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J O H N   K I R K

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Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: John Kirk  
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

John Kirk

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello                      Date: April 23, 1988

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing John Kirk for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on April, 23, 1988, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Kirk in order to get his reminiscences and experiences when he was aboard the destroyer USS Dewey during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Kirk, to begin this interview, give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, and a little bit about your educational background.

Mr. Kirk: I was born in Weleetka, Oklahoma, in Okfuskee County on December 3, 1917

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

Mr. Kirk: My father was a Baptist minister, and when I was around two years old, he moved to the town of Holdenville, Oklahoma, where I went through twelve

grades of schooling, graduating from high school. Then I went on to Virginia Polytechnic Institute for two years at Blacksburg, Virginia, where I was in the R.O.T.C. for two years. From there I went to the Naval Academy in September of 1937, where I spent four years, graduating and assigned to the Dewey in February of 1941. Later on, I went to the Navy Graduate School and got a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering and a master's degree from M.I.T. in 1948 and 1949.

Marcello: Why did you decide to transfer from Virginia Polytechnic Institute to the United States Naval Academy?

Kirk: Since I was about twelve years old or so, I had always thought I would like to go to West Point. Pursuing that, I lied about my age and got in the National Guard when I was fifteen. I ended up with an alternate's appointment to West Point, but the principal appointee got in. But, working all the way through high school--and I worked hard and was fortunate enough to get good marks--I ended up after the disappointment of not getting in West Point with enough publicity so that Congressman Boren from our district at that time ended up with an appointment in September. He happened to be, at that time, the youngest congressman ever elected. He was from Oklahoma. He is still a very close personal friend of mine. He lives up in Oklahoma City. So I pursued the Navy as an intention to make the military a

full-scale career. I went to V.P.I. just to qualify so I didn't have to take the entrance exams and so I would have enough educational background to give me a little running start when I took the courses at the Naval Academy.

Marcello: Describe the process by which you got to Honolulu and were given the assignment aboard the Dewey. I guess what I am saying, in essence, did you have any choice in the matter perhaps as to the type of ship you wanted to go on or anything of that nature?

Kirk: (Chuckle) Yes, I did. I don't know how interested historians would find it, but I have always been a fairly non-regulation-type of person, and a couple of times I was in bad trouble disciplinary-wise at the Naval Academy. It seemed to me, when I'd stuck it out, that the place for me was in a smaller ship. My class was the first one to ever have a chance to go from graduation to a ship as small as a destroyer. Most of them went to battleships and put up with the spit-and-polish and the regulations, where destroyer sailors were kind of a different animal. In fact, when I checked in with my orders, the captain signed my orders and checked me in in his skivvies. It was (chuckle) not at all formal.

Marcello: What was your function once you got aboard the Dewey?

Kirk: (Chuckle) Well, I guess it was true in all the ships,

but because a destroyer had a fairly few number of junior officers, they made me assistant gunnery officer, torpedo officer, assistant first lieutenant to take care of the deck crew, and mess officer (they called it commissary officer). Later on, I was mess officer in the wardroom, too. But I was responsible for making up the menus for the crew and supervising the cooks and the dishwashers as well as seeing that the torpedoes were ready and the guns were oiled and ready. In essence, I guess you could say I did everything but communications.

Marcello: It's interesting in that when I have interviewed enlisted destroyermen, they seemed to indicate that aboard a destroyer one has to be able to do several things, and evidently it must have applied to the officers as well. There are no specialists like you would find perhaps aboard a bigger ship.

Kirk: That's true. There were two of us who were assistant gunnery officers and two of us who were assistant first lieutenants. Now later on, long after Pearl Harbor, I ended up being the whaleboat officer, so everytime anybody got in the drink, an aviator or when the Warden went on the rocks, it was my job to man the whaleboat and go pick them out of the water. My first chore was when the Lexington was sunk in the Coral Sea Battle.

Marcello: When was it that you went aboard the Dewey? You may have to approximate that date, or maybe you know exactly.

Kirk: I guess I should have brought my orders. I graduated on February 7. We had about a month's leave, so it was approximately the end of March. We took the ship out from San Francisco.

Marcello: So you were on the Dewey approximately nine months before the attack occurred?

Kirk: That is correct. From June on, the ship itself had orders to sink any unidentified submarines or whatever. We were standing not four hours on and four hours off, but intensive watches.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the training routine of the Dewey in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, and let's go to that time when you first went aboard. Take me through a typical training problem or training exercise in which the Dewey would participate. We'll gradually bring it up to December 7 and kind of try to look at it from how it evolved.

Kirk: All right.

Marcello: Let's take a look at the training problems of the Dewey around the time that you got aboard.

Kirk: I'm not sure of the sequence, but it seems to me that the very first training was to get qualified as a full-fledged watch officer so I could stand my share of the watches at midnight and the goofy hours you keep. You stood the watch with the ship underway, and the man that was on watch was actually running the ship at the time

with the captain on call. They were reluctant to let a novice like me do it because the only ship handling I'd had was in small boats there at the Naval Academy. But to my amazement, in less than a couple of months, they had qualified me as a senior watch officer. I don't know whether it was my brilliance or because they got tired (chuckle) of standing watches themselves, but the senior lieutenants were pretty quick to get me on watch.

Now going from that, we had a series of, as you can well imagine, gunnery exercises. We had surface gunnery in which I remember distinctly that one of the chores I had was to get in the whaleboat and go down and go out to the target sled and reset the sails so they could have a new target to shoot at; and then we would hang back, and they'd shoot through this canvas sail, and then we would go out and put another sail up and repeat the process. Also, we had the other end of the problem. Sometimes they had me on the 5-inch guns supervising the pointing and tracking and doing the shooting. Then we had the aircraft towing targets. We had intensive antiaircraft firing, and the Dewey got pretty good at that. I think maybe they were better at that than any of the other aspects of the weaponry.

As torpedo officer, I also had practice firings of the torpedoes. With the practice warheads, you had to be very careful. We had eight torpedoes, and I had a



chief torpedoman that knew each of them and the crazy characteristics they had because they had used those same torpedoes for maybe ten years or since the Dewey was commissioned. I think maybe she was commissioned in the early 1930s, so it was close to ten years. We had one number that was always just about to sink, so we had to get to that one first and then pick the others up in sequence (chuckle). After they blew the air out of the head and they would float, we'd go harvest them and bring them back. Then we also ran quite a few exercises where we would not actually fire the torpedoes, but we would set up the firing problem. We had a torpedo director on each side of the bridge.

I did do a few tours in the engine room, but that wasn't really my primary function. I always was fairly handy around engines. That was one of my best subjects at the Naval Academy, and so there wasn't too much the guy had me do. He knew that if he got in a pinch, well, he could pluck me and have me do that, anyway.

As a crew at that time, we had a captain out of the Class of 1921 and an executive officer out of the Class of 1925. The chief engineer was out of the Class of 1929; two lieutenants were out of the Class of 1936; two ensigns were out of the Class of 1939; and I was out of the Class of 1941 (chuckle). Then we shortly after that started getting reserves in to train them.

Marcello: At the time that you went aboard the Dewey in early 1941, I'm assuming that it wasn't up to full combat strength, then, from what you've said in terms of its manpower.

Kirk: It was awful close. See, the Dewey had seamen on there that had twelve to fifteen years of Navy time. The saddest thing about Pearl, in my judgment, was not that we lost so many guys, but that all of those guys had all the way up to thirty years of service and almost none of them had less than ten. They were old-time sailors, and the beauty of a ship with old-time sailors is that you don't really need the officers if you have a good bunch of chiefs and the sailors do it. That was really the way the Dewey was. Now it also happened to get crossways with some of the skippers because the crew was pretty ornery. They didn't always wear the uniform-of-the-day. But anytime we went to gunnery practice or torpedo practice, the equipment worked, and in my judgment that's the right way to run a fighting ship.

Marcello: As you look back at those particular days aboard the Dewey, how would you describe the morale of the men aboard? Was it a happy ship?

Kirk: Well, I think so. See, being on a ship is hard work, and not everybody likes hard work. And you get different skippers and different "execs. Now we did at times have an "exec" that would see some man wearing his

skivvy shirt instead of his blouse, and he would restrict the whole crew. I won't say the Dewey was the like the Caine in the Caine Mutiny, but there were a lot of similarities in some of the skippers. I always felt my job was to...we certainly didn't have anything that coddled the crew, but I never had any trouble with them. There wasn't any serious complaints. It was the kind of complaining where nobody likes the chow. The last ship always had the best chow, or the next ship they go to is going to have the best chow. That was the same in the infantry. So I don't know. When you say a "happy ship, there was no time when there was concerted or, I'd say, devious actions on the part of the crew to confuse the senior officers. In fact, it worked the other way at times. Not necessarily before Pearl Harbor, the same crew was on the Dewey when we got to the Aleutians. I found out that I had been sent orders, I think, three or four times, and the captain wouldn't let me go. Yet, he early loved to give me hell on everything I did on that ship. I was promoted eventually to full senior grade lieutenant, and the only way I got off is that I was sent to Pearl Harbor as head of the torpedo school because they knew I was going back to go through flight training.

Marcello: Who was the skipper of the ship when you went aboard at that time?

Kirk: The first skipper was a tremendous gentleman, August J. Detzer, and I believe he was from the Class of 1921. I'd rather not talk about the others (chuckle). Well, if you want me to, I will.

Marcello: Well, let me just ask you this.

Kirk: All skippers have a different feeling, whether you work for them or they work for you.

Marcello: Well, let me ask the question this way, then. Who was the skipper at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack?

Kirk: I believe that was Detzer, but I'm not sure.

Marcello: Awhile ago you also mentioned the fact that the petty officers had ten, twelve, fifteen, or more years in the Navy. How slow or rapid was promotion in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy among the enlisted personnel or even among the officer personnel for that matter?

Kirk: It was very slow until the war broke out, and then it accelerated. See, with a crew like that and as educated as it was, we had one "exec" that checked in and said he wasn't going to take any crap off of any of them; and if they messed with him, he used to be on the wrestling team at the Naval Academy. So they ended up nicknaming him "Squeeze. (chuckle) They did tend to ridicule him, and we had all kinds of incidents or little isolated things. But I'd say that with the Pearl Harbor bunch and the time right after Pearl, there was no dissension. There isn't any dissension on any Navy ships if you're

in combat. See, we went from Pearl down to the South Pacific and the Coral Sea and Bougainville and back to Midway. We damn near got sunk at Guadalcanal. We were in the whole bloody smear all the way. The last I was on it was up in Attu when we landed the Army on Attu. But when there is shooting going on and shooting to be done, yes, that was a happy ship.

Marcello: You also mentioned a moment ago that there was a lot of emphasis placed upon antiaircraft drills and practice aboard the Dewey prior to Pearl Harbor.

Kirk: Right.

Marcello: Did anybody at that time, generally speaking, of course, realize just how important aircraft were going to be in future wars?

Kirk: Our gunnery officer definitely did. His name was Brown; he was out of the Class of 1936. I forget his first name, but he was one of these scholarly guys that would plot the shell burst pattern and the altitude and the speed of the target, and then the next time we went to do it, he had corrected all that stuff, cranked it into those pretty clumsy computers we had in the antiaircraft batteries at that time, and we'd get hits. I attribute a lot of it to him. It was not just that he did that, but the chiefs and all our gunner's mates got the clue.

Marcello: How did the antiaircraft armament of the Dewey change after Pearl Harbor?

Kirk: Well, the biggest change was that we got rid of the .50-calibers, which were kind of manually aimed, and we picked up some 20-millimeters. At the time, I didn't realize it, but later on I worked for the guy that invented the gun sight that was on that 20-millimeter, Dr. Draper at M.I.T. The lead computing gun sight was based on having two gyros that were perpendicular, so you could generate a lead angle, and you just had to put a pipper on the plane and get it framed. You didn't even really need the radar. If it's coming at you, get it framed so you've got the range, and you got hits with that thing. Now that alone caused the kamikazes to catch hell later on in the war. But I would say that adding the radar and adding that gun sight were the most important changes. Of course, it made us top heavy, so it would roll over and hang there, and later on in a typhoon it almost caused the Dewey to get sunk. But that was a major improvement. You could put a guy on a 20-millimeter, and in less than two practice firings, he could be shooting down airplanes. He just puts a spot of light on it like you see in the demonstrations when they supposedly have a laser gun. Well, we have laser guns now, and that's what we had in Vietnam for night shooting.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7 and as relations between the United States and Japan

deteriorated even further, could you in your position detect any changes in the training routine of the Dewey?

Kirk: Only in the sense that more and more we stood four hours on and eight off watches. You know, we just never got off of that. We didn't get off of that until we got down to where we were thinking we might be trapped by the Jap fleet. Then we went to four hours on and four off. But four on and eight off plus doing a day's work in the meantime is a killer. If I wanted to defeat the U.S. fleet even today, I would simply threaten them for six months, make them all go on watch; and at the end of that time, they would be so sleepy I could walk in and take them over.

Marcello: Did you seem to be having more general quarters drills or maybe..

Kirk: Absolutely!

Marcello: .blackout conditions and that sort of thing?

Kirk: We did. We definitely had the blackout conditions because, like I say, somewhere around the middle of that year, some of the destroyers did find unidentified subs. We knew they were submarines. Oh, and part of my job was being depth charge officer, too (chuckle). I forgot that one.

It ended up that in spite of all that, we were missing something. Now I don't know, after three wars, exactly what that was. In fact, I didn't know then, and

I don't know now. I actually bought from the Library of Congress, when they were released, all of the super secret transmissions of the year ahead of Pearl Harbor from the Japs and from all our intelligence guys all over the world. I got the whole series in trying to determine if anybody really knew what was happening. There is one message that was sent in January of 1941 that says the Japs were going to hit us at Pearl. There are several along that indicate that highly. Yet, .see, as I said, the tail-end of my career in the military and military R and D [Research and Development] was in the intelligence business. I am personally convinced that Roosevelt didn't deliberately do it to us. He wanted some handle, I'm sure, to put us in the war, but that wasn't it. I think we just absolutely were knuckleheads and screwed it up without any help from the President. I think we did things in a routine sense, and actually, even today, I know of more instances where that's made the intelligence passe' whether somebody deliberately circumvented it or did something. Most of the time the system just gets to you. It's too cumbersome.

Marcello: You mentioned this just a moment ago, and I want to follow up on something you said. Things become routine. How about the training schedule for the Dewey? In other words, if I were a Japanese agent ashore in Honolulu during that period, would I have been able to detect



very shortly a definite pattern relative to when certain ships would be going out and when they would be coming back and that pretty soon the pattern would be repeated and repeated?

Kirk: Quite definitely.

Marcello: In the case of the Dewey, would it usually go out on a particular day of the week and come back on a particular day of the week?

Kirk: When given an opportunity, we always would go out on a Monday and get back on a Friday. Now during that time, though, see, we would have extended exercises where we would go out with a carrier or we'd go out with a battleship and would be running screen for them. When we would do that, it would usually end up being several weeks. But they definitely tried to get us back in port on a Friday so we could get some liberty on Saturday and Sunday.

Marcello: Also, off the record, I believe, you had mentioned the increasing importance that was given to the antisubmarine work about six months before Pearl. You mentioned just a moment ago about the unidentified submarines that had been detected. Follow up on what you told me off the record relative to what the Dewey's orders were concerning those submarine detections.

Kirk: All right. Our orders were to search for them, and if there was slightest indication that they weren't one of

ours, we were to check once, and then we were to cut loose with depth charges and try to do something about it. Now to my knowledge, I remember only one incident, and I believe that was along in August sometime ( I don't remember exactly when). At the time I felt strongly that it was a whale, and after the depth charges went off, the the captain wrote in and said "probable submarine hull"; but it looked like a whale with fins to me. Anyway, he got his report in (chuckle), and I kept my mouth shut.

Marcello: But you actually did depth-charge whatever it was that was out there.

Kirk: Whatever it was, we depth-charged it.

Marcello: It was obvious that the potential enemy in the Pacific was going to be Japan. Among the officers, in your conversations or bull sessions, did talk ever come up or did discussion revolve around a possible Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor--not war with Japan but an attack at Pearl Harbor?

Kirk: Not ever that I heard. You know, a lot of it surfaced later, but that never seemed to be in the cards at the time. I don't know. Maybe it should have been because we all knew we couldn't run search planes (We didn't have enough of them). There is a million reasons why Honolulu was a good target for them.

Marcello: So far as you know, and, again, I'm keeping in mind that

you were a relatively young lieutenant at the time.

Kirk: Infant.

Marcello: I'm sorry. Infant, yes (chuckle). Did people think that the Japanese had the capabilities of hitting the Hawaiian Islands? Of course, there is a difference between their capabilities of hitting Pearl and their intentions of hitting Pearl.

Kirk: I guess almost to man among my acquaintances--and mine are probably as bad as any of them--the mind set was that the Japanese that we had seen were all nearsighted and not too brainy and that they couldn't hit anything if they shot at it; and since they all had to wear glasses, they couldn't see at night, so anytime we could, we'd get them involved in a night battle. That was about until the Battle of Savo Island.

Marcello: That was a real mistake (chuckle).

Kirk: ..where we lost four cruisers. I was in a destroyer off of that thing. That was our heaviest personnel loss in World War II. So we thought it was going to be awful easy. We had no understanding of the Japanese will and the kamikaze attitude to die for the emperor. We thought that was kid's stuff...and that they had to chain them to the rudders and all kinds of stuff. None of that's true. The Japanese were just one hell of a fighting machine. I believe they still are today. They don't ever give up.

Marcello: That was an excellent Navy in December of 1941 and for some time thereafter.

Kirk: Fantastic! I think that maybe it was the best it's ever been, quite frankly. Not because I was a part of it, but we had guys. .I mean, you could turn the ship over to the seamen and the petty officers. They just were smart and the equipment that we had in that day was excellent. Now maybe they wouldn't fit today. I don't know. We've got a lot of technological stuff and laser-guided weapons and Lord know what; where those guys, if a gun jammed or something wasn't working, they fixed it.

Marcello: I was referring a moment ago. .I'm sorry. I guess you misunderstood my question. I was referring a moment ago to the Japanese Navy. Your adversary was a pretty good navy.

Kirk: Oh, yes.

Marcello: .in December of 1941, too, was he not?

Kirk: But that part of our education had been sorely neglected. The U.S. Navy just didn't realize that. The submariners probably came the closest, but even those guys didn't know for sure. Somebody in our whole great Pacific Fleet should have picked up on the communication traffic that the Japs just flat shut down, and we should have looked for those knotheads. There is no reason we should have let them do that to us.

Marcello: I think one of the things that comes out in Gordon

Frangle's book, At Dawn We Slept.

Kirk: Oh, yes.

Marcello: .is getting intentions and capabilities mixed up. People were asking, "Do the Japanese intend to hit Pearl Harbor, and they would say, "No, of course, they don't intend to. The question they should have been asking is, "Are they capable of hitting Pearl Harbor?"

Kirk: That's true.

Marcello: And the answer to that is yes.

Kirk: Yes.

Marcello: When the Dewey would be in port--and, again, I am referring to the period prior to December 7--what kind of liberty routine was set up among the officer personnel? Do you recall?

Kirk: Pretty much so. In port the watches were about one and...see, you'd take turns. You might go a weekend and not have any watches. So we'd take turns. I'd say you could have two-thirds of them ashore and about one-third of them standing watch in the harbor.

Marcello: This would be a third of the officers?

Kirk: Yes, and about the same way with the crew. We didn't try to keep everybody on board. A "tin can" is a crowded son-of-a-bitch, anyway, and some nights are miserable, hot, mosquitoes like crazy, so we tried to let them get ashore.

Marcello: When the Dewey would be in port, what would be the state

of combat readiness? Again, I'm referring to that period prior to Pearl Harbor.

Kirk: I personally would say it was near zero. See, we would button up all the magazines; we'd turn the power off; we would go "cold iron"; we'd clean up everything and be ready for Saturday inspection. And when the Saturday liberty boat left, well, after that it was just what the Navy called "rope yarn Sunday. The guys just would live to have a few little make-work or hobbies they'd do. But unless some guys was on there for discipline reasons, most of them just "bugged out" and went ashore.

Marcello: Normally, when you had liberty during that period, what would you do with your time?

Kirk: I guess most of the time...see, I was always pretty much a loner. A lot of times I'd go ashore with some of the other ensigns, and we'd find some gals in Honolulu and go dancing and have a few beers and go to Lau Yee Chou's for Chinese food, which, incidentally, is still there in Honolulu, and it's a great Chinese restaurant (chuckle). Then I would spend some time on the beach trying to surf, touring around the islands. I pretty much stayed out of trouble. I was worried about my guys, so when some of my sailors would get in trouble, I'd haul out and try to get them out of jail before the skipper found out or whatever. There was usually a few of those. But I didn't have any particular routine. I was a tennis

player, so anytime I could get a tennis match, I'd play tennis or go over at the Officer's Club and have a few drinks and then head on back to the ship.

Marcello: I think this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and obviously we want to go into as much detail as you can remember. What was your routine on that Saturday of December 6, 1941?

Kirk: Well, (chuckle) I personally had resigned. I submitted my resignation back in August or September.

Marcello: Why was that?

Kirk: Because I figured the war was just going to keep dragging out, and so I had plans to get that gal that's with me downstairs [he and his wife were attending a convention of Pearl Harbor survivors] to come out to Honolulu and marry me; in which case it was illegal, and I'd get kicked out of the Navy. I thought I'd go to Australia. I thought the Aussies would probably be in the war before us, anyway, but I was going to move down there and be an Australian. She wouldn't cooperate with me, so I turned the resignation in, anyway. But on the 6th, I got the answer back from the Bureau of Navy Personnel that said, "Sorry, we can't accept your resignation at this time because the Japanese may start war with us in the Pacific on any day. And I remember throwing that in the wastebasket and saying, "A lot they know!" (chuckle) only to have them hit us the next

morning.

Marcello: And what did you do after you received that letter?

Kirk: I threw it in the wastebasket, and I was so irritated I didn't go ashore. I stayed on board that night.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen that aboard that night?

Kirk: Not a damned thing. Quiet as a church.

Marcello: What did you do with your time? Do you recall?

Kirk: Yes, I played acey-deucey for a while, and as I remember I lost to the commander. Commander Nyquist was our chief mentor and one hell of an acey-deucey player. I think he's out of the Class of 1921. He was a commander. He was out of one-half of it--the front half--and I think Detzer was out of the last half. I think maybe I did go over for few drinks at the club and came back about 11:00 or midnight on the late liberty boat.

Marcello: Generally speaking, when the crew came back from liberty in Honolulu on a Saturday night, what would be their condition? Would there be a variable?

Kirk: Well, even though I had only been on board a few months, there were a few guys that came back completely "snockered, and you knew who those guys were. See, for example, in the month or so before Pearl, one guy got a letter from his girlfriend, and his brother had gotten her pregnant. That upset him sorely, so he came back after that so "snockered" everytime that he wanted to



shoot all of the officers and do all kinds of stuff. He happened to be a good friend of mine, but an absolute maniac when he'd been drinking that much. But if you mean like the movies that show all the sailors coming back drunk, that's not so. There were some of them that would bring the booze back aboard and smuggle it on board, and that was, of course, a "no-no. So if I saw it overtly, I had them throw it over the side, but I'm sure I didn't work as hard as I should have to find it. I didn't see that made a hell of a lot of difference, frankly. But by and large, see, my torpedo gang and the fire control gang were pretty bright guys, anyway. I don't remember them ever coming back drunk, and I've been ashore with them and had a few drinks. But in those days they didn't want officers to do that with the sailors.

Marcello: Fraternization was discouraged?

Kirk: That's absolutely right. And I was dead set against that because these guys were not just sailors. They were my personal friends.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, and what I want you to do is to give me your version of what happened from the time you woke up until all hell broke loose.

Kirk: All right. I've never had any trouble sleeping, so that morning I was sound asleep. The mess attendant that

took care of our rooms and the wardroom came in and said, "Mr. Kirk, you better get up! The Japs are bombing Ford Island! And we were anchored right off the north end of Ford Island. I said, "Oh, Pete, for Christ's sake, let me sleep!" And while I was talking to him, I could hear the thumping start, and so I got up, stuck my head out the porthole, and I could look directly aft and see Ford Island and the Arizona and the battleships and a mine tender, which, I think, it was the Oglala. It was right behind us, and I was watching the dive-bombers hit that thing.

I put on my shoes and nothing else, got out on deck, and nobody in the harbor was shooting yet. I decided I better wake up the "exec. I went up there, and Pete had already got him awake, too. As we were coming down the ladder from the upper deck on that destroyer, which had kind of a broken deck, the Phelps had 1.1-caliber quad mounts, and they opened fire, and it was, like, as close as that other side of your room (gesture).

Marcello: So we're talking about a distance of maybe ten or twelve feet away?

Kirk: So if you want to talk about a noise that stops your heart, that's it. I turned around to go back up to get away from the bomb fragments--I thought--and my "exec, J.P. Canty, was backing up the ladder faster than I could go up front ways (chuckle).

Marcello: Now have you sounded General Quarters aboard the ship?

Kirk: We definitely did that then, but nothing happened until I went around with lock snippers and snipped all the locks off the magazines. Our gunner's mate was still ashore, and he had pocketed all the magazine keys and had them with him. Now we had an extra set in the gunnery officer's cabin, but I wasn't thinking about going to get those things. So I was busy snipping the locks off of the ammo magazines for the 5-inches, ammo for the .30-calibers and the .50-calibers, and snipping the locks on the black powder charges for my torpedoes. So we got our machine guns going within less than five minutes, so we were joining in, and I think that's probably the reason we weren't hit. A couple of dive-bombers turned away when they started coming down and they could see we were starting to open up and none of the other ships were.

I remember this went on fast and furious, and then the 5-inchers started shooting. Now I should say that the Dewey was in that five-ship mass. The Dewey was the only one that couldn't get underway. We had our main steam valve over on the Dobbin grinding a new surface on it, and so we had to install that damned thing before we could even get steam up and move. The rest of the destroyers were casting off and getting underway right in the middle of the attack and still shooting like

crazy. We kept shooting, but when you don't have any electricity, shooting a 5-inch gun by sighting down the barrel at an airplane is kind of a loser. Our guys claimed that they hit a lot. I would see the gunfire, and I saw a couple of planes fall, but I don't know. Since you've researched this thing, you know that if everybody got credit for what they said they shot down...

Marcello: The whole Jap force would be wiped out.

Kirk: .(chuckle) the Japs would have needed twenty carriers to get them all in there. So I know that didn't happen. But that was fast and furious, and I distinctly remember the Arizona blowing.

Marcello: Describe that. Describe what you saw or heard or both.

Kirk: I was back on the fantail, and so I can look over here and see it (gesture). Well, by now I guess the attack has been on for five or six minutes, which is a long time. I thought they were going to make it all right, and then one lone--it seemed to me--one lone dive-bomber dropped a bomb that strictly by accident went through the decking and down into the powder magazine right smack under that turret on the bow, and there was the damnedest explosion that I have ever seen short of the A-bombs. I worked on A-bombs for a few years and tested those idiotic things. But nothing but an A-bomb matched that blast aboard the Arizona. I actually thought--you

know you lose your perspective--but we were close enough that I thought that damned turret was going to come over and smash us. It really was extremely frightening to me. Now maybe nobody else thought it was going to come close. I don't know. You know, you go into almost shock. You get really trigger-happy, and you shoot at anything that's up there.

Marcello: Did you catch any fragments from the Arizona exploding?

Kirk: No, we weren't that close. I was just plain wrong. It didn't have a chance of getting over to us. It went more up and then came back down.

Marcello: Describe the smoke and the fire that you saw.

Kirk: Well, it's like almost all of the big explosions. You know, you get a giant fire plume that goes way the hell up in the air under that turret. Well, when it peeled off, you got another column coming right behind it that's a smoky, inky, black smoke that, I guess, indicated that they hit the fuel tank at the same time. Then it just started burning like crazy, and the ship itself started settling down.

About that time we got...see, now during all of this, only the "exec" was on board--the skipper wasn't--and I think maybe one of the lieutenants was on board. They had me and another couple of ensigns. Quite a few of the chiefs were on board. But about this time, the word came over the radio that the Japs had troop

transports--I think that's about the time, but you'll have to check the timing--and that they were landing at Barber's Point. Well, from where we anchored, you could see Barber's Point. You couldn't quite see it because it was around down behind the palm trees, but Barber's Point was just at the entrance of Pearl Harbor and kind of off to the northwest. So hearing that, I went to the "exec" and said, "I think we ought load for the firing of real exploders in my torpedoes. Now we had a rule at that time that only a commissioned officer could handle those things because they were a piece of confidential hardware. So I got these things and set them up, and it would take maybe ten minutes on each of them, maybe fifteen, for eight torpedoes. I got about halfway through...and you have to put the exploder on it and make sure it doesn't blow (chuckle) up when you put it in or stick it up in there while one of your crewmen puts the set screws in.

About that time, the second attack came in, so I was crouched under the torpedo tubes with that jazz in my hand, and I could see the bombs flashing. I guess I'd say this was ten to fifty yards out. They still didn't hit us, and we still didn't get any fragments. But it was a good exercise for my heart (chuckle). I kept doing that until I got them all in. By that time our machinist's mate on board had hand-made a steam valve

that worked enough to get us underway. So we were right on the ragged edge of doing that, and part of my job was getting the after lines off and getting us underway. I also got the torpedo directors checked out because I thought those transports were out there, and we'd just get out to the entrance, and I'd have to be a hero and launch my torpedoes. Maybe that's what I'd hoped, but I thought that was pretty real at the time.

I remember one incident with the commander on the Dobbin. See, I still was running around in my skivvies --well, really, my pajama bottoms and my shoes--and this guy called down off of the Dobbin and told me I had to get in uniform, or he was going to put me on report. This is while bombs are still dropping, smoke is still coming up, all kinds of stuff (chuckle).

Marcello: And what was your reaction?

Kirk: (Chuckle) I ignored him totally and went on about my business.

Marcello: In the meantime, I'm assuming that the skipper is not aboard.

Kirk: No, no, the skipper is not aboard. Canty took us out.

Marcello: How long did it take you to get out once you had rigged the--what was it--the valve cover?

Kirk: Oh, it was the main steam valve.

Marcello: Yes.

Kirk: You know, it's the one that's behind the big wheel, and

they make the props turn over. Well, see, once you're underway, it's like a new world. I think maybe getting out of that harbor is still a half-hour run--I don't know--and one of our sister ships in going out had seen a two-man sub and rammed it. I think the Dale might have done that. Again, I'm not sure of the names, but one of them did it. We went out shortly after he did, and not knowing what else to do--because there weren't any big ships that were out--most of the destroyers that got out there just picked up patrols around Oahu and the islands. We didn't get out very far.

Marcello: What I was asking awhile ago or what I had reference to was, how long does it usually take a destroyer under normal conditions to get up steam to move out? If you go by the book, how long does it normally take?

Kirk: About a half-hour.

Marcello: And how long did it take you that day to get up enough steam to get out?

Kirk: Certainly not a half-hour. I think maybe it was half that. You can do it in less time, but you're in danger of burning a hole in the boiler tubes when you crank it up too fast.

Marcello: Especially when you are starting from "cold iron" like you guys were.

Kirk: Yes, like we were.

Marcello: I also think that it is kind of a tribute to that



machinist's mate to have rigged up that part.

Kirk: Fantastic!

Marcello: .to get you out of there.

Kirk: You know, I don't remember the guy's name, but now he is one of the guys that would always come back a little drunk. He had been promoted to chief maybe six times and busted back to first class machinist's mate. He had an ingenious way of storing his booze at sea, which I found, but I didn't ever make him quit doing it. You know, in one of the stanchions down there in his living quarters, he tapped a hole in the bottom and one in the top, and he'd fill that with booze and throw the jugs over the side; so by the time he went to sea, he was living amid a stanchion full of booze (chuckle)--everyplace, like a forest! (Chuckle) he would undo the little knot at the bottom and draw a glass, and that's it. But he's the one that fixed the damned steam valve. It's been a moral lesson to me. See, I've worked with guys all my life, and I'm convinced that only the Lord know the good ones from the bad ones. We don't. We never would. You got as many that look like heroes that are complete failures as vice versa.

Marcello: It's like you mentioned earlier in the interview. Those were the kinds of guys that you could ill-afford to lose in combat or anytime.

Kirk: And, you know, they gave him hell all the time, and that

guy still loved getting that thing ready and out. His sense of duty was unbelievable!

Marcello: So what did the Dewey do once it cleared the harbor and was out thrashing around?

Kirk: Well, (chuckle) we had a big coffee klatch in the wardroom. First, we had everybody on watch, and part of what we had to do was also put the arming mechanisms on the "ash cans" in case we had to depth-bomb any subs we contacted. We had enough crew to man everything in a skeleton sense. We found there weren't any transports, but we found it was true the Japs had some two-man subs around, and we didn't know how many other submarines they had. I think later on it was proven they didn't have many, that that was kind of a fiasco from a Jap operational point of view. But it was alarming in a destroyer in the sense that my bunk was only five feet from the water, and I could easily imagine a torpedo coming through that thin steel and coming to rest on my stomach. So by nightfall I'd worked up such a case that I wouldn't sleep below decks. I took my life jackets and spread them out behind the stack and slept topside until it was my time to go on watch. Really, all we did was patrol back and forth in front of Waikiki and all the way around to the northern tip of Oahu, and then everybody sort of regrouped and went back in the next day.

Marcello: Describe what you saw when you entered the harbor the next day? First of all, what was the condition of the water?

Kirk: All kinds of debris and heavy fuel oil--just like what you see in the movies when a ship has sunk.

Marcello: I've heard people say that the water in the harbor before the attack was relatively clean and clear given the amount of ship traffic that was in and out of there.

Kirk: Oh, yes, you could swim in it easy. It was that clear. If you've never been around fuel oil, it makes a tarry mess, and it will burn.

Marcello: This is bunker oil, is it not?

Kirk: Yes, and it will burn forever. So as I went in to get my commissary supplies for us to get underway for real--we were supposed to join the Yorktown, I think it was--I remember the awesome look of all those battleships on fire during the whole thing. They still hadn't put any of the fires out. The Oklahoma was lying on its side; the Arizona was sunk out of sight except for the front mast.

Of course, my first thought was that "I'm glad it happened in the sense that we can get it over with now. None of us, I'm sure, knew how long it would be, and none of us had any doubt we would eventually beat them. But that's such a depressing sight. Again, you know, I can only liken it to the depression that I felt with the

A-bomb [weeping]. And I mean the practice ones later on at Los Alamos. I was one of the blessed ones in the sense that I lost some classmates but I didn't really lose any of my closest friends. A lot of them were on the right ships to get hurt, and one of them lost a leg and kept shooting, anyway.

Marcello: When did the Dewey get out of Pearl on some sort of a specific mission?

Kirk: Gee, it couldn't have been more than three or four days later. I don't know. I remember that by Christmas Eve we were running screen for the Yorktown, and Wake Island was in trouble. I did have a personal buddy that had been sent to Wake--he was a Marine flier--so I was anxious for us to go in there and get their tails out of there. I remember on Christmas Eve the blow that they gave us when they told us we had to turn around and go back to Pearl. We couldn't afford to risk an aircraft carrier. I suppose that about that time I didn't figure that the Navy would ever come get me, either. I believe it to this day. I don't say it slows me down any, but, you know, if the North Vietnamese had picked me up in Vietnam, nobody would have come got me, either, except my "spook" buddies.

Marcello: How long did you remain aboard the Dewey?

Kirk: Whatever the date of Attu is. I think that was 1943, wasn't it, or the winter between 1942 and 1943? I think

we got leaky seams from the near misses at Guadalcanal, and then we got patched up in San Francisco and sent to the Aleutians to escort those Army guys into Attu. At that point, they transferred me to the torpedo school in Honolulu, and from there I went back to flight training. I spent about a year in flight training and then went back out in early 1945, and I was on the Essex flying with the fighter-bomber outfit and was trying to get my share of the kamikazes and the the (chuckle) rest of the Japanese.

Marcello: What particular aircraft were you flying?

Kirk: Well, at that time it was the Corsair, F-4U. I flew the F-4F, F-6F, and F-4U. During the Korean War, I got to be skipper of an F-9F squadron.

Marcello: Is there anything else to the Pearl Harbor attack, Mr. Kirk, that you wish to talk about or you think we need to get as part of the record?

Kirk: Well, (chuckle) I can tell you a tale that happens to be true. I can remember when the B-17s came in to land at Hickham.

Marcello: It was during the attack. That's for sure!

Kirk: Yes, right. I think it was during the second attack.

Marcello: It was.

Kirk: I remember. .here's this group of airplanes--I think there might have been six or eight of them; I'm not sure how many--and as soon as they got within sight, every

ship opened up on them instead of counting the engines and seeing that they were our own bombers. So they went steaming around trying to stay out of the range of the ships that were still shooting, and they came around to Hickham Field. Well, by the time they get to Hickham, they are awful close because there's just no way they can stay that far away. But the tenders are always...they were kind of ridiculous, and I guess today they might get insulted on what I'm about to say, but they don't have any gunnery capability. You know, they had a 3-inch gun that's almost like a muzzle loader. It's okay for saluting, but it won't hurt anything. For some reason that chief gunner had decided that he was going to shoot at those B-17s because he thought they were Japanese, like everybody else. So I went around and tried to get our guys to knock off shooting. By that time we had counted the engines, plus we got the word over the radio. Then finally every ship in the harbor shut down except this one gun on the Dobbin, and it kept going BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! I personally sent one of my gunner's mates over there and said, "Tap that guy on the shoulder and tell him, for Christ's sake, those are our airplanes!" The guy came back, and he was still going BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! I said, "What the hell happened?" The kid said, "Well, Mr. Kirk, I told him they're our airplanes, but he says, 'Hell, I can't hit

them, anyway!' and he kept shooting.

Marcello: (Chuckle) It looked like he needed to have something to do to get rid of his frustrations.

Kirk: I guess I don't know of anything else. That's why I say my part of it was so insignificant. Of course, it's strictly an emotional thing with all of the guys that did survive that thing.

Marcello: Well, I want to thank you very much for having participated. I'm glad that we were able to get this interview in before I left Austin.

Kirk: Well, you are certainly welcome. I hope it is of some help to you.

Marcello: You've said a lot of interesting and important things, really.

Kirk: I don't know if they bear on Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: I'm sure that students and scholars will be able to use this information.