

Jacob "Sandy" Sanders

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Question: In fact, let's start with that. If you could tell me your name, branch and military and what your rank was.

Answer: My name is Jacob R. "Sandy" Sanders. A big old Texas boy from the Texas panhandle. When the depression was run down, no jobs, I wasn't good enough athlete to get a scholarship, so in 1939 I joined the US Marine Corps. After boot camp I ended up in signal school. Went to school, telephone lineman or telephone electrician. And then joined a company called First Defense Battalion. A new unit in the US Marine Corps set up to defend small islands. And we had several small islands way out in the Pacific that politicians as usual waited too long to get started fortifying. So there we were six weeks before the war started, trying to fortify that island and get ready to fight the enemy, because we knew it was coming. So that's where I was, 2,200 miles west of Pearl Harbor and I was -- had the night switchboard duty that night and got the call and heard the call that they'd bombed Pearl Harbor. I was sitting there on our -- on our camp switchboard.

Question: What went through your head? Do you remember it? I mean --

Answer: Oh, God, yeah. But we said well, general quarters immediately. We all -- luckily we'd been out there for six weeks, been working our tails off, laying telephone lines and everything else. Guys sand-bagging the gun positions, anti-aircraft, all of that. We'd had a dummy run for general quarters on Saturday, so (laughs) we all knew where to head for, immediately then. But Pearl Harbor was hit that morning right before 8 o'clock, and they hit us about 11:30. That quick. Well, they hit us with land-based bombers. They were only 400 miles away. And 36 two-motored Bettys as they call them come in there out of -- the big problem. Our biggest problem defending the island was a thousand man battalion, we had 450 of us there, and that included 50 sailors which wasn't part of our battalion. No radar, and this little island is surrounded by a big coral reef and that surf bounding off that reef, noisy as the devil. The only way you knew bombers were coming is because you saw them. You couldn't hear them or anything. And they came in on us at about 500 feet. And got seven of our 12 airplanes the first raid. Burnt down - blew hell out of everything. Luckily I was on the other side of the island. (laughs) Laying a telephone line. But it was -- it was something.

Question: How old were you?

Answer: Huh?

Question: How old were you when --

Answer: I was 21 already.

Question: Twenty-one.

Answer: I went in at 19, I was already 21.

Question: So that was your first -- I mean at that point you knew you were in a war?

Answer: Yeah, we were in a danged war, right.

Question: And you were on the far side of the island --

Answer: Yeah, but one thing about it. Talking about we were short of equipment. Three-inch anti-aircraft battery, you have a director there which is a modern day commuter,

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computer, and you have a height finder. Why, we're out there, they didn't ship all of our stuff. In my battery that I was attached to, E Battery, why, we were clear down on the point of the island. Didn't have a height finder. Clear around on the other island -- three little islands there. Wake is the bigger island and then two little islands. D Battery over there had a height finder. Well that morning, the first thing I did in general quarters, I started running a telephone line about four miles around to D Battery to hook up to their height finder so our guys could fire. And I was about a hundred yards from them when the first bombing raid hit, with the telephone line. So our battery didn't get to fire that first day.

Question: So what's it -- how would you describe the feeling when you realized that these bombers are coming in, after you --

Answer: My truck driver was driving for me. I was up in the back of the truck slinging this wire off. He saw them and he hit the brakes and damn near threw me out of the truck. I looked up and there they were already across the air strip over to our side swinging around the civilian camp where I was at bombing the heck out of it and you could see the Japanese up there on their machine guns. (gestures) getting him.

Question: They were close enough that you --

Answer: I could see them, yeah.

Question: -- had eyesight with them.

Answer: And ah, little frightening!. But it's amazing how you can get used to something. I didn't get off my feet for three days because we had so much work, all night long and everything, and invariably we'd have -- our telephone lines were all on the ground. Couldn't put them on poles or underground, just lay it on the ground. And as much activity -- we had 1,200 civilians that were building this naval base. All these trucks, equipment, bulldozers, everything, and I spent half my time repairing telephone lines that they'd run over. And invariably, most of our lines ran upside of the airstrip, right off the -- right off the airstrip. And I'd invariably be out there looking for a broken telephone line when a bombing raid would come off. No place to duck or anything. (laughs) And I love to tell the story about breaking Jesse Owens' 100-yard dash record. (laughs) I was walking, had the telephone test -- test telephone over your shoulder, abou.., what you call it, bullets in it?, rifle, everything else, pliers, all that stuff. And of course your steel helmet. Chugging along there looking for a broken telephone line, I kept thinking, looking up, looking up,.. God, and finally when I did spot the Jap planes, incidentally after that first day they went back -- they went a lot higher because we -- we taught them to get the hell up. (laughs) I kept thinking, my God, and all of a sudden, when they're about out like this, they're about at the bomb release point. And ooh, I looked up, about a hundred yards up there, there was a great big bulldozer sitting of the side of the airstrip. Telephone went this way, rifle went this way and I went hundred yards underneath that bulldozer. (laughs) And you know what happened? Forty-five minutes later I woke up. Hadn't been off my feet, laying under there and fell asleep. So you can get used to a lot of things.

Question: So the war's going on and finally you just --

Answer: God, I just pooped out. And when I finally got back and hooked in and called back to my battery, they figured I'd been blown to hell because they hadn't heard from me. And I never did tell them I was sleeping. (laughs) But that's funny how you can -- you just -- your body will do it.

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Question: That's what I was wondering if -- if -- so after the first attack, now you know war's going on.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Were you constantly overridden by fear or did --

Answer: No, I don't think I was, no. Can't believe it. No fear there. You just -- you had a job to do and you were just trying to beat those damn Japs -- excuse me, I've learned to say the enemy.

Question: That's good. But it is interesting because it is -- at that time, I know we've come to the political correctness in all that time but to you that's what they were. It was the Japs -- the enemy --

Answer: Like growing up in Texas. Using that "N-I" word.

Question: Yep, yep.

Answer: We didn't mean anything by it, it wasn't anything we were -- stigmatizing them or anything

Question: Standard operating procedure. A -- it just -- that was the word. And I had good friends and everything, blacks, but you don't do it anymore.

Question: Yeah, times change.

Question: Now how big -- those island you were on -- roughly how big was it?

Answer: Let's see, I forget now, 750 acres. There's three -- three islands. Horse-shoe shape. Wake is the bigger one. Peale over here and Wilkes over here are little bitty ones.

Question: And you were on Wake?

Answer: Yeah, I was on Wake.

Question: So from tip to tip, about how many miles?

Answer: I guess shoreline, probably ten mile, if you went shoreline all the way around it.

Question: So some people might call you a bulls-eye?

Answer: A what?

Question: A bulls-eye. A target. I mean, that's you know --

Answer: And we were lucky. The Japs - their bombing wasn't that good. And when they came in shelling from ships -- their shelling wasn't that good. They'd either fall short or get in the lagoon out in the -- luckily for us. But we have a distinction of sinking the first Japanese ship in World War II.

Question: Really.

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Answer: Yeah. Third morning of the war, sometime in the middle of the night, we figure 2, 3 o'clock in the morning, all of a sudden, boom, boom, and I don't know whether you ever heard bombs falling. Bombs don't scare you near as much as shells -- from shells. Cause the sound of those things coming through, man, and that was my first. But our commanding officer, just a major, told everybody as daybreak came, they kept, and we could see them out there, a convoy of Jap ships out there, come in trying to take that island. And they were out there about 12,000 yards, way out there, firing away at us, cruising north. They got up there and they turned little closer to the island and they'd cruise back the other way. And Devereux said keep the camouflage up on the artillery -- we had five-inch artillery too, shore artillery -- he says don't do anything. He suckered them in until about 4,000 yards, which is point blank. Opened fire and the first salvo got one of them. Three altogether, and boy, they left. (laughs) And on top of that, our five little airplanes we had left were Grumman F4F's, fighter planes. And they didn't have bombs on them, no place for bombs. But these darn guys of ours -- this Marine aircraft group that we had there, about 50 of them, figured out a way to put 200 pound bombs on those damn things. And they went out there bombing those ships. It -- it's ingenuity. But -- but when they -- they kept up bombing every day, and reconnaissance flights and everything else. And finally on the night of the 23rd of December, this started on the 8th, you know, 7th here, we was 8th out there, cross the date line. They came in there with that whole fleet that hit Pearl Harbor. Must have been 50 ships out there and by then we were running out of ammunition and everything else. That day they landed in the dark. In fact they -- they beached two small destroyers that they -- we found out later had been gutted of everything just so they could stack as many men as possible on them. Just run them straight into the beach and you hear the soldiers come off to hit the island. But the got lucky part for us, they hit our strong points on the beach. It was a pretty bad slaughter, but as the day come on, daylight and everything else and looked the situation over and here come the dive bombers and everything else. And evidently it's never been told but I'm sure that the powers that be back in Pearl Harbor, knowing there wasn't any help coming, cause of the problem they had in Pearl Harbor, and not sacrifice those 1200 civilians. They were all from up in the Northwest here, Boise Cascade I mean, the big company over in -- in Boise. And so they gave orders to surrender the island. And I was on the phone, in my gun position, I had headphones on and I handed the handset to the lieutenant, our commanding officer wanted to speak to all battery commanders. And he gave that word, and that shook me up more than the first bombing raid. Cause the background. We had a lot of our Marines that had served time in China in the old 4th Regiment observing the fight between the Japanese and the Chinese. There wasn't any sort of thing as prisoners of war. Surrender, that's stupid. They're going to kill us, why. But the main reason for Marine Corps boot camp is discipline. We were told destroy our stuff and surrender so we did. And within an hour and a half's time, I thought life was gone. Those Japs, the first one where we were at -- stripped us off naked. Add insult to injury, they took my telephone pliers and cut telephone wire. Run it around your neck and wrist and small of your back and set us down on the road there, then they set up machine guns behind us and started loading those things, we all said bye. Just knew they were going to slaughter us. But they didn't. And, but that was -- that was -- really scared me more than this bombing raid -- just the fact that we're going to surrender and -- why -- why surrender? Might as well take one or two with you.

Question: And this -- this was December --

Answer: Twenty-third.

Question: Twenty-third.

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Answer: And I was naked, and Wake Island's supposed to be tropical country. But I was naked, most of us were. Some parts of the island they didn't strip them. But in our group, they stripped us. Then they gathered us on the -- on the -- on the side of the airport that night and had guards around us -- spent the night there naked. And it ain't that tropical. (laughs) And then we spent the next night there naked. Finally on the afternoon, Christmas afternoon -- well, Japs were -- they were all discomboobled anyway, trying to pick up dead and everything else, they had working parties going. And finally late afternoon on the 25th a big flat bed truck come by, just loaded all those clothes they'd picked up everywhere. So I got clothes back. And then late that evening they brought food around -- the first food we'd had. And they were a ticklish few days. But the most -- main thing I've thought about through the years -- is those Japanese soldiers on that island -- the ones that came aboard and was there -- they didn't mistreat us, no. Had their jobs to do and everything. But -- then they moved us, finally, over to the civilian barracks, and we stayed there until the 12th of January. And on the 12th of January they put us aboard a ship called the Nita Maru which was a combination cargo passenger ship, used to make regular runs to San Francisco and L

Answer: Only they didn't put us in the passenger -- we were in the cargo holds. (laughs) But, I like to tell the story of -- they went over to the civilian camp and used the -- that civilian camp was a modern camp, everything you could think of. Government cost plus. They mimeographed traveling orders. Everyone else got a copy of traveling orders. And flowery language in there. The Great Japanese Empire and all this stuff. And first item on there -- there was about ten items on that traveling orders. Number one, while you're aboard the Great Jap -- Emperor's great ship or that stuff -- you are not to talk. The only time you will talk is when you are addressed by your superior Japanese. Disobedience of this order, you will be punished by immediate death. That's a pretty good traveling order. But actually they de-headed five of us in the 12 days on that ship. But the big part of it was, they ran around in pairs and they were Japanese Marines -- big Japs, with clubs, just come through the cargo holds, grab guys up random, beat hell out of them. And 12 days we had little old cup of barley gruel and a little old cup of barley water each day. And that was miserable. You had to lay down never stand up or anything. Only time you got up was we had a fine gallon can in each corner of the cargo hold for -- for nature. And if anybody was over there, you stayed -- laid flat. You only got up when nobody else was up.

Question: Really.

Answer: And they grabbed guys and beat them. And you like to remember back. You talk about these things -- the humorous things that happen. You say what humorous can happen? Well, this was humorous in after-thought -- not -- not the way it worked out. But they grabbed me and a buddy of mine one day. They grabbed him first, made him reach up and grab a pipe overhang, his feet was just barely touching the ground. And this Jap was behind him beating hell out of him with a club, all the way up and down his back. And they finally knocked him out. And uh, oh bright Sandy got a bright idea, watching that. I'm next. So when I got up there, I got way up, grabbed that overhang, and turned my head where I could see that blow coming, and then swaying with it, to soften it. (laughs) That other Jap pulled his big -- well, they carried these sabers which were sharp as razors. Pulled that thing out and put the point right in my belly button. (laughs) Later I laughed about it but I didn't then. I had to go back and meet the blow. But little things like that, it's amazing how you can remember those. But we were on that thing for 12 days. Stopped, I don't know what day it was, we knew we hear ships and everything; had no idea where we were at cause down in the cargo holds. And we knew it had gotten colder, real cold. But we stopped for about 24 hours and next day, here we go again. Now, where are we going? Wonder where we were and where we were going. And after two or three days, slowed down one -- we could hear noise around -- other ships and everything else, and spent the night, sitting there still. Next

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morning, here we're moving again. And finally they unloaded us and we were 50 mile out of Shanghai, Chin

Answer:

Question: Gee.

Answer: Yeah. At a prison camp they'd built up out there -- or camp, and they'd made a prison camp out of it. About five miles from where we got off the ship. But we got off the ship in the snow and 30 degree weather and most of us had on a suit of Marine Corps khaki with no undershirt. And there it was winter. But the barracks -- they weren't bad built, but there wasn't any heat. And without -- and the food. The food wasn't bad then as it was later, but it still wasn't up to real body heat, so you were cold all the time, it was miserable. But we had to cope with it. And the Japs there -- the Japs - the sailors on that ship were the most brutal we run into, but then we had occasions in this camp in Shanghai where you had -- you had beatings and what not. But the big thing -- most damaging thing is they just tormented you all the time. Running around keeping you awake at night, ranting and raving about some dang thing. But -- but they got things going. We cleared off Chin

Answer: I don't know if you've ever been out there or not. Around Shanghai it's delta country, flat, and they buried their dead on mounds for many thousand years and the Japs had took us about -- probably 10 or 15 acres around that camp, cleared out all these graves and made a big bean field. And the Chinese were mad, you couldn't blame them -- here's all the -- and of course to us it was a treasure hunt. They buried -- they bury valuables with their dead. I found a -- in one of these graves I had knocked down I found a couple beautiful silver bracelets. I ended up trading them for food -- I wish I'd brought them home. But, and in every one of those graves there'd be a pair of viper snakes, which are probably the most deadly snakes there are. So you really had to be careful. But things like that. Then later on -
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Question: What was a -- what was a day like in -- if there is a typical day in the camp? Once you were in the POW Camp, what did they do with you? What did you have to do?

Answer: Well, you just get up in the morning and go out and wash in that cold water outside. And stand around, have your breakfast and then whatever you're doing, if you're working in the bean field or what. And if you weren't working out there, most of the time, you'd exercise. Just walk around. Had two big -- had electric fence around the immediate barracks -- seven barracks, and it was only on at night. Then out around the whole camp was a big electric fence, it would kill, and it was on all the time.

Question: All the time.

Answer: Yeah. And so just.. that way until they started.. then they started 'nother deal. One time worked there for a month or two, and take working parties out every day on the local roads, which were all dirt roads, with shovels and picked, filling in chuck holes in the roads. Things like that.

Question: Did you -- did you live in fear all the time?

Answer: I guess in the background you had fear but it -- it didn't register. You just knew, God, I hope -- hope I don't screw up and they clobber me or something. But then I like to tell the story, next story about what they came up with. They were, well there's a couple in there, really. They had a propaganda lieutenant in Shanghai. Of course they controlled

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Shanghai and controlled the media and everything. And he just loved to come out there, you know the first several months of the war, Japanese were winning everything. They were all victorious. He come out there and he was a graduate of UCL

Answer: He'd lord it over us how they were whooping us, everything else. We're -- we're the masters. And also trying to be generous to us. So one time he came out and had a -- had us all out and yakety-yakety-yak, gave us all a little -- a little radio for each barracks, a couple little bitty two-bit radios. And (laughs) he underestimates Americans. He figured all we could get was a Shanghai stations, which they -- one of them was English language. Hell, in no time at all we were picking up Sydney, Australia and everywhere else -- our guys -- but then they took them away from us.

Question: So you could keep track of what was going on.

Answer: Yeah. Then they come up with an idea

Answer: This is really interesting. They preached to us out there one day, that beings we're here and we're going to have to spend the war here, we ought to be doing something for our fellow men. So they've decided we're going to build a war memorial for all fallen dead - - all these countries -- outside of Shanghai. It was probably -- where they put the spot was probably two, three miles from our camp. So they brought -- they had taken over everything in Shanghai. They brought a railroad a small gauge railroad track out there with, I don't know how many -- must have been 40 tracks of that stuff, couple 3, 400 yards long, just straight tracks. Little car towing it with boxes. We dug a lake down there and we'd fill all twenty of -- there'd be 20 cars on each track. We'd fill them all up and we'd all go up there and we'd dump them, building this mountain. The mountain was going to be the war memorial. Only thing was, they were a little stupid. For about three days time we figured out that wasn't any war memorial; it was a damn backstop for a rifle range. But I left there and we had a real international settlement in that camp in Shanghai. Among all the others, we had the Governor General of Hong Kong in there.