

#182 STANLEY ROBARDS: USS *MONTGOMERY*

**Bart Fredo (BF):** Just, you know, talk to me. Whatever use the National Park Service puts to this tape, whatever they do it, do with it, for . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

BF: Okay, I'll slate this thing. The following interview is with Stanley Robards. It was conducted on December 4, 1986, at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, at about six o'clock in the evening. Mr. Robards lives in Vallejo, California. My name is Bart Fredo, I'll be doing the interview and also with me is Dan Martinez, who is an historian with the National Park Service.

Let me ask you to, first of all, start off by telling us your name and where you were from back in 1941?

**Stanley Robards (SR):** My name is Stanley Robards and I was originally from Newton, Illinois.

BF: What branch of the service were you in?

SR: US Navy.

BF: And what was your rank?

SR: At that time, I was a Gunner's Mate Third [Class].

BF: When did you come to Hawaii?

SR: In 1940.

BF: And where were you assigned?

SR: On the USS *MONTGOMERY*.

BF: What kind of a ship was that?

SR: It was a destroyer, minelayer.

BF: Let's go . . .

SR: Its homeport was shifted from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor.

BF: Let's go back to the day of the attack, the morning, before the attack started. What were you doing?

SR: I was in the living quarters.

BF: On the ship?

SR: Below decks, yes.

BF: What were you doing?

SR: Well, I had just finished breakfast, and being Sunday, we were relaxing. But at that time, we heard blasting and we thought nothing about it because there were a lot of civilian projects and contracts being worked on in and

around the harbor. And no one thought anything about the blasting because it had been going on sometime.

BF: When did you get your first indication that this wasn't ordinary construction blasting?

SR: Well, actually the watch alerted everybody and sounded general quarters. At that time, everybody went to their stations and the ship made all preparations for getting under way.

BF: Where was your battle station?

SR: I was a gunner's mate at that time, and of course, the first priority is - - and our ammunition was in the ready service lockers, which was locked, and that was a top priority, or first priority, to get the locks off the lockers and make it accessible to the gun crews.

BF: Had much trouble doing that?

SR: Not really. You sort of react after, as a second nature, and perform without thinking really, as a second nature.

BF: Where was your gun position?

SR: My gun position was as a gun captain, but being a duty gunner's mate, I headed the preparations for -- like, the depth charges, they have to have a knob fork, so they'll arm themselves after they're dropped from the rack. And I was on the fantail, most of the time, but at the initial attack. Of course, the gun crews, or the gun that I was the captain of wasn't an anti-aircraft type battery, so . . .

BF: What was it?

SR: It was a four-inch fifty.

BF: You weren't going to fire that at airplanes?

SR: No, that's primarily for surface.

BF: So, what happened next? You got ammo out, and you went to the fantail.

SR: Well, as, like I said, I was back there, on the fantail, putting these knob forks on and . . .

BF: What's a knob fork, by the way?

SR: It's a knob fork that is put on the detonator end of a depth charge, that when it clears the deck, or the rack, this knob fork is wiped clear with a knife or a, or a bracket. It wipes it clear, then as the depth charge sinks, it is allowed, water pressure allows this to arm . . .

BF: I see.

SR: . . . the depth charge.

BF: Did you expect submarines? That's why you went back there?

SR: No, this is one of the procedures that you do as you, as you clear the harbor.

BF: When you went up on deck, what did you see?

SR: Well, there was a lot of smoke and . . .

BF: Where was the smoke?

SR: Over towards the other side of Ford Island, around Battleship Row. And when the -- maybe it was the SHAW, it was in the marine railway, when it exploded and the pyrotechnic lockers blew, it was like a firework, like the fourth of July.

BF: You saw that?

SR: Yes. Because the pyrotechnics is just like, it's fireworks, really, or markers or whatever.

BF: Did you see airplanes?

SR: Oh yes. The planes were making the run and over across from Battleship Row, and they were bombing and torpedo runs, on across Ford Island and they were banking over, in, around Pearl City, the Pan-Am landing. And in their banking, that's where they were more subject to being shot, or shot at, by our gunners.

BF: Could you see them dropping ordnance?

SR: I didn't. Never did see any ordnance actually dropped in the vicinity that we were in. The only actual ordnance was from our own ship, really. I looked out the channel, and I saw the destroyer that was leaving the area, the harbor, making the run on that submarine that was making entrance into the harbor at the time.

BF: You saw it firing?

SR: Yeah, it was dropping depth charges on the midget submarine that was entering the harbor.

BF: Were any of these attacking planes directing their attention to the MONTGOMERY?

SR: No, they were not. They just more or less, making their banking turn over that general vicinity, in preparation for a run back across Ford Island and Battleship Row. They didn't seem to bother the small ships and there was none, to my knowledge, directed directly to the ship.

BF: Were your anti-aircraft gunners firing at the planes?

SR: We were an inboard ship in the nest, and . . .

BF: Explain that.

SR: Well, when four ships are nested together, the inboard ships are the ones in the middle, and of course the stacks and things of this nature, you couldn't fire at 'em with other ships alongside, unless they were directly overhead.

BF: So, in other words, at this point, your ship, the *MONTGOMERY*, is not firing?

SR: No. After the ships alongside cleared, then we were cleared to fire at will, you know, when a ship's making a low run, and overhead.

BF: You mean a plane making a low run?

SR: Yes. Like while the ships, the other ships alongside, you're not able to do this.

BF: How long was it, approximately, from the time you went to general quarters, to the time that these ships on either side of you got under way, and you got under way?

SR: I would say the first ship probably cleared the nest within an hour, to an hour and a half at the latest. We cleared the nest and were headed for sea, approximately at 10:15.

Dan Martinez: Ask him if he can recall the ships that were nested?

BF: Okay, do you recall the ships that were on either side of you?

SR: Three sister ships, they were the USS *GAMBLE*, the USS *BREESE*, and the USS *RAMSAY*.

BF: Okay. When you first went up on deck and saw the smoke, and saw the planes, did you immediately know this was an enemy attack, or did you think it might be some kind of a drill.

SR: We knew it was not a drill. We just assumed it was the Japanese because the news at that time of the day, the newspapers and everything was leading to possible war and so forth.

BF: Do you recall anything out of the ordinary or unusual? I know that may sound like a strange question, but what sticks out in your mind? I'll ask that. What sticks out in your mind during the attack?

SR: The initial reaction, of course, of shock. But it's, like I say, it's second nature. When you go to, when the general quarters bell rings, you are reacting as a unit, not as an individual, and you're not supposed to be doing the thinking yourself, you're just trying to perform a job.

BF: So you really didn't have a lot of time . . .

SR: A lot of time to, (microphone cuts out) in other words, not to think about it at that point in time. It's after the fact, (microphone on) when you stop to think about what could have been. But at the time, you didn't, or I did not think about, you know, being hurt or anything of that nature. It's, like I say, a second nature to do what you're supposed to do.

BF: When the *MONTGOMERY* got under way, was the attack over? Were the two waves finished?

SR: (Microphone out) No, they were still -- it was diminished somewhat, but there were still some activity, but not too much. Our boats were shuttling back and forth.

BF: Like a little whaleboat?

SR: Yes, back and forth to the Pearl City dock, picking up people and bringing 'em back to just any ship they were trying to get aboard. Of course, a lot of our crew was among those people. One incident, we had got the word that there was a plane which we saw it go down, and our boat cops had went out to pick up this pilot. But as he approached alongside the ship, the plane hadn't sunk yet, and he waved his pistol in a threatening manner.

BF: The pilot?

SR: Yes. And the coxswain of the boat, who was armed with a forty-five automatic (microphone on) pistol, he shot him.

BF: Killed him?

SR: Yes. And in essence, that was what was, I think, the first ship to actually have first contact with the enemy. Of course, the war had sunk a submarine prior to that at the outer harbor.

BF: You saw this plane go in?

SR: It went into the water, yes.

BF: About how far from the vessel, the *MONTGOMERY* did it go in?

SR: Maybe three or four hundred yards, at the most.

BF: Did you see this incident involving the Coxswain?

SR: No. This was related to me from him, at a later time, of course.

BF: What else did he say about the incident?

SR: Well, naturally he didn't want to get shot himself. The man was threatening, or waving a pistol, you're just going to react, and which he did.

BF: How did he feel about what he had to do?

SR: I really don't know. He never elaborated on it.

BF: Once you got under way, I take it now the anti-aircraft gunners are firing?

SR: Well, by the time we were clearing the channel, there were no more planes coming in around that area. And of course, we were directed to sea, of course, and we really didn't look back.

BF: So did the *MONTGOMERY* anti-aircraft guns have an opportunity to fire at any of the attacking planes?

SR: Yes, towards the latter part.

BF: Oh, tell me about that.

SR: Well, as I say, as they were coming across from Ford Island and making their banks and turn, return run, they're pretty easy to shoot at. They make an easier target. Of course, the planes of that day were much more slower than they are in this day and age.

BF: Did you see any, any incidents or people doing things that struck you as unusual?

SR: I -- no, I don't remember any.

BF: Not one particular incident that sticks out in your mind?

SR: Well, nobody bothered to go below decks for quite some day, or several days. It was quite some time, unless you absolutely had to, because at that night, after we cleared the harbor and taken up station outside on patrol, when those planes were coming in -- actually, our own forces were shooting at our own planes, not knowing that they were our own planes.

BF: Was the *MONTGOMERY* firing?

SR: No. We were off patrol off Barber's Point, in a sector we had been assigned to. And we did not fire any more after we cleared the harbor.

BF: How long were you patrolling outside the harbor?

SR: We stayed out there until the nineteenth of December, so we went back in for provisions and fueling. Because the ship returned to sea from the Friday prior to December the seventh and we were, had intentions of returning to sea on Monday. We were only in for the weekend.

BF: So you stayed out quite a while?

SR: Yes.

BF: And you patrolled that whole time?

SR: Right. But after the firing at night, nobody, you know, with no communications, we really didn't know what was going on, on the beach.

BF: What was life like on the ship, between the day of the attack and the nineteenth?

SR: Very tense because, and after realizing what had actually taken place, everyone was making preparations for a continued war. I guess that's the way to put it.

BF: How would you describe the feeling of the crew?

SR: Well, to see all that devastation and, and destruction, clearing the channel, it was very sickening.

BF: Were you surprised by the extent of the destruction?

SR: Yes.

BF: Along Battleship Row?

SR: After we returned, yes.

BF: When you saw it on the nineteenth?

SR: Yes, when we returned.

BF: What was the scene like, twelve days later?

SR: Well, naturally, they had immediately started the, for the reconstruction of the harbor and the salvaging of the ships, and there was a lot of activity -- tugs, barges and this type of thing.

BF: Lots of activity?

SR: Lots of activity around the sunken ships, yes.

BF: Had your morale picked up by then?

SR: Oh yes. We, and of course, we got, the big thing is we got all of our crew back. I don't remember how many -- there were very few missed the ship, actually, but we did get what stragglers were still on the beach, we got them back. Plus we also received some of the crew, to bolster our crews, from the sunken ships.

BF: How long did you stay in Hawaii after the attack, before you left?

SR: We operated in and around and out of Pearl the entire war.

BF: So you were affected by martial law then, since you were here?

SR: Yes.

BF: How did martial law affect you, personally?

SR: It had no effect on me.

BF: Didn't go on liberty, didn't restrict your . . .

SR: Oh sure, we went on liberty and, like everybody else, up and down Hotel Street and out to the beach here, but . . .

BF: Didn't you have to be back by a certain time?

SR: Oh yes. There was no overnight liberties, and we were restricted to daylight hours and early evening. You had to carry gas masks and they, naturally, as the war wore on, and they eased this restriction somewhat.

BF: Was a lot of grumbling about liberty being restricted, having to be back before nightfall?

SR: And they, the more and more ships, the more and more people, it's more and more crowded all the time. So . . .

BF: Do you want to ask something?

DM: I'd like to ask you about the submarine contact you had at 3:15 that afternoon. Do you recall that?

SR: Yes. I don't remember what actually really took, when we actually dropped depth charges or not.

DM: The record shows that you did and I was wondering where, did that occur off Barber's Point?

SR: Yes, in that sector, we did have contact.

BF: Anything else stand out in your mind about that twelve-day period when you were at sea?

SR: Not really, other than we were interested in knowing what had actually taken place or this type of thing.

BF: So basically you worked and you slept?

SR: That's correct. We didn't sleep much the first day or two. Most of the time we were at general quarters.

BF: Did the *MONTGOMERY* take any casualties?

SR: No.

BF: A lot of time has gone by since the attack. Do you still think about it?

SR: Not very often. It's worn away, with age, I guess.

BF: So you don't think about it very much.

SR: No.

BF: When you hear, or read, say, the term or the words, "Pearl Harbor," or "December 7," is there a picture that comes to your mind?

SR: Yes.

BF: What's . . .

SR: The smoke and the fires. And off of Battleship, primarily, and over and around marine railway, where those ships were burning. And they, as clearing the channel, the boats, every boat in that harbor was busy shuttling crew members to any ship and every ship that they, seemed like, it was clearing the channel.

BF: Some people who survived the attack still, to this day, have some bad feelings . . .

SR: I can understand that.

BF: . . . about Japan and about the Japanese. How do you feel?

SR: I don't feel that we . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes)

BF: . . . people who survived the attack still, to this day, have some bad feelings about Japan and about the Japanese. How do you feel?

SR: I have no hard feeling against the Japanese people. The simple being is the people did not start the war. The politicians really started the war and you have to blame the politicians and not the people of any country, for any war, in my opinion.

BF: How did you feel?

SR: At the time, naturally, we had hard feelings against the Japanese in general.

BF: When did you, do you think, your feelings started to mellow and start to mellow and you felt, hey, these people didn't start the war, it was the politicians who started it.

SR: Well, naturally, I was a young man at that time, and politics was just a word, really. But it's in later years and so forth, this is when you really start to thinking about what actually happens throughout the world.

BF: Have you ever had an opportunity to talk to any Japanese survivors of the war?

SR: Yes. I, after the war was over, and this was in '48, I believe, and in Sasebo I went hunting with some Japanese.

BF: This is in Japan?

SR: It was in Japan. We were in Sasebo. And one of the members of the crew had a ship mate stationed in Sasebo who knew of a hunting party or group in Nagasaki, which is, like, I guess, sixty or seventy miles from Sasebo. And he made the arrangements for us to go on a hunting trip. We didn't know what we were getting into, but seven us went up there, we took our shotguns of course, and our ammunition. We took canned hams, eggs, bread, coffee, you name it, because we really didn't know what we were getting into, or what we . . . .

They met us at the train station and we had pooled our money, yen really, and made one man the banker and these two hunters, who, one of them was a retired Navy captain, Japanese Navy, and the other one -- I don't know what he was -- but they had permission to carry firearms, and at that time, they must have had permission to go hunting. They had made arrangements for a hotel and they put us up and took us out dove hunting and duck hunting. Dove hunting was fun.

BF: You had a good time?

SR: We had a good time. It wears you out, walking around in that fresh rice paddies.

BF: How about your dealings with the two Japanese men?

SR: We had an interpreter and there was no problem at all.

BF: Did you talk about the war?

SR: Briefly and in fact, we might have met one another off of Guadalcanal at some time or another.

BF: They had served down there.

SR: Not knowing it at the time. Yes, they had.

BF: Anything else said about the war?

SR: No.

BF: About Pearl Harbor?

SR: No. Just sort of . . .

BF: Enjoyed your hunting?

SR: Enjoyed our hunting and enjoyed a good time.

BF: How would you feel about again having the opportunity to meet a Japanese survivor? For example, let's say a surviving pilot of the raid here? How would you feel about that?

SR: Fine. I don't think it would make any difference to me.

BF: Anything that you'd like to ask specifically, if you had the chance?

SR: No.

BF: Let's go back to the day of the attack. You, the *MONTGOMERY* had just come in from patrol. Tell me, set me up on that.

SR: Well, we had just come in from sea, of course, and we were supposed to go back to sea on Monday.

BF: You came in on Friday?

SR: Came in on Friday and we were going back to sea on Monday, for continued exercise, I suppose. I don't know. But rumor had it that we were going to escort one of the battleships or two of the battleships back to the coast sometime in the middle of December. We hadn't been back to the States in over a year. So we were sort of looking forward to this operation, if it took, came about.

BF: So unlike a lot of the ships in the harbor, the *MONTGOMERY* was just about ready to go back to sea.

SR: Yes.

BF: About the ammunition, I take it that your ammo was pretty handy, relatively handy?

SR: It was handy because we had not stuck it below to the ship's magazines, which is a lot of added work, since for such a short stay in the port. And the captain had granted permission to leave it top side.

BF: This was rather fortuitous, as it turned out.

SR: Yes. And it was just, it was still under lock and key, but it was top side.

BF: So there wasn't much of a problem getting it at all?

SR: No, no. It was ready.

BF: You played a part, albeit a small part, but a part nonetheless, in a very important event in history. Do you think it's affected your life in any way?

SR: Yes, in a way I suppose. Any living experience is good for the soul, the body, or whatever, regardless of what it is, good or bad. You get something out of it.

BF: How was it though, for Stanley Robards body and soul?

SR: At times, I have no regrets. And if I had to do it all over again, I'd probably do it.

BF: So if you had the opportunity to change history and get yourself out of Oahu . . .

SR: I myself wouldn't change anything. I've enjoyed life.

BF: And the experience . . .

SR: And the experiences.

END OF INTERVIEW