

#248 JOHN DAVID HARRIS

USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

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CARA KIMURA

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(Background conversation)

**Robert Chenoweth (RC):** The following oral history interview was conducted by Robert Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 5, 1996 at 11:30 a.m. The person being interviewed is John Harris, who was on board the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

For the record, John, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

**John Harris (JH):** My name is John David Harris. I was born in Linden, Texas, June 25, 1920.

RC: In 1941, what did you consider your hometown?

JH: Linden, Texas.

RC: Linden, Texas. Okay. Thanks. Could you tell me again when you entered the service and what were the circumstances of your going into the Navy?

JH: You mean when I entered?

RC: Yes.

JH: I enlisted August 7, 1940. And I was just out of high school and at that time, there was -- the future looked dim. And I figured I would do a little adventuring, so I picked the Navy.

RC: You picked the Navy primarily because you thought you'd -- just traveling or . . .

JH: Yes, yes.

RC: Riding is better than walking.

JH: Well, I didn't like the Army.

RC: Uh-huh.

JH: All I could see is foxholes and walking. And the Navy appealed to me more.

RC: Where did you go for boot camp?

JH: San Diego. San Diego, at that time it was US Naval Training Station. They finally changed it to training center. And by the way, later on, I went back to San Diego as a commander. I trained recruits where I went through training at.

RC: Uh-huh. When you finished your training, were you assigned to the *ARIZONA* as an Apprentice Seaman? What was your rating?

JH: At that time, you know, at four months, at that time, if I'm not wrong, they automatically gave you Seaman Second [Class]. And you had to kind of work for Seaman First [Class]. But when it was sunk, I was Seaman First [Class].

RC: Uh-huh. And what was your duty on board the *ARIZONA*?

JH: I was a deckhand.

RC: Were you part of the Fourth Division?

JH: Part of the Fourth Division, right.

RC: So you came out with the ship when the fleet was deployed out to Hawaii?

JH: Yes. I went aboard in Bremerton, Washington.

RC: Uh-huh. And what date was that?

JH: That was -- I believe it was in October. About October 14, somewhere around there.

RC: Uh-huh. And then down to San Diego?

JH: No, we went from Bremerton, we went to Long Beach.

RC: Long Beach.

JH: And from there to Pearl Harbor.

RC: Could you talk a little bit about your duties? Describe your day to day routine or your duties on board the ship prior to the attack?

JH: The day to day, they generally had reveille about -- I believe it was five or 5:30. That's quite a long time ago. We got up and we did what they called the morning watch, which was before breakfast. They'd bring a pot of coffee around. We'd drink coffee, go out on the deck and scrub and squeegee down, shine bright work and tidy up the quarterdeck. We had a certain area of the aft deck assigned to the Fourth Division. And after we got through with that, we had breakfast. And after breakfast, we'd do our regular seaman duties, which was painting and scraping and handling boats and anything that a seaman would do.

RC: On the morning of December 7, what were you doing?

JH: I was sitting with one of my buddies, M. C. Lane, on the quarterdeck, waiting for colors. And we was reading the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* when it started.

RC: What event took place that made you realize that you were under attack?

JH: The awning above us. We could hear it. We could hear it, airplane motors. And the *VESTAL* was tied up alongside of us, 'cause we had an

awning over our part. And we couldn't see up, but we could see the guys on the *VESTAL* running and snatching the covers off of the machine gun. We could hear them airplane motors and also about that time, one of 'em strafed the *ARIZONA* and we could see holes coming in the awning, and the bullets were ricocheting around. And about that time, the guy on the *VESTAL* finally got a cover off of a fifty-caliber machine gun and just turned it up and run out a burst and knocked one of 'em in the water, off our fantail. That's when we realized it was something else besides a drill.

RC: What did you think? Did you realize it was the Japanese that were attacking?

JH: Well, yeah, because we could see the red ball on their wings. We knew but it was hard to believe it was so.

RC: Uh-huh.

JH: And about that time, the general quarters sounded and I went to my battle station.

RC: Where was your battle station?

JH: Down in the lower handling room, about five decks down, on turret four. I was the powder hoist operator.

RC: Now what did that work consist of?

JH: Well, from my part, all I had to do was match a button when the other guys lit a round up on the apron, rolled it over on the hoist. I matched the button and it went up in one cycle. And then another one, laid another one on there, and it went up a cycle. And that's . . .

RC: So the bags of powder . . .

JH: The bags of powder is . . .

RC: . . . up in increments.

JH: I guess about fourteen inches around, in diameter, and they're about that long, which is eighteen inches -- somewhere around there.

RC: So how long were you at your battle station before the ship exploded and did you realize what had happened at that point?

JH: Yes. I was there just long enough to -- I had to go down five decks, go in and dog the door down behind me, and I was only in there just a little while before it blowed up. And you couldn't help but know that something happened because the lights went out.

RC: Uh-huh.

JH: And the ship kind of gyrated and lights went out.

RC: Did you stay on your feet or did it . . .

JH: Oh yes. I was on -- I stayed on my feet. I think. I don't know if I -- if it knocked me down, I don't remember.

RC: Uh-huh.

JH: But it was a pretty good jolt. And after that, I think we took a bomb along side the barbette of turret of four, or somewhere near because gas was escaping inside the lower handling room from the burnt powder or it might have come from the blast forward or from the bomb close by. Anyway, we had to get out of there.

And we went out of turret four handling room over into turret three. And went up through the center column, come up out there.

RC: So you came out through turret three?

JH: Right.

RC: Did you have a hard time finding your way around in the dark? Was there emergency lighting that came on?

JH: No. There was no light, period.

RC: No light at all.

JH: You ever been in a dark place, where you couldn't see light? (Laughs)

RC: Yes. That must have been pretty frightening.

JH: Well, at the time, it was, but I didn't realize it was that bad until a little later on.

RC: So when you came out on deck, what did you see? What was happening?

JH: The bow was already down and water was back under turret three overhang. And there was fire burning. The oil on the fire was burning.

RC: So was the deck actually underwater at that point?

JH: Just forward of turret three it was. Yeah.

RC: Uh-huh. So it sounds then like the stern of the ship had not quite settled.

JH: The stern was still sticking up, I would say, way up on turret three. Just as far as turret three, back was still out of the water.

RC: Uh-huh. So what did you then, after you got on deck?

JH: Well, there was four or five of us and we assisted some guy that was burned pretty bad and wounded. We assisted him on the boat and we tried to get down. A big life raft that was tied up along side of turret four -- oh, it was turret three we was trying to get off.

Anyway, we couldn't get it down because somebody had tied the top of this where the water wouldn't knock 'em off. And we finally gave up. Somebody went and got an ax and chopped one of 'em down, but after that, we just waded off in the water and swam to Ford Island.

RC: Now, was there oil in the water? Was there fire?

JH: Yes, sir. There was oil in the water. There was fire all over the oil.

RC: Did you get covered with oil? Did you get burned at all?

JH: (Chuckles) Yes. I didn't get burned. But when we was still in the turret, up in the upper part, we took off all of our little shirts, white shirts and jammed 'em in the hose where the sights come out so the gasses from the bombs outside wouldn't come in there. And all I had on when I got to Ford Island was my skivvy shorts. You know what -- I guess you know what I'm talking. And I didn't even have a skivvy shirt, because we had poked 'em in the holes. But we was completely covered with oil from top to bottom. You couldn't tell who anybody was.

RC: What happened after that, after you got to shore? Where did you go?

JH: They had a --- well, over there, they had people from Ford Island. There was some officers' wives that were there on the dock, helping us off of the boats and putting coats on us and blankets and what have you. I wound up with a captain's coat. (Chuckles) Got oil all over it.

Anyway, after the attack was over, there was a bomb shelter there. And we decided to stay in the bomb shelter that night. Next day, they gathered us up and put us on a destroyer.

RC: What ship was that?

JH: That was the *USS PATTERSON*, DD-392.

RC: Did you end up staying on the *PATTERSON*?

JH: Yeah. I rode it the rest of the war.

RC: So you took part in the early operations in the South Pacific?

JH: We was in nearly everything that happened in the South Pacific, that wasn't going on at the same time. We was in the group that went into Guadalcanal first. We was in the group that, when the *QUINCY*, the *ASTORIA*, the *VINCENNES*, and the *CANBERRA* was so. That Australian, *HMS CANBERRA* [sunk August 8, 1942]. We took survivors off of the *CANBERRA*.

RC: So in those early days, right after the attack and when you first got on the destroyer, what were you thinking? It looked pretty grim, yeah?

JH: Oh man. I didn't want to go aboard a destroyer. (Chuckles) A ship. Because I figured those Japs are setting out there over the horizon, just waiting. But it turned out it wasn't all that bad. I got to where I liked it on the destroyer.

RC: If you --- fifty-five years later, looking back on these events, why are these events important? Why should people remember Pearl Harbor? What should people know?

JH: That mankind and I would say why they should remember Pearl Harbor, you know when there's not a war going on and after so many years, people get, "Well, we're safe," they take things for granted. But there's always somebody or some outlaw nation somewhere that's if they get a chance and they catch you with your armed forces depleted, they'll come and take over.

RC: Okay. I'd like to thank you.

JH: And another reason that I'd like to remember is 'cause we got shipmates and buddies that's in Punchbowl and still out on the *ARIZONA*.

RC: All right.

JH: That it?

RC: Yes, sir.

JH: Well, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was.

END OF INTERVIEW