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Interview with
GEORGE SLAVENS
December 8, 1978

Place of Interview: Las Vegas, Nevada

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved:

George C. Slavens
(Signature)

Date:

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Oral History Collection

George Slavens

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing George Slavens for the North Texas State Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 8, 1978, in Las Vegas, Nevada. I'm interviewing Mr. Slavens in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the repair ship USS Medusa during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Slavens, to begin this interview, 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. Slavens: I was born on January 9, 1922, in a little town in southeastern Missouri, Puxico. I graduated from high school, and at that time it was at the end of the Depression like, and there wasn't any work for us to do. So I joined the Navy.

Dr. Marcello: The Depression seemed to influence a lot of people during your particular generation, and a great many of them

give this as a reason for having entered the service. Times were tough, and jobs were simply hard to get. The service didn't pay very much, but it offered a certain amount of security.

Slavens: Yes, pay wasn't very much. For the first three months, it was \$21 dollars a month. If you took out the insurance, the insurance came out of that \$21. After three months, I think the pay went to \$36 a month for three months or something, and then to \$42. I joined the Navy on November 13, 1940.

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

Slavens: It is odd that you should ask, because a high school chum of mine, he and I went to St. Louis, Missouri, to join the Marine Corps. The recruiting office was closed . . . the Marine Corps recruiting office was closed. I said, "Well, I'll join the Navy then. I'm not waiting." I joined the Navy; he joined the Marine Corps. I haven't seen him since that day, although we used to correspond. He went through the war in the South Pacific in the Marine Corps.

For people interested in numbers, I would say thirteen was my lucky number, because I joined on November 13th, there were thirteen of us in the draft that went to Great Lakes Naval Training Station, and we were put in 113th company. So I always figured thirteen is a lucky number for me.

Marcello: So your decision to join the Navy was nothing more than a spur-of-the-moment decision.

Slavens: Yes. I had actually planned to join the Marine Corps. I had had a taste of the Army during high school. I don't know if anyone ever told you, but in those days they used to have what we called a Citizens Military Training Camp. During high school, I had attended two summers of this, so I had had a taste of the Army. The Marine Corps, I think, was rather flashy and I thought I'd like the uniform. As you say, the Navy ended up being my choice. It was more or less happenstance that I joined the Navy.

Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs in November of 1940 when you made your decision?

Slavens: Not very close, I'll have to be frank. It was more or less . . . well, I shouldn't say financial, but there wasn't anything else to do. Oh, I'd been reading about the affairs that had been going on in Europe, but I thought that was a long way off. Being from the Middle West, Europe is across the ocean and is a long way to get to.

Marcello: You mentioned something interesting here. I assume, therefore, that even if you did feel that war could possibly come to this country, it would probably come in Europe, rather than in the Far East.

Slavens: Right. I never thought of Japan as being a potential adversary

of the United States. We all saw the Japanese as small, little fellows that sort of strutted around. You'd see them in the movies that way, but we learned later that there was more than that.

Marcello: You mentioned that you took your boot camp at Great Lakes. Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as part of the record? Or was this simply the normal Navy boot camp?

Slavens: It was a normal Navy boot camp. After the boot camp, I was sent to machinist's mate school.

Marcello: Did boot camp last three months at that time yet?

Slavens: No, six weeks.

Marcello: Oh, they cut it back that far, even by November of 1940?

Slavens: Right, six weeks.

Marcello: Which, again, as we look back on it, evidently was an indication that an emergency situation was developing?

Slavens: That's right. The "higher-ups," I think, were trying to get as many of us through as possible and get us out to the fleet.

Marcello: How did you get selected for machinist's mate school?

Slavens: You took a battery of tests; that was one of the first things you did. The reason I would assume that I was selected for machinist's mate school is that as a kid in Missouri I used to hang out in the blacksmith's shop, and I used to help with plumbing and do things with plumbing; so I knew what the tools looked like, and that was one of the things on the test.

They'd have pictures of tools and what you'd do with them, so I more or less had an idea of what they were to be used for. I made a high score on that, so they said I should be a machinist in the Navy.

Marcello: Even at that date, I suppose it was still considered quite an honor to be selected for one of these Navy schools.

Slavens: Oh, yes. There was just a certain number; you had to make a certain grade to go to school.

Marcello: Where did you go to school in order to become a machinist's mate?

Slavens: I had the privilege of being in the first class to graduate from the River Rouge Training Station in Ford's Dearborn plant in Michigan.

Marcello: I've talked to some other people who became machinist's mates who went through that course there at the River Rouge plant.

Slavens: Right. I was in the first class to go through there. In fact, I was the first class of machinist's mates, I'll say. There were some carpenter's mates and so on, but when we were taking our first week or so in training in Great Lakes, before going to Dearborn, one of our members come down with the mumps, and we were quarantined and couldn't go to start right at first (chuckle). When I say the first class, I mean the first class of machinist's mates. There were a couple of other classes that graduated a couple of weeks ahead of time.

Marcello: Evidently, that training there at the River Rouge plant was first-rate training from what I've heard.

Slavens: Yes. In fact, Mr. Ford wanted to pay us \$5.00 a day while we were going to school, and, of course, the government wouldn't allow that. Anything that was involved with the Ford Motor Company or anything the Ford family owned, we could go to and attend free of charge.

I remember one incident. Mr. Ford used to come over for the inspections on Saturdays. This friend of mine had lost two front teeth, or had them pulled out. We used to call him "Smiley" all the time. Mr. Ford saw that his teeth were missing, and he questioned him. We didn't have a dentist there at that time. So on Monday morning, the first thing, this fellow was called over to the Ford dispensary and had two teeth replaced there. Those were things that were very nice.

I remember one Sunday night. At that time, they had the Ford Sunday Evening Hour--symphony--and they took four busloads of us up to view the symphony live. It was being radio broadcast. I'm trying to think of the name of the big museum section he had there, but I can't remember the name of it. It is still there, and we went there with no charge. There was usually an admission charge, you know.

Marcello: Is it true that the training you received there at the River

Rouge plant to become a machinist's mate was excellent training?

Slavens: Yes, and it was very strict. I forget now just how many weeks we were there, but I remember our math teacher, who was a former Naval Academy teacher. We started out with simple adding and subtracting, and in the course of less than three months-- whatever it was--we were doing calculus. You had to know it . . . or they made you learn it, let's put it that way. There wasn't any fooling around with those people. On the practical part, I worked right in the machine shop and worked on the lathes and different machines. Also, I helped set dies and things like this, so we worked right with the machinists there at Ford Plant.

Marcello: So you had a combination of both theory and on-the-job training.

Slavens: Right, that was it.

Marcello: Where did you stay while you were there at Dearborn?

Slavens: There were barracks specially built for us. In fact, being in the middle of the winter, we got a big kick out of it. They wanted to plant trees, and they sent men in with jackhammers, and they made great big holes and brought the trees in, enormous big trees, and put them in the ground so that we'd have trees around the place (chuckle).

Marcello: How long did this program last altogether?

Slavens: I was trying to remember. From January to May, I think. I'm sure it lasted until May, because I was sent to San Diego sometime in May of 1940.

Marcello: So you went from Dearborn to San Diego in May of 1941. At the time that you left Dearborn, did you know that you would be on your way to the Hawaiian Islands, or were your orders at that stage simply to take you to San Diego?

Slavens: No. My orders were to go to the USS Medusa, I went to San Diego awaiting transportation to the Hawaiian Islands for the Medusa.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands?

Slavens: It was quite a thrill. Every young fellow at that time could visualize hula girls and grass shacks. It was quite an experience to look forward to.

Marcello: How did you get from San Diego over to the Hawaiian Islands? In other words, what was your method of transportation?

Slavens: I was on a transport at that time, the USS Wharton. I got to Hawaii sometime in the latter part of May, so I was in San Diego probably two or three weeks at the most. I went aboard the USS Medusa late one afternoon, and I was the most confused person in the world--getting on board a ship, not knowing where you are, so many decks chopped up. I was completely lost. In fact, it took a month or more before I could get from one end on the ship to another (chuckle).

Marcello: Were you one of several people who were assigned to the Medusa at that time, or were you the only one who went aboard?

Slavens: No, there were approximately twelve of us at that time, all from the machinist's mate school,

Marcello: Evidently, they were in the process of bringing those ships up to a wartime complement around this time.

Slavens: I would imagine that's what the idea was.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you receive from the "old salts" aboard the Medusa when you first got there? Let's face it, as far as they were concerned, you were still a "boot," so to speak.

Slavens: Oh, sure, we were "boots," and we were harassed.

Marcello: You may have gone to machinist's mate school, but that probably didn't make any difference to them.

Slavens: That didn't mean anything there; you had to prove yourself there. The first thing you had to prove was how good a mess cook you were. The first . . . well, within a week I was mess cooking. At that time, there wasn't cafeteria-style. Each mess cook had two tables that seated ten men at a table. You were responsible for getting all the food for them. You had a mess captain, usually a first class, that would come down before the men would be allowed in the mess hall, and he would dish out the meat portions to everyone. It was your job to get back in line and get seconds. That was the thing everybody wanted, was seconds.

The more seconds that you could get, the better tips you

got at payday. Most people didn't realize that the mess cook on payday put out a bowl on each table, and the rated men were expected to chip in a buck apiece and the non-rated, fifty cents. If they didn't do it, you told the mess captain, and he would see that for the next two weeks they got the meat with the biggest bone or the most fat in it--to make up for it. So you usually made more mess cooking, off of our tips, than we did generally. Thirty-six dollars a month wasn't much, so if you had twenty men and if you were lucky--fifteen of them were first class--you made more off of tips than you did off your regular pay.

Marcello: I interviewed a Pearl Harbor survivor earlier this morning who mentioned that he particularly enjoyed serving as mess cook for the chiefs because their pay was higher, and therefore their tips were higher.

Slavens: That's right. I wasn't that fortunate. I did have mostly rated men in mine, so I made good off the tips. Then if you wanted to have liberty, you would tell the mess captain, and maybe once a week he would assign somebody to do your dishes. You had to wash your own dishes and get them all clean, and then they'd put them in the scullery and scalded them. He would assign somebody to do your dishes for you.

Marcello: Also, didn't you normally have every night liberty when you were a mess cook and you were in port?

Slavens: The mess cooks did, yes. One thing in Hawaii, though, at that time only first class petty officers were allowed to stay out after midnight. The rest of us had to be back, and it all depended on your rate how soon you had to be back.

Marcello: I think you could stay overnight if you had a place to stay.

Slavens: Yes, if you had a written request for you to stay overnight.

Marcello: I understand that they wanted most of those people to be back aboard the ships because there were actually very few places for you to stay in town overnight.

Slavens: Right. There was just the Royal Hawaiian, and sailors couldn't afford to stay there. The Moana was the same way, Downtown was the Alexander Young; I think that was the one that was on Bishop Street. And, of course, the YMCA was there.

Marcello: How long did mess cooking last at that time?

Slavens: Three months.

Marcello: Those repair ships have come to fascinate me as a result of doing these interviews. There are just so many skilled people and so many different functions that those ships can perform that it is simply amazing to me. What were some of the various functions that your particular repair ship could perform?

Slavens: The Medusa was AR-1, Auxiliary Repair-One. It was the first repair ship built to be able to repair anything on any ship. We had one of the biggest and best optical shops afloat; we had a foundry, pattern shops. You name it, and it was there.

We had special dentists to do dental work for other ships. There was what was known as the ship's company and the repair force. The ship's company ran the ship; they were like the crew of the ship. The repair force did the work in the shops and on other ships.

Marcello: Would you have been part of the repair force?

Slavens: Yes. I worked in what was known as the lower machine shop. We had one lathe there that we could turn a five-inch barrel in. It was a pretty good-sized shop.

Marcello: The ships do not necessarily come across as being very glamorous, but it seems to me that they were extremely valuable, so far as the fleet was concerned and the operations of the fleet.

Slavens: Well, they were and that was one of the things that I understand the officers, the top men in the Navy, couldn't understand--why the Japanese didn't try to sink more of the repair ships and tenders. We were there and enabled a lot of those ships to get underway a lot faster than if they would have had to come back to the mainland.

Marcello: The repair ships themselves are obviously important, but we also have to remember that all of those skilled personnel on there would have been virtually irreplaceable, in a sense, if those ships had been wiped out.

Slavens: That's right. You would have deprived some of the factories of

the skilled men to replace the whole crew or repair force on these ships. Once the war started, they needed all they could get on the mainland to get the factories going.

Marcello: Were you assigned right away to that repair shop after you came off of mess cooking, or were you assigned there in addition to your mess cooking?

Slavens: No. When you were mess cooking, that was full-time duty. As soon as I got off mess cooking, I was assigned to the lower machine shop. The first four months, I worked on what was referred to as the slab. It was a section in the center of the shop where pumps would be brought in and different machinery, smaller pieces that could be taken off of the ship and brought aboard. We would take them apart and find out what needed to be repaired and how the replacement should be made, put them back together, and made sure they would run. I worked there for approximately four or five months.

Marcello: Was this a type of work that you could handle on your own, or did you, at this stage of your Navy career, have to have a senior petty officer to supervise the work and so on?

Slavens: Well, there was a first class, and he was sort of the supervisor over about six other fellows. He would tell you what to do and come back every once in a while to see that you were doing it right. That's what it amounted to,

Marcello: How would you describe the on-the-job training that you received

there in the machine shop, while working under this first class petty officer?

Slavens: It was very good, very good. If you learned by your own mistakes, you'll know next time not to do them that way. That's about what it amounted to.

Marcello: What were your quarters like there aboard the Medusa? Describe them.

Slavens: (Chuckle) My quarters was a folding cot in the lower machine shop. We had the Navy mattress and the standard two Navy blankets, which we didn't need in Hawaii. After the four or five months on the slab, I was assigned to run the shapers machinery. My cot was right between the two shapers, and each day you'd fold it up and put it up on a ledge we had there; each night you'd take it down and unfold it and put it back. The only advantage . . . I shouldn't say the only advantage. A good advantage of having your bunk in the machine shop is that you didn't have to get up so early. You usually got to sleep in about an hour longer.

Marcello: Why was that?

Slavens: If you slept in the regular sleeping quarters at that time, it was the mess hall, and you slept in hammocks. All the time I mess cooked, I slept in hammocks. You had to get out of there so they could set the tables up for chow, so they didn't let you sleep in in there (chuckle).

Marcello: How did you enjoy sleeping in hammocks?

Slavens: I'll tell you, it wasn't bad. I rather enjoyed it, but I don't think I'd be able to get in one now. At that time, like in the mess hall, the hammocks were high enough that you could walk under them when people were in them. You had to swing your hammock and then jump up and get a rail and sling yourself up in it. (Chuckle) Today I couldn't do it.

Marcello: I asked that question because obviously that is a part of the Navy that is no longer in existence,

Slavens: That's right. Although the hammock . . . if I might go back to Great Lakes and at Ford Trade School, we slept in hammocks there. Where it was so cold, a hammock was like a sleeping bag. We used to fold our two blankets under the mattress and slide in from the top. It could be really cold outside, but you were nice and cozy in there.

Marcello: All in all, how would you describe the morale aboard the Medusa during that pre-Pearl Harbor period? In other words, basically, was the lower machine shop and the Medusa in general a happy place to be . . . a pleasant place to be during that time?

Slavens: Oh, yes. It was supposed to be, and was considered, one of the "gravy" jobs in the Navy if you could get on a repair ship. You stayed in one place, and the rated men that could would have their families ashore, and they could go ashore each night,

I would say it was considered more or less a "gravy" job,

Marcello: I'm sure that the fact that all of you were volunteers also would have contributed to the high morale. In other words, just about everybody was there because they wanted to be there.

Slavens: Oh, yes. That was the main thing there. You had nothing better to go to. Maybe that's not the right way to say it, but that's the way we looked at it. We were getting three square meals a day with board and room, and medical care. That was a lot more than most people on the outside were getting at that time.

Marcello: What part did athletics play in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Slavens: It was a very big part. Of course, like, each destroyer division and all, they had their own basketball and baseball teams. It was the same way on the Medusa. Of course, we were usually stationed in one place for a number of months. We would challenge all of the battleships, all of these different ships. We had a very good baseball team, a very good bowling team, one of the best rifle and pistol teams. They even used to have what we called acey-deucey tournaments, which is coming back now . . . and cribbage tournaments, that was something that happened then. As far as the other sports, they had rowing whaleboats; they had single oar rowing. So that was all part of the leisure time. We used to be off on Wednesday afternoons,

and Saturdays and Sundays we had off.

Marcello: It seems to me that sort of thing would have also contributed to the high morale. In other words, there were these friendly and sometimes unfriendly rivalries between ships, and it seems to me that that would have helped the morale, also.

Slavens: Oh, it did. The best way I can explain it is if anyone has ever attended one of the national Pearl Harbor Survivors Association reunions and seen the competition between ships there after all those years, It wouldn't take much imagination to see the competition that would have been there at that time.

Marcello: Everybody was rather proud of their ships at that time?

Slavens: Oh, you fought for your ship. That would cause more fights on the liberty landing than anything else (chuckle). Somebody would make fun of your ship, and that's when the fighting would start (chuckle).

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about your liberty routine. How did it work for you, personally, while you were there at Pearl? Like you mentioned awhile ago, the Medusa really didn't go out on the exercises, as such, in the same manner that the fighting ships would have gone out. So what was your liberty routine like while you were there at Pearl?

Slavens: They had the port and starboard watch, and you usually had liberty every other day. Like I said, usually you had Wednesday afternoon off, if you didn't have the duty. It was the same way

on the weekends. As I said before, I wasn't rated at that time. I was a second class fireman, which was like a first class seaman. We used to go over to the shore. There wasn't a whole lot to do in Honolulu, unless you wanted to go to the beach. There was plenty of entertainment with the girls on River Street, Hotel Street, Canal Street. There were numerous places of that sort around (chuckle).

Marcello: The Black Cat Cafe was a favorite place, wasn't it?

Slavens: Oh, that was right across. We used to catch the cabs home from the Black Cat Cafe.

Marcello: What was the attraction of the Black Cat?

Slavens: (Chuckle) I really couldn't tell you at this time. To think back on it, it must have been a dive. (Chuckle) That's all I can say. I used to get a kick . . . they used to have a lot of Japanese girl barbers. The fellows would go and get a shave---fellows that would never think about going to get a shave on the mainland. They liked to get a shave from the girls.

One of the incidents that happened during the War---talking about all the different houses on the different streets--the girls went on strike (chuckle). The military government, when they declared martial law . . . the girls that worked in these houses lived out in very nice areas and came down here just to work. The people in the residential areas complained that they

didn't want these girls in their area. So the girls went on strike. They were having so much problem with rape and assault on the local girls that within a week they were back to work, and the military government had changed their mind. That was just one of the incidents.

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

Slavens: Oh, yes. You didn't dare open a cab door to get in, because it would be loaded before you could get in (chuckle). At that time, they had buses running, and they had the little train that used to run. The train didn't run very often, but you could catch it back in the afternoon from Honolulu to Pearl Harbor for ten cents.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to deteriorate, could you, even as a relative newcomer aboard the Medusa, detect any change in your routine or the type of work that you were doing?

Slavens: Not really. The only thing that we used to discuss was how the island could be attacked, and if somebody could get in. About two to three weeks before December 7th, there was a mock attack. The Navy attacked, and the Army was defending. At that time, there was a lot of discussion over whether we could actually be attacked, but in a few days that passed off.

Marcello: What conclusions did you reach in your bull sessions, that is, did you conclude that the islands could or could not be attacked by the Japanese? I mean, after all, Japan was 4,000 miles away.

Slavens: They had defenders of both sides, let's put it that way. Nothing ever was settled; there was just a continuous discussion about it. The formula for the attack had been figured out by some American admiral years ago. This was discussed quite often and disputed and discussed.

Marcello: Did you have very many old Asiatic sailors aboard the Medusa who possibly might have given their opinions about the Japanese?

Slavens: We had a few in the ship's company. I'll clarify that. The Blackhawk was a repair ship in the Asiatic Fleet. I knew about three men who had served on the Blackhawk and who were in the repair force. Usually, when you were assigned to a repair force on a repair ship, you went from one repair ship to another, rather than from a fighting ship to a repair ship. Usually, once you were in the repair force, you stayed in the repair force for some time. There wasn't the chance for that many Asiatic sailors to be in the repair force, although I did know about three in the lower machine shop.

Marcello: They were characters, I'll bet, were they not?

Slavens: Oh, yes (chuckle). In fact, when I was mess cooking, one of the little cooks was on the Panay, and we used to razz him all

the time. They'd show a picture of it on the newsreel, and he was the guy that didn't have any pants on that was firing the machine gun; he was in his shorts all the time, We used to kid him about that. Yes, they could tell you some pretty wild stories.

Marcello: I gather most of those guys were just covered with tattoos?

Slavens: Oh, yes. We had another cook, and we called him Asiatic, but he hadn't been Asiatic. He was getting tattooed so he could be the "tattooed man" in the circus. He had tattoos all over him (chuckle). I managed to get two, by the way,

Marcello: There in Honolulu?

Slavens: No, I got this one in Chicago (gesture). I had this one started, That was to be Medusa, and this was being done when the war started by a little Japanese girl that did tattooing (gesture). It never got finished, as you can see. The Medusa has the snakes, but she doesn't have the heads on, and she doesn't have the neck. So that one was never finished,

Marcello: Over a period of how much time was that tattoo being made?

Slavens: About three weeks.

Marcello: In other words, just a certain portion of it would be done at a time?

Slavens: It got very sore. If you noticed, the hair was all filled in and all. People ask you why you do it, and I don't know (chuckle). It was just the thing to do.

Marcello: I guess you weren't considered very "salty" until you got at least one tattoo?

Slavens: Oh, sure, You had to have a tattoo to be in the Navy.

Marcello: Anyway, World War II, or the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, interrupted your ever having the completed head of Medusa tattooed on your arm.

Slavens: Right.

Marcello: This brings us up to that weekend of December 7, 1941, Mr. Slavens. What I want you to do at this point is to go into as much detail as you can remember concerning your activities of that particular weekend. Let us start with that Saturday of December 6, 1941.

Slavens: I had the duty that weekend. I had the twelve to four o'clock watch, which was midnight to four o'clock in the morning, on Sunday morning, December 7th.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday evening before you went on watch?

Slavens: They had a movie aboard ship. I can't tell you what it was, but we had a movie. I was what was called a messenger, deck messenger. We in the repair force did have to stand watch such as this and serve as messenger. What it amounted to, when the other watch came on, we had to go make sure they were awake and run messages for the officer-of-the-day. By having twelve to four o'clock watch, again, I was allowed to sleep in. People think I was always sleeping in.

Marcello: Let me back up just a minute. While you were on that twelve to four o'clock watch, did anything eventful happen?

Slavens: No, nothing out of the ordinary that you would notice was happening.

Marcello: Would you have very many drunks coming back aboard the ship on a Saturday night after the sailors had been in Honolulu?

Slavens: Well, I wouldn't say that many. I mean, you could almost name the ones that would come back "looped." They would come back drunk no matter what weekend or what night it was. That was just standard procedure for them. Most of the people, no, they wouldn't come back that way.

Marcello: We're talking about a very small percentage of people, then, who would come back drunk, so to speak.

Slavens: What you really would say as drunk was maybe one out of fifty or one out of a hundred. I wouldn't say that the others hadn't had a few drinks, but, I mean, they were not drunk enough that they wouldn't know what they were doing.

Marcello: Your watch was a quiet one, so far as you were concerned.

Slavens: Oh, yes, it was just a normal, routine watch.

Marcello: Pick up the story from that point.

Slavens: The next morning, I had been to breakfast with one of the fellows in the shop. I can't at this time even remember who he was.

Marcello: What time did you get up?

Slavens: Around seven o'clock. I remember they had hard-boiled eggs and bacon for breakfast--I can remember that--and toast. We finished breakfast, and we were coming back. Going down into the lower machine shop was a long ladder. We called them ladders in the Navy; it was a long stairway.

We were about halfway down it, and we heard this plane dive. Since two or three weeks earlier they'd had this mock attack, we thought this was what was happening. He and I, at that moment, didn't pay any attention. But it sounded like the plane didn't pull out of the dive and crashed. I remember he said to me, "Geez, that guy didn't make it," and that was all that was said.

Then all hell broke loose. I was on a repair party below deck, so I actually didn't see too much of what went on up above.

Marcello: You mentioned that "all hell broke loose." Can you describe exactly what happened here? You are on the ladder going down; you hear the plane in a dive; and then you hear the explosion. What happened at that point?

Slavens: Then there were lots of explosions, just sort of like a continuous explosion. The one went off first, and after that they were overlapping each other. With that we knew that something was going wrong. General quarters was sounded.

Marcello: I was going to ask you if you had heard the explosions and

then went back up again to see what was happening. You were still somewhere below decks when general quarters sounded.

Slavens: Right. I was about two decks below when general quarters sounded. I was on this repair party, which has a certain part of the ship to protect and shore up in case it gets hit.

Marcello: Where was your particular battle station? What section?

Slavens: Right in the lower machine shop--that section of the ship there. By way of explanation, the lower machine shop was three decks below the main deck. They had what we called a well deck with big cranes on it, and we had an enormous, big hatch. It must have been at least twenty feet square, and it was open. All of the attack I saw was through that hatch. Someone was scared worse than I was, because they closed all of the portholes and left the wind scoops in. I don't know who it was, but orders came down to open the portholes and get those wing scoops. When I was doing that, I saw the Utah roll over. It was sinking already.

Marcello: Describe the Utah rolling over.

Slavens: I could see it, and I could see the people going down the side of the ship on the bottom. All I could think at that time was, "Gee, this is just like the movies!" I could see it, but it was like it was in a dream. At that time, we had seen news-reels, and I just kept saying, "This is just like the movies," as if it wasn't happening to me. It was something I was looking

at through the porthole, and it wasn't so.

Marcello: About how long did you observe the Utah?

Slavens: I saw it from the time . . . well, at the time I first saw it, the superstructure was level with the water, it had already rolled over. The men were going over the side and down the bottom. Then I closed the portholes, and that is all of the Utah I saw.

Marcello: What were you able to observe in looking out that large open hatch?

Slavens: We could see the bursts of shell fire--you could see that--and tracers, tracer bullets. One airplane is all I saw--one Japanese plane. Here again, another fellow and I were standing and looking up through this hatch, and a shell fragment came down and hit about a foot above our head. (Chuckle) He turned to me, and he said, "What the hell are we standing here for? A person could get hurt!" So we went forward in the lower machine shop. The forward end of this shop had about six or eight decks over us, so we figured we'd be a little safer there if anything was going to hit us.

During the attack the Medusa got credit for shooting down two aircraft, and part credit for a two-man submarine.

Marcello: Now, all of this, of course, you couldn't see, since you were down in the machine shop itself,

Slavens: That's right.

Marcello: What thoughts were going through you and your shipmates while you were down there? In a sense, you were kind of helpless. You were simply standing by, so to speak.

Slavens: You said it--helpless, We didn't know what was going on. We could hear the gunfire; we could hear the explosions of the bombs; and we could hear the planes in a dive or something. Each time you would hear one, you would think to yourself, "Is that coming to us?" We couldn't see it.

Marcello: Were you mentally plotting a way to get out of that ship in case it did begin to sink or something of this nature?

Slavens: We were fortunate because we didn't have that much water under us. The captain said, "Leave her sit because we don't have that much water." Yes, I would say deep down in your mind, you were thinking about how you could get out of there if that bulkhead goes in over there. I never wanted to run so bad in all my life, but there was nowhere to run to. The training that we had received, the drills, you did things automatically. No matter whether you wanted to be somewhere else, you were there. I'll admit that I was scared.

Marcello: Did you have a full crew there in the lower machine shop, that is, was everybody there who was supposed to be there?

Slavens: Oh, yes, everyone was there.

Marcello: What did you talk about during this period? Or was every man keeping his thoughts to himself?

Slavens: At the start, yes. As it wore on . . . you know, an hour and fifty-five minutes is a long time when you can't see out and observe what's happening. Then we started discussing, "I wonder what's going on? I wonder what's been hit?" Then you hear all this scuttlebutt coming down. Some guy would holler down through the hatch that the Utah sunk, that Battleship Row was blown up, that the cruisers were sunk. Then you started to wonder, "Geez, are they going to land an army, a force to take over the island?" All kinds of thoughts would go through your head.

Marcello: While you were down there, had you heard any of the reports about the midget submarines?

Slavens: Once.

Marcello: That probably even made matters worse, did it not?

Slavens: Yes, because we were where the torpedo would go off (chuckle). That's why I say you were wondering . . . you'd look at that little thin hull, and you'd wonder whether it was going to blow up. Yes, they passed the word that a submarine had been sighted and fired upon.

Marcello: Generally speaking, was everybody more or less outwardly calm and acting in a professional manner so far as you could tell?

Slavens: In our group, yes, although we were just waiting. We were all there, and the chief in charge had given us our instructions and told us what we had to do in case anything happened.

The Medusa didn't get hit, but a bomb hit between us and a buoy that we were tied to astern. In fact, I think it hit the buoy and sunk the buoy. When that went off, the stern plates somewhere sprung a leak. That wasn't in our department, but we heard it over the phones. When that bomb went off, I think the ship must have jumped a foot sideways or more. Then we were really wondering what was happening, I'll tell you.

Marcello: Was it a loud noise?

Slavens: Actually, I think we felt the ship move about as soon as we heard the noise. Most of us thought we had been hit, That's what happened.

Marcello: When did you finally get out of the lower machine shop?

Slavens: When the last attack was over, then they secured for the time being.

Marcello: And where did you go from that point, and what did you do?

Slavens: I went to topside, and I looked around, and I couldn't believe what had happened.

Marcello: Describe what you saw.

Slavens: There was smoke covering everything. Smoke was coming from Battleship Row. Then you started getting all of these rumors about what had happened and all the ships that were sunk. One or two destroyers had gotten underway. I could look out, and I could see the Nevada beached. Guys were telling about the two-man submarine. Then the Curtiss, which was tied up about a hundred yards from us, had taken a kamikaze, She was listing

quite badly, and somewhere in that time I was in a party sent below to get spare pumps that we had to take to the Curtiss. I didn't go over, but I helped get the pumps out of the hold to take over there.

Marcello: I gather the water was just thick with that bunker oil, also, was it not?

Slavens: Where we were, it wasn't. Maybe that's not the proper way to say it. We were tied up off of Pearl City, and Battleship Row was on the other side of Ford Island from us.

Marcello: So you actually could not see Battleship Row from where the Medusa was tied up.

Slavens: No, we could see the battleships, but we didn't know what damage had been done. We were maybe a mile-and-a-half or two miles straight across. Still you could see the ships, and you could see the smoke, and you could see other ships smoking.

Marcello: So far as you can tell in looking back, were the senior petty officers and so on exhibiting the quality of leadership that you expected? Did they seem to know what they were doing? Were they being decisive and things of that nature?

Slavens: Oh, yes. I heard later--this is scuttlebutt--that we had one gunner's mate that took wire cutters or bolt cutters and cut the ammunition locks to get in. Our captain was ashore, and the "exec" was ashore, so actually I don't know who took over while they were gone. I do know the chiefs and the senior

petty officers took over the guns and did the work there.

Marcello: What did you do that afternoon and that evening?

Slavens: That afternoon was more or less spent in scuttlebutt. That evening we had . . . just at about dusk, there was a flight of planes--I don't know how many--that came in off of one of our own carriers. They were to land on Ford Island. They overshot the landing in the dark. When they gunned their motors to take off, the whole harbor exploded. I think there were two or three of them shot down. I know one was shot down right close to Pearl City where we were. I understand one or two of the pilots were killed. I never did get the true story, but I do know there was some killed.

Marcello: Were you out on deck observing this when it took place?

Slavens: Yes. In fact, during the afternoon, I had been assigned as a lookout on the boat deck, which was quite high in the Medusa. I was lookout on one gun, and when the firing started, general quarters went, of course.

Marcello: You were lookout for one of the guns?

Slavens: Right, to sort of keep an eye out for airplanes. When general quarters started, I started to go across this well deck we had on the ship. It looked to me like tracer bullets were coming across there. Of course, it was my imagination, I assume. But I could see tracers going across there looking as big as saucers. It was my imagination again. It had to be .30 or .50-calibers (chuckle). So I took a little sashay below decks and up and

around to get across, because I didn't want to run across there.

The next day I found out some of the crane stanchions had been hit that night.

Marcello: I guess that harbor must have lit up like the Fourth of July when virtually every gun there fired at those incoming airplanes,

Slavens: Yes, they did. It was like a fireworks. You really can't imagine what it looked like unless you had to have been there.

Marcello: I'm sure that everybody was jumpy and that you heard sporadic firing all night.

Slavens: Oh, yes. There were soldiers on the beach and in the cane fields, and you'd hear gunfire--one or two shots. Then you'd hear all kinds of rumors.

Marcello: I'm sure that most of you fully expected the Japanese to land.

Slavens: Yes, we did. Looking back on it, they could have taken us, I think.

Marcello: Given the destruction you witnessed at Pearl, you had every logical reason to believe that they would come in. After all, those carriers could not have been too far away.

Slavens: Right. At that time, the range of a carrier plane wasn't very far.

Marcello: In the days following the attack, were you essentially busy trying to make repairs to some of the ships and so on that were slightly damaged?

Slavens: Oh, yes.. The next day we went alongside a cruiser. I can't

remember which one, but it was either the Detroit or the Raleigh--one of the two. She'd had a bomb go through her and go through the hull.

Marcello: I think it was the Raleigh, wasn't it?

Slavens: I think so. They were both tied right close to each other. We patched her up so that she could get underway, and we fixed some of the pumps and electrical equipment. On Monday we were alongside ships working.

Marcello: What sort of days were you putting in, beginning on Monday?

Slavens: You worked as long as the work was to be done. Some of the fellows . . . of course, it all depends on . . . we had what was called the outside machine shop. Those fellows were the ones that had to go on the ships, take the equipment off, and bring it back. You worked until it was ready. You'd take a catnap, and if there were some more to come in, you went to work again.

Marcello: How long did this type of hectic schedule continue?

Slavens: That was for two or three months afterwards. Even later on during the war, after an attack, that's the way an operation was. During a push or an invasion or something, we were usually pretty quiet. It was before and after that we worked like mad.

Marcello: This would be when all the damaged ships came in?

Slavens: Right.

Marcello: Mr. Slavens, that exhausts my list of questions. Is there

anything else relative to the attack that we haven't covered and that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Slavens: There is one thing I would like to say. There was another fellow on the ship from my hometown; there were two of us. Neither one of us could get ashore to let our folks know we were all right. About three or four days after the attack, there was a system set up with the telegraph company. There was a list of messages you would send, and you would say what number it was, and then they'd send it, and then they'd know on this side. So I got ashore first, and I remember the message said, "We are all right," or something to those words. "It had "we" in it so that when my folks got it, they could let his folks know that we were all right.

Marcello: I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things. I'm sure that scholars will find your comments quite valuable when they use them to study about Pearl Harbor.

Slavens: Thank you. I hope it wasn't too dry. It was just my version.

Marcello: Well, that's what we wanted.

Slavens: Thank you.