

#190 GEORGE PIERSON: ENSIGN WITH THE VP-14 PATROL SQUADRON

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller, and we're at the Sheraton Waikiki, in Honolulu. It's December 3, 1991 at 1:25 PM and I'm speaking with Mr. George M. Pierson. Mr. Pierson was an Ensign on December 7, 1941, serving with the VP-14, a patrol squadron out of Kaneohe Naval Air Station. At the time he was twenty-nine years of age, and at the date of this interview, Mr. Pierson is seventy-nine. We're very glad you came by.

George Pierson (GP): And I'm still around.

SH: We're glad you're still around, and we're glad you're taking the time to talk with us today. You have some very interesting stories that we're discussing and I'd like to try to cover all those bases as we get going in this interview. But just to start, why don't you briefly talk about how you joined the Navy and how you ended up in patrol planes.

GP: I got out of GREAT university in Des Moines in 1936 and worked as -- a couple of civilian jobs there and one of my buddies, I ran across him, he was going to join the Army Air Corps, and he had told me about it, and I tried the air corps and they turned me down. So I tried the Navy, and they accepted me. This was on . . .

SH: Why did they turn you down?

GP: Said I had a deviated septum, which I still haven't found I've got one. But nevertheless, they had a surplus of cadet applications, and I guess they just, just didn't want any more for that time. You see, this was in '39. There was no build up. There was restrictions on how many cadets they could go through. But I passed the Navy entrance exam and started elimination base in Kansas City, Kansas from September of '39, which was a one month duration. And they give you ten hours of flying, and if you solo, then they send you on to Pensacola, for the regular Navy cadet training, and that lasted me from November of '39 until July of '40. And at that time, I was commissioned an Ensign and sent to Patrol Squadron 14 [VP-14], in, in San Diego, North Island in San Diego.

SH: During the training period, did you fly a variety of planes, or did you very soon begin to specialize in the patrol planes?

GP: Well, you start out, of course, in the old Steerman trainer, and then you go onto some old surplus carrier, old carrier types, bi-wing planes, really. And at that time, they give you an election of what you would prefer to have. Some of them got what they wanted and some of them didn't. You could either join, go with the Marines. You could go to fighters, you could go torpedoes or dive bombers, or what they called big boats-- big boats being PBYS in that case. And I elected big boats, and that's how I happened to get in PBYS. And that eliminated me from fighter training or any of the carrier stuff at that time. We separated from the Marines and everybody else. And when we graduated, we went to a patrol squad, which happened to be the VP-14.

SH: And that was formed in San Diego . . .

GP: It was joined . . .

SH: . . . you joined it in San Diego?

GP: I joined it along with Tanner and a couple other guys about that time. That squadron had been deployed to Sitka, Alaska and they just returned from Sitka down to San Diego and were forming and getting new PBY-5's out of San Diego, where they were made there, and consolidated across the bay in North Island.

SH: What were the good features of the PBY-5's, as opposed to the older . . .

GP: Well, the PBY-5 had blisters on the side of the airplane, the back section, where the other ones had a sliding hatch. They both had fifty caliber's, but the new ones had blisters out of the side and I guess the engines were a little bit better and they had some improvements, of course. At that time, we had a regular gas tank. See, they hadn't put on bulletproof gas tanks in 'em and we had arranged for two or three thousand miles of gas in there. Like I said, it took us twenty hours to get from North Island to Kaneohe on April 15 of '40 when we made that transition from San Diego to North, or to Kaneohe as our base.

SH: You said that the flight from . . .

GP: North Island.

SH: . . . from North Island to . . .

GP: Kaneohe.

SH: . . . to Kaneohe was the longest plane flight in your naval career.

GP: And we had, incidentally, we had twelve PBYS in a loose formation, making that flight. So it was a quite a thing at that time.

SH: Were there any special preparations for a flight of that length?

GP: Oh yes.

SH: Obviously you took a lot of gas aboard.

GP: We, we had to, we have to . . . the biggest problem was navigation and weather, of course. As you know, twenty hours across the Pacific can give you a lot of weather. But for weeks we studied celestial navigation and the way they navigated, each -- they had three, or four, three plane sections. And each of the three airplanes, or the four sections would shoot on one star and then they'd coordinate it with the captain's airplane. And he would be the lead navigator and he'd cross all the star sights, and that's how we'd have 'em.

SH: He crossed . . .

GP: No radio, engines were off. And they also had, in the middle of the ocean, they had two, I guess they were kind of target ships -- I wouldn't call them target -- they were sentry ships, in case somebody went down, they would pick you up.

SH: But you said in passing, let me clarify, you did not range on radio stations in Hawaii.

GP: No, no radio stations at all.

SH: Okay. That's interesting. When you arrived in Hawaii, what were the usual duties that you assumed? What was the sort of routine?

GP: Well, of course, we landed in Kaneohe with twelve airplanes. We pulled up on the ramp and got our Hawaii lei, which was quite a feature for us. And then we started operating in the same manner as we did in San Diego. We'd ride around as fourth pilots, you might say, and then we progressed to the navigator and then we got into the right seat as co-pilot, and we were riding co-pilot and practically all the ensigns that I went to squad, to squadron with were riding co-pilot in the right seat before the war. And the minute the war started, we were all designated patrol plane commanders, so we got in the left seat and had our own airplanes.

SH: But once you'd fully trained for the duties as a pilot, you stayed as pilot? You didn't rotate through . . .

GP: No. They called it PPC, which stands for patrol plane commander. In other words, you could take one all by yourself on a regular raise, a nine hundred mile patrol, with your crew. And you're on your own, just like a captain of the ship. You had your own command.

SH: Tell us about the regular 800 and 900 mile patrols.

GP: Well, the patrols, they didn't start those -- I can't recall exactly without looking at a log book, but probably sometime in November, early part of November, we were directed to send three planes out haphazardly. Not haphazardly but on various sectors around the island. One time they'd go to the northern sector and the east through the west, and depending on what the command Pearl Harbor wanted us to go. And the particular one we had on December 7 was three planes from Kaneohe going south out of the Pearl Harbor channel.

SH: Okay, before you get to December 7, let me ask you, was there any kind of difference, any sort of heightened state of alert or different kind of routine that you were asked to assume, prior to the attack? Or was it just business as usual up to the date of December 7?

GP: Well, any flight we had was strictly a training flight. One time you had to go out and you'd get to ten thousand feet and drop bombs. Now, for example, one time we dropped five hundred pound water-filled bombs on the *UTAH* as a target ship, 'cause we had an ordinary bomb sight on each airplane. You know, just like the B-17s. And then we would have anti-submarine patrols, where you'd get down towards around the water and they'd have smoke lights, and you'd circle around and drop some depth charges on where the smoke light had indicated, just like it happened on December 7, before the attack.

But basically, it was navigation training and gunnery training, and bombing training. Now, the gunnery training for the crew members in the blister would amount to them shooting sleeves drawn by other airplanes flying alongside and they would sight on the sleeve after the tool plane. And that's where they got their gunneries from.

But other than that, it was strictly training on a course, as the time approached for the attack -- we didn't, obviously didn't know there was going to be an attack, but we had been told to be (mumbles) and we were really armed with depth charges, and then we were told to look out for submarines out of what they call a submarine sanctuary, which was nothing more than a spot on the map where if one of our submarines was sighted, that wasn't, we weren't supposed to attack

it. But any submarine any place else was fair game. We could drop 'em. This was before, a month before the war started.

So we were armed for anti-submarine patrol and we had orders to drop on submarines which were not in a designated area.

SH: Elaborate on that a little bit. You said that, essentially, you felt your instructions were pretty clear, that basically what you were doing was anti-submarine patrol, rather than specifically . . .

GP: That's right.

SH: . . . scouting for, you know, approaching enemies.

GP: Well, of course, when the patrol was only got --- after we started these sector patrols, which went out for 800 miles in a pie-shaped area and then 400 across, and 800 back, we'd get down, usually fly around a thousand feet. That was the optimum range that you could see a submarine periscope or something, unless you're way up high. But we were normally flying at that level altitude, all that whole time, specifically looking for submarines. And of course, you could surface ships, if there were any, on the horizon as they popped over the horizon.

SH: Sure. Well, let's close in a little bit on the December seventh. Do you recall what you were doing, let's say, the day or the night before the attack? Was that business as usual for you?

GP: Well, we flew every third day and it happened to be my turn to fly that morning. And I was flying with another ensign by the name of Tom Hillis. And Tom Hillis ultimately made captain in the Navy, and he was the commanding officer of the Malta in the Mediterranean. And he was on a flight to Naples in the R4D-8, which is converted Douglas DC-[3]. And they lost an engine out of, coming back to Malta from Naples, and crashed into a line of steel telephone poles, and he was the only one that was killed in a total number of about ten people on board that airplane. So he was killed in 1959 and he was a captain in the Navy.

SH: He was your co-pilot?

GP: No, he was the pilot on my airplane. I was the co-pilot.

SH: You were the co-pilot, I see. Okay. Glad we clarified that.

GP: Yeah, he was. And he and I flew together a couple of more times. We went to the South Pacific to New Caledonia and flew around the Coral Sea. And after that, about three months later, I had my own plane and went to the Coral Sea battle. We were in the Coral Sea battle at the time the *LEXINGTON* was sunk. We didn't do anything but scout the Coral Sea. We didn't see anything, but we were there.

SH: So on the morning of December 7, when did you get up? Was it dark?

GP: It seemed it was dark. They got us out of bed about five o'clock. We went down to the flight line about 5:30, checked out the airplane, you made sure the crew was there and food. We had food for as much as twelve hours.

SH: Tell us how you put those planes in the water. That was interesting.

GP: Well, in the old days, they didn't have the 5 -- to distinguish between the PBY-5, which is a true sea plane, where you put beaching gear on it, in the water, and pulled it out of the water, and you put, took the beaching gear off when you launched into the water off of ramps. They backed it up off out of the water with tractors pulling from the tail.

SH: And that's the kind of plane you had that day.

GP: That's the kind, yeah. That's all they had, at that time, when the war started. They didn't have any [PBY-]5A's. 5-A's came out over six months or a year later. But without that landing gear as an integral part of the airplane, they were much lighter and we could fly them farther, of course. But they launch you into the water and they test the landing gear, the beaching gear, they called it. And you were on your own when you taxied out to the taxi strip, which in Kaneohe Bay was out by -- I don't know what they call it now. It used to be called Chris Holmes' Island. He had a big mast out there and a schooner, and he was a -- had that private island. And we'd taxi out to Chris Holmes' Island, and the take off was usually to the south or southwest of out of Kailua and Kailua Bay and there, in the town of Kailua. And then we'd take off to whichever section we happened to be flying.

SH: Was it light by then?

GP: It was just getting light. It was six o'clock in the morning, yeah.

SH: Okay.

GP: And that particular morning . . .

SH: The flight path . . .

GP: . . . Hillis and I took off and we, our patrol was out of the break water, Pearl Harbor. We . . .

SH: You said that you were one of three planes then.

GP: Yeah, one of three.

SH: Okay.

GP: The other three planes were piloted by Ensign Bill Tanner, who is alive today and survived the crash landing being shot down by JU-88s in the Bay of Biscay. And retired as a Navy Captain. And the other one is Ensign Freddie, Frederick Otto Meyer, who is retired as a captain and has since been deceased. And I can't remember all the crew members, but I'd have to look it up in a book. But we all three survived the war.

SH: Then you all headed in the southern direction then.

GP: Yeah, we were all in the three pie shape sectors out of Pearl Harbor channel. Eight hundred miles out, 800, or 400 across and 800 back. So that's where we left and we came over the island and as I told you earlier, we came over the hotels a little bit too low maybe and woke a few people up. But we got over Pearl Harbor about quarter of seven and started the patrol about quarter of seven.

SH: Didn't you say that your pilot purposely . . .

GP: Yeah, he changed the propellers for a little adjustment to make a, wake a few people up. And the comedy of it was, or the tragedy would have been, if there hadn't been a war, we would have probably got put on what they call a report, which would mean we'd have to see the admiral under what we were doing over there.

SH: Okay.

GP: And we'd probably been grounded for a while, but that was ignored and we went to the patrol and started out that morning.

SH: So when did you first notice something unusual was going on?

GP: Well, we intercepted the message that Bill Tanner sent when he dropped his depth charges on that midget submarine. And we was all in code and our radio man passed it up and we immediately thrown it around and make it three-sixty just to see if we could be of any assistance.

SH: It was in code. You received a coded message?

GP: Well, everything was in code. Everything they had was in code.

SH: So you actually had to decode . . .

GP: Yeah, we had to decode . . .

SH: . . . decode the messages.

GP: That's the way all messages were. You never had any plain language or anything. Otherwise, it was radio sounds for the whole day, if you didn't send any. And when we found out that we couldn't do anything, we kept on our original assignment.

SH: And so you circled back. You found out you couldn't do anything.

GP: Yeah, well, we just started back where we were supposed to be.

SH: So you never searched this side.

GP: This took us only about three or four minutes to make this circle and go back. And we kept on going and we went south to, about, let's see -- really, I can't tell. We were down at least 'til after nine o'clock and then they had a message from Pearl Harbor says, "Return to Pearl Harbor."

And we questioned that. Why are we doing all the turn, return to Pearl Harbor when we wasn't under attack? But nevertheless, we started back and . . .

SH: Excuse me, I just --- when did you realize that Pearl Harbor was under attack?

GP: At eight o'clock, when the message came from Pearl Harbor itself, "Pearl Harbor is under attack. This is no drill. This is the real, "--

SH: Okay, you got that message.

GP: Well, we got that and of course, then they said, "Continue on your present patrol." And then shortly after that, they said, "Return to Pearl Harbor."

By that time, we were far enough south of the island that we couldn't see it, by looking back when we turned around. We could see the black smoke billowing up on the horizon and as we closed in, you could see more of the damage and then we skirted around this side of the island, not getting close because we could still see airplanes driving, diving and flying around in there.

SH: Were you approached by any Japanese planes?

GP: No, I wasn't and Tanner wasn't but Ensign Meyer was. He was approached by one Zero as he went north past Kaneohe Bay. Our patrol was supposed to send us north, searching the northern sectors of the island, north of the island. And to get around the island --- and one of them made a pass at him, and I think they took half a dozen hits, but didn't do any damage and he kept on his patrol. And he was the only of the three that was attacked by a Jap airplane.

And from there on we all went in various directions, because we got a message from the command at Pearl Harbor to take certain sectors, and they changed it two or three times. And one time, they'd tell you to go three-fifty, the next day they would change it three-twenty. And by that time, you were going zigging back and forth all over the north Pacific. And incidentally, the weather was horrible. There were high white caps and scud, and low clouds and high wind. And the Japanese even admitted that they had a hard time bringing back their planes on their carrier because of the bad weather.

And we could have been within twenty or thirty miles of the Jap task force and not seen them, because we were down low on the water, and your line of sight is not more than twenty miles when you're that low. Anyway, if we'd have been up higher, we'd have been in the scud and clouds and we couldn't have seen anything anyway. But we were, I would assume, we were that close but we never did see 'em.

SH: So you feel from hindsight knowledge of what you know about the route of the fleet and where you were, you feel that you really got fairly, you were in the general direction and got real close.

GP: We were in the general direction. I don't see --- of course, they had thirty something ships on the route of the task force, including seven carriers, a couple of battleships and all the tankers and the oilers that were along with 'em. And of course, they turned tail the minute --- they're sitting there, their airplanes are launched so in two hours, they could have gone another -- well, at flank speed, twenty-five or thirty knots, they could have got fifty, sixty miles further than where they were when they started the launch attack. So we could zigzag over the whole north Pacific there and never saw 'em. None of us really saw any planes or saw any ships.

SH: How late did you stay up that day?

GP: It was over ten hours. Between the three of us, we got a total of thirty hours searching for the Jap fleet.

SH: It was good you got back then and it was, it would have still been light, or was it darkening?

GP: It was getting dark and of course, as I mentioned to you later, or earlier rather, they had shut down all of the tele-- or the radio stations, so you couldn't take a bearing on the broadcasting. And they had a --- the island was completely blacked out. And there was no lights going any place. Normally, you could spot a light on an island, and you knew it was an island, but when it's black at night, it looks just like the sea. As a matter of fact, we had one man who leaped in a VP-40, VP-11, I think, it was from Kaneohe, flew into the mountain over by Diamond Head, on a blacked out night about, oh, three or four weeks after the war started. He was coming in on a blacked out island with no radio range or anything. He flew right into the top of the mountain, killed 'em all there. I forgot the guy's name. It was Willie Howe, as I remember, in a VP-11.

SH: When you landed, what did you see and what did you feel like?

GP: Well, when we came in of course, there was still smoke coming from the hangars around Kaneohe. They had knocked one of 'em out. And the airplanes, as I mentioned to you earlier, were lined up to go into the water. The ones that weren't lying that morning were ready to be launched. And in between the attack, the first wave and the second wave, the skipper radioed or called into the commander, Captain Randall Bellinger's headquarters, that he want to get the rest of his airplanes in the air. And he got a delay, said, "Wait for further orders," and while he was waiting for further orders, this second wave came in and got the all the rest of the airplanes that were sitting there with their engines turned up and the crew in the airplanes and everything.

And they got 'em all and they all caught afire, and the guys jumped out of course. And a couple of them still stayed in the blisters and used their fifty-calibers until it got too hot for 'em. And the ones that were anchored out on the bay, they had, oh, maybe four of 'em hanging on buoys out there, just like a boat. And they strafed those and got those in the water. So they, effectively, got thirty something airplanes out of thirty-six. Disabled one and they put a couple of 'em back in order for the next three or four days, but basically the three that we had flying were the only ones that were flyable the next day. And we got all kinds of crews so a new crew took over the minute they gassed it up and went out again. So that was

And at Ford Island, as I recall, they didn't have any launchable airplanes after that attack, so they went to, they would do anything with us, with the PBY's they had at Ford Island.

SH: It must have been quite a sight when you got back. Do you remember reactions or any feelings when you saw the destruction on the base?

GP: I can't put my words on tape. I would hate to say what I said. But anyway, it was quite disastrous to see all that stuff. And of course, we didn't know who had been killed or anything else. What we saw was the damage that had been done. And of course, normally we would have the next day off and we would be required to fly the second day with a full commit. The guys that was --- they had so many crews that we didn't fly for another couple of days or three days, I forget, not looking at my log when I flew the next. But the next time we went out, Admiral Bellinger wanted our flyable PBY's to come over to Pearl and operate out of Pearl Harbor. In other words, just like we would be at Ford Island if were Ford Island PBY's, which was quite ridiculous because the harbor was covered with black oil. And we had taken off one morning, and I think it was -- seventh -- it must have been the ninth or the tenth.

We went out on another patrol and when we came in, they ordered us to land at Pearl Harbor. So we landed at Pearl Harbor and hit the water. It was a night landing and it was blacked out, and they told us we couldn't use our landing lights. But we black-- we did anyway. We disregarded because we couldn't see even where the channel was. And we hit the water, and it was covered with oil and the windshield on the airplane was just plastered with black oil and you couldn't even see out of the windshield. You had to stand up out of the hatch to see where you're going. And we ended up in Pearl City channel with the Marines in the cane breaks shooting at us with thirty caliber rifles.

SH: It did present some . . .

GP: Yeah.

SH: I was wondering about that. But nothing like that at Kaneohe . . .

GP: No, nothing at Kaneohe. And another thing, after they, after we tied up the plane in Pearl City channel, they put us in motor whale boats and brought us back to Ford Island, and we stood up in the boat to tell the Marines not to shoot at us, and yet again, they were shooting at these motor whale boats, helping taking these crews back to Ford Island. And they put us up on cots in these wrecked hangars to sleep. That's where we stayed. And two days later, they sent us back to Kaneohe.

SH: What is your most vivid memory of that time? Anything really stay with you?

GP: Well, I was shocked, certainly shocked when I saw Kaneohe, but after we landed at Pearl Harbor in the dark and the next morning, when I woke up and saw these ships and everything, it was just unbelievable. I couldn't imagine anything like that.

SH: What were your feelings about the Japanese at the time?

GP: Well, that they were out to kill us and we were out to kill them. Find them and kill them, that was our job.

SH: Fifty years have gone by since then. What do you feel about the Japanese and the war and the time that's gone past since today?

GP: Oh, what's this two fingers? That's the time remaining?

SH: That the time we have . . .

GP: Two more minutes to go?

SH: Yeah, you're doing fine.

GP: Well, anyway . . .

SH: You're just doing fine.

GP: I left Hawaii in 1943, and I came back in '63, and then back here, I went back, this is the second time I've been back. And all I can say it's over crowded, over-built and too congested. And it all happened for no reason at all. If they're in here now, they could have walked in peaceably and done the same thing without fouling up the harbor and killing everybody. They

miscalculated our ability to strike back, I believe. I don't have anything against them personally. No. They were out to kill us, we were out to kill them. Just like prizefighters shake hands after the fight, I guess. But it wasn't quite that bad.

So I stayed in the Navy for twenty-three more years.

SH: Could you just sum up briefly that . . .

GP: I went from PBY's to what they call PV-1s, which is the first Navy land-based bomber. Coincidentally, before I left, VP-14, we got B-24s to replace our PBY's. And I stayed with 'em a couple of, three or four months in B-24s. And then I went to the States in the PVB-1s for another thirty-six months and also with the Marines in B-25's for a while. And then I volunteered for carrier duty and got aboard a carrier in Corsairs. And . . .

SH: So you ended up in fighter planes after all?

GP: I ended up in fighter planes and I was on the USS *TARAWA* for a year, and then I ended up, from the *TARAWA*, I went to VR8, which is a transport squadron out of Barbers Point flying four-engine Douglas. And I stayed with them about two months and got separated, temporarily separated. And that particular squadron, one month later, was assigned to the Berlin airlift. And I was out of the Navy for about a year, and then I got back in the reserve program, and I stayed in that 'til '63.

SH: Okay.

GP: And then I got out.

SH: Well, you've certainly had an interest . . .

GP: And then I've been with Equitable Life Insurance Society of New York ever since.

SH: Well you've certainly had not only an interesting career, but a very interesting story to tell. And Mr. Pierson, I want to thank you for your time.

GP: You really touched on a lot of things, but this is kind of an extemporaneous thing.

SH: Well, perhaps some other time.

GP: Yeah.

SH: Thank you sir.

GP: Thank you.

SH: Thank you very much.

GP: Don't forget to get my buddies Tanner and John Finn in here, from VP-14.

SH: We sure will. We'll make every effort to. Thanks again. This is a real pleasure.

GP: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW