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Interview with  
EMIL T. BERAN  
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Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

Emil Beran

Interviewer: Dr, Ronald E, Marcello

Place of Interview: Las Vegas, Nevada

Date: December 9, 1978

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Emil Beran for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 9, 1978, in Las Vegas, Nevada. I'm interviewing Mr. Beran in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the destroyer USS Allen during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Beran, to begin this interview would you just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself? In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be brief and general.

Mr. Beran: I was born on August 22, 1916, in Saint Louis, Missouri. I went to a parochial grade school for eight years, and I went to Hadley Vocational School for a year-and-a-half. I studied auto mechanics, but I was more interested in girls than I was in mechanics, and I don't think I done too good at school (chuckle). So I quit school. My

parents were very poor, because that was right in the midst of the Depression years. I felt that I was saving them that car fare, which they would have gladly given me to use. I just played hookey from that school, so I felt I was actually cheating them. I just quit the Hadley Vocational School.

Marcello: How did you eventually get into the reserves?

Beran: I happened to see a casual acquaintance, and I saw him in his uniform. I was always dreaming of being in the Navy some day since being a small boy and seeing the news pictures of battleships and so on, and I became interested in the Navy. I went down--it was 1937--and I joined the Naval Reserves in Saint Louis. I put in a four-year hitch.

We all know from history that Japan was running rampant through China and Hitler in Europe, and anyone with just plain, common horse sense just knew that war was going to break out, and it was going to be a good one--a bad one, let's put it that way. No wars are good. Anyhow, my enlistment ran out in 1940, and I reenlisted for my second hitch on October 2, 1941. As we were preparing for . . .the draft was instituted in October, wasn't it? I was already automatically in the military service, being in the reserves. I think that's what made me rejoin the reserves. I hated mud and was thinking, "I don't want to be a soldier." We went along and America was

slowly preparing with broomsticks and things like that with their Army. They started calling up the reserves.

Marcello: When was the Saint Louis reserve unit activated?

Beran: We were four divisions in Saint Louis--35th, 36th, 37th, 38th. The 38th was called, I believe, sometime in June or July, and they manned destroyers that were patrolling the North Atlantic against the German submarines. The Germans were more or less warning us, "If you are going to help Britain, we're going to do something about it," which they did. I personally knew a boy that was killed at that time. His name was Klepper. The destroyer, I don't recall; but they were torpedoed in the North Atlantic in October or November. Those waters are cold, and those boys didn't have a chance.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and talk a little bit about your activities in that Saint Louis reserve unit. Obviously, when you joined the unit back in 1937, you did not join it to supplement your pay in any way, because you weren't getting paid very much.

Beran: No. I don't recall a pay rate much, but I think it was something like \$21 a month for an apprentice seaman, and we would get so much a drill. Breaking it down, it maybe amounted to \$1.50 or something like that per drill, after you even got maybe a rating. It wasn't really for that. We did go on cruises, training cruises, up to the Great Lakes. I made

several of those, which were very interesting.

Marcello: How was the training being taken by individuals in the unit? In other words, was this reserve training being undertaken in a serious manner?

Beran: Basically, yes. Some fellows did feel it was a supplement to their pay, because they tried hard and went up the ranks to chief or first class, which was a considerable amount of pay. You got paid, and you got a check every three months. For one night a week and maybe four or five training periods a month, you had a little extra money. Then I'd look forward to the training cruises up on the lakes, which we would make Detroit or maybe take a trip over to Canada or Chicago. The ships would go to different ports. It was very interesting for young men.

Marcello: Were you striking for a particular rating while you were in that reserve unit?

Beran: Well, yes, I was in an engineering group, and I always wanted to be a motor machinist. After being called into the active duty, I believe I was a fireman second class then. We were sent to the San Diego Destroyer Base, and we stayed there until a certain date in January, and we boarded the Lexington for Honolulu, Hawaii--Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute. Somewhere in here you mentioned that you were actually sent over to the East Coast and took part

in the North Atlantic patrol.

Beran: No, that was the 38th Division.

Marcello: Oh, I see--the 38th.

Beran: I was in the 35th, the engineering division.

Marcello: So when you were activated then, you went directly over to San Diego.

Beran: Yes, the three divisions went to San Diego Destroyer Base, and we all had a destroyer assigned to us, which consisted of the Allen, the Chew, and the Schley. The 35th Division was assigned to the Allen, which I belonged to.

Marcello: I gather from what you've said, then, that you really never did go through the normal Navy boot camp.

Beran: No, some divisions didn't, and we were the ones that didn't.

Marcello: I assume, also, that you did not stay in San Diego very long before you picked up the Lexington. Was it just a matter of days?

Beran: We arrived there . . . we left on the 17th, so it must have taken us about three days . . . possibly four days and three nights at least. It was sometime in January, so we must have spent two to two-and-a-half weeks, before we boarded the "Lex."

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being assigned to the Hawaiian Islands? Were you looking forward to it?

Beran: Yes, I believe everybody was until we hit the West Coast and talked to different sailors, especially the girlies that were

in town that took care of men's needs (chuckle). They'd tell you it was nothing but a rock--nothing there. Still, loving the tropics and geography, I thought, "I'll be my own judge whether I like it or not."

Marcello: So you get to the Hawaiian Islands, and, of course, that's where you pick up the Allen. Describe what sort of the ship the Allen was from a physical standpoint.

Beran: After getting off the Lexington, which looked like a huge building just turned sideways and cut to a point that was floating, and then coming alongside this dock, the thing looked almost like a submarine. As I said, it was a broken deck ship, and all you could see was part of it sticking up, and the rest of it was actually below the dock. That was an early impression, to tell you the truth.

Marcello: It was an old ship, was it not?

Beran: It was an old ship--World War I vintage.

Marcello: You did mention in our pre-interview comments that it was not a four-stacker, however.

Beran: No, not the Allen. The Allen was a two-stacker. I guess it was just one of its breed.

Marcello: Was it very seaworthy at the time you got aboard, or did you have to put this ship back into shape?

Beran: It was fairly seaworthy, but we had a lot of work to do to keep it in shape. It looked like an old Model-T Ford. It took



a lot of bailing wire to keep it in shape. It was good training, and, like I say, we were reserves. There was a little bit of animosity between the two "R's," the regulars and the reserves.

Marcello: Why don't you talk a little bit about that animosity, because I think it tells us a little bit about the Navy in that pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Beran: The thing of it is, the reserves come in the easy way, according to the outlook of the regulars, which is true. I think most of us know that in the height of the Depression that a lot of these fellows went in there to get three "squares" a day and a place to sleep. Let's face it, America was in a chaos, and there were hard times. In comparison to today--a man just goes to a relief office, and he almost immediately receives a check--it was different then. The first thing they'd say was, "Well, you goddamn reserves!" Then we had something or other to say to them: "You goddamn regulars!" It was something just about like it. You'd tell them that they couldn't get a job, and they had to come in here to eat and sleep and stuff like that. Sometimes it would get quite serious, and other times you'd just shake it off and forget it and shake hands. We were all in the same boat; we were here for training.

Marcello: Also, I gather there was quite a bit of resentment on the part of the regulars because the reserves had rank that was

equivalent to and sometimes higher than that of the regulars.

Beran: Yes, they did resent that.

Marcello: For example, what was your rank or rating when you went aboard the Allen? Do you recall?

Beran: Yes, I was fireman second class, which was quite a jump in pay from seaman. In other words, from, say, \$21 a month to about \$48 or \$42 or \$45--something in that vicinity. Considering that a dollar was a dollar in those days, doubling that amount of money meant quite a lot when you hit the beach.

Marcello: How would you break down the crew of the Allen? In other words, could you possibly estimate how many were regulars and how many were reserves?

Beran: Just roughly speaking, I'd say that they must have had about fifty men that were reserves. We had a crew of regulars, which had prepared the ship and helped rebuild it, let's say. That was all with the fifty destroyers deal that they had with Great Britain. What Britain rejected, more or less, the U.S. kept (chuckle). In other words, they gave Britain the best to use.

Marcello: That was the destroyers-for-bases deal.

Beran: Right. We had some old Fleet Reserves that were Navy men in the early twenties, and some of them went out on what they called the "old retirement bill" at sixteen years, which was terminated in about 1926. When the men would put some time in the Philippines or China Station, they would get time-and-a-half.

A year overseas meant a year-and-a-half toward their retirement and pension. Some of them were real dandies, I'll tell you. They were real old sea dogs. They loved their bottles, and they loved their girlies (chuckle),

Marcello: Did you have some of the old China sailors aboard the Allen?

Beran: Yes, we did.

Marcello: I understand those old Asiatic sailors were real characters, were they not?

Beran: They were real characters, yes. We must have had . . . in the Fleet Reserve, I'd say we maybe had eighteen to twenty of them aboard, including chiefs and so on down the ranks. I don't recall one, but he had a Mickey Mouse "crow." I believe he was a sailmaker or something. Naturally, they had canvas, even on the steel ships; but that was his rate, a sailmaker. He was a character out of this world. We had different ratings, and, like I said, most of those guys would hit the beach and make a load and just be demoted back down and start all over again. Some of them went back to apprentice seaman so often and then back up to their rate, which is second, third, and first class ratings, which is a non-commissioned officer's rate--the "crows." Some of them must have held that rate a dozen times.

Marcello: At the same time, I think we have to keep in mind that most of them were pretty good sailors, though, were they not?

Beran: Yes, they were. They knew their business, absolutely. We also had regulars that came in, and, like I said, some did it for purposes of hunger. We ran into one man, and all I know him as is Gross, and he came from a wealthy family in Minnesota. He loved the Navy, and he was going to make a career out of it. He was on about his second hitch, and he was a first class machinist, which meant quite a few years of hard study. You always had maybe a dozen people that were striking for a rate, and you had to be pretty sharp to get that rate. That's where that resentment came in between the regulars and the reserves.

Marcello: When you went aboard, what were you striking for? What particular rating?

Beran: Actually, I wanted to be a motor "mech."

Marcello: That's a motor mechanic?

Beran: Motor mechanic, or a machinist's mate, which is basically the same thing. A motor "mech" would more or less work on a lot of motors, but they can do the same thing that a machinist can do at a station in the engine room. When I went up . . . I don't know just when, but I finally reached fireman first class. I took my test and made it,

Our chief watertender that was boss over the boiler rooms . . . well, they would always address you by your last name, and among the crew members I was always known as "E.T." That

was my middle initial. Anyway, this watertender had come off of . . . he had been a battleship watertender, Those were the people that never sat, they squatted, You had no seats or nothing to sit down on in those engineering spaces. It was strictly regulation on a big ship. He said, "Beran, I'm going to put you up for a test for watertender second class." I said, "Chief, I don't want it. I want to be a machinist's mate." He said, "Well, you're the only one that's not afraid of them goddamn boilers." They were still trying to economize, and they wanted a light brown haze coming out of the stack, so the entire fire room was under air pressure to keep the fire inside the boiler. We used different burner tips for different speeds. Anyway, I could maintain a pretty good brown haze until the boilers would start going back and forth, which meant that they weren't getting enough air, and the flame was coming out of the wrong side of the boiler. I would immediately jump in and shut it down and grab the blower and give it more air. They were huge boilers. Like he said, "You're the only one that's not afraid. You go ahead and jump in there and turn the damn things off and give it a little more air, and then you regulate it again."

"I said, "No, I don't think so, Chief. I'll stay first class." So the engineering officer got hold of me shortly after that, and he said, "Well, you've got no choice. You go up one

grade or down one grade," So looking at it monetarily, I thought, "Well, hell, if I can't stay what I am, I might as well take the next jump." So I took the test and passed, and I became a watertender second class.

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

Beran: That was already the build-up period, and it went along fairly fast, considering what the old-time regulars had to go through when the Navy and the country economized. When the peacetime Navy would pull up to the dock, they'd more or less tell everybody, "Go ashore and buy your meals ashore. "We'll save money on food." Then prior to the war, during the preparedness period, they were kind of loosening up with promotions, because they knew they were going to be building ships and putting ships into commission--old ships that were mothballed and being repaired--and they needed these rates.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Allen?

Beran: Pretty lousy, at times. To tell you of an experience, we had an old chief, a commissary chief, and naturally he was right underneath the commissary officer. They were the ones that would figure out the meals, which was about roughly thirty-five cents a day per man. They'd always say, "I try to feed you boys the best." He was, like I said, a Fleet Reserve; he was really old-time regular Navy. He came up to me, and we were

leaning on the lifeline, which is the small cables that go around with stanchions to hold them up. Looking into the water, he says, "Beran, how did you like the chow?" I had meatballs and spaghetti. I'll never forget that, because it looked like a tub of spaghetti and about three meatballs on top of this mob of spaghetti (chuckle). The man's name was Kri, and I said, "Chief, that was the lousiest goddamn meal! You didn't have enough meat! Anybody can eat spaghetti!" The man actually cried; he got tears in his eyes (laughter). I just got disgusted, and I walked away from him.

That was still peacetime, and the government was still chiseling, giving money to France and England. Secretly, our State Department at that time even knew that we would eventually get into the war but was reluctantly still holding back monetarily and not appropriating enough money. Most of us know by past history that it was really a farce. The United States was never big enough to go in and use their club; they always have to get kicked in the pants and lose men and a lot of material before they actually get into the war. It happened in both world wars.

Marcello: Was the food served family-style aboard the Allen, or was it cafeteria-style when you went aboard?

Beran: No, when I went aboard this old ship, we were fed family-style. They had what they called a mess cook. Like I said, this was

an unorthodox ship, this broken decker. Our mess cook had to go up the ladder, up across the deck forward, and then to the galley, which was right under the bridge, and bring the food down in tureens. We ate off of china; we had plates and cups. He would set that on the table, and we would pass it up and down. They would usually feed you adequately; there was enough.

Marcello: Did you ever get mess cooking when you went aboard the Allen?

Beran: I was made compartment cleaner, because I was subject to seasickness, and they didn't much care for me to carry those tureens down the deck. I was apt to empty myself (laughter). They didn't much trust me, so that's one job I didn't have.

Marcello: Describe what your living quarters were like aboard the Allen.

Beran: I would roughly say it was maybe twenty to twenty-two feet long. The beam, which means from port to starboard side or starboard to port, either way, that must have been about eighteen feet. There were tiers of bunks--three and four here, and one and two. The footlockers were underneath the bunks, which served as seats at the mess tables. It was very close quarters. The chiefs' quarters were aft of ours, under the fantail.

Marcello: Where did you keep your personal gear and so on?

Beran: That was underneath your bunk. In other words, if you were in a tier that had four bunks, you had footlockers underneath, and you had a key to them. It was roughly two feet by eighteen



inches and possibly two feet deep.

Marcello: So living spaces were rather cramped aboard that ship?

Beran: Very cramped, yes. Personal odors and things like that at times were terrific, especially in rough seas when everything was battened down. By that, I mean, the hatch is closed, In rough seas with waves washing over the ship, everything had to be battened down, or else you'd be in water maybe six or eight feet deep. Underneath us was the powder magazine, which carried the powder for our shells and also shells which we carried. We had six torpedo tubes, three on each side, which the entire thing would swing around. We had 3-inch stationary guns, which would be termed cannons, and antiaircraft guns, which handled 3-inch shells in diameter and approximately four feet high. I think that was our complete armament, outside of rifles for landing parties, and Thompson submachine guns, hand grenades, and things like that.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the function of the Allen. I am correct in saying that the Allen was part of a unit that was called the Hawaiian Sea Frontier. Is that correct?

Beran: Yes.

Marcello: What was the function of the Allen within this Hawaiian Sea Frontier?

Beran: Our main function was antisubmarine patrol, which we would patrol practically from one end of the island, to the seaward side.

You would approach Pearl Harbor from Barbers Point to Sandy Hook or some such name. We would stay out approximately a week at a time patrolling anywhere from three miles off the beach to maybe ten miles.

Marcello: So it was basically all inshore patrol or inshore reconnaissance as such?

Beran: Yes. That was our primary job. We also kept the thing in repair, and that was our function. All of a sudden they clamped down, and there was to be no leaves, although some of the other ships were getting leaves. How they swung it, I don't know. We had one boy that swung a leave, and he got to come home. Whether it was political pressure from his folks back there or what, we know politics controls everything in our free society. What is prohibitive for you, someone else might get for himself. He swung a leave . . . but we did come in for a major overhaul. They took out our turbines.

Marcello: When did this occur?

Beran: That was in June of 1941. They repaired our ship practically; let's say they took the guts out and put new ones in. They rebricked the boilers and everything. Our job, being engineers, was to maintain these boilers and work in those boiler rooms and keep everything functioning as well as we possibly could. We had, as we termed them, "yardbirds" working on the ship, which were civilian machinists or blacksmiths or whatever

craft was needed to get the ship into commission. They also put the new Swedish guns--the Bofors 40-millimeters--and the 20-millimeters aboard, so we knew it was preparedness. Japan was running rampant, and we were shaking our finger at them, saying, "Don't do this and don't do that."

Marcello: Did you have any sophisticated equipment aboard, such as radar and sonar and things of that nature yet?

Beran: Not as yet, no. That was all fairly new and in its infancy. We were considered antisubmarine patrol units, which we did perform. Our main defense against submarines was our depth charges, which is like the shape of a big barrel. Most people have seen movies of that, and you may have seen them roll off. Then they also put on Y-guns, which held two of these and could shoot out a certain distance to the side of the ship. We did have sounding gear, which is a football-shaped thing that is lowered . . . well, I don't know what the maximum depth is, maybe six or eight feet down below the hull of the ship, and it sends out sonar. In other words, they are electrical impulses that will hit a solid object and bounce back and let you know approximately where there was a sub, or even a large whale which we picked up one time. Our sounding gear was faulty; it was still World War I vintage.

The word was that we were supposed to go to the Philippines and strengthen that Subic Bay Naval Yard over there. They were

going to give us different things, and I believe the Ward was in this unit that went to the Philippines, along with numerous other ships. They kept us there, and that was in June, and we got our ship repaired--brand new. They overworked the turbines and gave us new boiler brick, which meant new fire brick inside, and we punched tubes and cleaned the inside of the stack and everything that was necessary.

We went along, and we knew Japan was getting tougher and tougher with their answers toward us. President Roosevelt finally slapped this boycott against them. He wouldn't send them any more scrap iron and oil and other strategic materials that we knew they were using against China and Manchuria.

As the time grew close to that fatal day, we were out on patrol in the latter part of November. They knew we had faulty sounding gear . . . and this is all hearsay, but it is actually factual history. They spotted a large Japanese fleet out at sea--carriers, battleships, a number of ships. A submarine was tracking this fleet. On Wednesday of that week, which was our patrol week between these two points--Sandy Hook and Barbers Point--on antisubmarine patrol, they pulled us in. December 7th was a Sunday, and this was Wednesday when they pulled us in, which would make it three days back and would make it about the third or fourth of December. They pulled us into the harbor and sent another ship out in our place.

From that Wednesday to Saturday, they kept us on full alert.

Marcello: We're getting way ahead of our story at this point, because I have all sorts of other questions I need to ask you before we get up to this point. Let's get back to the training routine of the Allen again, because I have some more things that I think we need to get into the record at this point. At the same time that you were on these antisubmarine patrols, and you were patrolling this particular sector, was this a restricted area, so to speak? In other words, were all unauthorized vessels supposed to be flagged down that came within this area?

Beran: To a certain degree, yes. We would occasionally chase a sampan fisherman, a Japanese fisherman, and tell him to get out of that area. But as far as liners and things, they would go into Honolulu Harbor. Like you said, it was a training area. They would tow target barges, and planes would drop these flour bombs on them, and we would fire shells in them and things like that. Yes, that was a training area.

Marcello: But from time to time, you would have to chase fishing vessels and things like that from this restricted area?

Beran: Periodically, yes.

Marcello: Did this ever cause very much comment? I mean, it didn't take a genius to recognize the fact that the United States and Japan did not have the best of relations. I was wondering if

this caused any comment, that is, the fact that you would be finding these Japanese fishing vessels in the restricted area--fishing vessels that were run by the Japanese-Americans.

Beran: Yes, they were Japanese-Americans, and it happened occasionally, but not too often, that we would tell them, "Get out of this area. You have millions of miles of fishing, so stay away."

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate, did your training exercises and functions change any?

Beran: I think our attitude was sort of handed down to us from the officers and different articles and magazines and the newspapers of what our Navy could do to the Japanese. We are an open society, let's face it. You can buy a magazine today that you can build a nuclear weapon with. You can build a nuclear bomb if you know a little bit about physics and chemistry. That is our society. We actually believed, "What the hell! If we get in a war with Japan, in six months there won't be a Japan,"

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of person did you usually conjure up in your own mind? Did you have a stereotype of what the typical Japanese was or should be?

Beran: We saw so many of them in those islands, and reading about them, that we believed they were a fairly industrious people and clean

about themselves. You just didn't give it much thought, and being young men, we always thought the Jap girls were pretty nice. Many of them were very beautiful little girls-- trim and slim (chuckle).

Marcello: When you and your buddies sat around in your bull sessions and talked about the possibility of war coming with Japan, was the possibility of an attack at Pearl Harbor ever mentioned?

Beran: Never. Nobody ever went back to think that what Billy Mitchell said in the twenties when they bombed the German battleships. The importance of aircraft, in other words, bombers . . . nobody would actually think of that. I don't think even our admirals or people actually believed that it would happen.

Marcello: At the same time, we probably have to keep in mind that Japan was about 4,000 miles from Hawaii, too, so there was a great deal of distance.

Beran: That's right. The old saying was that they would build a ship and let it go down the ways and capsize, and I think that was actually Japanese propaganda because nobody actually knew whether those things happened.

Marcello: In other words, there was the belief that the Japanese also produced inferior military hardware, so to speak.

Beran: Yes, that's right. That was the concensus of everybody's thoughts, even the higher-up's, I believe, as you read about

these things later on. But it is history today.

Marcello: Did you mention awhile ago that the Allen would normally go out on those patrols for two weeks at a time?

Beran: No, approximately a period of about seven days.

Marcello: About seven days?

Beran: About a week, yes.

Marcello: But you would be at sea during those entire seven days, and then you would come in.

Beran: Then we would come in.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work aboard the Allen?

Beran: Usually it was a two-thirds liberty--peacetime liberty. Two-thirds of the ship went ashore, and you had a duty section that stayed aboard. In peacetime, this meant, say, you and I and another man had to stand a twenty-four hour watch . . . rather, four men would stand it. You would stand four, him four, and then this guy and so on. That would maybe be a Saturday and a Sunday, and then we would prepare to shove off Monday, because many a time I'd come late on a Monday. In fact, they were already off the dock, and a whaleboat had to come and get us and bring us aboard. We had a fairly decent skipper, which should have meant deck court-martial but we didn't get it. He just gave us the finger and admonished us and let us go. We would go out for our seven days again.



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

Beran: The first thing we'd do was look for something to drink. I always loved to swim, and walking didn't bother me too much. We'd hike up into the hills or maybe even around to the side of the island and put on our swimming trunks and swim. Being a young man and a week away from a woman and some drink, why, the first thing we'd look for was a drink and then look for the girlies, "stables," as we called them (chuckle).

Marcello: Did you spend a great deal of time down on Hotel and Canal and Beretania Streets?

Beran: Oh, yes, absolutely. The gift shops and tattoo shops and all the "stables" were upstairs.

Marcello: By the "stables," of course, you are referring to the houses of prostitution.

Beran: Right (chuckle). Each group or ship or group of men had their favorites. The three or four guys I always bummed with, we always headed for the New Senator Hotel. Those were our favorite girls (chuckle).

Marcello: I've heard the New Senator mentioned before, so they must have been other sailors' favorite girls, too.

Beran: Yes, that's true. In fact, the houses were practically all over the island. You'd find a favorite girl, and you'd kind of stick to her (chuckle).

Marcello: I guess downtown Honolulu was more or less wall-to-wall bodies

during that period prior to the war, was it not?

Beran: Yes. The famous meeting place was the Black Cat (chuckle),

Marcello: Why was the Black Cat Cafe such a favorite meeting place?

Beran: You had your tavern, and you had your pinball machines, and you had your waitresses that you would kind of wink at and give a little pinch (chuckle). The YMCA was right next to it, where you could go in and bathe and shave if you had civilian clothes and a locker there. You'd sit and play cards.

Marcello: It seems as though most of the cabs and buses and so on dropped people off at the YMCA. That was kind of like a central point or something, wasn't it?

Beran: Yes, because the Black Cat was here and the YMCA was there, it was right close. Usually, you would find more of the Army in there playing cards, which we could do aboard ship. Like I said, we especially didn't go to the YMCA to play cards. Maybe we'd drop a postcard home to the folks or something like that. They always had stationery and a pen handy, and you could buy your stamps. The YMCA had no liquor, though; that was the Black Cat (laughter). It was a central point; you could meet right there.

Marcello: On a Saturday night, let us say, would there be very many drunks coming back aboard the Allen?

Beran: Oh, yes, quite a few, including myself (chuckle).

Marcello: And all those Asiatic sailors, too, I'll bet.

Beran: Right. The one good thing about the Allen where we were docked--we would usually dock when there were some minor repairs to be made-- I'll say 200 feet away was a place they called the "Tin Roof," which sold draft beer. If you wanted to sneak over there, I think it opened at three or four o'clock, we'll say. A guy would grab a little bucket, which we termed the "shit buckets," where you would clean . . . , that's not literally speaking. It was just trash or oil where you cleaned your burners and a little bit of kerosene, because we couldn't use gasoline near open fires. You'd slip your white hat in your rear pocket of your dungarees, and you'd walk up to the end of the dock, which was about a hundred feet away. You'd duck around this trash bin and hide your bucket and put your hat on and run right across the road to the Tin Roof and get your beer. Then it would open in the evenings, and even the duty section was allowed over there to get their beer. It wasn't too good a beer, coming from the famous beer town of Saint Louis. Even then as a young man, I loved my beer. But it was something to do and something to drink.

If I remember correctly, I believe once a month they would give us free beer, and we would go over with our wash buckets that we washed clothes in and just fill it to the brim. It had no head on it, no foam, and we'd just get loaded with that beer (laughter). It was terrific! You'd see guys

laying all over the deck on those free days (chuckle). Those Asiatic sailors, they were usually the ones that passed out first, because I think they drank the fastest and the most (laughter), and they were all older fellows.

Marcello: This brings us up to that weekend of December 7, 1941, so let's go into a great deal of detail here. Earlier in our interview, you had been talking about the Allen's routine on that weekend of December 7th. You mentioned that it had been brought off patrol, is that correct?

Beran: That Wednesday.

Marcello: Why don't you pick up the story from that point?

Beran: Like I said, we were pulled off of patrol that Wednesday, prior to December 7th on Sunday. They told us we had faulty sounding gear, which we did have. We went on in, but we were on full alert, actually as if we were expecting an attack, which I quoted to you earlier about sighting the Jap fleet.

Marcello: Who had sighted that Japanese fleet?

Beran: One of our submarines. They lost the sight of that fleet in heavy weather. They ran into storms, and when they finally up-periscoped, they couldn't see a thing in clear weather. The fleet was long gone. They were really steaming at flank speed, which means as fast as a ship can go toward the target, which was about 300 miles off of the Island of Oahu. In other words, this was the range of the planes to make

it there and back with fuel consumption.

Marcello: Why was it that the Allen was pulled off of patrol?

Beran: Because of faulty sounding gear. We were on a full alert from Wednesday until Saturday noon.

Marcello: What did a full alert mean for the Allen?

Beran: Actually prepared for battle or a full header of steam on the boiler where we could have just untied from the dock, pulled our lines in, backed out, and then gone out to sea.

Marcello: Was this unusual?

Beran: Yes, very much, although the crew didn't know anything about this situation outside of hearing on the radio that the Jap ambassador was meeting in Washington with our statesman, Cordell Hull. This Nomura was in Honolulu on his way to fly to Washington around that Wednesday or Thursday, which he made it in a matter of hours, well, maybe eight or ten hours with the planes that they had in those days. At one o'clock on Saturday--I should be using Navy time, but it is confusing now after all these years--they gave full liberty. In other words, two-thirds of the ship went ashore, and I was in the duty section, which meant I had to have the auxiliary watch to maintain enough steam to keep power to the galley, to keep the pumps going for our heads, which are toilets in civilian terms.

They were also going to fumigate. The American Navy is

clean in comparison . . . I've been aboard French ships, English ships, Italian ships, As clean as we were, you bring forth roaches and bugs and worms in vegetables and sacks of potatoes and things like that. The ship actually had quite a few of these little brown roaches--German roaches, I think they termed them--and they were tough buggers, just like the German soldiers. Anyway, they were going to fumigate after breakfast, which meant they were going to close the compartment tight and release this gas and batten down all the hatches for several hours. They said, "Bring up your mail or whatever you want to do." This was to be a "Rope-yarn Sunday," which means sew your clothes, put your buttons on, or whatever patching you wanted to do, or bring up books to read.

I had the 0400 to 0800 watch in the morning. My relief came down at twenty minutes until eight o'clock, and breakfast was already served in the compartment, so I had to take my plate and go up to the galley. I got my two eggs, or as many as I wanted, and some bacon and bread and my coffee, and I went down to the compartment to eat.

All of a sudden, I heard a lot of gunfire . . . not too much gunfire at the moment, but bombs bursting. Well, they were constantly training, towing targets and firing their guns at flying targets. All of a sudden, I heard the damndest

bang under the hull of the ship. I'm eating and this Gross from Minnesota came running down and went to his footlocker to get his money; he was lucky at craps, and he had quite a bit in there. He says, "The Japs are here, and they're sinking the fleet!" I said, "Oh, boy!" I tramped my feet and says, "Here I go!" I thought he was kidding.

I looked at the man's face, and I could see fear on the man. He was pale, and his eyes were wide, and his lips were sort of trembling as he ran by,

About that time the General Quarters bell went off, which means man your battle stations. I took an extra bite and jumped up, and I ran up the ladder and stepped out on the deck, and I saw this Jap plane flying by. He must have been 100 yards away. I could see his teeth, and he was grinning, and he had his flight glasses. I thought, "Well, this is it," and I stepped out.

Three weeks before that my GQ station was changed. I was on a gun. I was number one shellman, which means I would be the one that would push the anti-aircraft shell into the barrel. Then you had the guy that would slam it shut, and he would do the aiming. I was transferred to the fireroom due to this chief's recommendation that I'm not afraid of the boilers.

So I went down, and the man I was to relieve . . . his name was Rominick, and he had a pair of boobs on him like about a

twenty-one-year-old woman, and we called him "Tits" for a nickname. He was sitting down there, and he was writing a letter, and he would look up at the steam gauge and the water gauge on the boiler. He said, "What is it? A drill?" Naturally, he felt that.

To back up a little bit, when I stepped out of the hatch, the Arizona was already burning, and the Oklahoma had a ninety-degree list and was turning very slowly and burning fiercely. That's the one that capsized completely, rolled over.

Getting back to "Tits" Rominick, he says, "Is it a drill?" I said, "Get off your ass! The Japs are sinking the fleet! Make up some burners! Let's get up some steam!" The burners put the oil through under pressure through an atomizer that forms the gas that burns.

Marcello: In a situation like this, that is, on a Sunday morning, would most of the crew have been aboard the Allen? In other words, if you had liberty did you have to be back aboard the ship at a certain time that evening?

Beran: Not if you had a weekend liberty, or, as they termed it, a seventy-two-hour liberty. Some came back, for instance, say, if they lost their money in a crap game. They'd go over and do what they had to do--maybe a few drinks--or if they had enough money for a girlie. Then they'd come back because they didn't have enough to get a hotel room. The YMCA looked



like cordwood, the way they were lined up on cots. Normally, some did come back.

To get back to the fireroom, between him and I, we had a full header of steam up in nine minutes, which was against regulations. Normally, you should build up steam in a period of twenty minutes to a half an hour, but it was an emergency. The entire fireroom was under pressure, and we had to go through an air chamber, or an air lock, which meant you would open a hatch topside, step on this ladder, pull the hatch closed, dog it down, go down, and then you had to undog this other hatch before you went into the fireroom, and then you went down the ladder to the floor plates. I heard a buzzer and a light would light, and I looked at this officer, and he is pale and he has a life preserver on and a big .45, and I think he was more scared than we were.

As I closed that hatch on myself, I don't remember my exact words, but I remember something like, "God save us! This is the last time that I'm ever going to see that sunshine!" It was sort of a cloudy day, but you could see some of the sun. I gave myself up then and there. I was thinking, as just a small "potato" in the military, "Well, if they're here now, they're really here in force!" I pictured an invasion of such terrific bombardment that there wouldn't be a ship afloat.

Marcello: Generally speaking, was everybody acting in a professional manner?

Beran: Oh, yes. You are trained to do this, although we had two guys . . . one guy became so frightened that he tried to crawl under a locker on deck that only had about a six-inch space--the locker where they stored their movie machines and projector. He was so scared--frightened--that he actually tried to get under there, and he couldn't get his ass under there. Another guy, a yeoman, Johnson, who was regular Navy and a con man and a "sharpie," he put on a tin hat, as they termed a helmet, the old World War I style, and he was actually shaking in that thing, and he looked comic. That thing was just flopping around on his head, almost making a complete circle because he was shaking.

Then the officer came down, like I told you, and he stood there with a .45. I don't know whether he mistrusted us or what, but there was no telling what he was going to do. He probably had orders to shoot us or try to stop us if we panicked and tried to run out, but that was the farthest thing from my mind. We were trained to do what we were doing, exactly, under an emergency.

So we had sixty-six men aboard. All of a sudden, we got word, "Prepare for sea! Get underway!"

Marcello: And what was the complement at that time?

Beran: Sixty-six men.

Marcello: How many men were actually aboard the Allen?

Beran: I would say 175 or 200 men. We had approximately about one-third of the men that were assigned to this ship, because two-thirds had liberty, and we were only one-third aboard.

Like I said, they were prepared to fumigate the ship, to delouse the ship itself. They took these canisters of gas that were supposed to kill the bugs and threw them over the side. Everything that was topside went over the side, including the mess tables where we were supposed to eat. I believe that gas was supposed to last about eight hours. That all went over the side. With axes, they cut the hawsers that had us tied to the dock, and we backed out, and we went out to sea.

Marcello: In the meantime, did you come under any fire or anything as you were going out to sea? Of course, you probably wouldn't have noticed this, since you were down below.

Beran: I was down below, but they were still concentrating on the battleships and cruisers. I believe the raid was over by then. In fact, it was, because it must have been close to ten o'clock in the morning when we pulled out. The raid was already underway since five minutes until eight o'clock.

Marcello: For the most part, they really weren't bothering the Allen. They were going after bigger game.

Beran: Bigger game, thinking that carriers were in there, which was their primary target. Like I said, being just a small "spud" in the Navy at the time, with ammunition ships and tankers

all around us, I just pictured that that island was going to be blown to pieces. I even expected them to do their damage and neutralize us as much as they possibly could and then have their landing barges out there so that they would have landed the troops, which would have been very easy for them to do.

Anyway, we pulled out to sea, and we were out there . . . everybody, I think, in the back of their heads thought, "We're hauling ass! We're going home to the States!" We were thinking that. Yet, two-thirds of your mind is thinking, "That's not it! We're out looking for these bastards," which we were (chuckle).

To get back to the duty aboard ship, I would spend two hours in the fireroom, which was my duty station, two hours topside manning guns or lookout or whatever was necessary . . . pass ammunition. No sleep at all. We were fed on-the-run-- coffee and sandwiches. Whenever they'd think they missed you, they'd bring you a couple of sandwiches. Nobody was interested too much in food.

We got out that night, and we ran into the New Orleans, a cruiser. In the meantime, I guess militarily being way down the line, the Hawaiian Sea Frontier, we were not given our recognition--wartime signals and code name. The New Orleans, which was a cruiser, already had theirs. So they're blinking lights at each other. Their skipper's telling the signalman

what to blink to us, and our skipper was telling him what to do. Our skipper knows that's the New Orleans. We're still going under our old signal. They all have code names, and then they have a code name for wartime, and he didn't recognize us. Finally, they get on what is termed a ship's phone, and they talked verbally to each other. Our skipper told them, "Goddamn it, I had six tubes on you!" We decided they were friendly, and the skipper of the New Orleans said, "Well, goddamn it, I had 8-inchers on you!" So there would have been two ships blown out of the water, just like that. I don't recall if it was two or three days that we stayed out, actually looking for the Japanese. They went one way, and we were cruising around and looking the other way.

Marcello: In the meantime, was the ship one big rumor mill?

Beran: Well, we were so damn busy and so tired that it wasn't too much of a rumor mill. It was just, "Well, what did you do?" "Were you scared?" "Did you shit in your pants?" We said stuff like that, maybe, as you passed a man(chuckle). "Are you hungry? I've still got a half a sandwich." There wasn't too much of that, outside of joking and jiving. I think we were all, deep in our hearts, scared about what had actually happened, knowing that they came close to 5,000 miles and practically snuck in on us, right through the open door. We didn't know at that time about the foul-up of communications

and things like that. When you see it now, you almost think it was a damn sellout by some politician to get us in the damn thing. Being a pretty good Republican, I always blamed Roosevelt because he was a Democrat (chuckle).

Marcello: You said you were out there thrashing around for three days?

Beran: Yes, two to three days. I'm not positive on the time. Anyway, while we were at sea, that evening, December 7th--it was already dark--we saw firing over the island, which we took to be another attack. It was antiaircraft guns and tracers. By tracers, they shoot up the red ones, and then they follow that pattern. That was when we heard that Halsey and his carriers were coming in. Usually, they land the airplanes first, because there is always that danger of the ship being sabotaged or running into a mine. Being at war already, a submarine could have been at that entrance, but that was peacetime procedure, also. As these planes were coming in, some happy trigger-finger guy on the island just hollered, "Enemy planes! Air raid!" He fired one shot, and all of a sudden the whole island opened because they were already alerted.

Marcello: Could you actually see this?

Beran: We couldn't see the plane, but we could see the shell fire. When they fire tracer shells, that is red hot and you can see that.

Marcello: Did you think that the Japanese were coming back or had come back?

Beran: We pictured that as another evening attack, thinking, "I'm damn glad we're here at sea! What good would we be there as a stationary target tied up to another ship or to the dock?"

Marcello: I guess you actually, yourself, couldn't see any of this, since you were below decks, right?

Beran: No, nothing outside of what I saw at the beginning--the Oklahoma turning over, hearing the noise, and all kinds of thoughts in my head, such as, "Well, when's the next one going to hit?" This was enough for me.

Marcello: So when did the Allen then finally come back into Pearl again?

Beran: Two to three days.

Marcello: What did you do when you came in?

Beran: I was off duty. I was topside, and I could see the damage that was done. The ships were still smoking and burning. We would get word of how many battleships were hit. We knew that the Oklahoma and the Arizona were totally disabled, sunk. The Nevada, she beached herself. The Utah was turned over; that was a target ship. You could see the damage on others that had holes in their decks. The Cassin and the Downes, they were in the floating dry dock with the Pennsylvania. The Shaw, she was in the floating dry dock, and her bow was shot off and exploded. In fact, one of the reserves from Saint Louis was

killed fighting the fires on the Cassin and the Downes when some of the ammunition exploded. In fact, there were two of them killed. Every Sunday closest to the 7th, another fellow and I go and put a little Pearl Harbor marker and a flower on their graves at our National Cemetery in Saint Louis. They don't allow flags. Only once a year do they allow flags, and that is Memorial Day. Usually, the Boy Scouts or different organizations put a flag on each grave. There is a constant big flag always flying over National Cemetery.

Marcello: I guess there was a lot of oil on the water at that time, also.

Beran: Oh, yes. Oil and debris were floating all over the place. We came back, and our crew was scattered all over to different ships. Some of them helped fight fires, like I said, and some of them worked at the hospitals bringing in the wounded. Others were just jerked aboard different ships. We had some that were on the cruiser Phoenix and some on the Detroit. Wherever a ship was pulling out, they'd jump into a whaleboat, and if they couldn't get to ours, which we were on, they just went aboard theirs and performed regular duties like they would on their own ship.

Marcello: Mr. Beran, is there anything else relative to the Pearl Harbor attack that we haven't covered? That exhausts my list of questions. Is there any other comment that you would like



to make?

Beran: Like I said, when we came in and saw the damage, it was heartbreaking because we knew a lot of men died. As you went into town and saw Hickam Field leveled . . . the hangars . . . the planes were lined up like for an inspection on that field. I think in every enlisted man's mind they more or less had in their minds that it was almost like sabotage, like somebody sold us down the river. To this day I don't believe it now that I've seen the facts and read them. Even in these movies, there was a foul-up in Washington. I believe it was just the stupidity of our politicians and State Department that creates situations like this. We had it in Korea, and we had it in Vietnam. Our politicians are damn fools. They just don't realize what is going on, and when a military man is smart and tries to tell them, they are told, "Listen, you are in the service of the government, buddy. You'd better keep your mouth shut." Like good school boys, they just go ahead with what they're told to do.

Marcello: That's probably a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated. 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 Pearl Harbor.

Beran: I was very happy to be interviewed and to have met you.