

#222 JIM MILLER: USS ARIZONA

John Martini (JM): Today is December 8, 1991. This is an oral history tape with Captain, retired, James Miller. On December 7, 1941, Captain Miller was aboard USS ARIZONA. He was a Third Division officer in charge of turret number three. He was twenty-four years of age, at that time. He was an Ensign. My name is John Martini, park service ranger. We're doing this oral history tape in conjunction with television station KHET, in Honolulu. And thank you for coming, Captain.

Jim Miller (JI): Thank you, very much. If I may enter one comment at the beginning, the name is Jim, not James, so thank you very much.

JM: Oh, this is an official - - an official Jim?

JI: That is correct.

JM: Okay. First question would be, how did you get into the Navy?

JI: I grew up in the panhandle of Texas, which is out of the prairie. And for some strange reason, I was very much interesting in the sea and read a lot of sea stories. And I became interested, as a young fellow in high school, in going into the Navy and heard about the Naval academy, and that became an ambition, and I was able to be successful to gain an appointment to the Naval academy. Entered in 1935, and graduated in 1939. And I spent a thirty year career in the Navy. I enjoyed every year of it.

JM: What was your first ship when you graduated?

JI: My first ship was the USS ARIZONA, and I must say that I could not have had a more fortunate assignment, because she was a ship with professional men in her and I learned a great deal.

JM: Was, was Captain Kidd in the command at that time?

JI: Captain Kidd was a commanding officer when I first joined the ship. He was relieved by Captain Train, who in turn was relieved by Captain Van Valkenburgh. Captain Kidd had been advanced to the rank of Rear Admiral, and had served on a battleship staff, but had come back to the ARIZONA as commander of Battleship Division One. So my former captain, now Rear Admiral Kidd, and my current captain at the time, Franklin Van Valkenburgh, were both on board. Unfortunately, two great men were lost in the ship on that day.

JM: When you joined ARIZONA in '39, she was home ported at Long Beach at that time?

JI: That is correct.

JM: Uh-huh. Were you in, were you aboard her when the fleet was moved up to Hawaii from Long Beach and home ported?

JI: That is correct. We came out on a fleet problem, as I recall, it was fleet problem twenty-one in May 1940. The intent, of course, was to complete that problem in about five or six weeks and return to Long Beach, but we were ordered to remain in that advance position in Hawaiian waters, and we did so.

JM: What was the word among the officers as to why the, the fleet was staying in, in Honolulu? Did they pass word down to you?

JI: Yes. We could see the situation. The, the war in Europe had intensified. There was strained relations in the Far East, of course. Japan was advancing into Manchuria and China. And it was the decision at high levels in the U.S. government that we would be in a better position of preparedness if the U.S. fleet were maintained in a more advanced position in the Hawaiian waters. There were those who disputed that, but nevertheless the decision was made and so we did remain there.

JM: Was it explained down at the level of the junior officers at that time, that that's why you were staying -- heightened tensions, or was it just that we're going to stay and . . .

JI: Oh no, I think it was explained, but I think we all understood. We could, we could read and know the news and understand the current history that was going on at that time. So the reason for it, whether one agreed with whether it was the correct decision or not, the reason was understood.

JM: When you got out here, Pearl was never set up to maintain the entire Pacific fleet all at one time. Was it hard, logistically being home ported at Pearl for such a long time?

JI: I don't believe it was too difficult. For instance, mail, well mail came by ship, so it was a bit slow. But the shipyard was here and on the occasion where we needed repair work, usually the Pearl Harbor ship port, shipyard was set up to handle that. I recall no particular difficulties in logistics or maintenance.

JM: How, how was life for a young Navy officer in that year before the attack?

JI: Oh, for myself and the other junior officers like me, we were single, which is wonderful to take off when the ships would come in from sea for the week, and have the weekend to run out to Waikiki, and to have the beach, and to have, to enjoy the islands. Yes, we enjoyed it. Some of the family men, whose families were left back on the west coast and were uncertain as to when the men might return, I think they were a bit anxious.

JM: Yes, I imagine. Did they, were they allowed to bring their families out eventually, and . . .

JI: In effect, no. There were no arrangements for transportation, or for housing of families. But nevertheless, there was no objection when a man wanted to bring his family out at his own expense, and to find a place for them to live. And incidentally, that was difficult. Housing was a bit crowded in Hawaii, but nevertheless several families had in the time between the summer of 1940 and the winter of 1941, the families had come out to the islands.

JM: What, when, when you yourself were here, did you live aboard *ARIZONA* all the time, or did you also have quarters on the mainland, or on the island?

JI: Oh no, I lived aboard. And if you have any recollection of an ensign's salary at that time, I don't think we would have spent any money in hiring, or in renting an apartment and anyway, we spent most of our time at sea. It was those weekends, and occasionally a week in port, where we could spend some time ashore.

JM: Do you remember what your pay was?

JI: Oh, it was a hundred twenty-five dollars a month, plus, I think, twenty-six dollars allowed for, allowance for ward room cost.

JM: Oh, okay. What, wardroom cost, what was that?

JI: Well, that was for our messing, subsistence.

JM: When you went out at sea and you were training, what was the primary emphasis that, that they had the *ARIZONA* training for? What type of warfare were, was being anticipated?

JI: We still anticipated the type of warfare where the battle lines lined up against each other and the main batteries of the battleships and cruisers would fire at each other. But of course, in the background, and we understood that this was a forthcoming and very important western weapon system, was the aircraft carrier and the aircraft. At the same time, we had to plan and train against the submarine threat. So in this case, the anti-submarine ships, the destroyers, were an important part of the, of the training.

Now, in those first months, our, our planning wasn't very definite, but we continued the type of training that we had done on the west coast. But as time advance, on into 1941, and the war in Europe seemed to be intensified, and the difficulties in the Far East seemed to have increased, we approached a more war time condition of operations, so that in the months prior to December, 1941, we were operating under rather realistic conditions. At night, the ships were darkened. During all times, we operated with condition watches, which meant that we had some guns manned and ready to fire at all times. And because we did think that there was a submarine threat -- and I might say that we had definite detection of quote, enemy, unquote, submarines in the area, we did operate with a submarine screen with the ships. So at sea, generally, we were operating in a pretty close condition of preparedness for some offensive operation against us.

JM: Do, do you remember how you spent the night of December 6, 1941?

JI: We had come in from sea on Friday and I was preparing for some upkeep work, and the reason we had come in was for that purpose, and we had the repair ship, the *VESTAL*, along side. And I stayed on board. I had no reason to go ashore on Friday. And as I recall -- I don't recall whether I went ashore on Saturday or not, but in any case, I was back on board and I had spent the night in my state room, aboard *ARIZONA*, the night of the sixth and on into the seventh.

JM: And what were your, what were your duties on the morning of the seventh?

JI: Well, as I hadn't, I did not have a duty assignment, so I was not standing on watch at that time, and I had gotten up a little late on a Sunday morning. I had completed taking a shower and had shaved, and had returned to my state room and was beginning to get dressed to go up and have breakfast, and this was a little while, just a few minutes before eight o'clock at that time.

JM: Remember what the dress was for officers on that morning, if you didn't have duty?

JI: Oh, on Sunday, one wore the white service uniform. That is the white uniform with the high collar and yes, we were very correct in uniform in those conditions. We did not have the short sleeve open neck uniform at that time.

JM: Hot in the tropics?

JI: Oh, it was the, the -- believe it or not, that high collar white uniform was rather, rather comfortable. Nothing uncomfortable about it, and in the tropics.

JM: So what was the sequence of events? When did you firsts notice that Sunday, that something was real wrong?

JI: As I said, I was in my state room getting dressed and I heard or felt an explosion in the distance, definitely it was something in the distance. And shortly after that, the announcement came on our P.A. system to set condition zed, which meant to close all watertight doors and hatches. In other words, to intensify the watertight integrity of the ship. So the thought in my mind was that perhaps some accidental explosion from a mine or a torpedo might have happened in the harbor, and that for this reason, we needed to tighten up the watertight integrity of the ship.

JM: So this is before general quarters?

JI: Yes, it was, just a few minutes before, so I quickly slipped on this white uniform, without any underwear, and put on my white shoes without any socks, and began to inspect my part of the ship, thinking of course, that after I found that everything was closed up, that I'd be back and I could go have breakfast.

JM: Would, at that time, were you operating in a darkened ship condition, with the porthole lids closed on the inside of the, of the portholes?

JI: At sea, we would have been. And it so happens that in my stateroom, which was down on the lower, lower level, that porthole was closed. So it seemed, but when we came into port, of course, we would open up things just for air. After all, we had a tropical climate here, and at that time, we didn't have air conditioning in the ships, of course.

JM: Okay. So you said you inspected your area, this would be not the turret, but this would be below deck area?

JI: Yes, that would be the, I was responsible for all of the spaces in the starboard side, aft in the ship. And this meant that where we had watertight storerooms and such things as that, my job, my men were doing the work of dogging down the doors and hatches, but I would inspect and I had a routine. We had done this many times. But within a few minutes, I can't say how many, the general alarm was sounded for general quarters.

JM: The, the bugle over the P.A. system?

JI: Yes, it was announced over the P.A. system?

JM: Did the -- on some battleships I know, men didn't react maybe as sharply as they could because there had been so many drills. Did they say any, anything unique over the P.A. that, that this was other than another drill?

JI: Oh, absolutely not. Even if it was a drill, this was part of our training, and we would react very quickly. But the only thing that I can say is that the men in my division immediately went to the jobs that they were trained and assigned to do. My job was then to follow up and inspect and make sure, and that so that I could report that my part of the ship was so established. And then as soon as general quarters for battle stations was assigned, all of those men began to man their stations, which were assigned within turret three, as did I.

JM: So when general quarters was sounded, you and the rest of the men entered turret three. Below decks entry into the turret?

JI: Yes, some of them did. You could go down through the lower handling room. So depending on where a man was and where his assignment might be, he could have gone in from the lower decks. In my particular case, I came up on the main deck aft, and would head for my position, which was in the turret, which was well above the deck, of course. And the turret booth was in the after part of the turret. And in so going up there, I passed the captain's in port cabin, and there as a gunner's mate there, knocking on the door. And he said, "I need to get the, the keys for the magazine from the Captain."

I says, "All right, I'll go in and see if I can find it."

I did so but the captain was not there. Nor could I find the, the magazine keys at the time, which were probably kept locked in the locker. So I came back out and I told the, the Gunner's Mate that the captain apparently was, had already gone to his battle station, and that perhaps they could break the locks to the magazines if need be.

JM: Would these be the main magazines, or all the magazines?

JI: Yes, would have been -- I can't recall where he was from, he might have been the secondary or anti-aircraft batteries. Or main battery magazines were down in the lower handling room, which was well down and we would have managed to open those magazines ourselves. I said something to this Gunner's Mate, at this time, there probably were other explosions. And I said, "What's happening? Are the Japanese bombing us?"

And he said, "Yes, I think that's what's happening?"

Now, why did I say that? Well, the intense relations had been developing over this time, and if there was a threat against us in the Pacific, it would have come from that direction. This was a thought that went through my mind. I can't explain why I said it, but it was that came out, and perhaps it foretold what was actually happening.

JM: At this point, you hadn't even been above decks yet to see what was going on?

JI: That is correct?

JM: What did you see when you did get up on deck and went up to the turret?

JI: Well, I went right up to my turret and I established my contact with the battle control station by telephone, and reported in, and I had contact with them. As I recall, I did not here the other turrets on the line, but nevertheless I did report that I was there and that we were manning the turret,

and as best I can recall, most of my men were on station, because at that time, not many men had their families in Honolulu or were able to stay ashore overnight. So we were practically completely manned. At it was shortly after I had so reported that this tremendous explosion shook the ship.

JM: That would be when the forward magazines exploded?

JI: That is correct. That is, and I saw with the open hatch and the overhang of the turret, I hadn't shut that hatch yet, I could see the flame. And . . .

JM: This would be the hatch that looked down from the overhang?

JI: Looked down from the . . .

JM: So the flames actually wrapped around your turret . . .

JI: It did wrap around, yes, from that big explosion, it must have wrapped around.

JM: Can you describe what it was like, being in this, basically it was a twelve or fourteen-inch armored box up there, the turret house, when that explosion hit, how you felt?

JI: Well, there was a tremendous shaking, of course, but outside of that we were not damaged nor hurt. There wasn't enough intense shaking to injure any of our men. So I stepped out of the turret and saw that the forward part of the ship, there was a break in the deck there at frame eighty-eight, was just solid flame. And I saw that several men were on deck, either somewhat bloody from injury or apparently burned. And I made the quick decision at that point that it was very unlikely that we would fire those big fourteen-inch guns at this time and that the men in my division could better serve the purpose of trying to save the ship, put out the fires and help the injured men. And I sent the word of for let's, let's all come out here on deck and see what we can do.

I found out later from the officers that were down in the lower handling room, that because of the flooding that I had already started, they were climbing up toward the upper handling room and the gun chamber. And the junior officer in the lower deck, lower handling room, Ensign Field, he was the last one to come up. I must say that. He saw that all of his men were ahead of him. He said he was about knee deep in water, climbing up the ladder, coming up.

So things were flooding quite rapidly. I did not know that, of course, until he told me later.

JM: Did most of your men come out through the below decks and up the catches, or did they come . . .

JI: Oh no, they were unable. They come up through the gun chamber and out through the, the hatch in the overhang of the turret, just as I had.

JM: Did you know how badly ARIZONA was, was damaged, when you came out on deck right away?

JI: I could tell that she was damaged, but with this flame and the smoke of the forward part, I had no idea as is disclosed to us at the pictures that were taken later, with the whole forward structure in the foremast leaning over. I could not see that. But I certainly could tell that we were damaged badly, and

that the best thing I could do and that I could direct my men to do would be to try to repair that damage and to help the men who were on deck.

JM: Would you, what were the next stages that you went through, with the, with taking care of wounded and evacuation and all?

JI: Well, we tried to break out the fire hoses, but we didn't have much air pressure. And we had used portable fire extinguishes as best we could, and I must simply admit that our effort to put out the fires was, was not very successful. There were several injured men on deck. I recall the Junior Officer of the Deck, Ensign Anderson, had a bad wound on his forehead, and I tried to lift him up. He was moaning. There were others, other men on, on deck who were burned, and within, within a few minutes, a motor launch from the hospital ship *SOLACE*, which was moored around the corner of Ford Island, and not hit or injured as far as I know, had come along side. I guess the motor launch could see that *ARIZONA* was badly damaged. And so we were able to evacuate a number of our injured and burned men into the motor launch and they were taken to *SOLACE*, a hospital ship, and I think well treated as best could be there.

JM: How long did you stay aboard her?

JI: I have no idea in terms of minutes, but I did stay and tried to see that things were taken care of as best we could and as I recall, every injured man we were able to evacuate. And finally the Command Duty Officer, Lieutenant Commander Fuqua, had ordered abandon ship. He could see that things were hopeless at this point. I can't help but recall one of the seaman coming up to me and saying, "Sir, Mr. Fuqua has ordered abandon ship. Is it all right if I leave, sir?"

In other words, he did not take any action until he had permission from his division officer. And I think that this illustrates the type of training and the dedication to the job that all of these men had, every one did what he should and what he was trained to do.

We were able to bring one of the fifty-foot motor launches along side. She had been at the boat boom and was not damaged. Ensign Field had been in training to be a Coxswain for boat handling, and he was good at boat handling. And so I asked him to take the tiller and I took over running the engine. It required an engineer. Why? Because I don't believe there were any engineers who had survived, at least there were none there. So with myself running the engine, and Ensign Field running the, handling the boat, we took off the last men that were on board and proceeded toward Ford Island. And en route, that's just a short distance, we picked up several men who were swimming, some who had been injured, and some who had been, I could tell, badly burned.

JM: You're extremely proud of the *ARIZONA*, the way the crew reacted, it's obvious when, the other day, when *MISSOURI* came in, spit shined, crew at attention, can see how everyone could feel about their ship. What was it like looking back on her broken and burning immediately afterwards?

JI: Oh, it was a sad thing. These, these recollections are somewhat painful to me. But perhaps they serve for some purpose to recall them. But yes, those crews of those ships were well trained. They had pride in their ships, they had a great deal of spirit. The moral was high and they were proud. And this was because this was important and they were trained, and they had confidence in the ship and in the weapons that they had.

JM: What's it like to go back to the ARIZONA Memorial?

JI: Well, it, it brings back those memories, and I put it this way, that we are here or we, we visit that memorial to recall and memorialize those who were lost in the past and who are still with the ship. There are, I believe, some nine hundred forty-five remains in the ship. So I think back to those times. They're not happy thoughts, but nevertheless I believe they're appropriate because those men were lost, but the result of that loss was that our unit, our country was unified as never before. And I believe that even though we had a devastating loss at that time, that in our minds there was nothing to do but go on toward victory in this thing.

JM: How did, how did you feel about Japan and the Japanese, specifically in light of Pearl Harbor, at that time?

JI: Well, they're not kindly thoughts. I have no antagonizing against them then. After all, there's a new, now, there's a new generation and so forth. And but I do believe, I think that the description of it being a sneak attack is correct and that's what it was at that time. They will try to justify their action, but the fact that we had established an embargo on them, a trade embargo, wouldn't let them buy our oil. But nevertheless, they had been aggressors out on the China mainland, and in Manchuria, and we felt that they needed to be held accountable for those actions.

JM: What's it like with all the attention that has focused around you and the other ARIZONA survivors? Has it been kind of overpowering in the last couple of days?

JI: I've used the word overwhelming sometimes, and yes it has been. And so I question in my mind as to whether these observances are correct or not. But it does bring back vividly the memory of those things that happened fifty years ago, and in the years of World War II that followed and that led the United States into a leadership position in the world. And I think that perhaps, particularly for the follow on generations, that recollection of what happened then and how the world has changed in the time since, and what we might look to for the future, is and will be a beneficial recollection.

JM: It's an interesting thing, you're not sure if these remembrances are correct or not. Could you expand on that?

JI: Well, let me see, that was in my own mind, that I wasn't sure whether it was correct or not. In other words, are we bringing back thought of old animosities that might better be forgotten? If that is the case, then perhaps this fifty year observance might better have been set aside. On the other hand, if it makes us remember what happened then with the thought that we will maintain our readiness and preparedness to avoid such things in the future, and to maintain the unity of our population, and the capability of our industrial might and military preparedness, then it has served a good purpose. So I simply say that the question comes to my mind as to whether it's correct or not, but then I try to answer it, and I hope that my answer is, is correct, that it does serve a worthwhile and beneficial purpose.

JM: It does. I think it does. It's fifty years afterwards, someone maybe watching this tape at the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary, or maybe even the hundredth. Why do you think it's important for us to, to keep remembering Pearl Harbor and ARIZONA, specifically? The, that maybe someone, fifty years from now, would want to know from the man who was there.

JI: Well, it's history. Of course, we go back and remember Bunker Hill and remember the horrible mistakes that we let the Civil War come upon us. It separated us, but it brought us together. Then there were, remember the Maine. Well, that was a small war, but we won it. I'm from Texas, and even in Texas, they remember the Alamo. So these things should not be forgotten, so I would hope that the remembrance of what happened at Pearl Harbor, fifty years ago, on December the seventh, 1941, will not be forgotten. But that the remembrance of them will serve a good purpose of saying that lest we maintain our capability to resist such things in the future, and to, if necessary, work together with countries that may be competitive with us, but let's don't let it come to the point of aggression.

JM: Thank you, Captain.

JI: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW