

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#421

DOUGLAS B. SMITH

USS *DOWNES*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY COMMANDER JUDITH LAFLEUR AND JACK GREEN

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

(Conversation off-mike)

Jack Green (JG): All right. This is oral history number 421. The following oral history interview was conducted by Jack A. Green and Commander Judith Lafleur, U.S. Naval Reserve, for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial and the Naval Historical Center at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001 at 7:15 p.m. The person being interviewed is Douglas Billingsly Smith, who was a fireman first class on the USS *Downes* on December 7, 1941. As I said, we're going to do some basic questions just for the record to start. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth, and birth date.

Douglas Smith (DS): My name is Douglas Billingsly Smith. I was born in Denver, Colorado, 1922, February 22.

JG: Okay. What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

DS: My hometown I considered San Antonio, Texas.

JG: Okay. What were your parents' names?

DS: Oh, Virginia B. and John L. Smith.

JG: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

DS: I have one sister.

JG: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

DS: Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Texas.

JG: Okay. Where and why did you enlist in the United States Navy?

DS: Well, I guess I could say I wasn't much of a studious person. I went to three months of junior college in San Antonio. I had a scholarship to Texas University, but I just wasn't the studious type and I kind of felt that if I joined the navy I could see the world.

JG: Okay.

DS: Back then. And I did.

JG: So what date did you enlist in the United States Navy?

DS: April 1, 1940.

JG: Nineteen forty. And this was in San Antonio?

DS: Yes.

JG: Where did you go to boot camp?

DS: San Diego, California.

JG: Okay. And when did you graduate from boot camp? Was it a six-week or eight-week?

DS: It was eight weeks.

JG: Okay. What was your first duty assignment after getting out of boot camp?

DS: Just to, for the transportation out to the USS *Downes*, who was in, the ship *Downes* was in Hawaiian Detachment.

JG: So basically you were assigned to the *Downes* straight out of boot camp?

DS: Yes.

JG: Okay, then how did you get to the *Downes*? How did you...

DS: I was on a destroyer that took us out. I don't know how many but I was transported out from San Diego to Pearl Harbor.

JG: So when did you arrive on board the *Downes*, approximately?

DS: Oh I figure I came aboard about early June.

JG: Nineteen forty?

DS: Nineteen forty.

JG: Of nineteen forty.

DS: Yes.

JG: So you had been aboard the ship approximately eighteen months...

DS: That's correct.

JG: ...by the time the attack...

DS: Yes.

JG: ...took place.

DS: Yes.

JG: So when you arrived on the *Downes*, what happened to you when you arrived, reported on board the *Downes*? What happened to you?

DS: Well, I was in the deck force for a little while and then I was assigned to the engine room and that's where I was and I have been for the rest of my life, as a navy person.

JG: Now did you volunteer to be a black shoe sailor?

DS: Oh yes!

JG: Oh, you wanted to do that.

DS: Yes.

JG: So you wanted to strike in a black shoe rate.

DS: Yup. That's right.

JG: Okay, all right. Now, what did you feel about Pearl Harbor when you were stationed here? You were a very young man, things of that nature. Were you pleased to be there in Hawaii?

DS: Oh, definitely. I never really left the United States for any reason...

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: ...and of course, being a young sailor like you said, I enjoyed it. It was really enjoyable and I toured all of Oahu in my time off on the weekends, in our cruises around the islands, Lahaina roads and...

JG: Sure.

DS: ...early part of '41, we made a cruise to Sydney, Australia and like I said, that's the start of my sea duty and I have seen it all.

JG: Okay. Now, on December 6, you had been on board the ship approximately eighteen months, did you have duty that Saturday or did you have liberty?

DS: I had liberty. I was playing for the semi-pro team there in Honolulu, the Bunny Ranch Sandwiches. And I had a game that night, sixth of December, and I broke my nose in the basketball game. And then I came back aboard ship that night.

JG: Okay. Who were you playing? Was it a...

DS: I don't remember the team that was playing with us.

JG: You don't remember the opposing team, okay.

DS: No.

JG: So you had broken your nose, did you go to sickbay or did you...

DS: No, I figured, they just taped it up and figured I'd go to sickbay Monday.

JG: Okay, so you...

DS: On the eighth.

JG: So you arrive back aboard the *Downes* at approximately what time that night?

DS: Oh I imagine it was close to midnight.

JG: Close to midnight.

DS: Yeah.

JG: Okay. Now, she is in dry dock with the *Cassin* and she's, there's just forward of the *Pennsylvania*. How long had she been in dry dock...

DS: I think we'd been in there maybe about a week or ten days.

JG: Okay.

DS: We were going to overhaul her in Pearl...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...and of course the engines and everything were out of commission.

JG: Okay.

DS: We even had our guns out of commission. We had no firing pins in the five-inch thirty-eights that we had aboard.

JG: So as a part of the refit, your workload must have been very high as a fireman. There's probably things to clean and inspect...

DS: Oh, yes. I was jack of all trades down below.

JG: As well young seamen are.

DS: Whatever they wanted me to do, I did it.

JG: (Laughs) Okay. Now, what was your first indication that there was attack?
You had obviously gone to sleep, I'm sure.

DS: Well, I did but I had a paper route. I was delivering *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
to four destroyers.

JG: Okay

DS: And I had just finished going to the other three ships and I was talking to the
chief on the quarterdeck...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...and it was close to eight o'clock or right around 0800 and we both noticed
these planes diving on Ford Island.

JG: Okay.

DS: And I don't know whether he said it or I said it. I said how were they practicing on Sundays? It's a holiday. And then we both spotted the meatball at the same time on the side of the planes. And I immediately ran down to the engineering department to hold reveille.

JG: Okay.

DS: And I more or less got kicked out of there, 'cause you know, back in those days, there was no reveille on Sunday so you can sleep as long as you want.

JG: That's right.

DS: And they were cursing me and all that. I was trying to get 'em up until the general alarm sounded and then they started moving.

JG: Okay. So once the general alarm goes off, you go to your battle stations...

DS: Battle stations.

JG: ...which was...

DS: Would've been the engine room but the engine rooms are out of commission.

JG: Okay.

DS: And then when they knew we were under attack, they had most of the engineering department belting fifty caliber belts, machine gun belts...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...'cause that's all we could fire, was the fifty calibers.

JG: Sure.

DS: And that's what we were doing on deck, is building those and handing them up to the fifties, as they used 'em.

JG: So you were doing that for how long? You were doing that when, of course, the explosion, of course.

DS: Yeah, we, I don't know how long we did it, but if I can remember it correctly, they had Gun Four, finally got the firing pin on Gun Four...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...and got off one or two rounds and then it took a direct hit there.

JG: Yes.

DS: And that's when the acting captain said to abandon ship, and which we did.
And...

JG: How did you abandon the ship? What was...

DS: We had one gangway going off and of course it was a mad rush to get off of there.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: And one little story, a gentleman, not a gentleman sailor, first class water tender, his name is Pig Reese. And if he's still alive, he's going to flip when he hears this!

(Laughter)

DS: He weighed about 325 pounds. Well, I was 155 pounds and nineteen years old and I had just come out of junior college, playing basketball and all that. I could run.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: I was running.

(Laughter)

DS: And he passed me up like I was standing still. I have never forgotten that!

(Laughter)

DS: And then I found out later one of our stewards had been stopped at the main gate and the marine asked him where he was going, he says, “Hell, I’m running ‘til the land gives out!”

(Laughter)

DS: So there’s some, you know, jokes or something to this stuff even though it got pretty heavy and pretty bad.

JG: Well, adrenaline does strange things.

DS: Oh, yes it does!

(Laughter)

DS: Especially when you're young.

JG: Yes, so after you've run from the ship, where did you go then?

DS: We just milled around 'til some of the people got us together.

JG: Okay.

DS: All the non-rated types like myself were issued thirty-aught-sixes.

JG: Okay.

DS: And that evening, we, all the survivors off the battleships and all that, spent the night at Bloch Recreation Center.

JG: Yes.

DS: And they gave all of us mattresses and we slept on the bowling alleys.

JG: Okay.

DS: That night at about two or three o'clock in the morning, I don't know, early in the morning, somebody rolled a bowling ball down one of the alleys and of course, here's a thousand survivors gumming out of there like they were shot out of a cannon. They thought we were under attack again.

JG: Gosh!

(Laughter)

DS: I was put on another destroyer that afternoon.

JG: Which destroyer were you put on?

DS: It was the *Benham*.

JG: Yes.

DS: Destroyer 411.

JG: Yes.

DS: Yes.

JG: Okay and then once on board the *Benham*, did you sortie with the *Benham*?

DS: We went out to sea...

JG: Right.

DS: ...for two weeks. All the clothes I had on was on my back, that was it. I had no other clothes. And another kind of a thing to get across, I'd been out there about ten days and I was on the bridge and the 1JV phones, which goes directly to the engineering spaces...

JG: Yes.

DS: ...and the captain says, asked me, he said, “You’re a survivor from the
Downes?”

I said, “Yes, sir.”

He said, “That’s all you have on, isn’t it? Nothing else.”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “Well, go down to my stateroom and help yourself to some clothes.
Get something else on.”

So I went down there and I came back up on the bridge and I had a brown
tweed suit with vest on and my white hat.

(Laughter)

DS: But we were out two weeks when we came back in.

JG: Okay, so did you stay aboard the *Benham* from that point on?

DS: Yes, I stayed aboard the *Benham* and we...

JG: Did you get a new sea bag issue or did you...

DS: Well, I got partial sea bag come November 14 and 15 in '42, we went into action off of Guadalcanal and I got sunk on the *Benham*.

JG: Yes.

DS: *Benham* went down that night, about midnight. We were about ten hours in the water before the other destroyer, *Gwin*, picked us up.

JG: Yes.

DS: Yeah, out of the four destroyers, three of us were sunk.

JG: That's right.

DS: Yeah.

JG: So after being picked up by the *Gwin*, what did you do then?

DS: Well, we went down to Espirito Santos and then I stayed down there and I was put aboard the *Anderson*.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: I can't remember the number.

JG: Okay.

DS: But after I'd been aboard about three months, there was a dispatch put out to all hands that anybody that'd been sunk twice or more could get new construction back in the States.

JG: Okay.

DS: So I immediately went to the exec, said, "Look, I'm out of here!"

JG: Uh-huh.

DS: So I got orders to go back home, back to the States for new construction.

JG: Where, what new construction were you assigned to?

DS: I was assigned in Tacoma, Washington...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...to a baby flattop and I got thirty days survivor's leave.

JG: (Inaudible)

DS: And I went home to see my folks.

JG: Now which baby flattop were you assigned to?

DS: It was the, it was called the *PIE-TUS*.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: And we put her in commission and we took it around to New York and gave her to the British.

JG: Yes.

DS: Through the canal...

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: ...and I thought, well, this is going to be good duty for the rest of the war.

I'm just going to make deliveries from Seattle, Tacoma, Washington to New York City. Well, little did I know.

JG: Uh-huh.

DS: And then I was assigned to the *Wake Island*...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...CVE-65.

JG: Yes.

DS: And stayed on her for about, oh, about a year and then I got orders to go to the USS *Randolph*, CV-15.

JG: The new *Essex* class carrier.

DS: The *Essex* class carrier. And put her in commission in 1944.

JG: So you were plank owner on the *Randolph*?

DS: I'm plank owner on the *Randolph* and then we didn't even go through _____ training. We went straight through the canal and out to the war zone.

JG: Oh my gosh.

DS: And, well, we were in _____ one night, where the fleet anchored. We got hit with a kamikaze.

JG: Uh-huh.

DS: We lost thirty or forty men and about fifteen or twenty aircraft. And we were off of Japan with our planes doing their thing over Japan, over Tokyo and all that when the war ended.

JG: Okay, so you end the war on board...

DS: Yeah.

JG: ...the USS *Randolph*.

DS: Yes. If I, can I go back a little bit?

JG: Sure can!

DS: Okay.

JG: This is your interview.

DS: On the *Benham*, we went to the Midway battle. We were in the Midway battle.

JG: Yes.

DS: And when the *Yorktown* got sunk, we picked up 700 survivors off of her, transport 'em that evening to the cruiser. I can't remember the name of the cruiser. Then we patrolled with the *Yorktown*, trying to keep her alive, keep her afloat. The *Hammann* went alongside of her and she got two torpedoes when some submarine snuck in and got two fish out...

JG: Yes.

DS: ...and one in the *Hammann*. And we picked up 150 survivors then and we were told to go on home, back to Pearl. We broke off from the task group because we had all these people and they were bed-ridden.

JG: Yes.

DS: They were, you know, the depth charges went off and messed up their stomachs.

JG: Yes.

DS: So we went into Pearl ahead of everybody. And of course we got welcomed by Nimitz. Our skipper, Captain Worthington, he got off, I remember, he got off on the dock there and Nimitz was there. And one of 'em saluted. Worthington had his hand out and then Nimitz had his hand out and then Worthington saluted. They couldn't get together! So finally they did. And we had about thirty ambulances there and they had to cut the stern off and the hatch there to get all these people out.

JG: My gosh.

DS: And then, later on, I was in on with the Doolittle deal, going to Japan.

JG: That's right. April 1942.

DS: I was one of the destroyer escorted to the, with the *Hornet*...

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: ...when they did that. And then we came back and I went to the *Randolph* and I ended up in World War II on *Randolph*.

JG: Now, what was your highest rate at the end of the Second World War?

DS: I was chief petty officer, chief machinist mate.

JG: Chief machinist mate. So you ended the war as a chief.

DS: Mm-hmm.

JG: Okay. Now you've told me that you were a career navy man.

DS: Yes.

JG: Could you just very briefly give your subsequent career after that, just the highlights, just very briefly.

DS: Well, when I left *Randolph* we went out of commission in '48 in Philadelphia. I went to another destroyer down in Norfolk, went on a Mediterranean cruise, came back. Then I was assigned to another destroyer up in Newport, Rhode Island.

JG: Okay.

DS: And I made a Mediterranean cruise of that one. Came back and I was assigned to, finally got shore duty, recruiting back in my hometown of San Antonio, Texas.

JG: Okay.

DS: I was back there a year when I found out I made warrant and I went back to Houston main office to get sworn in. And the, when I got back, I got a call from the bureau, my type desk officer, and he told me, he says, "What ship do you want?"

I said, "Wait a minute, I've only been here a year. I rate two years here."

And he said, “Well, you came as enlisted, now you’re an officer. You’re going back to sea.”

So I said, “Okay, give me a tanker out of Long Beach,” and that’s what I got.

Then I was on a couple of tankers...

JG: Okay.

DS: ...all right. I won’t go into, delve into the whole situation...

JG: Sure.

DS: ...but my, I ended up in, back to where I started, at recruit training command, San Diego. I was in charge of all the chiefs and first class that were company commanders, ‘til I retired there in 1970.

JG: So you retired in 1970.

DS: Yeah. And I could go in a little more detail about Korea and Vietnam, but...

JG: We're talking about Pearl Harbor but...

DS: Well, let's stay with Pearl Harbor.

JG: Yeah, that's right. So you retired as a master chief?

DS: No, I retired as a lieutenant commander.

JG: Lieutenant commander, okay.

DS: Yeah, I'm a Mustang.

JG: I understand, okay. Lieutenant commander in 1970. Okay, as a young sailor here in Pearl Harbor, what did you do for recreation? Did you go to Hotel Street or were there other things that you liked?

DS: Yes, I went to Hotel Street.

JG: Okay.

DS: And myself and two or three other shipmates, we bought an old 1936 Nash.

JG: Okay.

DS: For ten dollars.

JG: Okay.

DS: We split two dollars and a half apiece and we would cruise the island on the weekends.

JG: Okay.

DS: We would go around the island, we'd stop and sleep on the beach, you know, and swim. To me, Hawaii is wonderful.

JG: Okay.

DS: Back then, it was perfect. I can remember where only the Ala Moana and the Royal Hawaiian was on Waikiki and there was nothing else!

JG: Yes.

DS: Take a look at it now.

JG: It's all built up.

DS: Oh man.

JG: Now, did the *Downes* have a favorite bar? Many ships would have their own favorite bar that they would congregate. Did the *Downes* have one and do you remember what it was?

DS: Yes. They had one. I do not know the name. I don't remember it.

JG: Okay! (Laughs) Okay, where was it? I understand ships had—was it in Hotel Street or was it someplace...

DS: Yes, yes.

JG: Okay, so...

DS: All the ships had their own hotels, or whatever you want.

JG: Bars that they would hang out.

DS: Bars.

JG: Places they would hang out...

DS: Yes.

JG: ...or things of that nature. So you never saw the *Downes*, did you ever see the *Downes* again after you left her at Pearl Harbor?

DS: No. But I heard she'd went back in commission...

JG: Yes.

DS: ...in, but no, I never did see her again.

JG: Okay. So you're home for eighteen months. Now, any of your personal effects or things that were on the *Downes*, did you ever get those back?

DS: No, nothing.

JG: Nothing.

DS: I got a, like I said, a partial sea bag when I was on *Benham* and then when I got sunk on *Benham*, I...

JG: Got a full sea bag.

DS: ...didn't have any. I had to start over. And I got back to the States with a set of blues and some skivvies and that's about it, until I got back to San Francisco.

JG: Mm-hmm. What are your most poignant memories here in Hawaii, as a young sailor? You know, when you think about that time, what comes to mind the most?

DS: Well, I guess you could say the so-called freedom, because, you know, we weren't in any kind of a war situation or anything like that. It was strictly, we had, if I remember right, two out of three, had duty one day and two days off. And you could go ashore at four o'clock, 1600, every day and then get two weekends off. And of course we went to swimming, my gosh, swimming by that, you know, or cruising the island in our car.

JG: It was relatively easy duty. Sounds like very nice duty!

DS: Oh, it was great. And of course I wasn't old enough to drink, so I didn't...

(Laughter)

DS: ...didn't get to do that 'til I turned twenty-one.

(Laughter)

DS: But then, no, I liked it. I thought this, I still like this, Hawaii. This is very, very nice.

JG: Now, some accounts of your fellow black shoe sailors, I've read many sailors here, especially the married ones, wanted to be back in San Diego, that they felt that there wasn't really all that much to do here in Hawaii. Amongst your peers down in the engine room, what was the consensus? Did most of them like being in Hawaii, or were there some...

DS: Back then, the navy didn't want you to get married.

JG: Yes.

DS: I think it was second class and above, if you got married, you'd get a BAQ.

JG: Right.

DS: Up 'til second class, no, you didn't, they didn't want you to get married. In fact, the word was if they wanted you to get married, they would issue you a woman and a sea bag.

(Laughter)

DS: So it was quite a while before a lot of us got married and most of the people that were married had 'em out here. I mean the wives were out here. There wasn't any housing to speak of...

JG: Sure.

DS: ...back in those days, but you could live on really nothing.

JG: Now, the navy you retired from in 1970 in many ways was very different than the navy you enlisted in in 1940.

DS: Definitely.

JG: What do you think was the most striking difference between the two navies that you recall and you know, which one did you think was better or, and for what reason? Or how would you compare the two?

DS: Hmm. That'd be a hard question to answer. One of the main things, of course, thirty years in the navy, I knew what discipline was and all that bit, and chain of command and all that, but back in '70, it started to change.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: They were allowing civilian clothes to be worn off the ships. And they could grow beards.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: And I was still basically from the old navy and I couldn't see that, and I said, when I retire, I said to myself, I'm sure glad I got out now 'cause—and discipline was just really going downhill.

JG: Sure. It's a very different navy.

DS: Oh, yes it is. But these modern ships today are unreal. I went aboard one three years ago when we came out here to Hawaii.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: And it was a, I don't know what the nomenclature was, but she carried thirty-six surface-to-air missiles. It was a destroyer. And I got a tour of the engine room. Back in my days, in order to get under way, it would take us four hours.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: I asked ‘em down there, I said, “How long does it take you to get under way with these?” ‘cause they had these big turbines, which is the same aircraft engine on a C-5.

JG: Right.

DS: And they said, “Well, we could do thirty knots in about ninety seconds,” and I just couldn’t believe it.

JG: Oh. Times have changed!

DS: Oh man! And of course, another thing that kind of blew my mind. I said, the lieutenant took us around, he says, “There’s only two ways to get paid on here.”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “Well, you have allotment going back home or to your wife and then we have an ATM [automatic teller machine] machine out here and that’s how you get paid.”

And I couldn’t believe it, ‘cause back in my day, you had a pay chit and you go to the...

JG: Pay call.

DS: ...pay line, you know.

JG: Yes, you go to pay call.

DS: Here now they get paid by ATMs!

(Laughter)

DS: Unbelievable. But that’s the new navy!

JG: Commander LaFleur, do you have some questions?

Judith LaFleur (JL): No, I don't.

JG: Okay. Okay. And yes, it's very...

DS: I have really enjoyed the navy. I have no misgivings. I'd change a couple of things that happened and all that. Mainly my shore duty. I only had five years out of twenty-five, thirty, on the beach. I was at sea all this time.

JG: Mm-hmm.

DS: And it brings up to mind in 1956, when we, I was on a tin can going through the Suez Canal, that's when I circumnavigated the world. I had been everywhere in the world. The only country I hadn't been in was Russia.

JG: Uh-huh.

DS: But Mediterranean, South American, name it, I have been there. And that's what I wanted to do when I joined but I didn't realize I was going to get it all!

JG: Now, when you joined the navy, did you expect to make it a career?

DS: No. I thought I'd get out at the end of the war but I made, when I was a chief and that, to me, was the best rate in the navy at that time. And then when I made warrant, that became the—I would've stayed a warrant if they—they were going to get rid of the warrants, back in that time, and I shifted to LDO.

JG: Right.

DS: And then I couldn't go back to warrant when they decided to keep 'em. But no, I enjoyed it. I had the, it was just, to me, it was great. The ships I was on and the people I worked with, the officers and the enlisted and all that with me. I made a lot of shipmates, a lot of friends, and I still have some.

JG: Very good.

DS: We're not, there's not many of us left now at my age!

(Laughter)

JG: From the 1940 navy, no, there's not.

DS: That's about right.

JG: Well, thank you very much. It's been a very excellent interview and we've got lots of good morsels of information on the time and life of a sailor in 1940 and 1941, so thank you very much.

DS: I appreciate it.

JG: Okay.

DS: Thanks for having me!

JG: Thank you! All right.

END OF INTERVIEW