

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
#408**

**JOHN B. CAULFIELD, SR.**

**USS *DOBBIN*, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON  
DECEMBER 6, 2001  
BY CAPTAIN MARSHALL HANSON**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Marshall Hanson (MH): Mr. Caulfield, we're about to do oral history 408. The following oral history interview was conducted by Captain Marshall Hanson of the Naval Historical Center Detachment, in support of the US[S] *Arizona* Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001 at 12:07 p.m. The person being interviewed is John Bernard Caulfield, who was a storekeeper first class attached to the USS *Dobbin*, while waiting for the USS *Patterson*, on December 7, 1941. Is that correct?

John Caulfield (JC): That is correct.

MH: For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

JC: John Bernard Caulfield, born in Orient, Illinois, March 4, 1917.

MH: Now...

JC: I will add this, John Bernard Caulfield, Sr. as I have a son by the same name.

MH: Very good! What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

JC: My hometown in 1941 would've been Edinburg, Illinois.

MH: Okay.

JC: E-D-I-N-B-U-R-G.

MH: Thank you!

JC: Edinburg, Illinois.

MH: What were your parents' names?

JC: Parents' name was John Bernard Caulfield and my mother's name was Lia Caulfield. Maiden name D-I-E-D-R-I-C-H, Diedrich.

MH: So did you have any siblings, brothers and sisters?

JC: Yes, had one brother, Edward, one sister, Margaret.

MH: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

JC: Edinburg High School.

MH: Okay. Where and why did you enlist?

JC: I had gone through one year at Illinois State Normal University and I was somewhat bored with it, disenchanted with it and I just wanted to do something else, so I joined the navy in 1936.

MH: And what month in 1936?

JC: Probably in December of '36. A bit vague on that.

MH: Okay. How many years did you have overall in the service?

JC: About seven or seven and a half.

MH: And my understanding is while, although you came in as an enlisted person, you rose up through the ranks, became a chief, then became a warrant and then got a commission.

JC: Yes, that's correct.

MH: And when you left the service, what was your highest rank?

JC: Lieutenant JG.

MH: Okay. Now, in 1936, you went through your boot camp and as a—were you first trained as a storekeeper, or was that something you...

JC: I went through the boot camp and then I went to a school where they trained to be either a radiomen, yeoman, or a storekeeper.

MH: Okay. And from that, you came out as a storekeeper?

JC: Yes.

MH: Now you indicated that in 1941, you were waiting for the USS *Patterson*.

JC: Yes.

MH: What was your first assignment out of A school.

JC: Again please.

MH: Where were you assigned when you left A school?

JC: Oh, I was assigned to the USS *Whitney*.

MH: So you went to the *Whitney*, which was also at Pearl Harbor at the time.

JC: Yes.

MH: And how long were you on the *Whitney*?

JC: Oh, possibly three or four months.

MH: Okay. And did you have a permanent assignment after the *Whitney*?

JC: Yes. I went to the USS *Raleigh*.

MH: *Raleigh*. And how long were you on board the *Raleigh*?

JC: Probably a couple of years.

MH: Okay. So you were familiar with several ships at Pearl Harbor, weren't you?

JC: Yes.

MH: Okay. Now, you were, you reported aboard the *Dobbin*, waiting to go to the *Patterson*. Where were you before you went to the *Dobbin*?

JC: I was on board another destroyer. I believe it was the *Flusser*, [DD-]368 I believe, the *Flusser*. And then I was, I made, at that time I made storekeeper

first class and I presumably needed a storekeeper first class on the *Patterson*, so I was assigned to the *Patterson*, and I checked into the *Dobbin*, waiting for it to come into port.

MH: So basically you were transferred because of a promotion.

JC: Yes.

MH: And the *Patterson* needed a first class and they transferred you over there to fill that position?

JC: Yes.

MH: Okay. One question that we're asking is about the time preceding the attack. Now, you first got to Pearl Harbor when?

JC: Pearl Harbor, probably two years previous to that.

MH: So you'd been in Hawaii for two years?



JC: Yes.

MH: And did you have any impressions? Where were you before being assigned to Pearl Harbor?

JC: We were on board, San Diego, on board the *Whitney*, transferred to the *Raleigh*. Then we went on maneuvers off of Guantanamo Bay, in the Atlantic. We were scheduled to go into New York for rest, recreation. And at that time, Hitler made his famous speech and we were immediately transferred back to the West Coast. Stayed on the West Coast for possibly a month or two, then the *Raleigh*, which was the lead ship of several destroyers, probably a destroyer squadron. Then the whole squadron with the *Raleigh* moved into Pearl Harbor.

MH: Okay. Which did you like better, San Diego or Pearl Harbor?

JC: San Diego. Yes, San Diego.

MH: Any particular reasons why San Diego was more your favorite?

JC: A girlfriend.

MH: Girlfriends? Oh, we won't tell your wife about that!

JC: (Laughs) Oh no.

MH: Okay. Now moving ahead, on December 6, which is the Saturday just before the attack, do you remember what you were doing?

JC: Yes. Being on the *Dobbin* and not having any particular duties, I was given shore leave, so I stayed over in Honolulu overnight on December 6.

MH: Okay. When you went ashore in Honolulu, we hear a lot of the sailors took bus or the taxi over to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and then that became kind of the central point and then they sometimes went off to clubs from there. Is that what you tended to do?

JC: Yes. On several occasions I would stay overnight at the YMCA.

MH: Were you staying at the YMCA on the night of December 6?

JC: No, I was staying at a friend's house.

MH: Okay, so you were ashore?

JC: Yes.

MH: Okay. Can you tell me, starting with your first awareness on the morning of December 7, what you did and how you moved into the environment of the attack that Sunday morning?

JC: I first heard some shots and my first impression that perhaps the army was practicing. I was thinking, why would they be doing that on Sunday morning? Then I heard a little more and finally, as I found out later, it was the *Arizona* that blew up. At that point, I knew something was drastically

wrong. So I walked outside of my friend's house and some fellow said to me, "Are you sailor boy?"

I was in my civilian clothes at that time. Said, "Yes, I'm a sailor."

He says, "Pearl Harbor all blowed to hell."

So I went back, put on my uniform and immediately returned to Pearl Harbor.

MH: Okay. Whereabouts was your friend's house?

JC: Downtown Honolulu.

MH: Okay. So did you take a taxi to get back to Pearl Harbor?

JC: Yes, I did.

MH: What type of traffic conditions did you find?

JC: There was very little traffic, very little traffic. Direct route.

MH: So about what time did you get back on base?

JC: Probably an hour and a half after the attack started. Hour and a half to two hours.

MH: So you got back on base at about nine-thirty, ten o'clock?

JC: About nine-thirty, probably closer to ten because the attack was over by the time I got there.

MH: Okay. What type of security did you find at the gate when you arrived?

JC: There was none.

MH: No security?

JC: No security.

MH: Not even a guard?

JC: Nothing.

MH: So you just walked...

JC: We just drove on.

MH: You just walked through and nobody was there to stop you or direct you?

JC: No. No.

MH: Very interesting.

JC: The cab driver just drove me right on the base.

MH: Okay. Now the *Dobbin*, which you were assigned to while waiting, was reefed out with a group of destroyers out in the harbor.

JC: Beg your pardon?

MH: The *Dobbin*...

JC: Yes.

MH: ...was in a reef of destroyers out in the harbor...

JC: Yes.

MH: ...they were all tied out together and they were out at one of the mooring buoys.

JC: Yes, that's correct.

MH: Did you try and get out to your ship or did they assign you to go to somewhere else on base?

JC: No, I stayed on the *Dobbin* 'til the *Patterson* came in. I think the *Patterson* was already in the harbor at that time. And during the attack, as I understand, the *Patterson* shot down one ship, one plane.

MH: Okay.

JC: So it was just a matter of getting organized the next day and getting aboard the *Patterson*.

MH: Now, how did you get from the pier out to the *Dobbin*?

JC: There was a motor launch that was pretty well beat up, would vibrate a lot as we went out. It had been through a lot. There was oil on the water and it managed to get through the oil. And then I went aboard the *Dobbin*.



MH: Okay. As you were going from the fleet landing out to the *Dobbin*, what was the impression of the scene that you saw?

JC: Well, my impression of that, I think I was so overwhelmed and awed by all that had taken place that I do not think I had any particular impression. Yeah, I think I was too overwhelmed to have more than that type of an impression.

MH: Okay. When you reported aboard the *Dobbin*, did they have you do any special assignments? Did you do any type of work?

JC: Yes, I went into their coding room.

MH: Okay.

JC: And did, started breaking down the messages with—I had a warrant officer in charge and working with him. And one impression I have of that, around dusk, for some reason or another I happened to be standing out on deck and

a plane, I could see a plane coming in. And I saw our own plane from the *Enterprise* being shot down.

MH: Very sad moment.

JC: Yeah. At that time, I presumed it was an enemy plane, as well as everybody else. As I later found out, the pilots from the *Enterprise* was not giving the proper signals that they were friendly.

MH: Oh. On that flight, there were only three pilots that survived of which two of their planes crashed...

JC: Yeah.

MH: ...and then the last pilot to come in brought it into Ford Island...

JC: Yes.

MH: ...and when he actually, he did a ground loop to stop it since his brakes were out from the combat damage, when he brought it back to the hangar, there was a Marine there with a fifty caliber machine gun that was shooting right at him, point blank.

JC: Oh, I was not aware of that.

MH: Well, one of the other pilots from the *Enterprise* came behind the Marine and hit him with a battle helmet to get him to stop firing the gun.

JC: Oh.

MH: So he survived, but it was that scary of an environment that you were all facing. Now, you knew people on the *Raleigh* and on the *Whitney*, and they also went through the attack. Were any of your friends affected by the events on December 7?

JC: Not that I know of. With the *Patterson*, I went aboard the *Patterson* then within one or two days, we took a load of bombs out to Christmas Island.

We took them to Christmas Island, came back to Pearl Harbor and as the captain said to us at that time, he called all the first class and chiefs said, “Okay, now we’ve delivered these bombs. Now we’re going out looking for trouble.”

MH: Okay. Now did you have a chance to go ashore Christmas Island?

JC: No.

MH: Were you involved at the offload of the bombs?

JC: No, I was not. That was not part of my job.

MH: So, to your knowledge, you were just supporting an air group that was out at Christmas Island?

JC: Correct. And as I recall, that was getting very near Christmas Day also.

MH: Indeed. Now, you were looking for trouble while on the *Patterson*.

JC: Yes.

MH: What was the next assignment that the *Patterson* had?

JC: Well, we were assigned into South Pacific for the group that was off of Australia.

MH: Okay. So did trouble find you?

JC: No, not a whole lot. Not a whole lot. We were escorting various ships out of Brisbane and Sydney. One time we were escorting a ship and I was standing on deck at eight o'clock and I saw the ship behind us blow into pieces and sink within just a few minutes. Hit by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine of course.

MH: So did that elicit any special emotions or being in warfare, were you prepared for that type of action?

JC: I had no particular emotion on it.

MH: Now you were telling me in the pre-interview that the *Patterson* faced some special action at Savo Island.

JC: Yes.

MH: Can you tell us something about that?

JC: Yes. In the battle of Savo Island, we were one of the picket ships. The *Ralph Talbot* was ahead of us, part of our destroyer. And as I recall, we had one man staying in the wing, in the bridge at midnight, and it was very dark. And he said, "There's something out there."

And about that time, I think we illuminated very briefly and exposed the Japanese cruisers, four of them. The Japanese cruisers immediately fired on us and hit our after gun and exploded our ready ammunition. I was in the decoding room, which is dark, and I was decoding a message saying, "Expect the Japanese task force to arrive at two a.m."

Well, that was midnight. They arrived two hours early. So we were not at general quarters nor was any of our other ships in the harbor at general quarters and that was one horrible mistake, not to have been at general quarters. And I put that responsibility on Admiral Crutchley, who was in the *Australia*, about 200 miles remote from our task force. Which brings up this point to me, is that none of our servicemen should ever be under any foreign command. If we had had an American admiral there, we would've not lost four cruisers. Our ship, our destroyer might not have been damaged. On the other hand, we had sixteen torpedoes on our destroyer. Eight of 'em were trained out on the Japanese cruisers. We were hit and for some reason, the order did not go, "Fire the torpedoes." Our torpedoes were not fired. If they had been fired, probably would've changed the whole course of that battle, 'cause we would've knocked out two, at least two of their cruisers.

As a result, the *Canberra*, the *Quincy*, *Vincennes*, *Astoria*, and *Chicago* steamed out of the harbor, presumably \_\_\_\_\_. The Japanese changed their attention from us, very fortunately for me. And they started firing on

the cruisers. And they knocked all of those cruisers down because they had not been notified properly that the Japanese were there with their cruisers.

Now, the *Canberra* was hit and sinking and we went alongside the *Canberra* and we took off about, oh, 100 men or more from the *Canberra*, had them all on our deck at midnight. And one thing I remember vividly is the captain of the *Canberra* crying out for water. He had been, stomach had been injured severely. And the doctor, whom I was quite friendly with, he said, "I cannot help that man." He says, "I'm a pediatrician!"

And so we had these 100 men on there. The cruiser *Chicago* had been hit and it had steamed away from the action. Well it turned around and came back in. We saw it coming back in so we shot its mast off. And the *Chicago* fired at us and missed us, fortunately!

But so we were, at that time, we were tied alongside the *Canberra*, taking these men off and their guns were still firing automatically. But so the only thing we could do, we cut the hawsers and gave it full speed ahead so when



we finally broke loose, we tilted, listed severely. And of course a destroyer will come right back up. So it did come back up.

And so by the time we found out we were fighting our own ship, well, we, of course, was fine. And that's part of the story of Savo Island. It could've been saved, our destroyers, if we had made the proper attack, we would've saved our cruisers. We could've \_\_\_\_\_ save that battle.

The other mistake was our Admiral Crutchley, who did not take really command and have an organization for our battle plan. Now these are mistakes that we made.

The great mistake was made by Admiral Mikawa, in charge of the Japanese cruisers. He had already eliminated all of his opposition. All he had to do was to go back into the harbor, and we had numerous supply ships with the Marines still on board 'em. He could've gone in there and destroyed everything in there. But instead of that, he steamed away. He let us finish to unload our supplies. He permitted us to unload all the remaining Marines.

He could've changed the whole Battle of Guadalcanal, had he gone in there and shot all those transports down, but he did not do it. Admiral Mikawa's mistake.

MH: There were many lessons learned early in the war. Is this your first visit back to Hawaii since...

JC: No, I was here for our fiftieth anniversary.

MH: Now, the people that you met during the fiftieth, since you were a little more removed from the battle, what were your feelings about your new shipmates that you met at the fiftieth anniversary and who you've met in these past few days at the sixtieth?

JC: I'm sorry. I have a little hearing problem so I did not fully understand your question.

MH: The people that you met at the fiftieth and that you're meeting again at the sixtieth, what are your feelings about these individuals who were your new shipmates?

JC: I don't have anything particularly feelings about it. We're just ten years older and hopefully we will have a seventieth.

MH: Well, we hope so.

JC: Mm-hmm.

MH: Well, I have no more questions. I would first of all like to thank you for sharing your experiences with us and also I would like to thank you for serving this nation.

JC: Oh, thank you. So nice to meet you captain! Been a long time.

MH: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW