

#185 HAROLD RICHARDS: USS *UTAH*

Bart Fredo (BF): . . . we eventually start, I'll ask you to give us your name and your hometown back in '41.

--: Okay, Bart.

BF: Okay, here we go. I'm going to slate this. The following interview is with Harold Richards and it was conducted on December 4, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel. It's about 7:45 at night. Mr. Richards now lives in Nashville, Indiana. My name is Bart Fredo; I'm doing the interview. And also in the room with me is Dan Martinez, and he's a historian with the National Park Service.

Please, why don't we start. Tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Harold Richards (HR): My name is Harold Richards and I was from Nashville, Indiana, a small county seat in, about sixty miles south of Indianapolis.

BF: What branch of the service were you in?

HR: U.S. Navy.

BF: What was your rank and your job?

HR: At the time of the war, I was a Storekeeper Second Class.

BF: And which ship were you assigned to?

HR: USS *UTAH*.

BF: Now, that was a battleship converted into a target ship, right, and an anti-aircraft platform?

HR: Training.

BF: Training ship. Let's go back to the morning of the attack, just before the attack started. What were you doing and where were you?

HR: I was in the supply office. There's three of us slept in the supply office. We had cots in those days and you rolled your bedding at night and put it in a locker, and then you slept at wherever you worked at. And I heard a commotion and I stuck my head out the porthole to see what the commotion was, and I seen the plane drop the torpedo, which I knew something was wrong. I, we'd been through a lot of practice, but he dropped a torpedo, and I thought, "Well, I better get out of here and go to my gun station," 'cause I could see the, the ball, the red ball on the wing, by that time, before it hit. But about the time I got started, why, that explosion was pretty close to me and blowed me out through the door. I guess it was air pressure. The only thing I can figure, concussion.

BF: Were you below deck?

HR: Oh yeah. I was on the second deck, which would be the armor deck on that.

BF: And it blew you right out the door into the passageway?

HR: Right.

BF: What did you do next?

HR: Well, I was starting to battle stations. They sounded general alarm, battle stations, and we started to go to battle stations and it had listed so bad, we couldn't even get up the port side.

BF: Because of the list of the ship?

HR: The listing and also the water, I mean, the oil had started to raise by that time.

BF: Are you standing in oil or water at this point on the ship?

HR: Oh yeah.

BF: On the second deck, you're in water?

HR: Right.

BF: What did you do?

HR: Well, we got up, we formed a chain and the ones that was higher, stick out their arm, and they'd pull these guys up to the top, and that's the way we got over to the opposite side of the ship. So this was on the port side, we had to go to starboard.

BF: Why?

HR: Because if you hadn't, you'd have drowned on the port side, because that was the one that was going under.

BF: How long did it take from the time this torpedo hit and the ship started listing, to the time you got topside?

HR: I would say eight minutes. That's what we figured.

BF: Was there ever a concern in your mind that you might not make it top side?

HR: No, I wasn't worried about getting top side, but after I got up, well, to go through the hatch and they were strafing so badly, and I had to worry about getting over the side. That was the main worry.

BF: Bullets were hitting close around the hatch that you were trying to get through?

HR: Oh yes.

BF: Very close?

HR: I would say the majority of our crew that was lost in strafing, rather than being below decks.

BF: Did you see these planes that were doing the strafing?

HR: Oh yeah.

BF: Could you describe what you saw?

HR: Oh, there were so many of them, and even the ones after they dropped their torpedoes, they came back and strafed. And of course their dive bombers done the same thing. And the pilot, of course, he had twenty millimeters and most of the planes in the, mounted fixed guns. Then they had the gunner in behind the pilot with a mobile gun.

BF: So as the plane pulled out, the rear gunner was firing back.

HR: That's right.

BF: Did you see . . .

HR: They was thirty caliber, they called it thirty. I think it was a 6.75-millimeter, I'm pretty sure.

BF: Did you see many of the *UTAH* crewmembers get hit?

HR: Quite a few, yes.

BF: So you're on the deck now. What happens to you next?

HR: Well, I made a mad dash to get over the side. Of course we had to go in spurts, in between these strafing runs and I got up the lifelines and went down over the side. I could walk on the side of the ship for a portion of the way. And then, when I jumped off in the water, I thought, "Well, I'll get in a life boat," 'cause they had a lot of lifeboats at that time gathered up. And they kind of started concentrating on strafing the lifeboats. So I said, "Well, this I don't want either." But before I could get away from the ship, a guy jumped off the ship on this shoulder and broke this collarbone right here.

BF: Broke your collarbone?

HR: Right. But of course, it was -- I guess I was so excited I didn't know it. In fact, I didn't know it for four days. I know it was sore, but I didn't know it was broke.

BF: Did you have any trouble with the timbers that were used on the *UTAH* at all?

HR: The timbers fell on the opposite side. See, they came off of the high side and fell over, and they went into the bay side. In fact, I've got a picture, as I was telling him, I've got a picture at home that was taken by Japanese aircraft. And it came through Senator Moss of Utah, and through the Navy department. And it shows these timbers floating out in the bay, on that side.

BF: So you're in the water and this man is just, your shipmate has jumped into the water and hit you, and you've broken a collarbone. What happens next? What do you do?

HR: I swam ashore.

BF: How long a swim was that?

HR: I don't know. I would say probably a hundred yards. At that time, I think that those pilings, it's about a hundred yards from the beach.

BF: Did you see any of those lifeboats get strafed, get hit?

HR: Oh yes.

BF: Quite a few of them?

HR: Yeah. I think probably every one of them got some strafing. Whaleboats and then they had thirty-six foot launches, and they had fifty-foot launches, and they had captain's gig, officer's motor launch. Everything you could get available.

BF: Once you got on Ford Island, did you have a chance to then look around and see what was going on?

HR: Oh yes.

BF: What did you see at that point?

HR: Oh, mostly the island being on fire and the bombing of it. They had a large ditch they started to run around the edge of the island. I think it was for water, and we took cover in this for a part of the time. And then they started to holler for men for help to get the wounded out of the water and carry 'em to the base hospital there. And we done this for -- I don't know.

BF: Tell me about that. Tell me about helping men out of the water.

HR: Well, we had to go out and drag 'em in. I mean a lot of them was, you know, some were dead but some of them were still alive, but we had to drag 'em in to get 'em -- of course, at that time, they had all coated with oil. This bilge oil was, why, probably four or five inches deep, sitting on top of the water.

BF: So did you wade out into the water and . . .

HR: Oh yeah. And it's hard, you know, you're slick, you couldn't hardly get a hold of a man, you couldn't hold onto him when you needed to get a hold. But we saved, I think, a lot of men's lives just by quick action.

BF: Did you see any of the attacking planes get hit?

HR: One. One. The only one I saw.

BF: Tell me about that.

HR: Well, it was over in the, just north of the *ARIZONA*. Not too far off of the bow of the *ARIZONA*. Well, it was actually then between the *VESTAL*. You know, the *VESTAL* was alongside. She pulled up and then it was between that and he got hit, and he bailed out.

BF: Did you see him land?

HR: No. He landed in the bay there. I didn't get to see him land because I'm not in -- the contour of the island there, I couldn't see the water, but that's where he did land.

BF: Did you see any other Japanese pilots bail out?

HR: No.

BF: So you never saw any other Japanese besides that one pilot who bailed out?

HR: No. No, I never saw any bail out but that.

BF: I'm sorry. That's my fault, I misunderstood.

Dan Martinez: Where was he standing when he saw this?

BF: Where were you standing when you saw this plane hit?

HR: I was on Ford Island. Yeah.

BF: What part of Ford Island?

HR: West side. It was just right off the starboard bow of, which would be the starboard side of the ship. Actually, but dry dock was where that memorial is up now. That's where we went to, see.

BF: The *UTAH* memorial.

HR: Right.

BF: That's the, basically, the east side of Ford Island.

HR: Yeah.

BF: I'm sorry, the west side. Excuse me.

HR: The west side.

BF: I'm confusing myself.

DM: So this was a long distance.

BF: So it was a long distance away, from where you were standing.

HR: Oh yes. Oh yeah, it was quite a ways up the, I would say, mile, at least a mile.

BF: While we're on this point, what else do you want to know?

DM: Well, I want us to go back to the ship and talk about the type of guns on the ship and . . .

BF: Okay.

DM: . . . the training that went on.

BF: Okay. Sure we're going to change tapes now, so we . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

DM: . . . opening of the *UTAH* memorial.

BF: Okay. I was there. I covered that. I was a reporter that period . . .

DM: Oh, were you?

BF: Yeah.

DM: Were you there for the dedication of the memorial? We can get into that too.

HR: Well . . .

--: Okay, Bart.

BF: Okay. We're going to start the interview now. I understand that some men were trapped in the hull of the *UTAH*, and you saw at least one getting rescued. Please tell us about that.

HR: Well, he worked in the dynamos, which was the generator for producing electricity. And when it started to roll over, he got trapped and couldn't come up like he would normally come up. He had to go with the contour of the ship, which threw him going down into the bilge of the ship.

BF: What was his name?

HR: Vassett.

BF: Vassett.

HR: Vassett.

BF: First name, do you remember?

HR: John. But he finally worked his way down. He had to open these hatches as he went, and he had nothing but a, what we call a buckle buster ranch, it's an adjustable crescent, you know. And when he finally got to the bottom, he started pounding on the bottom of the ship with that. Makes a lot of noise. We heard it. So the cruiser in front of us, I think it's the *RALEIGH*, sent a boat back with cutting torches, and they deliberated a long time where to cut in here or not, you know. They figured, well, there's only one chance to save him, and that's what they done. They took him, cut a hole through the bottom of the ship.

BF: Why were they concerned about using the torches?

HR: Explosion from the gasses. Because even the oil, as thick as it was, had a certain amount of gasses that would raise on the top of it and of course they were coming up with him. At least, that was what they thought it would do.

BF: How long did it take for them to get this man out of the hull?

HR: Oh, two hours I would say. I don't know. The way time was, I couldn't judge.

BF: Did you have any opportunity, while all of this was happening, the attack, to think about what was happening?

HR: Yeah, I think you, a lot of things run through your mind. I just couldn't feature why that was, that was the whole thing. My first impression, when I seen that fish drop and then it hit, I thought . . .

BF: Torpedo.

HR: Yeah. And I thought, "Boy, somebody is going to catch hell over this."

That was the first impression that hit my mind. And, but it didn't take us long to find out that we was in, in trouble.

BF: Concerning the *UTAH* itself and the weapons aboard the ship. Tell us a little bit about the kinds of weapons aboard and the training involving them.

HR: Well, our main batteries was a five-inch twenty-five, which is what we called a case gun. And that's where the projectile and the powder and all this in, just like you would use in a rifle. And there was more or less strictly from anti-aircraft, these were. We had several end mounted, various parts of the ship, for the training of the fleet, or anyone else in the, that had a five-inch twenty-five. And then we had the water-cooled thirty caliber, and fifty caliber. We had the air cooled thirty and fifty caliber. We had a 1.1, which was the old British pom-pom, a four barrel outfit. And that was the only one, as far as I know, that was ever used in the US Navy.

We had several experimental guns. We had the first Mark Five director, which was a pointer, trainer, everything automatically. It was like your automatically controls today. It spotted it in, gave you the yardage, the speed of the object, elevation of the objects and such, so when it transmitted this information to the gun, the pointer, the trainer, the -- it had very good success in shooting down the planes, which they did.

BF: Were any of those weapons used that day, during the attack?

HR: No. Everything was covered. We had no ammunition on topside. That was the whole story. See, we wasn't in that phase. We just came back from Maui. And we'd been out of Lahaina for, I don't know, six, eight weeks. And we was strictly in bombing. So when you're bombing, we dismantled these guns, put 'em below decks.

BF: In other words, the ship had been, was being used as a target . . .

HR: That's right.

BF: . . . at that point.

HR: That's right.

BF: And then the Navy would drop dummy bombs on it. Sandbags and things like that.

HR: Right.

BF: Anything else at this point about the ship and the use of the ship?

DM: No.

BF: 'Cause I'll go on. What's the most vivid memory you have of that day?

HR: Death. I would say the getting the bodies out and sorting pieces, carrying wounded to the hospital, I think was the most impressive thing I did. It's something you never forget.

BF: You carried that with you all these years?

HR: Oh yeah, yeah. I don't see any way of getting, you know, forgetting that kind of stuff.

BF: Have you dreamt about it?

HR: Oh yeah.

BF: Bad dreams?

HR: Well, you couldn't have a good dream about that.

BF: Well, by that, I meant has it, have you dreamt about it and it sort of affected the rest of, the next day?

HR: No, no. No, it passes. Because I was in a lot worse battles than Pearl Harbor, actually.

BF: Oh really?

HR: Oh yeah.

BF: For example?

HR: Oh, I was in both invasions of the Philippines. I was in -- well, let's see, in Leyte Gulf, about twenty-eight days. I spent four days in Lingayen Gulf invasion. I was at Iwo Jima for thirty-eight days, Okinawa for fourteen days. And we had the same thing. Of course, the suicide attacks, kamikaze, they made a lot of destruction on the ships and it would push you right back into the death status again. But I think that's the most impressive thing.

BF: Back to the day of the attack, after the attack was over and things had sort of settled down, what was the rest of your day like? What did you do?

HR: Well, as I say, I helped get the men out and then when the hospital at Ford Island got so full, wasn't no room for anybody, we started moving them across to mainland. And then I got over there and helped there for a while, and I went aboard the *ARGONNE*, which was tied at the dock there. And that night, the *CALIFORNIA* cut loose, of course that's when they had that incoming planes.

BF: American planes coming in that night.

HR: American planes coming in. Well, the *CALIFORNIA* cut loose, a guy did, and shot across the bay, and he killed one of our men and wounded another one.

BF: In an airplane?

HR: Inside the ship.

BF: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a little confused. Who shot who now?

HR: The *CALIFORNIA* opened up with a machine gun and it shot across the bay, went through the *ARGONNE*, through the side of the ship. Of course, there was probably a hundred fifty, two hundred men in the mess hall. And it's just like, you know, as thick as flies. And how you kept from killing more men, I don't know.

BF: How many were hit?

HR: Two.

BF: Both killed?

HR: No. One of 'em, the bullet went right straight through his muscle, and the other one blowed his rib cage out.

BF: Did you see this?

HR: Yes.

BF: You were in the mess hall at the time?

HR: I was talking to the guy that got killed. He was a yeoman. I don't remember his name now, but he was a yeoman who worked for the captain's office.

BF: What was the reaction in the mess hall?

HR: Quite a bit. They didn't know what was going on and of course, that, we was below decks, and we had to have a, more or less, a semi-blackout. And it was quite a deal.

BF: Did you think that the attack had started all over again?

HR: That's what we had at first impression, and then they got on the P.A. system and told us that it was one of our own.

BF: Do you know why the *CALIFORNIA* was firing so low?

HR: Yeah, because the planes were coming in to land and he was shooting at one of the American planes.

BF: They were that low?

HR: Yeah.

BF: They were going to land at, what, Ford Island, or Hickam?

HR: Ford Island.

BF: Did you see any of those planes get hit?

HR: No.

BF: After the man was hit in the mess hall, did you go topside?

HR: No. We took him back to sick bay, but it was too late, I mean he was gone.

BF: Anything else the rest of that day that you remember?

HR: No, I spent the night on there.

BF: On the *ARGONNE*?

HR: On the *ARGONNE*. The next day I got up and we started all over again, with the getting out the wounded and of course, most of the wounded we got out, but when we started picking up the dead out from under the docks and hauling them up and making graves for 'em, wrapping 'em in blankets.

BF: You dug graves?

HR: Yeah. Well, most of it was dug with bulldozer.

BF: You put them . . .

HR: You see they put them under trench, the first group. And they had, well, you're supposed, everybody was supposed to wear a dog tag. And I probably counted eight or ten dog tags, identifying people, and I think I helped bury fifteen hundred the first three days. So nobody wore dog tags. In fact, when you pick up four or five pieces to form one body, why, you don't know who you've got.

BF: Where was this burial taking place?

HR: Up on Red Hill.

BF: So it was, it was ashore?

HR: Yeah. Yeah.

BF: How long did you stay in Hawaii, after the attack?

HR: Four days. I went aboard a supply ship.

BF: And you left?

HR: We left. We loaded up a load of pineapple and took it back to States, and unloaded that and took on a load of mines and gasoline.

BF: What was the name of the ship?

HR: *CASTOR*, AKS-1.

BF: So you weren't really affect-- you left so soon, you weren't really affected by martial law here at all.

HR: Martial law was enacted immediately.

BF: Did that affect you in any way, or did you stay aboard ship most of the time?

HR: No, I was on a base there. And of course, after I got on to the *CASTOR*, we left. Martial law, I guess, automatically went into effect within a matter of hours.

BF: Some people who have, who survived the Pearl Harbor attack, still to this day have some bad feelings about Japan, and also about the Japanese. How do you feel?

HR: Same way.

BF: You do, you still have some bad feelings? Have they mellowed at all in the years since the war?

HR: No.

BF: Can you talk a little bit about your feelings?

HR: Well, number one, I went into the Navy because of the depression. Everybody was hard up. And I was one of the conservative type that felt like I wanted to save my money and when I get out of this after four years, I'm going to be able to do something, which I didn't like with four months of being idle. Almost had my four years in. Well, I had saved my money and I put it in a safe, and when this thing is over with, my money's all gone, I had nothing on but my skivvy shorts. I had scratches up and down my rump from going over them barnacles. And I think the most horrifying part was to see innocent men that had no protection getting first degree murder. Now, that's my opinion. That's a hard thing to say, but I can't think of any other explanation for this. Because it was an undeclared war. Sinking a ship is one thing, when you shoot an unarmed man in the water, trying to survive for himself, this is, to me, I think, was the most impressive thing. And of course, I went to Guadalcanal. I spent fourteen months in Guadalcanal. I seen a lot there. So as I say, I don't think I ever will get rid of my bitterness.

BF: You've been to Hawaii several times since the war was over. We have a lot of Japanese tourists here, people from Japan who come to visit. When you see Japanese visitors here, you see groups of them, how do you feel?

HR: I ignore it. I have to. I ignore the fact that they're even around. I don't, I don't want to associate with them. They've got . . . really, in a way, they've got their chance of life, and of course, this is a generation for most of 'em. You can't hardly condemn this generation for what the past done. Of course the past generation was the warlords that wanted to make destruction. But I still can't get it, I can't come around to it.

BF: Would you like to?

HR: Not necessarily. No, I mean, I think it's embedded too deep. A man shouldn't say that, but I think I'm indoctrinated, or embedded too deep in this feelings that I don't think that I would.

BF: I take it from what you're saying then, that you wouldn't particularly care to talk to a Japanese survivor, say one of the pilots who took part in the attack? You wouldn't really have anything to say to him.

HR: Oh no, no.

BF: You'd rather not see him and talk to him.

HR: Right.

BF: You played a part in a very important event in history. I don't have to tell you that. But has that fact affected your life in any way?

HR: Oh possibly. I don't know . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

HR: . . . oh, you have a lot of bitterness, but I, most of the time I can overcome that. I get my mind occupied on something else. I can overcome the fact that . . .

BF: Are, are you . . . I'm sorry.

HR: Go ahead.

BF: Are you reminded of that day very often?

HR: Quite a bit, yes.

BF: What brings back the memories?

HR: I don't know. Little incidents have come along and just something will pop into your mind. You can hardly explain, but something will come into your mind, it will bring back, maybe a short thing that you remember, and then it fades away. It's just one of those things.

BF: What do you feel every December, the first week in December? Does it all come back to you then?

HR: Yes, because we always have a memorial service someplace. It may not be here, but we have it. In Indianapolis, we've got a war memorial there and we have a service, and we honor the dead.

BF: If you had the power to change history and remove yourself from Oahu on that day, would you do it?

HR: I don't think so. No, I -- the thing was, we was getting paid by the government to be trained to fight for our country. That was our obligation, and if the circumstances had been normal, I'd have thought nothing about it. If I'd had even a fighting chance of any kind, I wouldn't have thought too much about it. But, no, I don't think I'd have changed, because I felt like it was my duty and I don't shirk and run away just because something happens.

BF: Throughout your life, have you been proud to say that you're a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack?

HR: Yes. Yeah, I think so. I think so. I don't think that it's a big deal. I don't feel like that I deserve the Congressional Medal of Honor, or such as that. I'm just one of many that done what little they could have. I don't . . .

DM: (Conversation off-mike.)

BF: Oh, he didn't see 'em that day at all.

DM: Okay.

BF: I asked him during . . . thank you. Stop. Yeah, I asked him during the .
. . .

END OF INTERVIEW