

#251 JOESEPH LANGDELL
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
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TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky from the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki, December 5, 1996, 2:40 p.m. The person being interviewed is Joe Langdell. He was assigned to the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name?

Joeseeph Langdell (JL): Joseph Kopcho Langdell.

MS: And where were you born?

JL: Wilton, New Hampshire.

MS: When was that happy day?

JL: October 12, 1914.

MS: On October 12, 1914. All right. And why the U.S. Navy?

JL: Well, because -- I get too damn sentimental -- because as a young kid, I always wanted to be a Navy officer on a battleship. [*Early Langdells were sea captains out of Salem, Massachusetts. A William Langdell was a privateer during the Revolutionary war and preyed on English ships. He and his son were lost at sea. My grandfather, Joseph Langdell ran away to sea on an whaling ship out of Boston.*]

MS: That's a good dream. When did you join up? What was the date?

JL: I think we got a record here. (Pages flipping)

MS: I think he did his homework.

JL: I think it's here (inaudible). (Pages flipping) Well, I [*volunteered*] about October [20,] 1940 and under the [*class*] V-7 program, and at that time, all prospective reserve officers were sent on a thirty-day cruise. And mine was on the USS *NEW YORK*. We got aboard in New York and went down to Cuba, to the Navy base there in Cuba, and then over to Panama Canal and got back to Norfolk and took the train to New York and then to New Hampshire, back home again.

MS: Wow. Now, where was your recruiting station? Was it in your hometown?

- JL: Recruiting station? No. At that time, I was working for a certified public accountant in Boston.
- MS: Oh, okay.
- JL: So I went over to the Boston Navy Yard for a physical. Passed the physical and I figured twenty-five percent of the fellows that went there didn't make it. And from there, went to the reserve school at Northwestern University, Tower Hall, in [*Chicago*], I think the spring or probably the first part of 1941 [*December 16, 1940*]. [*Appointed midshipman, volunteer reserve, USNR December 16, 1940.*] Stayed there for the required time -- roughly thirteen weeks or ninety days, and became a ninety-day wonder. (Chuckles) [*Commissioned ensign D-V (G) USNR March 14, 1941.*]
- MS: There wasn't really a whole lot of folks that got into that program, was there?
- JL: I don't think so because I've known that as the war went on, the requirement [*lessened. Over 20,000 ensigns were commissioned at North Western University, Chicago.*] You had to be a college graduate at that time.
- MS: Okay.
- JL: And then go on this thirty day cruise [*30 day cruise discontinued*] And I graduated from Northwestern, [*in*] the third class of reserve officers that was [*ever*] commissioned. The other one was on an old ship in the Hudson River, New York City and one class that graduated from Northwestern. So I was amongst the first thousand volunteers.
- MS: Wow. So did they have a real kind of a boot camp type thing then, or was that already -- you had already completed that basic type . . .
- JL: No, this was the same standard officer program that's in -- that they use in the [*Naval War College*], Newport, Rhode Island today. It's just the same basic navigation, this, that and the other thing.
- MS: Okay. So when did you go to your first sea assignment and where was that?
- JL: From Chicago to the -- well, if you were born in New Hampshire, cold as hell in winter time, you wanted to go to a warm country, so I picked all the battleships in the Pacific coast at that time were right here in Pearl Harbor, so I said, "I want to go on a battleship in Pearl Harbor."
- MS: You had a little bit of say about where you could go?

JL: Yeah, that much. [*Things changed later*].

MS: Okay.

JL: That much. So they said, "That's just fine."

And the orders were to go to the *ARIZONA*. (Chuckles)

MS: Okay. And so you joined the *ARIZONA* in Hawaii?

JL: About, you know, about May [3], 1941. In May 1941.

MS: Okay. And so you took part in the maneuvers and such that were around here. How did you like Hawaii as the place to be stationed? Did you enjoy it then?

JL: You fellows should have been here. (Laughs)

MS: (Laughs) That good?

JL: You can't imagine it. There's no way you can. The only two big buildings in Waikiki Beach was the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and the Moana Hotel. Nothing else. You just can't imagine. Liberty was the best in the world in Hawaii. You had a little money to spend and this was a great liberty town. Really was.

MS: Did you stay down in the hotels then, when you were able to have liberty overnight? Or did you always have to go back to the ship?

JL: Well, you had to go back to the ship, yeah, eventually. But remember, when war was declared, then everything was a blackout. So you couldn't move after sunset or whenever the curfew started. Wherever you were, that was it. You couldn't move unless you had a special pass. And so the idea was to -- on liberty -- was to find a house here in town or a hotel where you could stay, and then you were all right. We had some good parties.

MS: I bet you did.

JL: They were called blackout parties. (Chuckles)

MS: (Chuckles) That sounds like another story.

(Laughter)

MS: Now, you know, leading up to the time of the attack now, December 6, did you have duty that day or did you have liberty that day?

JL: In August [4] 1941, I was assigned temporary duty with the fleet camera party. And I'll bring you up to that. [*August 4, 1941 "Proceeded by ships boat to USS ARGONNE and report to Commander Base Force for temporary duty with Fleet Camera Party..."*]

MS: Oh sure, okay.

JL: The fleet camera party. And the job of the fleet camera party was to take pictures of all the ships when they fired their battle practice at sea. So we would go on an old four-stack destroyers that had two stacks and tow a sled, a target, and the ships would fire their practice. And then, with a -- take moving pictures of it. And then it was a trigonometry problem, you could solve whether the ship, whether the bullet or the shell went over the target, under the target or left to right. And the only reason they needed ensigns on that particular deal was that the ensign was the lowest rating in the Navy that could work a slide rule. Now, today that would be done by a second class seaman with a computer. That's how it was.

And I was living at the BOQ on Ford Island at the time of the attack.

MS: Okay.

JL: Now you're right up to December 6.

MS: I got you. Okay, so basically you would come off of the ship for that duty in August?

JL: August.

MS: And so you didn't report back to the ship?

JL: No, no.

MS: Okay. [*No quarters available on ARGONNE ...*]

JL: They gave you a cot and two blankets. That was it. [*I lived at BOQ Ford Island and worked on ARGONNE.*]

MS: (Chuckles) That was the BOQ that was actually down there where the *ARIZONA* was?

JL: Yeah, the old BOQ and somebody's told me this, the cement slab is still there.

MS: Yeah, it is.

JL: And right next to the swimming pool. And on the night of December 7, we manned a machine gun at the swimming pool.

MS: Oh, okay.

JL: I don't think any of us knew how to fire the gun. (Chuckles)

MS: (Chuckles) But you were ready anyway.

JL: We were ready anyway.

MS: Okay. So were you in your quarters then by evening of the sixth?

JL: Yes, we were.

MS: Had you had liberty or duty that day?

JL: Could've been either one.

MS: Oh. (Chuckles)

JL: I don't know.

MS: Not sure, okay. So . . .

JL: Sunday, Saturday -- oh, you could have been -- we could have returned from liberty.

MS: Yeah, that's what I'm kind of . . .

JL: Yeah.

MS: . . . thinking. So was it a day that you were going to sleep in on Sunday a little bit? Did you . . .

JL: No, sir. No way. We had a party all scheduled for Sunday.

MS: Oh, you . . .

JL: And an automobile. An officer was allowed a quart of booze a week. We had that. Somebody had a little black book of the girls' names and we were headed over the Pali to a party on the beach over there. That never happened.

MS: And you were going to -- were you up and at 'em then, up and going, getting ready for this party when the attack occurred?

JL: No. We were sound asleep [,] I had a bunk man named Barney Malcolm, he came from up Washington way, and we were sleeping. The building started rattling and we didn't think too much about it, but when we heard a big boom, we thought we better get up and see. And we got up and I guess we looked out, went downstairs and looked out and saw that it was more than what we thought and could see a Jap plane go up. Then we went back and got dressed and came down to the water's edge, which as I remember was roughly a hundred yards [*from ARIZONA*]. And I'd like you to tell me, how far was it, actually, from the BOQ down to the water's edge?

MS: As I recall, it was roughly a hundred yards. Maybe a touch more.

JL: Well, that's the figure I've been using, a hundred yards.

MS: You're in the ballpark.

JL: Okay. A hundred yards. And we got down to the water's edge and watched the *ARIZONA* sink in nine minutes. We were just spellbound. You couldn't think what to do. And then, after the ship blew up, then the sailors started coming to shore with the skin peeling off their back and their arms, and all full of oil, and we helped them out of the water. And then I remember distinctly taking one man named Flanagan, happened to be an ensign. I didn't know it at the time. Took him down to the hospital, and when you get to the hospital, there was a doctor. And the first doctor would look the man over and if he thought he could save him, he says, "Go here."

And if he thought that he couldn't save him right off, or within reasonable length of time, he went down to the second line, and that was the fellows that they didn't think was going to make it.

MS: Which way did this guy go?

JL: He was alive. They saved him. And I sent a telegram to his folks. And some years later, they found the telegram.

MS: Wow.

JL: Lots of stories like that, of rescue.

MS: Did you -- when you came outside and saw the planes, did you think, at first, maybe maneuvers or anything like that? Or did you feel like it's . . .

JL: The common thinking was, "Well, hell, I just had another damn practice on Sunday morning. I can't understand it."

When you could see the red ball on the plane, you knew it was different.

MS: So you guys would recognize the planes pretty quickly as being Japanese.

JL: Yeah.

MS: Okay. So you're helping some of these guys out of the water and helping some of these pretty seriously wounded fellows to the different medical facilities. [*We all helped many sailors out of the water and took many to the hospital.*]

JL: There was only one, just straight . . .

MS: Just the one.

JL: Just the one.

MS: Just the one. Okay. And then what? Was that a pretty continual process for most of . . .

JL: [*The navy boats landed (and survivors swam) to its north end of the island where they waded ashore. That was the closest point of land you could wade to. That is where we went to help sailors get ashore.*]

All right. Well, the Marines started in there and they just [*moved*] you right on down to close to where the flying boats came in.

MS: Okay.

JL: Clipper. Where the clipper ships came in.

MS: Right. They just wanted to get you out of the . . .

JL: Get out of the way so that they know what was going on. And then, that night we came back, slept in the BOQ and we all manned a gun at the swimming pool.

MS: At the swimming pool, ready to go. Now that evening, did you have another commotion when the *ENTERPRISE* planes came in?

JL: I'm sure we did. And I've heard the story of what Captain Daniels, a flier on that deal. He told us that story five years ago at a [50th Anniversary] banquet that we had. And I'm sure -- yeah, 'cause I remember all the shooting up in the sky and we didn't know what the hell it was all about, but there was a lot. I remember that.

MS: A lot of trigger happy people after the attack.

JL: Yeah. Yeah. A lot of scared fellows in those airplanes, too.

MS: Sure enough, yeah.

JL: One fellow comes down safely and the second guy got killed. And then they abandoned the landing.

MS: When you think back to that time, are things pretty clear as far as your memory, or is a lot of it kind of just kind of a blur because of the activity?

JL: Well, after fifty-five years, you get to be eighty-two years old, you don't remember exactly what happened, but you could still see the ship blowing up and you can still see the skin coming off the back and stuff like that. No question about it.

MS: Certain things just always be very graphic to you, won't they? So what'd they have you doing the next day or two, after the attack?

JL: Our job [was] to take pictures. We took daily pictures of all the ships -- all of 'em. We went around. They had photographers and they take pictures of the ships, go back and develop 'em and give 'em to wherever they went, to whoever needed 'em.

MS: Official logging of the . . .

JL: Yeah. They were official fleet camera party. And they're still around. They're in Paul Stillwell's book, "*The History of the USS ARIZONA*", the same ones we took. In fact, I have a couple myself.

MS: So, now let's see, you were actually on the *ARIZONA* from May [3, 1941] to August [4, 1941.]

JL: Mm-hm. [Yes].

MS: So you had at least a part of your dream come true for a while there, weren't you?

JL: That's right. Yeah. [*On or about December 9, 1941, with a work party of 20 sailors, we removed all the dead from the ARIZONA above the water line; a grisly job.*]

MS: You were an officer on a battleship.

JL: That's right. [*They were taken ashore, identified, if possible, and mostly buried on Red Hill. Later, they were buried at Punch Bowl. Some went to the mainland.*]

MS: Did you get another ship assignment after [*July 1942*]?

JL: No, they held you right there at that job. It was a vital, necessary one when things started to calm down and build up.. I mean not build up but they got organized. And it was a going thing and it was needed thing. The only way that you could – [*get off the island was to ask for new ship construction*] at about that time, well, I'd met a girl at this Northwestern school, you know, [*I and wanted to marry her.*]

MS: Okay.

JL: And oh, before that, the ship had made a liberty trip to Long Beach [*in June*]. And this is an interesting part of this history too. But seeing I just gotten on the ship a month or two ago, or whatever it was, a lot of senior ensigns, if you want to call -- or let's call it officers or men who hadn't been home in a long, long time -- and the only way you could get from Chicago - - I mean from Los Angeles to Chicago was on the train, thirty-nine and three-quarters hours on the, whatever, the El Capitan, or something like that. Real good train.

And I didn't know what to do with liberty in Long Beach. Didn't have any friends there or anything. I thought, "Well, hell, this girl in Chicago, I got a couple of dollars I'll get on the waiting list of," -- I think I was about sixth in number and that was on the waiting list to get on the train to go. So my turn came up and I went, and met the girl and stayed there just one night and had to get back to get [*to the ship*].

And so we went back to Honolulu. Now, where are we? Oh, then in July of 1942, I got tired of just standing around Honolulu and I wanted to get into the shooting Navy. And the only way you could do that was to request new construction. So I sent a letter up the chain of command to BUPERS to get the new construction. And when it came through to go to San Francisco and be a plank owner of the USS *FRAZIER*, [*DD-607*] which is destroyer number 607, a Fletcher class.[*Reported onboard 23 July 1942*]. And then I thought, "Hell, I'll call this girl in Chicago and tell her that she might be a good idea for her to visit her girlfriend in the Ice

Capades on July 16," something like that. See, so . . . (Laughs) [*Married July 19, 1941 in San Francisco.*]

MS: Okay.

JL: You might as well make these things fun, you know.

MS: Sure. That's the rule.

JL: And then there was another ensign, but this guy somehow over here had bought an old beat-up Duesenberg automobile. And he wanted to get that thing back to San Francisco, see. So one officer was entitled to take one car. So I took his car over and they off-loaded it, put it right there on the dock, and the damn thing started so I put (chuckles) met the girl and we got married three days later. And then we went on a honeymoon. Well, I didn't know this girl too well and we'd only written letters and seen each other thirteen different times, see. One of these wartime deals [*that has lasted over 50 years.*]

So we got married on July 19, 1942 and we were going on our honeymoon, and Libby says, "Well, I'll read the maps and you drive the Duesenberg."

I says, "That's a good deal."

When I asked somebody where to go and they said, "Well, a good place to go is up the Russian River, that's north of San Francisco."

And we got it going and the water wasn't where it was supposed to be. I thought the water ought to be on the right hand side, but it wasn't. It was on the left hand side. Well anyway, you don't argue if you just got married.

So when the car stopped down the road a piece, down in Salinas, I think it was. Or Gilroy, down in the hot valley, the radiator boiled over with rust water, you know, because it had got stopped. So I said, "Hell, we'll drive in the garage," and we did.

And the man said, "Well, we'll fix the car. Why don't you go across the street and have a steak and then come back."

So then we asked him where to go, so we went to Monterey for our honeymoon. And that's a pretty good story, so.

MS: Yeah. You and the Duesenberg.

JL: Yeah. We got the destroyer finally in commission and it went from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor and I think we [*past*] Pearl Harbor [*on*] Thanksgiving of 1942 and by Christmas time we had been to Noumea and up to Guadalcanal and escorted several ships out of there. I think we took the first Marines off of Guadalcanal and escorted two or three of those ships that got hurt or banged up in that big battle of Iron Bottom Bay. [*FRAZIER equipped with first radar in the area; a big help in navigation.*]

MS: Yeah.

JL: And then we went to Attu, up in -- took part in the Attu, Kiska campaign. Sunk one [*T-31*] or two Jap subs up there. And our ship went to the Bremerton Navy Yard and then I got transferred to -- My father died then. I flew across the country, flew back again and when I got back to the ship, my wife said, "Well, you got orders to be a prospecting commanding officer of an LST in Maryland."

Now, I'll think of the name of the place [*Soloman Island*], where they just train [*landing craft*] for those -- did I say PT? I didn't mean PT. I meant LST.

So I got there, but we got there when we went from Bremerton, [*closed*] out our house in San Francisco and went to this place in Maryland, Solomon Island. It has a big base there. Today, that's \$200,000 houses built around that little base there.

So they give you physicals. Well, I didn't pass the physical 'cause I had a hernia. So I says, "Well, what's next."

Well, the man says, "You go see the head of the hospital and they'll figure out a day to operate on you."

And I went up to the commanding officer of the hospital and I recognized the name. He was the former doctor on the destroyer that I was on. So I says, "Doc, what do we do now?"

He says, "Well, you come back at four o'clock here in the office and we'll go home and figure out what we're going to do."

So we go in the office and there's a little paper bag on his desk, you know, about yea high and this wide. He picked that up and he said, "Well, now we got to go to the grocery store and get some grapefruit juice and then we'll go home, see." (Chuckles)

MS: Okay, I get it.

JL: And then orders came through to go way the hell back out to Manila or someplace, with the commander service war seven fleet. And my wife didn't like that 'cause she hadn't seen me for a while. One rule in the Navy was if you're an officer, you find the admiral's wife that's working on some damn project. It doesn't make any difference what it is, but this particular admiral's wife had a ladies [*officers' wives club*] in the [*Presidential suite*] of the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. So Libby went up there to help her, whatever the admiral's wife wanted, she did. [*The admiral was*] transferred to Washington, head man at BUPERS [*in Washington D.C.*] And Libby told Mrs. McCullough what the problem was. And Mrs. McCullough says, "Oh, that poor boy has been out in the Pacific and he's a survivor of the *ARIZONA*. He shouldn't go back there now. Let me see what I can do."

So I got -- and I told the fellows back at the BOQ there where we were sleeping. I said, "These orders are going to get killed. There's going to be another set coming in."

They didn't believe me.

Well, I got orders to go up and see this admiral in Washington, which wasn't too far away. And he says, "Well, they don't do things like that when I was in the Navy, but we'll see," and he says, "you go down and see Lieutenant so-and-so."

And I go down and see the Lieutenant and he said, "Well, where do you want to go?"

So I said, "I want to go to Boston."

He says, "You're already up."

So I stayed in Boston for a year and then got orders to go back to Commander Service Force Seven Fleet in the Pacific and I told this fellow, I said, "I want to do something that I know what I'm doing," and I said, "something in the accounting field."

So they made me the admiral's man in charge of all the officers' clubs around Manila. That was a good job.

MS: Hey, that's . . .

JL: And that's where I finished up the war.

MS: That's great.

JL: And there's more stories too, but . . .

MS: Well, finish it up 'cause it sounded a little bit more fun and more enjoyable in a lot of ways than the way you had to start out.

JL: That's right. By that time, I was a Lieutenant Commander [*October 9, 1945.*]

MS: Well, it's fifty-five years since 1941 and the anniversary is going to be in a couple more days. What kind of thoughts and feelings do you have now, revisiting your ship and that place?

JL: Well, number one, like ten other fellows, I want to be interred on that number three turret. We're working on that. The rule right now is that if you were physically aboard the ship on December 7, your remains can be interred on the ship. But we're working on a program so that anybody that was part of the ship's crew on December 7 could have that privilege. That's number one. [*Rules changed. Any crewmember as of December 7, 1941 (on ship or ashore) may be*]

And the second thing is that way back in about 1981, or before that, my son was an ensign on a ship here in 1976. And I thought that it's too bad that nothing has ever been done so that fellows that were on the ship December 7 couldn't go back here and have a memorial service or something like that. So I worked on that and succeeded. In 1981, we probably had about seventy-five or 100 people who were either survivors of the *ARIZONA* or former ship's crew, going way back to 1916, or their relatives. And we did that, got that thing started and we repeated it in '86 and in 1991, we had 300 people out there.

And yesterday, that's the way it is you know. (Crying) Oh

Yesterday, we went back to the [*memorial*], to the reunion, which I always do on the first day we get here, is go right out there and get that over with. Then we had our beautiful memorial service up at Punchbowl. And in twenty years, I've learned how to get the government or the Army or the Navy to do things for you that I didn't know before. So we had the Marine band up there and [*an*] international color guard, the firing squad. Beautiful ceremony. And because we were the *USS ARIZONA*, they closed the memorial up there. And all the flags were flying just like on an important day. Beautiful.

MS: As it should be.

JL: And then next Saturday, [*we will*] inter three [*men*] in the ship. One of 'em, I don't personally know, but I was there when they did, when we interred

[*Guy Flannagan the officer*] I took to the hospital. And we'll have our own memorial service and I'll again be master of ceremonies and it's a tough job. But it's been my philosophy that what I do there is to get each one of those survivors to get up to the microphone and say anything he wants to say. Some can and some can't. But they appreciate it.

MS: As we do.

JL: Yeah.

MS: So briefly, if you had the chance to be here for the hundredth anniversary, and we're talking about a totally different generation again.

JL: Yeah.

MS: What do you want them to know? What do you want them to remember? What's the lesson of Pearl Harbor?

JL: The lesson is remember Pearl Harbor, [*Keep America*] alert. That's not quite -- how does that go? Remember [*the Arizona*.]

MS: Keep America alert.

JL: Yeah. Keep America alert.

MS: And if we can get that across generations from now, we'll be doing what you feel should be done?

JL: I don't think you're gonna do it, but that's what ought to be done. Well, that's the feeling a lot of us have, you know. (Chuckles) That's right.

MS: Joe, we appreciate your time and we appreciate your efforts and all that you've done in your organizing and we also appreciate your entire generation, especially those of you that were assigned to the battleship force and the *ARIZONA*. And thank you for sharing with us today.

JL: Very good. Glad to do it.

END OF INTERVIEW

*I am one of the three principals in the video "USS *ARIZONA*: The Life and Death of a Lady." This historic film was shown on TV artist entertainment-next in December 1991 and 1992. It starts with the launch of the ship in 1915 and ends with the attack on December 7, 1941. I accepted a floral wreath on

the memorial from a Japanese officer who dropped a bomb on the *ARIZONA*. It is for sale at the museum store at the memorial.