

#253 JOHN EARLE
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 5, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
AUGUST 10, 1997

(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki, December 5, 1996 at 4:20 p.m. The person being interviewed is John Earle, who was assigned to the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

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

John Earle (JE): My full name is John Horatio Earle.

MS: And you were born when?

JE: Seven, January, 1915.

MS: And where?

JE: Reading, Pennsylvania.

MS: Very good. And was Reading your hometown in 1941?

JE: I had essentially severed all connections with people -- my parents had died and whatnot. It wasn't --- I was stateless. The service was my hometown.

MS: So wherever your ship was . . .

JE: Yeah, right, yeah.

MS: . . . wherever the assignment was was your hometown.

JE: Yeah.

MS: Okay. Now, you joined the Navy -- or I should say, excuse me -- the Marines, when?

JE: In 1936.

MS: Thirty-six. Where was boot camp?

JE: No, I didn't go to boot camp. I went to VMI, Virginia Military Institute and I entered the Marines as a Second Lieutenant.

MS: Very good. And so where was your first assignment then?

JE: Marine Barracks, Navy Yard, Philadelphia.

MS: So did you get a chance to move around the nation a little bit, or here in the Pacific, before . . .

JE: My wife thought sometimes too much. We did move around. But every two years or so, Marines and Navy, you know, changes station, inevitable.

MS: So you were an officer and did you feel at the time, that you were able to get a little bit of a break here in Hawaii because of the cost of living and being able to bring your wife over?

JE: Well, not really. My ship was -- (clears throat) excuse me -- home ported in Long Beach, California, and yes, I did bring my wife, but I had to bring her out at my own expense. And that was kind of hard to come by when you're a lieutenant. I was a lieutenant at the time. And we found it, you know, quite costly to live out here.

MS: You were assigned to USS *TENNESSEE* at the time?

JE: The *TENNESSEE*, right.

MS: How long did you serve with her?

JE: Almost two years.

MS: Okay. What was your job there?

JE: I was a Lieutenant in the Marine detachment.

MS: Okay.

JE: I was the middle rank officer. We had a Captain, First Lieutenant, and a Second Lieutenant.

MS: And the main job of the Marine force on a battleship was what?

JE: We manned the secondary battery and our control -- my control station was secondary aft, up on the top of the mainmast.

MS: Why were Marines on ships anyway?

JE: To keep the sailors in line.

(Laughter)

JE: Well, we did police, you know, the unguarded here and there. And we provided orderlies for the exec and the captain, and the admiral, if you had an admiral.

MS: And if you had a landing . . .

JE: Yes, but that was part of the reason historically why Marines were aboard, but in the present day and age, to think of landing Marines from a battleship in a hostile situation, it just ain't on. No.

MS: Very good.

JE: That wasn't really our mission.

MS: So, as a sea-going Marine, did you have a little bit of choice of where you could be stationed? Did you have any say . . .

JE: No.

MS: . . . "I want a battleship," or, "I want a cruiser," or . . .

JE: No. I, in fact, had requested to be stationed in China and I didn't get it. My friends did get it and they waved their orders in front of me and, "Ha, ha, I got China, you didn't," and those poor devils ended up in Corregidor.

I was very lucky. Anyway, I was posted to *TENNESSEE* and I was delighted. She was a flagship, of course.

MS: Right.

JE: That's the best ship in the fleet.

MS: Well, the highest there though.

JE: No, it had the gunnery E. On every gun and turret, it had the engineering E. It was a very battle efficient ship.

MS: And that was battle division?

JE: Bat Div Two.

MS: And then . . .

JE: It was the flagship of Bat Div Two.

MS: You had orders right before the attack to go to USS *ARIZONA*.

JE: I had those orders for about a month to leave the Marine detachment *TENNESSEE* and go over to the *ARIZONA* and assume command of that Marine detachment. A chap who had the Marine detachment, Allen Shapley, had been promoted to major and he was over-ranked for his billet. So it was logical that I would be ordered to go over and relieve him, but I never could catch up to the *ARIZONA* because they were in another Bat Div -- I think it was one or three, perhaps. But there was a rotational policy among the battleship divisions for months before the war started. Two and four would be out. One and three would be in, in Pearl Harbor. And then we would rotate. And on 6 December, for the first time, I was able to join the *ARIZONA*.

MS: So you were in the process of doing an inventory or kind of wrapping up your duties on *TENNESSEE*.

JE: I had wrapped them up and gone back, oh, I don't know, one o'clock in the afternoon or so, by motor boat, and joined the *ARIZONA* and Allen Shapley took me up and met the Admiral, and met the Captain. And then he and I had the job, onerous job, of inventorying all of the Marine stores - - rifles, bayonets, belts and uniforms and the whole bit. And we were doing that in the evening down in the double bottoms -- very hot, not air conditioned in those days, or even today. And finally, after some hours of that, Allen Shapley said, "Well, let's go to the club and have a beer."

And I said, "Fine," and we did and he ran into a bunch of *ARIZONA* shipmates of his, whom he all knew, but I didn't know any of them, having been a *TENNESSEE* Marine.

But anyway, they said, "Hey Major, come on and join me, it's my birthday," and he did.

And after he got into the spirit of the party, the birthday party, he told me to go on home to my wife in Waikiki and join him in the morning, Sunday morning, and we'd finish it then. And I said, "Fine," I thought it was a great idea.

I caught a cab and went home to my bride in Waikiki. And the next morning, there was no *ARIZONA* to join him on.

MS: When you say back home to Waikiki, where was your -- was it an apartment?

JE: Mm-hm, on the Ala Wai.

MS: On the Ala Wai. Okay. We'll stop right there.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE
TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

MS: Oh, so you were basically setting up your new home over at the *ARIZONA*
...

JE: Mm-hm.

MS: And you had taken all of your gear over?

JE: [Yes]. Sword, trunk full of clothing, my radio.

MS: And where was your quarters? Where did you actually stay on the *ARIZONA*?

JE: Down in officers' country, very stern of the ship. Just below the quarterdeck.

MS: Were you in with the other officers of the ship?

JE: Yeah, right. But I had only, as I said, just joined it and I was assigned a stateroom, a nice little room, and put my gear in. Then Allen Shapley and I met the captain and admiral, and I really had no memory of this stateroom. It was not much.

MS: You just basically moved in.

JE: [Yes], moved my stuff in and started. And it's still there.

MS: So you were home the night of the sixth. Did you wake up relatively early that day, or did anything awake you?

JE: Yeah, living next door to me was a Lieutenant Commander who was assigned to the fleet weather central in Pearl. And he got a call to get his tail down to this, you know, battle station, and he knocked on my door and he said, "Come on, there's been a," -- and then, I came out and I could see the flak over at Pearl Harbor.

And so I got in touch with some of my *TENNESSEE* shipmates and we got a cab and went straight on out to Pearl.

MS: You went down on a cab. So there was a little bit of traffic on the way too.

JE: Yeah, little bit.

MS: Did you go through the main gate, heading down towards . . .

JE: Main gate, right.

MS: And then you would have gone where? Ten-ten dock to pick up your . . .

JE: Merry Point landing.

MS: Merry Point, okay.

JE: Merry Point landing to pick up a boat for the *ARIZONA*, but I could see the *ARIZONA* was burning.

MS: Do you have any idea about what time you heard the news and tried to leave home? Or got to the harbor? Any idea of the time frame?

JE: I should think I got the news about [8:15], the first wave was clobbering the ships and had done a massive job on them by the time I had arrived. But while I was there, the second wave of the attack came in.

MS: Okay. Well, apparently the attack began just before eight, about 7:55.

JE: Seven fifty-five.

MS: So you really wasted not too much time getting down there if you were there for the second wave, 'cause that came pretty soon thereafter.

JE: An hour or so [*later*].

MS: Yeah, about an hour. So were you on the dock trying to get over to the ship, or what was your . . .

JE: It was all confusion at Merry Point landing. We could ships burning and there was actually a Japanese torpedo that had made a run and beached itself up on the land, and it was lying there. And boats were coming past Merry Point and the coxswains would call out, "I'll take you to any ship, any ship."

And so I couldn't go to the *ARIZONA*. I went to Ford Island.

MS: Okay. Where did you go in at Ford Island -- behind where *ARIZONA* was?

JE: No, we went in up past where the *CALIFORNIA* had been hit and sunk.

MS: Is there a particular name for that docking there?

JE: I don't know the name of it.

MS: Now, you were able to get over to Ford Island and then where'd you go?

JE: I worked my way up along side of Ford Island, past all of this ships that were there. And I ended up in a bomb shelter, up in the north end of Ford Island, quite near the *ARIZONA* actually. And of course the second wave was hitting the place. And there in the bomb shelter, I met Allen Shapley, the chap I had relieved and he had swum ashore from the *ARIZONA*. And with him were about fourteen other Marines. I didn't know any of 'em, as I said. I remember one was named Corporal Nightingale. I remember only because odd name. But we hunkered down in that bomb shelter until all clear was sounded. And then, not having any interest in going back to the burning *ARIZONA*, I took the Marines, except Allen Shapley, out back to my old ship, the *TENNESSEE*.

MS: How'd you get over to the *TENNESSEE*?

JE: From Ford Island, there [were] big water pipes that went out to the quays. And we tiptoed on top of that, you know, balancing our way.

MS: And the *TENNESSEE* was in relatively decent shape compared to some of the other ships?

JE: Yeah, she was in good shape. She had two bomb hits, but no great loss of life.

MS: So, did you put her to work?

JE: Put me to work?

MS: Did you put the Marines to work?

JE: Oh [yes], they incorporated them straight away into the Marine detachment *TENNESSEE*. Put 'em on the watch list, and me too. I mean, my old ship and it was, you know, home to me.

MS: Sure. What'd you guy's end up doing -- manning another anti-aircraft battery, or what was your job on the *TENNESSEE* after you got over?

JE: It was the same as it would have been on the *ARIZONA*. I would've controlled a secondary battery from the top of the mainmast -- secondary aft, as they called it. And on top of that were fifty caliber machine guns, and we manned them too.

MS: So that's where you guys . . .

JE: Yeah, right.

MS: . . . (inaudible). Were you up there most of the rest of the day?

JE: No. I was up there a good part of the day. I was up there at night, early in the morning, general quarters.

MS: And did you happen to see or hear the commotion when the *ENTERPRISE* planes started coming in?

JE: [Yes]. The whole fleet opened up on them. We didn't get the news that they were *ENTERPRISE* planes and in fact, the news that came over the battle circuit that I heard said something about Japanese bombers over Honolulu proceeding towards Pearl Harbor and it was, you know, kind of dark and we were peering up, looking for them. And the whole fleet opened up. Bad show.

MS: Yeah. Pretty rough.

JE: Yeah.

MS: Of course, everyone was pretty edgy after that . . .

JE: Yeah. A lot of gun-shy people out there in Pearl Harbor for a week.

MS: Sure.

JE: At night, you'd hear some guy would open up with his rifle and plenty others would. Shooting at shadows, mostly.

MS: Well, you live here in Hawaii now, don't you?

JE: I do. [Yes].

MS: When did you come back to actually live here?

JE: Oh, I've been posted here four different times. After the war started, I got into aviation and I was stationed twice over at Kaneohe Bay. C.O. of the air group one time and in the brigade the other time. And I retired out here.

MS: Very good.

JE: [Yes].

MS: Well, since you're kind of, you know, right here, do you -- whereas a lot of the guys have to, you know, fly in from the Mainland to take part in the fifty-fifth -- what kind of feelings do you have about all of that?

JE: About what?

MS: What kind of feelings do you have about all of that, December 7 and the beginning of the war, the surprise attack? What kind of feelings do you have when you think back to that, or when you go out to visit Pearl Harbor again?

JE: Well, it was, of course, the highlight of my life, I suppose. Most exciting day, the day of infamy. And it --- I don't really know. I mean, I was convinced that somebody had me up there by the hand because I had intended to be aboard that ship. I had told my wife I was not coming home and just because Allen Shapley wanted a beer, I did go home and that saved my life. But

MS: Do you have any feelings, positive or negative, toward the Japanese?

JE: Well, for years and years, I didn't think a hell of a lot of them. And I don't think many veterans did. But I think that they were just carrying out their orders too. They, from a military point of view, did a superb job. I mean, they were pros. And we were not prepared, unfortunately. They knew exactly what they were doing.

The *TENNESSEE*, I mentioned, it got two hits, center line hits. One right through the top of number three turret. One on the center gun of number two turret.

MS: That's pretty good.

JE: They were good.

MS: Suppose for a moment that you could send your memories, your feelings a hundred years ahead, to a generation not born yet. What would you like them to know about Pearl Harbor? What would you like them to remember? What lesson is there?

JE: I think the main lesson I would tell them is preparedness. It needn't have happened and had we been strong and alert and all, it wouldn't have happened.

MS: We as a nation.

JE: [Yes]. But I think that that need to be strong and alert will carry ahead for a hundred years.

MS: Is there anything else that . . .

JE: No, I don't.

MS: Okay. Well, thank you very much for . . .

JE: Thank you.

MS: . . . helping us be free America today.

JE: Thanks very much.

MS: Thank you for your time today. We really do appreciate it very much.

JE: Thanks very much.

MS: We're very glad you were able to spend that night with your bride.

JE: Yeah, I am too. Thank you.

MS: Okay, thank you, Jack. Appreciate it.

JE: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW