

#214 ROY A. WILLIAMSON: USS PYRO

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 5, 1991, at about 3:30 PM. And I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Roy A. Williamson today. We're doing this tape as a part of the USS ARIZONA Memorial and National Park Services' oral history program, in cooperation with KHET-TV, Honolulu. Mr. Williamson was on the ammunition ship, PYRO, at the time of the attack. He was twenty-five years of age and was a Carpenter's Mate, First Class.

So I want to thank you very much for joining us and taking the time to share your memories. Let's see, how did you get in the Navy?

Roy A. Williamson (RW): Back during the depression, whenever there was no -- there was jobs, but no money, and I saw a sign on the corner, says, "Come join the Navy and see the world," and I went in and, and they were only taking a couple of 'em a month from Oklahoma. And I went out and passed the examination, and they told me that if you don't get called within a month or within six months, then come back and take it over again to keep on the list. And yet I was called within six months, before the six months was up, and went into the service and spent four years in the Navy, and then got out and they told me that since the war was like it was, or would be coming up probably, that I was draft age and if I didn't ship over, they would draft me. So I was Second Class Carpenter's Mate already, so I shipped over and went aboard the, the ARIZONA, the ARGONNE, and got to first class. And then I --- the PYRO needed a Chief Carpenter's Mate, but since we weren't a line ship, they settled for sending a first class instead, and I got sent aboard it about the first of December, 1939. So . . .

SH: Where did you join PYRO? Was she at Bremerton?

RW: In Honolulu.

SH: In Honolulu?

RW: The ARIZONA had come over here to, I mean, the ARGONNE had come over here and that way I was transferred here in Honolulu.

SH: What were the usual duties of a carpenter's mate, or sort of Chief Carpenter's Mate then?

RW: On a ship, the carpenter's mate is the damage control crew. They are trained to repair and stop leaks, and help with the -- if you get a hole in the ship, you have a collision mat that you put over the outside of it for temporary repairs. And of course, then they have the boats that they have to take care of the wooden boats and things that they have. And then odds and ends like mess tables and things that they, the wood on the ship and benches and stuff, or cupboards and stuff for officers' quarters and things like that.

SH: You also said that you had some duties at the anchor windless, was that correct?

RW: And then they are the ---- went around the anchor, brakes on the anchor, more or less, when you anchor or when you were standing by to come in, you stand by in case they do drop anchor or anything. And I had the experience of even dropping the anchor in San Francisco, when we were under way, because the current and things there. Then we had a first lieutenant who was also a pilot

for ships and he realized that to help get the ship along side of it, you drop an anchor, and then they let this help to swing the boat in. But that was an odd experience that I had that time.

SH: Mm-hm. That's interesting.

RW: And a surprised one, because I didn't imagine of dropping the anchor when you were getting that near to a dock.

SH: Do you remember where you docked in San Francisco at that time?

RW: We docked along side a flour mill in San Francisco, that later on blew up, when we come back in again. It had someone lit a spark or something, it ignited the dust and stuff, and the whole elevator and stuff, flour mill was gone.

SH: You said that the officers on the *PYRO* were lenient, I think? Is that clear -- was she a happy ship because of that?

RW: Our ship was actually a working ship. The crew worked hard, they run the -- they handled the ammunition, unless we were in where they had stevedores, but we handled a lot of the ammunition ourselves. And so consequently, we were officers and all were the friends, just friends, and actually we had a full captain on the ship, when December the seventh. And he would come down on the dock, or on the deck whenever they were handling ammunition, and he'd say, "Good morning," or something and if you were busy, you didn't bother saluting. If you weren't, you saluted him for respect, because we had a lot of respect for him. But he wasn't one that insisted on being saluted, because of his rank or anything. And that was kind of the way with the all of the officers. And the crew worked hard, they went on liberty, and of course, they were like most sailors at that time, drinking was a good bit of a relaxation and things. And so they would drink and things.

And December the seventh, or December the sixth, actually we had worked, handled ammunition all day, and they give liberty at six o'clock and to be back at midnight. Well, they come back, the liberty boat brought 'em back at midnight, and they also brought, a lot of 'em had cases of beer, or bottles of beer. Well, the officer wouldn't let 'em come aboard with the beer, because this was against rules and regulations, and he couldn't go out. I knew that, but he let 'em go back on the dock, and didn't count 'em as absent or anything, until they drank the beer. And they got to playing around on the dock and broke one of the pipes on the dock. And so I was up at two o'clock, the morning of the seventh, fixing this pipe so they could turn the fresh water back on to my ship.

SH: Did that mean that you were --- when did you hit the sack?

RW: Well, then I wasn't up there very long, but I got up about -- I never missed a meal, if I could help it. I postponed one once in a while, when it would get rough or something, but I never. So I was up for breakfast and eating breakfast and we had gone up. It was customary on Sunday that you --- they had muster, the crew, and then they changed watches and the other group could go ashore. So I was setting up on the what they call a manger, on the bow of the ship, which is merely a raised portion of the deck that keeps the waves from sweeping the full length of the deck. And I was sitting there with a First Class Boatswain's Mate, and the barber of the ship. And all of a sudden, we heard these planes coming in. We turned and looked at 'em and we thought, "Oh well, it's just the Army coming back from a patrol."

Well, then the next thing we saw that they had torpedoes, and we wondered for just a second, how are they going to land with the torpedoes on there? And then we saw the red ball on the bottom of it, and the First Class Boatswain's Mate piped general quarters, which brought the ship to general quarters, without any orders from the captain, or anything. And the captain came out on the deck to see what was going on and of course he saw right away, and he set the alarm for general quarters. And I went down at the time, and on second deck, to close port holes and things, which was the carpenter's duties, and was still at a first raid came in, and left. And of course, we didn't have any ammunition in the ready lockers to fire back or anything, so it took us that time to get ready.

But by the time the second wave come in, we had ammunition and our guns started to firing at the plane, and they undoubtedly decided they would silence our guns, and one of 'em took a run on the ship and dropped the bomb. But our gunners had gunned down -- they hit him because he missed the ship and blew a hole in the dock about ten feet from the side of the ship, which brought the ship up enough to bring me to my knees, down on the second deck, where I was closing port holes. And that was when the executive, or the first of our ship realized that this was the real thing. So many of them thought it was just a drill. And they got up and automatically come to their stations, and he just sat there until this went off, and then he realized that this was not the thing, it was the real thing. And of course, that's what many of the ships reported, that they had this problem of getting it realized that, well, that this was . . .

SH: True. Sure. There's a --- as an ammunition ship, obviously your role is to provision the fleet. Were you able to pass out any of your ammunition during the attack?

RW: In the --- not during the attack, after the . . .

SH: You're pretty isolated. Let's get this clear. You're way over at the west loch at the time, right?

RW: Yeah. That afternoon, because the ships had been -- we had shifted ammunition Saturday in order to replenish the battleships and stuff with ammunition Monday morning. And so consequently, this was probably one of the reasons why some of the ships were not able to do a lot of firing, because they didn't have, they'd utilized it up in target practice and stuff, and hadn't replenished it yet. And we had ammunition ready to distribute.

So after the two waves came through, not knowing what was going to happen next, they did send boats over to our ship and we loaded their motor launches and stuff, and they transferred 'em back to their ship. Yes.

SH: Was there any problems about paperwork, or proper channels, or anything . . .

RW: No, no, no paperwork on it.

SH: Uh-huh.

RW: They just, we need so many, so much ammunition, and of course, we were a ship, could bill -- we could open up a certain hole and pretty well get most anything we wanted, just almost like out of a store. That's why our ship later

on was used for advanced ammunition base, because we could handle ammunition and store it in such a way that we could issue it a lot better than the newer ammunition ships could.

SH: Because of the . . .

RW: Because they were just one big hole. We were similar to a barn. We had stalls and stuff in the . . .

SH: I see.

RW: . . . ammunitions and where you could have this stall would have a certain kind of ammunition.

SH: I see.

RW: This one would have other stuff. And you could open a certain hole and then you could take out exactly what they wanted.

SH: I see. I see. Did your ship suffer any damage as a result of the near miss?

RW: When this bomb went off, the concussion and stuff broke a manifold, a cast-iron manifold in the fire room, which actually put our ship out of commission. It --- without any water to the boiler, you couldn't get the steam to run the ship. And we were very fortunate that we didn't have a metal smith aboard to do any welding, but in the fire room they had a fireman that had just come aboard, who had attended metal smith school in Alabama. And I found out later that he was really a qualified metal smith and he told a chief that he could weld this cast iron fitting, and the chief brought him with the cast iron fitting, and asked me, as the charge of the shop, if they could use him, use our equipment. Well, I was more than happy to have someone that could use the equipment. So we let him go ahead and he took the cast iron fitting and ground it to a bell, and we got our boxes with sand in it so we could use it and we heated this. We used two torches -- one or two. Heat the thing, we heated the cast iron and kept it cherry red while he filled in the places with braze. And then we slowly kept the heat on it so it cooled down properly without cracking, by cooling too fast. And then eventually, he covered it up with sand to let it do the finish and that part was still in use on the ship when I left it in the last of '43. They never had to have any repairs.

So within about two and a half hours, we had our ship back in commission. And actually the captain in writing his report gave the ship's force the credit for having our ship back in commission. All the damage that was done was repaired by ship's force.

SH: Speaking of, of credit, I understand you said that your ship did get official credit for shooting down one of the planes?

RW: We were given official credit for bringing down one plane. That was only one star we got for that battle, and that was the Battle of Pearl Harbor, because when they, later on, when we had the ships come down and drop bombs around, because they didn't want us to give 'em a location of us, we weren't allowed to fire back. So we were only given one star, and then we were given credit for downing one plane.

SH: Was that plane downed with the three-inch gun or with the fifty caliber?

RW: We're not sure. Probably the three-inch, though. We had three-inch and two fifty caliber's, was our anti-aircraft, all of our anti-aircraft.

SH: One three-inch and two fifty caliber's.

RW: One three-inch and two, two fifty caliber's. And of course then they had some thirty caliber's, but they don't do much damage to an aircraft.

SH: Mm-hm. Did you stay at Pearl Harbor for a while afterwards, replenishing the fleet, or did you get under way fairly soon afterwards?

RW: We unloaded the --- we spent a week in Pearl Harbor, after the battle. We unloaded all ammunition and reloaded our ship with what ammunition from, they had taken off of the other ships. Plus, they brought aboard a torpedo that had gone off in the mud, or had gone into the mud flats and didn't go off. And they brought that aboard and we shored it on topside for safety sake. We left it on topside. And it was an American torpedo that had been sold as scrap metal to the Japanese, and it still had the American tags and stuff on it, on what different parts were, along with Japanese writing that was just actually engraved into the body of it. And then there was a bomb that didn't go off, and they also brought this aboard, and we shored it up on topside, to bring back to the States. And it was a fourteen-inch projectile that had been reamed out and filled with explosives and a end of it was put a detonator and stuff on the end of it, for detonating, and then fins on the back to drop, and that's what they were using for bombs.

SH: Where did you deliver that torpedo to?

RW: They were took back to San Francisco, when we went back on the fourteenth. But I spend the week after the --- because for some reason or other, they never made any scuttles in our hatches. You had big hatches that were eight foot by twenty feet in order to get into our ammunition holes.

SH: Mm-hm.

RW: And in order this -- where there's ammunition especially, we needed to get down in there to check it, to see that it wasn't heating. And in order to do that, even out at sea, we had to open up these big hatches. Well, we realized that we needed to change this, so we went over to the scrap pile that they took superstructures and things off of these other ships that were damaged and things, and dumped 'em in a field, outside of Pearl Harbor there. And we went over with our metal smith and these torches, cutting torch, and when we'd find a nice scuttle -- which is a small hatch that's about twenty inches in diameter, so the person could get through it -- we just cut a section of the deck out and leave a flange there so that they could weld it on our ship. And then, later when we were in the Navy yard the first time, the Navy yard then cut these holes in our hatches and stuff and welded 'em in. We were not allowed to do something like that to the structure. The crew wasn't allowed to do something like that to the structure of the ship. So this had to be done, but we got the scuttles for them to use whenever they did this to our ship.

SH: Mm-hm. Did you have to take extra special precautions using -- it all of a sudden occurs to me you're using blow torches on an ammunition ship.

RW: Well . . .

SH: What kind of extra precautions would you be taking on an ammunition ship, on a . . .

RW: The only experience I had -- we'd weld, we did some welding over an oil tank. And this welder that we had, he knew this. He was -- that's why I say he really knew his stuff. What he had 'em do, he had 'em fill this oil tank all the way full, because there isn't, the danger isn't from the oil, the danger is from the fumes. So once you filled the tank up so that there was no fumes there, we could go ahead and weld something onto the deck above the oil tank. You just didn't get fire around in the hold and stuff. You didn't do welding in the ammunition holds and stuff. That is just a no-no.

SH: Yeah. Can imagine that. What was your subsequent -- you said you stayed with PYRO for a while?

RW: I stayed . . .

SH: How long did you stay with her?

RW: I stayed on aboard the *PYRO*. We went --- we took -- first took a trip, took 1,164 mines up in the Aleutians and they delivered these mines to mine layers and they took 'em out and laid 'em around that Japanese base up there. Then we came back and, in order, because we were not a large enough ship to empty a complete new ammunition ship, we towed a 100 foot lighter all the way to South Pacific with us, so that we could become an advanced ammunition base in the South Pacific, in the Espiritu Santo area, New Hebrides area. And we utilized this so that when an ammunition ship would come down, we could completely unload it on this barge and on our ship. And then we had it available there so that we could shift it and sort it out and have it ready to issue to the fleet, when it came back into Espiritu Santo, was after being out for a week or so of battle, right.

SH: How long did you stay with the *PYRO*?

RW: I stayed with the *PYRO* until August, 1943. And then they sent me back because they needed -- and of course, in the meantime, we had rated other, had carpenters on our ship to first class, and I had made chief, and they needed chiefs to be in charge of the damage control people that they were bringing down. They were qualified because they were workers, construction workers and different things. They were qualified for the work, but the way the Navy did stuff, they needed chiefs to be in charge of these. So they sent me back to the States to come right back down to Espiritu Santo on the base as in charge of this carpenter's shops there on the base. And I wound up there. And then I went from there, when we closed down Espiritu Santo, I went from there on up to put a boat repair out of commission in the Solomons.

And then, from there, we went on up to our last stand that they had. We had taken the Philippines back and we had bases there, and they -- also, before I left Espiritu Santo, we had the job of getting one of the cruiser dry docks -- when they came in, it comes in three parts. They had two parts and they came down there in the middle of the dry dock. And then, when they got down there, they just flooded it and the cradles and stuff that they set in, they let these go ashore. Well, when they got ready to move it on up, they had to make new cradles. And so I got the job of making these cradles. I happened to be lucky to have a couple of fellows that were civil engineers, which actually did the work, but I was the supervisor of it and we were given thirty days to complete the job. We got it down in twenty-four days and so the president gave each one

of my crew a letter of -- which is called the unit citation -- because of getting this done in the short order like we did. And this is quite an honor, to have something like that from a president.

So then I wound up in the Philippines when the war ended. I was working on, we were working on the -- they brought these dry docks on up there and we were working on those. They'd bring these ships that come in and have repairs.

One of the biggest repairs that the floating dry docks -- that we had earlier in the war, we had a ship that got torpedoed, a merchant ship. And it took partly near the whole bottom of the ship. They brought this ship in the dock down there, and then they filled it with oil drums, empty oil drums. And then they just welded strips of metal to hold these underneath and brought this back to the States. Well, I had the experience then of coming back to the States at the time this came to Vallejo, and got acquainted with one of the welders on the ship, and he came home that night and told me, I was talking to him, and he said he didn't know how this ship got back to the States. "The whole bottom of it's out," he said.

And I was able to tell him, inform him that we had fixed that up and it had come back filled with oil drums and stuff, all the way back to the States.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor?

RW: As evening, when the day was ending, and of course we couldn't imagine them not having a landing party. They did all this damage and everything and we would have had a landing party, I'm sure. So we were issued out equipment for repelling raiders, or boarders. And they issued us -- of course, that afternoon, I was standing OD watches on the ship and carried a forty-five, but I never shot one. And so they took us over in the base there and had us firing these. Well, I was a -- I grew up just outside the Ozarks and was used to handle shooting shotguns and rifles and things. And I wound up with a twenty-two, that I could use pretty readily in this. But on the practice with these, even with the Tommy gun, they had us shooting with Tommy guns. Because of having shot a shotgun, I automatically held down and I had no trouble holding a gun to shoot right at an eighteen by twelve target, and hitting it pretty every time, from fifty yards or something like that. It wasn't too far off. But I credit it so that I could fire one if it was necessary. And also the forty-five, I automatically held down on it, so that it didn't climb with me as I pulled the trigger.

And so that night, our crew was told to stay aboard because the Marines were on the base were told to shoot and ask questions later on. They wasn't to take any chances.

And so I was laying on one end of the deck, on one of the bunks on this side, second deck. Put the gun out of the porthole, waiting for them to come down. And all of a sudden, about 11:30, someone, one of the Marines out there, pulled a trigger on a Tommy gun and he let all twenty shells go before he quit.

Well, they wouldn't let us know anything about it. So we spent the rest of the night just wondering what happened. Well, it happened to be a dog that made a noise and the Marine just filled him full of holes. He never even had the chance to yip.

SH: Well, that's some story. Now that you think upon the time of the attack, what are you feelings about the Japanese a number of years later?

RW: I've never felt anything against the Japanese personally. Actually, most all wars are political and it's from the top, it isn't from the bottom. So those that were in the battle themselves, they were not -- they were just doing what they were told, the same as we did.

One other thing, we did have a funny incident. One of the gunner's mates, right during the battle and stuff, he said he wondered if the United States had been taken and we were all that's left.

SH: Well, I'm glad it didn't turn out that way. I'd like to thank you very much for taking the time to have a conversation with us. It's been enjoyable listening to you and I appreciate it very much.

END OF INTERVIEW