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Interview with  
JOE C. DILLON  
June 6, 1980

Place of Interview: Arlington, Texas

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Joe C. Dillon  
(Signature)

Date: June 6 1980

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Oral History Collection

Joe Clyde Dillon

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview; Arlington, Texas

Date: June 6, 1980

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Joe Dillon for the North Texas State Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on June 6, 1980, in Arlington, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Dillon in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the cruiser, the USS Saint Louis, during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Dillon, to begin this interview, would you 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. Dillon: I was born in McNairy County, Tennessee, on April 8, 1917.

Dr. Marcello: Did you go to school there in Tennessee?

Mr. Dillon: I received the first six years of my education in Corinth, Mississippi. At the age of thirteen, we moved to Tennessee, and I finished my education in the Tennessee schools.

Dr. Marcello: So you were born in Tennessee, moved to Mississippi, and then moved back to Tennessee again.

Mr. Dillon: That's right. I graduated from high school at Savannah,

Tennessee, in 1937.

Marcello: When did you enter the United States Navy?

Dillon: In 1940, January 2nd.

Marcello: What did you do between the time of high school graduation and your enlistment in the Navy?

Dillon: I worked on the farm with my father and relatives and tried to find a job doing something else, really.

Marcello: Those were still Depression times, I guess, were they not?

Dillon: They were. It was very hard for a boy my age to get a job or even to go to college.

Marcello: So did the Depression have some influence upon your decision to join the Navy, or why did you decide to join it?

Dillon: Well, it certainly did. The reason I joined the Navy, I had worked two months for the Kroger Grocery Company as a clerk at Corinth, Mississippi. My father knew the manager well; they were friends together years before. He told me he could not put me on the payroll. He would give me a letter of recommendation that I could take to Memphis to the district office and possibly get a job as a clerk in one of the tri-state areas that their stores were located in. And I did. I went to Memphis, and I couldn't get a job. They couldn't hire a clerk in the whole tri-state area.

I walked down on Main Street to the post office and checked up on the Navy, and I made preparations for going in the Navy.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Navy as opposed to one of

the other branches of service?

Dillon: Well, that's not really an odd question, but I guess I hadn't seen the water before, for one thing, and I had a cousin that had recently joined the Navy there in Memphis. He came home with his Navy uniform on, and I said, "Well, that looks pretty good."

Really, I had a little more reason for joining the Army. In 1937 I spent a summer in CMTC, and in 1938 I took the West Point entrance examination. I wanted to have a career in the Army, but not a single young man in our area, in the 7th Congressional District, could pass the examination. They were that tough.

Marcello: You mentioned that you were in the CMTC. I think I know the initials, but would you give them to me?

Dillon: I sure will. The CMTC was formed after World War I, and it's the Citizens Military Training Corps. They took high school boys, and they could spend a month each summer in military training. They could take an equivalency test and get a commission in the Army.

Marcello: How tough was it to get into the Navy in 1940 when you enlisted?

Dillon: Well, in the summer of 1939 is when I started action to get in the Navy. It was six months before they called me to get in. The Navy was approximately 50,000 men at that time, and it was the Depression era, and they had all the people they wanted at that time. It was a slow process. You had to have a high school education in order to get in,

and I did have one. I had four years of mathematics which, I think, helped me get into the field I wanted after I got into the Navy.

Marcello: How long was your enlistment?

Dillon: Six years, no less (chuckle).

Marcello: At the time that you enlisted in the Navy, how closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs and things of that nature?

Dillon: Well, that's a good question. I wasn't really seriously concerned, but I had kept abreast of current events. I knew that there was a war brewing in Europe, or I thought there was, but I didn't think we'd be involved in any way soon.

Marcello: You mentioned something interesting here. Is it safe to assume, from what you said, that you generally thought in terms of a war in Europe rather than in terms of a war in the Far East?

Dillon: Yes, I thought of a war in terms of Europe. Well, I was born during World War I, and I thought more of Europe.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Dillon: In Norfolk, Virginia.

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

Dillon: Normal Navy boot camp.

Marcello: How long did it last at that time?

Dillon: At that time, I went in in Platoon Two in 1940 at Norfolk, Virginia, and just prior to that, the training lasted twelve weeks. We were the first platoons to have eight weeks of training.

Marcello: That should've been an indication there that something was brewing, I suppose. They were cutting back on boot camp because I guess they were anxious to get people out into the fleet.

Dillon: Well, probably at that time the Navy started expanding.

Marcello: Where did you go from Norfolk?

Dillon: Well, from the training station, I was successful in getting a school before I joined the fleet. I went to the Navy electrical school at Norfolk for four months' training on the shipboard electricity, AC-DC theory and various things such as was required aboard a ship.

Marcello: That was quite an honor, I suppose, because not just everybody was selected to go to one of these Navy schools.

Dillon: Well, I thought it was. Of course, I asked for it. Before I joined the Navy, I talked with a fellow my dad knew that worked for the TVA. He was a retired chief electrician's mate. I talked to him, and he took me through Pickwick Dam and showed me the generators and whatnot and gave me a nice briefing on an electrician's job, at least with the TVA, and then he encouraged me to get into the Navy. I went in trying to get into the electrical division. After I graduated from the school in Norfolk, four of us went aboard the Saint Louis.

