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Interview with  
Noel E. Gill  
December 21, 1974

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: Noel E. Gill  
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Noel Gill

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas      Date: December 21, 1974

Dr. Marcello:      This is Ron Marcello interviewing Noel Gill for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 21, 1974, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Gill in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS California at the time of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Gill, to begin this interview, would you 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. Gill:      Well, I was born in Goliad, Texas, on May 2, 1918. I attended all of my school here in Corpus Christi. I finished the eighth grade. Then I decided I wanted to see a little of the world, so I joined the Navy.

Dr. Marcello:      In what year was this?

Mr. Gill:      That was in 1940.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Gill: Well, I had a brother in there. He came home and he kind of built it up to me, you know, a little bit of what a sweet life it was. So I was suckered into it and joined up. Fortunately, when I finished boot camp I put in for the USS California, which he was aboard at the time. I was number one on the draft, and I went aboard the California.

Marcello: Let's just back up here a minute and talk a little bit about your boot camp days. Is there anything outstanding that happened in boot camp that you think ought to be a part of the record?

Gill: Well, not too much. I was more or less elected one of the leaders in the camp, you know, a drill leader. We had a pretty active little deal there going. But as far as anything outstanding happening, well, we just graduated just normally, you know. We had a real good company, and we were sort of outstanding in our class, but that was about all there was to it, see. It was routine.

Marcello: How long was boot camp at that particular time?

Gill: Let's see. I believe it was six weeks. I believe it was six weeks I spent in boot camp.

Marcello: Now this was a shorter amount of time than some of the earlier boot camps, was it not? In other words, what

I'm saying is, was the world situation getting tense enough at that time that they were cutting short the training in order to get more people through?

Gill: No, this was just strictly peacetime. There wasn't any of this Japanese stir-up, you know--talking, you know, like they were doing with these representatives and these guys they had over here. We didn't know anything about that. It was just strictly routine training. I graduated and came on out and came home on ten days' boot leave. Then I went back, and, of course, I was assigned to the California.

Marcello: Did you want to go on the California basically because your brother was on that ship?

Gill: Yes, that was the main reason.

Marcello: I gather at that particular time the Navy had no objections to putting brothers on the same ship, did they?

Gill: No, that all took place after the Sullivan boys. So I went aboard, and there he was. He transferred off just before Pearl Harbor. He transferred. While we were in Hawaii he went aboard the Holland. I'm glad he did, or else he would have been dead.

Marcello: Now what were you striking for aboard the California?

Gill: I was a seaman. I was striking for first class seaman at the time. Then, of course, after that I went on up

and came on out of the Navy as a first class boatswain's mate.

Marcello: In other words, you were on the deck force.

Gill: I was a deck force sailor, yes.

Marcello: How did you like life aboard a battleship?

Gill: Well, it wasn't too bad. It's a pretty hard life at times, you know. They worked the fool out of you. Of all the preferences I had, I liked it best aboard the destroyer McCalla. I picked up a brand new destroyer. I kind of liked that life a little better. Of course, I saw more action on that destroyer than all the rest of my Naval career.

Marcello: Now I gather that you received a great deal of on-the-job training aboard the California at this time. How would you evaluate that on-the-job training that you received? Was it good? Fair? Excellent? How would you rate that training?

Gill: Well, it was . . . I would say it was good. It was good training.

Marcello: What made it good?

Gill: Well, we had several boatswain's mates on there, you know. They sort of took an interest in you. You else learned it, or they wanted to know the reason why. They kind of stood on top of you all the time and saw that you did your work, you know, which was seamanship more than anything. Of

course, we had to get the ship underway when it was . . . we handled all of the lines and all that stuff like that. Of course, they wanted to make sure you knew what you was doing. When you were refueling ship and all that, you had your own special place to be.

Marcello: What was discipline like in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Gill: It was kind of rough. It wasn't anything cruel. There were no cruelty or anything like that. They were just strict. But it wasn't a hard life. It was good. I enjoyed it.

Marcello: What were living conditions like aboard the California?

Gill: Very good, very good. The food was good. We had good quarters.

Marcello: Were you still sleeping in the old hammocks?

Gill: No, we had bunks.

Marcello: You had bunks.

Gill: Yes, we had bunks. We didn't have any hammock sleepers on the battleship. We all had lockers and bunks. I slept three decks down below the waterline so that made me uncomfortable for awhile till I got used to it and realized that I was living on a regular city. So I came around to it alright. I was afraid of the water when I went in the Navy. I couldn't even swim. But in boot

camp he told me to jump in the pool--twelve foot deep-- and I jumped. I came out on the other side. That was it. I learned how to swim (chuckle).

Marcello: When did the California move on to Pearl Harbor.

Gill: Let's see, she went to Pearl . . . it was about in . . . I guess it was in December. The latter part of November we were on maneuvers. We went back on fleet maneuvers. We were holding gunnery practice on the sixth of December. On the fifth or sixth of December we were at sea with a battle force holding maneuvers.

Marcello: Now the California was actually assigned to Pearl Harbor long before that date, was it not?

Gill: Oh, yes. We were part of the regular Pacific Fleet.

Marcello: That's what I meant. I was wondering if you happened to be based at San Diego or in the area or Long Beach . . .

Gill: Our home port was Long Beach.

Marcello: . . . when Roosevelt ordered the Pacific Fleet over to Pearl Harbor. Or had this order occurred before you actually got aboard the California.

Gill: No, I went aboard her in . . . I guess it was in . . . I went aboard the California in . . . it was in the winter-time. I went aboard her in Seattle in the Bremerton Navy Yard. She was in dry dock when I went aboard her. That's when I laid eyes on my little brother.

Marcello: How closely did you and your little brother pal around while you were aboard the California?

Gill: Very close. We made liberties together quite often. You know we pulled some "wing-dings."

Marcello: Was he on the deck force, too?

Gill: No, he was a snipe . . . what you call a snipe--you know, an engineer. He was first class then. He was a very good one. He came out of the Navy retired after twenty years. He's in the Pentagon right now.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands?

Gill: Well, I'd always wanted to see the islands, and they were all that I expected them to be. It's a beautiful place. Of course, that's where we spent most of our time, was in the islands. After the war broke out, well, after I left the California on the bottom, well, I came back. We took the guns off of her and built a shore battery around Hickam Field. That's where our anti-aircraft guns were. I manned that thing for awhile until we moved to Aiea Beach. We set up another shore battery. I stayed on that deal until I got orders to transfer back to the States. I caught me a Matson liner and came back to the States and came home for ten days or so. Then I came back to San Diego, caught me a train, went all the way to Brooklyn, New York, boarded me a

brand new destroyer, came through the Panama Canal, and right back to San Diego. Then we got orders for the Pacific. That's when I spent three years and six months, I think, in the Pacific without ever coming home.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about some of the routines or maneuvers that the California participated in during the pre-Pearl Harbor days. I assume that like most of the other battleships, you would usually go out on a Monday and come back on a Friday.

Gill: Well, generally, yes. Sometimes we'd go out that long. But generally every time to the States and went back, we brought a bunch of boots with us, see. We'd pick them up from out of the training station. Of course, they had to be acclimated, you know. You had to teach them everything. We had gunnery practice. They'd be assigned their position on the gun. So we'd go to sea and we'd fire at gunnery targets and sleeves, you know, that airplanes would pull. Of course, I was on a five-inch .51-caliber gun which is a surface gun.

Marcello: Now this was your battle station.

Gill: That was my battle station. I was the first loader. In other words, I threw shells in that dude. We had one side . . . we had the starboard side and the Marines manned

the port side, the port battery. Of course, we'd go to sea and we'd fire gunnery practice, and the sixteen-inchers. Then we would break out that big old cable, and we would tow battleships--practice towing them like maybe they were hit, you know, in simulation. We'd tow them dudes all day long. That is just some work.

Marcello: Now when you went out on these maneuvers, did you work in cooperation with any of the other battleships?

Gill: Yes, yes.

Marcello: In other words, were you part of a battleship division?

Gill: Yes, and we were the flag ship, see. We had the admiral aboard. Of course, he directed the whole operation from our ship, see. We had what we called the "Big Five," the cage mast ships. The California was one of them. They were all just exactly alike or built the same.

Marcello: They were called the "Big Five?"

Gill: The "Big Five." There was the Colorado, the California, the Tennessee, the West Virginia, and the Maryland. That was the "Big Five," they called them. They all had cage masts. The rest of them were like the Arizona and the Nevada--all tripods. So we all ran together out there. The Pennsylvania on December 7, she was in dry dock.

Marcello: How would you describe the training you received on that five-inch .51 gun?

Gill: Well, it was rough but it was good training. My first battle station on the California was as a five-inch shellman. When I went on and went aboard the McCalla, the destroyer, guess where I wound up--shoving shells. In other words, that was in my record, you know. Naturally, they looked that up when you'd go aboard a ship. They found out I was a first shellman. Luckily I had one of my gunner's mates off the California. He was on there, too, you know. So that's where I wound up. Then the next ship I went on, guess what I wound up doing--first shellman and I've got scars to prove it.

Marcello: I gather that when one was assigned to one of these gun positions such as you were assigned to on the California that one did learn just about every position or operation connected with that gun.

Gill: Yes, we'd switch positions. You'd be a trainer and a pointer. You'd be a powder man. And, of course, the gun captain was the man that put the little slug . . . the cartridge in that fired the load. See, we used powder in those--slug and powder. But on the one on the destroyer, why, we used the case shell ammunition, see. We didn't use . . . it'd fire just like a pistol or something like that. It had a cap on it. So everybody had to learn everybody else's position, plus safety first in case there's a fire or accident. So that's what all of the training was about.

Marcello: Now did the training routine change any as one got closer to Pearl Harbor, or did the routine stay just about the same right up until December 7, 1941?

Gill: It was all just the same. No one knew anything was going to take place.

Marcello: Under most circumstances, I gather that the California would, however, go out on a Monday and normally would come back on a Friday. Was this the general routine?

Gill: Yes. We all came in and the first thing we did was take on fuel again. We loaded her up with about 1,800,000 gallons of fuel. All of the ships . . . all the battlewagons fueled up, see. That's when the mess took place. You can imagine what that would be on a harbor--all of that fuel oil.

Marcello: And this was usually done just as soon as you came back in port.

Gill: As soon as we docked. That's the first thing that happened to the ship. She was refueled.

Marcello: I'm sure this was done so that she would be ready to go on Monday morning again.

Gill: That's right, yes. That's more or less standard procedure in case, you know.

Marcello: Okay, so the California would usually come in and dock on a Friday. What was the liberty routine like?

Gill: Well, we had more or less port and starboard watch. That would be such that half of the ship could go, and the other half would stay aboard.

Marcello: Now when you had the port and starboard watch, did this mean you would get off a Saturday and maybe have duty on Sunday or vice versa?

Gill: Well, no.

Marcello: Or would you have the whole weekend off?

Gill: We'd probably have the whole weekend, yes. And then the next . . . following weekend, the others would have it, see.

Marcello: Now, normally, when you had liberty you still had to be back aboard the ship at midnight, did you not?

Gill: On the islands, yes. But in the United States, now it would be about eight o'clock the next morning or seven o'clock, something like that.

Marcello: Why was it that on the islands you had to be back aboard that ship at midnight?

Gill: I think it was more or less safety precautions, you know, just in case of an emergency because we never knew, you know . . . when you left the continental United States, well, you more or less went prepared.

Marcello: I've also heard it said that it was done to keep sailors out of trouble. In other words, being out at sea a week and then coming in, a lot of them would get drunk, go to sleep in the park, get rolled or something of this nature.

Gill: Yes, I can vouch for that (chuckle).

Marcello: Let's just follow this one step farther and . . . what did a young, unmarried sailor such as yourself do on liberty?

Gill: Well, now we're getting down to the nitty gritty (chuckle). Naturally, we made every bar in town, you know, and tried to drink all the beer on the island.

Marcello: Now I assume that you usually went on liberty with your brother, like you said awhile ago.

Gill: Well, yes. Yes, he and I cruised together, and, of course, we might pick up a shipmate or two, you know, along . . . safety in numbers, you know.

Marcello: What were some of the places that you usually frequented? Can you remember the names of these?

Gill: Well, the most famous one, I think, there in Honolulu was the Black Cat Cafe. That's where I met my Waterloo (chuckle). That's one of the most frequented ones, I think. It was right across from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

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

Gill: Well, I don't know. It was just . . . you know (chuckle), girls and all of that stuff and all kinds of drinks. Just about anything you was big enough to imbibe in, well, they had it.

Marcello: But I guess, from what you've said, that you frequented all of the establishments on Hotel Street and Canal Street and Beretania Street and wherever they may be.

Gill: And all of the other places upstairs, you know (laughter).

Marcello: Normally speaking, when you came back off liberty, what sort of condition might you be in?

Gill: Well, most of the time I was in pretty good shape because I didn't always drink to where I got drunk, you know, and hungover the next day. But there was one instance that I did. I don't even remember going back. In fact, I didn't go back by myself. I left the Black Cat Cafe, and I walked out in the middle of Hotel Street. That's all I remember till the next morning when I woke up in my bunk. My buddy brought me back.

Marcello: Normally speaking, would it be safe to say that there were very few sailors who were knee-walking drunk when they came back aboard ship? In other words, were they the exception rather than the rule?

Gill: Yes, they were, yes. As a whole they were pretty well-mannered boys, you know. Just once in awhile you'd find

one that would get a little too much, and he wanted to enjoy a little fisticuffs. But as a whole they enjoyed themselves pretty muchly. They stuck together. They didn't give the civilian population over there too much trouble.

Marcello: When was payday on the California?

Gill: Well, let's see. I believe it was around the first of the month. You had to sign a pay voucher. You'd look . . . they'd send out a big list with all the crews' names on it, and down at the end it'd show how much you had on the books. When you'd fill out this pay voucher and sign it, you'd put down how much you wanted to draw. Then you'd go through the line and hand it to the paymaster. He'd read it and he'd look at the list, and he'd hand it out to you, see.

Marcello: And you were paid in cash, were you not?

Gill: Yes, in cash, yes. So sometimes I'd draw all of mine out. In the States I would. But overseas now, I let mine ride. I had "beaucoups" money when I got back. And, of course, between rattling the bones a little bit and playing cards, I did real well. I sent money home to my mother.

Marcello: Did you only get paid once a month, or did you get paid twice a month?

Gill: Just once a month, yes.

Marcello: It's kind of interesting because I gather that every ship had a different pay routine. Some of them were paid on the first and the fifteenth. Some paid on the fifth and the twentieth. In your case, as you mentioned, you got paid on the first of the month, just one time a month.

Gill: Yes, it was that old saying, "Twenty-one dollars a day once a month." That was boot camp pay. So that's what we were drawing when I went in--\$21 a month. But it was an interesting life. I enjoyed it very muchly so. It was an easy life. On the California I had an easier life than I did on that destroyer because on the destroyer I was . . . that was strictly combat from the day I went aboard till I left it when we brought it back to the States, about half of it, see. I left it and went to new construction again. Well, not new construction, I went home and spent a little time. Then I came back, and right back to Okinawa I went.

Marcello: That's another story that sometime in the future I'd like to get those particular stories on tape, too. Now getting back to the life of a sailor in the Hawaiian Islands and with the Pacific Fleet at this particular time, how would you evaluate the morale aboard the California during that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

- Gill: It was very good, very good.
- Marcello: How do you account for this?
- Gill: Well, see, we had no inkling of any trouble with the Japs. In fact, we never did discuss anything like that at all. We didn't know what was going on, to tell you the truth. I know I didn't. So, of course, we just carried on as usual right on up till the very day, you know, the very morning that that happened. I had no inkling that that was going to take place.
- Marcello: I gather, then, from what you're saying then that you didn't keep very closely abreast with world events or anything of that nature.
- Gill: No, that's something a sailor don't do too much. He's got other things on his mind, you know what I mean (chuckle). So we lived life to the fullest.
- Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?
- Gill: Well, I knew they had slant eyes. That's about all. They were dark skinned and little people. Of course, over in the Hawaiian Islands you don't see too many full-blooded Japanese. They're sort of mixtures, so there's very few. I could look at them, and that was it. I'd forget them.
- Marcello: Whenever you got into any bull sessions with any of the old salts and so on, did you ever talk about the capabilities of the Japanese Navy?

Gill: No, we never discussed anything like that at all. I didn't even know they had much of a navy. I thought that if they did have, there wouldn't be too much to them anyway, you know. They sort of reminded me of monkeys anyway.

Marcello: How safe and secure did you feel being stationed at Pearl Harbor?

Gill: Very muchly so. I didn't have a worry in the world. I got over my phobia of deep water and all that stuff, you know, and sleeping below the waterline. I was getting three square meals a day and a place to live and sleep. I was living it up.

Marcello: Now normally, when the California docked at Pearl, where was its location? In other words, where was it docked?

Gill: We always docked at the quays at Ford Island--alongside Ford Island. In other words, if you wanted to go ashore you had to take a liberty launch. There was no going over to the mainland. See, we were out in the middle of these . . . Ford Island . . . these quays were out in the middle. There was this big barge stuck up there, and we'd tie up to them, see, right in line. We were in line, and then there were two more battleships tied up and then two more behind her and just like that. They were tied two together, see.

Marcello: The California was not tied with another ship.

Gill: No, we were the number one ship. I don't believe the Arizona was tied to anything. She was the tailend ship. She was the last one to go.

Marcello: What did Battleship Row look like?

Gill: Well, if you could see it from the air it was very impressive-looking. Boy, I mean, coming in from fleet landing, you'd come down and you'd look down there, and they were staggered out all down the line, you know. This is a very impressive-looking sight.

Marcello: I gather that we're talking about a rather spit-and-polish Navy during that period.

Gill: Yes, sir, it was. The brass was polished. Everything shined. We holystoned the deck. Now that I can tell you about.

Marcello: Tell me a little bit about that holystoning.

Gill: Well, it's more or less . . . you know, we always went to the island of Lahaina Roads. We always put in there when we made that trip especially to load up with this sand. It's a black volcanic sand. It's coarse. We would bring that back and then on Fridays . . . this would be the day we'd clean the ship.

Marcello: This was field day?

Gill: Yes, it was field day. We'd clean it up. We'd get out . . . early in the morning we'd get out these hoses and hook them up to salt water. We'd hose the deck down. These were teakwood decks. We'd spray that sand all out over it. Then you'd put this brick down. It's just a regular brick with a gouged-out hole in the middle of it, and a broomstick fits down in this hole. You put it underneath your shoulder--underneath your arm pit--and you grab ahold of it. You get down and you start rolling that stone over that sand on that deck.

Marcello: Why do you have to put that stick under your arm?

Gill: That's where . . . you bend over like . . . that's the way you hold it. See, you get leverage that way--body leverage.

Marcello: I see.

Gill: And when you get through . . . you do that for about an hour and a half or two hours, and then they wash it down--the sand and all--right down to the scuppers and on out. Then they let it dry in the sun. When it dries out it bleaches out real white, clean. Then they dare a snipe to come up through one of them hatches, which they generally do once in awhile in them old greasy shoes. Then you've got a boatswain's mate to whip right there. That's what we did every Friday that rolled around.

Marcello: How long would it usually take you . . . how long did this whole process take?

Gill: Well, we started around eight o'clock in the morning, right after breakfast. We'd finish, I guess, around noon. Well, we'd have lunch and then we'd clean up, you know, get all the casemates cleaned up and everything and tidy up. Between one and two o'clock, well, they'd let us go ashore.

Marcello: This was on a Friday. You could go ashore on Friday.

Gill: Yes. And then Saturday, when you came back about nine o'clock, is when you had inspection.

Marcello: This is a personnel inspection.

Gill: Yes, personnel inspection--spit-and-polish. I kept a pair of shoes shined, spit-shined.

Marcello: These were your inspection shoes.

Gill: I kept them in a pair of socks.

Marcello: I was in the Coast Guard, and we did the same thing.

Gill: And my uniform . . . of course, I had it pressed, you know, and I kept one for an inspection uniform. I kept it stuck away, and my hat--special hat--special neckerchief and all, special socks, underwear. I didn't wear any of that. They didn't go anywhere. That's the way it went, and after inspection, well, good-bye. Hit the liberty boat.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less brings us up to the days immediately prior to Pearl Harbor. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Gill, is to give me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941. This, of course, would have been the day before Pearl Harbor. Then we'll follow the same sort of procedure in talking about Sunday itself. But let's talk about that Saturday first of all.

Gill: Well, that Saturday happened to be my weekend aboard. I had to stay aboard ship. So, naturally, our routine in the morning was . . . we got up. Well, of course, we went and washed our face and brushed our teeth and all of that stuff. We ate breakfast. Well, at eight o'clock they'd call for sweepers, you know. We'd sweep the whole ship down fore and aft, tidy up, and then you could lollygag around, see. Saturday wasn't a working day and neither was Sunday. But it just more or less went as routine on Saturday that day.

Marcello: It was routine on that particular Saturday?

Gill: Yes, it sure was. No one had any inkling, and, of course, that Saturday afternoon I think that . . . well, the officers, they got overnight liberty if they wanted it, see. The next morning . . . we had quite a few guys . . .

there was quite a few guys, I think, that lived over there. They had their wives over there or something, so they were off the ship. I know the admiral was gone. The captain was gone. I think the executive officer was gone. A lot of the junior officers were gone.

Marcello: On that Saturday night did you watch a movie or anything of that nature, or did you roll the bones?

Gill: I believe we watched a movie. No, no we didn't do that on that . . . not during peacetime. You didn't dare do that and get caught. No, that bone-rolling was after the war started. Anything went then. I believe we had movies every Saturday night. In fact, I think there were movies just about two or three or four times a week if you would get a good picture, you know. You'd turn in about nine or ten o'clock. There were lights out at ten o'clock, I believe, and reveille was at five o'clock.

Marcello: Did you notice anything extraordinary happening that particular night? Was there an unusually large number of drunks coming in or anything of that nature?

Gill: No, just a normal, routine night.

Marcello: Okay, so this more or less carries us into the morning of December 7, 1941. Once again, I'll ask you to go into as much detail as you can remember about your routine on that particular day.

Gill: Well, that morning, of course, we had reveille. I believe on Sunday morning they let us sleep an hour later, which was about six o'clock. Of course, that bugler gets on the horn, and you come out of it. We had breakfast. I went up to the gyp joint, and I bought me the Sunday Los Angeles Examiner.

Marcello: What's the gyp joint?

Gill: Well, that's where you buy your ice cream and stuff like that . . . "pogy bait." I took my newspaper and went back down. I had on my shorts--we wore shorts out there then--and a skivvy shirt. That was the uniform of the day along with your socks and shoes. I went down to the third deck, down at my bunk. I was sitting on the deck down there--steel deck. I was sitting up in a corner. I had just opened my paper up to the funnies. All at once they started sounding GQ. I said, "Now what in the world are they having a drill for at this time of the morning?"

Marcello: What side of the ship was your quarters on?

Gill: Let's see. I was on the . . . I slept on the port side. So, naturally, I threwed the paper and up top-side I go, you know, three flights up. I had to go to my casemate. I got up there, and I looked out, and I saw all of these airplanes flying around, you

know. There was a bunch of banging going on. I couldn't figure out what was going on. I thought, "What kind of drill is this?"

About that time two or three of them planes came over. One of the guys looked at it and says, "Uh, oh! Look at them flaming assholes!" He says, "Man, that's Japs!" About that time, boy, they started dropping things on Ford Island! And then I kept going from side to side, see. We had a passageway from our side of the ship through to the Marines' quarters, too, on the other side. That's all I could do because we couldn't get any ammunition. Just about that time the old wagon, she bounced about two or three times in the water, We took a fish.

Marcello: What did it feel like when that torpedo hit that ship?

Gill: Well, it was a deep underwater explosion, and the ship felt like somebody just picked it up and let it bounce. You know, it was just bouncing in the water. She was way down. It got our fuel tanks and all, see. So I went over to the other side, and I looked toward the . . .

Marcello: I think we need to explain that you were completely useless as far as manning that five-inch .51 gun. It was a broadside gun.

Gill: Yes, we couldn't . . . yes, when those torpedoes hit, well, naturally, that knocked out all of our power down below, which we had carried . . . we got ammunition up by an elevator, you know. That knocked all of that out, so we had no way of getting ammunition to our antiaircraft guns. We couldn't fire those five-inch .51's I was on because that was a surface gun, see. So there we were. All we could do was fire our machine guns in the tops.

Marcello: When you say "we," you actually weren't manning one of those machine guns.

Gill: No, but I was standing there watching that little fat boy up there do it. Of course, I went over to the other side, and I looked down toward the Navy landing. I could see these torpedo planes coming in. They were flying real low on the water. You could see that fish hanging under his belly. They carried them under their undercarriage. I watched that dude drop that thing. Here it comes! Then, all of a sudden, "Boom!" The whole ship, she bounced again. That was two of them. Well, here comes another one. Well, we took another one. We got three fish in the side of that dude.

Marcello: And you actually witnessed at least three of them.

Gill: Yes, I watched them come down, see.

Marcello: Well, I've been told that there's not a more helpless feeling in the world than to sit there, know you can't move, and watch a plane drop those torpedoes and watch them just smash into the side of the ship.

Gill: That's right. You see the propeller, the wake of it.

Marcello: Well, what does it feel like? Is it a feeling of helplessness?

Gill: Well, it is, yes, and you're wondering what's going to happen next.

Marcello: Do you kind of brace yourself for the explosion?

Gill: Well, I just grabbed a hold of something and hung on. That's all you can do. It wasn't long before we started taking a port list. She was getting about a ten-degree list on her, and then she kept getting a little lower and a little lower and a little lower, you know.

Then we had canvas strung all the way around, you know, like in the tropics, you know. We had a canopy. We had to have that. That stuff caught on fire. We had a fire going there, and then they were afraid the magazines were going to go. All of this was going on, you know . . . it was going on for about thirty-five or forty minutes before they found out that we had all of these fires going. In the meantime I was standing on

the deck looking up. I watched one of these dive bombers come down.

Marcello: By this time the torpedo bombers were gone.

Gill: Yes, they were through with us. They had done pickled our herring right there. So I looked up and I saw this dude come down. He started down diving. All of a sudden he let something go. It looked like a golf ball coming down. I watched that dude come right on down. It was about ten or fifteen feet from me. It hit on the deck right out there where I'd been holy-stoning that Friday morning. It went right on through. It made a hole about that big (gesture).

Marcello: This was probably an armor-piercing bomb.

Gill: It was an armor-piercing shell with fins on it. He went on down. When he hit the third deck down there, which was our armored deck and that was the engineering quarters (living quarters), that thing went off.

Marcello: In other words, that armor-piercing shell smashed right on through the teakwood and went down to the armor itself.

Gill: That's right. It went down to the third deck. It went through two decks and hit the third deck. Then it exploded. That's when they decided to try and get some ammunition. So they called for volunteers to go down . . . five men from each division to go below with these

battle lanterns and try to bring up some antiaircraft ammunition.

Marcello: What did you go down there with, battle lanterns?

Gill: Yes, that's all we had. There were no lights.

Marcello: I see.

Gill: So they had to go down. They called for volunteers. The old boatswain's mate, he started picking out us recruits, you know. He said, "You, you, you, and you." I was number six so I backed off. Well, these five guys went down . . . this was before that shell had hit. When that shell hit, those guys started . . . we had one guy come out of there. He was an old stupid-looking farm boy. He wore his hat square, you know, and everything like that. He come out from down in that hole. He had blood all over him and didn't have a scratch.

Marcello: Now thus far the California had been hit by three torpedoes and at least one of these armor-piercing shells.

Gill: That's right.

Marcello: I'm glad you made a point there about those armor-piercing shells. They really weren't bombs. They were artillery shells with fins.

Gill: They were armor-piercing shells. Yes, sixteen-inch shells.

Marcello: How did the impact and the explosion of the armor-piercing shells differ from that of the torpedo hits?

Gill: Well, it was more or less the sound. See, the torpedoes, they bounced our ship, but this didn't. It was more or less just a sound. You could hear it go off down below there.

Marcello: Was it a loud noise?

Gill: Yes, it was.

Marcello: Would you describe it as ear-shattering?

Gill: No, no, because it was muffled, see. We had all of the hatches . . . all of the hatches were closed and dogged down tight, see. That sort of contained the noise, but you could tell what went off. As soon as that baby went down, I knew what it was. Then that one guy came out of there. He was trying to describe what happened down there. That poor guy! He was just as incoherent as he could be. He couldn't talk. I can't blame him from what he saw down there. A guy was just blown to bits down there, see. That's where all of the blood came from on him.

Marcello: About how much time has elapsed at this point?

Gill: Well, I can say that there's been about forty-five minutes of fifty minutes gone by.

Marcello: In the meantime, what sort of resistance is the California putting up?

Gill: Fifty-caliber machine guns. That's all we had. I was standing there watching this kid fire this .50-caliber.

Marcello: Was this the guy up in the crow's nest?

Gill: Yes, a little old fat boy. One of those Jap planes came over. It had a pilot and a gunner in it. As he came across, this kid cut loose on him with that .50-caliber, and he was hitting him. That guy knew he was hit, and he couldn't go anywhere. He was damaged so he just took a dive and dove that thing right into the Curtiss. She was on the opposite side of the island from us, tied up. She was a sea-plane tender. It had a big crane on the side of it. He dove that plane right into the side of it. I stood there and watched that, and I'll never forget it. Those sailors over there, boy, they got hot. They started raking that stuff over the side. They didn't hurt the Curtiss too bad.

Marcello: I gather you had an unobstructed view of this taking place over there at the Curtiss.

Gill: Yes, I did. Bird's-eye view, couldn't miss. Then I was standing there and I looked behind. See, I could see everything behind us down there--all of Battleship Row. I could see the Oklahoma. She'd done turned

turtle. She took some fish, too, and she was bottom up.

Marcello: Did you actually see it turn over, or did you see it after it had turned over?

Gill: No, I didn't observe her. It was just a little while after that. But as I was looking back, I was looking at the Arizona, and that's when I saw her blow. That was the fatal moment when she took that . . . and I still say she took one of those shells down her stack.

Marcello: Well, describe the blowing up of the Arizona.

Gill: Well, it was a God awful sight! I'll tell you. Because when that thing went off, those magazines went off, too, see. You could hear it. Wow, that was a terrible explosion! And the black smoke . . . well, she is what saved us in the long run from more dive bomber attacks--with the smoke blowing right over us. It was a black billowing cloud of smoke. She burned and burned and burned and burned. That was that oil, you know, burning. I guess there was two or three inches of oil--black fuel oil--on top of that water.

Marcello: These ships were all loaded with fuel oil, like you mentioned earlier.

Gill: Yes, they were. And these guys were out in these launches--beautiful . . . these captain's gigs and admiral's barges

and all. They were picking up guys out of the water and everything, and were they getting messy! But they were plowing right on through that.

Then I was watching all of that, and then I saw the Nevada coming down the channel. She got underway. Boy, they was laying it on her! She'd been hit because she was riding low in the water. I understand that it was the chief quartermaster that got her underway. She came over right by us real slow-like. They was really giving her old billy hell. She went on by us, and then I saw that old boy pull her right into the beach because she was going to go down right there.

Marcello: And, of course, if it had gone down in the middle of that channel, it would have blocked the channel.

Gill: It would have obstructed the whole channel. You couldn't have gotten anything in there, see, in or out.

So it was about that time when all of this . . . and that fire was going on, you know. All of this canvas was burning. There was a lot of oil and stuff burning on the ship. The captain finally . . . I thought he'd never say it--but he hollered, "Abandon ship!" That's when I went over the side, brother.

Marcello: Okay, explain this procedure now--getting over the side and abandoning ship.

- Gill: Well, when you go over the side . . . this here is all hands, you know. It's abandon ship. Well, we weren't a hundred yards from the beach . . . from Ford Island, see. So it's every man for himself. Those that could get on the captain's gig and the launches, you know, that were manned. They rode them. Those of us what couldn't, we swam.
- Marcello: What was it like hitting that . . . first of all, how far down were you jumping?
- Gill: Oh, I'd say about twelve or fifteen feet.
- Marcello: By this time is the California actually settling on the bottom?
- Gill: Yes. She settled in about . . . I guess she was in fourteen and a half feet of mud on the bottom that she settled in at about a forty-five-degree angle. So I went ashore.
- Marcello: Let's get back into the water again. So you hit that oily water.
- Gill: That old black water, yes.
- Marcello: What was it like trying to swim in that stuff?
- Gill: Well, it's pretty hard. Of course, you have to keep your head above the water, you know, or else you're going to get a mouthful of it. I finally made it to the beach over there with a bunch of my other buddies.

We went over there, and we started raiding Marine lockers.

Marcello: Did you kick your shoes off or anything while you were in the water?

Gill: Yes. All I had was a pair of them old white shorts and a T-shirt.

Marcello: Up until this time now, how would you describe your own emotions? Was it one of fear? Confusion? Panic? Anger? How would you describe it?

Gill: Well, I'll tell you what. I was scared. I was only twenty-one years old then. I'd never been away from home in my life. That was sort of an experience to me that I'll never forget. As I would walk from casemate to casemate back and forth across that ship, I was talking to the man up yonder. I wasn't too much of a religious fellow at that time. But I'll tell you. I was scared. I got some gray hairs out of it at that age.

Marcello: Well, you know, this is a general feeling, I think, of most people. Most people there, you know, admit that they were scared. There's a difference between fear and cowardice, I think.

Gill: That's right.

Marcello: This was fear--a very, very natural reaction.

Gill: Well, it's a helpless fear. See, I knew I couldn't do anything about it. All I could do was stand and take it. I was mad and I was scared, too, because I knew those guys were trying to kill me.

Marcello: When the first alarm first sounded, that is, when general quarters was first sounded, would you describe the initial reaction of the men in general as one of panic . . . not necessarily panic but confusion, maybe?

Gill: No.

Marcello: It was professionalism?

Gill: It was real professionalism. That's right down to the "T." I'll have to say that much. We had a real good reaction to that.

Marcello: Okay, by the time you had swam ashore, was the attack over or was it still going on?

Gill: No, it was going on. I watched Hickam Field get torn up. I had a bird's-eye view of that, too.

Marcello: How about Ford Island itself? Were they still working it over?

Gill: Yes, they were still working it over, machine-gunning. They were more or less out of bombs, I think, because they deployed a lot of their planes to these outlying fields, see. Of course, the Kaneohe Bay, the other seaplane base over there . . . they went up in the hills

to that army post up there. I can't ever remember that.

Marcello: Schofield Barracks?

Gill: Schofield Barracks. That's where . . . I've eaten lunch up there one time. They played havoc up there, too. In general they played heck with all the airfields before they hit us because they didn't want any opposition from the air. Of course, you know that. That was why they did that. That's why . . . they were hitting Ford Island when this old boy hollered, "That's flaming assholes! That's Japs." We knew why they were hitting Ford Island because they had little fighter planes on Ford Island there. That was the little F4F Wildcat. Don't let anybody tell you that wasn't a little fighter because I watched them at Guadalcanal. So they didn't get anything off the ground to combat these guys with, so we just stood and took it.

Marcello: Okay, so you finally had managed to get over to Ford Island. What did you do at that point?

Gill: Well, like I say, we started raiding Marine lockers. I got me a Marine pair of pants and a shirt and a pair of old boondocker shoes. Somehow or another I came up with a .45 and a .30-06 and a Thompson submachine gun.

Marcello: But you don't know how and where you got it?

Gill: I don't know where I got it but I got it. And this kid and I off of the ship, we went over and we found us a hole--more or less a foxhole. Well, that's where we just dug in--right there.

Marcello: Did you do any firing at these planes when they passed over?

Gill: No. That was about all of it, see. It was about over with then. So we just dug in right there because we were expecting landing parties. So we stayed there and we stayed there all night. In the meantime there had been a recall back to the ship because the fire had been put out. We didn't get the word, so we spent the night in the foxhole. The next morning we went back aboard the California, and we manned those five-inch .25 antiaircraft guns.

Marcello: Were you expecting some sort of an invasion at this time?

Gill: Yes, we were.

Marcello: This was one of the rumors that was going around.

Gill: That's right. That night we had some of our own planes come in, fly over, and they didn't give the signal. I'm telling you, they caught it right then and there.

Marcello: Did you actually witness that?

Gill: I witnessed that, yes, sir.

Marcello: You might describe that incident.

Gill: Well, they were little fighter planes. I don't know where they came from.

Marcello: I think they came off the Enterprise.

Gill: Yes, they might have been the Enterprise planes coming in. But they came in and they didn't give any IFF, any signals or anything. I'm telling you, these shore batteries and machine guns on the island, I think, opened up on them. Well, they knocked some of them down.

Marcello: I understand the sky looked like the Fourth of July.

Gill: Yes, it did. Wooooo! Did it! So we stayed there till that morning. I went back aboard ship that next morning.

Marcello: Let's just go back here a minute. All this time, had you gotten anything to eat yet?

Gill: No, no food.

Marcello: Did you have any appetite?

Gill: No. The farthest thing from mine was eating.

Marcello: How about thirst? Did you have a powerful thirst?

Gill: No. No, I sure didn't.

Marcello: Where did you stay that night?

Gill: We stayed in that hole--in that foxhole. Like I said, I had my artillery (laughter). We were ready for any landing

party. That's what we were looking for--a landing party, see.

Marcello: And you had not really had any instructions or anything of that nature. You were just in that hole.

Gill: No, we were just in that hole, and that's where we . . . we'd found a safe place, and we were going to stay there.

Marcello: Did you sleep much that night?

Gill: No, we didn't sleep at all.

Marcello: What did you talk about?

Gill: Japs (laughter). That's what we talked about--Japs.

Marcello: What were some of the wild things that you thought might possibly happen? Everybody was expecting an invasion and that sort of thing.

Gill: Well, that's what we were looking for, see. We thought maybe they would just come on in, waves of those dudes, and . . . we didn't know where everybody else was, see. We were just sitting in that hole. We didn't know if there was a guy ten feet from us or not.

Marcello: Where was this hole located?

Gill: It was on Ford Island.

Marcello: I know that but was it close to the beach or close to barracks?

Gill: No, it was about half-way out in the middle of the runway. I think what it was was a bomb hole. I don't know

what it was. It was a good hole, and we were in it.  
We set up shop right there for the night.

Marcello: How did you get the word that you were to go back to the California again?

Gill: At daylight they came around and told us. There was some guy that came over and told us we were supposed to report back aboard ship. So away we went.

Marcello: Okay, now it was daylight. You were told to report back aboard the California. You were perhaps a little more calm. The excitement had died down a little bit. What sort of a view did you see in front of you?

Gill: Ohhhh, it was a mess! Those ships--I'm telling you--it'd make you want to cry to see some of the total destruction.

Marcello: It was quite a contrast from what Battleship Row had looked like the morning before.

Gill: That's right, yes. And that old fuel oil was all over everything, you know. And then those hangars were just all blown to pieces with planes and wreckage lying everywhere. Smoke was still coming up from the old Arizona. She was still burning. Then, of course, they tell me that when the Oklahoma rolled she had men trapped in there. They could hear guys pounding on that keel on the bottom of it. They cut a hole in there and got some guys out. They had an air pocket in there.

Marcello: How did you get back to the California the next day?

By a launch?

Gill: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, what happened at this point?

Bill: Well, we went aboard ship. Then they brought us anti-aircraft ammunition over in launches from the beach. Then we manned the five-inch .25. It was pretty hard to do with the deck sitting about like that (gesture), you know. We're trying to train the guns manually, no electricity whatsoever. But we manned those things like that, and I guess we stayed . . .

Marcello: In other words, the California was still listing.

Gill: About a forty-five-degree list, sitting on the bottom, yes.

Marcello: Was it listing to port side?

Gill: Yes, that's where the water went in. I guess the starboard side was sort of dry on that side. She didn't take any holes. So we spent about a week on there, I guess, manning those guns. They'd bring us food over in these old twenty-five-gallon garbage cans--soup and stew and stuff like that. You know, like I told you before, that bomb that went off down below had done tremendous damage in the way of killing men. It wiped out all of our engineer force nearly.

Marcello: This is what you were referring to earlier when you said that your brother just got off that ship in time.

Gill: Yes, that's why he would have been dead. In other words, he would be dead. So, you know, you have the scuppers . . . not scuppers. These vents lead down to get fresh air to all of these decks below. Have you ever smelled a dead man?

Marcello: No, I sure haven't.

Gill: Well, you've missed something. Those guys were down there, and they were under water, see. They couldn't get them out. So we had to man those guns and stand and eat that food and smell them dead men. If you've never smelled a dead man, well, you don't know. That takes your appetite away right there. You'll never forget it as long as you live.

So we stayed on there about a week. Then they took these guns off and put them over on the beach. They poured concrete bases for them and set them up over there on Ford Island. Well, of course, we went over there, and we were the crews. We manned them twenty-four hours on and twenty-four off, and, of course, we lived over there.

Marcello: In other words, you actually became part of the shore party.

Gill: Shore battery was what they called us. I stayed on that one there . . . I guess it was a couple of weeks. Then they built another one over at Aiea. I was transferred over there. I stayed on that battery there . . . I guess it was about three or four weeks. Then I got orders to go report back to the States for new construction.

Marcello: Now by this time, how had your attitude toward the Japanese changed?

Gill: I didn't like them one bit, no. All I could think about was getting back to the fleet and get to sea again, see.

Marcello: Mr. Gill, usually in something as serious as this, there were some comical or funny things that happened in spite of . . . well, in spite of the serious nature of what took place. Can you recall any of the specific funny things that happened?

Gill: Well, no, I didn't see anything funny happen that day.

Marcello: How about individual acts of heroism. Did you see any individual whose particular deeds stood out in your mind as being rather heroic?

Gill: Well, no. See, there wasn't much anybody could do on that ship. There wasn't much action going on, see. But I know that we had one boy on there . . . he was

a brother to one of the boatswain's mates on my ship. He was Leyton Spadone's brother. They called his brother "Red." They were both champion swimmers. They were more or less fleet champion swimmers, you know. This brother said . . . somehow or another . . . I don't know where he got hit, but they had brought him aboard and he was burned. I know when they brought him in the casemate he was standing there. He was standing just like this (gesture). It was a flash burn, is what it was, from a shell exploding. He died that night. That kind of shook me up when I looked at that boy because I had been with him for a long time. I had eaten meals with him. Well, he was in my division, one of my ship-mates.

Marcello: Is there anything else you think we need to get as part of the record before we close here, that is, in regard to the Pearl Harbor attack?

Gill: I don't know much of anything else that I could add to this.

Marcello: Well, I think we got a pretty good interview.

Gill: Well, that was about all that I saw of it. I saw a pretty good bit of it. I had a bird's-eye view of it fore and aft and port and starboard.

Marcello: Well, from what you've said, I think that it's quite evident that you did have a pretty good view of it.

Gill: That's all I had to do, was view.

Marcello: I think that historians and scholars will find your observations to be most helpful when they write about Pearl Harbor.

Gill: I sure hope so.