

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT BY BRAD WEBER FOR HIST 298
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
INTERVIEW WITH AL QUACKENBUSH, U.S.S. *Tangier*
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Al Quackenbush was a First Class Ships Cook on the USS Tangier at the time of Pearl Harbor. Today he resides in Minnesota and is very involved with the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association.

BW: Can you give me your full name, rate, and length of service on the *Tangier*.

AQ: My name is Al Quackenbush. At the time we put the *Tangier* in commission I was Ships Cook first class. Bill Fletcher and I were watch officers in our galley. I entered the Navy as a swimmer when right out of high school in a swimming program the Navy had in those days. In 1931 you couldn't get into the Navy in those days unless you was an athlete. So it was quite an honor for me to be accepted into the Navy when they was turning so many people. In 1931 there wasn't much action. So I was real fortunate. All I did for the first few years was swept for the Navy. I almost made the 1932 Olympic team. I tried out for it and the Navy was good enough to send me all over to Panama along with everybody. I had a great time with a lot of great people. I had this picture taken with Buster Crabbe at a swimming race. I later met him in Hawaii. We had a good times. It was a wonderful life.

BW: How did you come to join the Navy, this was during the Depression years so was that more the reason why you wanted to join?

AQ: I come from New York. In those days the Depression was on and there wasn't many things to do. I had two or three little jobs - I was trying to finish school - and needed jobs to keep going. The Depression really got great around '29 and '30, and so around 1931 I said to myself that I didn't really care for all of this anymore so I think I'll get in the Navy. They accepted me and it was a wonderful life.

BW: As far as the *Tangier* goes, you are a plank owner correct?

AQ: Yes I am.

BW: Can you tell me about starting up the crew on there when it was first commissioned?

AQ: The *Tangier* was a passenger ship, a kind of . It was absolutely used before the war as a passenger ship because they had great big staterooms. We put her in commission at Moore Dry Dock in Oakland, California. This is where I got acquainted with that Bill Fletcher I was talking about. He and I was sent down to the ship in Moore Dry Dock to set up a group buffet type of feeding, with hot plates and hot things. They had to carry the food in and they were going to start using hot plates. We were to go down there and show them how to do it, and we never had seen those before. I didn't even know what they were talking about! So we left and spent many days in

San Francisco. Before that I was stationed at Alameda Naval Air Station waiting for the ship. I had just come off of another ship. I was attached to the PBY squadrons before Pearl Harbor. When the PBY ship come along, the *Tangier*, they assigned people who had PBY experience. I had the experience with the PBY outfit. I've been a plank owner in about four or five places. Before they commissioned it they were commissioning a lot of PBY stations in those days and I went from one to another and I finally wound up on the *Tangier* which was a wonderful experience.

BW: Can you tell me a little bit about the buildup to December 7th as far as the training on the ship went?

AQ: We had a very good compartment of people. Very, very friendly. Everybody was good workers. Everybody did their job good. It was a very happy ship. Ships in the Navy are known as "happy" ships and "not happy" ships. So the *Tangier* was a happy ship. Ha! Let me just add one thing...I'm reading a book right now that I should tell you about. There's two places that we should always be ashamed of, and that was Pearl Harbor and...this other book I'm just reading right now..."The Shame of Savo Island." I was in that area when that battle was raging. The title of this book was "The Shame of Savo." It should have been said "The Shame of Pearl Harbor" because people knew that the Japs were coming. They had broken the code long before that so they knew the Japs were going to attack us. But the officers were fighting amongst themselves in those days to decide who was the biggest shot. So they just didn't take the ships out of Pearl Harbor and all of the battleships stayed there. And Captain Richardson who was then the commander-in-chief of the fleet said "President Roosevelt, let's get these ships out of here so they won't be sitting ducks." And consequently Roosevelt didn't agree with him and so they sat right there and got blown up. But everyone of them got back in commission except for the *Oklahoma* and the *Utah*. The *Oklahoma* was towed out to sea and sunk and the *Utah* was all blown up.

BW: What was the feeling on board the *Tangier* about a possible war coming with Japan.

AQ: It wasn't a real big surprise. When I was first went in the Navy for a while I was running boats. I took sailors ashore on liberty. I was familiar with running a boat. So the first thing I did was grab a boat and see if I could get the young men out of the water that was blown in the water. That took all day. We were picking up sailors, some of them were dead and some of them were taken to the hospital. I picked up a Japanese aviator out of the water. We had quite a few experiences that day.

BW: I definitely want to come back to a few of those things. How prepared do you think the *Tangier* was for battle?

AQ: Well, first a big surprise was when the people came over we didn't have time.....on a Sunday morning in Hawaii, you don't have very much action as far as drills or anything like that . Everybody was sleeping in. There had been a big dance the night before and everybody was having a great time. Hawaii was quite a place to relax, so everybody was kind of sleeping in.

Somebody came and told us that the Japs were coming, which the radar indicated that they were coming but it was too late. They didn't know how to run radar in those days very much anyway. None of the ships had radar except for that radar station out there in the hills. The army saw all of those blips but they didn't believe it. I was trained on the Browning automatic gun, and I was trained to fire that down in Guantanamo [Cuba]. So we were trained, but when the bombs started dropping all of the armory places were locked up where they kept the ammunition dumps. They were all locked up...and it took quite a while...by that time bombs were falling all over the place. So they had us running around in circles there for a while because we couldn't get things to shoot very fast. But they did a remarkable job. I have to give them praise where praise is due. Our men when their backs are to the wall can really fight. They put up a real gallant battle. There was a lot of lives lost, but they did it in dignity and courage that the American people always seem to come up with.

BW: Very well put, and you raise something that I want to ask you about. As I have done research for this project there was an order from Admiral Kimmel at the time to lock all the ammunition below decks and that Captain Sprague had in effect said he had come here to fight a war so leave the boxes by the guns. If an inspection comes we'll lock it up then. So the *Tangier* was believed to be one of the first that fired. Is that how you recollect things?

AQ: Yes, that was very, very true. In those days with inspections you had to open up the double bottoms of the ships to go down there and inspect them. Here comes the admiral and he looks them over...Kimmel was coming around to look the ships over. They spent more time doing those kinds of things than getting prepared. The point is that they wouldn't believe that the Japs had the nerve enough to attack us. All of the ships were not ready to go into battle.

BW: Taking me back a little bit, can you describe through your eyes either starting December 6th or December 7th and describe to me what happened to you that day.

AQ: It is a funny thing. When I didn't want to go to Japan or the China Sea I was taken off the ship and put on with a group of sailors that I joined the Navy with. They went to the *Arizona* - some of them - and we played cards quite often. I had a group of friends on the night before, December 6th, I was playing cards on the *Arizona*. Sometimes I just laid down there and slept on the deck. A lot of people did that in Hawaii then. So when we got through playing cards we just threw a blanket on the deck and slept there. But something told me that I should go back to the ship. I did have the duty the next morning so I thought I better be on duty. I had the watch so I went back to the ship rather than walk over there in the morning. I could run about 20 paces...we weren't too far from the *Arizona*. I left that night and went back to the ship. As I was coming up out of the hatch in the morning, after getting things ready down below, I saw this torpedo go over my head and a ball on the airplane. If that torpedo had been twenty feet lower I wouldn't be able to talk to you. It exploded on the beach and all of us sort of stood there and looked at it. A big explosion. We were tied up where all the big aircraft carriers were. We had their berths. The Japanese torpedo and dive bombers were supposed to take out the aircraft carriers in the first wave, and so they came in and the only thing they took out was the *Utah*, the *Raleigh*, and a

couple of other ships. They fired too high over us and a torpedo went right over our head, so we were lucky that the aircraft carriers weren't in. They would have been sunk probably.

BW: What was your battle station on board?

AQ: My battle station was the .50 caliber gun on the forward mount. Everybody had an assigned position. We had gone to sea a few times before that to fire our guns and practice a little bit, but we never expected to use them. I never did really feel comfortable with a .50 caliber.

BW: Is that where you were when you said you opened up the hatch topside as the attack began?

AQ: Yeah.

BW: Can you tell me what happened once you got topside at that point?

AQ: The point is, I saw my services needed in this rescue work so I grabbed a motor launch that was floating. When the *Utah* went over all of her boats were floating around out there so I grabbed one of her boats and helped get people out of the water. Because I preferred to go in, but the oil was so thick by that time that it was about two or three inches thick and rising about that time. So all we did was use boat hooks to lift people out of the water rather than having to dive in to get him. My head went under the water once to get this aviator, and I got some oil in my lungs. They took me over to Hospital Point where I was taking people, and this fellow said he was going to pump my stomach to get this oil out of here. This is darkness you see, no lights were shining. I'm standing there trying to talk to somebody and all I had I was throwing up. It was quite a night.

BW: I imagine it was! You said earlier that you picked up a Japanese aviator. Tell me more about that.

AQ: Well, my duty was to take people over to Hospital Point which was a little point across from Ford Island. On Ford Island the Japanese were coming down through there to bomb the PBY hangers and their airfield. They didn't get the ammunition dump, but they had a great big one there. They never did blow that up, but if they had blown it up it would have been a lot different story. Our job was to pick people up and take them to Hospital Point in as far as they were alive and kicking. One particular person I grabbed was a Japanese aviator. The first thing I noticed was that he had all gold teeth across the front of his face. He had a big scarf around his neck yet...big ones that the Japanese aviator's wore. I said "oh my gosh, we've got a Japanese aviator here!" But he was all shot up though so...but he wasn't alive. I took him over there anyway where we had to take all these people over to Hospital Point which wasn't to far. But that went on all afternoon. I was out there in that blazing sun, was thirsty and couldn't get any water!

BW: I could imagine...

AQ: No food nor water all day out in that boat in the hot sun. Anyway, it was an experience that I will never forget!

BW: I don't know how this fits chronologically in regards to your rescue operations in the boat, but I wanted to ask you about the episode where the midget submarine passed between you and the *Curtiss*.

AQ: We have a group in St. Paul across the river from us here that call themselves "The First Shotters." They was out in the *USS Ward* patrolling outside the channel and dropped this depth charge on a midget submarine. However, one of the midget submarines followed a ship into the harbor and we shot a five inch shell at him. He was right underneath us so we couldn't shoot at him very much. He got hit a couple of times and then surfaced....they blew him apart really. That wasn't very successful for them. There midget submarines didn't do very much.

BW: I also wanted to ask you about the *Utah* tied up behind the *Tangier*. I know there was a major rescue operation that took place involving the *Tangier*. I know you mentioned going past the *Utah*. Can you tell me anything about that episode?

AQ: When I went by the *Utah*, I heard this big hammering on the hull. You see, the *Utah* is upside down you. It turned over. So I heard this hammering and went back to the *Tangier* to the officer of the deck. I said there was some people pounding on the bottom of the *Utah*. He sent a group over there with an acetylene torch and they burned a hole in the bottom so the fellows could get out. But that was kind of....did you hear that man's name 'ol Pappy Fisk?

BW: It doesn't sound familiar. Can you tell me a little bit about him?

AQ: Well he worked in the water tenders. They used an acetylene torch. So when they called this party to get on deck with an acetylene torch and the tanks, he immediately went over there and burnt a hole in the ship so those guys could get out.

BW: What was his name again?

AQ: The only thing I ever knew him by was "Pappy." I had a roster at one time, but I called him Pappy all the time. He was at our convention in Seattle that one time, but he's passed away since then and I don't recall his name right now. I don't remember names anymore.

BW: That's OK. I've just heard about a lot about a person going to the *Utah* from the *Tangier* top cut the hole out, but I was curious if I could put a name with the person. That just means I need to do better research about that!

AQ: What other things?

BW: Well is there a story about the *Tangier* that day that is not widely known that you can tell

me about that may be of interest?

AQ: Well, the *Tangier* was part of a task force. We had the *Lexington*, the *Tangier*, the *Quincy* - a heavy cruiser - and three or four destroyers. We went to Wake Island right after Pearl Harbor to get all the marines off of Wake Island. We were supposed to be a suicide ship. We were supposed to beach our ship. We had a detachment of marines on there and they were to line up with the .50 calibers around the ship. So we were supposed to beach our ship and fortify Wake Island. But Admiral Fletcher said he was not going to sacrifice our ships anymore, and when we found out that the Japs had taken the marines captive we just turned around and beat it. So we headed back across the International Date Line to Midway. We went across the International Date Line so many times we didn't know what day it was. So every time we zig-zagged across the ocean, Tuesday was back to Monday, Monday was back to Tuesday! It was a confusing thing, but it didn't make any difference to us because when we arrived at Midway we all settled down anyway. It was kind of a confusing thought!

BW: What was the feeling amongst the crew and the marines you were carrying on the way to Wake Island?

AQ: I remember the feeling very well, because all of a sudden we better be prepared to get into the tussle. This was going to be a real battle. When our scout planes off the *Lexington* came in and took one look at the Wake Island and got back to us as quick ...they didn't even stop to pick him up. He ditched his plane in the sea, the destroyer grabbed him and they were on our wake fast. There was a time in our life. I was really concerned about that one, because we had time to think about it all the way out there. All the way out there we thought "suicide ship" ..."gosh are we going to be all blown up?"... We wanted to be fighting, but we didn't want to give ourselves up for nothing. They us that there was over 100 Japanese ships in that area.

BW: That probably negates my next question, but I will ask it anyway. Do you think running the ship aground would have made any difference to the outcome of that battle or not?

AQ: No, I don't think so. I just don't think so. We couldn't have done much good. You can't fight great big battleships like that. We were overpowered and outnumbered so bad that it would have been a suicide trip. I'm glad we never made it! Ha. Thank you Admiral Fletcher. I say a little prayer for him!

BW: Looking back almost 58 years removed from these events, what do you think about now regarding what happened to you.

AQ: I think I was pretty lucky for one thing. I think I would like to have had it over again...I don't like the idea of being a Pearl Harbor Survivor. I don't think that Pearl Harbor was really necessary. If everybody had been doing their jobs and on their toes and keeping things sharp, we wouldn't have been sitting in Pearl Harbor for them to throw bombs at us. Those are things that went on in those days...so many people worried about being prominent and noticeable they got in

their own ways. On the other hand, when you get in Hawaii you get so relaxed that you don't think that somebody could bomb you. We were just got caught with our pants down. Rightly so I guess, because we took life so easy. I went out to Hawaii quite a few times. The first time I went out there, my brother was there, my aunts, my cousins...and I had a great time. Hawaii was my second home. About the only home I knew. I left home when I was 17 and a half in New York, and I did that swimming. When I got to Hawaii I did more swimming and had a lot of fun. The Navy was good. I love the Navy.

BW: What would you like to see remembered about the crew of the *Tangier* and the survivors of Pearl Harbor?

AQ: Well, I can't say to that because I really don't know what will happen. Our motto is "Remember Pearl Harbor - Keep America Alert." We should always have that as a model for the whole country. We have [survivor] license plates now herein Minnesota, and I was on the committee that helped get them. I knew a couple of legislator people that helped get me these license plates. My license plate says "Pearl Harbor Survivor 001." I got the first plate and I've always kept it. I'm kind of proud of those plates, because the police chief comes behind me and says "I know you, you've got the 001." He is a good friend of mine and a decent fellow. I've been involved in club work and teaching swimming. It's been a great life.

BW: Is there anything that you would like to add to this record that I've not discussed during our interview that you would like to have down?

AQ: I'd just like to add this. When we went to the South Pacific after Pearl Harbor, we were in the process of getting folks to Guadalcanal through the Savo Island. This book I am reading now is "The Shame of Savo." It was a shame, because the same thing that took place down there took place in Hawaii. All of the people were not doing there job, and the first thing they lost was the *Lexington*. Things kept getting worse all the time. But... just a little bit of a miracle actually...that we didn't lose a lot more than we did. We almost got wiped out in that Savo Island deal. Some people I was with in San Diego later were from the *Quincy* and the *Astoria* were the ships that were lined up near Savo Island and they got blown up. They were heavy cruisers. We got about 20 destroyers that got blown up it was a great big mess that certainly never should have happened. People should have had been sending over planes watching them. The Japanese were coming down what they called "The Slot", and they should have been attacked instead of sitting around waiting for something to happen. The shame of that is that we weren't ready again. We weren't ready at Pearl Harbor, but at Pearl Harbor it was a different thing. We were relaxed.

BW: Well Al, I appreciate your consent to do this tape with and let me use this for my project...