

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#411

RALPH WILLIAM LANDRETH

USS *ARIZONA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY KAREN BYRNE & COMMANDER JUDITH LAFLEUR

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

NOVEMBER 5, 2002

USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

(Conversation off-mike)

Judith Lafleur (JL): The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Judith Lafleur, USNR [United States Naval Reserve], Naval Historical Center and Karen Byrne, National Park Service, for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii on December 6, 2001 at 1:45 in the afternoon. The person being interviewed is Ralph William Landreth, who was a gunners mate second class on the USS *Arizona* on December 7, 1941. Good afternoon.

Ralph Landreth (RL): Good evening. That's southern. (Chuckles)

JL: Okay. For the record, would you please state your full name and give us your place and date of birth?

RL: Ralph William Landreth. I was born in Carthage, Missouri.

JL: What day were you born on? What's your date of birth?

RL: January 17, '21.

JL: Nineteen twenty-one. And in 1941, where did you consider to be your hometown?

RL: Los Angeles. It's where I joined the navy.

JL: Did your family move out to California?

RL: They moved out to California when I was a year old. And then my mother died in—my father took me to Florida during the boom times and when the boom died, we moved back to California.

JL: Okay. And how many brothers and sisters did you have or do you know?

RL: Ooh, I had two, a brother and a sister much older than myself and then I had a brother that was just three years older than me. I was the youngest.

JL: And what were your parents' names?

RL: Ooh, well, there's Hattie Pearl Elliott Landreth and Schuyler Sheridan Landreth.

JL: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

RL: L.A. [Los Angeles]

JL: And can you tell us where and why you enlisted in the navy?

RL: Well, you know, this was the tail end of the depression times and jobs weren't all that plentiful and besides my brother had joined the navy three years before. And hey, (chuckles) he's there, I'll be there.

JL: When did you enlist in the navy?

RL: September '39.

JL: Okay. Now, what kind of training did you get after you enlisted in the navy?

RL: Well, I didn't specialize. I went to boot camp in San Diego and then from there I went to the *Arizona*.

JL: And when did you decide that you wanted to be a gunner's mate?

RL: Well, that was easy. Life for a seaman second class in a deck division isn't easy. And the next best thing is go in the gun crew. They took me and there I was.

JL: So when you reported into the *Arizona*, that was, where was the *Arizona*?

RL: They had been off—no, I think it came from Bremerton. And I had to wait on the hospital ship in San Pedro 'til they came back, which was about a week. And when I went aboard, I can't remember but it was in January.
And...

JL: So...

RL: Forty, yeah.

JL: Nineteen forty?

RL: Yeah.

JL: And when did the *Arizona* go to Hawaii?

RL: Well, (clears throat)...

JL: With you aboard.

RL: With me aboard. It was in '40. And we went there to join the fleet. There was a gathering of the fleet and, you know, by this time—1939, by the way, was when Franklin Roosevelt declared a state of emergency. And they knew it was coming then. And we gathered the fleet there and we all enjoyed ourselves and went down and roasted on the equator for a few days and came back. And then the work began. We started training, you know. Training exercises and actually running patrols for submarines. They ran

two off and one on watches on deck all the time they were out for submarines. You see a speck of white water, you better tell the bridge about it!

JL: So was...

RL: That went on for a year before, yeah, more.

JL: So when was the first time you went to Hawaii, to Pearl Harbor?

RL: Well, with the ship here in port.

JL: So it would have been 1940?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Now, what were your normal duties as a gunner's mate second class on the *Arizona*?

RL: Well, actually duties aren't that, make much difference inside the turret, but I was in charge of the gun pit, you know. And probably one or two seamen in the crew would be cleaning all the time. Everyday they shined the steelwork around. It's all steelwork. No paint in the gun pit. And oil these _____ fourteen-inch guns. Like you know how the *Missouri*'s got sixteen. It was the same way. And I was in charge of 'em and I don't really know what I did as supervision!

JL: Well, how long would you be on watch, when the ship was in port, how long would you be on watch each day?

RL: Oh, the watches. Well, see, our battle station is in the turret but you know we belonged to the fourth deck division. And that's, we were part of them to spread those watches around, you know, the actual four on, three on, four on, one off.

JL: And they were four hour watches?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Okay. And so when you weren't with the fourth deck division, then you were doing your gunner's mate's duties. Is that correct?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Okay. And when you were doing duties as part of the fourth deck division, what were your duties there?

RL: Well, you mean when I first went on the ship?

JL: Well, let's talk about the time...

RL: I was like a seaman, yeah.

JL: Let's talk about the time right around December of 1941.

RL: Oh. Well, I really didn't have any duties with the deck division.

JL: Okay.

RL: You know, except for the watches. And before that, of course, as a seaman, with the fourth division—you know what a holystone is?

JL: No, I don't.

RL: It's a brick about that big with a hole in it and they stick a broomstick in there and you get down and scrub this wood decks with it, to clean 'em.

JL: Oh!

RL: (Laughs) You get up at four o'clock in the morning to do this! (Laughs)

JL: So would that be considered sweeping the decks?

RL: Well, no. They swept and then they washed 'em off with fire hoses and then you did the scrubbing.

JL: So that would be the scrubbing.

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: Okay.

RL: That was to make 'em white. They had to glisten. No oil spots, no gum, no nothing better be on there when the captain came through there. Yeah.

(Laughs)

JL: Interesting. Okay, do you remember what you did on December 6, 1941?

RL: Sixth?

JL: The day before the attack?

RL: Not really. I can't, I really can't remember.

JL: You were living on board the ship, correct?

RL: Yeah.

JL: And where was your berthing?

RL: At, well, tied up to the same quay where it is now.

JL: Okay. Where were you? Where was your living space on the ship?

RL: Oh, just down in the lower handling room of the turret. You know, where the powder rooms are?

JL: Mm-hmm.

RL: And the lower handling room is where you transfer the powder from the magazines to the conveyors and hydraulic lifts that take the ammunition up.

JL: Did you have hammocks or did you have bunk beds?

RL: Oh, no we had cots.

JL: Cots?

RL: Well, I was part of the deck division, you slept in hammocks.

JL: Oh.

RL: They were one of the last ships to get bunks! (Laughs)

JL: Okay. So you don't remember what you did on the evening of December 6 then?

RL: I can't remember.

JL: So why don't we talk about December 7 then.

RL: Okay.

JL: Do you remember where you were on the morning of December 7?

RL: Yeah. I got a good memory of that. I just had breakfast and it was near eight o'clock. I came out to buy a Sunday paper and I'd go below to while away Sunday morning. And I was buying the paper and, well, let me go back a little bit. Every Sunday morning Hickam Field and sometimes Ford Island would hold exercises with planned attacks on Pearl Harbor. I don't know what they was getting out of this but they (chuckles), anyway, Sunday morning was the day for that to happen. And I come out and hear the planes. And I look up and there's a red ball on one of the planes! And, oh man, they're getting realistic with this thing! And, ah well, start going down to read the paper. (Laughs)

I got halfway down this. We had to go through the third deck, you know, and, to get into the lower handling room where I lived. And they sounded general quarters, clang, clang, clang, you know. And came over the speaker, "This is not a drill! Battle stations."

And so I sort of broke into a trot, you know, and going down, there's nobody around me. Nobody in front of me, nobody in back of me and I don't know. Everybody else finished breakfast before I did, I guess. (Laughs) They were already holed up. (Laughs)

Anyway, I broke into a trot and closed the hatches behind me, which I was supposed to do. And got to my station down there and in turmoil. I mean ain't nobody know what to do, you know. But I knew what I had to do. I had to climb a ladder through the shell deck and on up to the pits, the gun pits. And which I did.

JL: To get to your battle station?

RL: Yeah. And by the time I got there, you know, it was pretty clear what was happening. You could hear the strafing out from the gun ports, you know. And pretty soon here come a big blast that knocked me off my feet. A wonder I didn't hit my head on a steel, you know. And we knew then what it was all about!

And it wasn't very long and those people, all those people in the lower handling room come streaming up through there and out the hatch on the quarterdeck.

JL: It knocked you off your feet?

RL: Hmm?

JL: You say the blast knocked you off your feet?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Did you get hurt or bang...

RL: No, that's what I say. It's all steel. It's a wonder I didn't knock a hole in my head with hitting on a sharp edge of steel.

JL: So the people started coming up, you were saying.

RL: Yeah, and they was telling about their batteries are broke and the acid and fumes are all in that lower—the first thing out of the lower handling room was where they handled the powder, was up the batteries, which had hydraulic power. And the next was shell decks, you know where the shells, about that high, a thousand pounds each? And they was telling me that the batteries are broken and the guy on the shell deck was killed trying to wrestle one of those shells into a tray that shoots it up to the gun pit.

JL: You say the shells are about four feet tall? Three feet?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Be careful of the wire.

(Conversation off-mike)

JL: It's about five feet?

RL: Yeah.

JL: How big around?

RL: Fourteen inches.

JL: Fourteen inches.

RL: Well, that, yeah. They had to fit in...

JL: Fourteen-inch shells.

RL: ...in the chamber of the gun, yeah. (Laughs) Yeah. They—anyway, they told me that, so I knew it was really bad. And pretty soon some of ‘em coming up said there was water in the lower handling room. And I had an inkling to get in line with ‘em to get out of there. Something made me stay there for some reason. And I watched ‘em come and go. Pretty soon it was over! It wasn’t long.

JL: You mean the attack was over or what was over?

RL: Well, the attack was over and there was no more people coming up out of there. And I figured well, it's time for me to leave. And I walked out, climbed out of the hatch on the back end of the turret and the water was just coming over the edge of the comb of the fantail there. And got up there and I saw a shell. It looked like a bomb, you know, Japanese. Hey, one didn't go off! But that was (laughs), it turned out later, Mr. PER-JEL-LEO told me, it was not a bomb, it was a shell from Turret Two, that got blown in the sky and landed in back of our turret.

Now, anyway, by the time I got through sightseeing and everything, here's the admiral's barge and the captain's gig coming alongside the stern here. And I just walked, waded across the water. By now it's about ankle deep, you know. And I waded across the stern and climbed in the admiral's barge and away we go, fifty feet away to Ford Island. And that was the end of it. I mean that's, you know, it was all over by then and we should've known better but somebody had a radio and they were spreading all kind of rumors about landings in Ewa and several places, you know.

JL: When you say you were down at your battle station and it was hard to handle the shells...

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: ...do you remember how many shells you actually had to handle?

RL: Oh, they, well, we had a battle crew. For the shells, there's only two people. And they...

(Inaudible)

JL: Do you know how many shells? You can go ahead and sit down.

RL: I would guess it's about twenty-five or thirty.

JL: And how long were you at your battle station? Do you remember?

RL: How long...

JL: Do you have any sense of how much time you were at your battle stations?

RL: Not really. I was—in fact, when I got over to Ford Island, I was surprised at the time, which was less than ten o'clock. And...

JL: When you—I'm sorry. Go ahead.

RL: No, that's all right.

JL: So did you feel the big explosion that everybody remembers while you were on the *Arizona*? Is that the one you described to us earlier?

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: That was the...

RL: Actually there was two blasts that knocked me off my feet. The second one was, it was not as big a shell. It glanced off the side of the turret and went down three decks before it exploded in the officers' mess storeroom.

JL: Did you see that?

RL: Hmm?

JL: Did you see that shell?

RL: I didn't see the shot. No, it was outside of the turret.

JL: Okay. And while these explosions were going off and you were in your battle stations, did you see any injured men coming up and going by you and going out?

RL: Not really. Most of 'em, they're all walking and then they, I didn't see any cuts or bruises or blood or anything. They...

JL: And they...

RL: They had a lot of those lower handling people went up through Turret Three too. There's, you know, difficult ladders to climb and they, you know, they had to wait in line for 'em. They wasn't waiting. They went to Turret Three.

JL: So then you get up on the deck and you went to the fantail. Is that what you said?

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: And you stepped onto the admiral's barge.

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: Were you with other shipmates when you did that?

RL: Yeah. There was about five or six of us went on the admiral's barge. And that captain's gig stayed there and brought, eventually brought some more on.

JL: And while you were, when you came up and you were on the deck, did you observe anything when you were looking around?

RL: Oh yeah. I looked around and I see a lot of smoke and fire and oil that thick on top of the water. Guys swimming in it, bodies floating in it. In fact, when we got over to Ford Island, there was a little tiny dock there that the admiral's barge, just the nose of it would fit up there. And there was a guy in the water down there and me and another guy went in to boost him up to the little pier. And then I had a hell of a time. I had to climb on the rocks to get out of there, 'cause I couldn't. You know, it's oil on your hands and stuff you couldn't hold on to anything.

JL: Mm-hmm. How many people were on the admiral's barge with you?

RL: About five or six.

JL: About five or six. And were they, was the barge shuttling back and forth from the ship? Is that what...

RL: Evidently they had made some more tours before, trips before I got there. Yeah.

JL: And what did you do when you get to Ford Island?

RL: Well, there's a whole bunch of people in this Quonset hut. There's a row of Quonset huts, usually held ammunition. For some reason, there wasn't any in this Quonset hut. And I think, was thinking this ain't a very safe place to be. You know. (Laughs) But you know, there was, like I say, it was all over by the time I got there.

JL: Did you observe anything from there, when you looked back at the Battleship Row, or when you looked at Ford Island?

RL: I didn't see anything. Not even any of our planes. I didn't.

JL: Did you observe any of the other ships in trouble in the...

RL: Oh yeah, yeah. I think by the time I got there, got over to Ford Island, the *Oklahoma* had already turned _____. Yeah. The *Vestal* was going. I wondered how the hell they got under way. And they—I don't know. There was even some smoke and stuff over in the navy yard. And I never figured that out either.

JL: And how many, do you have any other specific memories of the attack period itself and coming over to Ford Island and being on board during the attack?

RL: Well, no, not really. I can, you know, I can picture the boat deck and the mess it was in, you know. Of course the forward tripod was just out of sight over there. But...

JL: When you came up on deck you mean, the mess...

RL: Yeah, yeah.

JL: ...that was on the deck?

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: After you came over to Ford Island, how long were you in the Quonset hut?

RL: Oh, I imagine a couple of hours.

JL: And what did you do then?

RL: Well, they come through asking for volunteers to help boat crews or motor launches and whale boats and stuff, to carry the wounded over to the hospital on the base. And I went with 'em and we worked at it for several hours 'til it got dark.

JL: And what did you do?

RL: And...

JL: You were on the boat?

RL: Yeah.

JL: Helping, pulling people out of the water?

RL: Yeah. Well, mostly we'd pull alongside the ship, like these battleships, and take, you know, their wounded and take 'em to the hospital. We didn't do a lot of fishing people out of the water by that time. And then when it got dark, they told us go on over to the receiving ship and I did that. They gave us some clothes and gave us, you know, a place to sleep and a shower and everything.

JL: Do you remember what time that was or how late in the day that was?

RL: Well, it was after dark, you know. It was maybe seven or eight o'clock at night.

JL: So how many people were helping out on the boat that you were on?

RL: There was just three of us. The coxswain and the machinist mate and myself.

JL: And how many people—is it hard for you to talk about what you were doing on the boat? Is this a difficult thing for you to remember?

RL: Well, it was, you know, lifting, help people aboard and all that.

JL: ‘Cause they were in pretty bad shape.

RL: Yeah, some of ‘em. Some of ‘em were on stretchers already. Yeah.

JL: What ships did you go to to—do you recall what ships you got the injured people from?

RL: Yeah, *West Virginia* and—gee, I don't remember now. Don't remember.

(Laughs)

JL: Did you help out with the *Oklahoma* or the *Arizona*?

RL: No.

JL: The *West Virginia*.

RL: No help for the *Arizona*. It took 'em three weeks to get most of the bodies out of the *Oklahoma*.

JL: Do you remember how many sailors you took on board your boat while you were shuttling them back to the shore?

RL: Oh, just three. There might've been another guy. I can't remember.

JL: So you did that for a few hours or just one trip?

RL: Oh, this was two or three trips.

JL: Two or three trips?

RL: Yeah.

JL: And you brought 'em from the boat back to Ford Island.

RL: Hmm, no.

JL: Where'd you bring 'em to?

RL: Well, I got off at the hospital...

JL: Okay.

RL: ...when we quit doing the trips.

JL: And then that's where you got your, that's where you bedded down for the night.

RL: Mm-hmm.

JL: Did you get something to eat there?

RL: Yeah, I think so. I don't remember being hungry though. (Laughs) The next morning they put me on the *Pennsylvania*. It was in dry dock.

JL: Oh! What'd you do on the *Pennsylvania*?

RL: Ah. (Laughs) They put me on the six-inch gun crew. (Laughs)

JL: Okay.

RL: Then I don't know. We was there two or three months, I think it was. No, not that long! 'Cause we got sent back to San Francisco for repairs and

refitting. You know, they take some of those old-fashioned guns off and put forty-millimeters and five-inches where the six-inches were and stuff.

JL: So what was the day after December 7 like for you? Do you remember?

RL: Well, I don't know. I think I was pretty shaky at that! (Laughs) Yeah, it started catching up on me.

JL: Were you working? Did you go back and do anything with the boat crews or did you stay with the *Pennsylvania*?

RL: No, I stayed with the *Pennsylvania* through. We put in a couple of months there at San Francisco. You know, that boatyard was on the tip of my tongue all my life and now I can't remember it.

JL: That's okay.

RL: It's right where they built the stadium for the San Francisco Giants. Yeah.

JL: Do you have any other recollections that you want to tell us about, about December 7 itself?

RL: Well...

JL: Anything that you want to make sure that we record since this is an opportunity to record your memories?

RL: No. I know there was an awful lot of heroics going on.

JL: Did you see any of that?

RL: Although I wasn't part of it. Huh?

JL: Did you see any of that, any of the heroics?

RL: I didn't actually see. I saw some people being assisted, you know. They were swimming and stuff, but like I say, I wasn't part of it. I was in that Quonset hut! (Laughs)

JL: Okay. That's fine. Karen, do you have some questions you'd like to ask?

(Conversation off-mike)

RL: Run out of tape.

JL: Did we go that far?

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

Karen Byrne (KB): Going back for just a minute, when you were at your battle station on the *Arizona*, could you feel the heat from that intense fire, where you were?

RL: No. I was, I didn't really know about the fire until I got outside on the quarterdeck there. Yeah. They say, you know, that some people was telling me, you know, they could see guys being burnt up, you know, and stuff like that. I never saw any of that.

KB: And when you went out on the quarterdeck, what could you see from where you were?

RL: Well, mostly smoke, you know. There was a little bit fire here and there, but there wasn't no roaring thing like a blast, bomb blast.

KB: And could you see planes? Were the Japanese planes still overhead?

RL: Not after I got out on deck, no.

KB: But before that, you were watching the planes?

RL: Yeah, through the, you know, the pointer and the trainer for the guns, you know. Pointer goes up, trainer goes around. I was a trainer! But you get a sight port because sometimes you actually shot these guns by sight for a towed target or something. And you could see a little bit of what's going on, like the planes coming in directly from the rear.

KB: How close do you think the planes were to the ship?

RL: Well, the one that I saw was less than a thousand feet, that's for sure, 'cause he was strafing and it would be that low.

KB: So you could see, could you see the pilot?

RL: Well, I saw the pilot on that one when I bought the paper. I saw the pilot in that plane. I didn't know, I couldn't make out his features, but I saw the helmet and stuff.

KB: After, excuse me, after 1941, when was the next time that you were back at the *Arizona*?

RL: Hmm. Nineteen-ninety.

KB: Nineteen-ninety.

RL: Mm-hmm. My wife and her folks came over with me and we toured the— they had the memorial built by then and we toured that and met this PER-JEL-LEO guy. And we did the other islands too. Sort of a vacation.

KB: What was it like to be back there after almost fifty years?

RL: Well, I don't know. It's hard to say. You know, (laughs) there's a guy followed me over here from Rockledge, where I live now in Florida, just to take my picture at that memorial and he ain't going to get on there!

(Laughs) But the rangers, you know, that was out there, stationed out there, said I was looking at the list, you know. It was up there, higher wasn't it?

Bigger? And he said, he saw my eyes welling up. Great! But I never was one to show emotions but it did get to me a little bit.

_____ catch 'em Kidd, he was our captain before he

made admiral and he came back aboard as admiral. Ike Catch'em—that's just _____ Isaac C. Kidd.

KB: Have you, over the years, have you really had the opportunity or did you ever take the time to talk about your experiences on December 7?

RL: Well, I didn't. I guess I lived forty years without talking to anybody about it. And I moved around the state of Florida for, oh maybe thirty years or more. I finally settled in Rockledge. Some old guy, Gary Pearl was his name, secretary of the Pearl Harbor Survivors. I met him somewhere and we got to talking and he insisted I come to one of their meetings and now I've been here ever since! I don't know. Newspapers interviewed me for several times. Pictures, one guy took a glamour photo of me! Had me posing, you know, and stuff! (Laughs)

But I always kept it short because it _____ a short story. All this happened in less than an hour, you know.

KB: So forty years before you talked about it?

RL: Mm-hmm.

KB: Tomorrow's December 7, are you going to the memorial tomorrow?

RL: Yeah. Yeah, we got invited to Admiral Conway or something, admiral of the Hawaiian district or something. He invited us to a service on the memorial tomorrow at six o'clock in the morning. And then to a buffet at his house. He owns a little shack or _____, as an admiral, or somewhere on Ford Island, I think. And a buffet afterwards.

KB: Besides being up at six in the morning, is that going to be a difficult experience, you think?

RL: Well, I don't think so. I'm getting immune to it, I guess.

KB: And earlier you told me, are you considering having your ashes placed on the memorial?

RL: What?

KB: Are you thinking about having your ashes...

RL: Oh, ashes! Oh, ashes. There we go again. Yeah, I was thinking about it.

First my wife was adamant, nah. And now seems like she doesn't care, you know. I liked it because it was cheap. (Laughs)

KB: Well, we appreciate you talking to us. Is there anything else before we stop that you'd like to tell us?

RL: No. I just—I didn't overhear, my wife overheard somebody discussing Kimmell and Short. And I think they got short-changed, both of them, because they knew more about it in Washington than we did and they didn't let us know! Or let them know rather. They got crucified.

KB: Well, thank you very much. We appreciate it.

RL: Mm-hmm.

KB: This is very valuable to many people over the years, so thank you very much for everything you did in 1941 and what you're doing for us today.

RL: Thank you.

JL: Thank you. Thank you for talking with us.

RL: Great.

END OF INTERVIEW