

#247 JOHN EVANS
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
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TRANSCRIBED BY:
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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 ten a.m. The person being interviewed is John Evans, who was on board the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

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

John Evans (JE): My name is John Willard Evans. I was born back in the hills below Waterloo, Alabama, January 1, 1922 [*Union Hollow*].

RC: Could you also tell me what you considered your hometown in 1941?

JE: My hometown, the place I enlisted from was Florence, Alabama. And that's where all my family was at.

RC: When did you enlist in the . . .

JE: October 4, 1940. I went to boot camp in Norfolk, Virginia and the whole [*platoon*] went by train to Seattle and then by ferry to Bremerton and boarded the *ARIZONA*. That was December 4 of '41, oh, '40.

RC: Of '40. Had you been trained in any specific duties?

JE: No, sir. We were all Apprentice Seamen at that time.

RC: Oh, Seamen. What duties did you assume when you got on board the *ARIZONA*?

JE: Well, I was a deck hand. Went into the Fourth Division and stayed in the Fourth Division until I got off the ship.

RC: Could you talk a little bit about your -- what happened prior to the ship going to Hawaii and what some of your experiences were?

JE: Well, when they finally got out of dry dock in Bremerton, they went to Long Beach. And that was the homeport of the ship at that time. And then we went from Long Beach to Honolulu, away.

RC: Did your duties or responsibilities change at all?

JE: Well, I spent a little bit of time as a mess cook in the Chief Petty Officers mess [*] because that paid a little extra money. And I think about two weeks before the seventh I was transferred back to my Fourth Division. And I had a duty station in the number four turret.

[*Under #1 and #2 14" turrets]

RC: What specifically did you do? What was your job in the number four turret?

JE: Well, I started out as a primer man, which was inserting about a primer, about the size of a thirty caliber cartridge to [*fulminate of mercury*] to explode the four powder bags that were behind the fourteen-inch shells. Later, I was a tray man and then a rammer man, and so on.

RC: So you were actually working directly with the guns?

JE: Yes, sir.

RC: I see. So December 7 comes along. What happened that morning?

JE: Well, that morning, we were all up early and our division, Fourth Division, had the duty of setting up all the benches and everything for the church service on the fantail. And we had already had breakfast and completed that and had just come back in the compartment when it started.

RC: And when did you realize that you were under attack, that the ship was . . .

JE: Well, when the general alarm went off. It went off right away and I went down to the lower passageways, into the lower part of the turret and then up, because that was where my battle station was.

RC: Did anybody talk to you? Did you -- what did you see before you went below deck? Did you see any of the Japanese planes?

JE: Well, we had . . .

RC: Did you feel anything . . .

JE: We had two or three portholes, I think, in our compartment that we slept in and I dogged one of 'em down, and that was what I was supposed to do. And then I went below and everything was so much turmoil, you didn't really feel or think or see anything. Everybody was doing what they were supposed to do.

RC: Did you feel any of the impacts when the ship was hit?

JE: Well, after we were up in the number four turret -- one of the big explosion -- and I suppose it was an explosion forward -- the ship just lifted up and then it settled back down and just sank real fast. And we had a lot of big, heavy batteries in the lower part of the gun mount [*to*] train and elevate the

guns in case we lost current. And when the salt water hit them, [*"Squeaky" Engelman (5 ¼ 4th D) said, "Better p--- on your handkerchiefs and put them over your face because that chlorine gas will get us before we can get out. Ha?"*] "Well, the chlorine gas started coming up. And so we up and leave the turret and we went out a hatch at the rear of the turret, got on the quarterdeck and you could see chunks of teak wood jumping out where the strafing was going on. And [*while inside*] we felt one bump in the turret. I think a bomb hit on the slope [*on the side*] of the armor and then went out to the side [*of the ship*].

And when we come out, John Anderson and I went out together. He was second class bosun mate and I was seaman first. And he had a twin brother that was up on the five-inch gun. We went to try to get him, but it was all on fire and we couldn't do it. We got some men that were wounded and . . .

(Tape skips, then resumes.)

RC: Okay, you come out with John Anderson.

JE: Yes. They brought the barge up to the stern of the ship and the Lieutenant Commander was Damage Control Officer. I don't remember his name but he told us we might as well leave the ship. In fact, he shoved us off. On top of the dead and wounded. And we got over there.

RC: Was that Commander Fuqua, by any chance?

JE: Yes. Yeah, Lieutenant Commander Fuqua. And we got over there [*to Ford Island*], we went just right over to the island, just a short distance and there was a runway out there that had an underground place and we took the wounded into it. And I think they were picked up and taken to the hospital. I'm not sure. But I got some clothes off of a clothesline over there. We was kind of messed up.

And then we got a boat and start picking up people. Slept on the beach that night and next day, I got on the *MacDONOUGH*, DD-351. And I stayed on it 'til '43.

RC: Uh-huh.

JE: And then . . .

RC: That night, or actually that afternoon, you could still see the *ARIZONA* burning?

JE: Oh yeah. Yeah.

RC: What went through your mind at that time? What were . . .

JE: Just completely -- I think we were pretty well disoriented and disorganized and really hurting. That night, somebody [*would*] shoot a rifle or something and everything would open up. And I had the fear of 'em coming back or landing and I wanted to get on the ship. You get out to sea on a ship, you got a fighting chance, but you don't have one on land. I don't think.

RC: So that night, you slept on the beach?

JE: Yeah.

RC: How many other survivors off the *ARIZONA* were you with at that time?

JE: Well, there was two or three other men around. I remember a boy by the name of Gaskins that was there. He helped -- he was off a farm and he helped -- he knew how to drive a tractor so he helped clear the runway there on Ford Island with that tractor.

RC: Did you have any sense . . .

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

RC: I wanted to ask you, that afternoon, did you have a sense of the degree of loss of life that had occurred?

JE: Not really. I don't think we really realized what had happened, but I knew enough about powder magazines and what they had stored down there, that that explosion forward had just about wiped out everything. Those bags of powder, I think they weighed 105 pounds. I'm not sure. And they were sewn in raw silk. And they used four for each projectile. So they had a lot of [*those*] suckers down there.

RC: So after -- when you got up the next morning, how long was it before you went over to the destroyer?

JE: I went over the next day.

RC: The next day.

JE: They took several of us on and I went with the gun crews right away because I had a little knowledge about it and they gathered some clothing up and gave us some of their spare clothing, and that's how we made it.

RC: So could you tell me a little bit about the rest of your service in the Navy?

JE: Well, I went on the USS *MacDONOUGH*, that's DD-351, and we served with *LEXINGTON* until it was sunk, and then the *SARATOGA*. And we were down in the South Seas and came back to Pearl one time in, I think, early '43 three or so, before Attu and Kiska. And they issued us damn cold weather gear, and we thought they were nuts.

So went down to Kiska and as the task force was going in, one of those old four-piper destroyers got out of formation and turned and come right through the middle of the task force until they got to us. And he almost cut our ship in half, in two at the [*torpedo*] tubes. And they towed us to Adak and they had to put a canvas patch on it, and we were towed back to Vallejo, San Francisco, Mare Island Navy Yard, I guess it was. It took thirty days behind a concrete tanker about five knots.

Then I agreed to stay on the ship coming down if they would advance me one rank and grade. That's what they agreed to. I didn't have to . . .

And then they sent me to school in Washington D.C. for gunners' mates and I was first class at that time. And then, I went to Miami for about four or five days, and then they sent me to Orange, Texas. And we put a new destroyer escort into commission. And I was really amazed. The first day I walked up the gangway, there's a bronze plaque there that said, "This ship, USS *WEEDEN* [*DE-797*], is named after ensign Weeden who was killed on the *ARIZONA*."

And we spent a short time in the Atlantic and come back. Spent the rest of the time in the Pacific, up through the island hopping in Manila and the Philippines and Okinawa. The last thing we did, short time after they dropped the second atomic bomb, we went into Nagasaki to bring our POWs out.

And then we gradually worked our way back to the States. I stayed in the reserve for eight years, but I got out of the Navy when my six-year hitch was up.

RC: When you look back -- it's been fifty-five years since the attack -- when you look back on that time, I want you to tell me why those events are important to people. Why should people know about what happened? Why should Americans care about what happened there? What does it mean?

JE: Well, it's kind of difficult unless you lived it, to put it in words, because for instance, those ten boys' names that I gave you that were from Dallas, Texas that died on the ARIZONA, none of those boys ever fathered a child, had a family, had a home, had what I've had. And that's really sad. And most of 'em have been forgotten and that's sad. Because if we forget what has happened in the past, we're in danger of losing the future also, I think.

I brought three of my -- last three of my grandchildren out here this time. I have a grandson named for me and two granddaughters. And I wanted them to know that the freedom that they have is not free. Somebody paid a hell of a price for it.

Most of the boys that I went in with were school dropouts. I was a school dropout. I didn't finish high school until I was over twenty-five. And most of 'em were hungry. Most of 'em their families were hungry. It was very, very tough times, after having come through that great depression. No jobs, no place to go, no homes. And we found a home in the Navy. So I think it's important that we not forget those boys.

RC: Okay.

JE: Thank you.

RC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW