

#153 DON MCCARTHY: FIREMAN ABOARD THE USS *MEDUSA*

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay. I have to read this little thing. The following interview of Don McCarthy was conducted on December 2, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, at about three-forty in the afternoon. Mr. McCarthy lives now in Maple Heights, Ohio. The interviewer was Bart Fredo, that's me, and I was assisted by Dan Martinez of the National Park Service.

First of all, let me get you to tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Don McCarthy (DM): Okay. Well, my name is Don McCarthy and I enlisted in the Navy in New York City on January 15, 1941.

BF: What was your rank and rate in the Navy?

DM: At the time? On December 7, I was Fireman Third [Class]. I had been from a Seaman, Seaman Second [Class], then I went to Fireman Third [Class], which was in the Black Gang, and I was striking for an Electrician's Mate. So on that particular day, I was still a Fireman Third [Class].

BF: When did you first come to Hawaii in the Navy?

DM: In August 1941. I went aboard the *MEDUSA*, the USS *MEDUSA*, she was tied up in San Pedro at the time.

BF: What kind of ship is the *MEDUSA*, was the *MEDUSA*?

DM: Well, *MEDUSA* was -- her letters were AR-1, which makes here auxiliary repair ship. And actually in the catalog, we were slated or typed as repair ship, we could repair anything from a watch to a battleship. Now, you brought the watch up, that's what it was, see. So we could repair a watch or a battleship. So she primarily was a battleship repair.

BF: And the *MEDUSA* was in Pearl Harbor at the time?

DM: Yeah, she was stationed at Pearl Harbor.

BF: Now, I understand that the ship was not near Battleship Row.

DM: Not at that particular time. See, normally, what we'd do is if we had to repair a battleship, we were what you might consider a floating dry dock, or floating Navy yard. In other words, we could do everything but hull work, because we didn't have a dry dock, but we could do everything aboard our ship that had to be repaired. So if we got a bunch of work orders for, say, to *CALIFORNIA*, or one of the other battleships, we'd pull alongside them and we'd tie up alongside them. But it just happened on December 7, we didn't have any work on any of the battleships, so we were anchored off at Pearl City, just off Pearl City.

BF: Early that morning, what were you doing?

DM: Well, like I told Danny earlier today, I says, you know, normally on Sunday, that was what they call holiday routine on a Sunday. And usually you slept in, you didn't have to get up and do any work. You didn't have to turn to. So that morning, for some reason, I got up. I went down and had breakfast, come back, and I went to the head, took care of my little duties there, I might

say, and I was standing in the shop and talking to a chief. Just at the time I was talking to the chief and I happened to look out through our portholes, one of the portholes on the ship, and I heard this explosion. And I looked out and I saw a lot of smoke. And the remark I made to the chief I was talking to, I says, "Oh, one of them darn aviators,--" used a little different language at the time, "he done crashed into one of the fuel dumps over there." I said, "Now I'll be called away for fire and rescue."

Well, about that time the alarm went off and the Boatswain Mate stuck his head down the hatch and hollered, "General quarters!"

And I says, "Boy, even the boatswain -- get a little excitement around here in the mornings like this, and everybody gets all fouled up. Even the boatswain mate doesn't know what's going on!"

And he said, "This is general quarters." And then he says, "This is no bleep." He made a few obscene remarks about it. And then, of course, now we knew it was general quarters.

Now I went to my general quarters station at the time, which is up on the fo'c'sle, and I was on surface kind of action, it was a five-inch surface gun and I was a sightsetter on it. Well, I got up to my general quarters station and all these planes were starting to fly in and out, you know. And I'd look up and I didn't know who they were. And one of the other fellows says, "Oh, look at that big, flaming bleep again." He said, "They're Japanese."

And about this time, they were dive bombing. They were dropping bombs. And I was, stood up there on the fo'c'sle and I could see these planes dropping these bombs, and they were just going, "psst." And it didn't dawn on me what was going on. I thought, you know, this is something new to me. And actually, what they were doing, they missed us seven times. Seven bomb misses around the *MEDUSA*. Of course, at this time now, everything is going on all around. And just across Ford Island, of course, their torpedoes were being dropped over there. And I wasn't too far from the *UTAH*, and I saw her get hit, started rolling over. But like I said, I was setting sights on this gun.

At about this time, just aft our counter, there was a periscope. It was one of these little two-man submarines, and its counting tower was out of the water. So I had the trainer train the gun around, and we just sat zero-zero. And then I told him, I says, "Load in a slug."

And one of the loaders back there says, "We ain't go no bullets."

Well, the magazine locked up, of course, and our ready lockers were locked and we had nothing to put in the gun. And now when I look back at it, now, it was a good thing we didn't, because we'd a been throwing five-inch shells out there, and they'd have been bouncing off the water, ricochet, and then wind up in the Navy yard. We'd have probably done more damage than good. But anyhow, but that little two-man sub, and we had an aircraft gun back on our boat deck that depressed and was able to put a shell through our counting tower. And, I don't know, if you look in the history books, everybody took credit for that submarine. About that time, the *MONAGHAN* come on down to drop depth charges on her.

BF: Did any of the attacking planes ever hit the *MEDUSA*?

DM: No, not with a bomb they didn't, but they, on our weld deck, what we called the weld deck, we had a big movie screen. Oh, it was a mammoth, big thing. And it must have made an awful good target, because they come down, they cut that to ribbons with machine gun fire. And our searchlight, back on the boat deck, was riddle with bullets. But we were very fortunate, there was nobody hurt. One man got the back of his hand cut with shrapnel, but I don't know, it was just luck.

In fact, the *MEDUSA* was a lucky ship, I'll tell you why. In November, we were out there and we were tied up at a quay at Ford Island, just like a battleship was, except we were on the other side. When we went out on maneuvers and come back in, the Utah get in before us, and she took our berth. Now, we were a little bit provoked about the *UTAH* being tied up where we were. But, of course, you know what happened to the *UTAH*, don't you? So, just as I say we were a lucky ship, we weren't there, or we might have took the brunt of that attack on the *UTAH*.

BF: During the attack, what was going through your mind?

DM: Now, first, when they started . . . when I said I saw them dropping these bombs, see. Of course, they hit the water and didn't make too much noise. And, of course, with no shells in my -- for the five-inch gun I was at, I decided I'd go hand the ammunition for the three-inch guns, 'cause we had a three-inch anti-aircraft gun. So I went over to the magazine hoist and they were shooting these boxes of three-inch shells up. Well, normally, it's a two-man operation, but I guess adrenaline must have flowed and everybody was just grabbing one by itself. And I started one with my head down and then I heard an awful big explosion. And I thought maybe one of these bombs had finally hit the -- and at first, I dropped on the deck and had this box of ammunition. And the thing that ran through my mind right then was, "We got our bottom blowed off." And I had my head down like this and when I raise it up like this, the bow just loomed up there, just as big. I thought, "Oh."

And what it was, actually, was a thirty-inch anti-aircraft gun fired their first shot and those things are noisy. And that's what it was. I thought we had an explosion but it was actually the thirty-inch anti-aircraft. And from then on . . . and then, first, these planes are coming in strafing. And that's fascinating. I don't know if you've ever been in front of another plane that was shooting bullets at you, but they have tracers and about every fifth is a tracer, see. And you just get fascinated, and you get stunned. You get mesmerized, that's it. And then when it dawned what they're doing, then of course, I dropped -- I always tell everybody I was looking for a rivet head to hide behind. You look for anything to hide behind in a case like that.

And I don't know, things just got kind of hairy after that.

BF: How so?

DM: Well, I don't -- it wasn't hairy, you just kept moving, just automatically. You train, you know, all this time, with general quarters drill and stuff like that, and it seemed like automatically you start doing things. And your mind really doesn't even function.

BF: Much confusion?

DM: I wouldn't say it was confusion, now. It was just that when you drill so often, then it becomes kind of natural. And then you start moving unconsciously.

BF: Did this three-inch gun crew hit anything that it shot at?

DM: We were credit -- we had two anti-aircraft guns, two three-inch anti-aircraft guns, and we had two thirty-caliber machine guns on our bridge. And according to the records, we shot down two airplanes and got one submarine. So that's not bad for a repair ship.

BF: Did you see any of these hits?

DM: Oh, yeah. I saw one plane, well, not that we hit, but come across Ford Island and it looks like its wheels are on fire, and she was heading off Ford Island towards the locks out there. And it looked like he turned and dove right into the *CURTIS*. I saw it hit the *CURTIS*. That was one.

BF: What kind of a ship was the *CURTIS*?

DM: The *CURTIS* was a seaplane tender. And another plane was coming down on our port side and she was just roaring right down through there. And all of a sudden it got quiet. And a quick look like that, and all I saw was just pieces of plane coming down and the engine and the pilot went right over into the bank over there.

BF: Were these -- were these planes low enough so that you could see the pilots?

DM: Oh yeah. Oh yes. In fact, they were low enough, if we had something to throw at 'em, we could've. Yeah, they were real low. In fact, you could see the guys', you could see the pilots real good. These dive bombers come right down on top of you, especially when they're strafing.

BF: What was the scene like in the harbor when you looked around, when you had a minute to look around? What did it look like?

DM: Well, I don't recall looking around, tell you the truth. I did remember seeing the *UTAH* roll over.

BF: That was a target ship, old battleship that had been converted to . . .

DM: Yeah. They took into our berth. And of course, that submarine I was talking about. I remember seeing that thing. And the story of coming down and dropping deck charge and then heading out. And the plane that crashed into the *CURTIS*. Those are things that stuck in my mind. But . . .

BF: Were you aware of what was happening along Battleship Row and the other side of Ford Island?

DM: Not really, not really at that time. But if I remember, I told you, I looked out a port hole and saw this black smoke, I think that was the first hit over there, on of those torpedo ships.

BF: So you knew pretty soon that this was an attack?

DM: Oh yeah. Then we knew we were in trouble somewhere.

BF: You never confused it with a drill?

DM: Oh, no, no, no. It wasn't a drill. No, no. We knew it wasn't a drill within two or three minutes, as I say.

BF: After the attack was over that day, what was the rest of that day like? What did you do?

DM: Well, I -- it seemed like we stayed in general quarters and I remember being up around the fo'c'sle and somebody come tap me on the back and says, "Hey, would you care for a sandwich?"

And I said, "Thank you." It was Spam sandwich, of all things. Good tasting sandwich at the time. And that was two-thirty in the afternoon. Now, what happened between the morning and two-thirty, I don't know. Really. I have no recollection.

BF: 'Cause that . . . that time go by very quickly, then?

DM: It did, it did.

BF: You weren't conscious of time.

DM: Nuh-uh. No, it just seemed like you were busy all the time doing something. I don't know what I was doing, but I must have been busy.

BF: Were you ever afraid?

DM: Not really. Not until that evening. I don't think I was afraid until after that. And then, of course, we went into general quarters at night again, because there's some planes, some planes come in. And of course, they called general quarters and everybody got excited again and it turned out they were our own planes. They were off the *ENTERPRISE*, they'd come in that night.

BF: What were the next few days like? Oh, stop, I'll ask you with that when we change tapes.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

VIDEOTAPE TWO

BF: Let's go back to this midget submarine that you saw. Besides your ship, who else was firing at it?

DM: Well, I really couldn't tell you who else was firing. It seems like later on, I've heard that everybody had taken credit for it. But what stuck out in my mind, of course, I did see it come up. And as I say, I was setting sights on his five-inch gun and we had it trained around her and, of course, nobody said anything about firing at it, but we were trained right on it. And I think if we did have some shells, we could have put one through the counting tower. And then, of course, our anti-aircraft gun on the boat deck depressed, and she did fire at it and put a shell through the counting tower. But at about this time, the USS *MONAGHAN*, which is a destroyer that was on ready duty. She was on the way and she was coming down or starboard side. And I watched her come in. She rammed this submarine, and you could see it roll. And then she dropped depth

charges, and then she went across the lock and I thought she run, she run aground across the lock, and put out a fire on a barge that was over there.

BF: This is the *MONAGHAN* now?

DM: The *MONAGHAN*, yeah.

BF: What about the sub . . .

DM: Well . . .

BF: . . . after it was rammed?

DM: After she rammed, of course, the *MONAGHAN* dropped depth charges and then I didn't see no more of it. She didn't come back up again, so we presumed it was hit. And I said, the *MONAGHAN* run across, run aground and there was a barge over there that was on fire, and she put that fire out, and then she backed off, and then she steamed off through the channel and went to sea.

BF: Can you recall any other incidents that stick out in your mind? Things like that?

DM: Well, now, that is the one that I can remember really, because I'm not sure whether another destroyer come down and dropped depth charges or not, after that.

BF: What about the next few days, the next few weeks? What was life like for you?

DM: Well, I think it was two or three days, it might have been about three days later when I finally was able to take a shower. You know, you were just -- as I said before, we kinda numbed you. You just sit around and waiting for something to happen. You didn't know what was going to happen. So I do recall that when I finally did get to go, I was wearing -- I'm only wearing sandals now, but that day I had on socks and I had on a pair of moccasins. And I didn't realize until I went to take off my sock that I must have got hit with a piece shrapnel, because my sock was stuck to my foot. Of course, it was all healed up by this time. But it took about three days before I was able to get a shower. And you slept with your clothes on and we went into general quarters every time somebody dropped a hammer, I think they got excited and went to general quarters.

And the thing -- funny things happened too, you know. Right after -- when I had a chance to look around, we had two more electrician's Mate who . . . Well, one fellow, his name was TOO, and the other guys name was Spindell. Well, TOO was a tall fellow and Spindell was a short fellow. And their general quarters station was on our after searchlight. And an after searchlight was a 24-inch searchlight, with a little platform around it. And they were up on this platform, and see, when the planes come in to strafe us, say they come in from the starboard side, they'd run around the port side. Well, when TOO was telling the stories about it afterwards, he says, "You know, we'd be on the starboard side when you're on our port side, Ducky was in front of me." This was Spindell.

And he said, "We go from the port side to the starboard side, Ducky was in front of me again." He says, "How'd you get in front of me? The platform was only this wide!"

And we didn't know how he done it. We found out, we went to general quarters and Ducky was a very fast fellow. He was going up to general quarters, he walked right up and down his back, no problem at all. Funniest thing you ever saw, the guy walking. He was just that fast, walked over the guy's back, and away he went. And that's what he must have been doing to Roger TOO, all the time, kept walking over his back. But you know, when you look back at it now, you had some humorous parts of it too.

BF: When was the first time you had a chance to leave the ship and go ashore?

DM: I think it might have been about two weeks later that we had liberty and went over on the beach. And everybody was real nice to us then. Before, you know, before this happened, of course, servicemen on the beach there in Honolulu, well, eh, just servicemen.

BF: You mean, when you say the beach, you mean downtown Honolulu, the Waikiki?

DM: Yeah, anyplace. On the shore, you might say. And, but then, after that, of course, people were really nice, in fact, they were getting close to Christmas time, you know. And I got invited to five different homes for Christmas. And I couldn't make any of them because there wasn't any liberty on Christmas. They thought there was going to be another attack at that time. They weren't sure what was happening. So never did.

BF: Were you affected at all by martial law, which was declared immediately after?

DM: Well, our liberty was cut down, from about twelve o'clock to four o'clock. We had about four hours liberty every fourth day, and that's about when it was.

BF: Is there any one thing about the attack that sticks out in your mind more vividly than anything else?

DM: I don't know how you'd . . .

BF: Something you remember more often than anything else?

DM: No. Well, I remember, you know, the first time I heard that noise and the remarks I made to that chief. That I can always remember. I can even remember the guy, chief's name, too. His name was Asher. (Chuckles)

BF: What happened to him?

DM: I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't know what ever happened to Chief Asher.

BF: What happened to you?

DM: Oh, I stayed aboard the Medusa. In April of '42, they sent me back to San Diego to go to sound and motion picture school. I become a movie operator. And I was back here . . . it was a five-week course. But I wasn't very smart, it took me three months to get through a five-week course. But I went back to the Medusa again and I stayed aboard her. In the meantime, I went from fireman -- I told you I was a Fireman -- I made Electrician['s] Mate Third [Class], Electrician['s] Mate Second [Class]. And when I left the MEDUSA in 1944, I was First Class Electrician['s] Mate. And we took the MEDUSA down to New Hebrides

from there and we done our work down there. And then I come back in 1944, January 1944. They sent me back to V-12 school, which is officer candidate school. And I stayed in officer school for -- well, actually until the war ended, in '45, I was forty-five. Then they abolished the school, and being I was regular Navy, I couldn't out when everybody else was getting out. I had to finish my enlistment which I had another, about another year to go. And they sent me to a tender, the USS *DIXIE*. And we wound up in Bikini, for the A-bomb testing, 1946. And that's where I finished up my regular Navy career.

BF: Do you have any feelings of, for lack of a better word, animosity towards the Japanese, as a result of what you went through?

DM: At this time?

BF: Then and now. During the war and now.

DM: Of course, during the war, they were the enemy. But after the war, no, I don't think so. Until recently. The reason I'm telling you that is I worked for Chrysler corporation, automobile industry. And of course, you know, the Japanese are putting us . . . so we have a little animosity towards the Japanese because of the cars they're putting out.

BF: But not because of the attack?

DM: No, not because of the attack. No, no. I don't have any animosity to them neither, as far as that goes. But I could always say that I don't like the Japanese because they're putting out small cars. (Chuckles)

BF: You played a part in a very big event. What effect did it have on your life, being here that day?

DM: Well, I . . . you know, actually, I've had people say to me, you know, I'd say, tell 'em I was at Pearl. Oh, I've had many people say, a hero, a hero. I don't feel like a hero. It just happened that I was in, might you say, the right place at the right time? Or the wrong place at the wrong time? I don't know. And I think I've been pretty fortunate in my life, that was one event. And there was a lot of things went on through my life, since then, where the good lord was taking care of me. And I've been very fortunate.

BF: When you see a movie or maybe read a book, are you often transported back in time to that day?

DM: Well, when I read a book about Pearl Harbor, I try to find out how many fallacies there are.

BF: You mean errors?

DM: Mm hm.

BF: Do you find a lot?

DM: I guess there are some, you know. The movie that come out, "Tora, Tora, Tora." Great, beautiful photography, but a lot of it wasn't right. But then, I don't know, really, because I was on the one ship and I was just in one small place. I only know what went around me. What went on, on the other side of island. In fact, actually, when we went on liberty, I had to go around Ford Island on liberty launches, and I wouldn't even look over at the battleships. I

didn't. And of course, there was a lot of debris in the water at the time, and there was still bodies being taken out.

BF: It almost sounds as if this was not the harrowing experience for you that it was for a lot of other people.

DM: It wasn't really. Well, I was twenty-one years and I still consider myself a kid. And I was enjoying myself. I was in the Navy, that was one thing. There was three things I wanted to do when I was a little kid, was join the Navy, get a tattoo, and go to China. Two out of three ain't bad, I've never been to China. I might get back someday, but. No, actually, I was in the Navy and it was just, I don't know, just another day's affair, as far as I was concerned, I guess. It really didn't bother me that much. Of course, I didn't like the idea of them shooting real bullets at me. And if I could help it, I wouldn't give them the opportunity again. And I was lucky, I didn't give them much opportunity.

Daniel Martinez: Would you like to . . .

BF: Let me . . . do it through me and then he'll look at me.

DaM: Okay, ask him about meeting . . . the fiftieth anniversary is planned . . .

BF: Oh right, I got you. Okay.

In another five years, there's going to be a fiftieth anniversary and we can assume that a lot of Japanese survivors of the war, and maybe even of the attack will be here. How would you feel about meeting with them?

DM: I think it would be interesting. I think I'd like to see some. In fact, there's an awful lot of Japanese tourists here right now. And I look at 'em to see who'd be the right age. I just wonder maybe if they are some of the ones that were there.

BF: What goes through your mind when you see them?

DM: I don't know. I'd just like to know what they look like. See if they'd aged like we have. Of course, I don't think I've aged because I look at this face every morning in the mirror and it hasn't changed. But if I look at one of my pictures from 1941, I guess I did grow a little older.

BF: Five years from now, you meet some survivors, Japanese survivors of the attack, what are you going to say?

DM: Well, it all depends what time of the day it is. I can say "Ohayo," if it's before noon, I guess.

BF: Which means, of course, "good morning" in Japanese.

DM: That's about all. No, I think it would be kind of interesting, if I could converse with them, I'd like to see what they -- you know, like I told you before, I have no animosity towards them. And actually, they were just doing the same thing that we were doing. They were patriots for their country, we were patriots for ours. But it would be very interesting. I understand sometime when, oh, sometime back, was it Fushido who led the attack?

BF: Fuchida.

DM: Fuchida. And he got religion, of course. He was in the States. I mean, I understand he tried to join the . . .

(TAPE STOPS, RESTARTS)

BF: You probably have to move from there . . .

END OF INTERVIEW