

Thomas C. "Tomcat" Nelson

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Question: Let me just start, so I can get it on tape. Your name is

Answer: Thomas C. Nelson. My call name, or nickname is Tomcat.

Question: Tomcat, right? T-o-m.

Answer: T-o-m. I did not care for my middle name, so when people would ask me what my middle initial, I'd say C as in Cat, so pretty soon Tomcat became, so I use that all my, everybody knows me out at the airport as Tomcat, you know.

Question: Well, it's funny, because I had, when I saw the name Tom Nelson, I...

Answer: There's a place around somewhere with the same name as I had.

Question: Oh, is that right. Well, somewhere I'd seen your nickname, and I said, I wonder if that's Tomcat, 'cause I'd seen your nickname. I don't know if it was one of the articles.

Answer: Well, see I've got a display. I don't know if it's on, at the airport with pictures and a lot of the documents that you're talking about.

Question: That's where I saw it.

Answer: Probably saw it there, yeah.

Question: And in the service, if there's, I understand that everybody, alphabetically, and if there's two of the same name, then it's initials, so.

Answer: Oh, yeah. I do all kinds of things.

Question: So where did you grow up?

Answer: Well, I grew up in Mill Valley, California, which was a suburb you might say of San Francisco. North end of the Golden Gate Bridge, and 6 miles from the bridge there, so. Born in Oakland, California, on Leap Year.

Question: On Leap Day or just Leap Year.

Answer: Leap Day.

Question: Oh, really. So you're only like 10 years old, or something like that.

Answer: Well, I'm 20 now. You gonna check and see if I'm on board this tape, or is it working?

Question: It's working.

Answer: ok. We were kind of battin' around here a little bit. I grew up, my first inklings were in Mill Valley when I was, my first memories of anything was when I was 2 years old, and I remember. I asked my parents when that happened. They said, Oh, my God, I don't believe you were just 2 years old when that happened, but we were moving to a new house. You know how I kept asking when we're moving to the new house and everything. I do remember that myself. And then from then on

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it's kind of a blur, when my brother was born when I was 4 years old. That, of course, was a traumatic experience for everybody. And, so on and so on. But I went through all the local schools there in Mill Valley, the grammar school. Some of the school is long gone, torn down, Old Mill School. Graduated in 8th grade in 1933, December. Odd part of the year. I skipped a little 5th, which (inaudible) I was just too danged smart, I guess. Which caught up with me later on. Some of the other subjects were not good. And I graduated from there and I went to a local high school, Tamalpais Union High School. And today, you know, it kind of bothers me. They're eliminating all these logos like the Indians and all that, and that was our big deal, because the story went, and the view of Mt. Tamalpais, actually, the silhouette shows a maiden, named Tamalpa so Tamalpais was a very nice name and very honorable, so I can't see why these people today and screwing everything up and eliminating these names that had a real purpose, so that's the logo was an Indian with full headdress sort of thing. Anyhow, I graduated from there in December of '37, and didn't like the idea of starting college then, so I went back and took a post-graduate course. Mainly, the subjects I wanted to take, they wouldn't let me take before, so I was 5 hours drafting every day, plus trigonometry, plus senior English, plus Spanish. I had to complete 2 years of foreign language to be able to go to college in those days. So I graduated from that, essentially got out in June of 1940, and went over the University of California in August of 1940. Along about September or October of that year is when they started the draft, and I had joined the Reserve back in 1938. Being a radio operator, I had an amateur radio license. The Navy was anxious to get trained people, so I went into the Navy as a, today they call them, they go by rank like E4. I went in as an E4, which is a Radioman Third Class. I was green as they make them, of course, 'cause I didn't go to Boot Camp or nothing, so I went on two summer cruises and battleships. I spent two weeks on the USS Tennessee, and all they did there was cruise around the San Francisco Bay area and outside the area a few miles, and then the following year I was on the Oklahoma. I made a cruise down to Southern California and did some gunnery and practiced down there and that was 1939. Meantime, I was in college. I went to what was then called Marin Junior College, studying engineering, and graduated from there in June of 1940. I'm sort of jumping from the story, that was a little backup there. So I was over at Cal Berkeley in Engineering when the Navy called me to active duty. On the day after Christmas, 1940, I reported. I'd already received a physical exam. They determined that I was disgustingly healthy, so I was on active duty. Next thing I knew, I was doing the San Francisco routine. They had us there at the receiving ship, which at that time was called Yerba Buena or Goat Island, right out in the middle of the bay there, attached to the Treasure Island site where the World's Fair had been. The Navy didn't take over Treasure Island until somewhat later. So we were living there in the barracks underneath the bridge with the trains whipping back and forth, but fortunately I was able to get off just about every night and go home to by bus and what have you to be with my future wife. Ok. We had a stunt we pulled there that was kind of unique, though. Every Monday morning, we would go down and bet the yeoman, who was like a secretary, that we wouldn't be there next Monday. We'd bet a couple bucks or something. And he's say What's your name? And he's put us down at the bottom of the list. So that went on for 4, 5 weeks. Finally the chief that was working, had us working on these details, began to think that too many faces were hanging around too long, so he went down, hauled all our papers out, put them on top of the pile, so next day or two, we were on our way up to Mare Island on a tugboat, for transportation to Hawaii. I was put on the Destroyer 365, the Cummings, and we left San Francisco Bay area, and I was standing back near the fantail where the depth charges were located, and when that old ship hit the first swells outside the Golden Gate, I got my

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feet wet up to my knees, 'cause she was already doing the pitching you know, and she already took water and it came right up over, next thing I know I was up to here in water, so I got my feet wet before I hardly even got outside the Golden Gate.

Question: Was that your first, 'cause you'd talked about some cruises and stuff like that. Was that your first starting to see what the Navy was going to be like?

Answer: Well, I was on those two battleship cruises, so it wasn't quite. It's much different on a little destroyer, though, compared to a battleship. A lot more motion, you know, and everything. The ship had been...

Question: What was the attitude at this point? I mean, you'd been called into duty, and now you're sent over to Hawaii, which we know I retrospect is famous. But was it just kind of, Oh, we're out on another cruise, gonna go do some work, or?

Answer: Well, because of the war situation in Europe, things were starting to heat up a little bit. I think they were getting a little bit worried. You know, we had that deal where we gave Britain 50 destroyers for that lend-lease swap they call it, or something. Ok. Things were getting.. they had the draft that was underway, so we were starting to build up, actually, in anticipation of something going on, so it's a good thing they were working on that idea anyway. But, we were uh.. the reserve unit I joined there in San Rafael was a Communication Reserve, and we would actually communicate by code, or CWs it's called, to all the other, we had a whole string of stations up the coast of California there, all the different cities like, we were in San Rafael, then they had Santa Rosa, Petaluma, clear up to Eureka. Had about 5 or 6 stations there, and our main station was right there in San Francisco, the main base there. So we did a lot of, every night we did a lot of. Monday, every Monday night we did a lot of practice with the code and everything. And, of course, having had the amateur radio license, that was old hat to me. But it was good training. But when I got out to, when we got on this destroyer, we went down to Southern California and spent about 3 or 4 days down going through all the, they had the degaussing gear on this ship that would make the ship appear to be neutral, non-magnetic, to a magnetic mine. And all these wires that went around the ship, I don't know, like a figure 8 all over the ship, and they had to be all set up and tuned perfectly, so they kept running you through this course to see and then they would make another change and, that went on for 2, 3 days there, off San Pedro. And we finally got it, then we thought, Well, we're going to get liberty that night. No, no. We got through with the exercise that day. They head due west, so we were gone. On the way out there we hit two storms, and I think that darned destroyer was going to make out more like a submarine than a destroyer, 'cause it was really putting the nose into the water and green, about 99% of the crew was seasick because they'd been in port so long, and. I wasn't feeling too good, but I never did feed the fishes, so I guess I survived that. Got to Pearl, and I was transferred to the, my assigned ship was the USS San Francisco, a heavy cruiser, and routine duty. We were right there about, I think it was Valentine's Day, February 14 or thereabouts, and I was fortunately in a way, 'cause I had relatives there, cousin, and my Dad had some relatives there, and I got hold of them, so I was able to get overnight liberty occasionally, when I had the time off on a weekend or something. But most of the time it was pretty much routine. The radio shack, you got up there and you copied the code, and typed out what you heard, and I never did care for that. I never became a touch typer. Today I have one heck of a bad time with my computer so forth, because my fingers are so, you can see, these bends and everything. Every

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time I go to hit something I hit the one next to it, so it's a good thing I don't touch type I guess.

Question: What's the code like? I mean, is it verbally coming in or are we getting

Answer: No, it's like an A is di-dah, you know, short long, di-dah. Dah-di-dah-di-dah

Question: So you've gotta take all that in.

Answer: Oh, yeah. I can, once you know the code, well, you hear the code. Lot of times, you can anticipate what the word's going to be. And you just wait for the ending. But when they're sending out coded messages like, that have been coded, you just get 5-letter word groups, I mean groups of 5 letters, all mixed. Now they have to put that into the code machine and whip out and convert it into plane text so you can understand it. So there were all these decoded and then, after we got them on the ship they'd put them in the machine, so you had to be accurate on those "x", "y"s and "z"s and so forth.. your "p"s and "q"s, in other words. But I tell you, that got old after awhile. They also used the same thing with the signal lights. You've seen the lights on the mast, you know, blinking away. Well, that's doing the same thing. That's doing the same code. Morse code. A is di-dah. I could read the lights, too, and one time we were coming back from liberty and I saw our ship out there. I saw some ship, I was reading a message to myself, and by God, if it wasn't a telegram being sent to me. SO I read the whole thing as I was....I got out to the ship they said, Oh, you got a message. Yeah, I know. So they gave me the hard copy of it. Anyway,

Question: And where's your station on this ship, where did you physically operate from?

Answer: Well, radio one was what they called it. Yeah. Radio one is up just under the bridge, and then radio two was the transmitting area which was back behind the hangars where the airplanes were kept. Well, after about 3 months of this, it got awfully old, and one morning they had me go down to the sick bay for an examination. I asked What's this all about? Well, we're checking you out for submarines. I said, Oh, no. I don't want submarines. They says, Oh, ok. Well, you've gotta be a volunteer, so that wiped that out. Darned if I wasn't down there a week later, though, same doctors and everything, saying, Weren't you down here last week? Yeah. What's this for? Oh, Aviation. I had a chance to transfer into the Aviation Division. So that's what I did. I said, I don't mind being above the water, but I just don't like being under water. So I started working in the seaplanes, and we had those bi-planes with a single float that would be catapulted and when you landed you landed in the water and the ship would make the proper turn or what have you to smooth out the rough water and you'd come in and land on the first swell and bounce, and then taxi up and engage the... the bottom of the float had kind of a hook under there that would come up and engage itself on the rope net that they were dragging on the sled. You come and get hooked up on the sled and then you'd be towed along with the ship, and then in my case I had to climb out of my cockpit, into the pilot, and come up, straddle him, and open the little hatch on top of the wing, and pull out this little eye hook and then they'd lower the crane down, this hook would be swinging around and I'd grab it finally and put it into the eye there, and then, that was only single block, though. If you should happen to slip off the

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sled, they could cut the rope so it wouldn't hang you up 'cause it was very dangerous to have a plane go back like this and then suddenly be jerked up. It would just do this to it. So if everything was ok, then they'd double block you, then you couldn't get away. Then they'd bring you up, soon as you were hooked up and being lifted, you had to jump back to your cockpit and there were some handling lines that were in there and as they came up over the catapult you tossed those lines out, and the handlers would grab those lines so they could. "Cause you know, a ship on its way, 15, 20 knots of course it generates a breeze even though there's, and usually they're headed into the wind, so you've got a lot of, very awkward, so the handling lines would settle the plane so they could lower it down and put it back on the catapult or back down on the well deck between the catapults. Actually, we had two catapults on that ship. And we could get all 4 planes off in a matter of a very few minutes. Two of them that were on the catapults would be revved up ready to go, and they'd aim one out and the ship was rocking or rolling and they always hit it so you were starting on the up rolling. That's when they'd shoot you. They didn't shoot you down to the water, they'd shoot you up in the sky. So they could shoot that one, then she would then train? And then the other one would shoot the other side, then they would reload the other planes on the other and then shoot them off, so we'd have 4 planes in the air most of the time.

Question: What was scarier, taking off or getting picked up, because as you described it, I imagine this ship's doing this and you've got ropes coming down and planes and water and

Answer: Well, actually the catapulting was never any problem I didn't think. We never lost any planes on catapulting. We lost a few physically on the pickup, but I'll talk about that a little bit about how we lost one out there during a battle because the guy jumped over the sled and got ahead of it. A rope caught up with him and tore the wing float off, so the plane just turned right over and went upside down. So the pilot and the radioman, they were out there sitting on a float when the destroyer came zooming up with a.. launched a little small, I don't know, lifeboat or whatever it was. They chopped holes in the float and let it sink. Picked the guys up and they got back aboard ship shortly after that.

Question: Two-person crew, right?

Answer: Yeah. There was only two persons in that SOC type plane. Your photographer is taking pictures of some of this so you'll see what that is. Those planes were bi-planes with two wings. They could fold back, so they could fold clear back for storage purposes. We could store, we always had an extra one stored in the hangar that way, and then we had the 4 operating planes. Well, one interesting thing that I used to do. I had the record of getting on the air faster than anybody else, because we had, most of the time we used a trailing wire antenna, which meant we had to trail out about 175 or 165 feet or so of wire, which had a 2-pound lead weight on the end of it. So the line would go out from the plane and then to out and kind of droop down like this. That became the right, amount.. antenna like to resonate when you're transferring frequencies. So, but you had to slip the brake off and let the thing spin, watch the counter, and then slowly brake down and stop it. And then adjust a foot or two either way with a crank on the drum there. Well, I used to loosen the brake just enough to it's barely holding that weight, so when that 20 pounds of black powder went off, boy, and you started forward, you had to lean forward, you had the hook's like this. You'd come up, I'd kick the brake off, but by the time the plane got to the end of the catapult, I already

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had about 20-foot out and the guys knew when I was in that plane not to be on that side of the catapult, 'cause that lead weight would, it would stand still for a little bit and then it would start to move. But I would be on the air, I already had the transmitter warmed up and I would, 9 seconds I would be on, I would be hittin' the key and callin' the ship.

Question: And so what was your job. I mean, you were up looking for

Answer: It was a scouting and observation plane. They used to go out and observe, like when any of the ships were doing gunnery, like shooting the big rifles they had on the battle wagons or even our own, you'd be out there watching and spotting the landing.. how far, how near, how left or right, what to do to hit the target. You report that back. Also, if you were out and you spotted enemy type of thing, it was all coded, the pilot would look at his, he's have an overlay sheet and make little circles reporting what was there. They'd hand you a sheet of paper and then you'd send that message. It was all just in code, and you didn't know what it meant, but he did. And the ship, of course, would decipher it and that would be the battle report, or whatever it was.

Question: So are you on a specific, 'cause you have

Answer: Yeah, a specific frequency.

Question: You had 4 planes up so you had 4 people on your ship receiving signals?

Answer: Yeah. All 4 planes were doing the same thing, and sometimes we'd have a whole squadron of 6 ships. We'd have 24 planes on the air. That was fun, too. I used to be insidious again, because we used to use what they call Z signals. Z-a-a, z-a-b, z-a-c and so forth. There was a sequence of 2, 3 signals that would say, Attention all units! Answer up roll call in numerical order! And so you'd send out and just sit back and, as each one, the whole 24 had to check in that way, see, so you could just sit back and do nothing for a few minutes while they were all checking in. You had a big old ledger book there you had to write all the data in there, so forth, and that was fun.

Then they also were out there looking for submarines. Anytime a task force was moving, these planes were out flying ahead of the task force at about 1100 feet elevation, and you could see pretty deep in the water at that elevation. A submarine looked like a big brown cigar. We actually had practice for those sort of things. And, see about 3 ships and 3 subs would be out there and they'd be there trying to do your ship and you'd be looking for them. If you spotted them, you drop one of those smoke floats, which was about that long, mostly wood, had a charge inside it that would send out smoke for about 5 minutes. And it felt just right between here, the fins and the nose, and you could take that thing, like that and that thing would go like this just like a bomb and when it would hit the water it would start to smoke. Well, one day I saw that sub down there, so the pilot dove down. I did this. I was watching it and just about that time the sub put up his periscope and when he looked, he just saw a plane literally going like this at him. Man, he pulled that thing down quick. I don't think I missed his scope by more than 5 or 6 feet. So...

Question: Even at your observation deck, that's pretty low. Would did you say, 1100 feet or so?

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Answer: 1100 feet above water, yeah.

Question: That's not very high.

Answer: No, that's true. But that's when we did our best work, I guess. That plane was not designed for real high elevation type work anyway. And our top speed was maybe 120 or something like that, knots. But in a vertical dive we were a screaming diver doing about 200, and I notice all the antennas would go slack. Wings would kind of lay back a little bit. It was tricky. Couple times when we almost bought it because.. When we go out for target practice, which is one thing we're doing all the time just before Pearl started, one plane would carry the target which he'd tow behind like a sock with about 800 feet of nylon, no, it was hemp, line behind you. And the other planes would use that as their target to shoot at. And there were all kinds of runs you went through. Well, it would mark your projectiles, we had 30 calibers there, with a paint different colored. And they would, when you get the target back, recover the target, they'd count up and see how many holes had red or blue or green, whatever the paint color there was, and that gave you your score. And we always had a pool, you know, how many, whoever did the best, that sort of thing. It was fun. By pilot used to always give me a good shot at it. So a target that big, you can just see, you almost write your name in the target, but...

Question: So who did the, the pilot did the flying and you did the

Answer: Yeah, you were in the rear cockpit, and this 30 caliber that would aim anywhere, see. You just didn't want to shoot your own tail off. That's the main thing. He did his own. He had a single 30 caliber straightforward shot between the prop. In fact, one day one of the things got out of sync and the prop ended up with a thing below stuck in it like this. So they had to recharge it.

Question: You always flew with the same pilot, right?

Answer: Not necessary, no. Most of the time I was with the same pilot. In fact, the first time they took me up, they tried their damndest to get me sick, and I did. Spoil their day, you know. Anytime you made a mess like that you had to clean it up, so it's not very pleasant. And it did happen.

Question: How much, 'cause you're talking about your codin' in, sounded like you were writing in a log. Is there much room in your plane?

Answer: Not much room, about so wide, just not much wider. There was kind of an arm here where the key was located, here, see, and so the pilot was doing a lot of this sort of thing. One day I was going di-di-di-daaaaaaa, you know, long dash because he was pulling out of a dive, my hand got real heavy, and if you go in a negative G, one day all the extra clips from the ammo went falling down and went floating by my face, so I just picked them all up and threw them over the side. It was a lot, actually that was a lot of fun compared to sittin' there behind a typewriter all day long, and we just wrote with a pencil in our log there. We had to change frequency; we had a freq meter in there, too. We had to kind of get down between your knees and work this little freq meter, set up a new frequency, and we communicated between the planes with our hand signals. This was a dot, and that was a dash, so on the side of the plane you'd go di-dah-dah-di, like that, see. That's the letter P, ok? And our A was di-dah. Or numbers di-dah-dah-dah. That's how you'd tell the new frequency and you'd switch frequency to that and then you're on

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the air again. So we used visual with lights, the ship could send a light signal to you. And you also had a signal light that you could send signal to them with lights. All for radio silence purposes. So, you actually had 3 means of communication. Then when you're getting ready to come in to land, they would display the flag, Able, Baker, Cast, Dog, type flag, what kind of landing you were going to make. Now normally, it was the cast, which meant the ship made a turn to smooth out the ruffle in the water, but you'd still have those swells. The pilot would come in and hit that first swell, crrrunch, then bounce along the next few, and then catch up with the sled, and then they'd swing the other way to pick up the other side. Only once did we every do, I think it was a Dog recovery where the ship went straight ahead, never turned, the water was so smooth like glass. We were landing two planes at once. Came in like this on both sides. It was kind of neat.

Question: It's a big pontoon on the bottom and

Answer: Just a single pontoon with two wing floats to keep the wings from going under, yeah. But it was a lot of... You see some of these pictures he's taking there. It was quite an operation. Well, anyway, we were doing all this. We got a 90-day. If you recall back in history when they started that a, b, c, d encirclement ring.

Question: I'm not familiar with it.

Answer: American, British, China and Dutch in August of '41. No more oil, no more nothing to Japan. Ok, that's when things started getting tender. That's what they called a,b,c,d encirclement ring. No more metal, no more oil for Japan, so I'm getting a little bit ahead of my story, but they were. That put them in tough shape, because they had converted their Navy to oil, and only had about a 6-month supply, so they had to either give up or fight. Well, they had done so well in China they thought well.. the warlord said, Yes. Tojo, etc. said Yes, so that brought on the war. Which gets into another area I'll get into in a minute or two, but we did make a trip back in August, and we were there in Long Beach when that thing started, so everything got kind of, security got high in a hurry right there for a short time. Didn't last very long, but it did. And I got to get home for a couple of days there, and are we running out of tape?

Question: Nope. You're good. I'll just make one adjustment there. I can keep an eye...

Answer: I didn't see myself down there. ok. Now I can get nervous. Anyway, on our way back out from San Pedro, back to Pearl, this was in August, we were also with another heavy cruiser, the Portland. And we were getting ahead of a storm that was coming, one of those late.. I don't if they call them typhoons or what in that part of the country. They've got hurricanes, typhoons, and what have you. Anyhow, this storm is one that develops and comes up the coast from out of Mexico area, and we were running ahead of that thing and doing well and all of a sudden there was a dredger being taken out on a.. towed out there to Pearl on a barge and they lost, they got in a storm and lost their tow, so they sent us back to find them. So I woke up that morning and that ship was really bouncing around. In fact, one of the screws was bouncing, when it would bounce in the air you get that rrumm, rrumm, rrumm and it was. So I got up and got dressed and went up. I poked my head up into the hangar, got into the hangar just in...and the ship was rocking quite wildly, and got in the hangar just in time to have a wall of water about 4 foot deep come

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over and. It took me underneath the workbench and turned me around. It went back to the other way. So then I went over and was able to get up into the silo. That was the catapult support where we had all of our radio equipment. Well, another radioman and I were up there trying to recover all our books. Everything on the shelves had all been tipped off. It was mess up there. We had to.. we were up there. We spent the rest of the storm up there. It got pretty bad at times, 'cause that well deck would be almost completely, well, 10, 20 feet deep in water, 'cause the waves were coming in from the side like this. And we had a plane parked there on the sled, I mean, on the regular, on it's carrier, and it was all bolted down with J hooks pretty tight. Well, the force of that water broke that sled loose, and bashed that plane around and it just about went over the side but it didn't. All that was left of that thing was the engine and a bunch of fuselage. Period. That was it. When we broke the carcass into Pearl, they said Why didn't you just dump it over anyway? So we had a lost plane. Well, every department put in a claim for all the equipment they lost that was supposed to be on that plane. The trouble was that the amount of stuff, the weight of all the stuff that was reported was about twice the weight of the plane. So obviously they didn't all get it, but we did lose all the radio equipment in the plane and everything else. I did have one, I did go out and save one souvenir. That's in the plane I flew. That's the relief tube. Little funnel I cut it off.

Question: That's one of the questions that kids like to ask. Eventually they'd start talking and figuring out how long and finally, like, Wait a minute, so when you were up there, how did you go to the bathroom and things.

Answer: Well, that's what the relief tube was for. Yeah. For the other thing, there was no relief for that that I know of anyway. You were sittin' on it, I guess. We had, our seat was actually a parachute pack. And that was it. No cushion. Just our hard pack, so when you bounced on a wave, you really felt it, crunch, crunch, you know.

But, we went, well, we got back to Pearl and that was in late August, so we continued to operate.. The ship went into the yard then for overhaul and they needed some wire. They had it pretty well torn apart in October/November, and into December, and so we were on Ford Island, which is right in the middle of Pearl Harbor. We were still operating our 4 planes, but were using water take-off and landings right there at Pearl. And again, I mention those antennas with the 2-pound weight on the end of them. If you didn't remember to crank in your antenna before you landed, all of a sudden you'd feel a little kind of a snip! You'd lose your weight, and you'd have to go down, draw another 2-pound weight out of the sea stores, and hook it all up again, see. I saw quite a few. I lost a couple during those times. You get so involved with everything else going on you forget to wheel the darned thing in. You see a plane coming in and landing. All of a sudden you see a little splash behind the plane and you know what you did. But, so we were doing our gunnery and everything like that. In fact, about a day before.. a day before or so before the weekend, I guess, before Pearl, Saturday morning, I guess, the pilot I flew with came down and said, Oh, you don't have to go out there. I'm going to take one of my friends along with me. One of his officer friends. I said, Well, that's fine. So put him in there, put the parachute, hooked him on like that, and when they came back from the flight, climbed up the side of the plane as usual, and, Everything ok? He said, Well the intercom wouldn't work. I couldn't talk to my friend back there. So I pick up the mic and said, You test it? Yeah, it works fine. The guy says, Oh, he reaches down, pulls up the relief tube. He'd been shoutin' in there like the old gosport in the early days, you know. Oh, that was priceless. Oh, man! Anyway, we

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had a lot of humor, even though all the serious things we had, we had always had a lot of fun.

One serious thing we had, though, in regard to this target towing. We were supposed to drape the target over the, I called the line, that ran from the bow up to the foremast. I'd say that line's a cable's about that big around with a lot of insulators in it. We're supposed to drape our rope across there and then pull this and drop it there so they could recover the target. Well, we got there, I pull the thing, and the D hook didn't.. it came apart, didn't work. So we couldn't get rid of that target, and I quick-like told the pilot, so he put the plane in kind of a sideways skid to soften the blow, and that thing got me wrapped around a couple times and the rope stretched out and then snapped. That could have been dangerous. If that had jerked that thing out that's holding to the float, we would have crumpled up right there and dropped probably a couple hundred feet. That would have been the end of us. So, you had all kinds of narrow little escapes at times, operational errors, so, but we lucked out, I guess.

Well, came the fatal day of December 7. I was going to go ashore that day and see my relatives. I had one foot out of the bunk.. and we heard a plane diving, and heard them pull out and then we heard an explosion. Didn't think too much of it because our own planes used to do that all the time. Then we looked over there and we could see a little bit of sky between the barracks and saw the smoke coming up. Just about that time a Jap plane flew through that piece of sky. You could see that big red meatball on the side of them. Boom! Nobody lined us up to tell us that we were at war. We knew it. So I got dressed in dungarees, went down below, we were on about the second or third level of that barracks there on Ford Island. Went down to the main below, and we thought the Chief Master of Arms had lost his brains. He was used a big fire axe.. was breaking all the big beautiful plate glass windows. Well, obviously, you know, in case of a near hit, they didn't want all that glass flying, so he was out there breaking out those windows. So I went down toward the hangar there, and I heard some strafing going on and stuff zinging around and I ducked up alongside a building and said, Well, get away from that for a minute. Then I realized that was a torpedo shop, which wasn't a very safe place to be either. Soon as that strafing stopped, I got on down to our hangar to find that out of the 24 planes on the ramp that night, about half of them were damaged beyond use because a bomb had landed right at the head of the ramp there and sprayed them all with shrapnel and concrete and what not. So, and the other end of the hangar we were in is where those PBY were located, and they took a beating there, too, 'cause the Japanese didn't want us coming out and finding them, hopefully. So we started a routine there of building up ammunition, working on the planes, trying to repair what we could. Meantime, the raid was still going on, and then it kind of hit a little bit of a lull then, and one cruiser went out to.. started out to sea, and I can recall there was somebody up on the, way up high on one of the masts. Maybe it was still a civilian worker, I don't know, but he was really pounding away doing something. Secure, something, as they went out. And then the battleship, Nevada, got underway, and she started out, and they really pasted her. I mean you could just see it. Planes were coming in and were dropping their bombs just at mast top. You could see the bomb leave the plane, hit the deck, go through the deck even, and then explode, and I saw some guys were, two guys were helping a guy that had been injured, and a bomb came right down between them, and they disappeared just like that. We saw lots of bad stuff that first hour or so.

They uh.. so many things happened. It was just hard to, and we were just down there at one end of the island. We didn't know that the Arizona had blown up, of course. But on my way down there I had noticed those horizontal bombers that were up maybe 10,000 feet or so. I looked up and saw that formation of planes, and

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they, I saw their bombs leaving the plane. That's something you don't realize you can see. But your eyes are so focused on that plane, that when those bombs leave the plane, you see like little round periods like dots right next to the plane, then they disappear. Well, immediately I figure, Oh, boy. Then I realized they're moving this way, so the bombs are going to go on over. It was obviously one of those bombs that went down and hit the Arizona and blew it up. That's what got her was a horizontal bombing came in and got her. And the first ship I saw when I came out of the barracks, the California, was already listing, and her bow was already sinking a bit. So, it was devastation there, believe me. And as I said earlier, couple years ago, I participated in a film episode where they interviewed about 50 or 60 of us that had been at Pearl Harbor, and while we were talking they're showing what's going on in the background. It's a 3-hour tape. Three single tapes, and I ended up in all three of them. So we spent the rest of the day putting our planes back together, and getting our, building up ammunition, 'cause the ammunition we had already built was in a little building over there and that building was on fire and all that ammo was going off like firecrackers, so we had to build up new material, which we did.

Question: How old are you at this point?

Answer: 21.

Question: You're still a kid.

Answer: Literally.

Question: I mean, you've crossed over into that "adulthood," but that's still pretty doggon young, really.

Answer: Oh, yeah. Well, lucky in a way being young, you know, I mean, you go through this stuff, but there were a lot younger. At that time, I could have been 17 old. There were even some that were younger than that illegally, but I was almost 22 frankly. Few months from that.

Question: Was it, I mean, when you think about it, did it become chaos, or were you so well trained or your mind takes over that you could slow down the world or whatever, No, I need to do this, this, this and..

Answer: Pretty much that, yes. I knew what we had to do, and we did, and we got all this ammunition built up and that night, I didn't know it, but during the day, some scouting planes came in from the Enterprise, the carrier, and she was the only carrier operating at that moment out there. And they came in during the raid. I had later met, some of those planes got shot down by our own friendly fire. "Cause I mean, anything that moved in was fair game. Everybody was trigger happy, to say the least. But that night some fighter planes were coming in from the Enterprise, and it was dark, lot of smoke, clouds, fog, what have you. You couldn't see the planes. And the signal was that if the red light on the red light on the water tower was turned off, it was enemy, well, some darned fool turned the light off. So the Pennsylvania was there at dry dock. She took off and started the first.. all of her 5-inch guns opened up right away, and then everybody cut lose. 50 caliber, 30 caliber, you name it. Was all just shootin' up in the air. Well, several of those fighter planes were hit and crashed. One of the fellows, though, that did come in later, he was able to miss that. He came in and landed and he's on this Pearl Harbor, The Real Story I told you about, and right after I get through talking about that. He's the

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next person on the tape, he's coming in and he says, All hell broke loose. 5-inch, 3-inch, 1.1's, 50 caliber, 30 caliber, rocks, pipes, anything they could throw at us. I almost hit the Nevada because it was beached over there. It had got hit so bad it went over and didn't try to go out it beached itself right near there. He says, I almost hit the fore tower on that, but he says, I missed it and came on and finally landed. I was taxiing back to where we were supposed to taxi, they had a revetment there with a Marine in it with a 50-caliber machine gun, and he started shootin' at me. All of a sudden bullets were going over my head, buzz, buzz, buzz, like that. He said it just happened his commander was there and he grabbed a rifle and hit this guy over the head with the rifle butt to slow him down a bit. I mean all kinds of weird things happened like that, so. I should say one thing. I backed off here a little bit. Here I'm jumping ahead or back again.

Question: That's fine.

Answer: We're talking about working on the planes here and all, as this fighting was going on, our anti-aircraft guns were real active, and as the old saying goes, What goes up gotta come down, so I'm holding here a nose fuse from one of our own 5-inch anti-aircraft shells that went up, did its thing, and came down in one piece. The rest of it, of course, the shell was all shrapnel. This being a good hunk of shrapnel it came down, smacked the pavement about 20 feet away from me. I went over to pick it up and it was still too hot yet. It was still warm so I waited till it cooled off, and I still have it today. Lots of officers have tried to talk this out of me, but I haven't let go of it yet. And it says inside here. You can read the fine stamping in it somewhere. It says, Schofield Gun Works 1917. So it was actually made for World War I, but it still worked.

Question: Wow. And that weighs a good couple of pounds.

Answer: I estimate maybe a pound at least. It's all solid brass, but you could see the powder train in here where it went around. Here's where it finally came through. There's a hole here somewhere. There it is. Then it went around the powder train, then went around to here and it started somewhere here, and on the ship before they would fire these things, they'd put them in a gadget and they'd crank in the time delay they wanted by turning these things, so then when that thing was ignited, it would then burn that fuse around so long and then fire. That's how they determined the altitude to shoot or how far out to go, so it was kind of crude but it worked.

Question: It's amazing to understand the ingenuity that went into a lot of the technology that

Answer: Let's face it; this was World War I type stuff, you know.

Question: Well, you said it worked. That's the important thing.

Answer: Yeah. In those days they didn't have radar that was developed to that point. They were using visual optics, you know, to look at the range and everything, to see how high and how far away and how fast, and they'd. In those days, the were all literally hand operated, turn cranks and things, bells and whistles and that would be setting on the mount. They had 4 places by each gun and it would load these things and fire.

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So, anyway, the night ended finally. Next day we had some of our planes back in order, so we went out on a search op you might call it to see.. obviously they were long gone, but we, they sent us out anyway. And that's the day they sent us down. We went down through all the Hawaiian Islands. Down from Oahu, we went on south and went down Molokai, Maui, the Big Island, did the big circle around. At that time, there was a lot of activity there, lava coming down, and making, hitting the ocean, making a lot of steam and everything. And when we came back to Pearl, we, they developed a scheme there for security. No matter which direction you came into Oahu, you had to go the rest of the way around the island before you could come in and land at Ford Island. We happened to come in just right at the entrance there. So we had to do the whole island, which was interesting, 'cause as you look down, we were flying in there at about eleven hundred, or a thousand feet, every gun, everything was looking at us. Looking down the barrel, there'd be rifle, anti-aircraft, everybody using you for spotting practice. So we survived that ok.

Question: What was, so that would have been when you left, you got your first aerial view of Pearl?

Answer: The day after, yeah. This was on the 8th.

Question: What was that like?

Answer: Well, there's still a lot of fire, lot of smoke going on from all the burning and everything. It was just utter.. Well, you've seen the pictures. I've got lots of books with pictures. It's just, you know, everything was, like the Pennsylvania and a couple of destroyers in dry dock were all beat up. The destroyers were practically done away with. The Shaw in the floating dry dock, when she blew, that's that famous picture you see with all the big explosion. Well, I saw that from just across the water, and pieces of that ship were raining down around us. Pieces of this, pieces of that, that sort of thing. There was about 30 in our division there, and why, none of our 30 got hit with anything, which is fortunate. I saw one guy there that was, had been strafed. He had 4 bullet holes right across his belly. They were loading him into an ambulance. He was still walking. But he earned 4 purple hearts that day.

Question: Was it a reality to you, or does your mind check out and it became this kind of surreal, did it put fear in you? I mean, what goes through your head at this point?

Answer: At that moment, you didn't have time to stop and think about it. Later, you think about, Oh, my God, this could have happened or that could have happened, but it didn't. But we were still alive. That's the main thing, I guess. Well, they put our ship back together in a hurry, and we got underway, and we went out with a task force of a carrier, a few other cruisers and destroyers. I don't recall the names of any of them, and about 6 transports, loaded with Marines and supplies to try and relieve Wake Island. Well, unfortunately, they took over on the 23rd. We were actually a day away. But in a way now, it's fortunate because at that time they outnumbered us probably 3 to 1 in every category, and we would have been probably all lost if we had tangled with them at that moment. So we came back and we left all of our supplies at Midway, which turned out to be a good thing a little later on. And we were down there on Christmas Day we were straddling the dateline. It's the day before Christmas, No it's the after. No, back and forth, this sort of thing. Finally, they says, ok, we'll stay on one side. Now it's Christmas. Serve chow, so we

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had our normal holiday, which in those days turned out to be turkey and all the trimmings, so we did ok on that.

We got back to Pearl and they finished putting us together. When they put us together we weren't quite lined up. Something in one of our turbines was giving us that old bumping all the time, so they worked on that while we were in there for a few days. Then we left again there early in January, and we went south and our first duty we did was we were stuck with the duty of protecting Pago Pago, American Samoa, so we cruised around there for 3 whole weeks. Meantime, they were doing some other actions, and our skipper wanted to get into action in a hurry, and he kept pulling for it. Finally, after about 3 weeks, we did join a task force down near the New Herbildes and headed toward what later became the Guadalcanal area, but he was quite a skipper. Callahan was his name, and he would give us a pep talk every so often, and he would always end up his speech. Now this is politically incorrect today, as they say, but he said, A good Jap is a dead Jap! Everybody was Hurray! You know this sort of thing, 'cause he was getting us all hepped up for it. Well, he became Admiral later on, actually, but that's another story. Let me continue with that then. The San Francisco was involved in a few other things, but before that happened, we were with, we joined up with another carrier and we were heading up to Rabaul, which the Japs were just taking over, and we were going to give them a pasting, but we were detected by one of those Japanese four-engine big flying boats, Kawanishi types. Sure enough, that afternoon, whole bunch of bombers came out. I think they started out with 18 and 17 finally came over. Well, our fighter planes up there, the F4, the F Grummans were doing their thing, and they got in real close and the anti-aircraft opened up on them, but I was, my duty station was there on the well deck with the planes. We were ready to, since the planes each had about 110 gallons of gasoline on board, we were prepared to fly them off to avoid having all that gasoline around. So we were revved up ready to operate, so actually I looked up and witnessed Butch O'Hara, who you may know became famous later. He made his Ace there in about 4 minutes. He knocked down 5 of those bombers in 5 minutes and his guns were not even working correctly. Some of them were not firing or sick or something, but he did manage to knock 5 planes down there in those few minutes. And we could see them all coming down, one right after the other. One of those planes wasn't hit that bad. It went over us and all of our guns were opening up on them, and that's where I just about lost my hearing because you didn't have any earplugs in those days, and with all 5 inch those guns going off, all that packing was coming down on the decks. I went around and picked up a bunch of that stuff and rolled it up and stuffed in my ears. I still have a hole in my eardrum on this side, which today is useful because when I go flying I don't get that pressure build up in my ears, 'cause it leaks through. Well, anyway, those planes almost did get one of the carriers, because they straddle. All of a sudden she was just hidden with all that smoke from the water flying up from those bombs, but they straddled her but they missed her. When she came out from that cloud of smoke it was like, man, it was a good sight to see. But this one plane that was trying to crash dive on her came down right between our ships. We were shooting at it and they were shooting at it, and their shells were hitting our ship, 50 caliber stuff, and actually penetrated part way through our siding there. We had 3/8 inch or 1/2 inch steel and those bullets came about halfway through. Pull them out and there was daylight. But we survived that, so we decided then, ok, we gave up on that idea, so we went up behind the New Guinea peninsula there, and that was interesting in a way because there are lot of coral heads that were built up from the sea, and they were high enough that some of them, our ships would have hit 'em, so that's the case where they had our scouting planes flying ahead of the task force. We were marking every one of those coral heads with a smoke float. They smoke would run about 5

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minutes, so they'd plot them and dodge them and miss them. So next morning early we got way up in there, they launched all the planes from the carriers and they went overland and came down and caught the Japanese when they were landing there at Salamaua and Lae and did quite a bit of damage to them there, transports and a few other ships. And then they came back and landed and soon as they landed we got the heck out of there. Well, that's the time when our plane landed too fast, overran the sled, and whipped, knocked, the tow line knocked off the float, plane turned over, the guys were rescued and came back. So that's when that occurred. Now, it turned to be night, but we reversed course, and the navigators knew the course to follow. How many turns, how many, so this whole task force got out of there without hitting any of those coral heads that night, and it was a dark night, no moon that night that I can remember. Another interesting thing happened at that point. The day before we got there, one of our search planes from our ship got lost. This task force made a turn and they didn't catch it. They were behind a cloud of something, and we went out to relieve them about 2 in the afternoon, and they weren't there. Went to the side where the other group of planes were searching, gave the hand signal for so-and-so, question mark, they hadn't seen them, went to the other side, they hadn't seen them. So, we went back to the ship and sent a message, but we used, another method of communication was, we would drop a message by the sandbag. A little envelope made up of canvass, they'd have a, oh, maybe a half a pound of sand in it, you'd write the message up, seal it in there, and tie it up and then, you'd come in real close to the ship, and you try to throw that down the stack. Well, they would curve around, come in and land on the ship. They had everybody on board looking for it to try and stop it. Well, I saw one hit the deck and it just kept going like, it was going about 100 miles an hour, literally. The guys were trying to stop it, missed it, went over the side, so if you saw it happen and you had to give them (inaudible) message, so we'd throw out the message, CSC-15 missing. So they'd drop that message, and then we went back on duty out there. Well, I came back and found out that the Admiral, Task Force Commander, had allowed the ship to make one quick message. So they called this plane. They ran a quick direction finder thing on it, found out he was maybe 100 miles away, and he's out of fuel. So obviously he was going to land in the water. Ok. When we got through with that raid, on our way back, that next morning, our sector was ahead of the group again looking, and I noticed one the carrier dive bomber planes was doing some funny things out there. It was in our sector, so we zoomed over there, and by God, it was our plane. Floating, still floating. A lot of the fabric was pretty well torn off it, but the pilot, Thomas, and the radioman, cannon was waving at us so we went right straight back to the ship, dropped that message again. And that's one case when I really hit the bull by the horns because the signal officer, which was on the bridge just below the main bridge, there's an opening there, and he was holding his clipboard, and that damn message came in and hit that clipboard and broke it. He instantly turned and went over to pick them up, and they got the engines started again. They got in and cranked her up and they got had that thing running so they could taxi up so the ship didn't have to come to a complete stop. Well, we had to finish our two or three hours out there and came back and got to talk to them and that pilot never did figure out how he had goofed and lost somehow. I don't think he ever figured it out. Anyhow, we were back together again. But that was. Now the reason why we did that is the navigator on the Enterprise, I believe, calculated drifting, wind conditions and everything else, and figured out about where that plane would be, so they directed our force to go to that area, and by God, we got them, and that was 3 days after they went down, so that was kind of an interesting thing. Anyway, we got back to, after that then we went back toward, we were pretty well shot. We'd been out to sea about 65 days by that

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time, and the way they would refuel is the tankers would come up alongside, they'd get hooked up and they'd get the oil lines and gasoline lines and whatnot draped between the ships so they'd be feeding us and we'd have a destroyer off on the other side and we'd be feeding them. And that's when the mail would come aboard. Everything like that, so that's quite an operation. At one time, that was a really secret thing, because they didn't want the enemies to know how we did all that sort of thing. Well, make a long story short, we were running low on everything, so they let us stop off

Question: I'm going to have you hold off for just a second.