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Interview with

H. R. Epps

May 14, 1976

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: H. R. Epps
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Ray Epps

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Date: May 14, 1976

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Ray Epps for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 14, 1976, in Austin, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Epps in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Maryland during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Epps, 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. Epps: I was born in October, 1923, in a little town of Fairburn, Georgia, not far from Atlanta. When I was five years old, we moved to Texas, south of Dallas, Ellis County, on the farm, and about 1932 we moved to central Arkansas.

In 1941, early '41, I joined FDR's CCC. I was shipped to a little place near Boise, Idaho, and decided the CCC wasn't for me. On March 25, 1941, I was sworn into the United States Navy at Boise, Idaho.

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

Epps: Due to certain consultations with educational officers and other people, I felt that the Navy offered a better future for learning some sort of a trade that would be more useful in civilian life. That's primarily the reason.

Marcello: At the time that you entered the service, were you giving very much attention to world affairs? In other words, did you foresee the possibility of the United States getting into war very shortly or anything of this nature?

Epps: Yes, however, being seventeen years of age, I didn't worry too much about it.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Epps: San Diego, Company 41-41.

Marcello: Was there anything out of the ordinary that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as a part of the record?

Dpps: No, except the training at that time was some eight

weeks, and it was very, very strict, very rigorous, which . . .

Marcello: But at the same time, the training had been cut back, had it not? Before world conditions started to get worse, I believe boot camp was actually longer than eight weeks.

Epps: I understand that it previously was twelve weeks, but I felt like that we covered quite a bit in eight weeks.

Marcello: Where did you go after you left boot camp?

Epps: I went aboard the USS Maryland in June, 1941, in the Navy yard--it was in dry dock--in Bremerton, Washington.

Marcello: Was this a voluntary thing on your part, or were you simply assigned to the Maryland?

Epps: I was assigned. We were all assigned to different ships, and a certain amount of us were assigned to the Maryland.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed aboard a battleship?

Epps: Well, I thought that was the biggest boat that I had ever seen. Of course, it didn't take some of the boatswain's mates long to straighten you out that that was not a boat, and that it was a ship.

Marcello: What were you striking for after you went aboard the Maryland?

Epps: Well, I was placed in the deck department, which I wanted to be an electrician or a radioman, and I was informed that that might come later. So I was put in what they called the deck division--the 1st Division--primarily being responsible for upkeep of that part of the ship, and the sixteen-inch main battery for battle purposes.

Marcello: Is this where your battle station was aboard the Maryland, on one of the sixteen-inch batteries?

Epps: Yes, it was, as a matter of fact, in the powder handling room.

Marcello: When was it that the Maryland was shifted to Pearl Harbor? Do you recall?

Epps: Yes. We left Bremerton in July, approximately. We went to Long Beach. As a matter of interest, I was still seventeen, but I did notice some Japanese freighters in the harbor. I noticed that they were loading some scrap metal aboard those, and I remarked to one of my shipmates, "There goes some scrap metal to Japan. I wonder how long it will be before they'll be throwing it back at us." I do recall that. And we proceeded to Pearl Harbor in August, 1941.

Marcello: Now all this time, were you still in the deck force?

Epps: Yes, I was still in the deck force.

Marcello: In other words, all of the on-the-job training that you received up to this point aboard the Maryland concerned the maintenance and upkeep of the ship.

Epps: That is correct.

Marcello: How would you describe the on-the-job training that you received during this period?

Epps: Wonderful (chuckle)! Reveille was at 0530, which is 5:30 a.m. We slept in hammocks, which is something they don't do today, I understand. We had fifteen minutes, from 5:30 to 5:45, to lash and stow the hammocks. From 5:45 to 6:00 a.m. we were served coffee, and then off with the shoes and up with the pants leg and up topside to scrub and/or holystone and swab the deck, depending on what day of the week it was. It got swabbed and rinsed down every day, but we had these . . . I don't know whether they were birch or what they were. They were planks. We'd take this holystone, which is, oh, a brick with a hole in it, and you slipped this handle in it, and you actually stoned each plank. It literally looked clean enough to eat from when we were finished.

Marcello: I'm glad that you described what that holystoning actually was because I would assume that 100 years from now, if somebody listens to this tape or reads

the transcript, they would never know what we're talking about when we're talking about holystoning the deck.

Epps: I'm not sure--I'm sure that there's a reason--how it received its name, but I'm not clear on just how it received its name. Someone said something about some seaman using this stone, and he said, "Holy cow! How long is this going on?" or something like that. So it had some roots.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale aboard the USS Maryland during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Epps: I would say it was excellent. When we left Long Beach in August, '41, we started practicing battle conditions. Of course, in the sixteen-inch main battery we were primarily concentrating on battle with surface ships. Of course, the antiaircraft guns were primarily interested in protecting a ship from aircraft attacks.

Of course, I shall never forget the first time I witnessed one of these sixteen-inch--.45-caliber to be exact--firing. That was the loudest noise that I had ever heard. Actually, the thing hurled a 2,300-pound projectile through the air some twenty-three miles. It was powered by five 105-pound bags of black powder, so you can imagine the explosive it had.

Marcello: How do you account for the high morale aboard the Maryland during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Epps: We were kept busy. There was no idle time per se. During the day, well, we had plenty of details. Maybe some of the people didn't particularly enjoy the work. Of course, even though I didn't particularly enjoy scraping and chipping paint and painting, I had my own electrical division. I felt like that if I did a good job where I was, I'd possibly go to the E Division some day. But I think primarily keeping the crew busy was . . . and some entertainment--movies and so forth--at night.

Marcello: What was the chow like aboard the Maryland?

Epps: It was very good, very good. I had three months of what we called mess cooking. At that time we had twenty people to serve, and we'd go to the galley and get the chow and bring it back and serve it. It was very good food.

Marcello: How about the living quarters aboard the Maryland? What were they like?

Epps: Well, they wasn't exactly luxurious, but they were comfortable. Actually, I enjoyed sleeping in a hammock because when the ship would roll and kick, the hammock would tend to stay still and the ship would roll around it.

Marcello: I was going to ask you if it took very much getting used to sleeping in one of those hammocks.

Epps: No, not really. Of course, they were made of heavy canvas and a mattress. When you would lie down in the thing, the sides would more or less come up around you, and it more or less makes you secure. I noticed some of the people did, as an extra precaution, tie ropes around themselves, but I never found that necessary.

Marcello: Well, I think you've mentioned a lot of things that certainly in part would account for the high morale aboard the Maryland. You mentioned the fact that you kept busy all the time. You mentioned that the food was good, and evidently the living quarters really weren't that bad.

Epps: No, they were not.

Marcello: Plus, I would assume, the fact that all of you were volunteers had something to do with the high morale. You were there because you wanted to be there.

Epps: That is correct. I volunteered. In fact, there's one interesting point. I mentioned I had been on the farm. When I was taking my physical, one of the doctors asked me to walk across the floor. I heard his remark to another doctor. He says, "Look! He walks like a farmer!" I couldn't help but remark,

"Well, that's where I came from," (chuckle). That's digressing a little bit there.

Marcello: How rapid or slow was rank or advancement aboard the Maryland during the pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Epps: I wouldn't say that it was actually slow, but it was by no means automatic. We had courses that we studied for each rating. When I went aboard the Maryland, I was what they called a seaman second class. I had a course book that I was studying for seaman first class. I didn't really want to be a seaman first class, but I went ahead and studied for it and was promoted, oh, after some four months or something like that, which was about normal, though, for that rating or a non-petty officer status, so to speak. Then, even though I was still in the deck division, I obtained an electrician's mate third class manual and started studying for it. The boatswain's mates weren't too thrilled with that, but we didn't have any trouble.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more about the training routine and so on that the Maryland engaged in during this pre-Pearl Harbor period. Before you do that, let me ask you this question. What did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Epps: Oh, I thought it was great until we got there, and

then I wasn't overly impressed after having . . . I went ashore one time and looked around. Of course, to me it was a hot, humid country. Of course, living below deck accounted for some of that. Actually, the climate is ideal. But when I found out we were going to Honolulu and the Hawaiian Islands, well, of course, I visioned hula girls and all that sort of stuff. I thought it was great.

Marcello: Okay, now let's talk just a little bit about the training routine in which the Maryland engaged during this pre-Pearl Harbor period. We're really getting into the months immediately prior to the Japanese attack by the time the Maryland got there. What sort of a training routine would the Maryland engage in during this period? In other words, when would it go out, how long would it stay out, and when would it come back into port again?

Epps: Well, normally we would go out on, say, Monday morning, and we'd normally stay approximately two weeks. Then we would come into port and stay for one week. During this two-weeks' period we would actually have many, many battle exercises. We would have aircraft--land-based aircraft--to tow sleeves to give the gun firing crews practice at firing at these sleeves. We would have floating targets on the horizon that'd give our

sixteen-inch main batteries and our five-inch secondary batteries practice in firing at a silhouette target to represent a ship. Sometimes we would actually go into battle conditions for twenty-four hours and stay at our battle stations for long periods of time. That actually took place from the time we arrived at Pearl Harbor until the attack.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit more specifically about your particular battle station. Now you mentioned that you were in the powder room of one of the sixteen-inch batteries?

Epps: Right.

Marcello: Okay, talk a little bit about what your functions was there.

Epps: Well, our responsibility was to deliver the powder to where they actually loaded it into the gun. Some interesting things about the powder handling crew, we did not wear shoes in this room for fear that the least spark would set off the black powder. They were nylon bags. We had electric elevators. We were some 100 feet below where the main gun barrel was located. We would have a man in the magazine, and there would be a steel door what we called "dogged down," in other words, secured. Then there was a little hatch in the middle where he would pass the

powder bags out, and then we would hand carry them to the elevator. And as a back-up to the elevator, we had batteries in case of a main power failure. We were some three decks below the water line. When we were standing by, well, there wasn't anything really to do except just sit there and maybe listen to the sound power phones and receive some information.

Marcello: Now where was the powder room in relation to your quarters--your living quarters?

Epps: Well, my living quarters was on what we called the first deck. That's the first deck below the topside. And then the powder handling room, I believe, was on the 03 deck, so it was about five decks below. I believe it was decks 1, 2, 3 and then start out 01, 02, and 03. So it was about five decks below. And, of course, we had a certain route that we were to take to go to our battle stations.

Marcello: Approximately how long would it take you to get from your quarters to your battle station?

Epps: I would say possibly three minutes . . . approximately three minutes.

Marcello: How much attention was given to antiaircraft defenses during this pre-Pearl Harbor period? You know, we're talking about a period when not too many ships had really been sunk by airplanes and things of this nature yet.

Epps: That's true. I would say more emphasis was placed on surface targets rather than air targets. We had more armament to use against surface targets than we did against aircraft. We had eight five-inch, .25-caliber batteries for antiaircraft plus some what we called the 1.1 British pom-poms which we had received while we were in the Navy yard. They were one of the latest weapons. Then we had various .50-caliber machine guns, and that's all the antiaircraft weapons we had. Of course, the five-inch, 51-caliber, whose primary duty was for surface targets, could be used against low-flying aircraft.

Marcello: I think a lot of times with those particular weapons they would even fire those into the water, would they not, to get some sort of a water splash or something to discourage torpedo planes and things of that nature. I think this is something that was developed later on during World War II.

Epps: Possibly so.

Marcello: At the same time, I know that the Maryland and all the rest of the ships had a heck of a lot more anti-aircraft weapons aboard after Pearl Harbor than they did before Pearl Harbor.

Epps: Very definitely. There's one interesting thing that happened. I don't remember the exact date, but it

was in November, prior to December. I did some lookout duty among other things. I didn't spot it, but one of the lookouts spotted a periscope. Of course, he naturally reported it to the officer of the deck. The officer of the deck reported it to the captain, and it was soon determined that we had no submarines in this area, so we had to assume that it was Japanese. We signaled for one of the destroyers to come alongside and escort us. I don't know exactly how long the periscope was there, but I think it was there for over a period of two days when we were cruising. This was less than a month before Pearl Harbor was attacked. That started quite a bit of speculation.

Marcello: What ships operated with the Maryland during the training exercises?

Epps: The West Virginia, which was a sister ship, the Colorado, which is a battleship of the California class. We didn't have any anti-aircraft carriers at that time that operated with us. We had destroyers; we had cruisers; we had oil tankers. Not that we needed fuel, but we needed the practice of tanking on fuel at sea. We had a supply ship for taking on provisions at sea. That was the extent of the classes that operated together.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that these training exercises would last about two weeks. You would usually go out on a Monday, and I would assume that you would come back on a Friday two weeks later?

Epps: Right.

Marcello: What was the liberty routine like when you came back into port?

Epps: For enlisted men, the liberty routine was normally from about 1600 to 2400 midnight. If you had an address that you could give, some relative or friend of where you could be reached, you could receive overnight liberty.

Marcello: Why was it that overnight liberty was not just a routine thing during this period? I've heard all sorts of theories put forward to explain this, but I was wondering if you could shed any light on why liberty was over at midnight.

Epps: No. The only thing I . . . it's strictly a theory. I had discussed it with some people. Honolulu was quite small then. There was quite a bit of fleet activities going on, and I feel that the civil authorities had something to do with this request in order to keep the streets from just being worked alive with sailors all night long. They possibly requested Naval authorities to curtail some of the activities.

Marcello: This is more or less along the lines of the thinking that I've heard. I heard it said by one individual that they didn't want the sailors simply plopping down in the city parks or something like that and going to sleep because, if for no other reason, they might have gotten rolled or something of this nature . . .

Epps: That's true.

Marcello: . . . if they did something like that. What did you usually do when you went on liberty--you personally?

Epps: Oh, well, actually . . . maybe I'd take the opportunity to attend a later-type movie than we would get to see on the ship. Sometimes we went to the Y.M.C.A. They had quite a bit of activities. Of course, the first few times we went on quite a few sightseeing trips. After that I could have just about as much fun going over to the submarine base to their movies and their actives versus going ashore in Honolulu.

Marcello: What was so attractive about the submarine base?

Epps: Well, they had good food (laughter).

Marcello: I've heard that from other people.

Epps: (Laughter) They had a good restaurant there, and the food was cheap. That, I think, was the main attraction . . . and good movies, too. They were about ten cents each.

Marcello: How come the submarine base had better food? Was the reasoning that if somebody could endure life on a submarine, why, they ought to be treated better than perhaps the other members of the fleet?

Epps: That's possibly it. In my later years, having taken the examination for submarine duty, I can see why they really had the rigorous requirements. Of course, possibly on submarine duty you're at sea so long and underwater so long that I felt like that there was maybe a little bit of reward for the long duties at sea and the cramped quarters.

Marcello: Now, what sort of liberty would you receive aboard the Maryland? Would it be a port and starboard-type liberty, or would it be a one and four-type liberty? How would it operate?

Epps: Port and starboard as I recall.

Marcello: In other words, you would get either the Saturday or the Sunday off.

Epps: Correct, correct.

Marcello: When was payday aboard the Maryland?

Epps: The fifth and the twentieth.

Marcello: So that would mean that on the weekend of December 7, the crew would have been fairly flush, considering what the pay scale was in the Navy at that time.

Epps: That's correct. Payday would have been on Friday.

Marcello: Generally speaking, when the Maryland had been out for two weeks and had come back into port and the crew had liberty, what would be the condition of the men when they'd come back aboard ship after being on liberty and having been out at sea two weeks?

Epps: Well, some of them would have too much to drink, to be frank, whereas some of them were not in bad condition. I recall we had a very good cook on the Maryland, Dave Davenport. He weighed approximately 300 pounds, and we had to use the crane one night to assist him aboard because he was too heavy to carry, and the ladder was too steep. A lot of them had fun.

I think there was one case . . . I don't recall the name, but one of the fellows had too much to drink, and the officer of the deck put him on report. He had to go up and see the captain the next day. The captain asked him what he had to say, and he said, "Well, nothing, Captain. When I was in civilian life and I got drunk, I came home. This is my home, so I came home." (Chuckle) He was dismissed. In other words, no charges were pressed.

Marcello: I asked you this question for a very specific reason. A great many people are of the opinion that Sunday was the best possible day that the Japanese could

have chosen for an attack because Saturday nights in Pearl Harbor were always a time of drunken debaucheries and revelry and things of this nature. How would you reply to such a statement?

Epps: Well, I can't agree with that on a wholesale basis. Now certainly you're going to have certain people that are going to drink too much. But with the liberty expiring at midnight and the attack some eight hours after that, except in an extreme case I think that by and large the people would have been up to par.

Marcello: In other words, what you're saying is that on a Sunday morning the vast majority of the people aboard the Maryland would have been ready for whatever occurred.

Epps: Correct. I would say that they were alert, and as evidenced by activities, I'm more convinced now.

Marcello: I'm glad you said this because this is more or less the way I've felt all along also. It's simply . . . the statement is not true that everybody came in on a Saturday night knee-walking drunk.

Epps: That's correct. That's correct. You had your certain percentage just like you would in any situation.

Marcello: Now as one got closer and closer to December 7, 1941, did your training routine change in any way?

Epps: I would say that it picked up considerably as we got closer and closer.

Marcello: Picked up in what way?

Epps: Well, more frequent battle drills. In other words, "All hands man your battle stations! This is no drill!" And maybe they would simulate an attack by aircraft or attack by surface ships or something of that nature. Now one point that's interesting is that we should have been at sea on December 7.

Marcello: What happened that you weren't?

Epps: We had an annual military inspection scheduled, and I think we came in on Friday a week before Pearl Harbor, not the Friday preceding but the Friday before that. We stayed in all week. Of course, the reason I remember that so vividly is that I was a side cleaner, and we were busy cleaning and painting the side. Then some ships came in on Friday immediately preceding December 7, and that was the main reason for the amount of ships that were within the harbor.

Marcello: Normally, on a given weekend, what percentage of the battleships would have been in Pearl?

Epps: We were in Battleship Division 3. Let's see, there were . . . well, I could count them, but I'd say about a third. A third of the battleships were there. There were eight or something like that. The Arizona, the Pennsylvania, the West Virginia, the Maryland, the

Tennessee, the Oklahoma, and, of course, the Utah had been a target ship, but approximately a third of them were there.

Marcello: When the Maryland came in, where did it normally tie up?

Epps: If I recall, normally at Fox Eight. That's the number of a berth at the Naval Air Station, Ford Island. That's where we were tied up on December 7.

Marcello: And you were tied up beside the West Virginia?

Epps: No, we were tied up immediately beside the Naval Air Station.

Marcello: I see.

Epps: And on Friday before, the Oklahoma tied up on the channel side of us.

Marcello: In other words, you were on the inboard side of the Oklahoma.

Epps: Correct.

Marcello: Okay, during this period, when you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of a person did you conjure up in your own mind?

Epps: (Chuckle) Well, in my own mind . . . of course, I had been around quite a few of them in the Navy yard as civilian workers. I didn't really take them too serious. To me they wasn't the type person that seemed

like you could engage in a normal conversation. I'm sure there were many of them, but the normal worker and . . . I really didn't think too much about the Japanese being the type that would attack the United States. There again, at my young age I didn't take certain things seriously.

Marcello: Did you ever hear any of the old salts talk very much about the prowess of the Japanese Navy? Obviously some of those old guys had served in the Asiatic Fleet or something and may have had had some passing contact with the Japanese.

Epps: That's true. I did hear some of the old salts say that they didn't . . . I think the proper expression was that they didn't trust the Japanese any further than they could throw a mule by the tail, or something like that, and maybe they gave some of their experiences over in the Asiatic part of the world.

Marcello: Did they ever talk about the quality of the Japanese Navy at all?

Epps: No, not really. I think that possibly they may not have known about its quality, but they were suspicious in some cases.

Marcello: As conditions got worse between the United States and Japan, how safe and secure did you feel here at Pearl Harbor?

Epps: Well, that's really hard to describe. I don't think I . . . I certainly wasn't near as aware of the war conditions as I should have been.

Marcello: Perhaps my question really wasn't really clear. Did you think the Japanese would ever have the audacity to attack Pearl Harbor?

Epps: No, I didn't. I really didn't. Even with the previous story about the submarine, I really didn't feel like there was any way that they could. We just had too many air patrols and too many defensive measures that I was familiar with.

Marcello: Plus the fact that Japan's an awfully long way from Pearl Harbor.

Epps: That's right. That's correct.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to the days immediately prior to the attack. What I want you to do at this stage, Mr. Epps, is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941.

Epps: Well, actually, I need to start back about the middle of the week due to an event that happened. As I mentioned, I was a side cleaner, and our duty when we were in port was to clean and paint the sides. Knowing that this inspection was coming up on Saturday, we usually

kept some of our gear in what they called the boatswain's locker, and I was going down this vertical ladder with an armload of clothes in one hand and attempting to descend the ladder with another hand. My feet slipped and my hand didn't hold. I fell some, oh, ten or twelve feet on a hatch and hit my hip on a dog, which is a piece of metal that's used to clamp the hatch. I was injured and was taken to sickbay. This happened approximately in the middle of the week. The doctor said I had a hematoma. So I was in the sickbay on the Saturday that they had the inspection, so actually I didn't get to see too many of the crew members and observe too many of the activities.

Of course, the inspection was over around 1:00, I believe. Of course, it was uneventful. I was by then, . . . I guess it's what you would call an ambulatory patient. I could move around to an extent. I was doing quite a bit of reading, and sickbay was on the second deck. This deck had portholes. There was no event particularly that I recall on Saturday night. On Sunday morning we were normally served breakfast at approximately 7:30, as I recall.

Marcello: Now Sunday was more or less a day of leisure even for those who didn't have the liberty, wasn't it?

Epps: That's correct. You had late reveille. Where it normally was at 5:30, I think at 6:30 was reveille, and breakfast was about 7:00.

Marcello: Okay, continue then with your routine on Sunday,
December 7, 1941.

Epps: So I was leisurely having breakfast and looking at
the newspaper. I heard what sounded like an explosion.
So I hobbled over and stuck my head out the porthole,
and I see all of this smoke and fire at the Naval
Air Station. A thought immediately came to mind
that one of our planes had crashed. There's where,
I guess, the intelligence of an eighteen-year-old
at that time really comes to light of not having
any sometimes.

I saw these planes flying low over Ford Island.
I saw people running in all directions and vehicles
doing the same. I didn't notice they were Japanese
planes. Of course, I didn't have a wide open view, but
I certainly had a good view. I heard the machine guns
firing. As bad as I hate to admit to this, it's
true. I thought that the machine guns firing was
motors backfiring and missing. Due to the events
preceding, I thought that someone had sabotaged our
planes, and possibly they were crashing. We had no
PA system in the sickbay, so I had not heard general
quarters sound.

The chief pharmacist's mate came down. He had
several first aid kits, some blankets, and he was

almost incoherent in his speech. I innocently said something like this: "What's the matter, Chief? Is our planes crashing?" He said, "Hell, no! We're being bombed by the damn Japs!" Well, I was just sort of numb. I went back and sat down on my bunk. I said, "The Japanese are bombing us?" About three guys that were around me, they disappeared. I don't know. I guess they went to their battle stations. They were in a little bit better shape than I was. So the chief gave me a blanket and directed me to proceed to what they called a battle dressing station. That's a place that's set up during battle conditions. It had a doctor and pharmacist's mate to take care of the wounded and the dead.

Marcello: Now were you in your hospital garb, or did you have on regular Navy clothing at this point?

Epps: Since I was ambulatory, I had on my regular Navy clothing, which was shorts and T-shirt--cut-off white trousers. We called them shorts and T-shirts.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened from this point? The Maryland itself had not been hit yet.

Epps: No, not yet. And the noise was beginning to pick up. As part of the story, along with wanting to be an electrician's mate, I had had visions of possibly

wanting to be a pharmacist's mate at this point. I proceeded to the battle dressing station, and the ship began to . . . everytime there seemed like there was an explosion, it would bob around like a cork even though it was 32,000 tons displacement.

Marcello: Now these were probably the repercussions from the Oklahoma being hit?

Epps: The Oklahoma being hit.

Marcello: What did it feel like?

Epps: Well, it actually felt like you were in a rowboat almost like hitting some rough water. It would literally move and shift around. We got hit by one 100-pound bomb up forward, and that caused quite a bit of vibration.

Marcello: Now was this one of those armor piercing shells the Japanese dropped?

Epps: No, it really wasn't. It exploded in the first compartment. There was very little damage, relatively speaking, from that.

Marcello: Could you feel the repercussions from this 100-pound bomb?

Epps: Oh, very much, very much. We were not very far forward, but we were a little bit forward, and we were on the third deck. So it wasn't too far from it.

After things really got underway, I began to collect my senses a little bit, and immediately above us was what we called an armor deck some four, possibly five, inches thick. I began to feel relatively safe until I happened to think about two or three decks immediately below me was this powder magazine that I had been working in. I thought, "Oh, well, if it happens, well, it'll happen quick." So I began to assist the pharmacist's mates. Some of the wounded were brought down. There wasn't too many, but some. That's when I decided that I did not want to be a pharmacist's mate.

Marcello: Are you referring to the nature of the casualties and so on that were coming in?

Epps: Nature of the casualties. I guess I had envisioned being a pharmacist's mate and dispensing pills and things like that and not really trying to patch up a guy that had a leg that had almost been decapitated or whatever medical term that would be. We did get word, "Standby to get underway," shortly after we arrived at our battle dressing station. Then the next word was, "Belay that last word! The Oklahoma just capsized!"

Marcello: Could you feel or did you have any sensations at all when the Oklahoma turned turtle?

Epps: No, really not. Of course, there was quite a bit of explosion from the Oklahoma, and that boat's vibrations, of course, were transmitted onto our ship. In fact, up forward we received a hole in our bow beneath the water line from those explosions. But as far as actually being able to tell anything about when it capsized, we could not.

Marcello: How would you describe the initial reaction of the crew members that you observed aboard the Maryland? Was it one of panic? Confusion? Professionalism? How would you describe the reaction of crew members that you observed?

Epps: The best way that I could describe it . . . they were mad and very serious, and I think whatever professional capabilities they may have possessed at that time was at its peak. We did have quite a few casualties due to the fact that our decks belowdecks at that time were linoleum, and our people were wearing these cut-off trousers I mentioned. As that deck became hot, the linoleum became soft and pliable, and a lot of people slid to the deck in that and were burned. But, of course, that wasn't as prevalent on the Maryland as it was on some of the other ships.

Speaking of the attitude and condition of the crew, they were very, well, hostile, you might say,

towards the Japanese. Everyone pitched in, it appeared to me, and did their job to the utmost. The crews from the sixteen-inch guns were shifted to the antiaircraft guns.

Of course, I need to digress just a moment. When this battle started, we were not able to commence firing immediately for the simple reason that due to this annual military inspection on Saturday, our ammunition was all in the magazines rather than in the ready boxes at the gun mounts.

One interesting story that I remember quite well . . . I think this seaman's name was Short. In the Navy, when you maintain your responsibility as the maintenance of a certain part of a ship, you more or less make that your second home. Well, this one seaman named Short--ironically, I think of General Short--his responsibility was maintenance of three .50-caliber machine guns which were situated directly forward of the conning tower--the conning tower being an emergency station for steering the ship under battle conditions. It has armor around it. And, of course, in the service there's always a certain percentage that doesn't get the word. Well, Seaman Short had either not gotten the word or didn't worry about the word to take his ammunition down below. He had been placed on report for not complying with orders.

Well, this particular Sunday morning, he had made his coffee and was reading the newspaper. He happened to see this Japanese plane coming toward the ship. He was much more alert than I was. He thought, "Well, this guy hasn't got any business coming toward the ship." So he flew a .50-caliber clip on and shot him down. This was before general quarters sounded.

Marcello: Now did you actually see this?

Epps: No, no, but we got good account of it. So they placed him on report again for firing without authority and before general quarters was sounded. And to actually concur with Navy tradition, I suppose, they gave him a court-martial. Now I'm not sure whether. . . the courts-martial have changed. I think at that time possibly they called it a summary court-martial. They fined him one dollar and gave him a Navy cross and promoted him to third class gunner's mate.

Marcello: (Chuckle) Now from where you were during the actual attack, could you see what was really happening outside?

Epps: At one point I did.

Marcello: What was going on outside?

Epps: Utter confusion (chuckle). I went up to the galley to get a pot of coffee for these people down there.

Marcello: Now was this between . . . was this during the lull between the two waves?

Epps: No, this was actually during . . . I can't recall whether it was the first or the second wave, but I know that the attack was going on, and when I got up to the galley, I felt like I had to stick my head out and see what was going on. I didn't watch it very long, but I did see one plane fly by that I could very vividly see the pilot. In fact, I think I can say with safety that he was grinning (chuckle).

Marcello: Describe exactly what he looked like.

Epps: Well, he looked like a dad-burned baboon with a helmet on, is what he looked like to me (laughter). I had the urge to go out and try to get hold of one of the guns myself, but, of course, they were filled. But it was an eerie feeling. He was just that close.

Marcello: In other words, did he almost look as though he were a spectator looking over the events down below, or was the plane going by fast?

Epps: It was going by fast. I'm sure that he had made a circle and did some strafing. As he, of course, flew by, well, he was looking down over the gun mounts. I don't know how he kept from getting hit, but . . . he may have later, but he was going on by when I saw him.

The people were very busy. Everyone seemed to be working, handling ammunition, or handling wounded or something like that.

Marcello: Could you actually discern the two attacking waves of Japanese planes? In other words, could you in all of that activity that was taking place discern that there was the first wave, and then there was a lull, and then there was a second wave? Or did it all seem like one continual activity to you?

Epps: As I recall . . . of course, I just went topside that one time. It seemed like just one continuous activity. Of course, not being able to see what was going on, it would account for that. Of course, I still felt a little bit numb from the thing. I almost couldn't believe it. Time didn't really seem to have too much meaning at that time.

Marcello: Did you have very much of an appetite or much of a thirst during this activity?

Epps: No, I really didn't. Possibly a cup of coffee or something like that. As I recall, we were served on station. We stayed at our battle stations until, oh, possibly late in the afternoon, as I recall.

Marcello: And you remained at this battle dressing station the whole time.

Epps: That's correct. Then when we were finished I went back to the sickbay.

Marcello: Okay, what happened in the aftermath of the attack? What did you do personally?

Epps: Actually, I stayed in the sickbay, oh, some three or four days, as I recall, after the attack. We didn't have a tremendous amount of wounded in the sickbay. Whether some had been transferred to hospitals, I'm not sure. We only lost three people on the Maryland.

Marcello: The Maryland was lucky that it was inboard of the Oklahoma.

Epps: That's right. The Maryland owes the Oklahoma a debt of gratitude, and also Ford Island, because they could hit us from neither side with the torpedoes.

But, oh, in some few days I was released from sickbay, and we were able to get a tub and get over to the Navy yard. Of course, this particular night . . . I believe it was the same night that these carriers . . . the Enterprise, I believe was one of them, that was off Pearl . . . three planes came in or attempted to land. I believe that we . . . I know that we opened fire. I think we possibly shot one down and the other two, or whichever it was,

went back to the carrier. Of course, I thought we were being attacked again when I heard the guns firing.

Marcello: Did you actually witness this?

Epps: No, I was in my bunk in the sickbay. I just heard the noise and then got the word of what had happened.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that you heard in the aftermath of the attack?

Epps: I think the main rumor that we heard when we were in the Navy yard some few nights after that . . . of course, we had Navy yard workers all over the place. I was standing guard on the forecastle topside forward and had a .45 automatic and with orders to . . . if I met anyone who did not . . . Navy yard workman who did not put his flashlight on his identification card, to shoot him.

But the rumor was that there was a Japanese alien aboard--that really made things tense--and that the Japanese were going to land troops on Hawaii. That was about the . . . well, there were some other rumors, too, that there were some B-17's going to come over from the States and catch up with these Japanese ships that had launched these aircraft, and, of course, that never landed.

Marcello: Did you have any direct experience and so on with the midget submarines that managed to penetrate the harbor during the attack?

Epps: Not the ones that penetrated the harbor. I had a little bit of an encounter . . . we had a little bit of an encounter when we left on December 21, but not during that time.

Marcello: Describe in your own words what the damage looked like--things of this nature.

Epps: Well, of course, where the 100-pound bomb exploded it was just in this compartment, actually. If I recall, we had mixed emotions about it. It exploded in the paint locker (chuckle). But, of course, the bulkheads, of course, were torn. It was quite devastating.

Then, of course, out on the dock they were actually doing some temporary repairs beneath the water line. Of course, the bow of the ships was what we called "down." It was not on an even keel. Of course, there were certain marks about topside where the shrapnel and .50-caliber machine gun bullets had hit. Well, it would be bullets. They don't call those projectiles necessarily.

Marcello: What did the rest of the harbor look like?

Epps: Oh, it looked like a mangled mess. I did go aboard the Arizona a couple of days after that to help salvage some searchlights. That was really an eerie feeling because . . . well, it was just . . . it was sunk except the main mast and the mast, and the very top portion of the ship was above water. It was just almost a twisted . . . what you could see was twisted hunks of steel.

The California had sunk on an even keel. The Oklahoma had capsized; the Utah had capsized; the West Virginia, which was in the place of where the Oklahoma was except she was outboard of the Tennessee, was a hunk of twisted steel. They were diving for bodies, of course, on the Arizona. It was just complete devastation. I don't know whether this would be too good of a picture to some people, but it looked worse than the tornado in Lubbock did in 1970.

Marcello: What did the surface of the water look like?

Epps: Quite a bit of oil. That was mostly what was on the surface. Of course, on the Arizona probably some of the oil storage tanks had been ripped open, and, of course, the same was true for the Oklahoma and many others. But Pearl Harbor was never really a clear blue body of water anyway. But it was quite oily.

Marcello: What sort of emotions or feelings did you have when you saw this mess before you?

Epps: Well, I guess my main feeling was that we needed to get at the Japanese as quickly as possibly. I guess I had a feeling of retaliation. Of course, knowing the size of the Navy and the way it had operated, well, I really didn't get too excited about it. But I was ready to go to battle.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Epps, that runs out all the questions that I had to ask. Is there anything else that you think that you would like to add that needs to be a part of the record?

Epps: Well, I might add a few things here. I mentioned the submarine on December 21, 1941. The Tennessee, the Maryland, and the Pennsylvania steamed out of Pearl Harbor to go back to the States for several things. One was to receive needed repairs, and the other was to receive more armament and electronic surveillance equipment. The Pennsylvania is the only battleship that had any kind of radar, and apparently it wasn't operating.

Of course, we went to our battle stations immediately upon going out of the harbor. They either sighted or detected a submarine just outside the harbor. I

was back at my battle station in the powder handling room, and that was the first time I had heard a depth charge anytime, and especially beneath the water line. I certainly knew that we were being torpedoed. I had that in my own mind. But, of course, what it was was the depth charges, and whether they actually sunk the submarine, I'm not sure.

But we came back to the Navy yard in Bremerton, Washington. We received . . . even though the 1.1 antiaircraft guns were great, the 40-millimeters had come to life. We received some 40-millimeters and various 20-millimeters in place of the .50-calibers. We took on many, many recruits, and we trained the rest of that year and still trained into the next year. We thought we were never going to get into battle.

Then in August or September approximately of 1942, we were steaming out to sea from Pearl Harbor, and the captain gleefully came aboard. He said that even though that he could not announce the details, that the Maryland was finally on its way to encountering the Japanese to possibly . . . I don't know the exact words, but it was to retaliate the attack on Pearl Harbor. Our first encounter with the enemy was in Tarawa in 1942.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Epps, I want to thank you for taking time to talk with me. You've said some very interesting things, and I'm sure that scholars are going to find the information that you've given me quite valuable some day.

Epps: I just wanted to add one thing for the record. I did get go be an electrician's mate. I didn't have to swab decks all of my career (chuckle).