

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER

208

Interview with
William F. Harris
May 19, 1974

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. R. E. Marcello
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: William F. Harris
Date: May 19, 1974

COPYRIGHT © 1974 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 Oral History Collection, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas, 76203.

Oral History Collection

William Harris

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of interview: Austin, Texas

Date: May 19, 1974

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing William Harris for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 19, 1974, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Harris in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Nevada at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack there on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Harris: I was born in Denver, Colorado, on November 7, 1921. I lived there until I was about eleven years of age, at which time we moved to Los Angeles, California. I went to Hollywood High School and graduated from Hollywood High School in the military at that time as battalion commander and president of the class.

I hoped to go to the Naval Academy but couldn't get an appointment and enlisted in the Navy, which, at that time, if you did and you went aboard a battleship, you could get study courses, and if you could pass the sufficient tests, you went to Bainbridge, Maryland, Preparatory School to go to the Academy.

Marcello: Was this your sole purpose in entering the Navy--to eventually try and get to the Academy?

Harris: No, I really wanted to become an officer in the Navy, and I was interested in the Navy. Going to the Academy was immaterial, but due to the shortage of money in the family, this was another means of getting an appointment to the Academy.

Marcello: At the time that you entered the Navy, had you been keeping abreast with current events, and did you think about the likelihood of this country entering war in either Europe or the Pacific?

Harris: No, at that time I hadn't because it was in October of 1940 that I entered and went to boot camp at San Diego. In the fall of 1940, I reported aboard the USS Nevada, a battleship, in Bremerton, Washington, while she was in the Naval Yard in overhaul.

Marcello: How long did you remain in Bremerton?

Harris: Oh, we remained there for a period of about three months during the winter period and left there, went

to Long Beach, which was the home base, and from there we proceeded on our course to Honolulu, which was the base port at sea, so to speak, in the Pacific at the time.

Marcello: When did you arrive in Honolulu?

Harris: The exact time . . . the first one, I don't know.

It would probably be in the first part of 1941. We stayed there a few months and then returned to the United States, to Long Beach, and then we went back again in the fall about November--it was latter part of November--for fleet exercises that were conducted off of Oahu and the islands there. Actually, the exercises continued up until the Friday night before the attack of Pearl Harbor, and we had various sea exercises, gunnery firing, and the likes of this.

Marcello: What was your particular function aboard this battleship?

Harris: Well, being just a new seaman basically out of boot camp and . . . just an apprentice seaman actually. . . let's see, I was a seaman second class in that period, striking for first class. I was assigned to the second division in the handling room of number two turret.

Marcello: In the handling room?

- Harris: Handling room which handles your ammunition, projectiles, and ammunition and passing them up through the projectile hoist, etc., up to the number two turret.
- Marcello: How would you describe the training that you received during this pre-Pearl Harbor period? In other words, was it thorough? Was it intensive? Was it good training?
- Harris: I would say it was excellent training. Also, it gave you an opportunity for advancement. They were interested in you if you were interested in them. The training was quite satisfactory both as--what would you call it--everyday occurrence and also in case of military conditions.
- Marcello: I would assume that most of the higher ranking petty officers aboard a ship such as the Nevada had quite a few years in the Navy, did they not?
- Harris: They did. They did. A good many of them, even third class, had been in, let's say, ten years. So that really your rate of advancement was quite slow in those days after you started to get up in the petty officer position.
- Marcello: I would assume also that during that pre-Pearl Harbor period that there really wasn't a sense of urgency or a deadline connected with the training, at least when you first boarded the Nevada, and consequently, I would assume that you received a rather steady amount of training.

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: There was nothing hurried about it.

Harris: No, nothing hurried. Everything was, let's say, routine in a sense, thorough, good indoctrination-- this type of thing.

Marcello: Now in being assigned to this gun turret, were you trained in every facet of the work involved in firing that gun?

Harris: Well, yes, you learned the different positions throughout the turret, from the bottom to the top, so to speak--from ammunition passer of the bags of powder up through the movement of the shell--learning how to move the shells that weighed several thousand pounds with a few fingers on up to being able to train the guns and load the guns in the upper . . . actual gun rung.

Marcello: I gather this was standard operating procedure. In other words, if something did happen to one of the other members of the gun crew, any other member of that gun crew could fill in for him.

Harris: Right. And not only were you trained in your own guns, such as ours was, I believe, about a twelve-inch--I'm not positive of the diameter anymore--but you were also trained in the use of .50 caliber machine guns, secondary battery five-inch fifty-two caliber antisubmarine

weapons, and also in your antiaircraft guns, five-inch twenty-five's?

Marcello: When had the Nevada been commissioned?

Harris: I haven't the faintest idea.

Marcello: Was it one of the older battleships in the fleet?

Harris: Yes, it's one of the older ones in that instead of having three guns per turret, all they had was two in number two and number three turret which gave you a total of ten guns instead of twelve in the main battery. It was a sister ship with, I think, the Utah, but I'm not positive. It was of the older type compared with the Pennsylvania, the California, the Maryland, and so forth.

Marcello: Well, if the sister ship was the Utah, then the Nevada was one of the older battleships.

Harris: Very definitely. It had been a coal-burner at one time and was converted to oil.

Marcello: How much prestige was there involved in being assigned to a battleship?

Harris: Well, now prestige . . . I'd have to get a little more definition of what you're talking about when you say prestige.

Marcello: For example, did somebody who performed on a battleship kind of look down on somebody who, let's say, had been assigned to a cruiser or something of that nature? Did

you kind of look upon yourself as being the elite perhaps?

Harris: No, not really because the battleship sailors were always considered by most of the other fleet as living on or traveling on, shall we say, a traveling hotel. The elite in the sense were the submarines, the aircraft cruisers. The work horses who were considered to be the rough and tough cowboy-type were the destroyers. The battleship was a spit-and-shine and dress affair, if you know what I mean in this sense.

Marcello: Generally speaking, I think, however, throughout the peacetime Navy during that period, it was a spit-and-polish service, was it not?

Harris: Yes, it was for the most part, except possibly for your destroyers and your old repair ships and the supply ships such as ammunition, fuel oil, and this type of thing. The battleships, in the same sense, often carried a Marine detachment like the aircraft carriers. They carried their own bands. We had a band aboard the Nevada and might have a flag or might not have a flag. That's inconsequential. They had a space for it.

Marcello: Now how much antiaircraft armament did that battleship have on it prior to Pearl Harbor?

Harris: Prior to Pearl Harbor?

Marcello: The point that I'm trying to get at here is, how well-armed with antiaircraft weapons was that battleship to defend itself against a determined attack by a swarm of torpedo bombers?

Harris: Actually, very . . . well, now torpedo bombers. . . it was better prepared than it was against dive bombers or the like because you only had eight or ten five-inch twenty-five's, which were the old-type antiaircraft guns, .50 caliber machine guns--about a dozen--up in the foretops manned by the Marines. For your ASW, your antisubmarine things, you had your secondary battery on both sides with four guns to the side, which were five-inch fifty-two's, the heavier-type. This type, you might say, gave more protection against submarines than they did against aircraft because you could bring your antiaircraft guns down to bear on submarines laying off, and you can use your secondary battery.

Marcello: Just out of curiosity, did the Nevada continue on with the fleet after Pearl Harbor and throughout World War II? You mentioned that it was one of the real vintage battleships.

Harris: It did continue after it was repaired and brought back to the States. It was involved in the invasion of

Normandy. I was not on it at this time. It later was used at Eniwetok in the atomic bomb tests. It was sunk later on. I don't remember. . . I think. I may be wrong on this. I think it also used on additional tests concerning bombs against ships.

Marcello: I would assume that that battleship had more antiaircraft guns after Pearl Harbor, however, than it had before Pearl Harbor on it.

Harris: That's correct. This is also true for the other ships because of . . . well, I'm getting ahead of my story, but I was transferred about three days after Pearl Harbor to the USS Phoenix. At that time we had several places for guns to go on the Phoenix, which weren't installed until we went back to the States about ten days after Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: From what I gather and from what I have read, those ships of the line had an antiaircraft weapon in every open space aboard there after Pearl Harbor.

Harris: Right. You had 40 millimeters, 20 millimeters, .50 calibers, what they called the "Chicago Piano," which was four barrels of 1.1's. We usually carried four or six of those aboard. I don't know where they got the idea to name it the "Chicago Piano," but that's what they were, and they vibrated back and forth when they were fired.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale aboard the Nevada during this pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Harris: Outstanding.

Marcello: What factors do you see as being responsible for this morale being so high?

Harris: Rather interestingly, at that point, if you would consider it, your officers as being in charge of the group, the commissioned officers were the top powers, shall we say, and between them and the enlisted men you had the petty officers. Problems arising in the compartment or living spaces of a ship of this size were taken care of by the crew itself. For example, if you had somebody who failed to take a bath, didn't keep his clothes clean--and you lived with him--we used to have what we called a . . . oh, gosh, I can't think of what it was. But it refers to you taking him down, and you get the scrub brushes and you scrub him, and then you watch him while he scrubs every bit of your clothes, and he's to hang them up on the turrets and wash them down with salt water after they'd been scrubbed with a scrub brush--he gets a little bit more sore, you know. In other words, you took care of your own problems. You might ask the petty officer for permission or even you might go ahead and ask the

officer, "We've got a problem. Can we take care of it?" It never got up to where we had a complaint to an officer about problems.

Marcello: I would assume that the fact that everybody was a volunteer also was very beneficial to morale. In other words, everybody was there because they wanted to be there.

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: Or at least everybody was in the Navy because they wanted to be in there.

Harris: Yes, that's definitely it, and, like I've told my own boys in this sense, in the Navy you've got it best up until the last, and at last it doesn't make any difference--if you've got a choice. You know what I mean there (chuckle).

Marcello: Now another factor that probably helped morale, also, was the fact that you were busy most of the time. In other words, there wasn't chance to get bored, and boredom can always lead to all sorts of morale problems.

Harris: Right, because at the same time, whether you were on a battleship or not, in addition to having been trained earlier, plus your regular routine work--the maintenance of the ship, your personal duties, such as mess cooking--at the same time you were studying for advancement of yourself either to a petty officer position, or, like

myself, also possibly getting into the Academy. You went to classes one or two hours a day.

Marcello: Well, in the months prior to Pearl Harbor, what sort of exercises or special types of training did the Nevada undertake?

Harris: Well, they had the basic routine drills enroute to Pearl Harbor--fire drills, abandon ship drill, collision drill, and your regular battle stations and this sort--and when we joined the fleet, we were involved in the fleet exercises. You actually fired some of the guns toward targets or this sort of thing. Is that what you were referring to in that line?

Marcello: As diplomatic relations worsened between the United States and Japan, did the pace of training accelerate considerable?

Harris: I can't say exactly that it did. In this sense we were already fairly high, and during that week or two weeks prior to Pearl Harbor, we were in fleet exercises, which concerned basically all of the ships that were in Honolulu except the supply ships. Carriers, destroyers, battleships--we were working out one group of ships against another on a tactical problem and that sort of thing.

Marcello: Generally speaking, how many battleships were usually in Pearl at one time? Now was it kind of unusual on

December 7, 1941, to have all of the battleships there at once?

Harris: Yes, I would say, probably, generally one or two were in all one time, maybe three or four, but not as many as . . . I believe it was a total of nine.

Marcello: Why was it that all of the battleships happened to be at Pearl Harbor on December 7?

Harris: Because of the two weeks prior . . . the fleet exercises were being carried out. Rumor had it--well, rumor and actual fact, it turned out to be--that the admiral in charge of the fleet exercises at that time on Friday decided that the main battleships and cruisers and their escort destroyers had done a satisfactory job and that the carriers hadn't done quite satisfactory, and they were to be kept at sea for further exercises and training. I won't say the main body, but the . . . well, let's say the main body came on in, and the carrier sections with their escort stayed at sea. We came in on Friday.

Marcello: How long had you been out on exercises before you came in on that Friday before Pearl Harbor?

Harris: I would say two weeks to a month. I actually lack positive remembrance--couldn't tell you.

Marcello: You'd been at sea, then, for a considerable period of time.

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: Now when you came in on a Friday like that off exercises, what percentage of the crew usually got liberty, or how did the liberty procedures operate?

Harris: Well, you had basically the same that follows later on. You had one and two or one and four. In other words, 50 per cent of the crew went ashore and 50 per cent stayed aboard, or 25 per cent stayed aboard and 75 per cent went ashore. At the time, as best I can remember, I would say it was the one and four operation.

Marcello: You mean at the time of the Japanese attack?

Harris: That's when we came in, yes.

Marcello: In other words, 25 percent probably had liberty.

Harris: No, there's a slight difference here. In other words, when you're working one and four, you have one that must stay aboard. One section is permitted a long weekend, doesn't have to come back on Friday. Another quarter must come back on Saturday. In other words, if I went ashore on Saturday and met a friend of mine off the Helena whom I had gone to school with, we had to report back to the ship that night. We agreed to meet the next day--actually, December 7. We didn't make it, but that's what we were supposed to do. One bit of information that I might pass on to you that just crossed my mind is that in the entering or the

travel from the fleet exercise area to the entrance of Pearl Harbor, which at that time was closed with a submarine net, we traveled inboard under antisubmarine conditions. In other words, the secondary batteries were manned, live ammunition was on deck and brought up from the handling room, and the secondary batteries were manned with men and ammunition.

Marcello: Was this unusual?

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: Why were these conditions undertaken? Do you know?

Harris: I don't really know. I mean, afterward I knew, but I can't say that that was positive either. We figured it was part of the exercise and also had heard that it was rumored that there had been submarines sighted, that most of them were not ours, and if we sighted anything we were to shoot.

Marcello: These antisubmarine nets kind of intrigue me. How do they operate? In other words, they were spread across the channel?

Harris: Right.

Marcello: And you couldn't get in until those nets had been drawn back or pulled back?

Harris: That's correct. Usually, the best way to explain it would be like a screen with large holes in it. The net is not a rigid thing. It's more flexible, and the

top part which holds it up is driven by engines on the beach or motors on the beach. When you pull the top wire taut, it raises the net. When you let it go or you take your tug and you pull the whole works--the end of it around--then you can go through.

Marcello: I gather it was a real pain for the fleet to have that antisubmarine net in operation.

Harris: I would say yes to that. To the ordinary seamen at that time, we thought it was hogwash, something strange, something different, shall we say.

Marcello: Let's get back to the liberty again. On the weekend that the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor, there was 25 per cent of the crew that probably had the duty. There was 50 per cent of the crew, let's say, that had port and starboard liberty, and then there was another 25 per cent that would have had the entire weekend off.

Harris: Right.

Marcello: Now normally speaking, would this sort of liberty also have applied to the officers?

Harris: Yes. Well, the captain was ashore. The executive officer was ashore. They went ashore as best as I know on Friday. Well, Friday night, it would be.

Marcello: What was your exact location for docking during this weekend?

Harris: We were the last ship in what was called Battleship

Row, and we were adjacent to Ford Island, across from the main Naval Base in Pearl, right next to where the water line crosses to Ford Island from the main Naval Base there.

Marcello: Were you tied up to another battleship there, or were you moored by yourselves?

Harris: We were moored by ourselves. We were just behind the Arizona and the Vestal.

Marcello: Why was it that the battleships were tied up over there two-by-two? Was it because the harbor was so small and that there were so many ships in there and this was a way of saving space? Was this perhaps one of the reasons?

Harris: Well, let's put it this way. It had been done before for convenience. With two ships tying up, you can reduce the number of officers on watch. It saves space. They didn't have any more ballards to dock the ships to. Over on the Naval Base side, the regular docks, shall we say, or wharves or piers were utilized by the cruisers, such as the Helena, and other destroyers and supply ships. I guess you could say, if you wanted to, that Pearl Harbor was really too small, and there was no way to do it unless you did this.

Marcello: We're talking about over a hundred ships in that harbor.

Harris: That's right. And imagine how many would have been there had the carriers been in there with their escort destroyers.

Marcello: And another thing that perhaps needed to be mentioned here is this. In tying up those ships two-by-two, it also meant that the inboard ships would not be subject to an attack by a torpedo bomber.

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: You couldn't get to that inboard ship.

Harris: That's right.

Marcello: Now I don't know whether this was deliberate thinking or not.

Harris: No, I don't believe it was. I believe this was just a case of it being easier to tie one battleship up to another or the lack of places to tie them up rather than, shall we say, protection of one battleship by another.

Marcello: As a young seaman during that period, did you think very much about the possibility of war with Japan?

Harris: No.

Marcello: Why not?

Harris: I really can't answer that with a definite answer. I don't know why.

Marcello: When you thought of an individual Japanese . . .

Harris: We knew that the two representatives were having problems in Washington, and they couldn't seem to have any agreement, but we didn't know anything about the breaking of the code that had been accomplished and so on until later.

Marcello: When you thought about a typical Japanese what sort of a person or individual did you usually conjure up in your own mind at that time?

Harris: At that time? Well, the ones I had been in contact with in Los Angeles when I'd go to the vegetable market, the fruit and vegetable truckers that brought it into the market, the Japanese who worked the stores in Honolulu, mostly in restaurants and bars and gift shops, sometimes called sailors' traps, and this sort of thing. That's about it.

Marcello: Okay, let's get back to that fateful weekend once again. You mentioned awhile ago that the admiral--and I assume you were referring to Kimmel--had called for an inspection that particular weekend, an inspection of the battle-ships and cruisers. Now as I recall, the way that inspection worked, Kimmel was going to personally inspect one of the ships, but you didn't know which one, is that correct?

Harris: That's correct. That's what was assumed. Probably, one of his other officers might visit other ships at

the same time he visited the one he picked out to make the inspection on.

Marcello: Explain how the Nevada prepared for that inspection during that weekend. I think this was an important aspect of the whole Pearl Harbor story.

Harris: Well, the preparations were that all guns were cleaned. The brass was all polished. The decks were cleaned. The canvas was strung out on the main decks, particularly forward, to make a shaded area for the quarter-deck. Everything had to be put in shipshape condition in this sense. The uniforms were ready in the sense that you had to get your uniforms cleaned and be ready for inspection. Your shoes were polished and this sort of thing on Saturday morning for inspection, and then liberty would be right after the inspection.

Marcello: What was the state of watertight integrity during one of these inspections?

Harris: None. It was the normal, what you would call, in port watertight integrity. Basically, all hatches were open, topside and bottom. The topside ones would have extra fancy macrame' covers on them to make it look nice for the admiral when he came aboard--easy access where he could just go (sound) from one end to the other, so to speak.

Marcello: Usually, how long did the watertight integrity remain

in this state during an inspection period? In other words, would the watertight integrity remain at a minimum for the entire weekend?

Harris: No, normally after inspection your storerooms would be secured, your supply areas, this sort of thing, where you kept food, clothing, hawsers for tying up the ship. The ammunition rooms would be open, and they would be closed then afterwards. The ventillating systems would still be left operable.

Marcello: I think you know why I asked that question about watertight integrity because, quite obviously, if you're going to sink a ship, the best time to do it is when the watertight integrity is not being maintained at a maximum.

Harris: Right. And you had different levels of condition of watertight integrity, as you were hinting at--those that were used for underway in normal conditions, those for battle conditions, such as antisubmarine, those for collision, and those, of course, for regular battle station conditions, which would be a little higher than collision.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up, more or less, I think, up to the Saturday of December 6, 1941. So you had an inspection that particular morning, and I do know that

Kimmel did not inspect the Nevada. I think it was the Phoenix that Kimmel inspected that morning.

Harris: It could be. I don't know the answer to that.

Marcello: But be that as it may, I want you to give me a blow-by-blow account, if you can, of what you did on Saturday, December 6, from the time that you got up until the time you turned in that night, and then from there we'll go into December 7.

Harris: Alright. As best I remember here on December 6, we rose at the usual time, which I couldn't even tell you the exact hour at this point, had breakfast, and then turned to clean up the ship and prepare for inspection. Inspection normally occurred about ten o'clock.

Marcello: What state would the guns be in during this period? I'm referring now to the ones that you were manning. You were on one of the twelve or fourteen-inch mounts, and quite obviously, they weren't going to do you any damn good in an attack by aircraft, but what preparations would you make in that gun mount for this inspection?

Harris: Oh, your breechblock would be opened, your various handling accesses would be opened and polished and cleaned. There may or may not be that gun plugs . . . that's not the proper word for it . . .

Marcello: I know what you're referring to.

Harris: They might be in place or not in place. Generally, one in the turret is out so that the inspecting officer can look up through the inside of the gun barrel and check the rifeling and see that it's clean. Your condition would be exceptional polish, but not one in which you didn't want to get like we were, but that fortunately wasn't at quite that point. Had it happened, I don't know what the result would have been.

Marcello: When the . . .

Harris: Then . . . do you want me to go on?

Marcello: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Harris: Then after the inspection that day, about 11:50, which is when your . . . you have your noon meal. It takes about two hours, depending, for the inspection. The men are inspected--physical appearance, haircuts, fingernails, shoes, clothing. Then the inspection party is over, and everybody secures and turns and . . . secures the guns, shall we say, and closes the breechblocks and closes the hatches and closes up their lockers, closes up the extra storerooms, and the men go for lunch. Now at this point, sometimes you can go ashore after the inspection and before lunch, or sometimes you stay on board until one o'clock so you can have lunch. I don't know which occurred. I couldn't say.

Marcello: Let me interject a question here at this moment, getting back to the inspection. Was there any ready ammunition in the turret at this particular time?

Harris: No, none whatsoever.

Marcello: Would this be true of the five-inch mounts, also?

Harris: That's true. No live ammunition.

Marcello: How about with the other antiaircraft weapons?

Harris: The antiaircraft weapons up on the 02 level would have the ammunition lockers open and unlocked during the inspection to be sure that your cartridges were clean, no corrosion, and were lightly greased so that they wouldn't hang up when you loaded your guns. The gun covers were off, and the breechblocks were open. But immediately after the inspection all of this is closed up, and the ammunition lockers on the main deck for the antiaircraft guns are locked with lock and key. The master-at-arms or the armorer goes below with the key.

Marcello: This is an important point, and I think it needed to be a part of the record with regard to the defenses of the ship during this particular period. Okay, so the inspection was over. You may or may not have gone about your business immediately after the inspection. If not, you did it after lunch. Pick up the story from that point as to what you did.

Harris: To the best of my memory, I had lunch aboard and then left with one of the next liberty boats crossing from, basically, Ford Island, shall we say, over to the fleet landing on the Marine side of the harbor.

Marcello: What was the landing?

Harris: The fleet landing.

Marcello: Oh, the fleet landing.

Harris: That's what it was called where the boats from the battleships landed their liberty parties. From there, I traveled to the railway station and took the train on into Pearl. No, on into Honolulu because that's where I was, and I don't remember where I ran across my friend--someplace in Honolulu in the process of going from store to store. I was one of these that always liked to look and sometimes bring back a memento, not always a pillow for mother, but something of this nature, if you know what I mean. I met him and we had a couple of drinks. What, I could not tell you. We had dinner and agreed that I had to get back and he did, too. We would meet the next morning over at Block Arena, which is in the Navy Base, for a further get together--old friends, so to speak.

Marcello: Okay, so what time did you finally get back aboard the Nevada that evening?

Harris: About ten o'clock.

Marcello: Did you turn in immediately?

Harris: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's pick up the story from this point. I would assume that all during the night other sailors were drifting in, some of them inebriated, some of them still in pretty good shape. After all, you had been at sea for virtually a month, and I'm sure that those sailors that did have liberty on that Saturday busted loose. At least, quite a few of them did.

Harris: Strangely enough, for the most part, backing up on that which you called busting loose, you had, what I call, at that time two types of Navy characters in a sense or Navy enlisted people. You had the old-timers which might do this busting loose and to get roaring drunk. For the most part, you had a large number of new ones like myself who had had a drink or two. Some of them, of course, would get "stinko" and would have to be carried back, but there wasn't a great deal of this. You had some that were aboard ship that when they couldn't get anything else would drink bay rum, too, and this sort of thing, but I don't believe that at that time there was as large a percentage of drunks as you encountered later on in a sense. Some of the usual ones always did it. I mean, you could plan on that kind.

- Marcello: Another question comes to mind at this time. I know that during this period there was a rather large and rapid influx of reserves into the Hawaiian Islands. Did the Nevada take on a large contingent of reserves during this period?
- Harris: I don't know. I know that they were there. We encountered them. I was a regular. I don't know. I couldn't say. I really don't remember.
- Marcello: Okay, let's pick up the story from this point. You turned in rather early. What was your procedure on that fateful Sunday morning, and again, I want you to give me a blow-by-blow account of what you did on that day? Sunday was a day of leisure. If you didn't have duty, you could stay in the sack for as long as you wished.
- Harris: Right, for a few extra hours until after breakfast in the morning. You could miss breakfast, but after breakfast, unless you had the watch, you turned out--made up your bunk, cleaned up, picked up. To the best of my knowledge, wanting to go ashore again, I got up at the regular time, made up my bunk, went to breakfast, completed breakfast, came back to my area, obtained my shaving gear and my dirty uniform. I call it dirty--it might have been and might not. I don't know. I took it with me and my wash bucket and my soap and my shaving gear

and went back aft into the head section, which was just below the main deck in the rear part or the after portion of the Nevada. I shaved, showered, and washed my hat and socks and underwear. Whites is what we wore over there. I had just finished that, and I don't remember whether I was shaving or what, but I know I had the bucket in my hand, let's put it that way, when, shall we say, all hell broke loose. The band had started to play because we could hear it above us through the open ports.

Marcello: You could hear the band playing the "Star Spangled Banner." That's the call to colors, of course.

Harris: Yes, and the PA came on and the boatswain . . . I guess it was the boatswain up on the watch who reported, "We're under attack! All hands man your battle stations!"

Marcello: At this particular time, had the Nevada itself been hit or attacked directly?

Harris: Not maybe more than by machine gun fire to the best of my knowledge. It could have been . . . you know, you hear sounds in the background when you have the machinery noise. You could hear the background of the "Star Spangled Banner" and possibly machine gun fire. I don't know. I wouldn't be positive.

Marcello: Your first knowledge of the attack was when the alarm was sounded.

Harris: When the alarm was sounded both by the alarm bell and the word being past. Looking out the port, I saw something slide by at a distance, and there was smoke in the area. What, I couldn't tell you. Having been trained, the first thought was that I just pushed that bucket of clothes and soap and everything else right under the sink and headed for my battle station. Having been caught in my--what do you call them--thongs, I guess, or sandals and underwear, I had to go from the rear part of the ship to the forecabin where my sleeping compartment was to get a pair of shoes, socks, and pants. I wasn't going to worry about the top because I had an undershirt on.

Marcello: In other words, you had a long way to go, then, to get to your britches.

Harris: I had about three-fourths of the length of the ship to go. I can't say whether I made it in full time or not, but I'll tell you that everybody was moving. Rumors as you would go along would be, "What's happening?" "What is going on?" Somebody said they don't know. "It sounds like explosions." "Some ship's on fire", or "Something's on fire." The exact ship, I couldn't tell you that they might have reported. Arriving up in the living area, I grabbed up and got my pants on, took my shoes and socks in my teeth, and headed down

trunkline into the handling room. I got inside and the coxwain in charge of the handling room said to secure all scuttles and normal air vents and secure all watertight doors. He also said we were to man the talking system with the main turret above--main gun up above. By this time, I would say that the turret, which is like an umbrella in a sense, the center part of the umbrella being the turning point, would at times vibrate. Whether it was from, at this point, direct hits on the ship, I could not say--we had then known it was the Japanese attacking by the talker--or whether they were near misses. I don't know. But you were getting some vibrations beyond the normal machinery noises. The question was asked, "Shall we break out ammunition?" The answer was no, except to know where the high explosive was. We all wanted something to do, and we all congregated around. The time interval, I don't know here now.

Marcello: In other words, there was a hesitation in breaking open the locks to the ammunition stores.

Harris: Well, no, the ammunition stores down below there were not locked in this sense because we were way down below, and you don't have any locks on those down there in that sense. The handling room man has the

key to those, and we can open those because, in a sense, you can't do any major damage to those except maybe by sabotage if you put a hand grenade in there, and even then it had to be stronger than a hand grenade to cause you any problems. The time interval? I don't know at this point. When word was received in the handling room that volunteers or men were needed up on topside to cast off the lines to the ships underway, myself and others volunteered and we climbed up through the turret, inside the turret turning section, and went out and dropped out onto the 02 level of the number two turret by the armored door that drops down. By this time, I had shoes and socks on and a pair of pants.

Marcello: Up until this point, was everybody now acting in a more or less professional manner?

Harris: Everyone was acting in a very professional manner except, shall we say, us down there because under normal battle conditions we would have been busy, but we were left at odds and ends down there.

Marcello: Well, like we mentioned awhile ago, they weren't going to fire those twelve or fourteen-inchers at the airplanes, and they couldn't if they'd wanted to, I suppose.

Harris: So we came out on the 02 level, and Chief Boatswain Hill was on the forecastle by number one turret. He

hollered at us to get fire axes. I got one. We went down by the side of number one turret where the lines leading from our ship tying it to the ballards at Ford Island were. Whether there was wire, I don't remember. I think there was wire forward. We had rope or hemp. We cut them and had to retreat one time because of strafing.

Marcello: What was it like being under this strafing?

Harris: Oh, it sounded like somebody was throwing a bunch of marbles against the turret side because the turret side was about eight or twelve inches thick. We'd chipped it with metal hammers so it didn't sound different, except you knew you better get out of the way (chuckle).

Marcello: You were outside at that time, of course.

Harris: Yes, outside on the main deck. We got the lines cut, and I think by now we had been hit somewhere aft of where I was. I don't know.

Marcello: How do you know that you were hit aft? Can you feel the vibrations?

Harris: The vibrations, and somebody had reported the fire, which would follow on afterwards.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that they were trying to get this ship underway. Quite obviously, they wanted to head out to open water.

Harris: Right. Word had been sent from the signal tower,

supposedly from Admiral Kimmel, CINCPAC Fleet, for all ships to proceed to sea.

Marcello: How long did it take a battleship to get up enough steam to get underway?

Harris: A battleship to get up steam, if it's in, let me say, port conditions, probably half an hour.

Marcello: Were you in port conditions that day?

Harris: The exact conditions, I could not say. I had the suspicion--all I can say is the suspicion--that either the time element was longer than I thought because of the excitement and the activity, or that we had two boilers on the line. In other words, at night you will have one boiler out of four on. During the night or the early morning hours, you will light off a second boiler in preparation for turning the first one off at eight o'clock. You will also blow stacks at that hour or just prior to that. So it may have been that we had two boilers on the line, which is the minimum that would be required to try to go to sea. Basically, you need all four. You need all the steam you can get for generating electric power and driving the turbines.

Marcello: All this time, were men coming back on the Nevada from shore? Were there launches available to bring men back?

Harris: No. Well, there may have been launches available, but very little movement was occurring as far as that was

concerned, I think there was a few launches coming out to the ships, I don't know. I was on the opposite side from where they would be coming. There could have been some enroute to us.

Marcello: Also, at this time, was the Nevada being hit mainly by strafing rather than bombs or things of this nature?

Harris: I would say probably some bombs--no dive bombing--and some strafing because we were basically inboard, last one all by ourselves. They were interested in those tied up two-by-two up above, where they couldn't miss as easy as they could with us.

Marcello: Pick up the story from this point.

Harris: Okay. The ship backed down. There was a move backwards because we were behind two ships ahead of us. We managed to get the lines cut. By backing down in the way we did, we rubbed against the thing which threw the bow out so that it would be clear of the two ships ahead of us.

Marcello: What did you rub against?

Harris: The ballards which you were tied to. Normally, you have two tugs and a shore handling party to take off your lines when they pull the battleship out sideways. Well, there was no tugs, and you weren't told to wait for any tug. This threw the bow out, and we couldn't

back very far. I don't know whether we hit the water line behind us. We could have. I don't know. They said it was ruptured. I don't know whether we did it or the bombs did it.

Then we started on a forward course ahead and started to proceed past the Arizona and the Vestal and the California and the others, which I don't remember who they were in line. That's the way we were starting.

Marcello: During this period, did you notice any of the damage being done to the other ships around you?

Harris: No, I was too busy either ducking or carrying out your duties. Like I say, when we did get clear and start up, we did take some bombs forward. On the opposite side of the ship by the number one turret, it threw the chief boatswain over the side and killed him. A few minutes later, another bomb landed in the water and blew him back aboard, or what was remaining of him.

We proceeded on . . . like I say, we started on down. At this point, word was passed for us to get to cover, and I, of course, went to the number two casemate, where we normally ate our meals. Now the number two casemate is where the antisubmarine five-inch fifty-two is kept.

At this point, the ammunition hoists to the lower five-inch magazines were opened, live shells and high

explosives were on deck, powder was on deck for at least two charges in the casemates, and the gun was manned. They were firing a secondary gun at airplanes. Never was it built for it, but we fired anything, and we would throw anything we had at it. I mean, that's just what we were getting to at this point.

Marcello: Now when you say the secondary guns, these were five-inchers that you're referring to?

Harris: Heavy five-inches. Five-inch fifty-two's.

Marcello: And these are the ones that you said were supposed to be used mainly against submarines and things of this nature.

Harris: Against submarines or against destroyers, just like when you get in close.

Marcello: Are you saying in effect that the planes were so low that you could actually use these five-inch fifty-two's?

Harris: You could see them either coming in if they came in from the side approach, or they would go by you, and you would try to--what was the word--traverse the gun by cranking the handles, since we didn't have power-types at that time for the secondary batteries to try and keep up with the plane as they went by, to lead him enough so that when you fired, you hoped your projectile would hit him. Possibly . . . somebody, I know, did hit the plane. Whether it was our gun, I doubt it.

Marcello: I assume that these planes were too low for your primary five-inch batteries to do much damage.

Harris: Well, now we don't have . . . we had fourteen-inch primaries. Your antiaircraft guns are above us.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Harris: The secondary ones are the ones closer to the water, which we'd fire at your submarines.

Marcello: But you had no five-inch batteries for antiaircraft weapons.

Harris: Yes, up above, but they were working the whole sky area, and we were only firing through, shall we say, perhaps an elevation between the water and fifteen degrees. I have since thought that perhaps many of the bombs that landed in Pearl and landed in Honolulu were five-inch fifty-two's, since that was the direction which we and other battleships were firing. Later on, you will remember or may know that these guns were used and depressed into the point of hitting the water a certain distance from the ship where they would explode and drive up a sheet of water to prevent torpedo bombers from coming in, but at this point we hadn't been taught fully about this. It was just throw something at the enemy, even if it was the kitchen sink and was never intended to be used.

Marcello: It was more or less that sense of futility. You had

to be doing something. You felt like you had to be doing something.

Harris: Yes, and we felt that we were accomplishing something in this sense. About this time, too, I don't know how many . . . time interval, again, is slow. I mean, it was lost. Reckoning of time is lost. There were reports that we had been hit by a torpedo bomber aft. We took a bomb into the casemate next to us where we were.

Marcello: What did this feel like?

Harris: Like you were on the inside of a bucket, and somebody hit the bucket with a sledge hammer. The wall, in a sense, curved, plates curved, did not break apart.

Marcello: When you say they curved, it was a concave-type curve towards you.

Harris: Towards you, right.

Marcello: Towards you. You were inside an armored area, were you not?

Harris: Right. Each one of the casemate guns is within a room where the walls and ceilings are armored in a sense against lightweight armor--machine guns definitely, 20 millimeters, .50 calibers. Not against five-inch. They'll come through, and bombs will come through above. We were in an area above the armored deck, which is below us. If you've got a bomb in your area, it came

in your area. There was no way of avoiding it. There was a hell of an explosion next to us. Like I say, the walls or the . . . gosh, I've forgotten my Navy terminology. The bulkheads bent in toward us.

Having had people we knew next door, we went out through the hatch around to see what happened. There was a fire in there. At the moment you could see nothing. Then things came out of there--black, charred, no recognition whatsoever, but moving, alive. We administered what we could, covered them with blankets. Whether they lived or not or who they were, I have no knowledge or . . . we didn't know, probably.

Marcello: They were almost charred beyond recognition, I guess.

Harris: Yes, in other words, like you'd stepped in a bucket of soot from head to bottom. They had maybe no hair at all, no eyelashes--black all over, had been moving, walking, bleeding, in some cases broken arms. We got the fire out from our end and the casemate aft. We were working on that and got it out. A bomb hit above us someplace.

Somebody reported the fire above and the need of additional men above in the antiaircraft battery. We went up above us . . . then several of us left there and went above. We found that a bomb had landed in one of these open-section magazines that you have for

antiaircraft and had killed most of the members of two guns.

We had a fire in the mainmast, in the conning tower section, between us and where the Marines were-- way up in the foretops where they manned the .50 caliber machine guns. They were having ammunition problems. We were trying to get ammunition to them. We were trying to get additional ammunition from either adjacent magazines on the antiaircraft deck on from the lower magazines to the five-inch twenty-fives, which fire a single projectile much like in shape of a rifle shell for a .30-06--all one piece--where the other guns are two-piece projectiles, only larger than a bullet . . . I mean a rifle bullet.

Marcello: By this time the Nevada was taking quite a few hits.

Harris: By this time we were down . . . we were probably passing other battleships. I couldn't tell you because I was on the opposite side. We could see planes, smoke, gunfire, and at this point we were catching it all because--and this is an assumption on my part and also having seen later pictures--here was the battleship going down Battleship Row heading toward the channel, and they weren't about to let us get out.

Marcello: If they could sink you in that channel, they'd have had the whole . . .

- Harris: We'd be the cork in the bottle. We'd be the cork in the bottle. We'd have stopped it up but good. I know we took one down the aft stack, and it went into the fire rooms and exploded. We took a couple of torpedoes from the starboard side.
- Marcello: Were you listing or were you taking on quite a bit of water? Were you low in the water?
- Harris: We were taking on water. Listing, I don't know the answer to that. Probably, yes, some. We were approaching the turn and, well, the ship was run aground at this point to prevent it from sinking in the channel.
- Marcello: This was the quick work of a chief petty officer, was it not?
- Harris: A chief petty officer and the officer of the deck that did that and I don't know whether it was done on their own initiative. I think they both got the Navy Cross for their getting the battleship underway--this was something that had never been accomplished without tugs before on its own--and the preventing of the blocking the harbor entrance. Whether they got the word from the beach or not, I don't know. I think that word had been passed, "For God Sakes, don't block up the channel." We went aground across from the turn as you go across from Ford Island. Into the cane fields is where we went aground. By this time, the bomb having landed

in the fire room, we were beginning to run short of electricity. We no longer had water of our own.

Marcello: Did that bomb explode when it went down there?

Harris: Evidently, it did. I don't know, but things were getting hairy. We couldn't depend on water. What water you got out of the fire hydrants wasn't very strong. You had to use the buckets or the portable fire extinguishers of that time, which was an old water pump deal.

Marcello: What did it feel like to get hit by a torpedo as opposed, let's say, to the bombs? Or weren't you close enough that you could really feel the full effect?

Harris: Well, you could feel it. I won't say you could feel the full effects, but you could feel it, and perhaps the best way would be if you were in a box or if a person five times your size had hold of you basically all over and just shook the devil out of you quickly and rapidly. In other words, there was a strong, sharp vibration and, of course, the terrific noise and compression in your ears. By this time, I was at the point where you had to scream to hear. I was deaf in the ears as far as that . . . both from the secondary guns and from being up on top where the antiaircraft guns were firing and exploding.

Marcello: And, of course, that bomb hitting close to where you were didn't exactly help your hearing either.

Harris: No, that first one sure didn't help it at all.

Marcello: Continue.

Harris: At this point we were aground . . . run aground. I'm going to say that as best as I remember here, there was no longer any planes involved. Time . . . at this point, again, I don't know where it was timewise. I don't know whether I was wearing a watch. I had a watch, I still have it, with the name of the ship inscribed on the back. But I know now that smaller boats are coming to our ship, tugs are coming out with hoses and pumps, and portable pumps are being put aboard the Nevada.

Marcello: Is the attack still going on?

Harris: I don't know. I don't know. But I know now we're fighting to save the ship from burning. That's why we were trying to save it for right now, or saving ourselves, so to speak. I don't believe we were shooting because I don't believe we were being attacked, but we were fighting to preserve the ship. We were trying to save these Marines, I know, above us because there was fire in between us. Time? I don't know what time it is. I know we are getting water and

power from smaller boats coming alongside. At this time is when the captain and executive officer came back aboard with another party of our sailors who were brought out by one of the small tugs. The fact is, I've heard rumors--and I don't know the truth--that he was on one of these small boats all this time, following us and trying to catch us as we were underway, but I can't say that that's true. I don't know.

Marcello: So what happened from that point after the ship was now beached or grounded?

Harris: Well, at this point water had risen in the ship. The ship had settled. I mean, at a slight angle. Which direction, I could not tell you at this time. I'm going to say that it tilted . . . as you would face forward, it tilted slightly to the right or toward the port side. I don't know how badly we were tilted. Water was coming up. I went down to see whether the water had come to our spaces. It had not at this time. We were out of lights. There was no light because we lost power in the engine room.

We were also trying to get as much other weapons--rifles, old .30 caliber Lewis machine guns, Browning Automatic Rifles. We were getting all of this out of the second deck magazines and ammunition handling spaces. We'd bring it up topside, and it was being

brought up and fastened to the rail. Men were standing by it partly in defense of the ship from the shore side and where Japanese could possibly be coming through the cane, you know, toward you. I don't know that they were there. I don't think that they were, but that's what you think of and what you envision in your mind.

Time now is late mid-afternoon as best I know, and we're beginning to get hungry and in need of water. Water is being brought out to us in garbage cans that were once used for garbage. Trash cans, anything else that you could bring water in. Sometimes it would look just like water, and other times it had a brackish look, but at least you knew that it had originated from the valve which had good water in it.

Hunger--no place to cook. The power was gone which would supply the ranges and the fuel oil pumps that pump the fuel oil up to the cooking ranges. Fire had occurred up where the mainmast was, which is the aftermast, in where the potatoes and grapefruit were stored. You were issued a grapefruit which was extremely warm and a hunk of bread which was extremely dry because it had been near the heat and the fire. These were the first beginnings of hunger. It was mid-afternoon, and dark was coming on. It was rumored

that Marines were in the cane field, and we weren't to shoot over there unless we heard shooting or saw a plane coming. If you did then we were to shoot like hell. Anything that came in overhead or flies in, until we heard otherwise, we were to shoot. All lights were out. No smoking. No more fires. All fires must be put out under control.

Now dusk, dark, was coming in. Some of the wounded men were being taken off or had been taken off earlier. They checked again to try and get some muster of the ship's personnel, at least those that we knew were alive. Could anybody remember who went over in the last launch that was wounded? Could we keep a record? Could we find out? Unknown . . . we remembered one man who had been an old one that drank rum and who had suddenly . . . not rum, but had drunk bay rum, and he was last seen cowering in the corner. We didn't know where he was now. We were trying to account for men--no idea unless you knew them.

We stretched out with what you could find to cover up. We tried to get clothes down below. Nothing was available but a blanket. I don't know if it was mine or somebody else's. We slept under the stars.

Sometime during the evening, dark hours, night, three planes came over from the cane fields. No word

was received that they were coming or whose they were, but they passed right smack over the top of us, and we threw everything that we had but the kitchen sink.

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

Harris: Well, that, and . . . oh, yes, during the earlier part, you'd hear a machine gun here or a few shots over there. You couldn't tell whether they came from the ship or someplace else. Later that night, we learned that the three planes that had passed over had been our own planes coming in from the Enterprise, heading for Ford Island. Today, 1974, I checked with some of the fellows from Ford Island. He said none of those fellows survived that came in in those unfortunate circumstances.

Marcello: I'm sure that the ship was one big rumor mill in the aftermath of the attack.

Harris: Well, yes, it was, and I'm going to say it was because of a lack of communications. All of our phone systems were out now.

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

Harris: Ninety-nine per cent of them anyway.

Marcello: What were some of the wilder rumors that you heard?

Harris: That they had landed over at Kaneohe, had landed at Barbers Point--the Japanese had. There were battle-ships and other carriers off in battle with our carriers which were at sea, and they were standing by at dawn the next morning for an additional attack by the Japanese because that would be the prime time target area. We would again be involved. All of this sort of thing,

The next morning or the next day, as a matter of information, is when we got our first . . . or half of us got our first meal. We were taken over by boats to Block Arena, where I was supposed to have to met my friend on the Helena, who had been killed. We were fed fruit, coffee, a stew of meat and potatoes. That's the first meal we'd had since the breakfast before, which would have been about thirty hours, outside of what we could find in terms of loose fruit aboard the ship and this sort of thing.

Marcello: During all of this business, were you able to witness any of the destruction being wrought upon the other ships, or were you too busy with your own job to notice?

Harris: Let's put it this way. At times during your process, you would see a ship . . . I won't say get hit. You would see the result--the explosion, the smoke. Someone would say, "The Helena has been hit!" We didn't

know what it was hit with, and we would look and see the smoke and the flames. In the most part, you didn't have time to really, shall we say, concentrate. After the things had slowed down that afternoon, we began to take stock and heard all kinds of rumors like I'd mentioned before--that so-and-so had been hit, the Pennsylvania in drydock, and the Bagley, and so on. For the most part, you didn't worry about anybody else as far as other ships were concerned. You worried about yourself and the fellow next to you and what was coming at you.

Marcello: What were your own emotions in the aftermath of the attack?

Harris: Anger, frustration. Frustration in the sense that we had nothing that we could use to . . . really, I mean in a sense that you could use, as the Nevada was concerned, to do anything about it. We couldn't go to sea, and we couldn't fight. Three days later, I was transferred to the USS Phoenix, and we did come back to the States for outfitting for additional guns and then went to the South Pacific.

Marcello: Did you blame any individual for what happened, or did you try to find any scapegoats at the time?

Harris: At the time? Scapegoats? Only one point as far as I'm concerned, or our ship. I'll put it that way.

We heard rumors which affected . . . I might say in a sense that I was derogatory, upset, that the captain couldn't have been there, that he wasn't there.

Although, I'm not saying that he could have done any better than those who did get us underway. I'm just saying that he should have been there. You know what I mean. He was, in a sense, shall we say, the supreme leader of that group. He wasn't there. That's not his fault--I didn't mean it that way--but you have that sensation that he should have been there.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that on December 7, 1941, that Pearl Harbor was prepared, perhaps, for war but was not alert?

Harris: Now you say Pearl Harbor. Now you're meaning the entire area?

Marcello: The entire area, yes.

Harris: Yes, let's put it this way. Yes, in this sense. When we were at sea, we were under conditions protecting us against submarines. We had live ammunition. We had the nets out. The patrol bombers were leaving Ford Island daily--morning, noon and . . . well, not noon, but morning and night, which is the night patrol--protection patrols against submarines and other ships. We had extra protectionary sentries located on Ford Island, located on the dockside by the railroad.

stations, more than normal with rifles and live ammunition. Also, around the destroyer Cassin and the Pennsylvania, which were in dry docks, there were additional security men on duty day and night with live ammunition and rifles. This, I think . . . and my mind is beginning to say this, and I may be absolutely wrong, but it seems to me that this was explained--these extra sentries--as possible prevention of sabotage by the Japanese, as possible sabotage. I may be wrong, Ron. I'm not sure on this, but this is what all the sudden comes to mind. This is how they explained it.

Marcello: This could very easily happen because there was a large Japanese population on the islands, and I'm sure that in the minds of many people they did represent a potential threat so far as sabotage or fifth columnist activities were concerned.

Harris: Yes, definitely so because of the large number of them as you mentioned, and the fact that we had these two that were supposed to be in Washington dealing with our government and trying to arrive at an equitable settlement, so to speak.