

#209 ART CRITCHETT: USS *DEWEY*

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. The date is December 5, 1991, and it's 11:20 AM. I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Art Critchett, who was a Seaman Second Class aboard the destroyer, USS *DEWEY* at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, at which point Mr. Dewey was nineteen years of age -- Mr. Critchett, excuse me, was nineteen years of age. I guess it was Admiral Dewey, huh?

Art Critchett (AC): The ship, of course, was named after Admiral Dewey.

SH: Right. Well, thanks for being here with us.

AC: Well, you're welcome.

SH: It's been a joy -- it's been enjoyable talking with you just before the interview, and I'd like to pick up, you know, pretty much where we left off. You were saying that you joined the . . .

AC: Well, I joined the Navy June 7, 1941 . . .

SH: Yeah.

AC: . . . and went to, of course, boot camp and basic training. And then, in August of '41, I was assigned to come out to Pearl Harbor to be assigned to a ship, and when I got out here, I went aboard the USS *DOBBIN*. No, not the *DOBBIN*, I'm sorry, the *DIXIE*. And there, I was assigned to the *DEWEY*. And as soon as the *DEWEY* -- it had been out -- and as soon it came in, then I went aboard the *DEWEY* and as soon as I got aboard, I assumed the duties of the deck force. I was Seaman Second Class, of course, and . . .

SH: What were your usual duties?

AC: And my usual duty was, of course, I worked on the deck force. We did a lot of painting and that type of thing, and when we got under way, we'd help with the line, the mooring lines, getting them out and getting them stored away. And then, of course, we probably (mumbling) and helped with the mooring. Well, under way and my primary duty was as a lookout on the bridge of the *DEWEY* and, of course, in the period of time, it was four hours on and probably eight hours off. That was our . . .

SH: Would you rotate different duties, or did you have the standard kind?

AC: Well, we had eventually the standard, but we'd rotate to different hours. I mean, sometimes I'd be on the duty, say, eight to four . . .

SH: Right.

AC: . . . or something like that. And then, of course, as a period of time, you'd rotate so everybody wouldn't have the same period.

SH: Did you call out the dog watch?

AC: No. Dog watch was from twelve to four. That was the worse, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But anyway, you either had the twelve to four, the four to eight, or so on. It was every four and eight. Always had somebody on the bridge.

SH: You said you generally operated to the south of Hawaii and . . .

AC: Yes. When I first went aboard in the August of 1941, the ship -- we escorted all of the battleships back to San Diego at that time, and they were back for -- I think it was a fleet we escorted back to San Diego. And then it was in November, I think, or maybe in early October, late October, we brought all the battleships back out again. And then, of course, then they were moored here at Pearl Harbor, at that time. But they had gone back for fleet week and we had gone back with them. And when we were under way, we'd operate with a carrier, *LEXINGTON*, and then right after the war started, of course, we went on a mission out of Pearl Harbor, to the South Pacific. We went to New Guinea, and we were making some raids there on the Japanese air fields, at Port Moresby and Leyte, and some of those other installations. And . . .

SH: What was life like aboard one of these destroyers?

AC: Well, life aboard the destroyer in peace time, well, it wasn't hectic like it was during the war time condition. I mean, we had a lot of liberty and we had lots of time in Honolulu. And that type of thing. And then when we're moored, you weren't actually on watch, then your time was your own. You could lay out on the decks or something like that and you had leisure. But when the war started, and then that, of course, was a different thing altogether, and we had what we call four on and four off. By that we had four hours duty and then four hours rest, and that was around the clock. And that got pretty hectic after a couple, three weeks time. And of course, as I said before, my main duty was as a lookout on the bridge. And of course, if they needed me anywhere else, like helping on the deck during the day time, I'd have to do that too.

SH: Where was your berthing arrangements?

AC: The berthing part of it, well, I was in the aft portion of the *DEWEY*, back in the, say, underneath. Close to number two, number four, and number five guns was on the aft portion of the *DEWEY*.

SH: Was it pretty crowded back then?

AC: Pretty crowded, oh yes. I don't remember. I think we had four, excuse me, four tiers of bunks and of course, you did all right. It wasn't all that comfortable, but you managed all right. And we had a small locker there, so to speak, on the floor, where we kept our clothes. And that's basically was where, if I wasn't on the watch, I wasn't outside, I'd be laying down on my bunk, you know, taking an easy sleep because after the war started, you got as much sleep as you can when you could get it. Yeah. Yeah.

SH: Was she a wet ship?

AC: She was a wet ship because so much of the time we were out in the Pacific. Not all the time, but most of the time we had kind of rough weather. And of course, a destroyer plows through the waves and of course, the water goes all over, and of course, you get wet quite a bit of the time, going from the bridge, back to the aft portion of the ship. Yeah.

SH: Would you get wet even up on the bridge, sometimes?

AC: Once in a while, yeah.

SH: Take a wave there?

AC: Oh yeah. And when that water would come in there and of course, you were standing out on what you call, I guess, the wing part of the bridge.

SH: Right.

AC: And because that's where we get our lookout. And of course, and if you weren't paying too much to the weather, paying attention, looking for aircraft, or anything that you, you know, you see, like ships. And of course, you get those waves and they get in there and you get soaked, you know.

SH: Were there safety lines under those kinds of conditions?

AC: Well, safety lines were put between the bridge and the aft portion of the ship, where our berthing was, because it had to go up topside. And then the older destroyers like the *DEWEY*, to get from the aft to the front part of the ship, to go back to the room, you had to go up on topside and then go down. Of course, the newer destroyers, they had passageways through -- which then, of course, the *DEWEY* didn't have that. And of course, and then the weather got rough. They put up lifelines and tied 'em up on all the bulkhead side of the ship. Not where the mud lines were, I mean the rail. And then you'd have to hang on because the water would be coming over, you'd get drenched, you'd be knocked down under rough weather. Yeah. So you had to be very careful. We never lost anybody, but it's amazing how some of those people, you know, were knocked down and of course, it was nice to have somebody there to help you. You grab 'em before they got to far. But life on the destroyer was kind of rough. But when the weather was nice, it was just beautiful, just like anything else, you know. You're just cruising along and the sea was nice and calm.

SH: Did you tin can sailors feel a particular kind of spirit, or a vibe?

AC: Oh yeah, a tin can sailor is always a tin can sailor. I mean, they had their -- oh, I don't know what you want to call it -- their own feeling and own way of expression, how they lived and their, you know, that type of thing. A tin can sailor was different from a cruiser sailor or a battleship sailor. Yeah. But we were the rough ones, so to speak. The cruisers and the battleships, you know, they sail all nicely and then the destroyers, we go under the waves and the big ones, they go on, above the waves. But it was interesting. I enjoyed it even though it was hectic, you know. Of course, I stayed there until -- I sailed aboard the *DEWEY* until 1942, and then I went back to the mainland. But on the morning of Pearl Harbor, of course, we were moored with five other destroyers and along side the destroyer tender, the *USS DOBBIN*, approximately 200 yards off the landing at Ford Island.

SH: Yes.

AC: And the *DEWEY*, of course, was in for overhaul and we had to take most of our ammunition off at the ammunition depot at West Loch, before going into dry dock ten days earlier, and then when we launched, the *DOBBIN* took that over . . .

SH: Excuse me, I'm very interested in this particular part of the story. Do you mind if I just ask you to speak a little more slowly.

AC: Oh, I'm sorry.

SH: That's okay.

AC: All right. All right.

SH: And . . .

AC: So, the *DEWEY*, as I said before, was in for it's annual overhaul. Now, we didn't have too much ammunition aboard because when you go into dry dock they take as much as you can off because the danger of fire and explosions. So the morning of the attack, most of us was sitting on the fantail of the *DEWEY*, reading the Sunday newspaper, when at approximately 7:55, we looked up and saw all these planes coming by. Of course, we had no idea what they were at the moment, and it wasn't long before we started hearing this large explosions. And when I looked over and saw along Battleship Row and saw that they were bombing over there. So we went immediately to general quarters. My general quarters station was on the number three, five-inch gun, which is located on the aft portion of the *DEWEY*. When I got to that position, I saw the *ARIZONA* blow up and literally the explosion was so large, it just lifted it right up and it settled right down where it sits today. And also, I was able to see the target ship *UTAH* capsize with many of its crew members sliding down the bottom of the ship, in the water, trying to escape the ship and that was a very somber, sad situation. And . . .

SH: What, you know, were your feelings at that time?

AC: Well, of course, the feelings, of course, I eventually understood what was going to happen. And then we got, you know, we got scared. We didn't know, you know, what was going to happen. We could see planes coming at us from up the runway behind us and they were dropping bombs, and we didn't know, we said, "Oh boy, we're next," at least I said that to myself, "We're going to be next."

Well, it didn't happen that way. The bombs dropped at the stern of the *DOBBIN*. She had three people killed and several injured, but the *DEWEY* had some minor damage when that bomb dropped. The concussion from the bomb made the destroyers bounce back and forth and it knocked our radio antenna down, and that's the only damage we had, and we had no casualties at all that morning. Yeah.

SH: Well, you were blessed in that sense.

AC: We were sure blessed. And of course, the attack lasted to about 9:45 and of course . . .

SH: Were you ever able to get ammunition aboard and fire back?

AC: No. Well, we had some aboard, we figured, oh, operate a couple of our five-inch guns and we had a similar fifty caliber that we were operating.

SH: Uh-huh.

AC: But most of our weaponry was down because we didn't have the ammunition to use it.

SH: Do you have a particularly vivid recollection of the airplanes?

AC: Oh yes, because after they started, when we went to general quarters, I looked down the air station, which was behind us and they were working their way up, bombing. And so we were right in line, right, but as soon as they got to

the end, they quit, except for that one bomb which -- and I, of course, we all breathed a sigh of relief, because we were all in this big group of destroyers, the only thing is this one bomb in between 'em had been all she wrote, you know. And then, you know.

SH: Sure.

AC: Yeah.

SH: Sure. What is your most vivid memory of that day?

AC: The most vivid memory of that day was the, as I said before, I saw the *ARIZONA* blow up and I saw the people on the *UTAH* sliding down off the bottom of the ship. That was my most vivid day. And then, when we were able to get under way, which was about three o'clock that afternoon. We were the last ship to leave Pearl Harbor. And when we went out -- of course, you went down the channel above Battleship Row.

SH: Why were you the last ship to leave Pearl Harbor?

AC: We had been in, as I mentioned before, we had been for overhaul and they had taken -- we'd been at dry dock and had our fire rooms all tore down and of course, we had been moved alongside the tender *DOBBIN*, to finish that overhaul a little bit. Our fire rooms were all torn down so our engine room gang had to work all the morning and part of the afternoon to get the fire rooms back where we could attain power to get under way. Because while we were along side the *DOBBIN*, we were getting our power, of course, from the tender itself. But once -- so we had to get our engine room back. Soon as we got the engine room back on line, and then we got under way. And by that time in the afternoon, everybody had been ashore and then officers and then missing personnel from other ships were anxious to get into the action. And so they come out to the *DEWEY*. And then the *DEWEY* was still there, and so they all come aboard. And we had so many people on board, it was hard to even do anything, but they wanted to get in the action. So we managed to handle the enormous amount of people we got on board.

SH: Really? That's really something.

AC: So the next morning, we -- of course, we left Pearl Harbor -- next morning, we were patrolling off Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, and we saw in the distance, on the horizon, a lot of 'em, mass of ships. And so our commanding officer, he doesn't have any idea who they were, but he says, "We still have our torpedoes, and we're going out there and do the best we can and get as many as we can before we get sunk."

And so we went out, you know, went out after 'em. But it so happens that was the *ENTERPRISE* and her group returning from Wake Island. And of course, they were supposed to be in Pearl Harbor on December 7. Because of bad weather, they were a day late, otherwise they would have been where the *UTAH* was, the *ENTERPRISE* would have been.

SH: That's right.

AC: Yeah.

SH: That's right.

AC: Yeah.

SH: You said that the *ARIZONA* literally lifted up . . .

AC: Just lifted up.

SH: . . . out of water. Could you actually see the . . .

AC: I could see it. I could see it. And then of course, then it settled down, and of course, that's exactly where it sits today. The initial blast, the forward force moved it like this, and it settled right back down in the mud and so.

SH: Could you --- was there a loud noise or shock wave?

AC: Oh yeah, a loud explosion and you could just see large clouds of black smoke just pouring into here, just in here, one big gulf like that, you know. Yeah.

So that was a terrible thing to see. And of course, you had to know, or in the case of everybody else, that there must have been many, many people killed, which there actually was of course. And of course, we had no idea until later on how many people, you know, really were killed during the attack. But it was quite a morning and as I volunteered out to the *ARIZONA* Memorial last weekend, people ask me about the same questions. I tell them it was a very rewarding experience. It's --- just takes you right back. I feel like I'm actually there at the time, you know, just like it just happened yesterday. And so, you know, I give theater presentations along with the movie out there. And of course I do a lot of -- I give lectures out on the back lanai, and I talk to people in general. And of course, meeting people from all over the world, and it's very, very interesting. And of course, they all have their questions, "Well, what were you doing," and, "how do you feel?" And it's this you know.

SH: When you look back at the attack with considering, you know, how you volunteer and the time that's passed, and that sort of thing, what's really the most significant, what's the importance of Pearl Harbor?

AC: Well as far as the Pearl Harbor is the monument itself over the *ARIZONA*, okay, that is what everybody comes to see. Of course, they also want to go out to the memorial. But that's the first impression a person gets as they come to the visitor's center, is, "Where's the memorial? Where can you see the memorial?"

And I think to me the important thing is that and I'm so happy that they did make a good memorial to remember the people on the *ARIZONA*.

SH: If there's one thing you can have, these people come to the memorial and if there's one thing you can leave them with that they didn't come with, what would that be?

AC: Well, of course, I explained the situation as it happened that day and how we feel about it today. But of course, I get many questions asked me and then I show 'em where I was and that type of thing. And then, towards the end, they see where the memorial is. But to give 'em a general idea and impression of how an individual like myself, or other people felt and were doing that morning and what we are doing today at the visitors' center. And it helps, you know, give 'em a good idea and setting for their visit of the memorial itself.

SH: Could you describe in a little more detail what your duties were on the gun crew?

AC: On the gun crew, I was a sight setter. We had to check the sights, you know. And they, of course, they had the people actually operating the gun, you know, getting them ready to fire. We had people passing ammunition, getting ready. And I had to set the sights -- you get the sights just right so it would fire, I think, you know, where we landed. That was my job on that.

SH: So where were you in relation to the piece?

AC: I was on the --- the gunner. Our turret went out this way, and I was on this side. And they were . . .

SH: Port side?

AC: Yeah. And they --- when they were loading the ammunition through the, of course, in the back, and on the right, on the starboard side.

SH: You'd be setting the sight, but you wouldn't actually be looking through anything?

AC: No, I would be looking -- I look at these sights and you were actually looking right into the muzzle of the weapon, so to speak. That is, now, I wouldn't be looking out. That --- I would be looking right into that.

SH: You'd be looking back the other direction?

AC: Yeah. Right, right, right. Because I sit, what is it, perpendicular to the -- and that's where I'd be sitting, looking right into the muzzle, so to speak. And actually the (mumbles) had the engines there. And I had these various knobs or (mumbles), you want to call. That's what I was doing.

SH: And where would you get the settings that you were supposed to . . .

AC: And then they would come over the intercom from the bridge, yeah.

SH: Would you actually --- you had headphones, or it was a loudspeaker?

AC: No, the gun captain had headphones, and he was saying, "Such and such, such and such," and he got that. That's where we go.

SH: And he was giving you a bearing, or a range?

AC: A range, yeah, that's what it was. We were ranged, to set your range out for interception and later, somebody this and that. That's what we were doing.

SH: I see. I see. Interesting. You said you served with the *DEWEY* until 1942.

AC: Yeah, yeah. Came away from nineteen-for--, no April 1942 and I went back to the mainland. I had got orders and went back to the Navy hospital corps school in San Diego, because I'm a retired Navy hospital corpsman, with the Navy.

SH: And did you --- what did you do subsequently in the war?

AC: Well, from the --- I went back to hospital corps school and then I went to the Navy yard at Bremerton. I went to recruiting duty in Seattle, 'cause my home at that time was from Seattle. And then eventually I went down to Astoria, Oregon, in August of 1943. And we put an air escape on the carrier, the USS *LISCOMB BAY* in commission. And we, of course, we had our sea trials in Bremerton, come into Pearl Harbor and then we went to -- we was in on the operation in Makin and Tarawa, in the Gilberts. And on the morning of, Thanksgiving morning, 1943, we got torpedoed and sunk.

SH: That was a terrible loss of life, as I recall.

AC: Yeah, we had over 650 people that were -- of course, it was around 225, 230 which got off. And of course, the main thing that -- with the initial explosion, didn't, you know, kill all the -- make the casualties -- the burning gas and oil. These people jump off the ship into burning gas and oil, and they couldn't get through. We lost many of our people that way. Just like they did here during the attack on Pearl Harbor, around the ships were all the oil and it collected around the hulls of the ship. That's what got so many people in Pearl Harbor too, was the oil.

But anyway, we lost around 650 people. We lost the admiral. We lost the commanding officer and from there I came back to the mainland and I went to the Naval hospital at Mare Island, which is in San Francisco Bay. I stayed there until, I think, about April of '45 and then went out to the Philippines. And I was in the Philippines up in Lingayen Gulf, when the war ended in 1945.

And then I stayed in the Navy until 1961, which I retired. But in 1954, I went with a Marine detachment, with this Marines to North Vietnam, to Haiphong, North Vietnam, and we evacuated 250,000 refugees from Hanoi to Saigon, on the operation passage to freedom. And that was a very, very rewarding experience too, yeah. We had to spray each and every one of the refugees with DDT, so we had to spray each one with (mumbles). That was a very sad situation, but it had to be done because they were going aboard our transports being shipped down to Saigon. And that was one of the problems, yeah.

And so I stayed until 1961, and then I went to work for the federal government. I went to work on the Mexican border as a quarantine inspector in Nogales, Arizona. I spent a few years with the federal government there.

SH: Some people have some stories in that are sort of interesting about what they did the day and the night before the attack. Were you sort of on routine duty?

AC: I had been to Honolulu. Of course, one of the nicest places to go over there in Honolulu was the YMCA. I always went there to write letters because there was a convenient hand station there out that way. And I had wrote several letters, one to my mother, of course, and one to my cousin. And my cousin has the letter from me that was postmarked Honolulu, December 7, 1941. I tried to have her let me have it, you know, to put it out in the museum at the memorials, at the visitor's center, but she wouldn't part with it, naturally. But of course, they, you know, any other time we had, we would go out to Waikiki Beach, and of course, Fort Derussy was there at the time, and the Royal Hawaiian, and the Moana was the only hotels that were there. And at Fort Derussy, they had facilities there we could change from uniforms into swimming trunks. And then we'd do that part of the time. But most of the time I spent at the YMCA and then around there in Honolulu.

SH: Did you consider Honolulu a good liberty for you?

AC: It was a good liberty back then. Yeah. In fact, I got here after boot camp, and after I went to San Diego, I think, once. And of course, San Diego to me wasn't much of a town. Of course, it's a new town. But as far as that, a liberty town for the Navy, we, trainees, that's not much. Of course, Honolulu was real nice, you know. And of course, it was so beautiful, you know, in the tropics, you know, and everything was just so nice. I really enjoyed it. And I often told myself, "Someday I'm going to come back out here and live," because I liked it so. Of course all my sea duty was all spent here in the Pacific and all my shore leave was spent on the east coast. And of course, my home was either in Washington or in California, so that's the way the Navy does things, you know. They didn't want to get you too close to home, I think. Yeah.

SH: Did --- what made you decide to join the Navy?

AC: I've always wanted to join the Navy. In 1933, when I was a young kid at school, the fleet -- we could see all the battleships up there, you know. And, oh, boy, that was the day, you go out to the battleships and spend the day. Of course, I said, "Navy, that's what I'm getting."

And of course, as, I mean, as the war in Europe progressed and things got worse, you know, and of course, it was getting where I was getting ready to graduate from high school, I knew I wanted to go in the Navy. I didn't want to go in the Army, because I didn't want to have to walk. I wanted to ride wherever I went, you know.

And so, anyway, I joined the Navy. I've always been happy that I had joined.

SH: We'll we're happy you did too and we're really happy that you took the time to speak with us today.

AC: Uh-huh. You're welcome.

SH: Thanks very much, Mr. Critchett.

AC: You're welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW