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I n t e r v i e w w i t h
W. H. P E T E R S
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Place of Interview: Austin, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: C.P.H.
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Oral History Collection

W.H. Peters

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

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing W.H. Peters 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. Peters in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was attached to the light cruiser USS Detroit during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Peters: Okay. I was born in McGregor, Texas, on August 22, 1923.

Dr. Marcello: Give me a little bit of information about your educational background.

Mr. Peters: Okay, I quit school, was forced to quit school in the beginning of my tenth year when it was an eleven-grade system. My mother was in the asylum,

and my father got ill, and I had to get out on my own; and I started making my living when I was fifteen years old. After World War Two, I took the G.E.D. high school program and got my high school diploma. I attended Howard Paine College in Brownwood, Texas, for one full semester. Since then I have gone to San Jacinto Junior College and completed another semester. Then in 1953, I passed that 2CX test. The U.S. Armed Forces Military Institute puts it out. If you pass it, you're considered to have the equivalency of two years of accredited college work. So I've had that on my record since 1953.

Marcello: When did you join the service?

Peters: In February, 1941, I was sworn in. I actually joined in October of 1940, but Houston had a quota. They were only allowed so many men per month, and, like I say, I actually did all my paperwork and everything that October of 1940. Then I was sworn in the 11th day of February, 1941.

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

Peters: Oh, it's kind of a strange story. Anyway, I was working for one of my uncles. I was an apprentice carpenter. We were building one of the "T's" for T and T at the Exxon refinery in Baytown, Texas. I was making 97 1/2 cents an hour. Man, I had money I didn't know what to do with. Then I got into a fight with my uncle and got

the "red ass" (I guess, if you want to call it that), and I said, "Piss on it! I went up and joined the Navy.

Marcello: And what kind of work were you doing?

Peters: I was an apprentice carpenter.

Marcello: You were building the "T's"?

Peters: Well, it was a big refinery-type operation, and it was one of the "T's" in T and T.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Peters: It's a distillate of petroleum. I had been a water boy on the job down in Texas City at the Union Carbide plant, and then we moved up to Baytown to Exxon, which at that time was Humble. But at any rate, I was an apprentice carpenter. What I did was carry boards and nails around, and if they wanted a board so long, I had enough sense to measure it out and saw it off. We were building forms, pouring concrete then, and then putting the towers up on top of that. That's what I was doing when I went in the Navy.

Marcello: Why did you decided to go in the Navy as opposed to some other branch of the service?

Peters: Well, I'll tell you, I had a chance to join the 36th Infantry Division. They were going to summer camp in 1939, and they needed one man. This kid couldn't go, so I was going to go in his place, but at the last minute he was able to go. I would have been probably in the

36th Infantry Division if that guy. His name's White; he was from Bangs, Texas. And, by the way, he was the first man killed in the 36th Division. He stepped on a land mine when they landed in North Africa.

But so far as the Navy, I had an uncle who was in the Navy right after World War One, and he was a quartermaster. He had always told me about the Navy. Of course, my father, now, was in the Army in World War One, and he was in the 90th Infantry Division. And I don't know. Just Uncle Raymond talking about the Navy, I decided the Navy was a good place for me. Of course, a kid coming from a landlocked city, you know, like Big Spring and Brownwood, Texas, well, that ocean sounded like fun to me (chuckle).

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Peters: San Diego.

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

Peters: (Chuckle) Oh, you may have heard this story, Doc. They had a chief petty officer, and apparently he was the meanest son-of-a-bitch on the face of the earth. When you finished boot camp, you went to what's called OGU (Outgoing Unit). It was right down on the water in these Quonset huts, and there was boardwalks. At any rate, this guy supposedly got pissed off at some guys and just marched them right off the end of a dock into

the ocean. So they busted him to second class. So, you know, we just finished boot camp, and now we're "old salts. You know, we're second class seamen. At any rate, we were waiting for shipment out, and this guy. .the first morning when he came down to get us up, everybody was "loggy-headed, you know. Up to then we'd get up, snap to, and all this stuff. But we figured, "Oh, heck, we got to take them leggings off, so now we're sailors. So we didn't get up, and he came down there, and he turned every bunk in that barracks over. The next morning, when he just started down the walk, we were all up and standing straight up. We had no more trouble getting up in the morning when that second class boatswain's mate came in. Oh, he was mean.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time?

Peters: Twelve weeks. We had three weeks of quarantine, you know, and then we had nine weeks in those old stucco barracks. I guess they're still there in San Diego.

Marcello: And where did you go from San Diego?

Peters: I went aboard the Enterprise, and I was a plane wiper. I stayed on her for about two months, and then I got transferred. We were in Pearl, and I got transferred to the Whitney, a destroyer tender. I ended up in the boat deck division. Eventually, I made seaman first class, and I ran the midship winch that moved the boom back and forth. You know, we had to carry stores and everything

for all the destroyers. We had always had a squadron of destroyers nested up next to us. I wanted to be a quartermaster. I guess this was probably because my uncle had been one. So I put my chit in and never did get it, so I volunteered, then, for officer-of-the-deck messenger.

Then a deal came up where they needed somebody in small boats for the Commander Destroyers, Battle Force flag. I ended up as a bow hook in the chief of staff's gig. Captain Dreyfus was his name. He was the chief of staff to. .what is that admiral's name that was COMDIV? Draemel? Admiral Draemel? He was Commander Destroyers, Battle Force. His flag was aboard the Detroit the day of the attack. He was a great, big tall guy, and he wouldn't take anybody unless they were six feet tall. You couldn't be in his crew if you weren't six feet tall, and he bought us tailor-made whites and satin neckerchiefs. Boy, we looked like a spanked baby's rear end. Of course, you know what those boats look like. They're just perfection. You know, everything on them sparkles--the brightwork--and we made those puff mats and canvas things, you know. It was a gravy-train. We made two trips a day. We went over in the morning and picked up the captain, carried him out to the ship. We got around to the lee side of the ship and plugged in the electrical power and sat there all day, and in the

afternoon we took him back. And that was it. It was really a soft touch, you know, if you were on duty.

Marcello: And when did you get aboard the Detroit?

Peters: They moved the flag, I think, from either the Whitney or the Dobbin in November of 1941, and so we moved over to the Detroit. See, we didn't stay aboard the Detroit. We had a boathouse over on the end of Merry's Point, where the barge, the gig, the motorboat, and the motor whaleboat all were. We had bunks and we had stoves and all this type of thing, so all we did was eat the noon meal on the ship. That was all. Then, like I say, the rest of the time we just "swung around the hook, so to speak. Of course, you know, if the captain wanted to go someplace during the day, we took him where he was supposed to go, and any other officer if he let them use the gig. But they had a motorboat for that--for the junior officers.

Marcello: Where did you take your meals and that sort of thing?

Peters: We took our noon meal on the Detroit, but we ate breakfast and supper at the boathouse, we called it, where we kept our boats tied up. Then every night, we went up to the submarine base and took our showers and took all the canvas work off the boat and scrubbed it. It was scrubbed every night. We had two complete sets of everything, and every night we took that stuff up and scrubbed it in saltwater and a saltwater soap to

brighten it because it's got a bleaching action. At the same time, we took our showers and washed our uniforms because we had to change our uniforms everyday. We had to be immaculate all the time.

Marcello: Your liberty routine must have been just a little bit different from that of a crew member aboard the Detroit.

Peters: Yes, it was. Yes.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work for you?

Peters: Well, most of the time, we had three nights off and one on. We rotated the duty among the four boats. One boat was always at the Detroit, you know, for messages and things of that nature, and the other three were off. After we got the boat cleaned up, we were free, then, until the next morning. I don't remember whether liberty was all night. I guess liberty was all night back in those days. But we had three liberties--three nights out of four. Then once in a while, you could trade with a guy who would want to, and you could get a six-day leave--he'd take your duty. So it was a pretty good deal.

Marcello: When you had your liberty, what would you normally do?

Peters: Being a kid, I went to Honolulu--go to the movies, go down to the beach, go swimming at Waikiki, go to the cat houses when I had the money. Oh, I made that trip around the island. We rented a car and got a driver to take us around the island. Then we found a Japanese

restaurant out close to Diamond Head. There was an old "mama-san" running the place, and we got to where we hung out there--all the guys that were on the flag. You know, guys kind of stick together in the Navy, so being part of the flag, we used to go out there all the time. I think Calvert's and Coke was fifteen cents, and a fairly decent meal was like thirty-five or forty cents. So that's where I usually spent my liberty.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, could you and your buddies detect any increase in tensions or any changes in the ship's routine or anything of that nature? Were there any changes at all?

Peters: Doctor, in my case, no. I don't really think that I was even remotely aware that any such conditions existed. Of course, since then, as I told you, I've read about things. But at that time, I don't think that thought ever crossed my mind.

It seems to me that somewhere in that period of time, we had some aircraft recognition classes. I don't remember where they were taught, but it seems like to me it was on the Detroit. At any rate, we attended those, and .well, as a matter of fact, if you remember or have probably heard, that Japanese envoy came through Pearl Harbor in, I believe, November of 1941, and they took

him on a tour or around the harbor, and we had to. .you know how you man the rails for visiting dignitaries. I can remotely remember that.

But as far as any tension or feeling of apprehension or thinking about war or anything, I really think, Doctor, it was the farthest thought from my mind. It just never even dawned on me, you know, and I don't think anybody ever said anything that would have keyed me to it. I think maybe I'd heard that we were having problems with the Japanese, but it didn't bother me. I just never thought about it, to be frank with you.

Marcello: You mentioned a moment ago that you were actually attached to the Detroit, and I think I understand what you mean now, since you told me what your functions were. What would you be doing, let's say, when the Detroit would be going out on one of it's training exercises and so on?

Peters: Most of the time we went to the boathouse and just stayed because she was never out more than three or four days, maybe a week at the most. If the admiral went. .now sometimes he would transfer his flag, Doctor, from the Detroit back to the Dixie or the Dobbin or the Whitney--the three tenders. In other words, I had been on all three of those ships as a part of the flag. Sometimes the admiral, if, say, the battle force wasn't going out, he wouldn't go. He'd stay in, and we'd just

transfer the flag over to the Whitney or the Dobbin or the Dixie, so we'd have something to do during that period of time. But when he did go out with the Detroit, we didn't have anything to do. We just went over to the boathouse.

Marcello: So other than that, then, like you pointed out, you would be following him around, in essence.

Peters: Yes, that's what I mean. We moved, you know.

Marcello: You'd been in the Navy for maybe about a year by the time the Pearl Harbor attack.

Peters: About nine or ten months, yes.

Marcello: How were you liking it?

Peters: I was crazy about it. I thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I got along real well. I had a boatswain's mate that I didn't like, but then you run into that. I was the bow hook, and a kid named Campbell was the stern hook. He and I got along real well. Then our engineer was a guy named John Bullard, and he was a real nice guy. But our coxswain--a guy named Brown--was an asshole. He jerked me off the bow of the Goddamned boat one time--deliberately. I threatened to whip his ass, and I think I could have done it; but then he was a petty officer, and I was a seaman, so I had second thoughts about that. He was, you know, just a real snotty-type of a guy--never had a smile, never had a kind word. Well, the rest of us were friendly, and we

enjoyed each other. See, we had bunks in the boat. We actually could sleep in the boat. There were two up forward and two in the engine room. Most of our gear--all my clothing--was on board that gig. And we had a hot plate with a coffee pot on it. We got along together pretty good. I liked the Navy. I thought it was a lot of fun.

Marcello: Why was it that you wanted to transfer from the Whitney over to the Detroit?

Peters: Because they wouldn't let me go be assigned to quartermaster. I couldn't see any future, and I didn't want to continue to be a "deck ape" the rest of my life. I thought maybe that if I got in the small boats, then I'd get a chance to be a coxswain or that something else would happen. But I just couldn't see any future on the Whitney. In other words, I was seaman first class, and all I did was run the midship winch, chip paint, and holystone on the deck. You know, that gets a little old after a while. At any rate, like I say, I volunteered for officer-of-deck messenger. Then later on, like I said, an opening came up in the small boats, and I jumped at it.

Marcello: This more or less, I think, brings us up to those days immediately prior to the actual attack itself. Let me ask you this. Can you recall for me what your routine was on that Saturday of December 6, 1941?

Peters: We had the duty We were the duty boat, so we had gone out to the Detroit that morning. I think we had to be there about 7:00. We were there, and our objective was to take any of the flag officers anyplace they wanted to go. But in the peacetime Navy, Saturday and Sunday was "Deadsville, U.S.A. Nothing goes on, so I don't think we even moved. We sat there all day Saturday We were tied up inboard of the quay, which the Detroit was tied up to. There were two big concrete quays that stuck out in the water, and the Detroit was tied to them, and then we were inboard of one of those quays, tied up to it. That's where we sat all day long Saturday. We were supposed to have gotten off at 8:00 that morning, and one of the other boats was going to relieve us at 8:00 Sunday morning.

Marcello: So you, in essence, were there all day Saturday and would have been there Saturday evening and so on.

Peters: Saturday night, yes.

Marcello: Where was the Detroit tied up relative to Battleship Row?

Peters: It was directly across Ford Island. We were immediately opposite the Nevada, if you want to go straight across Ford. The Nevada was the--I guess it was--the last battleship, and she was the only one that got underway. We were tied up directly across Ford Island from her.

Marcello: So you would have had all sorts of buildings and so on

between you and those battleships.

Peters: Well, it was some trees and things that were between us and the Nevada. We could see the top of their cage masts. Standing on this concrete quay I'm talking about, I could look across Ford, and I could see the tops of all the battleships, all those big cage masts.

Marcello: How did you kill your time that Saturday, since you obviously had a lot of idle time?

Peters: Well, normally, we spent that time cleaning the boat, polishing it. See, it had brightwork and brass all over it, chrome, and the decks were polished with about sixteen coats of wax. In other words, we just spent our time keeping that boat immaculate. It just absolutely was immaculate all the time, and we kept it that way. To do that, you have to work at it; you can't just slop around. There's a certain task that has to be performed everyday, you know, and you got to wax, you got to polish, you got to do everything that has to be done. And you keep busy, surprisingly enough. The time goes pretty fast. But we weren't working continuously, as you can understand, Doctor. There was slack time, and we'd sit in the shade and smoke a cigarette or get down out of the sun. We had a radio on board, and we were plugged into the electrical source off the Detroit, so we had 120 volts available in the boat. Of course, the engineer kept the engine immaculate. Everything from

the cockpit forward was my half of the boat, and the stern hook took care of everything from there aft. Then we both worked on where the captain sat. We had all this stuff you make out of canvas. You know, you strip the threads out of it and make puff ball mats and drapes and all this kind of thing. We kept all that stuff clean and so forth.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday evening?

Peters: I went to a movie on the Detroit. They had a movie on deck. I don't remember what it was, but they had a movie almost every night. You know, they swapped the movies around within the fleet. They usually had an open air area usually on the fantail. It seems like to me that's where it was, and then they put the projector up on one of the gun turrets. Everybody sat on the fantail and looked up on the gun turret and watched the movie. That's normally what we did at night when we were out at the Detroit. We'd watch whatever movie they had.

Marcello: Normally, on a Saturday night, would there be very many drunks that would be coming back aboard ship, or is that sort of thing exaggerated?

Peters: Probably so. I think it's probably a little exaggerated. Most of those guys knew better than to come back to the ship too drunk to navigate. First off, the Marine guards at the gate to Pearl, if you came back

drunk, they'd hassle the hell out of you--just give you the roughest go, even to the point of kind of roughing you up. They'd make you get off the bus, and then they'd take their night stick and tap you to see if you had a jug hidden on you and just give you a bunch of lip. Then you'd get back on the bus, and they'd carry you down to the liberty landing, and then you'd catch your boat out to your ship. I think back in those days, if I remember right, if you weren't a petty officer, you had to back to the ship by midnight. I'm almost sure that was correct. Oh, I've come back inebriated, and I'm sure a lot of other guys did. Once in a great while you had a big party or something, and we'd all get bombed out of our mind. But normally you'd go ashore to go to the movie, or you'd go down to Waikiki, or you'd take a tour, or you'd just walk around town--just something to get away from the Navy for a while. Then you'd catch the bus there from the Army/Navy YMCA and go back out to Pearl. You'd just be back by 10:00 or 11:00 at night.

Marcello: You mentioned the Army/Navy YMCA. What was the establishment across the street from the YMCA?

Peters: The Black Cat Bar. I've seen some of the damndest fist fights in that place that you've ever seen in your life. Guys would get in fights just for something to do, especially the Marines and the Navy. We used to love to

get in fights with each other. That was a wild time.

Marcello: I guess, among other things, its significance is that it was used as the first watering hole.

Peters: .after you got off the bus. See, the bus that came from Pearl stopped. .you could get off other places, but it stopped in front of the Army/Navy "Y, and, of course, right across the street was the Black Cat. That would be the first place you'd go in and have a Calvert's and Coke or whatever it was you drank.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, and let's go into this morning in detail. I'm assuming that you perhaps slept aboard the Detroit that night.

Peters: No, we slept in the boat--in the small boat.

Marcello: Okay so describe the events as they unfolded that morning.

Peters: I think reveille went at 7:00 on Sunday morning. Campbell and I got up and went aboard the Detroit and ate breakfast. We both got a pail of freshwater and brought it back down to the boat to wipe the salt spray off of it. We kept that salt spray off because it would corrode that brightwork real bad. Then Brown and Bullard left the boat and went aboard the Detroit to eat. Campbell and I were wiping the boat down with freshwater, you know, to keep that saltwater off it, and I heard a plane diving. Of course, there were always

planes around; and I still don't know why until this day, but I watched it for some reason. I just stood there with my mouth open.

He came to some kind of low-hanging clouds, and then he came out of those clouds. I saw the bomb fall out of it, and I saw the bomb hit in hangars at the end of Ford Island. See, we were on one end of Ford Island, and the hangars were down on the other end. Smoke and fire and shit flew out all over the place, and I hollered at ol' Campbell, "Hey, Campbell, that plane dropped a bomb on Ford Island! He said, "Pete, you're full of shit!" I said, "Well, look!" Man, fire was just going everyplace.

The Raleigh, which is a sister ship to the Detroit, was tied up to the stern of us, and she got torpedoed shortly thereafter. The plane that torpedoed her banked away like this (gesture), and we could see the underside and see the big red balls on the wing. I don't really know where I learned it, Doctor, but I somehow knew that the red balls meant Japs, and, oh, the proverbial [shit] hit the fan.

We got called away. They have calls on the bugle. I don't remember how it's done now--it's been too many years--but you can tell your call. They called the gig away. Well, Brown and Bullard were still on the Detroit, so Campbell and I unhooked the boat and took

off and got out in the harbor, and they told us then to go get the admiral.

Marcello: How were you communicating?

Peters: They were hollering at us from up on the bridge-- hollering down. See, we were just tied up right alongside the Detroit. They hollered down and told us to go get the admiral.

Marcello: In the meantime, what could you observe relative to what had happened to the Raleigh? You mentioned that it got torpedoed.

Peters: Yes, she got torpedoed, and she started capsizing.

Marcello: You probably weren't too far from that torpedo.

Peters: Oh, you know, just a ship's length.

Marcello: Describe what you heard and what you saw.

Peters: First, there was a tremendous explosion, and a great big plume of water went way up in the air like this (gesture) and fell down all around.

At the same time, I think maybe the Utah was being torpedoed--also at the same time--because we heard those explosions. Then we could look over across the island and see all of the stuff falling over there. I don't know what time it occurred, but I saw the Arizona when she blew up. I actually saw that ball of fire go up in the air. It was like a couple thousand feet in the air --big red enormous ball.

Marcello: You would have seen this after you got underway in the

gig?

Peters: No, we had to either come back or had. .were out. .when the Utah turned over, Doctor, she was covered with great, big heavy timbers. You know, she was a target battleship. So she capsized, which, I think, was two or three minutes after the attack started. I think they slammed three torpedoes into her. She was tied up where the Enterprise was supposed to be, and I think from the air, looking at those wooden boards, they thought that was a flight deck. So they just knocked the living hell out of her. I think she sank in two or three minutes, or capsized, so all that lumber was floating around out there. There were some seaplanes, some PBVs, that had come down and was trying to take off; and we went out there and was trying to get that lumber and stuff out of the way to where they could take off down that channel.

Marcello: Now this is when you immediately left on your first trip away from the Detroit?

Peters: No. On that first trip, we went to the admiral's landing.

Marcello: Okay, let's keep these things in sequence.

Peters: Okay. We left the Detroit and went around the end of Ford Island, and the Solace and the Whitney and the Dobbin were all tied up at some destroyers. Then we came around. There was a water line that ran from, oh, over on the other side and ran out to Ford Island, and

we went around it then and went down by the battleships to the officer's landing. On our way, we passed the admiral coming out in somebody else's boat. He'd commandeered somebody else's boat. So we went on to the officer's landing, and we picked up some officers. I don't remember what ships they were for. Then we came back to the Detroit.

Marcello: In the meantime, while you are going over to the officer's landing and coming back, what's happening around you?

Peters: Okay, the torpedo planes are coming down Merry's Point and torpedoing the battleships. They're flying right over the top of our heads. One of them flew so low that if I had had a broomstick I could have reached up and touched him. They were shooting at him with those 5-inch/.51 broadside guns, and those shells were impacting in downtown Honolulu. Then, of course, they were strafing, too, the boat. Nobody that I can remember particularly strafed us. At any rate, we were there with battleships on one side and the torpedo planes on the other, and we didn't even have a life jacket. At least on that first trip we didn't.

So we got back and dropped off these officers wherever they belonged, and then they put us out to gathering up that lumber to try to get it to where those seaplanes could take off. One of them came down and

started, and a Zero came down and strafed him, and down he went. That was the end, and they didn't even try to take off any more of them.

Marcello: How large were those chunks of lumber?

Peters: Oh, they were probably. I think they were about eight-by-twelves or eight-by-twenties. See, they dropped sand-filled projectiles on it, so it was used to protect the ship. They were lashed down until she capsized, and then all that stuff came floating up to the surface-- great, big ol' pieces of wood. We could only handle one of them at a time if we tied on to it, and then we'd pull it out of the channel there. See, some of the destroyers were trying to get underway at the same time.

Then that's when the Raleigh, I think, got hit the second time. A dive-bomber hit her, and the shell went through one of the upper decks, through the radio shack, out into the main deck, down through an oil compartment, out the side of the ship, and exploded in the water. That was kind of the crux because she really did start listing real badly then.

That's about the same time that little midget submarine showed up between us and the Curtiss. See, the Curtiss was tied up over in Pearl City, and we saw her shooting at something in the water. That was when the Monaghan was coming down, and she rammed, or tried to ram, that submarine. She ran over it and dropped

some depth charges on it.

Then, in the meantime, I saw the Curtiss shoot down a Jap plane. Now that's the first kamikaze. They hit him, and he came right on down and smacked into that big crane that they used to pick up aircraft. You know, that was an airplane tender. There was a barge tied up alongside of the Curtiss, and that plane smacked into that great, big crane and fell off onto that barge and set that barge on fire. The Monaghan, after it ran over that submarine, tied onto that barge and pulled it away from the Curtiss and then went on out the channel.

We made two more trips back to the officer's landing. One of them, I think, was during the first attack, and then I think the second trip or the third trip was either just after the lull or during the lull, because when we came back was when those bombers came in in those tri-formations and flew right down Battleship Row and just bombed the hell out of everything that was left. Then they started strafing, and a bunch of guys, you know, got killed from the strafing. That's after they dropped their bomb or torpedo or whatever it was. Then they started just going up and down the line of ships strafing them.

At any rate, why, we had an officer for the Nevada, and she was going down the channel, and we were trying to overcatch up with her. Some dive-bombers came down

on the Nevada when she was just about even with Ten Ten Dock, and every one of those bombs hit home. That was the damnedest explosion you ever saw. That damned battleship shook like a leaf in a wind storm--just [makes a flopping noise] like that. It heeled over to port and rammed the dry dock. They they went astern, and it started down the channel, but she was listing real bad to starboard, I believe it was. As I understand it, they ran her aground to keep her from sinking in the channel.

At any rate, we made the three trips that I know of during the attack, back and forth from that side of Ford Island all the way to the officer's landing.

Marcello: Now by this time, the oil must be spreading across the water.

Peters: Okay, on that third trip when we came back, we were coming along through there, and there was a guy in the water swimming. We stopped and I reached down to get him, and I reached down and grabbed his hand. See, the deck is probably this high above the water (gesture).

Marcello: So it's about four feet?

Peters: Yes. I leaned way over like this (gesture) and grabbed him by the hand, and his whole flesh on his hand came off in mine. He had been flash-burned. I don't know if you've ever seen a guy get flash-burned, but it just blackens you instantly. His flesh came off in my hand,

so I jumped in the water and got him under the armpits, and we laid him up on the deck, and we took him, then, to the hospital landing. I later on found out--I don't remember how I found out--that he died during the night sometime.

Then there was a lot of guys in the water and so forth, but we had a bunch of officers on board on two of the trips that we did, so we were taking them to their ships. I think that on the third trip we either didn't have but one or two officers or something, and that's why we stopped so long where the Arizona was because there was oil and it was on fire and there was guys swimming in the water and all that stuff.

Marcello: Awhile ago, you were starting to tell me about the Arizona blowing up, and I assume that you saw what happened.

Peters: Yes. Understand, all I can see now was the cage mast.

Marcello: Describe what you saw at that point.

Peters: Well, this tremendous explosion just almost deafened you. You could feel the concussion from it--kind of a blast effect on you--and then there was this ball of fire, I'm going to estimate, four or five hundred feet in diameter. It just went right straight up in the air. Just "PUFF!" and up it went. Then when you looked back, the cage mast had fallen forward. You could just see the tip of it. Then later on we went around there. Of

course, everything forward had just practically disappeared. As I understand it--and, of course, there's so many stories--the bomb went down the stack. I heard that. It hit the boilers, and they exploded and caused the two forward magazines to explode. That's all simultaneous, you know, within a blink of an eye. So all these 16-inch shells and the powder for them and all that just went off at one time. It was just, "BLAM, and it was all over with, you know.

Marcello: What did you see when you went over there around the Arizona in this gig?

Peters: Well, all you could see was from about midships forward. Everything else was gone; it just wasn't there. It was all on fire. There was fire and smoke and oil coming all over, and that fire was drifting down the row of the battleships, and they were catching on fire, you know, from it. Those inboard battleships were catching on fire. The outboard ones had all been torpedoed and bombed. Of course, the California capsized, and the two inboard battleships were the Maryland and the Tennessee.

Marcello: The West Virginia sank. It was outboard.

Peters: Okay, it was outboard the Tennessee, right. And let's see. .was it the Maryland that was inboard?

Marcello: The Maryland would have been inboard of the Oklahoma.

Peters: Of the Oklahoma, which capsized. Then what it was, the California was forward of them, and she got sunk. Then,

of course, the Pennsylvania was in dry dock with the Cassin and Downes forward of her. Then the Shaw was in the floating dry dock.

Marcello: Did you get a chance to observe the Oklahoma?

Peters: We could just see her stern, you know, the bottom sticking up out of the water, as we made our trips back and forth.

Marcello: What were your thoughts when you saw one of these huge battleships simply turned over?

Peters: I think at the time, probably, Doc, I was almost petrified with fear. I was just scared to death. But I knew I had a job to do, so I did it. Here we are, out in the middle of this damned harbor with all these planes diving and shooting and people shooting over our heads; but we had a job to do, so we did it. I was scared, but I think, Doc, that as the attack progressed, the more it progressed, the further it progressed, the madder I got. I just got infuriated. If I could just do something to hit back at those Japs, you know; if I'd had a pistol or a gun or anything. You just got infuriated, you know. Then you see all these ships burning and sinking and all these guys out floating in the water and dead bodies all over the place; and, of course, the smell was horrible, and that cordite smell was in the air and then the burning oil. Then there was the stench of burning flesh, and if you've ever smelled

a human being burn, there is no other odor in the world like it. It is so distinct that you'll never forget it the longest day you live.

But it was just kind of like bedlam, you know. Of course, it didn't last that long. It seemed like it lasted an eternity, but I guess--what--it lasted two hours, if it lasted that long. But it seemed like to me it lasted all day.

Marcello: In the meantime, had you guys come under any direct attack yourselves?

Peters: Not that I know of. I told you about that one Jap plane with the torpedo. He flew so low over us, Doc, that if I had a broomstick, I really believe I could have touched him. The big, long, greasy torpedo was hanging underneath. He flew right over us and banked away.

Of course, in all that hectic stuff, I don't suppose you really paid any attention. We may have been shot at; we may have been strafed. But if we did, I don't know that I knew it. It didn't dawn on me or something. None of us were hurt. I got a scratch over one eye, but I did that myself. I banged my head on the bulkhead. But there was none of us who got hurt, you know what I mean? The second time when we went back to the Detroit, they gave us steel helmets and life jackets, and we put them on. So on the second two trips, we had on those kapok-type life jackets and the steel pots.

Marcello: In the meantime, is the Detroit trying to get up steam and get out of there?

Peters: Okay, when we got back from the third trip, she had cut herself loose or detached herself from the quays and was out in the middle of the channel turning around. It normally took two tugs to do that. When we got back, she was turning around and headed out to sea. I think she was one of the only cruisers that got out.

Marcello: What did you do at that point, then?

Peters: We went over to the Raleigh and started working and helping them. See, the Raleigh was about to capsize, so everything on the port side they were heaving overboard --the catapults, the plane, the ready ammunition boxes, torpedo storage tubes. They got all that done, and she started then listing to starboard, so we went over to the other side and threw all that shit off on that side (chuckle).

So we were pretty busy, and that's along about the time that that guy on the Utah. what's his name? I've heard his name. Anyway, he was beating on the bottom with that spanner wrench or whatever it was, and they cut him out.

Marcello: This is John Vaessen.

Peters: Vaessen, that's the guys name. Yes, okay. That was along about then that they cut him out. Then I think they thought there were some other guys trapped, but as

I understand it, he was only one that got out.

Marcello: So you were actually on the Raleigh itself throwing things off?

Peters: We helped them. We tied a line onto the things with our small boat, and when they'd take the nuts off of it, then we'd pull and pull it overboard, because they thought it was going to capsize. At any rate, that's what we did, then, in fact, for the biggest part of the afternoon.

Finally, sometime late that afternoon--I don't remember when--we went aboard either the Dixie or the Dobbin and got something to eat. That was the first thing I had to eat since breakfast that morning. I don't think I even thought about eating up until that time.

Marcello: What did you do the rest of the day?

Peters: Okay, that night or that evening our whaleboat didn't have an engineer, and I had done a little sniping, so I volunteered to be the engineer, you know, to run the engine in the whaleboat. That's an open boat. So we ran messages all night long between the Dixie and the Dobbin and the Whitney. We'd take a message from the officer-of-the-deck and carry it over to the Dixie or the Dobbin, which was taking your life in your hands, because them people up there was so damned crazy they'd shoot at anything. You know, we'd get just a little

ways away from the Dobbin and "BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! We'd tell them who we were, and then we'd putt-putt over across to the Dixie or the Dobbin, and they'd get up and holler at us the same way.

Marcello: So you heard a lot of gun shots that night.

Peters: Oh, my God, it was incredible! When those first three planes off the Enterprise were coming in, they told everybody, "Don't shoot! The planes from the Enterprise are coming in! Don't shoot!" So they turned their landing lights on. They'd fixed up the field, I guess, enough for those planes to land, and the three came in and landed. Then three more came in, and some idiot shot at them, and that's all that she took. The entire harbor just opened up en masse and shot all three of them planes down. I don't know whether they killed all three of them. I think they did kill all three of the pilots.

Marcello: Did you actually see this?

Peters: Oh, yes, I actually saw that! We were tied up next to the Whitney.

Marcello: What did the harbor look like with all those guns firing?

Peters: It looked like when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated. That's what it looked like. You have never seen as many tracers and explosions and shells going up in the air. The sky was just saturated with them. It's a wonder

people didn't get killed from all that shrapnel falling. They didn't try to land any more planes, I don't think; or if they did, they didn't try to land at Ford Island. They went someplace else, I can assure you.

Marcello: What rumors did you hear in the aftermath of the attack?

Peters: Oh, my God! First off, we heard that a Japanese vegetable truck had pulled up to the entrance to Pearl Harbor, and the side had fallen down, and there was machine gunners, and they'd machine-gunned everybody at the gate. The next thing we heard is that paratroopers were landing up in Aiea, above the harbor. Then we heard that an invasion force was landing at Waikiki. Let's see. .what else? We heard some other damned crazy rumor. But they flew all night long. Everytime you talked to somebody, they had a new rumor.

Of course, you know them idiots shot the hell out of each other that night. Some of the destroyers came back in, Doctor. They had gone to sea, real early, and they didn't have any fuel, so they came back in that night. They put a whaleboat out to guide them in because, see, we were under strict blackout conditions. Well, then with a whaleboat, you sit down inside of it, so you can't hear. Well, the crazy Marines had set up a .50-caliber machine gun on Merry's Point there, and they challenged this motor whaleboat. They couldn't hear him, you know, so they just kept putt-putting along, so they

opened fire on him. They said both of them guys just dove over the side--just let the boat go. It putt-putted on down the harbor. But, boy, it was hectic. I understood guys shot each other. Sentries would challenge each other, and neither one of them would give up, and they'd finally shoot at each other. But it was hectic that night. My God, they shot at each other! I don't think anybody got a wink of sleep. I know I didn't.

Marcello: Where were you supposed to be sleeping?

Peters: If I'd have stayed on the gig, I'd have slept on board the gig. But as it turned out, I volunteered to be the snipe.

Marcello: So you didn't sleep at all.

Peters: I didn't get any sleep at all that night--not a bit. The next day I went back aboard my own boat, and then I think I got some sleep that day.

Marcello: Okay, the next day things have calmed down a little bit. You can look at what happened with a little bit more detachment and rationality, perhaps. Describe what you saw the day after. Take me on a tour of the island. Take me on a tour of the harbor the day after.

Peters: On Monday. .let's see. .I don't remember whether the Detroit had come back in or not. I don't think so. But I was back on the gig on Monday. As I told you, we had a boathouse on the end of Merry's Point where we could

tie up all four of our boats, and they had started bringing bodies over there and stacking them up. Most of them had been burned. They were just black, completely, with ears burned off, lips, nose, eyelids burned off. In fact, it was difficult to make sure it was a human being. Those medics. I guess you got to be calloused, but they'd sit on them guys' chests and jerk their lower jaw down and then sit there and make a diagram of their teeth, and that would be put with that particular body, you know. They were bringing bodies out of the harbor as they would float after coming to the surface.

The harbor to me, as I remember, was covered in that oil heavy, black crude oil. It just sticks to everything. The Arizona was still burning, as a matter of fact. They had started some salvage operations, I think, on the West Virginia and the Maryland or the Oklahoma, trying to do something with them, and the California. They were working on the Raleigh, trying to do something about her. Then they were trying to do something about the Utah. I think practically all the ships that could get underway were trying to get underway. Those that didn't get out during the attack and that needed some further stuff, they were all going out and trying to search for the Jap fleet.

I don't remember what all we did that day, but we

carried some officers around, I know, to various and sundry ships in the harbor that day. In fact, we carried the admiral some places, I remember. I think it was the next day that we carried the admiral. We stayed pretty busy that Monday. But, oh, my God, Doc, it was a horrible sight!

Marcello: Were you in on any body retrieval or anything like that?

Peters: No, not then. Later, I went aboard the USS Maury shortly after the attack in late December. I volunteered. At any rate, when I got transferred from the Maury, I was in the receiving ship over at Pearl, and they gave us a detail. They had brought the California up and had put her in the dry dock, and they had a working party to go aboard and retrieve bodies. Our job was to get just a body. We had a basket that was rubber-lined, and we had on a rubber suit and a gas mask and rubber gloves. They instructed us to be real careful and try to make sure we only got one body because when the water drained out of the California, those guys that had drowned. This was, like, March or April, I guess, or maybe even May, and those bodies had started deteriorating. The flesh would fall off the bones. You'd try to find a body and put it in this basket. You'd try to make sure you got his shoes or if there was any article of clothing or ring or anything like that--make sure that got in there. All we had to

do was get one--just one body--and I know the stench was absolutely horrible. I know I took about half a dozen showers trying to get that odor off of me. It seemed like to me it just permeated in my skin. But that was the only body retrieval that I got involved in.

That Monday, like I say, everybody was trying to get things in some semblance of order. Everybody had something to do to get things cleaned up, to get yourself in shape, to try to get things organized to where we could do something.

Marcello: Speaking of getting things cleaned up, what did the captain's gig look like?

Peters: Oh, my God, it had black oil all over it! Those bodies. .that body of the guy I picked up out of the water had oil all over him, and we got oil all over the deck. I had oil all over me from diving in the water. The top of the boat was white--brilliant white--and it had an ebony deck; and then it was supposedly battleship gray, but we put varnish in it so that it sparkled. It just had a real sheen to it. That ol' black crap was all over everything. I think we spent about a week trying to get that boat cleaned up. But then, of course, we carried the officers back and forth. There was so much crud and oil around that you couldn't do anything without getting oil on you. It was everyplace. You'd just step on something, and you'd get oil on you,

and then you'd track it on the boat.

Marcello: How long did you remain at Pearl before you finally got out of there?

Peters: Let's see. the Detroit came back in about two or three days--I can't remember when--and I think the admiral transferred his flag back to one of the tenders. I don't remember for sure, but it seems like we were on the Dixie. Like I told you, I didn't get along with this guy Brown, anyway. He and I didn't just didn't get along, so I heard, or somebody told me, that they were accepting volunteers for destroyers, so I went to see the flag lieutenant, this guy named Kirkpatrick. He was from San Angelo, Texas. I went to see him. He was a full lieutenant, and I told him I wanted to go aboard a destroyer. I think that within just two or three days, my transfer came through, which would make it around, oh, the 15th or 16th of December. Then I went aboard the Mauray. She was the newest "tin can" in Pearl Harbor up until the East Coast Fleet came around. It had a single stack. The two forward 5-inch turrets were covered, and the two aft were uncovered so that they could elevate about seventy-five or eighty degrees. I ended up, then, on gun number three. When I started out, I was a loader, and then I ended up as a gun pointer. We made the first attack on the Marshall and Gilberts and then Wake and Marcus. Then we would have

been in the jaunt to Tokyo, but we had offshore patrol, and two planes from the Enterprise smacked head on, and we went in and rescued those pilots. Both the radiomen had drowned. The pilots were both injured, and we carried them into the hospital landing.

And a submarine was in the Marine railway, and it had tipped over, and they'd run a great long cable out. We didn't know it, so we came in the harbor with our sounding device down, and we got all tangled up in that Goddamned cable. So we went to dry dock, and the rest of our task force, then, went with Halsey to Tokyo.

Shortly after that is when I got my transfer. I was actually coming back to the States to go on new construction in San Francisco, and they changed my orders, and I ended up then going into the armed guard. I was a seaman first, and I qualified as a signalman striker. I would have been rated, but there was no opening on the ship. So I ended up in the armed guard riding merchant vessels during the rest of the war.

Marcello: Okay, well, Mr. Peters, I think that's a pretty good place to end this interview.

Peters: All right, sir.

Marcello: I want to thank you very much for having participated.

Peters: Thank you, Doctor. Well, I hope that whatever I've said will be of some help to some future historian.

Marcello: I'm sure it will be.