

#246 CLYDE COMBS
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 5, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki, December 5, at 8:30 a.m. The person being interviewed is Clyde Combs, who was on board the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

Clyde, for the record, would you state your full name, please?

Clyde Combs (CC): Clyde Jefferson Combs.

MS: And where were you born.

CC: Monon, Indiana.

MS: And what was your birth date?

CC: Twelve, eleven, '21.

MS: Very good. Clyde, how come you joined the Navy?

CC: Got out of high school, no jobs, didn't like to farm and the Navy were accepting guys. So I enlisted.

MS: And when was that?

CC: October 8, 1940.

MS: All right, so you were in the Navy for a full year before the war started?

CC: Mm-hm. Yes sir. Yes sir.

MS: And you took your basic training where?

CC: Great Lakes.

MS: Great Lakes. Did you like it okay, or was it just . . .

CC: No.

MS: No.

CC: No, didn't like that.

MS: (Chuckles) What was the worst part about it?

CC: Oh, it was too cold.

MS: (Laughs)

CC: And I didn't like being away from home. I guess I didn't. And didn't like the discipline. Everything's new. Couldn't sleep in the hammock. You had to tie that thing up so tight and you would lay down then. You had to hug it, 'cause you'd flip in a minute. And you better (chuckles) -- I had the first watch and, boy, I had to go over there and help pick these guys up, you know. And just the discipline and being cold, things . . .

MS: Oh yeah.

CC: . . . you know. They weren't inhibited at all as they are now. (Chuckles)

MS: Well, you spent about how long at boot . . .

CC: Eight weeks.

MS: Long weeks.

CC: Yeah, eight weeks.

MS: And then, where did you go after that?

CC: Well, they sent us home for a few days and then we went to the west by train to Bremerton for the *ARIZONA* was in dry dock. And can't remember the date I went aboard, but it was in December, some time.

MS: Okay. So the *ARIZONA* was your ship right away and stayed your ship . . .

CC: Yeah.

MS: . . . until December 7.

CC: Yeah. Half of us went aboard the *PENNSYLVANIA* and the other half on the *ARIZONA*.

MS: Okay. And what was your job. What did you actually train to do?

CC: Job? We had no training at all at that time, but we went in the deck force, which is, of course, the Navy is squeaky clean, as you probably heard. So we spent all our time keeping the place clean. Our own laundry, our own sea bag and hammock. Still had hammocks, few of us on the junior end

of the roster. And so it was real nice on the hammock, when you were rocking and waving, you know. And these other guys are rolling out. Hammock is just there, swaying in the breeze.

MS: Once you learn how to do it, it wasn't so bad.

CC: Yeah, once you learn how to sleep in that hammock. And do what else everybody else on the ship wanted you to do. And of course, we had to learn to be a seaman. We had to learn to tie knots and say, "Yes, sir," and, "aye, aye, sir," and act like what you were.

And it wasn't bad as long as you didn't detest being told what to do, when to do, how to do it. And then, when you did it, it was wrong.

MS: Even if it wasn't, huh?

CC: That's right. Yeah, "Do it over!"

MS: Do it over anyway.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Well now, you were here in Hawaii with maneuvers and all of that for quite some time and did you like Hawaii? It was a good place to be?

CC: Hawaii, no. It was too hot. Didn't have any money. Six dollars at payday.

MS: Yeah.

CC: And I didn't drink or smoke. And I wasn't being like the rest of 'em, a lot of the rest of 'em, the old salts, you might say. And then, when you come over here, it was too crowded. There wasn't nothing you could do but go to the Y. And of course, there was a Y here then. There wasn't -- Waikiki wasn't nothing, I don't think.

So, if you come over, you drink your Coke and sit around and go back to ship. Of course, you didn't get to stay very long. Couldn't stay until midnight.

MS: The launch was heading back . . .

CC: Well, we had to go back before midnight.

MS: Well, now, so you really, you weren't partying all the time like some of the other guys.

CC: Never.

MS: Did you have liberty on the sixth or you had duty on the sixth?

CC: No, no. I didn't. I may have had liberty to come over, but we would have had to be back by midnight, see. We usually -- me and my buddies -- go back before dark, you know.

MS: So you can't really recall if you were over here for liberty, but you were definitely back early even if you were.

CC: Yeah, it wasn't -- Hawaii wasn't a vacation spot as much as it is now. In other words, the place was full of sailors. We had 100 ships out there, all at once.

MS: That's quite a population . . .

CC: I think there was 112. I think that's the historical figure.

MS: There were a bunch of 'em.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Well, so you were in the rack pretty early that night. Now what about the routine for Sunday morning for you? What was . . .

CC: Sunday morning, we didn't do anything. We had colors at eight a.m. And I think the band would go back. I think the band was preparing to do colors. And wherever you were outside, you would have attention to colors and inside, you just didn't have to worry about colors. And I was up in the chief's quarters at the time, and of course, they had the honor or the privilege of coming down and having breakfast when they wanted it. And I think we were sorting the laundry.

MS: So you were up pretty early and . . .

CC: Oh yeah, had to get up before eight o'clock. Oh sure. We got up about probably about regular time. And I'm sure we had watches on Sunday. So you had to get up anyhow.

MS: So you were up and about . . .

CC: Oh sure. Everybody was -- there was nobody asleep, I wouldn't think. Maybe guys in the brig.

MS: Okay. (Chuckles) Did you have a sound of general quarters? Did somebody start yelling down the hatch at you?

CC: No, with me it didn't work like that. One of the chiefs come down and say, "Hey, the *CALIFORNIA* is fire."

So I goes up the ladder, see this Zero coming over, rising sun on the wing. I says, "Uh-oh."

So I took off back aft to go back to turret three. Chief's quarters was up by the anchor. So I had the 125 yards to go, so I took off full speed -- no problem getting there. There was nobody there but me. And about the time I passed the quarterdeck, which is mid-ship, the Mr. Davison, the junior division officer of third division, sounded GQ, about the time I passed there. So I got on to turret three and I could either go in up in the overhang of the turret or down below the seventh deck and come up through. My battle station was in the upper part of the turret and why I went below, I don't know. Almost made a mistake.

MS: And how long were you actually at your battle station, in the turret, before you realized that your ship was being hit.

CC: We don't really know. We don't -- in the turrets, you don't have rings, watches, cigarette lighters -- nothing metal on you. So we had no idea what time it was. We've heard it was eight o'clock, or 7:59, or whenever it was, when the battle started. How long we stayed there, some of the guys went out before the main party, you might say. Most of them didn't get to their battle station, so we had very few guys there. We never manned a battle station because -- our individual assignment -- because we couldn't fire. We were knee deep in water immediately. And you can't fire that wet powder, and no use firing at planes with those fourteen-inch guns.

So we waited. We were unconscious anyhow. You didn't know what to do.

MS: When the explosion occurred then, what was it? Did the lights go out, or were you thrown to the deck?

CC: Well, our explosion was not the big one. Our explosion was when it hit -- when the turrets went down, we think to the fourth deck, which was armored, and exploded. I'd gotten down to the seventh deck almost, and when the explosion came back there. We didn't know about the big one until we got out of the turret, down to the deck. So when the explosion came, no lights. In fact, the guys went out -- it's a big one. Couldn't see and you could smell a lot of stuff. And couldn't breathe. In other words,

everything but unconscious. And nobody was hurt. It was just the explosion part that we got at that point.

MS: And did you have any officers or anybody of rank to tell you to finally get out?

CC: Yes, we had one or two and I can't remember which. They were the junior officers in the third division. Of course, the third division manned turret three. You see, this is . . .

MS: Okay.

CC: So there was one down there at least.

MS: And you were in there for a little bit of time, then, after the explosion occurred?

CC: Yes. We knew we were sinking and we knew we were listing to the left port. And other than that, we didn't know. Of course, the next question is, well, what did you do? What do you do?

And it was obvious that we had to go up as the water run us out of there. And could we do anything? Was the battle over? And we had no communication either.

MS: Right.

CC: See, nobody was telling us what to do. We had --- we were stuck there. So finally we went up, after some discussion. I think somebody said we shouldn't and somebody said we should. And then I didn't make them big decisions. Had no input.

So we finally went up into what they call the gunroom and stayed there a while. Took our clothes off. Of course, our uniform by then was skivvy shirts, cut off whites, black shoes and black socks.

So we thought that possibly there might be some gas involved in this.

MS: Oh, okay.

CC: See? So that's where we took all our clothes off but our skivvy shorts and stuffed them around the trainer and pointers sights out to the side of the gun barrel.

MS: To try to keep the smoke out.

CC: That's to keep it out, yeah. So not like the fellows that got into it in the Gulf War and didn't even know it. We were worrying about this. We didn't have any gas masks at the time.

MS: Okay.

CC: So we decided to venture out on the deck.

MS: And what happened? When you walked out, what was the first thing you saw?

CC: Couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe it.

MS: When you came out, were you facing aft or forward?

CC: Well, you could -- you came out probably not seeing much. You came out from under the overhang and go down the ladder to the deck, and we could see that the foremast was gone, or leaning over. First thing you know, the deck was riddled with bullets, bullet holes. And of course, the stern never did sink, so we weren't in the water. So the forward part, from the middle of the ship, or the middle of the quarterdeck forward was nothing.

And saw one main officer who I knew hanging on the mast, the after mast. And motor two, running around, picking up guys. And next question is what do you do? There wasn't anybody that I could help at the time. So we -- I think -- I'm not sure that the word got around to anybody to abandon ship. We had, as a group, you had to make your own decision, I guess. There was nobody on deck to tell you what to do. And so we jumped in the water. Take our shoes off, jump in the water, which is about ten or fifteen feet down. We could go over on the key and go down, but I think we jumped in. And that was a mistake too. Burning oil.

MS: Was the oil already burning?

CC: Already, yeah. You had to come up like you see in the movies and (inaudible) place a way to come up. So we went back, back to the key. And went back aboard. The three or four of us that I remember. And I see a guy walk out of our compartment, looked like crisp bacon. I think it was an hour or more he'd been in there.

MS: Where you had been earlier?

CC: Where our rigging place was.

MS: Oh, I see.

CC: Our rigging space was not --- we were at a cutout and we walked. There was another deck above that, so we had within the Marine compartment, and then we were next. So we had to walk out of there. And the oil that was on fire had the damage from the explosion. So this guy walks up to me and says, "Help me, Combs."

And I helped him to boat, got him down in the boat and he died on the way to the Ford Island. And I found out later who he was. He was my best friend from Indiana. And of course, we went up to Great Lakes as a group, from Indianapolis.

MS: What was his name?

CC: Criswell.

MS: Criswell.

CC: And we -- calling roll, we were close together, C-O and C-R, you know. And so I make sure my name wasn't above his over there on the slab when you come over.

MS: When you went from the key back to the ship, how did you get there? Did you swim back?

CC: We swam back, yeah. Yeah. Well, see, you know, it's probably 100 yards to Ford Island.

MS: Right.

CC: And it was only twenty, thirty, forty feet to, maybe, to back, and I think there's a ladder to go up on to the key.

MS: Was there a lot of people at that point then around, or was there still just very few of you?

CC: Very few of us, and see, I think the abandon ship, I think a lot of 'em went over on the line to the *VESTAL*. In other words, the *VESTAL* had their mooring lines over to our ship. A lot of 'em went over to the *VESTAL*, which that might have been a mistake too, because they got hit bad. And they were along our stern. The 300 [465] foot ship along the 900 [600] foot ship. And they kind of protected our -- I hope, you know, probably what happened, they kind of protected our stern. If they hadn't, we would have been in bad shape.

We were -- there was two safe places I think you could be, and that's where we were.

MS: Hold that thought.

CC: Yep.

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

MS: When you were back aboard the ship, after you'd gone to the key and back, there were still the same group of you from turret three?

CC: There were two or three of us. I'm not sure. Some of 'em may have gotten -- the division officer had gotten one of the captain's gig or admiral's barge and was running around, picking up people. And I'm sure he had come back to the ship, to see if there was any other fellows like us to pick up.

I think we may have feared another explosion. We had to get off of that thing, you see. This was . . .

MS: (Inaudible)

CC: Yes. This was bad. And so I think, everybody, I think, by that time, it was probably an hour, hour and a half, maybe. Nine or 9:30 . . .

MS: Wow.

CC: . . . before we got off of there. So I mean time was not a factor, you know, and we knew -- we thought the battle was over. It may have been over, I understand, in thirty minutes, or less. But we, not knowing what to do, knew we couldn't help anybody, probably.

So the one fellow -- the only thing I knew that Criswell was the only one I knew that come out, so we went down the ladder and got into the boat and over to -- I don't know which direction it was -- the end of Ford Island. And there was a bunker of sorts over on the end of the island, which I never knew. But it was there.

MS: Was that one of the whaleboats that somebody was . . .

CC: One of the admiral's barge, but a little different. A little fancier than our whale boats, yeah.

MS: So, did you give any thought earlier on to go over the *VESTAL* like a lot of the other guys did?

CC: To go over to the *VESTAL*? No, no.

MS: Didn't think that was a good idea?

CC: I never knew, I never got to that side of the ship.

MS: Oh.

CC: Because it was, see, the other ship was -- the other side of the ship was the fourth division, and of course, the land was on our side, see.

MS: Yeah. So you were kind of focused . . .

CC: Oh yeah. Yeah, we didn't belong on the other side of that ship.
(Chuckles)

MS: Not your territory, huh?

CC: No. No. That was a no-no. You didn't.

MS: You didn't go. What -- when you went into the water and you had the burning oil and such as that, you guys came back out. You probably were already covered in oil.

CC: Yeah, yeah. Well, (inaudible) not a lot. Not burning oil. We could be a little bit pick-and-choosy about where we -- you could see another way.

MS: Okay.

CC: Yeah.

MS: So you were pretty well . . .

CC: Well, it probably was (inaudible) worse before, later, I don't know. But I don't think anybody got burned -- in our group.

MS: In your group, right.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Do you remember guys that you were with? Do you remember who they were?

CC: No.

MS: You don't remember.

CC: No.

MS: Just some of the guys in the outfit who were trying to survive together.

CC: Yeah, that's right.

MS: And did any of you have any of the -- your little group there -- have any rank, or were you all basically the same?

CC: No, no, we were all -- I think we were all seamen.

MS: And you're . . .

CC: There could've been. Just like I said, we were so demoralized that I think we were thinking of ourselves only, really. And being that there was nothing to do, we just go with the herd, you might say.

MS: And what was your official rate at the . . .

CC: Seaman First Class.

MS: Seaman first.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Was there -- when you came off the boat and went to Ford Island, where did you end up going after that?

CC: Well, we went over and I was surprised to find women and children over there. And they lived on Ford Island, I guess, and they knew this bunker was down there. So had no clothes again. Had no clothes yet, so somebody decided to go up to Ford Island and break into lockers over there and get us some clothes. So we maybe got a pair of shorts. And I can't remember how we got there but we went over to fleet landing and reported in to a spot, fellow opened this (inaudible) door and you told him who you were and what ship and anything else he might ask -- if you need a service number. I didn't have any dog tags. I don't know why I didn't. Never did have.

MS: Oh, okay.

CC: This is another mistake, I guess. So then you filled out a card to send back to mom and pop, and told 'em what condition you were in. And if you could find a place to go, you write a letter, something like that, you know.

And then we were told to go over to the -- if you know where the amphitheater is. Went over there and sit down and wait. And they'd bring us a sandwich once in a while and call out names or rates and so on that a certain ship needed.

So I'm not sure, I think it was [*the tenth*]. I think most of the ships left the seventh. Went out and run around a while and come back. And so it was kind of a slow process. In other words, you had to listen up. We all wanted torpedo boats.

MS: (Inaudible)

CC: Yeah. All wanted torpedo boats. Would go out there and get 'em, you know.

MS: Yeah.

CC: And the old tin can wouldn't go fast enough for that. So we finally gave up and went aboard the DD-357, *SELFRIDGE*.

MS: Oh, okay.

CC: So myself and two second class gunners' mates off the *OKLAHOMA* went aboard the *SELFRIDGE* about noon and went aboard in no clothes. So the fellow had to -- Bosun Mate -- says, "Got any clothes, son?"

"Nah, you're looking at 'em."

So I said, "Hey, so-and-so, you know. Get in the boat, go over to *DOBBIN*," which was our tender, "and get this guy some clothes."

So we went over and of course all they had left was forty-fours. And I was a thirty-four. So he sat down at the sewing machine and took 'em up. That's what kind of bosun mate you had in those days.

MS: Sure.

CC: (Inaudible) maker also, see.

MS: (Inaudible)

CC: Everything. Yeah. So I think a few months later I got some clothes, in Australia. (Chuckles)

MS: Finally something to . . .

CC: Had to borrow my buddy's blues to go ashore, you know, or white, whatever it was.

MS: Can I take you back, just for a moment, to just as the attack was beginning? You said that somebody came down and yelled that the *CALIFORNIA* was on fire?

CC: Mm-hm.

MS: And your living quarters was where exactly on the ship?

CC: My living quarters was two-thirds of the way back to turret three.

MS: Okay.

CC: Hundred yards away. The chief's quarters was almost to the bow, anchor.

MS: So where did you actually pop up. What . . .

CC: Well, see, they were a deck below the main deck.

MS: Okay.

CC: And so all I had to do was go up the ladder.

MS: And you came out . . .

CC: And I could see -- from there, I could see. In other words, I wasn't on the main deck -- the weather deck, you might say. I was down at the first deck, below the weather deck.

MS: And that was close to . . .

CC: Forward, way up, yeah.

MS: . . . turret two.

CC: Way up above turret one.

MS: Oh, above turret one.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Okay, so you came out right near the bow.

CC: See, there was maybe a hundred feet beyond turret one until you got to the bow, you know.

MS: Oh, I see.

CC: Like this.

MS: And you had a pretty good view of the harbor from up there at that point.

CC: See everything.

MS: What did you see when you came up and was out?

CC: Just that plane flying over. He'd dropped his bomb, evidently, and was shooting out over at Ford Island.

MS: Oh, okay.

CC: See. And so I could see his wing. He wasn't 200 feet high.

MS: And you recognized him and . . .

CC: Oh yeah. We had plane identification.

MS: Oh, okay.

CC: Always stuck, yeah.

MS: Were you able to kind of take in the fact that things were happening, not just to the *CALIFORNIA*, but other ships were getting hit too?

CC: No, I saw no smoke or anything. I just seen him shooting out over back. I think I could see the tracers.

MS: I see.

CC: But I was intent on getting to my battle station. This is important, you know, that you get there. I had a long way to go. Normally, I didn't have that far to go. But I had no interference. I was the only guy that was going down that side of the ship.

MS: So, basically, you took one second look around, figured out what was happening pretty quick and you knew you had to . . .

CC: I would say two or three seconds later -- or four, maybe -- and I would've been in that fourth deck blast instead of going on down to the sixth or seventh deck. So, I mean, this is, you know . . .

MS: Saved your life.

CC: Yes. It may be an explanation of why I'm still here. If you want to delve that deep.

MS: Right.

CC: And we always do, you know. You get out and after the battle, you say, "Well, I would've -- if I hadn't slowed down," the skipper says a little later, "if I hadn't slowed down to twenty knots, we'd have got it right in the middle instead of in the bow." See?

MS: Yeah. You've had fifty-five years to think about this. You've come back a couple of times since and what are your thoughts, what are your feelings now as you go out to the memorial and look at your ship?

CC: Just sad. Just sad. And the older you get, the sadder it gets. It doesn't change. In fact, I just get more depressed than I normally I am. You know, it bothers me. In fact, one of the bodies is going to be interred Thursday, was one of my friends from Fort Lauderdale. And he wanted so much to come back to fifty-fifth. He'd been missing all the others.

MS: Well, he came back, huh?

CC: He's back over there. He'll be back there. Yeah.

MS: Are you planning to do that also?

CC: Mm-hm.

MS: Is that --- do you feel like you're coming back home or coming back to an old family by doing that?

CC: Well, part of it, yeah. See, in the Navy, the ship is your home. I mean, the beach didn't amount to that much to me. And so the way I describe it is, well, I lost my buddies but I lost my home. It's like having a fire, you know. And there's really no way you can describe it. But it relieves me in the respect that I'm going to join 'em, you know. Used to --- I had no idea that I had this guilt complex. In other words, how did you survive? Why, if you

ask yourself why. Or other people ask me how. Why do you have that complex, you know?

MS: That you survived and your friends . . .

CC: Yeah, they didn't.

MS: You felt guilty . . .

CC: And usually it's the guys who are doing all the work here, in the battle, he's the guy that doesn't make it. You stand around doing nothing, you survive, you know.

MS: Yeah.

CC: And the ship (inaudible). They were working at 'em.

MS: Yeah.

CC: Before the explosion.

MS: Returning fire.

CC: Yeah.

MS: Do you have, at this point, of course -- with the war fever that swept the nation and, "Remember Pearl Harbor," and such. There was a lot of animosity toward the Japanese. What are your feelings now towards the Japanese?

CC: Well, I've got to where I -- in the mental condition that I am, [I] can't worry about this. Not that it's bad, but it's just that it makes me more depressed if I start thinking about these things and sometimes I wonder why I keep coming back over here. But I guess this is probably the last time and I think I owe myself. I don't want to have to keep worrying about these things and if I didn't come, I probably would feel guilty, more guilty, the last time, to come back over here alive. And given my thoughts and whatever.

MS: For future generations, our great-grandkids, what would you like them to remember or learn from Pearl Harbor and the war?

CC: Well, we got to remain strong. If they have anything to do with being, kind of keep the faith. And of course, I don't have any sons, but if I ever had a grandson or whatever, I'd tell them to join the Navy. And we can't assume anything. You got to stay strong. And which I hope we can do.

MS: Well, because of your sacrifice and those of your friends, you've given us that opportunity. We thank you for that.

CC: Yes sir.

MS: And thank you for your time today and coming back to join us for this. We appreciate it.

CC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW