

#144 PERCY JOHN FULTON: MARINE ABOARD THE USS *ST. LOUIS*

Chris Conybeare (CC): Okay, this is an interview with Mr. John Fulton. It was conducted on December 2, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki at about 9:20 in the morning. Mr. Fulton lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Interviewer is Chris Conybeare and assisted by Mark Tanaka-Sanders. So, good morning.

Percy John Fulton (PF): Good morning.

CC: Mr. Fulton, just a little bit before we get into this . . . where was your hometown, where were you born?

PF: Blues Creek, eighteen miles around the post office.

CC: Blues Creek is in North Carolina?

PF: Yeah, it's just real, real close to Winston-Salem. It's a country town.

CC: Country town, small town?

PF: Yeah, one post office, two stores.

CC: And maybe we could move up in time a little bit. What was your name and your rank on December 7, 1941.

PF: P. John Fulton, oh, 1941? I was Corporal.

CC: And the first initial is P?

PF: P. John.

CC: Is there a name that goes with that, or is that a secret?

PF: Yeah, yeah. No, Percy John.

CC: Percy John Fulton.

PF: (mumbles) John.

CC: And your rank?

PF: Corporal.

CC: And what branch of the service were you?

PF: Marine Corps.

CC: What was your job and where were you stationed on December 7?

PF: On the seventh I was on the fantail and a member of a color guard, which is comprised of four men whose duty was to raise the colors at the exact eight o'clock, after the bugler got through with playing "Colors." But this morning we raised the colors five minutes to eight, which you never do. We didn't wait for the bugler to get through. We raised the colors and took off for gun stations.

CC: Before we get into why that happened, how did you happen to be in Hawaii on that date? What . . .

PF: We were . . . there were two task forces here. We were a member of one of them. We had been up two weeks, our turn to come in. We came in, the other one went out.

CC: And what ship was this now?

PF: USS *ST. LOUIS*.

CC: And what kind of ship is that?

PF: Light cruiser, six-inch guns, heavy cruiser is eight-inch.

CC: So you came in on the St. Louis, when?

PF: Friday night, we entered the harbor, after having been out two weeks, about four-thirty, five o'clock, coming in the harbor.

CC: And what was the mood of the times? Had you been on general quarters a lot or were you expecting trouble, or what were things like?

PF: On Friday, we . . . our submarine, our destroyers had picked up, detected this submarine which was sank outside the harbor. Prior to that in October, we had been in the Philippines in a very tense situation all the way out and back, all Japanese ships we sighted went to general quarters, ready for battle. And the only thing we didn't do was train the guns out on this ship.

CC: So basically, there was a feeling that there was going to be trouble.

PF: Right. Right. And the army had been practicing defense of the isle on prior to the week before, and placements, gunning placements on water tanks, on high places, and they had just taken them all down.

CC: So the morning of December 7, you were on color guard duty. Maybe you can explain a little bit about . . . who else was with you? Do you remember the other guys?

PF: I don't remember. It was comprised of all other Marines, which was part of the duty of the Marines aboard the ship. And duties of the Marines aboard the ship was security for the whole ship and if the ship got out here and the United States ordered it to make a landing party on an isle along some small island that the government was being disrupted, it was our job to go ashore and take care of the situation and get it back stable. That was the primary purpose of the Marines aboard the ship.

CC: What happened that morning when you went to put up the colors? Do you remember what you did?

PF: Well, we got out there and were waiting to raise the colors. And of course the bugler had not started, had not started blowing "Colors" yet. The planes came in and across our stern, which we could see very easily, their outline of the men, their heads, eyeballs. This close. And as soon as the plane started coming in, we knew, having been in the Philippines and having sank the submarine; we knew what was going on. Nobody didn't have to say, "Man your battle stations, we're going to war." We took off.

CC: You say you could see the pilots of the planes, how were they dressed?

PF: Just like the movies shown at the memorial. With the old World War aviator caps.

CC: And you were that close.

PF: That close. Yeah.

CC: Did they fire on you?

PF: No, no, no. They were . . . their sight was on battle wagons. They were looking straight for the battle wagons.

CC: What kind of planes were they? Do you remember?

PF: Torpedo planes, real low. They were getting down to where they could just slip that torpedo right out.

CC: What did you do? Did the other guys all know? I mean, did you . . .

PF: Oh yeah. Everybody knew there, in this color guard. We just ran the colors right on up, which you -- when you're getting ready to raise the colors, you already have it fastened to the lanyard, ready to go. When, at the proper time of the color -- Colors are blown, we already had it fastened, we just pulled it to the top, lashed it down, took off.

CC: Where'd you take off to?

PF: To our gun station, which was an anti-aircraft mount, five-inch, enclosed in an aircraft mount.

CC: Did you wait for any orders to get that gun into action, or . . .

PF: No orders, you were . . . During the time, general quarters sounded, but you didn't have to ask, "What's this for?" You knew what it was for. We went on to get the gun in operation, which was a very short period of time. We were firing, I'd say, within a minute after. Within maybe two or three minutes from the stern of the ship to not quite halfway fore, but we were on the same level as this gun mount, same deck.

CC: What kinds of things could you see? What did you observe going on out in the . . .

PF: Well, we were starting to see, before we got into the gun mount, the explosions from bombs, from the torpedoes. And then, after we got into the gun mount and started firing, which we were sitting our timer, our fuses on these shells, lowest possible because you're firing almost directly -- and as you've read, lots of people were killed from our own anti-aircraft fire, which later I encountered this out here. An armada, one time, when planes came in through the armada and hit nobody and we had men killed from our own anti-aircraft fire. But that morning we were sitting as low as we could, at dive bombers, at torpedo bombers.

CC: And meanwhile, the *ST. LOUIS* got under way?

PF: Between the attacks -- the first attack was subsiding, and we were tied up alongside of the [USS] *HONOLULU*, which our task force commander was aboard. And the same type ships and bridges were almost jumpable, over, not quite. In a hurry, you could have, but they could talk back and forth. And our captain, talking to the commander, told him, he says, "I'm getting out of here."

He said, "If you go, you're going on your own." Which, in your view . . . even in the movie down here, you see incidents of people not wanting to assume responsibility. Now the commander didn't say, "Go ahead. I'll back you."

The captain says, "I'm going."

CC: Was that unusual, though? Didn't it usually take quite an operation to get a cruiser out of there?

PF: They usually took four tugs to maneuver it from these finger piers, but this captain, being experienced enough, having come up from submarine, I mean, destroyers. Maneuvering small ships, you learn to maneuver big ships much better. And he maneuvered it back out of the finger piers, narrow stream, reverse the screws, spun the ship around and we were ready to depart then.

CC: Could you see anything from the gun mount? I mean, were you able to observe anything other than what you had to do, which was fire the gun? Were you able to . . .

PF: Oh yeah, you have hatches on both sides of the gun mount, which you could open. And as we went out of the harbor, which -- in the book titled *The Day of Infamy*, which is -- and there are several books titles "*Day of Infamy*", but one of them shows us going out right by these battle wagons, and it's identified as the *ST. LOUIS*.

But we could open this hatch and see what was going on right there, by the battle wagons and all. And the Arizona was not down, was burning and listing, but not down yet.

CC: What about the *NEVADA*? Did you observe the *NEVADA*?

PF: Nevada was trying to get up, under way, ahead of us. And I have heard that coxswain was at the wheel of this. How true it is, I don't know. But, saw it was going to sink, swung over in the channel, set it down or let it set down, stopped its engines and we went by then.

CC: And what did you do, what did the *ST. LOUIS* do?

PF: Proceeded onto the mouth of the channel, and we got to the mouth of the channel, the submarines were lying there, waiting for us. In your movies, you see pictures of submarines, torpedoes running through water. We saw the torpedoes coming, and we started dodging the torpedoes. Ran aground, but didn't stop us -- threw one of our screws out of line a little bit. And out three days and the screws -- whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp. And continued to whomp until we got back into United States.

CC: What were your -- the first thoughts you had when you realized that you were under attack? Do you remember what you were thinking at that time?

PF: This is hell, this is it. We don't have to wait no longer.

CC: So you'd been expecting that something might happen.

PF: Yeah. From Manila, the submarines sinking, the news.

CC: Did your ship take any hits?

PF: During this first attack, we had a bomb dropped between our bow, the *HONOLULU* bow, and *ST. LOUIS* bow, which -- your bows spread out when you're tied together -- went down on the floor of the harbor and exploded on the floor of the harbor. And during the explosion on the floor of the harbor, raised the ship up almost crumbled you, standing on your legs. And some strapping of the ship. But other than that, no more damage.

CC: So you were fairly lucky, in terms of . . .

PF: Yeah, damage in the harbor, very lucky, yeah. But at the time, we were in the harbor, in the finger piers, which was part of the Navy yard. We were under pretty extensive repair. We had had glass portholes. They had cut them all out, steel, three-eighth inch steel plate, and were going to seal them up. These portholes were open, had not been sealed. First thing, out at sea, was to seal these portholes, which are an engineering department seal with steel plates. Another thing, we didn't have -- pertaining to personnel -- nobody had dog tags, nobody had insurance.

CC: Thought you needed some insurance?

PF: First thing we started making was dog tags and insurance. I had no insurance. The reason I had no insurance, I had been a buck private, twenty-one dollars -- I mean a private -- twenty-one dollars a month. And if you took insurance, that was a dollar and ten cents out of your twenty-one. Couldn't see it. (Chuckles)

CC: As a corporal, what kind of pay did you make as a Corporal?

PF: I think as a Corporal you got on up to about twenty-eight or thirty.

CC: What would you . . .

PF: I still hadn't -- didn't have insurance.

CC: What would you have done that day if there hadn't been an attack? What were you planning to do after you raised the colors?

PF: Well, I was on duty all the day.

CC: So you would have been duty on the . . .

PF: Yeah, after I got the colors up, yeah. After I got the colors up, I would have come back to the gangplank and had duty there. And of course you -- in the harbor, you have men patrolling up on the stern and bow all the time, armed for whatever.

CC: So, that afternoon, or during the first attack, you manned a gun all during the attacks, or . . .

PF: Manned the gun until about ten-thirty that morning, proceeded on out to sea. Stayed out three days. We stayed at battle readiness, battle stations,

until about ten-thirty, before they announced over the loud speaker system, "Secure from general quarters," which then you could leave your gun station, go to your quarters, but nobody went to quarters. Everybody just went up on the main deck. Some of them saying, "What happened?"

They hadn't seen or didn't know.

CC: That's right, they'd been below deck.

PF: Yeah, yeah, below decks.

CC: What kinds of things did you talk about? Do you remember what people were saying?

PF: How terrible it was and what's going to happen, and, "Where are we going now," which you didn't -- the words never passed, what you're going to do. And light a cigarette and I started smoking. I had never been smoking. The guys were smoking, I said, "Give me one of them cigarettes."

Started smoking, smoked for about -- until I get back to California, about a year and a half later, get off the ship, quit.

CC: But, so Pearl Harbor started you to smoke?

PF: (Chuckles) Yeah, that's right.

CC: How did you finish the war?

PF: After I got off, stayed aboard the ship. Made the first offensive action back against the Japanese, which was up in the Marshall, Gilberts, which was one carrier, two cruisers and about three or four destroyers. Now this is February, after December, which was an air attack from the carrier on the islands, up there. And which we supported, and of course we had very little naval armament left, which was 1500 miles in the Japanese territory, very dangerous, caught us. If their fleet had caught us, we wouldn't have had a chance.

But, anyway, we came back from that and into, around Pearl, still patrolling. But in the three days -- let's backtrack a little bit -- the three days we were patrolling for the task force that had launched.

CC: Where did you go? Where did the patrol go? Do you remember?

PF: No. It's out to sea from Honolulu here. But what direction . . .

CC: You don't know if you went south or north?

PF: No, no, no. Unless you happened to have duty on the bridge, which the Marines did have duty on the bridge, which one of the duties of the Marines was to relay messages to the skipper from engineer, boiler rooms, whatever, come in on the telephone, you relay that verbally to the skipper. But if you had the duty on the bridge, you would know. The compass was there, you could see where you're going, and of course the coxswain, usually, the coxswain was at the wheel and you talked back and forth, you knew which direction.

CC: But you really didn't . . .

PF: You were just following an azimuth, or compass.

CC: How about after the three days at sea? You came back in, what kind of work did they have you doing after that? Did you get involved in any of the clean up, or . . .

PF: Oh, no. The only work we were doing was resupplying our ship. We had small amount of ammo, small amount of oil, small amount of supplies, which we had to resupply, get our ammo back on, and whatever you want into a Navy yard situation. Took off all the ammo, except for what we had orders to keep on, due to fire, dangers, explosions. And this is a tremendous job to load these shells. And all the things that go back to was fine. And this don't get done with ten men, it's every man on the ship, almost. Of course, you've got your normal duties, got to go on.

But anyway, we were resupplying the ship, getting ready to go back out. And in twenty-four hours we went back out. But as soon as we came in, the first night, completely black out on the island. Any lights were sighted up in the mountains, they were shot out.

CC: Were things pretty tense?

PF: Very tense, yeah. Trusted nobody. Not if they were -- looked suspicious.

CC: So there was a lot of, shall we say, itchy trigger fingers?

PF: That's right. And this itchy trigger fingers occurs all, in any combat situation. To illustrate, one time this -- as I said a while ago -- we were on the way to New Britain, New Guinea, supposed to make an assault there. Our intelligence found out that some way, the Japanese had got a hold of it. Now, this is an armada ready to land; they called it off. Japanese hit us one afternoon, now here's ships three hundred-sixty degrees, as far as you can see. Torpedo planes came in on us. Low level, mast height. Flew completely through this armada, did not hit a ship and got out.

Back to the itchy fingers. Next day, we get the word, "Our planes are coming in. Do not fire."

Some of these ships didn't have too much communication on them. Small, the small ships with just all tanks and ammo and this type of thing. But anyway, the order not to fire. One guy got an itchy trigger finger, opened on these planes, knocked one down, 10,000 on a plane.

CC: Did you see any of that during the attack on Pearl Harbor? Any of mistaking our own aircraft, kind of thing?

PF: No. Because we had very few aircraft in the air, but my primary duties was inside this gun mount, which you couldn't see out too much. The only time you could see out was you opened the hatch -- which you weren't supposed to open the hatch, see.

CC: Basically kept loading, setting fuses . . .

JP: That's right, yeah, yeah.

CC: Okay, let's stop right now. I want to change tapes . . .

END OF VIDEOTAPE 1

VIDEOTAPE 2

PF: Yes, S-I-N-K-I-E-W-I-C-Z [*Leo Sienkiewicz*].

CC: Okay, maybe we can reach him. Okay, why don't we kind of wind this up and maybe -- how do you feel about this? Here you are back, forty-five years later. How do you feel about this incident? Was it one of those things that's always been with you through this last forty-five years?

PF: Oh yeah, it's continued with me, but Pearl Harbor was bad. Terrible. But a beach head is another story. It's the reckoning of the real ante, on a beach head. But (sigh) there are some things that disturb me here, but I'm sure that the nationalities have nothing to do with it. But it's disturbing to go aboard this *ARIZONA* and know that there are men down below.

CC: Do you -- I mean, you have -- it's a dubious distinction to be sure, but to participate in an event that's of that historic nature, has it given you things to think about, in terms of a philosophy of life or how you approach things?

PF: Well, philosophy of life, we are living in one of the greatest countries there is. The opportunities, the freedom and we should -- as the movie explains down there -- never forget it.

CC: And do you think that young people today are -- really understand their history, or . . .

PF: No way they'd understand it. I worked -- I was an assistant register of deeds of a county of about 450 thousand people. And we had a big enough organization that many school groups, individuals -- we even had people from Hawaii come to observe our operation. And on the particular area that I worked, I had pictures of Iwo Jima flag-raising, Pearl Harbor, on a wall. And I would ask these students, high school teen-ager, how much they studied this in history. Some of them say, "I never heard of it." Some of them say, "Oh, a paragraph, one page." This is disturbing.

CC: Why is it disturbing?

PF: That it's not being taught more in our schools. To make them aware of what the country can get into if they're not properly governed. When I first was in the Marine Corps, I'm training with wooden rifles, rubber tanks. This all gets back to your legislation, defense department, congressman saying, "No, I don't want," -- "You can't have appropriations of 450 million to do this." This is terrible. We should never let our country get back to that.

CC: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW