

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
770

I n t e r v i e w w i t h
LAWRENCE KLOEPPEL
S e p t e m b e r 1 7 , 1 9 8 8

Place of Interview: Cape Girardeau, Missouri

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Terms of Use: OPEN

Approved: Lawrence S. Kloppel
(Signature)

Date: 9-17-88

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Oral History Collection

Lawrence Kloeppe1

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello Date: September 17, 1988

Place of Interviewer: Cape Girardeau, Missouri

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Lawrence Kloeppe1 for the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on September 17, 1988, in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I'm interviewing Mr. Kloeppe1 in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was aboard the target battleship USS Utah during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Kloeppe1, 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, and that kind of information.

Mr. Kloeppe1: I was born at Dixon, Missouri, on June 29, 1922.

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

Mr. Kloeppe1: A high school education.

Dr. Marcello: Okay, and when did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Kloeppe1: In 1940.

Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Kloeppel: I went in the Naval Reserves on the first of July, 1941.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Naval Reserves in 1941?

Kloeppel: Well, it was a little supplement to poor wages at the time (chuckle).

Marcello: Did the draft have anything to do with your joining the Reserves?

Kloeppel: No. No, I wasn't of draft age.

Marcello: Now at that time, when you joined the Naval Reserves, what kind of boot training or preliminary training did you undergo?

Kloeppel: They sent us on March 27, 1941, to what they called a Reserve unit there in Saint Louis for a year of active duty, supposedly, which lasted longer. They sent us to San Diego, California. We left Saint Louis at midnight, Friday night, the 27th, if I remember right, and we went through six weeks of boot camp at the San Diego Naval Station.

Marcello: At that point were you still a member of the Reserves, or had you been brought over into the Regular Navy?

Kloeppel: I was still a member of the Reserves. I went all the way through as a Reserve unit.

Marcello: So from the day that you joined until you got your discharge, you were a member of the Reserves.

Kloeppel: Yes, I stayed in a Naval Reserve unit all the way through.

Marcello: You mentioned that boot camp lasted six weeks at that time.

Kloeppel: It was a six-week deal at that time.

Marcello: Evidently, they were wanting to get people out into the fleet pretty quickly because that was a considerable decrease in the amount of time spent in boot camp.

Kloeppel: Right, it was. And that was the purpose of it, because they needed to run them through. They had more of them coming through, and they needed the barracks (chuckle) and the grounds for new recruits coming in.

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

Kloeppel: I would say it was a normal deal. It was a shortened time period in there.

Marcello: Describe the process, Mr. Kloeppel, by which you got aboard the target battleship Utah?

Kloeppel: Well, after boot camp I went on a patrol boat in the harbor at San Diego for a month or so, and then I was assigned to the USS Utah. And we went...I can't even remember the name of the...it was an old scow of some type (chuckle). We went from San Diego--up the beach--to San Francisco, and I boarded the Utah in San Francisco. That was in September of 1941.

Marcello: Give me a physical description of the Utah when you went

aboard it in 1941, and describe what its purpose and function was.

Kloeppel: When I went aboard, I really didn't know what it was all about. They had steel houses built over what few remaining guns was left on it, and they also had two layers of timbers all over the deck, and I soon found out what that was for. It was to be used as a target ship, and after we got out to Pearl, all the branches of the services used it for target practice by dropping bombs on it with dye in them. Evidently, each pilot had a different color, or each squadron--I don't remember how--and after they would make their runs, we would go out and find the little spots where the bombs of dye hit. That's the way they knew who scored and who didn't and how accurate they were.

Marcello: When you went aboard the Utah, what was your function? What was your responsibility? Where were you assigned?

Kloeppel: I was in the deck force.

Marcello: And at that time, what did the deck force consist of aboard the Utah? I know in general what a deck force does aboard most ships, but what was its function aboard the Utah?

Kloeppel: Well, there really wasn't that much to it because everything was covered up. There wasn't that much, and the crew was small. There really wasn't that much maintenance to it other than standing watches and things

in that category. There wasn't really too much to do except being aboard ship.

Marcello: What sort of reception did you receive as a member of the Reserves? I know sometimes there are some hard feelings between Regular Navy people and Reserves. I was wondering what happened in your case?

Kloeppel: There was twelve of us that more or less knew one another when we went aboard. We later became known as the "Dirty Dozen. You might have heard this before (chuckle).

Marcello: No.

Kloeppel: We didn't have too much trouble. You know, there is always safety in numbers (laughter).

Marcello: Now after you went aboard the Utah, did it then move very shortly out to Pearl Harbor?

Kloeppel: If I remember right, it was the next day or two that we were underway for Pearl.

Marcello: Now when you went aboard the Utah, we're really getting into the countdown toward December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point--and let's assume that we have you out at Pearl Harbor--is to take me through a typical training exercise in which the Utah would participate in that period before December 7

Kloeppel: Well, we would go out to sea, and it was used as a target ship.

Marcello: Was there a particular day of the week when you would go

out?

Kloeppel: Well, if I could recall, right it didn't very. When we came into port, it was usually on the weekend. So we would be out to sea the greater part of the week, and normally we came in the port on the weekend.

Marcello: So if anybody were watching the movement of the fleet, after a while they could see a particular pattern relative to the Utah at least.

Kloeppel: I would say so. I would say so.

Marcello: Okay, when you went out on one of these training exercises, exactly what would take place? First of all, would you be out there alone?

Kloeppel: You wouldn't be out in the outside. You would be inside whenever they would be making their bombing runs.

Marcello: I'm sorry. When the Utah itself left port to engage in one of these exercises, would the Utah itself be out in the sea by itself.

Kloeppel: More or less, it would be. There would probably be some coming and going and so on and so forth, but I would say on the average it would be out there by itself. We weren't that far out to sea, just out of the sight of land and that's about it.

Marcello: Okay, take me through one of these training exercises. How would it work?

Kloeppel: Well, it would be just like if you'd have sounded General Quarters. Everybody would have to be on the

inside as these bombing runs were taking place. They were dangerous if you happened to get one dropped on you, although they wouldn't damage the ship or anything like that. It would make a splintered spot on the timbers that was on the deck. Naturally, they had the steel housing built over the remaining few guns that was on it. Other than that, that was about all there was to it--just the time waiting until they got through with their runs and then the count afterwards.

Marcello: And would you participate in the count afterwards?

Kloeppel: Right.

Marcello: Did you have a particular battle station aboard the Utah?

Kloeppel: I'll tell you right now that I couldn't tell you if I did or not. I really don't remember if I did.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you in your position detect any changes at all in the training routine of the Utah?

Kloeppel: Not really. The only thing that I have often wondered about since, which I always thought was against Navy regulations, is to be out at sea with your double bottoms open, which we were. I understand that maybe several of the other ships were doing the same thing--getting ready for admiral's inspection (chuckle). I always had my doubts on that story as to why that was.

Marcello: But even when you were out to sea, you had the double bottoms open.

Kloeppel: We did have at least part of them open, and I think that was against all Navy regulations, to be out at sea with double bottoms open.

Marcello: Talk a little bit about shipboard life on the Utah. Describe what your living quarters were like.

Kloeppel: Well, naturally, this was an old, old ship, and we were a long way from being modern. The paint on the bulkheads and stuff, there's no doubt in my mind that some of that paint was at least three-quarters of an inch thick with every color you could think of (chuckle) if you peeled into it. Other than that, I expect it was more or less routine with your mess halls and your heads, your so-called showers, and so on. But it was an old, old ship.

Marcello: Did you sleep in bunks or hammocks?

Kloeppel: Bunks. We slept in bunks.

Marcello: How was food served aboard the Utah? Was it family-style or cafeteria-style?

Kloeppel: It was cafeteria-style.

Marcello: Did you have to take a turn at mess cooking when you went aboard?

Kloeppel: Well, I got my time in on the peeling potatoes deal, although, like I said, I wasn't on it long enough to really get into too much of that stuff.

Marcello: I heard that a lot of times the regulars would really give the reserves the sorriest, dirtiest, least desirable jobs on a ship. Did you detect that to be the case on the Utah?

Kloeppel: Personally, I didn't. I didn't see where I was doing anything different than anybody else aboard ship. Like I said, it was a small crew, and we did have several reserves on there.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Utah?

Kloeppel: I can't remember that it was bad, but I can't remember that it was anything extra good, either.

Marcello: Let us assume that the Utah has come in on a weekend. Describe for me how the liberty routine worked for you personally once the Utah was in.

Kloeppel: Well, I know we had at least one day of it, one afternoon or evening and night, and I don't remember exactly what time we had to be back aboard ship anymore.

Marcello: Was it a port and starboard liberty?

Kloeppel: I don't really remember whether it was or not. It could have very well been. I really don't remember.

Marcello: I'm assuming from what you said that you had to be back aboard ship by midnight, perhaps, unless you had some address ashore.

Kloeppel: I think it was something on that order. I can't remember exactly what the deal was, but I know some of them did stay overnight. I never did stay overnight.

The time they actually came back in, I don't remember; but I would say it was probably been twelve or one o'clock.

Marcello: Do you recall what your rank was at the time of the attack?

Kloeppel: I was seaman second class.

Marcello: And what were you striking for?

Kloeppel: At that time there wasn't anything going. The ratings hadn't really opened up, and there were competitive exams all over the fleet.

Marcello: So you were still essentially in the deck force at the time of the attack.

Kloeppel: Right.

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

Kloeppel: Well, about what any other sailor would do, I guess (chuckle).

Marcello: Would you like to be more specific?

Kloeppel: Well, to tell you the truth about it, we spent a lot of time in taverns, beer gardens, and so on and so forth. We did do some sightseeing. There was a gentleman who, I understand, had been a big partner in the Brown Shoe Company, that was retired out there, and his pastime was taking a group--what he could pile in his car--and drive them all around the island on sightseeing tours for free. You know, it was just have something for him to

do, and it was good for us (chuckle). I can't remember what his name was. I know he had been with the Brown Shoe Company.

Marcello: And I guess the significance there is that the Brown Shoe Company had its home office in Saint Louis, and most of you guys were from Saint Louis or the surrounding area.

Kloeppel: Right.

Marcello: Of what significance were Hotel and Canal Street so far as the sailors liberty routine was concerned?

Kloeppel: Well, I guess every sailor hit it at some time or the other while he was in there. You didn't really have transportation to do anything other than the main drags, and that was about as far as you ever went.

Marcello: What kind of establishments were there on Hotel and Canal Streets?

Kloeppel: Just about anything you were looking for (chuckle).

Marcello: I'm assuming that's everything from houses of prostitution to tattoo parlors and everything in between.

Kloeppel: That's right. A lot of tattoo parlors and plenty of prostitutes (chuckle).

Marcello: I know that after the war, at least, there were always long lines outside those houses of prostitution. What was it like before the war?

Kloeppel: Well, at that time, actually, it wasn't really that bad.

There weren't that many sailors in at the same time. I never did witness any line-ups.

Marcello: Generally speaking, on a weekend is it your understanding that most of the ships would be in?

Kloeppel: A lot of the times they would be, but I would say they didn't always all come in. Yes, I would say the majority of them would be in on the weekend.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and, of course, we want to go into this in as much detail as you can remember. When you and your buddies sat around in bull sessions, did the subject of war with Japan or even an attack at Pearl Harbor come up in any of your conversations?

Kloeppel: Oh, yes, it would come up. It would come up. There was rumors of all types. There was rumors going. As a matter of fact, there was rumors going, and prostitutes would even mention which day it was supposed to be, which came out to be (chuckle).

Marcello: You mean that some of the guys had heard from prostitutes that something was going to happen on December 7?

Kloeppel: That's right. That rumor floated. That makes you think about a lot of different things.

Marcello: How much credibility did you give to such a rumor, that is, that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor?

Kloeppel: On the particular day?

Marcello: Yes.

Kloeppel: None.

Marcello: Or even anytime.

Kloeppel: Well, it was a possibility, but you would think really in the back of your mind, "No, it can't be. They couldn't get in here. But they did. It seems to me as though there was a little bit of lack of judgment somewhere along the line because they did get in.

Marcello: We should have talked about this earlier, and I'm sure it will come up again as the interview proceeds. With somebody who perhaps was unfamiliar with the specifics of the Utah, what would the ship look like from the air if one were flying over the Utah. What might one think it looked like?

Kloeppel: Well, it was still one of the older ships. It still had the crow's nest. I would imagine it could possibly look like a flattop in one sense of the way on account of the timbers and the metal over the guns and stuff. From the air it could look flat.

Marcello: If somebody were flying over it at a rather high rate of speed perhaps and had really never seen the Utah up close, it could have looked like a carrier.

Kloeppel: It could have.

Marcello: And, of course, we know that that's what the Japanese were hoping would be in port that day.

Kloeppel: Well, my understanding is that the Lexington was

supposed to have been tied up where we were berthed.

Marcello: Okay, when you came in that weekend of December 7, where did you tie up?

Kloeppel: The exact berth place, I couldn't tell you. It was on the other side of the Ford Island from the Arizona. They were practically directly across from one another.

Marcello: I'm assuming, then, since Ford Island was between you and the Arizona, kind of, that you really didn't see the rest of the battleships from where you were.

Kloeppel: Not really, not really.

Marcello: And you say that you were tied up in the spot where the Lexington allegedly would have been tied up.

Kloeppel: That's my understanding. The Lexington was supposed to have berthed in there, but they didn't come in, so we tied up in there.

Marcello: Was it a Friday when you came in?

Kloeppel: If I remember right, it was on a Friday evening.

Marcello: Describe what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941.

Kloeppel: Normal everyday routine.

Marcello: Did you have liberty?

Kloeppel: I think I did. I think I did have liberty that day, and I was back aboard again.

Marcello: How would you get from the Utah on to the beach?

Kloeppel: We had liberty launches, they called them, over to the receiving station, and from there on you go on your own.

Marcello: Was the receiving station more or less on the same side...

Kloeppel: Same side of the island?

Marcello: ...that you were?

Kloeppel: If I recall, I think it was.

Marcello: And then would you take a taxi or something from there?

Kloeppel: They had buses going in. They had buses on a little two-lane narrow road that ran on in down into Honolulu.

Marcello: I know that one of the first stops for the taxis, I think, was across the street from the YMCA, and across from the YMCA was the Black Cat Cafe. Had you ever been in there?

Kloeppel: Yes, I have. I've been in there.

Marcello: What was the attraction of the Black Cat Cafe?

Kloeppel: Well, there was plenty of girls in there and so on and so forth. I mean, you could just make it whatever you wanted to.

Marcello: It wasn't really a house of prostitution, though, was it?

Kloeppel: No, no, it wasn't.

Marcello: My understanding is that it simply, among other things, was the first spot that one would hit after getting off the taxi or whatever at the YMCA.

Kloeppel: If you went on in, there was a lot of beer gardens outside at the different places down there, and there was a lot of servicemen who spent a lot of time in those

beer gardens and the different places around there.

Marcello: Did each ship kind of have its favorite beer garden that it would go to?

Kloepfel: They possibly did, but, like I said, we weren't in there that long to where you really got the pattern of what was going on in there. Until the war started, you really didn't get into the pattern that much.

Marcello: You mentioned that you had liberty on Saturday, December 6. Did anything eventful happen that night that you remember after you got back aboard?

Kloepfel: No, not that I can remember for sure. I remember being in a beer garden, and I can remember I learned one thing that day about the sunshine and sitting out in the beer garden. If you was out in the sun, it would knock the hoot out of you if you sat there and drank awhile.

Marcello: So you came back aboard ship with a good sunburn?

Kloepfel: (Chuckle) I had a pretty good sunburn, and also it had a drastic effect when you tried to get up after you sat there and drank awhile sitting in that sun.

Marcello: So are you saying you went back aboard the Utah in not too good a shape.

Kloepfel: That would probably be about right.

Marcello: And you seem to be a rather fair-skinned individual, so I'm sure the sun would have hit especially hard.

Kloepfel: (Laughter) Yes, you're right.

Marcello: Okay, you're back aboard the Utah feeling no pain, and

you hit the sack. Let's talk about that Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. Describe what takes place so far as you personally remember.

Kloeppel: Well, I know I was getting ready to go over on the beach and go to church, and I was down below decks by my locker.

Marcello: At approximately what time was this?

Kloeppel: I forget now exactly what time the launch was taking our church party over, but I know we had to be ready to go somewhere around 8:00, right after colors, and I was down there. In fact, I was dressed and I was standing by my locker.

Marcello: How far down in the ship were you? Do you recall which deck you were on?

Kloeppel: I think I was on the second deck down. If I can remember right where our lockers were, I was on the second deck down. My memory is terrible on some of this stuff. When the first torpedo hit us and...now whether it was when the second torpedo hit us...but before we realized what was going on, we decided to get out of there.

Marcello: Describe the sensation when either one or two torpedoes slammed into the Utah at that time. Again, it took those torpedoes in rather quick succession, did it not?

Kloeppel: It did; it did.

Marcello: Okay, describe the sensation.

Kloeppel: Well, you got a fairly good jolt out of it as they hit.

Marcello: Was it more thud as opposed to a loud noise?

Kloeppel: Yes, it was a dead thud. I remember locking the locker.

Marcello: Did it not knock you off your feet or anything like that?

Kloeppel: No, no. Like I said, I was fully dressed in my whites, and I started out. When I got on the first deck below, I met a buddy of mine coming down from the main deck on topside, and I asked him, "Where are you going?" Part of his battle station was to close watertight doors and hatches and stuff. He says, "To close the watertight compartments down below. I said, "To hell with that!" There was water already coming in. The ship was already...in just a matter of minutes, it was already listing.

Marcello: Listing?

Kloeppel: And the water was coming in on that first deck down. I said, "To hell with them!" I kept going and went out; and he kept going the other way, and he's still there.

Marcello: Now let me ask you this. Had General Quarters sounded?

Kloeppel: Yes.

Marcello: And how was General Quarters sounded aboard the Utah? Do you remember?

Kloeppel: To tell you the truth, I don't really remember. I don't know if it was done by bugler. I really don't remember, but I know General Quarters had sounded.

Marcello: In the meantime, have any more torpedoes hit the Utah?

Kloeppe: As far as I know, two. As far as I knew, two of them hit it.

Marcello: Like you say, at this stage the Utah was wide-open in terms of doors and hatches and watertight integrity in general.

Kloeppe: Right.

Marcello: Okay, so the water is already coming in. Is this just a gradual thing, or is it coming in pretty fast?

Kloeppe: Pretty fast, pretty fast. Fast enough that you wanted out.

Marcello: Okay, were you getting wet?

Kloeppe: No.

Marcello: Okay, describe what happens then.

Kloeppe: Well, when I got up on the main deck, they were strafing some places right around us, and the planes were coming in pretty low. By that time I was trying to decide which way to go, since they had abandoned ship. I decided to figure out which way I was going to go off. You couldn't go off on the list because you knew it would suck you under when it sank. So I tried to get up on the high side. Well, the timbers started moving. You might say I was crawling up that way.

Marcello: Estimate this if you can. How much of a degree of a list.

Kloeppe: The main deck was already dipping water.

Marcello: On the one side. So we are talking at least maybe..

Kloppel: Forty-five degrees at least.

Marcello: About a forty-five-degree list. Okay, how large are these timbers that are beginning to move?

Kloppel: If I remember right, they were eight-by-eight. If I remember right, they were eight-by-eight.

Marcello: Eight inches by eight feet?

Kloppel: Eight inches square.

Marcello: I see.

Kloppel: I don't remember what length they were.

Marcello: Okay, eight inches square.

Kloppel: They had two layers of them.

Marcello: Almost like a railroad tie.

Kloppel: Right. Well, that's always how I referred to them-- railroad ties.

Marcello: Okay, so you are in essence crawling up the deck, and these timbers are beginning to shift (chuckle).

Kloppel: They are beginning to move.

Marcello: Okay, describe what happens.

Kloppel: Well, when I got to the life line up there, I could see sailors up on the bow. Well, the way a ship is built, it would get to a point up on the bow and then it bellies out again. From where I was standing at the life line up there, some of them was going over, and I knew when they went over, they couldn't clear that bulge, which they didn't clear. It just splattered them

because they couldn't clear it. It was laying over, and then that big bulge was there. From where I was at, I was more or less midships, maybe just a little bit toward the stern. They had what they called a blister that kind of acted like armor on them ships, and I thought, "Well, the best thing for me to do is to slide down to that blister, which was a pretty good ledge. I slid down on that blister, and I guess you would call my next move a little Navy discipline--I pulled my jumper off and folded the thing.

Marcello: You folded the jumper?

Kloeppel: Folded it (chuckle) and let down on the blister and took my shoes off and set them down (chuckle) by my jumper. I left my pants on, and I had a T-shirt on, and that's when I went in. I was dumb. I went in head first, and it was a pretty good distance down to the water.

Marcello: How far was it from the deck down to this blister?

Kloeppel: I can't really remember. I know I went on the life line and hung on to it and just let myself drop down to it.

Marcello: And about how long would have been the length of the life line?

Kloeppel: The life line there? Do you mean on the main deck?

Marcello: Yes. I mean, when you say life line, was there one all the way around the deck?

Kloeppel: Around the ship.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Kloppel: There wasn't no life line down. It was a line on the ship.

Marcello: So you in essence jumped from the life line down to the blister.

Kloppel: Down to that blister.

Marcello: Was it around ten feet.

Kloppel: I would say it was probably around that--somewhere in that order. I can't really remember how far it was.

Marcello: So you're on this blister, which kind of protrudes around the hull of the ship.

Kloppel: Yes.

Marcello: And you dive into the water. How far was the dive?

Kloppel: That was good dive. It was a good dive because I didn't think I was ever going to find any bottom, which I didn't, and I didn't think I was ever going to start coming back up. But my bad part of the whole deal is that I lacked about an inch or two of dying right there. When I finally came up and just kind of just broke water more or less, I know the man that done it came feet first. But he caught me just far enough down on my butt that it didn't brake my back, but it took me right back down, and that's when I thought I was going (chuckle) to drown. But if he would have hit just slightly higher, he would have broke my back. That was actually about the worse deal I had out of the whole thing.

Marcello: In the meantime, had Abandon Ship sounded?

Kloppel: Yes, it had been sounded. It had sounded before I went off.

Marcello: Okay, so you come up. This other person was jumping in the water, and he hit you on your lower back. You go down under, and you come up again.

Kloppel: And by that time I didn't have no air left (chuckle).

Marcello: Now what is the condition of the water itself? Has the oil and so on spread over the water?

Kloppel: There was oil on it, and it wasn't really that bad yet. But it had some oil skim on it already. So I headed for Ford Island.

Marcello: Which was how far away?

Kloppel: Well, it wasn't that far, but it was still a good swim. I can't say just how far it really was.

Marcello: Now you went off the ship on the side that would be closest to Ford Island.

Kloppel: Right.

Marcello: Okay, are we talking of a swim of around fifty yards?

Kloppel: I would say something on that order. I would say it was something on that order. It wasn't just a whole great distance, but it was still a pretty good distance over there.

Marcello: What problems were there, if any, in swimming that distance?

Kloppel: They were still strafing. They were still strafing. They were still strafing the sailors that was in the

water.

Marcello: Did you have to go under anytime while you were going ashore?

Kloeppel: I don't think I ever did, because whenever they came over strafing, you'd just go under. I don't remember ever going under for it.

Marcello: Are there other people in the water with you swimming toward Ford Island?

Kloeppel: Oh, yes, there were some more of them.

Marcello: In the meantime, how is your back?

Kloeppel: Well, I never thought too much about it until I got over on the beach. Like I said, he hit me in a good spot because it really never did bother me that much. He hit me down low enough to where he took my butt end and took me right straight back down with him. But he got close. I don't know who the gentleman was that done it, but I'm glad he hit me where he did (chuckle). And it was a good thing he came off feet first and not head first. I found out later that you don't ever go off head first. I found out later that you don't ever go off head first.

Marcello: About how long did it take you to get ashore?

Kloeppel: I would say maybe fifteen minutes or something on that order.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when you get ashore?

Kloeppel: There was an ammunition dump there. We had some planes sitting on the runway right there, too. We went into

them, and they had a little cover there. Well, the first thing, I went down in there because you had a little head cover, and then it took a little bit for it to sink in as to where I was I was standing (chuckle). I don't know if that was the best place to be, but it was never hit.

Marcello: And how long did you remain there?

Kloeppel: We stayed around in that area there--me and another kid --until their last runs was over, which was around 11:00, if I remember right--when they made their last passes over. As the old saying goes, you're supposed to turn into your nearest station in a deal like that. Well, I was barefooted, had a pair of pants on and a T-shirt. The T-shirt was kind of cruddy. It had a little oil and stuff on it, so I threw it away. We decided we really wasn't too anxious about turning in anywhere for the day, so we didn't.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. While you're there under that sheltered overhang and the attack is going on, what do you observe? What were you able to see out there?

Kloeppel: Well, you could see the smoke and stuff coming from the Battleship Row right there on the other side of the island. You could see just a lot of smoke. Everywhere you wanted to look you saw a lot of smoke.

Marcello: What was happening on Ford Island itself?

Kloeppel: It was just a mad scramble. People were going here and

there, and nobody knew where they were going. You had your launches out there after they finally quit altogether--I guess there might have been some launches out there in the meantime--getting some bodies out of the water. I know that when they came in that evening, they had...I don't know where they got them all, whether they were all pulled out of the water or whether some of them was taken off some of the ships, but they had launches where they had plenty of bodies with them.

Marcello: In the meantime, while you're still under this shelter, what are you and your buddy talking about?

Kloeppel: Well, the one thing we talked about...we talked about whether we was going to turn ourselves in that night, which we didn't. We decided not to, and then after we didn't, we got worried about getting court-martialed, so we didn't turn in until the following Sunday (chuckle). We can get over to receiving station, and we eat over there. Nobody ever asked any questions. We were still running around barefooted with just a pair of pants on, but nobody asked any questions.

Marcello: So you remained there at that shelter most of the day?

Kloeppel: No, we went to a metal building. That's where we'd sleep--inside this metal building. That first night it was kind of noisy around. People were trigger-happy, and you'd hear somebody cut one loose once in a while. But other than that, we just roamed on Ford Island there

and over to the receiving station for a week.

Marcello: So nobody really ran into you or anything there at that metal shack?

Kloeppel: There was people around there all the time, but nobody ever asked any questions until the following Sunday when we ate our breakfast at the receiving station. So we decided we'd turn in. Well, we done it right there at the receiving station, and they never did ask any questions. Nobody ever did ask a question about it-- where we were at, how come we didn't turn in before. But about two hours after we turned ourselves in, we were assigned to the USS Minneapolis.

Marcello: So what did you do during that period between December 7 and December 14? You simply slept there at that metal shack?

Kloeppel: We slept there on the ground in that metal shack and just roamed the island until the following Sunday.

Marcello: Did you ever have a chance to get any clean clothes or to shower or bathe?

Kloeppel: I still had the same clothes when I boarded the Minneapolis that (chuckle) I got off the Utah with.

Marcello: In the meantime, while you're roaming around, did you have a chance to get a good look at Battleship Row?

Kloeppel: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what you saw over there when you had a chance to look at it with some amount of objectivity.

Kloeppel: Well, it was quite a mess. The Arizona was still settling down. In fact, we went aboard. We went aboard the main deck of it one day. I don't remember which day it was.

Marcello: How did that come about?

Kloeppel: I don't really remember how we got on there, but I know they still had bodies laying in there.

Marcello: Did you go over there mainly out of curiosity?

Kloeppel: Right. That was the main thing--curiosity, to just see just what it looked like. A lot of the whole day and the whole week was like a big dream. Some of it you think sometimes couldn't happen. It was kind of a confusing situation.

Marcello: Was the Arizona still smoking or smoldering when you went aboard?

Kloeppel: Yes. The oil was still burning on the water around it.

Marcello: I'm sure that, considering your age and so on, it was quite a shock to see those bodies.

Kloeppel: Right, it was. Yes, it was an experience.

Marcello: What did you think when you saw what had happened to your ship?

Kloeppel: Actually, by the time I got over to the island, by the time I got done swimming over to the island, it was already gone. You could see part of the bottom sticking out; it had already capsized. In fact, I think it took less...I would venture to say that it was about eight

minutes from the time the first torpedo hit until it turned over.

Marcello: Did you ever think that you could have been inside?

Kloepfel: Well, it never entered my mind, really, but, yes, you could have been; but it never did really enter my mind that I would have been inside of it. What bothered me for a long time was this one friend of mine that I met coming down the ladder. I was going up on the main deck, and he was going down. I knew that if he went down, he wasn't coming back, which he didn't.

Marcello: Going back to that night of December 7, you mentioned that you and your friend were in this metal shack. What did you talk about at that point?

Kloepfel: I really don't remember, but I imagine there was probably all kinds of topics of conversation without a doubt. But I really don't remember just exactly what we did do.

Marcello: Were you the only two people in that shack?

Kloepfel: No, there was some more around there.

Marcello: Were there any rumors getting around as to what was going to happen next?

Kloepfel: Well, naturally, there was rumors there that afternoon that the Japanese...somebody would come up with the rumor that they had already landed on the other side of the island. Now that persisted for several days, that they were going to or they had landed. In my own

opinion, I don't think anything would have kept them from it if they'd come in. I don't think there would have been anything that would have kept them from making a landing.

Marcello: During this period, I'm assuming that you had not received any kind of a weapon.

Kloeppel: No.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that the next Sunday, you finally reported and very shortly after that you were assigned to the USS Minneapolis, which, I'm assuming, was a cruiser.

Kloeppel: Right, a heavy cruiser.

Marcello: When did you get a shower and a shave (chuckle) and new clothing and so on?

Kloeppel: That night, that night. First thing, when we went aboard ship, we got on a working party. Right at that time, they were loading a bunch of these acetylene tanks. I don't know what they weighed, but they're not light. They had a pretty good string of us there, and each of us had one on our shoulders when we were walking up the ramp. The ol' boy in front of me dropped one, just turned it loose, and it came back, and I've still got a big deal on my toenail where it just buckled it up and practically took it off. Anyway, I didn't have to worry about wearing shoes for a long time after that. In fact, it was April before I finally put a shoe on

that foot.

Marcello: You were still aboard...

Kloppel: ...still on the Minneapolis.

Marcello: You were still aboard the Minneapolis. When was it that the Minneapolis...well, let me ask you this. Did that end your deal on the working party that night?

Kloppel: Yes, it sure did.

Marcello: Did they put you in sickbay or anything of that nature?

Kloppel: No. Well, I went to sickbay. It was just a little bit of the toenail that stayed on, and the rest of it was where it was just barely hanging. They just clipped it off. But that ended my working party for that day.

Marcello: Was your toe broken?

Kloppel: No, just smashed (chuckle), just smashed.

Marcello: When the Minneapolis left, where did it go?

Kloppel: We went out toward Midway. I think we stayed out at sea from the time we left...we left that evening, Sunday evening, and we stayed out at sea, and we didn't come back into port again until April. We ran out of food out there. We transferred rice, beans, and flour off other ships out at sea, and that's what we ate for a long time. We'd start out for breakfast with a little spoonful of rice and a biscuit, and of dinnertime you'd have beans and biscuits (chuckle). The next day it was all reversed.

Marcello: How long did you remain aboard the Minneapolis?

Kloeppel: Until April, when we came back into Pearl--sometime in April. I guess it was around the first part of April. As it was coming in, they said that anybody that had been in Pearl that was aboard could either stay aboard if they wanted, or they could transfer off and go back to the States for new construction. Well, we didn't know what the new construction was. It was several of us. First, we were going to stay, and then we decided, hell, we'd go back to the States and go to new construction, which we did.

We went aboard an old...I don't know if it was a...it was really not a troopship. It was the old USS Henderson. That's what we went back to San Francisco on. Now there we used hammocks for the crew. I don't know whether it was a real regular troopship being used for that, but it had more crabs on it than it had sailors (chuckle). I think everybody that got on wound up with a big dose of crabs (laughter). They must have been everywhere.

Marcello: Those boys must have had fun in Honolulu, then, huh?

Kloeppel: Man, oh, man! I really got some (chuckle)! That's how I got back to San Francisco, and then we went into the station there in San Francisco, waiting on orders from there.

Marcello: In the meantime did you get rid of your crabs there (chuckle)?

Kloeppel: (Laughter) Yes. They didn't show up until just a day or two before we got into Frisco. If I remember right, the sickbay used blue ointment. It got rid of them (chuckle). That was terrible!

Marcello: So what was the new construction you picked up then?

Kloeppel: The USS Massachusetts.

Marcello: Battleship.

Kloeppel: Battleship. It was up in Boston, Massachusetts.

Marcello: And did you stay on it for the duration of the war?

Kloeppel: I stayed on it for the duration.

Marcello: Now where was most of its activity? In the European or in the Pacific Theater?

Kloeppel: The Pacific. When we went cross-country to Boston, we stayed in a place they called the Fargo Barracks in Boston for about a week or so before we went aboard the Massachusetts. It was sitting there in the Navy Yard, and that was good duty. They had called a bunch of old retired chiefs in. Instead of reveille in the morning, they'd come around and shake you: "Son, it's time to get up. (laughter) And they had good food. Anyway, we went aboard the Massachusetts sometime around the middle of the first week of May. It was commissioned on May 12, 1942.

Marcello: So you were a plankowner.

Kloeppel: A plankowner on the USS Massachusetts.

Marcello: This is beyond the scope of the interview, Mr. Kloeppel,

but I'll ask you, anyway. What were some of the major actions that the Massachusetts participated in?

Kloeppel: Well, our first one was at Casablanca on November 8, 1942.

Marcello: So this was during the North African invasion?

Kloeppel: Right. It was on a Sunday morning. The French battleship, Jean Bart, was in there, and at daybreak we hit in on there. It was on a Sunday morning; it was on November 8. The password to start firing was "Play ball. We hit it at daybreak, and the Jean Bart was sunk there that morning along with several destroyers. I think the Jean Bart had 15-inch guns. They put a hole through our flag with the 15-inchers, and they hit us with a 6-inch or 8-inch--I forgot what it was--on our forward deck, more or less around number two and three 16-inch batteries. They have got the shrapnel from that shell that hit. It exploded below decks. I was up there this past summer to a reunion, and they have got the shrapnel holes repaired a little, some of them, and painted to show where they hit.

Marcello: So it must have been, then, after the North African invasion that you swung around to the Pacific.

Kloeppel: Right. We came back into Boston and Portland and then down to Norfolk. Then we went through Panama Canal and out into the Pacific. We stayed there until we went into Tokyo Bay when they signed the peace treaty on the

Missouri.

Marcello: So you were present at the beginning and then present at the end.

Kloeppe: Right (chuckle).

Marcello: What do you remember from the signing of the peace treaty at Tokyo Bay?

Kloeppe: Well, they took a group of men from each ship that came in there to go in like a landing party. They took maybe twenty-five or thirty off of our ship, and they transferred them. We were sitting there in the bay, so a group from our ship went over for the signing on the Missouri.

Marcello: I'm assuming that you are not one of those.

Kloeppe: No, I didn't get on that.

Marcello: What else was taking place in the area? Obviously, you couldn't see what was going on over on the Missouri.

Kloeppe: No. Actually, there wasn't anything in particular. We were just sitting there, and everything was quiet.

Marcello: No planes flying over or anything of that nature?

Kloeppe: Not that I recall.

Marcello: Did the significance of that day sink into you at that time?

Kloeppe: Well, yes, in one sense. I was glad it was over. It had been a long time. I had been back to the States once after the war started until September of 1945. Well, I finally got discharged in November in Saint

Louis, Missouri. But it was a long, drawn out affair.

Marcello: What were some of the Pacific engagements in which the Massachusetts participated? Just kind of mention them.

Kloeppel: I don't guess there was any we missed. We went out there around Christmas of 1942, I guess (somewhere around there when we went over to the Pacific). We anchored out in New Caledonia. They put torpedo nets around it there while we were sitting in there for a day or two. We hit Okinawa, Gilbert-Marshall Islands; we was in Samoa, Fiji Islands. I don't think we missed anything. We was in just about everything that went on. We went through a typhoon where we lost two or three destroyers, men and all. We didn't ever hear or see anything of them since. We had one carrier in the group at the time, the USS Bennington--which shows the force of water. It just bent the flat deck back like a toe on a shoe. It was a rough ride, but ol' "Bull" Halsey proved his spunk. He said he could ride it (chuckle).

Marcello: Of course, they lost a couple of ships in the process.

Kloeppel: Yes (laughter). I just don't know where we missed anything. We just kind of followed it all the way through.

Marcello: I'm assuming that, for the most part, the Massachusetts was used for shore bombardment and that sort of thing.

Kloeppel: Right, it was shore bombardment. We even had aerial projectiles for the 16-inch guns that they tried to use

and which weren't too successful. But they were good on shore bombardment, which we done a lot of. In fact, at that time, while we were in Casablanca, if we back up a little, we had fired more 16-inch projectiles out of those three 16-inch turrets aboard the Massachusetts than had ever been fired. I don't remember the exact number, but I think it was between 700 and 800 of those 2,700-pound projectiles that was fired there at Casablanca.

Marcello: That is quite a bunch because, if I'm not mistaken, after a certain number of firing, those rifles have to be rebored and so on, do they not?

Kloeppel: These were new riflings that they had in this 16-inch gun, and they did protrude, I would say, an inch-and-a-half or two inches when we got done. Those muzzles burnt the paint off of them. In fact, those muzzles on those 16-inch guns were still hot three or four days later, but it didn't hurt the rifling. All they done was machine them off. As far as I know, they're still in there.

Marcello: What rank had you achieved by the time you got your discharge?

Kloeppel: Turret captain first class.

Marcello: Would that be a gunner's mate rating?

Kloeppel: Well, yes. In other words, you went from second class gunner's mate to first class gunner's, and then from

turret captain there wasn't no third or second. You automatically went from second class gunner's mate to either first class gunner's mate or first class turret captain. I went with the turret captain.

Marcello: Okay. Well, Mr. Kloeppel, I think that is a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You said a lot of interesting and important things that I hadn't heard before. Of course, that's the sort of material we want.

Kloeppel: There is one thing I'd just like to interject in this. When I was on the Utah, the week before Christmas or two or three weeks before, I gave a friend of mine, Karl Johnson, \$20 because money was scarce and that way I wouldn't drink it all up and I'd have some for Christmas. Well, I contacted Karl again a couple of years ago, but I didn't see him until this past June. We were talking about the \$20, and he said, "It's still in my locker on the Utah. (chuckle) One night when we was leaving Salt Lake City after the Utah reunion this past June, he came down, and he knew we was going out to the airport. He said, "I wanted to tell you before you left that I stayed up late last night. I started out at interest rates in 1941, and I kind of guessed at them as the interest rates changed. He said, "I figure I owe you around \$63 and some cents on that twenty. But he said, "Don't worry about it! It's still in my locker!"

(laughter)

Marcello: That, I'm sure, is a good place to end this interview.