

GERY H. PORTER
USS *WEST VIRGINIA*, SURVIVOR

#259

INTERVIEWED ON
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BY JEFF PAPPAS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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(Conversation off-mike)

Jeff Pappas (JP): Just for the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date?

Gery Hudson Porter (GHP): Gery Hudson Porter and I was born in Cisco, Texas, February 14, (pauses and chuckles) February 14, 1922.

JP: Okay, thank you.

(Conversation off-mike)

JP: The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 6, 1998 at eleven A.M. The person being interviewed is Gery H. Porter, who was on, rather aboard the USS *West Virginia* on December 7, 1941.

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

GHP: Gery Hudson Porter and I was born in Cisco, Texas, February 14, 1922.

JP: Tell me a little about Cisco, Texas growing up as a kid and going through high school.

GHP: It was a great place. Small town, it had about 6,000 population. We had a lot of woods and lot of hills to climb and wander through. And had some pretty good schools and I had a great childhood.

JP: Excellent. Tell me a little about the geography of Cisco. Where is it located in the state of Texas?

GHP: Oh, it's about 110 miles west of Fort Worth, on the old U.S. 80, now the I-10 and east of Abilene, about fifty miles.

JP: So you attended high school in Cisco?

GHP: Part of my high school there.

JP: Tell me about—did you finish at Cisco?

GHP: No, I finished up in [*the*] Panhandle, in a little [*town*] called Floydada. I [*went*] there [*to live with an aunt*] after my father passed away [*in 1936*].

JP: What year was that, when did you finish high school?

GHP: That would be '39.

JP: Nineteen thirty-nine. So 1939, are you thinking about joining the service or was that something...

GHP: I didn't know what I wanted to do in 1939. And as a matter of fact, I went back to my hometown and worked for about a year as a bellhop in a hotel. And as I've often said, I looked around one day and I said, "There has to be a better place."

So I headed for California.

JP: Had you always been restless?

GHP: No. No, just, I guess, my teen years, I began to develop that restlessness like they all do.

JP: So you left Texas for California. You hadn't yet enlisted into the service?

GHP: No, that was in 1940 I had a good friend in San Diego whose family was gracious enough to invite me to come out and visit with them, which I did. And I loved it out here, the West Coast, and I got to looking around and seeing the navy and what the navy did. And it spiked my interest and I ended up going into the navy then in November of 1940.

JP: Well, tell me a little bit about San Diego in the late 1939, 1940, your impressions of the city, as compared to your childhood in Cisco.

GHP: Oh, it was an all new experience. It was entirely different type of atmosphere. One of the things I was impressed with in San Diego was the cleanliness and brightness of the city. And, believe it or not, the friendliness, although people claim that Californians weren't friendly, I found them to be very friendly. And I just fell in love with the place.

JP: So it was a year of leeway time between you going to San Diego and joining the service. What did you do as a vocation in San Diego?

GHP: No, as a matter of fact, it was only a short time. I decided fairly quickly that's what I was going to do because I didn't have anything to lean on really, to go back on. Well, the navy would be a good place to get a start, so I started to sign up. I had a little delay of getting my papers in order because of the birth certificate and the fact that I was a minor and had no legal guardian. So I went through Juvenile Court adoption procedure and got that squared away.

JP: So you joined the service. Were you thinking of the navy as a training ground for a potential vocation?

GHP: At that point in time, mostly that and just something to get me going. And the security looked good to me also.

JP: So you enlisted for a four-year period?

GHP: No, six-year at that time.

JP: Six years.

GHP: They didn't have any four-year enlistment's at that point.

JP: Where did you train, basic training?

GHP: San Diego.

JP: Okay, in San Diego. Were you aboard ship then?

GHP: No, I went from the naval training station [*in San Diego,*] to machinist school in Great Lakes, Illinois, [*at*] the naval station there for one month and then three months in a Ford plant in Dearborn, which was a new school the navy had just opened up. And following that, then I went back to the West Coast and eventually ended up going aboard ship, the *West Virginia*, in June of 1941, [*in Pearl Harbor*].

JP: So, coming back from Illinois, you were stationed in San Diego, had you heard any rumors or potential problems with Japan at that time?

GHP: [*No. I was in San Diego only temporarily 2 – 3 weeks, then on to Pearl Harbor. But as to rumors,*] yes, there were, as a matter of fact, there were even before I went in the navy. And I recall one incident where there was a Greek tramp steamer came into San Diego to take on fuel. It was loaded with scrap iron headed for Japan. And they refused to fuel the ship. And that spiked my interest. Of course, previous to that, in the summer of 1940, the European situation was already heated up. I thought it was only a matter of time that I'm going to be in the service one way or another and I [*didn't*] want to get recruited into the ground forces so that's another reason I opted for the navy.

JP: Tell me a little about this Greek ship that they had refused --- who had refused to refuel?

GHP: The federal government, the U.S. had put an embargo on fuel and a number of products, from the United States for Japan. And I guess the State Department put out the order not to fuel the ship.

JP: How'd you find out about that?

GHP: I saw it. It was docked at San Diego and it was on the news, in the papers.

JP: Do you remember the name of the ship, by any chance?

GHP: No, I don't. It was as I say a tramp steamer, it truly was. It was old in fact; their only way of having meat aboard was to carry livestock on deck.

JP: Now, this was in the summer of 1940?

GHP: It was in the fall.

JP: The fall of 1940.

GHP: Yes.

JP: So at this time, your suspicions had somewhat been raised as a result of some of the activity that was going on in San Diego.

GHP: Yeah, things begin to add up to trouble [*all over*] and I couldn't see how we could avoid it.

JP: So, by mid-summer 1941, you're aboard ship *West Virginia* at that time?

GHP: Yes, in June.

JP: And when did you first hear about your orders to Hawaii, going to Hawaii?

GHP: Well, when I first got out of the machinist school at Dearborn [*in May 1941*] we went back to Great Lakes, and while there, at that station, they assigned us to ships. They had a list of ships that wanted men and I happened to be fortunate enough to choose the one I wanted. And so then it was a matter of back across the country and then waiting in San Diego until they had transportation to send us to Pearl.

JP: Tell me about your choice, the *West Virginia*. (Telephone ringing in background.)

(Off-camera conversation)

JP: So, now it's—you had a choice. You choose between the *West Virginia* and another ship.

GHP: There were other battleships and repair ships, and probably all destroyers on the list. And of the group that I went to school with—it must have been about 100 or 120 of us, I guess, in that class, we were scattered out throughout the ships within the fleet.

JP: You were all trained as machinists.

GHP: Yes. We had been through the basic training, which enabled me to change my rating from seaman to fireman aboard ship, [*and have a fair idea of what I was getting into.*]

JP: Well, tell me about the attraction with the *West Virginia*. What prompted you that way?

GHP: Well, the size of it, for one thing, and what's aboard it and what [*it would be like*] going to sea on it, the stability of the ship and the enormity, size of the guns and everything about it impressed me. [*At the time it was our newest battleship even though it was nineteen years old.*]

JP: Seems to be that your interest in engineering had been peaked already...

GHP: Oh yes.

JP: ...by the ship itself. So, now you're aboard the *West Virginia*, and you're heading to Hawaii. Tell me about those first few months.

GHP: Well, it was in Hawaii when I went aboard.

JP: Okay, so *West Virginia* [*was at*] the dock in Hawaii when you got there. Tell me a little bit about your first experiences or your experiences on the *West Virginia* just before the attack itself. Anything strikes you or interests you particularly about those first weeks?

GHP: Well, about three weeks, I would say—there was talk aboard the ship and talk over the radio about the strained relationships between Japan and United States.

JP: This is popular radio?

GHP: Yes. And we were all talking about it and wondering what was going to be the outcome. And as I recall, about three weeks before Pearl Harbor, instead of going out for our normal one-week run at sea and two weeks in port—

we'd go out for training—we went out for about ten days or two weeks. And instead of going west and southerly direction, we went northerly and westerly, *and intensified our training.*]

JP: So this was different for you?

JGP: It was a different trip for us, a different training area and a different time and everything was off schedule a little bit. So we were all speculating something going on.

JP: So you're raising questions within the ranks...

GHP: Oh yeah. [*Not just me- everyone.*]

JP: ...at that time? What was your position then aboard ship?

GHP: Aboard ship. I had been assigned to the engine room when I first went aboard. But routine, of course, in the service was that you do your special detail, that is, as a compartment cleaner, mess cook, or whatever they happen to have for you in due course. And my time had come up. And I had been on mess detail for about two weeks, just prior to the start of the war. And that's what I was doing.

We fed family style on the *West Virginia*. That is we set up large tables and each mess cook had two tables for his particular section. We had four sections in each division. And we'd set up the tables, set all the plates and everything and bring food down from the galley. And after the meal was finished, cleaned up the mess and put the tables away and that sort of thing. At the time the attack started, I was in the process of starting to wash my dishes.

JP: And the *West Virginia* is docked at this particular...

GHP: Yes. We were tied up alongside the *Tennessee*.

JP: That's right. Tell me a little bit more about that morning, what you remember about it.

GHP: Well, there was nothing outstanding about it except that happened to be my liberty day that afternoon and I was looking forward to an early liberty. And...

JP: Did you make plans for your liberty day?

GHP: No special plans, just go over and see if I get in some trouble or [*stay*] out of trouble or something. But that was the plan of the day, after my breakfast meal. I don't think I had to set up for the noon meal because there were enough ashore that they cut it down to less than full mess.

JP: So you're working in the mess hall that morning?

GHP: Well, it was in our own [*living*] compartment. We set up our own compartments as mess areas in each living space. We had no bunks, by the way. The men who were rated second class or first class petty officers had cots. The rest of us slept in hammocks slung to the overhead. And so we had a clear deck and we'd set up the tables and after the meal, we'd break them down and put them back in the overhead and had a clear deck again.

JP: Tell me a bit more—7:55, the first basic shots are heard. Where were you at the time and what were your impressions?

GHP: I was washing dishes at the table. We had a pan and do the initial washing and after you get that done, you take them up to the scullery and they go through the sterilization process. But I heard probably the first bombs dropping over on the—I think it was Building Six on the island, on Ford Island. And passed it off as somebody's doing a little practice or a little drill or something, and we all did.

JP: It was the general impression on board.

GHP: Yes, yes. But we heard the first bombs drop. And it was a matter of maybe a minute or two, I suppose, at the outside, before our general alarm sounded. So I dropped everything and headed for my battle station. And the [*engineering personnel*] special detail—such as mess cooks and all—were assigned to the center motor room aboard ship, which was sort of a dead [*head position*]. We had nothing to do but just get there and stay out of the

way. And so I took off in that direction, aft. I think I got about as far as the compartment behind us—which was the A division—and the first torpedo hit. And I always felt like I did a Donald Duck—my feet going; I wasn't getting anywhere. Knocked me off my feet. I got up and started running again. I guess I got another twenty or thirty feet and the second one hit. And I believe I got down in my battle station and secured the hatch before we got the next hits. But they kept coming. And 'cause we didn't know exactly what was going [on] except that we did, but it's hard to convince yourself that it's really happening and that was my impression—that it is, but it can't be.

So we begin to list rather heavily. And as a matter of fact, I think the story is well-documented that had we not had a good first lieutenant aboard ship, who was the man in charge of damage control, and had he not taken the steps he had to counter flood in the double bottom, we would've capsized, same as the *Oklahoma*.

JP: Remember his name?

GHP: I do not. I'm sorry to say. But this is well documented and I've read the story. He's credited with it. And so I thought what we had done was probably list until we got over and hit the bottom and then leveled up. Truth of the matter was we were on the bottom, but we didn't capsize because of his action.

But we had lost all light and telephone communication and we had some battle lanterns—that's all the light we had. And somebody opened the hatch up above and told us to abandon ship. And I couldn't tell you at this point—I won't even try to guess how much time had passed because it was a lot of confusion. But it was during the first attack, so it could've been within twenty to thirty minutes, say, as a guess.

And so we did. We went up [*the ladder*] and the ship was flooding. We got up to third deck and the ship was already flooding on the third deck. And we got up on the quarterdeck [*by going up a ladder through a provisions hatch.*]

JP: Many of the hatches had been secured by this time, though.

GHP: Everyone closed the hatches behind them, yes. We went on up, got up on the quarter deck and I looked around and I saw what was happening and saw the *Arizona*, 'cause it had already blown. And I just was, you know, bewildered. You can't believe this is actually happening.

But obviously it was and about that time there was some dive-bombers started coming right at us. We figured we'd better get out of the way of the machine gun fire or whatever was coming at us, so we ducked into the nearest doorway, which happened to be the ship's library. And it was just forward of the number three turret. And while we were in there, the ship took some more hits, at least two that I can remember. And I guess we stayed in there a good ten, fifteen minutes, until it got quiet. And apparently that was about the time the first wave was over. We stepped back out on the quarter deck, and what had been a fairly clean quarter deck when we went in was now a mess, one of our planes that had been sitting in the catapult on top of number three turret, was laying on the quarter deck burning. And we realized we'd been hit right there. I didn't know for maybe a year or two what it was. It was a 500-pound projectile with fins fitted on it. It was a direct hit on number three turret and didn't go off. And I guess we were within fifty or sixty feet of it. We might've been in the same position as the *Arizona* had it gone off.

JP: Oh yeah. So now...

(Conversation off-camera)

JP: Okay, so now, you had a bomb dropped on deck that didn't detonate.

GHP: It actually hit in number three turret.

JP: It hit the turret though.

JGP: And went through the top, I think, three or four inches of steel but did not go off.

JP: At this point, you're still on the deck of the *West Virginia*?

GHP: Yes.

JP: Okay. What happened after this point?

GHP: Well, we waited 'til there was no more planes coming in our direction and it was fairly quiet. And as I say, we were told to leave the ship, so we left. We went across to the *Tennessee*, by way of the hawsers that had us tied together; the ships were side by side. And as a matter of fact, the *West Virginia* had settled to the bottom and wedged the *Tennessee* in and it could not move until they could get the *West Virginia* out and—or move it a little bit some time later. But got aboard the *Tennessee* and I thought, well, maybe I could do something aboard here, but they were telling us to go on over on Ford Island.

JP: Okay.

GHP: So the best way to do that was, I thought, by boat rather than to dive into the water, which had all the oil on it and a lot of debris which could be damaging or serious—could be the wrong thing to dive into. So several of us got a boat and rowed it over. We filled it up. We had, I don't know, maybe twenty in it. A small boat, it was a little whaleboat. And we got about all we could in it and rowed it over. And there were a number of other boats there.

JP: Now, this was between the first and second wave, or was this after...

GHP: Yes, this is between the waves.

JP: So there was a bit of lead, there's a bit of down time...

GHP: Yes there was.

JP: ...between 7:55 and 8:55, during the second wave. So it was quiet at this moment.

GHP: Yes.

JP: Okay. And that gave you time to hustle over to Ford Island.

GHP: Yes.

JP: Okay.

GHP: And when we got on the island, there was [*a*]—I think it was a Marine pick-up truck came by and they told us to go over to the Marine barracks, check in over there. And—‘cause we were out in the open there. There was nothing—no way of protecting. I guess they figured get under some kind of protection if possible. So we did, we went over there and just about the time we got into the Marine barracks, the second wave came. And it kind of let up after a while and the Marines were out there and I’ll give ‘em credit. They broke into their ammunition locker, broke the lock to get in just so they could get ammo, ‘cause they didn’t have any [*out*]. And they were out there with their thirty-ought-sixes or forty-fives, anything they could get their hands on, trying to shoot the best they could. But then somehow they decided that we were— [*I guess*] they needed the space for the injured in the Marine barracks, and so they told the rest of us to report in over at the, I believe it was the Officers’ club. And we started over there in the tail end of the second wave—came over in the strafing, so we ducked behind some concrete wainscoting in some new hangars that were being built. And waited ‘til that was over, then we checked in on over at the officers’ club. And that’s where we mustered and they started giving us assignments. I ended up going back aboard the ship, [*on a*] bucket brigade, fighting fires the rest of the day.

JP: How much fire did Ford Island sustain during the second wave?

GHP: Mostly strafing.

JP: Okay.

GHP: I don’t recall very many bombs being dropped at that time. They were after the planes and anything they could damage.

JP: And you had been put during, really, during the first and second wave, you were put—you were responsible for creating or helping to establish a medical facility on Ford Island?

GHP: Well, in the Marine barracks, the wounded were coming in and there wasn't a whole lot they could do and most of the wounds were from burns, flash burns. And about the only thing you could do, and that's what they were doing, was putting Vaseline on the places where they were so badly burned.

JP: Were you helping with that process?

GHP: Yeah.

JP: So you act as a medic?

GHP: For a little while, yeah.

JP: As a corpsman?

GHP: Until they told us to go out and check in over at the other place.

JP: So after the second wave, then you regrouped?

GHP: Yes.

JP: And you went back to the *West Virginia*.

GHP: Yes.

JP: And you were put on bucket brigade?

GHP: Yeah. Back then I spent the afternoon, the rest of the day, as a matter of fact, on the stern end on the quarterdeck. We had no—we didn't have enough fire hoses or pressure pumps or anything, so we just used buckets the best we could.

JP: So now, essentially the event is over.

JGP: Yeah.

JP: The first and second wave. What were your impressions? What were your feelings at that time? What did you feel like?

GHP: I was mad, I guess. I thought we're in it now. And there was a little bit of fear because I thought how much did we—damage did we sustain, overall and were they coming back? Are we prepared? You know, you ask yourself those questions.

JP: Had you lost any friends?

GHP: Yes. There was—I don't think anyone got out of the after engine room and that had been one station I had been on before I was on mess detail. Had I not been on mess detail, I probably would've been there.

JP: You would've been back in the engine room.

GHP: Yeah.

JP: So now essentially the event is over. The aftermath occurs and you continue your service in the navy. What did you do after Pearl Harbor?

GHP: As I say, I spent the rest of the day on the bucket brigade and then about dusk, they brought another group aboard and relieve us and we checked in over at the naval recreation center. And we got something to eat and they issued us a mattress and a blanket. And we slept over in the arena that night. And that is when there wasn't somebody shooting (chuckles) at ghosts or any passing plane or anything that moved, I guess.

But the next day, we mustered in and I was assigned to the work detail and went aboard the *Nevada*, which had been beached. And they had lost power and so to save the provisions—that was one of the jobs—was to unload all the frozen food. So that's what I did the next day, work detail unloading the reefers and spent the whole day there, just about.

Then the following day, we checked back in over at the arena that night and the following day, then I, they mustered us and I got reassigned to the *San Francisco*.

JP: You spent the rest of your career, rest of World War II on the *San Francisco*?

GHP: No. I spent only six months on it. And I had put my name in on a list for transfer back to battleship duty if I could get it. They asked who wanted, who would like a transfer, what kind of duty. What they had to do was regroup the personnel, I guess, and help man the new ships that were under construction and that sort of thing. Well, I got transferred about July, I think it was, of '42 to new construction and I went aboard an escort carrier, [*the Bogue*], in Bremerton. We went around to the East Coast and we ran convoy and [*anti-*]submarine patrol for quite a while in that floating coffin, they called it. And then I got rotated again and caught a light carrier in Philadelphia and commissioned it [*in late 1943*]. We went back around to the West Coast and joined the Pacific Fleet in January of '44 and stayed with the Pacific Fleet sixteen months of continuous operation. Got lucky. (Chuckles)

JP: So basically then you were, at the end of the war, in August of '45...

GHP: I had just been relieved of duty aboard this light carrier, the *Langley*—it was the second *Langley*, not the original—and was waiting for reassignment. Waiting for, actually for rehabilitation leave and reassignment. And the war ended.

JP: Very good. And you went on to Southern Cal after that?

GHP: I finished my six years and decided I did about enough. I'd try the civilian life for a while. But I have no regrets. The navy was a great experience for me, a great learning station. I have a lot of respect for it. [*Best navy in the world, you know.*]

JP: Excellent. Well, thank you very much for your time today.

GHP: It's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW