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BEN RUSSELL
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Oral History Collection

Ben Russell

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello Date: April 22, 1988

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Ben Russell for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on April 22, 1988, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Russell in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the light cruiser USS Phoenix during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Russell, to begin this interview, give me a very brief biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born and where you were born--things of that nature.

Mr. Russell: I was born on March 25, 1923, in Memphis, Tennessee.

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

Mr. Russell: High school.

Dr. Marcello: You are a high school graduate.

Mr. Russell: Well, I lacked one year to graduate.

Dr. Marcello: When did you join the service?

Russell: June 17, 1940.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the service?

Russell: That was at the tail end of the Depression, and lots of people were joining strictly to get a job. I would put myself in that class.

Marcello: From all the interviews that I have done, that's a standard reason that a lot of men of your generation give for going into the service at that time. Times were tough, and the Navy didn't pay too much, but at least it was a little bit of security there and opportunity for advancement.

Russell: It was three meals a day, hospitalization, thirty-day vacation a year; and something unheard of for a lot of us, three pairs of shoes, seven suits of clothes, and spending money.

Marcello: That pretty well sums it up.

Russell: Just about.

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

Russell: (Chuckle) Five of us went down to join the Army, and for some reason or other, that afternoon the Army recruiting station was closed. We went across the hall and joined the Navy, and I have never regretted it.

Marcello: How difficult or easy was it to get into the Navy at the time that you enlisted?

Russell: They were, I'd say, selective, moreso than they were

later on, just prior to and during the draft just before the war. If you had any hint of a police record, you didn't get in; if you had the least physical defect, they threw you out; and I suppose they had their own prerogatives to disqualify you for psychological reasons.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Russell: Norfolk, Virginia. Hampton Roads.

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?

Russell: It was normal. To me there was nothing exceptional about it. I had no problem with it. Some of the boys that were raised in a more sheltered way than I was had problems with it. I'd say, other than that, it was uneventful, except about midway through it, the young man I had told my mother to give all my clothes to hitchhiked all the way from Memphis to Norfolk to personally thank me. Outside of that, there was nothing eventful in the nine to ten weeks I was in Norfolk.

Marcello: That's kind of interesting. You mentioned that your boot camp lasted nine or ten weeks. Evidently, they were trying to get people out into the fleet as quickly as possible by that time.

Russell: There was one short period in there--I don't remember how long--that it was reduced from twelve to nine weeks, and then it went back up to the twelve weeks again.

Marcello: There is something else that I want to pick up on. You mentioned that you were born in 1923, and you entered the Navy in 1940, which.

Russell: .made me seventeen years old.

Marcello: .made you seventeen years old when you entered the service. Did you go in at that time under what was called the "minority cruise?"

Russell: No, I took a six-year cruise--six-year contract.

Marcello: Where did you go from Norfolk?

Russell: I was put aboard the USS Helena for further transportation to the West Coast to crew out the ships that they were including into the--at that time--ocean Navy. I was transferred off of the Helena at San Diego to the USS Rigel, a receiving ship at the time. I spent six weeks in San Diego just doing manual labor on destroyers. They were taking the old four-pipers out of "Red Lead Row" at the time, and it was just like an eight-hour-a-day job. In fact, once again, I didn't have any trouble with work. The old chief watertender, who was my boss at the time, tried to get me assigned permanently to his group, but they had already sent my papers on to the Phoenix, so there was no getting out of that. I had no regrets there, either.

Marcello: I am assuming that you were simply assigned to the Phoenix. You had no choice as to what particular kind of ship you wanted to go on?

Russell: We were asked at some point, either just before boot leave or right after we got back, what type of service we would prefer. At the time, after talking to people from destroyers, cruisers, and battleships, for some reason--I can't remember the reason itself--I picked cruiser duty and got it. But as far as the Phoenix itself, I believe that when we were sent to San Diego, at San Diego we were assigned to the Phoenix.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the life aboard the Phoenix. First of all, to what division were you assigned when you were on board?

Russell: The Fifth Division. That's the deck division in the after part of the ship, and in that division I remained for my entire five years eight months on that ship.

~~Marcello:~~ Am I to assume, therefore, that you eventually struck for boatswain's mate.

Russell: Boatswain's mate second class is what I got up to.

Marcello: Describe what the crew's quarters were like aboard the Phoenix--the living quarters.

Russell: This room is approximately twenty-by-sixteen, and the first crew compartment I was in was slightly bigger than this, but not much. There were three rows of two stacks of four bunks. I don't know whether that is clear enough or not, but that's...let's see...three times eight...that's room for twenty-four people. That just about wraps it up--twenty-four people sleeping in that

particular area. Now it sounds crowded, but after the initial getting used to it, it wasn't really all that bad. There were worse living compartments in the ship. This particular one was the second deck down, which made you in the freeboard of the ship. In port you could open the ports and let natural air draft through. After about a year of that, maybe less, they rearranged and. .in fact, I believe it was after the war started that they rearranged crew sleeping so that in case of a hit you wouldn't get all of the people in one division wiped out. In other words, if you've got a hit in the quartermaster's compartment under the old system, you've lost your navigational capabilities. So they mixed everybody up and put about half of the Fifth Division down one deck in half of one watertight compartment, which put us directly under the CPO quarters at the time and between the barbettes of turret four and turret five. In that particular situation, we had engineers and signalmen and radiomen and, I would say, two-thirds of the Fifth Division in that compartment. That compartment itself extended from one side of the ship to the other, sixty-two feet at that point, and it was about thirty feet from the forward bulkhead to the after bulkhead. You had about eighty people sleeping in that particular space, which still, after you get used to it, was not all that bad.

Marcello: Describe what the food was like aboard the Phoenix in that pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Russell: When I first went aboard, they had family-style feeding, which meant that the mess attendants (mess cooks) brought the food around and set it on the table. There were eight people to each table. That was the service, which was adequate. It was nice. There again, I never had any problem with the food because there were times before I went in the service that I didn't have it quite that (chuckle) good. But I would say it was good. I never had any problems at all with the food.

Marcello: Out of curiosity, did you gain weight?

Russell: When I went into the service at boot camp, I weighed about 140 pounds. I was underweight. In that nine weeks, I came up to about 164 pounds, and I topped out within six months at about 170 pounds, which I stayed at for the entire six years. In fact, I stayed at that until I quit smoking about twelve years ago.

Marcello: That in itself, I think, probably says something about the Navy food.

Russell: The Navy food and the routine. The routine has as much to do with it as food does. Like it or not, you're regimented to a certain degree. You get enough sleep. Even when you are waked up every fourth night for a mid-watch from twelve until four, you're still getting all the sleep you need. The exercise, the work, just

naturally fills you out to what you normally should be. There were not many overweight people there. I don't think there were any that couldn't pull their own weight, either.

Marcello: Did you take a tour of mess cook duty while you were aboard the Phoenix?

Russell: That's where I was when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I had three months of that; and the other nasty job was side cleaning, and I had three months of that.

Marcello: Is it not true, however, that mess cooking could potentially mean some extra income in the form of tips? I know that was a tradition on some ships.

Russell: After they changed it from .I left out something there. When we had the family-style, it wasn't too long after I got aboard that they changed to the cafeteria-style feeding, and then you stood in line and went through with a tray and whatnot. After that the mess cooks got five dollars a month added to their pay. I don't know whether they had that before or not. Before that, they got tips, I know.

Marcello: What were some of your responsibilities as a member of the Fifth Division? What sort of work would you be doing?

Russell: Well, the general maintenance and upkeep, which everybody did. Our two main enemies at sea are rust and fire; so fire drills were absolutes, and combatting rust

was a never-ending job. The launching and recovering of the aircraft was a Fifth Division responsibility. As soon as they got used to you and found out how far they could trust you, why, you were assigned to a specific task, whether it was handling a wind line or setting the float planes in cradles and hooking them down so they wouldn't fall off or whatever. In the five years, why, I handled, I guess, half a dozen different jobs connected with handling of the aircraft--everything from just bull labor, pushing them around, moving them on the hangar deck when they needed to be moved, to wind line, crane operator, and giving signals to the crane.

Combat-wise, I was assigned to the turret. The first time I went aboard, the first battle station I had was on the shell deck. That was three decks down, and you took the shells--they were 105 to 110 pounds, depending upon what their use was--and you passed them into a tray, shoved them along the tray, put them into a hoist. They went up automatically. As one was taken out of the top, the hoist went up, and you put another one in that slot. I was moved from there to the gun room in the turret as a shellman, then as a powderman, and then finally as gun captain. That is going through the whole war.

Marcello: What was your responsibility or battle station at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack? What was your

assignment at that time? Do you recall?

Russell: Number two powderman, left gun in the turret, turret five.

Marcello: So you were up in the turret by that time?

Russell: That's where my station was. At the time of the attack, we were in Pearl Harbor. We were moored, and all the deck force was required to get the ship underway as soon as possible.

Marcello: Obviously, you were not going to be of too much use at Pearl in a turret.

Russell: No.

Marcello: As you look back on that time aboard the Phoenix before Pearl Harbor, how would you describe the morale aboard that ship? Was it a happy ship?

Russell: It was. It was a good ship.

Marcello: What do you think was responsible for that?

Russell: Well, we had good teachers, the officers being the teachers, of course. We had a skipper who, when we got into port where we could have liberty, saw that we got liberty--saw that we had transportation to the shore when we were moored or anchored out. The competitive spirit between ships and between divisions was such that it kept you interested. We had the "E" for efficiency on all five turrets; all main battery and antiaircraft battery directors had the "E". We wore the "E" with three stripes on the stacks for the engineering

department. So we were pretty well up there.

Marcello: I want you to talk a little bit more about the "E" for efficiency. How would you in the turret, for instance, --how would you in gunnery--get the "E" for efficiency?

Russell: In speed of loading. In other words, we had a rapid, continuous fire by gun. Now wait a minute. Let me see if I can get this right. We had a four-second firing sequence for the particular gun I was on. Four seconds for a 6-inch gun is no small thing. That means everybody is clicking together immediately. And I believe the average for the three guns in the turret couldn't have been more than five.

Marcello: Then obviously, accuracy in firing would also be a part of the "E" for efficiency.

Russell: Accuracy on the part of the pointer and trainer and the turret captain and turret officer. All of which can't be done without the people in the main battery--directors giving you the proper information.

Marcello: In addition to the pride involved in getting the "E, did that mean anything monetarily? Was there any additional money involved?

Russell: I'm digging on my memory here, but I think we did. I believe we did and...yes, we did. I can't remember how much. It was a monthly additive. But the reason I remember it so succinctly is because it stayed with us during the war. They did not cancel it out when the war

started. In other words, it was good for a year. Your efficiency rating was good for a year. We thought at the time that we would lose it as soon as the war began or after the war began, but we didn't. It kept coming. To the best of my knowledge and my memory, I believe we got it right up until the end of the war.

Marcello: While we're.

Russell: .even with the advance in rate and whatnot.

Marcello: While we're on this subject of morale, I want to talk about a couple of other things. Obviously, I think the "E" for efficiency is one sign of the morale aboard that ship. What role did athletics play aboard the Phoenix in that pre-Pearl Harbor period? Was there emphasis put on athletics such as boxing or baseball or anything of that nature?

Russell: We had teams. We had wrestling teams, boxing teams, but I don't remember emphasis being put on it. We had Everett Gorden, who was the champion light heavyweight wrestler for the Pacific Fleet.

Marcello: Everett Gorden?

Russell: Everett Gorden from Sparta, Illinois. In fact, I am still very friendly and communicate with his brother George from time to time. We had rowing teams. As a matter of fact, I had backaches and blisters to go with that (chuckle). Wrestling teams, of course, I've mentioned. We had boxing and softball.

Marcello: But again, those were things to keep you active, keep you occupied, keep you busy, and I think they would have probably contributed a little bit to the morale aboard the ship.

Russell: They helped.

Marcello: Given your background from what you've said, what was your reaction to the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis at that time?

Russell: I don't know that I had a reaction. I didn't mind it. When I first got there and had a tour of the island, the one island itself--I didn't go to any of the other islands--why, it doesn't take long to absorb just about everything there is. As far as the general culture, I took the usual tourist interest in things. Then I settled in to a more or less routine when I'd go ashore.

Marcello: Let's talk about the training exercises in which the Phoenix would participate prior to December 7. Take me through one of your training exercises in terms of when you would go out, what you would do when you went out, how long you would stay out, and when you would come in --things of that nature.

Russell: It would depend on the problem that we were working on. If it was just a cruiser problem, we would go out and take stations with our division--that was CRUDIV 15--and go through a bombardment problem which might take three

to five days. In other words, it involved softening up for a landing, and these were things that were followed through later on in the war to some extent. Like I say, we'd spend three to five days on that, and it would be quite a bit of general quarters, quite a bit of time spent on battle stations, and quite a bit of time spent on standing watch. This is the second tightest condition of readiness. Three to five days of that wasn't bad.

Now if it was a full fleet exercise with the battleships and carriers--I think maybe two or three times we were out with everything we had--that could go two weeks at a time. You'd take stations with the other elements of the fleet, and the problem could be anything. It could be anything from a major invasion of one of the islands, or we'd break into two parts and meet for the classic sea battle and so on and so forth. Like I say, that could go up to ten days or two weeks, and by then, when you got back in, you were really ready to tie up and get ashore and forget the whole thing for a while.

Marcello: As one got closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, could you detect any changes in the ship's routine when you went out on these training exercises?

Russell: Not from that standpoint. Let's back up a little bit to

when I went aboard. I went aboard in Mare Island when the ship was in for a three-month overhaul. When we got out of there, I'd say maybe 250 to 300 people on the ship were new, so the first thing there is to find a niche for everybody to fit into. That takes a certain amount of time, and to wet them down a little bit, tune them up, and get them into those niches takes a little more time; and any increase in training activities as we approached the Pearl Harbor attack, which we didn't know we were approaching, I attributed it to the fact that we were just getting finer tuned from my own part. We had gunnery practice--not with the live shells but with target projectiles, just enough to make a splash so you could work your gunnery into a target. We had lots of that. Sometimes you'd think there was no tomorrow, the way we were firing powder. We had maneuvering exercises and whatnot, and there again we had the "E" in the maneuvering exercises. So I can't say that I detected any increase in preparation for war as, I believe, you intended the question.

Marcello: Let me ask you another question along these lines. What emphasis was placed upon antiaircraft practice in the pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Russell: Plenty. We would go out from time to time, and they would tow target sleeves. And everything from .well, our main antiaircraft batteries were eight 5-inch/.25-

caliber open guns, and we would have high-level sleeves towed. We would fire at them with emphasis being on timing the explosion for the antiaircraft shell and spot it under, over, forward of it or behind it. The emphasis wasn't in knocking that sleeve off of that airplane; it was placing the burst around it. Then we would have low-level for. .at that time we didn't have 40-millimeters on our ship. We had what they called a 1.1, .50-calibers, and .30-calibers, which wasn't a whole lot (chuckle). We had a 3-inch gun, too, but I could never see that they played a great big part in what we did.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that the antiaircraft armament aboard the Phoenix after Pearl Harbor was a lot different than it was before Pearl Harbor?

Russell: Not really all that great until we came back in 1943. They thought a lot of what we had on that ship in Pearl Harbor. After we got over to Australia, we were sent around to the West Coast of Australia. We did convoy work there for a very short time. If you remember now, that was at a time when Australia fully expected--and we found out later, rightly so--that they were going to be invaded. They tied us up for fifty-three days in Fremantle Harbor strictly for antiaircraft protection until they had their own antiaircraft shore emplacements organized. So that's what they thought of the

antiaircraft capabilities of that particular ship at the time.

Marcello: But in 1943 and thereafter, you probably had the 20-millimeters and 40-millimeters.

Russell: We got 20-millimeters added in 1942 in Sydney. This was after the Fremantle thing. Altogether we spent about six or seven months over at Fremantle. We put 20-millimeters on, 20-millimeter Oerlikons, in Sydney in 1942. I'd say it was around September, sometime in there, and one of them became my "baby" then as soon as they put them aboard (chuckle). I didn't really like that gun even though it was a fairly good gun, but its one fault was that it heated up barrels too quick. We had to constantly change barrels on it.

Marcello: When the Phoenix came off one of these exercises, how would the liberty routine work for the crew?

Russell: In Pearl Harbor?

Marcello: Yes.

Russell: Before the war?

Marcello: Before the war.

Russell: We had day by day from 4:00 to 1:00 a.m., and on weekends we had Saturday from 12:00 noon to 1:00 a.m., and Sundays was...I can't remember. I believe on Sunday we had. .if we wanted to go to church or ashore, we could get off about 9:00. Other than that, if you didn't go to church, you got off at 11:00 or 12:00 until

1:00 a.m.

Marcello: At any one time in port, what percentage of the crew would you estimate to be aboard? Here you are, in Pearl Harbor. Let's say the Phoenix is in for a weekend. What percentage of the crew might be ashore at one time?

Russell: If we just came in, and we'd been out on one of those full two-week exercises, a little over half of them would be on the ship at one time. If we stayed in--say we were in there seven days and with payday--why, almost everybody that rated liberty went ashore, which left you with half because it was fifty-fifty in Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: On a weekend would maybe half the crew go on Saturday and another half have Sunday, or how would that work?

Russell: That's correct, except that the first class petty officers and chiefs had a little more freedom. I think they had full weekends.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, what would you normally do?

Russell: Well, for the first part there, I would go ashore and have a couple of drinks and get a good meal other than the Navy meal. It didn't take long to exhaust all the possibilities in Honolulu, as far as an enlisted man's pay was concerned. You realized that--at least I did--that the chow on the ship was probably better than what you were getting (chuckle) in restaurants over there for the price. Maybe I'd team up with somebody, and we'd have a few drinks, maybe go to a movie, and that would

be it.

Then later on--in 1941--I started taking flying lessons over at the old John Rogers Airport, and, of course, that was a long haul on \$36 a month and later \$54 a month when I made seaman first. And that's what I was doing then when the war started. Of course, after Pearl Harbor was bombed, that wiped out that program that I was in.

Marcello: You mentioned something that I want to pick up on, and this is something I should have asked earlier. How slow or rapid was promotion in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Russell: It depended to some extent on the individual and on the department and the turnover. We had a good crew on the Phoenix. I remember the first skipper we had at that time--H.E. Fisher. He didn't transfer anybody off that he wanted to keep, and when the fleet asked for a certain number of men, why, to him and his officers it was usually a cull job. One time they wanted thirty-eight people for the Asiatic Fleet. I don't know what the ratio was for other ships, but they wanted thirty-eight people off the Phoenix. I remember the ones that went. No great loss! That's a cruel thing to say maybe, and not generous, but it's the truth. So for the opportunities or the vacancies coming up, there weren't that many on the deck force on the Phoenix. Like I say, it was up to the individual. I at the time wasn't

really all that interested in going up because I didn't want to go any faster than I could handle the responsibility.

To go down into the boiler rooms, we had one man that went down into the black gang, and they put him into the number four boiler room, which was the problem spot on the four fire rooms. That was numbers seven and eight boilers. He was (chuckle) so naive that he didn't know that they were putting him there because he was new and whatnot, and he went to work there. I think he had the record at the time he got out of the service of advancing from fireman second class, which was a striker's rank at the time, to watertender first class in the shortest time of any man in the history of the Navy--strictly because he didn't know enough to realize that he was being...well, to bring it down into the vernacular, "shit on" (laughter). That was Homer Bartlett from Houston. He died two, three years ago.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the Japanese attack. When you and your buddies sat around in bull sessions, did you ever talk much about the possibility of war between the United States and Japan? Did that possibility ever enter your conversations at all?

Russell: It did but not to as great an extent as the war in Europe did. The memorable thing to a lot of us was

the. .I can't remember the name of the British battleship that came back and stopped in at Pearl Harbor on its way to the States--coming a long way from the Mediterranean. It had been butchered up pretty badly, and it was headed for Bremerton for some Lend-Lease overhaul work. When we saw that thing and saw what shells and bombs could do to a ship, well, I guess that got us to thinking and realizing that all the training we were doing was for real. Still, our concern was that it was going to start in Europe or on the Atlantic side and not on our side because we had already had some of our ships involved with submarines and whatnot in the Atlantic Ocean.

We remembered the ultimatum that we were supposed to get everything back east of the 180th parallel. That created quite a stir, and I can't remember if that was just before or after we had taken a convoy over to Manila in October of 1941. I believe it was before because at the time we took one of the old president ships--President Pierce, I believe it was--to the Philippines with lots of reinforcements for the Philippine forces that we had stationed over there at the time. When we got back--I can't remember exact dates, but it was around the end of October when we got back into Pearl Harbor--at that time we went right into some rather extensive training with other ships. Among

the training we had damage control work, which they started emphasizing and which they had not emphasized before; and in those damage control problems, we would have pictures of the damage done to British ships that we were to study and learn how they fought their fires. We were sent ashore for firefighting schools more frequently than we had done before--things like that.

Marcello: Let's talk about that weekend of December 7, 1941. You had mentioned this off the record, and I'll ask you the question just to get it on the record. Do you remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941?

Russell: Well, I was a mess cook in the mess hall, and I can't remember whether I went ashore or not because mess cooks rated liberty every day. We could go when our work was done. We had to be back in time for setting up chow the next morning.

Marcello: On a Saturday night, any Saturday night, what kind of activities would normally be taking place aboard a ship while it was there in Pearl? Use the Phoenix as an example.

Russell: We had movies. I don't think we had movies every night. I believe we had movies about four nights a week, Saturday being one of them. I remember that. They would run the screen up on the aviation crane and set up the benches from the mess hall to sit on. I can't remember which movie we had. I probably watched it if I

didn't go ashore. Like It told you before, I can't remember whether I went ashore that night or not. I probably didn't.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Phoenix at that time?

Russell: On the fifth and twentieth, I believe, somewhere around there. It wasn't the first and the fifteenth. I understand the Marines were paid on the first and the fifteenth.

Marcello: So that meant that probably on that weekend of December 7, sailors would have probably had a little bit of money yet?

Russell: Yes, unless they were saving it for some reason or got wiped out the first two nights (chuckle) ashore.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about that Sunday morning, then, from the the time you woke up until all hell broke loose. Relate to me your routine on that Sunday morning of December 7

Russell: For mess cooks it was 5:00 reveille. I worked in the scullery, so my job was to go down and help with whatever I could help in setting up the mess hall. Then I'd go in the scullery, before they started the line through, to set the steam sterilizers and see that the proper detergent mixes were in the wash basins and whatnot. And if we were running special mess, which we were at the time, for venereal patients, you had to get out the gear that was set aside for venereal patients

because they ate on their own. They were isolated. Isolated is not the word. They were quarantined more or less from other people, and I don't know whether that was general throughout the Navy or just Phoenix policy. But at the time--to back up on that just a little bit, and this is not one of the most glorious things the Navy did--while on our trip to the Philippines, when we left there to come back, we had 105 sets of mess gear set aside for venereal patients who contracted a little present from the ladies in the Philippines. One hundred and five people out of 918, that's a lot (chuckle)!

Marcello: Were those people identified in any other way other than the fact that they segregated them relative to mess gear and eating and things of that nature?

Russell: They were restricted to the ship until they were cured.

Marcello: Were they kept away from the rest of the crew?

Russell: No, they kept working as long as they were able. Now gonorrhoea and syphilis weren't incapacitating infections usually, but in that particular case, I think we had ten or twelve people that had tropical bulbo, which was debilitating, and that put them to bed. A couple of them, when they started getting back on their feet again, looked like something out of one of those war atrocity pictures because a 180-pound man could go down to 90 pounds during the course of that disease before he was cured. What the after effects were on the

individual, I don't know; I have no way of knowing. But, anyway, that's why we were running so heavy on special mess gear at the time.

Back to the routine, after we set up. I had three people working with me in the scullery. I'd say ten minutes after the first man went through the chow line, why, the dirty gear started coming back in to go through, and we kept it going through. So within ten minutes after the last man left the mess hall, most of your stuff was cleaned up. After that you shut down the scullery, cleaned up. Of the three people on the different stations, one took the stuff in and made the first treatment and passed it on to the second man; and he rinsed it; and the third man dunked it in a sterilizing sink. Then it went through the steam treatment. So within ten minutes after the last man left the chow hall, you had the last piece of equipment in there. Within five minutes or less, after that went through there, we could start cleaning our cleaning gear. And that's what I was doing when the alarm was sounded.

Marcello: Okay, how was the alarm sounded aboard the Phoenix? By what means?

Russell: Well, we had a klaxon, which is something like these back-up klaxons on construction gear that you hear from time to time. Then the bugle, which at that time was

the air defense call, sounded repeatedly, which normally they didn't do. Normally, for a drill or an exercise, the air defense call was sounded once.

Marcello: But up until that time, you heard no noises, nothing of that sort?

Russell: No.

Marcello: Where was the Phoenix tied up?

Russell: I can't remember the number of the berth, but to enter into Pearl Harbor, you were going in a northerly direction, and we were off of Aiea Landing. I'd say we were about one-third of the way between Aiea and Pearl City. There were eight or ten berths there, and sometimes we would be in one and sometimes in another.

Marcello: Were these mostly all cruisers?

Russell: The cruisers and destroyers were over there. The Dobbin was there, and there was another destroyer tender that was over there just off Pearl City. Now we were tied up alone at the time. Normally, if everybody was in the harbor at the time, we would be tied up two, sometimes three, abreast to each set of buoys.

Back to my first knowledge of what was going on, when the air defense call sounded as such, I didn't have an air defense station at the time except in the turret, so I just kept right on working to finish up what I was doing in the scullery. I dismissed the three people that were working with me because there wasn't a whole

lot left to do except put away the special mess gear and whatnot. I'm in the middle of this when I have maybe five minutes to go to have the place shipshape.

The master-at-arms poked his head in the door and in no uncertain terms told me that I better get on my battle station. So I went back to my compartment, changed clothes, went up to the second deck, and I bent over the drinking fountain to get a drink of water just as the first of our antiaircraft guns went off. Then I knew that there must be (chuckle) something, because I knew we wouldn't be firing at sleeves while we were moored. I went up through the trunk, looking out on the starboard quarter; and as I came up, head above the main deck level, that's just about the time the Arizona got hit.

Marcello: Did you witness that?

Russell: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what you saw. Obviously, you were on your way to your battle station, but what did you see in that brief moment?

Russell: Just one puff to begin with and then the whole thing going and that great, big orange billow of flame--one-third the length of the ship, I suppose--then the black smoke and orange flames all the way up to the Arizona's foretops. And that's when I knew we were at war.

Then, of course, when I got out, well, then it was

all work then, trying to get the ship underway. I remember looking out across Aiea Landing at one of the cane fields over there and wishing I was over there watching this whole mess; and about the time I was thinking that, one of the planes that had been shot down crashed into that cane field and set the field on fire. Then I knew there was no safe place at that particular time (chuckle).

Marcello: So essentially, you don't have any use in that 6-inch turret.

Russell: No.

Marcello: So you're trying to get the ship underway.

Russell: Yes. Our dress mooring was 2 1/4-inch wire run out to the mooring buoy, and the mooring buoy was anchored to the bottom--I don't know how--probably with a big block of concrete. To take any of the line from that, you have to get a boat crew out on that buoy with the proper tools to take that shackle off of the buoy and release the cable, and then the deck force pulls the cable in and flakes it out for storing away later. That's what we did at the time. We got the wires in and backed clear of the buoy. We were going to go out the south channel, and just as we were backing clear of the buoy, there were problems out there with one of those small two-man submarines, so they told us to stay where we were. We went back and put a single manila line back to

the buoy.

Marcello: In the meantime, I assume you're trying to get up steam.

Russell: We had steam (chuckle)

Marcello: Did you have enough to get out (chuckle)?

Russell: I don't know what the figures are, but they set record on top of record there--different ships--for getting up steam. In fact, we were just talking about that not too long ago at a reunion. Getting up steam was only one of the things that required preparation.

Anyway, while we were back at the buoy with just the single line out, we were hauling up ammunition where it was needed. The 3-inch batteries had to be supplied by hand for some reason or other that morning--I don't know why--and their ammunition was fixed. By that I mean it was powder case and projectile all in one piece. There were four of those in a case, and I remember having one of those and pushing it up toward the 3-inch gun platform. The captain's mess boy was helping me, and we heard some odd noises and looked out, and here a Japanese plane was coming in jinking and strafing. To this day I don't know where they were going, but I knew he was aiming at us. "Ferdie" was what we called this kid. I said, "Okay, 'Ferdie, let's shove it up there and get out of here!" I started to shove, but I was by myself. "Ferdie" was gone (chuckle). But somebody reached down and got it. Then we were stowing gear.

The awnings and whatnot that we put up when we were in port had to be taken down, and they were rolled up and stored--in the regulation way, in spite of what was going on.

Marcello: Everything is being done, then, in a more or less orderly fashion.

Russell: I would say so, yes. There wasn't any confusion. Everybody was doing their job unless they were tapped on the shoulder and told to do something else.

Marcello: Which, in essence, is what you were doing, from what I gather?

Russell: Right.

Marcello: You seemed to have been doing several things here.

Russell: Then we were about to get underway again. We pulled the line in, and we started out the north channel--that's by the Navy Yard--and a tug grabbed the submarine gate and was dragging it back in place. In the meantime all of this other stuff that's a matter of record had been happening in front of us. The Nevada had gotten hit, and the quartermaster backed the ship aground to clear the channel. The West Virginia and the other ships that were hit were burning there, but we had space to get by. This tug started to bring around the submarine net, and our skipper signaled that tug to get out of the way or get dragged out to sea with us because we weren't going to stop. I can't remember what the speed limit was, but

I know you didn't normally do over about three or four knots going out the channel; but we were doing about eighteen knots when we went past the Arizona. I don't have it with me, but there is a picture that's shown quite frequently of the Phoenix passing the Arizona as it was blazing.

So we made it out that time and continued to stow our gear for sea. We stayed at battle stations, then, and met up with one of the aircraft carriers. I want to say it was the Enterprise, but I can't be sure. The carrier and her destroyer escort were coming back from Wake Island. It had been up there to deliver relief airplanes to the forces at Wake. We stayed out, then, in company of that task group for two days.

We came in on Tuesday night just before sundown, and my impression of Pearl Harbor when we came back in was just complete disaster.

Marcello: Can you describe what you saw and what your feelings were?

Russell: The one thing that stays in my mind more than anything else is the large stack of black coffins that were stored at Aiea Landing for the purpose of getting the people or the bodies out and put into those coffins because I believe at the time--and it's strictly speculation on my part--I believe at the time they figured sooner or later, they were going to get the

people out of the Arizona and out of the Utah, which were still in there. And I remember the smell. Pearl Harbor was a neat, clean, orderly place, and to come back in there, and to see oil floating over against the shore at Ford Island and Aiea, Pearl City, well, it was sort of heartbreaking to anyone who had been there before. That's about the story.

Marcello: Before the Phoenix got underway and got out of Pearl, was it coming under any direct attack? You did mention that one plane that strafed the Phoenix. Was there any other direct activity that took place?

Russell: They made a couple of runs on us, maybe more than that, but their primary concern was with those battleships. The old Utah was sandbagged across the decks and used for aerial bombing practice, and they for some reason or other thought they had a carrier there, and that's why they went for that. They made run after run on that poor old ship. The Ford Island installation--I don't know what importance they attached to it--they pulverized that place. You have seen pictures of it. It just didn't look like a military installation after they got rid of it or through with it.

Marcello: Were you able to view the tactics of Japanese planes when they came in, or were you too busy to take a squint at them.

Russell: I was busy. At the time I don't think I had the

knowledge to make an evaluation of that.

Marcello: How low were they coming in? Were you able to see that?

Russell: How low?

Marcello: Yes.

Russell: They were coming in low and high. They came in past the submarine base for their torpedo runs right down over the water, and after releasing your torpedoes, they would go out and over the south channel and turn. That's when they would come back for their strafing runs.

Marcello: Could you distinguish the pilots in the plane?

Russell: (Chuckle) You could see the grin on their faces, they were that low. The one came right down between us and Ford Island. That's the closest one I saw, and that was probably 200 yards off our stern, maybe less. I don't know what he was going for. I could see his face up against his gunnery sight, but I really don't know what he was going after.

Marcello: You mentioned the Nevada trying to get out of the harbor a few minutes ago. Did you actually witness that?

Russell: No, because for one thing that was one of the times we were turned back. We were turned back three times, and, of course, the third time we were turned back, we didn't put a line out. We just jinked back and forth to keep position. That was when the Nevada had been hit, and we thought that we were going to be bottled in there. But

when she backed aground, why, that opened the harbor, and then everything was all right for us.

Marcello: Once the Phoenix cleared the harbor, what did it do out there?

Russell: We made contact with--I don't know how--that other task group that was out there. It was we and one other destroyer, but I can't remember which one it was.

Marcello: What was the scuttlebutt going around the ship that night of December 7?

Russell: Where the Japs were going to land. We just knew that the Japs were going to land forces somewhere in the islands and take the place over or try to take it over.

Marcello: You had no reason not to believe that after what happened.

Russell: No, because we had no reason to think in the first place that that was going to happen. I remember sometime before in one of the national magazines, I had seen pictures of a submarine that launched an aircraft but couldn't recover it. It launched the aircraft, and then the aircraft was on its own and either made it to shore or went down at sea. And I remember wondering if there were enough submarines out there someplace for all these airplanes to come from, and you realized after you saw them up close that they were carrier aircraft.

Marcello: How long was it before the Phoenix got out of Pearl Harbor on a more or less permanent basis?

Russell: It was after ten o'clock.

Marcello: But I guess what I mean is, you mentioned that on that Tuesday, you'd come back into Pearl Harbor, and then I'm assuming that very shortly thereafter you probably went out again.

Russell: You mean our activities after Pearl Harbor?

Marcello: Yes.

Russell: All right, our first thing we did after that is that we received about 120 people off the Nevada because the Nevada was out of commission. So they broke that crew up--the people that were left--and we got 125 of them, most of them real good boys, and we knew right away they were going to beef us up.

Our first duty then was to convoy a ship back to the States, and then we convoyed a couple of ships from the States back to Pearl Harbor. I can't remember for sure, but the first time we did this we did it alone; and I believe the second time, when we came back out, we had another ship with us. I don't remember who she was. Then we took another ship back to San Francisco and another group back to Pearl Harbor. Of course, this was automatic policy from then on. Every merchant ship was convoyed.

Then on our third time back, we went into Mare Island, and then we moved down to one of the repair stations near San Francisco. The scuttlebutt at that

time was that we were going to take a long run because there were things they did to the machinery of the ship for sustained running. It was like painting it up on the bulletin board what they were going to do, so we were pretty sure then we were going over toward the Far East, somewhere over there. So we took another one of the old President boats, and I believe it was President Franklin. The Pierce and the Franklin. .between the Philippines and the Australia trip, it was the Pierce and the Franklin, and I think it was in that order. Anyway, we left on January 7 with the Franklin and convoyed her non-stop, twenty-eight days, to Melbourne, Australia. Again, we were talking about this a few weeks ago. I think we had just over one day's steaming fuel left when we got to Melbourne, which is figuring it pretty close for that long a trip. We stayed in Melbourne for six or seven days, something like that.

We cleared Melbourne and met the Queen Elizabeth and took her to the west coast of Australia. When we made contact with her, our skipper asked her skipper what speed he intended to maintain, and that crusty old jerk radioed a flashback on the signal system, "How fast can you go?" And that set the tone for that trip. That was almost a full speed run from Melbourne around to the west coast. That was a lot of ship!

Then I mentioned to you what we did in the Indian

Ocean. We did some patrol work and convoy work, fifty-three days of antiaircraft guard in Fremantle. We took the Langley. the Langley was loaded up with P-40s in Fremantle Harbor, and under cover of night. they wouldn't let anybody within the perimeter of the harbor itself to see what was going on, even some of us coming back off liberty. They made us sit down alongside the curb until they got an okay to let us in. We took that ship out and took it up northwest about 500 miles southeast of Colombo, Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka. We turned it over to a Dutch unit, and we headed back for Fremantle. Forty-eight hours after we turned it over to the Dutch forces, it was on the bottom.

Marcello: What were some major engagements that the Phoenix later participated in? Just mention them briefly for the record.

Russell: After we came back over to the east coast of Australia, we did screening work for the Solomon Island campaign. We would go out and screen on the southern approaches for that particular mess. I think the most we were out was forty-five days that we were steaming. We would refuel at sea, take on provisions at sea and everything. Then we would go back and lay behind the Great Barrier Reef and reprovision and whatnot. All of this was drudge work. We never fired a shot; we never saw anything. Tension got pretty tough, but there was no

real action for, oh, ten or eleven months. Then we got in pretty bad shape from an engineering standpoint from the overwork that our engineering equipment was being subjected to.

They sent us back to the States in 1943 for overhaul and upkeep. They beefed up the antiaircraft gun emplacements, which we talked about before. They had 40-millimeter quads, 40-millimeter twins, and, oh, probably about twenty of the 20-millimeter Oerlikons. They beefed up our catapults to handle to OS- 2U Kingfisher, which made quite a name for itself during the war for observation purposes. They made changes in the crew complement. Where we used to sail with about 1,000 people--918 before the war and then something over 1,000 right after the war--they beefed us up to about 1,180 people plus officers. And we went back with probably somewhere between 85 and 90 percent of the crew we came back to the States with in spite of the fact that the captain we had at the time, Captain Noble, had been instructed on arrival in the United States to get rid of 86 percent of his people. These people were to be split up to form a nucleus for the new ships that were being commissioned at the time.

Well, he had some pull in Washington, and he went down as soon as we put our first line over in Philadelphia. He went down to Washington and collected

a couple of his "you-owe-me's" and came back and just got rid of about 120 people, people he wanted to get rid of. We got 110 recruits, among them--I didn't know it at the time--my future brother-in-law. So that was one of the things I attribute our success to in the latter part of the war. Everything we were assigned to do, we did. We lost maybe four people, most of them to aircraft action (four battle casualties), and we lost a couple to accidents, one to drowning. Other than that, that's where those "E's" paid off that we carried along.

Marcello: I guess one of the more famous battles that I always think of the Phoenix participating in was the Battle of the Surigao Straits.

Russell: I can't say too much about that. I went into it with some resignation, some maybe trepidation, anxiety. We all did. We went to general quarters about . . . we knew where we were going when we cleared the harbor that night because we cleared the harbor in a different way than we usually did. We had been on call fire prior to that. At sundown we would clear the harbor and patrol or run back and forth, just anything to stay out of that trap. Then in daytime we would come back, and we would be on call fire for the land forces. Oh, there was a routine. There was just a certain way you got ready for the night and cleared the harbor, but this particular time we didn't. We laid out the wires in case we had to

tow; we dropped the crane. In other words, this was about a fifteen-minute job to lower the aviation crane down across the hatch and secure it. We took away canvas covers that were kept on things, like, canvas boots on the wire reels or hawser reels and various things.

So, anyway, we knew exactly what we were doing, and after the sundown general quarters, why, the captain came on the ship and told us what we were up to, where we were going, what was supposed to be coming, and what he intended to do about it or what the force intended to do about it.

Shortly before midnight, General Quarters were sounded, and we made our stations. I had a little platform that I stood on. At that time I was gun captain, and I could take a pair of loader's gloves and put them on the edge of that platform so it wouldn't cut off the circulation on my leg. I could curl up on there in almost a fetal position and sleep, which I did numerous times. I even managed to sleep that night before the buzzer sounded and we were alerted for action. Then when it came, it was just so routine to look at the shell and case and run the rammer, retract the rammer, and put both hands up (which was the signal that we were ready). We had it loaded, and we sat there in the turret--moving and kicking in automatic--and we

fired by salvo. That way no other ship could range on us because the belts of flame were out, and then it was dark. I don't know how many rounds we fired. We fired a lot of them. But it was so routine it was almost ridiculous. But still, there was that alertness inside that the least odd noise made you wonder if something greater was coming.

Marcello: I'm assuming that you opened fire before the battleships. They were behind you, is that correct?

Russell: Yes. I believe the first people to get into it were the torpedo boats. I don't know. I heard different stories about that they jumped the gun and that they weren't really supposed to do it; but they did it, anyway. I can't remember whether the destroyers went in ahead of us or not.

Marcello: I think they did.

Russell: I kind of think they did. Of course, they had to do their own maneuvering to stay out of our way. It was sort of like a ballet team. Everybody has his own position, and you better not get out of that position.

Marcello: For the uninformed listener of this tape or the reader of the transcript, we're talking about the Battle of the Surigao Straits mainly because it was the last time when the classic naval maneuver was performed, that is, crossing the "T.

Russell: It was not only the last time that that maneuver was or

will ever be performed, but it was the last major ship-to-ship surface battle in naval history and probably will be the last. Most probably it will be the last.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Russell, I think that is a pretty good place to end this interview. I was determined to get the business of the Surigao Straits in this interview even though we are dealing with Pearl Harbor. I want to thank you very much for having spoken with me. You said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I think that students and scholars are going to find your comments most valuable. And I'm glad we finally got to do this interview.

Russell: I hope so. And I'm glad we did it, too!