

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
268

Interview with
Jesse R. Smith
December 21, 1974

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: Jesse R. Smith
Date: 12-21-74

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Oral History Collection

Jesse Smith

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Jesse Smith 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. Smith in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was a member of the Marine detachment aboard the battleship USS Tennessee during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Smith, 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. Smith: Well, I was born the third day of May, 1922, in Dallas, Texas. My father was a police officer in Dallas for twenty-three some-odd-years. My mother, of course, was a housewife. I was raised in Dallas out in Oak Cliff. I only went to two schools--Lida Hooe Grade School and

Sunset High School. Shortly after graduating from high school in 1940, money was pretty tight, and that twenty-one dollars a month that the Marine Corps offered, plus the chance to travel, looked pretty doggone good. So I joined the Marine Corps at the age of eighteen.

Marcello: You know, economic reasons is an excuse that a great many people give for having entered the service at that time. We were still in the depression even though things were getting better and jobs were hard to come by. I suppose that the service offered a certain amount of security that couldn't be found in civilian life. Why did you decide to join the Marine Corps as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Smith: Well, having just graduated from high school, I was just about as smart as I was ever going to be (facetious). Undoubtedly, none of us will ever be that smart again. But they did offer a good opportunity for travel. I knew everything I needed to know (facetious). All I needed to do was see part of the world. That was my particular reason for joining the Marine Corps. Several of my school chums had joined the Marine Corps a month or so prior to my entrance.

I did join the Marine Corps on August 8, 1940. I went through the regular boot camp, all of the rifle

training, combat training, and so forth. Being a big youngster--I was already 6'4" and weighed close to 200 pounds--I was accepted for training in what they called sea school.

Marcello: Why did you want to go to sea school?

Smith: I felt that I would have a much better opportunity to travel all over the world if I was aboard a ship than I would if I was just sent out to Guam or China or Wake Island or someplace of that nature and stay there a couple of years or half of my enlistment. So I did finish the sea school and was assigned aboard the USS Tennessee.

Marcello: Now what does a seagoing Marine do aboard a battleship?

Smith: Most of the duties of a Marine aboard a battleship at that time were security, captain's orderly. The word orderly is quite a misnomer in my opinion because he did have charge of all the keys to ammunition lockers, that is, you had charge of the keys to the cabinet inside of the captain's quarters that held the keys to the ammunition lockers to the various weaponry aboard ship. We stood various watches aboard ship. When we were out to sea we stood what they called the life buoy watch on the quarter-deck. In case anybody fell overboard, it was up to us to sound the alarm and

release the lifesaving apparatus that could be put into the sea for people to grab hold of. We stood what were called time watches. We were more or less . . . the time orderly was more or less directly under the control of the officer of the deck both in port and out of port and care of various security measures that might be relegated by the officer of the deck. When the ship was in port, there was always a Marine on the gangway to be sure that no one came aboard that was not authorized to do so.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of pulling duty aboard a battleship as opposed to one of the other ships in the fleet?

Smith: Well, the battleships were, of course, somewhat larger. It did have a stronger complement. I felt like it was real great because there was a little more room to move around. But being a normal eighteen or nineteen-year-old youngster, it was rather confining. We griped and raised hell a whole lot wishing that we were somewhere else because the grass is always a little bit greener. Usually, by the time we got somewhere else, we wished we were back on the USS Tennessee.

Marcello: Now where did you board the Tennessee? Was it on the West Coast?

Smith: Yes, at Long Beach, California. I don't remember the exact date. It was after I had finished boot camp and sea school. But it was in the later part of 1940. I believe, if my recollection is right, at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, I had been aboard the USS Tennessee some fourteen or fifteen months.

As far as my personal biography is concerned, I feel that I was indeed fortunate to be a member of the armed forces during World War II. It did offer me an opportunity to continue an education that I may not have gotten otherwise. I did subsequently upon being discharged from the Marine Corps in 1945--I received a medical discharge just before the war was over due to some injuries--I attended, what was then called, North Texas Agricultural College at Arlington, Texas, pursuing a course of pre-medical studies. I attended North Texas State University for two semesters and failed to be accepted in any medical school for about a year and a half. But upon second application to Southwestern Medical School, I was accepted and finished over there one year of work. Subsequently, I resigned, had no desire to be a physician like I thought I wanted to be. I went into the sales business and never went back to school to even finish my bachelors degree until 1958, when I entered Texas A & I University. Upon completing

my bachelors degree, I was offered a position as instructor of freshman chemistry while working on my masters. Two years later, I finished my masters degree and subsequently moved on over to Louisiana State University to work on my doctorate which I received in 1969 in nuclear chemistry through the Nuclear Engineering Department.

Marcello: Now what did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Smith: Oh, well, at that time, man, going to Hawaii, you know, was very glamorous. It was just a great idea that we were going out and see some of these things that we've been reading about all of our lives in our school work and in various supplements to newspapers and so forth. Hawaii was a glamorous, romantic place to go. It didn't turn out that way exactly, but damn it sure did sound good. The shore leave was not too good. There was so many doggone many servicemen out there that it was practically impossible to even talk to a woman much less go out on a date or anything, so most of your time was spent in a bar getting boozed up.

Marcello: What sort of liberty routine did you have aboard the Tennessee when it was in port at Pearl?

Smith: When we were in port, I believe that the chiefs and officers were given overnight and weekend liberty.

But men of the pay grade . . . I was a private first class, about as low as you can get on the totum pole. We had to be back aboard ship at twelve o'clock every night. We were given . . . like, we were on duty two days and off two days, if I remember correctly. We could go ashore each of the two days we were off. Liberty started at noon, I believe, but we had to be back at midnight that night.

Marcello: When was payday?

Smith: Payday was twice a month. We used to have a saying that "Man alive! I make \$21 a day once a month." But this was kind of a misnomer because we made \$21 a month, but they split it up into two pay periods every two weeks. We were paid in cash. Most of that time I had a \$10 allotment made out to my mother, so this left me to split \$11 every two weeks. In other words, I'd receive \$5 on one pay period and \$6 on the other, but it was quite sufficient at that time, seeing as to how all of our clothing was furnished, also our room and board. We didn't want for anything.

Marcello: I assume that when you went ashore, as you pointed out awhile ago, you frequented the establishments on Hotel Street and Beretania Street and Canal Street.

Smith: Naturally, and we found after a few trips ashore that it was a lot cheaper for us to go into some of the

walk-up hotels or bordellos, whatever you want to call them, and there was no pressure put on you to have dates with any of the girls that were in those places. But you could sit around and look and drink all of the beer you wanted for a dime a bottle. They did serve beer. Of course, with our income, our consumption of alcoholic beverage was more or less restricted to beer. But for a dime a bottle you can put away quite a bit of beer.

Marcello: Normally speaking, on a Saturday night, what would be the condition of those who came back aboard the USS Tennessee after having been in Honolulu?

Smith: Pretty damn well loaded, yessir. I remember . . . I was on liberty on December 6.

Marcello: I don't want to get into that particular phase yet because we'll talk about that a little bit later on.

Smith: I do remember coming back aboard ship pretty well loaded and having quite a hangover. This was, generally speaking, true.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk just a little bit about the daily routine of the Tennessee. Now during those months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, I gather the ship usually went out on weekly maneuvers. In other words, the fleet would go out on a Monday and would normally

come back in on a Friday. I think this was the general routine. What was the routine of the Tennessee during this period?

Smith: I don't remember this as being the routine of the Tennessee. What I remember, we were usually out for two weeks and then back in port for two weeks. We were sailing security patrol around and around the island. I don't believe most of the men aboard ship . . . I know at that time I had no idea what the hell we were doing or anything else. We just performed our duties as they were prescribed for us.

Marcello: What sort of a relationship existed between the Marines and the sailors aboard ship?

Smith: Aboard ship, you wouldn't say it was exactly cordial all of the time. But there was some feeling of resentment. That isn't the correct word that I want to use. All of the Marines felt that they were extremely superior to any sailor that was aboard ship, particularly in performing any kind of weaponry duty, security duty, so forth and so on. Now we knew that we were not capable of sailing that ship, but it wasn't our job to do so.

Marcello: In other words, basically the Marines and the sailors had their particular functions to perform aboard that

ship, and, for the most part, each group minded their own business.

Smith: That's right. They certainly did. If they didn't it would erupt into a few fisticuffs, which it did quite frequently. I've seen this happen several times.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy or Marine Corps? Either one because you were mixed together on the . . . or at least you were on the same ship.

Smith: We were on the same ship, but I wouldn't say that we were mixed together. We had our separate compartments, and we held pretty steadily to them. As far as the morale is concerned, I would say it was fairly good. We had several malcontents, people that wouldn't be satisfied if they had been sitting in the lap of Jesus Christ. But on the whole, I think the morale was fairly good for men confined into close quarters under those kind of conditions.

Marcello: How do you account for the high morale?

Smith: As far as the Marine Corps is concerned, it was strictly esprit de corps.

Marcello: What were living conditions like aboard the Tennessee, that is, in terms of your quarters and food and this sort of thing?

Smith: Well, up until just a month or so before Pearl Harbor-- the attack on Pearl Harbor--the lower ranks were sleeping in hammocks. We were living on the port side of the ship just off the quarter-deck. We had two compartments, and we'd have to take our hammocks down and stow them into great big lockers arranged along the bulkhead. Now the corporals and sergeants, they had cots which were just put right out in the middle of the compartment. You had a certain place to put your cot, but they had to be up and stowed up by 0730 every morning or . . . no, earlier than that--0730 on Sundays and weekends. But in an ordinary day, you had to have everything put away before seven o'clock and ready for inspection. After that you could get out on the quarter-deck and move around to any part of the ship. You weren't restricted as far as . . . except from officers' country. You could not go into officers' country at all unless you had specific business and permission to do so.

Marcello: Was the food pretty good aboard the Tennessee?

Smith: At the time we didn't think so, but after being in another outfit, we found that that food was not only hot and regular, but it was of a pretty good quality. We didn't think so at the time. You know, after eating your mother's cooking for all of these years, it just did leave a little

something to be desired. But it was regular and it was hot, which we didn't find so in some other posts that we went to later on.

Marcello: What was the normal Marine complement aboard the Tennessee?

Smith: Now that, I don't even remember. Being a Pfc and having nothing to do with records, no desire to have anything to do with records . . . but I believe it was somewhere around seventy men.

Marcello: And as you mentioned awhile ago, they would be performing, generally speaking, most of the security functions aboard the ship.

Smith: Security functions, right.

Marcello: Now did you have a particular battle station aboard the Tennessee, and, if so, where was it?

Smith: Yes, my battle station was one of the five-inch .51 broadside guns. We lived right in the casemate where this gun was located, that is, we moved into these casemates. They moved our living quarters from down below up to the casemate deck just a few months before Pearl Harbor occurred.

Marcello: Now this is the five-inch .51-caliber, is that correct?

Smith: No, that's a five-inch .25.

Marcello: Five-inch .25-caliber.

Smith: Right. It has an explosive shell. But all ours were bag guns, they were called. We trained very diligently. We

could load our gun and fire it faster than anyone aboard ship.

Marcello: Being on one of these five-inch broadside guns, were you trained to handle any position on that gun?

Smith: Right, we were interchangeable as far as any position on the gun was concerned. Now, of course, we had our specialty fields and, being a big man as I was and being athletically inclined, I had the job of first loader. You would take one of these five-inch projectiles . . . it's . . . well, it's five inches in diameter across the base. It was about, oh, I'd say, twelve or fourteen inches long and made out of solid steel. I have no recall of what they weighed. It took a pretty good-sized man to heave that thing into and seat it into the mechanism of the rifle. We practiced day after day after day.

Marcello: I was going to ask you how you would judge the quality of the training that you received in the use of that five-inch gun.

Smith: I think it was excellent. We could fire with more accuracy and more rounds per minute than any of the guns aboard ship. Of course, there were only two of the guns that were manned by Marines. The rest of them were manned by the sailors. But we could out-fire them any day of the week, not only from accuracy but the number of rounds put out.

Marcello: I gather, then, that there were strictly Marines on this particular battery that you were part of.

Smith: That's right. However, when we get down to that part, I'll tell you something else about what happened on that particular day.

Marcello: Okay, in the weekly maneuvers or bi-weekly maneuvers that the Tennessee engaged in, what sort of things would you as a Marine be doing aboard that ship when it was out at sea? Obviously, you would be practicing in the use of this gun.

Smith: Right, and we had regular study periods where we not only studied the weaponry that we manned aboard ship, but you had to keep and maintain in an A-1 high quality condition your rifle. You were expected to maintain an efficiency of any weapon that the Marine Corps might have. You studied diagrams and actually dismantled machine guns, hand weapons, hand grenades, so forth and so on. We didn't just sit around and snooze all the time. They kept us fairly proficient in the use of the basic weapons of the Marine Corps.

Marcello: I assume that this was also in part responsible for the high morale aboard that ship. In other words, you didn't have a lot of idle time.

Smith: Well, we had plenty of idle time to lay on the deck in the sun while we were out to sea. There was time enough

for this, yes. When we were in port, I was relieved of all duties during the . . . what they called the whaleboat racing season. Again, being athletically inclined, I did pull an oar on the Marine whaleboat. There was only one ship we could never beat. That was the Pennsylvania. But we had the best whaleboat team in the Pacific Fleet with the exception of the Pennsylvania.

Marcello: I gather that there was a great deal in inter-ship and inter-service athletic competition at that time.

Smith: Yes, the rivalry was real great. It certainly was. But we trained intensely for that whaleboat crew. Everyone of us was just as hard as a rock and in excellent, A-1 condition. We got special groceries like steak and eggs every morning for breakfast, plenty of rest--be darn sure you got plenty of sleep. Not only those men, all of the Marines and the sailors, too, as far as that's concerned, stayed in real excellent physical condition.

Marcello: Did your training routine change or vary any as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, or was it basically the same sort of routine right up toward the end?

Smith: I don't remember it changing. I certainly don't.

Marcello: Now as a young Marine, how closely were you keeping abreast with world events at that time?

Smith: Very little, very little. I can look back and from my studies of history see the events that occurred that were inevitably leading us into this confrontation, but at the time I had no concept of it. Like I said, I was still pretty doggone smart from high school, and I didn't need all of this stuff that was . . . let somebody else take care of that.

Marcello: How secure did you feel at Pearl Harbor as relations between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate? In other words, even if a war did occur between the two countries, did you feel relatively secure here at Pearl Harbor?

Smith: Well, frankly, I don't remember even thinking about the relationships deteriorating. But as far as the feeling of security, we all felt that we were impregnable. We certainly did.

Marcello: Plus the fact that Pearl Harbor would have been so far away from the scene of action, I mean, Japan was a relatively long way from Pearl Harbor.

Smith: And we all had the idea--it never occurred to us--that Japan could pull something like this, being such a small country. We had read and remembered in our high school

history courses and geography courses about Japan as a nation of little bitty people that ran around with wooden clogs and wore kimonos and ate a lot of rice and fish and raised lotus blossoms all of the time-- sat around and sniffed on their lotus blossoms. At that time, it really never occurred to me that anyone, especially a country like Japan, would have the audacity to even think about coming into Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what your vision was of the typical Japanese. I think you've more or less answered that question for me. This, I think, more or less brings us up to the days immediately prior to the actual attack itself. What I want you to do at this point is to give me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, that is, from the time you got up until the time you went to bed that night. After you give me your routine of that Saturday, we'll then proceed into the actual Sunday itself. Let's start with Saturday, December 6, 1941.

Smith: I don't remember exactly what time I went ashore, but I did have liberty Saturday and was due to have liberty again that Sunday. We were off for the entire weekend-- what we called the port watch. We were divided into port and starboard watches. I had gotten several tattoos

during the months preceding Pearl Harbor. I might mention that I never got one when I was loaded or drunk, if you please. I had thought several months back about getting a tattoo. I started to get one one night when I was pretty well loaded. I thought, "Well, no, Jesse, now this is something that's going to be with you the rest of your life. You better wait till you're sober and find out whether you really want one." Well, I thought about it for several weeks and finally decided that I did want to get a couple of tattoos. So after that, that would be the first thing I'd do when I'd go ashore. Then I would start boozing it up. This is typical procedure. When I say boozing it up, I was by far and long not in the minority.

But to get back to that Saturday. I had gone ashore. I didn't get a tattoo that day, but I was going to get one Sunday morning. I had planned on having a large eagle tattooed on my back. I had about fifteen of them on my arms and legs. I figured, "Well, that's enough of the small ones." This thing would have had to go on in three different stages because it covered such a wide skin area. I had made an appointment for Sunday to go back. I had been rather successful in some of the crap games and blackjack games, which do

not occur aboard ship (chuckle). I had a little money in my pocket. On December 6 . . . of course, we were not allowed at that time to have any civilian clothing aboard ship at all. You wore strictly uniforms when you went ashore. You were not allowed to come ashore or go ashore or even have aboard ship any article of civilian clothing. So I bought for myself a pair of slacks and a sport shirt, which at that time was a considerable investment of two dollars or more. I rented a locker at the YMCA and left those clothes in that locker that night of December 6. Needless to say, I never did see them again.

Marcello: Did you actually get part of your tattoo on December 6?

Smith: No, I didn't. My appointment with the tattoo artist was for Sunday, December 7.

Marcello: When you went into town that night of December 6, did you notice an extraordinarily large number of servicemen milling about on the streets, or was it business as usual?

Smith: Not really. It was business as usual. Everybody was boozing it up and walking up and down Hotel Street wondering where they can get the drinks the cheapest.

Marcello: Do you remember any of the places you went to that night?

Smith: Not really. We had one bar that we frequented quite often. They concocted a drink that, man, come to think about it, I don't know how the hell anybody could stand it. They called it a "Tennessee Special." I believe the price of the thing was about thirty-five or forty cents. But this Kanaka bartender they had in there, he'd pour in a shot of sloe gin and a shot of dry gin, a shot of whiskey, a shot of rum, and fill the damn thing up with sake in a tall glass. About three of these was about all anybody could muster, but we usually managed to get down five or six of them.

Marcello: And this is what you were drinking on that particular night, as you recall?

Smith: Oh, certainly! Man, that's the cheapest way in the world to get drunk (chuckle). You didn't drink for companionship or sociability. Like later on in the South Pacific, you drank to get drunk. Forget this damn thing for awhile.

Marcello: Okay, so what time did you get back aboard the ship that night?

Smith: I got back shortly before midnight. I don't remember a whole lot about coming back.

Marcello: Were you pretty well drunk by the time you got aboard ship?

Smith: I like to think that it was due to the fact that it has been so long ago that I can't remember. But to be frankly

honest, I was probably so damn loaded that I just barely did remember getting back (chuckle). But at that time I had progressed up the scale of seniority to such a degree that I no longer had to sleep in a hammock. So it wasn't nearly as much trouble to get my bunk out and put it down.

Marcello: Now were you a private first class at this time?

Smith: Yes, I was a private first class. At that time, it wasn't too bad of an accomplishment to make private first class in just shortly over a year in the Marine Corps.

Marcello: Yes, promotion was pretty slow in all of the services, and I'm sure in the Marine Corps in particular.

Smith: Yes, prior to 1940 there was many a Marine that shipped over for his second enlistment for the rank of Pfc.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less, I guess, takes care of your routine on the night of December 6, 1941. So let's now move into the day of December 7, 1941, from the time you got up until all hell broke loose.

Smith: Well, naturally, on Sunday morning the routine varied from other mornings. I remember very distinctly sitting on the side of my cot. We were supposed to have everything cleared away by eight o'clock--have the decks clear of all the cots and various paraphernalia that you accumulate around where you sleep.

Marcello: What sort of a condition were you in?

Smith: I felt pretty bad (chuckle). I remember I was nursing a pretty good hangover. I had one shoe and one sock on, and I was putting on the other shoe when they sounded general quarters.

Marcello: What was the condition of your fellow Marines?

Smith: Generally about the same, I would presume. I don't recall, but I would say generally about the same-- those that had been ashore the previous night. I was just putting on my second sock when they sounded general quarters. I remember thinking, "Man, what a loused up damn Navy! Sounding general quarters on Sunday morning? That is the most idiotic thing I ever heard of!"

Marcello: What deck were your quarters on?

Smith: At that time we were on the main deck.

Marcello: That's right. You mentioned that your quarters were right there by the gun.

Smith: Right there by the gun.

Marcello: Did you move any faster now that general quarters was sounded? I would assume that up to this point anyhow, you weren't moving too fast.

Smith: No, I wasn't. I wasn't moving fast at all, and I didn't move any faster after general quarters sounded until they sounded them the second time. Of course, when they

sound general quarters, you man your battle stations on the double. I was sitting there cussing the Navy, you know, "Good God almighty! This is the silliest thing I ever heard of! General Quarters on Sunday morning!" with a little stronger language than that, naturally. Then they sounded general quarters again, and they said, "This is not a drill! This is not a drill!" I heard a couple of far off explosions, and about that time the West Virginia that was tied up right next to us took a . . .

Marcello: Now she was outboard of the Tennessee?

Smith: She was outboard of the Tennessee, and she took her first torpedo. That big old battleship of mine just went, "Wooomp!" I don't know how you're going to spell that, but it seemed like I moved about six inches.

Marcello: In other words, it gave the Tennessee a good jolt.

Smith: It certainly gave the Tennessee a good jolt and me along with it--not only physically but mentally.

Marcello: Is there any other sort of phenomenon that you can compare it to, such as a collision of automobiles or something of this nature?

Smith: I've been in a few automobile collisions since that day, but I don't remember any of them being as dramatic

as that was. It came as such a totally complete surprise, particularly after having heard a couple of explosions off in the distance somewhere. I had no idea what they were. But then when they said, "This is not a drill," and I felt that big battleship jump . . . as big as that thing is and for something to make it jump like that, I figured, "Man, something is going on!" And with just a very slight modicum of delay, I finished dressing, got that cot put away, and manned my battle station.

Marcello: You did put your cot away?

Smith: Oh, you bet! It was right in the way. We had to before we could train that gun. After we did get our battle station manned, which was just a matter of just very few minutes . . . well, let's face it. We're standing up here with a broadside gun--a five-inch .51-caliber rifle that hurls a projectile, a solid projectile. It's designed for long-distance, long-range, firing. The West Virginia is directly in our face. We couldn't even train our gun out, so we're absolutely useless. After a matter of a very few minutes, orders were sent down from the bridge to secure the five-inch .51 battery. We were not told particularly where to go until the gunnery sergeant told us. He said, "Hey, one of those little three-inch guns right outside the hatch is not being manned! Let's get some men out there on it!"

Marcello: Now why wasn't that particular gun being manned?

Smith: I don't have the slightest idea. Some of the sailors were supposed to man those three-inch antiaircraft guns. It's just a little small antiaircraft gun. I wouldn't have had any more idea of what to do with that thing than the man in the moon.

Marcello: Now by the time you got to your gun position, was the Tennessee already beginning to put up any resistance? In other words, were the antiaircraft guns already in operation?

Smith: Some of the five-inch .25's . . .

Marcello: Five-inch .25's?

Smith: Five-inch .25's that was manned solely by the Navy personnel was in action. I think some of the machine guns up in the maintops had gotten into action. But we went outside the hatch, and there were already some other Marines, including the gunnery sergeant, firing this three-inch gun. He told us to go on up to the maintops and take over those .50-caliber machine guns. By this time the machine guns . . . and really I don't know whether they had been firing before or not. But they were not firing and there was no one in the maintops. There had been quite a bit of strafing--at least what we thought was strafing.

Marcello: What sort of attack was the Tennessee itself coming under at this time?

Smith: Strictly strafing and a few bomb hits from some horizontal bombers that they had up there. But we were standing out there watching these torpedo planes coming in. I believe that they had several torpedoes that probably had USS Tennessee written on their nose, but they couldn't get to us. I think the West Virginia took all the torpedoes that were intended for her and for the Tennessee.

Marcello: Did you actually see those torpedo bombers lay down those torpedoes?

Smith: Yes, I did. I watched two or three of them.

Marcello: You might describe that.

Smith: It was such a futile feeling to be standing there watching those planes coming in. We saw a couple of them while we were still up in the casemate on the five-inch gun. There is absolutely nothing you can do but watch that damn fool drop that torpedo.

Marcello: I've heard some people say you're almost awe struck.

Smith: Yes, and you just wonder, "Well, what's going to happen?" And there's no place to run, no place to hide, not a damn thing you can do but just watch it come on. Of course, it's a feeling of abject futility, really. We were very glad when we were told to go on up in the maintops and

man these .50-caliber machine guns. It's a pretty good climb up through that cage mast.

Marcello: You had this sense of futility, like you mentioned, so any activity, any action, was better than what you were doing.

Smith: Anything at all would have been better. There were some of the fellows that, when they seen that nothing could be done, they ran back inside. Someone unlocked the rifle case, and we got our rifles out--but no ammunition.

Marcello: I was just going to ask what you were doing for ammunition even with those machine guns. Was there any ready ammunition there?

Smith: Well, I haven't gotten to the point to where we got up on the machine guns yet. When we got up there . . .

Marcello: Was it a hazardous climb getting up there? Were you strafed or anything of that nature?

Smith: Yes, they were . . . well, like I said, what I thought was strafing at the time. I'm not really sure upon reflection whether it was strafing or whether it was fall-out from other ships' guns' shrapnel and so forth. But we did get up into the maintops, which is just as high as you can go on that battleship. And the machine guns-- the .50-caliber water-cooled machine gun . . .

Marcello: You were actually climbing out in the open to get up to that maintops.

Smith: Yes. They had been unlimbered, and there was ammunition there. Now I don't recall whether they had been fired or not. But I immediately loaded one of the .50-caliber machine guns. I knew what to do with a .50-caliber machine gun. That three-inch gun, I had no idea. But that .50-caliber machine gun, I could handle. And another fellow got on the bicycle handle grips. You didn't fire these by looking through a sight. You were supposed to fire them strictly by watching your tracers. I loaded the gun and got it ready to fire. He started firing and we're trying to watch these doggone tracers. There were so damn many tracers in the sky that you had no more idea where your projectiles were going than a man in the moon.

Some way or another he got off of that machine gun. The next thing I knew, I was firing it. Looking right out over that barrel, I could see my tracers coming out, but when they'd get mixed up with the rest of them . . . I know I fired at several planes. Whether I hit any of them or not, I wouldn't have the vaguest idea.

Marcello: Now from the time the attack started until you got up in that maintops manning that machine gun, how much time had elapsed?

Smith: I would say ten minutes at the most. Ten minutes at the most. We were on duty till . . . we stayed up there until almost noon.

Marcello: Now during this period that you were up there, could you tell when the several waves of planes had come over? In other words, from the standpoint of history we now believe that there were two waves. But I've heard many of the participants say that they couldn't tell where one wave began and the other one ended.

Smith: I couldn't either. I could not attempt to say. I know we did fire at several planes. I remember that an hour or so later there was a plane coming down the channel. When I look back on it, I believe it had to be one of our planes that was surveying the damage that had occurred. But, boy, somebody opened up on that plane! The first thing you know, everybody was firing at it. No matter of recognition or anything else. They figured, "That damn fool doesn't have any business out there." I don't believe anybody hit him, though. I remember him swerving, banking, swerving out of the way from that row of battleships. The last thing I remember, he was still airborne. I doubt very seriously that anybody hit him.

Marcello: Since you were that high up in the Tennessee, being up there in the mast, did you have a pretty good view of the other action that was occurring down in Pearl Harbor? And, if so, did you have a chance to observe any of it? Now obviously you were fairly busy manning this machine gun.

Smith: Well, I remember the Arizona exploding. We hadn't paid too much attention to these other ships around us until the Arizona exploded. When she exploded we were completely engulfed with black, thick, oily smoke.

Marcello: How far were you from the Arizona?

Smith: Well, the Arizona was directly behind us. She did not have a ship tied up outboard of her, so she took several torpedo hits directly. But after she exploded we were engulfed with this black, thick, oily smoke. I believe this was probably when it really came home to us that something had happened. I remember a sergeant we had on there named Flood. I don't remember who he was. He said, "Man alive! They sure put a crimp in our ship." (chuckle)

Marcello: Was this guy up in the tower with you?

Smith: I believe he was. I remember him making that remark. I don't remember whether he made it up there or whether we were down on the quarter-deck later on. I believe Flood was up there with us.

Marcello: What sort of a feeling did you have or what sort of emotions did you experience when you saw this happening to the Arizona?

Smith: Well, I felt that . . . just like he said, "They really cramped our style, but they're going to get it in the long run because we're going to get them. It might take us a little while, but we'll get them."

Marcello: What other ships did you see being hit?

Smith: Well, we watched the West Virginia settle on the bottom. Of course, her being right next to us, fire was all over the deck. The bottom part of her . . . the lower part of the foremast of the West Virginia was completely on fire. All of the ladders going up had been broken to such an extent that no one could get to the bridge. I remember we could look down onto the bridge and see several of the wounded officers there on the bridge.

There was . . . I don't remember whether he was an admiral or a captain at the time. But Captain Kidd--I believe he was captain of the West Virginia--he was killed at that action. We saw him crawling around out there on the bridge. They were trying to figure out ways that they could get up there to him because he wasn't dead, and there were several other men that were moving around somewhat. They must have took a pretty doggone bomb hit right

close to that bridge. They were even thinking about trying to fire a line from the Tennessee over to the bridge because the whole bottom of that mast was on fire, and there was no way that you could get up to it. They never did get around to that. What they finally did about it, I don't really recall.

The damage as far as our ship is concerned that I recall was that the fantail, the back end of the ship, did catch on fire. The officers' country, being in that area, was completely devastated. There was a heavy bomb, to the best of my recollection probably a five hundred pounder, that . . . we think that it hit the yardarm on the mainmast where we were on the .50-caliber machine guns. This yardarm was broken, and the bomb veered somewhat and went through the overhang of number three turret and killed several men when it went through that turret . . . that were inside the turret. But the bomb never did explode. I remember looking at it afterwards. The bottom part of that bomb was sticking out from the bottom of the turret. It had gone through two, I believe, fourteen inch plates of steel--one at the top and one at the bottom--and it was sticking out the bottom.

Marcello: This was obviously then an armor-piercing bomb, was it not?

Smith: Right, I would imagine that it was designed to pierce armor and then explode.

Marcello: That, of course, was about the only kind of weapon that could have done the Tennessee any damage, given your position inboard of the West Virginia.

Smith: Right, it had to come from a horizontal bomber. I don't know of any other way it could have gotten there. But it had some yellowish-looking powder. The nose of the bomb was cracked open. It had some yellowish-looking powder in there. It looked more like sulphur than anything else. Of course, we were told to stay away from it until they got it cleared up. We received some damage from that and some damage from strafing and so forth and so on.

As far as I am personally concerned, my only injury was when we were told to secure. We started down the ladder, and I fell off that damn ladder somehow or another. From all of that greasy smoke and everything, it had gotten pretty slippery. I fell about twelve or fifteen feet into a safety net. They had safety nets every twenty feet up and down that mast--big steel . . . what they called these . . . well, today it would be called expanded metal. I don't know. I suffered a slight sprain to my ankle. Not

even anything real bad enough to . . . you know, to go to a . . . to require medical attention. Too damn many other people needed medical attention a lot worse than I did.

Marcello: While you were up there on that mast, did you witness the Shaw exploding?

Smith: No, I have no recall of that. I have no recall of that at all. We did watch the Oklahoma slowly turn over.

Marcello: You might describe this incident, that is, what you can remember about it.

Smith: Well, the only thing I remember about it is that she was tied up next to the Maryland, which was immediately in front of us.

Marcello: And the Maryland was also inboard.

Smith: Right.

Marcello: It was inboard of the Oklahoma.

Smith: The Maryland was inboard the Oklahoma. Well, their mooring lines . . . naturally, they were tied up next to the Maryland . . . they were tied up to the Maryland just as the West Virginia was tied up to us. Apparently, the West Virginia suffered enough damage that she settled right on the bottom. I watched them cut several lines loose that became so taut that they were afraid that they were going to pull the Tennessee right on away from the

mooring points. How the lines got off of the Oklahoma to allow her to turn over, I don't know. I have no idea. But I do know we did watch her slowly . . . the first time I noticed that she was going over, she was probably at a forty-five degree angle already from the horizontal, and then we just watched her go slowly on over. We saw men scrambling along the bottoms.

After that we stood around up there, waited for planes to come back and waited to see what was going to happen. Every once in awhile they'd tell us that they . . . well, they immediately got welders over onto the bottom of the Oklahoma and began cutting holes in there trying to get people out. There'd be a large cheer go up whenever they'd announce over the intercom that they'd rescued three more men or five more men alive from the Oklahoma. We were up there till . . . I guess it was shortly after noon or maybe a little before.

Marcello: What did the surface look like--the surface of the water--during this period?

Smith: Well, it was on fire all the way around our fantail and around the Arizona. There was a lot of oil on the water, and quite a bit of it was on fire. There were a lot of men in the water. A lot of them were trying to get over to Ford Island. A lot of them were just in there because

they had to leave those doggone ships--the Oklahoma and the Arizona especially. If they happened to be on the outboard side away from Ford Island, they had to go into the water on that side.

One of the more . . . to me it's humorous at this time. They sent us up some chow. It must have been 10:30 or eleven o'clock. Of course, everybody was starved to death by then--no breakfast or anything. It consisted of what we called "horse cock" at that time, which was canned beef--canned corned beef and baloney and so forth--and some boiled potatoes that were about half-done. They were just about half-done. But I'll guarantee you one thing. That was one of the best meals I've had in my life.

Marcello: That's kind of unusual because a lot of the other people have told me that they didn't have any appetite at all in the aftermath of the attack.

Smith: Well, I know we did. This was several hours later. None of it went to waste that they sent up to the maintops. Of course, they had regular rigging that they could send this stuff up on.

Marcello: Did you have enough ammunition up there that you could keep firing as long as planes kept coming over?

Smith: Right, we had ammunition left over when it was over.

Marcello: How big an area are we talking about up there on that mast?

Smith: Oh, well, the machine guns . . . there were four machine guns up there--two on the starboard and two on the port side, one forward and one aft on each side. The mast at that level, I would say, was maybe five feet across. You had maybe four to five feet on the parapet surrounding this cage-type mast, so it wasn't a whole lot of room up there.

Marcello: Were all of those guns being manned?

Smith: This I don't recall either. I know two of them were being manned by Marines.

Marcello: And these were normally supposed to have been manned by sailors?

Smith: Right. Yes, this was not a gun station assigned to the Marine Corps at all.

Marcello: I wonder what happened to those sailors?

Smith: I wouldn't have the foggiest idea.

Marcello: But you'd like to know (chuckle).

Smith: Not really. I might get mad (laughter).

Marcello: After you had a chance to reflect and after a certain amount of calmness set in and you looked out upon the harbor and were able to see all of this destruction, what sort of emotions did you experience?

Smith: I think probably my greatest emotion was anger--the outstanding one as I remember it best. The idea that we were in for a whole lot more. We fully accepted that after this had happened, and we realized that it had happened, that there had to be some kind of a follow-up attack. We fully expected landing parties.

Marcello: So what did you do, then, in the aftermath of the attack itself and after things had more or less calmed down and the last planes had left?

Smith: Well, after we had secured the guns up there in the main-tops, we went back down and we got out our rifles, cleaned them again, made sure they were ready. We were issued ammunition for our rifles, and we were standing by to go to anyplace that we were needed to resist any landing force that might be apparent. It's always been a source of amazement to me that the Japanese had not prepared a follow-up attack with a landing force. I believe that they would have been fairly successful--not to the success of actually taking over the islands, but it would have taken . . . I believe they would have had a lot more success than they did on those islands later on over there in the South Pacific. We were ready--not right at that moment but, as you say, later on. We fully expected

further attacks. I guess probably the only reason we didn't get it is because the Japanese did not expect to meet with the success that they achieved there at Pearl.

Marcello: What were some of the other rumors that you heard in the aftermath of the attack? I'm sure that that ship was just one big rumor mill.

Smith: Oh, yes. There were rumors galore. There were rumors of landing parties landing on various areas on the island, and various two-man submarines and three-man submarines. To this day I've never been able to differentiate the rumors that we received about submarines being sunk, submarines inside the harbor, and so forth and so on. I know they did sink a couple of submarines. I've read accounts of it.

Marcello: You didn't know anything of it at the time.

Smith: We had no first hand information. We heard rumors that there were submarines inside the harbor. Of course, we did maintain a vigilance. We got back on our gun stations, lookouts, and so forth for several days.

Marcello: And I'm sure you believed every one of those rumors.

Smith: I don't recall whether I did or not. I can't say.

Marcello: Okay, so in the aftermath of the attack, then, you were standing by. How shortly thereafter did the Tennessee

get out of Pearl? I guess it would be quite awhile since the West Virginia was sunk.

Smith: Well, see, the Oklahoma had capsized. In so doing, she had forced the Maryland in against these great big concrete quays. When the West Virginia settled on the bottom, she forced us in against the quays. The Arizona sunk right behind us. There was no way in the blessed world you could have gotten the Tennessee out of there at all. What they eventually did . . . and I believe it was some time in January that they finally blasted these cement quays enough--blasted them out of the way. Then they towed the Maryland right straight forward. If I remember correctly they had to do a little digging to deepen the channel so they could get her out of there. But they towed her out and then put lines on us and towed us right between the Oklahoma and these quays that had been partially blasted out.

I don't even remember the exact dates that we left there, but I believe it was some time in January. I know one thing. We never got ashore again after December 7, At least I didn't. The closest thing I got to getting ashore was a few days later when we were assigned to a detail to go out in our whaleboats and pick up bodies.

Marcello: I'm sure that was a rather gruesome task.

Smith: Yes, it was. I don't remember too much about it except being in the whaleboat and picking up several of these bodies. The mind tends to reject these things that are so unpleasant.

Marcello: I have just one last question, and it really doesn't fit into the chronological sequence that we've been operating in thus far. Were the torpedo bombers going so low that you could actually distinguish or see the pilot and co-pilot in those planes? I've heard several of the other people say that they could actually see these individuals with their goggles and this sort of thing. I was wondering if, from your position, you could see them.

Smith: The only thing I could tell was that there was a pilot in there. But they were flying at such speed . . . of course, not speed as we know it today, but at that time they were going fast enough, and we were looking at the whole airplane. When we finally did get up on them, you know, with the weapons that we could respond with, we were looking at the whole airplane. We weren't looking to see if he was a Japanese or what. As long as it had a sun ball on it, throw everything you've got at it.

Marcello: Now even in a situation as serious as this, there are many times some funny or comical things that happen-- usually inadvertently, but they do happen. Did you notice anything of a funny or comical nature that occurred during the attack?

Smith: Not really. I've heard several stories about things that happened, but I have no recall of any of them personally.

Marcello: At the same time, did you see any individual acts of heroism that perhaps stand out in your mind?

Smith: Yes, I did. Of course, we had not been issued . . . we did not have helmets. We were up on these .50-caliber machine guns without even any helmets. Just barely had on a khaki shirt and khaki pants or khaki pants and a T-shirt. When it came to the attention that the men on these guns did not have helmets . . . there were several men around the bottom of the mast that did have helmets on, and as soon as it came to their attention that we didn't have them, these men took off their helmets right in the course of the battle and sent them up to us. I think this was one of the greatest things that a man could have done.

Marcello: At the same time, did you ever see any individual acts of cowardice on the part of anybody? Everybody was scared to a certain extent. I think there is certainly

a tremendous difference between being scared and being a coward.

Smith: I don't recall any acts of individual heroism or of cowardice. Not at all. It seems like that just the bringing of oneself to the point that he knows he's facing death . . . and he'd like like hell to get out of there, go somewhere, but yet he doesn't because he knows that that is not what he's supposed to do. I think this is about the greatest thing that a man can do. No one has a desire to face death. There was no one at Pearl Harbor that I know of that elected to be there because he knew this battle was going to take place. Well, hell, no one knew this battle was going to take place, but I'll guarantee you one thing. I wouldn't go through it again if I could help it. I wouldn't volunteer for it. Let's put it that way. But to me it seems that no man wants to voluntarily face death. We'll get away from it without the confrontation if at all possible. But the real act of heroism comes in when a man knows that he's facing death, and he goes ahead and does what is necessary. Maybe not the most expedient thing, but what is necessary to bring this thing to a successful conclusion.

Marcello: Speaking of conclusions, I think that's probably a good place to end the interview unless you have anything else to add to the record.

Smith: No, I think we've covered it pretty thoroughly.

Marcello: Okay, Mr. Smith, I want to thank you for your time because I think you did give us some rather interesting insights into the activities that took place aboard the Tennessee. In fact, I think this is the first interview I've had thus far with somebody that was aboard the Tennessee.