

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
645

Interview with
FLOYD H LAUGHLIN
May 6 1984

Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia
Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: Floyd H Laughlin
(Signature)
Date: May 6 1984

COPYRIGHT



1984

THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF NORTH TEXAS STATE
UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF DENTON

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Coordinator of the Oral History Collection or the University Archivist, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas 76203

Oral History Collection

Floyd H. Laughlin

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Date of Interview: May 5, 1984

Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Floyd Laughlin for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 5, 1984, in Norfolk, Virginia. I am interviewing Mr. Laughlin in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was a member of A Battery, 97th Coast Artillery at Fort Kamehameha on December 7, 1941, during the Japanese attack there.

Mr. Laughlin, 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. Laughlin: Well, I was born on November 14, 1917, in a town in Ohio-- Ulrichsville, Ohio. That's down near Denison, The Twin Cities, they call them. Anyhow, I lived there four years, and my father and mother moved to Holloway, Ohio, which is toward Wheeling. It's just about thirty miles from Wheeling, West Virginia. I was raised at the small town of Holloway, and I finished high school there in 1936, when I graduated. Then I was one year in a CCC camp at Toledo, Ohio, and that was 1937.

Then in 1940, I was working in the town of Canton, Ohio, where I signed up for the draft. In the meantime, I had got a job up in Pennsylvania, where I worked in 1941 at the chemical plant. Then that's where my draft notice came through, and I had to drive back to Canton, where I was drafted on June 10, 1941.

Marcello: So you were actually a draftee. You did not volunteer to join the service?

Laughlin: No, that's when they had the draft, and there's a lot of people that don't realize that there were draftees over there at the time.

So, anyhow, I left my job in June of 1941, and I was sent to San Diego to Camp Callan. That's where I had thirteen weeks of basic training. Then we went up to San Francisco to catch the boat to go over to Pearl Harbor, which was the Atolin. So we went to Pearl Harbor on September 14, 1941.

Marcello: Let me ask you a couple of other general questions here. Now as I recall, the draft was for one year at that time.

Laughlin: Yes, one year.

Marcello: Why did you volunteer for the draft?

Laughlin: I didn't volunteer. That's when everybody had to sign up, and they picked the numbers like a lottery style. So when my number came up...of course, everybody thought--"Well, I'll go get my year over with," so we didn't contest it or anything.

Marcello: So even by the time you went to the Hawaii Islands, you

assumed that you were going to be in the service for just one year.

Laughlin: Yes, that's right.

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

Laughlin: Yes. While we were there, they added eighteen more months on to it, so we knew before we went over that it wouldn't be just the one year.

Marcello: What did that do to the morale of you and your buddies?

Laughlin: Well, everybody didn't like the idea, but there was nothing you could say about it because they realized the way things were at the time. So we had a celebration party in California, and I have a newspaper clipping about the party to celebrate our eighteen-month extension.

So from there we went up to San Francisco, and they hadn't even told us we were going to Hawaii. We went up there, and they marched us on the boat. We didn't know ahead of time to notify anybody that we were going over.

Marcello: What was your reaction when you found out that you were going to Hawaii?

Laughlin: Well, we didn't like the idea. We thought we would...because I was married at the time.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Laughlin: We were married in May of 1941, so we've been married forty-three years now. I was overseas almost four years before

I saw her again after that.

Marcello: Let me ask you a few more questions at this point. I would assume that when they were contemplating sending you overseas, probably the choices would have been either the Hawaiian Islands or the Philippines, and in one sense I guess you lucked out by going to the Hawaiian Islands as opposed to the Philippines.

Laughlin: Well, that's another thing I wanted to tell you. There were two shiploads that left our camp in California. One shipload went to the Philippines, and I happened to be on the one that didn't go there. I never did know what happened to the other fellows that were sent to the Philippines.

Marcello: Okay, so you land in the Hawaiian Islands. What was your reaction to being assigned to the Hawaiian Islands?

Laughlin: Well, that part was good; I mean, everybody knew that Hawaii was nice. We almost had six months in, and we thought we wouldn't be that long over there.

We were in training over there on searchlights, and they were antiquated equipment from World War I, I think--the trucks with the hard tires and all this. Everybody thought we were really equipped, but it was really ancient equipment.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. Now when you landed in Honolulu, did you go directly to Fort Kamehameha?

Laughlin: We took the train--that small narrow-gauge train that had

open cars and everything. That's what they used to haul us from the depot in Honolulu up to Fort Kamehameha.

Marcello: Where exactly was Fort Kam located relative to Honolulu and the other military installations?

Laughlin: Fort Kam is right at the entrance of the harbor. In fact, that camp was made to guard the entrance to the harbor. They had 16-inch guns and the antiaircraft weapons around to guard the harbor. They were equipped for the old-time war style, where they fired guns out in the ocean to hit ships and stuff. It has all been eliminated now--all that kind of equipment.

Marcello: How large a base was Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Oh, I'd say it was probably a mile long, and there were only about five outfits at Fort Kamehameha. There was the 55th Coast Artillery, the 15th Coast Artillery, 41st Coast Artillery, and the 97th Coast Artillery. It really wasn't a big base as far as bases go.

Marcello: How many men would you estimate were at Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Oh, I'd say roughly 2,500. I imagine that would cover it. It was behind Hickam Field. We had to go through Hickam to get to the base.

Marcello: Describe what your living quarters were like there at Fort Kam.

Laughlin: Well, the barracks were a quadrangle, and it was all well-kept-up with a lot of shrubbery and trees all around. We were pretty much under trees. They were called algarroba trees,

and we had to pick up the beans all the time in the morning. We were far enough from the ocean that we weren't right on the ocean because the other gun batteries were between us and the ocean.

Marcello: Now were you living in a barracks-room atmosphere in your living quarters, that is, there was a squad bay and all that sort of thing?

Laughlin: Yes, it was built into a square. Like, one section was a dining hall, and they had the barber shop, the poolroom; and then the barracks was around on the other side. That took care of all the living quarters. In fact, our outfit was too large for the one building, and we had tents outside where about half of the outfit lived in tents. I was living in a tent when it happened.

Marcello: Were these the pyramidal tents?

Laughlin: Yes. We probably had twelve of those outside the barracks.

Marcello: How large were those pyramidal tents? In other words, how many men would there be to a tent?

Laughlin: There was four men in each tent. We had the metal beds and everything inside the tent.

Marcello: What was the space like inside those tents?

Laughlin: Well, around twelve-by-twelve, like a room.

Marcello: Was there sufficient space in there for four men?

Laughlin: Yes, there was sufficient space because you don't have that much clothing and stuff. You had, like, a footlocker and a

bed. That's all we had.

Marcello: Describe what the Army chow was like there at Fort Kam in that period prior to the war.

Laughlin: Well, it wasn't too bad. There was pretty good cooks in those days, and it was pretty good food, I'd say.

Marcello: Now you mentioned a moment ago that when you got over to Fort Kam, your training and so on resumed or continued. What kind of training did you undergo after you were assigned to A Battery of the 97th Coast Artillery?

Laughlin: Well, like I say, this equipment they brought in from Fort Shafter with the searchlights. Radar just came out about the time we got there. It was something new. They had those radars down the beach about a half-mile out of camp, and we were stationed down there at night for training. Then we came back to camp in the morning for breakfast. So that's what happened. I was on the power plant that night. I ran the power plant for the radar.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what your function was.

Laughlin: Yes, I was down on the beach that night before December 7. We would go down and have drills in the evening, you know, trying to pick up targets--planes or anything. It was so new that when they picked up something, they wasn't sure whether it was right or something wrong with the equipment, you know, because we only had them, like, a couple of weeks before December 7.

Marcello: Now what would you be doing during the daytime? What kind of training would you be doing at that period of time?

Laughlin: Well, like, normal drilling and marching and stuff like that, but it wasn't that big an area where you could do a lot. We did nothing major because all we had was rifles and searchlight equipment.

Marcello: Am I to assume, then, that most of your actual specialized training would be taking place at night?

Laughlin: Yes, most of our training...after we got the radar...they had searchlights set up, and they had cables hooked to a control station. The radar would pick up a target, and they would tell you they're on a target, and they would say, "Throw one light in action." So this one light would go in action and try to find the plane. If it picked up the plane, then the other lights that distance away would...there'd be, like, three lights on a plane at a time, you know. As a plane got farther away, the one light farthest away would go out, and another light would come on to carry it farther. There was a light with the radar, and then there was carry lights that would continue. We had, like, fifteen lights for our battery.

Marcello: These are called carry lights?

Laughlin: Yes, they just carried the target to another light which would pick it up. Then they had, like, three or four radars. Like, one radar would be on one section of the island, and then maybe six miles away would be another radar. Then they moved

them quite often to find a better location because they didn't want them too low. They tried to find hills around there where they could really pick up the targets better. They experimented a lot of times moving...we'd go out in the evening a lot of times with searchlights to try to find a good location. Then the telephone crew would hook up wire--run wire from one position to another--for communication.

Marcello: I gather, then, that these radar stations were rather mobile?

Laughlin: Yes, they were pretty mobile. For a while, until after the war had begun, they had to dig in and put them down in the ground further and sandbag around them.

Marcello: How much confidence did people have in that radar, including the radar operators themselves?

Laughlin: Well, they wasn't real accurate at first because they wasn't right on the distance and the azimuth and the elevation and all that stuff. It was hard to...but there was a three-man crew that ran the radar--up there turning the handles to rotate it. It wasn't like these modern radars that turn all the time. See, they would turn by control. Well, with something new like that, they was never sure just whether they had one target or two targets.

Marcello: I've also heard it said that sometimes you couldn't tell the difference between an incoming plane and a flock of sea gulls. Is that correct, or is that an exaggeration?

Laughlin: I don't think sea gulls would mess it up. I know they picked

up a drum out in the water--floating around--and radar would pick it up, and they'd send someone out to see what it was. Any metal like that would...another thing about these radars is that they kept men on that all day long to practice. There'd be one crew on for three hours, and another crew would take over the next three hours. They ran pretty steady after they got to use them.

Marcello: That's kind of interesting. I didn't realize that the radar was in operation there at Fort Kam basically twenty-four hours a day.

Laughlin: Well, yes. It was something that just started because that radar wasn't that new over there before. In fact, in the movie "Tora! Tora! Tora!" it shows how they got a radar, and they couldn't get permission to put it on one hill, and that's about how it was in those days. They tried to change them around where they could get better reception with them.

Marcello: Was that radar subject to breaking down quite often?

Laughlin: Yes. We had a regular repair crew that would check tubes and everything else in it. They had to go out and check it out if they couldn't get good reception. We also had trouble with the cables from the searchlights to a control station.

Sometimes there'd be a break in a wire, and they had to get guys out to check the cables out to see where they wasn't getting contact--rotate the light and stuff. But the control station was a distance off from the light, and you couldn't

see anything if you're that close to the light. You had to be away from it, and I'd say the control station would be three or four hundred feet. They could run the cranks to control it and keep the lights on steady. That was the main thing in learning how to operate it--to get a steady tracking pattern with the searchlight. It's not easy to learn, you know, to stay right on the plane.

Then they had practice planes to go up for us to practice with. A lot of times they would blink their lights in the planes because they'd stay on so long that planes couldn't tell where they were at--the lights were shining too bright in their eyes. So they'd blink their lights for us to get off and let them go without their lights on.

Marcello: What was your specific function with one of these searchlight batteries?

Laughlin: Well, I operated a light a good bit, too. There were two carbon rods in there that operates the light, you know, and makes an 800,000,000 candlepower, is what those lights are.

Marcello: Eight hundred million?

Laughlin: Eight hundred million candlepower. They're good for about eight or ten miles, they claim. They're real powerful. As the carbon rod burns...you can only keep them on for a half hour at a time because they'll overheat. Then when the carbon rods get so short...you have to keep watching to make sure... you have to change the carbons so that they don't burn down in the...there's a brass head in there, and it would ruin

the...in fact, I burnt one one night. The gears didn't mesh right, and it burnt the brass head. It just melted it down. So that's when you have a crew to come out and replace it. You don't know what you're doing wrong until it happens.

Then there was a time when I went to Honolulu one day, and I came home and they changed searchlights on me. Everything was different--all the clutches to move it in the right direction. So they got an order in the middle of the night to operate the light--throw it into action in a certain direction--and I couldn't find the clutches, and the sergeant was hollering. I said, "I can't tell where the clutches are!" It was in the dark, and I didn't have a light. He was mad, but there was no way you could help it. I didn't know they'd changed the light on me.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. I do know that in some cases, the Army before the war was operating on what was called tropical work hours. Was that the case at Fort Kam? Are you familiar with tropical hours?

Laughlin: Well, I know how the pineapple fields operate. They announce it every morning on the radio whether there's going to be work in the pineapple fields or not. I know what you mean about the hours because we never did too much in the afternoon hours because it was hot and everything. We'd do most everything in the morning, as far as the work hours.

Marcello: Were you kind of an exception in that you had to conduct

most of your training in the evening? It seems to me this would cause some morale problems.

Laughlin: No, it really wasn't bad. Well, like, in the afternoon you wouldn't be doing anything. The way it was at first, all the searchlights would be in camp in one spot. So in the evening, they would start going out about four or five o'clock to get out to where they were going to set up. There's jacks on the searchlights where you crank them down and set them up, and then you hook all your cables up. That's why they went out to different places every evening until they found out where they operated best.

For a long time, they did it that way. They'd all come in in the morning. They had a trailer to haul the searchlight in and then a trailer for the power plant. It would take two trucks to haul one searchlight outfit out. The radar stayed in position. They were too big just to move like that.

Marcello: Would you be going out on this kind of activity every evening, or how did it work?

Laughlin: Oh, yes, every evening we would be out. In fact, we went clear around Diamond Head and up to the east side. We experimented over there. Yes, every evening we went out, and every morning we would come in. Then, of course, the guys wouldn't have to work that much that day--the ones that were up all night.

Marcello: Well, again, how often would you have this duty during the week?

Laughlin: Every night.

Marcello: And you would be out there all night?

Laughlin: Yes. Well, there's so many on duty and so many off. Like, one guy would be up two or three hours with the light. But they would stay out all night, and then after the war started, though, they would rotate shifts. So the best thing to do...I got a job in camp once, where I just took care of machine guns and stayed in camp all night. That was the best job I had. I didn't have to go out on night duty all the time.

Marcello: Now as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you, even in your position, detect any changes in your training routine?

Laughlin: Yes, I could...well, this was before Pearl Harbor. I was driving a truck some, too. We weren't allowed to have the lights on on the truck. This was a couple of weeks before Pearl Harbor. I was driving down the road, and I'd run into the end of a sewer. The guys wouldn't be allowed to have their lights on. You'd just have these little peep lights. They knew something was up, but they wasn't sure what was going to happen. That was before Pearl Harbor.

I can even remember them saying that they were actually out hunting the Japanese fleet. They knew they were out there someplace, but they just didn't find them, that's all.

There was thirty-two ships out that were hunting the fleet, and they never found them--four task forces.

Marcello: How about in terms of the alerts and things of that nature? Did you have any of those in those days and weeks before the actual attack itself?

Laughlin: No, we didn't have any alerts to speak of. All we knew was what the notices were that were coming in. We would be on alert for a few days, and then they'd say, "Well, it's called off. It's all over." But that's all we knew about any alert. We didn't know what the higher-ups were doing all the time.

Marcello: So you were not going on any alerts, and you would not be going into the field for any extended period of time.

Laughlin: No.

Marcello: Suppose war did come. Did you have a specific function or place that you were to go or things of that nature?

Laughlin: No, we had no place to hide. They didn't even have sandbags around the equipment or anything. It was just all out in the open.

Marcello: But I guess what I'm saying is, if an attack did come, were you to assemble someplace, or was there a particular thing that you needed to do when the attack occurred? For instance, in the Navy, when General Quarters sounds, everybody has a battle station. Did you have a particular location or place where you were to go?

Laughlin: No, we were never notified of anything like that. In fact, we didn't have anyplace big enough to gather at the barracks area. We were never notified about doing anything like that.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work for the people in your unit there?

Laughlin: Well, we were allowed an eight-hour pass every ten days. Like, if you wanted to go to Honolulu for a day, you could put a notice in a couple of nights before. They'd just let so many go so that they'd have enough there to operate the equipment.

Marcello: How about the evenings?

Laughlin: Well, that's why we had to be back in the evenings. See, if we went on pass, we was to be home by seven or eight o'clock, and then we'd be out at our position for the night. We were on duty.

Marcello: When you went on liberty in Honolulu, what was your usual routine? What would you do?

Laughlin: Well, I always went down near Waikiki, and there's little houses down there that they would rent out to servicemen. I forget what the price was--three dollars a night or something. Then there was Fort DeRussy, where you could stay three days for a dollar-and-a-half if you had a three-day pass. I was laughed at when I was over there recently and thinking you could stay there for a dollar-and-a-half. The price now would be about \$150. Fort DeRussy was a good base down there near Waikiki. Then you could walk and go...we always

went to Waikiki Theater a lot. I always liked the theater. We'd go swimming on the beach during the day and walk around town down there.

Marcello: Usually, for you, considering what job you had, when would liberty commence?

Laughlin: Well, we would usually go at eight o'clock in the morning. We'd catch a bus right on the road and go through Fort Kam and Hickam Field and out to Honolulu that way.

Marcello: And then you would have to be back by four o'clock that afternoon?

Laughlin: No, we'd catch a bus by six o'clock down in Honolulu and be home by seven o'clock. The Navy always had to get back earlier than we did. They had to get back by six o'clock, and we were allowed back by nine o'clock.

Marcello: How close a contact were you keeping with your wife? Did you have any intentions, for instance, of ever bringing her out to Honolulu?

Laughlin: No. Back in those days, a private or a low-ranking person couldn't bring anybody over. Just the officers would do this. In fact, there wasn't that many women...if you was down on Waikiki, you never saw too many American people down there. It was so different in those days when everything had to go by boat. You know, there wasn't that many people over there.

Marcello: What kind of pay were you receiving at that time?

- Laughlin: Twenty-one dollars a month.
- Marcello: And I assume the Army didn't make any provisions for dependent housing or anything of that nature during this time.
- Laughlin: No. I think it was around the time the war started that they raised the pay to \$50, and then they was taking \$28 out and sending it to my wife, anyhow, because we married before that. So actually, we wasn't making that much money, anyhow, but we didn't need that much because there wasn't nothing to do.
- Marcello: What was there to do on the base itself there at Fort Kam?
- Laughlin: Well, they had a basketball team. They played down at Fort Kam. They had different baseball teams where you could play ball and so on. There wasn't too much activity on the base.
- Marcello: I do know that at places like Schofield Barracks, for instance, athletics and sports played a very important part in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Army. In other words, various unit commanders would actually recruit athletes and so on and so forth. Was that much emphasis given to sports at Fort Kam?
- Laughlin: No, it wasn't. In fact, I don't remember that much emphasis on sports. But they used to take truckloads of guys...we'd go to Schofield and watch boxing or wrestling or whatever they had up there. We even went to movies at Schofield. They had a nice theater up there.
- Marcello: Boxing was a rather popular entertainment at that time, was it not?

- Laughlin: Yes. Everybody tried to be a hero in the boxing outfit because that helped them in their status in the Army. In fact, there was a lot of rough characters, so I was never foolish enough to take up that sport (chuckle).
- Marcello: Okay, in general, how would you describe the morale of the people in your unit during that period prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor?
- Laughlin: Well, I think it was good. I don't think there was nothing wrong with the morale. Everybody got along good together. In fact, we weren't there long enough to get tired of the place yet. We just were learning what we was over there for.
- Marcello: You had gotten there when? In September?
- Laughlin: September of 1941. There was only a couple months away from when the war started.
- Marcello: What was the Army chow like?
- Laughlin: Well, it was rather good, I thought. The chow in the Army always depended on the cooks. Sometimes you'd get good cooks... but they fixed a lot of Spam and a lot of...they could make it taste real good or real bad--whoever was cooking. But I never did complain about the food in the Army. I always thought that they did as good as they could do.
- We used to take hikes, too. We did a lot of hiking, where they'd take you out for a ten-mile hike. Then we used to walk through sugar cane fields. There's a lot of jiggers on sugar cane, you know. It's real hot in those fields.

It really makes you work to get through them.

Marcello: This was a part of your military training?

Laughlin: Yes, we'd hike single file through a sugar cane field, and it's fifteen feet high. Then they'd have a thing, like, some guys would hide in the field, and you'd try and find them, you know, like the infantry do.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us up to the days immediately prior to the actual attack itself, Mr. Laughlin. What we want to do is go into that particular weekend in as much detail as possible. Let me ask you this question. I do know that one of the main concerns of the Army was the possibility of sabotage. As we know, there were a lot of people of Japanese ancestry on the island, and it was believed that they were potential sources of sabotage if war came between the United States and Japan. What emphasis or measures were taken to guard against sabotage there at Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Well, I think that's the main thing they prepared for, only they didn't realize there might be an attack by planes. They kept thinking it would be sabotage. They lined up everything in perfect order so that one guard could watch a big area.

Marcello: Was this the way it was done at Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Well, yes. I was right next to Hickam Field, where they lined up all the planes next to it. Well, at Fort Kam we didn't have that much to watch over, you know, because we were a small outfit.

- Marcello: Did you ever receive lectures or anything of that nature relative to the dangers or possibilities of sabotage?
- Laughlin: No. Like I say, all they ever told us is that there's an alert on and there's no passes and stuff like that, and then they'd call it off a couple of days later and say, "Everything is okay." But they never really expected anything that major to happen.
- Marcello: When you and your buddies sat around in your bull sessions and talked, especially after the news media seemed to indicate that the relations between the two countries weren't too good, did the subject of a possible Japanese attack in the Hawaiian Islands ever come up?
- Laughlin: Yes. On the ship we went over on in September...I can remember once that we met a ship way out in the ocean, and they sounded General Quarters, and they even manned the guns. They thought maybe it was a Japanese ship and that something might happen. When we left California, they told us then that they had cut off iron ore and all the stuff that was supposed to go to Japan. We knew there was trouble in their feeling toward each other. They were a little leery everytime they'd meet some ship or something. They'd have a practice drill on the guns. They really expected something in the last few months before Pearl Harbor.
- Marcello: Did you ever see that the guard details and so on were stepped up or increased or anything of that nature around the base

there at Fort Kam in those days and weeks immediately prior to that?

Laughlin: No. The only thing that I noticed was that they did give us more ammunition one time there. We had a couple hundred rounds apiece and everything, but then we had to turn it all in before December 7, so it was all in the storeroom locked up with the rifles. We couldn't even get to our rifles.

Marcello: When did they give you these a couple hundred rounds apiece?

Laughlin: A couple weeks before Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Explain how all this took place.

Laughlin: Well, that's when they had an alert in November--a couple of weeks before Pearl Harbor--that they expected something to happen. So they had us all with bandoleers, and we had a couple hundred rounds. Then the Friday or Saturday before, we came back into camp, and we turned everything in, and they said, "The alert's over. We don't think there will be any trouble."

Marcello: Where did you go? When that alert took place, where did they send you? Where did you go?

Laughlin: Well, we were out along the beach. That's where our radar and searchlight equipment went. So actually, at the time, we rode back in camp, and then we were free to get passes again. They really thought it was all over. So up to the day it happened there, I don't think anybody realized what was going to happen.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that weekend of December 7. Let's talk about that Saturday, December 6, 1941. What did you do that day?

Laughlin: I have a hard time recollecting. I think I was in Honolulu on pass, and I got home about eight o'clock that night.

Marcello: Did you recall what you did that day in Honolulu?

Laughlin: I figure I was at Waikiki, and I came home early.. I know that I had a radio in my tent, and I was listening to a conversation on the radio. They was talking about what would happen if we got in trouble with Japan. They said, "The Marines could settle that in six months time if we get in any trouble." I can remember that part of it, but I can't remember just exactly anymore about what I did down in Honolulu that day.

Marcello: Were you in any way preparing for Christmas?

Laughlin: Yes. I bought some things to send back to the States. In fact, I'd sent my wife a picture home of a map and marked where our camp was on the map. She got that about the time of Pearl Harbor, so she knew right where I was when it happened. Then I couldn't notify her right away because we were out in the fields, and all this commotion was going on. So it was a couple of weeks later before she ever knew that I was all right or not.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened back in Fort Kam that evening of Saturday, December 6?

Laughlin: There was nothing that happened outside of that we were out on the radar that night.

Marcello: What time did you get to bed that night?

Laughlin: Well, I was up all night, and we came in at seven o'clock in the morning.

Marcello: You had to go on duty?

Laughlin: Yes, I was on radar.

Marcello: What time did you go on duty?

Laughlin: Well, the way we worked it, I'd run the power plant three or four hours, and then another guy would take over and run it three or four hours. Because the weather was warm, we would sleep out near the power plant. We came into camp at seven o'clock in the morning. We had ours turned off, and we were eating breakfast.

I was in the mess hall when I could hear all those planes buzzing around. I didn't realize what was happening. I thought we was getting some new planes in. I saw them-- they were only about a hundred feet high--going down the street. Some guy hollered, "We're getting new planes in!" I looked over and said, "There goes the oil tank!" I thought they hit the oil tank at Pearl Harbor, but that's when the Arizona got hit. So we could see the bombs going down then when they were dive-bombing.

Marcello: What kind of view of Pearl Harbor did you have from where you were located?

Laughlin: We had a pretty good view. We had to look over the top of the barracks at Hickam, and all we could see was a high view. We couldn't see the actual ships from our location, but we could see the dive-bombers dropping the bombs.

Marcello: Now in the initial minutes of the attack, did Fort Kam come under any fire?

Laughlin: Well, after they strafed the harbor, they would come around Fort Kam--coming down the street. That's when that one Japanese plane crashed into the ordnance building. It was only about three hundred feet from where I was.

Marcello: Describe this incident.

Laughlin: Well, I was standing in the alley beside our barracks. Some guy hollered, "Hey, there's a Jap plane that went down over here!" So I ran up to the front of the barracks. It was across the street, and there were three of our guys that got hit with the wing and cut in half. There was a hole in the building--like a Jap body had hit it. It cut off a coconut tree. The pictures are in all the books that you get of Pearl Harbor. They show the plane, which was only about three hundred feet from us. So they roped the area off right away, and we just left and went back to where our camp was.

Marcello: Once the attack started and after you found out that this was hostile action on the part of Japan, what did you do?

Laughlin: Well, we had a sergeant that was in charge of the storeroom.

He finally unlocked it, and we got our rifles out and everything. We had a captain from West Point who lined us all up and told us not to shoot at the planes because it would draw fire where our camp was.

The outfits next to us were setting up machine guns in the alley so they could...so it was dangerous to move any way because they were firing low over anybody's head who went to cross the street. They were firing at the planes with machine guns. I never actually fired my rifle at all.

Marcello: So where were you deployed?

Laughlin: Well, I was standing at the storeroom door--right outside, just where I could watch the harbor. There was a bullet that hit right beside my head and hit the ground. I always wished I had picked it up; but at that time, I wasn't thinking about that, so I never did pick it up.

Marcello: How long did you remain there at Fort Kamehameha during the attack?

Laughlin: We was getting ready to go out of camp after the first hour was over.

Marcello: In the meantime, is anybody taking charge? Is anything decisive being done here at Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Yes. We had a Captain Wollaston. He was from West Point, and he was a good officer. He lined us all up, and he separated all the truck drivers and everybody, so that if they did get hit, it wouldn't kill all the truck drivers or

...he was separating everybody in different bunches.

Then we started for the trucks, and I had a flat tire. I had a half-ton truck to get out of camp with, and I had a flat tire. I had to change a tire. I pulled the shrapnel out of the tire and put it in my pocket, and I still have it at home yet. I kept it the rest of the war.

Marcello: Was this a piece of shrapnel from a Japanese bomb or a piece of shrapnel from an exploding antiaircraft shell?

Laughlin: No, it was a Japanese bomb. It landed in the parking lot. So I still have that at home. It's about three inches long, a real jagged piece of metal.

Then some of our crew, the next morning, brought a Jap motor out of a plane down to our camp. We were taking souvenirs off of it, and I have a gear out of it that I had engraved in Honolulu: "The Rising Sun That Set on Oahu, December 7, 1941." I still have it at home yet.

Marcello: So after you got your truck in operating order, what happened at that point?

Laughlin: Well, we went out to the beach--about a mile out where the radar was--and we started digging in and filling sandbags and stuff like that. So that's where we stayed the rest of the night. They had us digging foxholes, and we were only about a foot above sea level. They'd tell us, "Dig it deeper! Dig it deeper!" So we'd dig the foxhole, and then when the tide would come up, it would fill with water, so we couldn't

use it anyhow. You couldn't lay in there, so we had to fill sandbags and make places to hide behind.

Marcello: What did you talk about that night?

Laughlin: That's the night that they were getting all kinds of alerts that the Japanese were landing here and there. I suppose you know about the carrier planes we shot that night. There was about three planes coming in from a carrier and trying to get into the island, and everybody opened up with machine guns and everything else. It really lit up the sky, trying to shoot down the planes. The guys parachuted out, and I think that one guy got killed.

Marcello: Did you actually witness this?

Laughlin: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what this scene looked like.

Laughlin: It was dark. It was around ten o'clock at night. Of course, there was no communication between outfits, so when one outfit starts firing, everyone else gets in on the act. So they fired, and they brought the planes down. Even after we shot it down, we didn't know whether it was a Japanese plane or ours because you don't hear all of the information until the next day or so. There was no orderly way of doing it in those days; I mean, they didn't have communication with radio or anything to tell the next outfit what was going on. There were a lot of incidents of guards shooting at each other. You walked around the building, and you'd meet another guard,

and they'd shoot at each other.

Marcello: I'm sure that it wasn't too safe to walk around anyplace.

Laughlin: No, it wasn't even safe to move at night because...I was laying on the beach the first night there, and they had orders to shoot anything that moved. So I don't know how this guy...I think he was from our outfit. He come up along like he come out of the water, and he was laying on the beach, and I aimed at him, and I kept aiming. I thought, "I better not shoot. I'm not sure." I'm glad I didn't shoot because it wasn't a Japanese. I would've shot one of my own men.

Marcello: What did you talk about that night--you and your buddies?

Laughlin: Well, we weren't with too many because there was only about five of us in the group where we had the radar. We were wondering what was going to happen next. You keep waiting and waiting, and you'd hear firing, like, up in the mountains, and then there'd be lights and flares. You didn't know all what's going on.

The infantry moved in behind us, and we heard bullets hit the radar. We were above ground yet, and there were bright lights on the radar shining down where we were at. The officer tried to keep us in there, but we got out and made a place that was away from the lights. He said, "Hey, you're supposed to be in there where the lights are!" I said, "That's too dangerous over there! They're shooting at the

radar!" It was dangerous no matter where you were.

Marcello: Did you get very much sleep that night?

Laughlin: No, I don't think I got any that night.

Marcello: How about food? Had you eaten since breakfast?

Laughlin: No. That's another thing. We went into camp...it was in the dark, and we got into a mess hall. I still don't know what I ate, but I know we was eating in the dark--wasn't allowed to turn any lights on.

Marcello: Was this that evening of December 7?

Laughlin: Yes, that evening. They would transport guys back in and back out and bring out stuff for you to eat or something.

Marcello: Approximately how far was this site from Fort Kam itself?

Laughlin: About half-a-mile up the road. It was toward Honolulu. It was just an open beach.

Marcello: How long did you remain out there altogether?

Laughlin: We were living out there...they did keep a radar out there longer, but they shifted a lot of the men around. Like, they sent me to Schofield to pull guard duty for a week. Then I'd come back to Fort Kam. Then they ended up sending us all to Aiea, which was a camp right behind the harbor, and that's where they built the main headquarters for our search-light outfit. So I never did get back to Fort Kam after they moved us out there.

Then they had me...well, all the searchlights were scattered so far--clear around the harbor. I would drive a

chow truck, and I would hardly ever get to sit down and eat a meal because I'd be hauling meals everyplace else--feeding everybody else. They had these insulated cans, you know, so I'd get the truck at ten o'clock, and I'd be driving until 1:30 before I'd get back with the dinner stuff. Then they'd wash them up and get them loaded for the next meal. So I was on the road most of the time feeding everybody else.

That's how I knew most of our men. A lot of guys can't remember their men, but I can remember everybody because I was meeting them all the time. Our outfit had about 225 men in it because it was a large outfit. A lot of infantry outfits only have only 125 or 130 men, but by having so much equipment, we had to have a much bigger outfit.

Marcello: Let me go back and just pick up a couple of loose ends relative to the attack itself. Now you mentioned that it was around seven o'clock, and you were at your chow hall when the planes first came over.

Laughlin: Yes. That's when we came into camp--around seven o'clock. We were eating breakfast when...at 7:55 I was still in the mess hall. That's the time the attack started. I could hear the commotion outside, and I didn't know what was going on, so that's when I ran out and saw all these planes.

Marcello: Approximately how much time elapsed from that point, that is, from about 7:55 until you finally took off and went out into the field?

Laughlin: It was about, I'd say, 10:30 before we got out to the field because we had to stay right there because there was too much going on for us to...

Marcello: So it was about two-and-a-half hours later before you went in the field.

Laughlin: Yes.

Marcello: What were you doing basically during that period of time between 7:55 and 10:30?

Laughlin: Well, all we could do was watch what was going on at the harbor--the planes and all this. I saw at least four planes crash into the ocean out there--that was shot down. They said that two of our P-40's shot down a couple of them. In fact, I think there's still a plane or two out there that they haven't recovered yet--they were going to try to recover.

Marcello: On a weekend were there very many officers on the base?

Laughlin: No, we never had many officers around. We had a captain and a 2nd lieutenant. There were three officers that we had for our outfit.

In fact, one time there was a...this was before the war. General Short came through our camp, and I didn't realize it until later, and I bought this book, and I found out what he looked like. We were on the tennis court, and he came through with another officer or two. He said, "We're going to have to get this training serious because we're going to get into this war like we had to end the First World

War." I never did forget that ~~either~~. That's what he told us. I was reading the book, At Dawn We Slept, and they had his picture in there. That's who he was--General Short. He was a short guy, too. He wasn't too big.

Marcello: Is there anything else relative to the attack at Pearl Harbor that you think we need to talk about?

Laughlin: Well, it was so much to watch that morning. During the first hour the bombing was all low. All the planes were coming real low and doing all the damage. In fact, in the first half-hour, they did the worst of the damage. Then the second attack came in, and they came in real high. That's when all the anti-aircraft was shooting at them. They shot down twenty-nine planes altogether. I can remember the second attack real well. The shell bursts wasn't reaching the plane. They wasn't shooting down that many with that type of anti-aircraft guns we had in those days.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that Fort Kam was more or less a secondary target? In other words, did the planes do their damage at either Pearl Harbor or Hickam Field, and then, as they were pulling out of there dives, they would throw a few rounds into Fort Kam?

Laughlin: Yes. They really didn't try to hit Fort Kam. There wasn't that much there to hit then. They were trying to hit the airfield and damage the planes and the ships and the main things.

Marcello: Could you observe what was happening over at Hickam Field?

Laughlin: Oh, yes. We could look right out on the runway at Hickam.

Marcello: What could you observe over there?

Laughlin: Well, that's where the B-17's were trying to get in to land, and they were burning on the runway.

Marcello: Did you actually observe the B-17's coming in?

Laughlin: Yes, I saw them coming in on the runway there.

Marcello: Describe that incident.

Laughlin: Well, the picture shows that one that got the wing half-tilted and onto the runway and was burning. The crew jumped out of it, and they were still shooting at them.

But the hangar part was the part I remember the most. The barracks...they bombed the whole roof of that--that three-story barracks at Hickam. The whole top floor was practically demolished. That's where they killed a lot them in that.

Marcello: Describe that scene of the B-17's trying to land and their being pursued by the Japanese planes. Describe what you saw.

Laughlin: I didn't see that real well outside of the one B-17 that landed. There were two of them that was going to land, and then they took off and landed at Bellows Field, another base. But the only one that I'd seen was one B-17 that landed on the Hickam Field runway.

Marcello: Was it being pursued by Japanese planes when it came in?

Laughlin: I could see one time that there was a Japanese plane that

came down and touched its wheels down on the runway and took off back up--just to show off, I guess, that they could do it.

That's all I remember. There was so much commotion that it's hard to pinpoint everything that was going on at the time.

Marcello: So what you're saying, in effect, is that nobody knew what was going on, and there was a lot of confusion and chaos during the actual attack itself.

Laughlin: Yes. There was so much smoke around the harbor that I thought the oil tanks got hit over there. But that's one major mistake they made, they claim--that they didn't hit the oil tanks. But that was the Arizona that I saw. When it went up, it made so much smoke like the atomic bomb.

Marcello: You could actually detect when the Arizona blew up, even if you didn't know it was the Arizona?

Laughlin: Yes, right. You could hear the rumble, too, of the big ships blowing up.

Marcello: Describe what you saw and heard when the Arizona blew up.

Laughlin: Well, as I recall, the smoke looked like the atomic bomb. It was lifted out of the water. Like I say, all I could see was the tops of the ships because Hickam Field was between us and the harbor. But these planes really...there was a lot of activity in the harbor--all these planes torpedoing and dive-bombing. In fact, they made a mistake. They all

came in at once. They were supposed to take turns--the torpedo planes and the bombers. Someway, they got their signals crossed, and they all came in at once. Of course, if seemed to be effective, the way they did it, anyhow.

Marcello: I'm assuming that life in that Army was never the same after the Pearl Harbor attack.

Laughlin: Oh, no. Right away, we said, "Oh, oh, there goes our year's training. We're not going to go back to the States." It wasn't going to be anything quick. We knew that.

Marcello: Did you eventually leave the Hawaiian Islands?

Laughlin: Yes. I was in the first invasion down on Baker Island, when they were getting ready to take the Marshalls back.

Marcello: When did that occur?

Laughlin: In September of 1943. One platoon from our searchlights went down to Baker Island, and I was in that group. We were there for a year. This island is only 5,700 feet long, and that's where they had metal runway mats from one beach to the other--just long enough for a B-24 to take off. One time they parked some B-24's--around ten of them--on Baker Island. They loaded them with bombs and gasoline, and then they couldn't take off because there was no wind. The island wasn't long enough for them to get up in the air, so they waited about a day before they could get enough breeze to get off the ground. They hung out over the water for a good while before they could get high enough to get up in the air.

Marcello: How long did you remain there at Baker Island?

Laughlin: I was there a year on Baker Island--from September of 1943 until April 30, 1944. That island was so small. We used to play baseball, and the left fielder had to stand on the runway. He'd had to keep watching for any plane coming in--to get off the runway. But it was really small.

Marcello: Evidently, there was not a lot to do on Baker Island.

Laughlin: No. The sun...it's right on the equator, too. There's all white coral. We wore dark glasses all the time because the white coral...and nobody...you just wear shorts all the time--the whole year around. You never had to dress in uniform. We'd go to the mess hall and come back. We had to walk from one end of the island to the other. Our mess hall was on the other end. It was just a nice walk up to eat and walk back and then get ready for searchlight duty at night. We had, like, two radars and six lights on that island--two at each end of the runway.

So our bombers would take off to go bomb the Marshalls, and they would come back later. It'd take them a long trip. They'd leave at eight o'clock in the morning, and they wouldn't get back at night until ten or eleven o'clock. We'd have the lights on so they could find the runway to come in and land. One time they came in all shot up, and when they touched down, the nose of the plane fell underneath the wheels. That's how bad the B-24 was shot up. They had a lot of injured people.

But if they could make it back, they'd go back to Christmas or Canton Island--bigger islands. But if they were in trouble, they'd land at Baker.

We were in landing barges, and where we landed the front of the barge wouldn't go down, and we had to jump off the sides into rocks. A lot of the guys would get their ankles banged up pretty bad from the rocks. When we went to leave the island in 1944, they tried to have all the men pulling the barge into the water, and we couldn't budge it. They had to bring a bulldozer back in to get us into the water to leave the island. They evacuated the island because it was only, like, a radar or a radio station.

Marcello: I guess you were kind of glad to get off that island.

Laughlin: Oh, we were glad to get back to Honolulu.

Marcello: So you went from Baker Island back to Honolulu.

Laughlin: Yes. I was there for the rest of the war--back at Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Well, that's probably a pretty good place to end this interview, then, Mr. Laughlin. Thank you very much for having participated. You said a lot of interesting and important things.

Laughlin: Well, I hope I did. I tried to cover everything I could think of.

Marcello: Thank you very much.

Laughlin: Thank you.