

#169 ORAN DANIEL SMITH: NAVY CORPSMAN AT EWA

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay. Let me slate this. The following interview is with Oran Daniel Smith. It was conducted on December 3, 1986 here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, and it is about 7:30 in the evening. Mr. Smith now lives in Tucson, Arizona. I'm doing the interview, my name is Bart Fredo, and also in the room is Mark Tanaka-Sanders, who's with the National Park Service.

First of all, let me ask you to give us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Oran Daniel Smith (OS): My name is Oran Daniel Smith and I, well, originally came from Girard, Pennsylvania.

BF: Let me stop. Don't look at anybody but me.

OS: Okay.

BF: Don't look over at her or anyone, and we'll start again. This is . . . we're still rolling?

--: Still rolling.

BF: Okay, again, why don't you tell me who you are and where you were from back then.

OS: My name is Oran Daniel Smith and I come from Girard, Pennsylvania.

BF: What branch of the service were you in?

OS: U.S. Navy.

BF: What was your job?

OS: I was a, well, a Pharmacist's aide [Mate]. Of course, the Marines call 'em corpsmen.

BF: So you were assigned to the Marines?

OS: Yeah.

BF: When did you come over to Hawaii?

OS: Of course, I was on a cruiser before then. And of course, well, we came over in early '40, I think. Of course, we went down to South America, and then we came back to the islands, and then I got transferred to the Marine Corps Air Station, Ewa. That was in May, I think, of '41.

BF: By the way, what's your rank? I don't think I asked you that.

OS: Well, it was Pharmacist Mate Second Class, at the time.

BF: Let's go to the morning of December 7, '41. Early in the morning, before the attack, what are you doing?

OS: We'd been out all night and sleeping on the beach at Waikiki.

BF: This is on liberty?

OS: We were on liberty and I had the duty that Sunday, so we missed the last bus and we slept on the beach, so we caught the first bus, it was about 5:30 in the morning, back to Ewa. Then I think I laid down about a half hour before, you know, colors went and well, then I got up and went outside and, well, colors was going. We were standing outside when the attack came. We could see those planes coming in.

BF: What did the planes -- the first thing you were aware of were the planes?

OS: Yeah.

BF: What did you see?

OS: Well, they were, you know, they were all painted black. They were real dark. Then, of course, you know the impression everybody got was, you know, they were our own planes, you know, having a little fun out there.

BF: How many did you see?

OS: Oh gosh, I don't know. I think when they came over -- you know, I think they flew over before they started shooting. Then they, you know, they swept around and came back. And then, when they started firing, then all our planes started burning, that's when we realized something was going on pretty badly. But I mean, nobody did anything. I mean it was just standing there, watching, until -- well, when the plane, you know, our duty is -- anything like that happens, the fellows laying the fire trucks have got to go out on the line. So that's when we, the ambulance driver and myself, went out on the line. And of course, there wasn't anybody out. There wasn't soul out there but of course, we got out. Well then, they were swinging around for another run, you know, that's when I got shot (chuckles) in the leg and we both dove under the ambulance, see.

BF: You were with one other person?

OS: Yeah. Yeah. I can't think of his name and I never saw him again after that. I don't know where he went.

BF: So you took a round through the leg?

OS: Yeah.

BF: What happened to you then?

OS: Well, we dove under the ambulance and stayed there until they, you know, were through with their strafing, you know. Of course, I don't know, it was -- then they went around about three or four times, I think. You know, they made a circle and came back with a strafing run.

BF: Did they drop any bombs?

OS: Not then. They did when they came back the second time, was when they dropped some.

BF: About how long after these planes strafed did the other planes come and drop bombs?

OS: God, that's what I was always trying to realize. I know I was . . . well, it must have been fifteen minutes. I'm sure it was just about there.

BF: You obviously didn't spend the rest of the war under that ambulance. What happened to you next?

OS: Well, of course we drove back. You know, we were all sleeping in tents. You know, the mess hall and the payoff and everything was tents. And of course the sick bay was a tent. Of course, we didn't have any facilities for operations or anything. We were sent down to the Navy hospital.

BF: So where did you go? You got a bullet wound in the leg.

OS: Well, the ambulance had four flat tires, so we managed to get back to the sick bay with her. Well, then the wounded started coming. There wasn't any bad wounds. It was mostly little penetrating wounds in the arms and legs and the extremities and so forth. Of course, the second attack is when they got most of the bad ones. And the second one is when, well, they had several killed and most of the wounded. They had some guts shot. Well, we didn't have any facilities to take care of 'em. So the ones that were really serious afterwards, oh, we took them down to the Navy hospital. Of course, you know what the Navy hospital was like. It was so --- people laying all over the place, trying to get in.

BF: Was your wound treated out there at the Ewa [*Marine Corps Air*] Station?

OS: Well, actually, they didn't do nothing about it, with all the wait, I mean, I never even thought of it. Didn't even hurt.

BF: So, in other words, while you have this wound, you were working as a corpsmen?

OS: Well, yeah. I mean, in fact, I didn't, you know, I never felt it. I mean, of course, there was blood on my pants leg and all that. But, heck, I didn't even hardly notice it until the colonel comes and says, "Geez, where'd you get that," you know.

Of course, then we --- hold on. But then I --- we had a guy that was gut shot and the hospital couldn't take any more, so we went over to a plantation hospital at Ewa. You know, there's a little town in Ewa there? And there's a little plantation hospital and I had to go over there for three days to take care of him.

But of course, I had a shot of tetanus. The doctor finally says, "Well, you're gonna get a shot of tetanus." And, oh god, that made me so sick, I couldn't hardly move.

So I went over there with him and of course that wore off about the next morning. I was all right. Of course, I stayed over there three days with him and he finally died, you know.

BF: You were taking care of this . . .

OS: Yeah.

BF: . . . it was a Marine?

OS: Well, this Marines corporal, yeah. So then I came back to the base and everything went along. I mean, that's when the Navy started moving in and they, geez, they built all permanent buildings and new dispensary with an operating room. Oh god, it was really nice.

And then we left in February and went down to the New Hebrides.

BF: While you were here, in those first few days after the attack, you spent those three days, as you said, at this little plantation hospital in Ewa. When you did go back to the Ewa station, what -- the Navy's coming in, but what did the place look like? Still wreckage all over the place?

OS: No, they had cleaned up pretty well. I was surprised. I mean, you thought there was a disaster. I mean, you thought, you know, it was a calamity, but it didn't seem that -- everything was getting back to normal and everything. They got new planes were coming in and the ones, you know, I'm sure they repaired some of those planes. And actually, I don't know what they did with the ones that were destroyed. I mean it seemed like it was all cleared up by the time I got there.

BF: Just in a short period of time?

OS: Oh yeah.

BF: Did you ever have an opportunity to go over to Pearl Harbor and see Battleship Row and what happened?

OS: Oh yeah.

BF: When did you get over there?

OS: Oh gee, we had to get onto the Navy yard. I mean, we took some paces down there. We must have been about four or five days after. And we had to take two guys, you know, from the Naval hospital, that's when we saw all that.

BF: What was your reaction when you saw that?

OS: Jesus! Christ, I couldn't believe it. (Chuckles) I never saw anything like that.

BF: You had --- even though, of course, you knew it had been bombed, you had no idea it was that bad?

OS: Well, we could see the smoke rolling up, you know, from where we were. And of course, you didn't know the extent of it. That's the thing, you know, you never want to have. Just --- we had one guy that the FBI, I think, called up there. You know, it got tense, everything was tense. We had a gate that looked like a cow pasture, you know, a gate for a cow pasture. When they called up the gate and says, "Get this guy." And he was a Marine sergeant. They just says, "Get him."

So all of a sudden, this was after the second attack, these Marines brought this guy in. He was on the bumper of a car. I says, "Jesus, what are you doing, what are you putting him on a bumper for? Let's get him off there."

They wouldn't touch him. And he had ten bullet holes in his head. Well they got him all right, they went out and shot him.

BF: Again, who was this man?

OS: He was a Marine sergeant.

BF: Why did they shoot him?

OS: Well, the FBI called up and says to get him. That's all they said. What they found out later, that his father was a Nazi and they'd been watching his mail for months, you know. And they thought there was a connection, he might have been a spy. I don't think he ever was. He was a real nice guy, real nice friendly sergeant. But, boy, when he come in, he had -- did you ever see a guy shot in the head that you know, some of them come out and some don't and there's big knots all over his head. But you know, those Marines wouldn't touch him. You know, they hated him so much, just because they thought he was, you know, when they told him that.

BF: What's your most vivid memory of that day of the attack? What do you remember the most?

OS: Well, that the -- actually the -- naturally the surprise. I mean, good lord, you can't imagine anything like You know, everything was running smooth. Everybody was intent, there was no . . . you know, the only excitement out there was in September and October, everything started happening. Everything was smooth before that. And then they started sending squadrons to Wake and Midway. I almost got on Wake because, you know, somebody had to go with the squadron and this guy was married, so he said, "Well, you know, I don't have my family here. I ought to go out there." And of course, he was captain, which was -- I never did see him again. I don't know what ever happened to him.

BF: So surprise was the thing that you remember the most?

OS: Oh yeah. I mean, just looking up there, I mean, what are these things coming over?

BF: Did you notice anyone at the Ewa station shooting back at these attacking planes?

OS: The second time. First, hell, there wasn't anybody out there. Nobody had any weapons. Of course, then, after the first one, they, geez, I was issued a forty-five and I carried that for twenty years, you know. Never did turn it in.

BF: The second time, though, the Marines were then firing back?

OS: Then they were firing back with rifles. One guy was -- well, two or three of 'em were firing back with a little machine gun, an SBD.

BF: SBD, what's that?

OS: Well, dive bomber.

BF: Firing from the plane, but sitting on the runway?

OS: Yeah, sitting on the run-- the plane was damaged, but he got in the back, you know, there's a two seater and he got in the back and was firing. You see, that's the difference between a ship and a base. A ship can get into action in

fifteen seconds, boy, you're ready to go, but a base is -- I never realized the difference until I was out there. You just don't fight like you do with a ship.

BF: Did you see any acts of heroism that day?

OS: Well, the thing is, after that, I was mostly in the dispensary taking care of wounds and stuff, and I didn't see actually what was going on out on the line or something. For as far as heroism, I don't know. I didn't actually see any.

BF: In the time that you were here, after the attack, as you know, martial law was in effect. Did that affect your life in any way?

OS: I had to wear a gas mask, the only thing that I had to do.

BF: I mean, for example, did it restrict your going on liberty or anything like that?

OS: Well, we had just bought a car. I just bought a new suit. We had a couple of girls we were going with and then this happened, and that ended the whole thing.

BF: This "we" you're talking about is a buddy of yours?

OS: Yeah, mm hm.

BF: So martial law didn't really affect your life one way or the other?

OS: No. Of course, we didn't stick around too much then. I mean, we left right after that. And then we didn't come back 'til, gee, I don't know.

BF: Long time.

OS: Well, we didn't come back. And we were in Guadalcanal but we didn't come back, we went right back to San Diego when we left there. And I didn't come back here 'til '45, I think, or something like that -- '44, I don't know. I gotta go.

BF: Just a couple more questions. One --- some people who lived through the attack still have some bad feelings towards Japan, towards the Japanese. How do you feel?

OS: I like 'em. Jesus, wherever we had -- Japanese were our barbers, they were our tailors, they were the ones that worked in the store. They were all nice people. I don't know.

BF: I guess I was thinking more in terms of Japanese from Japan, Japanese nationals. Do you have any negative feelings towards them? Some people do.

OS: Well, you know the *NORTH CAROLINA* just had a reunion there in the -- you know, the Battleship *NORTH CAROLINA*? And they invited, they got torpedoes out there in the middle, I mean the South Pacific. They invited four of the survivors of the submarine that, you know, shot the torpedo out. And they were over here in May, I think, or it was June. I forget. See, it's all, I mean, it's all smoothed over now. They got along and they really enjoyed each other.

BF: So, for example, if you were to talk to one of those pilots who attacked the . . .

END OF INTERVIEW