

#213 JOHN ANDERSON: USS ARIZONA

John Martini (JM): Okay, today is December 5, 1991. It's 1500 hours. This is an oral history interview tape with Mr. John Anderson. Mr. Anderson was a Bosun's Mate Second Class, on USS ARIZONA, on December 7, 1941. His battle station was fourteen-inch gun turret number four. At that time he was twenty-four years of age. This tape is being done by the National Park Service, USS ARIZONA Memorial -- my name is ranger John Martini -- and also television station KHET.

Now, thanks Mr. Anderson. Thanks for coming and sitting down. When did you get in the Navy?

John Anderson (JA): I joined the Navy in 1937, it was in the month of March. And I joined the Navy and went to training in Great Lakes, Illinois. And after training there three months in naval customs and etiquette, and the military activity. Incidentally, in those days, you were also taught landing force procedures. The Marines get the same type of training. But I don't think they do that today, but we did then. And after training I was assigned to the west coast and I went to Bremerton, Washington, and I went aboard the SARATOGA.

JM: The carrier, SARATOGA?

JA: Carrier SARATOGA, the old carrier. And they had too many people and the battleships had not enough. They were rather, shall we say, short-handed? And so I was assigned to the ARIZONA in Bremerton. And my first sea voyage was going out Puget Sound, out into the Pacific. It was quite a ride. I enjoyed that ride.

JM: Where did you go to?

JA: Well, we went down the coast to Long Beach. But then, I had never been a salt water sailor before, but after a few years, I was a deep water sailor, plenty of salt.

JM: When --- did you want a battleship or a carrier? Did you have a choice?

JA: Well, no, I was rather ignorant of the Navy, except I had an uncle who retired from the Navy and he used to bandy us around with his sea stories and his sea chanteys, and sing the sailor songs, and things like that. So he more or less intrigued us, my twin and I. Now, I joined the Navy before my twin did. My twin came in about three months later and he washed out in Naval air training because of depth perception, so he wound up being a swabby like I, on board a battleship.

JM: So you, at that time, when you joined the ARIZONA, you were Seaman, what, third class?

JA: Well, seaman second.

JM: Seaman second.

JA: Yeah.

JM: All right.

JA: And I became seaman first quite quickly. And mainly because I used to work for everything I ever got, and so I was in the Navy. Discipline was not something I was used to and I pitched in and made seaman right away and learned the trade, if you will, that a salt has to learn. I loved gunnery 'cause I'm a hunter from my home state of Minnesota. And so I was a good shot, and naturally I gravitated toward the gunnery department.

JM: I was going to ask about that. You don't get much bigger than a fourteen-inch gun.

JA: Well, I didn't realize that was what I was going to get into, but that's what happened. Short time later, my brother appeared. They sent him to the ARIZONA. And he was assigned to one of the anti-aircraft divisions, the Fifth Division on the ARIZONA.

JM: Did you guys request same ship?

JA: Well, I don't know if he did or not. I know that that's where we wound up.

JM: Mm-hm.

JA: And so we had a lot of communication back and forth because our divisions were very close together, but our gunnery duties were somewhat different. His was anti-aircraft and ours was for the main battery, the fourteen-inch rifles. And I was a gun pointer on those.

JM: What was his rank?

JA: He was a Bosun Mate Second [Class] at the time.

JM: So there was no problem with . . .

JA: No.

JM: . . . crossing ranks?

JA: No, we were the same. And incidentally, when he was training, he became a gun captain on the anti-aircraft batteries, which means his gun crew was under him. Well, I didn't let the grass grow. I tried to find out what his duties and he worked the anti-aircraft battery so that I was able to fill in as a gun crew member in case anything ever happened. And that was what I attempted to do on December 7, 1941. But we're a little ahead of the game here.

JM: In that --- because at turret number four, you were the gun pointer?

JA: Gun pointer on a fourteen-inch rifle.

JM: Mm-hm. You were physically inside the turret?

JA: Inside the turret.

JM: However, how I got there was something else. Quite a jolt. If that means, if that's of interest.

JA: Sure.

JM: Well, maybe we can say something about it. My duties as the day dawned -- wait a minute, I better get ahead of that, I better get ahead of that. My brother and I had gone ashore on liberty the night before. And we had come in off maneuvers on Friday, as I remember. And on the way in, I remember the bosun mate of the watch told me, he said, "We have to dog down all the "Z" doors," the ZED, that's what it means. That means for watertight integrity.

And that was unusual to me, it seemed, and our division to dog down "Z" doors. We weren't at war. We weren't in any condition watch of all the certain amount of guns manned, or anything, so I didn't understand that. But I did it anyway.

So we classed the "Z" doors. That means the ones with least access that's necessary. So then, we came here and then dogged these down, and they dropped the ammunition down into magazines. They usually did that, they didn't want to shoot any accidentally into Honolulu or someplace.

And so that day, we had liberty, so we went ashore together and we shopped around in the small shops. There weren't many shops here in Honolulu then that catered to what we wanted. What we wanted was Christmas cards, things like that, to send home to our folks. And that was what we went ashore for, 'cause we only had a couple hours liberty anyway. We had to be back by ten o'clock, or, if you know what that is, twenty-two.

And so we got the liberty boat back and went to bed. And that's the last time I saw my brother alive.

JM: Did you guys berth together?

JA: No, we didn't. We berthed in the divisions that we were supposed to be in and that's where you were supposed to be, because you had to be awakened for the watches you stood, and all that. If you went to a different division and berthed there, you'd be in trouble with the leading supervising petty officer.

In any case, we got back and the next morning, I awoke early. I had a chore to do, that was to make sure to clean sweep down in our quarter deck, on the port side, and also to make sure that the services were set up for church. Chaplain Kirkpatrick had to lead the church services. So I took a crew out to do that. Bill Guerin was in the crew, by the way. And give me the usual stuff (chuckles), but I got him out there and we got him on a broom, and we got him on a bench or two, and we got the pews set up. And we got everything set up. But we were a little bit late doing this. And so we went in for chow, or breakfast, into the quarterdeck hatch. When I got in there, I heard a bomb explode, but I didn't know it was a bomb at the time.

JM: Know where it was?

JA: No. I just heard a noise, a real loud noise. So then, the mess cook said, "Take a look out the port hole"

So we took a look out and he said, "Andy, there's a, a plane dipped down with red balls on its wings."

So I rushed over to the porthole and took a look, and sure enough. You know, tip down, I saw the red balls, and then I saw an explosion underneath it, and I said -- on Ford Island. And I said, "Uh-oh, that's a Japanese plane!"

And I run, I raced for the general alarm system, which was general quarters. It was the yellow gadget, thing you pull the switch, up on the side of the bulkhead, on the outside of the quarterdeck. And I raced for that, but I got to the quarterdeck door, and the hatch was open, and then the bomb exploded along side the ship, and it blew me back in. So then I went down below, through the armor deck, the hatch was open, and went on down about two or three decks, and got under the barbette, came up through the barbette into my gun station, which is the way you're supposed to go. We had a trail that you followed to do that, to get into battle position.

And when I got in there, a bomb hit the side of the turrets, bounced off and gave us terminal illness, a headache, I'll tell you. And . . .

JM: Can you back up? So the bomb, it hit the fourteen-inch or on . . .

JA: It hit the fourteen-inch side plate.

JM: What did that sound like inside?

JA: It sounded like a tremendous drum. Now, I mean, if it had exploded, it would have killed us all.

JM: This was a dud?

JA: No, no. It went down below through the armor, and blew up down there.

JM: So . . .

JA: It hit on kind of a ricochet.

JM: Whoa!

JA: And it peeled off an enormous piece of steel. I saw it later when I came out of the turret. Red hot. But anyway, it didn't go through, and thank goodness for that. But it sure gave us something.

Anyway, so then I was in the gun seat as a pointer, but the lights went out. We began to smell fumes of gas, of some type of poison from the batteries that were down below that the salt water was getting into. And cordite exploding ammunition, and that sort of thing. And all kinds of noises you could hear through the turret, believe it or not. And I decided that being in this turret wasn't the place for me. I needed to be on an anti-aircraft gun, and the one my brother was on. I knew he had to be there, because he followed the same thing I did.

JM: Could you -- can you make a decision like that as a bosun's mate?

JA: Yes, I could. I also made the decision by running through the back of turret, and turret captain Campbell was there, and I said, "I'm going outside on an anti-aircraft gun." I said, "There --- those aren't ships shooting at us, those are bombs."

He says, "Go for it."

So I took off, out the trap door and I was followed by Guerin . . .

JM: Uh-huh?

JA: . . . and John Evans, boatswain boss, Williams, was a gunner's mate, and Jake Pacitti. I remember these guys following me out. And Bill Guerin took off right behind me. And I took off down the deck, toward the boat deck, to get on the ladder, to get up there on one of those anti-aircraft guys, particularly the one my brother was on. Bill Guerin had headed over to the side, and I saw him and Turkey Graham, with their fire axes, banging away while I was heading for the ladder.

JM: Banging away at . . .

JA: At these lines, the *VESTAL*'s lines.

JM: Had the forward magazines blown up?

JA: They hadn't blown up. No. The *VESTAL* was still alongside. And when I got to the ladder, there was a fellow on fire under the ladder. So I reached down to get him and pull him out of there, and then we had a terrible explosion, and it blew me back aft. Kind of knocked me a little bit silly. But I hung on to this fellow and I decided the thing for him to do was to get him off in the clear, where he wouldn't get hit by the strafers, 'cause they were strafing us too. So I dragged him around the side of, or the stern of number four turret and back over on the starboard side, where Admiral [*Lieutenant Commander*] Fuqua was standing. And here was a bunch of wounded people laying there, and I started gathering them up and bringing him back over there. And it was very difficult to lift him because they were so terribly burned, and I mean really shattered, blown legs and arms, and head, and everything. And all I did was grab them and run, the ones I could get. And I had to do the fireman's carry because I couldn't hold onto 'em, their skin would slide off. And they were just raw meat underneath and their eyes were just blank stares, because they were, you know, just blasted. And no hair left.

JM: These were guys who would have been on deck . . .

JA: That's right.

JM: . . . during the explosion.

JA: And they were some of the guys off those guns up forward. So I finally headed back to the ladder, see if I could get up there. And I tried and it was impossible to get up there, the fire was so intense. It was just a raging fire. Everything was on fire. There was no water in the fire mains. One of the guys tried to turn on the water and there was just nothing there. And I believe that was Williams. And then John Evans was trying to get a life raft off the side of number three turret, and he had found an ax somewhere to do that with. All the time being shot at by these strafing planes.

JM: Did -- it's almost a silly question, but were you scared while this was going on?

JA: Well, I don't think I thought about being scared. I thought about my twin. My main effort was getting up on that boat deck to join that anti-aircraft battery, because they didn't have enough people in the batteries to begin with. And they were shorthanded. Whenever we used to fire in practice, we used to fire on one side, then take all the guys and go over to the other side, and fire the guns on the other side, 'cause there was not enough people to do it, the whole thing at the same time. And I guess, maybe fortunately, there

wasn't, because there just would have been more people killed if there had been a full complement aboard. That's the way I see it now.

JM: When you saw that there was no possible way getting forward, you put yourself to helping the wounded the best you could.

JA: Right. And there were a number of other people that did the same thing. I --- the names of those people are difficult to recall because some of them were third division sailors who had gotten out of their turret and guys out of the fourth division turret, those sailors, those are the ones that were doing this. Some were blown overboard, some jumped over and swam ashore. John Evans fortunately did not. He stayed with me -- and neither did Bill, just that I remember. A guy name of Forbis, I believe he jumped overboard and swam ashore.

But in any case, Charles Otterman was one of the lucky ones. He managed to survive. What happened was, I had a load of various parts of people and I came over to -- and the ship had slipped to a slight slant. And Admiral Fuqua then was a Lieutenant Commander, by the way, and we were wearing whites. This is something that I happen to remember. People keep wondering what he was wearing. He was wearing whites. You know, the dress white?

JM: Sure.

JA: Officer of the deck duty. Anyway, there was a slight slant and there was a boat came along side, and the Coxswain aboard was a fellow by the name of Alexander. I'll never forget that. And it was a barge, admiral's barge. It was stove in and there was a bunch of wounded people on there that had already gotten in there. So I dumped these people in and then Fuqua, who knew me, 'cause he was my division officer, said, "Get in, Andy."

And I says, "I can't go, my brother's up there."

And he looked up there and he said, "He's gone. He couldn't have made it. It's just, it's too bad. You've got to go, otherwise, you know, you're going to go with him. You're going to be blown up too."

So he give me a shove, that's how I got in. I wasn't going in there, but he shoved me. And so I was on the bow of the boat, 'cause there was no place else. And John Evans was in the bow also. And then Guerin, I couldn't see. I don't know where he went. And --- did he swim?

JM: He swam, yeah.

JA: Well, I didn't know how he got ashore. But anyway, then the boat slowly headed toward Ford Island, and we picked up a guy in the water. I reached down and got him, and John gave me a hand. We pulled him in, his name was Rupert. And I took my t-shirt off, that's all I had left, and wiped his oil off so he couldn't see, 'cause he couldn't see where he was going. And the fire was terrible in the water.

So we got over to the corner of Ford Island and the people that were in the boat unloaded it and I couldn't stand it, so I decided I'm going back. And there was a small boat drifting out there, off shore about fifty to a hundred yard, and a guy by the name of Rose came up, one of the sailors, and he said, "You going back out there?"

And I said, "Yes, I am."

And he says, "I'll go with you."

And I says, "Let's do it."

And a fellow by the name of Rentslaf, or [Edward Louis] Wentalaff, one of the sailors off the ARIZONA, tried to prevent me from doing it. And he tried to, he held onto me, but I slapped him around a little bit and he let go. And I remember this fellow and if you ever talk to him, he may remember that. And he says, "You'll get killed out there."

And I said, "Well, that's where I'm going."

So we got in the boat. We swam out, got in it, got it started, went back to the ARIZONA, and under the ARIZONA's crane swung out, was another motor launch that got in there and Charles Otterman was driving this one. And he is the guy, I think, is the bravest man I ever saw. He didn't get any medal, but he was a brave man. He had driven in there, and that stuff was exploding in there. And he went in there so those guys on the crane could drop down and had a chance to survive. You see, they come off of the fore tops. You know how high and how bad it was up there. And they were being roasted. And they got on the crane, but he was in there and he motioned for them to come down, and one of them dropped in and he fished them out. All the time, he was under intense pressure. Well, these things remained cataloged in my mind.

I backed out of there and I decided that wasn't for me, 'cause he had it under control. So I'd go around to the seaward, to the channel side, on the port side, and pick up people from that side. So Rose and I backed it -- it was a whale boat, is what it was, a twenty-six footer. We backed out, went around there on the port side. The blister tops were underwater down then.

JM: She was going down.

JA: Yes, she was. So --- and the deck was awash. The main deck was awash. I went aboard and Rose held onto the extension that was there, so the boat didn't drift off. And the water was on fire there, by the way. But he was trying to hang on, so he stayed out of the fire. And I got on board and I opened a hatch that was there, and there was a fellow in there by the name of Cruise. And Cruise lives in California, survived. I got the hatch open and he took off running, and I never saw him again until, oh, a reunion some years later. And I don't think he never paid any attention to who opened that hatch. But anyway, we got it open and undogged it -- and by hand, by the way. I didn't think I was that strong.

JM: This was one of those big, plushed armor hatches that came like that?

JA: Yeah, well, it was the hatch to the officer's pantry, next to the number four turret.

JM: Oh yeah.

JA: And it was a square hatch, about four by four. Well anyway, he got out, you know. Then we picked up a few dead and wounded. We picked up BRE-ZELL, a ship's cook. He was dead. He had a knife rammed through him, about this long, one of those big, long butcher knives.

JM: How did -- what had happened, in the . . .

JA: Oh, he had got blown out of the galley. And apparently, he had been cutting meat or something, 'cause it rammed right into him and killed him. And I recognized him. And a number of arms and legs, and people, 'cause I didn't know what to do. I figured that was the only thing I could do. I couldn't get up on the boat deck either, 'cause it was still, it was burning like mad. And there was no way up there. So I finally resigned myself to the fact that I better get going, and because the ship was probably going to blow up anyway. But it didn't blow up any more than that, but there was a lot of bombing and shells coming down from the ships that were shooting at 'em, they were exploding. And we went down the channel. I stopped at the *WEST VIRGINIA*, and I'm sure it's logged in there. I asked them if they needed any people going to Hospital Point, and the officer on deck -- the ship was sunk then. I went, of course, went around the *OKLAHOMA*, which was turned over. And he said, "What are your orders?"

And I said, "I don't have any." I said, "Have you got any wounded people?"

And he said, "We funneled 'em off to the *CALIFORNIA*, to the beach." He said, "Carry out your orders."

I said, "Well, my orders are to do whatever I think I can do."

He says, "Take off."

So I rode on down to about a spot 150 yards from the seaplane ramp on Ford Island, across from Hospital Point. And that's where we got hit.

JM: By?

JA: By a shell, I think. Now, some people think it was a bomb or I don't know. I don't know what it was. I don't know, suddenly everything exploded and the ship, the boat came apart and I was back in the water. And that's where I lost Rose. And *BRE-ZELL*, and all the unknowns, and I couldn't make it any further. I . . . swam to shore . . . to Ford Island.

JM: You had been somewhere down near the seaplane ramps, where they started.

JA: So when I got ashore, I ran down the dock, down the island. There's a road running around the island near the beach, and I ran down this road and I found a rifle, that somebody had been carelessly left leaning against a tree and some ammunition. And I picked that up and I was a good rifleman anyway. I could hit what I saw and I knew I needed something. And so I took this rifle and I took off. The planes were on fire behind me, and these planes were still getting Ford Island and dropping, and the ships along side there. And I took off and I finally got down to the bunker and I ran into a Walt Gaskins, who was off the *ARIZONA*. And Walt had somehow got a hold of a Marine uniform. There was another Marine there, and he gave me a shirt, 'cause I didn't have anything left on me. So I had a shirt, no pants, no shoes, no hair. It burned, the hair was burned off. And I had a shrapnel in, in my right shoulder. And I was singed. I was burnt. So Gaskins said, "I've got a machine gun." He says, "I'm going in that hole over there," and he says, "you want to join me?"

And I says, "You bet your life."

So we parked in this hole on Ford Island runway, and he handled the machine gun. There was no tracers in the belts, unfortunately, or otherwise we probably would have hit what we didn't want to hit. But anyway, when those planes came in that night, we fired at it. He had a machine gun and I hope he didn't hit any of those planes. He couldn't tell where he was shooting, 'cause without tracers that night, you couldn't tell. And I know I didn't hit anything with my rifle because it was dark. I could, you know, I'm sure that I hit in there with a thirty-yard six.

JM: Unlike . . .

JA: It was a sprinkler, I remember, it had bubble action. And so the next morning, why, some Marine detail come up and relieved us of the weapons and said we were supposed to go to ten-ten dock. The survivors were supposed to go over there. So we got a ride across the harbor, and the *ARIZONA* crew were mustered there, the ones that survived, and everybody was wounded. And I didn't get a Purple Heart [Medal], by the way. And I volunteered for hazardous duty. I wanted to go with the *ARIZONA* crew to any battleship or cruiser they'd send us to. And they decided to break us up in small units to wherever they needed replacements, or to fill out the other gun crews or ships, in stations. And so I tried to stick with the guys, but it was impossible. They didn't give us a break that morning. They just sent us out wherever they needed a guy with your rate . . .

JM: Right.

JA: . . . to fill the billet. And I never did find out what happened to my brother, except for one fellow who was blinded. He was burned so badly. He did tell me that he was in a gun crew next to my brother, and he was wounded on it, and he was laying on Ford Island, by the way, when I talked to him. It was just briefly. That he'd been shot by machine gunning, and strafing, and knocked down, but he got up and got the gun in action, and got the crew back in action. And according to his story, what little he could tell me, was that they had a misfire, so my brother got the gun crew away from the gun, which you're supposed to do in case of a misfire, and try to clear it. And when they cleared it, the gun exploded, and that killed him, according to him.

JM: The breach exploded?

JA: Yes, with the shell in it. So, anyway, I was sent to a destroyer, *MacDONOUGH*, [DD] three fifty-one. And I've made up my mind that I don't want to appear bloody thirsty, or anything like that, but wherever I went, I'd volunteer and I knew I was as good a sailor as any Jap that I'd ever have to face and that I was going to shoot my way to Tokyo and I sure did. And I volunteered for the raids, and I made the Asiatic-Pacific raids, made the Makin raid, made the raid at Hollandia, and Salamaua and Lae. Raided at -- you know, was in the Truk raid. And I was in the landings and captured defense at Guadalcanal. I went to Tarawa, made the landing at Tarawa. And the list goes on and on and I could say that I (chuckles) had a few battle scars.

But, then of course, I was there the night that the survivors of the *ARIZONA* went down with the battle, with the cruisers *VINCENNES*, and *ASTORIA*, and *QUINCY*, in the battle for Guadalcanal. We lost to a crew, Australian cruisers that night. And it was a bad night for everybody. It was one of the disasters, probably almost as bad as the Pearl Harbor disaster.

JM: And, in the last couple of minutes that we have, fifty years later, how do you find yourself able to go out to the memorial with your ship? Has fifty years helped put some distance, or is it still hard?

JA: Well, there's a slogan called, "Remember Pearl Harbor." And this is something I'll never forget. I spent three years in China watching this activity go on. I was actually --- I had my baptism of fire long before Pearl Harbor. And the thing that hit me the most was the fact that this happened there and when it happened, and that I lost my twin, which makes it so, just makes remembering so vivid. I probably wouldn't think of it any more than the other fights we were in, because there were so many of 'em, and some of them were a lot worse. But this one sticks because that's where I lost my twin. And if you would like to know a little further, I do not hold any animosity toward the Japanese people, at least the new generation, because they were not responsible for this. These young people today in Japan are just like our young people. And if I be honest with myself, I really shouldn't hold any against the veterans of Japan, who followed the orders of their superiors and were quite capable warriors. Let's say that. Admirable.

JM: They were a . . .

JA: Very capable warriors. They were very capable. But then I have to say this, so were our warriors. And we prevailed, and I guess I can't say that I'd ever take back the rounds I fired then. But I didn't do it in anger. But it's sort of win this war and get it over with.

JM: I'm glad you were able to make it to come back today.

JA: I am glad myself. And to me, it's not a time for joy or it is to see old sailors that I served with. That is the joy, and remembrance. But it's the total . . . and that's what makes it worthwhile.

JM: Thank you very much, Mr. Anderson.

JA: Mahalo.

END OF INTERVIEW