

#245 CLINTON WESTBROOK
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
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TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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Robert Chenoweth (RC): The following oral history interview was conducted by Robert Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 4, 1996 at ten p.m. The person being interviewed is Clinton Westbrook, who was on board the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

For the record, Clinton, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

Clinton Westbrook (CW): Okay, it's Clinton Howard Westbrook. I'm seventy-seven, born March 1, 1919 in Brooklyn, New York.

RC: Could you also tell me what you considered your hometown to be in 1941?

CW: Probably Trenton, that's where my parents were at the time. I had been living by myself, finish up school and whatnot, but probably Trenton.

RC: Okay. We were talking out there a little while ago about your coming into the Navy and could you talk about entering the service and your training, prior to being assigned to the *ARIZONA*?

CW: Yeah. I came in in -- let's see, March 6, 1940, called me up April 1, which I kind of doubted because it was April 1. Went through Brooklyn Navy yard and took the ferry up to Connecticut and then to Providence, then to Newport, Rhode Island for eight weeks of boot camp up there. I got my boot leave. Served ten days on the -- I guess it was the *CONSTITUTION*, but I'm not sure at that time. It could've been the *CONSTELLATION* [it was]. But I did spend ten days of service on the old sailing boat.

And then I got sent to Philadelphia to recommission an old four-stacker, World War I destroyer. And we finally got it out of Philadelphia. More luck than anything else, I think.

Went through a hurricane, got sent to Charleston and then came back to Norfolk, 'cause it was going to be the fifty -- one of the fifty that went for the Bermuda bases.

Got transferred to Texas and volunteered for the *ARIZONA* -- you, you, you and you type. (Chuckles) I joined the *ARIZONA* in Long Beach, late September of '40.

RC: What was your rating when you were assigned to the *ARIZONA* and what were your duties?

CW: Well, let's see. I hadn't made seaman second yet, so I'd been a Apprentice Seaman. And [I] made second on the *ARIZONA*. We took it to Bremerton and then back to Pearl after that.

And I'd been in the communications through Bremerton and all the first couple of months, I guess, in Pearl. But I had a bad habit of if I missed a character; I missed the next sentence or two. And communications officer didn't like that. He finally sent me to deck force.

I had various jobs. In fact, I was mess cook for the band. They ate in the fourth division compartment. So I'd feed them first then I'd feed the fourth division people. And they were a good bunch of guys. I've learned a few things belonging to this association about the band.

Then I went from there to the boat crew. And I was bow hook in the fifty-footer. That was my job.

Sunday was [my] liberty day, supposedly. And I was due to solo -- I'd been taking flight lessons at John Rodgers Airport, which I understand now doesn't exist. It's part of the major airport here.

RC: (Inaudible) who were you taking flying lessons from?

CW: Well, I had a woman instructor last. I don't remember her name any more, but . . .

RC: Was her name Margaret GAM-BO?

CW: It could be. She was in the air at the time, I understand.

RC: Yeah.

CW: Of the attack.

RC: She had a flying service that . . .

CW: Yeah. Lost all my records 'cause they dropped a bomb right on a hangar. So then I never got back to it either no time or no money. One or the other. Yeah. Someday maybe I might get back up there and see about trying to fly it, but I don't know any more. But it was fun. She had me doing aerobatics and everything else before I soloed. She was a good instructor.

And so we were about -- we'd been along side of the *NEVADA* when the attack actually started. And we saw the first planes. We helped out on

the *NEVADA* until she got under way and they [*cleared*] the sides and we [*were bringing*] the boat back to the *ARIZONA* when she blew up.

And we started casualty work and they sent us to the tip of Ford Island, down by the channel entrance. We carried the casualties over to hospital landing. And we got strafed six times there, [*that*] finally sank the fifty-footer. And that's where I got wounded in the strafing. And . . .

RC: Could you talk about that a little bit?

CW: Well, it's pretty much guesswork. I was already at sea on the can days later when my eye hit me, when they woke me for a watch and they found the steel in it. And they just covered it up until we got back into port, let the doctor take it out. The bullet in the shoulder, they think was probably a spent slug. Probably hit the water flat, didn't get deformed. When it hit me, it was dying. So when it hit the bone, it stopped. And all it did was just infect it enough that it formed a blister and I had trouble, so they sent me to the hospital to get rid of it. And he was teaching a couple of ensign, just out of medical school, and so he went probing and that's when he found it.

RC: So you didn't actually realize that you'd been shot?

CW: No, we'd been carrying casualties and we had the burnt flesh from picking them up, things like that. Blood from the wounds, oil from the water from the people we'd pulled out of the water earlier. If somebody had knifed me, I probably wouldn't have known it. It was that bad.

RC: Geez.

CW: It took three guys to get the clothes off of me when I got aboard the tin can three days later. It was that stiff. It was just completely covered.

RC: Now, what destroyer did you go on?

CW: I went on the *CUNNINGHAM* [*DD -371*]. They sent me back to the main office on the mainland. And I got there just in time that they were sending a list out. They had me listed as missing in action. And [*the Chief*] cleared that and sent me back down to the shore patrol officer on the pier, and they loaded me out to the *CUNNINGHAM*, and they got me two sets of clothes and got under way. And I guess -- let's see, that was the tenth.

I'd been on salvage with the salvage officers just three days before that as part of the boat crew for him. And so that was the tenth when we got under way, so it was probably four days later when they discovered the --

they were waking me up for the four to eight watch in the morning. It was like somebody had stabbed me.

And so I was pretty much on medical non-duty business until they got us back to the tender. And I stayed on the *CUNNINGHAM* until -- let's see. She got under way for the Battle of Midway. I got transferred that morning. In fact, he left me hanging in the big ten dock and pulled out right out from under me. (Chuckles)

It was my own fault really, because I didn't believe I was being transferred when they woke me up to tell me. And when I got to the quarter deck with my bag, the captain hollered down from the [*bridge*], he already just had number one and number six left, and he told me to get the "H" off the ship, right then and there.

And I started climbing up the side of the Pier Ten and he just pulled -- yeah, big ten dock -- he just pulled right out from under. And I got put on an APA, went back for new construction.

And I got back to West Coast; they sent me to the East Coast to commission the *TAYLOR*. And I stayed on her for the end of the war. Put twenty-three campaigns in. (Coughs) Excuse me.

RC: *TAYLOR* was a Fletcher class . . .

CW: Fletcher class, yeah, [*DD 468*]. One of the best tin cans they ever built. In fact, they thought we were an AA cruiser at Guadalcanal, one night, one afternoon, when the Japs attacked. We got 469 rounds out in five minutes. That was a good ship.

RC: That's (inaudible)

CW: And we wound up taking the *MISSOURI* into Tokyo, for the end of the war.

RC: When you did that, when you went into Tokyo Bay, did you think about Pearl Harbor?

CW: Yes, and it was scary because we beat the *MISSOURI*'s hook to the bottom, so we were classified or credited being the first U.S. warship to anchor in Imperial waters. And we had an escort the next morning up the channel and the deal that they had made when they signed the armistice was [*for*] the batteries that guarded that channel were to run up a white flag as we approached. And they waited until the last possible minute before they run that flag up. And they're sitting up there with eighteen-inch naval rifles and we got little old five-inch sitting down there.

But we got in and they sent us to Yokosuka, because we were going to carry the mediator out, for the surrender ceremony. And I went ashore that night and it looked like any other town. They had a road along the waterfront and warehouses and houses. We walked up one block and it was total destruction. They had wiped it right off the face of the earth. It was amazing. Never touched the waterfront.

And we're credited with the last overt act of the war. We had a mascot that we found, a little dog, in the Philippines. I guess he'd been pretty well man-handled by the Japanese. And the last mediators to come aboard were three Japanese news reporters under Marine guard. And as the last one stepped aboard off the gangway, that old puppy run right over and bit him. (Chuckles) So they called it the last overt act of the war. The Saturday Evening Post made a big story out of it. They took a picture of him sitting along side the ship's bell with his little blanket on and his badges from the Philippines and Okinawa and whatnot. And wrote it up. I got a copy of it back home.

But then we did -- we picked the Wake Island survivors up, 600 miles north of Tokyo, out of a prisoner of war camp. Brought them back. And then we took Seabees back, the Great Circle route, come home. We were in Portland, Oregon for Navy Day in 1945.

Prior to all of that, the *TAYLOR* was at the Casablanca Invasion of Africa. So we were involved in both theaters of war, one time or another. And we went from Sydney, Australia to 600 miles north of Tokyo. We didn't miss much. Kept us pretty busy.

RC: I'd like to talk to you a little bit more about what (inaudible) . . .

CW: Okay.

RC: . . . what you were doing on December 7. I had not heard about losing a fifty-foot boat.

CW: Oh, I don't imagine they had any of the small stuff. They probably lost a lot of 'em. They got us up just before six o'clock for a special trip. We had to go along side the *NEVADA*. And I was standing on a blister top, 'cause they kept the gangway clear whenever you performed a mission that was not directly involved with the gangway.

And when the first planes went over, they were level. And they just went down Battleship Row this way. And I said to the coxswain, I says, "Looks like the flyboys are out early," because they used to pull surprise raids on us.

And right behind him come another one that was banked. And there's the great, big red sun sitting up there and I hollered at the coxswain, and I says, "They're not ours. Let's get the hell out of here!"

And we went -- I climbed up the side of the *NEVADA* and I rolled . . .

RC: What did you think when you realized that these were Japanese planes? I mean, what . . .

CW: I don't think we really had time to think right away. You kind of -- the adrenaline came out of no place and you just instinctively reacted. 'Cause I know that I reached up off the blister top and caught the scuttle edge and actually flipped up on to the deck. And I don't think I could've done it if I'd wanted to, thinking about it.

RC: Uh-huh.

CW: And I rolled along it -- that was forward of the quarterdeck, where you went up one deck.

RC: Uh-huh.

CW: And so it was very narrow. It was probably only about six foot wide at the most, and then you had superstructure. But right behind that, they had a five-inch mount, or three-inch mount that they were going to put the new AA guns on. And all they had was the platform. And I rolled under that, and when I rolled up, I rolled back, looked back along the deck, and I could see these white dots on it, and I couldn't understand what it was, and I rolled out to the edge of the platform and looked up like that. It was a double row of holes through the canvas. But the only thing I can figure is that somebody was strafing at just about the time I hit the deck. So --- and the *NEVADA* got hit with a torpedo that took the lower electrical out. So the hoist, the upper -- I'm sorry. Yeah, because the hoist was working to the main deck for the anti-aircraft guns, but they couldn't get ammunition up to the guns up on the gun deck. And so they were grabbing anybody to go ahead and carry it up. And I can remember coming out, going up the ladder, and you could hear this pitter patter. Didn't have the slightest idea what it was until I made about three trips with this ammunition. It suddenly dawned on me; it was this shrapnel coming back down.

And one of the big things was that they were not regular gun crews on a lot of these ships. It was whoever happened to get there first and man the guns. So a lot of them were never fuse set.

RC: Uh-huh

CW: And so they went off up there and came back down again. So a lot of that -- and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if a lot of what they thought were bombs out in the land area was probably the shells that went on up and came on back down again.

RC: Well, in fact, the studies that were done later on and people that have gone back and checked on each particular incident where shells landed . . .

CW: Yeah.

RC: . . . they -- it was exclusively . . .

CW: Yeah, I wouldn't doubt it.

RC: . . . the anti-aircraft shells . . .

CW: Yeah.

RC: . . . that were not set and to the best of our knowledge, there is no indication that -- I mean, the Japanese knew exactly what they were . . .

CW: Oh yeah, yeah.

RC: . . . what they were going to bomb and they weren't wasting bombs on . . .

CW: No, I don't think they were, as far as cities and whatnot were concerned. They were only interested in the military, strictly. Because my impressions were fighters came in first, maybe mixed with the dive bombers or whatnot. And I think they were primarily in to disrupt everything so the torpedo people could get in. And they had been practicing in Tokyo -- well, not Tokyo Bay, but in one of the bays up there.

RC: Kagoshima.

CW: Yeah.

RC: Southern Japan.

CW: For the low, shallow water torpedo type work.

RC: Actually, from what we know now, the first planes to actually strike were the dive bombers that hit the air station on Ford Island. Those were the first . . .

CW: Yeah, I think they took . . .

RC: . . . that was the first ordnance to fall . . .

CW: Yeah.

RC: . . . in Pearl Harbor.

CW: Yeah.

RC: Then the torpedo planes were swinging around, came over, flew over Hickam, actually . . .

CW: Yeah, they came in over big ten and whatnot, so that they could get a nice broadside right there, set there at the battleships.

RC: (Inaudible) point.

CW: Yeah.

RC: Through the channel there. That's what gave them the longest run.

CW: Yeah.

RC: That's probably why almost certainly why the *ARIZONA* and the *NEVADA* were not hit with torpedoes, because they were too far . . .

CW: Too far down.

RC: . . . too far down.

CW: My understanding was -- and I don't know, I haven't seen the latest investigations, but I know in the early days, they said that they had taken one very up in the bowel because it had gone underneath the stern -- what was it -- the *ANTARES*, that was along side of us. In fact, she saved a lot of the fire control people off the *ARIZONA*. They threw a rope over and they came over hand over hand, to the . . .

RC: *VESTAL*.

CW: . . . the *VESTAL*, that's right, *VESTAL*. I don't know where I got that *ANTARES* from.

RC: There's no way, really, now, I mean, because of the investigations that the park service and the Navy have done on the wreck now. Because the hulk is so far down below the mud line . . .

CW: Yeah.

RC: . . . there's no way to determine whether or not she actually took a torpedo.

CW: I wouldn't doubt it.

RC: So, yeah, I mean, it's very possible.

CW: Well, like the *OKLAHOMA*, we heard everything from two torpedoes to ten. But definitely she had to take enough that the compartments were filled enough to flip her like they did. But they had all sorts of things. And of course, we sat there that day and everybody was at general quarters all day because we thought they were going to invade, which is the normal thing you would expect. There wasn't for -- I don't know how long before they found out that they weren't interested except just to disrupt us so they couldn't interfere with their south moving.

But, yeah, it was a trying time. Like you asked earlier, I really don't think when we realized that the fifty-footer was sinking, we tied up to a barge that was on Ford Island, and just let her hang there and fill it with water. We went ashore and we found a pick up truck sitting there, keys in it. So we all piled in the truck and one guy would drive in the truck. We found a building -- wasn't a Quonset, but similar to that type of a building. And looking inside, it was full of armament and whatnot, and we put a machine gun in the back of the truck, and we each had rifles and forty-fives. We're out looking for Japs, 'cause they were bailing out of the planes here and there. Of course, we never found one.

And we blew a tire, so we got out of the truck, left it. That's when I saw more gold than I've ever seen in my life, about eight Admirals, I guess they were, walking toward us and the first question was, "What's your ship, young fella?"

And I just pointed to the column of smoke and says, "That's it."

He says, "You're just the one we need." He says, "You're going to be a body guard and you stay with this officer until you get relieved."

And that's what started it. And I think probably 'cause I had the two forty-fives sitting on my hips like a western cowboy, that was funny. I probably wouldn't ever have been able to draw 'em if I had to. But that's where I spent the three days, and we were all over Pearl Harbor. And they finally changed the crews and whatnot, and that's when I got sent back.

RC: So you had a pretty unusual opportunity to see what things looked like all over?

CW: Yeah, 'cause we were even up in West Loch, which surprisingly, the Japs never touched, which would've really been a prime target, if they wanted to totally disrupt the fleet, ruin the facilities up there. We just made a trip up and when he realized there was no damage was done, well, we never went back. But we were up and down both sides of Ford Island, pretty steady pace.

RC: What did you think when you saw all the destruction?

CW: Total amazement to start with and fear on top of it in that they could do it, with as little opposition that they actually had. When we were in the fifty-footer, at one time, one of the PBY's got off of Ford Island and they were taking off toward Pearl, on the mainland side of Ford Island. And the co-pilot was hanging half out of the window with a handkerchief or a towel or whatever, waving it up and down like crazy to let everybody know it was a friend, not a foe -- don't shoot at us, you know. And somewhere in there, the destroyer made the depth charge run on the submarine. That shook everybody up. And the poor little old whaleboats, the fifteen-footers and the seventeen-footers, they couldn't get through the oil. And they get stuck. The engines just weren't strong enough to push 'em. And so whenever we got the chance, we'd stick that fifty-footer up in there as close as we could and I'd throw 'em a bow line, we'd tow 'em out. Things like that, you look back on it and you say, "Oh yeah, that's right. We were doing that."

But it's not a complete sequence all the way along the line. You gotta keep going back and say, "Oh, yeah. That's what we were doing. No, we did that later."

I guess it was ten or eleven o'clock in the morning before I stopped and said, "Hey, we're at war," and then I got scared.

And up to that point, I really wasn't scared. We were just running around on adrenaline, I guess. But I was kind of glad when the war was over, though. We'd had enough. It was a good time to call it quits and go home.

RC: Did you stay in the Navy?

CW: On and off. I got out in '46, but stayed in the reserves, so I got called back for a career. And I had tried to re-enlist, 'cause they had a big ad in the New York papers for reservists or anyone to come in. When I got down to

headquarters to offer it, some captain was sitting there and says, "Oh, you'll lose at least one stripe if not two."

I'd made first class in the reserves, active reserves. And I told him, "No way. I've got wife and kids."

He says, "Well, that's the way it's going to be."

And they'd said right in the ad, no loss of rate or rank. So I just turned around and walked off and they called us, the whole unit, about six weeks after that.

We were electronics outfit . . .

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

CW: Forgot what we were talking about. (Laughs)

RC: Well, what I wanted to do is talk a little bit with you about, get your ideas about today. You're a member of this organization, Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. You come out here.

CW: Yeah.

RC: What does this mean to you now? What should people -- why should people care about Pearl Harbor, about the events that happened fifty-five years ago? What does it mean?

CW: Well, I think the real reason behind the whole works is that lack of knowledge is outright dangerous. And if you don't have the knowledge of what happened in the past, then you're not going to be prepared for the future. And, oh, there's a lot of sages have said that you've got to learn from the past, but you can look at World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam. We're doing the same thing that we did before all of those four wars, we're doing right now. We're downsizing the military. We're getting to the point that some country upstart around the world someplace is going to figure, hey, they've got to be easy pickin's. They've been cutting down, let's go get 'em. And we're going to be right back in the same old spot. And I don't know whether the American people will be up to it like they were at World War II, when we got -- we might even have a war right on our own soil, which we've never had outside of the Civil War. Things like that.

It's like the weather. People in certain parts of the country have not experienced a hurricane, or a tornado. And so, when it hits, they're not prepared, because it's never going to happen. And I think I've been around long enough that somewhere between now and the fairly new future, we're going to have problems that we can't handle.

And I've talked at several schools and the kids know that there was a Pearl Harbor and it was attacked by the Japanese, and that's where their knowledge stops, period. They don't know anything about the people who were there. They don't know anything about the veterans. They don't know whether they're living or dead. They don't know what they did. They don't care. And the parents don't do anything about it either. I mean, it's not just the teachers not teaching it. They don't cover it in their curriculum anymore. It's just all the way down the line.

I've been at veterans' celebrations of one thing or another -- parades and whatnot. Wear my shirt, wear my hat, and have news people walk right by me -- young people that are the reporters and whatnot. Not interested. I've had people walk up to me and look at the shirt and say, "ARIZONA, what's that?"

I thing mine's finished. (Chuckles) So I think the main thing is education, if you want to put it in that term. But I think they need to know the knowledge of the past as to what it means now. People look at the past and say, "Oh, that's all done with. Don't have to worry about it. It's over with. Forget it."

And I don't think you can forget it. It's too important to the future. And I think it'll always be that way, unfortunately.

RC: If you had to -- well, you've sort of summed that up. How do you feel about the Japanese?

CW: It's kind of dull right now. I mean, after all the years. In the beginning, I didn't want nothing to do with 'em. But I've been back to Okinawa because my son-in-law was in the Air Force and he was a [*Squadron Commander at*] Kadina. [*And*] been through Southwest Asia. I don't like the young Japanese because they don't give a damn -- excuse the French. And they don't think that Japan was at fault. The older Japanese has come to the realization that they were at fault. But the young people, they don't think that way -- or at least the ones I've run into, anyway. And when I was here for the fiftieth, the Japanese were walking down the street, not necessarily arm in arm, but five and six in a group, straight across. And you gave ground to 'em on the sidewalk. I finally got mad enough that I stood right still and let 'em [*come,*] I split 'em, but I wasn't

going to let 'em push me around anymore. But that's their attitude. And it's too bad.

The average Japanese, with their culture, really are not too bad [on] World War II. It was the military, period. Army, primarily. 'Cause Yamamoto said right away, "Either we beat the United States or forget it, we're going to lose the war."

RC: Well, he had spent some time here.

CW: Yeah.

RC: He'd lived here and he also understood the depth . . .

CW: Yeah.

RC: . . . of the United States. The Army didn't . . .

CW: No, they had only one idea in mind and that was take it. And use any means that was necessary to do it, and get rid of the people. If they objected, kill 'em. And then they can't object any more. And they just wanted all the necessary resources that they could get.

And of course, most of that army is pretty well gone, like our own. So there's -- like I say, the feelings towards the Japanese are pretty much dull by now. And that's about the state as far as they're concerned. I don't like to see 'em buying things in the United States and stuff like that. But we go in foreign countries, I'm sure we're investing over there, so. That's something.

RC: Well, all right. Anything else?

CW: No. I'm just glad I wasn't as busy in Korea and Vietnam Wars as I was in World War II. The closest I got to Vietnam was Indian Ocean, so I was going the wrong way around the world. But that was better that way. I'd had enough fighting, I guess, World War II.

RC: Yeah, I think you certainly had enough. I think you probably had enough just in one day.

CW: Oh yeah, Pearl. But we had a lot of naval fights after that. Tin can was always around.

RC: Yeah, usually in right up to their eyeballs.

CW: Yeah, yeah. I went through seven typhoons in the Pacific. I'll take a dozen hurricanes to any one typhoon, any time. Typhoons start where a hurricane ends. You get a 125 mile an hour, 135 mile an hour in the hurricane. That's when [*typhoons*] start at. It hasn't even got up to speed yet. About 200 miles across open water and that's up around 200 miles an hour. We lost three cans in thirty-seven seconds in one of the typhoons. Over a thousand men. And we were rolling so bad -- all destroyers had stabilizer fins and you had to time your roll to pull those people to you, 'cause if you didn't, they slid underneath and you came back down on 'em. We lost a lot of rescuers that way too, trying to get the guys that were in the water. *PITTSBURGH* lost sixty feet of her bow. [*Yeah, even*] one of the carriers lost about 100 feet, rolled up like you used to open the old sardine cans. Just rolled the flight deck back. Just left it right there in a great big roll, where it stopped. Of course, they didn't have the closed bows in those days, so the water could get to it. But I stood out on the bridge lots of times and looked up at the water, and our yardarm was eighty-five feet off the water line and the water was going over the yardarm. I mean, solid water.

Oh, typhoons are terrible. That's when Mother Nature is really mad. The rest of the time, she's just playing with the human factor, but when she starts one of those typhoons around, get out of the way. Bad.

RC: All right. Well, thank you very much.

CW: Appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW