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Interview with
PAUL DECKER
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Place of Interview: Kenner, Louisiana
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Paul Decker

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello Date: November 14, 1987

Place of Interview: Kenner, Louisiana

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Paul Decker for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on November 14, 1987, in Kenner, Louisiana. I am interviewing Mr. Decker in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the battleship USS California during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Decker, 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--that sort of information.

Mr. Decker: I was born on March 28, 1921.

Dr. Marcello: Tell me a little bit about your education.

Mr. Decker: High school was all.

Dr. Marcello: You are a high school graduate?

Mr. Decker: Right.

Dr. Marcello: Where were you born?

Decker: Maurepas, Louisiana.

Marcello: When did you go into the service?

Decker: February 19, 1941.

Marcello: What prompted you to join the service in 1941?

Decker: At that time, prior to joining, I was in the CCC camps, and there was a lot of talk about the Army conscription, and I didn't want to go into the Army. So I joined the Navy.

Marcello: Why was it that you didn't particularly want to go into the Army?

Decker: Well, I lived around water. Maurepas has a lake, also, and there is water there. I've been born almost in the swamps, and I just dealt with water all my life, and I thought it would be great to be in the Navy.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Decker: At San Diego, California.

Marcello: And at the time that you went through boot camp, how long did it last?

Decker: The boot camp period?

Marcello: Yes.

Decker: Approximately two months or something like that.

Marcello: So they had cut it back somewhat over what it had been at one time.

Decker: I imagine so, because there was talk about all this war stuff going on. I imagine that they shortened it considerably.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened at boot camp

that you think we need to get as part of the record, or was it the normal Navy boot camp?

Decker: As far as I saw it, it was just a normal training period. We got a week leave after we was finished, and then I was assigned to the California. I didn't have a choice.

Marcello: Where did you pick up the California?

Decker: Treasure Island, California.

Marcello: Give me your impressions of the California as you remember them when you initially went aboard. After all, you were really nothing more than a "boot" at that time. What were your impressions of this huge ship?

Decker: I was absolutely awed. I was all alone, and I really didn't have any friends to come aboard with me. I knew Eddie Jones, and I guess that's the reason why I was real pleased to be assigned to the California.

Marcello: How did you know Eddie Jones?

Decker: We were in an orphan's home together, and we joined the Navy fairly close together. He was assigned first to the California, and after I got out of boot camp, well, I joined him there.

Marcello: Did you and he become fast buddies once you got aboard the California?

Decker: Oh, yes. Of course, we were together about four years in this orphan's home, and we were buddies then.

Marcello: I suspect that the California was almost like a small town, was it not, considering all of the various things

that were aboard.

Decker: Absolutely, man! It was just tremendous. You'd never go through all of it, I don't guess, in your assignment on it. I never got to know all the people on it, not even a fourth of them.

Marcello: And it had everything from a cobbler shop to a barber shop to soda fountains and all that sort of thing on board, did it not?

Decker: It sure did. It was a city within itself.

Marcello: When you went aboard, where were you initially assigned? To what division?

Decker: I was assigned to Division Two--shipfitter gang.

Marcello: You were a part of the shipfitter gang?

Decker: Shipfitter gang.

Marcello: Is this what you were hoping to strike for?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: Why was that? Why did you want to become a shipfitter?

Decker: Well, I've always been mechanically inclined, and I was sure then that I would probably advance faster in something I liked and done well in.

Marcello: Did you spend any time in the deck force prior to going into the shipfitter gang, or did you go directly into the shipfitter gang?

Decker: I went right into the shipfitter gang.

Marcello: That was a little unusual, wasn't it?

Decker: Yes. If I recall correctly, though, we were assigned to the shipfitter gang, but we had to work on deck. I

recall chipping paint. I don't know if it was right out from the shipfitter gang that they assigned me or if they would take people from different divisions or not. I really don't recall.

Marcello: When you were working on the deck force after that initial assignment on the California, do you remember participating in a process known as "holystoning" the deck?

Decker: No. I've never really done this. I've heard the expression "holystoning, and I imagine it was something like sandpapering wood except they were doing it on steel. I'm not really familiar with that.

Marcello: Talk a little about the living quarters that you had aboard the California. First of all, where were your quarters located, that is, where you were assigned? Do you remember?

Decker: In relation to what?

Marcello: In relation to the ship--the section of the ship.

Decker: It was in the forward part of the ship, and it was very crowded. Even with such a tremendous ship, it was still crowded. We were in tiered bunks.

Marcello: You did have bunks at that time?

Decker: We had tiered bunks, as far as I recall. Now I was on four ships during the war.

Marcello: So you missed sleeping in a hammock.

Decker: The cots and the hammocks, yes, although we trained with the cots. In our training station, we slept in cots. We

just rigged them up and slept in them to see how they worked.

Marcello: Did you serve a tour as mess cook aboard the California when you went aboard, or did you miss out on that?

Decker: No, I missed out on that.

Marcello: How would you rate the food aboard the California? You mentioned that you were on four ships. Now obviously some of those would have been under wartime conditions. But in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, as you look back on it, how would you describe the food aboard the California?

Decker: Well, good and bad, I guess. Some foods I wasn't familiar with. I was just a kid born in the swamps, and I was used to fish and eat wild meat and so forth, you know, wild game. Some of it I really thought was excellent. But this particular. .I guess you've been told this a hundred times. They call it. .can you say a dirty word (chuckle)?

Marcello: Sure, you can.

Decker: They called it "shit on a shingle, and I really didn't care for that. But all in all it was good food.

Marcello: Now "SOS" is the chipped beef on toast. Is that what it is?

Decker: Yes (chuckle) Then on the holidays. .of course, let's see. that may be another ship. I wasn't really on there for. .yes, Thanksgiving. We had excellent food, I know from the other ships, especially when we would come

into port, we had excellent food--all the fresh vegetables, ice cream, and stuff like that.

Marcello: When was it that the California moved to the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis? Do you recall? In other words, once you got aboard the California, did it very shortly thereafter head for the Hawaiian Islands?

Decker: Yes. I think it went directly from California to the islands.

Marcello: In fact, I guess that it had probably been assigned over there even before you had gone back to the West Coast for some particular reason.

Decker: Yes, yes. Now that's been a long time ago. But taking two months, say, for training. I joined in February, so it would be March, April, May. I'd say that about May she was on her way out there.

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

Decker: Great, really! From high school days I had learned a little bit about the Hawaiian Islands--not much--and I thought it was going to be a great, fun place.

Marcello: In general, as you look back upon life aboard that battleship in the pre-Pearl Harbor period, how would you describe the morale aboard the ship or maybe even more specifically in your particular section, that is, with the shipfitter people and so on? Was it a happy ship? Was it a happy section?

Decker: Yes, yes, it sure was, except that probably the main thing is that they missed their families. Most of them was like me, you know, away from home and young, just kids. But overall, I think the morale was great.

Marcello: What do you think was responsible for that?

Decker: The morale?

Marcello: For the high morale, yes.

Decker: Oh, gosh, I don't know. I really couldn't say outright. We were learning like a child, I guess, you know. We all learned together, and it just grew with us, I imagine.

Marcello: I'm assuming that all of you were volunteers at that point, too, were you not? All of you were in the Navy mainly because you wanted to be there.

Decker: Right, right.

Marcello: Now that may have helped. You mentioned that you go to the shipfitter gang. Tell me a little bit about the training that you received there to become a shipfitter.

Decker: Well, a shipfitter in general, I guess, would be called a maintenance man in outside life. We did plumbing and small electrical work. Of course, we had our own electricians and electrical shop. But we did welding, cutting iron, putting together things, taking care of the watertight doors, and making sure that the ship was seaworthy. I learned a great deal while I was there.

Marcello: What kind of people did you have instructing you or teaching you? Obviously, most of this was on-the-job

training, but what kind of petty officers did you have? I guess what I'm saying is, how much experience did they have in the Navy?

Decker: I would think, from the instructions that we had and their ability to lead and everything, we had. .of course, we had the chief, and usually you don't make chief, especially in peacetime, until you have had a lot of experience and time in there. Certainly, this was the case because he seemed to know everything.

Marcello: As a rating, how fast or slow was promotion as a shipfitter in that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Decker: Promotions were hard to come by. I made my seamanship status mainly after the war started. I imagine I only made one grade from seaman to third class, and then the other two grades were made during the war.

Marcello: Would this be third class petty officer?

Decker: Yes, right.

Marcello: And is it not true that one had to take fleetwide examinations for advancement?

Decker: Yes, that is correct.

Marcello: And then there had to be an opening.

Decker: Yes, (chuckle) absolutely

Marcello: In other words, you could pass the test, but if there was no opening for that slot on your ship, you either had to wait or transfer.

Decker: That's right, yes.

Marcello: Am I to assume that promotion went a lot faster after

the war started?

Decker: Yes, it did. They were putting more ships in commission, and certainly we lost a lot of people.

Marcello: At the time of the attack, where was your battle station? Do you recall?

Decker: We had to take care of the watertight doors--the integrity of the compartment--and we were assigned to this compartment. It was three decks below, and that's how we did that, really. There was no other duty other than to make sure that everything was watertight. If there was damage, we had a few materials on hand to seal up minor things.

Marcello: So you also became, in part, connected with damage control?

Decker: Absolutely, yes.

Marcello: And I'm assuming that in that position, you perhaps could be shifted throughout the ship to wherever you were needed.

Decker: Oh, sure, sure. Absolutely.

Marcello: Okay, talk a little bit about the liberty routine aboard the California. How did it work for you? Do you recall? I'm referring to that period when you were at Pearl Harbor.

Decker: Well, as far as I can remember, it was alternate days. They'd let probably half go. Half the ship would go one day, and then half the next and so on.

Marcello: In other words, if the California were in on a weekend,

you would perhaps have liberty on either Saturday or Sunday.

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: Now if you had liberty, what time would you have to be back on the California? In other words, did it have the "Cinderella" liberty where you had to be back before midnight?

Decker: No, I really don't believe it did. We were committed to come back the next morning at eight o'clock, I think. I think that was the schedule, but I couldn't really swear to that.

Marcello: Did very many people actually stay over at Honolulu when they had liberty?

Decker: Oh, yes, there was quite a few of them.

Marcello: But did you have enough money to get a hotel room or maybe stay at the YMCA?

Decker: No (chuckle) Probably some of the guys had little deals going, and they might have a fairly well off girlfriend. But as a general rule, we all came back probably before midnight since we had all day, and certainly you'd get tired enough to come back.

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

Decker: Sightsee. I was young and inexperienced and bashful and backward and so forth (chuckle) Like I said, I was brought up in the swamps. Sightseeing and gawk at the mountains and so forth and go to the seashore.

Marcello: What significance did Hotel and Canal streets have in

Honolulu? Do you recall those two streets?

Decker: If you are in reference maybe to the prostitutes, yes, that was a busy place (chuckle) What more can I say?

Marcello: I guess that was especially true on payday

Decker: Oh, yes, yes.

Marcello: I guess Hotel Street also had tattoo parlors and curio shops and all that sort of thing, did it not?

Decker: It sure did, yes--all over They had these things all over.

Marcello: In other words, there were all sorts of establishments down there to lift the sailor's pay?

Decker: Yes. To show you how backwards I was, especially when I was a kid, I never even got a tattoo. I never was tattooed.

Marcello: You never really had become "salty" at that stage then, right?

Decker: No, no. Or drunk enough, probably

Marcello: There's another thing I wanted to ask you relative to life aboard the California. I do know that among many of the units, athletics and sports played a prominent role in the life of the Navy How about aboard the California? What kind of a role did sports play?

Decker: Well, that's true. Of course, being kids, you know, I think everyone was interested in football, baseball, boxing, badminton. They had all kinds of sports there. I was a little bit interested in boxing. I did a little boxing. Of course, you couldn't play baseball too well

or football (chuckle) But we had a lot of games.

Marcello: You mentioned boxing. I gather that that was a sport that was a lot more prominent then than it is today

Decker: I would say so, yes.

Marcello: Did you ever attend any of the smokers over at Bloch Center?

Decker: No. I don't quite know what you mean.

Marcello: Well, these were the boxing contests and so on that they held over at the Bloch Arena, and they were usually referred as the "smokers.

Decker: No, I don't recall that I did. We had boxing matches right on board.

Marcello: Is that correct?

Decker: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Where would they set up the ring?

Decker: On the fantail. In fact, Eddie and I was just talking about a friend of ours that was real good at boxing, and we just saw him awhile back.

Marcello: And could anybody go back there and spar a couple rounds if they wanted to?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: I also know that the battleships had bands. What can you tell me about the band aboard the California?

Decker: Not much except that it seemed to me that everything looked big when you are that age. It seemed like it was a big band that we had.

Marcello: What role would the band play? What kind of functions

would it play for and so on? What would it do?

Decker: Probably like the Fourth of July or. .I don't know.

Marcello: What about the raising of the flag in the morning-- colors? Would the band get out and play for that?

Decker: I don't believe so. We just had a bugler, as I recall.

Marcello: Would it ever hold concerts on the fantail or anything like that to entertain the sailors?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: And then it would also get into contests with other bands. Didn't they used to have the so called "Battle of the Bands" ashore?

Decker: I'm almost sure they did, yes.

Marcello: Okay, the California is now at Honolulu, or actually at Pearl Harbor. Take me through one of the California's training exercises that it undertook after it went out to Pearl. First of all, when would the California normally go out on one of these exercises--what day of the week? Was there a specific day or not?

Decker: I don't think there was a set day, no. We didn't go out that much, as far as I recall. We'd have these special training sessions, and they would even fire at moving targets that was being towed with a tug and so forth. And we'd man our battle stations just like it was the real thing.

Marcello: When you went out on one of these exercises, how long would you normally stay out?

Decker: As far as I can recall, it wsn't more than three or four

days, a week at the most.

Marcello: And then you'd come back into port?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: Could you usually expect to come in on a Friday, perhaps?

Decker: Yes, I think so.

Marcello: And I'm assuming. .well, let me ask the question rather than actually answering it. Where would the California normally tie up when it came in? Where was it tied up the day of the attack?

Decker: It was tied up alongside Ford Island. We were moored there.

Marcello: And is this normally where it would tie up?

Decker: I would believe so. They had certain places for certain ships.

Marcello: It may not actually be at the same quay everytime, but it would certainly be over there along Ford Island somewhere.

Decker: Yes, yes. I knew we had to take a launch, and it was quite a ways across there.

Marcello: Well, I'm asking you these questions for a specific reason. If anybody were observing the movements of the fleet, everything was done on a pretty regular basis, was it not? The routine wasn't altered too much.

Decker: No, not too much, as far as I can recall.

Marcello: In other words, you could usually expect to be in on a Friday, and you would tie up at pretty much the same place.

Decker: You could almost bank on it, yes.

Marcello: You know, on the other hand, in saying that I'm not really faulting the Navy. I'm assuming there were only so many places you could tie up one of those battleships there in Pearl.

Decker: Right, yes (chuckle) Yes, it's not a launch, you know.

Marcello: As I recall, the harbor itself was only about forty feet deep.

Decker: That's about it.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you--even in your position--detect any changes at all in the routine aboard the ship when you went on one of these exercises?

Decker: No, not at all. As far as I can recall, we didn't even talk about it. There wasn't much talking going on, except that they were having a little trouble, you know. There wasn't much difference in the regular routine.

Marcello: So when you and your buddies sat around in bull sessions, the subject or the topic of war with Japan rarely ever came up?

Decker: That's right. We'd hardly talked about it when I was in a position to be in a group that talked about it, no.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and, of course, we want to go into a great deal of detail concerning it. Is it safe to say that by that time you and your shipmates were kind of looking forward

to Christmas a little bit?

Decker: Oh, yes. Of course, that was a big holiday, you know, and I guess some of the fellows were even anticipating a leave, maybe. It probably wasn't on a schedule, but they felt maybe they might be able to go home. We were all looking forward to Christmas.

Marcello: When did the California come in that weekend? Do you recall?

Decker: Oh, I couldn't say for sure.

Marcello: Was it in on that Friday?

Decker: Since it was so routinely done, I would say yes.

Marcello: When it came in--as we mentioned a moment ago, it normally tied up somewhere over around Ford Island--was it tied up alone, or was it tied up to another ship at Ford that weekend? Do you recall?

Decker: It was tied up alone.

Marcello: Okay, do you recall what ships were in front of it or which ones were behind it at that time?

Decker: There was some sort of tug-like ship--maybe it was a tug or some sort of little minesweeper--right in front of us. Then forward from that, I recall that there was some double mooring of battleships, and I think it was the Oklahoma and the West Virginia. And right forward from that was also double-moored battleships. This is about all I can really envision right now.

Marcello: I know the Oklahoma was tied up alongside the Maryland, and the West Virginia was tied up alongside the

Tennessee. Of course, the fact that the Oklahoma and the West Virginia were outboard more or less saved the Tennessee and the Maryland from more extensive damage. And I'm assuming that the Arizona was somewhere behind you?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that Saturday of December 7, 1941. First of all, would you normally have some sort of an inspection on a Saturday?

Decker: As far as I can recall, these were done in the middle of the week. I don't recall a Saturday or any specific day on the weekend that we would do it. That was liberty for most of us.

Marcello: In terms of what you mentioned awhile ago concerning your responsibilities, when the California was in, what would be its condition so far as watertight integrity-- doors, hatches, and things of that nature? Would most of them be open?

Decker: They were wide-open. There were passageways in between, and people had to go through them, so they were wide-open all the time.

Marcello: And that, again, is normal procedure when a ship is in port.

Decker: Yes, yes.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did on that Saturday evening of December 6?

Decker: I don't even know if I went ashore that day. Probably

Marcello: Well, this then brings us into that morning of Sunday, December 7. Of course, here again, we want to go into some details on this. Describe your routine on that Sunday morning. Okay, at this point let's assume you are in the sack. What happens at that point?

Decker: Well, you're bugled up, and the chief boatswain's mate makes sure that everyone is up.

Marcello: Even on a Sunday morning, everybody is out of the sack?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: At what time?

Decker: It's been so long ago. It seems like to me it was at seven o'clock.

Marcello: Okay, so what do you do?

Decker: Then you clean up and go to breakfast. Then from there you go to your work area or your department area, and you get your assignments for the day--what you must do, what the jobs are that have to be done that day.

Marcello: What happened that Sunday morning? Describe what happened.

Decker: Well, as I recall, we hadn't started to work yet. It was my duty that morning--my turn--to bring up the trash can. We had a trash can--a great, big ol' thing--that we'd throw metal in and all the fittings from plumbing and so forth. I had to bring this to topside to do away with--to dump. Well, I did this. I was topside and dumping it when I. .do you want me to continue with this

line of thought?

Marcello: Yes, go ahead.

Decker: I saw this airplane just going over us, and actually it wasn't doing nothing that I could see. I didn't see it drop any bomb or strafe or anything like that. It just flew over, but it had this insignia of the rising sun on it. We did talk a little bit about Japan--very little--prior to this, so we knew what the insignia was. When I saw this, I saw another one coming behind him. Since things were a little touchy with Japan and with talk of the war in Europe and Asia, I assumed then that we were being attacked.

Marcello: Had you heard any explosions or anything of that nature at this point?

Decker: At that time, no, none.

Marcello: All right, so what do you do? You see these planes coming over; you recognize them as Japanese planes. They really haven't done anything in terms of bombing. What happens next?

Decker: Well, you would assume first that maybe it's just a drill, but when you see one coming and then .we had a thing that you could tell different nation's airplanes--spotters--and you could tell, from what I could recall, that this was a Zero. That's what it looked like to me. I didn't see no bombers.

Marcello: In other words, what you are referring to are something similar to flash cards, where you would have silhouettes

of planes and so on.

Decker: Yes, right. So I guess I assumed that it was Japan and that we were being attacked.

Marcello: But no General Quarters had sounded.

Decker: In fact, to this day I believe I saw one of the first planes that flew over our ship because I was up there topside with this trash can.

Marcello: Approximately how high off the water was that plane?

Decker: I'd say .it's hard to tell in the air, you know, but I'd say it was no more than a thousand feet. It was flying pretty low.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens next?

Decker: Well, I go running back down to my shop where the can came from and where I must go. I ran back to the shop yelling, "We're being attacked by Japan! About that time the alarm did sound--General Quarters.

Marcello: Now does General Quarters sound aboard the California? In other words, was it a bugle or loudspeaker?

Decker: Loudspeaker. Then for General Quarters they'd tweet the little seaman's.

Marcello: Boatswain's pipe?

Decker: Boatswain's pipe. They had a certain sound for General Quarters with the pipe, and then they would vocally announce, "General Quarters! Man your battle stations!

Marcello: And is this what you did?

Decker: This is what I did. I immediately left. I had just got to the shop, and I immediately left and went to my battle station and secured the doors.

Marcello: Your job was to secure some of the watertight doors?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: Were these the watertight doors going into this.

Decker: Passages between the compartments.

Marcello: Where your battle station was?

Decker: Yes.

Marcello: What happens at that point?

Decker: Well, even though the ship is real big and the metal is tremendous in thickness, I could hear explosions, and it was almost at that time that I got down there. In fact, I don't even know if I had the thing buckled up or not. We didn't have an explosion right there, but we received a . . . later on, I heard it was a torpedo hit.

Marcello: Okay, you received your first torpedo at about 8:05.

Decker: This is correct.

Marcello: And then you received another one very shortly thereafter.

Decker: Very shortly after, yes.

Marcello: I know one of them hit aft, but I'm not sure where the first one hit.

Decker: It would seem to me. . . I was in the forward part of the ship, so it would seem to me it was about midships or pretty close around in there.

Marcello: What do you remember from those two torpedoes slamming into the California? In other words, how did they affect you personally at your station?

Decker: Scared as hell! We all thought at that time--I guess I

did--that this was it, you know, that we were going.

Marcello: What did it feel like when those torpedoes hit the ship?

Decker: Physically?

Marcello: Yes, to you personally

Decker: I got real scared, and then it felt like. .if anyone has ever been in an earthquake, I imagine it would feel similar to an earthquake. And there was a tremendous explosion and a shaking vibration.

Marcello: Were you able to maintain your balance? Did you stay on your feet?

Decker: Yes, yes. The ship is so big, you know, that it would have to be almost adjacent to where you are manning your station.

Marcello: You mentioned that these torpedoes don't hit really anywhere near where you're at.

Decker: No, but I knew later on that the torpedo did hit at one of the compartments about midships, and that was close enough because there was a tremendous explosion.

Marcello: What does it sound like? Is it an ear-shattering noise, or is it a muffled noise from where you are? How would you describe it?

Decker: If I recall correctly, it was a muffle, but a loud muffle, you know, rather than a shrill whizzing sound or something like that.

Marcello: I'm assuming that a torpedo hitting a ship has a different sound or makes a different noise or different explosion than a bomb, for instance.

Decker: Well, we did get a bomb hit, too. During that time there was so much noise, not only of our ship being exploded by these torpedoes and bombs, that I imagine some of it was coming from the other ships that I could hear.

Marcello: How many decks down were you?

Decker: Three.

Marcello: Now I do know that also around this time, wasn't the power plant knocked out? Do you recall losing power? Electricity? Lights?

Decker: Yes, but we had emergency lights of some sort because I don't recall being in total darkness, myself, before we abandoned ship.

Marcello: I also know that as a result of those two torpedoes hitting, the fuel tanks were ruptured, and fumes were starting to go through the ship. Do you remember smelling any fumes?

Decker: Yes, I do. Yes, I do.

Marcello: Describe what that was like.

Decker: I don't really recall the smoke as such. It was the smell. It was a gaseous smell, I guess you would call it.

Marcello: In fact, I believe that some of the men actually thought that the ship was under gas attack.

Decker: Really? I hadn't thought of that, or it's never come to my attention. I never thought of it.

Marcello: Was it something that was rather uncomfortable?

Decker: Yes, it was. It was kind of a stench--putrified, putrid.

Marcello: As I recall, about 8:25 the ship takes still another hit, and I believe this is another torpedo, is that correct?

Decker: Yes. Well, as far as I know, yes. Oftentimes you get confused with what happened and what you've read.

Marcello: Yes, that's correct. I'm glad you mentioned that. In the meantime, what are you doing? Simply standing by?

Decker: Staying right where I was supposed to (chuckle)

Marcello: Is there anybody else in that compartment with you?

Decker: Yes. Oh, yes.

Marcello: What are they doing?

Decker: They are standing around or sitting and trembling like me.

Marcello: But is everybody doing their job?

Decker: Yes. Of course, there wasn't nothing to do after we secured this area. It only takes a moment or two to secure these watertight hatches and doors.

Marcello: Is there any panic or fear?

Decker: No, none at all. In fact, other than personally knowing that I was scared, I don't believe that you could tell that the fellow next to you was scared.

Marcello: What are you talking about?

Decker: I don't think there was any talk, except maybe some praying, you know.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that most of you had more or

less a nervous expectation? You really didn't know what was going to be happening next?

Decker: That's right. That's absolutely right.

Marcello: Now when the California took that hit at 8:25, I do know that it caused some fires on the second deck. Do you have any knowledge of those fires, or do you recall them affecting you in your position in any way?

Decker: No, I didn't. It didn't affect my position at all.

Marcello: Okay, at about ten o'clock--10:02 to be exact--the first order was given to abandon the ship. What do you recall doing about that and what did you do? This was the first time that Captain Bunkley gave the word to abandon ship.

Decker: Well, it must have been an individual oral thing that we got the word because I don't believe we had any kind of power. It must have been someone yelling down that we were abandoning ship because I heard no order from Bunkley. But when we got the word, we got up topside.

Marcello: In other words, you unhatch all the dogs, and you get out of there.

Decker: Right.

Marcello: What happens at that point? Is the abandoning of the ship being done in an orderly fashion, or is there chaos in getting out of there?

Decker: No chaos at all. We were pretty well trained, and I guess we knew that the best way to get ashore and to get to where we were safer was to go in an orderly fashion.

Marcello: Okay, what happens when you get up on topside?

Decker: There was a lot of sailors up there; it was pretty well crowded. They were still coming up from the hatches. As I recall, there was only one launch, and nobody seemed to take the launch because we jumped overboard.

Marcello: You are not that far from Ford Island, are you?

Decker: Right. We were moored right. .you can't say right against the shore because these great, big mooring pads go quite a ways from the shore.

Marcello: Where did you go into the water? From the stern of the ship? One of the sides? Where did you go into the water?

Decker: From the side. Kind of the forward side.

Marcello: Now the California is not sinking at this stage, isn't that correct?

Decker: No, it was just settling, I believe.

Marcello: About how far are you above the water when you go in?

Decker: It must not have been far. I'd say it was no more than twenty feet from topside at the most.

Marcello: Did you jump in, or did you dive in?

Decker: It seemd like to me I went down a boatswain's ladder, you know, these things that hang along the sides. It was a rope ladder.

Marcello: How are you dressed? What do you have on? What clothing do you have on?

Decker: I had my. .we called them dungarees in those days. I had my dungarees on and a shirt.

Marcello: Did you go into the water with your shoes on?

Decker: (Chuckle) I think I did.

Marcello: What happens at that point? You are now in the water. What is the condition of the water where you're at? Is it oily? Is it burning? Is it clear?

Decker: No, it wasn't burning from the way I got out. I could see all around that it was burning in the general area. It wasn't that oily--we had a little oil--because I don't remember ever having to scrub myself to get the oil and what-have-you.

Marcello: So you are in the water. What happens at this point now?

Decker: Well, we get ashore and crawl out. There was someone in charge as these sailors came off these ships over there--several people were in charge--directing us to the airplane barracks--hangars--on Ford Island, the Navy hangars.

Marcello: Now I do know that the wind kind of shifted, and the fire and the oil was moving away from the California, and the captain was trying to get everybody back on the ship again. I'm assuming that you never got the word.

Decker: No, I never heard that word.

Marcello: So you get ashore.

Decker: I only heard that she was sinking (chuckle)

Marcello: Okay, you get ashore. Now what happens?

Decker: Well, we were mustered in the hangars.

Marcello: In the meantime, is the attack still going on once you

get ashore?

Decker: No.

Marcello: Was it pretty much over?

Decker: I can't recall being strafed or seeing anymore planes. I don't recall that at all.

Marcello: Okay, so you are mustered in one of the hangars on Ford Island. I'm assuming that these are mainly California sailors, or are there other personnel there, also?

Decker: They were mainly California sailors in my group, but there were sailors coming from all over.

Marcello: Okay, what happens at that point, then, after you are mustered? What happens?

Decker: Well, they got us together and gave us. I think they issued us some clothing, and it seemed like there was sandwiches there. Later on, we were assigned bunks. I think they were portable cots or something like that.

Marcello: But in the meantime, what are you doing? Are you given any arms or anything of that nature?

Decker: No, I wasn't. There was arms being given out, but I didn't receive one.

Marcello: What do you do that afternoon?

Decker: We just went around the island. We couldn't go very far from the hangars; we wasn't allowed to. We just waited. We just sat around and talked about the attack and waited. Of course, even though there was no more attacks, you could hear firearms going off all over. People were that scared that the Japanese were coming

ashore.

Marcello: As you were sitting around and more or less waiting, what were you talking about? What were you speculating about? Do you recall?

Decker: Mainly how fortunate we were to be alive and safe, and I'm wondering when they are going to be coming ashore or when they are going to take over the island and my being captured. I wanted to get out on another ship, which happened the next morning.

Marcello: Were you speculating about what had happened to the California? I guess at this point you hadn't gone out there to see what was going on.

Decker: No, we didn't go back to the California. But when we left, we could see that she was really hit. She was listing and settling. She never turned over. I guess we were thinking to ourselves that we had lost our temporary home, and we were wondering what's going to happen in the near future. We were wondering if Japan was attacking the States, and we were worried about our families at home.

Marcello: What kind of rumors were circulating?

Decker: There were a few rumors that I recall, that they were hitting the West Coast and that they were landing all over the island. Even though they was attacking Wake Island, I don't think we really heard about anything on that yet.

Marcello: And did you believe most of these rumors?

Decker: Yes (chuckle)

Marcello: I guess you didn't have any reason not to.

Decker: Right. To a certain extent, we did believe them. And being young and scared, too, we didn't know otherwise, so we believed them pretty much.

Marcello: What did you do that evening? In other words, were they doing anything with you guys yet to make you useful?

Decker: No. Like I said, I never received a rifle, and I wasn't given a machine gun post. I wasn't doing anything to fix anything. We were just waiting.

Marcello: That evening, a couple planes off of the carrier Enterprise tried to land and were fired upon. Do you recall that incident?

Decker: No, not other than talk. I think later that night or maybe even the next morning that they were talking about the Enterprise planes coming in and that our carriers were safe.

Marcello: How much sleep did you get that night?

Decker: Very, very little. All night long there was firing. Not that the enemy was there and that they were firing at the enemy, but they were firing at everything that moved.

Marcello: And I'm assuming that there were blackout conditions in that hangar.

Decker: Definitely, yes.

Marcello: And I'm sure it was safer to stay inside than to go out and walk around.

Decker: Yes, you were afraid to go out there, that somebody was going to shoot you.

Marcello: Okay, what do you do the next morning? What kind of an assignment do you get the next day?

Decker: The first thing that we did the next day was line up. We were getting readied to take another ship. I don't know why they asked me this, but I had a choice of going on the USS Portland--a heavy cruiser--or the USS New Orleans, which I started to take because I'm from New Orleans, and the USS San Francisco. I chose the Portland because my buddy was from Portland, and I did my CCC time near there.

Marcello: Now when did the Portland come in? The Portland, I don't think, was there at the time.

Decker: The Portland wasn't there then. It was the San Francisco. We were ready to go on the Frisco. Or I think the New Orleans was in there. But the Portland wasn't in there that I recall at all. But it seemed like to me we got underway that morning and shipped out.

Marcello: Now let me ask you this. The attack is over; we are into that Monday. Describe for me the scene that you saw when you looked out into the harbor.

Decker: Well, actually, it was horrifying. Gosh, it was like the wreck of a shipyard or something or other. You could see masts just barely sticking up; you could see overturned ships and oil still around. Some ships were still burning. It was just a frightening thing because

you wondered then what was going to happen next and whether our country would be able to pull through and survive this.

Marcello: Did you get a glimpse of the California?

Decker: (Chuckle) Everything. There was nothing taken with us.

Marcello: How about your wallet and things of that nature? Did you have any of that sort of thing?

Decker: More than likely I had my wallet. I always carried my wallet on me.

Marcello: When was it that you were able to let the folks at home know that you were okay?

Decker: Oh, gosh! Well, I had a brother that worked in the shipyard there as a civilian.

Marcello: In Honolulu?

Decker: Right. And the dreadful thing about it is that he came aboard looking for me.

Marcello: Aboard the California?

Decker: Yes. And how he got aboard--because they wasn't letting anybody aboard--I don't know. He told me later that these dead people were laid out with some kind of covering over them, and not knowing what happened to me, he'd go to each one and raise the sheet to see if it was me. When we got aboard the Portland, and after we was out at sea a day or two, they gave us these postcards to jot down a few things and to mail home.

Marcello: It was almost like a multiple choice sort of thing, was it not?

Decker: Yes. It wasn't your own words. You had to just let them know that you were safe.

Marcello: For example, "I am well, "I am injured, whatever it might be.

Decker: Right, right, yes. From what I gather from home, when we did get on a writing basis, they didn't receive this thing for about six weeks or two months later, and my mother thought I was dead. My family thought I was dead.

Marcello: Did you ever see the California again?

Decker: I never seen her again. (Chuckle) I never seen her again.

Marcello: You mentioned that you were on other ships afterwards besides the Portland. What other ships were you on?

Decker: I went from the Portland to. . .that's when I made first class, I guess. I made first class aboard the Portland, and I was transferred. Usually, when you make a rate, they transfer you (chuckle) So I transferred to the USS Leguth. That's an AK 125--cargo ship. It was captained by an old merchant marine captain.

Marcello: And then what other ships were you on?

Decker: Well, after the war was over...I had signed up for six years, so after the war was over, I was transferred from there to the USS Kershaw.

Marcello: And what kind of a ship was that?

Decker: It was similar to a cargo ship, but it was like an attack cargo ship or whatever.

Marcello: Let's back up to the Portland once again. How long were you on the Portland? Did you remain on it for a considerable length of time?

Decker: Oh, yes, yes. I was there for over two years.

Marcello: Now the Portland got into a certain amount of combat, did it not?

Decker: Let me tell you it did, yes!

Marcello: What were some of the actions the Portland participated in?

Decker: I was just about in all the main battles in the Pacific. I remember the great battle of Guadalcanal with the Japanese fleet and our fleet. We were so close together that the guns weren't elevated at all; they were down to the gunwales. We were hit twice. We were hit with a torpedo in the fantail, and we got a small bomb hit midships.

Marcello: There were a lot of naval battles around Guadalcanal, were there not?

Decker: Oh, yes, yes!

Marcello: And what were some of the other major engagements that you were in?

Decker: You forget the names of places over this length of time, but I was at Leyte Gulf. I was in several sea battles where the carriers were hit.

Marcello: The Portland was also up in the Aleutians at one point, was it not?

Decker: Yes. That was at a later time. We came into Pearl for

a while and then went to the Aleutians, and that was an experience. It was cold and rough. It was the first beard I ever grew. The funny thing about it is that there was Japanese at one time on Attu and Kiska--small, barren islands--and we were going to take them back. We had a sizeable fleet out there. As I recall, we bombarded those poor little islands all night long, and when our Marines landed there, there wasn't any Japanese--from what I gather--that was on there (chuckle).

Marcello: Well, you had been through several battles in the Pacific, obviously, and let me ask you this as maybe a last question. What kind of respect did you gain for the Japanese Navy? Let's say especially when you were down there around the Guadalcanal?

Decker: A great respect, yes, sir, yes. In fact, we knew that Guadalcanal was taken and that we were run off. Then we had to retake it, and the fighting was terrific there. So they must have been terrific soldiers, too, or Marines, I imagine, because they were their better soldiers. We had great respect for their navy.

When we were hit, that gave us a break for a while. There's a harbor they called Tulagi harbor. We pulled into Tulagi harbor. Like I said, the torpedo hit our stern, and half of it was blown away, so it got our rudder. In fact, after we got hit, we were going around in circles during the battle. The next day we were

towed into Tulagi harbor, and we all got ashore, I recall, and cut trees down and camouflaged our ship. We rigged up a jury rudder, and we went to Australia. (Chuckle) We had a good time there.

Marcello: When did you get mustered out of the service?

Decker: Well, they let you out before your time was up. My time was up in 1947--February, 1947--and I got out in November, 1946, if I'm not mistaken. I got mustered-out pay and got out then.

Marcello: Okay, well, I think that's a pretty good place to end this interview, Mr. Decker. I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of interesting and, I think, important things concerning your experiences aboard the California. I'm sure students and scholars will find your comments to be most valuable.

Decker: Well, Ron, I really appreciate you having me. This is the first time that I really talked that much about it (chuckle) Thank you.