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Interview with  
JAMES WOMACK  
November 14, 1987

Place of Interview: Kenner, Louisiana

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: *James T. Womack*  
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

James Womack

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

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing James Womack 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. Womack in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the cruiser USS Saint Louis during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Womack, to begin this interview, just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me where you were born, when you were born--that kind of information.

Mr. Womack: I was born on January 31, 1921, in Naples, Texas. It's a little town that's about sixty or seventy miles from Shreveport, Louisiana, in Northeast Texas.

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

Mr. Womack: I finished high school--at that time they only had

eleven grades in high school--and immediately after high school, I went into the Navy. I did attend several service schools while I was in the Navy.

Marcello: What year did you enter the Navy?

Womack: February 13, 1939.

Marcello: Why did you decide to go into the service at that time?

Womack: I was looking for a job. The economy wasn't in too good of a shape in those days, and I came from a family of five children. My dad was looking for his family to lessen in size so it wouldn't be so hard to provide for. So when I finished high school, my cousin and I signed up to get in the Navy. At that time you couldn't just get into the Navy like you wanted to. To get into it, I had to have two teeth filled and my tonsils taken out before they'd take me in the Navy. I was seventeen years old at the time, and they waited until I was eighteen before they called me so that I wouldn't get in on the "kiddie cruise" and get out when I'd get to be twenty-one. I'd have to serve my full four years. So I was eighteen on the 31st of January in 1939, and they called me in February of 1939.

Marcello: You know, economics is probably the primary reason that most people give for going into the service, particularly during that period before the draft went into effect. Times were still tough as late as 1939 in a great many areas.

Womack: Oh, yes, they were. They sure were.

Marcello: You mentioned that if you had gone in at age seventeen, so you would have come in under what the Navy called the "Minority Cruise" or what you're referring to as the "Kiddie Cruise. Now if you went in at that age, how long would you be in the service?

Womack: I would have remained in until I was twenty-one, which would have only been three years.

Marcello: And as it was, when you did enlist at that time, how many years did you enlist for?

Womack: Four years, four years. Then in order to be qualified to come back to a service school, I extended my enlistment before it was up another two years because upon completion of the service school, you had to have two years of obligated service that I wouldn't have had. So I signed up for six years...well, not originally for six years, but I did sign up to stay in six years, and then after the war was over, I still had to complete my enlistment. So I was in they Navy for seven years and two days.

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

Womack: I suppose the main reason was because there was a person from my hometown who was in the Navy--a bit older than I was--and when he would come home on leave, it would just turn you on as to wanting to see what he said he had

seen and do what he had said he had done. That was a big contributing factor to the reason that my choice was the Navy.

There was a first cousin of mine and I that agreed to join and sign up to go to the Navy together; but he was a little bit older than I was, and they called him in January to go. He went from our hometown in Haynesville to Shreveport, from Shreveport to New Orleans. But in New Orleans he didn't pass the examination. He got some kind of food poisoning or something on the way down, and he had a rash when he got to New Orleans, so they turned him down and wouldn't send him. In February, when they called me, I went on through. When I came back on leave, my cousin--Marshall Collins, he was--decided he wasn't going to get in the Navy if they didn't want him. So when he saw me come home on leave with my little white hat and blues, he went trying again, and the next thing I know, well, he was in the service there. I was in Unit D in Norfolk, where we went through boot camp. Marshall came through there. I was assigned to the Saint Louis, and he went to the USS Vincennes. Then when the Vincennes was sunk after the war started, Marshall got killed.

Marcello: You mentioned that you took your boot camp at Norfolk, Virginia. How long did boot camp last at that time? Do you recall?

Womack: We were the first platoon that went through there in seven weeks. We were the first--Platoon 11. Our platoon commander was Chief Quartermaster G.I. North. They told us the reason for cutting it from twelve weeks of recruit training to seven weeks was the fact that the fleet was coming around from the West Coast and they wanted enough recruits to replenish it when it would come around. They assigned my whole platoon to a ship that was just being commissioned at that time--the Saint Louis (CL-49). That's the call letters, CL-49. I think the USS Honolulu, our sister ship, was CL-48, and I believe the Helena--the first Helena--was CL-50, if memory serves me.

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

Womack: It was a normal Navy boot camp. Well, not really normal. I guess it was accelerated. What they had been putting people through in three months, they tried to put us through in seven weeks. We were pretty busy. The one thing that I remember--the event that had stood out in my mind--was at a drill one time. We were all lined up and marching, and they had this guy by the name of W.T. Storey, who was on my right. They were pretty strict as to how you carried your rifle and all that, you know. You had to have your arm over the stock of

the barrel just so. This G.I. North, the platoon commander, sneaked up behind him with his saber and hit that rifle and knocked it off over his shoulder (chuckle). It scared him half to death, and me, too (chuckle)! He was quickly informed that he wasn't squirrel hunting back in Georgia and to get that rifle right (chuckle). I remember that, and everytime. .see, the Saint Louis has a convention--CL-49 has an association of the members that served aboard this ship during her time--and every other year we have a meeting. Ol' Storey comes to these meetings, and each time that we see him that's a big topic of conversation. In fact, we just had our reunion this past May at Virginia Beach.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Womack: I went aboard the Saint Louis there in Norfolk, Virginia.

Marcello: At the time that you went aboard the Saint Louis, what were your initial responsibilities?

Womack: I was just a raw recruit. I was assigned to a deck division. We went aboard there with a sea bag on one shoulder and a bag of spuds on the other and put the ship in commission. Each recruit was assigned to a division. I was in the Sixth Division--the deck division.

Marcello: That was pretty much normal procedure, was it not, that is, to put recruits into a deck division when they

initially went aboard a ship?

Womack: Well, I wouldn't exactly say that it was procedure to always put them into a deck division. Well, I guess maybe it was, too. From there all the other specialized divisions would draw their men, but a lot of them were assigned to the black gang, you know. They'd go in as seamen and have to work their way up. But the storekeepers and all the other divisions in the specialized ratings (quartermasters and signalmen, for example) would get their people from the deck division here.

Marcello: How long did you remain in the deck division?

Womack: Less than two years. I made second class ship's cook in 1941--the 1st of December, 1941--and I went in in 1939. So it was just barely a year that I was in the deck division.

Marcello: Is there any particular reason that you stayed in the deck division that long, or did you simply enjoy being in the deck division?

Womack: I liked the deck division, all right, but it came to a point where I felt that I should be getting to be an older hand, you know, and not continually get working parties and all, so I started trying to get out of the division. The first time I tried to get out, I wanted to get in the quartermaster gang. I'd been standing wheel watches on the bridge, and the navigator happened

to be the officer-of-the-deck one day during the time that we were having a short-range battle practice. I was the helmsman, and he asked me if I wanted to get into the division. I put a chit in, but the division officer turned it down because he didn't want me to leave the Sixth Division, so I stayed in it awhile longer. Then another opening came up, and that was to get into the F Division as a cook striker--get in the galley. So I put a chit in to get that, and I was able to get in there. Our division officer was in the hospital sick, and when he came back, well, the acting division officer had let me go.

Marcello: I'm assuming that the division officer didn't want to lose you probably because of your experience. Is that correct?

Womack: They'd get rid of the people just like in any outfit. You get rid of the ones that you don't want, and if you want to keep them, you try to keep them. I was one of the crane operators in there. Whenever we'd come in and take on stores, I'd run the cranes. Of course, there's no real responsibility there. They had a boatswain's mate or a coxswain down there who was on the deck and giving you all the signals. All you had to do was just turn the wheels. But I assumed that's the reason why he didn't let me out. He wanted to keep me.

Marcello: Was there any particular reason why you decided to

become a cook striker?

Womack: Not really. It was just a way of getting out of the deck division.

Marcello: In order to become a cook striker, was all of your training from that point on on-the-job in the galley, or were you sent to a particular school?

Womack: No, no. As you progressed in your ratings--third, second, and first class--then before you could make chief, you had to go back to the States and go to a service school. That's the one I had to agree to an extension of my time in order to go back to it. I was in the Navy at the right time. If you did your work and put your courses in your record, whenever you'd become eligible for a rate, you'd get your rate without even any test or anything, see. So I made third class, and ten months later I made second class, and a year later I made first class. Then less than a year after that, I made chief. That was right after the war broke out, and they were expanding the Navy. For a person who had any ability at all, you know, and kept his nose clean and tried, well, there was nothing that would keep him back except himself.

Marcello: What you're saying, in effect, is that promotions were pretty slow before Pearl Harbor, but they picked up considerably after the war started.

Womack: Oh, yes, that's correct. That's right.

Marcello: Describe what your living quarters were like aboard the Saint Louis for you personally.

Womack: We were on the second deck, and we had tiers of bunks. There were some two feet or so, or maybe a little less, between them. There'd be three, one right above the other one, and they were pivoted on a post and supported by a chain. I guess they were maybe thirty inches wide and six-and-a-half feet long or so--just a set of springs with a little thin mattress on it. Each morning you would have to make yours up, and after all three were made up, you'd hang this up so you'd have a passageway down through there. This was one of the newer ships and all, and on a lot of the others, they still slept in hammocks. Then in the mess hall, they'd just have hooks hanging down from the overhead, where you'd hang your hammock on it and get into it. But on the newer ships like the Saint Louis, there weren't any people on it that had to sleep in hammocks.

Marcello: When was the Saint Louis commissioned? Do you recall?

Womack: Yes. It was commissioned on April 16, 1939, I believe.

Marcello: So you were not quite a plankowner, but pretty close.

Womack: Yes, yes, I was a plankowner. I went aboard as one of the first.

Marcello: I didn't realize that you had gone aboard it that soon.

Womack: Yes, we went aboard it right from boot camp. I went in in February, and when we completed boot camp, we

remained there in Norfolk until the ship was commissioned. Then we went aboard it.

Marcello: Did they take a good many people out of your recruit platoon onto the Saint Louis?

Womack: Yes, they took our whole platoon. Yes, our whole platoon went aboard.

Marcello: Assuming that you got along well with members of your platoon, I guess that was a pretty good deal then, too, to be aboard a ship with people that you knew.

Womack: Yes, it was--with a lot of people you knew. Yes, it sure was. At these reunions we have, we still have some of the people from the platoon that come back to them.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Saint Louis?

Womack: It wasn't like Mama's cooking, but it was palatable and nourishing. Before the war they used to have what they called a ration-in-kind mess, where you fed according to so many rations, you know, and a ration consisted of, like, twenty ounces of meat or whatever. But then after the war came, they changed it a bit. Of course, when you go aboard ship and you go out to sea and you have to carry provisions to last you for some thirty or forty days, along toward the tail end it might get to be a little gripey. I say I was classified as the ship's cook, but actually I was the butcher aboard. I was in the galley for a short while--about two months--and then I went in the butcher shop and spent my whole time as a

butcher. When we first started, we used bone-in the beef--not boneless--with the whole quarters, full quarters and hind quarters. We used to carry about 30,000 pounds of beef on there--that's the quarter beef --and after the war started, they started boning it out and just putting it in boxes. They'd label the boxes as ground meat, roasts and steaks, or stew meat. They'd come in fifty-pound boxes, and you could put on a lot more, and you could stay out a lot longer that way.

Marcello: You called this originally "rations-in-kind?"

Womack: Ration-in-kind mess. Now this was before the war--rations-in-kind. You had to prepare your menus so that you had the required rations, you know. Rations-in-kind, they called it. Then later it was called "money mess. They used to allow us seventy-six cents a day at one time to feed the men for all three meals--seventy-six cents.

Marcello: When was it that the Saint Louis moved to Pearl Harbor on a more or less permanent basis?

Womack: It was in the summer of 1941. I don't remember the exact dates. I know we were out there in September; we were operating out of Pearl Harbor. We escorted the old Chaumont, which is a troop transport, to the Philippine Islands to carry a load of, I think, some 5,000 troops out there. We carried those 5,000 troops out there, and they were all captured and participated in that Bataan

Death March.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands? Were you looking forward to going out there?

Womack: Yes. It's terrible to admit this, but at that time things like that hardly impressed me. I regret now that I didn't take advantage of what I was able to see and take more full photographs and spend my time to a more advantageous way than I did when I was in the Navy. Of course, hindsight is always better than foresight. We went back out there last year--my wife and I--to the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association reunion, and Pearl Harbor sure didn't look then like it did the other time when I saw it. We took one of these little ol' excursion boats that takes you and brings you on around Pearl Harbor and points out where the ships were and by the Arizona monument and all that.

Marcello: We were talking about your feelings relative to going out to the Hawaiian Islands. Let me just follow that up in this respect. Describe for me how the liberty routine was set up for the crew on the Saint Louis once you got to the Hawaiian Islands.

Womack: Well, as you know, aboard ship they have two watches--port and starboard. One watch would have liberty at one time and then the next watch at the other time.

Marcello: Would this be, like, every other day, perhaps? In other

words, suppose the Saint Louis were in Pearl Harbor on a weekend. Would perhaps half the crew go ashore on a Saturday and then the other half on a Sunday?

Womack: Those with the know-how to swing it could get both days (chuckle), but for the peons, primarily that was it.

Marcello: Could you stay overnight, or did you have to be back aboard at a certain time?

Womack: I don't remember that. I don't remember. I know I didn't ever stay overnight. I don't remember if you could. I'm sure you could, yes, because I've read stories about some of the guys relating their experiences at the time that Pearl Harbor was bombed. Yes, yes, because they had guys coming back from liberty the next morning that were strafed in the motor launches and all.

Marcello: I guess one of the limiting factors in terms of staying over would be the lack of funds.

Womack: Well, that's true.

Marcello: And I guess there were very few places to stay. A moment ago we were looking at a picture of Waikiki Beach, and there were only a couple of hotels down there.

Womack: Right, right.

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

Womack: (Chuckle) I'd just find some barroom and spend a major

part of my time there. That was what the majority of the sailors would do there.

Marcello: Does a place called the Black Cat Cafe have any significance to you?

Womack: No, but the New Senator Hotel does.

Marcello: Why does the New Senator Hotel have any significance?

Womack: Well, for the type of business it was running (chuckle).

Marcello: I'm assuming that it was one of those places of.

Womack: ..of ill-repute, yes.

Marcello: ..down on Hotel Street or Canal Street, which was where the houses of ill-repute were located.

Womack: Yes, yes, yes, it was.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Saint Louis? Do you remember?

Womack: (Chuckle) No, I don't remember.

Marcello: Some got paid on the 5th and the 20th. Does that sound maybe right for the cruisers?

Womack: I can't really say. I don't remember when was payday.

Marcello: The reason I asked you about the Black Cat Cafe is that that was evidently a saloon right across the street from the YMCA, which was where most of the busses and taxis let off people. So I guess that this was the first bar that people would hit.

Womack: That people would hit, right.

Marcello: Hotel Street and Canal Street had all sorts of other establishments besides the houses of prostitution,

didn't it? I guess that's where all the tattoo parlors and all the curio shops and all that sort of thing were located.

Womack: Fortunately, I never did get a tattoo. I kept my common sense well enough not to be that foolish (chuckle).

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more about the shipboard activity of the Saint Louis. We now have you at Pearl Harbor.

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: Take me on a typical training exercise or problem that you might have had during that pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Womack: Well, we used to fire a short-range battle practice aboard the ship. Now they did away with that after the war started, and whether they resumed it again after the war ended, I don't know. But I remember that at one time when we fired. .and the efficiency of the gun crew would determine the rating that the ship would get. If you got enough hits on a target, you'd get an "E" for efficiency. Generally, it would be two ships that would participate in this exercise at the same time. One day one ship was firing the battle practice, and the other one would be the one that would go out and change. .they would have the target raft crew that would go and change the targets after each firing run. I think it was the Helena and the Saint Louis. We had fired the day

before, and this day they were firing. I was still in the deck division, and we were aboard this seagoing tug that was towing the target raft. After each run of the firing ship--the Helena--well, after the firing of each run, well, we'd have to get aboard the motor launch and go back and take that target down and put up a new one. Then we'd come back and get aboard the tug, and they'd make their next run, and then we'd have to go back. Generally, when you'd start these, you'd complete them in one day. It would take practically a hurricane to shut them down. But around lunchtime one time, it did start getting rough on us. They did call it off, but before they did, we had made one run out there, changed the target, and were coming back. In the process of getting off of the motor launch back onto the tug, the swells had really picked up. One time that tug would be way up in the air, and you'd be way down here (gesture). The next time you were way up there, and the tug was way down here (gestures). About half of the people had gotten off of the motor launch and onto the tug, and this one second class boatswain's mate by the name of Caswell. .he was a second class boatswain's mate, and he had a little ol' stubby cigar clamped between his teeth. He started to step off of the motor launch onto the tug, and it just looked like the bottom fell out. The motor launch went way up in the air, and the tug went way

down, and he fell between the tug and the motor launch. Fortunately, the coxswain's mate on the motor launch, when he saw that, threw the tiller hard to one side there, and it kicked the back of the motor launch away. It looked like there was about a hundred hands that reached out of the motor launch and out of the tug and just grabbed ol' Caswell--picked him up and set him up on the deck. He still had that little cigar clamped in his mouth (chuckle). They put him up on the deck. That's the closest we came to losing a man in that episode. It did get rough.

Marcello: When you went out on one of these exercises, would you be part of the cruiser division? Would you be out with other cruisers as well?

Womack: Yes, yes.

Marcello: And perhaps some additional ships.

Womack: Yes. Actually, there would just be two ships that were in this particular exercise at the time. One was a target ship for the other one, and that would last a couple of days.

Marcello: Normally, how long would you stay out on one of these exercises?

Womack: Oh, this would just be out and in in one day.

Marcello: And was that typical?

Womack: Before the war, yes. After the war they didn't have that anymore.

Marcello: The battleships, I gather, must have stayed out longer than the cruisers and other ships.

Womack: They probably would, yes.

Marcello: How much emphasis during those exercises was given to antiaircraft drills or antiaircraft practice? I'm referring again to the pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Womack: Very little, very little. The aviation end of it wasn't that...they still had the carriers and all that, you know, but no one thought that you could do with an airplane what you could do. Of course, while I was in the deck division, that was my gun station--on a 5-inch antiaircraft gun. On this light cruiser, we had fifteen 6-inch/.45-caliber main battery guns, and then we had eight (four twin turrets) of 5-inch/.38-caliber antiaircraft guns. We could load that thing twenty, twenty-five times a minute and fire. Now the powder case on that 5-inch gun weighed about thirty-eight pounds, and the projectile weighed fifty-four pounds. We had a loading machine up there where we used dummies, you know, and on that loading machine we could kick out twenty, twenty-five rounds in a minute there.

Marcello: I would venture to say that the Saint Louis had a bunch more antiaircraft weapons aboard after Pearl Harbor than it did it did before Pearl Harbor.

Womack: Yes, they had these 5-inch/.38-calibers, and then they had some .50-caliber and .30-caliber machine guns. But

after that they came out with the quad 40-millimeters and then the 20-millimeters. Before them two, they had what you called a 1.1, which had a very, very sensitive projectile on it. But they got rid of it because the projectile was too sensitive. They had some that exploded before they cleared the gun barrel, and they got rid of those. Then they came out with the quad 40-millimeters and the twin 40-millimeters and all of that.

Marcello: Would this kind of training take place on a daily basis?

Womack: Do you mean the practice on a loading machine?

Marcello: Yes, or whatever. In other words, would you go out every day and come back every day? Exactly what was the time period.

Womack: Oh, you mean in the short-range battle practice?

Marcello: Yes.

Womack: That'd be like an annual thing that you'd do that, but as far as simulating general quarters and all that, manning your battle stations and familiarizing yourself with the gun and the loading machine, yes, that could be daily or just however the commanding officer or the executive officer or the division officer--whoever--wanted it to be.

Marcello: Obviously, you wouldn't fire the guns everyday because, among other things, that would be too expensive.

Womack; Yes.

Marcello: The Navy was still watching its pennies in that pre-

Pearl Harbor period. But I guess that question I'm trying to ask, though not very well, is, would you go out everyday on one kind of exercise or problem or another?

Womack: No. We had other things to do. See, after the Saint Louis was put in commission and went on its shakedown cruise, the war in Europe started, and we were on a neutrality patrol down in the Caribbean and all in there. Then right after the war started between Great Britain and Germany, well, the United States made an agreement with Great Britain for the rights to build some bases on some of their islands--Newfoundland up there--in return for fifty of these old-aged "tin cans. Well, the Saint Louis was chosen to take the task force that would go to choose these sites that they were going to build. We went up there on that, and then after that I think we went around to the West Coast and from there on to Pearl.

Marcello: Let me back up for a minute. I'm going to phrase my questions correctly if it's the last thing I do. Once you get to Pearl, are you going out on a daily basis on some sort of an exercise?

Womack: No, not really, not daily. You see, we'd go out and stay out for five, six, eight, ten days or so more or less on patrol and then have whatever exercises that they deemed were necessary. But we were not in port

today and then out and then back in port that night and out. No, we never did do that.

Marcello: That's what I was trying to establish.

Womack: No, no.

Marcello: So when you went out on one of these training exercises, you would be out for an extended period of time.

Womack: Yes, you'd be out for a while, yes.

Marcello: Could you expect to come in on the same day of the week whenever you did come in?

Womack: Oh, no, no.

Marcello: That would vary, too.

Womack: Yes, yes.

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 training routine?

Womack: No, I couldn't.

Marcello: In other words, so far as you were concerned, it was the same sort of training up to December 7

Womack: Still right on, yes. Of course, had I been older. .I was twenty-one years old then, and war never entered my mind, that we were fixing to get into a war. I suppose for someone who was older and more settled, maybe they could see what was going on. I was still living in a fantasy world then--having gotten into the Navy and getting to eating regular (chuckle).

Marcello: And I guess it's safe to say that if you did think war was going to come, you're eyes were turned mainly toward Europe at that time.

Womack: Yes, yes. And you just didn't think that something like Pearl Harbor could happen to the United States. I mean, the United States is the greatest nation in the world, and no one could do that to them. Still, it's kind of hard to believe.

Marcello: Okay, that more or less brings us up to those days immediately prior to the attack at Pearl, so we need to go into that period in as much detail as you can remember. Obviously, the Saint Louis was in that weekend of December 7

Womack: Well, we had been in for a while. In fact, we were in the Navy Yard at Pearl Harbor, and they were in the process of tying in the radar, which was fairly new then, so that through the radar they could have a more efficient antiaircraft system. All the power motors that you use to train and elevate the antiaircraft guns were all disconnected, so when they started bombing Pearl Harbor, those guys in there were grunting and groaning in trying to train and elevate those 5-inch guns, and they couldn't even keep up with the planes. All they could do was to get them around in a position to where they thought they might come and start firing. Even with that, the Saint Louis did get credit for

shooting a plane or two down, though.

Marcello: So you're in the Navy Yard during that weekend and are really not battle ready at all.

Womack: Oh, no, no. We're getting water, steam, electricity-- everything--from the dock. In fact, we're on the outboard side of the USS Honolulu. We got all of the big steam hoses and water hoses and all of that coming from the dock.

Marcello: You are actually tied up to the Honolulu?

Womack: We're tied up to the Honolulu, which is tied up to the dock.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did that weekend? Let's be more specific--that Saturday. Do you recall what your personal routine was that Saturday of December 6?

Womack: Not particularly that Saturday. I remember the Sunday well.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday night? Do you remember?

Womack: I was aboard ship. I was aboard ship.

Marcello: Was there anything extraordinary happening aboard ship that night?

Womack: No, no, it was just routine. We had a movie, and it was just routine shipboard procedures. Being the butcher, we used to have to get up at 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning to prepare the meat for that day's meal.

Marcello: And did you have the duty on Sunday?

Womack: Well, you just had one butcher on, so you had duty all

the time. This particular Sunday, though, we were fortunate in that we were going to have creamed turkey on toast, and we didn't have to get up early and prepare that. All we had to do was just take it out of the freezer and thaw it out, and then the cooks would take it from there. So we slept in that morning. I didn't get up until around .well, it was just about 7:30 when I got up, and when they started this, I was down in the wash room washing my face and brushing my teeth and combing my hair. That's when General Quarters sounded.

Marcello: How did General Quarters sound aboard the Saint Louis?

Womack: We had a bugle call that goes out [simulates the notes], and then you could tell. .I could tell immediately that something was wrong by the way the coxswain that had the duty on deck was reacting. He gets on there with his little boatswain's whistle, and he starts piping that, and then he says, "All hands, man your battle stations! All hands, man your battle stations on the double!" You could tell by his voice that he was excited.

I wondered what in the world was going on. I walked out on the topside, and when I walked out there was a Japanese torpedo bomber that came across the fantail of our ship. If I had had my old trusty 12-gauge shotgun, I could have shot his head off because he had his head sticking out the side of the plane. He had this Plexiglas canopy on it, and he had it slid back because

he couldn't see over the end of the plane. He had his head sticking out on this side of the cockpit (gesture) looking around the end of his plane. He had a torpedo on him that looked like it was about six blocks long. I could see his eyes. That's how close he was.

Marcello: Describe what he looked like.

Womack: I don't know. As you think about it after so long, it seemed like that in the expression of his face was a gloating, like he had accomplished something big. Maybe that picture has just come to me after thinking about this all these years, but it seems in my mind that that is what I can see, is him with his head hanging out over the side with his goggles on and looking so that he could see. We had some little ol' spotter planes on the Saint Louis, and had the aviation crane been up, he'd have had to go around it or he'd have hit it. But when he got past us, he got down closer to the water yet to release that torpedo. We were just right across the bay from Battleship Row.

Marcello: At that point, were you more or less hypnotized or mesmerized on that plane, or did you move as soon as you saw it?

Womack: No, I watched it. I watched it.

Marcello: And you say you saw it release its torpedo?

Womack: Yes, I saw the torpedo hit the water and saw the wake of the torpedo. Then I guess it went 400 or 500 yards

before it hit the battleship. Then you see a big, black, ball of smoke followed immediately by a flame. Then it seemed like after two or three minutes you'd hear the explosion, but it wasn't that long. Then after that things started happening so fast that you didn't have a chance to look. We started trying to get underway. They were chopping the hawsers in two, throwing everything over the side that they could. We got out of there at 10:00, and we didn't even have a boiler lit off.

Marcello: Normally, how long does it take to get up enough steam?

Womack: Normally, if we were going to get underway at, say, 10:00 in the morning like we did, they'd start at 4:00 in the morning to prepare, and then you'd have two or three tugs in there waiting to pull you out. We got underway from 8:00 to 10:00 by ourselves--no tugs or anything.

Marcello: Now General Quarters has sounded. You're out on deck; you see this Japanese plane. You see it drop its torpedo, and then you see the results of its dropping the torpedo. How are you dressed? You mentioned that you were in the head.

Womack: Yes. Well, I had my whites on and a T-shirt.

Marcello: Shorts or long trousers?

Womack: Long trousers. No, they didn't have shorts then. I had a regular T-shirt--just a skivvy shirt, they called it.

I was dressed.

Marcello: Okay, where is your battle station?

Womack: At this particular time, I didn't have a battle station. There were six cooks and bakers whose job it was to get food to the people when they would have prolonged general quarters and couldn't leave their guns. Our battle station was to supply them with refreshments-- something to eat and something to drink.

Marcello: So what do you do then?

Womack: Do you mean during general quarters? What did I do?

Marcello: What do you do personally now, yes.

Womack: Oh, aboard ship then?

Marcello: Yes.

Womack: Well, I went outside there and watched what was going on until this...what was it? Let's see. The number four antiaircraft gun trained right straight up and fired right in my ears, and then I went back inside. I don't really remember what I did do. I remember that went ahead and prepared the meal and got it out.

Marcello: How long did you watch the activity out there before the weapon went off and you just went back down into the galley?

Womack: It wasn't very long. Maybe it was a minute or two (chuckle). I didn't have any more business out on the topside then.

Marcello: Do you recall what kind of food that you prepared for

the men?

Womack: Yes, yes. We had creamed turkey on toast that day.

Marcello: You still had the creamed turkey on toast?

Womack: Oh, yes, yes, we had it. See, they were already in the process of getting it ready, you know. They had boiled the turkeys, and they had to debone them, and they had to chop them up and make this cream sauce. They were already in the process of doing that, so they just carried it on through.

Marcello: In the meantime, do you have time to think about what's going on outside? If so, what do you think about?

Womack: When you're really thinking about it is when the machine guns and all that start opening up. Then you figure they're getting pretty close. I would try to find me some heavy structure like an archway of a door somewhere and get in that and wait until they slowed down. It keeps your attention, and you don't forget it real quick.

Marcello: Now had the Saint Louis cleared that pier when the bomb hit under the Honolulu?

Womack: No, we were still tied up.

Marcello: Okay, do you recall that incident? If so, what effects did it have on your ship?

Womack; I remember that all we felt was just the ship shake. It didn't hurt us. It did rupture some plates on the Honolulu, and she wasn't able to get underway. It

didn't hurt us, but I remember the shaking of the vessel when it exploded, yes.

Marcello: In the meantime, are you and your buddies down in the galley talking about this, that, or the other? Are you speculating? Are you simply standing by?

Womack: Just wondering, just wondering. Most of them are just awestruck and standing there with their mouths open and thinking to themselves. There's not very much conversation going on.

Marcello: And how long did you remain down in the galley preparing that meal? How long were you down there?

Womack: Well, actually it's not "down there." The galley is on the main deck. I didn't participate too much in the preparation of it, but I was in and around there. They just kept doing their duties and that even though they were getting underway and we were going off.

Marcello: When did you get outside to see what was going on?

Womack: We'd take a sneak out every now and then to see what was going on, but when things would pick up, we'd duck right back in.

Marcello: So what does the Saint Louis do? It has picked up steam, you're chopping lines--whatever.

Womack: By 10:00 we're in the process of getting underway, and as I said before, normally it would take three or four tugs to berth us and to get us out. But this particular time the skipper got it out on his own. He backed her

down and pulled up, and by that time he had her squared around. But in backing down, it was close enough to Battleship Row that you could actually feel the heat from the flames over there. Of course, that didn't have to be too close because they had a lot of flames.

Marcello: Did you ever get out to take a look at Battleship Row as you were getting out of there?

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: What did you see? Describe what you saw.

Womack: Just one behind the other with a mass of flames there. Actually, it just seems like it fades from your memory-- what you actually did see. I guess you want to block it out and don't want to see it again.

Marcello: And you say that the heat from the flames was so intense that you could feel it.

Womack: Yes, you could feel it. That's when we were in the process of getting underway.

Marcello: How far away would you have been from these battleships at that point? You'd have to estimate this.

Womack: Well, we were going across the harbor from them now.

Marcello: But, I mean, how far away from them were you when you were able to feel the heat?

Womack: Feel the heat? I'd say four or five hundred yards. Maybe I'm wrong in that. It wasn't an intense heat, but you could feel it, though. It wasn't to the point where you couldn't stand it or anything, but you could feel

the heat.

Marcello: Were you able to get a glimpse at the water and see what it looked like--the surface of the water and so on?

Womack: No, no, I don't recall seeing that. Where I've heard other people say that they saw burning oil on the water and all, I don't recall seeing that, no.

Marcello: Okay, so do you clear the harbor?

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, what happens once you clear the harbor and get out into open seas?

Womack: Well, on our way out of the harbor, one of these two-man submarines fired a torpedo at us that fortunately struck a shell reef before it got to us. A shell reef was between us and it, and it exploded on the shell reef. Then we cleared the harbor.

Marcello: You took no action against that submarine?

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: You did?

Womack; They fired at him. I read a story about the gun that shot the conning tower off that submarine. It's somewhere at the University of Michigan now. I read that story in the VFW journal or something. The torpedo missed us, and I'm sure that if they saw it, they took action. I don't remember if they fired at him or not. But we cleared the harbor and went out with the intention of intercepting the Japanese task force, I

guess, but I'm so glad we didn't find them.

Marcello: I guess you were kind of glad you didn't (chuckle)!

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: And how long did you remain out there?

Womack: Until Wednesday. We came back on Wednesday.

Marcello: Did you have any submarine scares, either real or imagined, while you were out there?

Womack: I don't recall any real big scares while we were out there. Of course, we were at Condition Two--half of the battle stations manned at all times and all the lights out. The only casualty we had aboard ship happened while we were out those two days there. The guns were manned. As I said half of the guns were manned at all times. You were on four hours and off four hours. There was a guy that was sitting in one of the anti-aircraft guns with his feet hanging down in the well. When you elevate the barrels, the breech goes down, and you've just got a narrow space there where it goes down. He had his feet hanging down in there, and they elevated it and crushed both legs. They had to take both of his legs off. Probably nowadays, with all this modern stuff they got now, they wouldn't had to have done that. But then that was the only alternative.

Marcello: While you were out there at sea immediately following the attack, were rumors already circulating around the ship as to what was going to happen next or what had

happened? Did you hear any rumors or scuttlebutt?

Womack; I'm sure there were rumors, but I don't recall any impressing me enough that I remember them. I know aboard ship there you could hear anything you wanted to hear if you listened long enough, so I'm sure there must have been some rumors going (chuckle) But I don't remember any.

Marcello: How much sleep did you get during that period of time when you were out there at sea thrashing around after the attack?

Womack: The sleep you'd get was just more or less sitting down. There didn't anybody go to bed, I don't think (chuckle).

Marcello: Was this mainly because of the excitement?

Womack: The excitement and not really knowing what was happening or what was going to happen. Sleep was the last thing you could think of.

Marcello: How about the appetites of the men? What were their appetites like?

Womack: I don't remember that, but I don't suspect it was very good.

Marcello: I'm assuming that perhaps you were in battles later on in the Pacific, and is this the same sort of thing that would occur in just about all of these battles? Obviously, you never really get used to this sort of thing.

Womack: yes, but the anxiety is not as great. We were on the

first retaliatory raid that the United States made after the war started--the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. A small task force went up there and bombarded them. Yes, it's the same anxious feeling, but it's just different. You know what you're doing, and you know kind of what to expect.

Marcello: When you come back into Pearl, describe the scene that you see two or three days later.

Womack: Well, what impressed me most was. .I had a friend who was a signalman up on the bridge there. They had what they called a long glass telescope, and I went up there and looked through it and looked on the beach up there at these boxes--coffins--that they had lined up and stacked up three high. A bulldozer was digging a trench for them over there. That's the thing that I remember most vividly. Then all the wreckage and all that you see. .of course, we didn't get to go back in the Navy Yard to see what it looked like in there. We were anchored out when we came back in there.

Marcello: Did you ever get a chance to see what was left of the Arizona?

Womack: Not until I went back out there the latter part of November a year ago.

Marcello: In 1986.

Womack: Yes.

Marcello: So did you ever really get back into Pearl Harbor itself

during this period?

Womack: Not ashore. Just the ship would come in and anchor, and then you'd leave again.

Marcello: But eventually you did get into the harbor itself?

Womack: Yes, we got into the harbor, but we never had liberty.

Marcello: How shortly thereafter did the Saint Louis leave Pearl Harbor for other duties or purposes?

Womack: As I remember it now, we came back in there on a Wednesday, took on some provisions, and then turned around and headed back to the States. We went under the Golden Gate Bridge and dropped anchor. The commissary steward went ashore, and he ordered provisions. He had them put on a barge. There was another barge that came out with a hundred recruits with their gear and all that on it. They loaded those recruits aboard the Saint Louis. We could see our barge of groceries coming, but they picked the anchor up and turned us around, and we went right back. We went by Pearl Harbor--I don't know what we did--and then carried this load of recruits to Wake Island, and they were out there when Wake Island fell.

Marcello: Describe some of the battles that you participated in aboard...I'm assuming that you were aboard the Saint Louis for most of the war.

Womack: No.

Marcello: You were not?

Womack: No. I lacked thirteen days of staying on the Saint Louis four years. I got off in 1943, and I was one of the real fortunate ones in the Navy. After I got through Pearl Harbor, I figured I had it made then. We went to Alaska during the Battle of Midway. They had detected this Jap task force but didn't know exactly where they were going. They diverted a task force of heavy cruisers and light cruisers up off of Alaska. We stayed up there until November of 1942, and then we came back to the States in November. We spent Christmas in New Caledonia in the South Pacific. I stayed aboard her then until May of 1943, and then I came back to the States to go to a commissary steward school. Then I went aboard a little seaplane tender, the USS Alchiba (AVB-50). It was a 2,000-ton displacement ship that they had built to take care of squadrons of seaplanes down in the South Pacific. But they started taking those islands so rapidly down there that they didn't need any seaplanes; they just built a base on the islands. So they sent this ship around to the East Coast. We went to Brazil for six months and then came back and started making runs across the North Atlantic, and that's what I did until I got out of the Navy. I stayed in the Navy seven years. I had six months shore duty out of the seven years.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Womack, I think that's probably a pretty good

place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having taken time to relate your experiences at Pearl. You've said a lot of interesting and, I think, important things. I'm sure that historians are going to find your comments most valuable.

Womack: Well, as far as my experience, like I say, I was one of the more lucky ones. The Saint Louis was involved in quite a few more battles other than what I have mentioned here. In fact, it didn't have a scratch on it, except that it was strafed with a machine gun once, until I had gotten off of it. Then after I got off of it, two or three different times the Japs said they had sunk it. They did hit it. But she went through the whole war with the name "Lucky Lou. After she was decommissioned, the Saint Louis was sold to Brazil, and Brazil used her for their main sea force until they sold her for scrap. The story goes that each vessel has a life of her own, and she didn't want to give her's up to the cutter's torch. So in a little rough sea around the cape down there, she up and sunk (chuckle) and went to the bottom on her own.

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

Womack: It's been a pleasure.