

The National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

J.C. Alston

Pearl Harbor

USS California (BB-44)

USS West Virginia (BB-48)

This Larry Rabalais. I am at the museum in Fredericksburg, Texas and I am interviewing J. C. Alston, of Troy, Texas, who is a Pearl Harbor survivor. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas in conjunction with the Texas Historical Commission. It will be used for academic and research purposes here at the museum. With that, I will let you talk J.C., if you would start with where and when you were born.

J.C. Alston: I was born close to Crosby, Texas which is 30 miles from Lubbock, on May 3, 1923. We farmed. I went to school in Combs, Texas. We had a choice. It was just a distance across the road from Werner and Combs schools. I went to both schools.

Larry: Did you have brothers and sisters?

J.C. Yes. I had five brothers and a sister.

Larry: Did everybody stay on the farm? Was it cotton farming in those days?

J.C. Yes. Mostly cotton. We didn't have irrigation, but up around Plainview, they began to get it when we quit farming. In 1935 it was so dry that tumble weeds didn't even grow good. That is when the government bought all those cattle and killed them., because they were starving.

Larry: Did you graduate from that school?

J.C. We moved in 1935 to Lapan which is a little old town up close to Mineral Wells. We raised peanuts a couple of years and then we quit farming business. My daddy was a carpenter and he went back to carpentering. We moved to Temple. He was originally from Temple.

Larry: Did you go to school there.

J.C. Yes, I went to school some, but I didn't finish high school.

Larry: Did you start working then, or did you join the Navy or what?

J.C. I did delivery for drug stores and I did some other work around. Believe it or not my first job, when we were living on the farm in west Texas, was working for a neighbor. I did some plowing for him. I worked five days and got fifty cents a day. I got paid in half dollars. That was a load of money then. To me.

Larry: Were you all eating ok in those days?

J.C. Yes. We did better than the people who lived in town. We had cows and hogs.

Larry: You were out of high school before the war started. When did you join the Navy?

J.C. There were three of us that thought we were going to get into a war. They were building up the Army base in Brownwood, Texas and we got together and decided to join together. I said that I wanted to ride as I didn't want to do all that walking. We went to the Navy recruiting station in Dallas. They accepted us and we went to San Diego, California for boot training. Long Beach was the home port of the USS California (BB-44). It was anchored there.

Larry: How long was boot camp?

J.C. Six months.

At the airport that was near, there were B-24s (Bomber) already had the British insignia on them, so we knew that in time we would probably be in the war.

After I got out of boot camp, I was assigned to the USS California. We left in the later part of October, we left to go to Pearl Harbor. That was the first time I had ever heard of it. We practiced with the big guns. The Battleships and Heavy Cruisers were there.

Larry: Do you recall what the size of the big guns was?

J.C. On the California, they were 14 inches and 16 inches.

Larry: What was your duties when you went aboard ship?

J.C. I was on the deck force. They were training me on number two turret on the middle guns. We would put the shell in with the powder in behind it. The guy down below, locked the breach and put the primer in there.

Larry: What was your job?

J.C. I was the rammer. We did that for five weeks. We would go out on Monday and come in on Fridays. The ones that didn't have duty could go into town.

Larry: Did you go into town quite often?

J.C. Yes. That was the first time all three Battle Groups were in port at one time. Always before, one was out. Consequently; the town was overrun by sailors and other military personnel.

On the evening of the sixth of December, I was on watch and there was a Carrier up forward of us. They said that they were going to take some planes to Midway. It pulled out about midnight, so there were no Carriers in port at the time of the attack. The next morning, I had the four to eight watch and I was fixing to get relieved from watch to go eat breakfast. I hadn't eaten breakfast yet.

That morning a PBY (Patrol plane) couldn't get off, because the water was so slick that morning. He made three or four attempts, so they got a PT Boat (Patrol Torpedo) to rough up the water, and they finally got off about twenty minutes to eight. The usually left about seven. He went out the other way, so he wouldn't have seen the Japanese coming.

The attack started at the back. I heard the bombs going off, but I didn't know what was going on.

Larry: Most of the ships where anchored in twos. Were you by yourself?

J.C. Yes. I heard a loud explosion and I guess that was when the USS Arizona (BB-39) blew up.

Larry: Did you think it was our guys practicing or something?

J.C. No, we knew right away. When we got to our Battle Stations, we had to abandon ship.

Larry: Where did you ship get hit?

J.C. We got hit by both torpedoes and bombs.

Larry: They gave the order to abandon ship?

J.C. Right.

Larry: Was the ship trying to turn over, or was it just settling to the bottom of the bay?

J.C. It was trying to turn over, but they flooded the other side of it and there were a couple of tugs fighting the fire and pushing it. The ship finally just settled down into the mud, upright. We were already off and on Ford Island by that time.

Larry: How did you get to Ford Island?

J.C. We had to swim. It was only about fifty yards. It wasn't very far.

Larry: When the torpedo hit, did that knock you down?

J.C. It was just a big whoop and I was in the water.

Larry: At least you weren't below deck. As far as you know, did you lose quite a few people below deck?

J.C. We lost 104 people.

Larry: Did you know any of these people very well?

J.C. No, I hadn't been on the ship long enough for that. In fact, I didn't know very many people in our Division.

Larry: After you got to Ford Island, were you covered with oil at that point?

J.C. Yeah. They mustered us, trying to find out who was missing from the ship. They knew that the ones below that didn't get out, weren't going to get out. I was late getting off and they even sent a telegram home saying that I was missing. They corrected all of that pretty quickly. They took the four and five-inch guns off of the USS California and put them in the Navy gun range. They were putting forty millimeters in and of course they had a lot of 50 caliber machine guns. We stayed over there with them a couple of months. Then they started raising the USS West Virginia (BB-48).

Larry: So, they didn't reassign you immediately?

J.C. Well, first I went to the USS Maryland (BB-46). It had just got a bomb hit. I stayed on it a couple of weeks, just to have a place to stay. We stayed there until we moved over to where the guns were put up. We were working six days a week. They pumped the water out and kept raising it. We threw all the damaged things into a barge and they hauled it somewhere. They refitted it.

The first island we hit after we rejoined the fleet. I was now on the USS West Virginia. It had sixteen-inch guns on it. While we were there a PT boat would run along the coast and fire their machine guns. We swapped ice cream off of the ship for bananas. They didn't get ice cream. At times we got pretty lean on something to eat. I could never go with powdered eggs.

Larry: What were some of the islands that you hit?

J.C. We went to Admiralty islands. This was on the Equator and it was hot. We didn't have any air conditioning in those days. After that the next run was the Philippines. On the way to the Philippines, you could step up on deck and any direction you looked, you could see nothing but

ships in any direction you looked. About three o'clock there was one lone Jap plane. There was a converted Carrier over to our right and the Jap dived down through the deck of it.

Larry: You saw that?

J.C. Yeah. We took part of the people from that ship and kept them aboard our ship for a while until they could get placements for them.

They sent a Destroyer over there to sink the damaged ship, after they got everybody off.

Our landing group was Leyte Gulf.

Larry: This was in 1944?

J.C. Yeah. Everyday there was one Battleship assigned to the Army, in case they had any big gun emplacements that needed to be hit.

Larry: Were you still in a gun crew at that time?

J.C. No, I was in Supply. That changed after I went to second loader on the 40 Millimeters. After the five-inch quit firing, all of those hot casings had to be handled with asbestos gloves because they kept those and returned them to be refilled.

Larry: Did you ever have Japanese aircraft attack your ship?

J.C. Oh, yeah. The first plane that came in was blown up. We had good fire power and we blew him up. Part of the wing landed on the Quarter-deck. It was that close. The second one came in low and when they blew him up, the motor hit the side of the ship. The next one, missed the ship and hit the water. The fourth one hit us on the Port-side on a 40 Millimeter gun mount and killed nine people. A bomb went down on the third deck, but it was a dud. We stayed around there supporting the Army.

You know, General McArthur said that he would return. Well, he came in on a light cruiser and they put him in a small boat and took him close to shore, I guess the water was only knee deep, and the first time he waded in apparently did not satisfy him, so they made a second wade in.

Larry: Did you see this?

J.C. Oh, yeah. He had his corn-cob pipe as he strolled in. Before that, when they were making the landing, you know there were Frogmen. Now they are called Seals. There were two fellows

who went in and there was one lone Japanese in a little building and he shot one of the Seals and they brought him back to the ship and fixed him up.

Larry: Did these Frogmen come off of your ship?

J.C. No, they were from a different ship. They brought him to our ship for treatment because we were the closest on.

Then we were getting near the end of taking care of the Philippines so we went to New Zealand and got repairs. We were there for four days. They were loading supplies so we could participate in the Iwo Jima operation. The Captain got impatient and he just cut loose from the supply pier and left four guys from our ship, there.

Larry: Was this in New Zealand?

J.C. No, it was Ulithi. That was our supply base.

We were lucky. They didn't think any of the Jap planes could fly that far, but some flew right over the top of us. I was talking to this guy and he recognized the sound and he started running. It was a Jap Betty bomber (G4M Mitsubishi). It flew right over the top of us and hit the Carrier. USS Franklin (DV-15) that was right in front of us. It burned for quite a long time but they finally got it put out. I don't know how many people they lost, but it was serious. What got me was, inside the bay at Ulithi, the water was so clear. It was like a fish bowl. You could see the bottom and fish swimming.

As far as I know, that was the only Jap plane that got in there and did any damage to our ships.

From there, we went to Iwo Jima. We shelled it and they bombed it but they didn't realize there were as many Japanese on that island as there was. The reason for taking it, instead of bypassing it, was if our B-29 (Bomber) got damaged on raids over Japan, there would be a place that they could be repaired.

Larry: Did you do shore bombardment there for several days?

J.C. Yeah.

I was sitting at my 40 Millimeter mount and saw this personnel carrier start up a hill and he didn't get too far and he stopped. He must have got hit, because he didn't move anymore.

Larry: When they fired those big shells from the ship, could you actually see the shell going through the air?

J.C. In some cases, you could. It depended upon the atmosphere.

I watched them put up the flag the first time and I watched them put up the second one. After Iwo was secured, we went to Okinawa. While we were taking it, we lucked-out again. There was a ship that had just come from the states after being repaired and he anchored beside us.

Larry: What kind of ship was it?

J.C. It was a Battleship. They got hit that night. What we did every night, we put out smudge pots and we stayed in the smoke all night and they couldn't see us.

Larry: Were these Kamikazes?

J.C. Oh, yeah. They didn't give them enough gas to get back to the mainland. It was a one-way trip for them.

About this time, they were trying to negotiate a treaty with the Japanese. They painted the planes green and painted a white cross on them. They notified every ship that those planes were coming out and to make sure they weren't shot down.

Larry: Now this procedure took quite a few days. Were you just hanging around at this time?

J.C. Yes. The Japs had two large battleships that they sent out that were to run aground and fire their large cannons as long as anyone was alive on the ships.

Larry: They were the Yamato and the Musashi.

J.C. Yes.

Larry: After Okinawa, where did you go?

J.C. That sort of ended the fight.

Larry: When you heard about the Atom Bombs, did you have any idea what they were?

J.C. No, we had no idea.

When we headed into Tokyo Bay, there were Japanese jumping into the by swimming.

Larry: Really?

J.C. When the Emperor said the war was over, they just dropped it like nothing had happened and they went swimming in the bay.

When we went ashore, there was a lady that could speak English. She was a teacher. The town itself was bombed out. The only building standing had a Ford fire truck in it. She said the fires from the incendiary bombs would get hot they would take the trucks out.

Larry: Was this close to Yokohama.

J.C. Yeah. It was Yokohama. That is where we went in. It is not far from Tokyo.

Larry: When you went ashore, you saw some of the local people, how did they look?

J.C. The older ones wouldn't talk to you. After that, all of the POWs were put on different ships so they could feed them right and give them medical attention.

Larry: Did you get any on board your ship?

J.C. Yes. I often wondered how their health was, later in life.

We stayed there in the harbor for about thirty days. Every ship coming back was loaded with people going back to the states. Every Island we stopped at, we would pick up a few to take with us to the States.

When we got to San Diego, my enlistment was up, and they had a train waiting for us. A lot of the guys wanted something to eat or drink. They said, "If you want anything to eat or drink, you better get it as we are leaving in a little bit." Those guys no more than got out of sight when the train started moving. Some of the guys hitch-hiked and beat us to Houston.

We got discharged there.

Larry: Did you think about staying in the Nay at that time?

J.C. No. I thought I would be better off to just get out.

Larry: You had been gone from 1941 to 1946.

J.C. Yeah.

Larry: What was your Rating, when you got out.

J.C. Seaman Second Class.

Larry: So that ended your time in the Navy.

How many people did the Battleships have on them?

J.C. Around 1700. That was before the war. After they put bigger gun on them the crews were larger. I think we had a little over 2300 people on board.

Larry: Did you sleep in hammocks or bunks?

J.C. We had bunks. They folded up.

Larry: Thank you for your service and I really appreciate your time.

J.C. Your welcome.

Transcribed by:
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