

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**#427**

**JOSEPH CURTIS TYLER, JR.**

**PEARL HARBOR RECEIVING STATION, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON**

**DECEMBER 6, 2001**

**BY COMMANDER JAMES ANTONELLIS AND JACK GREEN**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

FEBRUARY 20, 2003

**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL**

**NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

**ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

James Antonellis (JA): This is oral history number 427. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander James Antonellis and Mr. Jack Green for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial and the Naval Historical Center at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001, at nine p.m. The person being interviewed is Mr. Joseph Curtis Tyler, Jr., who was an ensign at the receiving station Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. For the record, please state your full name, your place of birth and birth date.

Joseph Tyler, Jr. (JT): Joseph Curtis Tyler, Jr. Born in Spokane, Washington, May 11, 1916.

JA: What did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

JT: We were living in Honolulu.

JA: What were your parents' names?

JT: Joseph Curtis Tyler and Annette OO-DAN Tyler.

JA: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JT: One brother, one sister. Brother, deceased.

JA: Where did you go to high school and where did you go to college?

JT: I went to New Mexico Military Institute for two years and at Piedmont High School near Oakland, California. Graduated from Piedmont in 1933.

JA: Where did you receive your commission from?

JT: I worked in the merchant marine for two years and then went to the University of California and had the naval ROTC training there, two years of it. Came to Hawaii at the end of my sophomore year and worked in Honolulu and we had the draft in November of 1940. I drew number forty-five. And I said to my wife, "No way I'm going to be in the army," and I went down to the old naval station on Ala Moana Boulevard and told 'em

two years of merchant marine, two years naval ROTC, showed them my credentials—I'd been the honor student there.

And they said, "Come back in about a week," and I did.

And they said, "Hold up your right hand, you're sworn in as an ensign," DVG they called it, Deck Volunteer General.

And that was probably in March or April and on May 6, I got orders to active duty to go to Pearl Harbor and report to the receiving station.

JA: Wow. No time wasted.

JT: Hmm?

JA: No time wasted.

JT: No sir! (Laughs)

JA: And you didn't have far to travel either, now did you?

JT: No. We lived in Manoa Valley and, you know, it was a twenty-minute drive in those days. No traffic. Narrow road.

JA: So everything was pretty convenient?

JT: Extremely so. Even more so on December 1, I had a call from the housing officer who was an attorney in Honolulu, been called to active duty, telling me that there were wonderful brand new quarters in Makalapa going vacant. And we were living in Manoa Valley at twenty-five dollars ensign's housing allowance and he said, "We've got these magnificent quarters that are available. They're fully furnished and two-story, three-bedroom, two-bath."

My wife and I looked and said, "We'll take it!"

And we moved in on December 1!

JA: Wow!

JT: Right across from 42 Halawa Drive, right across from the last tank and just a block from CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet].

JA: Since, I guess one can say for all intensive purposes, you were a local...

JT: Exactly.

JA: ...having spent so much of your life here.

JT: Yes.

JA: Not to digress, but could you describe what a bit of Hawaii was like then, in the thirties and the early, you know, '41, growing up?

JT: I should say so. I came from '36 and worked my way over on an army transport with ten bucks in my pocket. Got off at Pier One under the Aloha Tower. That was the tallest building on the island. You could see it from anywhere on the leeward side. Honolulu was really a small town. And my

wife, who was born in Kona but had been in school at Punahou and working in Honolulu, knew everybody. And I eventually got a job at American Factors at the foot of Fort Street and she worked just opposite, the Aloha Tower. She worked up the street at Bergstrom Music. And as an example, we'd meet for lunch and walk up the sidewalk on Fort Street, which was a one-way street then for cars, and we'd know almost everybody on the street.

You walked out onto Waikiki, on Kalakaua Avenue, hardly any commercial at all. And again, you'd know every fourth or fifth person you met on the street. You go to the beach, it would be uncrowded and just, you know, no tourists, 'cause the only way they could get here was by ship. And a regular thing everybody did was to go Friday down to the pier just below Aloha Tower and watch the *Lurline* or the *Matsonia* or the *Malolo* come in and greet all the passengers, you know.

And for fun, you know, I was just telling my son today, we'd get our old junk car and head for Wahiawa, go up over the hill and come down to Haleiwa and around the island. And when we were married in '38, at St,

Andrew's down there in Honolulu, we spent our honeymoon in Punaluu, on the other side of the island. We drove out there today to see it.

Honolulu was a navy town. Always saw sailors in town. And when you went to any kind of a social function, there were always naval officers there, and I guess there were army too, but they weren't quite as noticeable. And so my whole orientation had been toward the navy.

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. We used to have Fleet Week there. And the whole damn Pacific Fleet would come in. And you go down to the trolley piers and they take you out to the battleships and the carriers. You could even get on the submarine! And so, you know, my whole life was aimed at the sea and when I got a chance to go into the navy, I was delighted to do it.

But Honolulu was a quite low-key, wonderful place to live before the war.

JA: Now, you worked at the receiving station. What was your position there?

JT: Yes. Well, the skipper there was Commander Peterson. And he was married to a local girl, as I was, although he was regular navy and I was reserve. And I remember when I reported aboard, he said, “Well, the lieutenant, the first lieutenant’s position is vacant.”

And I said, “Yes, sir. What’s that?”

And he said, “Well, you’ll be responsible for everything that’s materiel and condition of the three decks were all enlisted \_\_\_\_\_.”

And he said, “We’re building a brand new recreation center right across the street called Bloch Arena and when that’s completed, you’re going to be the officer in charge.”

And I said, “Sounds interesting.”

So that was my first duty. We were right there at the fleet landing, so a lot of activity. And of course, new construction began right after the bombing. And that’s the purpose of a receiving station, to house all the men who were

being transferred to new construction, to house all those who would come in for the first time, getting ready to go aboard ship.

JA: Since the fleet had just recently been transferred from San Diego to Hawaii, did you see a lot of build-up, a lot of funds coming in, a lot of more men, materiel?

JT: Indeed. I wasn't so aware of the funds but no question about the ships in the harbor and the activity. And in the navy yard itself, the civilian working force must have gone up considerably because there was an awful lot of dry dock activity, work along the Ten-Ten Dock there, not to mention over on the submarine side, where there was so much activity. Yeah, it was very noticeable.

JA: What do you remember about December 6, the day before?

JT: Yeah. It was a Saturday. It was peacetime. My duty station at the receiving ship was to be in the next day at noon. A good friend of mine named Ed Simmons was getting married and I had a bachelor party over at Kaneohe.

And we went to the bachelor party and that was the big thing Saturday night. Got home about some ungodly hour, one or two o'clock in the morning, which was already the seventh.

JA: Right. And then what can you tell me about the seventh?

JT: Yeah, our house at 42 Halawa Drive, you know the big oil tanks up there?

JA: Mm-hmm.

JT: We were right next to the one just above the sub base. It's about 100 feet from our...

JA: Close to CINCPAC Fleet?

JT: Yeah. And the bedrooms faced over the sub base and that Ford Island. My wife and I had the front bedroom. Her mother was spending the weekend with us in the other bedroom and my son, my brother-in-law was here from Kona also. I heard this loud explosion, I sat up in bed, still asleep—thought

I was anyway—sat up in bed, looked out and I saw the smoke and heard the loud explosions on the south end of Ford Island. There was no activity on the ships at that time, nothing. But you know, it was obviously something going on down there. And as I looked out, I was telling Curtis today, this low-flying plane was coming—you know those houses at Makalapa are up maybe 150, 200 feet. This plane was just about the level of our bedroom and he was headed our way and I thought, wow, what is this? Here we are, right next to this tank and he made a sharp bank to the right and I saw the dots under the wing. And I jabbed my wife, I said, “Get up, honey, it’s the Japs!”

‘Cause the newspapers had been full of all of this negotiation and you know, the Japanese said, you know, “We’ll let you know before we do anything.”

And every day there were these discussions going on and you’d hear it on the radio and catch it in the newspaper. So right away I knew what we’d been worrying about was going to happen, was happening.

And so I had a Buick '32, old Roadster with the top down, sitting in the garage. We all jumped into our clothes and got down on into the car. My brother-in-law sat in the back in the rumble seat and my wife and her mother sat alongside and we started down Makalapa Drive. We were on 42 Halawa, which is right on the corner, CINCPAC's here. And I turned down and started heading for, you know, where you go down to get out and we got strafed. And so I pulled in Captain MON-SIN's garage. He was a submarine skipper and he was on the *mauka* side of the road. And I pulled in there and this guy went by, strafing the road. And I can't remember exactly how long we were there, maybe a minute or so, until my brother-in-law said it was all clear. I backed out and we started heading down toward the gate and the top was down, we looked up and we saw these bombers in the air. And I thought, am I taking my wife and her mother and me and all right into the middle of it? What do we do?

So I made a sharp—I don't know if you've been up to Makalapa—but I made a sharp turn to the left. We were on Makalapa Drive and the upper one was where the admiral's quarters were. And we right up to the top there and I'd never been up there. That was kind of officer's country for ensigns!

Well, when we got up there and looked at the top of it, it was a cane field, directly behind! It kind of dropped gradually down and then you remember that used to be something or other crater? I can't remember the name, but I'd never been up there. And there was a cane field.

So the cane fields in those days were in furrows. You know, the cane would be planted here then the irrigation ditch in the furrow and then another one. Johnny, my brother-in-law, lay on top of his mother, looking up, and I lay on top of my wife in neighboring gullies, looking up and watching. And I can see it to this very minute, those bombers coming in on a perfect V and seeing the bombs let go and disappearing out of our sight because we were up—it was the top of the hill, we were right here like this.

And I don't know how long it took before, there was suddenly a terrible explosion and a lot of concussion. And I don't know, we were cussing and saying, "What the hell is that?" I thought maybe something had dropped and there was another one, perhaps thirty seconds later. We finally discovered we were almost under the muzzle of a five-inch AA battery. It was mounted up there.

So we got out of there in a hurry. And as we were coming out and going toward the submarine base gate, the *Arizona* exploded. And I was telling Curtis, I said, “You know, it’s the biggest, flashiest explosion I have ever heard in my life and loud.”

And you know, we were what, half a mile maybe from there to what’s now the submarine base gate. It was terrible.

And anyway, we went down to the main gate. I jumped out. My brother-in-law jumped out because he was in the Seabees and he was enlisted man. I ran through the main gate and down to the receiving station, which was right there. It’s only fifty yards from the main gate. And my wife drove the car and took off with her mother to Kahala, where her sister was living. And we finally connected on Friday. I didn’t talk to her or see her until Friday.

Anyway, I got to the station and Pete, Commander Peterson was in his office. And I reported for duty and he said, “First thing we gotta do is get

some fifty caliber machine guns on the roof, get a working party on a truck and go down to Building So-and-So.”

And we brought four of ‘em back with quite a bit of ammo and took it up on the roof and installed it on the four corners. I wish I knew where we put ‘em today, and the hatch through which we dragged ‘em up. And then the next thing was to rig up some kind of communication between Peterson’s office, which is on the first deck and immediately to the left as you go in that front door there, and these guns. And while that was being set up, he said, “We’ve got word that they want to use Bloch Arena as a holding place for folks who were not injured, but who had either lost their ships or needed a place to stay. Get a working party and go down to Building So-and-So and get all the cots and mattresses and blankets and everything you can,” which we did.

And I don’t know if any of you have ever been in Bloch Arena, but it was a pretty big facility. And by the time we got back, they were already pouring in. And so laid these things out all over the floor and \_\_\_\_\_ all the

seats and the bowling, the two bowling alleys, and got that all organized. I had a very good chief and a first class there.

JA: Do you know about what time of the day it is by now?

JT: Yeah. This is 9:30, I guess. You know, I don't really have a strong memory of the whole day.

Jack Green (JG): (Inaudible)

JT: Oh yeah, the attack, the last sign of the attack I saw was when the *Shaw* blew up and somebody knows what time it was. My guess is around 9:15.

JA: Did you experience any sort of a lull between the first wave and the second wave? Do you remember that?

JT: Yes, the first wave were torpedoes. We saw them coming in. The planes were coming in right over navy housing there. You know, as you're going toward the main gate, there's a housing. Those were for chiefs. They came

in very low over them, dropped their fish and headed at the battleships and that was—the first thing was Ford Island. I didn't see that. I only saw the results. But by the time we got out of the car and came out, we could see that the torpedo bombers were coming in very low and dropping those. By the time we got up the hill and in the cane field—I don't know what the timing of that first wave, those bombers in V formation came, but it seemed like it was as just as soon as we got up there. But there was a lull between the first, that we saw, and the second that we observed. And was it fifteen, twenty minutes, I have no idea. I've read a lot of accounts, but that thought never...

JA: When you drove from the cane field down to...

JT: Yes.

JA: ...the main gate, said good-bye to the wife, were you still seeing enemy airplanes or...

JT: Well, yeah. The, you know, as you approach the main gate coming from Makalapa side, Hickam in those days was just right out there in front of you. It's kind of hidden now.

JA: Mm-hmm.

JT: And there was so much stuff going on there. There were planes diving on it and strafing it, I think.

JA: And you're driving right through all of this?

JT: Yeah!

JA: With your mother-in-law?

JT: With my mother-in-law and my wife.

JA: Your brother-in-law and your wife.

JT: And my brother-in-law in the back. And (chuckles) I think—you asked me what time it was when we finally got through it—somebody would know when the *Oglala* sank, alongside Ten-Ten Dock. And within ten minutes, the skipper, that was the mine fleet's flagship, and the admiral showed up at the Bloch Recreation Center. How they got there and how long it took 'em, I don't know, but I can remember them coming in. There were possibly a couple of hundred of 'em.

In the meantime, stragglers from all the other ships were coming in. Many folks were not wounded in any way. The fleet landing was already severely clogged with bodies. And after we got all that going, he asked me to go down there, Pete did, Peterson asked me to go down there. And I wanted to be of some help but there wasn't really anything I could do. The enlisted men were doing a whale of a job. And the boats were coming in as fast as they could load 'em up and unload them and then they'd go back out and pick up some more survivors. It was a pretty horrible thing.

JA: Do you recall seeing the *Nevada* on her sortie?

JT: Yeah, just saw her steaming out, you know!

JA: You did?

JT: I didn't see her go aground at Hospital Point there...

JA: But you saw her...

JT: Yeah, I saw her moving. Yeah.

JA: Did you see her guns firing?

JT: I can't...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JT: I really thought that was going to be their main target.

JA: Kind of darned if you do and darned if you...

JT: There were five tanks along. Can you imagine what that would've done?

JA: Oh yeah.

JT: Why they never bombed 'em or filled 'em up with incendiary bullets, I don't know.

JA: Well, they're still asking that question and they will ask that question as long as this planet exists.

JT: Yeah. Exactly, exactly.

JA: Okay. So picking up again, we, you were just recalling the sortie of the *Nevada*.

JT: Yes.

JA: Any other ships do you recall seeing?

JT: Yeah, you know, there was a, I think it was a yard tugboat. We had quite a few yard craft here in those days and I didn't realize that any of 'em were equipped as fireboats. But I can remember one of 'em very distinctly. I think it was shooting flames on the *West Virginia*, firing water on the *West Virginia*. I'm not sure. In any case, it was after the *Arizona* was gone. It was after the *Oklahoma* was rolled. It was after the *Tennessee* got sunk so which ship it was, I don't know. And then there was an oiler, I think, a yard oiler. Not an ocean going one, but we had a number of 'em that...

JA: Mm-hmm.

JT: ...went around the harbor. I remember that. And then some of the ships that were northeast of the *Arizona*, which were anchored out there. I think the *Phoenix* and the *Allen* and the *Chew* were out there and there was a tender. I'm not sure which one it was. Most of them seemed to get under way. At least there was movement from that area, coming around. I guess some of 'em went the back way around the *Utah*. But that area, which was pretty full of anchorage in the beginning, was cleared in a hurry. And I wound up on

the *Allen* myself, years, I mean months later. But I wasn't aboard when she got under way.

JA: You had said you were up, obviously in the housing area. Do you recall any—you said you saw, I think it was Captain Momsen or MUM-FORD?

JT: Yeah, Momsen.

JA: Momsen. Did you...

JT: M-O-M-S-E-N. He made Momsen Lung, the submariner? You're a submariner, you know who Momsen was?

JA: I'm surface. I'm surface.

JT: Oh yeah, okay.

JA: Do you recall seeing any other navy captains or admirals as you were making good your way through the housing?

JT: No. The houses on the *makai* side of that street, like we were on the corner of Halawa Drive in there, were all, most of 'em, lieutenant commanders. And I was a very junior ensign and felt, we were very conscious of the fact that we were about as junior as you could be out there.

JA: I remember being an ensign too.

(Laughter)

JT: So, no, I didn't and I didn't see Momsen. But, you know, in those days, they all had their signs and having lived there for a week, we knew exactly whose house that was. Yeah. And fortunately it was one of those double-car garages that was open to the road. All I had to do was make a sharp turn and we were under cover. I mean false cover.

JA: You mentioned you got the fourth fifty-caliber battery set up,

JT: Yes.

JA: On top and...

JT: Yeah and unfortunately that evening, I was telling Curtis again, you know, we thought we had a pretty good communication setup rigged up from Pete's office down on the first deck to the roof, but when those planes came in, and I don't know what time that was, over, oh, more or less the entrance where Pearl Harbor is, came in right low, it looked like headed for Ford Island, everything in the navy yard seemed like it went off.

JA: And you think that was also...

JT: And our guys did too and they didn't get any order from me or anybody else to fire. But very quickly we got the word that they were friendlies and to, you know, just, the firing stopped almost as fast as it came up. And (chuckles) then things were quiet for two or three hours. As I remember, that wasn't too far after sunset and being winter, it must have been around 7:30, eight o'clock. I don't know.

Maybe around ten o'clock, one of the other guys that was assigned to the station, Ike Sutton, was an ensign like me. We were about the same age, he was out at Camp—oh, what the hell was the name of that camp? Out there on Aiea. They built a camp out there. And I was in Peterson's office when the phone rang and he picked it up. He said, "Huh? I can't hear you? What'd you say?"

And pretty soon he said, "Gas attack?"

And he looked at me and he says, "That's Sutton, he says they're under gas attack out at Camp,"—what the hell was the name of the camp!

So, you know, man the gas masks! Well, about a half an hour later, Ike Sutton comes in with a very crestfallen look and he said, "I'm sorry Commander, but it wasn't a gas attack."

And Pete said, "Well, what was it?"

And he said, “Well, I think it was that stuff they use for anti-mosquito,” you know that smelly stuff? I can’t tell you what it was. But that was kind of a joke around the station for a while after a kind of a rough day. (Chuckles)

JA: You said you didn’t see your wife until the following Friday...

JT: Friday, yeah.

JA: ...what happened in that stretch of Monday through Thursday?

JT: You know how time disappears? And I’m eighty-six years old and I’ve still got a good memory but if you ask me to say what happened five days in a row, the whole main focus was on that disaster out there and trying to get those people taken care of. And because I did have the recreation center as my responsibility, although I had a good chief and a good first class that were there, I spent a lot of time being damned sure the place was at least sanitary. Pretty difficult to do with several hundred people in there. But I don’t know, somehow the days went by and I think probably the tension that they were, you know, they were coming back. They had beat the hell out of

our fleet and it was only a matter of time before they landed. And you know the rumors, well, there were rumors all over the place. They sent a sub in over at Waimanalo to test the defenses, you know. Well, we know that wasn't true but, you know, that'd be a perfect place for a landing. And there was all kind of scuttlebutt that—and there was even a story that a submarine had fired on Maui, I think. And you know, there were diversion, they were trying to get our attention over there. The whole sense of it was that what's happening next, here we are defenseless. What's happening? No air defense. Although we did get—was it Monday or Tuesday? We got a bunch of B-17s that came in. And I'm not aware of any other support except, I think, the *Enterprise*, which was somewhere out at sea, came fairly close to the islands and their forces, their carrier, its planes were available had they been needed. But somehow or other, I don't know. It just, time went like that. It didn't go like that, but in my memory it's suddenly I was able to talk to my wife.

JA: How long did they keep you at the receiving station and where did you go after that?

JT: It was about the first week of March when I got orders to go to the USS *Allen*, the tin can. And I was on her for I think less than a year and I got orders to command the USS *Peridot*, which was one of the patrol vessels that ran the picket line out off Pearl Harbor. Headquartered at section base, we'd go out for a week at a time and come back. And I had her for I think about a year. And then Commander of \_\_\_\_\_ Frontier's flag was the *Azurlite*. And I was skipper of there and I relieved Steve Hawkins there. And our duty consisted primarily of manning the weather station out northeast of the Japan islands. We'd go out there for six weeks and we had a 150-mile diameter circle we had to stay in. We had to keep total silence and open up at night. We had \_\_\_\_\_graphers aboard and we'd get a coded group message of the weather and send it out.

And so we'd go out to a station six weeks and come back to Pearl and go again. We'd be relieved by another one. And we got in a very, very bad storm. I've saved the barograph trace, you won't believe it. Hundred and twenty knot winds, three and four days without stopping. Waves eighty, ninety feet high. And to make a long story short, we got disabled out there, lost our steering gear and they wouldn't let us come back to Pearl, so we

went into Midway. And the sub base there, they did some jury-rigged repairs and then we came back to Pearl. And after that, I was ordered to the *Allen* as the skipper. And so I went there and I had her until we decommissioned her in Philadelphia in November of '45. Yeah. Yeah.

JA: Jack...

END OF INTERVIEW