

JOHN E. WALLIN
USS *MONAGHAN*, SURVIVOR

#266

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 6, 1998
BY JEFF PAPPAS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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Jeff Pappas (JP): Okay, the following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, on December 6, 1998 at seven p.m. The person being interviewed is John E. “Spike” Wallin, who was aboard the USS *Monaghan* on December 7, 1941.

(Conversation off-mike. Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: For the record, John (coughs), could you please state your full name, place of birth and the date of birth?

John Wallin (JW): John E. Wallin, 633 University Street, San Francisco, California.

JP: Is that your current address or where you were born?

JW: I was born in San Francisco.

JP: Very good. Can you spell your last name for us?

JW: W-A, double L, I-N.

JP: Very good.

(Coughing off-mike)

JP: So you were born in San Francisco, John. It looks like you haven't left.

JW: Nope.

JP: Is that right?

JW: It's the best city in the world.

JP: Very good.

JW: It is.

JP: Oh, it's a wonderful city. Tell me a little bit about growing up in San Francisco, about your parents and your family.

JW: Well, my father was a sea captain. My father went to sea for almost fifty years.

JP: Was he a navy man?

JW: No, he was in the merchant marines. He was born in Finland. He left home when he was about fourteen. Sailed right up 'til he was past sixty-five and then he retired. But he was out in the Pacific during the war there on the merchant ships there.

JP: In World War II?

JW: Yeah.

JP: Did you ever meet up with him in the Pacific?

JW: What's that?

JP: Did you ever meet him in the Pacific?

JW: No, but I met him down in Pearl Harbor just a week before the attack. And he had left there one week before the war started and came back to San Francisco and I think he got back about the eighth. I understand—he told me that they made him, when he was getting close to San Francisco, he had to veer down south and come up and hug the coast to come back into San Francisco. So that's how my folks knew that I was there, that he had seen me just the week before, so he figured that we were still there in Pearl.

JP: Tell me a little about your mom, your mother.

JW: Well, my mother was born in Finland too, you see. Great lady. A housewife, she always took good care of my sister and I. Myself and my father was out at sea all the time.

JP: They ever talk about why they settled in San Francisco?

JW: Why did they settle?

JP: Mm-hm.

JW: Well, they—I don't know if you ever heard—they had the Scan—what they used to call the Scandinavian navy in San Francisco. There was these lumber schooners and the majority of the sailors on the ships and the officers too were either Norwegians, Finns or Swedes. And they used to run up and down the coast and brought the lumber from Oregon and Washington down to San Francisco and down to Los Angeles. And that's why they started calling it the Scandinavian navy because the majority of the crew was...

There was a big waterfront in San Francisco in those days and they had a lot of ships at that time.

JP: Is Wallin your real name?

JW: Yes it is.

JP: So that's the official name.

JW: Yeah, it's my father's name, yeah.

JP: What was your father and mother's, what were their first names?

JW: What was my father's first name? Axel.

JP: Axel.

JW: His middle name was John.

JP: And your mother?

JW: Her name was Aino, A-I-N-O.

JP: Interesting. So you grew up in San Francisco, what part of San Francisco did you grow up in?

JW: I, well, we called it the Eureka district at the time. It was off of Market and Castro Street. We lived on Douglas Street.

JP: So you went to school there?

JW: I went to school.

JP: Elementary school, middle school?

JW: Yeah, I went to grammar school at a school called McKinley High, I mean, McKinley Grammar School, Everett Junior High School and Mission High School.

JP: You went to Mission High School.

JW: High school, yeah.

JP: Did you graduate from high school?

JW: Right.

JP: Excellent So what year was that? What year did you graduate?

JW: I graduated in December of '39.

JP: December of '39?

JW: Yeah.

JP: So at this time, were you or your friends thinking about joining the service? Had there been talk? I know you're from the West Coast. We've had many of your colleagues today from the East Coast talking about, oh, Japanese aggression in the South Pacific, the fact that they had been negotiating in Washington D.C. But they really didn't have a feel for whether something was going to happen in the immediate future. How about the West Coast? What was San Francisco thinking?

JW: Nothing. I mean, I didn't even think about it when I joined the navy. I always wanted to go in the navy. I wanted to go out and sail ever since I was a kid and my father said, "If you want to go to sea, join the navy," because in the merchant marines there was no retirement and no benefits or anything.

JP: Did you ever tag along with your father when you were very young, on the ship?

JW: Yes I did. When I was on vacation, I used to go up and down the West Coast on these lumber schooners. We used to spend maybe a month or two. We used to just take two weeks to go up to Portland and Washington and come back to San Francisco. And then it was a one-week trip to go down to Wilmington, which is right outside of San Pedro, California, where they unload the lumber and then they come back.

JP: So right out of high school then you already had the notion about...

JW: Oh, when I was a kid I just liked, I always liked the navy. San Francisco used to have a whole fleet used to come into the bay over the Fourth of July. Every Fourth of July when I was a kid, I can remember and we'd be down at the waterfront trying to get rides on the Liberty launch out to see the battleships.

JP: Sure, that was an impressive...

JW: Yeah, it was very impressive.

JP: So you joined, you enlisted in San Francisco?

JW: What's that?

JP: Did you enlist in San Francisco?

JW: Yes I did.

JP: And after that, were you enlisted and then you went off to training?

JW: Yeah. I joined in June of 1940 in San Francisco. [I] was sent to boot camp in San Diego. And [upon graduating boot camp I was transferred to] an ammunition ship, the *Nitro*, just for transportation up to Mare Island [Navy Yard]. And then from there on, I was transferred to the USS *Monaghan*, [a] destroyer [DD-354].

JP: Had the *Monaghan* been stationed at Mare Island?

JW: No, it was in there for yard repair. The homeport was supposed to have been San Diego, but they had been out in Hawaii for a year and a half already. They had just come back for overhaul.

JP: So they were—well, tell me where Mare Island is, first of all.

JW: Well, Mare Island is in Vallejo, [California], it's about thirty miles...

JP: North.

JW: Yeah, well northeast of San Francisco, with the big navy yard.

JP: So at that time then you went to the *Monaghan*, had you been assigned to specific tasks? Had you been to duty? Had you been given...

JW: Well, I was out of boot camp. I was a seaman when I went aboard. But I was only a seaman there for about two months, then I got what's called the "black gang," the engineer's force [as a fireman]. That's what I had asked for.

JP: What was that called again?

JW: Well, we used to call it the "black gang" because, you know, the guys down in the fire room, [from] the engine, [are] all dirty and oily all the time. That's what they were known as.

JP: When was that then? Is this now 1940?

JW: Forty, right.

JP: So you're on the *Monaghan* now and you're cruising and you're heading toward Hawaii?

JW: Well, when we finished the overhaul, we left [*Mare Island*], I think, in September, stopped in San Diego for a week, and then from there we went out to Pearl Harbor. And that's where we stationed at.

JP: You were a young guy. Did you do any letter writing?

JW: Did I do any letter writing? Well, I wrote a few letters home but not every day.

JP: Well, how often—your dad probably was at sea quite a bit...

JW: Well...

JP: ...with the merchant marines.

JW: My father, when he was on [*the*] lumber schooners, he used to get home at least once or twice a month. But then around 1940, when the— company started running their ships overseas my father had to [*make longer trips*]. [*The*] trucking business [*was taking over the lumber schooner business. But,*]—I got to see my father quite a bit when we were kids because he'd be able to take a month off at times, maybe work long shore for a month or so. And, he had a good record and he had a pilot license for every bay from Seattle all the way down to Los Angeles. In those days, you had to have a pilot's license if you wanted to be a captain on those ships

JP: Hmm, okay. Well, tell me now, the *Monaghan* is cruising toward Hawaii...

JW: Right.

JP: ...and you have left San Diego now and you're heading out to your base, essentially. When did you arrive in Hawaii? How long did it take you to get to Hawaii from San Diego?

JW: Between five or six days.

JP: Okay. So you're stationed now in Hawaii. This is now still 1940?

JW: Yeah, right.

JP: Okay. You heard any—at that time, had you heard any talk? Were there any rumors, any anxieties about what was happening in the South Pacific?

JW: Well, we heard about it in roundabout way that something was coming on. By the time '41, we were carrying live ammunition already on the ship. But everybody thought it was going to be that either the Japs, if they attack, they were going to attack the Philippines. I mean, we didn't expect—I mean, in my point of view, and most of the majority of the crew there, we never figured them coming to attack Pearl. That was quite a surprise.

JP: Had you ever been to Hawaii before?

JW: No.

JP: What'd you think of the island?

JW: I liked it. It was good then. It isn't like—you know, then there was only a few big hotels and quite a lot of nice beaches out there, when I got there.

JP: What did you like to do for fun? What are some of the favorite things that you did?

JW: Well, swimming and, well, it's kind of hard to—just had a good time when we went ashore all the time. Sure, we hit a few bars now and then and had a few beers. But I liked to swim and I did spend a lot of time out on the beach out there like we were swimming.

JP: So it was a pretty contented time. You were fairly satisfied with the navy on something you had always wanted to do. Did the navy live up to your expectations?

JW: [*Yes*], I liked the navy. I never counted the days when my time was up. I just enjoyed it. I mean I know a lot of guys [*watched*] the calendar. They

knew how many days right up to the minute they had to do until [*their*] enlistment, [*was up*].

JP: So it did. Navy did live up to your expectations.

JW: [*Yes.*] When I joined [*for a*] six-year [*enlistment, the starting pay was*] at twenty-one dollars a month, take it or leave it. Oh and there was a depression. Lot of the fellows that joined, weren't [*able to find other work*].

JP: Was that something that you had considered when you joined or you just wanted to join?

JW: Well, I wanted to go in the navy, but I mean, when we got out of school, there weren't too many jobs. And what jobs there [*were*] didn't pay anything.

JP: Ever think about going to college? Was that an option?

JW: No. I figured my mother and father saved enough money [*to send one of us to college*]. My sister was a lot smarter than I was. I told my folks, save the money for my sister.

JP: Did she end up going to college?

JW: Did she go? No, the war started and she went to work. She had good jobs and the last twenty years of her life, she was a private secretary to the dean at University of Santa Clara.

JP: Did you have any more brothers or sisters?

JW: No.

JP: Just one sibling.

JW: Just the sister and I.

JP: So you were in Hawaii, you're settling in. Tell me a little bit about your crew that you worked with.

JW: We had a very good crew. I mean, it was, to me, it seemed like a good, happy crew. There was a few that wanted to get out, you know, griping about the navy, but the majority liked it and we had good officers and good chiefs and I had no complaint.

JP: Do you remember any of your commanding officers? Any of their names?

JW: Well, I'm trying...it's on the tip of my mouth. I can't remember the— first skipper [I] had was, but it may have been Van Horn. Or something like it? But he got transferred to the *Marblehead*, which was out in China. We had run aground on patrol, in early '41. When something happened to the ship, the commanding officer got the blame for it, and he was transferred for that reason.

JP: Well, let's go—any, any...

JW: Oh, our second skipper's name, now I remember, his name was Burford.

JP: Okay.

JW: Yeah, he was Commander Burford.

JP: So let's go to 1941. Let's breeze over 1941 though and as the attack is approaching, what sort of preparations or any preparations did the *Monaghan* take to prepare for a potential or a possible attack?

JW: Well, I don't think we really were. Well, we weren't prepared. They told us something was going to happen, but they didn't say where or what. But we were, it seemed like we were building up the crew because, you know, there was more and more men coming into the navy and...

JP: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

JW: ...so what we always figured something was going to happen, but we didn't know when.

JP: So let's go then, let's go right to the attack then. Let's recreate about a half an hour or so before December 7, Sunday morning, at 7:55. What were you up to? What were you doing?

JW: Well, I had got up early, taking a shower and cleaned up. We had the ready duty that Saturday, so we had all hands aboard. But we were supposed to have been relieved at eight o'clock [*on Sunday morning*] by another destroyer in our nest. I [*had eaten*] breakfast, [*and*] was walking on the deck [*in my*] my whites, going to [*early liberty*.]

So I was walking down the deck and [*heard*] the general quarters alarm go off. I [*saw*] a couple of planes come by and I said, "Oh boy, I bet the army is holding maneuvers and going to foul up our liberty."

And then, I [*saw*] the [*planes*] come real close by and I [*saw*] the rising sun [*insignia*] on [*them*] and I couldn't believe it, I wasn't quite sure what [*was*] [*happening*]. By that time, I had jumped down into the engineers' compartment because my battle station was in the shaft alley, but I had to rout about five or six guys out of their bunk because they didn't believe anything was happening. But as soon as our five-inch guns were going, they got up quick enough.

JP: Well, you had been trained to identify enemy aircraft?

JW: Huh?

JP: Had you been trained to identify...

JW: Well, they had showed us some [*pictures*] of the Japanese ships and there [*were*] books and we had cards. They had some cards but not until after the war started, then they started training us, especially the lookouts, [*on*] what type of plane. But it seemed like us engineers, they knew we weren't lookouts. We were down below.

JP: So you spotted some planes now. Had you heard any bombing or any noise at that particular time?

JW: Well, I heard guns starting to go off, but by that time I had jumped down into the [*engineer's*] compartment — I mean, my battle station was the shaft alley, which is underneath the engineers' compartment. But we were already dogging all the hatches in this compartment, but some of the guys, they just didn't believe, you know. They thought it was exercises. But when they heard [*the*] guns go off, the gun crews got up real quick enough. Well, everybody got to their battle station. Well, I just dogged myself down in the shaft alley and had to dog the hatch out of the compartment. There was only two hatches. I was just below the second one. And I was just in the shaft alley by myself. And my duties there were just to take the two shafts, the spring bearings that you have in there, when you go from high speed to low speed, we had to adjust the water levels coming in, so we wouldn't fill the shaft that way.

JP: Tell me...

JW: So when we were steaming out of there—and now this is—I didn't see this, now this is what I heard. I was down below. I didn't know about this until I got up late that night, that we spotted this submarine, two-man submarine that came in the bay. And the [*USS*] *Curtiss* and the [*USS*] *Tangier* were firing at it and told us it was a sub, two-man sub. And so we went right through there and we rammed it. And as we rammed it, we got past it. We dropped two depth charges. Well then I knew something happened. I was in the shaft alley when those depth charges went off, our fantail flew up in the air. Then I landed in the bilges, the gratings gave away but no scratch. Couple of scratches on the leg or whatnot, but I knew something happened but, I had no telephone. We didn't have phones in the shaft alley in them days. So if anything happened...[*we didn't know what.*]

I stayed in the shaft alley most of the day. And it seemed like late in the afternoon, when the mess cooks came down and gave me a can of peaches. I can always remember a can of peaches and some bologna sandwiches, or cold cut sandwich. I don't know what they were but that's the first thing we had to eat that day.

JP: So you didn't know then where the *Monaghan* was exactly? Because the *Monaghan* had been located—where was the *Monaghan* at that point, when,

at 7:55, during the attack, the beginning of the attack, where was the *Monaghan* located?

JW: Well, it was on the east canal. I forget what the area [*was*] called it. It's on the map. We were pretty close to Pearl City. That's just across the other side, down the northeast, I guess, of Pearl Harbor. We're in the harbor, but way down the end.

JP: And were you coming into the harbor? Had you gone out...

JW: No, we were [*in the harbor*]. We were in the harbor tied up to a nest. But we just had that one boiler on the line with the ready duty and it didn't take us too long to get the second one on [*to get underway*]. And now what articles I've been reading, it seems like we didn't get out of there until 8:26[AM].

JP: And you were below deck though, so you didn't know.

JW: [*Yes*], I was below deck then, in the shaft alley. And then we steamed out and we stayed. We just patrolled the island of Oahu. We just kept circling around the island and seeing if any Japs or anybody because we were getting information that the Japanese were landing in Nanakuli. We'd rush over there, nothing there. And then they tell us another beach. So we stayed—there was a couple of other destroyers outside there too with us, but we just kept patrolling around there. And then we came back in the ninth and that's when we really sensed, we got to see the damage that happened.

JP: So it's basically forty-eight hours after the fact...

JW: Yeah.

JP: ...that you were able to get out and actually see...

JW: But there was still smoke, burning, the whole bay was still covered with oil and what sailors you seen, some of them were still walking around there in a daze, still didn't know what happened.

JP: When you rammed the midget sub, was there any—did you feel a jolt? Was there any sort of...

JW: Well, you heard a scraping. I could hear and remember some kind of scraping. And then when the depth charges went off and our fantail flew up—well, if they had dropped one more depth charges, we went from flank speed ahead to full speed astern. As we had rammed it, we bumped in or hit a barge right by the Ford Island, right by the hospital entrance, it seems like, on a pier there. And as we did that, the torpedo men, they locked the depth charge rack because they had left it on there and the guy on the bridge had pulled that switch on there or the trigger on there that dropped. If they dropped the third one, that would have blew our fantail right, because we were going backwards at that time.

JP: But during that, during that moment between, let's say, 7:55...

JW: Yeah.

JP: ...to the second wave at 8:55, you're en route, you had rammed the midget sub. Is there any talk, you're talking with your colleagues at that time about what's going on? How much confusion?

JW: Well, there was, I mean, when we were going out, there was a lot of confusion, you know, from the crew, but most of the crew knew where their battle station was, and they [knew] something was up and they knew what they were doing. I mean the gun crews, we had a good gun crew down there.

JP: So after that, you headed out.

JW: Then to try to get to the magazines, they had to get bolt cutters, cut the locks, because the gunners mate is the guy that had the keys. And we had—let's see, one, two, I think there was four magazines in there. They were way down below deck. And of course the guys got down there and started sending the ammunition up. But to get into the ammunition locker first, took a few minutes, maybe ten or fifteen minutes before we get some of that ammunition up because...

JP: Where is the ammunition now?

JW: Well, they were stored down below.

JP: Down below, in the ship?

JW: Yeah, on the ship and then the magazine lockers, to get into it, it's locked. And then the ammunition is stored and they got this rack like an elevator that'll send the shells up and the powder. See, we had semi-fixed, had five-inch, either five-inch forty-eights or five-inch fifty-twos, I think, we got there. But they were semi-fixed. You had a shell that weighed about fifty-four pounds and then a big casing of powder. They had to be loaded both powder and shell.

JP: So you went out to sea after the seventh and you stayed out for a couple of days.

JW: Right.

JP: What were you doing out there?

JW: Just on patrol, just watching for anything in the water, especially any other submarines.

JP: At this time, had any debriefed you about what had happened?

JW: Oh yeah, well, that's what the guys that were damage control, or topside lookouts, they was telling us what was happening. You know, told us what they seen.

JP: So at this time, you know. What was your feeling? What did you feel like? What...

JW: Well, you know, it's hard to say. I said, "The war started. We're in it and we're going to have to do the best we can."

You know what I mean. I didn't think for two minutes about what I felt like because...

JP: Just you had a job to do and...

JW: Yeah, we had a job to do and that was it.

JP: So now after the ninth, you come back, you have an opportunity to come deck side to look at what had happened. For the first time, you actually get to see a visual, had a visual account of Pearl Harbor and the damage that had happened, that had been done. What went through your head?

JW: Well, it was sad. I mean that really woke us up. It woke me up anyway. But I did go see the rest to see the damage that was done and the oil all floating all around the water and the boats, everything was floating in the water because, remember, we were going out, we were throwing paint cans over the side. We threw all the—anything that had wood on, they're afraid of fire, we got rid of all the scaffolding like that we had for painting over the side. The paint locker, the whole paint locker, we threw everything out of that into the water and anything that was loose, got rid of it.

JP: That was basically, that was your...

JW: And there was still a lot of that was floating around in there. So it was a big clean up mess. And they were heading, they were starting to working already on the battleships, but everything was just in bad shape.

JP: So the *Monaghan*, did you dock, or did you...

JW: We tied up alongside the dock, if I remember right. It was pretty close to what we called Ten Ten Dock. And we did more work that one day, I think, taking on ammunition, fuel, and supplies. It usually took us three days, we did it in one day.

JP: Had the *Monaghan* sustained any damage?

JW: No, not that I know of. Not then.

JP: So what did you do after the ninth? Were you part of clean up crews or did you...

JW: Well, I forget what day—I think we stayed—well, I can remember, they gave us like a postcard and we just put our name on it and said everything was fine and then put an address on it to send home to let ‘em know that we were okay.

JP: What did you do afterwards?

JW: Well, we went back out to sea. It seemed like we stayed out for a time. A couple of weeks, we formed a task force with cruisers and I think we were heading for the Marshall Gilbert Islands. And I think—but it seemed like they weren’t sure what we were going to do after we got pretty close to there, the captain said we got a message for us to turn around, come back to Honolulu, that the Japs knew we were coming there already. But it would’ve been in a trap anyway.

JP: So you had turned around before you got to the Marshall, Gilbert Islands?

JW: Right, yeah. We went down—I mean, I can’t remember how far away we were from it, but we had had orders, they already told us. They had a chalkboard that we were, what we were—so many destroyers were supposed to go on the other side and start bombarding and then the cruisers and the big guns were supposed to hit the other side of the islands, see. We were like a decoy, the way we were talking would happen.

Then we came back. Oh, and then we took a convoy back to San Francisco, five or six transports and cargo ships, another destroyer with us. And we brought it back to Mare Island. And while we were in the yard there for a week, we got some twenty-millimeter guns put on and we had a radar put on. So it was a little bit more modern equipment that they took on and said that we were on twenty-four hour sailing notice as soon as we finished there.

And incidentally I got married on February 14 there and we went up to Reno and I got married. They brought me back and we came back that night. It was a Saturday night and I had to be on the ship Sunday morning. And then I told my wife if we had liberty, I would be home, but I didn’t know what time. But we finally got ashore and I spent the afternoon and night there

with my wife and then on that Monday morning when I left there, I told her, I said, “I don’t know if I’ll be—if I get off ship, I’ll be over there.”

Well, we left that day and my wife—I had no way of getting a message to her because I was already aboard the ship and the ship was moving.

JP: So you had been married. You went to Reno, obviously you had to go to Nevada, you went to Nevada to get married.

JW: Right, yeah.

JP: Was that because of the time or because it would’ve taken too long to get married in San Francisco?

JW: Well, yeah, and then I didn’t know how many days we were going. Of course, I married my high school sweetheart anyway and I had taken her to the senior prom, so I mean, it wasn’t one of these marriages you just met somebody. I had known her for a couple of years already.

JP: What was your wife’s maiden name, her full name?

JW: Medrano. Yeah, that’s the last name. First name is Lillian. And we were married—we would’ve been married fifty-six years this year. My wife passed away on the first of February.

JP: I’m sorry to hear that.

JW: But I had a good life.

JP: Well, I think on that, we’ll stop there, at that note. And we really appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

JW: Yeah. Okay.

JP: Excellent.

JW: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW