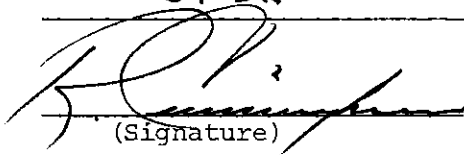


NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
NUMBER  
746

Interview with  
RICHARD CUNNINGHAM  
April 22, 1988

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
Terms of Use: OPEN  
Approved:   
(Signature)  
Date: 4-22-88

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Oral History Collection

Richard Cunningham

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

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Dr. Marcello:      This is Ron Marcello interviewing Richard Cunningham 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. Cunningham in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the battleship USS West Virginia during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Cunningham: Well, I was born on March 28, 1921, although my birth certificate at the time I enlisted in the Navy says April 28, 1921. I later corrected that after I got out of the service, but that's when I

was born.

Marcello: And where were you born?

Cunningham: I was born in a place called New Salisbury, Ohio.

Marcello: Tell me a little bit about your educational background.

Cunningham: Well, I had put in eight years of grade school, four years of high school, and I went for over three years in college after I got out of the service.

Marcello: When did you join the Navy?

Cunningham: I joined the Navy on the 25th of September, 1940.

Marcello: And why did you decide to go in the service at that time?

Cunningham: Well, I had been working as a mechanic, and another fellow, an acquaintance of mine, had been thinking about joining the service, and we had been talking together. In preparation for my job as working as a mechanic, I had went to Detroit, Michigan, and when I got out of school there, I decided I wanted to be a mechanic. As I said before, this fellow kept after me to join the service, so one winter I decided that would be a good idea because getting underneath those cars and having snow fall in your face and all was not too appealing. So we went in the service.

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

Cunningham: Well, I suppose it was because my friend always

alluded that he would like to go in the Navy. And my father had been in World War I, and he'd told me about the many hardships he'd endured while he was in the Army. I decided that if I ever went in the service, I wanted to go in the Navy (chuckle). He had received a dose of mustard gas in France during World War I.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Cunningham: I took my boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at the time you went through? Do you recall?

Cunningham: I have it here [refers to personal records] if you can wait just a minute. Let me see...I enlisted on the 25th of September, 1940, as I stated earlier, and I arrived in Great Lakes on the 26th of September, 1940. I was en route to the West Virginia in Bremerton, Washington, on the 12th of November, 1940, so that's-- what--six weeks, a little less than two months, isn't it?

Marcello: The reason I asked you that question is because it's quite evident that they had cut down on the number of weeks one spent in boot camp as compared to what it had been, let's say, two years earlier or maybe even three years earlier. They evidently wanted to get people out to the fleet in a hurry. How difficult or easy was it to get into the Navy at that time?

Cunningham: I believe it was difficult because we had to undergo a

pretty good physical examination. That was my own interpretation. Looking at it objectively, on a nationwide basis, with the nation's preparedness for maybe getting into a war, maybe they lowered their standards (chuckle).

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?

Cunningham: Oh, it was the normal Navy boot camp. I was selected as an apprentice pay officer in boot camp and had charge of a group doing certain details. Other than that, why, we did the normal boot camp. We slept in hammocks so many feet off the floor, and it seemed to me that all during the night people were falling out of their hammocks onto the deck.

Marcello: Where did you go after boot camp?

Cunningham: Well, from boot camp we left there on the 12th of November, 1940. We left Great Lakes. We traveled by train to Bremerton, Washington, in the Puget Sound and arrived there. .I was on the West Virginia on the 15th of November, 1940.

Marcello: Were you simply assigned to the battleship West Virginia, or did you have some sort of a choice as to what particular kind of ship you might want to go on?

Cunningham: I didn't have that choice.

Marcello: What was your reaction when you learned that you were

going to be going aboard a battleship? Do you recall?

Cunningham: Well, I don't specifically recall any reactions other than I thought that ship was the largest and dirtiest-looking thing I'd ever seen (chuckle) because it was being renovated--putting shields around the gun turrets--and there were welders all over the place. Of course, under those circumstances, it would be dirty. And they had barnacles underneath the ship, and one of the first things we were assigned to do was to scrape off the barnacles.

Marcello: To what division were you assigned when you initially went aboard the West Virginia?

Cunningham: On that point they gave us an option. They told us to line up in two groups. They said the ones that wanted to work below decks, engine room, get on this side, over here (chuckle), and the ones that wanted to work topside were to get on the other side. So I chose to work on topside.

Marcello: Which, in essence, meant then that you were in one of the deck divisions?

Cunningham: Yes. I was in the Fifth Division.

Marcello: Describe what your quarters were like aboard the West Virginia while you were in the Fifth Division. Tell me a little bit about your quarters.

Cunningham: Well, ships are divided up into casemates, and I was assigned to one of the Fifth Division casemates. Our

responsibility was maintaining--what they called--the broadsides, 5-inch guns. The antiaircraft guns were in the deck above those and were assigned to another division. But we were in close proximity to our guns. We ate in our little casemates, to handle the setting up of the table and, after we were finished eating, to put it back. We was assigned also to go into the kitchen, get the provisions, bring them back to the table and then be responsible for cleaning out.

Marcello: So you were eating family-style at that time when you went aboard the West Virginia.

Cunningham: Yes. The tables were stored in the individual casemates--in the ceilings of each casemate.

Marcello: And those were also you sleeping quarters, isn't that correct? Didn't you also sleep in there?

Cunningham: We slept in the sleeping quarters there. We had our hammocks, which you stretched up, and then you'd sleep in the hammocks. Some of the fellows had cots, as did I later on, and we slept beneath some of the fellows that were sleeping in the hammocks. I suppose that by that time they were proficient in sleeping in hammocks and didn't fall out so much. But we were responsible for setting up our cots and rolling up our bedrolls and blankets, putting them in a canvas bag, and carrying the bag in the folded cot down to a locker where you put the whole thing in there. They were



stored until that evening, until you got ready to go to bed.

We had washrooms and showers, and we washed our own clothes. After we got done each day, we would take a shower and get our dirty underclothes and wash them in our own individual buckets. We had pails that we shined with brightwork, and we had brass labels we put on there with our name on it. Some of us would decorate the handles with twine in some configuration.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the West Virginia?

Cunningham: The food was very good to me. I came up through the Depression, and food was hard to get, and certainly quality food. But to me it was good because I never experienced anything like that before, especially the pies. I know that when I joined, I weighed 135 pounds, and through exercise and all the normal daily duties, I went up to 185 pounds pretty quick. I was on the Fifth Division rowing team and the Fifth Division sailing team, both, when we competed against other battleships.

Marcello: You brought up a subject that I want to pursue just a little bit further. How important were sports and athletic competition in the Navy before Pearl Harbor?

Cunningham: My own personal opinion was that they were very important because in any gathering it was always one ship against another. Especially when you were

together on shore or wherever men congregated from different ships, why, that was about the only thing that they could brag about--what they did in sports. Certainly, we weren't in war yet.

Marcello: I gather that sports like boxing, for instance, were very, very popular in the Navy at that time.

Cunningham: Yes, we had a regular schedule of boxing events.

Marcello: I've heard that those so called smokers were very well attended.

Cunningham: Yes, they were. Of course, sometimes they were mismatched, with maybe a heavyweight going against a middleweight, but it was (chuckle) entertainment.

Marcello: Tell me a little bit about the kinds of duties that you were doing in the Fifth Division in that period when you initially went aboard the West Virginia. What were some of the things you would be doing personally?

Cunningham: Basically, I suppose you could say that most of the fellows in the division had been initiated through a chipping hammer and chipping paint and then putting red lead on it and painting it once, twice, or several times so they could have the pleasure of chipping it off again. Also, we were regularly assigned to...out on a deck, they had these teakwood decks, and they were very durable and splinter-proof. We had our "happy rocks, which consists of about half a brick

with a concave indenture in it, and you would stick an end of a broom handle down in that and then flip it up over your shoulder and hold it in such a way that you could keep pressure on it. They would throw sand and saltwater on the deck, and you would get everybody in a line, and you'd do so many strokes on one board and then we'd shift to the next board. When we got done with that, well, they washed all that sand overboard and then the sun bleached it out. Most certainly by this time, I thought that was the cleanest thing in the world, as compared with the ugliest thing whenever I first went on.

Marcello: This process is also referred to as "holy stoning, is it not?

Cunningham: Yes, or "happy rock.

Marcello: How often within the course of a week would that process take place aboard the ship?

Cunningham: I don't recall how often--I really don't--but it seemed to me it was at least once a week.

Marcello: When did the West Virginia make its way to Pearl Harbor on a more or less permanent basis? Was it after it got out of the yards there in Bremerton?

Cunningham: Yes. From the yard in Bremerton, we made our way south to Long Beach, and from Long Beach we went to Pearl Harbor, and that was our base. We were in and out of Pearl Harbor thirty days at a time.

Marcello: Considering why you said a moment ago that you joined the Navy, what was your reaction to being assigned to the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis?

Cunningham: Well, I enjoyed it. I had never been away from home. Like I said, I came up through the Depression years, and it gave me an opportunity to travel. I was busy collecting photographs of about everything that I could find, and I was putting those photographs in my locker.

Marcello: Okay, we have the West Virginia at Pearl Harbor. Take me through one of your normal training exercises or routines after you got there. For instance, was there a particular day of the week when the West Virginia and some of the other ships would go out?

Cunningham: Yes.

Marcello: Normally, what day of the week was that?

Cunningham: I don't recall, to be honest with you. I couldn't say specifically. I do know that we stayed out thirty days at a time.

Marcello: That's interesting. I didn't realize that the ships stayed out that long on one of their training exercises or routines. I thought it was maybe a week or two weeks, and then they would come back in.

Cunningham: No, we were out for thirty days at a time. Our seaplane went in at various times. We had a

cartridge-launched seaplane--the old Kingfisher, a single-center pontoon with the two little small wing pontoons--that was catapulted off the number three turret. They would regularly go in and get the mail for us. We stayed out thirty days at a time.

Marcello: What sort of activities would take place when you were out on one of those training exercises.

Cunningham: Besides our normal everyday cleaning responsibilities, there would be days they would have, like, a band concert. We could go up and listen to the band for a while in our leisure time, or we'd go down to what they called the "gedunk" stand and get yourself some ice cream or something like that. And you had to take care of you clothes, and we had inspections.

And we had general maintenance. I recall that one time we were out at sea, and I was painting the boom--the boom that hoisted the boats on and off the ship--in a boatswain's chair. In comparatively rough seas, the ship would just sway back and forth, and at times I looked down, and I saw nothing but water below me. But I was up there, nevertheless, painting in that boatswain's chair (chuckle). But we just had normal maintenance items.

Marcello: How about battle training? What kind of battle training would you undergo on those exercises.

Cunningham: It was pretty standard, probably, throughout the Navy.

We had about four different conditions that we could go into. We had Condition One, Two, Three, and Four. On each of those conditions, you would be assigned a different post. I recall that in one condition in my own experience was when I was on phones in the foremast. It's the highest part of the battleship. It was my job to relay information from the skipper to the lieutenant who commanded the broadside batteries. He was up there so that he could see what impact our shells were having, if they were falling short or going long. On the next condition, I had to come all the way down that mast, go back afterwards on the rear deck and up through the rear mast, completely to the top there, and man the machine gun. But we had four different conditions, to answer your question. I don't recall what all my positions were.

Marcello: Where was your battle station?

Cunningham: My battle station was up on the phones on the foremast.

Marcello: So you had some hustling to do once General Quarters was sounded.

Cunningham: Yes, I had to climb that stairs up to the topmast up there. Now I also had had training on the broadsides, as far as putting powder in or shells in or slamming the breech shut or on the elevators that moved from right to left or up or down.

Marcello: How much emphasis was given to antiaircraft practice

in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy while you were aboard the West Virginia?

Cunningham: Well, I can understand your question, and as I recall, I suppose you could say it was probably equally divided between broadside or surface contact and aerial contact.

Marcello: You actually didn't have a whole lot of antiaircraft armament aboard that ship before Pearl Harbor as compared to what was on the ship after Pearl Harbor.

Cunningham: That's true. That's true. As I recall, we had machine guns and 5-inch antiaircraft guns. There was nothing in between, as I recall. Later on, they got the 20-millimeters and things like that.

Marcello: As one gets closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse, could you in your position detect any changes at all in the training routine aboard the West Virginia?

Cunningham: As I recall, we had more of the general quarters type of things the closer we came to the actual bombing of Pearl Harbor. I know now that there were a lot of negotiations taking place, that we had broken the Japanese code through the "purple machine, but at that time--and in retrospect--I believe the general quarters drills were intensified, but not to the same degree as it were maybe six months before Pearl

Harbor.

Marcello: Did you and your buddies ever talk about this at the time, that is, the increasing intensity of the training?

Cunningham: Occasionally. It wasn't a topic of conversation. We did our job and didn't talk about that too much. I know that it was one of regular exercises while we were around the guns that, if there was a Japanese ship, they usually had a large red ball painted on the side of the ship; and we would put our cross-hairs on that red ball. We felt that the war with Japan was imminent because we talked about it.

I recall in Long Beach seeing a picture--think at the time Japan was at war with China--and it was a little Chinese baby on the railroad tracks squalling and urging the Americans to send aid to China. Then on the other hand, there would be a Japanese ship down at the dock loading up with scrap iron. We had talked about that and discussed that.

Marcello: When you thought about the possibility of war coming, did you ever think about a possible attack at Pearl Harbor?

Cunningham: Not really. In truth I don't think we ever discussed that. We had the feeling that the war wouldn't last too long with the U.S. Navy. We shot those 16-inch shells, and we knew the power they had, so we didn't



think the war was going to last that long (chuckle).

Marcello: When the West Virginia would come back into Pearl off one of these training exercises, how would your liberty routine work? What kind of liberty would one have aboard the West Virginia? Let's assume you came in on a Friday, perhaps.

Cunningham: Well, if we had some scheduled events, as I said, which dealt with competition between the ships and which you take training on a sailing ship or boat or the rowing boat, under those conditions we were immediately put into that training program. And it was a pretty strenuous program. We had to row over to the sub base; and we would come back and then jump in the pool; then we'd get out of the pool and run around the sub base; then we'd get back in the boat and come back to the ship. To answer your question, that was our routine if we were in competition. Other than that, why, we could spend it however we wanted. If we wanted to spend it on board ship, we had that option; or we could go and see any of the sights around the island or go to the restaurants or whatever we wanted to do. I have been to Waikiki Beach, gone swimming, been to the Pali, north side of the island (Kaneohe side), and some of the plantations. There were a lot of things to be interested in, more than would meet the eye.

Marcello: Of what significance does Hotel Street have for the fleet at that time?

Cunningham: I know there was a Hotel Street, and there was also, it seems like, a Water Street down there. I believe the significance of both those places probably was the cat houses or houses of prostitution or something like that.

Marcello: And I guess that's where all kinds of other clip joints were, too. I think that the tattoo parlors and curio shops and that sort of thing would be down there.

Cunningham: Well, yes, anything that would separate a sailor from his money or get the money out of the sailor's pocket into their pocket--whatever device or way they chose.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us into those days immediately prior to the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. Let's talk about the days immediately preceding the attack. When the West Virginia was in that weekend, where was it tied up? Do you remember?

Cunningham: Yes, I remember distinctly. It was tied up on Battleship Row outboard of the Tennessee.

Marcello: Who was in front and who was behind the West Virginia? Do you recall?

Cunningham: In front of the West Virginia was the Oklahoma on the outboard side, and on the inboard side, I believe, was the Maryland. To the rear of the West

Virginia...since the West Virginia was on the outboard side, then immediately to the rear was a repair ship. I believe that was the Vestal. On the inboard side of the Vestal was the Arizona, and to the rear of the Arizona was the Nevada.

Marcello: Was the West Virginia normally tied up at the same place all the time when it came in, or could that possibly vary? Obviously, it would be over there on Battleship Row?

Cunningham: That would vary because of the length of stay. Some of the ships would go out, and some would come in. Some ships we would meet them on their way out of the harbor, and we would go in, and maybe we would tie up at the same place that they had just vacated. But there's one important point. That December 7th was the only day that I can remember when all the battleships in the Pacific Fleet were in Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: Normally, though, under those circumstances, that harbor would have been pretty crowded, would it not have been? There were a lot of ships in that weekend.

Cunningham: Yes, it was crowded.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday, December 6, 1941? Do you remember?

Cunningham: I don't recall. I don't know whether I was on duty or had taken leave.

Marcello: Normally, what would be going on aboard ship on a

Saturday night?

Cunningham: Well, fellows would be engaged maybe in different games, and I believe they sometimes had movies. Some were reading books; some were writing letters home; some were cleaning their lockers out. It was just a time to reflect.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941. Of course, we want to go into as much detail here as possible. Tell me what your routine was that Sunday morning from the time you got up until the action started.

Cunningham: Well, I believe we were awakened by what they call reveille every morning. We get up and we go to the bathroom, do our business there (chuckle), you know, shaving and brush our teeth and shower. Then you'd get ready for breakfast. After eating breakfast, I'd then go to my station, which was on board an officer's boat--not the captain's gig but the ones that would take anyone less than the captain, any of the officers. It was a boat that was made out of...the top deck was hardwood, and the hull was hardwood, and it was all varnished with a lot of brightwork and a lot of lace made out of canvas. The fellows would shred canvas and weave it in such a pattern that would be attractive and decorate the boat with that. That boat was tied up on a boom. The boom was swung

straight out from the ship in a stationary position, and down from the boom could be other ropes that we could tie to. As I recall, that morning that was my assignment. At that period in history, I was assigned to the boat--getting ready or preparing to go to the Officer's Club Landing to pick up officers.

Marcello: So you had obviously had duty that day, and you would not be going ashore. You had not planned to go ashore, anyhow.

Cunningham: No. No, I had duty.

Marcello: Okay, continue with what happened.

Cunningham: Well, after we had left the ship and were on our way to the Officer's Club Landing--and we were to be there at 8:00--about midway on our route from the ship over to the Officer's Club Landing, which was directly across from the sub base, we heard this scream that usually a gasoline engine on an airplane will make when it dives. I for one and another fellow looked in that direction, and then we kind of didn't pay anymore attention to it and looked back. We thought, "Well, what are they doing, having practice bombing runs on a Sunday morning?" Well, we heard a loud explosion, and by that time we saw a second plane coming in and diving. When he turned we could see the red ball on the side, and the general consensus was--the moment we saw it--was, "Holy mackerel! This is no drill! This

is an attack!" And whereupon the coxswain gave the little boat all it could handle, and we headed toward the channel that leads to the submarine base.

Now the channel that leads to the submarine base, unfortunately, was the only place that the Japanese could drop their torpedoes in order for the torpedoes to reach sufficient depth to hit the ships. The battleships have what you call an armor plate all around the mid-hulls to deter any torpedo attacks. Well, the Japanese in this case had set their torpedoes so they would go underneath those armor belts around the ship. In order for the torpedoes to reach that depth, they would have to have a long channel. So the torpedo planes were coming in this channel and were dropping these torpedoes around us and at the same time were strafing. Now I could look up and see the pilot and co-pilot very easily.

Marcello: Describe what you saw. Give me a physical description of what you saw in the airplane.

Cunningham: Well, they had two motors, one on each side. As I recall, on each wing there was a motor. They had an encased housing like torpedo bombers usually do. They had a torpedo hanging underneath the airplane. Other than that, they had the rising sun insignias, and it was a strange-looking airplane to me because I had never seen it before.

Marcello: Approximately how high off the water were these planes?

Cunningham: At the point when they released their torpedo, it seemed to me that they were only probably--this is a guess--about fifty feet or sixty feet.

Marcello: Could you distinguish the pilots?

Cunningham: Yes, you could see the pilots. Of course, they had their helmets off, and they had their goggles on; but you could see their mouth and nose.

Marcello: At that point, what kind of resistance was being put up by the ships, if any at all?

Cunningham: None, as I recall. Everything that was happening was being done by the Japanese.

Marcello: Can you describe in any more detail the torpedoes that have been unleashed in the water all around you? In other words, can you see the wakes of them and all that sort of thing?

Cunningham: Yes. As I said earlier, we were being strafed, and it's a wonder we weren't hit. All we suffered, really, and throughout all the whole attack, was one broken window in the boat where a bullet had gone through. Other than that, why, everything that was happening was Japanese-oriented. You could see the trails of the torpedoes through the water to a point, and then they disappeared, of course, and went down to a greater depth.

But I do recall that there was a DE, which is a destroyer escort, something smaller than a destroyer, tied up over at the submarine base, and it had what I believe was a 5-inch gun. It was on a mount where he had the lateral and perpendicular movements. I recall seeing a lone sailor, one sailor, on that destroyer escort, and he managed somehow to load that gun and get it on the right lateral movement, which was normally a two-man operation. Apparently, he saw what elevation the planes were coming in at, so that left him on the vertical and fire mechanisms somehow. He cut loose with one of those 5-inch shells and hit one of those Japanese planes almost point blank. He couldn't have been over seventy-five or a hundred feet from the plane, and that plane to me just seemed like it just disintegrated. I don't know (chuckle) where a plane that large could disappear to, but it just seemed to me that that plane just disintegrated. I remember seeing the two propellers go flying through the air off in the distance. The torpedo dropped straight down into the water. It went beneath the water, and then it came to the surface and started the whole torpedo on a completely flat plane. It started moving around in the water and circling and headed right for us. That's when the coxswain of our little boat--just about that time we were nearing the



Officer's Club Landing--shoved it in gear and got up and tied up that boat, which was the fastest tie-up in history. We got out of the way of the strafing and went up and hid behind a concrete abutment that would be away from the strafing. There was nothing we could really do in that point in time.

Marcello: What did you see or what did you do while you were there at that concrete abutment?

Cunningham: Well, we saw a few more of the torpedo planes come in and saw and heard some explosions from our ships, although the abutment was in such an elevation that we could not get full view. We could see the upper part of the mast, and we could see the explosions by that time.

Marcello: So you actually could not see what was happening over at the West Virginia, for instance.

Cunningham: Right at that moment, no.

Marcello: How long did you remain there at that abutment?

Cunningham: Oh, until the last torpedo plane stopped and the strafing stopped. We got out of there and went back to run our boat. We got in that thing and went back to our ship.

Marcello: In the meantime, had you not picked up any officers or anything? Were there any there?

Cunningham: No. No, there weren't any officers who made it back, I don't think (chuckle). We ran back to that boat and

got on the boat. That torpedo, incidentally, that we noticed before had gradually eased up on the sandbar alongside the dock. It had just run up there just like you had placed it there.

Marcello: What was happening back on the West Virginia? First of all, describe your trip back to the West Virginia. In other words what was the condition or state of water and so on at that time?

Cunningham: Well, the water at the submarine base and to about halfway back or three-fourths of the way back was just not much different than it normally was, but as we got close to the West Virginia, of course, we started encountering oil. Then we eased in to the West Virginia to see what we could do there, and we picked up some survivors there and ran them back to the submarine base. We went back, and they said, "You've done all you can do here. We have other boats to take the fellows over.

Then we went over to the Oklahoma, which by that time had capsized. Some of the fellows were. .how they ever did it, I'll never know, because they came out of those portholes underneath the water, against the pressure of the water. Now these fellows were trapped in encasements--watertight encasements below the waterline. The portholes open inward, so they had to force themselves against that water and through

that porthole, which wasn't very large. We picked up some fellows that did that. I don't see how in the world they ever got through a porthole. We made several trips picking fellows up out of the Oklahoma until we were satisfied that there wasn't any more there. We carried them over to the submarine base. Then we'd go back to the West Virginia to see if there was anything more that we could do there. If we saw anybody in the water, of course, we'd run over and pick them up.

Marcello: What were the conditions of the people that you were picking out of the water?

Cunningham: The ones from the Oklahoma--some of those fellows--were just about half-crazy, I guess, if that's the correct term (chuckle). They were really shocked and in just a state of shock. It required a couple of guys to hold them. You know, we didn't have that many in the crew, so we'd have to get those fellows over there and then come back.

Marcello: Describe the damage that you saw around the West Virginia.

Cunningham: Well, there was fire on the water--I recall that--and by that time the West Virginia had not settled all the way down, but she was on her way down. It was evident that ship wasn't going to sink or capsize or anything like that. It was just going to settle down. You

could tell that. Also, it was evident that the water had come in below decks, indicating a condition in which all casemates were open. On different conditions, as you probably know, the casemates are "dogged down"--what they call "dogged down"--and they are watertight so that if a casement in that particular part of the ship is hit, the damage is confined to a very small area as compared with a whole ship. And on this Sunday morning, as we weren't ready for any alert, we weren't under any condition, so the ship quickly flooded with water from one casemate to another. Maybe it's good that it did because that way she settled down square and saved a lot of lives.

Marcello: Describe the condition of the Oklahoma. You mentioned you had been close to it, and you had actually rescued some people from it. Describe what you remember from the Oklahoma.

Cunningham: The Oklahoma was turned to a point where the complete deck was below water--her main decks were below water --and the only thing that kept it from capsizing completely was, of course, the mast. The mast had hit bottom, and it was a very shallow harbor; and so, therefore, we were looking at a quarter of the hull with one screw sticking out of the water--one of its propellers sticking out of the water--and that's about it.

Marcello: I assume that it wasn't too long after the Oklahoma turned over, however, that people were already scrambling on it with cutting torches and so on to get people out. I was wondering if you had seen any of that?

Cunningham: Yes.

Marcello: It didn't happen too long after, did it?

Cunningham: No, it didn't. The latter part of that day, why, it happened. I don't know what part of the day. I think the first attack was...they say it was 7:55 to 8:25, and then there was about a fifteen-minute lull in there where there was just random strafing by the Japanese. Then I think about--what--8:40 the second phase started taking place. I don't believe we had any torpedo bombers in the second phase. I think all the torpedo bombers were in that first phase.

Marcello: What do you remember from the second phase?

Cunningham: Well, all I remember is more bombs, more explosions, and more strafing. We were just busy trying to do what we could to pick people up out of the bay.

Marcello: Were you picking up very many burn victims or anything of that nature?

Cunningham: No. We had picked up quite a few that were completely engulfed in oil--hair matted with oil and dirty and, you know, just glad to be alive type-thing (chuckle). The part I remember was just that the bombs were

having their effect.

Marcello: You remember the Arizona blowing up?

Cunningham: It was a loud explosion, and it came from the rear back there (gesture), and, as I said, it was on the inboard side of the vessel, so you couldn't really see the damage that was done.

Marcello: So what did you do the rest of that morning and into the afternoon?

Cunningham: Well, I think it was over at 9:45--an hour and fifty minutes of attack, I think we had. As I recall that day in the afternoon, we were over toward our ship. As I said, there was fire, and we had to take some kind of paddle or something and kind of part the oil so that we could get into the ship. We'd just haul people around. Whoever wanted to leave the ship to go someplace or to someplace, well, that's what we did.

Marcello: Was the Abandon Ship order given aboard the...it was given aboard the West Virginia, was it not, at one point?

Cunningham: I don't recall because, as I said, I was in the boat (chuckle), but I'm sure that it was. No one would have drowned. There may have been more deaths from bombs if more fellows would have stayed there. I think the West Virginia took two bombs, and I think we took six torpedoes. I think our captain was killed by a bomb that had hit the top of the number two turret

on the Tennessee, and the fragments reached over into the pilot house on the West Virginia.

Marcello: What were you doing that evening?

Cunningham: That evening we tied up at dark. I'd say we worked until dark, and we tied up over at what they called the Ten Ten Dock. Fortunately, we had peanut butter and crackers in that little boat of ours. We always kept something there to eat. So we went ahead and...it really didn't satisfy our hunger, but we kept ourselves from starving to death. There was nothing we could do. A lot of ships were burning. The Arizona was burning. I do recall that there were some planes that came in, and I later know that they were from the Enterprise. They were trying to land at Ford Island, and I think anybody that had a gun in the whole harbor opened up on them. Also, there was a PBY or maybe one or two PBYs that no one had also mentioned, or that I read in a book that had mentioned--and those were shot at. A lot of guns were in the position where they would be shooting directly across the harbor from each other, and personnel would be shooting into each other when these planes came in at low attitudes. I know at the time I felt a little ashamed that anybody would do that, that they would open fire upon our own people. The situation was obviously that our own people knew that the Japanese

wouldn't come in with lights blinking, and I thought that was a shameful act, really, on our part.

Marcello: I'm sure that there were a lot of trigger-happy people around that evening. You could probably here sporadic gunfire all night.

Cunningham: Yes. I don't recall hearing any gunfire other than when the planes were coming in.

Marcello: Did you actually see the amount of firing that went on at those planes?

Cunningham: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what the sky looked like.

Cunningham: Well, as you know, there are tracer bullets, and for every so many rounds of ammunition, they put a tracer bullet in there, and you could see these tracer bullets. It would start up at an elevation in which an airplane was coming in, maybe at a thirty-five-degree angle, and as the plane got closer to land--in the case of Ford Island or in the harbor at Pearl Harbor as was the case with the PBYS--it seemed to me that the tracer bullets from both sides of the harbor, from Ford Island, say, over to Ten Ten Dock...we were sticking our heads up above the dock and looking across on a horizontal plain and could see all this fire going directly, it seemed to me, across from each other. I would say there was probably more damage done to personnel in those cases than the Japanese



(chuckle) did.

Marcello: What kind of rumors did you hear floating around that night?

Cunningham: Well, as I recall, the conversation dwelled upon the possibility of an invasion by the Japanese.

Marcello: Did you have any reason to doubt those rumors, considering what had happened that day?

Cunningham: No, I didn't. I did not have any reason to doubt it because I felt that if the Japanese were successful in coming in with that large of flight without detection, without being reported, certainly they could land troops just as easily.

Marcello: Were you ever given any sidearms or anything during that day? Were you armed in any way?

Cunningham: No, we weren't armed.

Marcello: What did you talk about? What was the course of the discussion that night? I'm sure nobody was getting much sleep.

Cunningham: Well, as I recall, we talked about the possibility of invasion and where we might go--the individual concerns of each man for his own well-being as to where he might be shipped and what his next duty might be. I had never thought of anything other than I would still be attached to the West Virginia, knowing that full well we'd probably raise her.

Marcello: In the meantime, I guess you had in essence lost all

of your possessions other than what you had on your person.

Cunningham: Yes. The fellows on the boat went back into their respective casemates to their locker. I had the key to my locker, and it opened fine. The lock was still intact, although the paint had burned completely off the locker. I opened it up, and all that I had in there was just burned seemingly to a crisp. I had bought...

Marcello: All your photographs were gone?

Cunningham: All my photographs were burned. Thereafter, I regretted it intensely because we weren't allowed cameras after that, and I had a lot of good photographs of the island and some ships--things that I treasured, you know. Our clothing in the Navy...we had to fold them in such a way that all of them were supposed to be the same, you know. The inward seams were out; the pants were turned inside out. And those I could just lift like sheets of paper. It was all burned around the edges, and the cloth I could just lift like sheets of paper. And they were crisp and hard. I had bought my mother a broach to send to her for Christmas. That had a little ribbon on it, and the ribbon was burned off. But the broach was still intact, and I sent her that broach later. She still has it to this day.

Marcello: What did you do in the days following the attack?

Cunningham: Well, the next morning was Monday morning, and we went out in the harbor to see what we could do. Then we got close to a tug that was fighting the fires on the Arizona, and the tug couldn't get up to the fire--couldn't get its hoses up there--because of the amount of draft that it drew in the water. So we had a shallow-draft boat, a lot less than a tug, so they asked us to take the hose from the tug. I believe the tug's name was the Hoga. We could take the hose from that tug and take it up to the bow of the Arizona. We could get up as close as we dared, you know, without becoming scorched, and we stayed there all that day--all day Monday and all Monday night, and we stayed there until about 1:30 on Tuesday when we got the fire out. Then after that, why, we reported in to the base. They had a temporary base, I think, set up.

Marcello: So the Arizona was still burning that intensely..

Cunningham: That night.

Marcello: That night.

Cunningham: Yes. Yes, it was a beacon. They were concerned about it because certainly a beacon would be helpful to any later possible Japanese attacks.

Marcello: Describe what you remember from the condition of the Arizona or the damage done to the Arizona when you were over there.

Cunningham: Well, I can remember that there was a lot of twisted metal. I believe the superstructure was still up, but the decks and everything were all...it must be a little bit deeper there because those decks were below water, and the oil was coming up out of there, as it still does to this day. That oil was coming in, and it was on fire. That's what we were trying to knock out with pressure--trying to knock out that fire.

Marcello: So it's just a twisted mass of metal that was still smoldering, and the oil was coming out and all that sort of thing.

Cunningham: Yes. As I said, it looked liked to me it was submerged or had blown to the point where it was below the waterline, anyway.

Marcello: What kind of feelings did you have when you had a chance to look at all this damage in a rather objective manner, if we can call it that? The Arizona is gone; the Oklahoma is turned over; the West Virginia is sitting on the bottom; the California is sitting at the bottom; other ships have received various amounts of damage. What kind of feelings did you have when you saw that?

Cunningham: I was young then, and I can't say definitely what I was thinking of all the while. Generally speaking, I felt that something was lacking--that we weren't notified, that we didn't have our scout planes out or

maybe not in the right direction. Whatever it was, maybe they didn't go out in the right direction. We had them going west and south. I didn't know it at the time, but the Japanese, of course, came from the north. Probably at the time, I was a little bit dejected in seeing all that potential firepower just sitting idle. I remember seeing the Nevada getting underway on that morning.

Marcello: Describe what you saw there.

Cunningham: Well, I had heard later that there was a chief boatswain's mate who was instrumental in getting the Nevada underway. Rather than taking the time to release the ship by taking the hawsers off the quay, he had instructed the personnel to just get the fire axes and chop those lines, and he got that battleship underway. I don't know how. He must have tried to get it underway or started getting the engine rooms ready at the outset of the attack--they had to be--in order to get up enough steam to hit any kind of propulsion. I remember seeing it go past the West Virginia and saw it steaming up the channel. Then I saw the Japanese bombers come in just as she was nearing the mouth of the channel. She didn't get right in the mouth. Then there were some tugs that came out there, I think, to help her. They got her beached. But I remember seeing the dive-bombers come

in and hit that ship during the latter part or phase of the attack.

Marcello: I guess the Japanese planes were all over that Nevada like a swarm of bees.

Cunningham: Yes, they were definitely running around looking for something to hit (chuckle).

Marcello: When did you leave Pearl Harbor? Or didn't you?

Cunningham: I didn't leave Pearl Harbor. After reporting in, I was assigned over at the West Loch. On the 17th of December, 1941, I was assigned to the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot at Oahu, which is over in West Loch.

At this point in time, I want to interject that on the 16th of December, 1941, my parents had received a telegram that I was missing in action. I'd like to read that, if I may. This is by postal telegraph from Washington, D.C., 4:28 a.m., December 16, 1941. To my father, Leslie Cunningham, at RFD #1 Irondale, Ohio. It says: "The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your son, Richard Cunningham, Seaman First Class, U.S. Navy, was lost in action in the performance of his duty and in the service of his country. The Department extends to you its sincerest sympathy in your great loss. To prevent possible aid to our enemies, please do not divulge the name of his ship or station. If remains are recovered, they will be interred temporarily in the locality where death

occurred, and you will be notified accordingly. It's signed, Rear Admiral C.W. Nimitz, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. Then on the 17th of the December, 1941, I reported to the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot on Oahu there.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. In the meantime, or sometime after the attack, I know that there are instances where the survivors were able to send postcards home, which in essence said: "I am well" or "I have been injured" or something along those lines. Evidently, you never had an opportunity to send one of those cards home.

Cunningham: No. We apparently were confined to a different world on our little boat, you know, running around the harbor and trying to "get with it" (chuckle), so we weren't in the mainstream.

Marcello: When was it that your folks found out that you, in fact, were not killed or missing in action or whatever?

Cunningham: That was on the 19th of December, 1941. My father received a Western Union message from Washington, D.C., 11:40 p.m., December 19, 1941. It's addressed to Leslie Cunningham, RFD #1 Irondale, Ohio. It says: "The Navy Department is pleased to advise you that later reports received indicate that your son Richard Cunningham, Seaman First Class, United States Navy,

previously reported as lost, is now reported as a survivor. In all probability he will communicate with you at the earliest opportunity. The great and unnecessary anxiety caused you is deeply regretted. And that is signed by Randall Jacobs, Chief of Bureau of Navigation.

Marcello: When was it that you were able to contact your parents in one way or another?

Cunningham: Well, I don't recall right now. I feel reasonably sure it was when I got assigned over at the Naval Ammunition Depot.

Marcello; What kind of work were you doing over there?

Cunningham: We were detailed to process ammunition that had come from sinking ships or ships that are blown up. Ammunition powder cans were floating around in the harbor, and it was our job to process this ammunition and put it on little freight cars or rail cars that ran from close to the water and close to the dock up to Barber's Point. These cans were floating around in the bay with these powder charges in them. As I recall, they were probably four feet long and were mostly 5-inch powder charges. On one end there was sewn a black powder charge; the rest of the powder in the can was powder that looked like the size of pencil broken up into short--maybe one-inch--strips. Now these were inside of a bag, and the black powder



charge was sewn to one end of the bag, that then being the last to go in the chamber and be ignited. So we had to rip open the bag. .first, we had to open the can, pull the powder charge out of the can, cut the black powder charge off the bottom, take the rest of that powder and pour it back in that empty can, then fill it with water, then put the lid on tight, and then stack those inside of these freight cars. We also processed .50-caliber ammunition. Any type of ammunition that came out of that harbor, we processed, and it was taken up to Barber's Point.

Marcello: And how long did you continue to do this?

Cunningham: I did that until 17th of December, 1942, at which time I was transferred to what they called "new construction" on the West Coast. Now that was a little over a year after the Pearl Harbor attack, so I was over there...well, in fact, exactly one year because I was assigned on the 17th December, 1941, and I was transferred to the West Coast on the 17th December, 1942.

Marcello: And what new construction did you pick up over on the West Coast?

Cunningham: Well, after leaving Pearl Harbor, we were on the USS Henderson, I believe, and we were transported to the West Coast. At the West Coast, I was assigned to what they called APC-35. The APC was fashioned after a

tuna boat. In fact, it was built from tuna boat drawings completely, even to the open hull--the open part of the hull back in the stern where you would throw the fish. That little transport was to serve as a little inner-coastal supply ship in the Solomon Islands during the Solomon Island campaign and then supply some of the PT squadrons. I didn't know it at the time, but John Kennedy was in one of those PT squadrons. That was what the original design was for. They were building ships just as fast as they could. Just anybody that could build a ship was building them.

Marcello: So you remained on that ship through the Solomon campaign. Where did you go from there after that campaign was completed?

Cunningham: Well, before that campaign was over, we had invaded one of the islands--New Georgia Island--and coming out of there one night, we hit a reef. It was a wooden ship, and the reef coral went through our hull. We were rocking back and forth on it, and it finally went through. We stayed there all night until the next morning, and it sunk as far as the coral would let us sink. Some other ship had picked us up and took us back to our base. Then there was one other ship, another APC, that was short a chief boatswain's mate, and I was assigned to the APC-33 and continued on it

through the Solomons operation.

Marcello: And how long did you remain on that ship?

Cunningham: I remained on that until the 7th of December, 1944, and then I went to the receiving ship, West Coast. I reported in on the 31st of December. I don't recall the name of the ship that we took back, but I reported to the receiving ship, West Coast, on the 31st of December.

Marcello: And then how long did you remain there?

Cunningham: Well, I remained there until the 9th of March, 1945, and I was then assigned to the Advance Base Personnel Depot at San Bruno, California, in which we had 500-man barracks. I was in charge of one of the barracks, and we were processing men through there from overseas.

I remained there until the 17th of May, 1946, and I then was assigned to the Headquarters Command, 12th Naval District, in the troop training pool. I was in charge of the conduct of the men and all that on this troop train going from Oakland, California, to Chicago, Illinois. We'd put a kitchen car in the middle of the troop train, and we'd have about 250 or so men forward of the kitchen car and 250 aft. We would run the ones in back through to the front of the train and back through the kitchen car and feed them, and then we would reverse the procedure to feed the

men in the front. I made eleven trips to Chicago.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Cunningham, I think that is probably pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk to me. You've given me a different slant on the Battle of Pearl Harbor from one who was aboard the West Virginia. I'm sure that scholars and students are going to find your comments most valuable and useful.

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