

#181 STEVE J. PAYCHECK: USS CALIFORNIA

Steve Paycheck (SP): Oh yeah. I was in the photography business at one time, at Fort Kam[ehaeha].

Chris Conybeare (CC): Oh really? That's . . .

SP: Yeah.

CC: We'll get to talk a little bit about all that.

Okay, this is an oral history interview with Steve J. Paycheck, and it's conducted on [December 4] '86. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki, it's 3:45 p.m. Mr. Paycheck lives in Sun City, Arizona. My name is Chris Conybeare and I'm being assisted in the interview by Mark Tanaka-Sanders.

Steve, what was your name, rank and duty station on December 7, 1941?

SP: Well, my name was Steve Paycheck, like it is today. And I was a Fire Controlman Second Class, which is a E-6, I believe. And my duty station was in a range finder that had been mounted at the higher elevation aboard the USS CALIFORNIA, and it was considered a flag range finder, which meant that the, I was under orders from the admiral's staff. In 1940, when we went to the Navy yard, and they installed a radar, and they had to use a pretty high point forward, and they took the range finder, and I, they mounted it on top of turret number two, which was the fourteen-inch main battery. And that's where I was December 7.

CC: Let's go, let's get a little history. How did you end up in Hawaii in the first place? Maybe start back with your, what happened to you. You were born in Pittsburgh?

SP: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Yes.

CC: And how'd you get from Pittsburgh to . . .

SP: Well, my mother died when I was eight, so my -- there was five children and my father had a brother, older brother, on a farm in Ohio. So being as we were Catholics, he wasn't able to remarry. He had to be in mourning for two whole years before he could remarry. And so, so we were farmed out to my uncle and when I was twenty years old, I was working on a dairy farm. We were real poor and we had to -- when I was sixteen, my father pointed his finger up the road and he says, "That big dairy farmer up there needs a hired hand," and I milked cows this way. I used to milk ten cows, morning and night, three hundred sixty five days of the year.

Well, one Sunday in August, in 1935 -- you usually get Sunday afternoon off, not every Sunday afternoon, but I mean, you know, quite a few -- I was listening to the radio and they were, the Army was recruiting. It said, "Join the army," and "We need people to go down to Panama, to Hawaii, the Philippines, and China." And it says, "We pay twenty-one dollars a month and your room and board. You get thirty days vacation a year," and when you work on a farm, you get zero days vacation. And you get your clothes, every Wednesday afternoon, Saturday afternoon, and Sunday off, unless you have specific duty.

Well, my mother didn't raise any dumb kids. (Laughs) And a twenty-year, thirty-year retirement. So I bade good-bye to my farm job and I went in.

Fortunately, I was physically able to pass the test, and I enlisted in the Army, and they sent me to Fort Kamehameha, which is on the island of Oahu, and it was the coast artillery station for the defense of the entrance to Pearl Harbor.

CC: How did you get from the Army, at Fort Kamehameha, to duty in the Navy on the CALIFORNIA?

SP: Well, as you know, enlistments are three years in the Army, and when I completed my hitch in the Army, I went back to Ohio, fully realize, fully intending to try to find a job and I didn't consider making the military my career, although I did like the military life. However, the depression hit Ohio pretty bad, 'cause it's basically, especially up around where we live, it was basically a one, one industry state, steel. Well, as many of you probably read in history, one of the first industries to fold was the steel industry, because if you're not selling anything, you can't produce steel to make anything. So the depression was still pretty bad back there, so I went down to the post office, with it's -- at that time, you had to stay, if you stayed out over ninety days, and you enlisted in something, it did not count as continuous service. So I'd make sure I went down there when I had like eighty-five days after I come out of the Army, and I enlisted in the Navy, knowing that they had a better peg, pay scale, they had better food. Oh, I mean not too much better, but I mean, the Navy life appealed to me more than the Army life.

CC: You'd got, you'd met some sailors when you were in Hawaii?

SP: Oh yes. Yes.

CC: Okay, we have to change tapes.

SP: Okay.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

SP: . . . obsolete railway guns. But I've got guns of, I've got pictures of three-inch, I've got pictures of five-inch, and firing and not firing.

CC: And while you were at Fort Kamehameha, you met some sailors.

SP: Well, Fort Kamehameha, it was called, it was a coast artillery fort and it was the -- we were supposed to protect the entrance of Pearl Harbor to keep foreign ships from coming in, you know, invading and so forth. At Fort Kamehameha, our biggest guns were sixteen-inch guns. I mean, they weren't right in the fort, but they, you know, we were . . .

CC: Yeah.

SP: That was one of the batteries we had. Naturally the outfit I was with, the forty-first coast artillery, we had some obsolete model 1888 eight-inch railway guns and we, we ran up and down the coast, you know, on maneuvers and we were kind of scared to fire 'em because they were so old, you know.

CC: I don't blame you.

SP: Yeah.

CC: So, anyway, when you had a chance to enlist in something after you'd gone back home, you decided the Navy was a better deal?

SP: Yes, because of the pay scale and the lesser time that you had to put in as retirement. See, the Army was thirty years, the Navy was twenty. Also, in the Army, if you wanted a transfer across the street, then you were, let's say, a sergeant, you had to take your stripes and leave 'em there because they belong to the outfit that you were with. In the Navy, once you made the rate, it was permanent, unless you got court marshaled, or something like that.

So, so it had definitely, it had better career advantages than the Army.

CC: And was it just luck that it ended up getting you back to Hawaii, or how did . . .

SP: Well, yes. I always liked Hawaii. I really did. When you come from the snow country, and you come to a place like Hawaii, I mean, my gosh, it's, it's just like they say, paradise, you know. And I went through boot camp at Great Lakes in ninet-- latter part of 1938, and they assigned me to the USS *CALIFORNIA*, and that's how come I ended up at Pearl.

CC: When did you get to Hawaii, at that time, before December 7? Had the *CALIFORNIA* been out here for a while, or . . .

SP: Well, the *CALIFORNIA*, the, the whole battle fleet moved out to the Hawaiian Islands sometime in early part of '41. Now, I had been to school in San Diego, while the fleet, the battle fleet, you know, the battleships, did move, move to Pearl Harbor. And I didn't rejoin my ship because I was, I was in school the early part of '41. I didn't rejoin my ship until September, 1941.

CC: Let's move back up to that Sunday morning. What were you doing and how did you first know that there was an attack happening?

SP: Well, we were tied up at one of the keys, the two keys that normally would have been the USS *ENTERPRISE* docking facilities. And I had just finished breakfast and I was drinking a second cup of coffee, and I looked -- I was looking out the porthole, on the port side, which faced the direction that the Japanese came from. Well, we first noticed that there was something wrong when we heard explosions on Ford Island. And we thought, "Holy cow, what the heck's happening over there," you know.

And then they passed the word, "General quarters, general quarters."

And everybody cussed. They says, "What the hell are we having a drill for on Sunday?"

And just about then, I don't remember whether the torpedo, one of the torpedoes, hit the *CALIFORNIA* just before I went to my battle station, or right afterwards, but we got hit with a torpedo and the ship just up like this, two or three feet, and you knew there was something wrong. And they said, "We are under attack by the Japanese."

CC: Now, where -- you heard that on the ship's . . .

SP: Public address system.

CC: Said that they're under attack?

SP: Yeah, they said, "General quarters, general quarters. This is no drill. We are under attack."

CC: And you went to your duty station?

SP: Yes.

CC: Do you, you remember -- you don't remember if the torpedo hit before you got to your station, or after? Do you recall?

SP: I don't remember, but it was so close, because we took more than one torpedo. And from describing the events with other members. For instance, in the Arizona, Phoenix area, the Pearl Harbor survivors chapter, there are five members who were on the USS *CALIFORNIA*. And we all come to agreement that the torpedo hit either just before we went to general quarters, or just after. That is the first torpedo. And then, later on, we got, you know, either one or two more.

CC: What, what did you observe as you were getting to your duty station? What kinds of things did you see happening around you?

SP: Nothing too much. I had a real short distance to go from where I'd been drinking the cup of coffee. It was no more than say, a hundred feet at the most. I went right up out of the hatch and turret two was just at the top of the hatch, and there was a ladder put up there for me, so that I could get to my range finder station. I upped the ladder real quick like and I jumped into the range finder. And there were two of us. I was the operator and we had a trainer that moved the thing around. And I buttoned myself up in that darn thing, and it was like it was heavily armored. It had one-eighth of an inch steel plate around it.

So after a few minutes, maybe three or four, or five minutes -- and you know, you can't see anything if you're all buttoned up inside one of those little shells -- I said, "What am I sitting here for?"

So I opened up the doors and I had a sound powered telephone head set and I stood outside with my elbows up on top, and I was describing the action to the people who were about four or five decks below, you know, telling 'em, "Well, the planes are coming in," and about that time, another torpedo hit us, and they said, "Holy cow!"

And even though they had emergency lights, they were battery operated emergency lights, they didn't last very long, because we didn't have the rechargeable type that you do now. You know, they recharge them periodically and, you know . . .

CC: So they ran down pretty . . .

SP: Oh they ran down, see. And here they're sitting in the dark. They had very little illumination. And about that time that they ship flooded, eventually there was about twenty-five or thirty feet of water above them. Well, somewhere, a seam leaked, and there they were, about fifteen or so people down there watching that water drip. And they didn't know -- and I, you know, I told them, I said, "Well, the, it looks like the *OKLAHOMA*'s gonna turn over," and then she did.

And then later on, when the *ARIZONA* got hit, I described that. And . . .

CC: What did you see when the ARIZONA got hit?

SP: Well, actually, my back was to it. And I heard this tremendous explosion, and I didn't quite know where it was coming from, until the, my fellow crewmen that was with me, he pointed. He says, "Look, look, look!"

And there was a huge cloud of smoke and I didn't know it was the ARIZONA. I knew it was one of the battle ships. And I described that fully to the people down below, and later on, I found out, they said, "Well, at first, we were scared." And then, you know, because they couldn't see what was happening. And they knew that the ship was leaning, because just as soon as the torpedoes hit, well, the water flooded, starting flooding the lower part of the ship, and it got waterlogged on the port side. And as you know, the banks of the harbor, and thing like that, aren't straight up and down, they're at this angle. And we settled down to the bottom, then naturally we started leaning over. And they were sure that we were going to overturn.

CC: Now, they were below the water line, the people you were talking to?

SP: Yeah, oh yeah. In the main battery planning room. They were below the water line.

CC: Now, did -- you said also that during the next part of the attack, the high altitude bombers, you took a bomb hit too? Is that correct?

SP: Yeah. Well, shortly after we went to general quarters and they just had a limited amount of anti-aircraft ammunition topside, which they used and fired against the planes. And then, due to the fact that we didn't have any power, because we were, we just had enough power coming from Ford Island by cable, to operate our basic electrical needs to operate the magazines and guns, and stuff like that, you gotta have a lot of power. Well, they couldn't hoist the ammunition up from the magazines by the conveyor belt, so they said, "Everybody secure from whatever you're doing. Go down and help pass out five-inch ammunition up to the five-inch guns."

And I asked my division officer, Mr. Hall, I says, "Does that include me?"

And he says, "No, Paycheck." He says, "You are flag range finder operator, so you take your orders from flag," which is the admiral staff, you know.

See, so I says, "Okay."

And sometime, I couldn't say exactly when we did take that bomb, but again, I didn't see it hit. But I felt it and later on, I saw the hole and the hole wasn't any more, where it went through the fo'c'sle deck, it wasn't maybe twenty, twenty-five feet from the turret.

CC: Were you still talking to the men down below at that point?

SP: Oh yeah, yeah.

CC: What did, what would -- they must have been pretty scared down there.

SP: (Chuckles) Yeah, I can imagine. I talked to a couple of them later on, and they said, "We kept looking at that water and we kept feeling the ship

leaning further and further and further. And then, when you said the OKLAHOMA turned over, you know, we could just see ourselves entombed here, you know."

And it could have happened. But we had a good bosun mate, or a -- weren't bosun. And he, right away, good damage control people, and they right away started trying to keep the ship from turning over. We, we ran, they ran all kind of cables and everything they could lay their hands on toward anything on, on Ford Island, to keep the thing from rolling over. They were successful.

CC: Were you able to observe the NEVADA during this time?

SP: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, sometime after the attack started -- I couldn't tell you the exact time -- the NEVADA got under way, and it went by, and not too far away from us. And being as I was on top of turret two there, well, I saw all the action, and when it went by, they were busy trying to fire at the planes and we fired sporadically, depending on how much ammunition we could get. I mean, we might have got off ten or twenty rounds per minute, you know, and fired 'em as fast as we could. And when the NEVADA went by, well, we let out a cheer. And then we saw the Japanese concentrating on it, to stop it. And after -- I didn't actually see it get hit, because it's awfully hard unless you, if the bombs explode top side. You know, when a bomb goes through the deck, it explodes two or three decks below, I mean, you don't have too much visual knowledge of it. You might see the ship do this, or something like that. And we saw it headed for the, to ground it, so that it wouldn't block the harbor.

CC: Did you see any other ships under way?

SP: Not really. I couldn't say. I mean, there was -- especially after the ARIZONA got hit, there was so much smoke you couldn't see hardly anything. The one thing that I remember, I saw a lot of small boats from admirals' gigs, captains' gigs, and other small boats were rushing all over, rescuing people that had been either blown over the side, or jumped over the side, stuff like that.

CC: At some point, did the CALIFORNIA abandon ship, or . . .

SP: Yes. Yes. When that bomb hit, the one I just described, when that bomb hit, it exploded somewhere not very far away from one of our magazines, and naturally, there was some fire. And they were afraid that the, if they couldn't control the fire, that the ammunition would blow up and then we would have another ARIZONA. So we abandoned ship.

Now, I jumped over the bow part, and jumped in the water. And then I swam to Ford Island, which wasn't very far, and put my shoes back on, because I, for some reason or other, didn't want to get my shoes wet. I don't know why. I mean, those things that happen, you know, see. I actually tied my shoes together and put 'em around my neck and held on so when I jumped feet first, down and so, well, naturally, I went down below and my shoes got wet anyway. You know, see. So when I got on the island, I said, "Now, I'll put my shoes on," and I just ran like hell, because they, they said, "Get away as far as you can from the ship in case it blows up."

Well, not too long afterwards, maybe ten, fifteen, twenty minutes afterwards, well, they passed the word again, that all crew members return to the ship, so I returned to the ship and helped in trying to keep the ship from

turning over. I didn't have to go back to my battle station, because by then, the attack was over.

CC: What about later? What kinds of, what did -- since the ship was really out of action, what, what did the crew do then?

SP: Well . . .

CC: What was your assignment for later on that day, or that night, or . . .

SP: Well, the biggest duties we had was, like I say, trying to keep the ship from turning over. And then, some of the crew did go below and try to get the people that were trapped in these compartments that were just starting to flood, the ones that were closest. Because as the ship kept leaning further and further, well then, the compartments kept getting a little bit more water and there was some rescue work, but I wasn't in on that because I was -- see the aft division, even though it was the fire control division, it was considered a deck division, in those days, and we helped top side to keep the ship from going over and things like that there.

CC: Do you know for a fact that the men you were talking to from your original duty station, they were able to get out of their compartment?

SP: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. See, in the main battery plotting room, and also there is an electrician's compartment with it, there is an escape hatch, or an escape tube, that goes up all the way to the conning tower. And the conning tower, when the ship finally settled on the bottom, I mean it was twenty, thirty feet above water, so that's the way they managed to escape.

CC: Did you have any chance when this, all this is happening to you, did you think about what was going on? Do you know what was going through your head, or just too scared, or what?

SP: Well, as I described in an article that was printed in the Phoenix paper about fifteen years ago, I said that first I was scared. After, you know, several minutes, I got mad, because here we had always discussed Pearl Harbor as the Gibraltar of the Pacific, "Pearl Harbor is impregnable. The Japanese would never dare to come, or any enemy, any enemy would never dare to come and try to attack Pearl Harbor."

So those were my feelings, I mean, you know, for the first five, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, I was scared. And then, just like anybody who's been in a similar situation, regardless of whether it was military or anything like that, the first thing they do is they get scared. And then, you know, the adrenaline rushes to your muscles and stuff like that. And then, all of a sudden you get a, the urge, the surge of energy and that's when every, your blood pressure increases and your head clears, and that's when you start thinking, and that's what makes heroes out of a lot of people. You know, that they get that extra urge of energy.

CC: What, did they reassign you then, after that night? Or what happened to you?

SP: No, no the -- if I remember right, that night, we, you know, after, oh, toward dark, or maybe even after dark, the, the main thing was trying to get food, because we hadn't eaten anything for breakfast and Sunday morning, you don't get a very big breakfast in the Navy, anyway. So we were detailed, some

of us were detailed to go over to Ford Island, to one of the few remaining facilities that were still available there, hangar decks and stuff like that. And we helped prepare food for anybody that came to the, to the, the makeshift mess hall on Ford Island, and, and, and I was there for about a day, doing that. And then they, like, say, the December eighth, I probably did that. And then, on about the ninth, they, they started talking about taking the anti-aircraft guns off the ship, the USS *CALIFORNIA*, and setting it up on the, the land someplace so that if the Japanese did make an about face and come back again, well, we would have something to fight 'em off with. And then, that's the way I spent the next two years, setting up Navy anti-aircraft guns and directors. And then . . .

CC: In Hawaii, or all over?

SP: Oh, right around the Pearl Harbor, including -- you know where Sand Island is in . . .

CC: Sure.

SP: The last one I helped set up was on Sand Island. And the latter part of 1942, they realized that the Japanese would not come back. That was after the battle of Midway, in the Coral Sea, and stuff like that. So they started turning over these Navy equipment to the Army, because they needed the experienced sailors. And there were a fire control man and a gunner's mate stayed with each one of those four-gun batteries and the two directors, and, to instruct the Army to operate the equipment. And in that process, it took us about a year, or nine months to a year. And I received the designation as an instructor.

And in the middle of 1943, the, I was first class fire control man. I got one promotion in two years. My chief came to me one day and he says, "Here's your orders." He says, "You're going to school."

Well, everybody in, any fire control man, when you mention school, they always think of the fire control school in Washington D.C. And I clapped my hands, I says, "Goody." I says, "I'm going to school."

He says, "Oh no. No, no. You're not going to Washington." He says, "Up the coast here is an anti-aircraft training center and you are an instructor, and you're going up there."

So I finished up two more years at Waianae, which is up the coast here, twenty-five, thirty miles from Pearl Harbor, as an instructor.

CC: So you spent the war in Hawaii, really?

SP: Yup. And I didn't complain. (Laughs)

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

SP: . . . but she tried to get in the armed forces, especially the Navy, as, you know, as a nurse. Well, the first part of the war, they didn't take any married nurses, and then the latter part of the war, well, she -- I forget what happened. But she enlisted in the WACS.

CC: Oh yeah?

SP: And she enlisted in the -- because they wouldn't take her as a nurse and give her a commission, she was patriotic and everything like that, and she decided to join the WACS. Now, the first WACS, were the WAAC, which is auxiliary. It wasn't, you know, it was like with a master's degree in nursing. And you know what they did with her, they sent her to radio school to try to make a radio personnel out of her, and then when she got -- do you want to me continue here?

CC: Sure. Go on, keep going.

SP: Then when she got out of the radio school, which was in New Jersey, they sent her to the west coast to some Army air base in the San Francisco area, and she pushed a lawn mower, and she helped the soldiers repair airplanes, especially hoisting the engines after they were overhauled aboard the planes. And then, in -- this was in early part of '42, 1942. And then, toward the -- she had about six or seven months in, the Congress authorized to have a Women's Army Corps, instead of the Auxiliary Army Corps, and they gave them all a choice of either enlisting in the Women's Army Corps, or going out. And she said, she said, "I ain't about to stay in this darn outfit." She said, "They're putting square pegs in round holes," so she left.

CC: Did you ever get together out here during the war?

SP: Oh no.

CC: She never made it out here.

SP: No, no, no. As a matter of fact, right after December 7, they were shipping all the dependents back to the mainland as fast as they could.

CC: What was it like here during the war years? Martial Law was in effect.

SP: Oh yeah.

CC: What kind of condition, what were the conditions like, in contrast to peacetime Hawaii?

SP: Well, the biggest thing was the blackouts, because you had to, you know, you couldn't have any lights at night, at all. And naturally, there was rationing. You couldn't get any, like, liquor and stuff like that. And barbed wire on the beaches and hurry, hurry, hurry, you know, there's a war on. You practically worked twenty hours a day.

CC: And did you get to know any people from Hawaii during this time? Did you pretty much have to interact with the folks in . . .

SP: Well the only contact I had was with some civilians was when I was transferred from the Sand Island, the last battery that we had set up, after the Army officially took it over, and I went to Waianae. We used to have to send our laundry to Pearl Harbor, and I think they washed everything with a lot of lye water and if you . . .

CC: Yeah.

SP: (Chuckles) With a lot of lye soap. And it was terrible soap, so the, so the higher ratings -- I was first class at the time -- we found a Japanese laundry woman that would do our laundry in the little town of Waianae. It was

like a sugar, a sugar cane -- they had an old mill down there. The mill was actually, wasn't in operation. It was, you know, obsolete or, and in ruins. And that's the only contact I had with any civilians.

However, we had a gunner's mate, he had been chief gunner's mate on the USS CALIFORNIA, then he made warrant gunner, and he had a Chinese girlfriend. Well, we used to fish off of the rocks at Waianae, on, usually, just on Sundays. And we would save the fish for him and after we had a round tub, you know, like a washtub full of fish -- we kept them froze, we, you know, dressed 'em and kept 'em froze. For every laun--, for every tub like that that we had, he would bring us a gallon of torpedo, hundred and eight proof alcohol to trade, so he could make points with his girlfriend. And that's what we used to, you know, have happy hour. Because at that, at a hundred eighty proof, you would take what would be just about, maybe, a thimble full, a large thimble full, and you'd put it into a Coke, and one of those was adequate, I mean.

CC: You'd get pretty happy.

SP: Get pretty happy, yeah. And then, we did start getting the beer from the coast, because the -- even though they had one, or -- I think they had one brewery here in Honolulu that made -- I forget the name of the beer.

CC: Primo?

SP: (Chuckles) Primo, yeah. It wasn't too bad. However, I don't think I went on liberty or on pass, for you Army type people. I doubt if I went out on liberty more than once a month and then maybe three months, you know, before I went to, because it, it was a hassle downtown, because it was you had to carry a gas mask with you and a helmet, and all that stuff. And it was very -- you had to wear the damn helmet, you know.

CC: They figured out how to take the fun out of liberty, huh?

END OF INTERVIEW