

#207 MAX WALKER: USS CUMMINGS

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 5, 1991 at ten AM and I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Max Walker. Mr. Max Walker was a Seaman Second Class on the destroyer, USS CUMMINGS, at December 7, 1941 -- or rather on that date. He was twenty-one years of age. And Mr. Cummings, Mr. Walker, I'd like to thank you very much for joining us here today and taking . . .

Max Walker (MW): Quite all right.

SH: . . . to tell the story. We were talking about destroyer duty before we got in here to do the tape and you told me that you didn't particularly ask to be . . .

MW: No, I didn't ask for destroyer duty. I was assigned to the CUMMINGS right out of boot camp in Great Lakes, Illinois.

SH: When did you join the CUMMINGS?

MW: I went aboard the CUMMINGS, best of my recollection, in April of '41.

SH: Where was she then? Where did you join her?

MW: Well, I came to Pearl Harbor and the CUMMINGS was not there. It was on a goodwill cruise to New Zealand. And so they put me on the USS DIXIE, and I spent a week or two on the DIXIE, waiting for the CUMMINGS to come back from her cruise and then when the CUMMINGS came into port, then I went aboard the CUMMINGS.

SH: When you joined CUMMINGS, what division were you assigned to?

MW: I was in the Second Division, deck division.

SH: So what would your usual duties be?

MW: Cleaning and swabbing, painting the decks, that sort of thing, you know.

SH: Where did you --- where was your berthing compartment?

MW: Way aft, on the port side.

SH: Was it crowded?

MW: Yes, it was crowded. I think, the best I can recollect, the bunks, the Navy had switched from hammocks to bunks by that time, and I think the bunks were strung four high, from the deck to overhead, about four high. And my bunk was way back in the port quarter, top deck, top bunk.

SH: What were the usual kind of duties that your destroyer would go on, prior to the outbreak of the war?

MW: Well, we patrolled around islands. We'd be in port for a couple weeks and then we'd be out for a couple weeks and we patrolled around the islands, oh, for months before Pearl Harbor. And just patrolling around and gunnery practice. They'd have planes come out and towing a sleeve, and we'd shoot at that suddenly

with anti-aircraft fire, and a ship would come and tow a towing target out on the surface, and we'd shoot at that. And just general patrol duty.

SH: What was your battle station?

MW: My battle station was second shell man on number two gun. My job was to take the projectile -- we had five inch thirty-eights and semi-fixed ammunition, that the projectile and the powder were separate. My job was to take the projectile from the third shell man, put it in the fuse pot and turn the crank to my --- up the pointer that was coming from the director on the bridge. If you're firing at aircraft, they know the distance, the speed, you gotta set the seconds on the fuse, how many seconds after it's fired, when it exploded. That was my job, set the fuse setting on the projectile.

SH: And from then, where'd you pass the projectile to?

MW: I passed the projectile to the first shell man, and he put it in the breach of the gun, and it was rammed home.

SH: When you are doing your job well, how often could you get off a shot?

MW: Oh, pretty rapidly. I mean, we threw a shell in there every five or six seconds, and as I remember on December the seventh, we didn't have any power aboard ship. We're taking power from the dock, and then when the attack started, they cut off the power, so everything was manual. So we had to point and train the guns manually. And they had to be loaded manually and we had to ram the shell and the powder home, by hand, you know, and then close the bridge and the fire. And I remember that day, both of my pant legs split from the cuff to the crotch. Split my pant leg, the concussion from the gun.

SH: Really?

MW: Split my pant legs.

SH: Oh. Well, let's go back just a little prior to the attack, and work our way into that day. In the day to the weeks prior to December 7, was there any heightened sense of alertness, or anything special in the air that you recall that made the tension seem increased?

MW: Not really. Everything was pretty serene.

SH: Yeah.

MW: Kind of . . .

SH: What was your ship doing before? When you came in, you were at the Navy yard at the time, so when were you last at sea, and when did you get into Pearl?

MW: Well, the best recollection I have, we came in on the fourth or fifth of December. We came in from patrol duty and there was, I remember we were going to have the hull scraped or we were going in that floating dry dock.

SH: Okay, and it was just to scrape the hull, or do you remember?

MW: Yeah, scrape the hull or something like that. And we had the winch line from the dry dock, and they were winching us in and we got the blinker light from the Navy yard to throw off the winch line and go up and tie up to Pier 11

in the Navy yard, that the *TUCKER* and the *SHAW*, the two destroyers in our division had been in a collision at sea. The *TUCKER* rammed the *SHAW* and had a hole in the bow, so she had to go in the dry dock for repair. So we went in the Navy yard and tied up at Pier 11. And the *SHAW* went in the dry dock, and then on Sunday morning, the Japanese dropped the bomb on the *SHAW* and blew the whole bow off of it.

SH: So you're saying that except for the coincidence originally, you were scheduled to go into that floating dry dock, that would have been . . .

MW: That would have been us in the dry dock, instead of the *SHAW*.

SH: That's a happy coincidence, at least for you guys.

MW: Yeah. If you see the pictures, the second largest, the first largest explosion was the *ARIZONA*. Second was the *SHAW*.

SH: That's right. That's right. What were you doing the morning of the attack? Did you --- were you on duty the night before? Were you on liberty? Or how did that go, just the night before?

MW: Gee, I don't recall, but on that Sunday morning, I was . . .

SH: Talk about that, okay, talk about the morning of the attack then.

MW: I was a mess cook. In other words, I was setting up breakfast chow for the crew, down in the mess hall.

SH: When had you gotten up?

MW: Well, around six o'clock, probably. Being Sunday morning, they didn't hold reveille.

SH: Uh-huh.

MW: So you could straggle into the mess hall for breakfast 'til, I don't know, eight or 8:30.

SH: I see.

MW: And I just served the crew their breakfast.

SH: So you were just in the middle of breakfast?

MW: Yeah, right.

SH: Okay, do you remember what the menu was that day?

MW: No, I don't really. Don't really remember what the menu was.

SH: So, what happened . . .

MW: We had some pretty good menus of that day, you know.

SH: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

MW: But when the alarm sounded, the crew was there in the mess hall at the time, wasn't too pleased about it, you know, because we were having -- had been having a lot of drills, a lot of general quarters drills and so being in port on Sunday morning and having a drill, they were complaining about it, you know. So they just meandered out of the mess hall, very casually up to their gun stations, 'til they got top side and saw what was going on, then they hurried up a little bit.

SH: Did that include you?

MW: (Chuckles) That included me.

SH: Okay. When did you first begin to realize that something was not right?

MW: Well, when I come topside, the torpedo planes I saw first. They made their attack first. And see 'em flying.

SH: What was that like?

MW: They come between the mountain peaks . . .

(Conversation off-mike.)

SH: We need to back up.

MW: Looking to our right, over the mountains, you see . . .

SH: Hold on.

(Conversation off-mike.)

SH: Go on.

MW: Looking to our right, between the mountain peaks, to our right, you see the planes coming through there and they come down and swoop down low. It seemed like they were awfully low on the water, maybe not more than fifteen or twenty feet. It could have been higher than that, but they were low on the water.

SH: Were they literally below the . . .

MW: They had to be because Pearl Harbor is not very deep and if you dropped a torpedo from too high a depth, it'll stick in the mud, as they found one here about . . .

SH: Yes.

MW: . . . a month or so ago. So it was my --- first I see 'em coming in, and then I see the red ball on the fuselage and on the wings, and then I went, "Who's that?"

You know, it's not -- don't look like our planes. And then, I tried to -- next to us was the *RIGAL*, old repair ship, *RIGAL*, and the Navy was in the process of making a repair ship out of it. And an officer came up on deck over there and he says, "It's the real thing, men." He said, "We're being attacked by the Japanese."

And we seen the planes coming down below on the water, and dropped their torpedoes and you see the torpedoes hit the battleships.

SH: Could you see the splash?

MW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

SH: You actually saw them splash?

MW: Saw them very, very vividly.

SH: Do you recall the hits on the battle . . .

MW: Oh yeah. See the geyser of water come up when the torpedoes struck, you know.

SH: Right.

MW: All the torpedoes came first, I guess. They didn't want to pre-warn us because the torpedoes had to get so close to you, to drop your torpedoes in, and then the horizontal and then the dive bombers came in after that. And it was a shock to say the least, you know. Sometimes I thought --- I knew we had to get in the war, but it didn't sink in, though it came so sudden and unexpected, it was really a shock.

SH: I can well imagine. Had ships begun, around you, begun to open fire, or when did you . . .

MW: Well, I think a lot of the ships around us were in the same position we were in. That we were --- they were doing some welding down below decks on our ship and we had taken all the live ammunition off and taken it over to the Oahu ammunition depot, and probably all we had on board was a rifle ammunition, or a Colt 45 sidearm ammunition, you know, with the -- we had fifty caliber machine guns for anti-aircraft, and the five-inch and the ammunition was all taken off, so we really had nothing to shoot at them. So they just took -- and none of the other six, I think, were in the same position we were in. They didn't have nothing to shoot.

SH: Was anybody able to get any ammunition there?

MW: Oh, well, very, very shortly, the civilians and everybody on shore, they started bringing the ammunition to us in trucks. You know when we eventually -- and everybody was helping out, civilians to Navy yard personnel, you know, they had a line and they were passing the ammunition on board to us, just fast as we get the ammunition, we'd put it in the gun and fire it. We had to fire manually because we didn't have any power. We had been taking power from the dock and it was in shut down the engines on board ship, so they weren't making any electricity. So we had to do everything manually. But we got off a few shots, and we were credited with shooting down two Japanese planes.

SH: You were.

MW: One horizontal bomber and one dive bomber. And if you saw the movie, "Tora, Tora, Tora," with the plane went all the way across the harbor and dove into the seaplane hangars on Ford Island?

SH: Yes.

MW: We shot that plane down. He dropped the bomb on the heavy cruisers, tied up astern of us. And the best I saw the bomb fall and I saw the bomb go through the focsle deck on one of the cruisers, and come out the side of the ship, back behind the anchor. Came up the side of the ship and hit the water, and never did explode. And when that dive bomber pulled out of his dive, he was right over us, and he wasn't more than 200 feet above us. And our --- right about number three gun, we had a fifty caliber machine gun and we, when he come over us, we filled him full of lead as he went over, and he burst into flame and fire right away. But he managed to --- apparently didn't hit the pilot, 'cause the pilot managed to steer that plane all the way across the bay and dove into the hangars on Ford Island, set them on fire.

SH: That's quite a story. Let me clarify for a second. You said you were on number two gun, or number three?

MW: Number three gun.

SH: Okay, number three gun.

MW: Number three gun, yeah.

SH: Okay. And that was one of two that were facing aft on the . . .

MW: Right, right.

SH: . . . on the CUMMINGS.

MW: Mm-hm.

SH: Okay. You also mentioned you saw a dive bomber drop a bomb by the weevil? Was that . . .

MW: Yeah.

SH: . . . that correct?

MW: Coming in . . .

SH: You saw that?

MW: Yeah, coming in on our port bow, see this dive bomber come down and, and we were watching him and at that time, we didn't have any ammunition. So we couldn't shoot at him. And I saw the bomb fall out of the plane, and we watched the plane fly away and we're watching the bomb falling. It's coming across this way, crossed our ship from port to starboard and it went over and it landed under the counter on the *RIGAL*. *RIGAL* had a big, big counter and the bomb hit there, a few feet away from it, and exploded. Some of the shrapnel hit us. Piece of shrapnel hit a gun shield above my head, long piece of shrapnel hit the gun shield and ricocheted off of 'em, and went right in front, right by my face, and hit the number one shell man. I was number two shell man, hit number one shell man in the shoulder and went -- ripped his back open, from shoulder to shoulder, piece of shrapnel.

SH: What happened to him? Did he survive?

MW: He did survive. I talked to a fellow here yesterday at the reunion, yesterday. He was -- his name was Moore and the two brothers, Moore brothers on board the *CUMMINGS*, twins, but they were not identical twins. One was a big guy, one was a little guy. But anyhow, he got hit and then our Chief Gunner's Mate got a slug in one of his thighs. Machine gun slug -- whether it was ours or Japanese, I don't know, but he got -- that's the two casualties we had, but no fatalities.

SH: And this was in open -- you were describing -- this was an open gun mount, right? Not one that was partly enclosed.

MW: Yeah. Was open, was open. Then our two forward gun mounts were semi-closed. They were closed on three sides. And the two after guns were open all the way around.

SH: Were you able to maintain your fire, or you treated the wounded at that time? Were you able to . . .

MW: Yeah, well, we just moved one on up. When one man got injured, you just move up one, and I became number one shell man when he got injured, then I just move up one man and we just continued to . . .

SH: I see. So the drill was you had somebody else's duties to take over in case of . . .

MW: Yeah.

SH: . . . casualty and you were drilled to . . .

MW: Mm-hm.

SH: . . . to go ahead and do that.

MW: And I didn't know 'til yesterday, they took this man off the ship, took 'em to hospital and I never heard of him after that. But like I said, I talked to somebody yesterday, he said he recovered from it all right. They said that he -- gangrene set in, from the wound. But he got all right, he recovered all right. And . . .

SH: You certainly were in the thick of things. What do you --- what else do you recall from the attack?

MW: Well, we just continued to fire, shoot at the planes that were -- mostly shooting at the horizontal bombers, the high level bombers. But when a plane came close enough, we opened up with our fifty caliber machine guns. I don't know exactly how many we had. I guess we had about two aft and two forward fifty caliber machine guns. But if the plane comes, Jap plane comes close enough, why, we shot at it with the fifty caliber, otherwise we're shooting at the high level bombers. And we was supposed to have shot down one of those, but it has not been confirmed.

SH: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

MW: And we just continued firing until the attack was over with and then all the ships that were seaworthy -- got together all the ships that were seaworthy and we formed a task force, and we went to sea in search of the enemy.

SH: When were you able to leave the harbor? Do you recall? When did your ship leave the harbor?

MW: Well, we left the harbor shortly after the attack ceased. You know, they got together, like I said, all the ships that were seaworthy, and we went to sea. There were several cruisers that were still, you know, undamaged or slightly damages, that were seaworthy and we formed a task force, and we went to sea in search of the Japanese. So maybe it's a good thing we didn't find them.

But as we were leaving the harbor, we got a submarine contact, right in the mouth of the channel.

SH: Mm-hm.

MW: And we rolled off in less than fifty feet of water, we rolled off a 600 pound depth charge. And when that thing went off, it raised the whole stern of the ship up out of the water. You could see the propellers turning.

SH: You must have had a pretty good view of that from your battle station.

MW: So that's a pretty big depth charge to drop in less than fifty feet. You can't get very far away from a depth charge after you drop it in fifty feet of water.

SH: Right, right.

MW: So I don't know what happened, whether we made a hit on that or not, but apparently it was one of those two-man submarines that was trying to get in the harbor.

SH: Mm-hm.

MW: And we went to sea at blank speed for about two days in search of the Japanese, and we never did contact. We turned around and came back in a couple days later, came back into port and everything was still burning and smoldering. The place was chaos and there was two or three Japanese, two-man submarines that were loose in the harbor. And they, I remember, they came over to our ship for a dash of depth charges. And . . .

SH: Who is they?

MW: Beg your pardon?

SH: You said they came over to, to our ship -- another . . .

MW: Yeah, well, I guess they . . .

SH: . . . a truck came over?

MW: They, they came over with a motor launch.

SH: Oh, I see.

MW: A fifty foot motor launch, and they were going to haul around some depth charges on this fifty foot motor launch, and were going to search for these two-man submarines in the harbor, and they were going to signal us the position of 'em and then we're going to roll the depth charge off on 'em, and the motor

launch (chuckles) the motor launch would have went sky high on that depth charge. Luckily, they canceled that and they brought alongside a couple of PT boats.

SH: Yeah.

MW: And they put depth charges on the PT boats. Now, they can move a little faster. They can drop the depth charge and get away from it fast enough. So they ran around the bay, dropping depth charges on the two-man subs. Luckily, we got 'em all, we got 'em damaged or they beached 'em or something, before they did any damage.

SH: Clarify this for me. The PT boats and the depth charge was after you returned to Pearl . . .

MW: After we returned to Pearl, yeah, mm-hm.

SH: Oh, okay.

MW: I don't know the --- they still have that two-man submarine at the submarine base over -- where is that, Aiea? Is that still there? I know they -- one of 'em, they beached it, the Navy took it, mounted it up over the submarine base.

SH: There's a two-man submarine that's coming back to Pearl Harbor, that's now at the Admiral Nimitz Museum.

MW: Oh, really, well, maybe that was . . .

SH: That's the one the . . .

MW: . . . they had mounted it on sort of a monument over there. One of several two-man submarines that got loose in the harbor. But to my knowledge, they never did any damage. They never got a chance to do any damage. We kept 'em bottled up.

SH: When you think back on that day, what's your most vivid memory of that day of the attack?

MW: Well, it's just the shock of coming up on deck and seeing strange planes flying around all over the place, like they own the place. You know, it was little or no opposition. I don't think I saw one of our own planes, you know, pursuing the Japanese planes, so they pretty much had the place to themselves. And at that --- that was quite a shock. You know, to have something like that happen.

SH: What did you feel about the Japanese at the time?

MW: Well, I --- my thoughts weren't too good of the Japanese, you know, being the sneak attack like it was, you know, on Sunday morning, probably one of the worst mornings for us to be attacked, because a lot of crews were ashore for the weekend. I think our skipper was even ashore for the weekend. Not a lot of Navy personnel maintained -- well, some of them maintained residence in Hawaii, and they went ashore for weekends and Sunday morning, the crew didn't have reveille, you didn't have reveille on Sunday morning, so you got up when you felt like it and it was just a shock. But more or less, expect something was happening, because we were doing so much patrolling around the islands, prior to

that day and gunnery practice. Of course, that's all part of military training anyhow, but to sound general quarters on Sunday morning and here in port, that's a shocker.

SH: Well, fifty years have gone by since the attack, when you reflect on that day from the vantage point of fifty years later, what is most important to you in your thoughts?

MW: Well, I guess I was pretty lucky to come out of World War II with no serious injuries. I served on several ships. I fought in eight major naval battles against the Japanese during World War II. I had two ships sunk from under me and I went back to the States in March of '45 without a scratch. So I guess that's something. I had a couple long swims, though.

SH: Well, Mr. Walker, I really want to thank you very much for taking the time to talk with us today. It was a interesting conversation and I want to thank you very much.

MW: It's quite all right. Glad to do it.

SH: Thank you, sir.

MW: Okay, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW