing and talking to from the time it started until I got up and we swam ashore.

Marcello: How many jolts did you feel the whole time you were on the Utah?

Davis: Oh, I'm going to say probably four or five. I know of at least two torpedoes and maybe two or three bombs,

Marcello: Could you distinguish between the torpedoes and the bombs?

Davis: Yes, there was quite a bit of difference.

Marcello: Describe the differences between them.

Davis: The torpedo would just kind of lift the ship, you know, out

of the water almost, it seemed. The bombs were just concussions and loud noise, you know. They didn't hit real close to me, so I didn't really see the damage that might have been done with them. But you could see the machine gun bullets, you know, on the deck with the splinters flying and all that stuff; you could see those things hitting. You could see the planes coming in.

Marcello: Now were you being machine-gunned by the dive bombers, which I think had a two-man crew, did they not?

Davis: Right.

Marcello: And I guess it was the tail gunner that was doing the actual strafing.

Davis: Right.

Marcello: How low were these planes coming in? You might describe their descent.

Davis: Oh, you could see the pilots (chuckle).

Marcello: What did they look like? Describe them.

Davis: I mean, they were just like you would see in a movie, you know. You could just see them; they were that close.

Marcello: How were they dressed?

Davis: In just regular . . . you know, the pull-down helmets, you know, and goggles. You could see that much of them, and their shoulders.

Marcello: About how high off the water were they?

Davis: Oh, I'm going to say . . . just almost to the point to where they would almost crash into the ship--they were that close.

Marcello: There were all sorts of lethal weapons on topside, I gather. There were the bombs from the planes, the strafing, the snapping mooring lines, the shifting timbers. There were all sorts of obstacles up there.

Davis: Right. A lot of our guys . . . and, of course, we didn't have a big crew. I'd say just off-hand that our crew on the Utah was somewhere around 350, because on a normal battleship it's way on up to a couple thousand, I guess. But on our ship, for the purpose that it was used for, all we had was a nucleus crew on there. But many of them did get down below the second deck where they were supposed to go when they sounded general quarters, and that's where they are now. There was sixty-seven, I think, that's still intombed in the Utah, and that's primarily the reason.

Marcello: Now when we talk about your description of the pilots and the Japanese planes and so on, I assume that all of this activity is taking place in a rather rapid manner. In other words, you're not standing around gawking at these planes and pilots and so on.

Davis: No, I'm not. Just for a very few brief seconds, you know, up on the edge of the ship, you know, before I dove off in

the water. Of course, the water was full of sailors at that time trying to get ashore.

Marcello: Now did you dive off the Utah before abandon ship orders had been sounded?

Davis: I'm not even sure whether they ever sounded them or not at this point. All I know is that there was a lot of guys, you know, going off the side. By the time I dove off, I don't think there was any mooring lines still holding. You know, they were all parted.

Marcello: Now you say that you dove off the Utah. I'm assuming then that you were going off the part of the ship that was farthest out of the water.

Davis: Right. It was still quite a bit of a drop to the water, because, you know, the ship was about like this (gesture), you know, and the waterline was down like this (gesture), and we just dove off in the water.

Marcello: I guess you had to go off on the higher part of the ship because the part that was underwater was probably facing out toward the harbor.

Davis: It was. The part that was toward Ford Island, which was the starboard side, is the side we went off on.

Marcello: Okay, describe your dive into the water.

Davis: Well, I made a pretty good dive and a fast swim.

Marcello: Were you fully clothed?

Davis: Fully clothed.

Marcello: Shoes and all?

Davis: Shoes and dungarees. I didn't kick anything off. It was really cold that morning, too, for Hawaii. I don't know what the temperature was, but it was extremely cold. Like, when we first got to shore over there, there was a big trench that had been dug along Ford Island, the shore there, for some reason--I don't know. But it was probably five or six feet deep and a couple or three feet wide, which would have been an ideal place, you know, to get.

But I jumped across this trench--and this buddy that was with me--and we went over to one of the officer's homes. There was a lot of officers homes along the beach front there, and we went into the garage of one of these homes, which was right next to the airstrip on Ford Island there, which they were bombing quite heavily, too.

We were there . . . this lieutenant junior grade, who was the engineering officer aboard our ship, that was the home that he had, I guess, because he was in there. Now he had been aboard ship; he was the highest ranking officer aboard ship at the time of the attack. The captain and the executive officer and those people were ashore; they weren't aboard. He was the highest ranking officer aboard at the time of the attack. He couldn't swim; they fished him out of

the water--one of the boat crews did--and brought him ashore. He happened to be in this house.

I never will forget that he came out into the garage where my friend and I were, and he had written out his last will and testament on a piece of toilet paper. He asked this kid that was with me, by the name of Wallace--J.B. Wallace--he asked him to run it up to the administration building and put it on file up there, and the kid wouldn't do it (chuckle).

About that time, there was a bomb that hit pretty close to the home there on the airstrip, and that concussion kind of raised the roof of that garage, so we came out of there. Then we noticed that all our other shipmates had gotten in this trench, and so that's where we headed for. Then we watched the attack from there.

Marcello: When you dove into the water, was it already full of oil?

Davis: There was oil but it was not burning there. It was not burning there--no fire--but there was a lot of oil and debris.

Marcello: About how far did you have to swim to get ashore?

Davis: I'd say it was about 150 yards probably, maybe 200.

Marcello: Did you come under any strafing or anything when you were swimming ashore?

Davis: I didn't notice any then.

Marcello: Was it a relatively easy swim for you?



Davis: Pretty easy because I really "got with it" (chuckle).

Marcello: Had you kicked off your shoes or anything?

Davis: I kept my shoes on.

Marcello: Why did you head for this house?

Davis: I don't know. It just seemed like security, I guess. Just two of us headed over there.

Marcello: It's kind of interesting that this lieutenant junior grade was in the house. You would think that he would have had some other place to go.

Davis: He was a lieutenant commander.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Davis: I think this was his home there. You know, the officers had homes that they shared and so forth there. Because he had already changed his clothes and everything when we saw him.

Marcello: But like you mentioned, he evidently had headed for his house as soon as he got ashore. You perhaps might think that an officer would have had some other more important place to go than to his house.

Davis: Well, I'll have to tell you some more about this character if we have time after while, because I've got some stories to tell about him (chuckle).

Marcello: Now you mentioned that after the concussion from that bomb more or less lifted the roof of the garage, you decided it wasn't very safe there and you headed into the ditch. What

did you find when you got into this ditch there at Ford Island?

Davis: There was already a bunch of sailors in there, from the Utah primarily. We were the only ship on that particular side of Ford Island that was sunk per se. Now the USS Raleigh, which was a cruiser, was moored right ahead of us. There was a ship, a seaplane tender, that had come in late Saturday night from sea. That ship, as I understand it, had been on the way to Guam or someplace, but the seas were rough outside. It was one of these ships that was just kind of tack-welded together, and it was carrying high explosives to the Philippines, as I understand it. So they had that ship come in from sea that night, and they moored right behind us. It was a new ship, and they were still kind of on the shakedown cruise, really. It's my understanding that when that ship came in that night, you know, they didn't close the sub nets that they have, you know, coming into Pearl. When that ship came in, they did not close those sub nets.

Right after we got in the ditch about that time, there was a two-man sub that surfaced just, oh, a hundred yards off the other side of where the Utah was. Now the Utah was bottom-side up at this time; just the keel was above water. The cruiser Raleigh had sunk, but it settled down, you know,

where their deck was still just above water. It probably wasn't deep enough there for it to really sink. They were still firing and everything else. Of course, the ship that was right behind us, they happened to be at general quarters already before the attack. Because on the shakedown cruise, you know, at 6:30 or seven or anytime, you know, they're liable to sound general quarters. So they were at their battle stations already, before the attack, so they were really ready for them.

Marcello: How much protection did this ditch afford you?

Davis: Quite a bit. It was deep and a good place to be, I think.

Marcello: Was it a relatively large ditch?

Davis: Yes, it was. It was, oh, a hundred or 200 yards long, I imagine.

Marcello: The reason I ask that is because I swear everybody in that neck of the woods that I've interviewed ended up in that ditch at one time or another.

Davis: Is that right? Well, I don't remember what the purpose was; it seemed like it was too deep for a pipeline or anything. But there was a ditch there, and that's where we were.

Marcello: What did you do when you got down in the ditch?

Davis: We, of course, were quite cold and in shock and afraid or scared. Then you know how rumors go; the rumors were going up and down the trench that the Japs were landing all over the island. We

just expected any minute to see them, you know, come charging with fixed bayonets and so forth.

Marcello: You did believe all these rumors.

Davis: I did. We didn't even have a slingshot, you know, between all of us.

Marcello: In the meantime, had the action ceased, or was bombing and strafing still going on?

Davis: It was still going on. This is where I really observed more than when I was on the Utah--the closeness of the pilots and so forth.

Marcello: Describe what you observed here.

Davis: They were coming down on the Raleigh and the ship that was behind us, and I don't remember the name of it now. But they were just bearing down on them, just coming in, and, of course, they were throwing up all kinds of lead at them, and it just seemed like they keep right on coming, you know. We did see two or three planes that were on fire. In fact, one of them that I recall very vividly, it didn't look like there was very much of the plane even left, you know; but the pilot . . . you could still see him. He was still coming in, and he was trying to crash into this ship that was behind us. This was all going on. Then this little two-man sub surfaced just out on the other side of the Utah.

Marcello: Describe that incident.

Davis: All we saw was the conning tower that came up out of the water first. Then there was a ship across the harbor from us that fired on it, I guess, with 3-inch .50-caliber guns. They kept firing on it and finally did hit the conning tower of this little sub.

About that time, there was a four-stacker destroyer that was really, you know, "hell-bent for election" trying to get out of Pearl, and it spotted that two-man sub and rammed it. Right in the middle of the channel there, they rammed that sub; and then as they passed over it, they dropped depth charges on it and then just kept on going. Well, later on--this was several weeks later during the salvage operation that I got involved in--they did bring up some of the pieces of that submarine. There wasn't anything hardly as big as this table here left of it (chuckle). They really made mincemeat out of it.

Marcello: So how long were you watching the action from that ditch?

Davis: I'm going to say that we were there in the ditch until around eleven o'clock.

Marcello: Eleven o'clock a.m.?

Davis: A.M., yes. All this time we could hear this rapping on the botton of our ship, you know. We could hear this noise on the bottom of the Utah.

Marcello: Oh, you were close enough in that ditch that you could actually

hear the rapping on the ship?

Davis: Oh, yes, it was right on the beach there.

Marcello: About how far was the Utah away?

Davis: About 150 yards. We could hear this rapping, you know, with a piece of pipe or whatever.

Marcello: By eleven o'clock all the other activity had more or less ceased.

Davis: Yes. So they got some volunteers together, and they got an acetylene torch, and they went out to the Utah. They tapped the Morse Code back and forth to find out if there was any gas evidence, you know. Fortunately, I guess, this guy that I told you about awhile ago knew Morse Code, and he tapped back, "No." So they proceeded just to cut a hole in the bottom of the ship, and here comes old Jack Vaesson out of it, and they brought him ashore.

Marcello: Now were you on this party that went out to the Utah, or were you observing this from the beach?

Davis: No, I just observed this.

Marcello: How long did it take them to cut through?

Davis: Oh, it didn't take long--probably a half hour. They cut him out and brought him ashore. He had been on watch down on the electrician's board. Of course, he didn't have any idea of what was happening. All he knew, you know, was that the ship capsized, and he heard all these explosions, and they knocked

him around and all that. All of a sudden, he didn't know which way to go, where he was going. There was no lights or nothing, and he just took a dog wrench--pipe, you know--and he was going through compartments and closing them behind him. He just kept going until he got as far as he could go, and then he just started beating. He didn't know that he was beating on the bottom of the ship, but that's what he was beating on.

Marcello: How long did you say it took them to cut through to him?

Davis: I'd say, after they got out there, about thirty minutes, I guess.

Marcello: Was he the only person down there?

Davis: He was the only person there.

Marcello: Okay, you mentioned this is about eleven o'clock. What happens at this point?

Davis: Okay, they kind of lined us up and put us on . . . we marched across Ford Island. Of course, it looked like the whole Navy yard was still on fire, you know, around the Arizona and then over in the Navy yard itself. They put us on boats and took us over into the Navy yard proper.

As we were marching through the Navy yard--now this is something else that I saw; I didn't know what it was--there was a truckload of Japanese--big ones. I mean, big Japs. They looked like Amazons to what most Japs look like. But

they were all dressed in dungarees and had on sailor white hats, except there was one high-ranking officer of some kind --Japanese officer--in a white uniform. They were all in this stake-bed truck, and, of course, they were being guarded by Marines. They were taking it through the Navy yard, I guess, to someplace there. Now I don't know where these guys came from, whether they had been on the island for some time and had been sent in the Navy yard to sabotage or what. Now I understand this officer that was on there--the one that was in the white uniform--he came off of one of those two-man subs that washed up on the beach out at Waikiki. There was one that washed up out there. I understand that when they put those guys in the two-men subs, they sealed them, you know, and they gave them a military funeral and everything at that time. We'd heard that that was one of those guys.

Marcello: But other than that, that truckload of Japanese really had no significance so far as you were concerned.

Davis: No.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do when you got over there at the Navy yard proper?

Davis: Okay, they put us on another ship over there--a seaplane tender. I don't even remember the name of it now. This was all the guys off the Utah, and they put us aboard there just for living accommodations until they found out what they



was going to do with everybody, I guess.

Marcello: Were you covered with oil and all that sort of thing at this point?

Davis: Right, And no clothes except what I had on. We didn't have anyplace to sleep aboard this ship. About dark, I'd found me some little nook and cranny and just curled up in the corner, and then all hell broke loose again, you know, I mean, just firing all over the island. I understand there was some planes that were from the States, you know, Army planes that were already at the "point of no return" when Pearl Harbor was attacked, so they had to come on into Pearl. Then they got in there about dark or dusk. At that point, you know, somebody started firing. When they did, well, every gun that was on the island, I guess, was firing at these planes coming in.

There was a ship that was across from us and pretty close to where the Arizona was apparently--it might have been the West Virginia--that some of their antiaircraft guns, 20-millimeter or something like that, maybe 1.1's, that had fired several rounds into the side of this ship that I was on. One of the guys that had gotten off the Utah that I'd gone through boot camp with--he was a yeoman--got hit that night by one of our own bullets, and it killed him. It just hit him right in the heart and killed him dead.

Marcello: I understand the harbor was just lit up like the Fourth of July,

Davis: It really was. You just wouldn't believe it.

Marcello: Was your first reaction that the Japanese had finally landed?

Davis: I think that was the reaction of everybody--that the Japs were landing all over the island.

Marcello: So what did you do when everybody started firing?

Davis: Well, they grabbed me. Some guy grabbed me and put me down in one of the ammunition magazines for passing up ammunition. You know, this was a new experience to me, too; I'd never done that (chuckle) up to that point.

Marcello: Had you eaten at all that day?

Davis: Nothing until we got aboard this ship. When we got aboard this ship, they did set up a chow line for us.

Marcello: Did you have very much of an appetite?

Davis: Not really.

Marcello: Okay, so how well did you sleep that night?

Davis: I guess you'd say I didn't really sleep, because I was still cold and still in pretty much shock. You know, I was nineteen years old and hadn't been away from home too much, and you just really think that you dreamed all this, you know. You just really couldn't say that it was all happening. It was that kind of a feeling, you know.

Marcello: So what'd you do the next day?

Davis: The next day they took us off of this ship and took us over to the receiving station there in Pearl. This is where kind of all the survivors wound up. Now a lot of them that swam off the various ships, you know, they were picked up by the ships going out of the harbor, and they weren't heard from for quite some time. But most of them that were survivors, they put them in the barracks there at the receiving station. From that point, every day they would assign, you know, so many men to such-and-such ship and so forth. You just waited until your name was called for something and, you know, got your orders.

Marcello: When did you finally get cleaned up?

Davis: After I got over to the receiving station. They put me on the burial detail there for three days out at Red Hill Cemetery. I was on that burial detail, and that, I guess, was a more terrifying experience, you know, than the attack itself.

Marcello: Why was that?

Davis: They were hauling these bodies out there just by the truckloads in pine boxes, and they hadn't been . . . you know, they were just thrown into the boxes. By this time the smell was terrible, and it was just running out of the boxes and getting all over you, and you just couldn't get rid of the smell. Then they were just kind of burying them in trenches out there.

Marcello: It was a common grave, in other words, that they were putting

them in.

Davis: Right. You know, one box would just have pieces of arms and legs and burned, charred remains of somebody, you know. So I did that for three days. I guess after about a week, they formed a salvage unit, and I was assigned to the salvage unit in Pearl, and we kind of got that thing going.

Marcello: How shortly thereafter did the salvage operations commence?

Davis: Oh, it probably took thirty days before we really got it going and really started the salvage operations on the ships that were still salvagable.

Marcello: That must have been quite an operation, was it not, to salvage those ships?

