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Interview with
Ernie W. Totten
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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Ernie W. Totten

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: El Paso, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Ernie W. Totten for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 7, 1974, in El Paso, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Totten in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was at Hickam Field during the Japanese attack there on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Totten: I was born on January 28, 1922, in Shenandoah, Iowa, at the Hand Hospital at 8:35 in the morning, and spent until I was eighteen years old in Shenandoah. I attained the tenth grade in high school there, and then after joining the Army, I left for Angel Island

in the Bay of San Francisco there and stayed there about three months and then went to Fort Armstrong, Oahu, Hawaii, and in the year of 1941 I finished . . . I went to night school and finished the tenth grade. Then I attained a general educational development testing grade of high school and one year of college and went to college. I have two years of college. Along with the credit hours obtained through various schools in the Army--radar school, adjutant general school, the non-commissioned officer's school--I have obtained seventy-eight credit hours.

Marcello: Okay, let's go back just a minute. Why did you decide to enter the Army?

Totten: Well, my dad was a captain in the Army. He was the captain of the guard for General Pershing and had thirty-six years in the Army. So my brother and myself were brought up more or less as Army brats. We were Army and I just went into the Army. There's no other particular reason that I can remember.

Marcello: When did you say that you arrived in the Hawaiian Islands?

Totten: November, 1940.

Marcello: In other words, you were there just a little bit over a year before the Japanese attacked at Pearl Harbor.

Totten: And now I'll bring something up that I wish you would include. Hickam Field was a part of Pearl Harbor, and Hickam Field is where I was at (chuckle).

Marcello: I see. In other words, as I recall, there was just a chain-link fence that separates Hickam Field from Pearl Harbor. Is that about the case?

Totten: Right.

Marcello: Okay, what was your particular speciality or your unit at the time that you arrived in the Hawaiian Islands?

Totten: I was a quartermaster clerk. Well, my particular job was . . . I was subsistence bid and contract clerk for the subsistence colonel there--Colonel . . . oh, I've forgotten his name. Well, anyhow, this colonel would read the bids, and I had to sit there and listen to him and make sure he didn't make any mistakes in reading the bids to open them up to make a contract for subsistence. The Army, Navy, and all service personnel on the island received their subsistence or food through our quartermaster depot there.

Marcello: What do you mean when you talk about reading the bids?

Totten: Bids for a contract? Say a million dollars worth of canned corn or something like that, meats or vegetables and so forth.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that when you first got to the Hawaiian Islands you went to Fort Armstrong. How long did you remain there?

Totten: Till the first day of November, 1941.

Marcello: In other words, you weren't there very long at all then. What--about a year? Well, you were about a year there at Fort Armstrong. Is that correct?

Totten: Approximately a year, yes.

Marcello: And then from there you moved over to Hickam Field?

Totten: I transferred to the Detachment Quartermaster Corps at Hickam Field to become subsistence clerk for the commissary there, with the promise of making PFC then corporal because I was a private. Well, I was a PFC at Fort Armstrong, but when you were a PFC or less than a staff sergeant and you moved in the Army, at that time you moved in the grade of private, and any new outfit you went into you had to work yourself up again to PFC, corporal, sergeant, and so forth.

Marcello: From what I gather rank in that pre-World War II Army moved very, very slowly. Is that correct?

Totten: Right. Wait a minute. I was corporal at Fort Armstrong because I went to the West Point Preparatorial School there at Schofield Barracks and made 89 in mathematics

and got kicked out because I didn't make 90. I went from corporal back to private when I went to Hickam Field. That's right. I got kicked out of there (chuckle).

Marcello: How would you describe the morale in that pre-World War II Army? Was it high? Low? How would you describe it?

Totten: Oh, I'd say the morale of my squad . . . well, for a year I'd say it was alright. I wouldn't say it was high or low. It would be about medium. My morale was just . . . of course, making corporal, I guess I had a good morale (chuckle). But I made it because Corporal Whitey died. You had to . . . either a non-com had to die or something before you could move up. He'd been a corporal for twenty-five years in that outfit. Corporal Whitey had quite a following there in Hawaii because he was the champion lightweight boxer for twenty years there--a champion for over twenty years.

Marcello: That's a long time to be a lightweight boxing champion. Now how would you describe the training that you received here at . . . well, at both Fort Armstrong and

at Hickam Field? I assume that most of the training that you received there was on-the-job training. How would you describe it? Was it good? Excellent? Do you feel that you were well-trained?

Totten: Well, I was, yes. We were not just quartermaster. We were called the quartermaster infantry at Fort Armstrong, and we had to defend our own fort in case something happened. We had alerts and I understand they didn't have this at various other places, but we had our rifles in our rack in our squad room. Well, in those days the training was marching, which I had to do. I had to march my squad. It might be a point of interest to say that to become a corporal you had to stand on one end of the parade field a block away and march your squad a block away to pass the test. So you had to have a good voice (chuckle) and good command of orders so they could be understood.

Marcello: At the time that you got to Pearl Harbor, how much thought did you give to the possibility of the islands ever being attacked by the Japanese or any other foreign power?

Totten: At the time in 1940 . . . in September, 1940, they started the build-up of calling the National Guard in.

They knew something was up. There were things in the world that were happening, but as far as an actual attack on the island of Oahu, I didn't have any idea that something could happen like this until November, 1941.

Marcello: But even going up to November, 1941, I think it's true that most people still felt relatively secure there. Even if we did get into a war with the Japanese, the Japanese would probably strike some other place, probably either the Philippines or the Dutch East Indies-- where they eventually did strike, of course.

Totten: Well, no. Maybe I'm expressing this opinion on the intelligence I gathered later in life. So at that particular time I can't remember or recollect any . . . that I had any knowledge of specifics. But I think that my answer is based on not the year or the month before Pearl Harbor, but because I went through intelligence training during the war.

Marcello: But again, I want you to express your particular view at the time.

Totten: I can't recollect what my view was at the time, as far as any speculation or any thought of attack or anything like that.

Marcello: As relations between the United States and Japan did begin to deteriorate somewhat--and again this would be moving into 1941, certainly the later part of 1941-- did your daily routine change any? In other words, were there more alerts or maneuvers or things of this nature?

Totten: Oh, yes. In November of . . . no, it was first of November . . . no, no, no, there wasn't . . . well, there's something we have to regress and go back to. The first month at Hickam Field for me, I was a fire clerk at the fire station there. I had a job to do eight hours a day seven days a week because I was the only one doing that job. I was sitting on the switchboard answering the phone and doing the morning report and so forth. As a fire clerk or part of the fire department, we did not have to participate in any of the training or alerts or any of that sort of thing. We were there for a specific job of fire watch. That's why I don't recollect anything there.

Marcello: What was the social life like for a young soldier in the Hawaiian Islands at that particular time? What did you do in your spare time?

Totten: Go on pass. Have a date. I had a girlfriend. Go to church on Sunday. Go to the YMCA. Go to school. I went to school at the YMCA for night classes. Played chess, going to the beach, going swimming.

Marcello: How often were you able to get liberty?

Totten: Well, if it was my turn to pull duty . . . my turn at night--Saturday and Sunday night--they would let me pull duty at night, and then I could take off all day Saturday and Sunday or in the evenings.

Marcello: Normally speaking, in a month how many weekends might you get off? Maybe three or four or something like that?

Totten: I didn't get a whole weekend off. Like I say, the first month I was in training, and I was the only one that was trained the first two or three days there at the fire station for the switchboard. The sergeant trained me and that was it. I did the job.

Marcello: Okay, the Hawaiian Islands have a relatively large population of people of Japanese ancestry. What concern did these people cause the Army in those days and months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor?

Totten: Well, none to my knowledge until the day of Pearl Harbor, and then I have a story to tell about the day that it happened. Did you want me to go into that right now?

Marcello: We'll probably talk about it a little bit later on.

Totten: The actual day?

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

Totten: Well, I never did have any personal contact with any Japanese until the war.

Marcello: But even so, without even having any contact with any Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually think of? You must have seen pictures of them and things of this nature. I'm sure you must have had some stereotype of a Japanese.

Totten: No, the church I went to was strictly Anglo, and I can't even remember any Japanese being in that church. There were Hawaiians. There were Hawaiians in that church, but I never had any real--until during the war--personal contact with any.

Marcello: Okay, this more or less, I think, brings us up to the days immediately prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor. What I want you to do at this point is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what you did on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and then from that point . . .

Totten: I'd like to go back to the first of December.

Marcello: Okay, go back to the first of December.

Totten: Well, for a week before that day, or the sixth of December, we were on restriction--no passes, either night or day or any time. Then on the sixth, about 6:00 in the evening, I got a call from the Detachment Quartermaster commanding officer stating that restriction was lifted, and we would be allowed to go on pass tomorrow--the 7th of December.

Marcello: What was the reason for the restrictions to begin with?

Totten: Well, they said something was happening. They wouldn't tell us exactly what was happening. I don't know whether to say they said war was imminent or something was imminent or not, but that's what I kind of recollect--that the reason that we were restricted was because something was going to happen.

Marcello: But as you mentioned, this restriction was lifted at 6:00 on that Saturday of December 6, 1941. When did you get off duty? Did you get off duty at that time?

Totten: No, I still was on the . . . let's see, I did get the evening off, but we still couldn't leave until Sunday morning. We were told that we couldn't go on pass until 8:00 on Sunday morning.

Marcello: How did you spend your time that Saturday evening?

Totten: I went to a movie.

Marcello: On the base?

Totten: Yes.

Marcello: And what did you do after you left the movie?

Totten: Well, I slept for a couple of hours, and then I had to pull switchboard duty. From 11:00 that night until 7:00 the next morning I had switchboard duty.

Marcello: Okay, while you were on switchboard that night, did anything out of the ordinary happen?

Totten: We had one fire call. I can't remember where it was now, but I had to send a truck out to someplace. I don't remember what it was for. A house--a little fire in a house or something.

Marcello: In other words, it was simply a routine call. A routine fire call.

Totten: A routine fire call.

Marcello: Okay, so this more or less brings us up then to Sunday morning, December 7, and what I'd like you to do again is to describe your routine on the morning of the 7th.

Totten: Well, as soon as I could, I went to breakfast at 7:00. I went across the street to this large 12,000-man mess hall where they fed 6,000 troops every half-hour.

About 7:30 I returned to the barracks and was sitting on the side of my bed. No, I took a shower. That's right. I took a shower and I was sitting there trying to decide whether to go to sleep or what. I decided to go to church, so this buddy of mine that got killed, Matthew Bills, he and I were getting dressed to go to church in Honolulu. I think I was sitting there adjusting my shorts. I can't even remember the time, but, of course, the time that I knew was the time that was put in the paper, and I didn't watch the clock or anything. I was sitting there on the bed, and he was sitting there, and we were starting to get dressed, and we heard some loud explosions.

Marcello: What was your first reaction when you heard these loud explosions?

Totten: Well, I just wanted to go see what they was because we were in the fire department, and they could be something that . . . we wasn't going to get to go on pass. We was going to have to go and do something about it. I'd have to report to the switchboard and relieve the CQ because he was a fireman and he'd have to get on the truck and go fight the fire. In fact, he was . . . that one that was on duty that morning was a driver of the truck. One of the drivers left there would be on duty as the truck

driver. Nobody had left yet . . . actually left except Sergeant Chagnon, the fire chief, and he was on his way out. He got killed later on, too. So we went out on this balcony over the guardhouse and looked toward Pearl Harbor and seen a lot of smoke going up and planes. I said to . . .

Marcello: Well, now were you in the barracks?

Totten: No, we're not in the barracks. We're in a room for firemen, and our bed is above the fire station.

Marcello: Oh, I see. Okay.

Totten: We have a pole that we slide down, you know, a brass pole. We looked out over the balcony and seen the smoke and these planes and a lot of explosions, a lot of noise. I remarked, "I think those are Japanese planes. They've got the rising sun painted on the side of them."

About that time, "Well, we'd better get dressed." So we run back in. I got my pants on and my shoes and that's about all. I did get my pants on and my shoes on, and then I was going down to report to the switchboard because it was really noisy, and I didn't go down the pole. Everybody else was going down the pole, so I went down the stairway. About that time they

bombed across the street, and what I really believe, and always have believed and always have thought, is that the first two bombs hit the water main and hit the gas main across the street from the fire station at Hickam Field.

Marcello: You might describe these two explosions. What happened?

Totten: Well, I went and fell down the stairs, or was knocked down the stairs, and got under the pool table. I was scared to death (chuckle). About that time some more bombs fell.

Marcello: Did they fall close to the fire house?

Totten: Right, yes, and knocked the windows out, and the glass cut my buddy, but they didn't even touch me. I never even got cut. So I got to the switchboard . . . and I guess it was a twenty millimeter cannon bullet, or whatever you want to call it, that went through the wall and . . . went right through one wall, two walls, three walls, and went right through the . . . well, anyhow the switchboard room was a mess. I don't know whether it hit it exactly there or exploded there or what happened. But anyhow, nothing could be used in there.

So about that time Major Blair, the commanding officer of the Quartermaster Group there . . . Hickam Field Quartermaster Group, showed up . . . and guys were

hiding and scared and running around. He lined us up and says, "I know you're scared and so am I, but everybody is going to be given a job to do, and anybody refusing to do what they're supposed to do . . ." He had a .45 and he says, "I'll shoot the first one that's not doing their job."

Marcello: About how much time had elapsed by now, that is, since the first bombs dropped?

Totten: I don't have any idea. Everything was so fast after the bombs dropped across the street there. They'd also sprayed the trucks with tracer bullets when they tried to pull out. The tires were burning, and trucks were unusable. They did a good job on those.

Marcello: What did you do after this officer had lined you all up and had made his threat?

Totten: Well, he gave me the specific job as messenger. He told me that since I was clerk that I was to be the messenger. At this particular time--just about the time he told me that--I remember the first raid was over, and at this particular time he was handing out the assignments. He was doing what you could say was regrouping us for specific jobs. That first raid . . . as far as remembering what . . . except what I've told you . . . as to

what **actually happened**, it was utter confusion. It was **just running around there** and not knowing what to do. **Nobody knew what to do**. That's why he was **making these remarks--the major**.

Marcello: You indicated that the **water mains** had been blown, or at least some of them had been blown up. You also **mentioned** now that the **fire trucks** had been shot up. Did this mean that **Hickam Field** was without **any fire-fighting equipment** or that the **amount of fire-fighting equipment** was drastically reduced?

Totten: Well, as far as **mobility** was concerned, yes, but what the major had done in **organizing this** was that he had them carry **fire hoses** around the barracks where it was burning and carry them to the **fire hydrants**. He had the **water turned off** on that main and turned on at **another main** somehow. Then he sent me as a **messenger down** to the **captain's offices** to get them to get a bunch of men out to fight the fires, dig out, and try to plug the leak in that water main because it was the **main main** across the street from the **hangar row** that was hit. In fact, I've got a picture of the **hangar row** with the **general's plane** parked right across the street. The **general's plane**

was number one, a B-47. Also, he has us throw foam cartridges into the gas main that was on fire in order to try to put that out. He also sent two people down to where the main started in order to try to shut the gas flow off through that main.

Marcello: In other words, you were no longer a messenger, is that correct?

Totten: No, I was a messenger up through . . . no, during the second raid, I became a fireman. I've got pictures of that, too, where I was holding a hose and fighting fires.

Marcello: Well, you might describe this fire-fighting here in this second raid.

Totten: Well, we didn't have much water pressure, but we was trying to take water out that was in there and put it on a fire on the second floor or the third floor of the 12,000-man barracks.

Marcello: Were you fighting these fires while these raids were going on?

Totten: During the second raid, yes. Then, of course, I'd run down through . . . I forgot to tell you I went running across the parade field to get these captains. I got sprayed with . . . or . . .

Marcello: You were strafed?

Totten: Strafed with a . . . a Jap plane tried to get me running across the parade field (chuckle). I remember that perfectly well. I'll never forget that.

Marcello: You might describe this particular incident--exactly what happened and how it happened and what did you do.

Totten: I just ran as fast as I could. It was about six blocks from the fire station to the captain's office--commanding officer of the Quartermaster Detachment--and gave him the message to get as many men as possible up there to start digging out and get the water main restored to operation.

Then I run back up there, and I was told to start fighting fires and help haul thoses hoses--fight the fires that was raging--because in the first raid they really started a bunch of fires in that big barracks there and the mess hall and everything.

Marcello: Were you ever strafed or anything of that nature while you were fighting these fires during the second raid?

Totten: No, bombed.

Marcello: You were bombed? You might describe what took place here. Give me the details of what you remember.

Totten: Well, bombs were falling all around, and we were trying to fight the fire, and, like I said, Matthew T. Bills was with me and was within arms length of me. He got blown to bits, and I wasn't even touched in the first or second raid.

But in the third raid, I was told to help try to get some of the injured and wounded out of the planes that had landed that were coming in from the States. We had some B-17's coming in from the States. I went over to these planes trying to get the wounded out and pull them over next to the building.

This was during the third raid when I got hit in the head and the legs and the hip. I got six pieces of shrapnel in me, and then I ended up in the hospital. I woke up in the hospital. That's about all I can remember, except that I was recommended for the silver star which I never got for that deal.

Marcello: Okay, let's just go back here a minute and talk about this particular incident once again. When you did get hit--and again I want you to go into as much detail as you can--describe this particular incident in terms of what happened.

Totten: Well, I went into this plane, and I was pulling a man out across the street by the barracks. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital. That's all I can remember about it. That's just about it.

Marcello: How long was it after you got hit that you woke up in the hospital? Was it a matter of hours or days or . . .

Totten: Oh, no, no. It was about noon, I'd say. I remember the guy laying next to me had told me that the nurse had told him to tell me to stay there and not move until a doctor could get to me--that he was supposed to holler for him.

I just got up and walked out. I had a .45. I don't even know how I got that .45. Some master sergeant came up to me with a shotgun, took the .45 away from me, and told me to get on the truck because I was going on guard duty.

Marcello: Now by this time had your woulds been dressed or anything of this nature?

Totten: No. They didn't even . . . I didn't get the shrapnel taken our or dressed until the 16th of December.

Marcello: So you mentioned that after the raids were over that you went on guard duty?

Totten: Right.

Marcello: What sort of guard duty was this, and where did you go?

Totten: There was a barn up at Aiea Sugar Mill that they put me on guard duty by until way after . . . I don't know why I was guarding that barn, but later on, I found out there was a bunch of arsenic in there, and the FBI had found out that the Japs were going to take this arsenic and put it in the reservoirs of Honolulu to poison everybody. The Japs had drawn a lot of water in various bowls and bathtubs and so forth for them to drink to stay alive. My job--my special orders--was to not let anybody near that barn and to shoot anybody that came anywhere near that barn.

Marcello: When was it that you were in on the apprehension of one of the Japanese who was a saboteur? You mentioned earlier that you had knowledge of one of . . . didn't you mention earlier that you had knowledge of one of the Japanese who . . .

Totten: No, I found out this later. No, I never did apprehend anybody. I fired into the night when somebody came near the barn, but I don't know whether I hit anybody or what happened. I never did see any dead.

Marcello: I understand that there were a lot of trigger-happy GI's around that night.

Totten: Yes, I was one of them (chuckle). If anybody came near that barn, why, they were going to get a shotgun blast (chuckle).

Marcello: Is that what you were given to guard the barn with, a shotgun?

Totten: Right.

Marcello: How long did you remain up there at the barn?

Totten: Till the 16th of December. That's when they found me. In fact, I was missing in action, as you can see, because they lost track of me. They put me up there. The master sergeant had my name, but he forgot where he put me.

Marcello: What did you do so far as food and this sort of thing? Was it brought up to you or what?

Totten: No, I didn't have much to eat. There was an old Japanese lady across the street that gave me a bowl of rice a day and a glass of water when I wanted it, and that's about it. She would very slowly come across and hand them to me, and that's all I had for eight days. I had a bowl of rice and a glass of water. I lost from 200 pounds down to 138 pounds in

six days . . . **eight days**, whatever it was. I lost a lot of **weight**, anyhow.

Marcello: How did your attitude toward the Japanese change as a result of this attack at Pearl Harbor?

Totten: Well, I didn't like them too much. I wrote a letter that I think I said that "I hate the Japs and I'm at war with the Japs." I wrote a letter that . . . after . . . let's see. When did I write that letter--about the 17th or 18th of December. I wrote a letter to my mother just so they wouldn't worry too much. I said I was just slightly wounded, you know.

Marcello: As you look back on the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, how do you speculate as to how they were able to pull it off?

Totten: Well, I can say from my studies later on that the intelligence . . .

Marcello: No, I don't want to know about your studies later on. I want to know how you felt at the time.

Totten: At the time?

Marcello: Right.

Totten: I just couldn't imagine how it could happen or how they could get there all the way from Japan.

Marcello: Did you blame any individuals at that particular time, such as General Short or Admiral Kimmel or anybody of this nature? Did you look for scape-goats at that time?

Totten: No, I never had anything to do with anybody that high in rank in those days. The most I ever knew was a major. I got a commendation from Major Blair for my actions at Pearl Harbor. That's the only commendation I've received. The witnesses that were put in for my purple heart and for my . . . at that time you had to have three witnesses for a purple heart and five witnesses for a silver star. They couldn't come up with but two. All the rest of them were killed that was listed on there, so I never received my purple heart until 1950 (chuckle), nine years later.