

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#425

FRANK BELISLE

USS *MARYLAND*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY JERRY GREENE & KAREN BYRNE

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Jerry Greene (JG): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jerry Greene and Karen Byrne for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 7, 6, 2001, December 6, 2001 at 8:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is Frank Belisle, who was a fireman first class on the USS *Maryland*, on December 7, 1941. For the record, Frank, would you please state your full name, place of birth and birth date?

Frank Belisle (FB): Frank Belisle. I was born July 21, 1920. And you want the place of birth?

JG: Yes.

FB: Bondsville, Massachusetts.

JG: What did you consider your hometown to be in 1941?

FB: Bondsville, Massachusetts.

JG: And what were your parents' names?

FB: David and Katherine Belisle.

JG: How many brothers and sisters did or do you have?

FB: I had four brothers and four sisters.

JG: Where did you go to high school?

FB: I went to high school in Palmer, Massachusetts.

JG: Where did you enlist?

FB: In Springfield, Mass[achusetts].

JG: And Frank, why did you enlist?

FB: At that time there was no work! That was during Depression, end of the depression and there was no work anywhere. As a matter of fact, I was in the CCC camps, the Civilian Conservation Camp, for a dollar a day at that times. And when I got out of there, I went down to see if I could join the navy and I passed the test and I signed up for six years at that time.

JG: I'm curious, did any of your CCC training carry over to your navy training?

FB: Well, it was much different but the CCC training was good because you had, you lived in a barracks and it was like, I'd say, more on a army style. You had khakis and you had inspections and you lined up every morning and it was, that was sort of thing. And they took you to work out in the forest all the time.

JG: Any other information about your military background before coming to Hawaii?

FB: No. That was it. I had a brother that was in the navy previous to me. And he was on the USS *Portland* years ago.

JG: What circumstances brought you to Hawaii?

FB: The—when I went aboard ship. I was in Bremerton Navy Yard and when we come out of navy yard, the ship came straight here to Pearl Harbor.

JG: And that ship was?

FB: The USS *Maryland*, the battleship.

JG: When did you get here?

FB: Oh, I would probably say in July of '41. Right around that area.

JG: Can you tell us something about your duties here prior to December 7?

FB: Well, I was in the—first of all, I went to Henry Ford School in Dearborn, Michigan, to become a machinist mate. And I think it was about three months or so. Then I got shipped to Great Lakes and from Great Lakes out

to the *Maryland*. And from the *Maryland*, I stayed on it for over five years.
I put it out of commission actually.

JG: Can you give me some sense of what your daily activity consisted of?

FB: Well, when I come aboard ship, I got sent, assigned to the boiler room, B Division. And the ship had eight boilers and each boiler room had their own crew. And our duty was always, not only firing the boilers, but to keep the boiler tiptop shape and so many hours that the boiler steamed, it had to be cleaned, inspected and everything shipshape all the time, and we had to keep that up all the time. But other than that, that was most of our working day. If we weren't on watch, we were in the boiler room cleaning up and making sure everything was shipshape.

(Conversation off-mike)

JG: Frank, where were you assigned on December 7, 1941?

FB: At that day, I had the eight to twelve watch in the boiler room, in boiler room number two. And I got down to the boiler room at 7:45, 'cause you always relieved the watch fifteen minutes early. And I was down in the boiler room when it all started.

JG: Why don't you tell us about your day in detail from the beginning?

FB: Okay. When it all started, we didn't know, actually we were down in the boiler room, we didn't know what was going on, but we heard all the banging and everything else. And finally we got word from up on the bridge that it was an attack, Japanese attack. So we were down in the boiler room, there was three men on watch all the time. And we had to keep that boiler enough steam. We were lucky enough that our anti-aircraft guns were in shape where they were firing, so we had to keep steam pressure up all the time and we had to work quite a bit. But as the attack went along, what we didn't know, we found out later, but the boiler room started filling up with smoke. It got so thick in the boiler room that we could hardly see the gauges and we had to go right near, up near the gauges to make sure we had enough

steam pressure and oil pressure and everything else. So we reported it to boiler control. So they says, "Okay."

And a little later, they opened up a hatch and threw us down three gas masks! They says, "Here, put these on!"

We didn't know. That scared us because we didn't know what it was. But later on, we found out it was the smoke from the *Arizona* and the *West Virginia* and it was blowing there and it was coming down the stack, filling up the boiler room. And we were stuck down there for, oh, I would say probably about eight or nine hours before we got out. And then they opened up the hatch later on and threw us down a can of Spam and a loaf of bread. (Chuckles) But that was okay. It was like having a steak at that time!

Because all the boiler rooms have their own hot plate and coffee. You had coffee there all while you're on watch and everything else. So at least we got fed or it wasn't that bad. But when we finally got out and got to go up topside to see what happened, it was just about dark. And none of us could believe what was going on, what we saw at that time. And when the

Oklahoma went over, it pushed us up against the quay and we couldn't move. We thought we were way out to sea, but we hadn't moved an inch!

JG: What were some of the things that you saw when you came up, that you mentioned?

FB: Oh, we saw like the *Arizona* was still burning and smoking. The *West Virginia* was just about sunk. They were smoking. And a lot of oil in the water. But by the time we got up, most of the guys that were in the water were picked up and they got most of 'em. But other than that, then the *California* was hit. But see, we couldn't get off the ship anyway so we couldn't go out and see what was going on, that the rest of 'em that were, like the *Cassin* and *Downes* that were in the dry dock and they really were splattered.

JG: And it was dark by the time you came up?

FB: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm.

JG: How many were down there with you in the boiler room?

FB: Three. There was three of us on watch, every watch.

JG: And did you guys wear those gas masks for most of the time you were down there?

FB: Well, we wore 'em for a while and then they finally informed us it was smoke coming down, so we took 'em off. And see, the ship was so old, the boiler rooms were under air pressure and you had to go through an air locker chamber to get into the boiler room. And later the newer ships, they had EER-IN-CASE boilers. They had a CASE-IN on the boiler. And the new ships, you could have an open boiler room, but ours you couldn't because if you open both air locker doors before you come in, you'd have a flareback and the fire would jump out of the boiler about that far. Yeah, so we always had to have air pressure in the boiler room all the time. And we had a four-strap blower that would, we used to keep it, but that was only one spot where you could get a little breeze.

JG: Frank, what do you remember about that night?

FB: Well, that night, I don't think too many guys slept that night, but as soon as it was dark, darkness, everything was a blackout. You couldn't go up topside with a cigarette or no lights or there was no lights anywhere. And even if you were up topside to do a job, you couldn't turn on any lights or anything else because actually the whole island was blacked out from then on, at six o'clock every evening there was a blackout on the whole island. And then even after it was completed, when we did get liberty, we had to be back to the ship before six, because the whole island was blacked out and all the ships were blacked out too, you know.

(Conversation off-mike)

Karen Byrne (KB): Before we move on, is there anything else you want to tell us about that day or the next couple of days, anything that comes to mind?

FB: Well, I think it was about, I would say roughly probably a week, because we couldn't move 'cause we were up against the quay, 'cause the *Oklahoma*

pushed us up against the quay. And they had a dredge a little in front of us and pull us out so we could get out _____. When we did finally get out, we went up to Bremerton, 'cause we got hit by two bombs and was strafed and we went to Bremerton and we got patched up and fixed up and then we came back.

KB: Came back to Hawaii?

FB: Yeah, mm-hmm.

KB: So when the next time you left Hawaii, when did you come back after that?

FB: Oh...

KB: Have you been back since you were here in the military?

FB: No, no.

KB: Is this the first time?

FB: First time since...

KB: First time?

FB: I think '46 was the last time I was here.

KB: Was the last time you were here.

FB: I was still in. We were on what they call Magic Carpet duty. We were taking a lot of the troops that were getting discharged and sent back to the States, we would pick 'em up here at Pearl, load 'em up, take 'em to San Diego, come back and get another load, take 'em to San Diego. That was our duty then.

KB: Transport.

FB: Mm-hmm.

JG: I wanted to take you back to the attack for just a second and when the *Maryland* was hit by the bombs. What do you remember of that moment? Could you feel that?

FB: Well, I, actually there was so much noise from the bombs and the, like the *Oklahoma* going over, we couldn't tell the difference. There was just steady booming, you know?

JG: Sure.

KB: Sir, how does it feel to be back here at Pearl Harbor...

FB: Oh, it's nice.

KB: ...nearly sixty years later?

FB: Yeah, nice.

KB: Good experience?

FB: Good experience, yeah. I enjoyed it.

KB: And you, have you been out to the memorial yet?

FB: Yeah, to the *Arizona* Memorial, yeah.

KB: You have been out there.

FB: Yeah, mm-hmm. Went out there two days ago.

KB: How was that?

FB: It was kind of touching. Yeah.

KB: Did it bring...

FB: Where we were, the *Missouri* is.

KB: Right.

FB: Yeah. Where us and the *Oklahoma* was, the *Missouri*'s there now.

KB: When you were out there, did it bring back lots of memories?

FB: Oh yeah. Yeah. I had a...

JG: I have a question.

FB: I had a friend that was on the *Oklahoma* that I went to school with and he got off but he got killed in the water when they was strafing.

KB: Oh. Since you were at Pearl Harbor in 1941, have you had much chance to talk about your experiences here with other people?

FB: Not that much. I was more a loner.

KB: So this is one of the first times you've really talked about what happened to you?

FB: Yeah, my son's been trying to get me for the last few years. But like today I met three other guys from the boiler room and we had quite a session!

(Laughs)

JG: Frank, I wanted to ask you, how long did it take for your family to get word about your circumstances after the attack?

FB: Well, after the attack, I don't know how many days it was, probably two, probably three days. They gave us a postal card. And on there it says, you know, "I am well. I am wounded, not seriously," and we had to check what item. I just put, "I am well and letter will follow soon," and we had to sign our name, and we couldn't put anything else on that envelope.

As a matter of fact, I still have that envelope. My mother saved it. I still got it.

KB: Do you know when they received that back home? Did it take a long time?

FB: Oh, not that long. I think they got it about a week ago. I think they had clipper mail at that time here, which was, everything went by air, which was pretty fast.

KB: A week, that is fast.

FB: Yeah. I would say a week, probably.

KB: What are you planning to do with that envelope?

FB: I still got it. My sons and grandsons...

KB: Your grandsons have it?

FB: No, I still have it but they'll get it after me.

KB: It'll go to your grandson. I see.

FB: I got quite a bit of stuff that they'll get. (Chuckles)

KB: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about your experiences here on December 7?

FB: No, that's about it that I can recall right offhand.

KB: And you're going out to the memorial tomorrow?

FB: Oh yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah, it'll be a long day but it'll go.

KB: Well, we'd like to thank you very much for everything that you did in 1941 and for coming back sixty years later to help remind us about all the contributions you and others like you made. We thank you very much.

FB: Well, thank you. It's a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW