

#147 ERNEST REEPMAKER: SAILOR ABOARD USS *SACRAMENTO*

Chris Conybeare (CC): Okay, this is an oral history interview with Ernest Reepmaker, conducted on December 2, 1986 at about 11:15 a.m. Mr. Reepmaker lives in Sherman Oaks, California. My name is Chris Conybeare, conducting the interview, and Dan Martinez is assisting.

Why don't we ask you, what was your name and rank on December 7, 1941?

Ernest Reepmaker (ER): I, Ernest J. Reepmaker, and I believe I was a coxswain. I Coxswain is the Third Class Petty Officer on the topside, boatsmate.

CC: And what was the name of your ship?

ER: USS *SACRAMENTO*, PG-19.

CC: And what does that mean? What was the *SACRAMENTO*, what kind of ship?

ER: Sacramento was a -- originally it was a gunboat from the China coast, serving over there when the *PANAY* was over there, but they brought her back and it was a coal burner which they made into an oil burner.

CC: Let's go back a little bit and get a little history. Where were you born and raised? What was your hometown?

ER: I was born in Denver, Colorado and I -- but I was there about four years and went to Indianapolis, Indiana. I was in an orphan's home for about eight years and then I was raised in Indiana until my growing years. Seventeen, I was on my own and then come the war. I went in a year before the -- Pearl Harbor, because Roosevelt called out all the Naval reserves at that time.

CC: And you were assigned to the *SACRAMENTO*?

ER: I was assigned to the *SACRAMENTO*. We even cruised on the *SACRAMENTO* for our two-week cruise before the war, I mean, during the summer cruises.

CC: Where did you report to *SACRAMENTO*?

ER: Michigan City, Indiana.

CC: And how did you get to Hawaii?

ER: Well, it was a nice little trip we took up through the Great Lakes and around what they call Father's Point there, and down to Boston. And we spent six months in overhaul and repair. Boston was quite a town at that time. And went on down to Cuba for a couple weeks, Guantanamo, then on through Panama Canal and then over to Hawaii. And we were in Hawaii, there, at that time six months before the war started as doing patrol duty, up and down the coast.

CC: What was the mood like? Were you expecting trouble?

ER: Oh no. There wasn't any idea of we sailors aboard. I mean, probably there was in the upper clientele or so forth. But we never had any idea. And if you want to know my mood that morning, I'll tell you an hour later.

CC: No, go ahead, what were you . . .

ER: Well . . .

CC: What were you doing then?

ER: Well, I was getting ready to go on liberty, there in my whites, before eight o'clock, when I have a nice day of shore in Honolulu. But so I was standing over there with a bunch of sailors, ready to go on liberty and we saw this motion coming over these planes, making these . . . dropping of bombs and so forth. We had no idea what was going on at the time.

And then all of a sudden, Megel, our executive officer says, "Get down, get under the overhead, get under the overhead,"--as if that could do any good, you know. So we got under. Then, before long, after this was done, or after we got our ammunition, got our ammunition holes open, why, what happened then, he put a bunch of us sailors right out on the dock at that time, just to keep us busy with those thirty-oh-three rifles, behind a shack, cement shack, firing at these planes with these regular strength rifles.

CC: Kind of a futile gesture.

ER: Very much so.

CC: What did the planes look like? Do you remember how they looked?

ER: Scary. (Chuckles) No, I'll tell you, of course, they weren't after our small ship, they were after any other ship, which the *PENNSYLVANIA* was there in dry dock, not too far from us. But of course, until we saw the red suns on the wing tip of the planes, we had no idea what was coming on. And then it came to the realization that what was happening, we were being attacked by Japan.

CC: At that moment, when you realized, "Here I am, a young man," and all of a sudden you're at war, what did you think?

ER: Who said I realized all that at that moment? (Laughs)

CC: What did you realize? What did you think?

ER: Well, you didn't have time to think, you know. Because this was all happening and you were too excited with what was going on in your inner self that you just went ahead and did something to try to prevent or get yourself occupied or prevent anything happening to you.

CC: And so your basic thought was just go ahead and do what you . . .

ER: Right, uh-huh.

CC: . . . what you had to do.

ER: Right.

CC: What kinds of things did you see as the attack progressed? Do you remember seeing any of the ships being hit or any of the . . .

ER: Well, from my vantage point at that time -- of course, as I said, I was out on the dock, shooting, and then later on, I couldn't see what was happening because I was on the dock. But then, he had some of us go up and help a ship forward, might have been the *MUGFORD*, I don't know which one it was, help fire their five-inch gun, because I was on the gun crew of a four-inch surface gun, which we couldn't use our guns because it was surface guns. Just our thirty caliber's and twenty (pauses) what do you call them, thirty caliber, thirty millimeter and twenty -- fifty caliber guns are all we could use.

CC: So did you -- during the whole attack, you were -- at one time, you were shooting a rifle on the dock, and then you moved up to try to man the . . .

ER: Try to help these on the gun crew, but we were just probably more in the way than anything else, you know, because they did have their own gun crew, but we were there. And then after this happened, I was in a boat -- because I was a coxswain -- and helping go around picking up survivors and so forth.

CC: What was it like, out in the water? You picking up survivors, what was it like out there?

ER: It was just scary that's all. I mean, you see these, all these ships that have been sunk and so forth, you just couldn't imagine what it was all about. I mean, it's too unthinkable, you know, something that's just too much to -- and picking up these guys that were around in the water, you know, and then taking them back to the dock. It was a . . .

CC: What was their condition, the guys you were picking up?

ER: Oh, most of them were ones that could . . . were all right, you know. The ones we were able to get to. But we weren't that close to the ships at the time, the big ships.

CC: And did you observe the *PENNSYLVANIA* at all during this, the attacks on the *PENNSYLVANIA*?

ER: To tell you the truth, I didn't observe the attacks on the other ships because with the planes coming in and seeing them coming at different times, why, you're more interested in what's going to happen to you, you know. And although, as I say, they weren't . . . you know, after everything was quiet, after the first wave of planes, and then, here they come up again, you know. And you just didn't know what it was all about.

Daniel Martinez (DM): When you picked up the survivors, do you know which ships you picked up survivors from?

ER: No, I didn't.

DM: Your ship was credited with picking up survivors from the *OKLAHOMA* and the *UTAH*.

ER: Oh, there was men . . . Harry Musgrove was also one that . . . he was running a boat.

DM: Right.

ER: Uh-huh.

CC: Now, you do -- there were some folks from the *UTAH* that joined your ship that night, though, right.

ER: But I didn't know about it. There were several survivors, as you say, but we didn't know about those at the time, because, well, everything was all at night, right from then on. There were four hours off and four hours on duty. Why, you couldn't make it eight hours off and say, "Get a little sleep," no, but that was that way for the next month.

CC: Navy's been like that as long as I know.

ER: Yeah, I guess so, huh. (Chuckles) Why, huh. (Laughs)

CC: That's right. Suppose you'd gone on liberty that day and nothing -- the attack hadn't -- what would you have done? What did a young sailor do?

ER: Oh. Yeah, well, occasionally I'd go to church, occasionally. But then, there was a buddy and I, we used to -- Buchanan -- and he got killed during the war. I don't know, I never heard of him again, but he and I were buddies. We always went ashore. We used to go down and have fun on the avenue. One Palm Garden, I think, was the name of the place at one time. And we used to always start out there, you know. And then we'd just buddy around and never got into too much trouble. Used to come back to the ship a little inebriated sometimes, but not too much trouble.

CC: I find that hard to believe, sailors would be inebriated.

ER: Oh. (Laughs) My captain saw me come back with Panama, from Panama, with a bottle in my sock. (Laughs) He was walking down the dock, "Hi, Captain."

CC: What was Honolulu like in those days?

ER: Oh, it was a nice town. We used to take these little cabs in for . . . eight of us get in for a quarter apiece and go into town and it's much Of course, we weren't out to do the shopping, you know. We weren't out to shop in Honolulu. We were out to enjoy ourselves and in the clubs and so forth. But of course, you never got as much liberty as you would like to either, you know. (Chuckles)

CC: Yeah. Now, how old were you then?

ER: When the war started, I was twenty-three.

CC: What kinds of things did the ordinary sailors talk about after, during the attack? When it was all over, what kinds of -- were there rumors about the Japanese are landing, or that kind . . . ? What kinds of things were going through -- what was the scuttlebutt?

ER: Well, I'll tell you, I couldn't honestly tell you what we were thinking at the time, I know. Because we were, ourselves, after the attack, our ship was in charge of the port of Hilo for eight months.

CC: Oh, so you were assigned -- you immediately left, or when?

ER: A month later. I think it was in January. We were in charge of the port of Hilo, the *SACRAMENTO* was, uh-huh. And we were over there.

CC: Okay. As you . . .

ER: Yeah. It was a nice duty over there too.

CC: Yeah, I'll bet. As you look back, forty-five years perspective now . . .

ER: Oh boy. (Chuckles)

CC: . . . how do you feel about the whole incident as you look back?

ER: Oh, well as I look back, I can't help but think that it was . . . we knew a lot more than we ever showed at the time and of course from seeing "Tora, Tora, Tora," you got the other side, view, too. And it seems like it could have that much been avoided, to have something like that happen because from what they had before, even that morning, you know, it seems like -- and they didn't take notice of what's going on. It's a shame, terrible.

CC: Has it been something, has it been one of those things that you, as you've gone through life, that it's always something you think about?

ER: Oh yes. Well, until I got . . . I belong to the, joined the Pearl Harbor survivors about fourteen years ago, why, it didn't concern me so much at the time. I mean, it was a memory. Because I came back on leave when I came back, and I made speeches to my sister's company, tell them all about Pearl Harbor and how, you know, you were a, not a star, but someone that had been there and they wanted to know all about it, you know. So I, in her company, I had several hundred people, I was telling them all about what happened that morning. Yeah. But it's something now you look back on, you just think it was something that should have been avoided and you were part of it.

CC: Okay. You have any other . . . ?

DM: Yeah. I was wondering what your feeling is now, forty-five years after the fact, towards Japanese and people that come here, and perhaps the returning of Japanese survivors as well?

ER: Well, I haven't . . . they were doing their part, the same as we were.
But

the only thing (chuckles) I have is we can't get a stamp, a Pearl Harbor stamp, mainly because they think that the, because of Japanese politics, they won't let us have a Pearl Harbor stamp, maybe, until our fiftieth year, fiftieth anniversary. We're trying to get it for the forty-fifth anniversary.

We don't have any -- harbor feelings. The Japanese might have. I had a Japanese pick me up one time going up to Stockton, and it was a Pearl Harbor convention, but I didn't dare tell him that I was going to the Pearl Harbor convention. I mean, that's just one of those things you just didn't feel like it, you know. They might have dropped you off right away.

CC: But you see it basically as they were doing their jobs, and they were soldiers or sailors, you were doing yours and . . .

ER: Yeah, I have no fence of the Japanese at all. I have good friends that are Japanese and it's just something I just -- the only fence I have, they're winning the war now.

CC: Okay, thank you.

ER: Thanks a lot, Chris.

END OF INTERVIEW