Marcello: How would you evaluate that training that you received in this school?

Dillon: Well, it was very good. They gave us all the necessary training that we needed to go on the new "AC" ships, they called them. Prior to that, most of the ships had been "DC" ships. So it was a new field of training for a Navy electrician.

Marcello: Maybe you need to explain this. When you say that the old ships were "DC" ships and the new ships were "AC" ships, what do you mean by that?

Dillon: All right. The "DC" ships operated with DC motors. They had brushes. They had . . . well, I don't know the voltage they used, but I think it was around 250 volts, DC, probably. Now the "AC" ships had 450-volt motors and altogether different methods of maintenance and upkeep. They had transformers, and they could have various different types of voltages.

Marcello: What was the advantage of the "AC" ship over the "DC" ship?

Dillon: Well, I suppose there's several advantages. The main advantage is the maintenance. The electricians spent considerable time replacing brushes and armatures and rebuilding on the old equipment. I would imagine that it's lighter equipment, and, of course, it's much more modern, too.

Marcello: And is this specifically why you were assigned to the Saint Louis? Was the Saint Louis an "AC" ship?

Dillon: The Saint Louis was one of the newer ships. It was built in 1939, I believe, at the Newport News Shipbuilding. It



was either 1938 or 1939. It was pretty new. That's the reason I was assigned to it, is because we were trained for this particular type of career.

Marcello: You had been through boot camp, and you had been through the Navy school. You probably thought that you were pretty "salty." What sort of a reception did you get when you went aboard the Saint Louis?

Dillon: Well, when I went aboard the Saint Louis, there was only a couple of strikers on there. Now a striker is a person that has no rating and is striking to become an electrician or whatever field that he's endeavoring to get into. There were very few strikers. The crew was well-trained.

I was treated very well, but I certainly knew my position on the ship. I was taken to the engine room and turned over to a guy named Kovacs. He was a second class, and he was a good guy. He didn't say much to you, but he told you what your job was. He never said much else to you, but he made sure you did your job.

Marcello: I guess they were glad to get people like you because it lightened their workload quite a bit, did it not?

Dillon: Well, it did and I think most boys my age were eager to get into anything that looked promising as a career or that they could learn and progress in--any technical field, especially. Most of the people were hard-working members of the crew. "Ernie" was a hard-working member of the crew, and he demanded considerable work from me, too. In

fact, one time I had to scrub the floor plates with a toothbrush just as a matter of punishment, I suppose (chuckle).

Marcello: Did you find that the senior petty officers aboard the Saint Louis were eager to give you the necessary on-the-job training that was required?

Dillon: I sure did. They were all eager to train you, and they just seemed to want to be helpful in all ways. It was a good group of guys.

Marcello: Describe what your quarters were like aboard the Saint Louis.

Dillon: Well, my first quarters aboard the Saint Louis was down on the first platform level, which is below the . . . they had three decks, and then anything that doesn't run the full length of the ship is called a platform. So I was on the first platform level, which, you might say, is the fourth deck, if it extended through the ship. We had rather small quarters, and we had fifteen men. We had five tiers of bunks and three bunks to the tier. We had our small lockers. Men in those days didn't . . . they could carry everything in their small locker. It was below the waterline. I know my bunk was right against the bulkhead, and I would imagine there was some voids in between there and the outer hull. I could go to sleep at night and feel the force of the sea or hear the force of the sea banging against the side, and it would rock you off to sleep. So it was good quarters. It was a little stuffy down there-- no portholes or anything.

Later on, I had quarters on the second deck, and we had nice portholes, and when we were cruising at sea, we could put a wind scoop in and get a nice, cool breeze. It was really nice.

Marcello: Where were your working spaces located?

Dillon: Well, my earlier working spaces were in the engine room, and, of course, at different times they assign you to what they called circuits, like, you had the topside power or the boats and batteries and the airplane crane and winch and so forth, or you had interior communications, which was the IC room, the gyros, the automatic telephones, or various things. Now a regular Navy electrician's mate in those days got the opportunity to serve in all facets of the electrical division.

Our division was governed by a chief warrant officer, who was a commissioned officer in those days. We had one pin-striped warrant who . . . actually a warrant officer. Mr. Craig was his name. Mr. Craig was an ideal officer. We all liked him. He ran a tight ship. He was fair to the men, but he was very strict and stern, and he followed regulations to the "T." If you were right all the way up the line, he'd do anything for you, but you couldn't be wrong anywhere and expect him to do anything for you. We knew that. It was a tight ship. It was a very good division to work in.

Marcello: So you mentioned that you ultimately started out in the engine room, and then, as you mentioned, from there you went

all over the ship.

Dillon: Various different jobs over the ship.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Saint Louis? I'm again referring to this pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Dillon: Well, when we were around the stateside ports, we got fresh vegetables and fruits and so forth, and it was fair. Of course, it was different for me. I came off of a farm in Tennessee at the time, and we had good food, but it was different. I enjoyed the food when I went in the Navy. I would say the food was very good. It's maybe not the best in the world but very good. We had beans and cornbread every Saturday morning, which was the old Navy tradition. Later on, in my years in the Navy on other ships, they didn't serve some of the officers beans and cornbread, so they'd come back and try to get the crew's mess to bring them a bowl of beans. It was an old Navy tradition.

Marcello: Did you have a tour of mess cooking while you were aboard the Saint Louis?

Dillon: Well, I'm glad to say that on the Saint Louis, Chief Warrant Officer Craig never allowed any of his strikers to become mess cooks. All the other "black gang" divisions furnished mess cooks but not us. He said he didn't have enough strikers, and he got away with it. So I never had to mess cook in the Navy.

Marcello: How fast or slow were promotion as an electrician's mate in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Dillon: Well, it was pretty slow up until about the time that I went aboard the Saint Louis. I expected in a six-year cruise to get second class petty officer. We had a few second class petty officers that had eight years in at that time, and I thought if I could get it in six, I'd really be doing well.

But I think promotion picked up. I made third class petty officer in eighteen months. In those days the electricians did not go for fireman first class. If you went to fireman first class in the electrical division, the other engineering divisions could grab you off and put you in the boiler rooms or in the engine rooms pretty easily, so they never gave us a fireman first class rating. We went automatically to third class petty officer. Fireman first class made the same money that a third class electrician made in those days. They gave you the money, but they didn't give you the rating. In the electrical division, they eventually gave you the rating, but you had to wait longer to get it. So that was it.

Marcello: Describe the process by which the Saint Louis got to Pearl Harbor. Now you mentioned that you board the Saint Louis in Norfolk, Virginia. Did the Saint Louis then proceed more or less directly to Honolulu or Pearl Harbor?

Dillon: I'm trying to remember. I went aboard the Saint Louis in June, 1940. The first trip we made on the Saint Louis was with Admiral Greenslade aboard. We made an inspection tour

of all the British bases that were later to be traded for destroyers with England.

That ended sometime during the summer, and we went to the southern drill grounds and various other places in the Atlantic for antiaircraft firing and all kinds of training and so forth. The ship was underway practically every week in and out of Norfolk. We made a trip up to Newfoundland, and just prior to my going on the Saint Louis, she had been down to Rio de Janeiro with a crew. So primarily she operated on the East Coast and around the West Indies.

In late . . . I'd say, maybe, December of 1940, we went to the Panama Canal and went to San Diego, and we went to the Navy yard in California.

Marcello: Vallejo.

Dillon: Vallejo Navy Yard. Then we had radar and whatnot put on there. Then we made a trip out to Pearl Harbor. Then we operated with Cruiser Division Nine under Admiral Leary. I think this is the same Admiral Leary that after Pearl Harbor was assigned to Douglas MacArthur as a Navy strategist of some type. I don't know what his title was.

We made a mission during 1941. Well, we came back and forth to the States two or three times for various gunnery replacements or radar replacements or whatnot. We made a trip to Manila. We escorted the old Henderson with a shipload of Marines to Manila, and then we were going on over to Vladivostok. We were going to escort the Henderson to some

point in China, but our ship was to go to Vladivostok. We were looking forward to that, but we got into Manila, and we stayed there a week. The Henderson went on, and we came back.

While I was in Manila, a couple of fellows and myself went over to the Cavite Navy Yard. Of course, we went over and ate chow with all of the sailors. We immediately learned that these people wanted to get back to the States--swap duty or any way they could to get back to the States. So at that time, we really began to think that the trouble was closer at hand than we realized.

So we came back. I don't remember the month, but we got back at least a couple of months before Pearl Harbor. We had quite a few people from Naval Intelligence come aboard the Saint Louis. We would have various training and lectures and whatnot about damage control problems. They particularly stressed the thermite bombs that were being used by the German Navy particularly. Well, I suppose that they were beginning to be more concerned about a possible war coming up.

Marcello: What was the scuttlebutt going around the ship as a result of all this activity?

Dillon: Well, the scuttlebutt was that something was brewing and that we may get into it with the Japanese.

Marcello: When you thought of the country getting into war with the Japanese, did you ever think about the possibility of an attack at Pearl Harbor, though?

Dillon: I never thought about an attack at Pearl Harbor. I thought we'd have to go over around the Philippines and fight the Japanese. I felt at that time they were so inferior that it wouldn't take us long to do the job.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what your stereotyped impressions of the Japanese were, and I think in part you've certainly answered my question.

Dillon: Well, we felt we were the best navy in the world, and we thought we could handle any situation that came up.

Marcello: What did you think about being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands in a more or less permanent basis? Did you consider it good duty there? Did you like it?

Dillon: Well, I didn't see too much of the islands. In those days I didn't make much money and never owned an automobile. The only occasion that I really got to see any of the islands . . . we had a chief watertender that invited a couple of the firemen out of the engine room. I stood watches in his engine room, and he invited me to come along. He and his wife had an automobile. They lived ashore . . . had a home ashore. We had dinner in his home, and they just took us on a picnic around the island. We went all the way around the island. That's the first time, really, I got to see much of Hawaii.

I really didn't like it there. I seldom went ashore, and if I did, well, there wasn't much to do---just go to downtown Honolulu and just see the sights around the center



of town, maybe go out to Waikiki Beach. There really wasn't much to do, as far as I was concerned. We met a few girls and got acquainted with them but nothing really serious. We'd take a few pictures and write a letter or two to the girls, and that's about it.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work for you aboard the Saint Louis when you were at Pearl Harbor?

Dillon: Well, we were divided into sections, and you would either be in the duty section . . . I believe . . . well, there was three-section liberty in port, I believe. When you're at sea, of course, it's slightly different.

Marcello: Now when you say three-section liberty, that meant three sections could go ashore and one section would stay aboard?

Dillon: Two sections could go ashore and one would stay aboard.

Marcello: And one stand-by?

Dillon: And one stand-by. Now the stand-by may or may not go ashore. It depended on their particular situation.

Marcello: Did you have a particular time when you had to be back aboard the Saint Louis when you had liberty? I know that a lot of the battleship sailors had to be back aboard by midnight.

Dillon: You know, I believe we did. We had to be back by midnight. It was a midnight liberty.

Marcello: I guess this was probably because of the lack of hotel space in Honolulu. There wasn't too much there at that time, was there?

Dillon: That's right. There wasn't too much.

Marcello: You couldn't have afforded what was there, anyway.

Dillon: We couldn't afford it, anyway, because I only made \$36 a month. I don't know what hotels rates were, but I'm sure I couldn't afford one.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to deteriorate, could you detect any changes in your training routine, and, if so, what were they?

Dillon: Well, we had extensive training. We had fire control and damage control problems. We had a lot of antiaircraft practice. Of course, I wasn't concerned with gunnery, but we did have quite a lot of gunnery practice. We were out on missions out of the harbor every week. I think in general all training was stepped up. They concentrated more, as far as my job was concerned, with damage control and fire-fighting.

Marcello: Did you have more general quarters drills?

Dillon: We had a considerable lot of general quarters drills.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that the Saint Louis was a part of Cruiser Division Nine?

Dillon: As best as I know, it was part of Cruiser Division Nine.

Marcello: What were some of the other cruisers with which the Saint Louis would be operating?

Dillon: Well, you know, our sister ship, the Helena, was one. The Honolulu was the flagship. There were several other cruisers around there, but I just don't remember whether we operated with them in prior years. I don't remember whether the

Nashville and San Francisco were in our division or not, but it was mostly light cruisers in Cruiser Division Nine.

Marcello: Normally, when you went out on one of these routine training missions, how long would you be out?

Dillon: We'd be out five days and come in for the weekend.

Marcello: Did this occur like clockwork?

Dillon: Pretty much like clockwork.

Marcello: In other words, you would go out on a Monday normally and come back on a Friday.

Dillon: We'd come back on a Friday, and we'd have inspection on Saturday. We had inspection practically every Saturday and maybe even have an admiral's inspection.

Marcello: Liberty would commence when the inspection was over?

Dillon: Yes. We usually moored out between Ford Island and Aiea in a designated area.

Marcello: Were you out there with other cruisers?

Dillon: We were out there on Friday with other cruisers prior to December 7th. On Saturday we got orders to go into a berth at the Navy Yard.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to that weekend of December 7, 1941, so let's pursue this last comment one step farther. You mentioned that you are out between Ford Island and Aiea with some of the other cruisers, and then you were ordered into one of the berthing spaces. What was the purpose of this? Do you know?

Dillon: We had a one-week yard period scheduled, and we had moved in

to do all this yard work.

Marcello: But now it did not commence at all on that weekend, is that correct? Was that to begin on Monday?

Dillon: No, it started on Saturday morning.

Marcello: Was there a lot of griping about it, or did you know it was coming?

Dillon: Well, we knew that it was coming. There was no griping about it. We were really glad to get a chance to do this. It broke our routine, for one thing.

Marcello: So what happened in your particular case when you went into the berthing space, and you were getting ready for this overhaul? What did it mean to you on Saturday?

Dillon: Well, I don't know that it meant anything in particular because I had to work that day doing something. I don't recall what I did during the day.

I know that on Saturday night I had the duty. I was in the duty section. Well, I had watch later on that night. I had the midnight watch on the number two generator, the running generator, the only one we had running for the ship's power. I had the twelve to four o'clock watch on Sunday morning, but on Saturday during the working hours, I was busy doing something. I have no idea now what it was.

Marcello: At this time was the ship still in condition to get underway if it had to? In other words, had anything been torn down or taken off or taken apart or anything of that nature at this point then?

Dillon: From the time that we pulled in and tied up alongside the Honolulu, which was in the same berth . . . we tied alongside the Honolulu. The San Francisco was in the same berth but at the pier on our other side across from us. We weren't tied to them, but they were tied to the pier. They were in the same slip.

Yes, they began immediately disabling the ship as fast as they could to accomplish all the necessary work that had to be done in one week's time. I don't know what all the other divisions did, but in our division and in the "black gang," I know, there was a considerable amount of work to the engineering system on the ship.

I know that our 5-inch guns were disabled. On the electrical controllers that control the shell hoists and the training and elevating and whatnot, the contacts and all of these controllers were taken off and taken over to Shop Fifty-one in the Navy Yard. The Navy at that time didn't put new material back on. They had these rebuilt, replated, and they put them back in. Well, we had no way of starting our antiaircraft guns with this in the shop.

Marcello: How about the boilers and so on? Had they been torn down, also?

Dillon: Well, the boilers per se had not, but the fire brick had been taken out of the boilers. The firemen were cleaning up the area, and they put new brick back in. That wasn't part of my job.

I can't recall what I did, but I think I was involved with taking all of the phones that day down to central station and getting them in order to check them out--all the sound power battle phones--to get them worked over. We had a pile down there as high as your head laying in the middle of the floor in central station.

Marcello: You mentioned that you had the twelve to four o'clock watch that night, that is, on Saturday night. Did anything eventful happen during that watch?

Dillon: Not a thing. Everything went smooth. It was just as normal a night as you could ever hope for.

Marcello: Up until this time, are you pretty satisfied with your Navy career? Had the Navy turned out to be everything you expected?

Dillon: It certainly had. I would say that I was completely satisfied.

Marcello: On a Saturday night, when the Saint Louis would be in port, would you have very many drunks come back aboard?

Dillon: Well, knowing the crew on the Saint Louis, there'd be quite a few to come back drunk, but, of course, I didn't get to see what came aboard. I wasn't around the gangway at that time, and I really didn't get to see. I really couldn't say. It depends on what port you're in and what the occasion is and . . .

Marcello: And how long you've been at sea, I suppose.

Dillon: And how long you've been at sea. Most of the guys I knew didn't really care to go over to Honolulu.

Marcello: Why was that?

Dillon: Well, probably they had no money, and it was boring. We

could find some entertainment over in the Navy Yard. I believe it was the Marine canteen that we would go to and sit around and drink beer and just get away from the ship for a few hours.

Marcello: I guess that Honolulu would be wall-to-wall bodies on a Saturday night even in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, wouldn't it?

Dillon: That's right. I don't remember the names of the streets, but downtown . . .

Marcello: Hotel and Canal Street were two of the favorites, weren't they?

Dillon: Well, I remember Canal Street. I believe it was one of the main thoroughfares and had a lot of photo shops and bars and whatnot. I know some of our guys used to hang out in a . . . well, I forget the name of it. It's something like a tiger.

Marcello: The Black Cat Cafe?

Dillon: Or something like that. We had two or three old boys in E Division who was always fighting down there, either getting beat up or beating the other boys up. I guess I was too much of a softy to get involved in those bar fights. I never went in any. I might go in and have a beer or drink or something and not stay too long.

Marcello: Generally speaking, how would you describe the morale of the men aboard the Saint Louis in that pre-Pearl Harbor period? Was it a happy ship?

Dillon: It was a very happy ship. We had an excellent captain-- Captain Rood. He came aboard in the summer of 1941 at Vallejo Navy Yard. He was a little fellow. He walked on the bridge, and then he ordered the ship to proceed at twenty knots going down the Napa River, I believe it is, going out into the bay. The engine room couldn't believe it when he rang up twenty knots at one time, so they figured they had a good skipper. He operated that cruiser like it was a destroyer. He was "gung-ho." He had been a submarine commander during World War I. The crew liked him. He stayed aboard and kept a tight ship. He was well-liked. The morale of the crew was excellent.

Marcello: And do you think a lot of this had to do with the skipper, or were there other factors as well?

Dillon: I think a lot of it had to do with the skipper because he instilled confidence in himself, and the crew reacted accordingly.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into the morning of December 7, 1941. I assume that after your twelve to four o'clock watch was completed, you hit the sack.

Dillon: That's right. I went topside and it was a beautiful night-- calm, still, blinker lights are in the harbor going and whatnot. So a little while after four o'clock, I got some fresh air. You know, after being in a hot engine room, you got to get a little relief. I turned in my bunk on the second deck--nice quarters, comfortable, cool.



I got up at seven o'clock. Then I caught the end of the chow line. We could sleep until seven if we had the mid-watch. I ate chow, and I went back up to my compartment. It was a big compartment. There was a lot of other people who slept in this compartment. I bought a Honolulu paper, and I went over on the peacoat lockers, which are along the bulkhead. It was a good place to spread your paper out and read. I was standing there reading the paper when the thing started.

Marcello: Well, describe what happened at this point. You're at the peacoat locker reading the newspaper.

Dillon: I was reading the funny papers, and a general alarm went off. In those days the general alarm had to complete a sixty-second run before they could operate the mike. So all we could hear for the first sixty seconds was the general alarm going off. However, there were men coming down the ladder just nearby saying, "The Japs are attacking! The Japs are attacking! They're bombing the battleships, and the sailors are being blown higher than the masts of the ships!" They said that you could see the red balls on the sides of the airplanes.

Marcello: Now where was the Saint Louis located relative to Battleship Row?

Dillon: Well, we were near the submarine entrance to the submarine area, and it's just across from Ford Island. We could look off of our fantail and see the whole Battleship Row over just a small expanse of water there.

Marcello: But up until this time, you heard nothing.

Dillon: Up until this time, I heard nothing.

Marcello: And you felt nothing.

Dillon: And I felt nothing.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when general quarters sound and these sailors are coming down below deck?

Dillon: Then I begin to hear the explosions. Maybe they had occurred before and I hadn't heard them, but then the general alarm did run for the minute there; and when it finished, the announcer on the quarterdeck said, "This is no drill! This is no drill! All hands, man your battle stations!"

Just prior to that, some guys were in their bunks and said, "What the hell do they want to have a drill on Sunday morning for in the Navy Yards?" We began to think that was a dirty trick to be pulled on us. Some guy said, "Well, it's probably some deck hand washing paint work, and he tripped the alarm."

Well, then we found out that that was the real McCoy. So all I had to do was cross over on the starboard side of the ship and go down a ladder and report to Repair Three.

Marcello: Did you have to go outside to get to Repair Three?

Dillon: I did not. I just crossed my compartment and went down a hatch to the next deck below and went forward through one or two watertight doors, and I was right on station.

Marcello: And what was your function on station?

Dillon: I reported to the repair party. Pretty soon Lieutenant

Bristol, who was the only officer we had . . . he was the assistant engineering officer on the Saint Louis. We had several missions. We were actually a repair party, but this party was made up of all facets of people.

I, being an electrician, would take care of electrical damage. I may have had one or two other electricians with me. I don't recall. I'm sure I must have. I was also engine room relief for any casualties that might happen just on the deck below me in the engine room. I would just run down the ladder and take over the switchboard.

We also had remote control for the main steam valves on the third deck. We had access to all the battle circuits-- electrical circuits--on that deck. We could also pass through any cables necessary to keep the power to the turrets and various other things operating. The main thing is to keep those guns firing.

Marcello: Well, in the condition that the Saint Louis was in, about all it could do was sit there, wasn't it? Maybe you could get some of your machine guns operating and so on, but other than that, what else can you do?

Dillon: You're absolutely right. We had two .50-caliber machine guns, and they were immediately wheeled out on deck. They had one old .30-caliber machine gun strapped on the bridge, and that was all. The 5-inch guns could not fire, and, of course, the 6-inch main batteries were useless. We were sitting ducks, but we weren't quite as bad as the San Francisco,

which was next to us. They had to abandon ship because they had no ammunition aboard. Those poor sailors were throwing potatoes at the Japs.

Marcello: Now did you hear this, or did you actually see it?

Dillon: That's actual scuttlebutt.

Marcello: I was going to say, because, given your battle station, you were in no position to see what was going on outside.

Dillon: I was in no position to see. Now my first job, the first order, was to go to central station and get telephones and carry them to the fire rooms and engine rooms. I don't recall how many trips I made up and down this trunk . . . what they call a trunk. It's a ladder that goes all the way down, and you have to climb manually up these ladders--they're not steps--with armloads of these phones. Then we'd take them and hand them up and get them up any way we could. Any phone would fit any plug, and anyone could use it as long as there was a headset. So they went to the guns; they went to the engine room; and I personally took some down into the boiler rooms.

Then the next problem was that everyone was getting their communications through the ship set up at that time. Well, the next order we received was to tear up all of the thick rubber-like carpeting in the ship--it was a red-type material--and also to throw out all brightwork polish. Well, when that order came through, everybody cheered, as you could well imagine.

Marcello: Why did they want the brightwork polish thrown out? Was it because it was flammable?

Dillon: It was flammable, and anything that was flammable or would give off an acrid smoke or anything that could burn was thrown over the side immediately. I'm not sure if we had portholes then or not. At one time we had them welded up, and I don't know whether it was before or after December 7th. I believe it was after December 7th that we went in the Navy Yard, and they welded it up. I'm not sure.

After a short period--after we got all the work done--we sat down at the entrance of the number two engine room--there was a trunk going down in the engine room--and then someone said, "Say, we didn't get the brightwork polish in the soda fountain," or what we called the "geedunk" stand. So the officers told us to break the lock, go in and get all that stuff out of there, and get rid of it. We did.

Then when we came back, there was a period of quietness there for a long time. Then a bomb went off, an explosion, that lifted us apparently some inches off of the deck because it felt like two feet. What had happened, the Japs had dropped a bomb through the pier, trying to hit either us or the Honolulu, and it went through the pier and exploded in the water, and that's what gave it the force it had.

Marcello: Is it rather disconcerting to be down below decks and to know all this activity is taking place and to feel the concussion effects of this bomb and at the same time not being

able to see anything or do anything?

Dillon: Well, it's a little disconcerting not to see what's going on, but I think by then I had been pretty well oriented to be a below-decks person, I suppose you'd say, but I think it takes awhile to eventually be oriented to that. I did feel that I'd like to know what's going on, but we hugged closely near the people on the phones, and we'd get as much information as we could as it went along the lines. Of course, our telephone man would tell us everything that was going on.

Marcello: What did you talk about during this period when you were getting rid of the brightwork polish and tearing up this rubber flooring and so on?

Dillon: Well, I suppose we just talked about actually getting it up and where we'd take it and where we'd put it, and the people just seemed to go ahead and do their job without any fear or realization of what was going on on the outside.

Marcello: Where did you throw this material? Where did you put it?

Dillon: Well, from our compartment we threw it into another compartment, and a bunch of guys took it up to the topside and threw it over the side.

Marcello: About how long does all this take?

Dillon: I don't really have a feel for time. Some of this was done by the time I got back from the telephones, and I didn't get too involved in the rubber material, but I'd say it took at least thirty or forty minutes, maybe an hour of our time,

at that time.

Marcello: This is a very, very serious situation, but at the same time, are there any funny incidents that happened while all this was going on?

Dillon: I'm glad you asked that. After we got everything thrown out, and a period of quietness came, and after this bomb had dropped . . . we were pretty quiet and still, and it was getting more serious at the moment, but someone said, "Let's have 'geedunk,'" and several of us went in and made us an ice cream soda or ice cream sundae, and we set around and ate it and enjoyed it. But I think we were very much aware that things were going on on the outside.

Marcello: Do you think this is kind of a nervous reaction as much as anything?

Dillon: I believe it was, after I look back on it. That's about the most unusual thing I can think that happened.

Marcello: Do you recall exactly what you ate?

Dillon: No, I'm afraid I can't. I probably had chocolate syrup and nuts and everything else I could put on it,

Marcello: Now you mentioned this bomb that jolted the Saint Louis. What did that feel like? Can you describe the sensation?

Dillon: Well, the sensation was that I was just bumped up off of the deck about two feet. I have no idea how far we were jolted. We didn't know. Our first reaction was, "Well, what in the world happened?" But it was just a matter of a few seconds that we got the report back on the phone, and he told us

what happened.

One of our electricians was sent over to Shop Fifty-one to get the contacts for our antiaircraft guns, an old boy from Birmingham, Alabama. He had started down the pier when the bomb went through the pier behind him, and it blew him over on his face. I believe the boy's name was Murphy. Murphy ran down to the end of the pier, and the Marines grabbed him and handed him a rifle and marched him out in the middle of the field, and he fired by squads at the Japanese planes. He never got to Shop Fifty-one, and we never got the contacts.

Marcello: So what happens in the aftermath of the attack? I assume that by this time the attack is more or less over.

Dillon: Well, I suppose the first wave was over. Then there was this quiet period, and then the second wave must have started because, from what I've learned--this is second-hand information--our captain walked out on the bridge of the Saint Louis. He was real close to the bridge of the Honolulu, and he talked with Admiral Leary. He told the admiral that he was going to take the Saint Louis out, that he was getting his boilers up-steam, and as soon as he got steam, he was taking the Saint Louis out. It's my understanding that the admiral told him he didn't think he could make it or something to that effect. He more or less encouraged it, but he didn't give him an order not to, as far as I know. The ship prepared to get underway, but we were held up for two reasons--to get



our steam up, and also the Nevada had run aground in the channel nearby, I understand, and we had to wait for the Nevada to be pulled out of the way so we could get by.

I understand that our ship backed out of this berth, and the camel that was placed across the berth at the rear of the ship--to protect it from torpedoes--was just pushed out by the ship's own movement instead of having the crew go out and move it. So we backed out, and as we backed out, we'd be headed directly toward the Nevada. So the ship got underway, I'd say, in an hour and a fraction; I don't know what part of the fraction. It'd be during the second wave.

Marcello: In the meantime, I would gather they're trying to get the weaponry and everything else back into shape.

Dillon: Yes. I'm glad you asked that. The electricians tied the controllers down with wire and used the line switches to start the motors. They got the motors going on all of the 5-inch mounts, and by the time we could go around the Nevada, the crew on the Nevada said we had a ring of fire around us as we went out of the harbor. That's been verified by several members of the Nevada. We got credit for shooting down seven Jap planes, and mostly during this period, from the time when we started leaving the harbor until we left. I know we caught one in the engine, just as we got in the channel and started out, with a 5-inch projectile.

Marcello: Now do you hear most of this over the sound-power phones and

so on?

Dillon: Well, we heard some of it over the phones immediately at the time, and, then, of course, we rehashed it afterwards. Some of this I learned by various reports and letters and things that I've later seen.

Now as we went out the channel with the Saint Louis, the captain stationed men on the bow and on each wing of the bridge, and he gave them orders. Being an old submarine skipper himself, if you saw a torpedo wake, you were to immediately notify the bridge, and he would evade it.

Well, we were still down on the third deck at our repair party station, and the ship was really moving--I mean, moving--with everything it had. I don't know how fast, but it must have been at least twenty knots or more. There's two destroyers that went out ahead of us; I don't know their names.

But as we went out, there was a miniature submarine laying in the lagoon, and they fired two "fish" at the Saint Louis. They let these two destroyers go on ahead, and they fired two "fish" at the Saint Louis. In those days the Navy would dredge this channel, and they'd leave a lip on each side. Well, there was a lip on the lagoon side, and the Japs set their torpedoes a little too deep, and it didn't clear the lip of the channel, and each torpedo exploded before it hit the Saint Louis. But the skipper had seen the wakes, had been alerted, and he laid the ship over on

its side--first one side, and then he rolled it back over on the other side--and it felt like about a forty-five. Sitting there on the third deck, you couldn't see what was going on.

Marcello: Forty-five degree list or what?

Dillon: No, right and then left, or left and then right. Then we moved right on through the gates and out to sea,

Marcello: Okay, what happens when you get out to sea?

Dillon: Well, when we get out to sea, we just seemed to be traveling a long time, and finally they set Condition Two, and we started standing "four-on" and "four-off" watches.

Of course, the first thing we did is go topside and get some fresh air and look at the blue sky. All of our turrets were still manned, and the gunners had itchy fingers.

Now I forgot to tell you . . . coming out the channel, after the Japanese submarine fired two "fish," being a miniature, it lost its ballast and popped up out of the water, and I understand the number one mount . . . now I could be wrong, whether it's number one or number three, but it was on the starboard side. They just dropped their 5-inch guns down and shot the conning tower off, and we went on through.

After we got to sea, some hours later . . . of course, the captain got on the speaker and talked to the crew periodically. I don't know . . . we heard Roosevelt's speech, but I don't know whether that was that night or . . .

Marcello: Well, it would have probably been the next day, I guess.

- Dillon: . . . or the next day, yes. We heard him, and then the captain made a speech, too. The crew felt pretty good about the situation.
- Marcello: In the meantime, what kind of rumors were running throughout the ship?
- Dillon: The rumor was that the Japanese had landed and that they were going through the sugar cane fields over near Pearl Harbor and that the Japanese fleet was out there ready to back them up.
- Marcello: Did you believe these rumors?
- Dillon: I believed them, yes. I had no reason not to. My personal feeling was that we had lost so much Navy there that the Japs could probably take us over if they wanted to.
- Marcello: Incidentally, there is a question that I should have asked earlier. Under normal circumstances, how long would it take the Saint Louis to get up steam to leave?
- Dillon: Well, that's kind of hard for me to answer. Being an electrician, I'm not that familiar with the boilers, but they usually set the sea details at least a couple of hours ahead of time, or maybe three hours ahead of time, under normal conditions. During that time, all preparations for boilers and everything else are made. We light off all the generators and set up the steaming . . . there's a certain steaming routine. You've got to have so much electricity and whatnot.
- Marcello: How long did it take on December 7th?
- Dillon: Well, it was a little over an hour, and they began with having

to put the bricks in the boilers. The only boiler lit off was just one boiler for auxiliary steam for the laundry and the galley. They had to put the bricks back in and get the water and everything and the men to operate it, and they did it in a little over an hour, I suppose.

Marcello: How long did you stay out at sea after you cleared the harbor?

Dillon: We came back in on the 10th. We steamed around with some other ships. I don't know where they came from, but there was some heavy cruisers out there, and we just steamed around. I don't know whether we was running from the Japs or what the story was, but we went to general quarters several times. Everytime they'd spot a group of planes, which were probably ours, they'd go to general quarters. We came back in on the 10th. We primarily just steamed around in some area off of Pearl Harbor, but I don't know exactly where it was.

Marcello: What does the harbor look like when you come in? Was this the first opportunity you really had to get a look at the damage that had been done?

Dillon: Yes, it was. I think we went to topside quarters when we came in, and we did get a good view of Battleship Row as we came in, and all I could see is the bottoms of these ships and the wreckage and the carnage and the smoke and the oil and whatnot.

Marcello: It must have been a rather sickening sight, even for somebody your age.

Dillon: Yes, it was. It was a rather sickening sight.

Marcello: What kind of emotions did you have, or perhaps feelings would be a better word, toward the Japanese as a result of what happened--at that time?

Dillon: Well, we were angry, I suppose. I don't think that our crew was very emotional. They were mad more than anything else.

Marcello: This seems to be a general feeling that I've detected as a result of doing these interviews. What did the Saint Louis do after it came in? Did you stay in very long?

Dillon: That's a good question. I hadn't thought of that. We came in and, I think, got underway that same day. We probably took on oil, which we had to do, and maybe took care of just some normal things they had to take care of--food and things like that.

We went to San Francisco. We did escort duty. Between Pearl Harbor and San Francisco, we made six or seven trips. We escorted the Lurline and the Matson liners primarily at first. We would come into San Francisco and anchor over at Alameda Naval Air Station. Of course, our planes would fly off, and they had to take care of those things.

Marcello: Were these civilian liners bringing back dependents and so on?

Dillon: I presume there was a considerable number of dependents on the Matson liners that plied back and forth. They needed the protection of a cruiser where there was that many lives, I would imagine; at stake. So that was primarily our mission after Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Mr. Dillon, I have one last question, and we can probably

close this interview. Why is it that forty years later you are a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association?

Dillon: Well, I've been a member since I first heard about it in 1964, and I suppose it's the reason any organization's formed. We were a part of history, and we feel that we're unique in that we were there. One thing I've never really felt, that we did any more than the people that came in later on at all. But it's just the uniqueness that we were there and that there is an organization, and I enjoy meeting and knowing people and maybe find something in common that we can discuss about the matter. That's about the only reason that I . . . well, of course, I stand by our own reasons for being, is to have a stronger defense of our nation. Anything that our survivors organization can do to strengthen our Navy, our armed services, of course, we'd be glad to do it. Of course, there's other service organizations that do a job like that, too. That's essentially it.

Marcello: Well, I think that's probably a good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated.

Dillon: That's all right.

Marcello: You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that . . .

Dillon: Well, thank you very much.

Marcello: . . . historians will be able to get a great deal of value out of this when they study the material.

Dillon: Well, I hope that I made some contribution. I'm interested

in history. I've always liked it, and maybe this will be some contribution, and I hope it'll be worthwhile.

Marcello: Well, again, thank you very much.

Dillon: Thank you.