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***Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas***

***Interview with Leroy McCovney
USS Honolulu***

Interview With Leroy McCovney

This is Cathy Marlowe. Today is December 8, 2001. I am interviewing Mr. Leroy McCovney. This interview is taking place at Bethany Lutheran Church in Fredericksburg, Texas. This in support of the Center for the Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Ms. Marlowe: Tell us your name and where you were born.

Mr. McCovney: My name is Leroy C. McCovney. I was born in Coffeerville, Kansas, in 1922, November First.

Ms. Marlowe: What were the names of your parents?

Mr. McCovney: My mother's name was Dolly, before she was married Dolly Potter, and my daddy's name was Harry McCovney.

Ms. Marlowe: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Mr. McCovney: I have five brothers and one sister. They're all dead now, except my sister.

Ms. Marlowe: Is she older or younger?

Mr. McCovney: She's four years younger than I am.

Ms. Marlowe: When and where did you enlist in the service, and what part of the service did you enlist into?

Mr. McCovney: I enlisted into the Navy in 1941, in May of 1941.

Ms. Marlowe: And where were you when you did this?

Mr. McCovney: Long View, Texas.

Ms. Marlowe: And where were you on December 7th?

Mr. McCovney: I ws in Pearl Harbor on the USS *Honolulu*.

Ms. Marlowe: Who was with you, did you have any buddies that enlisted with you?

Mr. McCovney: No.

Ms. Marlowe: How old were you when you enlisted?

Mr. McCovney: Nineteen. Five feet four.

Ms. Marlowe: How many pounds?

Mr. McCovney: One hundred and forty pounds.

Ms. Marlowe: Oh, you were a toughie, weren't you.

Mr. McCovney: I shaved. A full set of beard.

Ms. Marlowe: What was your parents' reaction when you decided to go into the Navy?

Mr. McCovney: They were thrilled silly that I was leaving home.

Ms. Marlowe: Where did you go to training?

Mr. McCovney: I went to boot camp in San Diego. Best as I can remember, eight weeks of boot camp. In that time I came out—I was supposed to go to aviation radioman's school. I didn't take any boot leave because I was so glad to get away from home. Then I went to a barracks waiting to go to school, and they sent word that anybody waiting to go to school was going to be in the fleet, they were going to build up the fleet. They said that if you had a brother on some ship, you could get on that ship, or you could pick out any ship you wanted, any kind of ship, I mean, to get on. I didn't know one kind of ship from another, and this one guy, he said "My brother's on a light cruiser," and I said, "Well, that's for me." He said, "That's the best kind." And it turned out to be that way.

Ms. Marlowe: What was your first duty assignment?

Mr. McCovney: I was in the deck force in the first division. Deck force means what some people term loosely as swab jockey. They keep the deck clean, the compartment, the whole thing.

Ms. Marlowe: Were you good at it?

Mr. McCovney: Yes.

Ms. Marlowe: So that was your primary duty, keeping the ship clean.

Mr. McCovney: Then after awhile, I got side cleaning duty. And that means, then, this is before the war, when a ship came in the first thing that was done is wash down the whole ship, the whole sides, with linseed oil. Then the side cleaner's job was to keep it clean until it went to sea again. It was a full-time job.

Ms. Marlowe: Do you remember what day it was that you walked on that ship?

Mr. McCovney: No, I sure don't. It was probably in May after boot camp, probably about eight weeks after.

- Ms. Marlowe:** So probably around August of '41. What did you think about the food on the ship?
- Mr. McCovney:** That was the first time that I ever could have two pieces of pie in my life. And we had three meals a day. We're talking about the Depression. And have regular bread, instead of homemade bread.
- Ms. Marlowe:** Who did you become friends with on the ship?
- Mr. McCovney:** It was probably a guy named Mel. After awhile you got duties besides the side cleaning thing, and he was coxswain on a motor launch. After we were out at Pearl Harbor for awhile we came back to Los Angeles. He and me and the engineer had a motor launch duty.
- Ms. Marlowe:** Did you enjoy that, more than cleaning the ship?
- Mr. McCovney:** Well, it was a job. Anything you did was a job.
- Ms. Marlowe:** So Mel was your best friend.
- Mr. McCovney:** Yes, he was my friend.
- Ms. Marlowe:** Do you still keep in touch with him?
- Mr. McCovney:** No. I didn't keep in touch—and that's another thing, after a long time, we got new construction and we left. Me and another guy, though, this other guy said he was going to write to his friends back home, and this guy said "You don't need to be doing that, we'll get some new friends wherever we go." And that's the way it always was.
- Ms. Marlowe:** Now speaking of writing, did you write home to your mother and dad?
- Mr. McCovney:** Yes. It was the rule in boot camp, you had to write home every week. And then after awhile when I was on the ship a long time, I didn't write home for awhile and my mother wrote a letter and said that I hadn't written home, and if I had been killed she wanted to know about it. Well, the captain called me up and he said that I was going to be writing home every week and he was going to read it. Then they had to censor your mail. So I started writing home every week. It turned out that she had a different attitude after I left. One time, it was the battle of *Kolombangara*???, she sent me a picture of me she found in a magazine, I still have it. The article said that I saw the *Helena* go down. But she just cut the picture out, and that's all it said, I saw the *Helena* go down, a little bit of writing on the bottom of it. A guy called me recently, he's writing a book about the *Helena*, and he wanted to find out, so I sent him a copy of all that.
- Ms. Marlowe:** Tell me where you were on December 7th.

Mr. McCovney: I was on the USS *Honolulu*.

Ms. Marlowe: And what did you think? What happened?

Mr. McCovney: It wasn't all that much happened. I was sleeping in the mess hall in a hammock, because . . .

Ms. Marlowe: Was that your regular bedroom?

Mr. McCovney: Yes. The reason for that because I hadn't been in the Navy long enough. Anybody that didn't have a bunk had a hammock in the mess hall, and at revelry everybody had to get out of their hammocks so they could let the tables down. The tables were fastened in the overhead, and the hammocks were swung under them. They had a bosun's mate, he came down there every morning at revelry, he'd get under those hammocks and say "You guys get up, you want me to lose my job?"

Ms. Marlowe: So what did you think when you heard?

Mr. McCovney: Battle stations? I thought, this was really chicken. Sunday morning and we had been trying to get ready for war, and we had general quarters at least twice a day, every day. But this was Sunday, supposed to be not having, and there they had it. I went from there, general quarters, I already had my hammock tied up, I went up and my battle station was in number two turret shell deck. I went up there and I took my paper with me, I was going to read and whatever, and of course it was going to last two minutes, we were trying to get to battle stations in two minutes. There wasn't nobody on the ship hardly, so I had no problem getting up there. So I thought, this will probably last about five or ten minutes, then they'll secure general quarters like they always did.

Ms. Marlowe: So you thought you'd read the funnies while . . .

Mr. McCovney: Yes, in that five minutes, or however long they wanted to go. This guy, though, came down out of the turret. It had a barbette, went up by the shell deck under the turret. The barbette was around the turret, around the hoist and everything, down to the armored deck. It was like a tube, and the turret set on top of it. It had a ladder going down. And a guy came out of the turret and came down and he told me that the Japanese were out there and that they had sunk our battleships. It just sounded so crazy, I just couldn't believe it. I wouldn't have believed it, but he was so quiet, scared, I mean he was just plumb white. Right after that, they called away third section battle lookout—you'd have a battle station, and then a watch station, and I was in the third section battle lookout. So I went—from number two turret, you had to go up to the turret and climb down a ladder to get on the deck. And when I came down that ladder there was a plane strafing. I didn't look to see which way he was strafing, but I figured he was shooting at me. So I got behind the barbette, and as soon as he left I

went on up to my lookout station, which was above the bridge then.

Ms. Marlowe: Were you excited, were you scared to death?

Mr. McCovney: No, I just, I was, nothing. I didn't have any feeling. I wasn't afraid, I wasn't anything. I tell you what, I was more embarrassed than anything else that they could get there and shoot up our ships. That's mostly what I was, just embarrassed.

Ms. Marlowe: What was your reaction, what were you going to do?

Mr. McCovney: I was a lookout, I was going to look out. That whole thing, I remember two planes, the one that dived on our ship and dropped the bomb. It came down, I can close my eyes and see it now. It came down—we were tied up by the dock. It came down, and I was on the lookout station above the bridge, and it came down and I thought it was going to—I didn't know where it was going, but it came down to the dock and blew up beside the ship and sprung the seams on the ship. And that was where my battle station ended up being, in number two magazine, because I wasn't big enough to do shell deck anymore. So that ended up my battle station as soon as we got it cleaned out . . .

Ms. Marlowe: All the debris . . .

Mr. McCovney: Yes. And that bomb hit and it crushed the powder in that magazine. It was a green color, about eight by, seven or eight feet tall, probably about eight by ten. It hit in such a way that it crushed the powder up in a corner, but it didn't hit any primers. It just crushed it up, just like you'd push it up in a corner. After that we had to go in dry dock and started cleaning it up. That's what my thing about the whole war, was cleaning up something.

Ms. Marlowe: That was your official job, from day one . . .

Mr. McCovney: Yes, cleaning up. I don't know why, there was oil on everything, from when the ship got hit or whatever. When you'd pick up survivors from another ship, they were covered with oil.

Ms. Marlowe: When you knew that this was going on, and the degree of the devastation, what did you think? Other than that you were embarrassed.

Mr. McCovney: I thought we were going to work on it. We got guys off the battleships, we had 800 men and we needed to have 1500 men, so we got guys off the battleships. After we got out of dry dock and went back to the States, then they put more bunks, facilities for . . .

Ms. Marlowe: For more people.

Mr. McCovney: Yes. And got—that was about it. See, people didn't know, we weren't ready for a war.

Then we started convoying ships to the South Pacific, hauling stuff down there. Did that for about a year, made three trips.

Ms. Marlowe: Where did you go?

Mr. McCovney: To Australia, Melbourne, Australia, usually. Then it was winter time, so summer time in Australia, and there they had picnics. After that, then we started the war. Went down to Melbourne, then went up to, I can't remember the island. Then started operating out of a place called Espiritu Santo, they called it "Button."

Ms. Marlowe: Where was this? In Australia?

Mr. McCovney: No, from Australia we went up there, and started taking Guadalcanal. Every night, it seemed like every night, we'd shoot up, bombard, Guadalcanal. The first time we went up there, we were going to bombard, and we went along for a training course—see, we were on a light cruiser and they had four heavy cruisers, and they were going to bombard, but we never did get in range because they sank all four of those heavy cruisers. I talked to a guy last night who was on the *New Orleans*, and it was the second one of those four ships that was going to bombard. I don't remember the other two.

Ms. Marlowe: Did you get any survivors off of those ships?

Mr. McCovney: Yes. The *North Hampton* was sunk, and what they said was "Abandon ship." And so they abandoned ship and then they got the ship going again, so they had guys strung out for 50 miles, survivors. They may have lost some of them, I don't know. But what they always did, sent destroyers to pick up survivors. Then they'd bring them over to our ship at a later time. And they were always covered with oil. And it would mess up our deck.

Ms. Marlowe: Did the survivors that you would pick up, did they have stories to tell?

Mr. McCovney: No, all they wanted was some shoes and clothes. We had to give them our clothes. It sounds good now, we helped them out, but what they were doing was eating our chow.

Ms. Marlowe: Oh, there go your two pieces of pie, you had to share them.

Mr. McCovney: That's right.

Ms. Marlowe: What was the most emotional experience you had during the war?

Mr. McCovney: I didn't really have emotions, I just did my job. It was a job. If it was firing, like in a battle or something, it was my job to get the powder out of the magazine to the guy that was running the *horse??* They had a handling room, the guys in there and guys

in the magazine, and ship it on up to them. And that was my job, and I better do it.

Ms. Marlowe: And did you do it well?

Mr. McCovney: Yes, I did good.

Ms. Marlowe: Tell me about your commander. What did you think about him? What was his name?

Mr. McCovney: I don't remember his name, but he was the best. We got hit by three torpedoes. This one time some guys told me, I was in the magazine, they said torpedoes came at our ship and instead of telling the helmsman what to do, he grabbed the wheel himself and turned the ship in time so the torpedo ran down beside it.

Ms. Marlowe: So he saved . . .

Mr. McCovney: Right. And he always, like that thing about my mother and all that, and one time I was AWOL and I had such a good story, and he commended me for that, for getting back at all.

Ms. Marlowe: Do I dare ask what that story was? Why were you AWOL?

Mr. McCovney: It was because we had 30 days' leave after that torpedo, we got the bow blown off. We came back to the States and everybody got 30 days' leave. so me and another guy went on leave, his name was Knobloch. He and another guy said, we were coming back on the train, and these other two guys said that we'd stay overnight and then in the morning we were going to catch this fast train back up to San Francisco. Well, we got off and were living it up, and we had a hotel room and we stayed in it. But in the morning when we woke up somebody had taken my pants, and that's where you carried your money in your jumper. It had my billfold and the rest of my ticket, and they took his pants. Anyway, between the two of us we had a uniform, but the other guy went down and found the clothes in a restroom, downstairs.

Ms. Marlowe: They'd taken it in there?

Mr. McCovney: Yes. And then I had a watch that I got for graduation and I hocked it . . .

Ms. Marlowe: Was that your graduation from high school?

Mr. McCovney: Yes. I hocked it—I gave it to my daughter recently. Anyway, then we were broke. I was from a small town, and we went to the police station and told them that somebody broke in our room and took our stuff, and so they wrote out a report, and he said, did you see any cigarette butts around or what? It just sounded silly to me. He thought—I know now what he thought, a bunch of country boys. Then we had this report—he wrote a report. So I hocked my watch and got \$8 for it, and then hitchhiked up to San

Francisco. Then when I had—Ted Knobloch, he said “Now be sure—” We were going to get a deck court martial, I thought, because I was AWOL two days over leave. The captain and my division officer were there, and the division officer said I was a good man: he just about had to, because I was. And then I told the captain what it was, we were robbed, I didn’t say anything about we were going to catch the fast train the next morning or anything like that. He said, “Well that’s just really fine.” I said, “Knobloch was with me,” and he was glad about that. I went back to the ship, but he stayed with those guys. Nobody said anything about that, either.

Ms. Marlowe: But he made the ship?

Mr. McCovney: Yes.

Ms. Marlowe: And you went back out. Where did you head this time?

Mr. McCovney: South Pacific.

Ms. Marlowe: Back again. How far did you get this time?

Mr. McCovney: We stayed down there another couple of years. I all together put four years in the South Pacific, except for those two 30-day leaves I had. And then after that we got hit by a torpedo and I got 30 days’ leave then, and that had been, I’d been on that ship four years then. After we got hit by the torpedo, we went back down, and had half a new crew. And those guys, they were, the new crew—see, the war had been going on two or three years, and those guys had a different attitude about the war, and they had been working, they were not glad to get two pieces of pie, they expected it. It was just half a new crew.

Ms. Marlowe: Were they younger?

Mr. McCovney: Yes.

Ms. Marlowe: Now you’re a couple years older, you’re only 21.

Mr. McCovney: Yes. On that leave I met a girl in Beaumont. My daddy had to quit his job and he went to work in the shipyard, that’s what everybody did, or a lot of people, anyway. I came home on leave and met this girl, and six months later I married her. And that’s how come I have this daughter now. Not this daughter, another daughter.

Ms. Marlowe: The one you gave the watch to.

Mr. McCovney: Yes.

Ms. Marlowe: What was the sweet young thing’s name that you met in Beaumont?

Mr. McCovney: Florence *Palos??* Well, that's her name now. She married again. I think she thought that guy was a lot smarter and prettier than me. I never could figure out why she didn't stay married to a good old boy like me. In the first place, I wondered how come she married a good guy like me. I think it was the uniform.

Ms. Marlowe: OK, that's what I want to know. Were you all decked out when you met her? All in your uniform?

Mr. McCovney: Yes, I dressed for liberty every day. We went out at night.

Ms. Marlowe: How long was it before you married her?

Mr. McCovney: On that second leave. It was in March, I came home the first of March and we married right in the middle of March. That was '43, I believe, because my brother was born in February of '44. And that leave, there was new construction so I went back to Treasure Island, and every night, I jumped ship every other night, because we got liberty every other night, and some guys, if you wanted another ID card, you could be put on—and then didn't get liberty for five days. I didn't want to do that, so I just borrowed another guy's ID card. So one time I went out the gate, showed the ID card, nobody looked at it very close. This one time on the bus, going on liberty, going over to where we were staying, MPs came on, and they said "OK, put your ID card up by your face." So they could look at you and your ID card. I had a plan, if they got back there to me I was just going to make a break for it. Wouldn't have worked because they were two Marines. When they got about half way down they just quit looking. I guess they were looking for a certain kind of looking guy, and they left.

Ms. Marlowe: Did you give up all this shenanigans, as it were, your going AWOL, your leaving ship with somebody else's ID card . . .

Mr. McCovney: No, it just scared me a little bit. One other time a guy called that somebody was sleeping in my bunk. If they had a bunk check . . .

Ms. Marlowe: There'd be a body there.

Mr. McCovney: Yes. Anyway, this guy called, and he said "Get back over on the double," and the guy said, "That means fast, doesn't it." They were having a bunk check for some reason, I don't remember what it was. And then we went to visit my brother, he had joined the Navy and he was a torpedo man. He came up there to visit me and my wife, and he was telling me about something, and I was AWOL then, or whatever, jumped ship, and he was telling me about he had climbed over a fence or something, it wasn't like every other day doing it . . .

Ms. Marlowe: But it was like a family tradition, doing things like that.

Mr. McCovney: I guess so. But after awhile, after a long time, we got some guys on our ship, they said if they got on the front lines, they could get out of the brig. And about three or four of them came on our ship, and I told my turret captain, "Look at these guys, they're on the front lines, just like us. And they're doing this to get out of the brig." And he said, "Those guys are no different than me and you, except they just got caught." Everybody, it was just a common thing, try to get ashore.

Ms. Marlowe: When you got out of the Navy, when was that?

Mr. McCovney: I got out in October of 1947. You were supposed to get 30 days' leave a year, so when I got out I had 60 days' leave coming, so I got out and I was discharged in Pensacola, Florida, and then I came home and went right to work for a contractor working for the telephone company in Beaumont. They said after that, anybody working for that contractor, when the job was finished, they could go to work for the telephone company if they could pass the test. I passed the test, but the thing was, you'd get the job—and I was so glad to get a job, my daddy never had, nobody ever had a steady job before the war. I was so glad to have a job with the contractor and then get a job with the telephone company, boy that was tops. It was unlocated, I went to work for the telephone company in, I don't remember what the month was, but it was in 1947.

Ms. Marlowe: You were a lucky man, weren't you.

Mr. McCovney: Yes.

Ms. Marlowe: By this time you had one daughter?

Mr. McCovney: Yes. She was four years old then, three or four. And she remembers it. She's always been close to me. And then after two years I met the wife I have now, and anytime I'd say I was going down to Beaumont, I had to ride the bus down there because I'd been working for the telephone company for two years and they said I had to go down to Beaumont—any time I told the girl, I'd meet some girl, that I had to go see my daughter, I'd get dropped like a hot potato. Nobody wanted to marry, or even know, anybody that was paying child support. When I told Earline, my wife, she said "I have an uncle that lives down there and we'll go see your daughter." The first time they saw each other they just hit it off, and they've been that way ever since. And she's just like a regular daughter.

Ms. Marlowe: Did you ever get back to see your mother?

Mr. McCovney: Oh, my stepmother? She was still as tough as she ever was, and they had moved to West Virginia during the war. We had gone around to the East Coast and I went down a couple of times to West Virginia from New York. It was kind of running it close to go that far on a weekend pass . . .

Ms. Marlowe: But she did get to see you.

Mr. McCovney: One of the division officers said, "I don't see why you guys want to risk not getting back in time." I said, "It's our prerogative. If we don't make it, that's tough." But he didn't see it that way, he wanted his men back.

Ms. Marlowe: Do you have any other stories you can recall from the war that . . .

Mr. McCovney: No. What I thought about yesterday, and the other guys say the same thing, you look at guys my age, this week, these guys here, they all look like pretty good health, good health, and what we were talking about is because during the Depression, or right before, we had to cut wood for the fire, and then we had to work all the time. Us, we always had to have three cows, and that was my job, doing the cows. And then every year they'd have a calf.

Ms. Marlowe: For milking?

Mr. McCovney: Yes, milking. And then the cow would have a calf. We had three cows, and we'd always have one expecting, and she'd have a calf, and that would make her fresh again, and then that would give us meat in the fall, kill that calf. A constant job.

Ms. Marlowe: Well, I'm glad to hear from you, I hope you have many many years ahead of you.

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