

#223 LARRY ELLIOTT: USS ARIZONA

**Steven Haller (SH):** My name is Steve Haller and we're here at the Waikiki Park Hotel, with Mr. Larry Elliott. It's December 8, 1991 at (clears throat) p.m. John Martini and I will be interviewing Mr. Elliott, who was a Chief Machinist's Mate aboard the USS ARIZONA. At the time of the attack, Mr. Elliott was thirty-one years of age, and as he says now, he's not old, he's just been around for a long time.

**Larry Elliott (LE):** Yeah. (Chuckles)

SH: So, I'd like to thank you very much for spending some of that time with us here today, Mr. Elliott. I know you spent a long career in the Navy and it sounds like a pretty interesting one, so maybe you could tell us how you got into the Navy in the first place?

LE: Well, I, I lived in Alabama on a farm and one day, cotton was just about that high. And we had about a forty-acre field right next to the barn and I had been in the barn and left the gate open. And the mules got out and instead of running down the road, they went at an angle and they made a row for, each one of them, as they went, kicking the cotton stalks down. Well, my father and my brother and I, we got out and we herded them back into the barn and my dad says, "Who left that gate open?"

And I says, "Well, Dad, I guess I did. I was there a while ago."

And he said a few choice words. I said, "I never will make a farmer, will I, Dad?"

And he says, "No, doggone it, you won't."

I said, "You sign the papers and I'll join the Navy."

He says, "Get 'em." (Laughs)

And way back yonder, in the Navy, if you could buy yourself out if you hadn't been in long enough to, for the government to get their money invested in you back. So we knew nothing about the Navy. I hadn't seen a half a dozen sailors in my whole life.

So I, one day I got on the train and I went to Chattanooga and I got there early in the morning, and I, I was hanging around the, the depot, Union Station there, and got daylight. And so pretty soon, there was a train come in and I was standing out there at the gates, watching the trains come in, the people. And there was a railway mail clerk that his father owned the adjoining farm to us. And I saw him and he asked me, he said, "What are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm going to join the Marine Corps." I got myself mixed up then.

He said, "No, you're not. You join the Marine corps and I'll kick you all over Chattanooga." He said, "You're going to join the Navy."

I said, "Yeah, that's what I'm supposed to do." (Laughs)

And he says, "You come on with me." And he says, "I just got in off my run from New Orleans, Louisiana, so," well he says, "you go on down with me, on down to my rooming house." And he says, "I'll introduce you to the people, and

then we'll go have breakfast and then you go down to join the Navy and don't come back until about two o'clock because I've got to sleep."

So I went down to the post office in Chattanooga, and when I went up on the floor with the recruiting office, well right across the hall from the Navy was the Marines. And the Marine Sergeant, and there was a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy recruiting office, and they were standing in the door talking and so the Marine says, "Come on here and join the Marine Corps."

The Navy said, "No, you don't." He said, "You come on in here."

And so I walked in with him and they, I thought they was going to go to first city and so he got me signed up there in the Navy. But he says, "Now, you're going to have to wait two days now before we're going to send a bunch of you to Nashville to our head office and get you sworn in."

And that was my entrance into the Navy. I went to Nashville and got it.

John Martini: What was the first ship you were assigned to in the Navy?

LE: The *NITRO*, USS *NITRO*. It was an ammunition carrier.

JM: Good name.

LE: Yeah. It was known as the ship that would roll two ways at the same time. The bow would be going to port and the stern to starboard. That's right. It was a long, slim ship and it, it just carried ammunition. And, and I was only on it as a passenger really. And president-elect Hoover was going to ride the *MARYLAND* down to make that goodwill cruise.

So there's -- I had graduated from engineering school that the Navy was sending the, us enlisted personnel to. And out of a hundred and sixty-four that started the class, thirty-three of us graduated. And pretty rough school. So you had to keep your marks up or they'd drop you right out of it. Well, we made that trip to South America, and crossing the equator was when I met King Neptune.

SH: This is on the *MARYLAND* now, or on the *ARIZONA*?

LE: Yes, on the *MARYLAND* now. We made that trip to South America.

SH: Tell us about meeting King Neptune.

LE: Well, that's pretty rough. That's worse than these hazing that the colleges gives out. And so Allen Hoover, they wasn't going to initiate him, and he come out and demanded -- that was the President's son -- he come out and demanded that he be made a shell bag. That's what they called people who crossed the equator. We made -- I had already been through it then. And I got revenge. And we made a shell bag out of Allen Hoover. (Laughs) And Mrs. Hoover's secretary, we made her kiss the Royal Navy. He was a big, big Italian, and he was all panted up, and he had dressed up like a baby, and he weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds and so they wouldn't let her, she wouldn't kiss him. And I told her, I said, "Well, you either have to kiss him or you're going to have to buy ginger ale and coke for the whole crew."

And she did. She, she bought the drinks. (Laughs) And . . .

JM: How serious are you?

LE: Well, so Mrs. Hoover, she said, "If you don't have the money with you, I'll loan it to you until we get back."

Well, they went down to, on the east coast, I mean on the west coast, and then went over across the country on the train, and then caught the ARKANSAS back to the north, to New York.

SH: You picked up a nickname in your, your Navy career pretty early on. Could you tell us about that?

LE: What?

SH: Your nickname. What was your nickname?

LE: Oh, my -- one morning, we had a water tender that had been ashore and he come back and he wasn't feeling any pain. He was about half-lit and his, he says, "I tell you I'm going to name every one of you guys here."

And he was pointing his finger and naming them all, and he pointed his finger at me, and he said, "You countrified hick." He said, "Your name will be Silas Elliot."

And they, they cut the "as" off of it, and just named me Sy, and that followed me all through my whole naval career. And after the raid here at Pearl Harbor, well, I went, left there and went on the NEVADA, and there was some knothead on there went with me and he carried that name, Sy, and it started in on the NEVADA, but I only stayed on that long enough to get to the Navy yard in Bremerton, Washington. And they transferred all excess rates off of there, and there was another Chief Machinist's Mate and myself, well, we got transferred to San Francisco, to Goat Island. That was before Treasure Island was commissioned.

And when I got there, well, there was a Chief Printer there by the name of PLAT-ICK. He saw me as I was coming in the door to report in, and he said, "Hey, Sy," he says, "what are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm coming in but I don't know what I'm going to do."

He says, "I have charge of the brig." And he says, "Now, you get in my gang," he said, "I've got fourteen chiefs in there." He said, "We stand one duty every time." He says, "Now, you join my gang," and he says, "you'll have fifteen days off. You don't have to report in. You can go anywhere."

So I said, "Well give me tonight. So I take tonight and then tomorrow I'll be long gone, for fifteen days." (Laughs)

'Cause San Francisco was really a sailor's town. And so I, I joined his group, stood my duty. Well, all I done was just slept there in the chief's room that night, 'cause the Marine sergeants was in charge. And so the next morning, after breakfast, well, here comes PLAT-ICK and relieved me. He took the day shift every day, but we could go, we didn't have to come back for a day or night, and for fifteen days.

Well, then one morning, I thought, well, I guess I better go back and see what's going on. I got a bunch of clothes that's got to be laundered, and when

I got back, I could, found out I couldn't go back to shore. Well, I, I turned my laundry in for one day service and it, the guy at the laundry said, "You better go down to the office. They probably want to talk to you."

And then, so I be heading and lord have mercy, the whole lobby was crowded. They had that whole hotel that the Navy had taken over. And so I went in and, and I says, "What's going on here?"

And somebody said, "They're transferring everybody. They've got a list in there. Look up and see if you're on it."

Well, pretty soon here come a chief petty officer digging his way out and I says, "Hey Chief," I says, "what, what's this all about?"

He said, "The Chief's list is right over there."

And so I worked my way in and sure enough, there was Lawrence E. Elliott, Chief Machinist's Mate, so I was in this transfer group. And, and so I just got my laundry the next morning and we had to leave. And we went on a big transport and I wound up down in New Zealand, and setting up the first amphibious boat pool in the South Pacific.

JM: I've got to ask you, of course, about the most memorable -- and it's evident in the *ARIZONA*'s career. Can you talk a little bit about the December 6 and December 7, 1941, your last days with *ARIZONA*?

LE: Well, I was ashore, one of the fortunates. I had started to back to the ship three times, and something would stop. And finally stayed ashore with some friends of mine. And the next morning, I thought, well, I better get out of here and go on back. And I was going down to Gus Grisham's Locker Club. I had civilian clothes on. And I just bought a brand new sports suit the day before. And though, they -- I heard a bomb falling, screaming. And I never had heard one before, but I knew what it was. And I laid that brand new sports suit down in the gutter there. There was a car dealer across the street from the YMCA. And I think it was called the Schumann Carriage Company, if I'm not mistaken. And there was a car parked catty-corner across the intersection from me, and the bomb hit that Carriage Company, that building. And I, everything went over me, but there was that car was mutilated, and I, best I could under-- information that I could get, there were three people in it killed. And, but I went on and got changed back into uniform, and I walked out in the street, and there was a car drove up and a lieutenant driving in it. He said, "I've got room for one more."

And there was another chief standing there with me and we made room for two, because we both got in it. And going out to the base, it was just a two lane highway, back in those days. And it had a white line right down the middle of it, and there, here come a Jap plane over it, and he was so accurate, that he was chipping the asphalt out of that white line. And I was glad he was accurate, because if he had been over to the right, he'd have got us.

So got on back to the yard, and they, whenever the gate, the guard at the gate so that it was an officer driving, he motioned us on in. And I got out right down close to the landing, but the *ARIZONA* was burning then. But they still was bombing and strafing. And that's the reason that I keep saying, "Huh, huh" every once a while, because they dropped a bomb a little bit too close to me and I have a little hearing problem. And Doctor Shea in Memphis told me that a hearing aid wouldn't do any good.

But anyway, I had went around and I found the senior surviving officer, was Lieutenant Commander Fuqua. And he gathered up a bunch of us, and we're walking across the yard, trying to find a ship that would get under way and man that I was walking with, the name of Tom Murdock, and he lost two brothers on there. And we were about, I guess, about twenty feet behind Mr. Fuqua and those men, and they come over strafing, right in this, right between us. Well, they run and hid to get out or something. Well, there was no need of moving then, because heck, he's gone. But Tom, he reached over and he picked up a bullet, and it was hot, and he was bouncing it in his hands. And he said, "You know, Silas, when these things were addressed, Silas Elliott, or Thomas Murdock," he says, "it doesn't bother me." But he says, "When they're addressed to whom it may concern, is the ones that bother me."

And so, and he had it gold plated and a necklace made for it, fit to it, and gave it to his wife and she would never wear it. And so then there was another man that was water tender on there, and he was on the football team, and he was so mad that if he'd have found anybody that looked like Japanese, he'd have killed them right there, because he was a just a brutal of a man, but a fine fellow even at that. And he used to want me to, I used to wrestle in my young day, and he wanted me to show him, teach him to wrestle. And every time that we would do it, he, I'd get him down on the mat and start teaching him. He was so strong that he didn't realize it, and he'd hurt me. And he almost cried for doing it, "I didn't intend to," but that was his, his thing. He wanted to learn how to wrestle.

SH: Oh sorry, didn't mean to interrupt.

JM: Oh, I have a question. After the attack, you were involved with the salvage of ARIZONA. You dove in the wreck to retrieve items. You went down into the hull of the ship.

LE: Oh, yeah, yeah.

JM: What was that like, going into it?

LE: Well, I had my bowling ball on the ship and so I was captain of the bowling team, and so I tried to get the diver to go get it and they wouldn't do it. So I told the salvage officer, I said, "Put me in the monkey suit and I'll go get it."

And he says, "You, you're not afraid?"

I says, "No." I said, "They go down and come back up." And I says, "I can do the same thing they can. I'm as good a man as they are."

So they put me in it and fastened that headpiece on and down I went. Well, I knew where the ball was supposed to be. It was in the fuel tank filling room. And so I went in there, feeling around, and I found it. And I found there was one of Murdock's brothers, his ball was in there. He had owned his own ball too. And so I got it and sent it up. Well on command forward, there was a bronze plaque, about that long and about that wide. And I thought why, if I can get that thing off of that bulkhead, I'll send that to my dad and get it out of here somewhere or another, because I want that. It said, "At'Em Arizona, speed, dash and accuracy."

And boy, that was one thing I wanted out of certain, more than anybody but that. But I was sliding them big, lead shoes along, and wrecked the one of them just went on down. Then I, I mean I backed up and I hollered into the -- we had a phone rigged up to the motor launch along side the ship -- and I hollered in there, I said, "Haul me in. I'm coming back." (Laughs)

SH: Was that an authorized kind of move for you to get that . . .

LE: No, it wasn't. I, when I got back, I told the salvage officer, I said, "You know, if the bureau ever finds out about this, they'll put me and you both far back under the brig, that they'll have to feed us beans with a slingshot." (Laughs)

And right now, that bowling ball is in the Naval Air Station bowling detain-- gain, house, on the Naval air station in Marine, Mississippi.

SH: Mr. . . .

LE: Huh?

SH: Mr. Elliott, you spent a lot of time on the *ARIZONA*. You were there from 1929 until you were officially transferred off of her, I think you said, in February of '42. I think I recall you saying that you had something of a premonition about it when you went on board.

LE: Well, I went on there. I had been transferred from boot camp, to seagoing camp, and from there to school camp and from there back to seagoing camp, and from there to the *USS NITRO*, and from there to the *USS MERLIN*, and from there to the *USS ARIZONA*. And there were two of us off of the *MERLIN* in my class from school, it went on the *ARIZONA*. The other fellow was named John Massey Siran, S-I-R-A-N. And I told him, we called him, him Sy too. I said, "Sy, I've been transferred so confounded much around here." I said, "I'm going to stay on this blasted ship until they sink it."

And I never thought that they would, but they did. That, that did get me off of it.

JM: What's it like to go back to the memorial today and to see the *ARIZONA* down there?

LE: It, it's kind of choked up. I, I was out there yesterday and it's, it's pretty sad. You see, a civilian don't understand, people who never been in the Navy don't understand how we Navy people feel about a ship. That's our home, and everybody on there is just like one big family. We may yak-yak among ourselves, but don't nobody from the *PENNSYLVANIA* or the *MISSOURI* or anything like that stick his nose in, or they get it pushed out. And then that's just the way we feel about it. It's just like the three musketeers, "All for one and one for all." And so those, those men that still there were men that I associated with every day. And it would be just like your brother.

And so it was, I went out there yesterday, I wanted -- I never did want to before. I come through here one time on a ship, but it was pretty sad then just to come into here and, and my ship was damaged. We come in for repairs, but the Navy Yard was full and I had, we went out, they sent us to San Francisco, the yard there. But it, it is a feeling, it's pretty hard to explain. You, you get kind of choked up and you can't talk. So yesterday, I was out there and I knew underneath me was a lot of my old shipmates. And their bodies was there -- of

course, their spirit was someplace else. And I feel sure that god found a place for them anyway. But that was my felling because I loved that ship. I was on there so long that it was home.

JM: What would your battle station have been?

LE: Center pump room.

JM: Forward or main . . .

LE: No, it was in -- we had three pump rooms on there, right in the center of the ship. The boilers were three on one, on the port side and three on the starboard. She had six big superheated DMW boilers on there.

JM: So if you had been at your, at that battle station, you probably wouldn't have survived.

LE: One of Murdock's brothers and I, we used to go down there and there was a rag can there, setting under a ventilator, and the first one down there got it. And when we had general quarters, well, boy we made a beeline for that, because the engine, pump rooms was hot. All the pumps was in the pump room, except the main feed pump for the boilers, and they were in the engine room. And so, but everything else was in the pump room, all the fire main and all them pumps. And so my job was at the time, I was in charge of the fire room repair and we took care, we maintained the pumps and all the external fittings on the boiler.

JM: Well, we can talk with you for about two days, but we only have two minutes.

LE: Hm?

JM: We only have two minutes left. We'd like to ask you, people are going to look at this tape for a long time. What would you like someone in the future, maybe ten, fifteen years from now, what would you like to have them know about ARIZONA?

LE: Well, to know that it was a ship, that it didn't, didn't get a chance to fire in defense of itself. But it was a well trained crew. There was no confusion, I could see from the yard, that there was no confusion what part of the ship that wasn't covered with smoke. Everybody was trained for a job, when at general quarters, their battle stations. And they manned them and they, there was nobody excited. Everybody was naturally in a hurry, but that's not excitement. Have to get to your station in a hurry, do what you're supposed to do and, and get it over with. So everybody that come off of the ship said that everyone should be proud of 'em. And, and of course, the Captain, he was killed and Admiral -- the commander of the Battleship Division One, he was killed on the ARIZONA, going up to the bridge.

JM: I want to thank you very much for giving us a half hour.

LE: Well, I'm glad to do it. I hope I done some good for you.

SH: You have, sir. Thank you.

LE: Thank you.

JM: Did you do this for the thirtieth, the fortieth, and the forty-fifth?

END OF INTERVIEW