

#226 LAWRENCE DOSTANKO: USS CURTISS

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here on December 8, 1991 at 4:30 p.m. at the Waikiki Park Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. And I'm pleased to be talking with Lawrence Dostanko. Mr. Dostanko was an apprentice seaman on the seaplane tender, USS CURTISS, at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. At this point he was twenty-one years of age. And Mr. Dostanko, I'd like to thank you for taking the time, sort of at the spur of the moment to come up and talk with us about your experiences that day.

Lawrence Dostanko (LD): Roger. We commissioned the ship in Philadelphia Navy Yard. We were supposed to go to Alaska, and the [USS]ALBEMARLE was supposed to be stationed in Hawaii. They broke down. When they broke down, they sent, they told us to go to Hawaii. And we went through the Panama Canal and everything. We got to Hawaii, we traveled all over the islands, Fiji, Samoa, Marshalls, all over. We got done and we took on a bunch of planes in Hawaii, on a ship to Wake Island and Midway. Oh, they, I don't remember. I tell you, it's hard, it was a long time ago. But, when we were there, we saw a sub pop up. Okay. And we signaled it, no answer. We dumped everything, the gas, the dive bombs and all, both places, and we shoved off the next day, they even cut the lines down. They won't let nobody in the radio shack to see what's going on. When we got back on a Saturday . . .

SH: To Pearl?

LD: . . . to Pearl -- Sunday morning, I ate breakfast and the gangway, you have two levels where the boat hits the middle of the ship. I was standing there eating an apple, and I looked over, Fire Island -- yeah, that was Fire Island.

SH: Ford Island?

LD: Ford Island, Ford Island. And I saw the first bomb dropping. I was saying, "Oh my god, the Russians are here!"

Yeah, that's why, because I'm Russian. I says, "Oh my god, the Russians are here!"

Well, I ran upstairs, the guy's on watch, the quartermaster was shot. There was strafing. I didn't know which way to turn. I tried to -- we had a ladder up to number three gun, five-inch fifty caliber. I went up there and I started to strafe. I jumped down, I ran through the hangar deck and up through the ship, got on the, on the what-do-you-call, and we had no hydraulic gear.

SH: What-do-you-call is your battle stations?

LD: Yeah. No hydraulic gear whatsoever. They were never hooked up with the radar. It was all manual.

SH: Okay, where was your battle station?

LD: I was a loader on a five-inch fifty caliber anti-aircraft gun.

SH: Where was that?

LD: The starboard side, see. And we just started to fire, everything which way we can, shooting and everything. About a, about in a half hour, I would

say, we got a bomb hit, a five-hundred pound bomb. Went through the deck, into the hangar deck and hit the cable that towed targets, that we used tow targets for them to shoot at for practice. It, it must have come out at least fifty feet, it blew, and that's where it hit. And it blew and everybody in the handling room went, they all died, period. After that . . .

SH: What did it feel like . . .

LD: Oh, you could see, you know, the holds . . . the blisters inside the hangar deck and everything. It was really a mess, see. And the hangar doors that we had, that you pull aside were wrapped around the crane. That's how bad it was. And we had a seaplane, observation plane, that we used to shoot off a cruiser. They strafed it. All was left was the, the engine, the tail, two pontoons. Everything else was down.

What happened, then we got the word, submarine approaching in the harbor. And it was, I would say, about five, six hundred yards away from the ship.

SH: What did it look like to you?

LD: Well, first we saw the conning tower and they yelled, "Sub, sub," and it popped up out of the water.

SH: The whole . . .

LD: Yeah. Now, they were putting a fire out . . .

SH: The whole (inaudible)

LD: Yes. The whole conning tower came up. They were putting a fire out, but that water that they were putting a fire out was, the ship was listing. It was running into the metal shop, see. If not for that, we wouldn't have been able to hit the conning tower.

SH: Okay, explain that again -- the ship was listing . . .

LD: Listing.

SH: . . . (inaudible)

LD: The war, they were dying out the fire in the wa-- you know, where the bomb hit, see. Lot of guys got hurt down below, that I know of. And in fact, only one guy got out of the handling room, but he died later. He actually climbed down the ladder and he was all a mess, see. So when we saw that sub, we fired the first shot and the ship was listed, and it was a good thing it was listing, otherwise we'd never hit it.

SH: Now, this is your gun crew?

LD: That's right, number three gun.

SH: So, you're -- what was your job on it again?

LD: I was a loader. In other words, I took the shell. The guy behind me was the powder man. He would put the casing in, I would the shell in and I'd yell, "Ready one." Every shell that I had, "Ready two. Ready three."

I must have thrown about thirty-two rounds on anti-aircraft, but when we saw the sub and the ship was listed, we fired one shot, we missed. Then we fired again and we knocked it right through the conning tower. We knocked the Japs' head off. And *MONAGHAN*, I think it was the *MONAGHAN*, he come along side and dropped the depth charge, see. Now, when the Japanese plane hit the crane, I mean the boats were on fire, the other guys, our number two gun was blast with gas, and some of our guys -- I dove -- they said, "Abandon the gun."

SH: Did you see the plane coming in?

LD: Oh, like night and day, like it was nothing. (Chuckles)

SH: Did anything go through your mind at that point?

LD: All I thought was we had it, that was it. Okay? That was it. So what happened, when they said, "Abandon ship," two of us, me and another guy, I dove, because I was a good diver and swimmer. I dove eighty feet and I hit the guide line going down and hit me on the side, and ripped my muscles. And I was under the water, I came up, bombs dropping all over, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. Even one bomb hit -- oh, at the same time, excuse me, when that Jap popped up, they shot a torpedo. It landed up on the beach.

SH: The submarine?

LD: Right. The torpedo landed up on the beach.

SH: See the wake?

LD: Yeah. It was, it came right out of the water, in fact. They were trying to hit this time . . .

SH: Did it explode?

LD: No. No. They said it landed there and it never exploded. That's what I know of, you know. So after that, I got on, trying to get back on the ship, I must have dove three times from the gangway. They were strafing it so bad. Bombs were dropping in the water and if that was land, we were finished. I was finished. So I made the deck . . .

SH: So, wait -- you jumped off the ship to avoid the explosion . . .

LD: That's right, see.

SH: And then you were trying to get back on.

LD: I got back on, but every time I got back on, I got one of these planes strafing, and I would jump in the water, because that would be the safest place. But finally I got aboard and one of the guys had a big shrapnel wound in the back. And the captain's gig came along side from the *CURTISS*. Somehow, I don't know, he was on it. He says, "Anybody want to go to the hospital?"

I said, "Hey, come on, we're going to go."

So I went and I grabbed this guy and we got on the motor launch on the captain's gig, and they were strafing that even as we were going. I got to the beach, I got him to the hospital. And I was driving with one hand -- I put burn

jelly on me, you know, from the burn, and they gave me a shot of morphine. And with one hand, I was driving a pickup truck, picking up the burned guys.

SH: This was on Ford Island?

LD: No.

SH: This was at the Navy . . .

LD: On the beach.

SH: At the . . .

LD: Landing, at the landing, yeah, at the naval hospital. Oh man, the poor guys were laid out, you know, both guys running burnt, you know. You didn't care for anything. In fact, when we were on the gun, in order to open them canisters, you have to have a wrench like this to open it to get the powder cases on it. We didn't have it. I don't know where the heck it went to, but boy them guys with their hands and all, you have no idea what you could do when it's a little hot under you, you know.

Well, anyway, I got back to the ship. When I got back to the ship, they had a muster. 'Cause some of those was still over there.

SH: This must have been days later?

LD: No, no, no. The same day. It was, only lasted not even two hours, I don't think.

SH: So they treated your wounds . . .

LD: They treated me, they gave me a morphine shot and I went back to the ship.

SH: Before (inaudible)

LD: Yeah. Right, or something. The ship, just so it don't hurt or bother me, I guess, so I went back to the ship and they had a habit of calling me Russian. Really Russian. So he says . . .

SH: Like a nickname?

LD: Yeah, they called me Russian. So when I got on the ship, one of the guys says, "Hey, who said Dostanko is dead? They couldn't kill that Russian."

Honest. It was -- so I was there and I tell you what happened after that. You get aboard the ship and you see everything blown up. You couldn't believe it. Well, it was all over with and our carriers, thank god they were outside. And they thought that was our planes coming in when it first started, right, but it wasn't so. When our planes did come in, one guy opens fire in the harbor and the whole harbor started.

SH: Was this at night flying in . . .

LD: Just dusk, just dusk. And the captain of the ship was saying, "Cease firing, that's our plane! Cease!"

He had the bullhorn so everybody quieted down. And then . . .

SH: Were you on duty then, or . . .

LD: Oh yeah, I was stuck on duty.

SH: So you went back on your gun, on your gun?

LD: No, no, no. It was all over with. There was nothing to do, really. They were picking up the dead guys, you know, trying to, you know, put out the -- they were pumping out the metal shop, because that's what made the ship list. We had a guy down below, MIN-SIN-OW-SKI, he was in HALL-IS, in the showers down below. No radio, nothing. He had no connection. He opened the hatch and saw the water come down. He thought the ship was flipped over. So they pumped it out and he come up, because he got white as (mumbles).

It was unbelievable. It was just unbelievable. What can I tell you?

And then, after that, you wouldn't believe this, but my mother happened to hear about it, I don't know, through the police station or something. She knew I was wounded and she decided to come and see me. She happened to get there and she never could get hold of me, when we went back from San Diego. There's a telegram there showing me that my mother was there. Unbelievable. Man, was I crying.

SH: So your mother went from New York to . . .

LD: All the way by train to see me. And some chief just couldn't seem to get in touch with me. I said I couldn't understand that, because, you know, anybody in the Navy, I know I can go to any ship you can get on and find out, hey, will you call so-and-so to the radio. And I tell you, before we went to, out to Wake Island also, I knew a rigger in Philadelphia. I was going out with him, drinking, you know, and having a good time. He gets on the ship and he says, "Dostanko, come to the quarterdeck, to the gangway. There's a visitor."

I thought who the heck is visiting me here, in Hawaii? We took a bunch of civilians out on Wake Island, and he was on up there. He was a rigger. He says, "Larry, I'm going to make 25,000 a year, for two, three years and I'm going to get back, I'll be set, you know."

I never saw him again. I got one letter from him, from Wake Island and that was it.

And then we went from there, they sent us out to Espiritu Santo, where the Guadalcanal battle was.

SH: So this was after -- where did the *CURTISS* go from here?

LD: Oh, I think it was, what, three days. They repaired us and . . .

SH: (Inaudible)

LD: It's right in San Diego.

SH: You went from Pearl Harbor to San Diego.

LD: Yeah, when we dumped them planes, you know, then we took a planes back too with us. And boy, they repaired us up so faster than a bunny.

SH: As a plane (mumbles), the *CURTISS* must have been pretty crowded, this ship?

LD: Yes. I loved the ship. Clean as a whistle, everybody was beautiful. I tell you, no, I loved the ship. I almost stayed in, you know.

SH: What (inaudible)

LD: They all like it. I mean, but, but what they did to us at the cemetery, they didn't let us in.

SH: (Inaudible) Now this is fifty years after . . .

LD: After, when one can gripe. We went down there to see, you know, to be there with Bush and all that. We never got in. We got in, but you know how far away we was? We never even saw 'em. I think that was a shame. And that stopped me from going to the *ARIZONA*, I was so disgusted.

SH: From the perspective of fifty years after Pearl Harbor, what, what do you think about the events of that day and what do you think we can . . .

LD: Well, they could have stopped it, I think. 'Cause they had word that an unidentified plane -- and they knew, they broke the code. They knew they were coming, in my opinion, because crews were going around and they said, "Unidentified planes," and no one checked on it.

You know, the general and that admiral, they were vindicated, you know. They were finally, after they died, then they said they had nothing to do with it, which they didn't.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of that day?

LD: My best buddy got killed, in the handling room. And I went all through boot camp with him, you know. You know, you're friends and what can I say?

SH: What was his name?

LD: *MAS-TER-TUH-TAH-REE-OH*, he came from Massachusetts, I think. I think they named the park after him, if I'm not mistaken. He was the first one that died on the ship. Well, they all died in the handling room, but in the, that area, Massachusetts, he was the first guy that died. Like I told you, that's it. What can I say?

SH: Well, you do a good job telling the story. I'll tell you that.

LD: Well, it's the truth, because I got that book, the one that Nimitz printed. They say just the opposite.

SH: About what?

LD: About the ship, that we didn't hit the, the conning tower until the destroyer dropped the depth charge. It wasn't so.

SH: (Inaudible)

LD: They, in the book, it said that the *MONAGHAN* dropped the depth charge and then we hit it. It isn't so.

SH: You hit the conning tower . . .

LD: And *MONAGHAN* was coming along side, boy, and they said, "Cease firing," and he dropped the depth charge. And some parts of the book is true.

SH: Did you see the *MONAGHAN* hit the sub?

LD: No. Yeah, the depth charge and when they picked it up, it was blown apart.

SH: Did you actually see the *MONAGHAN* strike the sub?

LD: Depth charges and all, you can hear the sound of the depth charges dropping, and that's when it was all over with and that's when I got on the gig, went to the hospital. Got back to the ship. Well, by the time I went to the hospital and got my shot, it was almost all over with. I was, you know, it was just cleaning up. They held the muster on the ship while I was there. And when, like I said, when I come with the ship, they says, "Hey, look at Dostanko, he's alive!"

They thought they, they thought I drowned. I says, "I ain't drowning in that water, baby. That's the way I swim."

And then I got out and I joined the New York city fire department.

SH: (Inaudible)

LD: Yeah. Twenty-seven years, .

SH: How many times have you been out to Pearl Harbor since?

LD: This is twice only.

SH: This is twice.

LD: This is my home port, but this is twice actually, you know, when I got off. Eighty-seven, 1987, and now.

SH: What does it make you feel like when you come back?

LD: I got -- you know, you get that felling you, it isn't so, you know, when you look out. I tell you something, another change in Hawaii. I can't believe it.

SH: Did you like Hawaii as a . . .

LD: A home . . .

SH: Did you get to see much of Hawaii as a . . .

LD: Yes, yes. We got, we got shore duty pretty good. No problem. I went surf, surf -- what do you call?

SH: Surfing.

LD: Surfing and everything. No, it was all right. We had good liberty. But that day, when it happened to us, I didn't know if . . .

SH: What were you, what were you doing the day before, the night before?

LD: I was on liberty that night. Yeah. I was on liberty and then when I came back, I had the duty.

SH: Well, really thanks very much for your sharing your memories. It's been very interesting to talk with you.

LD: This is.

SH: It's good of you to come back.

LD: Let me, let me get that on there, fellow up here. He's from the same, from the MEDUSA, right next to us. Yeah.

SH: Thanks for talking.

LD: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW