

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#420

EDMOND TORDEL ESPING

USS *WEST VIRGINIA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY COMMANDER BILL SCULLION AND JERRY GREENE

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Bill Scullion (BS): This is oral history number 420. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Bill Scullion for the Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C. and Jerry Greene, for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001 at 6:40 p.m. The person being interviewed is Edmond Torkel Esping who was a seaman second class on the USS *West Virginia* on December 7, 1941. Is that information correct, Mr. Esping?

Edmond Esping (EE): Pardon?

BS: Is that information correct?

EE: That's all straight news!

BS: Okay. For the record sir, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

EE: Well, you got all of that!

BS: Yeah, but I'd like to hear it from you.

EE: Oh. Well, I was born January 18, 1920.

BS: Where were you born?

EE: In the bedroom.

BS: Where was the bedroom located? In the house.

EE: In the house, yes. The house at the farm, yes.

BS: Yeah.

EE: Yeah, well, no, that's where it was though. At that time they didn't have too many hospitals. And Dad says, "Oh well, Mom don't care so we'll just do it there."

Everything went fine.

BS: So where was the farm located?

EE: Three and a half miles north of Minneota.

BS: Okay.

EE: On Highway 3.

BS: And what did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

EE: Minneota.

BS: Minneota. Okay.

EE: That's where I go back to if I went back.

BS: Okay. What were your parents' names?

EE: Torkel and Katie Esping.

BS: And did you have any—go ahead.

EE: That's Torkel O. Esping. It should be for Olaf, like his dad.

BS: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

EE: Brothers and sisters? Yeah, I had one brother.

BS: Okay. Do you recall his name? What was his name?

EE: Donald.

BS: Donald. Where did you go to high school?

EE: Minneota.

BS: Minneota. Okay, here's the good one, where and why did you enlist?

EE: Because all my buddies was going to the service and damn it, I started to cry because I can't do anything and I want to get in there and respect the flag!

BS: Okay. When did you enlist?

EE: I had it on the tip of my tongue. Hmm.

BS: We can start with the year.

EE: Sorry about that.

BS: That's okay.

EE: Oh, trying to—maybe this'll help.

BS: Okay.

EE: Nothing like having a drink, you know. September 17, 1940. I was only a kid.

BS: How old were you when you enlisted?

EE: I was about twenty.

BS: Okay.

EE: They said, "You ain't of age!"

Oh, I says, "I will be in just a little while."

BS: Okay.

EE: So, okay. He says, "We'll let you go through." But he says, "Remember, you get into trouble, we know nothing about it!"

(Laughter)

EE: Yup.

BS: How did you get on board the *West Virginia*? I know, the ground.

EE: I walked on board. No, it was I come out of Bremerton—not Bremerton—
out of training camp.

BS: San Diego?

EE: Chicago.

BS: Oh, okay.

EE: And by the way, I was in the choir, 200 voices. One of the world's best!

BS: Tenor or bass?

EE: Hmm?

BS: Tenor or bass?

EE: Tenor or better?

BS: Tenor or bass? What did you sing, what part?

EE: Tenor.

BS: Tenor. Okay.

EE: It certainly wasn't soprano!

BS: I wasn't going to—I almost said it, but I didn't do it.

EE: (Laughs) Yeah, I had five records cut that they sent home with me.

BS: Okay.

EE: I don't know, I think the kids went to work and busted 'em all, 'cause I don't seem to find 'em. But then, that's water over the dam and I thought it would be nice to have something for the grandkids, if there was any. Like I say, my wife is from Australia, or was from Australia.

BS: Okay.

EE: Brisbane, the queen _____.

BS: Were you married at the time of December 7...

EE: No.

BS: ...or was that afterwards?

EE: No, no. I didn't get married until, in June, I think it was.

BS: But it was after December 7?

EE: I had an uncle from Chicago that was there with his camera and he took the whole wedding! I got it unless they've thrown that out too. I don't know. See, I have no property any more! They sold it all to pay my bill at that nursing home.

BS: Yeah.

EE: So here I sit only.

BS: But you have some knowledge we'd like to get from you anyway, 'cause that's valuable to us.

EE: No, it don't cost anything to give you that! (Laughs)

BS: Okay. So before December 7, you got to the *West Virginia*, right?

EE: December 7, I was in the navy for quite a while.

BS: Okay. What division did you work on in the *West Virginia*?

EE: Fifth Division.

BS: Fifth Division.

EE: And then I was also on the weather division.

BS: What were your duties?

EE: Hmm?

BS: What kind of duties did you do?

EE: Well, the Fifth Division, that was just work, keeping the place clean and such. But then—this thing don't work too good.

BS: You said about the weather division?

EE: Yeah, oh yeah. We would be way up there in the main top, 108 feet off the water and we'd be checking wing pressures, directions, clouds and how far the horizon was. Supposed to be twenty-four miles, you know. Well, that's when you stand down on the deck of the ship, I found out later.

BS: Let me ask you a question I've been asking a number of people. December 6, Saturday, December 6, do you remember what you were doing the day before Pearl Harbor?

EE: December 6, that'd be a Saturday?

BS: Yeah.

EE: Just taking it easy, went ashore.

BS: You went ashore?

EE: Mm-hmm.

BS: Any idea where you went?

EE: No. I went into little WIM-PIES in the pool.

BS: Okay.

EE: Well, he had a hole in the wall for beer and it was usually lined up, waiting in line, waiting to get their beer, you know. Oh boy. Yeah, and he sold it cheaper than anybody else. I'll tell you one thing, you can get just as goddamn drunk on that cheap beer that you could on any other. (Laughs)

BS: Was WIM-PIES the *West Virginia* bar or was that just a general bar?

EE: Kind of a general. There was no cooking or anything going on in there.

BS: Okay.

EE: He was pretty good. Pretty good. Hell, that was in Honolulu! All right! Is it still there?

BS: I don't know. That may be something you have to look for.

EE: I know there's an awful lot of people that go in and out.

BS: Well, let me ask you that, Mr. Esping, is this the first time you've been back to Honolulu since December 7? Is that correct?

EE: Sixty years.

BS: Sixty years, okay. Well, you've got some exploring to do.

EE: Well, I'm striking for another sixty.

BS: Okay.

EE: Just kind of fun, let's have some more fun.

BS: Sounds good.

EL: (Laughs)

BS: So I gather you got back to the ship a little late?

EE: No.

BS: No? What time was the liberty boat running?

EE: Hmm? Midnight.

BS: Okay, so you got back to the ship? No problem?

EE: I was back about nine o'clock.

BS: Okay.

EE: I felt something was starting to work on me and I thought let's get out of here.

BS: Okay.

EE: Because the MPs had come along and they'd each take an arm, you know, and they'd drag you if nothing else. They get you home! (Coughs)

BS: Let's go to December 7 then. What's the first thing you remember of significance on December 7?

EE: It was about eight o'clock. The church parties was on one end of the fantail and then up forward of it more was the swimming crew peoples. And the, he hadn't blown the whistle on the showdown for it but they told me before, he says, "Just as soon as you can take that hose and go up to the fo'c'sle up there at the bow and water it down."

Well, I was tugging on this damn hose, you know. You got about 150 feet of it to go. Because the boards, they dry out and then they split. And then you can't the crap out of 'em, and then they rot.

BS: Right.

EE: So I was pulling and all I had to do was one more pull, you know, I would be in business. But I happened to look west and there was two planes coming, and they were coming at an angle I couldn't see their insignias. But I thought to myself, this don't look right. What in the hell is them big round things underneath? They were really flying about this far off the water, four feet. Because I suppose then they could drop the torpedoes, see. But they were torpedoes, you know, and I'll tell you, they wrecked a couple of hell of a holes.

So I didn't know what to do. Then I heard this, (shooting noises) and I thought, this ain't no place for me! So I headed over to the big long sticking out that they tied the boats to. The boat boom.

BS: The boat boom.

EE: And I thought, well, if anything else, _____ oh well, just crawl under that. I don't think anything should hurt me. Well, I

happened to look up and there was something coming down at me. And I thought, well, I'll just sneak under there a little, sneak closer and about that time, zip goes the pants! Well, they didn't draw blood, but it sure made a mess of my trousers.

So then from there, about that time, but when I seen them planes, I yelled real loud, "Planes! Planes! Planes!"

And all the activity what was being done stopped and they tore into the rest of it they had been trained for. And well, I don't know how many people on the back got shot, but I thought, well, I better get down in the water there and help them guys out because they had these big _____ last round lifesavers, or whatever you call 'em.

BS: Life ring?

EE: But you know, the damn fools, they couldn't swim, you know. And what do they do, just like a bunch of sheep? The whole works goes in at once! And I told 'em, I says, "Now, if you guys were smart, you'd grab each other and

kind of help along and then grab that rope on that thing and pedal yourself ashore.”

Well now I don't know if they did or not. It was only about ten or twelve of 'em. And I thought, well I better get out of here. There was a couple of guys that had a hold of me and I tell you, if you ever had eagle claws, hoo, that hurt!

BS: And where were you when these guys were grabbing on to you? Was that on the deck or down in the...

EE: I was in the water then.

BS: Okay.

EE: See, what I did, I got down on the armor belt and I jumped.

BS: Okay.

EE: And doggone it, I hit it. I didn't feel so good. I chipped a hipbone there. Well anyhow, that's when I was trying to get 'em all together and in the meantime, I happened to look up along board ship there and there was a guy standing up there on the armor belt of the *Tennessee* beating his head against the damn bulkhead, blood squirting out his ears. And I tell you know, you get kind of, funny feeling. And I thought, well, so I turned around, I looked at these guys and there was two of 'em that had grabbed me and I thought there's only one way to do this, so I took—oil running down, you know—I took a good deep breath and I made myself heavy. You can do that, you know. And down I slid. Well, they didn't want to come down with me, so I thought, well, that's nice now. So then I got down for a ways and I thought this better be enough. So then I started swimming. I didn't know which direction I was going. Lo and behold if I didn't hit the damn *Tennessee* right square in the head. Oh! And it kind of dazed me a little bit. And I thought, well, we gotta keep moving. So I started swimming up and I got up to the bow and them two foul chains up there in front, to keep the logs and stuff away so they don't hit the after, I was standing there, hanging on to that, getting my breath. I was just getting to feel kind of happy and I thought—then I happened to look up the west and there was another goddamn plane

coming! Well, I thought, this ain't no place for me so I hurry it up and I got past the bow there and trying to keep afloat, you know. And just about that time, ploop, ploop, ploop, ploop! If I'd been hanging on to them chains, I'd have been going headfirst that way!

So then the war was kind of dying down a little bit. I thought, well, maybe I better try and get ashore! So I started to swim for shore and in the meantime, the soldiers had took fire hoses, them three-inchers, you know, and throwed 'em over the side for us to get a hold of to get up _____ . And that was some slippery junk with all that oil on. And if they'd have put water on 'em first, you know, that oil wouldn't have stuck so good.

Well, I tell you what, that line, the shore line on top of it, about that high. Well, you know, you stand there and I think you took three strokes before you moved a couple of inches, you know. And I finally got out of the water, _____ moved a little bit on some of the dirt and all of that. And I got up to the top. I was all in. I didn't have much air left for nothing.

So I looked around and I thought, well, boy, there is a good hiding place. It's that great big cactus patch there on Ford Island. And they told me afterwards that even a rabbit don't go in there. And I went in there just like a bullet, they said.

Well, I tell you why I went so fast was because that plane that was up to my, he crashed right over there about fifty feet from me. After he had left the goddamn—this other fellow was a friend of mine and he says, "There was a hole about ten inches about a diameter and it's about a foot deep," machine gun bullets.

So evidently, they had hit him and he froze at the trigger. Well, then I imagine it was kind of sticky all right. But I was standing there, it was nice, oh, I felt so comfortable and all of a sudden, slash, slash, slash. Some of the sailors, they would come in there with machetes and was chopping the cactus off. And they brought a board in and they strapped me into it, 'cause they didn't want me dragging on the ground and that damn cactus, oh, they

were terrible! You see, it's the cactus from Texas and Wyo—not Wyoming—down there, another.

BS: Arizona?

EE: Arizona, yeah. And they are some brutes that would go up higher than that, I'll tell you that. Well, anyhow, they—yeah, they strapped me in that thing and they says, "Well, we're ready to move!"

And I walked right out of it. They said, "What're you doing?"

"Oh," I says, "this is no place for me!"

They started laughing. The other guy says, "Oh, I'll fix 'em."

So he took out of there and he come back with some two-inch straps. Well, they worked. But I stretched 'em something terrible but they got me down in the basement of this, one of the soldiers' homes—officers is what they were. And they throwed a sheet on and laid me on it. Oh, it was that cold

down there. And then they went around to some of the other houses and gathered up a bunch of ice cubes. And they put another sheet over me and then they poured them on the top of me. Well, it was kind of comical in about five minutes. Here was coming streams of smoke up. Well, it was steam, you know, because I was so hot from that oil.

Well, that kind of blowed over and then the firing kind of quit and there was a couple of guys went up and check things out. And he says, "I think we can move." He says, "We can move him."

And then after that, I was in five different auxiliary places for checking out. And I finally ended up down in the servant's guys' quarters. Boy, that was a big _____. You know, where you sat, the seats were that wide! And they just laid us on those, throw the blanket over us and walked away. Of course, if I needed medicine, why then they'd put it up to you.

Well, then there was another wave that kind of come through and but then they cooled that in a hurry. So I laid there for a while and then it was kind

of quiet. A couple of guys talking, “We gotta get up to the small stores. We gotta get some clothes!”

Mine is all burnt up _____ too. And the navy is supposed to furnish you clothes after being in battle like that. Well, I never did get ‘em. But I betcha the boys got together and they, each one took a little out of their locker of theirs and give it to me. Well that was nice. I appreciated that. But sometimes one of ‘em would have a little more smaller size than I did.

Well, anyhow, then they were going to go ashore and I was able to walk, but I wasn’t any speed demon. And I says, “Hey,” I says, “do you mind if I go with you?”

“No, come on! Come on!”

Well, we went up to the store because I wanted to get a different pair of trousers. We got some stuff when we was coming back. That’s when the lightning struck again. And that cane field, right beside there! The Japs

were in there and they were shooting at us! And I said to the guys, I says,
“Hit the ground!”

So we did. And then they quit. Well, they had all their groceries and everything and we got back to the barracks—I call it the barracks because that’s where our home was at the time—and I was getting kind of tired. I figured I better sit down and, well, I laid down, I passed out. And when I woke up, there was a couple of nurses and a couple of doctors and all. There was all kinds of help around. I says, “What’s the matter?”

Oh, he says, “You’re awake now, huh?”

Well, I hope, I says, “I hope so.”

So then it was, I don’t recall how long I was in that thing, but they did get me back to a barracks. And it wasn’t too long and they put me back on a ship and we got out to sea. Oh yes, it was the USS *Chicago*.

BS: So that’s where you...

EE: Heavy cruiser.

BS: ...went back to sea, on the *Chicago*?

EE: Hmm?

BS: So you went back to sea on the *Chicago* then?

EE: Yeah, so we went back out to sea.

BS: Was this still on the same, was this December 7 or was this later?

EE: No, this was later. See, I was getting healed up, you know.

BS: How long were you in the hospital?

EE: Well, I was about a week there that I know for sure.

BS: Okay.

EE: But then of course I was moving around so I wasn't—well, there they go.
And well, then it was, "We're going to send you off on another ship."

BS: Okay. Well, we're going to bring you back to December 7.

EE: Well, this is about a week at least later, see.

BS: Okay.

EE: And then I went back on, I went on the *Chicago* and then down through the
South Pacific. Now, down in New Zealand...

BS: Well, again, I just want to come back to the seventh for you, okay.

EE: Yeah, well, there wasn't much going on after I left there.

BS: That's true.

EE: As far as I was concerned.

BS: Well, I wanted to ask you about the seventh because, did you have any friends that you lost on the *West Virginia*?

EE: I might have had a couple of friends because I never seen any more of 'em.

BS: Okay. What's your biggest memory about December 7? What's the most vivid memory?

EE: Cheating the Japs out of my life!

BS: What's the best memory you have of the *West Virginia*?

EE: Up on the fo'c'sle deck.

BS: Yeah?

EE: I was going to spray her down. That was my orders.

BS: I just mean in general about the *West Virginia*. Did you have any good memory that really connects you to that ship?

EE: Mess cooking.

BS: Ah!

EE: (Laughs)

BS: Okay.

EE: And we fed 2300 men so then I got to be a mess cook! Oh god, I found out what them devils go through! (Laughs) Oh, it was more fun than anything.
So...

BS: We got a couple more questions.

EE: All right.

Jerry Greene (JG): I wondered if you happened to see what was going on on the *Arizona* on that day.

EE: No. No. I tell you, I was so damn full of oil that I couldn't see hardly anything. Boy, that stuff smarts in the eyeballs!

JG: Were you aware of the explosions on the *Arizona*?

EE: Seems to me I heard 'em because I seen that plane going along and he kind of raised with his one stack and then I seen a big, black ball go down and he slid over to the other one and same thing. And then he went up. I suppose he went to strafing and killing, you know. But it wasn't too long and, poom, she opened up. See, that went clear down to the fire pots, the steam boilers. (Coughs) Boy, oh boy, I don't know.

You know, after, oh, I don't know, sixty years, it's kind of hard to remember some of that stuff. But I have to dream as I go along. Put two and two together and you'll get four! Not five but four.

BS: Is there any other particular memory of December 7 you want to make sure that we know about?

EE: Hmm. No, I was chief operator for all the operations that I did!

BS: Okay.

EE: (Coughs) But no, well, that clothes business is about the only thing that I can remember of any decency.

BS: Okay.

EE: There's always plenty of, you know, that mushy stuff going around.
(Laughs)

JG: Just one more.

BS: Okay, go ahead.

JG: Just out of curiosity, how did your parents find out about whether or not you had survived Pearl Harbor?

EE: It was on the radio.

JG: The navy was able to get the information...

EE: Well, they got their men out, you know, for news, see. That's how they got it. And I didn't write a letter for a whole, hell, it must have been three weeks or a month before I wrote a letter to 'em. And then they went to work and they read the dumb thing and they cut out a whole bunch of stuff, you know, that I didn't think would amount to anything. But it must've to them, 'cause I got, it was about another month later I got a letter from 'em. And they says, "Why did you have to get everything cut out of it?"

Well...

BS: Censorship.

EE: Pretty hard to explain. (Laughs)

BS: Mr. Esping, we want to thank you for your service and for your time tonight.

EE: Well...

BS: We really appreciate it.

EE: Anytime, anytime. This is kind of fun in a way.

BS: Well, good!

EE: That sun should set pretty soon, shouldn't it?

BS: I think we can take care of that right now.

EE: (Laughs)

JG: Thanks a lot, sir.

EE: You bet, you bet. I was just wondering if they were going to get at me because, what was that, two days ago?

BS: Yeah.

EE: I was in there and they wanted to interview me that night at 6:30...

BS: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW