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Interview with
WILLIAM (BILL) W. FOMBY
May 15, 1982

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Interviewer: R. E. Marcello

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Approved: William W. Fomby
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

William Fomby

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Date: May 15, 1982

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing William Fomby for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 15, 1982, in Austin, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Fomby in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Oklahoma, during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Fomby: I was born at Hamlin, in Jones County, Texas, on December 22, 1919. I grew up and went to high school at Hamlin, Texas. I joined the Navy on December 18, 1940.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

Mr. Fomby: Well, at the time, of course, the country was in a depression, and I didn't have any suitable job, and the draft was getting closer all the time. I just felt like if I was going to do

time in the armed services, why, I had rather do it in the Navy than the Army, so I joined the Navy,

*Revolving the
distress*

Marcello: You know, economic reasons are one of the standard things that I hear for people having entered the service at that time. Even as late as 1940, even though the defense industries were beginning to crank up, jobs were still pretty tough to come by, and I'm sure this was especially true for somebody who wasn't too far removed from high school,

Fomby: Well, I had worked at jobs, but there wasn't any job. But one of the main reasons for doing that was that the draft had gone into effect, and on December 22, 1940, I was going to be twenty-one years old and eligible to be drafted. So on December 18, I beat them to the punch, so to speak, and went ahead and joined the Navy because I didn't want to do time in the Army.

Marcello: At that time, how long was the Navy enlistment?

Fomby: Six years. However, I took the approach...of course, the war clouds was gathering in Europe, and some war was getting ready to go on; and it looked pretty much like, if you was going to do some time in the military, and if the war scare thing blew over and they didn't need the men, why, it wouldn't have been any problem to get out, I don't think. If they had a war, you was going to have to go, anyway, so it was half a dozen of one and six of another, is the way I looked at it.

Marcello: You mentioned something else that I think I need to pursue. When you thought of the country getting into war at that time, were your

eyes turned more toward Europe or toward Asia?

Fomby: Well, naturally, it would be Europe because Hitler and Mussolini and France and England and all them...that's where all the noise was coming from. There wasn't anything happening in the Far East at that time.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Fomby: San Diego.

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

Fomby: Yes, it was a monotonous...however, in years later, I discovered that a good training in boot camp--that I didn't like at the time--was well worthwhile. Immediately after the war started, I got a lot of the recruits right out of boot camp out at Pearl in my organization out there. They had just been there for a short time and didn't know anything, and one of our deals was to try to get those kids--some of us that had seen a little war already--and try to impress on them that it wasn't any bed of roses and try to train them how to stay alive, if they could, because they came in and went through boot camp, and they didn't know what they were getting into when they got out there. There was none of us that knew a few months before or a few weeks before,

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

Fomby: Three months.

Marcello: That's interesting, I think, because by the time some of these

people went through in 1941, they had cut it down to six or eight weeks,

Fomby: Yes, I think we got a good many out there. They were bringing those "boots" in from the West Coast to Pearl, and at that time I was in the harbor patrol. A bunch of sailors off the Arizona and the Oklahoma were sent down to Bishops Point, and we had those old motorboats off the battleships that were sunk, and we had depth charges and machine guns mounted on them, and we patrolled from sunset to sunup, every night. They had their little submarines getting in the harbor.

But back to the "boots," they sent them to the receiving station down there, and they wanted some of us "noncoms" to help train them further because they hadn't received hardly any training. They were there just waiting for ships to come in--to go aboard ship--so we did some training. They didn't have anything like the training that I had when I went through boot camp, but, of course, I went through in peacetime, and they went through in wartime.

Marcello: Describe the procedure by which you got aboard the Oklahoma.

Fomby: Well, I got out of boot camp in March or April of 1941, and I caught a tanker, and I can't to this day remember the name of it. We went from San Diego up to Mare Island, and there I caught the old Henderson, which was a transport, and a whole bunch of us "boots" went out to the fleet, which was based at Pearl Harbor at that time--all the battleships and cruisers.

Our Pacific Fleet was operating out of there, and several guys in my company went aboard the Oklahoma and the other ships around there,

Marcello: Had you requested a battleship, or were you simply assigned to it?

Fomby: No, I was just assigned to a battleship, just wherever they sent me, but I knew I was going to the Oklahoma when I left boot camp, though, I had been told that.

Marcello: What were your feelings about being sent to the Hawaiian Islands? Were you looking forward to it or not?

Fomby: Well, it's like everything else in life. That's just part of it, and that was part of the job or whatever went with it. Of course, I was a green recruit. I didn't know anything, and sometimes I think maybe that was an asset.

Marcello: What were your feelings about going aboard a battleship?

Fomby: Well, of course, at that time, for an ol' country boy who was raised in the country, that was a big, impressive ship. Of course, they were invincible. You know, a battleship was supposed to be about the biggest thing...aircraft carriers were not...in fact, they only had two out there in the Pacific--the Saratoga and the Enterprise. I have a great deal of admiration for the Enterprise and the crew. I think they shouldered a lot of the load of that war for a long time out there before they got some more people to help them.

Marcello: When you went aboard the Oklahoma at Pearl, what sort of a

reception did you receive? After all, you were still basically a "boot,"

Fomby: That's right, I received a "boot's" reception--swab the deck and do whatever anybody else didn't want to do. However, I got to be a gunner's mate striker and was assigned to the Fifth Division. Our division took care of the broadside battery guns. That was the 5-inch/,51's that shot out of the side of the ship. I was assigned to a gun, and I cleaned that thing and washed it. It was my job to take care of it, and I was graded on the way I took care of it, and I guess I did a good job. When it come time for,,,I was a seaman second class, and when it come time for me to take my exam for seaman first class, why, I passed that and was recommended, I guess, by the people that recommended me. That was about September, and that's when I started,..I mean, my chief told me, "You better go ahead and get your mess cooking. I'm going to assign you to mess cooking, so that when it comes time for you to go up for gunner's mate third class, you'll be eligible," because in peacetime you couldn't be promoted supposedly--on that battleship at least--unless you had your mess cooking done.

Marcello: You mentioned the whole business of promotion, so let me pursue that a little bit farther. How difficult or easy was promotion in the pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Fomby: You had to earn it, and you had to take an examination and pass it. It wasn't automatic. That, incidentally, is the only one

that I ever had to pass and all that kind of stuff because they were automatic from then on, if I was eligible, up until I was a first class, and then I was eligible for chief. Then I was on a destroyer, and it had a chief on it, and it had three first class, and I couldn't get off of it. None of the first class could get off, and the chief wouldn't. So we were bottlenecked, all three of us eligible for chief gunner's mate, but we couldn't advance because the complement didn't call for it.

Marcello: I think you bring up another interesting point, too. There had to be openings in order for one to be promoted. It was not simply just a matter of passing tests. There had to be openings.

Pomby: Yes, there did. Well, this destroyer was operating out of Japan and Tsingtao, China, and a sister ship needed a chief, but that's the typical bureaucracy or whatever (laughter). The executive officer wouldn't transfer any of us to that ship, and our chief wouldn't transfer; and here's a sister ship, and the highest-rated gunner's mate on there was a second class.

Marcello: Getting back to the Oklahoma, what was the food like aboard that ship?

Pomby: It was good. That's one thing about the Navy. I was on several ships, and I never did run into bad food in the Navy. I was lucky enough that every one that I was ever on, even the shore stations that I was stationed at, had good food. That was one of the things,,my older sister's husband had been in the Navy

in the First World War, and he told me the same thing. He said, "That's one thing that helped me decide on the Navy." He said, "You've always got your bed and your kitchen with you when you're in the Navy, and you don't when you're in the Army." So that's one of the things that prompted me to look toward the Navy.

Marcello: What was it about the food that made it acceptable to you?

Fomby: Well, it was cooked good, and there was plenty of it. Destroyers had a little more problem than the bigger ships because they rolled more, and sometimes I've seen the time when you had to stand with your arm around the stanchion and hold your mess tray in your hand to eat because you're rolling so bad. But the food was good, and it was cooked good. On bigger ships, you didn't have that because you didn't get that much roll, but a destroyer during a typhoon goes over one and under one. It's a little harder for them to cook it and prepare it and everything as good. Ninety percent or 100 percent, almost of the time, the food was always good, and it was where you could eat it.

Marcello: Talk a little bit about mess cooking aboard the Oklahoma. How would the mess cooking routine work?

Fomby: Okay, a mess cook had, I believe--again, that's been a long time ago--twenty men in my division, and all of them were in the Fifth Division and were gunner's mates. You had these overhead tables, folding tables that hung from the overhead, and the mess cook at mealtime went and got his tables down, and he got his dishes, and he put his dishes on the table. Then he went to the

galley, and they had this rack that your pots and containers all went in. You went to the galley and got your food and brought it back up and got it on the table. They'd eat and then you cleaned the tables and put the tables back up on the overhead. You did that three times a day.

Marcello: So you were served family-style then when you first went aboard?

Fomby: Yes, battleships had it in peacetime. I don't know what they did after the war because I wasn't on any of the big ships after the war. Of course, destroyers all had cafeteria-type. But the battleships ate out of china plates. You set plates and a knife and a fork and everything for each man in your mess every meal.

There was a little bit of a gimmick there, though. You made a little extra money because the old chief was head of the mess, whoever he was, and everybody anteed up the mess cook a little money on the first of every payday. They would leave you a dollar or so. When you're making \$21 or \$36 a month, why, \$15 or \$20 extra a month helps out.

Marcello: Is it not true that you ate, slept, and lived in the same spaces? Weren't the mess tables...didn't you also swing your hammocks and so in those spaces?

Fomby: No, They did, I'm sure, on some ships, and if you had too many people or something, why, they did. But everybody on the Oklahoma, to my knowledge...in fact, most of those ships required more men than they had on. I had a bunk down in a compartment, and this

gun emplacement on the side of the ship was completely separate from the living area. You just turned the ol' gun around forward, and there was plenty of room because those guns, as they swung around and pointed out, why, of course, you had to have room for the back of them where you loaded them and everything. The breech and everything swung back around in there. But when your gun was pointed forward, why, it was like a room, and you had plenty of room in there, and that's where we set the mess tables and everything.

Marcello: Did you swing a hammock when you first went aboard the Oklahoma?

Fomby: I don't believe I did on the Oklahoma, but I did on the Henderson and some of the transports or tankers, something like that. They didn't have accommodations for anymore than the crew, and you had to swing a hammock. A hammock wasn't a bad place to sleep, though. It was all right.

Marcello: What role or function did the band play aboard a battleship such as the Oklahoma?

Fomby: Mainly for colors in the morning. The band got back on the fantail in time for colors, and on special occasions the band played for different things. You kind of caught me off guard. I remember them playing, but I don't remember all the functions that they did do. But they did have a band on there, and they were always back there for colors in the morning and played the national anthem when they made the colors,

Marcello: I'd always heard that most of the ships were rather proud of

their band, and all sorts of arguments could be started between battleships as to which band was the best.

Fomby: All the ships were highly competitive. When a ship has an "E" on the stack for efficient operation or the best boxers or the best band...boxing was quite a thing there. If an ol' boy could fight good, he was really in demand on a ship because he represented his ship. Sometimes they had these smokers, and those guys from different ships, say, maybe a destroyer, for example, there would be a whole bunch of them congregate at one destroyer tender and have these boxing matches.

Marcello: You mentioned the "E" awhile ago. How could you in the Fifth Division earn an "E"? When I say "you," I'm using that term in a collective sense. How could you earn the "E"?

Fomby: I don't remember whether a division got an "E" or not. Divisions on the ship...I'm sure you're familiar...like, the number one gun turret was a division, number two was a division; three, four, and five was the broadside batteries; and I assume the anti-aircraft deal was a division. Really, like I say, I was just on the Oklahoma from the time that I went aboard in April until it was sunk in December. As a recruit and a new man on there, my function was strictly within my own division with my own people, and I didn't have...I mean, I knew guys in other divisions, but it would be like a bunch of different little towns. Each division was kind of a little unit within themselves. You had one head. Generally a chief or somebody was the head of that

division. Now in the gun turrets or something like that, they might have had that, but I don't...that's been forty years ago (chuckle). I don't remember too much about that.

Marcello: In general, as you look back upon that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy and the Oklahoma specifically, how would you describe the morale?

Fomby: Oh, if a bunch of sailors are not griping, they're not good sailors, I don't guess. That used to be the saying. But I think most everybody was satisfied and happy. Of course, the Navy was just starting to get,..since the war talk...a lot of those ships were operating with skeleton crews, so to speak. They didn't have a full complement of people. I would say that in the 1940's probably some of us new people were coming in there because there was lots of men that had been in the Navy for years and had been all over the world.

Also, back in the peacetime Navy, promotions wasn't as fast. You'd find a man in the Navy that had been in there fifteen years, and he might not be over a third or a second class gunner's mate or boatswain's mate or whatever. Whereas, after the war, why, they automatically became,..I was a seaman first class when the war started, and I automatically was gunner's mate third class within thirty days, I guess. As I became eligible time-wise for second class, I was automatically a second class; and as I became eligible for first class, I was automatically,..if you were what they needed,..they had so many new people coming in, and they needed noncoms, where they didn't

need them before when all the ships was operating with a thousand men when a full complement would be 1,500 or something like that.

Marcello: Describe what a typical training exercise was like for the Oklahoma after you got aboard there at Pearl Harbor. In other words, to be more specific, what day of the week would the Oklahoma usually go out, how long would it stay out, and what would it do while it was out there?

Fomby: Generally, there wasn't any set day to go out or to come in or anything. We were Battleship Division Three, I believe it was, which included the flagship, the Arizona. There was the Arizona and the Oklahoma and the Nevada. The Pennsylvania was a sister ship--it was the same type of ship--where the California and the West Virginia and the Tennessee were a different class battleship. But mostly, though, we were all out there.

I was talking to a man this morning that remembers when the Oklahoma and the Arizona had a collision at sea. Lots of people don't know about that. Few people that you run into that was out there in the fleet knew about that.

We did a lot of things. We towed sleds for other battleships to shoot at. We'd have a big sled and would tow it on behind our ships, and here would be another battleship off over the horizon over there that you could just see maybe the flash when he would fire his guns; or we would tow those sleds, and dive-bombers would come in and dive at those sleds and bomb them,

sand-bomb them, Then the old Utah sometimes went out, and they used it for bombing. They put on a bunch of timbers and stuff, which later down the line turned out to be a bad thing.

Marcello: How much emphasis was given to antiaircraft drills and practice during that period before the war?

Fomby: Well, there was just overall drills complete. When you had General Quarters, then they manned the antiaircraft guns. They manned the broadside guns. They manned everything. But it was training and drills all the time. Everytime you went to sea, why, you had drills.

Marcello: Normally, how long would the Oklahoma stay out on one of these manuevers or training exercises?

Fomby: Roughly, a week, when it was operating out of Pearl.

Marcello: Would it usually be in on weekend?

Fomby: I can't remember, but I think we would be more likely to be in on a weekend than we would at sea. We got liberty when we came in. If they came in on a Friday or a Saturday, one bunch got liberty that day and then another bunch the next day.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work, and what did you do when you went ashore?

Fomby: About the same thing all the sailors do--go over and drink a little beer, sightsee around. Sailors were about as popular in Honolulu then as they were in Norfolk, Virginia. They didn't like us, and guess we kind of had the attitude that we just

didn't care, It didn't make any difference to me. I didn't really care that much about it. I enjoyed going and seeing when I first got out there--sightseeing--but I would just go over and drink some beer at the bars. That's about the only thing there was to do.

Marcello: Did you have a particularly favorite bar that you would go to?

Fomby: Not particularly, Not in Honolulu, I didn't. Yes, later, when I was on other ships in Boston or San Francisco or someplace like that, why, generally our ship would have a bar that we would like to go to or something to just go and relax and have a few drinks.

Marcello: How about the Black Cat Cafe? Do you recall that one?

Fomby: I don't really remember any details of any of them specifically.

Marcello: I notice that you don't have any tattoos, so I assume that you resisted that temptation down on Hotel or Canal Street.

Fomby: Yes, I just never did go for the tattoos.

Marcello: Describe what Hotel and Canal Streets were like.

Fomby: A bunch of them were just regular cat houses. That's about all they were. They were not anything like is there now. They was all just holes in the walls--dives--but that's what sailors looked for, and that's what they were there for.

Marcello: I guess there were also curio shops and tattoo parlors and...

Fomby: ...oh, yes, all the sailors...

Marcello: ...all the places that could take the sailors' money.

Fomby: That's right. They were there. You could have you a set of dress blues tailor-made over on the beach, and, boy, some of the

skippers on them battlewagons and stuff was stricly "by-the-book." You could go on liberty with them, but you didn't wear them to inspection or anything like that,

Marcello: I gather from what you said previously that the liberty aboard the Oklahoma was port-and-starboard liberty.

Fomby: Yes.

Marcello: Normally, is it not true that the liberty section had to be back aboard by midnight unless you had a place to stay?

Fomby: Yes, unless you had something specific or something like that, I believe that's right.

Marcello: Why was this done? Why did they insist that you be back at midnight as opposed to, say, being on duty at eight o'clock the next morning?

Fomby: Well, I imagine,..well, later on, it got to where it was that way. In fact, one time I even had an apartment in Boston, and I had overnight liberty--just as long as I showed up out there everyday. Of course, I was a gunner's mate first class then and in charge of the whole after part of the gunnery department on the ship I was on, and I had to be there at eight o'clock every morning to muster my men and all that. At four o'clock in the afternoon, why...I could shove off sometimes even earlier than that. But the ship was in for taking torpedoes off and putting radar gear on,

Marcello: I've heard it said that they didn't want people to stay overnight and sleep on the beach or in parks and things of that nature,

Obviously, most of these sailors couldn't afford to stay in a hotel,

Fomby: Well, they didn't have that many hotels, anyway, to stay in, but I think, yes, the primary reason for it was to get them out of town, Honolulu didn't want them over there carousing and raising the devil all night, and so they were supposed to be back aboard ship at midnight.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the two countries continued to get worse, could you, even in your position, detect any changes in your training routine during these exercises?

Fomby: Not, I wouldn't say, until very shortly before December 7, but it became evident...and I may be talking out of turn, but guys in my division were up on watch on one of the antiaircraft guns one morning at daylight, and we came up on a Japanese submarine. The guys looked at him through the telescope that is on the guns. Of course, as soon as he saw us, he immediately submerged. I'm talking about old sailors that had been in China and Japan and all of them places, and they were wanting to open fire on the thing, and everybody started saying, "Oh, don't do that!"

Marcello: Of course, if the submarine was out in international waters, you really couldn't fire at it, anyway (chuckle).

Fomby: Well, at any rate, there was a terrible commotion on that ship that morning, and I think it was the last time we was at sea

before that Pearl Harbor deal. Of course, all the people in Washington and all the Japanese people was having big powwows and all this sort of thing.

But I've been asked a "jillion" times, "Did you or did anybody have any idea that that was going to take place?" I sure as heck didn't, and I don't think any other average sailor out there did, either. Now your admirals and somebody like that might have had some inking of what was taking place, but the old run-of-the-mill sailor down there like me didn't know anything about it. In fact, I didn't even know they was Japanese planes when the dern things was diving all over there.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, what kind of an individual did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Fomby: Oh, the same thing that everybody,..they all wore dresses and flew kites and all that kind of stuff. That was the image of the Japanese that I think was predominant at that time. As they proved later, they didn't fly kites, and they were pretty good at what they done.

Marcello: This brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and we need to go into this period in as much detail as you can remember. When did the Oklahoma come in that weekend--what day?

Fomby: I couldn't tell you, but I think it was on Friday or Saturday, one,

Marcello: Where did it tie up?

Fomby: Right on Battleship Row, They were all tied up. I believe the California was forward of us. I don't know. It's been so long. I used to could tell you exactly, but I can't right now. But the Oklahoma tied alongside the Maryland; the West Virginia and something was tied side-by-side; the Arizona was aft of them; the Nevada was aft of the Arizona; and the California was up forward somewhere. They were all along Battleship Row.

Marcello: Were you tied inboard or outboard of the Maryland?

Fomby: Outboard,

Marcello: What was your routine on that Saturday, December 6, 1941?

Fomby: Well, mine was the same everyday. When you're a mess cook, you had to stay there and feed your crew, and if I got any liberty, it was after the evening meal. I had to feed three meals every day, and they called the mess cooks about 4:30 or five o'clock in the morning, so they would be up and have their tables set up and their food and everything from the galley when the crew come to breakfast. They had to finish their breakfast and be ready for colors and all this sort of thing by eight o'clock, so as I remember I generally had breakfast or the meal served at seven o'clock in the morning and about twelve o'clock and again at 5:30 or six o'clock, something like that, in the afternoon, But I did feed three meals a day, and my routine was... see, you just did three months or four months in a tour of duty as a mess cook, but when you were on mess cooking, you didn't

have any,,there wasn't anybody to relieve you, and you had to feed your crew, You had to work your liberty in around that, so there wasn't much time. However, if I remember, I think I went ashore,

Marcello: That evening?

Fomby: Yes, Now a mess cook couldn't get off at four o'clock like the rest of the crew, but I believe that a mess cook, after he got everything all cleaned up, could go ashore nearly any day, He wasn't on a port-and-starboard deal, Now I stand to be corrected, and some of these other guys may remember a lot more about it than I do (chuckle), but I went ashore, I think, that night. But I never did stay very long, I was up and fed my crew again the next morning,

Marcello: Do you recall what you did in Honolulu that night?

Fomby: No, I don't

Marcello: Generally speaking, when people came back off liberty on a Saturday night, what kind of condition would they be in?

Fomby: Some of them was drunk everytime they came back, and some of them just went ashore and fooled around sightseeing or buying something to send home to some of their family, a souvenir deal. But, of course, when you were based out there, if you went into a port or something you hadn't been in before, you would naturally want to go see the curio shops and all this kind of thing and maybe buy something for somebody back home or something. But when you're operating out of Honolulu for months and months

and months, finally all the novelty pretty much...another thing is that it took money, and guys like me didn't have much money. A seaman first class or seaman second class just made \$36 or \$50 a month, and you just didn't have a lot of money to go and drink every night or something like that. I don't remember too well, but I don't think there was any of the guys that really...all of them once in awhile would go ashore and get a little too much to drink, but mostly they was pretty stable kind of guys. They would go over and have a few beers, but they would come back...sometimes they had softball games or something like that, or they went to some "smoker" or something like that. But they didn't have any...not like after the war started. They didn't have any USO or anything like that, There wasn't as much to do.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, and what I want you to do at this point is to go into as much detail as you can remember from the time you got up until all hell broke loose,

Fomby: Well, I just got up the same as I did every other morning and went and fed my crew, and they had all finished eating,

Marcello: Did you have a full complement at the tables?

Fomby: Gosh, it was too long ago. I can't remember. But I'm sure that we had most of them there. You most generally had twenty people at every meal--just about. Maybe in the afternoon, sometimes you didn't have. If I remember right, you were

supposed to find out how many you were going to have on that evening meal, and you only drew enough food for...that way they didn't waste so much food. But I got up just as soon as I always did. They called the mess cooks early. They had a call, and the master-at-arms or somebody came around and woke you up. You got right on up and started getting your food and your dishes and everything.

Marcello: Okay, so proceed. What happens?

Fomby: Well, I finish...I had got my dishes all back to the galley and was just cleaning up up there...or the fellows had all got through eating, and I was getting my dishes together. Some ol' boy...there was a catwalk that went right alongside this gun emplacement deal where you could walk outside of where this gun casemate was, and some ol' boy came in there and said, "Boy, they're having maneuvers this morning! Planes were just diving all over the place!" One thing I can remember is that I was drying my hands on my apron, and I walked out there, and I looked. We had been out towing a sled for our dive-bombers which had a retractable landing gear on them. The plane was up there, and it was the same color and everything as our planes--a grey-looking plane--and he was diving. But one thing that I remember more vividly, I guess, than anything else was that I wondered, "What the hell is that guy doing, diving with his wheels down," because our planes always had them folded up.

He dropped his bomb. I saw the bomb drop from the plane--

he released it--which was still nothing; I mean, we saw our own planes do that all the time when we was out towing a sled for them. But I saw another one coming right behind him, and he had his wheels down, too. I don't know why that stuck in my mind, but I just wondered, "Well, why in the devil are them guys diving with their wheels down?" And about that time, that first bomb that that one released hit one of those hangars there on Ford Island, and that dern thing went about five hundred feet in the air, and I thought, "Oh, hell, somebody is sure going to catch hell for that!" About that time, why, they passed the word on the Oklahoma to man the antiaircraft batteries,

Marcello: How was the general quarters alarm sounded aboard the Oklahoma?

Fomby: Well, if you want it verbatim, word for word: "Man the antiaircraft batteries! This is a real air raid and no shit!" That's exactly the words that came over the speaker. My battle station, just in an air raid, was below decks sending the ammunition up to the antiaircraft guns--down in the magazine. Now this would be, like, when you're off out here at sea or something and an air attack comes, but you don't have any surface ships, so there is not any really...so we headed for the magazine. Most of the guys that were in the compartment below where I was mess cooking were already down at the magazine because they were one deck closer to it than I was when the word... I went down to the magazine, and just as I got there, they passed

the word--and to my knowledge, that was the last that was ever passed--to man the broadside guns.

Well, my battle station was on the broadside gun, and I went back up the ladders. In the course of going up the ladders, why, that thing caught four or five--however many it caught--torpedoes, and by the time that I got back up to where I originally started, the ship had listed so far that you couldn't...I had to hand-over-hand myself up the mess tables to get to the outside to where the gun barrels stuck out of the deal. By that time it was so far over that I walked part of the way over the bottom to get into the water.

Marcello: Describe what it felt like when those torpedoes slammed into the Oklahoma.

Fomby: Well, the ship weighed about 30,000 tons or something like that, and it shook everything on the ship. You could tell there was a tremendous explosion. Of course, at that time I didn't really realize what it was, but I knew something was blowing up on the ship bad. I knew when you take something as big as a battleship and start the darn thing turning upside down--it would be like turning this motel upside down--everything in it is going to just fly. If you turned it up, all this furniture and everything is just going to fly in every direction. That's another hazard on a deal like that, is that those big gun turrets and stuff like that...those big shells weigh 2,000 pounds and breaking loose and mashing people and every other thing.

Marcello: That must be a hell of a sensation to sense or to feel that ship turning over and being on the inside of it,

Fomby: Well, I wasn't on the inside of it when it got turned over, but later on down the line, I served with some ol' boys that we cut out of the bottom of that ship the Tuesday after the ship was sunk. They had been in there, but they had enough air to breath. Those ol' boys were really shook up, and I would have been, too. I believe if it would have happened to me, I had rather them just went ahead and got me. We got those guys out, and I served with them down...a lot of the guys that got off of the Oklahoma and Arizona that went down to the section base down there.

Marcello: Let's back up just a minute. You mentioned that the Oklahoma had turned over, You had managed to get on the outside, and I assume that you were walking across the bottom to wherever you were going. Describe what happens,

Fomby: I was going to the water, and when I got where I could get in... it was quite evident that there wasn't anything more that could be done on the Oklahoma, and there wasn't any word ever given, as far as I know, to abandon ship or anything like that, but there wasn't anything else to do. I got in the water, and there was a lot of oil and some fire and all that sort of thing in the water. We had been tied alongside the Maryland, and the Oklahoma rolled away from the Maryland out toward the channel. It wasn't a real long swim--I don't know--probably from here to the office or something like that that I had to swim to the

Maryland.

Marcello: So we're talking about maybe two or three hundred feet.

Fomby: Of course, when you're in the water swimming, it seems like a hell of a long ways, but it wasn't really that long. But there was a lot of strafing, there was a lot of commotion going on in that water with fire and oil, And those planes, when they dropped those torpedoes and bombs, they generally went back up and came back down the deal strafing all those ships and the people in the water and everything else. So to speak, all hell broke loose and continued there for quite a while.

Marcello: When you went into the water, did you literally walk into the water, or did you have to jump some number of feet into the water?

Fomby: No, I jumped, I'm sure, twenty or thirty feet into the water.

Marcello: Did you take your shoes off?

Fomby: I kicked them off in the water.

Marcello: Did you dive in, or did you jump in the water?

Fomby: No, I jumped straight off, but I had on...the uniform-of-the-day was those little shorts...you wore shorts and a T-shirt, and I had those on, but when I got aboard the Maryland, a chief on the Maryland threwed me a Marine's uniform there and told me to get some clothes on before--I had oil on me--before that oil... he said, "You'll burn up if we have a bomb or something explode, and a fire," So I put that uniform on, and I wore it there for quite a while, I can't remember just how long, but it was several

days.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up again. So you get into the water. Now what happens at this point?

Fomby: Well, we swim to the Maryland, and as I say, there was so many things going on I can't even remember all of them. But I saw the bomb hitting in the water there by the West Virginia, and planes were strafing. There was some machine gun bullets out of a plane hitting the deck of the Maryland.

Another boy, named Nigg, was in the water with me. He was already in the water when I got in. I don't know where he came from, but he was in my same division and had come into boot camp and everything; I mean, I had known him for a long time. He had a brother. I think his brother got killed, but I don't know for sure.

Marcello: So you're in the water, and you're swimming toward the Maryland, and you mentioned that you saw the bomb that missed the West Virginia or whatever.

Fomby: I saw some hit in the water between the West Virginia and whatever it was tied to.

Marcello: Can you feel the concussion of those bombs in the water?

Fomby: You're darn right! Boy, you could feel it!

Marcello: What did it feel like?

Fomby: Well, it's just a jar. It's like somebody banged a couple of rocks together or something in the water, but only it's magnified a good bit. It just depends on how close they are,

also.

Marcello: Okay, so you swim over to the Maryland. What happens at this point? How do you get aboard the Maryland?

Fomby: Well, I climb up an ol'...these fender deals...they had them over the side to keep the two ships from bumping together, and there was one of them setting right in the edge of the water, and I got on that, and we climbed up the rope that supported it to get to the deck of the Maryland.

Marcello: What happens when you get aboard the Maryland?

Fomby: Well, when we get aboard the Maryland, as I say, I went inside the ship there, and they had drug out some clothes and stuff there, and a chief grabbed this uniform and told me to put it on. Mostly, I started to go up toward the antiaircraft battery, but he told me to stay down there because of that oil on me, so I did. He didn't want me around any gun flashes. Of course, all of this took some time.

This didn't happen in a little bit. The firing on the antiaircraft guns kept going for a while, but as I remember the most severe part...the torpedo planes, I think, had done left their...in my opinion--this is strictly my opinion--the worst part of the damage to the battleships was done, I would say, within the first ten or fifteen minutes of the attack because that's when all of the dive-bombers and everything dived on them, and all the torpedo planes came down that channel by Merry's Point over there and let those torpedos go. I don't remember...I'm

sure there were at least four torpedoes that the Oklahoma got. Now I wasn't at Pearl when they got it afloat again, but the people that were there told me that there was holes in it that you could drive a truck through--on the side when they got hit.

Marcello: So what are you doing the rest of the day, then, aboard the Maryland, during the rest of the attack, I should say?

Fomby: Well, about sometime in the afternoon, you don't keep very good track of time at a time like that. Mostly, I was sick. I drank a bunch of that oil and water in the water, and salt-water and oil will make you awful sick,

But we went to Ford Island, and we set up an aid station over there at Ford Island. They had mostly some wounded on Ford Island, and it was in some officer's house down there, in his garage or something, and we had this aid station.

Somebody came around and brought us a rifle. When I came by it, I don't know; but I wound up with an ol' rifle, which I kept with me. A little bit later, somebody brought us an ol' van, and a boy name Fogelsong--he was off the Oklahoma, too--he drove the ol' van, and I was the armed guard. They said for every vehicle to have an armed guard on it.

They moved us the next day, we were there that night. One eventful thing that happened that night was that there was four or five fighter planes that came in off one of the carriers, and we shot them all down,

Marcello: Did you actually see that fireworks?

Fomby: Part of it, yes.

Marcello: What did it look like?

Fomby: In fact, my rifle was out there. I didn't have it. I was inside the house when it started, but I heard all the shooting, and I got out there, and some guy had my rifle banging away at them, too. There wasn't any organization or anything. A guy just comes along, and you didn't have to sign anything for a rifle or ammunition. Some guy would just hand you a rifle and some shells, and somebody else comes along and says, "Well, we need to haul these people...."

We took that van over into the Navy yard, up to that recreation center up there, and there was an aid station there. For, I'd say, oh, until about Tuesday or somewhere along in there, we hauled wounded from...they was using anything they could get to haul...this guy drove this thing, and we would haul the wounded down to the hospital. I'll tell you one thing--and I've said this before--when you see all these people in bedsheets laying out stacked up just like cordwood, it takes all that glamour out of war. You really realize that something is going on.

But along about Tuesday or Wednesday, I guess, somewhere in there, I got word someway that the crew of the Oklahoma, what was left of them, was on the second floor at the submarine base, so I went over there and reported in. Incidentally, in that time the Navy Department had notified my folks that I was missing

and presumed gone because they didn't know where I was, and I didn't know where they were. But they later notified my folks that I had been located and was okay. But I went over to the submarine base and checked in.

Then I was on that crew out there on the Oklahoma. They were still trying to see if they could find anybody else alive in there. They cut through the...we liberated some good denatured alcohol out of the medical storeroom there, and we used to have some up on the second floor of the sub base when we'd come in every afternoon. We'd get some powdered tomato juice or some coffee or something to mix with it.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and go back to the evening of December 7. You mentioned that you were over on Ford Island, and you also mentioned that you at least heard the firing that was taking place as those planes were coming in. When you heard that firing, what did you think was happening?

Fomby: Well, I assumed like everybody else did, that the Japanese had come back. What happened, so I was later told--I don't know--those planes, I think, came off the Enterprise. I'm not sure.

Marcello: They did.

Fomby: But those planes should have come around and come over Barbers Point when coming in. Instead, they came right across Honolulu. Well, the Army and everybody up around Honolulu all opened fire on them. We had during the day already kind of gotten addicted to shooting at everything that flew, and I guess that was just

automatic that they did that. But I understand the planes did not fly the pattern they were supposed to have flown, but they may not have got down, anyway, as disorganized and confused as everything was. But at any rate, the Army opened up on them, and they came right on across the Navy yard, and when they did, everything that would shoot started shooting at them. I think maybe one or two of them maybe finally landed, but they weren't worth taking off again, so I've been told,

Marcello: Did you hear sporadic shooting that night, other than the shooting that took place at those planes?

Fomby: Yes, that went on for several days. You could hear shooting at night. Up around the oil tanks and stuff, up there in the Navy yard, they... stories was that there were saboteurs and things of that sort, but I don't know how authentic they were. But there was something to it; I mean, there was some firing and some shooting going on. But then it's pretty easy, when you don't have any lights... for example, we were trying to haul those wounded guys down to the hospital at night, and, man, you would come to an intersection, and the driver had no lights, so he couldn't see. The first thing you know, you would be looking at a Marine's bayonet, and you're sitting out on the fender of that thing with your gun and everything. Well, you know better than to contest him, anyway, or anything. At every certain intersection, they had a Marine guard at every place, and, of course, some of them got accustomed to us. After we made one trip, they knew

us and they just sent us on through,

Marcello: I guess it wasn't too safe to walk around at night.

Fomby: I wouldn't have wanted to do much of that. I didn't even want to ride on the fender of that thing with a gun in my hand, but I didn't have any other choice (laughter). That's what I was told to do,

Marcello: What sort of rumors did you hear that evening of the 7th?

Fomby: Oh, all day long there, for several days, there were rumors that the Japanese had landed or there was troopships and all--the typical stuff that goes on in a situation like that.

Marcello: Did you believe most of those rumors?

Fomby: I didn't know what to believe. I really didn't. It was a pretty mass confusion.

Marcello: You mentioned that in the ensuing days, one of your more distasteful jobs was hauling the wounded and...I assume that you had nothing to do with retrieving the dead. You simply saw the stacked bodies and so on.

Fomby: Oh, well, I retrieved lots of them when I was in that harbor patrol because they'd come floating out of those ships, and we would find them floating out in the water. We were told not to handle them in any way, so we would just get a piece of rope or a piece of wire, anything, and pull them to the beach and anchor them there and then let the medic people take care of it. But, yes, we would run onto lots of them.

Marcello: When were you on that harbor patrol? You told me this off the

record, so we don't have this on the record yet.

Fomby: I was in the harbor patrol, I would say, from about somewhere around Christmastime until about the 1st of May. I was in there until the Battle of Midway.

Marcello: Those bodies must have been pretty ripe then, the ones that were floating up at that time,

Fomby: Sharks came in that harbor by the thousands. We would be out there on patrol at night, and those big ol' fins would be coming along beside the boat. They came in from everywhere. But I don't remember any real specific things,

We had a lot of things going on out there in that harbor, though, at night. Those ol' PBV's a time or two would come in there,,and I'll get back to what I started to tell you about that ol' Utah and all them ol' timbers. Those darn things were floating in the harbor, and at that time all those ol' PBV's were sea-planes. Those darn things on one or two occasions...one night one came in there and hit one of those darn timbers, and it just took the whole front of the plane off at the wing. The pilot and the co-pilot went to the bottom, but we got into the plane back there in those blisters. When it broke off, it flipped the plane upside down, and it stayed afloat long enough that we could get in there--us patrol boys could--get the other three guys out of the plane,

Marcello: You did mention that you did participate in rescuing some of these crew members for the Oklahoma after it turned over?

Fomby: No.

Marcello: You just saw that?

Fomby: I didn't see any of the...oh, oh, where they cut into the bottom?

Marcello: Yes.

Fomby: No, they had already got those out. I went out there, and we stood watch on that thing. I stood watch on it out there, and you listened to see if you could hear anybody hammering or anything like that. No, I didn't see the people that they got out of the bottom, but I did do duty with some of the guys that they did get out of there. I wasn't on hand when they got them out, but those guys told me some pretty hairy tales about that. There was air trapped in those compartments, and when they would cut into the compartment, they would let the air out, and the water would start coming up, and those ol' boys said that would give you a lot of room for thought there about that water coming up there. Of course, they had been in there, some of them, for two or three days and looked like they was going to get out of there, and that water would start rising up. They was afraid they was going to drown before they could get them on out.

Marcello: When did you finally leave Pearl Harbor?

Fomby: Oh, in 1944. Well, no, I remained there or on the islands out there. I stayed at the section base down there in harbor patrol until the Battle of Midway, and they transferred me to the Navy yard. I put up...at one time, we had 108 .50-caliber machine guns and twenty 40-millimeters. They organized an organization they

called the Pearl Harbor Civilian Volunteer Force, and that consisted of civilians that worked in the machine shops and the welding shops. Most of them were ex-World War I men. Each of those shops had sandbag emplacements on the roof with a .50-caliber machine gun, some of them with as many as four guns on the roof up there. Those guys were the crews, and that released the...they had some kind of a paper that they had signed whereby the governor of the Territory of Hawaii could declare them in the military to keep them from being shot as guerrillas or something.

But I took care of those guns during the balance of 1942 and up until early in 1943, and I was transferred to the Naval Air Station at Ford Island. But I went to French Frigate Shoals, a little manmade island out in the Pacific, and I stayed out there six or seven months. Then they flew me back to Pearl and took my appendix out, and I went back to the harbor defense and security there in the Navy yard and stayed there until I came back to the States in 1944.

Marcello: Okay, well, that's probably a pretty good place to stop the interview, Mr. Fomby. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You said a lot of interesting and very important things, and I'm sure that scholars will find your comments most valuable when they use them.

Fomby: Well, I have said many times, and I'll say one more time for the record, that I wouldn't have missed being or having participated in that, but I wouldn't ever want to do it again. Down the line,

I look back on it, and maybe I done something worthwhile,