Davis: It really was. They brought in, you know, a lot of specialized people, you know--divers and welders. I didn't have any specialized rating at that time, but I worked in the salvage office that they set up there, and they gave me the trucks and the cars for the salvage operation. I was in charge of those and routing those, getting materials and supplies and things like that.

Marcello: It seems unbelievable to me how they could refloat a huge ship such as the California or one of those other vessels.

Davis: It was quite a thing. Of course, you know, they got everything off of them that they could--clothing and all the officers' silver and stuff in the lockers and all that stuff.

They got it out, and we tried to refurbish it, you know, through special processes and so forth. All the big electrical engines and everything were taken off. I remember we took those over to Dole Pineapple, and they reworked all those engines.

Marcello: But you yourself were not directly involved in the salvage operations out in the harbor as such.

Davis: No. I did go out and watch some of it. I do have pieces that one of the guys took off of the Utah. When he was down, he took a firing cut-out cam off of one of our 5-inch gun mounts. It's still got the Utah's name on it and everything. I have that.

Marcello: What did he take off? What was it?

Davis: A firing cut-out cam, they call it. It's a device that's on a gun to where if you train the gun around into any part of the ship, you know, superstructure or bolt or something like that, that it will automatically cut out the firing mechanism and won't fire as long as the gun is trained at any part of the ship. Then when it leaves that area, then, of course, it will fire. This is a chrome-plated thing, and it's been pretty well-preserved. He'd gotten it for me just as a souvenir, and I still have it.

Marcello: What did the harbor look like in the aftermath of the attack when you were able to perhaps observe conditions in a somewhat

more objective manner?

Davis: Completely devastated--that and Ford Island and lots of the Navy yard. Hickam Field was right close to there, and all the hangars were just demolished and planes on the ground demolished.

Marcello: What sort of emotions did you have when you saw all this damage?

Davis: Well, of course, we were mad. Everybody was mad, and everybody was on edge. You just didn't dare walk outside at night anywhere.

Marcello: There were a lot of trigger-happy servicemen around, in other words.

Davis: Lots of trigger-happy people.

Marcello: You mentioned that incident when the planes were coming in and all the firing that had taken place. I would assume that beyond that you had even heard all sorts of sporadic gunfire throughout the night of December 7th.

Davis: Right. In fact, this went on for several days. I mean, gunfire at night was not unusual at all. There was just a lot of shooting.

Marcello: I gather that the smoke and the oil on the water were unbelievable, too, for somebody who had never seen anything of that nature.

Davis: It really was, particularly on the other side of Ford Island and between there and the Navy yard. It was just, you know,

kind of like . . . all of it was on fire.

Marcello: That fuel oil was very, very thick, too, was it not?

Davis: Right.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Davis, is there anything else relative to the Pearl Harbor attack that we haven't touched upon or that you would like to add as part of the record?

Davis: Yes. One of our salvage boat crews--this was probably about a little over a week, I guess, about a week maybe after the attack--found this Jap pilot, you know, in the water just floating. Of course, he was bloated, and they just tied a rope on him and dragged him into shore. They took a packet off of him--waterproof packet--and they brought it on up to the salvage office where we were, and we looked in this packet. He had a map in this packet, and it showed the name of every ship, you know, where they were berthed, where they were moored, and so forth, the names of the ships. In our particular case, they had the Enterprise there, you know, where the Utah was, because they wouldn't have wasted anything on us, you know. But it showed the Enterprise, and it did look like a carrier from the air because of the timber that was on there. So that was the reason, I assume, that they kind of hit us right along with the first ones.

Marcello: What did you do with that information that was retrieved from that pilot?

Davis: We took it up to the Naval Intelligence in the administration building there in Pearl Harbor and gave it to them.

Marcello: I have one last question. Why is it that thirty-six-plus years later you're a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association?

Davis: Well, I didn't really know there was such a thing until . . . you know, I kept seeing that on every December the 7th there'd be an article in the paper about somebody. But I didn't know that there was such a thing as the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. But I saw an ad in the paper just prior to December 7th, I believe it was, last year. I just decided maybe if I joined it I might get in contact with some of the people that I knew, which I did.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Davis, I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things.

Davis: Thank you very much. I hope it just comes out. A lot of the details I can't remember, but some of the things I think I'll always remember.

Marcello: I'm pretty sure that scholars will find your comments most valuable when they use them to write about Pearl Harbor.

Davis: Thank you.