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CLAUDE WILKINSON
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Interviewer:	<u>R. E. Marcello</u>
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Oral History Collection

Claude Wilkinson

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Rusk, Texas

Date: October 22, 1983

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Claude Wilkinson for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on October 22, 1983, in Rusk, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Wilkinson in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the seaplane tender USS Tangier during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Wilkinson: I was born on November 29, 1918, at Winona, Smith County, Texas. My father was superintendent of schools. I finished at Troup High School in May, 1935. I attended North Texas State Teachers College from September, 1935, to August, 1936. I also attended the University of Texas and Texas Technological College and got a B.S. degree in business

from Oklahoma City University in May of 1948.

Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Wilkinson: I enlisted in the Naval Reserve on the 15th of July, 1941, and was called to active duty on July 25, 1941.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Naval Reserve?

Wilkinson: I thought I would get a shorter term than a six-year enlistment. A six-year enlistment was the deal then for the Navy. Also, I went in as a storekeeper third class. I got credit for some of my education. At that time I had three years of college, and then I had three years of working experience.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the service at all during this period?

Wilkinson: Well, I had a low draft number. You see, we registered for the draft in October of 1940, and that's the reason I went into the Naval Reserve.

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

Wilkinson: I thought the eating would be better--the living conditions.

Marcello: Had you perhaps heard a lot of people talk about what things had been like in Europe during World War I in terms of the trench warfare and all that sort of thing?

Wilkinson: Yes, sir, I had. I knew that if I was aboard a ship and we got hit, I might not have a very good chance of survival, but up until, say, the time we got hit, I'd have a whole lot

better standard of living.

Marcello: You mentioned that you went into the Naval Reserve first. Describe the process by which you got into the regular Navy. How did this come about?

Wilkinson: I didn't go into the regular Navy. In other words, after I volunteered for the Naval Reserve, I knew that within just a short period of time, I would be called to active duty. So I stayed in the Naval Reserve all the time I was in. I served in the Navy, but I was always designated as being a USNR.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Wilkinson: I didn't go to boot camp. I went directly to the receiving ship at San Diego, was issued my gear, and stayed there approximately six weeks. I went aboard the Tangier at Mare Island Navy Yard on September 4, 1941.

Marcello: Why was it that you didn't go through boot camp, as was the normal situation?

Wilkinson: No one did that went into the Naval Reserve prior to the war, as far as I know, especially those of us that went in with a rating. See, I didn't go in as an apprentice seaman. I went in as a storekeeper third class.

Marcello: Did this ever cause any resentment at that time?

Wilkinson: It sure did--very, very much--because we were going in there with guys that actually had probably done a hitch of four years and who had just made third class. They didn't like

any part of us. And, of course, I understood it after I got in. I didn't know before then. Yes, it was very much so. But after the war started, rates opened up, and that was all over with.

Marcello: I guess the reason I asked that was because I know that before the war promotion and advancement was very slow in the Navy.

Wilkinson: Right. In other words, I knew several aboard ship who had served in the Navy during the Depression, and it was not uncommon for men to ship over, that is, to extend the enlistment beyond four years, that were only seamen first class. Some extended or shipped over as seamen second class --after four years.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the Tangier. Describe exactly what its functions were as a seaplane tender.

Wilkinson: We were to go out to advance bases and anchor where they didn't have a land base. We tended the PBYS, and PBYS, of course, had pontoons that landed on the water. What the Tangier was, we were a hotel or a motel for the crew--those that flew and those that kept the PBY's operational. So we were a part of the scouting force--aerial scouting force.

Marcello: Would you actually be responsible for the repair of these seaplanes and so on, also?

Wilkinson: Not necessarily. In other words, we had facilities there, and we had men and officers with aviation rates and rank,

but the crew, enlisted men and officers, were assigned to these planes. They called them squadrons.

Marcello: What exactly was your function as the storekeeper aboard the Tangier? What specifically did you do?

Wilkinson: I worked most of the time in the general storeroom aft of the ship. We had almost anything that you would need. In other words, one classification that I'll never forget is Class 43--nuts, bolts, and screws. Of course, we had a lot of other things there in the storeroom, but that's where I was most of the time. I was in there.

Marcello: Describe what your quarters were like aboard the Tangier.

Wilkinson: The sleeping quarters?

Marcello: Yes.

Wilkinson: All right, sir. We had bunks that when they weren't in use-- of course, that'd be in daytime when they weren't in use-- would fold over. We had bunk straps, of course, that was over our bedding--our mattresses and our blankets and our pillow. Of course, when we put those bunk straps on those bunks, then those bunks could fold up, and that would give you a lot more room. I believe they were three tiers high-- three berths high. We had little lockers that, I would say, were about twenty-six inches square and approximately thirty inches deep. That was our quarters.

Marcello: So quarters were relatively cramped aboard the Tangier.

Wilkinson: Of course, after the war started, within two or three days

after the attack, they issued three of us Army cots, and we slept in the storeroom from then on. So the storeroom was always available anytime, day or night. If someone needed something, they might have to wake us, but they could come there and get whatever items they needed.

Marcello: Describe what the food was like aboard the Tangier during this period.

Wilkinson: The food was real good. We were known as a good feeding ship. We had different squadrons that had served aboard other seaplane tenders, and they said they got the best food and the best cooperation from the Tangier of any seaplane tender that they had been associated with.

Marcello: How about you personally? Did you enjoy the food aboard the Tangier?

Wilkinson: Oh, yes, I liked it. On Wednesday mornings and on Saturday mornings, we had what they called pork and beans and corn bread. Ninety percent of the time, it was very good. Of course, it took you time to get used to it, but it was always good.

Marcello: I assume that most of the training and so on that you received aboard the Tangier in your capacity as a storekeeper was on-the-job training.

Wilkinson: Right. Or it was by word-of-mouth.

Marcello: We mentioned awhile ago that there was some resentment among the older hands aboard the ship because you guys were coming

aboard as third class storekeepers. What sort of cooperation existed between you, for instance, and some of the older hands in terms of their showing you the ropes, so to speak?

Wilkinson: The resentment was very brief because they realized that the way the Navy was expanding, they would probably be transferred, or maybe some of us would be transferred; and those of us that had Naval Reserve ratings would have to know a little something about the deal either by being left on the ship or being transferred off the ship. So it was very short.

Marcello: In general, as you look back upon life aboard that ship in the pre-Pearl Harbor period, how would you describe the morale of the crew?

Wilkinson: Well, it's kind of hard to say because I know one fellow in particular who was very dissatisfied that he had come back in the Navy...he had been out three years, and he came back in, and he saw what a mistake he'd made. Of course, the ship was pretty "regulation." They demanded quite a bit, as far as getting up on time and having early breakfast.

I know, working in the storeroom, we had what they called the morning watch, which was before breakfast. When we got up, we put on dungarees during that morning watch, but to eat breakfast we had to be in undress blues,

so we had to change uniforms. Then when you "turned to" about eight o'clock, you had to get back into dungarees. Then when you ate lunch, you had to get into undress blues. Then that afternoon you worked in dungarees. Then when you knocked off around five o'clock for the evening meal, well, you had to get into undress blues. So there was five or six changes a day, and that went all over the ship. Of course, there was a lot of complaints about that. I think, looking back, it had a whole lot to do with our taking orders, not asking any questions, just doing what you were told, and go from there.

Marcello: What kind of a relationship existed between the officers and the enlisted personnel aboard the Tangier?

Wilkinson: I would say that it was typical Navy. You might find an officer who within his division would turn everything over to the higher rated enlisted man, whether it be a chief or first class petty officer. I know there were several youngsters in their teens, say, seventeen, eighteen, or nineteen, who would every now and then get into what they called "officer's country," which was taboo, and they were given extra duty. Of course, it was published in the plan-of-the-day--what had happened--so that the rest of the enlisted men wouldn't make that mistake.

Marcello: So there was a pretty strict segregation between officers and enlisted personnel?

Wilkinson: Right. There sure was.

Marcello: And that would be both aboard ship and obviously ashore?

Wilkinson: Right.

Marcello: When did the Tangier go to Hawaii, that is, after you got aboard?

Wilkinson: I went aboard at Mare Island on September 4, 1941. Just prior to that--ten days prior to that--the ship was commissioned. That would make it on August 25, 1941 that they commissioned it, and those that were aboard at the time it was commissioned were called "plank owners." We did some shakedown cruises. We went to sea for two or three days, and then we went to Bremerton Navy Yard and picked up torpedoes and warheads. Then we went to San Diego and picked up some aviation gear, and we shipped from Long Beach or San Pedro in the latter part of October, and we got to Pearl Harbor, I'd say, around the third, fourth, or fifth of November.

Marcello: So you actually weren't at Pearl Harbor too long before the attack actually took place.

Wilkinson: No. And actually, on November 11, there were two envoys who came through from Japan--going to Washington--and, of course, they had to land at Pearl City on the Clipper. They cleared the harbor--they said--so Japan wouldn't know what was there. But, in fact, Japan knew what was there regardless of what time.

Marcello: When you say they cleared the harbor, do you mean that all the ships left the harbor when those Japanese envoys went through?

Wilkinson: Yes. When the plane landed, we were at sea.

Marcello: What were your immediate reactions or thoughts when you learned that the Tangier would be going to the Hawaiian Islands? In other words, were you looking forward to Hawaii?

Wilkinson: Yes, sir. Of course, I was looking forward to seeing the fleet because I'd never seen any ship other than the Tangier. Well, maybe I'd seen a few subs and a few destroyers, but I'd never seen a cruiser, never seen a battleship, never seen an aircraft carrier. Of course, I'd never been to Hawaii. We were hoping that it would just be a short deal, not over three or four or six months at the most, where we could then come back to the States.

Marcello: At that time, how closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs and that sort of thing?

Wilkinson: I would say fairly close. Of course, the only thing I had was newspaper accounts. We had radios and things like that. As I mentioned before, about the envoys coming through, we knew that they were coming through from Japan, landing at Pearl City, and going on to Washington. Of course, we knew about that. I'd say my knowledge was above average.

Marcello: When you and your buddies sat around in your bull sessions

and talked, did conversation ever turn to the possibility of a Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor?

Wilkinson: Yes, sir. This one buddy that I was telling you about previously, who was very sore at himself for coming back in when he did, said that the Army said--the air force of the Army--that they could drop bombs in the pickle barrels that the Japs had on topside. On November 29, 1941, this buddy of mine, Norris George Edwards, carried me over to the Maryland. He had served a hitch between 1933 and 1937, and he wanted to show me just what the battleship was like. To get aboard the Maryland...the battleships were tied up two together. We went aboard the West Virginia and asked permission to come aboard. Permission was granted. We walked across the ship. We asked permission to leave. Permission was granted. We walked a little ol' catwalk of a deal over to the Maryland and asked permission to come aboard the Maryland. Permission was given. We went down to the disbursing office, and he ran into a storekeeper first class whom he served with while he was on the Maryland. And during the course of conversation, Edwards asked his former shipmate what he thought about the situation. He says, "It's very tense," and he says, "They've got more than we're being told." He says, "It may be rough if war breaks out." I distinctly remember that.

Marcello: But were they specifically talking about war coming at

Pearl Harbor itself?

Wilkinson: No, sir. That was the surprise of the whole business. They had no idea. Of course, they thought it would happen either in the Philippines or in around Singapore and down in the Dutch East Indies.

Marcello: Describe what the liberty routine was like aboard the Tangier after it got to Pearl Harbor. In other words, first of all, how was the liberty organized?

Wilkinson: You had starboard and port watches. The first and third sections were starboard; the second and fourth sections were port. Okay, we had port-and-starboard liberty. In other words, not over half the ship was gone at any one time. Now then, like, on Saturday night, first class and chiefs of a watch--we'll say a starboard watch--could be ashore after eleven o'clock. But from second class petty officers down, they had to be back at eleven o'clock.

Marcello: Do you know why that particular regulation was put into effect?

Wilkinson: Yes, sir. I'd say that they wanted at least half of the ship there, and then, too, on those ratings they probably just thought that first class and chiefs could take better care of themselves.

Marcello: I've also heard it said that, given the low pay and the lack of hotel space in Honolulu, they didn't want those sailors sleeping in parks or on the beach or anything of

that nature. Consequently, they wanted them back aboard ship.

Wilkinson: I imagine that would be a good explanation.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, what did you usually do? Again, I'm referring to that short period of time before the attack and when the Tangier was at Pearl Harbor.

Wilkinson: You're talking about in Hawaii?

Marcello: Yes.

Wilkinson: Well, there wasn't much to do but just sightseeing because I've seen as many as ten or twelve in a cab and go from Pearl Harbor to Honolulu. Of course, the thing was real crowded. I'd say the bars had at least two to three times the customers that they should have had because it was just that bad on being crowded.

Marcello: Generally speaking, what would be the condition of the crew that had liberty when they came back aboard ship, let's say, on a Saturday night?

Wilkinson: Well, I would say that all of 25 percent of them would be drunk.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you, even as a third class storekeeper, detect any changes in the training routine or whatever aboard the Tangier?

Wilkinson: No, sir, because we had our regular general quarters drills

and things like that. And let me say this. On Saturday night, December 6, someone had gone ashore and brought back a newspaper, and I very distinctly remember reading where Tom Connally, who was the senior senator from Texas, I believe, had been visiting in the Caribbean, and he was quoted that he didn't think that war was imminent, that Japan dared not attack. Of course, within twelve hours we were at war.

Marcello: So it was basically business as usual, then, right up to the time of the attack.

Wilkinson: Right.

Marcello: Incidentally, as a storekeeper third class, where was your battle station?

Wilkinson: My battle station was on the port side. It was up pretty high, but it wasn't on the bridge. It was aft of the bridge. There was a clipping room up there where they clipped .50-caliber machine gun bullets into belts of about 160 bullets per belt. There were two .50-caliber machine guns above that clipping room, and I carried ammunition to that. If you don't mind, I'd like to tell you about my routine that morning.

Marcello: This is of December 7?

Wilkinson: December 7.

Marcello: Well, we're going to get into that pretty shortly.

Wilkinson: Okay.

Marcello: Let's talk about that weekend of December 7. Let me ask you this, first of all. What did you do that Saturday, December 6, 1941?

Wilkinson: I was aboard ship. I had the duty. I couldn't go ashore. In other words, if we closed the storeroom down at twelve or one o'clock--I really don't remember what time it was--and locked it up, then if they needed anything in the storeroom, they'd pass the word over the loudspeaker: "The storekeeper with the duty in the after storeroom, lay down there," because somebody wanted in.

Marcello: Did you have very much to do that day?

Wilkinson: Well, that morning...

Marcello: No, I'm referring now to that Saturday.

Wilkinson: Yes, that's what I'm talking about. We had an inspection. We were all standing out there in our little ol' white shorts and had an inspection. By the way, that morning of December 6, we changed executive officers. The executive officer we had when I went aboard was being...I don't want to say he was dismissed. That's not the word I want to use. But he was taken off, and we had another one coming aboard that day. That's when they changed "execs."

Marcello: You mentioned that you had an inspection on Saturday morning. This was the Captain's Inspection?

Wilkinson: Right.

Marcello: And that's evidently routine on every ship in the Navy on

Saturday morning.

Wilkinson: Right. On the Friday before that, we had a ship's inspection where we had the storeroom all fixed up, and then we swabbed down the deck on the inside.

Marcello: When a ship is in Pearl--and we'll use the Tangier as our example--what is its state of combat readiness?

Wilkinson: Well, at that time...you see, of course, the Tangier was not a combat ship. We had those .50-caliber machine guns, and we had .30-calibers. Of course, that was all for anti-aircraft defense. We had, I'd say, a half-dozen...now that may not be right. We might have had as many as twelve 3-inch guns that were for antiaircraft use. The big gun we had at the back was a 5.51. The .51 meant that the barrel was fifty-one times the bore of a gun, but, of course, it couldn't elevate much more than, I'd say, 45 to 60 percent. In other words, there was no way. It was more a shore deal than it was an antiaircraft gun. It was in August of 1942, when we came back to the States, that they removed it and put on a 5.38, where we could shoot the thing almost at a ninety-degree angle. But the combat readiness, as far as being ready, yes, we were ready. In other words, you take there where my general quarters station was, the ammunition that was ready, that was in clips, was inside a weatherproof box that had a lock on it. So it wasn't any good the instant that war started

until somebody could come and open that weatherproof box.

Marcello: At the same time, I would assume that all the doors and hatches would normally be open, also, while you were in port.

Wilkinson: Well, of course, we didn't have the watertight integrity that the, say, men-of-war had, like the destroyers or the cruisers or the battleships or the aircraft carriers, because the Tangier was built for a cargo ship, and they took it over from the Maritime Commission and converted it into a seaplane tender. It wasn't built for a seaplane tender; it was converted into it. It was a C-3 cargo ship, is what it was, so we had five holds where you could put cargo down. Of course, there was no such thing as watertight doors there at all. It was commissioned as the Sea Arrow. It was built at Moore Dry Dock, was where it was built. Then the Navy took it over and converted it into a seaplane tender. We were AV-8. A is for Auxilliary, V is Aircraft, and we were 8. You mentioned the Curtiss awhile ago. It was AV-4. We were AV-8, and our account number was 1708.

Marcello: Sounds like a true storekeeper speaking (chuckle).

Wilkinson: (Chuckle) Well, I've got that remembered.

Marcello: Let's get back to that Saturday, December 6. You mentioned that Saturday morning was a rather busy time with inspections and things of that nature. How did you spend the

rest of that day even though you had duty?

Wilkinson: Well, that morning, up until we closed the storeroom, I went back to the storeroom and worked. But then when the storeroom was closed, I had, you might say, liberty of the ship.

Marcello: You just had to be available?

Wilkinson: Right. I had to be available, so that if they passed the word, I could get back to the storeroom.

Marcello: How did you spend your time?

Wilkinson: Oh, I'd say reading or talking or something like that. As I mentioned awhile ago, I read that article in the newspaper that night, and I'm sure that I read the newspaper. But I well remember reading that article of the little interview they had of Connally--the news media.

Marcello: Was Saturday evening rather uneventful?

Wilkinson: Oh, yes, it was uneventful; it was nothing. Of course, on Saturday night we had movies up on...they called it the flight deck, but it wasn't the flight deck like the carrier had. The carrier had a flight deck where the planes could take off and land. Our flight deck was the place where, if we carried PBYS with us, they were strapped down on the flight deck. In other words, the last half--when I mean the last half, I mean the aft half of the ship--had a flight deck on it where we could carry at least three, maybe four, PBYS. When those PBYS landed in the water,

we had a big crane back on the starboard side aft, and we could pick that thing up out of the water with that crane and lift it up here on the deck. If the PBVs were on the flight deck and wanted to get in the water, the only way you could do that was to hook them on this crane and lower them into the water. We also had a little light plane with a pontoon, and it was used by the officers and a few enlisted men who received flight pay. Each month each of those who got flight pay, which was half of their pay for flight pay, had to do four hours in the air, so, of course, we had that little deal aboard.

Marcello: Do you recall what movie was showing on the back of the Tangier that night?

Wilkinson: No, sir, I sure don't. I probably got it, but I don't have it with me.

Marcello: What time did you turn in that night?

Wilkinson: I'd say ten o'clock or ten-thirty.

Marcello: Incidentally, I should have asked this earlier, but where was the Tangier tied up?

Wilkinson: We were on the west side of Ford Island opposite from where the battleships were tied up. In other words, behind us was the Utah, the Raleigh, and the Detroit. Just foreward of us was where the aircraft carrier should have been tied up. Luckily, we didn't have one there, and, thank God, we didn't have one because they would have gotten it.

Marcello: So from where you were tied up, you did not have a good view of Battleship Row because of Ford Island?

Wilkinson: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Oh, you did?

Wilkinson: Oh, yes, because it was pretty flat. Of course, when the battle started and I was at my battle station, I had a darn good shot of the beach. Of course, I was busy carrying ammunition. Just every now and then somebody would say this or that, and you might look in that direction. But I didn't know what ship it was that was burning over there. I had to ask to find out that it was the Arizona. The Utah was behind us, and it went down in eight minutes.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, and what I want you to do at this point is to describe in as much detail what your routine was that day from the time you got up until all hell broke loose.

Wilkinson: Well, there was no routine. There again, if I didn't have the duty, I had the stand-by duty. In other words, we had four sections of the ship, and the port watch had the duty. Really, I think it was the second section that had the duty, which would be about a fourth of the ship. The other part of the port watch, which was the fourth section --and I was in the fourth section--had the stand-by duty. We had breakfast.

Marcello: What time did you get up?

Wilkinson: I'd say we got up about six-thirty because we had breakfast at seven-fifteen, and I had eaten breakfast. The mess hall was on the same deck level as the crew's quarters, where we slept and had our lockers. Also, on the same level was where the storeroom that I worked at was located. It was aft.

Okay, after finishing breakfast, I went up the ladder out of the mess hall to topside, and about a hundred feet aft of the bow on the starboard side, there was three storekeepers--a storekeeper by the name of Manvill, a storekeeper by the name of Beno, and a storekeeper by the name of Edwards. Now Edwards was the fellow who was in charge of the storeroom where I worked. I asked Edwards for a key to the storeroom so that I could go back and either get a magazine or a book or a training manual, and I think it was a training manual.

He gave me the key to the storeroom, so I went back down that ladder in the mess hall. I walked aft to the storeroom, unlocked the lock, turned on the light, got my manual, locked the lock, walked back forward into the mess hall. Just as I came up this ladder on the starboard side, out the hatch, I looked over here where it hadn't been ten minutes since I'd left them. All three of them were running forward toward the bow and looking over their shoulder. So I looked up, and here was a plane going

from starboard to port across the ship.

Marcello: And it was strafing these guys?

Wilkinson: It was strafing those guys. Had he seen me, he could have shot me slicker than a whistle.

Marcello: Now up until this time, you had heard no explosions or anything?

Wilkinson: No.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens at that point?

Wilkinson: The rule was that at General Quarters, if you're going forward on the ship or from one deck to a deck higher, you use the starboard side, and you use the starboard ladder; if you are going aft on the ship and you're going from one deck to a deck below, you use the port side and the port ladder. So I went across the ship to the port side, went aft, went up a ladder; and as I rounded a bend near the incinerator, our commanding officer was coming out of his quarters, and he beat me to the ladder by about five or six feet, and I went right up the ladder behind him. We didn't speak or anything. He didn't speak to me; I didn't speak to him.

Marcello: At this point, you do realize very quickly that at least the ship is under attack?

Wilkinson: Oh, I knew what it was as soon as I saw the planes because I could see that rising sun on the underwing. I knew exactly what the deal was as soon as I saw it. I was

halfway to my battle station before General Quarters sounded.

Marcello: You anticipated my next question.

Wilkinson: I knew exactly what the deal was even though I hadn't been in the Navy for about 140 days.

Marcello: How did General Quarters sound aboard the Tangier? In other words, by what means did they sound General Quarters?

Wilkinson: Well, first, we had a buzzer, and then there was a bugle call that was General Quarters, and, of course, everybody knew it.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story now. You were on your way to your battle station.

Wilkinson: Okay, I get up there and I don't know how long I waited for that waterproof chest to be opened to where we could get to the deal. Of course, I had never seen a .50-caliber bullet that wasn't in a clip until that morning because then we started clipping ammunition, too, right away.

Marcello: You had never really clipped ammunition?

Wilkinson: No, no, I never clipped ammunition. Whatever was up there in that storage box had already been clipped and put there. Sometimes when we'd have general quarters, they would always go up there real quick and undo the lock, or there might have been somebody standing by. I never did know that. I'd been up there before when we'd had drills, and I knew how the thing sounded and all. But this was for

real, you know.

Marcello: So basically, up until that time, whenever you did have general quarters drills, you simply went to your battle station...

Wilkinson: And just stood there.

Marcello: I was going to say that you didn't really do what you were supposed to be doing.

Wilkinson: Right. I knew what to do, but I had never carried any. Then that morning, from the waist up the only thing I had on was a T-shirt. Of course, that was the uniform-of-the-day. They had repeated both at quarters...see, we mustered every day at quarters, and they would read sometimes what to do and what not to do. Then sometimes on the plan-of-the-day these little tidbits would come out that the English had found out that they had gotten a lot of burns on arms and legs because the men weren't covered, and by all means don't go into battle without being covered. We didn't have time to go down there and tell them to wait and let us put on our clothes so we can start fighting. So it was somewhere, I'd say, around eleven o'clock before they ordered anybody to go down below and get out of our whites and get into dungarees.

Marcello: Okay, so you get to your battle station, and you're waiting there for somebody to come by and unlock the weather-proof ammunition box.

Wilkinson: Right.

Marcello: Had the thought ever crossed anybody's mind of simply breaking into it?

Wilkinson: Well, there again, I don't know whether you could have that far up--whether there was anything. May I say something? Now I may use a bad word here. Is it all right?

Marcello: Sure.

Wilkinson: Okay, I learned this later. Over on the opposite side, over on the starboard, there was a coxswain and a gunner's mate. The coxswain got there ahead of the gunner's mate. The coxswain's name is Triolo. The gunner's mate is Weyganbt. When Weyganbt got up there, Triolo said, "Well, Goddamn, Weyganbt, let's break out the ammunition!" I'm sure Weyganbt had the key. As I say, this was on the other side. I have no idea who opened the box over on my side, and I don't know when they opened the door to the clipping room or how fast they started clipping ammunition. All I know is that when I'd pick a belt up, there was one man manning the gun; there was another one kind of giving directions. And I think that we had water-cooled guns at that time. You had to keep the pump going so you'd have water so that the darn thing wouldn't burn up. It was at least another man...in other words, I'd say there was at least six men on top of this deal above the clipping room.

Marcello: And there was a ladder that went from the clipping room to

this machine gun?

Wilkinson: Yes, but, of course, it was on the outside. Actually, you had to go outside the clipping room. It was an outside deal. Sometimes they'd just put the belt around my neck, and I'd go up that way, and the guy up there would pick it up off my neck.

Marcello: How many of you were clipping ammunition in that room?

Wilkinson: Oh, I'd say there was thirty around those two guns. Some were clipping, and some were handling it, but I'd say there was at least six up there on that deal.

Marcello: If you had never clipped ammunition before, isn't there a certain procedure you use? Don't you, for instance, put in a regular projectile and then perhaps a tracer and then a...

Wilkinson: In other words, a tracer is about...

Marcello: ...high-explosive bullet or something like that?

Wilkinson: The tracer is about every fifth bullet. It's the red one.

Marcello: Now in your position in the clipping room, what opportunities did you have to see what was going on outside?

Wilkinson: You didn't have any opportunities. We had a porthole in there. We might have had two portholes. I don't remember that. But, man, you didn't have time for that because the idea was to get everything clipped as fast as you could. We had about 7,000 rounds clipped the morning it had started. In twenty-four hours, we had 100,000 rounds clipped.

May I say this? In Simon and Schuster's encyclopedia of World War II, under the biography of C. A. F. Sprague-- he was our commanding officer; he was from Vermont--it states that we were the first ship at Pearl Harbor to open fire.

Marcello: Is it rather disconcerting to be in an area such as you were in and hear all the noise and know things are going outside and yet not being able to see it?

Wilkinson: No, because I wasn't in the clipping room that long. I'd maybe just be in there ten or fifteen minutes. Most of my deal was carrying ammunition. Now, you see, as I told you awhile ago, the Utah went down in eight minutes. I didn't hear the thing because I'm right there where those guns are. I heard very little except what guns we had aboard ship that were firing.

Marcello: What action did you see once you got outside and when you were carrying ammunition?

Wilkinson: Well, I didn't see anything except us shooting at Jap planes. Of course, they were the ones that were going away from the port side. I wasn't looking to see what was going on at the starboard side; I wasn't looking to see what was going on aft; I wasn't looking to see what was going on up on the bow. I was just watching when I got a chance to glance. I was just watching the two machine guns there that were firing at Jap planes.

Marcello: Would you say that everything was being carried on in a rather professional manner during this period of time?

Wilkinson: As far as the Tangier was concerned, yes, sir, I sure would. We'd all been up, and all had breakfast.

Marcello: You mentioned that from where you were, you did have a fairly good view of Battleship Row. What did you see over there?

Wilkinson: Well, I didn't see anything until the Arizona started burning. Of course, I asked what ship that was because I didn't know one battleship from another. I did know the Utah because they had taken the big guns off the Utah and were using it as a target ship. They had big timbers on the decks so that when they dropped water bombs on them, it would break the thing and wouldn't damage anything. Then they had the most sophisticated antiaircraft deal on there because they trained gun crews. They took this thing out every week, and a plane would go and pull a sleeve, and they'd use that for target practice.

Marcello: You mentioned that you did see the Arizona burning. Describe what you saw.

Wilkinson: Well, there wasn't much there. You just saw a terrific amount of smoke, and you knew that something...I didn't know enough about the Navy. I just knew that it was a battleship.

Marcello: In the meantime is the Tangier attempting to get underway?

Wilkinson: No, sir. No, we never did attempt to get underway. The only ship that got underway...well, there was a destroyer. The only battleship was the Nevada that got underway.

Marcello: How long were you continuing to work in the clipping room there and...

Wilkinson: ...and carry ammunition? Somewhere around ten o'clock or maybe eleven o'clock, they sent about a sixth of us down below to change clothes and get into dungarees and get back as quick as you could. I still had this key to the storeroom, so I went back to see what had happened to Edwards. The storeroom was his battle station because he had to be there to issue anything they wanted. So I went in there, and he grinned a little, and I said, "I am very sorry." And he said, "Hell, you don't owe me an apology at all." He said, "They've been razzing you guys for being reserves and this and that." He says, "Listen, you've seen as much as anybody that's been in the regular Navy for the last twenty years. You might find somebody on here that was in World War I, and that's a horse of a different color. But anybody that's in the regular Navy for the last twenty years hasn't seen as much as you've seen." I said, "Let me ask you something." He said, "All right." I said, "How did you get in here?" He said that there was another key in a locked cabinet in the supply office, but he would have had to have gone and gotten the supply officer on duty

to have gotten that thing undone. So they went out in the machine shop, which was just forward of where we were, on the same deck, and got a bolt cutter. They cut the hasp. They didn't cut the lock. They cut the hasp to get in there, is how they got in the storeroom.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens at that point? You're down in the storeroom.

Wilkinson: Well, I just gave him the key and then turned around and went right on back. Sometime during the morning, and I don't remember when it was...in other words, if anybody told me to do something, I didn't turn around to see what his rate or rank was. I just went ahead and did it. They sent a few of us--I'd say half a dozen--down below, maybe as many as four or five decks, to pick up some ammunition. A box of ammunition weighed about a hundred pounds. I remember on one occasion I had come up about two decks--come up the ladder. In other words, I had it on my right shoulder, and I pulled with my left arm coming up that ladder.

I ran into an ol' boy. His name was Deshazo. He was a first class molder, and he was on the master-at-arms force. He was from Senatobia, Mississippi. He ran into me on about the second deck up, and he said, "'Stores,' let me have your box of ammunition, and I'll take it on up yonder, and you go back and get another one. I need that to help me sober

up." In other words, he was a first class who had been over on the beach.

Marcello: Could you detect a lull between the first and the second wave that came in that day?

Wilkinson: Oh, yes, I sure could. I sure could.

Marcello: Approximately how long did that lull last as far as you remember?

Wilkinson: Well, it wasn't over ten or fifteen minutes as far as my mind is concerned. But, of course, it was about an hour, I learned later. But things were happening so fast.

Marcello: Okay, you mentioned that by the time you got out of the clipping room, it was ten-thirty or eleven o'clock, so the attack was pretty much over by then. Now what kind of thoughts were going through your mind at this point?

Wilkinson: Well, of course, I was dumbfounded. I couldn't understand how in the world it happened because, as I said, we had scouting planes there--not only Navy but Army. Of course, I knew those carriers were gone. I didn't know where they were. Really, I couldn't understand what had hit us. I didn't know that much about the Navy.

It wasn't until about three o'clock that afternoon that a first class storekeeper by the name of Wright came up there. He said, "Somebody's head is going to roll over this thing." It had never dawned on me up until that time that somebody was going to be held accountable. Of course,

I didn't understand how they got in there.

Before that happened, and I don't know where it came from, but somewhere around there, around that little clipping deal and those guns, somebody made mention that they were landing, and I thought they were landing because they had just disorganized the whole thing.

Marcello: Did you hear all sorts of rumors in the aftermath of the attack?

Wilkinson: Nothing much other than that they were bringing a landing force ashore. No, I didn't have any idea as to where they came from or anything.

Marcello: And, of course, you had no reason not to believe those rumors after what had happened.

Wilkinson: Right. Right. After it had happened, I mean, it changed you. I keep going back to the deal of Saturday, November 29, aboard the Maryland, when this guy who had stayed in the Navy all this time says, "They've got more than we think they have or that we've been told they've got." He says, "It's going to be rough. I just hope it don't break out." Of course, I'd give anything in the world...if I knew what the guy's name was, I'd try to see if I couldn't trace him down. That's what I'm doing now. I'm looking up the guys. I write all over the country.

Marcello: What did you do that afternoon and then into the evening following the attack?

Wilkinson: Well, we clipped all day. As I told you before, we had 7,000 rounds when the thing started, and the next morning at eight o'clock, we had 100,000 rounds. Of course, we didn't do it all there. They were clipping at places all over the ship. That night we had had darkened ship. Now we clipped in there, but you wouldn't stay in there over ten minutes because it was too hot in there. The porthole was closed, and the door was closed. And the door was latched. If somebody wanted out, everybody had to stop, turn the light out, undo the door, and let them out. If anybody wanted to come in, it was the same procedure because in no way that there was any light to be let out.

Marcello: What did you guys talk about as you were clipping this ammunition?

Wilkinson: There was no talking about it unless there was some of this rumor or some fact that you'd hear.

Marcello: In other words, every person simply had his own thoughts, and he was keeping them to himself.

Wilkinson: Right. Now that night, over on Ford Island, a plane came in off of a carrier, and evidently it thought it was overshooting the landing, and it turned on its lights. Just the minute it turned on its lights, everything in the harbor opened up on it. Of course, it went over here in the cane deal and crashed. It destroyed the plane and killed the pilot. That's just part of the deal of the war.

You didn't know it was a friendly plane because you had had that other deal that morning, and you didn't know but what they were coming in there and landing.

Marcello: Did you actually see this take place, or did you hear most of it since you were inside?

Wilkinson: I saw that plane deal.

Marcello: Describe that in whatever detail you can remember.

Wilkinson: All right. I don't know what kind of a...all I know was that afterwards, I was told a plane came in off of a carrier --of course, at that time I didn't know where it was coming from--and it was going to land on the runway at Ford Island. Evidently, the guy overshot, and just before he was to land, he turned on his lights and saw that he'd overshot, and he pulled out of his descent. Just the second he pulled out, everybody opened up, and then he went back over here and fell in the cane patch over here close to Pearl City.

Marcello: I understand it looked like the Fourth of July when everybody opened up.

Wilkinson: It sure did. By the way, getting back to the Utah going down in eight minutes, the Raleigh was behind it. The Raleigh was the next ship after the Utah, and they took a bomb on the top deck, and it didn't explode until it went out the last one. It was forty-eight hours before they even knew for sure they was going to keep it afloat. Now at different times during the day and the next day, I'd

watch those tugs alongside. The tug was pumping, and the ship was pumping--pumping water out. One time it looked like it was going over one way, and they had this tug pushing it the other way. All of a sudden, it took a lunge the other way so they had to break that tug loose, and the tug went over on the...and then when they got it back over on that side...the only way to get the thing straight is that they had to put tugs on each side of the thing to keep it afloat. Of course, I saw all that.

Marcello: How much sleep did you get that night?

Wilkinson: Oh, I guess I got two or three hours. I slept on topside because they didn't secure us from general quarters. I'd say it was sometime the next morning before they secured us from general quarters. Again, to eat was like changing clothes. We went about a sixth at a time. Now we might have been an eighth, but I always had in my mind it was a sixth. In other words, if there was thirty of us up there, about five or six would go at a time either to eat or other ...of course, after we got into dungarees, from then on in it was the dungaree Navy. They put those whites up. We never did use them anymore except maybe going on liberty or something like that, but not aboard ship.

Marcello: What did you do in the days immediately following the attack?

Wilkinson: We actually thought we were going to go back to the States and get it fixed up so we'd be, say, a ship ready to go to

sea and not be something else. But on Wednesday morning... now I've a book that says it was Friday morning, but I think it was Wednesday morning. Before breakfast, Edwards came down to the storeroom and said, "Now all of you guys that think we're going to the States to have an overhaul, you go on topside and look at what's coming aboard. It's not in code." A lot of times, if they were going to send something to an advanced base or to a certain ship, they would have it in code so that no eyes around the shipyard would know the destination. We went up there, and ammunition was coming aboard, and it had been written on there in chalk: "Wake Island." So we knew that we were going to Wake.

We left on December 15 with the Fourth Defense Battalion of Marines to take them to Wake. That was on Monday, a week following the attack. He let me go to topside, and I looked at the island as long as I could see it because I didn't think I'd ever see any more of America. I thought that would be the last...because I thought they'd sink everything out there.

Marcello: You were part of a convoy?

Wilkinson: Yes. They used us as a transport ship to transport the Fifth Marine Defense Battalion to Wake. We got out there and picked up the Saratoga, and they had three heavy cruisers and nine destroyers and the fleet oiler Natchez. The

Natchez is what saved our lives because it could only make twelve knots, and, of course, you couldn't go any faster than your slowest ship. That plus the fact that they kept refueling those destroyers meant that we were slow getting there, and it failed before we got there.

Marcello: I was going to say, you never did get to Wake Island. You turned around and came back.

Wilkinson: Right. We took those Marines to Midway, and we picked up a bunch of civilians who were there working building the base at Midway.

Marcello: Now during the attack itself, the Tangier never really came under any direct attack, did it? In other words, it was not one of the principal targets of the Japanese attack.

Wilkinson: No, it wasn't one of the targets, but we did have a bomb that fell off the bow. I don't know how close it was. It was pretty close. Then sometime that morning, a midget sub surfaced, and we think that we shot its conning tower. It was later rammed by a destroyer. Our lookouts up front saw it, and the gun crew shot the conning tower of a midget sub.

Marcello: But you actually didn't witness this yourself?

Wilkinson: No.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Wilkinson, I think that's probably a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project. You've said a lot of very interesting and, I think, important things about

the Pearl Harbor experience, and I'm sure that students and researchers are both going to find your comments most valuable when they get to use them.

Wilkinson: Well, good.