

#242 DONALD STRATTON
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 4, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
JUNE 24, 1997

(Background conversation)

Daniel Martinez (DM): Yeah, we'll go, we'll start. Yeah, okay. Good, we'll talk about that. All right, the following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 4, 1996 at seven p.m. The person being interviewed is Mr. Donald Stratton, who was aboard the USS *ARIZONA* as a crewmember on December 7, 1941.

For the record, would you please state for me, Don, your full name?

Donald Stratton (DS): Donald Gay Stratton.

DM: And Don, your date and place of birth.

DS: Seven, fourteen, 1922, in Inavale, Nebraska.

DM: And in 1941, what did you consider your hometown?

DS: Red Cloud, Nebraska.

DM: Don, in 1991, we did an interview with you, talked pretty extensively about, you know, your family and life growing up and all of that, and of course, what brought you to the *ARIZONA*, and of course, the loss of the ship and such. I'd like to bring you back to one thing that kind of -- some clarifying points. How were you selected to go aboard the USS *ARIZONA*?

DS: Well, we just finished boot camp in Great Lakes and had a leave and came back, and bulletin board with all the people that were assigned to the *ARIZONA*, where we were supposed to catch the train and go to Bremerton, Washington.

DM: Now, when you saw those orders that said USS *ARIZONA*, did you know what that was?

DS: Well, I did, it was a battleship, but that was about far as it went at that time.

DM: Was that the kind of ship that you had thought of that you might be on when you were in the Navy, or desired to be on?

DS: Well, not necessarily. I was just -- Navy was Navy, but I had no idea how big and extensive that the Navy was, you know. The difference between a destroyer and a battleship, or a carrier, or whatever. It was quite an experience for . . .

DM: Did you see any ocean before?

DS: . . . as young as we were.

DM: I'm sorry.

DS: Well, as young as we were, you know, at that time, why, we just didn't have any idea of what the Navy consisted of outside of what we read.

DM: Did you ever see the ocean before then?

DS: No, I didn't. I had never . . .

DM: Your ocean was the flat lands around you.

DS: That's it. Flat land Nebraska. (Chuckles)

DM: When you came aboard the *ARIZONA*, where did you board her? At San Pedro or . . .

DS: Bremerton, Washington.

DM: Bremerton.

DS: In dry dock.

DM: In dry dock. What year was that?

DS: Nineteen forty, early part of 1940.

DM: She was going through some modernization at that point, right? A little bit.

DS: Right. Well, I guess it was the latter part of 1940.

DM: When you first saw her, what was your impression?

DS: Well, it was -- very bad impression to start with because of all the fire equipment, hoses and welding leads and everything all over the deck and people crawling all over everything. Welding here and welding there, and it was kind of a mess to start with.

DM: What was your assignment when you came aboard ship?

DS: Well, we were just all kind of boot seamen at that time, so they just put us in divisions like most of us went, that I could remember, went in the sixth division, and then later they split it up to the fifth and sixth division. So

there was a boat deck division that took care of all the motor launches and the admiral's barge, and the captain's gig, and the motor whaleboats, and the motor launches.

DM: So you kept those clean and operating and in operational condition?

DS: Yes. Right.

DM: Were you in charge of when they had to lift those things and get 'em over the side, or was that somebody else's responsibility?

DS: Well, the seamen had the lines and take care of the lines, and the sea painter, or whatever, you know, that actually went out and happened to in the right position at one time where they needed a bow hook on the forty-foot motor launch to pick up some pilots that dunked in the ocean and I jumped in and cut loose the sea painter and cut loose the crane, and we went and picked 'em up, come back and hooked back up and picked it back aboard.

DM: Those operating cranes on the *ARIZONA* were quite impressive, weren't they?

DS: Oh yeah. They were -- there's one each side, right on the boat deck there, right aft by the main mast.

DM: As kind of a boot seaman, what was the least liked duty for a boot seaman, aboard ship?

DS: Well, chipping and painting, and of course, the first thing we had to do was go over the side on the scaffolding and scrape and paint the side. And then, underneath, on the bottom, clear down on the [*keel*].

DM: When she was in dry dock?

DS: Yeah, on the keel.

DM: Now, I dove on the ship and she's, underwater, she's pretty impressive.

DS: Yeah.

DM: She's just a big, big vessel.

DS: Oh yeah. I said to the lady out there today that -- she was interviewing me, she says, "It's awful large."

I says, "Yeah, but a lot of these people that are here today don't realize that that buoy out there, to the right, there is the bow and the buoy at the left there is the stern."

And she says, "It's that big?"

I says, "Yeah, that big."

DM: And nearly two football fields long.

DS: Right. Six hundred and thirty-three, 606 feet, I guess.

DM: Yeah. What about holystoning? I've interviewed a lot of sailors.

DS: We did a lot of holystoning.

DM: Did you enjoy that?

DS: Well, not really, but it was part of the -- I mean, it's like getting up and doing calisthenics, you know. I mean, they spread the sand out, they get us to holy stone and a mop handle, they had chipped out the holy stones in the top and you put the mop handle in there, and stand side by side, six to eight sailors and one plank, move to the next, one plank. But those decks, you could eat off of 'em.

DM: Get 'em white, right?

DS: Oh yes.

DM: Those teakwood decks.

DS: Wash 'em off with salt water.

DM: Do you recall your last night of peace, December 6, what you were up to? Did you stay aboard ship or did you have leave?

DS: No, I was aboard.

DM: What did you do? Did you go to see a movie, or . . .

DS: No, I wasn't -- I don't believe on Saturday night, I don't think we had a movie that night. But see, at that time, a lot of the sailors, even with our group here, lived ashore, because their wives were there. But they were still attached to the *ARIZONA*. But only the regular sailors only had liberty 'til one o'clock in the morning. Had to be back aboard.

DM: So did you have duty that night, or do you recall anything?

DS: No, I didn't have duty that night. I don't believe -- of course, this buddy of mine, I was taking oranges to in sick bay. He and I run the incinerator. We had -- in the harbor, why, they come around with the garbage scow and pick up all the garbage and all the wood stuff and whatever, but at sea, nothing went over the side, they burned the garbage and burned all the packaging material and everything. But everybody either had mess cook for three months or the incinerator for three months. That was just one of the climbing the ladder.

DM: You know, on that night, did you go out on deck and you know, here you are in Hawaii and it's kind of balmy and . . .

DS: Oh, sure, I did, I just don't remember that much about it, but. I slept on topside all the time.

DM: Oh, you did? Where'd you like to sleep at?

DS: Well, it was at kind of an overhang up by the incinerator and toward the bow, under the bridge and the -- yeah, in the conning tower. It was just a little overhang there, had a cot, slept there every night.

DM: Wow. Right out there in the tropical breezes.

DS: Yeah, oh yeah. Sure.

DM: You know, that morning . . .

DS: Slept in a hammock for a while, aboard, but . . .

DM: What's it like, sleeping in a hammock, by the way? I've never asked anybody like that. Do you get used to it, or do you get a sore back?

DS: Well, it kind of gets you down the back because you're never in a straight line, but it gets so you can turn over in 'em and do whatever, you know. I didn't mind the hammock all that much. But they used to get a spreader bar where you could spread it out and make it kind of square rather than just folded up like that. Like rolled up in a blanket or something.

DM: In the morning of the attack, do you remember what time you got up and what your routine was pretty much?

DS: Well, reveille was at 5:30 every morning.

DM: Well, you know, that brings up something. A lot of visitors have the impression that the fleet was asleep.

DS: No, that's not true.

DM: And that's not true.

DS: No.

DM: What was the regimen? Explain what the regimen was in the morning, aboard the *ARIZONA*.

DS: Well, get up and of course, get your bunk ready and then you had a few details to keep shipshape and the mess cooks had all the mess tables were hooked in the overhead, and they had to get 'em down and set 'em up. And all the [*sailors*] ate in the casemates, where the five-inch fifty-one broadside guns were. And 6th Division that is.

DM: This all started at 5:30 in the morning?

DS: Right.

DM: Even on the weekends?

DS: Right. Of course, some guys, I guess some of the people had some sleep in privileges, like the band. They'd been to some band thing the night before and they slept in a little later, or something. But I mean, with a ship that big and people moving around, you don't get much sleep after reveille goes off anyway.

DM: Right. So you were up and about, having breakfast. You went down to see a friend in the sick bay.

DS: Well, I didn't get down there.

DM: You didn't?

DS: No. I was -- well, they had fresh fruit. They had oranges on the table and I just -- excuse me -- turned the brim of my white hat open, up and put some oranges in there. I was going to take it to him in sick bay. He was Harl Nelson. He was the one that I was working with on the incinerator.

DM: And he was a buddy?

DS: Very good buddy. And we kind of noticed his eyes. He says, "What's they matter with my eyes? They're kind of yellow."

I said, "You better get to sick bay and check that out."

They told him he had jaundice and then he -- touch of jaundice and so --- then he had to go back down and stay for two or three days 'til they try to cure that. He was down there that morning and I'm sure sick bay was just about second deck down, right under where the first bomb hit, right aft of number two turret.

DM: (Inaudible)

DS: That was right in that area.

DM: So he was in between turrets one or two?

DS: Yeah.

DM: Two decks down yeah.

DS: Yeah.

DM: So you lost your best friend?

DS: Right.

DM: You ever think . . .

DS: And a lot of other friends, yeah.

DM: You know, Don, after all these years, does that still kind of haunt you and some of the survivors, about the friends you lost that day?

DS: Well, sure, it does. I mean, it's just -- I mean, you know, you kind of look at it, like in a way, they say, "Well, you're going to, one of these days you're going to be talking and you're going to be shaking hands with some of the Japanese people," and stuff like this.

And I said, "You're looking at the wrong guy," 'cause I'm not going to ever do it and I'm never going to drive a Japanese car, or whatever.

Everybody can live their own life, but that's what I'm going to do. I've never forgiven 'em and they've never apologized for what they done. So, they can . . .

DM: So it's still (inaudible) so it's kind of hard feelings even fifty-five years afterward.

DS: Well, why should we apologize for Hiroshima and let 'em take it off our stamp, that they were going to publish in the United States here, when they killed more people in China than our two bombs did in Japan.

DM: This whole deal about the war is still very much part of your life still.

DS: Well, only when it's brought up like this. But I do voice my opinion.

DM: Well, that's okay. This --- we have the ending of World War II, since we're on the subject. Did you watch any of that on TV that was televised here from Pearl Harbor? With the official ending of World War II signing. And how did you feel about that? Did you remember VJ Day and how you felt when the war came to an end.

DS: Well, yes I do, but at that time, you see, I was medically discharged after healing up from some of this here. And I was about a year and I reenlisted through the draft. I had to go through the draft. And I had to go to Omaha and stay for about ten days while they got permission for me to go back in the service with my same service number. So then I had to go through boot camp again, the second time. And I caught -- I asked for sea duty. I could have stayed there and pushed boots through camp there, but I wanted to go to sea, so I did. I caught the DD-406 destroyer out of Treasure Island, the USS *STACK*. South Pacific we went and didn't come back for a couple of years. But then I got off of there and when the war was over I was going to school at San Diego Repair Base, electrical hydraulic school.

DM: How did you feel when you heard the news of the war had ended with Japan?

DS: Very jubilant and very -- and better yet, when I found out I had enough points to get out.

DM: Taking you back to the morning of December 7, when did you figure out that something wasn't right that morning? When did it first just strike you? Now, you're . . .

DS: Well, it was when we seen the planes over Ford Island. I still think it, to me, in my mind, that there was a water tower on Ford Island that they bombed and I seen it go over. And I knew it was no drill. And then, when we seen the planes, then I could see the rising sun or whatever. And I was a sight setter in the port anti-aircraft director, which was one deck above the bridge, as you know. And they had a hatch on the side, on the outboard side, and a hatch on the overheard, where I could stick my head up and look down at the guns and see.

I was setting sights and as you know, they go by on a dial and you set a bug there and then it transfers to the gun, and they match it up and then they put it on automatic. So this was all going on and we were looking . . .

DM: After you went to general quarters?

DS: Right. And we were firing at 'em.

DM: Was there a --- how'd the announcement -- do you remember how that announcement came across over the P.A.? What it said?

DS: Just, "General quarters, general quarters. This is no drill."

And but mostly everybody was on their battle stations by that time, anyway, I think.

DM: 'Cause people were starting to realize . . .

DS: It was just -- happened just so quick.

DM: Was it loud? What was it -- do you ever think about those noises? I've never asked anybody that, but obviously . . .

DS: Well, when the planes come in, but see, we -- when the planes come in over us, then they come from Aiea landing and drop them torpedoes toward the Battleship Row and then they had the dive bombers. And then they had some horizontal bombers up. We couldn't even reach 'em with our anti-aircraft . . .

DM: Up about 10,000 feet.

DS: We couldn't touch 'em. We were shooting that high. But every gun, anti-aircraft gun, had a ready box of ammunition which was, I think, fifty rounds, but I think we used it all up.

DM: So the ship was fighting back.

DS: Yeah.

DM: In your mind, do you have any idea of how many minutes, once the attack started, 'til the detonation of the big bomb? Was it, to your recollection, five, ten minutes, or was time standing still?

DS: I couldn't tell you that at all.

DM: When the bomb that took out the ship struck, you were up in this gun director?

DS: Right.

DM: Did you see these -- did it just suddenly happen or could you say water splashes (inaudible)?

DS: Oh, I could see they were strafing us and everything else. I could see the gun bursts. I seen the *NEVADA* get hit. I seen the *WEST VIRGINIA* get hit. I seen the *OKLAHOMA* capsize. All from up there.

DM: You were up about how many feet above the water?

DS: Well, let's -- probably, at that time, the ship's main deck was probably eighteen foot from the water line, and probably up another forty-five feet.

DM: So you're up about sixty feet.

DS: Yeah.

DM: And you had all of this happening in front of you. It must have been a little surreal.

DS: Oh yeah. It was just, they were right out there, like, right in front of us, coming in from -- coming over the top of us, strafing us from the side, torpedo planes coming in.

DM: It must have been almost unbelievable.

DS: Oh yeah. Worse than that.

DM: When the *OKLAHOMA* capsized, was that after the explosion, or before the explosion? What's your recollection?

DS: I would think -- I thought that was -- I think that that was right after the -- well, we had the big explosion and the fireball and everything had just engulfed us up there. And we were just trying to get someplace behind the bulkhead or squatted down, or do something. We were just actually burning alive, but then after the initial explosion kind died down, but the decks were so hot you couldn't touch 'em, or you couldn't lean up against the bulkhead or anything. But then I think that was when I looked over and seen the *OKLAHOMA* capsize.

DM: And this cauldron of fire was all around you guys. And how'd you keep from -- how many guys were in that director?

DS: Oh, there was -- it takes ten men to operate that director. I mean, one of 'em was killed instantly there, (inaudible). Zimmerman and Devork, I don't know what ever happened to Zimmerman. Devork went across the line with us, but he only made it two or three days after that. Lott went across . . .

DM: Russell Lott went across? Were you guys talking to each other . . .

DS: And myself and Bruner. Oh yeah.

DM: What was the conversation? What were you guys saying?

DS: Well, it don't seem much when you're burnt as bad as we were burnt. We were just trying to get someplace where you could get comfortable or something. But we had to go across the line after we were burnt, so, you know, it was -- any line you stretch like across -- our body weight, you go down to the center, and then you're going up again, see. That was the tough part.

DM: Well, we'll get into that line, but when did you realize you were burned? I mean, did you know right away, or . . .

DS: Oh yeah, we just took this, just pull it off like a big glove. It just . . .

DM: You mean the skin fell away like that?

DS: Just pulled it off, threw it down.

DM: How did you keep from -- you know, you must have been terribly frightened. Were you panicking?

DS: Well, not that bad. I guess we're just caught off guard and we just -- somehow we survived and just trying to still keep surviving.

DM: So that instinct takes over . . .

DS: Yeah.

DM: . . . you think, in a moment of crisis like that?

DS: Oh, I think you do anything to help better yourself or get yourself out of a bind if you can.

DM: Russell Lott tells a story of a blanket that was out there that you guys used to shield some of the heat . . .

DS: Well, he did. He had one blanket. He held it up and of course, I think he wrapped around somewhat around himself, and that's why he didn't get burned but he had long whites I think he was attached to the boat crew I'm not sure, but I think he was attached to the boat crew and they wore long, white at that time, and long sleeves. We were all in shorts.

DM: And so you . . .

DS: And t-shirts.

DM: And the burns that you have on your arms today is a result of having that T-shirt . . .

DS: Oh yes. They just stop right there, see.

DM: Right.

DS: Back there. But that caught afire in the back and my back is burnt. But you can see where my socks were. White socks were up, just where they cut off, right there. And where the shorts, right here.

DM: Now, you had third and second degree burns as a result of this?

DS: Yes.

DM: Did you . . .

DS: See, I lost a lot of muscle, well this arm is a lot bigger than the other, but lost -- just the meat took on. There ain't nothing there hardly any more.

DM: And you've been undergoing skin grafts for how many years?

DS: Well, I had two more skin grafts in the last five years here now, at the hospital in Phoenix, VA hospital in Phoenix.

DM: This escape that you guys were able to make from the ship, how did that come about? How did that line get over to you and . . .

DS: Well, we were -- we couldn't go down the ladders, 'cause we couldn't hardly touch anything and everything was cratered anyway, but you know, talking about the people that were on that platform, see, we had spotters for planes and surface spotters for ships. And we had part of the, I guess, part of the crew for the range finder for the big guns was up there. And of course, then you had the starboard side with the same amount of people.

So actually there was like only six of us went across that line and were -- everybody else was I don't know. That was it.

DM: Who threw the line across the *VESTAL*?

DS: Well, that was the -- a sailor was on topside on the *VESTAL*, which she was tied up here bow to our stern. And we pulled across the heavier line, she threw the heaving line over, we pulled across the heavier line and we tied it off on the *ARIZONA* and crawled hand over hand across to them.

DM: You know, what I've often wondered is how did that heaving line make it that distance? Is there . . .

DS: Well, it's just -- you know, there's a lead ball in that, what they call a monkey's fist and they -- so those guys, I used to be pretty handy at it myself, throw the thing that so it stand it right straight out.

DM: This guy threw this across, did you ever get his name or who . . .

DS: Yes, his name was -- George was his last name, but Lorraine Marx found out who it was and called back to his hometown and he just passed away a couple months ago.

DM: Would you have liked to have met him . . .

DS: Jeff George, I think it was.

DM: Jeff George. So this is the guy that . . .

DS: They were going to try to get him to this reunion if he was capable, this year. And he'd had, I guess, problems and was -- had Alzheimer's and everything, and finally he passed away.

DM: This was the guy that's responsible for you sitting here today, right?

DS: Right.

DM: Now, what's that line . . .

DS: (Inaudible)

DM: . . . that the hardest part was ahead. Did you have enough feeling in your arms to think you could make it? Or, there . . .

DS: Well, you just didn't have a choice, really, but you started across and then when you started up the other side, the guys -- some of the guys that were

across and some of the sailors on the *VESTAL* say, "C'mon, one more swing, you can make it."

Couple times I had to stop and swing a couple times to get it.

DM: Now, how -- you were about, what?

DS: I had a lot of help up there.

DM: You were sixty feet high above the water?

DS: Probably.

DM: And how -- what, how far did you have to go hand over hand? Do you know how many feet, just guessing? From the *ARIZONA* to the *VESTAL*?

DS: Oh, I would say forty-five feet or so.

DM: And what was down below you?

DS: The main deck of the *ARIZONA* and the water between the ships.

DM: Burning.

DS: Burning and water between the two vessels.

DM: That was on fire too, right?

DS: Right.

DM: So it really wasn't a choice.

DS: No. Was no alternative, really.

DM: And once you got over to the *VESTAL*, did they take you to sick bay, or . . .

DS: Well, not right away, but they told us to go back to the boat dock there, on the gangway.

DM: The key, or . . .

DS: (Inaudible) where the -- I'm trying to think of the gang way, the ladder on the *VESTAL*, where the boats come along side. And we were there for a while and then they put us in a motor launch and took us over to the pier.

DM: On Ford Island?

DS: No. Over at, like Pier Ten, or over in that area. And then they put us in an open air truck and took us to the naval hospital there.

DM: When you look back at this event of survival, you know, do you ever ask yourself why you survived and the others didn't?

DS: No, I just said -- I go along with what my wife said, I guess maybe it's something we're put here for some kind of a purpose. Maybe one of these days we'll find out.

DM: Since we last talked in '91, what's happened with you and this reunion group. Is there anything, highlights or stories you can tell since we last talked?

DS: Well, not really, outside of the ones when I was telling you about raising the flagpole that was on the memorial, the original was here, where they replaced with the new plastic one, or whatever. They took it to Phoenix and refurbished it, Bob Manzetti and Lorraine Marx and that group. And I was there for the dedication. And I lowered the flag at half-mast for all our shipmates at that time. And I was out looking at a model of the ship that Gates had. Do you remember? It was there. And somebody talking to Clyde Combs said, "Do you know any of the other survivors, some of the sailors that was burnt real bad and went to Mare Island, California?"

He says, "Yeah, Don Stratton. He's right over there."

He says, "Come on over here."

He brought the gentleman over there and he says, "You remember when you were in the hospital in Ward Fourteen in Mare Island?"

I said, "Sure do."

I was there a long time. He said, "You remember when we used to get you, we double sheeted you and we had four men and one on each corner, and pick you up and set you in a tub of salt water?"

I said, "Yeah, I remember."

"What'd that feel like?"

I said, "Well, not too good the first time, but after that it was kind of -- looked forward to it."

But actually I think when I was able to get out of bad and stand up on the scales right by the bed, I weighed ninety-two pounds.

(Background conversation)

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

DM: Don, you know, it's been fifty-five years since that dreadful day, especially for you and your crew. What do you think the -- how do you feel the story of Pearl Harbor should be remembered for these younger generations? How should -- what kind of story would you like to tell?

DS: Well, I guess, like I told the young lady here today, just to keep this in front of the public, the people of the United States, so that we don't -- lest we forget. And be alert that this does not ever happen again, 'cause you have to realize that all services of the United States are doing one hell of a job. But, these people that gave their lives, gave up all their tomorrows so we could be here today.

DM: You go to the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial and the National Park Service, for which I work, as there. What would you like to see us do in the future for that place? Have you given it much thought?

DS: Well, no, I haven't, but I think that probably the next thing that they'll probably do after they get the bridge to Ford Island, they'll build a ramp out to the *ARIZONA*, probably. That's in the future, probably, I think. But, I don't know. But I hope not, too.

DM: We would like to maintain what's going on there.

DS: Yeah.

DM: The boat ride out, the solemnness of it.

DS: That's what I want. I just hope they don't ever do that. But I'm sure that we talked about it, some of the sailors and myself, and I said, "I hope they don't do that."

DM: It would really take away from the experience. We're dead-set against that.

DS: But see, when you go out there and look down, I know that I've been on all those decks there, you know.

DM: Does that seem real to you?

DS: Yeah. Still comes back.

DM: And you see that oil leaking up from the ship still.

DS: Yeah. Yeah, that's a constant reminder.

DM: Will you still keep coming back to Hawaii for these reunions, as long as they hold 'em?

DS: Well, maybe every five years if they do, but it's gotta be up to the good lord and my health, I guess. Getting up there, you know. Like the old saying goes, "What ever happened to all the Slims and the Curlies that you used to know?"

(Chuckles)

DM: Don, my final question is probably, I think is going to be the toughest, and that is, how -- when people watch this tape, how should they remember Don Stratton from the USS ARIZONA?

DS: Well, I hope they don't just remember Don Stratton. I hope they remember all the shipmates that are still aboard the ARIZONA. And I hope they remember all the people that gave their lives for this great country. And I want to compliment all of our service personnel for the hell of a job they're doing right now, all over the world.

DM: I think with that we'll close the interview. Thanks, Don.

DS: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW