


NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
441

Interview with
Marvin Alexander
July 7, 1978

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: OPEN
Approved: 
(Signature)
Date: 7-7-78

COPYRIGHT © 1978 THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF NORTH TEXAS STATE
UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF DENTON

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Coordinator of the Oral History Collection or the University Archivist, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas 76203.

Oral History Collection

Marvin T. Alexander

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas

Date: July 7, 1978

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Marvin T. Alexander for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 7, 1978, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Alexander in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was assigned to the Ford Island Naval Air Station during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Mr. Alexander was a member of squadron VP-24 while at Ford Island.

Mr. Alexander, to begin this interview just tell me a little bit about yourself. In other words, when were you born, where were you born, your education--things of that nature? Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Alexander: Well, I was born in Sibley, Louisiana, which is in the northern part of Louisiana in Webster Parish, on July 1, 1923. I was reared there on a farm outside of Sibley about two miles. My father died when I was two months old, and my mother and I lived on the place. We had two colored families that worked for us on the farm. They

did most of the farming and taking care of everything. We lived there until I was approximately nine or ten years old, at which time we moved into the town. Mainly it was because my brother and sister thought we shouldn't be living by ourselves at that distance off the highway; it was probably a quarter of a mile or a half-mile off the main road. And it was a very nice colonial-type home. We moved into the little community, and, of course, I continued school there and elementary school. And later I moved to Tyler, Texas, where we moved in with my sister and lived with her for a time, and then we moved on to New Mexico. So I was kind of drifting back and forth.

I completed my education in Tyler, and from there I went to Illinois, where I was going into the University of Illinois which didn't materialize. So I wound up working in the oil fields. I later joined the Navy in January or February of 1940.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Navy in 1940?

Alexander: Well, I had some friends that had gone into the Navy and were very pleased and happy with it. At that time, it provided still an opportunity for an education, and I was more interested in getting into the aviation branch, because I was interested in flying at that time.

Marcello: Why did you select the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Alexander: You know, I can't recall my reasons back at that time, but I think basically what caused it was that it was water-oriented, and you get to see more of the world. It was more adventurous, I would say, than the Army. At that time, you associated the Army with the infantry, and I wasn't much of a foot soldier. I thought my experiences in the Navy would be more adventurous than they would be on the ground. I would suppose that this is the main reason.

Marcello: You mentioned that you did have an interest in aviation. I think a great many young men of your generation were interested in aviation because it was relatively new.

Alexander: Yes, it was still in the pioneer stage. The aircraft was all reciprocating engines at that time--very low horsepower, so to speak. But it was interesting. You'd read about Lindbergh and all these things that were being done, and Amelia Earhart; and these were the headlines in those days. I think that created an interest among our generation.

Marcello: Now, at the time you entered the Navy in 1940, how closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs?

Alexander: Really not very much. Of course, I was out in the oil fields. Really, at this point, I still don't know the reasoning that I joined the service, to be honest with you, because I had the opportunity, if I so desired, to go on to college. For some unknown reason, I chose to take the other deal and join the Navy.

Marcello: Did you possibly foresee the country eventually getting into war?

Alexander: Not at that time.

Marcello: I assume that you took your boot camp at San Diego, or did you go to Great Lakes?

Alexander: At San Diego.

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

Alexander: No. (chuckle). It was the normal Navy boot camp. I had no problems going through boot camp.

Marcello: How long did it last at that time?

Alexander: As well as I can recall, about twelve weeks.

Marcello: In other words, they had not cut back on boot camp as of yet, because I know later on they did.

Alexander: No. We got the full charge (chuckle).

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Alexander: From boot camp, I went into a squadron in San Diego which at that point was VP-12. I started my training with VP-12, and we later in May of '41 moved to Honolulu--Ford Island.

Marcello: What sort of training did you receive in VP-12?

Alexander: Well, it was basically mechanical at that time, because I was involved in the mechanical aspect of it. I was training to be a mechanic or technician at that point.

Marcello: I assume that all the training that you received here in VP-12 was on-the-job training. You had not gone to one of the Navy schools.

Alexander: Right.

Marcello: What sort of aircraft were you working on here in VP-12?

Alexander: PBY's, which is your seaplanes--twin engines . . . multi-engines.

Marcello: That was quite a workhorse before and during World War II, was it not?

Alexander: Well, I think it was really along with the DC-4, which is the old airline DC-3 that they flew. I guess we called them R-4D's at that time. Those were the two major airplanes in the Navy, as far as I was concerned--as far as reliability and being trouble-free.

Marcello: And that PBY served a great many different functions, did it not?

Alexander: Yes, it really did.

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

Alexander: Well, it was very exciting at that point, and it was exciting after we got there. We had free time at that time, and we got to see most of the beach and to write home that you were at Waikiki Beach. The two major hotels on the beach at that time was the Royal Hawaiian and the Ala Moana, so you could go to the luaus, and it was very exciting for a young man to be

stationed in the Hawaiian Islands.

Marcello: Now, when you went to the Hawaiian Islands, did you go directly to Ford Island?

Alexander: Yes.

Marcello: At the beginning of our interview, we mentioned that you were in VP-24. Did you change squadrons somewhere along the way?

Alexander: Right. As we crossed from San Diego to Honolulu, we changed our numerical number from 12 to 24. VP-12 at that point was in Kaneohe. They moved a squadron into Kaneohe Bay, and it was VP-12.

Marcello: Your squadron moved into Kaneohe Bay, but you were moved over to Ford Island.

Alexander: Right. We moved from San Diego, and they had a squadron in Kaneohe Bay, which was VP-12.

Marcello: What was Ford Island like from a physical standpoint? Describe what it looked like at that time.

Alexander: Well, it was just a pod sitting in the middle of the bay area. The only way that you could get back and forth was by boat. They ran the ferry boats back and forth.

Marcello: Was it a rather crowded place?

Alexander: No, not the island itself. We had--I don't exactly remember-- probably 300 men in the squadron, which wasn't a real large squadron. The island was really not that large to be overly crowded. Of course, all the ships were tied up around the

island, because it was all deep port completely around the island. So you had all the ship traffic. But most of those people were either on shore or on the ships, and really they weren't involved on the base unless they would come into the PX or something. Most of their activities were still aboard ship.

Marcello: Describe what your barracks were like there on Ford Island.

Alexander: Good gracious! It was just a normal two-story building with numerous bunks (chuckle) side by side, double deckers. Of course, there were community showers and bathrooms. As far as I can recall, they were wooden structures but comfortable.

Marcello: What was the food like there on Ford Island?

Alexander: Well, I never really had many complaints about the food in the service. I always seemed to get my share of it--of quality food. There were things that I didn't particularly like which you learn to like and learn to, you know, to develop a taste for after awhile. If I had my preference, I would choose others, but overall I thought the food was all right. I can't recall any adverse comments that I can make about it.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the morale in the Navy during the pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Alexander: I thought it was very good. We had a lot of activities and intramural sports and a lot of functions; we had, of course, all kinds of recreational activities and movies and so forth.

- Marcello: You mentioned sports. Sports did play a very important role in life of that pre-Pearl Harbor service, whatever branch we're talking about.
- Alexander: Right.
- Marcello: I know boxing was particularly well-attended, was it not--the smokers?
- Alexander: Yes, they were. Most of the athletics . . . of course, on Ford Island we didn't have the major sports. We had no baseball or softball field . . . football or baseball fields. But we did have tennis and other sports that were . . . of course, you still had the water sports, but this was normally done--surf-boarding--on the beach area.
- Marcello: Describe what a typical day was like for you there at Ford Island during that pre-Pearl Harbor period. In other words, what sort of on-the-job training did you undergo there on Ford Island?
- Alexander: Well, at this particular point, just prior to the attack, I had been assigned to material division, which was spare parts and aircraft parts and things of that nature; I was assigned to that as well as to flying. You were assigned to crews, but the days you weren't flying and if you wasn't working on your airplane, you had other activities. But I was at that point working out of a material storeroom.
- Marcello: Now, you mentioned awhile ago that you did from time to time

actually do flying in the PBY's?

Alexander: Yes, I was in a crew.

Marcello: What was your particular function aboard one of these PBY's during one of these flights?

Alexander: Well, basically, at that time it was basically a patrol squadron; so you took your stations in what we called the bubble or blister on the side and maintained a lookout for surface craft or aircraft or whatever you may see in the ocean in the sector you're flying at that time.

Marcello: How did these . . .

Alexander: You did your cooking and your cleaning and your general chores that were involved while you're up in the air for ten or twelve hours.

Marcello: How did one of these patrol flights proceed? In other words, describe what one of these flights was like. When would you go out?

Alexander: Well, we would normally take off at daybreak, and we would have a sector that we would fly. We would fly out probably 600 miles or 700 miles and cross and come back and form a pie shape or an apex-type sector that you would fly. Each day was a different sector. Of course, it was not the same crew flying each day. At that time, we were probably flying one a week or two a week; I really can't recall, but normally it was one a week.

Marcello: During the course of the day, how many of these PBY's would normally be going out on one of these patrols?

Alexander: Well, from my squadron we would have probably two or three, but there were other squadrons also which would be doing the same thing.

Marcello: Were there ever enough of these PBY's that the area around the Hawaiian Islands could be covered in a 360-degree circumference? You may not be able to answer that question, but I'll ask it anyway.

Alexander: No, I would say not. In our squadron we had probably twelve planes at that time. Some of them were in for maintenance and other things. So if we had three or four in the air at a time, that would be the maximum. Of course, you couldn't cover a 360-degree circumference with that.

Marcello: I guess I was wondering if the combined patrols from Kaneohe and Ford Island were enough to cover an entire 360-degree circumference.

Alexander: I would say that would be true with that, and, of course, the Army was there, too.

Marcello: It would seem to me that these patrols would kind of be boring.

Alexander: They truly were. You sit and do nothing for hours at a time.

Marcello: And I guess you had the monotonous drone of those engines and so on, also.

Alexander: Well, you know, after awhile that doesn't bother you. It's

kind of like living at an air station, and you hear the planes coming in and out all the time. You can still sleep and rest; it's something that you're accustomed to hearing. So you just get accustomed to the sound.

Marcello: I assume that by the time you got to Ford Island, you were no longer in one of the beaching parties and so on.

Alexander: No, (chuckle) I had already gone through this.

Marcello: You must have got that back in San Diego?

Alexander: I drank a lot of salt water and had to pull a lot of side gear out, you know--the wheels--for flotation.

Marcello: I guess that's where everybody starts when they are assigned to one of those patrol wings, are they not?

Alexander: Yes, you get indoctrinated quickly--trying to lug and pull this tire and flotation tank out to put on the side of the airplane.

Marcello: But you avoided that when you got out to Ford Island.

Alexander: Well, yes. At that point, I had changed and moved up somewhat in the structure.

Marcello: I would assume the water around Ford Island wasn't exactly the cleanest in the world to have to go out there and attach that flotation gear and so on?

Alexander: Well, I don't recall. You know, it was a . . . you had circulatory water in it, so it would rise in all the tides; it was an open area into the Pacific. But we had a lot of ships involved--that's true--and I understand that there was some oil on the surface

of the water at times.

Marcello: How often would you personally go out on one of these patrols?

Alexander: Well, probably two or three times a month. You know, you'll have three or four out each day, so your turn would come up sometimes once a week.

Marcello: Now, as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to worsen, did your routine change any in terms of the patrols and so on?

Alexander: No. Our routine, as far as my knowledge was concerned, never changed. I don't recall any change at all. Of course, it could have been in the higher echelons; they knew more about it than we did in the squadrons. I don't recall at any time anything changing. I don't think they were prepared for it; I really don't think they knew.

Marcello: In other words, you weren't told to be extra alert or anything of that nature when you went out on those patrols in the period counting down to Pearl Harbor?

Alexander: Oh, no. I'd say we were looking for a fleet or anything of that nature. Had we caught the fleet as it was coming in, then they would have been monitored much closer. How they crossed the Pacific without being monitored, I still don't know. Anyway, they came through all the sectors. At that time, we didn't have all the radar; we didn't have all the electronic facilities we do now.

Marcello: Now, would these patrols continue on a normal basis even on the weekends?

Alexander: Yes.

Marcello: They would?

Alexander: But on a smaller scale. In other words, we would normally have one flight on the weekend as opposed to two or three.

Marcello: Which again might possibly explain why the Japanese fleet wasn't detected coming in from the north. Of course, it came in from the north when they hit Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: We had one plane out on the day of the attack.

Marcello: Now, was that unusual?

Alexander: No, because this was something we did each week. You know, it was just routine. I'm sure they probably knew that; their intelligence had no doubt picked this up. There's no way I know that, but if you try to analyze and put the factors together, well, then it looks like they were pretty smart.

Marcello: When you and your buddies sat around in bull sessions during those days and weeks prior to the actual coming of hostilities, did you ever discuss the possibility of an attack at Pearl Harbor?

Alexander: Not to my knowledge.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Alexander: Of course, there were all kind of Orientals, so you were accustomed to seeing and being around these people constantly

in Honolulu, because they have a lot of Oriental people. A lot of the Orientals--Japanese and Chinese--both went to the university in Honolulu. I really didn't think a lot about them until after the attack (chuckle). They were just a part of the community.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about your liberty routine. How would the liberty routine work for you here at Ford Island during this pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Alexander: Well, of course, we had most evenings off unless we had classes or something scheduled, and weekends unless you had caught the watch or you were on duty for some particular reason. So we had decent liberty. We weren't really restricted in any way and had freedom to come and go as our time permitted.

Marcello: And you could stay overnight if you wished?

Alexander: Well, you could, I suppose . . . yes, we did many times.

Marcello: I guess finances would determine whether or not you were going to stay overnight.

Alexander: That was the basic thing. Of course, just before the attack there were three or four of us that had a house on Waikiki Beach, and so we would spend the weekends that we were off there. We had this place that we'd rented.

Marcello: Oh, the four of you rented this house on a monthly basis?

Alexander: Right.

Marcello: Did that strap you very much financially?

- Alexander: Well, yes (chuckle). You know, it was very inexpensive in terms of dollars as opposed to now. There would be no way that you could rent that kind of property, particularly on Waikiki Beach. Of course, it was a block-and-a-half off the beach; it was not really on the beach, but there was no residential development on the beach, anyway. It was back two blocks from the beach approximately.
- Marcello: What did you normally do when you went on liberty?
- Alexander: Basically go to a show, go surfing . . . just enjoy the water.
- Marcello: And would you more or less kind of use this house as a headquarters as such and so on to do whatever you wanted to do when you went ashore?
- Alexander: No, it was a place that was cheaper to stay than it would have been if you had tried to stay in a hotel room or something for the weekend. It cost us less money with the four than it did if you tried to stay in a hotel. We used to go two or three weekends a month. Two of the guys actually stayed there most of the time.
- Marcello: Were they petty officers of some sort?
- Alexander: Yes, they were a little higher ranked and didn't catch the watch as often as we did (chuckle).
- Marcello: I guess catching the watches would have played a large role in determining how many times you would go ashore and be able to use that house.

Alexander: That's true.

Marcello: Now, many people like to say that if the Japanese were ever going to pick a time to attack Pearl Harbor, the best time to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning. Do you feel that a Sunday morning was the best time for an attack?

Alexander: Yes, I do. I think that everything is curtailed; the total operation is slowed; you have less possibility of getting people into the air. So it was very well-planned. Like I say, I think their intelligence knew . . . most of them . . . a lot of them had gone to school, in Hawaii, so they were very familiar with the area.

Marcello: Sundays were a day of leisure in the Navy at that particular time if you didn't have the duty.

Alexander: True. It truly was--both Saturday and Sunday.

Marcello: Is it probably more accurate to say that it was because Sunday was a day of leisure rather than because everybody was hungover from a wild Saturday night that the Japanese picked a good time to attack?

Alexander: I really don't recall those kind . . . we did not have those kinds of parties within the group that I ran with. We were pretty conservative people, and we just more or less would go for relaxation and to get away from the barracks and the routine of things. We had an opportunity to cook our own food and snack and then do the things that you would normally do in a home

atmosphere as opposed to military. And I think this was a reason, I don't recall any big parties. We really weren't into that.

Marcello: I've heard it said--just like you mentioned--that many of the people would go ashore just to get a different type of food or something of that nature. Not that the Navy food was bad, but just something that was not the usual routine.

Alexander: Right. You could say that you had some choice as opposed to whatever they were serving that particular meal. They had some decent restaurants, and the restaurants were very inexpensive at that time. Of course, we had a little car, and we could go to Pearl City, and this was an experience where the only major airline came in and all the tourists and people flying in those big seaplanes.

Marcello: You're referring to the Pan American Clipper?

Alexander: It came into Pearl City. So we used to run over there and see all the people and go to the plantations and some of the farms. So it was, you know, more sightseeing and playing tennis and other things that you could do on a weekend.

Marcello: It's interesting that you brought up the subject of the Pan American Clipper. Again, I think this illustrates just how primitive aviation was at that particular time as compared to today. It was a big event when the Pan American Clipper came in.

Alexander: Well, it was, because you didn't have ten flights a day, you know. You were lucky if you had two or three a week. As far as I know, they only had two planes--one or two planes--that serviced that area. They were big four-engine seaplanes, and it was quite an event to see them. Of course, we were flying PBV's, and we thought those were very large airplanes at that time.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up, I think, to that weekend of December 7, 1941, Mr. Alexander, so let's go into that weekend in a great deal of detail. Describe as much as you can remember what you did during that weekend. Can we start with Friday, or is that asking too much of you to recall?

Alexander: Of course, we had the weekend patrols, so we were on duty. We were going to quarters in the morning at our hangar. They had already called squadron to order and to take the roll call and muster at that time. This was about the same time the bomb went off in the first hangar. Had they dropped the bombs on our hangar instead of the hangar on the point, they would have probably killed a number of people. But fortunately the bombs they dropped hit on the hangar that was on the point.

Marcello: Did anything eventful happen that Saturday night that you can think of?

Alexander: I don't recall anything . . . nothing other than just . . .

Marcello: Since you had the duty, you would have been there at the Naval

air station, I gather.

Alexander: Yes, we were on the station at that time. Our squadron had the weekend watch.

Marcello: Okay, so on Sunday morning, you're mustering because you had the duty. Pick up the story at that point.

Alexander: Well, of course, when we heard the first explosion, of course, obviously everyone thought a plane had blown up. So we go running out the hangar to see what had happened, and at this time we see the airplanes and see that it was the other hangar. Until they dropped the next bomb, we really didn't know what was going on. Of course, once they dropped the bomb and came up, then you see the big red ball on the plane, and everyone knew what that was.

Marcello: So what happened at that place, or I guess maybe I should say, what was the initial reaction of the people?

Alexander: It was pretty much chaos at that point, because no one knew what to do. You know, you didn't know whether to go back into the hangar or to leave the hangar, because you knew obviously at that point, if you stayed too long in that hangar and anyone caught a glimpse of you, they were going to bomb that hangar. Fortunately, they never bombed our hangar.

We did go back into the hangar--the majority of the people--just to get away from the shrapnel and stuff that was flying. I got hit in the side of the face as we went out.

But at that point, it was decided to disperse and get out of the hangar and to find another shelter. They were laying a water line or a sewage line along this strip--landing strip--so most of us picked up what ammunition and what guns we could and took off and got into this ditch.

Marcello: What sort of ammunition and guns were available to you there?

Alexander: We went into the ordnance shop, and we got .30-caliber machine guns and .50-caliber machine guns and took those and lugged them out and got them down into the ditch area. Some people had actually got onto the planes and were firing from the blisters in the planes.

Marcello: What sort of a procedure did you follow in procuring those guns and ammunition?

Alexander: Well, we had direction. The officer of the day directed the people to pick up what they could.

Marcello: I guess what I am asking is, you didn't have to go through the usual red tape to check out weapons and ammunition and so on?

Alexander: No, no.

Marcello: Was there somebody there to distribute the weapons, or did you have to break into the ordnance room or anything of that nature?

Alexander: No, no. All of our departments were open because we were all at work or in the process of getting ready to go to work and to put in your normal routine.

Marcello: How much training had you had in the firing of machine guns and

so on?

Alexander: Well, nothing other than what experience we'd had in training. When we were flying, well, we did a lot of training in the open waters--firing at targets, you know, in the water as they would move and maneuver. So we had had experience at firing the gun, and we knew how to operate it.

Marcello: Now, by the time you got to the ditch, approximately what sort of a time span are we talking about? You might have to estimate this, of course.

Alexander: I really don't know. It was probably five or ten minutes. It really wasn't very long.

Marcello: So things got organized very quickly then?

Alexander: Oh, yes. We moved quite rapidly.

Marcello: I guess you were lucky in a way that your particular squadron did have the duty, because that meant that your non-coms at least would have been there--somebody who could give orders.

Alexander: Right. We had all the commissioned officers there. Our whole squadron was there.

Marcello: So what happens when you get into this ditch?

Alexander: Well, of course, we started firing on the planes as they were coming over, because they're bombing the Tennessee and the Arizona, which was opposite our hangar, and they were coming from the Honolulu side across the bay and dropping their torpedoes and bombs. And so we just started firing on them, and then

they later located us and they had shot down one of the planes that fell directly behind our hangar. It seemed like the attack lasted for an hour-and-a-half. I don't really recall how long it was . . . thirty or forty minutes. It was less than an hour in total length.

Marcello: Describe the action that you saw out in the harbor itself. You mentioned that you're able to see Battleship Row and some of the things that are going on out there.

Alexander: We really didn't see much of that. We did see the Nevada, and it was trying to make passage out and got hit and then ran aground. What they were trying to do is to sink her in the harbor to block the harbor. But the skipper actually took it and ran it aground to get it out of the ship channel. So really, we could see the Curtiss. I think it was the Curtiss. I don't recall. It was a small aircraft tender that was anchored, and we could see it better than we could the Arizona. There were too many buildings between us and the Arizona. But they were coming over the buildings there after they dropped their bombs, and across the island, and so we were firing on them as they came across.

Marcello: How low or how high were these torpedo bombers coming in?

Alexander: They were very low. In fact, because they had no counterattack on them, they could drop their bombs and torpedoes relatively close to the ships, so each one they dropped, I'm sure, was

a direct hit. You know, there was no maneuverability of the ships and nothing that you could do; they were just sitting ducks.

Marcello: Could you actually distinguish the pilots in the Japanese planes from where you were?

Alexander: Yes, you could see them. Of course, they was wearing their glasses, and some of them had their cockpits open. In fact, we shot one of the planes down, and it landed behind us--behind our hangar where there was a wheel repair service, where they repaired all the wheels and tires and all behind the hangar. After it was all over, we pulled the pilot out of the cockpit. The most unusual thing that I can recall is that he had a photograph of the harbor drawn on his flight suit, and he had an "X" on his target. He had a big "X," but it showed each location of the ships on that side of the harbor. It showed the harbor and whole outline of the island.

Marcello: And you actually saw this yourself?

Alexander: Yes. We took it off and cut it out of his suit, and then Intelligence took it away from us.

Marcello: And it was actually sewn on the leg of his flight suit?

Alexander: No, it was drawn on there.

Marcello: It was drawn?

Alexander: With ink. It looked like an ink outline that he had taken and copied from, I'm sure, his briefing that he got of his assignment.

To me he had just drawn this on his pant leg where he could look at it and pick his target from his map.

Marcello: I guess that it wouldn't have really taken any genius to have some sort of knowledge as to which ships were in and where they would be berthed and so on, would it?

Alexander: No. It was kind of unusual that we had the whole fleet in the harbor at the time, though. Normally, you don't do that.

Marcello: And that had not been the case prior to December 7th?

Alexander: It had on occasion, but it's rare. Part of the ships are normally at sea. The Saratoga was at sea coming in, and this is what they really thought the planes were from.

Marcello: The Enterprise, was it not?

Alexander: Yes. The Enterprise had the carrier flight that was coming in--which later came in that night, and we shot them, also.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that you jumped into that ditch there at Ford Island. Either there were a bunch of ditches there, or that was one long ditch, because I swear that everybody and their brother must have been in that ditch.

Alexander: It ran completely the length of the strip--the landing strip.

Marcello: Because I know a lot of people of the California and the West Virginia and the other ships that were sunk got ashore and found shelter in a ditch, and I assume that we're talking about the same ditch.

Alexander: Well, I don't know. You know, it could be because the island

was relatively small. Probably it could be. I don't know for sure. Of course, they were putting in a bunch of sewer lines and water lines all over the island at that time.

Marcello: What do you talk about while you're in that ditch and as the action is going on?

Alexander: You're not thinking a lot of things--you don't--other than "here's one" or "there's one at three o'clock" or "there's one at two o'clock."

Marcello: Now, did you stay in that ditch for the duration?

Alexander: Until it was pretty well over.

Marcello: Did you have to go back and get more ammunition, or had you carried enough with you?

Alexander: No, there were people going back and forth and getting it out the planes, you know, what we could. We tried to get planes in the air. We had crews that attempted this, and they were strafing the planes. We got one in the water but could never get it off.

Marcello: I assume that it was a rather sickening sight to see all these PBY's being destroyed.

Alexander: (Chuckle) Yes, it really was. You're helpless; you're just sitting there.

Marcello: Is it a very frustrating feeling, among other things?

Alexander: Well, it was, yes. Because, you know, you'd think, "Well, are they coming back? What are we going to do? There is no way

we can get these things prepared and ready for a counterattack or to meet them later on!" So you really feel helpless--and we were helpless--there was no question about that. I think had an invasion taken place on that same day, there would have been very little opposition.

Marcello: I assume that you were all fully expecting an invasion to occur.

Alexander: Well, we really expected another flight, because normally when you have an initial attack, that's normally followed up by another one. But it didn't occur; they just hit the ships and left. They didn't attempt another attack.

Marcello: In other words, you could only detect one wave, so to speak, of Japanese planes during the attack?

Alexander: That's the only ones we saw, was during that initial wave.

Marcello: You could not detect a lull or anything like that in the planes coming in?

Alexander: No. It looked to me--and from our conversations there--that they each had their assignments; they were laid out, and they knew exactly where they were going.

Marcello: In one sense, do you have to have a certain grudging admiration for their efficiency and so on in carrying out that attack? They seemed to know what they were doing.

Alexander: They did. You had to give them credit. They were very well-informed; their intelligence had done a tremendous job; there is no way

you can criticize them.

Marcello: When you're down in this ditch and you're firing at the planes and so on, do you have time to be scared? Is there a certain amount of fear, or is there too much going on at that particular point?

Alexander: No, it never did occur to us at that point. You know, you're involved and you're trying to do things. Fear never entered until later--after it's all over, and you get to looking at things and the way things were torn up. You see all the fires and the ships on fire and the water on fire, and then you get to thinking how fortunate you are that you're still around. Of course, we went over . . . from that point they dispersed us, and we had to go and assist in moving the bodies and all. We took these into the mess halls and just lined them up on the floor.

Marcello: Where were you getting these bodies?

Alexander: All over.

Marcello: Were they floating up on the shore of the island and so on?

Alexander: The ones that we got were from the hangars and from the strafing. But most of them came from the ships. After it was all over, you were bringing the bodies off the ships. They would bring them to the shoreline, and we would pick them up.

Marcello: That must have been a rather gruesome task, was it not?

Alexander: It really was because it was very difficult to identify the

people. You know, you had the people from each squadron and from each ship going down the line identifying the people. It was quite an experience.

Marcello: Did you simply put them on a stretcher and take them up to the mess hall?

Alexander: Just laid them on the floor and covered them up.

Marcello: What sort of rumors did you hear in the aftermath of the attack? I'm sure that the place must have been one big rumor mill.

Alexander: Actually, I can't remember what was said. No doubt (chuckle) we had many comments to make, but I don't recall any,

Marcello: I'm sure there were a lot of trigger-happy servicemen around that night.

Alexander: Yes, very much so. Obviously, this was true because we shot some of our own planes down.

Marcello: Do you recall the incident when those planes were shot down, that is, the planes attempting to land that were coming off the Enterprise?

Alexander: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Describe that incident.

Alexander: Of course, it was dark--it was night.

Marcello: Where were you at the time?

Alexander: We were at the squadron. We were still at the hangar, of course, trying to get things together. We had finished our duties over at the mess hall in helping move those bodies.

Then the ship people were taking care of the ones that were left. Of course, those from the ships that were capsized and sunk had nothing else they could do. We were still at the hangar. Of course, our particular hangar and our group was not the ones that were firing. It was from the ships and from the others, because they assumed this was the next wave coming in.

Marcello: From what I understand, it looked like the Fourth of July when every gun in the harbor opened up.

Alexander: Yes, because of all the tracers. You know, you got a tracer bullet for every so many on a clip.

Marcello: When the firing started, what did your group do?

Alexander: Well, actually, we were just watching more than anything else-- waiting to see what was going to happen.

Marcello: I thought maybe you went back in the ditch again.

Alexander: No, (chuckle) we didn't go back to the ditch. They were attempting to land and they was shooting them on their approach. So they were pulling up and just scattering. These planes were all over trying to get out of the way until they were finally recognized as our own planes.

Marcello: Were you able to piece together any of the PBV's that day so that you would have any planes that were flyable?

Alexander: No, it was probably a week before we really got back in the air.

Marcello: There was nothing flyable on December 7th there at Ford Island.

Alexander: No, none that was flyable, except the one that was out. It was the only plane that we had left that was serviceable.

Marcello: How many did you finally get that were serviceable?

Alexander: Well, it really didn't take very long. I would say that within a week to ten days we had most of them back in shape. We just had a lot of holes to patch on the elevators and wings. Fortunately, none of them burned or caught fire, so we . . . well, we did have one that caught fire, and the fire department saved it.

Marcello: That was kind of unusual or lucky in a way, was it not?

Alexander: It was very lucky. We couldn't figure out . . . that's one of the things we talked about. I can't recall any of them that were exploding or burning. It was just strafing. Had they had tracers and all hitting, it would have no doubt probably ruptured more or at least set more of them on fire. But we didn't notice tracer bullets or anything that they were firing from their planes. They were small caliber bullets.

Marcello: I would assume that those planes were gassed and ready to go, since you had the duty.

Alexander: Yes, most of them were.

Marcello: How many planes would normally have been going out on that Sunday morning?

Alexander: Just one.

Marcello: Just one?

Alexander: We were only required to put one in the air each Saturday and Sunday, as well as I can recall.

Marcello: That's almost incredible, is it not, as we look back on it? All one has to do is read the newspapers to see that the two countries were on a collision course, and there is only one patrol plane going out from Ford Island and probably no more than that going out from Kaneohe.

Alexander: Well, of course, we were very remote at that time, though. You know, Pearl Harbor was the last point that I would think that they had anticipated any action, and I think this was probably one of the main reasons. Otherwise, there would not have been the ships in the harbor; that alone would indicate that we were so remote from it that we didn't anticipate any kind of an attack such as we got.

Marcello: That's an interesting and important point that you have made. In other words, some people may have seen that war between the United States and Japan was coming, but it was not going to occur at Pearl Harbor--so they thought.

Alexander: Right. The same thing could have happened at San Diego or Los Angeles. Because had they taken the right course, they were between . . . they could have just as easily gone another 600 miles or 700 miles and attack the West Coast of the United States instead of Pearl Harbor.

In just trying to analyze it, here again we had many bases

between Pearl Harbor and Japan. My thought would be . . . I assumed just like the others--that if they're going to attack or if they're going to do something, it's going to be closer within their own relative country or territory rather than 2,000 miles away.

Marcello: In other words, if they were going to attack American territory, it would probably be the Philippines.

Alexander: Yes. We would have thought the Philippines. I think Pearl Harbor and the West Coast were completely out of the question.

Marcello: What sort of a day was December 7th in terms of weather and climate and visibility?

Alexander: Very nice, as well as I can recall. It was a nice day.

Marcello: Was it cloudy or cloudless?

Alexander: I can't . . . no, there was no clouds.

Marcello: A good day for an air attack?

Alexander: Right, because the visibility was unlimited . . . and at night, too.

Marcello: You mentioned that most of the action that took place there at Ford Island came from strafing--not all of it but most of it. Was the strafing being done by the rear gunner, so to speak, of the torpedo planes after they had made their approach?

Alexander: No, they had the fighter escorts that were doing a lot of the strafing; as far as we were concerned, this is where most of it was coming from. You still had, of course, even in the

bombers and torpedo planes they had mounted wing guns that did strafing. No rear seat action or strafing was taking place on our side. All the planes on our side had either wing-mounted or nose-mounted machine guns.

Marcello: How did you sleep that night?

Alexander: We just didn't sleep that night.

Marcello: What were you assigned to do?

Alexander: We worked. Of course, my job was to issue whatever material it took to get the planes back in action.

Marcello: Was there usually a relatively large inventory of spare parts and material available there at Ford Island?

Alexander: No, really not because we really didn't need that much, you know, at that point. But it was adequately supplied, and I don't recall anything major . . . had we had to change a wing or this type of thing, it would have been difficult. We did have to change some blisters, but we had those fortunately.

Marcello: What was the morale like in the aftermath of the attack?

Alexander: Well, of course, I think people were kind of depressed at the time--to think that this could occur with no prior knowledge and at least no advanced notice of even three or four hours.

Marcello: I guess it was pretty depressing to see the destruction that took place among the ships, because Battleship Row was a rather impressive sight, was it not?

Alexander: It was very depressing, and the people . . . you know, to go

and to see what was happening with all the gas and oil burning on the water. People in the water, you could not get to. You know, they would be under and come up for a breath, and all they would do was suck flame and oil in. To see them drown was horrible!

Marcello: Evidently the oil was very, very thick.

Alexander: Actually, I don't talk about this very often.

Marcello: I'm sure that's true. Actually, the oil was very, very thick on the water, was it not?

Alexander: Yes, it was burning--just a mass of blaze on the water.

Marcello: I understand that bunker oil is just like gelatin, so to speak--very thick.

Alexander: Yes, it was a heavy oil and burned very freely on the water.

Marcello: I assume that your opinion of the Japanese changed after the attack, also. You mentioned that prior to the attack, you really didn't think about these Orientals too much.

Alexander: Well, this is true. I mean, you become concerned with . . . you know, here you're still . . . you go to town, and they're still on the streets . . . and I'm sure it created a lot of problems for them. It was embarrassing to them, and in many cases their ancestry was certainly coming forth in the minds of a lot of Americans--that they would send this knowledge back to their people or wherever they picked up their intelligence. Of course, we didn't fraternize with them very much even in the

beginning. But we were very skeptical of anyone you saw thereafter.

Marcello: Were you allowed to send any word home to your mother or other relatives in terms of your well-being or anything of that nature at Pearl?

Alexander: Yes, we were. The Red Cross took care of that. They notified all of the families. But it was probably a week to ten days later. It was some time before they really knew.

Marcello: I'm sure it was just a matter of informing your kinfolks that you were alive and well---nothing about the damages that were done.

Alexander: No, sir. It was just that you had survived. I don't know the wording or the topic of their message other than to notify them that you were safe. I really can't recall, but I think it was a week to ten days before they really knew.

Marcello: How long did you remain on Ford Island after the attack?

Alexander: We were only there for a short period of time. Then we were moved to Kaneohe Bay. From Kaneohe Bay, then we were assigned and went to Midway. I was in the Battle of Midway, which was in the following June. So I would say that three months after Pearl Harbor, we went to Kaneohe Bay, and then we went to Midway Island.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Alexander, that's probably a good place to end this interview, unless you have any other comments that you think

we need to make relative to the actual attack at Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: No, I really can't think of much else.

Marcello: One last question. Did you see any acts of heroism or cowardice that stand out in your mind during that period of the attack itself?

Alexander: I think that the people reacted very calmly. I saw no cowardice at all. People were anxious to do what they could to assist in any way. We had people . . . as I said, we would leave the ditch and go back in to pick up ammunition or whatever we could find to bring back.

Marcello: And they were doing this under fire, too.

Alexander: Well, they were strafing. You'd just had to watch, and if they were fixing to strafe, they'd come right down the ditch. They killed some but not very many. It was very difficult to fire accurately down a two-foot wide ditch. They would signal us from the ditch that it was clear and to come on in.

Marcello: Well, again, I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that the scholars will be able to find your comments very valuable when they use them to write about Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: I hope so.