

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#424

STANLEY C. BLAKER

USS *WEST VIRGINIA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY JACK GREEN & COMMANDER JUDITH LAFLEUR

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Stanley Blaker (SB): ...terrific. I had debutantes, boy, I'll tell you. Daddy paid for all that booze. I was only getting thirty-six, fifty-six dollars a month, you know, and that's not an awful lot of money to go ashore at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Jack Green (JG): That's true.

SB: But some of those girls were very, very, very charming and I did very well with them!

(Laughter)

Judith Lafleur (JL): Are we ready to go? Should I start? Okay. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Judith Lafleur of the Naval Historical Center and Mr. Jack Green, historian from the Naval Historical Center, for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001, at 8:05 p.m. The person interviewed is Stanley C. Baker who was a seaman first

class at NAS Ford Island, VP-24, on December 7, 1941. Can you hear me
okay?

SB: Mm-hmm.

JL: Okay. Good evening.

SB: Good evening.

JL: For the record, would you please state your name, your place of birth and the
date of birth?

SB: Stanley C. Blaker, Chicago, Illinois, and I was born on September 8, 1922.

JL: Okay. And what did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

SB: Chicago.

JL: And what were your parents' names?

SB: I'm sorry?

JL: What were your parents' names?

SB: Well, Edward T. Blaker and Gladys Blaker.

JL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

SB: I had two sisters.

JL: Okay.

SB: One older and one younger.

JL: Where did you go to high school?

SB: Oh boy. I went to NU-CHER High School my first year. My second year, the first half, I went to Kentucky Military Institute. The second half of the second year, I went to...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

SB: ...and...

JL: Shall we continue? Okay. Now, you were saying that you started college and you had a professor who spoke with a German accent?

SB: Yeah and between his accent and his slurring everything through his beard, I just couldn't understand him so I decided there's no sense in me spending my money to do nothing but sleep. So I quit and I went down to join the navy in December. It took me a long time to get in the navy because I had bad teeth and I didn't know until I got in the navy that my uncle, who was my dentist, who was very cheap, I guess, to my dad, he didn't believe in Novocain in the first place, so he would drill down until it hurt and then he'd fill it.

JL: Oh my.

SB: And I lost two teeth while I was still in boot camp at Great Lakes!

(Chuckles)

JL: So when exactly was it that you went into the navy? Do you remember?

SB: Yes. December 16, 1940.

JL: Mm-hmm. And you went into training, you went to boot camp? You went into boot camp?

SB: Yeah, at Great Lakes.

JL: And where did you go after boot camp?

SB: I happened to have a high school education and in those days, that was a pretty big thing, so they asked me what I wanted to be and I found out that

the only way you could become an aviation pilot in the navy was to have an aviation rate. So I wanted to go to aviation rating, machinist mate school, but that was in Corpus Christi and I was going with a girl in Chicago who lived in Los Angeles. So I went to aviation radio school because it was (chuckles) in San Diego, which is kind of stupid, 'cause I never saw the girl again!

(Laughter)

SB: But that's how I got into radio school.

(Laughter)

JL: Okay, okay. And where did you go, how long were you in radio school?

SB: Well, I was at North Island Radio School for, what, I don't know, two months, something like that, three months. And then they shipped me to VP-12, which is right on the same island as PBY squadron. And I remember, I was on a beach crew and, oh, then they put me training,

teaching the code to the new reservists that were just coming in. Some of these guys were first class and here I am a first class seaman and they're getting sixty bucks a month and I'm getting thirty-six or fifty-six dollars a month. And I'm training them how to do the code, you know! It didn't seem reasonable to me.

JL: You're talking about the Morse code, correct?

SB: I did what I was told to do.

JL: When you talk...

SB: Huh?

JL: I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

SB: I said I did what they told me to do.

JL: Mm-hmm.

SB: And then I found out that one of the guys got leave and I said, “How’d you do that?”

He said, “I just put in for it.”

So I went up and put in for leave and they gave me twenty days leave!

When I went home to Chicago, I didn’t have enough money in my pocket to fly the nickel snatcher to go from North Island over to San Diego! I borrowed a nickel and I wired home for money and they sent me enough money to get home but didn’t realize I had to eat too. So I finally got a car that was going that way and I drove it all the way and I beat the super-chief in by two hours. (Clears throat) And, you know, my dad was down there waiting for the train, at the train, and I wasn’t at it ‘cause I was home already!

(Laughter)

JL: And how long after that—so you were home for, what, twenty days leave?

SB: I what?

JL: How much leave did you have?

SB: I'm sorry.

JL: How much leave did you have?

SB: I had twenty days.

JL: Twenty days.

SB: So I...

JL: Now when you, if I could just ask you to clarify something, when you said you were teaching the other shipmates the code, you were talking about the Morse code, correct.

SB: Morse code, yeah.

JL: And then you went back to the ship after you, back to the squadron after your leave?

SB: Yeah.

JL: And were you at the same squadron at that time?

SB: Oh yeah, oh sure.

JL: Okay.

SB: And they shipped me right up to the navy, up to the mess hall as a navy cook, as a navy chef, you know. What do they call it? What do they call it?

JL: A cook. Or a mess...

SB: Mess...

JL: Yeah.

SB: Mess steward. (Clears throat) And I stayed there until we left for Honolulu. And we left on the USS *Rigel*, which was an old World War I ship that had been tied to the dock for, I don't know, like fourteen or fifteen years as a receiving ship for the band members. And the only time it kept its commission is because every year a tug would tow it out to sea and tow it back in again! (Laughs) It's commission. And we painted, well, we did our plane duty or plane watch through our squadron. Now, we only had six airplanes. We had just been issued new planes and they were PBY-5As, which were amphibious.

JG: Yeah, amphibious.

SB: And we had, you know, we had PBY-3s before. And we only had six of 'em. But they took off finally. They stayed extra days, 'cause it was raining. (Laughs) I mean, this is a _____. And we had to stay out there fifteen days it took the *Rigel* to get to Pearl Harbor because we'd stay

three days in one spot, waiting for them to fly over. And then we'd stay three days in another spot waiting for them to fly over. Of course, this is before the war, so we didn't have to worry about white lights _____. But we painted the ward officers, the ward room, the warrant officers ward room, I think, three different colors on that ship.

(Laughter)

SB: All they did was keep us busy painting.

JL: When did you—I'm sorry. When did you arrive in Pearl?

SB: But it took our planes twenty-four hours to fly from San Diego to Pearl Harbor. And they had to take the bunks out in order to make room for extra gas tanks. But you can imagine what an ordeal this was. It's just unheard of.

JL: Now, when was it that you arrived in Pearl Harbor?

SB: I think it was September 18, if I'm not mistaken, but I, you know, I can't swear to that.

JG: Pretty close.

JL: Of 1941?

SB: Yeah, 1941.

JL: Okay. And then you were assigned to which squadron when you arrived there?

SB: Well, yeah, I was still a radio striker, is what they called it. We weren't rated yet. We were striking for a rate. And I worked in a radio shack and I did, I beached airplanes and so forth. And on December 6...

JL: Were you at VP-24 at that time?

SB: Yeah, VP-24. We used to be VP-12 in San Diego. When we got to Honolulu, we changed to VP-24 and VP-24, which was at Pearl Harbor at that time, moved over to Kaneohe Bay as VP-12. I don't know who they were confusing. They were confusing us a lot more than they were the Japs, I think.

JL: So what kind of aircraft did you have at VP-24?

SB: PBY-5As.

JL: So it was the 5As.

SB: Amphibians, yeah.

JL: Okay. Okay, and what were your duties then? You were a striker for radioman?

SB: I was striking for radioman. We were, we repaired radios and so forth. We didn't have too much to do because everything was new, you know! Not

many things was that bad. But we beached aircraft. We did everything that had to be done, you know. The squadron was very small, compared, you know, we only had six airplanes. That's half a squadron.

JL: Okay. Now these, the PBY, the aircraft used to fly out and do patrols daily or...

SB: Well, in those days, yes, they did. We drew most of the patrols because we were the new guy on the block. And VP-22 was, I think, it was down at Midway. They were all over the place. I didn't know where they were. But we drew most of the patrols. (Clears throat)

JL: Now, where did they take off in the harbor to do their patrols, do you remember?

SB: I'm sorry, what?

JL: Where did they take off in the harbor to do their patrols? Do...

SB: Oh, we just take off right down the middle of the harbor. I mean, it depends on which way the wind was blowing, left or right. The ramp went down and the planes got, and they...

JL: Just turned around right there and take off...

SB: Yeah, sure.

JL: ...depending on the direction?

SB: Yeah, they'd start to take off right away.

JL: Mm-hmm. Did you have any more questions...

JG: Now, you said you had the brand new PBV-5As.

SB: Yeah.

JG: Were they the only Dash-5As at Pearl Harbor at the time?

SB: Yup.

JG: Because all the other photographs I've seen are just Dash-5s...

SB: Yeah.

JG: ...these straight...

SB: Well, there were a few 5s, yeah, but we had the only 5As.

JG: Now, as a radioman, aviation radioman, how often were you on the flying schedule? Did you fly every other day or once a week?

SB: Well, I didn't, at that time, I wasn't flying at all, 'cause I was...

JG: Okay.

SB: ...ground crew.

JG: So you basically just worked in the shop?

SB: Yeah.

JG: You _____ back shop.

SB: I don't remember, you know, it's kind of hard to remember which days we had the duty. I know it was at least every third day.

JG: Okay.

SB: And sometimes less, sometimes more, but I'm pretty sure it was pretty close to every third day.

JG: Now, did you specialize in command and liaison sets or did you work...

SB: No, no, no. The funny, I think one of the funniest things, they put radar on our planes.

JG: Yes.

SB: After we got there and we were the first planes to have that. We had one plane, the skipper's plane, they couldn't get the radar to work. And finally, after we worked on it, oh, day after day and we couldn't get it. And finally they shipped a lieutenant colonel, I think he was, all the way from England. He flew in there, he cut off about that much of the antenna and it worked fine!

(Laughter)

JG: _____.

SB: Yeah. I mean, that, not three-quarters of an inch. I couldn't believe it!

JL: And then, when did you get the radar in there, do you remember?

SB: Oh, the radar was right after. Well, it was, I don't remember if it was after or before Pearl Harbor we got it in there. I can't remember.

JL: Right before Pearl Harbor?

JG: Probably afterward.

SB: Well, no, I think probably the plane was equipped with radar after Pearl.

JL: After Pearl Harbor, yeah. Okay.

JG: Now, so you arrived in September, so you had been at Pearl Harbor roughly four months?

SB: Yeah.

JG: _____ the attack takes place. Now, that Saturday, December 6, did you have duty that day or did you have liberty?

SB: No, we had duty.

JG: You had duty.

SB: We had to fly a patrol the next morning. We had four planes in the air at six o'clock in the morning on December 7.

JL: Were you, did you have duty on the sixth?

SB: Well, yeah, we all, the whole squadron, when it flew, everybody was on duty.

JL: Was it an all day thing?

SB: Was what?

JL: Was it an all day duty?

SB: Oh yeah. Like, twelve, fourteen hours we patrolled, you know. They were out that long. And (coughs) we launched the planes but instead of being on patrol, they were dropping messages on our own submarines up in the harbor of Kauai and one of the harbors—I don't know which one it was—by a new message drop that was top secret. It's so simple, it's pathetic. We had a 200-foot long length of, what do you call it—what do you call it? Laundry line, you know, that you hang your laundry on?

JL: Clothesline? Clothesline.

SB: Clothesline. And at one end was a sealed container, at the other end was a block of two-by-four. And they would string it out the tail hatch of our plane, fly over the destination and drop it, and it'd drape over and they'd pull it in, they had a top-secret message. And that's what they were practicing at the time. (Coughs)

But so they, in fact, the second radioman, the radioman, the first radioman the skipper's plane was flying and he was a friend of mine, and I asked him about it when they came back in. I said, "What happened?"

He said, “Well, I got the message that Pearl Harbor was being bombed and I handed it to the skipper, he said, ‘Boy, they said they were going to make it sound realistic the last day of these maneuvers. They’re really making it sound realistic!’”

JL: And that was on the sixth?

SB: And then, well, it came back again and so they all just _____ down to the submarine, “Did you get this message?”

“Yes.”

So they said, “Ask ‘em if it’s true.”

Well, they asked them in plain language, “Are you telling me the truth?”

And boy, you should’ve heard the language! (Laughs) He had it written down and I can’t use it on this kind of program but it was, the poor guy was,

the fellow next to him was dead and he's operating two keys and this guy's asking if it's true! He didn't really take it formally too good.

JG: When were you first aware of the attack? What happened?

SB: Well, we were in the squadron waiting for eight o'clock quarters or muster, whatever you want to call it. And we heard a plane on a dive. Well, everyone in the squadron ran to the rear door. I don't know why I went to the front door of the hangar but I did. And I got there just in time for the first explosion of the war, I mean it was on Ford Island and it was right across from me, about 250 feet.

JG: Hangar, you're Number One?

SB: Yeah. And it was right in the middle of three Dutch PBYS that we beached the night before. I think they were Dutch. I don't know. They had those kind of markings. And they were the PBY-5As and they were on their way through. They didn't get very far because they were completely gone. And the guy that was in that hangar over there was injured and I have never heard

from him since and I don't know what happened to him. Lowell Applegate was his name and he (clears throat) went through boot camp with me.

(Clears throat) He was a VP-23, I think. And they were all down at Midway and he was left here but he had _____ watch, you know (chuckles) of the hangar.

And so anyway, I turned around and the squadron is trying to get firefighting equipment 'cause I thought the plane had crashed. I didn't know it was a bomb. And everybody's headed to the back door of the hangar but me, and I can't get that equipment out there by myself, especially when the hangar door is only open about a foot and a half. And you know, these doors are two stories high. They're not easy to move.

So then another explosion took place and I thought, oh my god, those planes are exploding out there! I'm not going. So I headed for the back door too. And as I got there, our leading chief, Sy Sellers, was too fat to get through the door. We could not get him through. Another guy and I, we tried push—finally we took him and threw him out of the metal shop window.

We got him out there. And then this fellow went out and I went out and then

one went off on my right. And I looked up and I saw these planes with red spots. What are they? You know. The only war I knew that was going on was with Spain! (Laughs)

So everybody was going over right along Luke Field, which _____, there was a ditch for a new sewage line or something, and that was seven or eight feet deep. Some of the guys went in head first, broke their backs and so forth. I mean, really in trouble. I went in with my foot first! And this is where we stayed. And bullets, I mean, they dropped their bombs and so forth and then they come with machine gun us and the planes. They were trying to destroy all of the aircraft of course. And we were laying down in the back of a ditch and they'd spit dirt in our face.

So when the first attack was over, we got out and we turned our planes that were on the ramp so that they were facing the other way, so that our ordnance men can get in to the center of the plane, where we had our fifty caliber machine guns and they could use them, because we had nothing else. In fact, about three weeks before the attack, the army had put a anti-aircraft

gun between our ramps, you know, right outside between the two. And I talked to these guys, “Oh yeah, we’re going to be here.”

They were off on Sunday! (Laughs)

JG: The exercise was over.

JL: Mm-hmm. Well, you mentioned that the hangar doors were hard to move. How did you normally open them?

SB: With a tractor. Yeah, or 400 men!

JL: Exactly. And then you were talking about the ditch and...

SB: The what?

JL: The ditch that you jumped into...

SB: Oh yeah.

JL: ...to protect yourself and everybody else jumped in.

SB: Yeah.

JL: And there were a number of injured people.

SB: Well, the injuries all took place with broken legs or broken ankles or one fellow went in headfirst and he did get some vertebrae broken back here. But all in all, it was a lot safer being in that than up above because they were machine-gunning us badly. (Coughs)

JL: And then when you came back out and you got the...

SB: Between...

JL: ...aircraft positioned so you could use them...

SB: Well, we got them done and then I was ordered to go up and get cigarettes at the ship base, at the ship service, which is a lanai, it's on a lanai around the barracks. And I got there and I had to step over all of these bodies that were laying there. I mean, some of them were moaning and some of 'em were dead and some of 'em weren't. And that's not my orders. I'm not supposed to be a corpsman! And so I went into ship's service and I said, "I want four cartons of cigarettes."

"Take whatever you want. No charge."

And I went back and I was heading back and the second wave came in. And I was just across the street going by this building. I didn't know what it was, but it was an armory and a guy grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in and pulled down the steel door. Handed me a forty-five caliber pistol and a holster and so forth, "Clean it, it's yours."

So I cleaned it and as soon as I did, I left because I thought it was over, the second attack. Boy, I got back and I was heading for that ditch! And this guy is coming back. I looked up I could see his grinning goddamn teeth,

smiling at me as he's machine-gunning me, but he missed! And I got into the ditch again and stayed for the rest of the whole thing, you know. And by that time, the war is over, I mean as far as we're concerned! We didn't know it but.

And that night, they put me on a thirty-caliber machine gun on the edge of the field and a tripod. I had the eight to twelve watch. And at that time, you wouldn't believe it. These guys were all testing their guns all the time. Why they were testing their guns, everybody knew the guns worked, you know. But one guy would open up, testing, oh my lord, the whole place would open up. Just absolutely. And then they came around and warned us that the *Enterprise*, I think, it was coming back. Were coming in, six planes. I never fired a shot but everybody else did and I got news for you. They, a fly couldn't have flown through that flack. The one guy that lived out of that six planes, he landed on Ford Island and he got down safely but his plane was a real mess. And it was really bad 'cause...

JL: Friendly fire.

SB: Yeah, it was, what do they call it? Friendly fire? But you never seen such people. It was just jittery. Everybody was so jittery it was pathetic. When we went to see the movie *Pearl Harbor*, I was very interested in one man's comment, a Pearl Harbor survivor that I happened to hear when he was being interviewed, walking by. He said, "What did you think of the movie?"

He said, "Well, it gave me a chance to see everything that happened. I didn't know what was happening because I was doing my job!"

And this is about all of us. You know, we didn't know what was going on. When the bomb went into the *Arizona*, now we're about a mile away from the *Arizona*, on Ford Island. I estimated, I don't know. I never measured it. But it shook the ground so bad that we got piles of dirt on us. I mean, just came out of the walls. It was just so tremendous. You can't believe how much—when that atomic bomb was—the only expression I can think of that it might be equal to. 'Cause it was a lot of blasting.

JL: So you were up all day? Sorry. So you were up all day on the seventh and then up all night...

SB: Yeah.

JL: ...on the thirty cal[iber]...

SB: Yeah.

JL: ...and then in, what did...

SB: And then, well, our barracks were full of bodies. I mean, we can't get back to the barracks. No way. In fact, the blankets, we had white wool blankets, you know. Very good blankets in the navy. And we had two of them apiece. And they (clears throat) when I got my blankets back, they had been cleaned but they were bloodstained and I took them out of the navy with me and we cut them up and left it, crib blankets and everything, and I don't think we got rid of them until just before we moved to Phoenix, thirty years ago! I mean, it's ridiculous, but it's true. They're very fine blankets. But the bloodstains were still there.

But they, the mess hall, all the tables were covered with bodies. All of our barracks were covered with bodies. All the lanai was covered with bodies. We stayed in the hangar for roughly, I think, six days and they came around with sandwiches and coffee, three times a day. That was what we ate. And we had to sleep on those—I got news for you, those cement floors are not very comfortable.

JL: Did you have anything to, did you have any blankets to use for yourselves?

SB: No. No, we just, we left our clothes on and we slept in those.

JL: Did you have enough clothes or did you have to get new clothes issued or, your clothes?

SB: Oh no. No, well, no. Well, we bought our clothes. In the navy, you buy your—well, you know as well. You're not in the enlisted but. (Chuckles)

You don't know that! (Laughs)

JL: But as a result of the attack, did you have to go get new clothes? I mean...

SB: No, no, no. Our clothes were in our, you know, in our barracks in our lockers, so that wasn't so bad.

JL: Okay.

SB: And they didn't give us new blankets! They gave us the old ones back and get 'em cleaned.

JG: Now, you were in the large barracks that were right next to the base theater...

SB: Yeah.

JG: ...and the building.

SB: Right across the street from the dispensary which got the bomb right in the middle of it.

JG: Exactly, okay. I know exactly where you were. Now, the hangar you were working in, was that between the barracks and Hangar One, which of course is destroyed in the attack?

SB: I'm sorry. What was the...

JG: Okay.

SB: Nothing in the barracks were destroyed.

JG: Oh, I understand. No, no. The hangar you were working, your duty there, your duty hangar where you were working...

SB: (Inaudible)

JG: ...was it between the barracks and Hangar One?

SB: Yes, right across from there. We were the hangar right across from that.

JG: I know it very well.

JL: Now, we're getting a little bit short on time, so what I want to ask you is how do you feel coming back here to Pearl Harbor?

SB: It gets harder every year, really.

JL: Have you been coming back regularly?

SB: I think this is our sixth visit. Sixth five-year visit, yeah. We've gone to other ones in the States, but finally—I shouldn't say that! I should say main side. (Laughs) But we come here every five years for the last twenty, twenty-five, thirty years, whatever it is.

JL: And what's the most sort of poignant time for you during this visit?

SB: I think probably tomorrow morning.

JL: And that'll be a visit to the *Arizona* Memorial?

SB: No. No, I'm not invited there.

JL: Okay.

SB: That's by invitation only. This will be at the Punchbowl [Cemetery].

Because the Punchbowl is where we're going and usually they had a choice of an evening service at the [Arizona] Memorial and a morning service at the Punchbowl and we usually chose for the evening service, but this year we had no choice.

JL: Is there anything you'd like, anything else on a final note that you'd like to share with us?

SB: Well, the attack itself, not much you can say about it. It was the disaster. It was a surprise, let's put it that way. I blame—and I may, I'm going to say this without any real affection on the organization—I think Roosevelt should've been taken out the next morning and shot as a traitor, but that's my _____. I think he was the worst thing that ever happened in the

world or United States. He wanted us in that war and the only way he could do it was to kill 3000 men, that's all. And a lot of—they talk about New York. New York had about the same amount of casualties we did, almost, and a little bit higher, but their damage was done to private property. Ours was done to American property, that the taxpayers have to pay for it. And I don't know why they ever built the *Missouri*, for example. I mean, there was no reason for it. I mean, it was a dead issue, battlewagons were already dead, but they did. The *Iowa* and *Missouri* were built anyway.

JL: Well, do you have anything more that you'd like to ask?

JG: Well, could you give us very briefly what your rest of your navy career after Pearl Harbor was? What did you...

SB: All right. I left, I think it was May 13, well, after the trip—well, I didn't tell you about that. Remember I told you about that message drop? We had an advance base, our crew, and went out to an advance base on Midway and we didn't know what we were looking for but we found out we were looking for

the *Hornet*. And we used that message drop to drop the latest pictures of Tokyo on the *Hornet* as she was headed to bomb Tokyo.

JG: Hey!

JL: Wow.

SB: And then I came, we came back from that advance base and we'd been flying every third day, twelve to fourteen hours, and we had an overnight liberty at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. And then the next day, I come back and still in my whites, I had to go on a bounce hop training privates to land PBYS. You know, and it got very, very boring, over and over and over. So I came back from that flight and I walked into radio shack and they're looking for three volunteer radiomen to be transferred west with one PBY. I raised my hand.

They wouldn't tell us where we were going, what we were going to do or anything, just we're going west. So on the thirteenth of May we took off and they announced the skipper was flying the plane but he wasn't going to

stay and the co-pilot wasn't going to stay and the navigator, just the three mechs and the three machinist mates, I mean three radiomen. And they announced we were going to Auckland, New Zealand.

Well, we got to Noumea, New Caledonia and flew down to Auckland, flew Admiral _____ back to Noumea and he was replaced by Halsey. And we became Admiral McCain's private plane. So flag, ComAirSoPac, Commander Aircraft South Pacific Forces. And we were the first airplane to land on Guadalcanal, or taken territory for that matter in the whole war. We landed with a torpedo under each wing. We had sixteen marines in full battle gear...

END OF INTERVIEW