

#252 EDWIN DALE JUSTICE
USS *VESTAL*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
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TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Robert Chenoweth (RC): The following oral history interview was conducted by Robert Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 5, 1996 at 3:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is [*Edwin*] Dale Justice, who was on board the USS *VESTAL* on December 7, 1941.

For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

Edwin Dale Justice (EJ): Okay. Edwin Dale Justice. I was born in Illinois. And let me see, that was -- there was no city there, no town. The nearest place, I think, was Charleston, in Coles County. That was in May 28, 1918.

RC: So in 1941, what did you consider your hometown to be?

EJ: Well, of course, I was in the Navy. But I was raised in Iowa, a little town -- I ended up in Traer, Iowa. And went to school there -- well, I went to several schools, but I graduated from Traer High School. And there wasn't a whole lot going on in Traer or in Iowa at that time. Maybe you guys or nobody will believe it, but I really figured that at that time in our history we're going to get in war with Germany.

RC: And when was this?

EJ: Well, in '39.

RC: Thirty-nine.

EJ: So well, I joined the Navy in 1938 for four years. Along about that time, when I was supposed to be inducted, they changed that to six years, so I had to start over again. So I finally got called in August, August 23, 1939. Went to training at Great Lakes, in Illinois, and asked for service duty on the *VESTAL* because my brother was on the *VESTAL*. He told me all about how good a ship that was and how you could learn something there. Well, he was right, I learned a lot.

RC: Why was there something about the *VESTAL*? What was it you could learn by being on the *VESTAL*?

EJ: Oh, she was a repair ship and they had all, well, everything that you would ever need to do to repair another ship or anything else -- electrical, anything. We did it. And I wanted to put in my years there to learn something. I didn't plan on Pearl Harbor, though, so, anyway.

RC: When did you report to the *VESTAL*?

EJ: Just after Thanksgiving in 1939, in San Pedro. And of course, I was a seaman there. We put in our -- well, it ended up we were transferred -- the fleet was transferred to Pearl Harbor in, I think it was in about April of 1940, somewhere in there. And of course I was still on deck force and I liked that. I mean, it was out in the open in the boats and such things.

Anyway, that was not what I went into the Navy for, so I put in for electrical department there, which was a 5-E Division. And I was accepted.

When I was a Third Class Electrician is when the Japanese hit us.

RC: Uh-huh.

EJ: Now then . . .

RC: Could you talk a little bit about how the *VESTAL* was organized to do repair work and also specifically what kind of work you did? What your duties were exactly. You said that you were an electrician but probably a lot of people don't know what that means.

EJ: Well, in my particular case or on a repair ship, they have various divisions which do the repair work, like machinists and foundry people and carpenters and about everything that you would want to do.

RC: You could repair . . .

EJ: Optical, yeah.

RC: You could repair the weapons?

EJ: Yes, oh yes. Right. And well, that's another thing I'll get into, repairing weapons. Anyway, we could do about anything. We could repair -- our main duty as a repair ship was battleships, cruisers and aircraft carriers. That's what we started out. We used to be known as the R-4. Well, they changed that to the -- what the heck was it? They added another letter to that thing. Oh, AR-4, which is auxiliary. Well, do you know -- you don't know -- or maybe you do. The *VESTAL* was an old ship. I mean really old. She was laid down, I think, in 1908 as a coal collier and then changed to a repair ship in about 1909 or '10, or something like that. And when into the fleet as a repair ship.

Now, okay, I'm going to get that thing later too, I hope. If I can remember it.

But anyway, by the time the war started on December 7, she was an old ship. Now she had been modernized a number of times and she had destroyer boilers but she was a reciprocating engine ship. Triple expansion steam engine. And she could do pretty good for the age of her. But she'd been pretty well modernized as things go in 1941.

RC: So on December 7, the *VESTAL* was tied up alongside the *ARIZONA*?

EJ: Yeah, we'd been at Pearl Harbor since -- well, when we went to Pearl Harbor, we went out for a six-week cruise. By the time we got there, they changed that to our new homeport. So yeah, we'd been around there for those months, up until December.

We got a call from somebody. They ordered some work done on the *ARIZONA*. I think it was some work on the evaporators. Now they probably had another few things that we would do. We'd been alongside about four or five, six days, something like that.

And well, I knew guys on there. One of 'em was a Gunner's Mate who I'd went to school with. And we'd been out the night before in Honolulu and that was on Friday. Not the night before. We went over on Friday night and of course, we had the weekend duty. He did and I had too. So we did a few things in Honolulu as sailors did in those days. We might have had a couple of beers and then we came back.

I had the four to eight watch in the morning, from Sunday morning. And I was relieved of my watch, went down to where the guy that was to relieve me. And he was almost still asleep, but anyway, I gave him my pistol. Went up back on deck and I heard planes and I heard noises, booming noises. And I looked over to my right there and I saw these strange looking planes and I saw smoke coming up from the sea plane area of Ford Island. These planes had -- their landing gear was down. And we didn't have any planes that flew around there that had landing gear that you didn't retract. And I saw things coming out of these planes. Then they looked rather lethal, I thought, and they were coming out. These were of course bombs.

RC: Sure.

EJ: And my brother, being in the battery locker on the *VESTAL*. That's battery repair. And I ran back there. I was going to get a cup of coffee. Well, I didn't get my coffee. I told him that something was happening and I heard the Quartermaster say that, "Hey, those are Japanese planes."

Well, I told my brother and the coffee drinkers in the battery locker about that. Now they -- I don't know whether they believed me or not, but they rang a fire drill. Quarterdeck rang fire drill. And well, that was no fire that was coming up, and I don't know why, but anyway, my brother and I were ammunition handlers for the anti-aircraft gun, and boy, we had a good one. Three-inch anti-aircraft gun and the only one on the ship. And hell, we weren't a fighting ship. Well, okay, we had Lewis machine guns, left over from World War I, I think.

But anyway, we went to our battle station, which was in the mess deck in the forward part of our ship, and of course, they had ready boxes at the anti-aircraft gun. And we didn't have to have ammunition at the moment.

Anyway, on the way up through to our battle station, I was following another fellow and these darn planes were getting pretty close and the fellow in front of me, he got -- there was a bullet hit the door to the mess area. And it splattered and hit him in his hands. And I was just behind him and I saw him pulling these that shrapnel out with his teeth.

Anyway, got up there, nothing to do. And you could hear the strafers coming over, hear them hitting the deck above and the sides of the ship. And you know if you're busy, that's one thing. When you've got nothing to do, waiting for somebody to say, "We want some ammunition on that gun."

RC: What did you --- what was going through your mind at this time? Did it seem real to you? What the heck were you thinking about?

EJ: Hmmm. It seemed real, yes.

RC: And you were already convinced that these were Japanese planes.

EJ: Yes. Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And in our location, see, we were not in line with the torpedo planes. They got the *OKLAHOMA* and the *WEST VIRGINIA*, and those which were right in line.

RC: Yeah. Did you see those planes come in? Did you see those . . .

EJ: No.

RC: . . . torpedo planes?

EJ: No. I hope not. They had tail gunners on those things and they would spray anything in sight. In fact, one of our casualties was killed by a tail gunner, one of those torpedo planes. He was ashore going to church.

And no, I saw fighters coming by. They were strafing everything in sight. Of course, what got us was the high level bombers, same thing that hit the *ARIZONA*. The magazine of the *ARIZONA* was the high level bombers. These were sixteen-inch naval projectiles, which they had modified 'em with fins and so, well, of course, the old *VESTAL*, she wasn't important. But we were in the wrong place. And we got hit aft. The bomb went all the way through the ship and began to flood the aft part of the ship.

And along about that time -- I'm not sure if it was before or after -- was when the same type bomb, I'm sure it was, came through into the *ARIZONA* magazine. And that was quite a bit of noise there, went that thing went up.

RC: And you were on the aft end of the ship?

EJ: No, I was on the forward end of our ship.

RC: So that puts you . . .

EJ: Chinese gangway. [*Note: Chinese is a term referring to the fact that the Vestal was moored so that her bow was moored to the stern of the Arizona, and that her stern was moored to the bow of the Arizona.*]

RC: . . . at the aft end of the *ARIZONA*.

EJ: Yeah. Because of the different heights of the decks.

RC: So when that big blast occurred on the *ARIZONA*, you were somewhat shielded from it.

EJ: Oh yeah, sure. Yes. Quite a bit.

RC: Did you actually see this explosion?

EJ: Oh no, no. No. But we sure heard it. I mean, it rocked the ship pretty bad. And of course, that's when it blew quite a few people from the ship over the side. And of course, there were a lot of flash burns from the fire. But our captain, [*Commander Cassin*] Young, was up. He went back there to see why the darn gun wouldn't work. Well, he shouldn't have been there either. But he got blown over the side.

And then, somebody come -- one of the officers -- I'm not sure which one it was and it doesn't make any difference now -- ordered abandon ship. And well, before that, there were other things that we had people off of the *ARIZONA* were down between the two ships and we had some of our people who rescued them.

And so anyway, when the -- we were ordered to abandon ship and we had casualties. And they had taken most of 'em to the radio room. And everybody was either going over the side or I was headed for the stern, hoping to get into a motor launch. And then, I noticed these injured in the radio room, so I got another guy and I, and we carried a guy that I knew who had been hurt in the back -- shot, shrapnel in the back -- and we carried him. Heck, he weighed quite a bit more than I did. We carried him down, back to the quarterdeck and put him in the boat.

By that time, our captain had come back aboard and he countermanded the order to abandon ship. And so we went back to our battle stations and we had been alongside the *ARIZONA* for some few days. And normally, when you're in this condition, you don't have enough steam up to maneuver. You got enough to run a generator or alternator, and for the power and lights, but you don't have steam up to maneuver. So all of that time that had gone when they hit, and when we wanted to get out of there, we couldn't do it. So of course, they got steam up as fast as they could, but we'd have been right down there along with the *ARIZONA*, except for a tug that came by, and I forgot which one it was. Threw a line to us and begin to pull us away.

And now we were -- we had our mooring lines over on the *ARIZONA*, and she had already sunk. We had a coxswain name of Joe George. He has since passed away, I understand. He cut those lines to the *ARIZONA*. Now, I don't know who cut the lines aft. Maybe they were burnt through, I don't know. But he cut the lines forward on our ship, which was aft to the *ARIZONA*. And pulled us away. And I have read in the Pearl Harbor-gram, that the tug that pulled us away, the captain of the tug had just served on the *VESTAL*. And he was quite disturbed when somebody chopped the [*mooring lines*], which (chuckles) -- from his ship, from his tug to ours. And I understand he was disturbed and anyway

There was a couple of things I wanted to say before. One of 'em was that the fires on the *ARIZONA*, of course they were -- they had no power. They couldn't operate the anti-aircraft guns -- not normally. So they tried to do it manually. And I know this 'cause I saw them. And they were firing their five-inch guns -- at least once in a while. And the fire would spread so it was just about all around them. And I'm not sure whether it was my imagination -- and I don't think it was -- but I saw those gunners, fire all around 'em, trying to train those guns around and they were dying there. I mean, really. Now, I've tried to suppress that idea as much as I can because it bothered me quite a bit. And I don't even like to remember. Fifty-five years later, I don't like to even think of it, but to me, it happened.

Now, those on the aft part of the *ARIZONA* were fortunate because they didn't get killed by concussion or lack of oxygen, or whatever. They may have gotten a lot of oil going over to Ford Island, or getting over to our ship, but they were fortunate. That is about the only ones that survived, of course.

Okay. We're getting pulled away. The captain is in command and now, of course, I was still looking for something to do and I couldn't find very much. Anyway, he decided to run the ship aground. And now we were down at the stern and headed for the nearest land there that we could beach the thing without going all the way down, was Aiea, over in that area. And that's where we ran it aground. And of course, otherwise, they were so concerned about the bulkheads aft from the water pressure, they would fail, see. And if one of them did, then we had no chance of keeping afloat. But we got aground and saved her that way.

After that, I saw the last planes, Japanese planes. They checked the place, checked the harbor out. There was about four of them. Apparently, that's what I've heard later. They were checking to see the damage, probably photographing. And they took quite a few photographs and in fact, we've got reproductions of them all over the place now, right out here in the small stores place. And that was quite a relief to see them leave. Of course, we never knew whether it was coming back or not.

RC: What did you feel like right then, when you saw this plane?

EJ: I was -- well, I was scared, you know. I mean, I'd been scared for two hours by that time and I was damn scared. And well, you hoped they couldn't come back. So then the next while later, we had word that there were twenty-six troop ships off the western coast, northwest coast there, with ready to land on Oahu.

RC: Japanese ships?

EJ: Yes. Yes. Right. And boy, the way it looked, they could've and I was also in the landing force, so they gave us rifles and a helmet, and that's before they got out the gas mask, and sent us to the recreation area at Aiea, to take over that area until the Army could take over.

And so we were -- we went over there, about 150 of us, maybe. And . . .

RC: All from the *VESTAL*, or from different ships?

EJ: No, all from the *VESTAL*. Yeah. And so along about noon, somebody brought over some sandwiches. We hadn't eaten anything since the night before.

RC: How did you get over there to Aiea?

EJ: We had motor launches. Our motor launches, they were operational. So anyway, the Army finally came by and they put a platoon there and took what we had there. We went back to the ship. And finally, I got something to eat. Good old Navy baked beans. (Chuckles) And I'll tell you, they tasted good.

After that, of course, we -- oh, we were still afire in the forward part. There was a big bomb came through, about twenty feet away from where we were, I was. And it hit a steel billet storage area. Now these were armor piercing bombs, and it took quite a bit to set 'em off. Anyway, they hit like pieces of ten feet long steel and that set the thing off, and of course it started a fire. And it went in three decks before it did that. But it started a fire and you can't -- well, the smoke and dust and -- I still -- now, if she was supposed to have not been a coal collier. I mean, she was designed as one, but she wasn't supposed to have seen any duty as a coal collier. But they found coal in that area where that bomb came through that had been lodged in nooks and crannies there, so they claim at least.

So anyway. And to get that fire out, we didn't have water we could use. We had no fire at all then. And those that were able, we went down to an area where they had CO-2 bottles, these big ninety-pound CO-2 bottles, which we used in welding and things like that. They had about, oh, I don't know, twenty-five or thirty of us, carrying those things up three decks, going forward to where the fire was, going down two decks and the fire fighters would open the valves on these things and throw 'em down a hatch. And we did that for quite a while, I guess until they had all the bottles used up. And those are heavy. Normally you would have some kind of conveyor to move 'em up on topside. We did it by hand and they wore the skin off our wrists. But anyway, you got the darn fire out anyway.

After that, a lot of clean up, starting a lot of clean up. Now . . .

RC: How long did it take to get the *VESTAL* refloated and (inaudible)

EJ: Am I using too much (inaudible) . . .

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

EJ: . . . these people that were injured and I just -- I don't know, nobody told me. I just got another guy and we began to carrying one of them off. Anyway . . .

RC: Look out for somebody who couldn't look out for themselves.

EJ: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, no particular instruction along that line, but yeah, sure.

RC: So, I was going to ask you, how long did it take to actually get the *VESTAL* refloated and repaired and what was the extent of her damage?

EJ: Okay. We, of course, we had the fire forward, which didn't affect her seaworthiness. But the one aft, that went all the way through and blew a hole and exploded when it went out the bottom, so they say. And it flooded quite a bit of the aft section of the ship and it killed several people. They had to put a patch over the hole. Now, being a repair ship, we built our own cofferdam to put over that hole. And they finally pumped it out.

We were a DC ship, direct current ship. And being a repair ship, we had an awful lot of motors, electrical motors. And when they got the oil and water pumped out, we began to salvage what we could. And we -- I was in the repair force, so I was in the middle of that part of it. And we took every electrical motor out of -- that had been flooded -- out, took 'em apart and cleaned 'em. And they cleaned 'em with carbon tet [*carbontetrachloride*]. That is known now to be rather dangerous thing. But we had vats of those things, and they dumped these parts into the carbon tet, get that oil out. We put 'em back together, dried 'em out, put 'em back together and I think out of 500 and some motors, we lost two that had to be rewound. The rest of 'em, we cleaned 'em up so they could be used again.

Those sailors that worked on those vats, I knew all of 'em. They -- I think they all eventually got cancer from carbon tet and they're all dead now. Of course, a lot of us are, but

It took us about six weeks and of course, as soon as they got the cofferdam on there, pumped the water out, those divisions that were able to operate without the damage caused by water, then we began to take on jobs from whatever ship was around that needed help. And so we may have been on the beach for six weeks or so, but we became operational in some way at least, oh, within two weeks. But we couldn't get a dry dock.

RC: Did you go over to other ships and work on other ships?

DE: Yeah.

RC: Which ships . . .

EJ: Well . . .

RC: . . . did you go over to?

EJ: Yeah. Let's see, well, on the eighth, they took about 120 people off our ship and another 120 off another ship over to the ammunition storage area, ammunition depot, to unload the [USS] *PYRO*. And now, here again, the Japanese missed a lot of chances. Really, they did. They missed that *PYRO*, which was loaded with a lot of sixteen and fourteen-inch ammunition, and of course, everything else smaller. They missed it by about ten feet, with a bomb. It went through the dock where they were tied up and that was one thing.

Another was the oil storage tanks. I mean, we operated on oil. I mean, if we didn't have oil, we didn't operate. And they didn't get those. And if they'd have got those, they'd have flooded the harbor with burning oil.

And they also missed the gasoline on Ford Island. They didn't get that. Well, anyway, that was -- I spent all day the eighth and most of the ninth. We unloaded ammunition. We had unloaded that ship in two days which normally a civilian crew took two weeks. I'll tell you, we worked.

RC: Sounds like it.

EJ: Yeah. And I hurt my back there. There was a sixteen-inch shell we were handling and it tipped over, fell on the deck there. And another guy and I tried to pick it up. And this was too damn heavy. I hurt my back there. I had that for thirty years, I guess. I never did go to sick bay. And from then on, it was -- oh yeah, we went over to the -- let me see, there was the *WEST VIRGINIA*, *TENNESSEE* -- I'm not sure which one it was now. The one forward of the *TENNESSEE*. One of those big bombs came through the number two turret, I believe it was. I went over there with some other people that we -- see what we could do with that. It had gone all the way through the top of the turret, which is, I don't know, six or seven inches of steel, and landed in the breach while the guns didn't explode. So we went over there to see what we could do, which was -- that was a Navy yard job.

From then on, it was clean up, work and clean up. And . . .

RC: When did the *VESTAL* -- did it stay in Pearl Harbor for quite some time, or did you begin operating with the fleet or . . .

EJ: No, we -- after we get into the Navy yard and they patched us up, in August, around the first of August in '42, we were sent to the South Pacific. We went to New Caledonia. No, I don't think we stopped at Fiji at that time. I think we went to New Caledonia and spent maybe a week or so there. We did plenty of work there.

And then we went to Fiji and we spent a few days there. And then, I think it was the *SOUTH DAKOTA* battleship had hit a reef and they didn't know how much damage had been done. So they sent us to Tonga. And there they -- we were there about six weeks. But during that time, they laid the battleship over and we had our divers go down to see what damage was and see what it took to get her back to States. And apparently, it was not so that she couldn't maneuver and so they sent her back to States.

While we were there, there were other ships we worked on. But it was quite an experience at Tonga because that was the kingdom -- I guess it still is a kingdom, and we were at NU-KA-LO-FA [*Nuku'afola*]- probably pronounced wrong -- but that was the capital of Tonga at that time. And we met the people, some of the people there. I even played a little bit of golf on the king's golf course there. Not very well, but it was a new experience. And there was a turtle, the tortoise, that roamed around that town. And it was about, hmm, two and a half feet tall and it could carry a man easy. And it had the initials of Captain Cook carved on it. And that had been, what, 200 years before? Something like that. But anyway, that's the story, that this had been alive that long. Of course, it wasn't near as big at that time, but boy, it was big.

RC: How long -- did you stay on the *VESTAL* through the entire war?

EJ: My part of it, yes. I stayed on it. We went back to Fiji. We worked on the *ENTERPRISE*, which had had an elevator disabled by bombs. And she was a last aircraft carrier that we had. The rest of 'em had been sunk or damaged and she wasn't -- she couldn't operate either until they came. Well, we didn't come along side her because she's way big, way too big for us. Anyway, we had crews working on her for maybe, I don't know, ten days or so, trying to get her ready to meet the Japanese again, because they were coming down again. And so they hadn't had -- they didn't get the elevator ready when she was along side us. I mean, when we were working on her. So they sent about sixty of our people out with her when they went out to meet the Japs. And by the time they needed her, they got that elevator working again and they sent the planes out and stopped that drive down. They were probably headed for Australia.

And then, that was another turning point, of course.

RC: When did you leave the *VESTAL* finally?

EJ: Oh, okay. We went from Fiji to Espiritu Santo, Ellis Island and several others. And to Majuro, in the Marshalls. And we had a -- two battleships had collided. I think it was -- let me see -- I forgot the names now. Anyway, one had broadsided the other and pushed their bow back about sixty feet and that was the main damage to the battleships. But to get the thing back to Bremerton or wherever, they had to hold that darn bow down so we took the anchor chain back under the keel and welded it there, while it was in the water, and was able to send her back.

So we went back to the States. We came back to Honolulu. That was in August '44. So we'd been out quite a while. We had ten days in Sydney for R and R in two years or so and -- well, over two years. There wasn't much recreation in those islands and the beer they sent out, it got so that you couldn't drink it. Too much formaldehyde in it.

Anyway, got back to Mare Island in the latter part of August in '44. And somebody said, "You want shore duty?"

And I wanted shore duty. So those that had been out all the time, they gave us shore duty.

RC: Fifty-five years ago, you were at Pearl Harbor on the *VESTAL*. And you have -- when you talk to Americans today, especially young people, and they want to know what was Pearl Harbor all about and why is it important for people to know about it today, what difference does it make if someone knows what happened. What do you tell them?

EJ: A lot of 'em don't even know where Pearl Harbor is. Our schools in Chico and in Paradise have had some of us over to talk to some of their classes. And to tell them what it meant as much as we can. Usually we talk to the lower grades. Well, the eighth, ninth and such. My last time doing that were tenth graders who were studying world history. And they seemed to like to know about it and I think they -- if they are told, they get a much better idea of what took place fifty, sixty years ago, but they're not getting taught in school. In fact, I'm afraid they're getting taught the wrong way. Such as it was our fault and not the Japanese for attacking us at Pearl Harbor. And you always . . .

RC: You think we bore any responsibility?

EJ: Of course. Yes. Now here again, a lot of us that were Pearl Harbor, we blame Roosevelt for a lot of this. The government wanted to get us in the war so we could go against Germany. And that has been a lot of us, our opinion is it was known about or almost planned to allow the Japanese to do this. I guess history will not support that too well. But it's sure, to me, it

sure makes a little bit of sense that we could have been notified, alerted, so that we wouldn't have had all those people killed. And it bothers us.

RC: Okay. Well, again, what's the lesson? What's the lesson when you talk to schools?

EJ: Our motto is one of them. Don't be -- keep alert. When this thing started, we had almost nothing to fight with and sure we had some old battleships, we had some old aircraft carriers, but the people who ran the Navy and the military then, they didn't understand what aircraft could do. And boy, keep alert, keep your defenses up and keep your offenses up. Planes, whatever it takes to keep us safe from aggressors.

RC: Okay.

EJ: It costs money, but boy, it's not as expensive as the alternative. That's my opinion.

RC: Okay, appreciate it. Thank you very much.

EJ: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW