

**AN INTERVIEW OF  
MR. DOUGLAS HARPER  
PEARL HARBOR SURVIVOR**

**Mr. Hammerson:** This is Peter Hammerson. Today is December 6, 2001. I am interviewing Mr. Douglas Harper. This interview is taking place at Bethany Lutheran Church, 110 West Austin, Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is 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 the historic information relating to this site.

Mr. Harper, let's go back to a little basic information. Where and when were you born?

**Mr. Harper:** I was born in Crosby, Texas, on January 5, 1924.

**Mr. Hammerson:** And your parents were....

**Mr. Harper:** Hayden I. Harper and Marcia \_\_\_\_\_ McClemore.

**Mr. Hammerson:** What were you doing before you enlisted?

**Mr. Harper:** I was going to school.

**Mr. Hammerson:** You enjoyed that, I take it.

**Mr. Harper:** Up to a point.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Where and when did you enlist?

**Mr. Harper:** I enlisted in the Navy in Houston, Texas on July 9, 1941.

**Mr. Hammerson:** So you beat the deadline.

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes, I wasn't drafted.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Why did you choose the Navy?

**Mr. Harper:** That would be a whole lot better than being a dog-foot. I didn't want to be walking all that time and sleeping out in the open.

**Mr. Hammerson:** And where did you take your basic training?

**Mr. Harper:** The Naval Training Station in San Diego, California.

**Mr. Hammerson:** How did you find that training at that time?

**Mr. Harper:** Oh, it was easy for me. I had no problems with it at all. I started getting some good eating and gaining some weight. As far as the actual basics, I had no problem.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Then you apparently got to Hawaii, so tell me a little bit about that as to what your assignment was and how you got there and your rank.

**Mr. Harper:** Well, we were brought in to the Naval Receiving Station at Pearl Harbor itself. We worked on the old coal docks. I was attached to the USS Kingfisher. My records were, that was in order for them to be able to pay me. We worked on these targets that they towed behind the ships for ships to fire on. Also land based artillery would fire on them.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Where were you located on this eventful day of December 7, 1941?

**Mr. Harper:** I was at a little base called, Bishop's Point right at the entrance to the harbor. It was a repair base and net depot where they were right next to each other. Right at the entrance here the net across the harbor was. When the ships went through, they would close the net behind them to keep the submarines out.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Now they mentioned the business of the miniature submarines that they had and apparently the USS Ward had fired on one out there? Were you aware of that at that time?

**Mr. Harper:** Not until later during the day. Quite some time after the raid started. We heard that the Ward had fired on one.

**Mr. Hammerson:** When that raid started, what were you doing at that time? It was early morning, were you still sacked out?

**Mr. Harper:** No, my brother and I had gotten up and eaten breakfast and bought a paper and we were sitting on our bunks reading the paper. Then things started - we started hearing thunder and I got up and said "hey, its going to rain." I said that would be the first time since we had been there. I got up and looked out the window and said "man, look at that cloud."

Well it wasn't exactly a cloud. The bomb had hit pretty close and the shrapnel went through the building. I said, "man, come on, let's get out of here." He had injured his foot and he stuck his shoe on and groaned. He took it off and he said that he couldn't walk. Then another one hit real close. He shoved that shoe on. Several days later I asked Hayden about his foot. He had forgotten all about it.

They put us out at general quarters then. The raid went on. I walked out on the porch and there was a Japanese plane going by. There was funny markings on the wings that I didn't recognize. I was thinking the Army had gone on maneuvers or something. But when you see that red meatball on that plane, I said, "man, they have a meatball on the wings." One of those planes, the pilot tipped his wings a little and reached out and shook his fist at me - his left arm.

**Mr. Hammerson:** They were that close?

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes, they were very close. Just above the power lines, just clearing them. So my brother and I decided to get out of there. We moved out and separated. We would check with each other during the day while the raid was going on.

**Mr. Hammerson:** For heaven sake. But did it take long to realize that this was an enemy attack or were you just.....

**Mr. Harper:** I think it took us quite a while. We had no idea what was going on. Even with the bombs going off on the ships down in the harbor and the torpedoes exploding. It was too loud for thunder, but not knowing any better, we thought it was thunder.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Now they had a general quarters on that. How long did it take to get some sort of organization out of this. Everybody seemed to be working as an individual.

**Mr. Harper:** That's right. For the whole time. There was never any organized thing going on at all until later in the day, after the raid was over.

**Mr. Hammerson:** There were two raids really. The one that came in just before 8 a.m. and one that came in just before 9 a.m.

**Mr. Harper:** I don't know. We had planes flying the whole time. Now they were criss-crossing over where we were. Normally, they had the Army to go on alert when the fleet comes in. Well, they didn't go on alert this time. We usually had at least one 37-mm gun emplacement set up below us and they usually had two 50-caliber machine guns set up with two or three 30-caliber machine guns. None of those were there.

**Mr. Hammerson:** They weren't there.

**Mr. Harper:** They were not there. And they didn't go on alert. So nothing was there to help us. We were able to get rifles by breaking down the armored door.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I understood that at one point somebody was actually guarding an armed area and said that he did not have authority to open the door.

**Mr. Harper:** That's right. At the base where I was stationed, there was a man like that. But we moved him. We broke the door down and got the rifles. We got ammunition which was then a bandoleer, we just slung it on our shoulder and we went out shooting at the planes. We could get two shots at each plane, one coming and one going. Some of them you were half afraid to shoot them because the torpedoes were hanging under the plane. We were afraid who might hit a torpedo and it would blow up and take care of us. They were that close.

During the raid, we noticed a B-17 coming in to land at Hickam, which was right across

the street from us. I saw a Jap plane go over the sea and it banked to come back in. I yelled  
Jap “Jap plane is after him.” So we all ran over there. We started shooting at the Jap. That  
came in on his tail, just sitting there, shooting at him. I ran out of bullets in my rifle and I  
looked down to get me some more. When I looked up, he was gone. I wondered “what  
the hell happened to him.” I couldn’t figure out where he had gone.

In 1991, when I went back to Pearl, I bought a magazine that showed where that Japanese  
was. That plane went down against the end of the hangar and killed 7 or 8 Army personnel  
there. That was the end of that one. But we had our targets tied up at the coal docks and  
the first ship to come out was a destroyer. They had been in docks, they had been working  
on them. They had scaffolding all up on it. The fellows were up there throwing the  
scaffolding down and the guns on the ship were firing as fast as they could at the air  
planes. They were trying to sink her in the harbor. Bombs were falling behind her. She  
got out, but she broke the targets loose from the anchorages, so we had to go down and re-  
anchor them and get them out of the way. They were in the way of the other ships trying  
to come out. There was another destroyer that came out.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That was some time after the initial attack, I take it.

**Mr. Harper:** Well, it was still going on. We were still seeing planes flying all over. We had the  
targets tied back up and went back up to the place.

When they bombed the Hickam Field barracks, it was just a big cloud of smoke, where the  
explosion was. There were sheets of tin floating on the outside edge of that. It was a  
beautiful sight. But, you know some fellows were killed in there. You were ashamed of  
yourself for seeing the beauty in it.

My brother was standing fire watch with 7 or 8 soldiers against the building, the Hickam  
Field hangars right across the street and I wanted to talk to him. So I went out there and  
hollered at him, and said “Come over here.” So he came across the street to talk to me.  
We were standing there and those 7 or 8 soldiers were still there. Suddenly we looked and  
there was a Jap plane coming down the street. (Mr. Harper is emotional at this time as he  
remembers that sight and that his brother had been with those soldiers just a few minutes  
before.)

**Mr. Hammerson:** I know what you are feeling. There again we wonder was there any organized  
attempt to get the casualties.....

**Mr. Harper:** Downtown. They had to....I don’t know if it was organized or not, but they had a lot  
of trucks already hauling the casualties to the hospital.

**Mr. Hammerson:** At Hickam, all the aircraft were there in one area. People were trying to get to  
them. You must have had tremendous fires and explosions.

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes, going on all over the place. I will try to keep it in sequence as it happened.

It is hard to do. I saw so much that day. Now the last six planes, just before 10 a.m., that came over, dropped their bombs and I was watching them. They were high flyers. The anti-aircraft fire was trying to knock them down, but they were only reaching about half way. Finally, one got up there and knocked out one of them. Those six bombs were 2000-pounders coming down just floating down just as pretty.

I heard a noise on my right and I looked to see about 150 men running down the middle of the road. They were looking up. They would fall, get up and run, still looking up. I wondered what was going on. So I looked up there and here comes six more bombs. I said, "it's too late to run." So I just walked over by a target and squatted down. Those bombs went off and almost knocked me off my feet. The shrapnel got two or three of those men running down the road. I was not touched, not a scratch. That was the last bombers that came over. It was 5 minutes to 10.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That would have been the roughest two hours that anybody could have put in.

**Mr. Harper:** Not only that. It was a rough two hours, but we were all gathered together about 3 in the afternoon and reissued rifles with three bandoleers of ammunition, gas masks and helmets. We were told that they were expecting the Japanese to come back that night. So we went on watch, four on and four off.

Then that night, about 10 or 11, they sounded the air raid alarm. There were six planes coming over slow with their lights on. You could tell by the sound that they were our planes. They got out over the harbor and some nut turned loose with a 30-caliber, then the whole harbor just lit up. We shot five of our own planes down.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I never heard of that one. Those were the planes that they had been expecting to come in, I suppose.

**Mr. Harper:** Well, no. Those were the B-17's that we saw there. These planes were off the Enterprise. See her and the Saratoga had come in, but they went back out. They were out on patrol, away from the harbor. The Admiral in charge of that particular group sent some planes over to get an estimate of how much damage was done. So six came over, and one flew out.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Tragic. Tragic. But it sounds as though they had started to make organization then by that evening.

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes, they were getting together. Of course, we had volunteers to go help pick up the dead and wounded.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That was probably the most difficult job on that day. The emotionalism....

**Mr. Harper:** Yes, that was my first real initiation to picking up dead people. I went to the Hickam Field barracks. They asked for volunteers, so I jumped on the damn truck. I was

walking through the mess hall. A sergeant was over there and pointed and said “get that man out from underneath that ice box.” His arm was sticking out. I grabbed hold of his arm and that was all I got. Just the arm.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Now again, with the barracks gone and everything else. What would they...

**Mr. Harper:** Well, they didn’t get the barracks. I found out later that all they got was the mess hall. But they still lost a big group of men. This happened after the raid had started somewhat, so they were able to get out of the barracks.

I talked to a man in 1991, who was in that group. He said that he was coming in from the hangar to the mess hall when the bomb landed. He said it blew him about 50 feet backward. He didn’t get hurt, but it blew him off his feet.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That is so amazing. Were you in a position to see an effect there in the harbor again where those battleships had been.....?

**Mr. Harper:** I saw the Arizona when that bomb hit her. It looked like she lifted out of the water about 8 feet. I am sure that nobody inside the ship lived. The explosion was so drastic. It probably killed everyone that was enclosed in the ship.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That seemed to have been the center of the first attack. It was just straight along that battleship row.

**Mr. Harper:** Right. Get all of those and the air planes that were parked at the air field. Ford Island was right inboard of the battleship row and they caught hell. Then Kaneohe was the Naval Air Station over on the other side of the island. They fixed her up. Shot all of the planes up. There weren’t very many planes that got off the ground.

Just after the destroyers came through and things were kind of at a lull, we were watching a Jap plane coming down the harbor, just off the water. We started shooting at the plane, and he went out and banked and went around the harbor towards the beaches on that side. Then there was another plane coming down, so we started firing on it. That plane tipped its wings - it had a white star - it was our plane. It went on around and shot that Jap plane down. I have often wondered who that pilot was because we only got 3 or 4 in the air. We watched dog fights over Wheeler Field which was right across from us.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Well, we did get some of our planes up and into the air.

**Mr. Harper:** Just a few. I spent two years there at Pearl and I was.....my brother was there with me. After about a year, somebody said, “somebody out here wants to talk to you.” So I was in the carpenter shop and I walked out and there was my Dad. He had come over to work in the shipyards.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Incidentally, after that, were you able after the attacks to get some kind of message to your parents to say that you were still alive.

**Mr. Harper:** They had some kind of a gram that you could send, a radiogram or something, so we sent a letter that we were both ok and doing fine. They got it about a week later.

**Mr. Hammerson:** A week of worrying, I am sure. How long did it take for you to get any answers back from them?

**Mr. Harper:** The letters really never stopped coming from home. It was just a long interval in-between. We went without food and water for a long time. We got word that the water was contaminated. Without water, they couldn't fix anything to eat. So it was a while before we had anything to eat.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Was there concern about the water being contaminated, of a fifth column of the Japanese there?

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes. That is why we had to be careful because they were afraid that our water supply had been poisoned. When the Japanese attacked, they knew where things were from the day before. If I had the pictures of it, I could show you where the Pennsylvania was tied up and they moved her out.

**Mr. Hammerson:** We have a picture here, I believe, of the.....(the tape sounds like shuffling of pictures).

**Mr. Harper:** No it doesn't show much. Hickam was right down here. That is right about here is where I was stationed. (Referring to a point on a picture.)

Let's see, the Pennsylvania was tied up right in here (referring to a point on the picture) and they moved her into the dry docks that night. They moved the Oglala in her place. The Oglala was torpedoed and she turned over. So they were after the Pennsylvania, they knew it was supposed to be there.

**Mr. Hammerson:** So they did have intelligence.

**Mr. Harper:** They had somebody that knew it. Then the Pennsylvania was in dry dock and had two, the Cassin and the Downes was in front of her in dry docks. When the Pennsylvania was hit, then they flooded the dry docks and those two ships turned side-ways and they lost some men off those ships. The Pennsylvania was raised and repaired and was one of the first to get back in commission.

**Mr. Hammerson:** How long did it take to start getting things organized then again? Granted you had all been issued weapons. You were expecting a secondary attack. But as time went on, I imagine that finally .....

**Mr. Harper:** It went kaput. Nothing happened for a few days. Then we felt that we were safe. The Saratoga and the Enterprise were still out and they were unable to locate any

Japanese. We started feeling better about not being invaded again. But that was the only two  
air craft carriers that we had, as far as I know.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Of course, there has been a lot of talk about whether both the Army and Navy commanders in Hawaii should have been aware of what went on. Was there any feeling of a lack of.....

**Mr. Harper:** There was and still is. I feel that we were set up.

**Mr. Hammerson:** By them or was it something from stateside?

**Mr. Harper:** Well, they had a warning from the new radar they had on the mountain. They had a warning from the destroyer out there that fired on the submarine. Not only that, they were warned by the President, himself, sent word over there to be on the alert. They weren't. They went the opposite way. Why wasn't the Army on alert? They could have murdered them.....they could have shot.....there were 100's of planes that went through where I was.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Of course, what was equally interesting on that was the Army and the Naval commanders there were tried. But it was hours later, really, that the Philippines were attacked with MacArthur and he came out a hero. And yet he had his planes all jammed together.

**Mr. Harper:** MacArthur was not there. I was talking to a man that was in the Philippines on December 7. They were getting it the same time we were. But he had gone to some kind of a hideout that he had. The man that was left in command while he was gone requested permission to move the planes out. He said "put them on the runway. Line them up." MacArthur refused to let him move those planes out. That is why they were shot to pieces.

I cannot help but believe that we were set up. I did then. I have always felt that way. There are just too many coincidences. Too many things stack up against it. That is the way things were at Hickam Field and all the other fields, they were lined up.

**Mr. Hammerson:** They were expecting sabotage rather than an air attack, I imagine.

**Mr. Harper:** Yes, we were expecting sabotage after we got started, but the Japs took care of that. I have been teased because I now buy Toyotas. I had a fellow ask me one time, "how come you buy those Toyotas, being at Pearl Harbor?" I said that if they do half the job on that Toyota that they did on us, it's a damn good car.

**Mr. Hammerson:** You say you stayed there for how long after.....

**Mr. Harper:** I left there in October, 1943.

**Mr. Hammerson:** So you must have seen quite a reconstruction in that period of time.



**Mr. Harper:** Not a whole lot. There were a lot of ships that came in for repairs. They were building a new dry dock at the coal docks when I left. When I came back through there after the war was over, there were docks where I hadn't seen any before. They had done quite a bit of work since I was there.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Now, again, you weren't there for the full extent of the war. Where did you go during that time?

**Mr. Harper:** Well, I came back to the states and met a girl and married her and we had a kid. About the time the kid was born, I was shipped out again. I went out of San Francisco and headed for Ulithi and Eniwetok and I landed at Okinawa. I was in a motor torpedo boat repair base advance with Marine training. So we had a little repair base at a lagoon called Taguchi, on the south end of the island next to the island where Ernie Pyle is buried.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Of the two, which did you like best? Hawaii or Okinawa?

**Mr. Harper:** Well, Okinawa, we had bombing raids and we had infiltrations with sniper fire. It wasn't all that bad. It didn't seem to be. I think I would rather be in Okinawa. It was bad. But it was worse during the raid on Pearl. I think that was the worse thing that could happen.

**Mr. Hammerson:** You weren't expecting it and didn't know what was going.....

**Mr. Harper:** When I went to Okinawa, I knew what was going on. I knew I was taking a chance. Two days after we were headed to Okinawa, we had a torpedo went across our bow. They sounded general quarters. So my general quarters station was at my bunk. Stand by my bunk. I crawled up in my bunk and laid there waiting. Then they cut off all ventilation and closed all water tight hatches. It was hot. So I was laying on my bunk and all of the sudden the biggest explosion happened. They had fired that gun right above my head on that deck and I was right up next to the deck. I had to be careful when I raised out of my bunk because I would hit my head.

When they fired that gun, I came out and went down to the floor. The fellows were talking, but all I could see was their mouths moving. I couldn't hear anything.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I imagine you thought you were being hit with a bomb.

**Mr. Harper:** Well, I thought a torpedo had hit us. Shut up down below, it was hot, you could hardly breathe. Once in a while, they would turn on the fans to circulate a little cool air.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Why would they have turned off the air conditioning?

**Mr. Harper:** That was one of the things they did. It wasn't air conditioning, it was circulating fresh air intake. Well, where air comes in, water comes in. So they shut it off. That was for the protection of the ship. Once you leave the states, you are expendable.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That is a nice way to put it.

**Mr. Harper:** I don't care. I have a lot of respect for any ex-serviceman that has been sent out. If he has been shipped out, he is expendable.

**Mr. Hammerson:** That business of being locked in below decks.....

**Mr. Harper:** It is frightening. And then to have an explosion like that happen, it's a wonder I didn't have a heart attack right there. I've had one since then. And I still can't hear.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I suppose the concern is for the ship - save the ship....

**Mr. Harper:** Yes, save the ship. Then I went ashore at Okinawa. While we were unloading the ships.....of course, I had to stay behind to help unload. We would have those air raids. Every night you would have two or three. They would shut down the operation, throw smoke screen all over the place. A kamikaze hit a ship right down from us and killed about twenty-seven men. The kamikazes were coming in. I finished unloading that ship and went to my base south of Naha. They tell me Naha now is a beautiful place. All it was then was clapboard shanties like we have here. I went down to my little base. My base was at one time a small fishing village and they had some kind of plaster or stucco houses, but it had been fired on so many times that there was just a wall here and there that was left standing. That is where we set up the repair base for torpedo boats.

**Mr. Hammerson:** So you knew those torpedo boats well. The PT boats.

**Mr. Harper:** That is what they are. PT boats usually carry torpedoes. One on each side, at least.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I can see the need for a carpenter on something like that. They seem to be put together with plywood.

**Mr. Harper:** They were. Not necessarily all of them were put together with plywood. But they were put together with boards. They would run on a 45-degree angle and on the other side they would run a 45-degree angle the other way. But in between the two, they would sandwich a tough piece of cloth that was made waterproof. So the only way water could get through is if it were penetrated.

**Mr. Hammerson:** You must look at the PT boat that they have down at the Nimitz Combat Zone now. There is a special time for you this afternoon to go down there.

**Mr. Harper:** I want to see it.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Now tell me in retrospect, you certainly had seen the full span of that. What event stands out in your mind most clearly?

**Mr. Harper:** Well, shooting five of our own planes down is the worse thing that can happen. I still choke up on that one.

**Mr. Hammerson:** Bad memories. What about your best memories? Did you get in on any of the USO shows? Or was there anything else .....

**Mr. Harper:** Oh yes, I saw one or two. I saw Bob Hope. I didn't like it. We had some USO areas at Pearl, but not much. I came back to the states and saw a lot of USO shows. But not much overseas.

**Mr. Hammerson:** How was it when you came back to the states while the war was going on? Or, after the war when you came back, did you have any recognition that anything had been going on? Or have we waited now 60 years for this?

**Mr. Harper:** Nothing whatsoever. I came back and it took me 26 days to get back. I came into San Diego on the battleship Arkansas, I think it was. I was issued my transfer orders and I went ashore and the Salvation Army met us and gave us coffee, orange juice, donuts, anything we wanted. Then we went to the receiving barracks, where I was to be stationed until further orders. So I stayed there for about five days and I got my written orders to report to Galveston, Texas.

I have about a two-week leave in-between. No other recognition, nothing. Of course, the war had been over.

**Mr. Hammerson:** When was that?

**Mr. Harper:** That was around Christmas time after the war was over. I didn't get to go home right after the war was over, because I was regular Navy on a minority cruise. Now when my minority cruise was over, the war still going on very strongly. So I extended my enlistment two years. Now the war is over and I am in Okinawa and I am sitting there with all kinds of points and no way to get home. So I was a Carpenter's Mate Second Class. Every place I went, the rates were frozen. So they opened them up and I was to get Second Class, but there was another fellow who came up with time in a rate on me, so he got it.

I was staying in for a few months. There were quite a few months left on my cruise. So they called my name out at muster one morning. Says, "Harper!". I answered. I was told I was shipping out. They said that I had a ship in over leave coming. I went out ahead of those guys with points. So I told that old boy who had gotten that first class rate that if he gave it up, I would get it and when I was gone it would come open again and he would get it. He wouldn't do it. So I stayed in the rest of my time as a Second Class. I made that Second Class the first two years I was in. That was with fleet competition. It's not that easy to get those rates. I didn't get any more promotions after the first two years.

**Mr. Hammerson:** It sounds very familiar somehow.

**Mr. Harper:** Well, when I got discharged, they shipped me back to San Diego. I stayed there for the rest of my time. My wife and my kid came out there. We had an apartment we lived in. That is about the end of my cruise.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I take it, you don't have any great regrets.

**Mr. Harper:** Oh no. I don't care whether there is a war going on or now. It is a good experience for any young person. They need to learn how the world ticks.

**Mr. Hammerson:** If you had to do it again?

**Mr. Harper:** I would do it. I would be right there. I was a Protestant. Didn't have any religion. I knew that the Catholic Church was the first church, because I was taught that in school. I married a Catholic girl and I am a Catholic now.

**Mr. Hammerson:** I think an awful lot of people turn to religion.....as they have said "there are not atheists in foxholes." As you said, a couple of those times your ticket could have been punched.

**Mr. Harper:** More than a couple. It has been a good life.

**Mr. Hammerson:** This has certainly been most pleasant talking with you. You must go down to see the PT Boat. I thank you for sharing your experiences with us today.

Typed by Becky Lindig  
Nimitz Volunteer  
October, 2002

