

#167 DONALD SEELY: USS HENLEY

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay, let me slate this. The following interview is with Donald Seely and it was conducted on December 3, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel at about six o'clock in the evening. Mr. Seely now lives in Kansas City, Kansas. I'm the interviewer, my name is Bart Fredo and also in the room is Dan Martinez, and he is a historian with the National Park Service.

Mr. Seely, let me first of all ask you to start this tape the way we started with all the others. Tell me your name and what your hometown was back in 1941.

Donald Seely (DS): I was Donald James Seely at the time of the attack. I was born Donald James Spitzengel in Kansas City, Kansas. In '41 -- I don't know much about Kansas City, Kansas in '41. I only had one liberty from the time I enlisted.

BF: What service were you in?

DS: Navy.

BF: Rank?

DS: Gunner's Mate Third Class, at the time of the attack.

BF: When did you . . .

(Conversation off-mike.)

BF: Who was it? Was it me? Oh, let me move a little bit. And what part of my anatomy was it?

(Conversation off-mike.)

BF: We can do it again. We can start it again.

(Tape stops, restarts.)

BF: Okay, this is take two. The following interview is with Donald Seely, also known as Donald Spitzengel. It was conducted on December 3, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, about six o'clock in the evening. Mr. Seely AKA Spitzengel lives in Kansas City . . .

(Tape stops, restarts)

BF: Mr. Seely lives in Kansas City. I'm Bart Fredo doing the interview, and with me is Dan Martinez, a historian with the National Park Service. So again we start.

Why don't you tell us your name and what your hometown was back in 1941?

DS: I'm Donald Seely. I'm from Kansas City, Kansas.

BF: Let's do that again. You're also going to tell me the Spitzengel part too, like you did the second time. Let's start again now. I'm going to ask you what's your name and where were you from back in 1941?

DS: My name is Donald J. Seely. I was born Donald James Spitzengel in Kansas City, Kansas.

BF: What branch of the service were you in?

DS: Navy.

BF: And rank?

DS: Gunner's Mate Third [Class] at the time of the attack.

BF: Aboard the ship?

DS: USS *HENLEY* DD391.

BF: That's a destroyer?

DS: That is a destroyer.

BF: When did you arrive in Hawaii?

DS: April 6, 1938.

BF: So you were here a while?

DS: Oh, yes, yes. We were the original Hawaiian Detachment.

BF: Let me take you back to the morning of the attack. Before the attack started, where were you? What were you doing?

DS: I was on the fantail. We were getting gathered up for muster, roll call.

BF: What happened then?

DS: A mistake was made at the quarterdeck. The petty officer of the watch, Third Class Torpedoman, Don J. Wilson, was eating. And he inadvertently did not watch but he was eating and he reached up and he grabbed the wrong gong. It was a battle station gong instead of the muster call. And immediately, the battle stations, everybody was manning battle stations. And he had a young recruit, messenger, and he tried passing him along to say, "Hey, tell everybody it's a mistake, I goofed. It's still just for muster."

BF: This was before you realized there was attack?

DS: Oh yes. And muster was 7:55. So you can see how close it was to the attack time.

BF: So what did the crew do?

DS: Everybody that was awake went to battle stations. And those people down in the decks, they were hitting the deck and getting clothes on so they could go to their own battle stations.

BF: So were they at battle stations when the actual attack occurred?

DS: Some of them were, absolutely. They --- you can see, on a 341 foot ship, the word cannot get from bow to stern immediately to belay that it was a mistake.

BF: When did you first realize that something was wrong, something was happening?

DS: A group of us noticed aircraft near Barbers Point. We turned to look. It was not unusual to see the aircraft coming in with the aim of a supposed attack on the Navy forces. But this time, they dropped fish. Well, we still didn't think anything about it until they hit the ships and exploded.

BF: When you say fish, you mean torpedoes?

DS: That's correct.

BF: Tell us more about what you saw.

DS: As soon as these torpedoes hit, I think then we knew immediately something was wrong, 'cause they never dropped torpedoes inside the Pearl before. At that particular time, I looked up and right down the way, towards the sea, was Ford Island and here come a Japanese air-- we didn't know it was Japanese at the time -- but an airplane came down strafing. And just as it got to us within less than 150 feet, it banked to go around for another turn and here's the big red flag on the fish launch.

BF: You realized then?

DS: Oh yes. It was immediate. And the pilot just grinned at us.

BF: You got a good look at him?

DS: Oh yes. No problem.

BF: Still remember that face?

DS: Well, I couldn't identify him with his helmet and everything, but I remember him grinning. Now, he was getting away with murder because nobody was firing back.

BF: About these torpedoes that you saw dropped, what happened to them?

DS: As soon as this attack started --- I was machine gun petty officer, it was my responsibility for fifty water-cooled Brownings and I had charge of the machine gun ammunition lockers. Well, I immediately tried to go down to where there was machine gun magazines to get ammunition and already the hatches were being dogged down.

BF: And that means?

DS: That means that I had to open a manhole, undog it, go down through it, went into another deck, had to open another hatch, go down and I picked up ammunition, threw it around my shoulder in belts, dogged that hatch down, come back up that staircase, the ladder, going up to that first hatch, open the manhole, undog it, climb through, push the ammunition up, dog it back down, and then I went out through the number four gun handling room and started up the deck house, towards my guns.

BF: How long did that take?

DS: Who knows. All I know is I was busy. I didn't look at any watch.

BF: You didn't tell us what happened to those torpedoes. Did you see them hit anything?

DS: I seen 'em hit the *UTAH*.

BF: And what happened?

DS: Well, when I came back up on deck, the *UTAH* had already turned over.

BF: So by the time you went below deck and came back up . . .

DS: The *UTAH* had capsized.

BF: You came back up on deck, what did you see then when you looked up, besides the *UTAH* capsized?

DS: Aircraft, all kinds of aircraft. I started up the starboard side of the ship, trying to hug the deckhouse because I knew these people were out to kill us. It was evidently war. I got up to my machine guns and we had just come in the night before from a 300 mile patrol out. And we had taken heavy grease and greased our machine guns so that no salt spray would hurt them. And they were just immersed in grease. So I had to go back down to the torpedo locker and get a five gallon can of diesel oil and bring it back up and I was busy pouring this five gallon can of diesel oil over these fifty caliber machine guns forward, two mounts, to get them to where they would operate.

BF: So after you initially realized that there was an attack under way, how long was it before you were actually able to operate the weapon?

DS: The first opportunity I had to operate the weapon on a target, we got under way . . .

BF: You left your moorings?

DS: We went a-buoy. We slipped the buoy, and as we came about, a bomb hit, probably, about 150 yards away. We were throwing anything that would burn, splinter, or catch fire, we were throwing over the side -- the brow, the gangway, all the paints, the varnishes, the mops, the brooms. Anything that would splinter or burn.

BF: Sounds like the deck was a beehive of activity.

DS: Oh, it was. Now, we must remember, we had the flag for the division. The division commander was ashore and the captain was ashore, the exec was ashore. We had a lieutenant senior officer present who took us out. As we came down the Row, past the *RALEIGH*, the *DETROIT*, the *RALEIGH* was already taking a fish in her stern. I didn't know about a bomb hit, which she had had . . .

BF: That was a cruiser?

DS: Light cruiser, scout. The *UTAH*, of course, had capsized, and the [*TANGIER*] was afire from her boat deck aft. I later learned she had knocked a

plane down that had went into her boat deck, and I think they lost thirty-four men there.

BF: What kind of a ship is the [TANGIER]?

DS: Seaplane tender.

BF: Were you taking fire during this time?

DS: No. No. All the targets were the battleships and the heavy cruisers. We received no fire of any kind.

BF: As you're getting under way, are you using your weapons?

DS: No. No.

BF: Still washing 'em down with the oil, the kerosene?

DS: They were diesel oil. They were being manned and we were busy belting up ammunition into belts. But I had no opportunity to fire on any of 'em, anything.

BF: Tell us about the planes you saw.

DS: The most planes that I saw were attacking the west side of Ford Island.

BF: That's the side where the UTAH was.

DS: That's correct. They had those pretty well EN-SIV-ED.

BF: ARIZONA, NEVADA, MARYLAND, WEST VIRGINIA, all on the other side.

DS: They were on the east side, that's correct.

BF: Could you see the east side of Ford Island?

DS: Oh yes, because I was up on the secondary com of the destroyer I was on, so we was probably somewhere in the vicinity of forty feet above the water line.

BF: Did you see any of the battle wagons on the east side of Ford take any hits?

DS: I didn't see 'em take anything except bombs, because I was so high up, but yet I could not see the other side of the battleships open to torpedo fire.

BF: What did you see when you saw these hits on the battleships?

DS: Fire, flame, explosions.

BF: These planes, now, back to the planes. Did you see any of the attacking planes get hit?

DS: I don't recall anything because our five-inch was going off at that time and any plane that got up was a target. They didn't bother to identify anybody. If they got up, as far as we were concerned, they were enemy. Now remember, a goodly portion of our crew was ashore, and they were being manned with anybody that could get up there and throw a projectile into the breach of a gun and

hammer it home with a spade. No fuses set, no nothing. The bombardment of Honolulu was Navy artillery, pure and simple, fuses were not set.

BF: So you, eventually, you began to operate your weapon?

DS: Yes. We came down and as we passed the [*TANGIER*], the battleship *NEVADA* came into view. As we went astern of the battleship *NEVADA*, she took two more 500 pound bomb hits.

BF: You saw that?

DS: Oh yes, I sure did. And as we turned to be on her port side, it was evident she was going to beach. If they had sank the *NEVADA* in the channel, nothing was going to come in, nothing was going to go out. Fortunately, all of the torpedoes and all of the bombs had been expended on the battleships. All we took were strafing fire from strafing aircraft. One guy made a mistake, he came down our starboard side and I picked him up and I put rounds into him until he caught fire and went into the sea.

BF: You hit him?

DS: Oh yes, I cut him to pieces.

BF: You're sure it was you?

DS: All the ship's company and I've got my division officer right on the bridge and I'm immediately below him.

BF: You fired tracer rounds?

DS: Yes, every fourth round was, the rest of it was ball, the fourth round was a tracer.

BF: You knew it was your stuff going in?

DS: Oh yeah. The whole ship's company forward could see it. It was very evident.

BF: How long were you firing at him before you saw that you were having an effect?

DS: Well, I picked him up by the tail and I didn't stop until it went up into his engine. And I would estimate that I was probably on him four or five seconds.

BF: And was this a torpedo plane?

DS: They tell me it was a light bomber. He had no armament on him, the torpedoes or bombs had been expended. Pretty hard to identify.

BF: And where did he go in?

DS: Forward of us, probably a quarter of a mile ahead of us.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

BF: After you saw this plane go in, what happened next?

DS: A five-inch, they were firing as we were coming out.

BF: I'm sorry. I don't understand what you mean. They were firing the five-inch gun on the *HENLEY*?

DS: That's correct.

BF: Why?

DS: The targets . . . well, out of the tube, I would judge to be in excess of twenty to twenty-five thousand feet.

BF: The high level bombers?

DS: Well, we didn't know, I didn't know . . .

BF: Or fighters?

DS: . . . what it was. All I know is it was an aircraft, he was headed south. I looked up at the director and the director and the guns turned together and gunner two fired and you could watch the white projectile go up underneath that plane and it exploded. No plane.

BF: So the *HENLEY* has its second kill?

DS: That's my story, yes sir, that's right.

BF: What happens for you next?

DS: I really don't recall during the attack because I don't remember dropping any depth charges. I don't remember any more firing, from the fifty-calibers anyway. I met a man tonight that told me that he remembered us coming out, "boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom," and you know, I don't recall this particular occasion.

BF: As you're making your way through the water, are you on the west or the east side of Ford Island?

DS: To seaward.

BF: Seaward of it. Did you have an opportunity to see the destruction, the extent of the destruction on Battleship Row on Ford Island?

DS: Only as we passed down the channel on the west side.

BF: So you really didn't get a good look at it, at that point?

DS: Oh, no, we did not because all I seen was bomb blast. I seen no torpedo hits whatever.

BF: What happened when you were on the seaside of Ford Island? I understand you saw a launch coming in?

DS: After we went out the channel, we were completely out the channel.

BF: You were outside the . . .

DS: Oh yes.

BF: . . . outside the harbor?

DS: Yes, we were.

BF: What did you see?

DS: I seen a forty-five to a sixty foot motor launch.

BF: Coming in . . .

DS: Coming along the beach, on the west side of the beach, coming up to the channel area.

BF: Could you see who was in it?

DS: I only seen one man waving a white handkerchief.

BF: A civilian or a . . .

DS: Well, he was not in uniform.

BF: I understand the *HENLEY* was firing at this launch . . .

DS: Only with fifty-caliber machine guns.

BF: Did you hit it?

DS: I cut it in half, as far as I'm concerned. I hit it.

BF: This launch?

DS: Yes.

BF: And then when the man started waving the flag?

DS: My division officer told me, "Seely, cease firing."

BF: Then what happened?

DS: I ceased fired. And then I happened to glimpse behind us and the next ship behind us was a light cruiser, *ST. LOUIS*. I saw the turret on the *ST. LOUIS* trained towards the motor launch and fire.

BF: A five-inch gun, three-inch gun?

DS: Six-inch forty-sevens.

BF: And?

DS: No boat.

BF: Hit it?

DS: It hit it.

BF: The next thing you knew, the launch was gone?

DS: There was no pieces, nothing.

BF: And I understand you have some question as to whether or not this has ever been reported before.

DS: That's correct.

BF: You've never heard that it had.

DS: No sir. It's not in any of the books I read. And I'm a reader.

BF: What happened then, after this incident with the launch? What happened to the *HENLEY* and you?

DS: The --- as I related earlier, the five-inch fired up at this aircraft, somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand feet, and hit it. I think about that time, if there was any more gunfire, I don't remember. We spent a considerable amount of time bringing aboard our division commander and the captain and the exec.

BF: Where did you pick them up?

DS: From a life raft, let loose by the *TREVER*, a destroyer.

BF: Inside the harbor or . . .

DS: Oh no, outside it, past the channel.

BF: So you were out in open water?

DS: That's correct.

BF: When did you come back into the harbor?

DS: December 10.

BF: So you were about three days, then?

DS: Yes.

BF: What did you do during those three days?

DS: They came down and told us that we were going to hunt that Japanese fleet that had inflicted so much damage on us. It was interesting because the officer that took us out, after being relieved by the captain and the exec, came down, gun mount by gun mount, and he explained to us. He says, "Look back there and see what them SOB's has done to our fleet. Now we're going to go out there and we're going to get them guys."

And we all looked at one another and I know I was only twenty-one and I started bawling, 'cause I could see the flames and the smoke still rolling up, and I know how many aircraft they put above them. And we were going to go out and take these people on? I counted ships, I counted nineteen. One cruiser,

the *DETROIT*, age 1921, and the others were destroyers, and we were going to go out and attack a fleet that can do that to Pearl Harbor?

BF: During those three days, you didn't see anything?

DS: We saw, before dark, we came upon an American submarine and he gave us a blinker light at probably something in the neighborhood of six or seven miles. He was surfaced and he says, "I am friendly, I am friendly, I am friendly, I am friendly."

 Sometime later, we came in contact with an American tanker, no fuel aboard. He was high ballast. And he was also blinking the light. I don't remember what his call was, but I know he was friendly.

BF: No --- you saw, no sign of the enemy, however?

DS: No, none whatever.

BF: When you came back into the harbor on the tenth, what did you see?

DS: Can we stop right there and go back to what occurred on the evening of ninth?

BF: We just have . . .

DS: On sometime after dark, on the evening of the seventh, we picked up a carrier. I'm going to assume it was the *ENTERPRISE* . . .

BF: Picked it up meaning on your radar?

DS: We didn't have no radar.

BF: Oh.

DS: No, we sighted, visually and we immediately formed a screen for her. The evening of the seventh, we were in company with her all of the evening of the seventh, the eighth, and the ninth. On the evening of the ninth, after dark fall, nightfall, four destroyers on either side of that carrier, she was hit by a torpedo, on the port quarter. She immediately went to flank speed and left us wallowing. This was after dark. We never saw this carrier again until the next morning, at daybreak. We were coming back into Pearl. I never saw so many torpedo wakes and the carrier planes, they had lost all her carrier planes, and they were all over the area outside of the channel, dropping bombs, depth charges, smoke bombs, pots, and the torpedo wakes everywhere.

BF: These were planes from this carrier?

DS: That's correct, American carrier.

BF: Was it the *ENTERPRISE*, coming back in?

DS: It has to be, it would have to be.

BF: Do you know where this torpedo that hit the ship came from?

DS: Well, they tell me it was a sub.

BF: Do you know if it did very much damage?

DS: I think it killed something like eighteen men and seeing as how they've got about eighteen fire rooms, well, it didn't slow her down at all.

BF: So when you did come back into the harbor, if we can go there now, what did you see?

DS: All kinds of destroyers trying to trace down these torpedo wakes and dropping depth charges everywhere.

BF: So, in other words, you were seeing and hearing explosions going off in the harbor three days after the attack?

DS: Not in the harbor, outside the harbor.

BF: Outside the harbor.

DS: Oh yes.

BF: So lots of activity off shore?

DS: Just particularly with submarines. No surface craft, no aircraft.

BF: When you came back and the ship came back into the harbor here, the *HENLEY* . . .

DS: Yes sir.

BF: . . . what did you see? What did you see?

DS: Debris. Things were still burning. Of course, ships were still damaged.

BF: Did you go down by Battleship Row?

DS: No, we went over on the other -- same on the -- stayed on the west side of Ford Island again.

BF: Could you see, though, could you see?

DS: Oh yes. It was very clear. Now, let's make something here, I would like to make a point. When we came back into Pearl, they lowered a whaleboat for me, put me in a whaleboat and sent me to the hospital ship *SOLACE*.

BF: What was wrong with you?

DS: You must remember that we went out after breakfast on December the seventh. We had nothing to eat. It was approximately the third day before we got anything to eat. They told us that one man at a time could leave a battle station, on the third day, because that's the only time you left that battle station, was to eat. And we had one meal. We came down, they had a rack of cups at the galley window. You stuck one cup in there, they threw two eggs in there and a biscuit and said, "Next." That's it.

They brought the coffee up to your battle stations. This particular coffee pot -- probably a two-gallon one -- was boiling coffee, but we hadn't even had water. So I pickled the ladle up and I lowered her down and it burnt

my tonsil tissues. I had no tonsils. It was just tissue, but blood poisoning set in. I had an abscess. I went to probably around 105 degrees.

BF: So you went to this infirmary . . .

DS: *SOLACE*.

BF: . . . dispensary.

DS: I had to go to the hospital ship.

BF: Okay and that's --- and you spent how much time there?

DS: Oh, I would say at least two weeks, because my ship waited until the *SHAW* had a false bow and escorted her back to San Francisco. I'm still on the *SOLACE*.

BF: How long did you stay in Hawaii after the attack?

DS: Probably less than a month.

BF: And a couple of weeks you were in the hospital?

DS: Well, I was on the hospital ship.

BF: Hospital ship. Did you get to go ashore at all?

DS: No.

BF: So martial law didn't affect your life in any way.

DS: No. I was aboard the hospital ship.

BF: What the most vivid memory you have of the attack itself? The thing that stands out in your mind more than anything?

DS: The two torpedoes they put into the *UTAH*.

BF: Early on.

DS: Right on.

BF: Almost the --- one of the first things you saw?

DS: We saw them coming in and thought nothing about it, until they dropped the fish. And then they hit.

BF: During the attack, did you see acts of heroism or men doing unusual things?

DS: Well, I know that the torpedo men couldn't man torpedo, but torpedo battery, so the torpedo men were manning machine guns and I'm sure there were other people manning the five-inch, 'cause we had dual purpose mounts that would elevation of seventy-eight degrees. And they probably weren't loaders. They probably weren't shell men, or hop shell men, or pointers, or trainers, but they were in there, trying to get the job done.

BF: Did the *HENLEY* take any hits?

DS: Only machine gun fire.

BF: Any casualties?

DS: None. No hits whatever. No personnel.

BF: Have you thought much about the attack over the last forty-five years?

DS: Oh, I read every book I can lay my hands on. And I taught -- I'm state chairman of Kansas and I talked with the personnel at my district Pearl Harbor meetings in seven states and then I talk with my own convention personnel in my own state, and we rehash a lot of things that went on.

BF: Some of the survivors of the Pearl Harbor attack, still to this day, hold some bad feelings about Japanese, about Japan.

DS: I'm one of 'em.

BF: You do?

DS: I don't buy Japanese products.

BF: For that reason, or for economic reasons?

DS: For that reason. Japanese products are probably better and they're cheaper, but I won't buy 'em. When I came over here, my ship went out in possibly January of 1942. I did not return to Pearl Harbor, even on that ship, until thirty-five years later, in '76. My ship was sunk by a Japanese torpedo off of New Guinea. We lost personnel. I have a bitter hatred for the Japanese and when I came back in '76, for the first time in thirty-five years, one of the first things I met was a Japanese tourist party. It did not set well with me. They could've been me, see. I don't know. But that hatred was still there.

BF: How do you feel about your hatred? Would you rather not have it?

DS: Oh yes. It's mellowing. It's mellowing. But it's still there.

BF: Even though the people at whom you're directing this hatred probably had nothing at all to do . . .

DS: That's right. They were doing a job. It could've been the pilots that actually were in that attack. I do not know. When you see machine gunning of people, actually they're helpless. It just doesn't set well. There was no declaration of war. There was no declaration of war.

BF: You played a part in a very important event in history. Has that fact affected your life?

DS: Oh yes. Oh it sure did. One thing, it's been pointed out to me. It has one thing, a national occurrence of this magnitude, World War II, entry of the United States forces, I was there and I'm credited officially with knocking down one aircraft. My children, their children and their children, it's going to be here in eternity, that their relative was there and he took a part in it.

BF: If you had the opportunity to speak with a surviving Japanese who participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor, let's say an attacking pilot, would you like to talk to him?

DS: Sure.

BF: What would you want to know? What would you say?

DS: I'd like to know where he got his training, how long was he training, what actions he took part in, was he a portion of that outfit that we had to mix it up with in Guadalcanal or the Coral Sea, or over in New Guinea?

BF: How do you think you would feel talking with him?

DS: We were men doing a job. I was trained to shoot to kill, so was he.

BF: And yet you still -- given what you just said -- you still have these very negative feelings.

DS: Oh, it's still there. Sure it is. Yeah. It's mellowing, but it's still there.

END OF INTERVIEW