

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#416

ROBERT DEVERE BISSELL

NAS FORD ISLAND, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY CAPTAIN DONALD FRASER AND JERRY GREENE

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Donald Fraser (DF): This is oral history interview number 416. The interview is being conducted by Captain Donald Fraser, United States Naval Reserve, and Mr. Jerome Greene of the National Park Service. I'm from the Naval Historical Center and we're supporting the National Park Service and the USS *Arizona* Memorial. The interview is being conducted at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu. Today's date is the sixth of December 2001 and we're commencing the interview at approximately 15:30 with Mr. Robert Bissell, who was a seaman first class, Naval Air Station, Ford Island, as a coxswain of a fifty-foot motor launch, a liberty boat, on the seventh of December 1941.

Mr. Bissell, for the record, if you would please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

Robert Bissell (RB): Robert D. Bissell. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, November 11, November 18, 1918.

DF: What did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

RB: Oran, Ohio. My folks had moved from Cleveland to Oran, Ohio.

DF: What were your parents' names?

RB: Ray L. Bissell was my father. And Mildred A. Bissell was my mother.

DF: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

RB: I had three brothers. My older brother Richard was already in the navy. He had broken service. He had put in a kiddy cruise from 1937 to '40 and then he had gone back in at '40. He had gotten out for a short period of time then gone back in. He was a year and a day older than I was.

He was stationed in Norfolk and because of him, I went down to visit him and while I was down to visit him in Norfolk, I joined the navy and that's how come I got in the navy.

DF: You anticipated my next question, how you came to be in the navy.

RB: Well, that's what happened.

DF: Did your parents know you were going to do that?

RB: No, they didn't. And by that time, I was twenty-one years old so I signed my own papers and went in.

DF: Sure. Where did you go to high school?

RB: Mayfield High School in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. And I put in two years of college at Baldwin-Wallace University, Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio.

DF: We were chatting a little bit before the interview and you told me you came to the Hawaiian Islands in October of 1940.

RB: Yes sir, that's right.

DF: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

RB: Well, I joined the navy in May of 1940 and after I finished boot camp, they sent us cross-country by train to San Diego. And we got to San Diego, they assigned us to the different destroyers that were being put back in commission from World War I, old four-stack destroyers. And I was assigned to the *Chew*, 103 [USS *Chew* was DD-106] and that was my duty station.

DF: But at some point you were transferred to Naval Air Station...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

DF: Okay. Let's go back to Ford Island. Could you talk to us about being assigned to the *Chew* and then being selected for your duty at Ford Island?

RB: Well, as you can well imagine, being a World War I ship, even though it was in mothballs, it was in pretty bad shape and we had to chip all that rust and try to clean the ship up and put it back in commission. They had recalled a bunch of the reserves who had worked, who had been in World War I. They

were all types of rates and one of those people that were, they were just really good sailors and they had done a good job. And they put those sailors on there like machinists mates and boatswain mates and gunners mates, and they taught us what to do and how to do it and they taught us how to chip paint and how to paint and how to really put the ship back in shape. And within three months we had the ship back in shape.

At that time, we got orders to move to the Pacific and there were three ships that I can remember that were in our squadron, the *Allen*, the *Chew*, and I don't remember the name of the third one. And when we got to Pearl Harbor, we were used to cooler weather, it was so hot that we took our bedrolls up on deck and slept on deck. It was in October. Went swimming and the people in Honolulu just thought we were crazy because going swimming in the ocean at that time of the year. But to us it was very hot out here.

The, most of the seamen, the young sailors that I was with, were transferred to Ford Island at that time. And the crew was manned by reserves who were called in and they took over the ships.

DF: How did you find Honolulu and Hawaii, coming from Ohio?

RB: I really enjoyed it. I thought it was wonderful and that it was good duty and we just, we really enjoyed it.

DF: Is there anything that sticks out special? How, what would you do when you had liberty?

RB: Oh, I would work out and I would try to go swimming when I went ashore or maybe I would go out and have dinner someplace. I didn't drink and I didn't smoke and I was, I tried to keep in shape and be a model sailor.

DF: Do you remember going to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]?

RB: No, we didn't go to the Y, but we had a place where we worked out at Ford Island and so we were able to work out right there.

DF: And you were telling me earlier that you boxed.

RB: Yes sir, I did. And my first fight was on the Friday before December 7. I fought a big Marine off of the *California*.

DF: Did, I guess the destroyer *Chew* didn't know that you were such a good boxer. I'm surprised they let you go.

RB: Well, I don't think that would have entered into it at that time. I think they were just trying to get the reserves back into active duty at that time.

DF: Let's, you know, focus on that particular weekend. And you fought that marine on Friday night?

RB: Yes sir.

DF: You said you beat him in the second round?

RB: Yes sir. I broke his nose, they stopped the fight. And the morning of December 7, as we, when we got the fleet landing, he was coming up the *California*, he was coming up the landing and I ran into him and he said, “Bissell, I’d rather fight you again than go through this!”

DF: That was Sunday morning?

RB: Sunday morning, after the *California* had gotten hit.

DF: Oh, I see. What did you do on the sixth? Did you have, was that a duty weekend for you?

RB: It was and Sunday morning I didn’t have to get up early. We went out, went ashore that night and had dinner and just fooled around and got back probably around eleven o’clock or so. Went to sleep when the boatswain mate came through at eight o’clock in the morning or ten minutes to eight and said that the Japs were attacking, somebody said, “Hit him in the head with a shoe! He’s going out of his mind.”

And at that time, we were, we heard all this, the bombs exploding. We heard the torpedoes hitting and we ran to the window at the boathouse. We lived above the boathouse. The dormitory was built right above the slips of the boathouse. And we looked out and saw what was happening.

DF: This is on Ford Island?

RB: Yes sir.

DF: What did you think?

RB: We didn't know what to think. We saw our ships being, going down, those battleships we thought were invincible. And it was just total despair. You couldn't imagine...seeing those ships going down.

We manned our boats. I didn't use the fifty-foot motor launch because it was too big to get out there. But we did, we took the smaller boats and went out and tried to save people.

The water became so filled with debris and there was so much confusion and water caught on fire. The oil on the water caught on fire. And one by one our boats were getting disabled because of the debris on the water and the oil. And we had to tow some back in and so at that point, there was no more we could do because there was, it was total chaos.

DF: When did you man your boats?

RB: When we went, we got dressed and went down below and we manned the boats.

DF: Right away?

RB: Yes sir. And at that time we, I grabbed a couple of the crew and we went over to the garage, broke into the garage, got the keys for some of the trucks and the two men that were with me, we got a two-ton flatbed truck, went up to the landing, boat landing on Ford...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

DF: Okay. I had just asked who you worked for there at the boathouse. Why don't we get that for the record.

RB: The petty officer in charge was a third class boatswain mate and he ran the boathouse. And then we had a chief boatswain mate who lived on the base and he was our chief. He was the one we looked up to.

DF: And you recall the third class...

RB: No, I was a seaman at that time.

DF: No, no. I said, you recall the third class boatswain mate, getting, rallying you guys...

RB: Yes sir.

DF: Yeah.

RB: And at that time they called a third class boatswain mate a coxswain and that's what we called the third class boatswain mate. At that time, like I say, we tried to, after we—we couldn't do any more—we went over to the garage, we broke into the garage, in the public works garage, and I found the keys to a two-ton flatbed truck. Took that down to the boat landing and that's where I ran into that marine. And at that time, these two sailors and I loaded everybody we could onto the flatbed truck because, like I say, the sick bay on that side, on the main side of the island was full and so we drove around the island over to the other side to take 'em to the infirmary on the other side of the island. And while we were going over there, they were strafing us but none of us, we didn't get hit. We didn't lose anybody on that deal. And so when we got everybody over there that we could at that time and then we went back to the boathouse and put, we took the truck back. Went back to the boathouse, at that time the chief boatswain mate was there and the rest of the day we spent digging foxholes.

DF: You spoke about the big ships...

RB: Yes.

DF: ...being damaged so...

RB: Yes sir.

DF: Could you take a moment and reflect on that and describe what you saw, as you can remember seeing?

RB: When the, you see the torpedoes going through the water to the ships. They were running shallow and when they hit, it would just be, just such a tremendous explosion, you couldn't believe. And like I say, we thought those ships were invincible. We didn't think that anything would ever happen to them. That was our security, you know.

DF: Was the coxswain with you? How many people were there in the boathouse? How many people did you work with?

RB: We probably had a crew of probably forty, forty-five people.

DF: Did you—how did you know what to do?

RB: I guess instinct. I don't know. I don't remember anybody ever telling us what to do or how to do it. We received a Presidential citation.

DF: You said you were operating boats for a while.

RB: Yes sir.

DF: As long as they would operate.

RB: Yes sir.

DF: What do you remember of that?

RB: Well, the oil got into the screws and the engine and we couldn't, some of 'em we couldn't use any more. And some of 'em the props had hit debris in the water. The crash boat crew took their big boat out and it wasn't just a short time that they were unable to operate.

DF: Were you trying to conduct rescue operations?

RB: Yes sir.

DF: To recover people?

RB: Yes sir. The, as I said before, all the boat crew got Presidential citations.

Jerry Greene (JG): What did you do that night?

RB: That night the, about ten o'clock, we got an alert that the Japs were coming in. We heard these planes coming in and it was B-17s coming in from the States and they didn't have the proper code to let them know who they were and the, and so we started firing at 'em. And we shot one down. And they were our own planes.

JG: Were you involved in that?

RB: Well, I was there. I don't know, you know, what we did as far as knocking anything down, but we did what we could, you know. And we just thought it was enemy planes and we didn't know 'til afterward that they were own planes.

JG: You were armed though?

RB: Yes sir. By that time we were. We didn't, we weren't at first.

JG: What did you have for arms?

RB: M-1s and we had AR, what they call 'em, AR...

JG: BAR [Browning Air Rifle]?

RB: BAR, right. But we weren't really equipped to do battle.

JG: It was a long night.

RB: Yes sir. Several long nights and long days, believe me. We thought we was going to be attacked and so that's why we dug the foxholes, 'cause we thought surely they was going to come in.

JG: Where did you dig the foxholes?

RB: Right around, in the vicinity of the boathouse.

DF: Was the boathouse damaged?

RB: No sir. No, we didn't have any damage at all and as far as I know, we didn't lose anybody.

JG: Did you do any shooting yourself?

RB: No, sir.

We had a marine colonel who was in charge of the Marine Corps on the base and he was, he had his people out and they were very active and did what

they could. In fact, yesterday, or the day before yesterday, I was talking to that commander. After I walked out, there were two ladies approached me and one of 'em said, "Were you on Ford Island,"—I had my tag on—they said, "were you on Ford Island?"

And I said, "Yes."

And they said, "Well, did you know our father? He was the marine colonel in charge of the marine base on Ford Island, the Marine Corps on Ford Island."

And I said, "Yes, I knew him."

I knew who he was. Of course I didn't rub elbows with him 'cause I was a seaman, he was a colonel! But I did know him and they were thrilled to death! They said I was the first one that they had ever run into from Ford Island.

DF: What did Ford Island look like? The PBYS were struck there.

RB: It was, they were completely demolished. It was pitiful. It just, all the fighter planes and all the PBYS were just disintegrated. There was nothing left there.

JG: I got a question, how did your family find out eventually how, if you were safe, that you were safe?

RB: After, I think it was probably about a week or ten days, maybe two weeks before I was able to get a card off to 'em and tell 'em that I was okay. And then they received a copy of the citation and they put it in the paper and whatnot.

DF: There are accounts of the heroism that the boat crews displayed that morning.

RB: There are?

DF: And there's photographs, as Mr. Greene mentioned.

RB: Very good.

DF: I'm wondering what it must—I just can't imagine what it would've been like, the fire, the damage. People in the water.

JG: When you were rescuing people from the water, pulling people aboard, were you fishing bodies out too?

RB: Yes sir.

DF: What about your own safety? Did you, were there things that you couldn't do?

RB: Oh, I'd have to admit I was really, figured that maybe I'd get hit, you know. But I, fortunately, I didn't.

DF: Well, we've spent a lot of time talking about that morning. Did you remain the coxswain there and continue those duties?

RB: Oh, I guess I should tell you that after that, I made third class and they shipped me to Palmyra Island. No, they shipped me to French Frigate Shoals, which was halfway between Hawaii and Midway. And while I was at French Frigate Shoals, they had, was the Battle of Midway. And then I was sent back to Ford Island and sometime between there I made second class and then I was shipped to Palmyra. I spent nine months there. I made chief before I went to Palmyra. And when I got to Palmyra Island, I was the coxswain, I was the skipper of a 103-foot yard salvage derrick. And of course the war was still going on. And at that time, we would, if a plane went down or was damaged at sea or the fighter planes we had, if they crashed, we would use the *Marianne* to pick ‘em up and bring ‘em back on. It had a boom on it, had a high tower on it for _____ in. It was—if ships came in it would, they had stuff that was too heavy and they couldn’t unload it, sometimes we used the *Marianne* to unload some of the cargo. And at that time, I was recommended for officer candidate school and my division officer was one of ‘em that recommended and they said that, the Bureau came back and said that all the recommendations were all right but at that time they had recommended me for landing craft officer and

they weren't making any more landing craft officers at that time, so I didn't get the commission.

Then it was fifty-six months from the time that I went out before I got back the first time. And when I got back, they assigned me to San Diego, training recruits.

DF: Glad to be back?

RB: Oh, it was—I'll tell you what, I was just about on edge at that time.

DF: Well, the tape is running out. Is there anything that you'd like to say that we didn't ask?

RB: No, sir. I'm sorry that I came apart but...

JG: We want to thank you very much...

RB: Yes, sir.

JG: ...for your time. It's wonderful for you to contribute this.

RB: Thank you.

DF: And we thank you for your service.

RB: Yes sir. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW