

John Kuzma USAR #22
December 5, 1984

Q: Mr. Kuzma, when did you first join the Service?

A: I joined the Service in (tape slips).

Q: What made you choose the Navy over say the Army?

A: Oh I think maybe a lot had to do with (ts). I think maybe (ts) the ultimate goal (ts).

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

A: Newport, Rhode Island.

Q: How long did boot camp take in those days?

A: Well, let's see (ts) it was two at boot camp and September and then when we got back from a weeks leave and went back to boot camp, stayed aboard the USS *Constellation*, and old wooden ship that was a sister ship to "Old Ironsides" the *Constitution*.

Q: What was your first assignment?

A: Well, of course I really didn't get assigned to anything. We were waiting for traveling orders while we stayed aboard the old wooden ship, and we shipped on the USS *Pyro* which is ammunition ship, which we caught at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We were passengers that were being transported, well, we didn't know where we were going at the time but we ended up at Pearl Harbor.

Q: When was that?

A: That was October of 1940.

Q: What Unit were you assigned to?

A: Well, like I say, we were just passengers on her. We weren't assigned to anything until we arrived within a days docking in Pearl Harbor. We were asked to pick; I think they gave us a choice of about six different ships, or shore duty. My first choice was shore duty, because I got seasick pretty much across the whole trip there, so shore duty looked pretty good to me then.

Q: Where did they send you?

A: They sent me to the Naval Air Station at Pearl Harbor, and I was assigned to the Fire Dept.

Q: Was that on Ford Island?

A: Right on Ford Island, yes. The Naval Air Station is part of

Ford Island.

Q: Were you assigned to a particular squadron then?

A: No, I was at that time assigned to the Fire Dept. as a firefighter. Of course we had a few fire trucks, and we also manned a crash truck for duty on the strip of the airfield in case of any accidental crashes. Why the result was to not only extinguish the fires but to rescue the personnel aboard the aircraft.

Q: Were you in the Fire Dept. there on the morning of the Attack?

A: I was at the Fire Dept. that morning, yes.

Q: What did you do the night before?

A: The night before, the fellow I mentioned, his name was Frances Burke, he and I went on a double date in Honolulu. He went out with a girl called Vicky and I went out with Vicky's cousin. I stayed over that night in Honolulu and he went back to his duty; it was aboard a tugboat. The morning of the 7th I was on my way back to Ford Island and the bombing already was in progress as I was passing Hickam Field.

Q: Is that when you first noticed it?

A: Just about near Hickam Field. By that time some of the explosions were very audible and the smoke was arising from some of the damage.

Q: Could you see the planes?

A: Oh definitely! You could see the aircraft, yeah; especially once we were dropped off before we got to the Naval Yard gates. They kept all the automobiles away from there and we had to do the rest on foot. By that time you could see the aircraft coming down from it seemed like all directions.

Q: How did you make your way from the gate over to the landing?

A: Well, it was a long time from my getting to the gate and before I got back to get a boat back to Ford Island and there was a lot of things that happened. And I'm not sure of the sequence of them, but during that period of time I helped fight the fires on the battleship *Pennsylvania*, the destroyers *Cassin* and *Downes*, which all three were in the large dry dock. Besides that, I did help take some of the injured that were coming in off the whale boats, and helping them to the Naval medical center there. I,m not sure, it was just a Navy sick bay on the shore side of Ford Island.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the fire fighting that you did over at the dry dock where the *Pennsylvania*, and the *Cassin*, and the *Downes* were?

A: Well, quite a few of the lines were already being stretched when I began to help, and I helped advance the lines, helped aim the streams on the source of the fire. But there was so much fire that you needed a lot of water charged lines to really do any real good extinguishment.

Q: How was the water pressure?

A: Well, it wasn't that good, possibly because there was so much water being used at the time. But what was worse, when I finally did get back to Ford Island, and got the trucks out, we had no water pressure. Our hydrants were all dead because one of the bombs had broken the water main on Ford Island there. So we were drafting sea water through our pumps, and discharging sea water.

Q: Was the Attack still in progress when you got back to Ford Island?

A: Well, I don't really know because there was so much going on and the firing was going on. In fact they were firing at anything that moved, so I lost all track of time. I presumed it was but I'm not sure. They kept firing well into the night. We were still firing guns later that night. I think a squadron of fighters were coming in from the Enterprise and mistakenly they opened up. It seemed like every gun in the world opened up on them and they shot down a few.

Q: What part of Ford Island seemed the most damaged of all the parts of the Island that you worked on that day.

A: Well, of course the seaplane hangar that was directly across from the landing where I caught the boat, they had been hit first. I guess one of the first bombs went through the hangar and ignited the aircraft in there. That to me was probably the most noticeable damage. Of course, there was other damage. Bombs were dropped in various places. In fact some of the bombs didn't go off; they planted themselves in the ground there. One of the bombs at the sick bay on Ford Island there. It must be they were trying to hit the *California* but the bomb went and buried itself under one of the large slabs, and when it went off and when it exploded it raised it completely off its base. In fact if it wasn't for that I think there would have been a lot of lives lost because there was a lot of people that were brought to the hospital there.

Q: Were any of the fuel tanks on Ford Island hit.

A: No, we took our fire trucks there and had one of them standing by in case there was any that got hit or fire reached them. Of course one of the problems was, we took one of the other fire trucks that we had and we played our streams on the BOQ [*Bachelor Officers Quarters*] that was on the shore side away from the *Arizona*, and the heat was so intense that we had to play our stream on it to keep the wooden building from igniting and of course that burned for a considerable amount of time, the *Arizona*. I'm not sure just when it finally died down, but I know it was still burning Tuesday.

Q: Were there survivors from the *Arizona* and the other ships coming ashore onto Ford Island?

A: There wasn't too many from the *Arizona*, because the devastation there was almost complete. To my knowledge, I think there were only something like 200 survivors from the *Arizona*. I'm not sure of the original compliment, someplace around 1300 I think.

Q: What sort of shape were the survivors in that were coming ashore?

A: There were all degrees of injuries from swimming ashore, and some were burned, some were injured and bleeding. Well, there were so many ships involved the there were all kinds of injuries. Some of the men weren't injured but they had to go through the water. I do know we formed a line of men from the firehouse to the battleship *California*, and we kept recharging the fire extinguishers from our side and using that to extinguish or keep the fire from spreading. And the tugboats around the other side were pouring water on there. It was a long day. See one of the problems we had was because the water pressure was gone, we had to use the water from the swimming pool across from the fire station to recharge the extinguishers. They were mostly salt and acid (??) and foam extinguishers.

Q: Must have been pretty tough trying to fight a fire on a battleship with just fire extinguishers.

A: Absolutely. It was almost nil. You don't fight that type of fire with hand tanks. You need volumes of water. But anything is better than nothing I guess, at that time.

Q: What was the atmosphere on Ford Island then? Did there seem to be panic or...

A: No, there was no panic. Everybody seemed to know their job and everybody was doing something constructive and working with rescue or firing the guns. Everybody was doing the job. I didn't see any panic.

Q: How soon after the Attack do you remember seeing the first plane get off of Ford Island?

A: I didn't really see the planed but I could hear them revving up the engines there. I couldn't tell you, gosh, like I say I lost all track of time. That's something that you're not even concerned about... at least I wasn't.

Q: What memory sticks in your mind more than any other from Dec. 7th, 1941?

A: In what way, you mean dramatically or just routine...

Q: Either.

A: I would say, in 1968, I was asked to give advice and work with 20th Century Fox on the movie, "Tora, Tora, Tora" and I did that for about two years and they had me at their studios, and I met various people making the movie, and I did some PR work for them, and this sticks in my mind over that period of time and before then. I had the pleasure of being on national television. I met people like Kitty Carlisle, Tom Polson(?), Orson Bean. Phyllis Newman, Ed Sullivan. I was able to get on hid program one time. I met people like Arthur Godfrey, a lot of people I was fortunate enough... I was on the set when they were making a movie called "Chie"(?) with Omar Sharif and Jack Palance and Caesar Divano. I met people like Katherine Ross, very interesting.

Q: How long did it take you, getting back to Dec. 7th, before the fire department had the fires on Ford Island under control?

A: Well, the fires on Ford Island, we had them under control ...well it wasn't too long. The fires aboard the battleships were extensive. Actually it's very difficult to fight a fire like that when you have so many battleships that were leaking oil from the ruptured ... from the bow hits and the torpedo explosions. So you had water that was constantly being fed by leaking oil and it just kept burning as it came to the surface. It was next to impossible to extinguish just trying to put it out with hose streams.

Of course that was not the end of my fire fighting career. I spent 32 years as a firefighter for the city of Binghamton(?). I retired a fire captain, filled in as a fire marshall, training instructor, assistant chief. So over the years I've seen a lot of fires

Q: So those started your career then.

A: Yes, although when I first came out of the service I went on the police department for a period of time before I went on the fire department.

Q: After the fires got out and things sort of settled down at Ford Island, what did they have you doing at that point?

A: Well, of course that very night we were awful busy because there was rumors that we were being invaded and it seemed that every noise or sound, you felt that they were coming across the channel...the Japanese. And the gunfire, sporadic gunfire all night with the exception of when they opened up with every ship and gun in the harbor when the planes were coming in from the *Enterprise*. But of course the next day was spent, for us in the fire department, getting our equipment back in fire fighting shape again, and that was no easy task, because we ran those engines continuously for hours and hours, and you had your hoses to pick up and recharging extinguishers, and of course some of the damage we had to overhaul and make sure that weren't any sparks, or leaking oil, or gas. It was a lot to do for days after.

Q: Did you do any kind of salvage work on any of the wrecked vessels there?

A: No, not aboard the vessels. I didn't get involved in that type of work but we did help, right in front of the fire station, one of the planes that was shot down was right alongside the dock underwater and had to be hoisted out with cables and brought up winched up on shore. The pilot was still in the cockpit when they brought that up. That was about the only salvage work that was in the area where I was at, although there was a lot going on. But that was mostly being done by people in that expertise end of it.

Q: It's an interesting story and especially to get the fire department angle on it. Anything else you think you'd like to add?

A: No. My mind right now is not thinking fast enough, but I'm sure in a few minutes I'll think of a few things that I could have projected here for the sake of history.

Well of course, one of the things I was concerned about was my friends you know, that were in different parts of the Island. I had many friends many friends that were in the army, that belonged to Schofield, Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, and I used to go visit them before the Attack. So naturally when things returned to normal (well they never did return to normal but when it returned to where you could stop and view what was happening) I wondered how about this one, how about that one. That's on your mind and that's a worry because I'm sure you know they're worried about you. Then of course my family back home, I was worried about what they would think. What they had us do a few days later or I don't know just how long, was they had us all sign postcards that didn't identify where we were, just that we were safe at that time.

Q: How long did it take before that postcard finally got home to your family? Do you remember?

A: No I don't. I don't really know. I honestly couldn't tell you. I imagine it probably took a little while because they probably sent most of it (I'm just guessing) by ship transport. I'm not sure they would tie up all the room on aircraft. I'm sure that everything that was going back to the states was of vital importance, so they probably sent it back by ship. I imagine it took (well it depends on the speed of the ship) 7 or 8 days; sometimes less. I know I made one crossing later in 1943 on the aircraft carrier, the USS *Yorktown*, and I think we made it in less than 72 hours. That's pretty good speed, because when I originally came out to Hawaii on the *Pyro* (the ammunition ship), it took us about 10 days I think. We had engine trouble and seemed like forever and a day before we ever sighted land again.

Q: Well thank you. I really appreciate your coming up here, taking the time to.

A: I thank you for being interested enough to preserve history as it was.

Q: Well, that's what I enjoy.