

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**#272**

**A. H. MORTENSEN**

**USS *OKLAHOMA*, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON  
DECEMBER 7, 1998  
BY DANIEL MARTINEZ**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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**Daniel Martinez (DM):** The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. The taping was done at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998 at approximately 5:25 p.m. The person being interviewed is A. H. Mortensen, also known as A. B.

**A. H. Mortensen (AM):** A. D.

DM: A. D. And he was aboard the USS *Oklahoma* as an ensign on December 7, 1941. For the record, A. D., would you give me your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

AM: I'm Adolph Henry Mortensen. I was born in the city of Oakland on April 10, 1916.

DM: And could you tell me, in 1941, what you considered as your hometown?

AM: Oakland, California was my hometown.

DM: Not San Francisco?

AM: No, Oakland, California. I was born and raised in Oakland.

DM: Alrighty. Give me a little bit of a background on your family. How many kids were in your family when you grew up?

AM: I had an older sister and two younger brothers.

DM: And where were you in that?

AM: I was the oldest boy.

DM: You were the oldest. Well I know what that's like...

AH: Yeah.

DM: ...so that's, talk about that maybe a little bit later. What'd your father do for a living?

AH: My father was a cabinetmaker.

DM: A cabinetmaker?

AH: He had emigrated from Denmark.

DM: All right. And your mother, what did she do?

AH: She had emigrated from Sweden and she was a housewife.

DM: And so she was in charge of those four kids?

AH: Right.

DM: Now, you grew up in the Great Depression.

AH: Correct.

DM: Was it tough on you living in Oakland at that time or...

AH: Well, I guess it wasn't easy but neither was it tough because my dad was able, fortunately, was always able to earn a living and we boys worked also.

DM: What did you do?

AH: Oh, I had an *Oakland Tribune* paper route and in the summertime I would mow the lawns and then after I graduated from high school, I got a job with the General Electric Company. I think I was only the—there was only one or two or three of us in our high school class that [*were*] able to get a job right out of high school.

DM: What did you do for the company?

AH: I eventually wound electric motors.

DM: All right.

AH: I did that for about two and a half years and then I went to UC [*University of California*] Berkeley.

DM: Okay.

AH: Took a leave of absence from G. E.

DM: Now, going back, you went to high school in Oakland.

AH: Yes.

DM: And you went to elementary school in Oakland.

AH: Yes.

DM: Were those public schools?

AH: They were public schools.

DM: And what was your favorite subject in high school? What'd you like?

AH: Oh, I guess the sciences and math especially.

DM: Okay. Did you play any sports at all?

AH: No, I didn't. I usually worked after school.

DM: Okay. And when you went to college, did you know what you wanted to major in or...

AH: Yes, I wanted to be an architect but two weeks before I enrolled in Berkeley, I switched to mechanical engineering because architects were starving to death.

DM: Okay. And so you looked at the monetary end of it...

AH: You had to.

DM: You had to because you weren't there at college just to go to college.

AH: That's right.

DM: How far did you get in college?

AH: Oh I graduated from Berkeley in 1940.

DM: So you got your...

AH: I have a B. S. [Bachelor of Science] degree in mechanical engineering.

DM: Had you planned to go to graduate school?

AH: No, I hadn't.

DM: Okay. So you were going to start your career right there?

AH: I was going to start my career. Mm-hm.

DM: So how did you get involved with the United States Navy?

AH: Well, in those days, it was compulsory to take ROTC. And since I didn't particularly care to walk, I enrolled in Naval ROTC.

DM: Okay. And so when you got involved in Naval ROTC and you graduated, did you have a commitment to join the navy or...?

AH: You didn't have a commitment, you had a commission and however I was out of school just a very few days when I got a thick envelope in the mail, said U.S. Navy, and they were my orders, to active duty.

DM: And so did they send you to boot camp?

AH: No. Since you're an ensign, you didn't go to boot camp, but I...

DM: Where did you go?

AH: I went to—they sent me to Penn State College. It was Penn State College in those days. Now it's Penn State University. For a course in diesel engineering. And when I finished that I got orders, believe it or not, to the submarine *Stingray*. I reported to *Stingray* and...

DM: Where was the *Stingray* located?

AH: In Honolulu.

DM: Okay.

AH: In Pearl Harbor. And I reported aboard and I think I would've enjoyed it except that they had no space. And I was sleeping in the wardroom and the chest, the cooks who had to get up and stewards would get up at four o'clock in the morning and start rattling pots and pans in the next room where there was no door closures or anything. And the rest of the officers played poker 'til midnight and one o'clock in the morning and after grumbling about that one day at lunch time, the skipper looks at me and he says, "You don't like it on here, I'm going to get you off."

So it didn't bother me at all that I got orders to the *Oklahoma*.

DM: And...

AH: I hadn't requested submarine duty.

DM: They just...

AH: It was...

DM: When did you report aboard the *Stingray*? What year was that?

AH: Oh, that was in, I would say maybe the first of July, last of June in 1941.

DM: Okay, so that was several months before the attack.

AH: Oh yes, yes.

DM: Now, you go aboard *Oklahoma*, a battleship, that's much different than a submarine.

AH: Completely different.

DM: And...

AH: And it was heaven.

DM: You liked it?

AH: I enjoyed it thoroughly.

DM: What kind of ship was the *Oklahoma*?

AH: It was real happy ship. I felt right at home, right off the bat, you know. And on the submarine, there wasn't another ensign. There was all lieutenants and above.

DM: How many ensigns on the *Oklahoma*?

AH: Oh, we had forty-three.

DM: So you were at home?

AH: Yeah, mm-hm.

DM: Can you—I have a very specific question about the *Oklahoma*. All the battleships were painted in a paint scheme before the war started. It was dark gray with light gray tops.

AH: That's correct.

DM: Called a measure paint scheme.

AH: Yeah. Mm-hm.

DM: Were you on board when that happened?

AH: I don't remember the paint job. No, I don't.

DM: So...

AH: I think it was probably painted by the time I got on board. Mm-hm.

DM: Okay and she had a false bow wave painted on her side as well.

AH: No, I don't believe that was true. I believe it was...I remember the light gray battleship gray paint.

DM: Right. And then...

AH: Not even the dark gray.

DM: Okay. Well, later on in that year, they did get the paint scheme. I've often wondered. I've been trying to time when this paint schemes were applied, 'cause [*those*] were their battle colors on December 7.

AH: Yeah, I can't answer that.

DM: No problem. Still be in search of that answer, I suppose.

AH: Okay.

DM: You go on board and where are you assigned?

AH: I was assigned to the "B" division, Boneyard Division. They only had a "B" division officer, an ensign, and he needed an assistant. And Joe Hittorff had graduated in the class of '40, U. S. Naval Academy and I graduated from Berkeley in '40, ROTC, Naval ROTC. And he and I really hit it off. We enjoyed one another's company.

DM: Now, when you're down in the boiler room area, depending where you are, was the area where you worked very warm?

AH: Boiler rooms are always hot.



DM: Right. And so where you were, it was hot. It was over a hundred degrees?

AH: When you were in the boiler rooms, they were hot, but they have intakes, you know, and you, whenever you weren't doing something you specifically had to do, you were standing under this intake of cooler, outside fresh air coming in from the outside.

DM: Now these were blowers...

AH: They're blowers, right. Not air conditioning...

DM: Right.

AH: Not air conditioning, just blowers.

DM: So that would make it tolerable in there?

AH: It was tolerable.

DM: Okay. What was your job specifically?

AH: Assistant "B" division officer.

DM: Okay. So you supervised sailors, operators...

AH: I was learning to supervise.

DM: Okay. Going aboard the *Oklahoma* just a few months before the attack, you started to learn the ropes of the ship. Now...

AH: Yeah.

DM: Did you get a, did anybody ever give you a tour of the ship, so you knew her from stem to stern?

AH: Well that take place over perhaps a period of weeks. As you stood engineering watches, not just "B" division engineering watches, but

engineering watches and you'd—in the evening, you had what they call, you made the eight o'clock report. And you would have to tour all the engineering spaces, climb in and out of everything and see everything that was secured.

DM: Right.

AH: And then you'd make a report. So you climbed in and out of everything to find out what was happening and...

DM: I suspect that you did make it to the bridge, got to see that operation up there at all?

AH: Very little.

DM: Okay.

AH: There was enough to do in engineering to begin with.

DM: How about up on the big, it was a tripod mast, there was—the mainmast was tripod. Did you ever get up there for a look and see the ship from that angle?

AH: I don't recall ever climbing up into the mast, but I don't believe I did. Now I did on a ROTC cruise.

DM: Uh-huh.

AH: On the *Colorado*.

DM: Okay.

AH: Yeah, mm-hm. Climbed up the mast.

DM: Very impressive. You're up way up high on the mast...

AH: That's right.

DM: ...these firing control platforms are pretty interesting.

AH: Right.

DM: Did you have any idea or feeling or a sense that war clouds were gathering in the Pacific, that it was getting a little tense out there?

AH: I'm sure that we had a feeling for that because there'd been no justification. We're building up the personnel in the fleet and we were getting more and more. The enlisted personnel were coming on board and we even had four ensigns that came on board, oh, it might have been sometime in November. I would say early November. And they had to sleep in passageways. And that's on cots. And that's not a very comfortable thing to do. And in anticipation, I think, of learning to operate the ship. And then the more senior officers moving on.

DM: Now, you were in the same battleship division with the *Arizona* and I believe the *Nevada*. Is that correct?

AH: Yes, the *Nevada* principally. The *Nevada* and the *Oklahoma* operated together.

DM: Okay.

AH: Quite frequently.

DM: Now, you, there was a lot of maneuvers that you were involved in.

AH: Right.

DM: What was the pattern of the navy, well, the battleship navy? Did you guys go out on a Monday and come back on a Friday, or rotate at sea? How did that all work?

AH: Now, when I came on board, I really don't remember the operation that was going on above. I was down...

DM: You knew the operation below.

AH: I knew the operation that was going on down below. It...

DM: Now, you were located on the, what, the third deck down?

AH: The main boiler control and the forward boiler control were on, classified as third deck.

DM: Okay.

AH: That's one deck below the second deck. The second deck or the overhead of the third deck was armor-plated.

DM: Okay.

AH: And so from there on down it was covered.

DM: Okay.

AH: And then the boiler rooms were down below that particular area.

DM: Okay. And so that would place you about mid-ships, is that correct?

AH: Exactly mid-ships. Exactly mid-ships.

DM: That weekend, the fleet came in. I believe the *Oklahoma* came in on a Friday.

AH: It did.

DM: And tied up, the *Arizona* was getting tied up, and the *Nevada* was getting tied up. And you guys were secure for the weekend.

AH: We were tied up outboard of the *Maryland*.

DM: Okay. So you're the outboard ship to the *Maryland*?

AH: Right.

DM: Right there on the east side of Ford Island?

AH: Correct.

DM: Now, what was, were you going to look forward to a nice leisurely weekend, or did you have the duty?

AH: I had the duty. I was J.O.D. from—I had the mid-watch Saturday night. Saturday night.

DM: Now what's the mid-watch? What are those hours?

AH: Oh from midnight to four a.m.

DM: Okay.

AH: But you always relieved quarter to and then you were relieved quarter to. So I was relieved at quarter to four.

DM: All right. And then you, what, retired to your compartment?

AH: Correct.

DM: Where was your compartment located?

AH: It was on second deck, port side, very far forward.

DM: Okay. I gather you just retired, went to sleep?

AH: Oh, I put on PJ bottoms and got in that upper bunk and I was, I guess I zonked out in just a few seconds.

DM: What time did you wake up the next morning, Sunday, December 7, 1941?

AH: Well I woke up when Herb RO-MEL, Ensign Herb RO-MEL passed this word, "Air raid, air raid! Get moving. This is no drill!"

And he used the phrase, “no shit,” in there. And which is a term you’d never use over a P.A. system. Not only that, I guess I was perhaps due to wake up anyway because I heard this. And here is a voice I recognized, Herb RO-MEL, an ensign when usually a quartermaster would’ve come on the P.A. system.

DM: Does RO-MEL have a peculiar voice?

AH: Yeah, I thought he is. I recall now he certainly had a little gravelly, scratchy voice, compared to the rest of us.

DM: Right.

AH: Yeah.

DM: So you hear this announcement and what’d you think?

AH: I said, well I knew—I instantly knew that something was happening. And so I jumped out of bed and Maurie, he had the bottom bunk, and he and I got out of that bunk the same time. And I put on slippers. I had PJ bottoms on. You know, it’s hot in Pearl Harbor, even December. You only had one porthole in our stateroom.

DM: Did you have a t-shirt on?

AH: Oh no.

DM: You’re bare-chested?

AH: Bare-chested. And I grabbed my billed hat and put it on and stepped out the door, in the passageway, and crossed over to the starboard side. And then, going aft, into the JO (*Junior Officers*) wardroom, and just as I came opposite the number one barbette, the number one turret, the first torpedo hit. And it lifted that ship up twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty—it’s hard to say how much it was raised up. It was just a big muffled boom and it jumped right up. And then it settled back slowly. And of course we knew, I knew that the day of infamy had begun. That wasn’t a term that I knew of

then, but I—Walter [*Lord*] concocted that one or Franklin Roosevelt concocted that.

DM: Well, and at that point, had you got outside to see anything?

AH: No.

DM: So everything, you were in the interior of the ship?

AH: Yes.

DM: You were hearing these explosions?

AH: No. No, I didn't hear any explosion before they hit. The very first, the very first one hit our ship.

DM: Okay.

AH: That's when I got the muffled boom.

DM: And then followed by the ship lifting up?

AH: Right away, mm-hm.

DM: And you knew the ship had been struck by something.

AH: Oh, absolutely. Oh, you bet. Yeah.

DM: And then you went where?

AH: Oh, I continued aft, pass the stewards' galley and slipped over the threshold into warrant officer country, which was always nice and clean, you know, painted. And I think we had four warrant officers, so there were four staterooms on that starboard side. And continued through that into second—no—boiler division, "B" division living compartment. And that was the first one inside from warrant officer country. And there was a passageway maybe fifteen, twenty feet into that area in which there is, just seemed like a blank space. And then there is a big massive deck hatch through the armor-

plated deck. And that thing is probably four feet by six feet with a ladder going down. And down I went and as I recall most everyone that was supposed to be at forward boiler control was there at the time. And I can remember now one person pulling the hatch down and dogging it.

DM: And so in your section, you guys were going about the task of securing the ship...

AH: That's correct.

DM: ...for watertight integrity.

AH: That's correct. And lighting off the boilers.

DM: Why? You lit off the boilers?

AH: No, no. But that would've been the thing that would've been done.

DM: Had it been ordered.

AH: Had it been ordered. But we didn't get any orders. We didn't get any orders at all. Even voice communication to the bridge was non-existent. You can talk to the bridge but if there's nobody up there to answer, or they're not answering, it didn't do you any good. And the old sound-powered telephone that connected the bridge also and I guess one or two other stations wasn't getting, doing any good either.

DM: Meanwhile, were you starting to feel the other torpedo hits coming in?

AH: Yes. And I can't tell you just exactly when the torpedoes began to hit, but I would say that when I hit, when I came down through the hatch and hit the deck, the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth torpedoes hit and it just seemed to be a swarm. It was just one after the other.

DM: And did it knock you off your feet? Did the ship...

AH: No.



DM: ...shudder or...?

AH: No, the only torpedo that actually did something to the ship other than blast holes in it, was the very first torpedo, because evidently it had hit in a spot where it could and it had the force that it could lift the entire ship. But then as the swarm hit, you know, and the holes got bigger and bigger, this filled with water.

DM: Right.

AH: And so probably, you know, it didn't have as much energy to push against all that water.

DM: Now were you sensing a list of the ship?

AH: Oh yes. I think the list occurred the moment I started going down the ladder.

DM: Okay. And now this list becomes more and more severe?

AH: It gets more severe and it didn't go down to forty-five degrees, as you read in so many reports, because we were standing on the deck, not on the bulkhead.

DM: Okay.

AH: And not in any scupper or corner.

DM: Did you have an inclinometer in that area at all?

AH: No, we didn't. No, no.

DM: So you were, you could guess-timate what the list was?

AH: I could just guess-timate. That's all I can do and that's all I can do today. And I assume that the only inclinometer would have been up on the bridge.

DM: Inclinometer? Thank you for correcting me. But it starts to get pretty bad?

AH: It got bad.

DM: And did you think she was going over or what did you think?

AH: No. It gradually went over to a particular point there and then it held itself and it stayed there. And you know, we didn't say much to one another. There was nothing to say because we were waiting for instructions from the outside.

DM: How many men were down there with you?

AH: In forward boiler control, there was not over five. Four or five.

DM: But all around you in different compartments were men?

AH: That's right. The, see, when I came into the, our second "B" division living quarters, the mess tables were still set up. Mess benches were still there. Stuff was still on the tables. I didn't know whether they'd finished breakfast or not and I assume they probably had. But all of those fellows, they were water tenders or firemen, or whatever, were down in the fire rooms. And I do remember one fellow, he did follow me down the ladder and he was going down to one of the fire rooms and I can remember him spinning the handle, going into the air lock and spinning it shut, and I said to myself, I wonder what he's going to find down there. And you know, I told myself that there's no way you're going to light off these boilers. And what good would it do when you had a list of twenty degrees.

DM: Was there any word to abandon ship?

AH: None whatsoever. None whatsoever.

DM: No communication?

AH: No communications at all.

DM: Was that frustrating?

AH: It was frustrating to me because I would ask, "Call the bridge again, talk to the bridge," and they just say nothing.

DM: In these latter years, have you talked to anybody that was up at the bridge or found out...

AH: No, no.

DM: ...for your own satisfaction why...

AH: No.

DM: ...was communications cut off by the explosions, was it just too much happening, or indifference?

AH: No. It was not indifference. I think it was just so many things were happening so fast. And for one thing, you know, perhaps most of the married men were ashore.

DM: Right.

AH: And so that left the more junior officers on board ship. And the most senior officer was Captain Kenworth (*Cdr. Jesse L. Kenworthy, Jr.*), the executive officer. And...

DM: What was his name, the executive officer?

AH: Kenworth. (*Kenworthy*)

DM: Kenworth. (*Kenworthy*)

AH: Kenworth (*Kenworthy*) the Kenworthy, Kenworth. (*Kenworthy*)

DM: Okay.

AH: Yeah. Oh, he was a commander, Commander Kenworth (*Kenworthy*). And so I think it was just total confusion at that particular time.

DM: Now...go ahead.

AH: Although we didn't even have any communications to main boiler control, which is the passageway to the stern, to the rear, to the stern of the ship.

DM: You couldn't talk to them?

AH: No. And why we couldn't, I don't understand. But we hung there for a short period of time and the lights would blink and off, and the cordite smell, you know, the smell of exploding torpedoes, was being sucked in by the blower.

DM: So you could start to smell this?

AH: Oh, we smelled it, yes. There was a little bit of smoke coming along—perhaps quite a bit of smoke coming in with this. But we weren't there all that long when all of a sudden, I looked down the passageway, in the short distance, there was a hatch. And one of these where the hatch height is maybe, oh the hatch, you can crawl through the hatch, but you have to step over...

DM: Right.

AH: ...the combing or whatever it is.

DM: Sort of like a submarine hatch.

AH: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And I saw the dogs moving. And it didn't take long before that was open and about seven or eight fellows poured in from main boiler control, including the division officer and Bill Goggin (*Daryl H. Goggin*), who is the warrant machinist. And Joe looked at me, he says, "Abandon ship."

And you know, that sounded really good to me. (Chuckles) Well, you know, I didn't feel that I was—I was certain that that ship wasn't going to go any place. But maybe continue listing.

DM: Right.

AH: And it sure wasn't going to go out of the harbor. You couldn't make it move. You couldn't light. We only had one boiler. When you're...

DM: So you suspected the damage was very severe.

AH: Oh, I knew it. I'm—I was trained as a mechanical engineer and I'm very mechanical anyway.

DM: Right.

AH: And you have a feeling when things get to the point where they're not going to go and get any better.

DM: The integrity of the ship had been sacrificed.

AH: It was gone.

DM: So these guys come forward...

AH: Yes.

DM: ...and so now what do you do?

AH: One fellow undogged that hatch over our heads. And fortunately, that thing was hinged and sprung so that when the last dog went off, I could still see and hear that thing going up with a whoomp. Whereas when it has springs on it, you only have to push it up, put your shoulders against it to lift it up, if it were just on a level surface. And we scrambled up that ladder and that ladder was pretty darn steep now.

DM: Right.

AH: Very steep. And you know a ship's ladder still had rungs on it, were that wide. It was more like a steep pair, set of stairs than a ladder. And we scrambled up and we all got out of there and \_\_\_\_\_ stepped over the combing into that little compartment like I described, into "B" division living compartment, and there we really saw chaos.

DM: What'd you see?

AH: Well, the tables of course were—I don't remember if they were upside down, but they had slid down into the corner and there were some berths that were against the bulkheads, you know, that had popped loose and so they're swinging on their chains. And coffee pots and slop all over the decks. And so we got up there and Joe Hittorff, the division officer, said, looked at me, he says, "Let's try to get back to chief quarters. They've got fifteen-inch portholes back there."

And I think he said that because in the living quarters there was maybe three or four portholes, the smaller variety. I always thought they were eleven inches, but my wife says they can't be. So I'll settle for twelve.

DM: Okay.

AH: And they all had two or three fellows lined up behind them and they were trying to get out through those portholes. And the last one towards the stern, and that was just before the doctors' offices, the doctors, the medical department was right there, kind of came into second division, or "B" division quarters. Here was Chaplain Schmitt, Aloysius Schmitt.

DM: Yeah.

AH: Yeah.

DM: Let me make this clear. Where you were was on the...

AH: Starboard side.

DM: ...starboard side.

AH: Starboard side.

DM: Because the port side was now dipped.

AH: Dipped.

DM: Okay.

AH: Dipped.

DM: So that was dipped.

AH: It was...

DM: And you were going to starboard...

AH: Yes.

DM: ...and the chaplain, Aloysius Schmitt...

AH: Was on the starboard side.

DM: And what was he doing?

AH: He was pushing, helping push fellows through the porthole. And you know when you could get a glimpse on the outside, you'd see one person maybe, and I did see at least one, helping pull from the outside. And you know, it'd be very, very difficult to squeeze through a porthole unless somebody helped you, had pushed from the inside, and somebody helped you pull from the outside.

DM: Right.

AH: And because you have no purchase for your legs and feet.

DM: Nothing to push off of.

AH: Nothing to push off against. And the twelve-inch porthole is still pretty darn small.

DM: Right.

AH: And so we went, we were trying to get back to chief's quarters, where they had these fifteen-inch portholes. And we had made it just to what is called the crossover, where you could cross from one side of the ship to the other side. And that's about the only spot on the ship that I knew where you could stand and see a porthole on the starboard side and a porthole in the port side at the same time.

DM: Okay.

AH: And just as we came to that point, the ship started to roll.

DM: She was going over?

AH: She was going over. And there was a porthole—I saw the water come in on the port side, from both the bow and the stern, just about the same time, flood in. And then there was a little waterfall from one of the portholes that was still was open. And it made a little waterfall until the port went under the water. And she just kept on rotating and as it rotated and the water came in—you know, swimming in Hawaii is a wonderful thing, and the water is nice and warm. And I just, you know, not like taking a cold bath. And it was really comfortable to sit there or stand there and let the water come in and then I started treading water. And I, you know, I said to myself, I can't fight this. I can't do anything about it. I'm just going to let the water take me where it's going to take me.

And as I treaded water, I just briefly looked around to see what happened to Hittorff, and he was gone. And I looked for Goggin, and he was gone. And I found out later that neither of them could swim. And Goggin had been on board, I think, since 1917, when the ship went into commission. And he was a man in his, close to fifty, I would presume. And Hittorff, four years at the naval academy and still not being able to swim. That's incomprehensible to me.

DM: When you say they were gone...

AH: They disappeared.

DM: All right. We're going to stop tape to change tape.



END OF TAPE #24

TAPE #25

DM: These two individuals that disappeared, that couldn't swim, do you know that—they died, right?

AH: Yes. Yes. They couldn't do anything but.

DM: What were you going to do now? Did you have any—had the lights gone out?

AH: Well, we still had—I don't know if lights were out or not.

DM: You had sunlight in there?

AH: There was sunlight in there. There was thin light in there at that particular time because there was enough portholes open that sunlight was streaming in. Now, I might back up just a little teeny bit. Also at the stern end of "B" division was a deck hatch and a ladder up to the main deck. And the only place I saw any panic or crowd of people was at that area. The deck hatch was closed but there was an escape hatch, you know, a round escape hatch, in the deck hatch. And that was open and one by one, they were trying to go through that, and they were pushing. And there might have been twelve, fifteen fellows around there trying to make that, make it out.

DM: When you say panic, what do you mean?

AH: Well, I think they weren't taking, they were pushing one another and I mean they were crowding, you know, like you would...

DM: They weren't being orderly, they were trying to get the heck out of there.

AH: They were trying to get the heck out of there. That's right.

DM: How did that strike you at the time?

AH: Well, I thought it was kind of funny that somebody, the ship being in the condition that it was, why not open up that hatch and let everybody stream out? Because it was obvious that they...

DM: Why didn't they?

AH: That's something I'll never know. I'll never know.

DM: At one point, it had, when—were you frightened at any time during this whole thing and scared, or did everything move in slow motion, or what was your mental condition at the time?

AH: I don't think I was all that frightened. For some reason, I had the idea that I was going to get out. I was still alive.

DM: So you didn't think you were going to die, you just thought I'm going to get out of this somehow.

AH: That's what I thought.

DM: Okay.

AH: That's what I thought.

DM: So now the ship's turning over. Two of the people you were with have been swept away.

AH: I don't know if they'd been swept away, because the water just came in. It was very gentle. Just very, very gentle. Just one minute the water wasn't there and the next minute the water was there.

DM: And when the water came up, the two people you were with weren't there.

AH: Right. They weren't there. They just weren't there.

DM: So what did you do next?

AH: I was treading water and I just watched the ship rotate around me, and here was the—I've always called this little compartment of the medical department the dispensary.

DM: Right.

AH: But the pharmacists called it the pharmacy.

DM: And that's where you were?

AH: And that's where. And the door was open. And the ship just passed, the door just passed over me, and as the door passed over me, the medicine cabinets against the bulkhead—and they were painted all white with little panes of glass. The medicine bottles slipped down and actually popped the doors open and I got a shower of little pill bottles. But they didn't do any damage, I was just treading water.

DM: But isn't that an odd feeling, that the overhead now slips away and then the deck is...

AH: It's a very odd feeling to notice the overhead going down and the bulkhead coming up, and then finally the deck coming up over your head. The ship just rotated.

DM: Around you?

AH: Around me, as I was treading water.

DM: And literally your world turned upside down?

AH: The world was turned upside down. Mm-hm.

DM: Now, does it cause any disorientation?

AH: No, none whatsoever. Not to me.

DM: Okay.

AH: Now, you know, you've read stories and you've read Walter Lord's account. And George Murphy?

DM: Mm-hm.

AH: How they could come up with conclusions like they did, I don't know. That—well, we'll get into that a little later on if we have some more time.

DM: Sure.

AH: But anyway, so there was, we found ourselves—and there [*were*] five of us, a total of five of us that wound up in this pharmacy. Now the pharmacy on board the *Oklahoma* is probably, I don't know how big your kitchen is at home, but probably no bigger than your kitchen at home.

DM: Right.

AH: And it was kind of an eerie feeling. The only time I felt a little anxious—and I knew the ship fairly well, and I had seen this porthole that came up and the deck come up and the porthole go down. So I knew there was a porthole in that area, and I said to myself, if we're going to get out of the ship, we have to get out through that porthole.

And the...

DM: Now, were the men in there with you enlisted?

AH: I'll come to that in just a moment.

DM: Sure.

AH: As the deck came up and the deck was—are you familiar with these little old-fashioned hexagonal white tiles?

DM: Sure.

AH: That was the deck.

DM: Okay.

AH: And it was kind of an eerie feeling to see that thing up and it came up and the scupper, the corner where the outside of the ship, the side of the ship and the deck were together. And then I don't know if the ship was coming down or the water level was coming up. But anyway, we had this triangle of air, and if it has any length to it, that makes it a prism. And you know, I said to myself, I hope this portion of the ship is watertight and airtight. And because the water passed the—although the porthole was secured, this triangle got smaller and smaller and smaller as the triangle came down on our head. And finally, the rate of acceleration of this occurrence got less and less, and finally the water level stopped.

DM: Where was the water level on you?

AH: When you're treading water, it's right here.

DM: So you were still, you couldn't stand on anything?

AH: No.

DM: You were still treading water.

AH: We were all. There was—I looked around, it was dark. It was dark, but it wasn't completely black. And anybody who tells you it was completely black has not got the right story. It was dark. However...

DM: Where was any light coming from?

AH: We had—John Austin was with us. He was the ship's carpenter. He never went anyplace without a five-cell flashlight, one of those big, old, long flashlights.

DM: Right.

AH: And we had light. He shined it on for a little while. But then he shut it off. But that didn't matter because the door to the compartment that swung open was hanging open and light was coming in through other portholes and

filtering up through. So we had a blue hazy light in there. You could make...

DM: Kind of surreal.

AH: Surreal. You could make out objects and I could make out heads. And they'd, you know, as your eyes become accustomed to this dim light, you could see better. And I could recognize John Austin, he was on the back bulkhead, and I was toward the front bulkhead and I was closest to this porthole. And I had seen this porthole go down. And then there were three other fellows in there. Two I didn't recognize at all. One I did. He was a tall, skinny kid in "B" division. And the third one, well, the third one, well as I say, two I couldn't recognize. When the third one was a senior wardroom steward—a little boy from Guam. And I said to myself, we're not going to have too much time in here. And as I look back at it, we probably had a triangle maybe three feet on one side, four feet on the other, and five feet. So it was a—we maybe had two cubic yards of fifty, sixty cubic feet of air, that was about it, to last.

DM: Who took charge in there?

AH: I had a hat on and nothing else on, except PJ bottoms. I'm sure by that time I lost my slippers. And I, since I had seen that porthole, I dove down and I said to myself, I hope this thing is just hand-dogged. I reached for a dog wrench. Most compartments have a dog wrench that they clip. And why they need one, because I never saw anybody use these dog wrenches on 'em. But I reached for it and there's a clip there, but there wasn't any dog wrench. And I told myself, I hope it's hand-dogged. And I tried those things and they were just hand-dogged. And when the last dog came off, the battle port, which normally goes up and is clipped up, fell down, with a "whoomp."

DM: Because it was upside down.

AH: Because it was upside down. And but if it's not upside down, then the glass part is just laid down.

DM: Right.

AH: And you have to lift it up. And in this case, I had to hold it up. And so I held it up and there was just enough room to hold it up and have my chin out of water.

DM: Okay.

AH: And so I said, “Who’s first?” I didn’t say anything else, “Who’s first?”

And this seaman who I did not know. I guess I had seen him in the ship, I sure didn’t know his name. And I—he dove and he started poking around. I remember he poked around my knees two or three times and finally he got through. And I told myself, if he could get through that porthole, then I can get through. I could fit.

DM: Now, at that time, just for interest’s sake, what was your height and what was your weight?

AH: I weighed 144 pounds and five feet eight inches tall.

DM: Okay.

AH: Mm-hm.

DM: And...

AH: At that time I weighed 144.

DM: And excuse me for asking, but it’s important to the story, what was your waist size, for your trousers? Were you a thirty-two or thirty-four?

AH: I think I was a thirty-two.

DM: Okay.

AH: I’m pretty sure I was a thirty-two. I’m only a thirty-four now.

DM: Okay. So a thirty-two. So an important question to ask. And so this first guy went through, now did you ever find out who that guy was?

AH: I never knew who he was until 1981.

DM: How did you find out?

AH: And I'll tell you that when we come to a little bit later on.

DM: Okay. All right, keep going.

AH: Okay. And so I didn't even say, "Who's next?" because the second one was this kid in "B" division, name was Kellogg, and I didn't ever know his first name, but it's Gale Kellogg. He was still on the roster a while back, so he must have made it to the outside. But anyway, he was a tall, skinny kid and he went down and he went through there with no trouble.

And then the third one, he was the closest one to me, was the boy from Guam, the steward. And he was a little fellow. And he was, had his hands, he was praying. And but his eyes were open. His eyes were open. And I said, "You're next."

And he shook his head. And he said, "No.

And I, you know, I assumed that any kid from Guam knew how to swim and he was treading water anyway. So I reached over and took his head and pushed it down into the vicinity of the port and he went through with no problem.

DM: Do you think he was just frightened?

AH: I think he was just frightened. He just was frightened. Mm-hm. And then the air was getting pretty bad. You know, I guess you use up oxygen in a hurry.

DM: Especially when you're scared.

AH: When the adrenaline is flowing, I guess.



DM: Right.

AH: And so that left myself and John Austin. And if John Austin had weighed 160 pounds or less, it would've been his turn. But he knew he couldn't make it, I'm sure. He didn't say a single word. He had a very anguished look on his face. And he had been hanging onto a bulkhead and he just came over and moved over and reached down and held the port. And I didn't get a chance to say anything to him because I knew that I could just sense the oxygen was almost gone. I said, if I'm going to get myself out of here, I gotta get out in a hurry.

DM: Now, why couldn't John Austin get through?

AH: He weighed 215 pounds. And so I dove and went through, left arm first and then your head, and then your right shoulder and finally it's easy until you get to your hips. And then I pushed, but the hips went right on through with no big problem. And at that time, I opened my eyes and looked overhead. And you know, I don't know why I—I said to myself, ah, there's skylight up there. The sky is up there. But why it didn't register to me, why that color wasn't green or blue instead of a golden brown hue, I don't know. It was a golden brown hue and I kicked off for the surface and I had to swim, literally swim, to the surface. It was a long way up there.

DM: How many feet do you think it was?

AH: I think it was at least eighteen, twenty feet, maybe even twenty-two feet. Because \_\_\_\_\_, when you only see the bottom of the ship as kind of a whale. And from where the water line is down from that porthole is a long way down there. And so—and I came straight up and the hull is at an angle. And so when I came up and hit the surface, now I understand why it was a golden brown hue instead of blue and gold, blue or green.

DM: And why is that?

AH: Because it must have had three, four, five inches of fuel oil floating on the surface. And so I looked around and there was little, lot of fellows, maybe

five, six, seven fellows, just kind of hanging on the ship. Maybe ten yards away, ten feet away, ten feet away.

DM: Did you see the fellows you were with?

AH: You know, I swam over and joined them. And I, you know, just kind of dog-fashioned to get over there.

DM: Dog paddled over?

AH: Dog paddled over to get over there. And I looked around, I couldn't recognize a single one. But one fellow recognized me. And he said, he called me by name, "Mort."

And I looked real closely and it was an Ensign Bill McClelland. And he could recognize me. And then when I looked real close, I could see it was Bill.

DM: All of you had oil on your face?

AH: We were just like tar babies.

DM: Did that get into your eyes?

AH: Oh yes.

DM: Stung?

AH: Well, enough of it that that's another part of the story. Well we kind of discussed what to do and some of the fellows wanted to swim around the ship and go out to Ford Island. And I didn't know whether that was a good idea or not. But I don't think they were there maybe ten minutes when a forty-foot navy motor launch was coming in towards us. And but they wouldn't come in all the way. And they stopped out there maybe twenty yards.

DM: Was the raid still going on?

AH: I would say the first part of the raid was almost over. But they—I'll tell you what, when I look around the harbor, you could see just splashes all over the place. And I assume that that had to be shrapnel that was coming back to earth because it was little black puffs all over it and white puffs all over the sky.

And so but they wouldn't come in all the way and I swam out to 'em. And I was the first one to reach this forty-foot motor launch. And I stuck one arm up and it was, there were three Marines on board. Although they had khakis on, you know, they were starched and they were just like Marines, as clean as could be. And one fellow reached down and grabbed my arm and they dropped me back in. And he did that twice, but finally enough oil was scraped off that he could reach, get my arm up high enough that I could get the gunwale. And once I got the gunwale, then I could kick myself and lift myself in. And I was the first one in. And they picked up, it might have been three or four, five more that came out and swam out and got in also. But evidently they didn't like it out there and they took all four to Merry Point Landing, Liberty Landing. And I guess we, first off, I was covered with oil from head to foot, and I thought—and their motor launch was absolutely crystal clean. And I felt badly that I was getting oil on the deck. And I didn't sit down. And finally my feet went out from under me. I said, to hell with this, and so I sat on the thwort. And I didn't feel badly after that. But I think we had gone in, maybe, we had traveled maybe 2 or 300 yards and there was a Marine sitting right across from me and he took a look at me, and evidently he didn't like the looks of what he saw, because he stood up, took off his trousers, took off his skivvies, tossed me his skivvies and put his trousers back on. And I put his skivvies on.

DM: Does that mean you were naked when you were in the...

AH: I didn't have a stitch on. I didn't have a stitch on. The only thing I had on was the turquoise ring that was smashed. And how it got smashed, I don't know. And I lost that someplace within the last five years. I used to show it when I give talks.

But then when we hit the Merry Point Landing, somebody said, "Go on up to the receiving ship and receiving station and take a shower."

And so I did and went up to the second deck, and there's spigots coming out of the big shower room and there was two ten-gallon cans of kerosene and a bunch of rags, and I don't remember if I took a shower first or—I'm sure I didn't. I tried, I took some kerosene on some rags and got the worst of it off and then took a shower. But even then, ten percent was still left on.

When I came out, they had some piles of dungarees there and I found a shirt and a pair of trousers and some shoes that are about four sizes too big for me, went outside, went around the corner towards the main gate and here comes a Zero strafing right down that main drive, you know where the \_\_\_\_\_ golf course, by the golf course?

DM: Right.

AH: And so I got my nose back in a hurry. And then I went down, I wandered down towards the Liberty Landing, and I ran into navy, Bill Ingram, Bill Ingram, the fellow that I had the mid-watch with? And here he was, all ready to go, two pearl-handled revolvers, one on each hip. Where he got those, I don't know.

DM: (Chuckles) But he was ready to go to war?

AH: He was ready. Yeah.

DM: Now, what about the men that were in that compartment with you? Did you...

AH: I didn't see any of them.

DM: Even in the water, you didn't see?

AH: Even—I couldn't recognize them. I could not recognize them.

DM: But they did survive?

AH: George Smith did, the first one out did. Kellogg, I understand, made it. I don't know about the steward, steward mate nor—do you know what happened to John Austin? He received the Navy Cross.

DM: May I ask you something?

AH: Yes.

DM: This issue of John Austin is one that affects you.

AH: Yes.

DM: The hard question here, and one I need to ask you is, why does the death of John Austin affect you so much?

AH: Just because I had to leave him behind.

DM: And as an officer, your duty was to look out for the welfare of men that were with you? Or was it something more than that?

AH: Well, it's probably just more than that. You know, I knew at the time I couldn't do anything for him, so....

Then after around going down to Liberty Landing and finding Bill Ingram and Adam DE-MEER, Ensign Adam DE-MEER was there at the same time. Bill said, "Let's go on out to the *Oklahoma*."

And see, he literally commandeered a motor navy whaleboat. And the coxswain put up a protest, but Bill said, "We're going," so we climbed on board, went out to the *Oklahoma* and Commander Kenworthy was up there and there was probably eight or nine or ten fellows, BOATS BOS-KEY was up there. And I can still remember "Dapper" Dan John Davenport, in his whites, still with a spyglass under his arm. And...

DM: Was the raid over by then?

AH: I would say the raid was over by then, yeah.

DM: Now we're approaching almost eleven, twelve o'clock?

AH: No, it was more like ten o'clock.

DM: Ten o'clock.

AH: Yeah.

DM: Raid had just finished.

AH: Just had finished.

DM: And why were you going out to the *Oklahoma*?

AH: See if we could do some good, help. And so Bill called up to Commander Kenworthy and asked if we could be of any assistance. And they said, "No, just get out of here. The yard's going to take care of things."

And so we turned around and went back to the Liberty Landing. And then I was walking pretty—I had had a hole in my foot and I don't know where it came from, I don't know, but it was squishing. And so Bill says, "Go down to the hospital and get it taken care of."

And so I walked down to the hospital and the nurse looked at my eyes and she says, "I'm going to take care of your eyes first," and so she washed them out, you know, and I guess boric acid and that type of thing.

And at that time, they were putting up blackout curtains already in the first part of the day, getting ready.

DM: Now was this at the Naval Hospital?

AH: Naval Hospital, down at Hospital Point. I walked down there. And then she dressed my foot, cleaned it up, and there was a pretty good-sized cut in it. And like a tear. All I can assume is that came from a hunk of shrapnel that hit me when I was making my way out to the motor launch. I didn't feel it.

And she said, "Now, you stay off it for a day or so."

And so I walked outside and walked over to the sub base, to join the rest of the crew.

DM: Can I ask you what you saw at Hospital Point, because there was a lot of casualties being brought in there?

AH: I saw very little at that time because that was maybe eleven o'clock, eleven a.m. Yeah, I didn't. I don't recall how many were being brought in at that time, or what they were doing with them.

DM: During this time of great stress, did time stand still? Did you have any idea what time it was?

AH: I had no idea what time it was. Yeah. And I had no breakfast, I wasn't hungry. But when I came over there and they were, the crew had, some of the crew had gathered at the sub base and I located 'em. And as I say, the first thing they got me to do was sign the roster. I guess they wanted to make an accounting of who was still alive. Anyway, I don't remember what number I was, but there was quite a list ahead of me. And then the second thing they do is give me a piece of paper and a short, stubby pencil and said, "Hey, sit down and write your story."

And you know, I don't even think some of these fellows who were having me do this knew who I was. I had a pair of dungarees on and that was it. And...

DM: Did you maintain a copy of that story?

AH: No. No, this was just a scratch story that I turned in.

DM: Do you know what happened to it?

AH: I don't know. The only one, the only person that was there would be Hobby, Lieutenant (*LCDR W.M. Hobby, Jr.*) Hobby. He was the one, he was the most senior officer there at the time, Hobby.

DM: A. D.

AH: Yeah.

DM: Unfortunately, we're running out of time here.

AH: Yeah.

DM: But your experience in the *Oklahoma* is a remarkable one. Do you realize how lucky you were? Has it ever haunted you as it haunts some survivors that, why me, and why did I survive and others die? Because your ship suffered the second highest casualties...

AH: That's right.

DM: ...as any ship in Pearl Harbor. Does that haunt you even to this day?

AH: Well, I don't think it haunts me, but I won't say it doesn't bother me.

DM: What did you do with your life, after Pearl Harbor? Did that have an effect on what you did in future life? Did you sense that you were living on borrowed time, as some survivors have told me? Or did you...

AH: Oh, I had a sense that I was, you know. The lord must have been looking out for me. Just to put me in the right set of circumstances at the right time that I could swim, it was lined up with the door that led in to a compartment that had a porthole that wasn't dogged too tight. That there was a little bit of air space to exist on and that I was a good swimmer.

DM: You saved four other men's lives.

AH: I think I did. No, three.

DM: Well, your own.

AH: Well, yes.

DM: Did the navy recognize that?

AH: I don't think they did. In 1943, when I was on Admiral Halsey's staff, I had the night watch again, and this was a watch in the operations, that went from eight p.m. to eight a.m., actually seven, because then you were relieved to go



to breakfast. And it was a very quiet night and there was a yeoman on duty and we got to talking. And he asked questions and he said, "You gotta write that story."

So I scribbled out a scratch copy and gave it to one of the yeoman. I asked, actually, we had kind of a yeoman pool, "Who wanted to type this?" and a fellow named, a yeoman second named Lewis Pressler.

He said, "Oh, I'll do it, Mr. Mortensen."

And so he did and I have that copy and I turned that the original copy into headquarters, it was Admiral Halsey. And about three or four days later, a Marine came around the corner. I had a little office just inside the operations office in Noumea (*New Caledonia*), and he tossed this little package on the desk, which was a little box with the citation wrapped around it, with the Purple Heart [*medal*] in it.

END OF INTERVIEW