

#171 FRANK CAMPARELL: USS *UTAH*

Bart Fredo (BF): Tell him you don't have to worry about a thing. I'm driving.

Let me slate this thing. The following interview is with Frank Camparell. It was conducted on December 3, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel. It's about 8:50 at night. Mr. Camparell now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I'm doing the interview, my name is Bart Fredo, and also in the room is Mark Tanaka-Sanders, who's with the National Park Service.

Let me ask you to tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Frank Camparell (FC): My name is Frank Camparell. I was from Youngstown, Ohio.

BF: What branch of the service were you in?

FC: U.S. Navy.

BF: When did you enlist?

FC: Nineteen thirty-seven, but I had to wait 'til 1938 to get in, because of the waiting line.

BF: In 1941, what was your rank and what was your job?

FC: I was seaman first class, working in the ship's laundry.

BF: When did you come to Hawaii?

FC: The first time, I believe, was in 1938, on the way to Samoa.

BF: And you came back?

FC: Yes.

BF: And you were assigned to which ship?

FC: USS *UTAH*.

BF: And that was a battleship converted to a target ship and an anti-aircraft ship, right?

FC: And it's converted from the BB31 to the AG16.

BF: Let me take you back to the morning of the attack, before the attack started, what were you doing?

FC: I was licking stamps and putting them on Christmas cards.

BF: Below deck?

FC: Below decks, in the laundry.

BF: Doing your laundry at the same time?

FC: No. No, no. No, I wasn't doing any laundry. It was a Sunday morning and I was -- just before eight o'clock.

BF: When did you get some kind of an indication that something out of the ordinary was happening?

FC: I heard something splash into the side of the ship on the port side and I felt like it was an ammunition lighter, or something, that broke loose, but it really, truly, it wasn't. It was a torpedo that had hit, evidently, on the port side.

BF: What effect did it have on you and on the ship?

FC: Well, the ship started listing pretty badly to port and I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know there was a war going on.

BF: Did it knock you off your feet, the impact?

FC: It really didn't knock me off my feet, because this was on the port side and I was on the starboard side.

BF: What did you do?

FC: Well, I tried to get off.

BF: Off the ship?

FC: Yes. (Chuckles)

BF: Tell us about your efforts in trying to get off the ship.

FC: Well, you couldn't get on topside because I now know there was a first wave that hit, it was almost really impossible because of the strafing, so I went back below decks, where I was all the time, anyway, and tried to get back from another part of the ship, up forward, and wasn't able to get up at all. It was clogged by fellows trying to get through the hatch.

BF: People are on this, on this -- is it a ladder?

FC: It was a -- yes -- on the ladder trying to get up on the next deck, on the main deck.

BF: So there was a backlog?

FC: Oh yes. Quite a few fellows.

BF: What happened?

FC: Well, I finally -- I'm a little guy -- I finally went through a guy's legs and got up into the air castle on the starboard side of the ship.

BF: Was it someone frozen with fear or whatever on the ladder?

FC: It appeared to be, yes.

BF: And you just went right through 'em?

FC: Right through his legs.

BF: You got topside, what did you see?

FC: Well, I saw smoke billowing from the Battleship Row and I could -- of course, I realized the ship was sinking.

BF: Your ship was sinking?

FC: Oh yes. And the Japs' planes coming in from the stern and couldn't get off.

BF: You couldn't get off?

FC: Nobody could get off.

BF: Why?

FC: Well, they finally realized they had tail gunners, and the tail gunner was getting most of the boys 'cause they could see the strafing from the planes diving in, but I doubt if most of the fellows realized those tail gunners were the ones that were really getting the guys.

BF: As the plane was pulling out . . .

FC: Mm hm.

BF: . . . you saw quite a few people hit?

FC: Oh yes.

BF: So where were you protecting yourself, by getting behind?

FC: Well I was behind a Hawser, there in the air castle, and I was with a fellow by the name of George Krauss, and there was a Lieutenant Commander there with us and I had no life jacket, neither did George Krauss, but the Lieutenant Commander wanted a life jacket and I think George Krauss threw him one.

BF: What happened to you next?

FC: Well, I was trying to go off the side and I told George to synchronize getting off that ship. I said, "You wait 'til after they make their run and watch that tail gunner. And don't come too soon."

Well, when I hit the side of the ship, I was walking down. Of course, it was pretty slick, I guess with a lot of barnacles.

BF: Now, the ship is already capsized and you're walking along the hull.

FC: Right. And George come up and hit me and straddled me all the way down. And he rode me all the way down the side of that ship.

BF: And you hit the water?

FC: Oh, we both hit the water, but he was riding me all the way down.

BF: Did you both come out, were you hurt when you . . .

FC: Well, I believe the barnacles ripped my shirt and trousers, dungarees pretty badly. I didn't see George until months later.

BF: Did you have any problems with the timbers that were used on the ship?

FC: The timbers were going to port and I was going off the starboard side.

BF: And there was no fire in the water or anything like that?

FC: No, no. I didn't see any fire there, but I could see smoke billowing from, I guess it was the ARIZONA, which was up on the other side of the island.

BF: You really couldn't see the battleships on the other side of the island?

FC: Just the smoke.

BF: That's all?

FC: The smoke, yes.

BF: You're in the water, what happens next?

FC: Well, I started to go to one of the ships, and I didn't know whether to change over to the CURTIS, and there was another fellow with me -- I think his last name was Wesley, or Wellesley -- and they wouldn't let us board ship. They said they were going to shoot us. (Chuckles)

BF: Why?

FC: Well, they didn't know who we were. So I went back and to the beach, and that's when the second wave hit.

BF: Tell us about that.

FC: Well, that's kind of bloody. I was --- it was --- they were digging up either a water line or something, and they're coming in and some guy recognized me and told me I better duck because they're going to get me, and I ducked into this slip trench, what it looked like. And from there, I went to a metal building and then over there, they -- it was kind of rough. I got to the metal building and there's a huge desk and there was two other guys and I don't know who they were. I said, "We'd better get this desk over because if they strafe, they're going to come through the roof."

And about that time, they started strafing and that desk just flew over me. (Chuckles) I don't know where they got the strength. But then they said that the Japanese were landing at Barbers Point. And a guy handed me a steel helmet, the old bellboy type, gave me a rifle, I think with five rounds of ammunition, and put me on a boat, I think it was a whaleboat, and said, "Get out there, defend Barbers Point."

BF: Let's go back to the beginning of the second wave attack. You said it was pretty bloody. What did you mean by that?

FC: Well, I was with two fellows and I don't know, there was a hole about the size of this room and I couldn't feel anything, but when the smoke cleared up, they were gone.

BF: I don't understand. What do you mean they were gone?

FC: Well, I guess they evidently got hit.

BF: A bomb went off near this hole you were in?

FC: No, they were running for the building, a bomb went off.

BF: What impact did it, effect did it have on you? Did it knock you off your feet?

FC: Yes it did. And subsequently, they found that -- I didn't even know -- I was pretty young. They found that I had some shrapnel.

BF: How much?

FC: Oh, I don't know. Still in my head, little piece, that's what they told me at the VA hospital.

BF: Were you aware at the time that you had been wounded?

FC: No.

BF: It just knocked you off your feet, this bomb that went off?

FC: Mm hm.

BF: And you looked around and these two men that were running with you?

FC: They disappeared.

BF: No sign of them.

FC: No sign. And then I made it to this building by myself and I found the other fellows in the building when I got there. It was a metal building.

BF: Anything else happen along those same lines?

FC: Well, inside the building, I couldn't see anything going on, other than that second wave. Everyone was doing a lot of strafing, dropping bombs.

BF: Did you see the effects of this strafing, dropping bombs?

FC: Oh yes.

BF: Tell us about that.

FC: Well, evidently, they were fighter bomber planes -- and if I'd had the time to unlatch that machine gun, I'd a been hero today. If I had a potato, I would have been a hero.

BF: The planes were that low?

FC: Yes.

BF: Could you see the pilot?

FC: I could see the -- I didn't see the pilot, I saw the tail gunners.

BF: Real close?

FC: Oh yes.

BF: What kind of destruction were they causing?

FC: Well . . .

BF: That you could see.

FC: Well, on Ford Island, I really didn't see much, other than the one area that you could see the smoke from, I think, the *ARIZONA*. A lot of smoke was coming from.

BF: When did you first have an opportunity to actually see, get a good look at Battleship Row, on the east side of Ford?

FC: I was sent to the *USS ARGONNE*, most of the crew from the *UTAH*, and while we're there, we could see the devastating effect of what they had done to Battleship Row.

BF: Is this still on the same day, on the seventh?

FC: Yes sir.

BF: The morning or afternoon?

FC: The evening. And that night, evidently some of our planes were coming in and one of the -- I thought it was the *USS CALIFORNIA* -- the guy that was on the *CALIFORNIA*, I met at Salt Lake City last June, swears up and down it wasn't. But someone opened up with some twin fifties at those airplanes coming in, and some of us were frozen on her as they splattered the side of that *ARGONNE*. 'Cause I know, 'cause I saw a guy get hit.

BF: This is in the evening when American planes were returning, flying over. And now, I'm a little confused, who hit who now?

FC: Well, I don't know who did the shooting, but either off the shore batteries, or off the *CALIFORNIA*, which was up on the other side of ten-ten dock. I think that's what they called it, ten-ten dock in those days. I don't know what they call it now.

BF: And you're saying that shells of some kind were hitting the *ARGONNE*?

FC: Those were machine gun came right through the side of that whole ship.

BF: That you were on?

FC: Yep. In the evening. And I just tonight verified with another guy, 'cause I was told I was nuts. But I know I had blood splattered on me and that, I've had nightmares about that and no one believes that guy got hit. But I met a guy tonight who was the last guy off the *UTAH*, and they had to cut him out from the *RALEIGH*. Jack Basil, I think his name is.

BF: Who got the hit on the *ARGONNE*? I'm a little confused here. Did someone get hit by this friendly, so-called friendly fire?

FC: Yes, guy sitting down there just toppled over.

BF: So he was killed that night . . .

FC: Yes.

BF: . . . by U.S. fire?

FC: As far as I'm concerned, he was killed.

BF: What were the next few days like? What did you do?

FC: See, I don't know. They sent us to a barracks. There were barracks there some-- I don't really recall. We spent a couple of nights there at the barracks, no clothes. Just what we had on. Then they sent me to the *DETROIT*, USS *DETROIT*.

BF: And is that a heavy cruiser?

FC: No, light cruiser.

BF: Light cruiser.

FC: Four piper, Omaha class. It was in the line there, just before the *RALEIGH*.

BF: And when did you leave Hawaii?

FC: Very shortly. Well, the *DETROIT* had gone out with a Captain Wilkes, one of the ships that did go out, I understood that before I got on there. And subsequently when they took the goals off of Corregidor, we transferred to go from one of the submarines to the *DETROIT* and take it out to San Francisco.

(Taping stops, then restarts)

FC: . . . no, but he's here in the hotel.

BF: Maybe we can talk to him.

FC: And tomorrow, we're going to meet in the hotel, and I went nuts.

BF: Let me get your, to put your hands on -- there you go. (FC coughs) Sitting the way you were sitting before. That's fine.

About your wounds, when were they tended to?

FC: I didn't even know I had it until I went to the VA hospital did I know that -- after the war, that even had anything.

BF: You took shrapnel in your head, there was no blood?

FC: I had a scratch, I scratched it. I didn't know. It's still there.

BF: They never took it out.

FC: No. No, there's a little scar there, they tell me.

BF: What's the most vivid memory you have of that day? The thing that sticks out in your mind most.

FC: Rear gunners and those planes coming down so low. The devastating effect they had on these kids that didn't realize, coming out of the hatches, what was happening.

BF: Have you dreamt much about that day?

FC: Well, my wife said when I first got out of the Navy, I, one time, went back on leave, and she said I was kinda nuts. (Chuckles)

BF: Why did she say that?

FC: Oh, evidently in the middle of the night, there was a fire engine or something, I thought I was going to general quarters. I was deep asleep then. She said I looked like a cat with distemper.

BF: It hasn't disturbed you though, I mean.

FC: No. No. This disturbs me because I never talked about this to anyone, but two other people. Fellow by the name of Robert Widmark, who was on the *ARGONNE*, and this other fellow tonight. The only time I ever talked about it.

BF: Why?

FC: Well, I was led to believe I was nuts, 'cause nothing, something never happened that did. I thought it was just a bad dream.

BF: Then why are you talking about it now?

FC: Why, I don't know, because of Jack being able to verify, hopefully, something that I know I had witnessed.

BF: This man on the *ARGONNE* being hit.

FC: Well, he wasn't on the *ARGONNE*, but he knew two men that were, off the UTAH who witnessed the same thing I witnessed.

BF: How much, how long after the attack did you leave Hawaii?

FC: We took a convoy of -- well, the, I understood that there was the families of military people, we took 'em back to San Francisco.

BF: How long after the attack was, did that happen?

FC: Oh, I'd say, a couple of weeks.

BF: During that couple of weeks you were here, did you have occasion to go ashore at all, or were you just more or less on Pearl Harbor base the whole time?

FC: We weren't allowed off.

BF: So martial law didn't affect you in any way?

FC: No.

BF: Have you ever had the opportunity to talk with any Japanese who participated, either on the attack on Pearl Harbor or in World War II, ever?

FC: No. No. I had a Japanese secretary that lives here in Pearl City, lovely lady, who was born on the Island of Hawaii. Her daddy was a macadamia nut farmer.

BF: But you haven't had a chance to talk to any war veterans from Japan?

FC: No. No.

BF: How do you think you might react if you had the opportunity to talk to someone?

FC: Well, they were doing their job. You know, I don't know. I don't hold any animosity towards anybody.

BF: That's an interesting point you raised because, as you know, some people who went through the attack at Pearl Harbor still, to this day, hold some bad feelings towards Japan, towards the Japanese. You apparently don't.

FC: No. Why not hold it against the Italians, the Germans? No, I don't think it's right to hold a grudge.

BF: You played a part in a -- as you know -- a very important event in history. Has that fact had any effect on your life?

FC: Yes, I think it helped make me a better American. I feel when -- of course, I don't want to get into politics, but my children call me a reactionary because I feel that we're a different breed of cats. And we, I think, most of us, I don't know -- I can't speak for other people, but -- are sort of more of a patriotic bunch.

BF: The fact that you were here that day, what did you learn about yourself, if anything?

FC: I learned that I was a human being, that I was well trained. I wasn't scared one bit, until it was all over, and then I was scared as hell. Didn't have time to get scared.

BF: If you could change history and change it so that you were not there on the UTAH that day, would you change history?

FC: I once had a college professor that told me the past, the future are all part of the evolving present. And right today, I don't know that I could think of what I would have done last year, or what I would do next year. No, who knows? I think the Italians have a saying, "Que sera, sera," you know. Doris Day?

BF: Okay. That it? Okay, thank you very much.

FC: I wish I hadn't done this now . . .

END OF INTERVIEW