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Interview with  
Robert C. Hughes  
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Place of Interview: Little Rock, Arkansas  
Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

Robert C. Hughes

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Little Rock, Arkansas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Robert C. Hughes for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 5, 1978, in Little Rock, Arkansas. I'm interviewing Mr. Hughes in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Tennessee during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Hughes: Well, I was born in Winchester, Tennessee--Franklin County--on September 5, 1918. My family moved to Arkansas in 1921, which I don't remember at that time. I grew up in a community . . . in the country on a cotton farm. I went to a country school and finished the tenth grade. In 1941, on June 6th, I enlisted in the Navy--the U.S. Navy.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Navy in 1941?

- Hughes: Well, at that particular time, the conscription law was in effect, and I was about to be drafted into the Army, I didn't think I would like the Army, so I decided I would volunteer for the Navy.
- Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs at that particular time?
- Hughes: Not too much, really. I mean, to me at that time it was sort of insignificant.
- Marcello: When you thought of the country getting into war, is it safe to say that you were thinking more in terms of Europe rather than the Far East?
- Hughes: Oh, yes. I thought probably that that would be where our war would begin. Of course, I went through basic training in the Navy in San Diego.
- Marcello: How long was basic training at that particular time?
- Hughes: Six weeks, I believe.
- Marcello: They had cut it down considerably at that point.
- Hughes: Yes. I think it was six weeks. I had no inkling or idea of the war being in the Far East or Pacific. Like I said, I thought possibly that the war would be . . . I had been keeping up a little bit with England and Germany and France, and my dad was interested in it; he was concerned about it. I was conscious of it, but I wasn't too interested in the thought of war coming. I didn't bother me one way or the other. I didn't ever think we

would ever be in war.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Hughes: I went aboard the USS Tennessee.

Marcello: Where did you pick it up?

Hughes: In San Pedro harbor.

Marcello: In other words, I guess that by that time the Tennessee already had been stationed on a more or less permanent basis over in the Hawaiian Islands and had just come back to the Coast for some reason or another.

Hughes: I'm sure that's what . . . I think that's what it was. I believe it was the Seventh Fleet.

Marcello: Well, it was the Pacific Fleet at that time.

Hughes: Oh, yes, it was the Pacific Fleet. I went aboard in August-- I don't remember just what date it was--and the next day we set sail for Honolulu.

Marcello: What did you think of the idea of going aboard a battleship?

Hughes: I thought it was wonderful.

Marcello: Why was that?

Hughes: I just thought it was exciting. An old country boy like myself that grew up on a cotton farm, well, to get out and see some of the world, man, it was beautiful. It was really wonderful, I enjoyed it.

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

Hughes: It was just a dream come true. It was just magnificent. It is

indescribable. You go and look at it now . . . there have been so many changes since then, but back in those days it was just a paradise.

Marcello: I guess the only hotels of any significance on Waikiki Beach at that time were the Royal Hawaiian and the Moana.

Hughes: Yes, the Royal Hawaiian was the popular hotel at that time. It was beautiful, and still is.

Marcello: What sort of reception did you get when you went aboard the Tennessee? After all, you were still a raw "boot," so to speak.

Hughes: I was a "boot." No reception--just get in line over there and wait for your orders, you know, for the boatswain's mate or whoever to take me to where my division was assigned.

Marcello: To what division were you assigned?

Hughes: Well, after about two weeks, I was assigned to B Division.

Marcello: Now, what is B Division?

Hughes: That was boiler and fire room--a boilermaker and fire room. I was in the fire room.

Marcello: You weren't in the deck force too long then?

Hughes: No, I didn't scrub decks much and tie many knots. I went in the fire room and learned to fire the boilers. It was very interesting.

Marcello: Describe the on-the-job training that you received down there in the fire room. Would you say that the training was excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? How would you describe it?

- Hughes: I thought it was excellent--yes. They'd take their time in explaining things to you and getting you familiar with parts of the boiler and the fire room. In changing tips on the burners, why, you have to put the right size on and everything for different amounts of steam. They were very patient with all the boys, and, of course, I was the youngest one in the fire room, and I thought it was very impressive.
- Marcello: I would assume that most of your senior petty officers down there had quite a bit of rank. I mean, rather, they had had quite a few years in the Navy, did they not?
- Hughes: Yes, I think the watertender in charge of the fire room had about, oh, I guess, eight or ten years. He was the first class watertender. It took a long time to make a rate back in those days. As best I remember, there was four assigned at the battle station. Of course, I think there was five--four, five, six, maybe--that wasn't at that battle station. That was my battle station--number seven fire room. Lotka was the watertender. He was the watertender, and Hosea was the phone man. He wore the headphones and kept in contact with the chief engineer and the smoke watch and various parts of the ship. James was the gig man. He took care of the water and kept the water level even all the time. Of course, I myself was the fireman.
- Marcello: How many people were there in this fire room altogether?
- Hughes: During general quarters or battle, there were four to the best of

my knowledge--as best I can remember.

Marcello: How about in terms of the actual operation of the fire room?

How many people would be down there at that time?

Hughes: Well, about six, I think there was about six assigned to a fire room. It was a small area, but there was a place for everybody. Every person there had a duty to perform and a job to do. We'd close the fire room down and clean the tubes. We had to rod the tubes out and tear the fire bricks out. Brother, that was hot--especially there in Honolulu, see. We done that while we would be in port. We would go out on maneuvers during the week and come in on weekends. Sometimes we would stay two or three days, depending on what kind of condition the ship was in.

Marcello: What were your quarters like aboard the Tennessee?

Hughes: Well, at that particular time before the war, we slept in hammocks, cots. Sometimes we slept on the deck--wherever. We had billets assigned to us for our hammocks. Of course, below decks there wasn't a great many of us that slept in hammocks. We slept in cots--those that were lucky to get cots.

Marcello: What was it like to sleep in a hammock, which, I'm sure, you had to do when you first went aboard the Tennessee?

Hughes: Oh, yes, I did. It wasn't too big a problem. Of course, my buddy always told a joke on me. He'd tell my friends that I fell out of the hammock if I didn't do what he asked me to do. But I never fell out of the hammock. He was just kidding. The



hammock wasn't bad, you know. Of course, it would swing and sway with the ship. If the ship rolled, why, I would just sleep like a baby. I enjoyed it.

Marcello: You probably had to have a little bit of seniority before you could get a cot, however.

Hughes: Oh, yes--either seniority or luck.

Marcello: Now, did you have to buy your own cot?

Hughes: No. If somebody would be transferred, you would ask the locker--sail locker, I believe you called it--boatswain's mate--if you could have his cot. Then, of course, if nobody had priority to you, then you could get it. It took quite awhile before I got a cot. Of course, I've still got my old hammock.

Marcello: Now, when you got a cot, I understand that a lot of people usually took it up on the deck--on the main deck--and slept up there.

Hughes: Yes, a lot of them did. A lot of times I would just take my blanket up--blanket and pillow up there--and sleep up there under a gun mount or under a blower--wherever I could find a cool spot--because it was pretty hot in the islands there.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Tennessee?

Hughes: I thought it was good. I got fat . . . I gained weight; I didn't get fat. I enjoyed the food. It was just like all military organizations. You will find some . . . day in and day out as the rule, you'll find some that's not very good,

but as a whole I would say it was real good food--real good food.

Marcello: Were they serving family-style when you first went aboard the Tennessee?

Hughes: Yes. We had a mess cook and a compartment cleaner in each division--in the divisions port and starboard--and they had a rack up overhead to put the tables and benches. This compartment cleaner and the mess cook would work together, and they would take these tables down and benches and set them up, and then the mess cook would go get the food--we'd say he'd "run chow"--from the galley and back down and have it set there for the crew. There'd be about eight men to the table. Eventually, I got into that, but that was quite awhile after I went aboard ship.

Marcello: I guess that at one time or another, everybody took their turn as a mess cook.

Hughes: They were supposed to have had a turn at it. Of course, some of them, I think, were lucky enough not to get it. I think it was more or less an assigned duty for everybody to have their turn of mess cooking at one time or another,

Marcello: How long did mess cooking last?

Hughes: Well, that would depend on the person--thirty days, three months. Some of them had it for three months.

Marcello: I understand some people actually volunteered to continue as a

mess cook.

Hughes: Yes. Some of them liked it. They didn't have any other duties to perform--just mess cooking. They didn't like to chip paint, so they volunteered for mess cooking. That's true.

Marcello: I understand that in many cases the mess cooks would get liberty every night when the ships were in, and also there was the possibility of a chance of receiving tips at payday.

Hughes: That's true. There was some of the boys that run chow just constantly. They was mess cooking when I was and was mess cooking before I was and mess cooking after I was (chuckle). Anyways, they liked it.

Marcello: On the other hand, by remaining as a mess cook, that kind of eliminated the possibility of advancement, did it not?

Hughes: That's true. If a person wanted just to mess cook or compartment clean as a Navy career, about a fireman second class was about as far as he would go--maybe a fireman first class, but it was unlikely.

Marcello: Did you find that your quarters aboard the Tennessee were comfortable?

Hughes: Well, after a little adjustment, it was all right. Of course, my locker--my clothing space--was very small. I would say it was eighteen-by-eighteen probably. Of course, I had a sea bag to put in there. I had plenty of space at the particular time that I went aboard, you know. Of course, some of the fellows

accumulated things . . . well, I did, too. I accumulated a lot of articles and kind of got my locker space cramped up sometimes. You would take two or three pair of shoes and a couple or three suits of blues and the same way with whites and dungarees . . . of course, your hammock and sea bag went to the sail locker. They stored that for you, You kept up with your mattress and blankets and sheets. Mattress covers , . .we didn't have sheets.

Marcello: What was the morale like in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy? I'm referring to that period prior to the actual attack itself.

Hughes: There was always griping. You know, it was just human nature. As a whole, I think the ship had good morale. We would go out on maneuvers, and we would . . . we'd steam out, and we carried the big "E" for efficiency quite a number of times. The gun crew was wonderful. Boy, they carried that big "E," and they was proud of it. Of course, the steaming part was more or less our department, and I think we carried the "E" a time or two. As a whole, I think the ship had good morale all the time.

Marcello: I would assume that at that time just about everybody was a volunteer. Or were you beginning to get the influx of reserves and so on?

Hughes: At that particular time, they was volunteers, I don't think . . . we may have, but I don't remember getting any reserves until after the war started.

Marcello: I understand that there was virtually no theft at all aboard most of the ships during that pre-Pearl Harbor period. In other words, you could leave something on your bed or your locker might be open or something of that nature, and none of your belongings were ever touched or stolen.

Hughes: That's true. As far as I know, that was true, I have done that many times, and I have gone by other fellows' lockers that would be open, and their belongings might fall out if the ship were underway, so I just went over there and closed their locker for them. I have done that, and I have had it happen to myself. As far as I know, there was no theft at that time.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about a typical training exercise in which the Tennessee might engage during that pre-Pearl Harbor period. For instance, when would the Tennessee normally go out? Would there be a particular day of the week?

Hughes: I think possibly we would leave out on Monday and stay out on maneuvers Monday through Thursday and go in on Friday.

Marcello: What would you normally do when you went out on these maneuvers?

Hughes: Well, when we would go out of the harbor, we would always go out under general quarters--under battle circumstances. When we would get out to sea at a certain time . . . of course, I was in the fire room, so I didn't see what was going on topside. We would go out and get a certain distance out from the harbor, and they would secure from general quarters, and we would go

about our business--daily routine.

Marcello: What would your daily routine consist of?

Hughes: Well, if the fire room was in operating conditions, all I would do was just stand watch on my eight o'clock to twelve, twelve to four o'clock--what-have-you--and so then from that time on, I had no other duties--very seldom. Sometimes we would have to chip a little paint in the compartments--our living quarters--and we would paint, but that didn't last long. A lot of times we would just go topside and watch the maneuvers--watch the other ships and planes. They would be up there dogfighting and just practicing. My buddy and I, Bill Hodges, were pretty well together most of the time, you know--we were good friends. We would get tired of that, and we would go down and get us an acey-deucey board and play acey-deucey or we would play cribbage. That's the entertainment we'd have. There was no television back in those days, you know, and we didn't have nothing to do.

Marcello: Now, awhile ago you were talking about the various divisions perhaps flying the "E" pennant--"E," of course, standing for efficiency. How would one go about obtaining the "E"? For example, what would it involve in the fire room?

Hughes: Well, one particular fire room wouldn't have it. It would be in the engineering department . . . throughout the ship . . . the entire engineering crew. It would depend on how our smokestacks smoked and how efficient we were on . . . the captain would say,

"Give it full steam ahead." It would depend on how quick we reacted on that, I say "we." It was the entire division--the engineering division. You could get an "E" on how quick and accurate the guns were and for the maneuverability of the ship--things of that nature. That is more or less what the "E," I guess, stood for. I know we carried the "E" on our stack and, of course, the other ships did, too. They beat us out sometimes. It was just a game.

Marcello: How often would this competition among the ships be held?

Hughes: As far as I know, it was all the time. Every time we would go out on maneuvers, we would see who could do the best job.

Marcello: And, how often would these maneuvers take place?

Hughes: Weekly, to the best of my knowledge. I think when we would go out on maneuvers, we would be either towing a sled for a target--for other ships to use for a target. I remember one time the Oklahoma . . . we was towing a sled, and the Oklahoma was shooting at the target with their big guns, and they missed the target and got pretty close to the ship. It kind of shook us up a little bit, but that's about the procedure of our maneuvers. We would pull a sled some, and other ships would pull a sled; and, of course, the planes would be maneuvering and dogfighting and the such like. Of course, we had two planes--two planes on our ship--to catapult, and they would go out daily, and I don't know what reason they would go out for. It wasn't necessarily

a military secret, but it was just something I didn't know about. Catapulting them off--that was fascinating to me. I'd just get up there and watch them catapult that plane off, and it would take off and about an hour or two later it would come back and land on that sea sled. If the water would be rough, well, then they'd land and taxi up on that sea sled, and then they would hook the crane to him and pull him in. I've seen them lose one occasionally; they would lose one every once in awhile.

Marcello: What did the "E" mean to you in terms of pay or extra privileges?

Was there any reward for getting the "E"?

Hughes: It was just the honor--just the honor of it. You could always go ashore, and you could always have something to start a fight about, I guess (chuckle).

Marcello: Now, did you detect any changes in your training routine as one gets closer and closer to December 7th and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate? Could you detect any changes in the training routine?

Hughes: No, not really. I don't remember any.

Marcello: Did you perhaps have any more general quarters drills?

Hughes: They were frequent. I think we had general quarters drills every day to the best of my knowledge.

Marcello: How about sailing with darkened ship?

Hughes: We done that several times, but it didn't have no significance



at that time.

Marcello: I guess what I'm saying is, did you always sail with darkened ship at night, or did that procedure usually take place in those days or weeks initially prior to the actual attack?

Hughes: I think we darkened ship before, I mean, when we would be out on weekly maneuvers. I think we had darkened ship quite often. Of course, after the war started, naturally we did have it, and it was totally darkened,

Marcello: When would the Tennessee normally come in off these maneuvers?

Hughes: Normally, on Thursday or Friday. We didn't usually stay out on weekends.

Marcello: In other words, if anybody had been observing the routine of the ships, it would not be too hard to determine when they would be going out and coming in?

Hughes: That's right. I think that if there had been any observation of that, it would have been very easy to spot a routine, and it could have very possibly been observed by most anyone, really,

Marcello: When the Tennessee came in, what was the liberty routine like?

Hughes: Port and starboard.

Marcello: When would liberty normally commence?

Hughes: About four o'clock in the afternoon.

Marcello: Of the Friday?

Hughes: Of the Friday, yes. We would normally get in around noon--something like that--and sometimes, if we got in early enough, it would

start at one o'clock, and you had a one o'clock liberty. I never had an overnight liberty.

Marcello: Well, you probably would not have had enough rank to have overnight liberty.

Hughes: No, that's true. We didn't have the money to buy a room with, either. I mean, even if I had stayed at the YMCA, I wouldn't have had enough money to do anything, you know, I mean, twenty-one dollars a month was very little. Of course, at that time--I think in September--I got my thirty-six dollars a month. I mean, I was automatically raised from twenty-one to thirty-six after three months, so I got my thirty-six dollars a month. Of course, that was in September and October and November that I was drawing thirty-six, but still that's not much. But I didn't require much. I adjusted myself to it, and even it was more than what I was used to.

Marcello: I assume that liberty expired at midnight.

Hughes: Yes, mine always did. My liberty expired at midnight. I would maybe go out to a movie when I would go down to Honolulu. I didn't go downtown very much because, like I said, my funds were limited. I would go on over to the opposite side of the island from the harbor and play baseball, go out in the sugar cane field and walk around, and tromp around through those woods and such like. That's about the extent of my liberties there. I mean, I enjoyed going out and playing baseball. I didn't

participate in any of the whaleboat races and such like. Of course, I hadn't been aboard ship long enough. But at that particular time, though, about the extent of my liberties would be such that once every two or three weeks I would go downtown and go to a movie. I would save up enough money to do that. I think it cost us a nickel to ride the bus down there.

Marcello: I guess downtown Honolulu was quite crowded with servicemen during that period.

Hughes: Oh, yes. You take all those ships coming in there and half the crews going liberty, why, there was a pretty good bunch of them. I had a cousin on a submarine that was stationed there, and I met him, and, of course, he was an "old salt." He'd been in four or five years. He knew the ropes, and he took me around town and took me aboard his submarine and showed me that and it was interesting.

Of course, when I was in boot camp, I wanted to volunteer for submarine duty. It was kind of funny--to go back to boot camp again--but this officer was interviewing me, and he asked me why I would like to be in the Submarine Service, and I just said I thought I would like it. I thought I would enjoy serving on the sub, you know--going up and down. He said, "Well, what is meant by the phrase 'don't count your chickens before they're hatched?'" I was searching for an answer, and I said, "Well, you know . . . you know . . . you know . . . ." He says, "Hell,

no, I don't know!" I'm telling you, it just scared the tar out of me. It just really scared me because of me being a raw "boot," see, and he come up with an answer like that. Boy, I'm telling you, I was scared (chuckle). I told my wife and daughter about that, though, and they always kid me about it.

Marcello: Did your cousin take you down to Hotel or Canal Street when he was showing you around?

Hughes: No. He took me to a luau--it was the Royal Hawaiian's grounds--and it was real interesting and entertaining. Of course, he drank a few beers, but I didn't drink no beer then. I was afraid to drink. I was afraid I would get drunk and get put in the brig.

Marcello: So you stayed away from Hotel and Canal and Beretania Streets?

Hughes: Yes. I didn't know there was a Canal Street there. I don't remember Canal Street. I sure don't; I didn't know of it. I know of Hotel Street, but I didn't participate (chuckle).

Marcello: During that pre-Pearl Harbor period, when you thought of an individual Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your mind?

Hughes: During what period?

Marcello: During the period prior to the actual attack itself.

Hughes: I really hadn't thought much about them. We'd see, I guess, the mixed breeds on the island--Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiians, and,

you know, Portuguese and such like. One was just like the other to me; one looked just like the other one. I never thought nothing about the Japanese at that time.

Marcello: Now, as conditions continued to deteriorate between the two countries, did you or your buddies in your bull sessions ever talk about the possibility of an attack in the Hawaiian Islands?

Hughes: Not that I remember. I don't recall any.

Marcello: Suppose a showdown did come between the United States and Japan. Did you and your buddies feel rather confident about the outcome?

Hughes: That, as far as I know, never entered any of our minds. Like I said, it was just a total surprise. I don't think that there had been any thought of it. There might have been, but not in the group that I associated with.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up to that weekend of December 7, 1941, and at this point, Mr. Hughes, we will go into as much detail as you can remember. Let us start with that Friday, which would be December 5, 1941. I am assuming that the Tennessee came in on that Friday. Was that the case?

Hughes: Yes, I believe so. It may have been in the day before, or it may have come in that day. I mean, that is the way I sort of remember the maneuverabilities of it. It was out on Monday and in on Friday.

Marcello: Did you have liberty that weekend?

Hughes: Yes, I had liberty Saturday.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did that Saturday?

Hughes: I sure do. I went ashore. I had a friend on the Lexington, and he and I somehow or other got together.

Marcello: Now, was the Lexington in on that weekend? I didn't know that any carriers were in.

Hughes: She was in that Saturday. She left Saturday night. This friend of mine . . . he and I went to school together. We grew up down here at England, Arkansas. He was on the USS Lexington, and they were to get underway. So he and I went ashore and went to a movie and came back, and he went aboard his ship, and I got on the motor launch and came to my ship. You see, the West Virginia was tied up alongside of us. We were tied up at Fox Seven, and the West Virginia was tied up alongside of us; and so we had to leave our ship, go across through the West Virginia, and get on the motor launch and go ashore. He went on aboard his ship, and they were supposed to get underway around one or two o'clock. Liberty was up at midnight.

Marcello: What time did you go back aboard the Tennessee?

Hughes: It was around eleven o'clock or 11:30--something like that.

Marcello: Did you go to the movie and then go directly back to the Tennessee?

Hughes: Yes. We went to the movie and then directly back to the Tennessee. They got underway, assumedly . . . well, they did because they wasn't there. What direction they went, I don't know.

Marcello: Now, would there be very many drunks coming back aboard the Tennessee on a Saturday night?

Hughes: Yes.

Marcello: There would be quite a few?

Hughes: Yes, quite a few.

Marcello: What sort of condition would they normally be in to fight the following day under such circumstances?

Hughes: It wouldn't take them long to sober up. A couple or three hours' sleep and they would be all right. Some of them would be pretty well "knee-walking" drunk, but a couple or three hours' sleep would . . . they would be in pretty good shape. We had one boy in the fire room (chuckle)--Hosea--he loved his schnapps. He'd come in all drunked up. The next morning he would have a terrible hangover, but, boy, he done his job. He never let it interfere; he wouldn't complain. He would be sure he done his job efficiently. He was in the fire room, I'm sure that the boys topside in the gunnery department would . . . I'm fairly sure that they were capable of doing their job the next day. There wasn't a drunken brawl or a bunch of drunks all the time. It is a natural thing, really.

Marcello: Did you notice anything out of the ordinary occurring that Saturday night when you returned to the Tennessee?

Hughes: Nothing whatsoever. It was just another routine Saturday night.

Marcello: I understand it was rather pretty at night when all the battleships

were in with all their lights on and so on.

Hughes: It was beautiful. It was a beautiful sight. We'd go down through the harbor and have a straight shot coming in, but they've changed that now. You would be on the motor launch that's coming in--coming to your ship--and you would see all these ships with lights up on the masts. It was beautiful; it sure was.

Marcello: Why was a Sunday morning a good time for the Japanese to attack--any Sunday morning for that matter?

Hughes: Well, under the circumstances, I think that it would have been a good time, because they knew that we were in there. All the ships were there, and we wasn't expecting anything--as far as I know. I'm sure we wasn't. I feel like that was sort of their motto, I guess you would say--the "rising sun." They wanted to attack at sunrise,

Marcello: But Sunday is a day of leisure, is it not?

Hughes: Sunday is a day of leisure, and everybody is relaxed and carefree and enjoying their day off, so to speak.

Marcello: Could you sleep in, if you wished, on a Sunday?

Hughes: You could sleep in if you liked. You might have to get up and go somewhere else to do so, but you could still sleep without any problems. If you didn't have a watch, then you could sleep as long as you liked.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday morning of December 7, 1941,



and once more I will ask you to go into as much detail as you can remember about that day. I'll let you pick up the story at this point.

Hughes: Well, I had a routine morning. I got up and went to chow,

Marcello: What time did you get up?

Hughes: Oh, around six o'clock or 6:30--something like that. We went to chow and had breakfast,

Marcello: Do you recall what you had that Sunday morning for breakfast?

Hughes: No, I sure don't, I really don't. We usually had pretty good breakfasts, though, but I don't think it was ham and eggs or bacon and eggs. Anyway, we finished our breakfast and come on back and went to roaming around there.

There had been rumors that there was going to be an admiral's inspection the next day on the ship--locker inspection and ship's inspection and stuff like that. So I was sitting down in the middle of the deck. My locker was . . . we had a stack of lockers, and I was sitting down in the middle of the deck there rolling my clothes. At that time, we had to roll our clothes and pack them just a certain way--really had to be precise. I shined my shoes and had them ready, and I had my blues all packed because we wasn't using them so they was in good shape. But my whites that I had been using--had been wearing--I had them all cleaned up and all washed.

I was rolling them up real good and tight, and general

quarters sounded. Well, I had my locker pretty well filled up. I didn't have a whole lot of clothes on the floor--I think a couple of suits of whites and a couple pairs of shoes. So I was sitting down to roll my clothes and general quarters sounded.

I kind of ignored it, you know, it being Sunday morning, and in the harbor there, too, at anchor. I thought, "What the heck are they doing that for?" I just kept rolling my clothes, and I put my string around it and tied it up and put it up in the locker.

Well, about this time, I heard it on the P.A. system. The boatswain's mate blowed his whistle, you know, and it sounded on the P.A. system that, "This is no drill! This is no drill! The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor!"

At about the same time, I heard this bomb, and I guarantee you, buddy, I got up and got gone to my battle station, I got to that fire room, and . . . I'm telling you, I was scared but I wasn't scared. I mean, I didn't know what was going on. I was there down below, and I couldn't tell what was going on.

Marcello: Now, when you say you heard this bomb, was this a bomb that hit the Tennessee?

Hughes: I don't know. I think it was, I just don't know whether that was the bomb that hit our ship or what, because it was just so sudden, you know, and instantly done. The P.A. system had just

finished that the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor. So, like I said, simultaneously this bomb hit, and then I scampered, I just left my clothes and everything. My locker was open, and my clothes were on the deck.

I got to my fire room--my battle station. We got down there, and Hosea was on the phone there trying to find out what was going on. There was so much pandemonium that he couldn't relay the message fast enough--everybody that was topside was trying to talk--and it was really exciting--a lot of excitement,

Marcello: Could you feel the repercussions from that bomb? Did it jar you and shake you or anything of that nature?

Hughes: It felt like the ship, you know, kind of vibrated or something of that nature. But there was so many and it happened so fast that I just don't remember how the ship felt at that time.

Marcello: So what happens when you get to the fire room.? What is your job when you get there?

Hughes: Well, if need be, I light the burners, but, of course, the fire room was already in operation. I would just be there, really, to do whatever is to be done in case we have to add more fuel or add more air. Of course, James was the gauge man and the air controller, and he operated the air, you know, to keep from smoking.

Marcello: Now, when you say that the fire room was already in operation, what do you mean by that?

Hughes: It was already burning.

Marcello: In other words, the boiler had already been lit?

Hughes: Oh, the boiler was lit. We had to keep the boiler burning . . . ,  
some of the fire rooms in operation all the time.

Marcello: It just so happened this Sunday morning that the boiler was  
lit in your fire room.

Hughes: Yes. This boiler was in operation during the time we were in  
port. It seemed to me like number eight fire room, since I've  
thought about it, was inoperable. It was being cleaned. The  
tubes were being blown and rodded out and replaced . . . and  
fire bricks, stuff like that. But I do know that my fire room  
was one of the duty fire rooms. We had eight fire rooms, and  
I think part of them stayed lit one weekend, and then they  
secured and the others were lit the next weekend. It wasn't  
really routine, but it was similar to that.

Marcello: Now, in the meantime, can you feel any of the effects of the  
hits that the West Virginia was taking? It was tied up outboard  
of you.

Hughes: No, I couldn't. Of course, it may have been the torpedo that  
she got in the side that made her list over against us; we  
may have felt that but not knowing what it was. We could feel  
some repercussion, but we didn't know what it was.

Marcello: What were your thoughts while you were down there in the fire  
room and the activity was raging outside?

Hughes: Well, we had no inkling or idea what was going on, Those bombs was falling, and our gun was being fired, Old Jimmy James was standing up there sort of going through a shadow-boxing thing; "Let 'em have it, boys! Let 'em have it! Give it to them! Sock it to them." We was just having a lot of fun down there, not really knowing what was going on, We didn't want to get excited and scared--such like--so we was trying to keep calm, and we started making a little bit of a game out of it.

Marcello: What were you talking about?

Hughes: Well, we were trying to find out what was going on topside, but, like I said, Hosea was trying to transfer the message on to us. Then we would talk about, oh, just various things, Nothing in particular,

Marcello: How long did you remain down there in the fire room?

Hughes: Well, that was about eight o'clock in the morning, and it was around four or five o'clock in the afternoon when they secured the ship. It was about six, eight, or ten hours--something like that--but it was quite a while,

Marcello: And you were down there the whole time?

Hughes: Yes,

Marcello: Did you receive any food at all?

Hughes: Yes. They brought food and coffee to us--sandwiches and coffee-- at about noon. I guess it was about four o'clock that they did it again. It seemed to me like they brought it down twice,

It seemed like it was around six o'clock when they secured. It may not have been. I never so much . . . when they secured from general quarters, I went to look for my buddy.

Marcello: Now, is this the first time that you went topside?

Hughes: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of a sight did you see when you got topside?

Hughes: Oh, Lord! We got up there, and smoke--black smoke--was just pouring out. The Arizona was burning. I looked over, you know, and it was just burning. The sky was full of smoke in every direction you looked, and I couldn't believe it. It was just . . . then was when I started getting scared, really. The water was afire--oil on the water was on fire--and bodies were strewn through the water. Some of them were still swimming out--still trying to get out--and some of them got out, and some of them didn't. I heard . . . I don't remember this, but I do remember hearing that the captain of the Tennessee started the propellers--going to push the fire and oil back from the ship.

Marcello: Now, when you say he started the propellers, do you mean the propellers that would normally be used to move the ship, or did he lower small boats over the side?

Hughes: No, the propellers they used to move the ship. That's the way I heard it. Of course, I didn't see this. But I do remember vaguely the oil on fire on the water. I remember that, really.

I can see that clearly right now. I can see that Arizona. We wasn't very far from her, you see, and I can see that very clearly.

Marcello: How about the West Virginia?

Hughes: She was so close to us that I don't even remember what (chuckle) . . . I mean, at that particular time, I wasn't really thinking about the West Virginia, I guess, because I was concerned about these fires and water burning. That was horrifying to me.

Marcello: Were there fires all around the Tennessee?

Hughes: Well, it got pretty close. Of course, I think by the action of the captain that that would have been . . . possibly it could have gotten up there and caught the ship on fire. I think he made a real good move there.

Marcello: How much damage was done to the Tennessee?

Hughes: Well, the best I remember, number two turret was torn up; the conning tower was torn up pretty bad; and, I think, back aft some small bombs hit the ship pretty smartly back there, and I think it killed ten or fifteen men. I don't remember how many we lost in number.

Marcello: Were there any fires on the Tennessee as a result of damage that it sustained?

Hughes: If there was, they had put them out before I got topside. I didn't see it. Of course, that was . . . you see, during general quarters, they would have been fighting that fire; and while I

was down in my fire room, I don't know if they were . . . I'm sure there was some small fires. We had wood decks, and I'm sure there was some small fires aboard the ship, I don't remember seeing them.

Marcello: How long did you stay topside?

Hughes: Oh, I guess, for probably an hour.

Marcello: Did you do anything while you were topside?

Hughes: No. They issued us . . . they gave us a helmet, a lifejacket, and a .45 and an extra clip. I wouldn't have known what to do with it if I'd had to use it, I guess. I mean, the further along in the day, in the evening, the more scared, I guess I'll say, that I got, because I got up topside and actually seen what had happened; and from the shock of that, that really put me to thinking.

Marcello: What did you do that evening?

Hughes: Nothing that I can remember--that particular evening--other than I think I had a fireman watch,

Marcello: Well, in other words, after about an hour, you went back down in the fire room again?

Hughes: Yes. I think from eight to twelve o'clock. I think it was my watch from eight to twelve o'clock, as best as I can remember, I stayed up, and, of course, I ate. I got me a sandwich and a cup of coffee and was just meandering around the ship. I was kind of looking around to see what kind of damage it was--what



wasn't restricted.

Marcello: Was there still confusion at that point, or were things pretty well organized?

Hughes: Oh, there was still confusion. There was still confusion the next day. It was really confusing the next day.

Marcello: What sort of rumors were going around that night?

Hughes: I don't remember. I really can't remember what rumors there were.

Marcello: Did you hear any speculating or talking down in the fire room when you were down there?

Hughes: I'm sure we did, I just don't remember what the topic of conversation was. I guess fear was getting to us at that particular time.

Marcello: Were you fully expecting the Japanese to land?

Hughes: We thought possibly they might be back. I do remember talking about that. After we got topside and saw . . . the submarines, though--the mini-submarines--that was pretty much of the topic. They had captured . . . there was rumors that they had captured two or three of them. You know, then there was so many planes, and then some the paratroopers had landed on the island. That was rumored and such like. We really didn't know what to expect.

Marcello: Did you believe all these stories that you heard?

Hughes: Had no reason not to believe it. I mean, under the circumstances, I sure did. There was one submarine captured, wasn't there? Of course, there was rumors that there was three or four of

them, you know, and that the paratroopers were all over the island. That was rumored, and, of course, that put a fear into us. It may have been rumored for a purpose, you know-- to make us be alert. I'm sure it was.

Marcello: Did having that .45 give you a little bit more security, perhaps?

Hughes: Possibly the next day. That evening and that night, it had no bearing at all. Of course, I kept it with me from . . . I wore it all the time.

Marcello: Do you remember the planes from the Enterprise coming in that night?

Hughes: No.

Marcello: You were probably down on your fire watch.

Hughes: Possibly so. Of course, and then, too, after my watch was over, I tried to get as much sleep as I could.

Marcello: Did you get very much sleep?

Hughes: Well, I got about four hours, I guess, that night.

Marcello: Where did you sleep?

Hughes: Slept on the deck.

Marcello: You still slept out on the open deck that night?

Hughes: No, not on the open deck. I slept down in my compartment. Of course, the head man of the fire room--the watertender--would let us kind of rest and relax--lay down on the deck there if we wanted to and get a little bit or rest. We didn't sleep, but we got some relaxation. He would let somebody else wear the

headphones and let the phone man get a little rest. Then he would get a little rest and turn the duty over to the gauge man. It was very cooperative, but I wouldn't have known what to have done with that .45, I don't suppose,

Marcello: When you're down in that fire room, I am assuming that it is very hard to hear outside noises and activity. Is that right?

Hughes: Yes. You've got forced air. This ship had forced air in the fire room, and you had interlocking doors. See, if you opened both doors at once, you'd have a flare-back and catch the fire room afire--too much draft and pressure. So that made a lot of noise. The boiler itself, you know--the pressure there--made quite a bit of noise. I mean, you had to talk a little louder than normal in the fire room than you did on topside.

Marcello: And all of this would have prevented you from hearing any of the noise from the outside.

Hughes: I think so. We could hear some bombing, and, of course, we could always hear the guns. We could feel the . . . of course, they didn't fire any of those 16-inch guns--the big guns, the broadsides. We could even hear our pom-poms, but we couldn't hear the planes. We couldn't hear the planes as they were coming.

Marcello: Actually, you really wouldn't have seen any of the planes at all.

Hughes: No. They were gone. I didn't see any of them at all. Like I say, I was in my compartment, which was below decks. Now, if I had been topside, there is a possibility that I would have, but

I was down below decks. I was, I think, three decks down and got my . . . of course, when general quarters sounded, I went on deeper down into the ship. So, no, I didn't see any planes,

I didn't see anything until, of course, six o'clock or six-thirty that evening. It was still daylight, but it looked dark to me when I got topside. All that black smoke just filled the sky for as far as you could see. I guess my nerves began to shatter a little bit then after I had seen what had happened. It was pretty horrifying to see what the outcome of it was. Of course, you've heard, and know, that if they'd have come back maybe with another fleet, they would have had us. They would have taken the whole island. We feel they would have, but, thank goodness, they didn't.

Marcello: What did you do during the following days and weeks?

Hughes: Well, the next day they started . . . as soon as possible, they started cleaning up and repairing. My clean-up detail was to clean up the mess from the bombed area and the shrapnel and such like. We were repairing the ship and trying to get it back into maneuverability. They built . . . you see, our degaussing cable around the ship was broken in different places, so they had to replace the degaussing cable. I was on a working party to bring that degaussing cable from Ford Island. They built a ramp from our ship over to the bank at Ford Island and had a two-way ramp-- off the ship on this ramp; on the ship on this ramp. It looked

like one-way streets. We had this working party . . . I guess, it was fifty, seventy-five men. I don't know how many men there was, but there was a bunch of us. We got hold of this degaussing cable and marched on the ship with it, put it where it belonged, and then the electricians took it over from there. We would go back and get another one. You see, it took us quite awhile to get that all repaired.

Marcello: Obviously, you wouldn't have had too many functions in the fire room, because the Tennessee couldn't go any place. It was pinned in by the West Virginia.

Hughes: It was pinned in, yes. We couldn't go anywhere, and we were wedged in there. I don't remember exactly how we got the West Virginia away from us to get us out, when we did get out. I think we was there probably a week, ten days. I just don't remember how long we was there.

Marcello: Now, were the crew on the Tennessee helping with the work over on the West Virginia during this time?

Hughes: I don't know. I'm sure they was. She got a lot more damage than we did. I'm sure some of our crew helped out over there. You see, Paul Ross (another Pearl Harbor veteran from Little Rock) was on the West Virginia, and he didn't stay . . . right after the blitz, I think he was transferred to some other ship. I don't remember just what went on between the two ships. I don't know how they got us apart and when we left, but it seemed to

me like we was in there about a week or ten days--maybe two weeks; I don't know--but I do remember we had Christmas at sea. My first Christmas in the Navy was at sea.

Marcello: When you left Pearl, where were you going?

Hughes: Back to Bremerton.

Marcello: What were you going back to Bremerton for?

Hughes: Repairs. You see, we just kind of patched ourselves up there at Pearl, and we were going back to Bremerton for major repairs. I don't know if you would call it . . . I guess you would say major repairs, because that's what we had. Before we got out--before the West Virginia had gotten away from us--for some reason or another, I was assigned to the smoke watch. I guess it was because my fire room was well-manned. The smoke watch had to go up topside and stand up above the stacks . . . it was in the crow's nest, I guess. There was a machine gun in there, and there was a gunner manning that machine gun. I was on the opposite side of it watching the smokestacks.

Marcello: What do you mean when you say you had the smoke watch? What were you up there watching?

Hughes: Watching for smoke from the fire rooms. That's what I was up there for--to see that the fire rooms was not putting out any white smoke nor black smoke--just more or less a heat wave. Too much air would make the smoke white; not enough air would make the smoke black. That was my job. That was just a duty that

particular name. As best I remember, I made it fine from eight to twelve 'clock that night . . . that may have been four to eight o'clock watch.

Anyway, the next night I think it was the next shift--twelve to four o'clock--and I went up there to take my duties. I was up there, and about midway through the watch I noticed a smoke, I couldn't see because of the blackout. Everything on the island was totally black. No lights on the ship--nothing. You had to just guess where you were going, so to speak; you really had to know where you were going to find your way.

I was watching my stacks, and I could still see this smoke coming from one of the boilers. I think it was number three. On the phone, I told them, "They are smoking black," So they added more air--adjusted for the black smoke. They looked in their periscope and asked for a report. We'd had a lapsed time there, because it takes a few minutes for it to really clear up. I says, "Number three fire room, you are still smoking black." So they readjusted it there and asked for a report. He said he was showing white smoke. So he readjusted, and, of course, that made it smoke more. So I come to find out it was smoking white, and, boy, it was really smoking white.

About that time, the executive officer was up there on the watch and he saw it was smoking. He called the chief engineer, and the chief engineer called the B Division chief. Of course,

it went on through channels.

The next day, I got me a new job--I was mess cooking (chuckle). That was the last of my smoke watch. Then we got underway.

Marcello: Well, what was it that caused you to misread the type of smoke that was coming out of the stack?

Hughes: I don't know. I really don't know why. Like I said, it was dark--total darkness--and you could just see a guff of smoke there, and you couldn't tell what color it was. I couldn't, and it is not the fact that I'm color-blind, because I'm not. It is that I could not tell. I mean, it was total darkness up topside--out there in the wide open spaces. You could see the smoke, but you couldn't see what color it was. They could look in the periscope and see what color it was, because that's what that was built for.

Marcello: When you say they could look in their periscope, this was down in the fire room?

Hughes: Yes. If it is smoking black, you add a little air to it, and that cleared it up. It is, like I said, like a hot water heater. If it gets too much air, it is going to smoke. If you take too much air away from it, it's going to smoke black,

Marcello: But they have a periscope down there that they can see this?

Hughes: They can look there. They can adjust it like that. They can look in that periscope and see just how they are getting it



adjusted. I mean, that periscope stays there. It is not movable like a submarine periscope, It stays there permanently. Of course, sometimes the water level droppage would cause it to smoke, too. That was the extent of my fire watch--two nights,

Marcello: And did you say that the next day the Tennessee then left?

Hughes: No. The next day, I got a new job--mess cook. You see, that's when I went to mess cooking. When we left Pearl Harbor then, I was mess cooking from the time we left to the time we got to Bremerton. I was mess cooking during Christmas. Like I said, I spent my first Christmas at sea in the Navy, and I was mess cooking then. We got to Bremerton and we got our repairs--a quickie job, you know--and got everything patched up. Then, we went back to sea again.

Well, then in March I went . . . I don't remember how I got in the laundry, but I went to the laundry--started working in the laundry. It paid ten dollars a month extra. That was big money to me. Mike Hector was the head laundryman, and he was the man in charge of the laundry, and he was a fine fellow. He was a boxer.

Marcello: So then you stayed in the laundry for quite awhile from that point?

Hughes: Yes, I stayed in the laundry from then on. Rather, that was the rate I picked up when ship's service eventually picked the rates. I had a laundryman's rate when I was discharged.

Marcello: Okay. That sounds like a pretty good place to end this interview,

Mr. Hughes, I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You have said a lot of very interesting and important things. I know that scholars will find your comments very valuable.

Hughes: I hope it helped. I enjoyed very much talking to you about it, and it has been very enjoyable to me. I hope that someone gets some benefit out of it.