

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#274

THOMAS E. DECKER

USS *HULL*, SURVIVOR

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 7, 1998
BY DANIEL MARTINEZ**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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Thomas Decker (TD): One hundred forty pounds, but he could drive a ball 260 yards. [*Talking about his grandson Shaun*]

Daniel Martinez (DM): Accurately? (Chuckles)

TD: Yes. He's a little taller than I am. He's kind of a skinny kid.

DM: Well, he's still growing, isn't he?

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: Yeah.

TD: Yeah.

DM: Alrighty. We're about ready to start and Tom, you and I are like in your front room, in the living room.

TD: Okay.

DM: And you and I are just going to talk to each other. If there's any question you feel uncomfortable about, don't have to talk about it. If there's anything you want to say, feel free to say that. You could say anything you'd like. I'm not here to evaluate that. I'm just here to listen to that and record it for posterity. So it's pretty wide open here. It's not the Jerry Springer show, but it is.

TD: Hey, on December the 7, I was on national television not too long ago, from Hawaii.

DM: Which December, the fiftieth [*anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor*]?

TD: The fiftieth.

DM: You were?

TD: Yeah, channel five.

DM: Oh, okay.

TD: Yeah.

DM: All right, let me just do the introduction here now. The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. It was taped at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998 at approximately 7:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is Mr. Thomas Decker, who was aboard the USS *Hull*. Was that DD-350?

TD: Yes.

DM: DD-350 on December 7, 1941.

(Conversation off-mike)

DM: The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. It was taped at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998 at approximately 8 o'clock in the evening. The person being interviewed is Mr. Thomas Decker, who was aboard the USS *Hull*, DD-350, on December 7, 1941. For the record, Tom, would you please state for me your full name?

TD: Full name, Thomas Elrod Decker.

DM: And what did the "L" stand for?

TD: "E" it's an E. Elrod.

DM: Elrod, very good.

TD: Yeah.

DM: Thank you. Elrod Decker.

TD: It's an Irish name.

DM: And what was your place of birth and date of birth?

TD: Springfield, Illinois, November 18, 1919.

DM: And in 1941, what did you consider your hometown?

TD: Alton, Illinois.

DM: Alton, Illinois. Is that where you grew up and went to high school?

TD: I was raised there, yes, and went through grade school and high school.

DM: Now, when you were growing up, how many kids were in your family?

TD: Two, just my brother and I.

DM: And were you separated by some years or pretty close together?

TD: He was about two and a half years older than I was.

DM: Were your mother and father together and alive?

TD: No, they were divorced when I was six years old.

DM: And who raised you?

TD: My maternal grandmother.

DM: Is that right?

TD: Yeah. My mother was _____. She was generally working and grandma took care of us, yeah.

(Conversation off-mike)

DM: So you were raised by your maternal...

TD: Grandmother, yeah.

DM: ...grandmother. And where was that, in Alton?

TD: Alton, Illinois.

DM: Okay. Did you go to a public school or parochial school?

TD: No, I went to parochial school.

DM: And that was both elementary and high school?

TD: Right.

DM: And what was your favorite subject in high school?

TD: Girls.

DM: (Chuckles) And what was your least favorite subject?

TD: Latin.

DM: And did you play sports and what was your favorite sport?

TD: I played football and we didn't really have a gymnasium in our high school, it was quite small. Matter of fact, our class was only fifty people. And we had a football team and that was about it.

DM: Yeah. When you graduated from high school, did you know what you wanted to do and...

TD: No. Had no idea.

DM: Did you go to work or what did you do?

TD: I went to work at the theater down there as an usher and I decided that I might as well go in the navy. It meant possibly get some kind of education, because at that time, why, we couldn't afford it.

DM: Well, the depression was on, still, right.

TD: Oh yes, yes. We were never hungry, I'll say that. But you know, it was quite rough at that particular time. I used to have a paper route at one time too. I mean, we did what we could, but it was a bad time, so decided to go in the navy.

DM: Great. When you decided to go in the navy, what year was that and where did you enlist?

TD: Well, I was, lived in Alton, but we had to go over to St. Louis, Missouri and about fifty of us took the examination, you know, the physical and the mental. And out of the fifty, only two of us passed. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine went with me and he flunked. But the one, the other one that passed, he went into the reserves and they held off on me until they needed me, which was, notice sent to go to Great Lakes on January 4.

DM: Mm-hm. And when you went to Great Lakes, was that for basic or boot camp?

TD: Yes, yes.

DM: How'd you like boot camp?

TD: Boot camp, in those days, was rough. I mean it's not as easy-going now as, because—and I spent thirty-one years in civil service at Great Lakes. And...

DM: You saw the changes?

TD: I see all the changes there at Great Lakes. It's immense now. It's really immense. They have schools, you know, that, electronic schools, radar schools, and propulsion engineering schools and they really get a good education, the sailors now. But then, there was at that particular time, when I graduated, there was only one school that was open and that was hospital corps school. And I figured rather than waste my time just going aboard ship, that I would, you know, get some type of an education.

DM: Right.

TD: So they sent me down to San Diego, to a hospital down there, to hospital corps school in San Diego.

DM: Did you have an affinity for medical things as a youngster, or did you...

TD: Not really, no.

DM: Did blood and all that stuff bother you?

TD: No. No. No. My mother was interested, you know. She worked sometimes at the hospital and stuff like that, but I didn't. I was not the least bit interested. It was not my...

(Phone rings, taping stops, then resumes)

DM: Choosing to be a pharmacist's mate, did you have an inside, that this might be a good way to go in the navy?

TD: Well, being a Pharmacist's Mate, you learn other things besides, you know, hospitals and things like that. You learn how to make medicines. You learn how to care for a person. I know when I got aboard the *Hull*, why, I had a chief pharmacist mate on there that taught me everything I knew.

DM: Is that right?

TD: Oh yes.

DM: Squared away.

TD: Oh yeah. We would suture up the guys when they got cuts and...

DM: Oh, you could do that?

TD: Oh yes. Yes. We had guys who would go on the beach, you know, and get beat up and come back with all kind of cuts and bruises and we'd suture 'em

up and take care of 'em. And sometimes the doctor would get a little—most of the doctors on board the destroyers were just out of medical school.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: They were raw. And you know, when they're just out of medical school, they have a tendency that they would like to operate, no matter what it is. But generally the guys aboard, you know, the crew, would wait until the doctor was out of the pharmacy, and then they'd come up and see the chief or me. So if they had a carbuncle or a boil or something like that, then all we would do was (claps hands) put some ointment on there, _____ ointment, then the next day it would draw it all out. But if it was a doctor, he'd want to lance it, cut it, you know. So they get wise. They stayed away from the doctor as much as they could. Not that they weren't good.

DM: For those that don't know what a Pharmacist's Mate does, and I know this will sound a little redundant, could you describe to those that are going to be watching this in the future, what a Pharmacist's Mate was in the navy? Basic job description.

TD: Well, many of 'em work in hospitals, naturally. And they do practically the same thing, which a lot of 'em won't agree with me, the nurses do. It's just almost, I would say, like being a male nurse.

DM: Right.

TD: And of course you got all men to work with, generally, and you make bandages, you make medicines, which come in handy, really, because when you're out to sea, you know, you run out of a particular kind of medicine and you just have the ingredients to make it up, like your laxative. You get two ingredients in a laxative in the navy, which is mineral oil and—oh what is it—I can't even think of it any more. But it's called a black and white and it was a good purgative. It worked very good. You didn't...

DM: Take care of it.

TD: Yeah. But anyway, we had a lot of things that we did. We give shots. Naturally you had to take shots when you were overseas for things like

typhoid and different diseases, you know, to combat ‘em. And take care of the welfare of the crew because a lot of ‘em, you know, they come down with colds and things like that and some of ‘em want to get off and get off the ship and go on the beach. They think up all kinds of excuses to do it.

DM: To go to sickbay?

TD: Yeah.

DM: Now, how would a Pharmacist’s Mate treat somebody that came in with a souvenir from a good liberty?

TD: Souvenir, what do you mean? Oh! You’re talking about that. Well...

DM: They came in with some kind of venereal problem. Did you deal with that?

TD: Oh yes! We give ‘em shots of penicillin, yeah. We gave penicillin, sulfur. And at that time, sulfur and penicillin were the main ingredients that they used for—later they got more sophisticated stuff to get rid of it. But that particular time, that was really a rough treatment that they got.

DM: It was?

TD: Oh yes. ‘Cause those shots, well, I always said that I never, a guy had never felt a shot that I gave him.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: Which is probably a lie, but I always said that anyway.

DM: Did the navy frown, by the way, on sexually transmitted diseases?

TD: Oh naturally. That was misconduct, actually.

DM: Is that right?

TD: They classified it as misconduct, yes. Yes. Any time you lost with having venereal disease, you would have to make up before you get out of the navy.

DM: Is that right?

TD: Oh yes, yes.

DM: And that's not something that went unreported?

TD: That's right, it went right to your record. Yeah.

DM: The—once you completed Pharmacist's Mate school, how long did that school last for you guys?

TD: I think it was a twelve-weeks class.

DM: And then were you tested when you got out, or was...

TD: Well, we had examinations and things like of this nature.

DM: Periodic...

TD: We had to pass 'em before...

DM: Moved on to the next...

TD: ...graduated. It's like graduating from high school.

DM: Okay.

TD: It's the same difference.

DM: Now, once you completed that school, were you kept there or did you get assigned to ship?

TD: No, I was assigned to Mare Island Hospital, at Vallejo, California. And I worked up there. Well, I worked in the psycho ward, really.

DM: The psycho ward?

TD: Yeah.

DM: What was that like?

TD: Well...

DM: Don't say it was nuts. (Chuckles)

TD: No, it wasn't nice. It was—well, some of them you couldn't really tell whether they were just doing it to get out or what.

DM: Okay.

TD: But we had, well, one particular Marine we had, he was confined. I mean he had his own little room and he was locked in there with bars on it. That man was an artist, a real artist. But I gave him a picture of a girl, my girlfriend at the particular time, asked him to draw a picture for me. And he drew a beautiful one side of it. But you should've seen the other side of it, it was grotesque. It was terrible. But he was that type.

DM: So he did like a split-figure?

TD: Yeah. Yeah.

DM: So he was out there a little?

TD: Oh, he was really way off the deep end.

DM: Now, how long did you serve down at Mare Island?

TD: I was there I would say about six to nine months. I'm not really sure how long it was.

DM: Is that when you got assigned to a ship?

TD: Yeah. That's when I got assigned to the USS *Relief*, which was a hospital ship.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: And we caught a cruiser that was having repairs done up in Mare Island Navy Yard, and they took us out to Hawaii on the famous maneuvers of 1940.

DM: Okay.

TD: We were supposedly a battleship in this...

DM: Fleet? _____.

TD: Yes. But we were a big, white ship. Beautiful, the USS *Relief* was one of the most beautiful ships you could imagine. It was all white.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: And the decks were wooden and we had to holystone those decks.

DM: Oh, even Pharmacist's Mate had...

TD: Oh yes. Hey. We had to work. You're darned right we worked.

DM: I didn't know that they had...

TD: We painted. Go into dry dock, you'd have to scrape the bottom of the ship. You'd have to paint. Oh yeah.

DM: Now there was another hospital ship out there and one in the harbor at the time of the attack, the *Solace*. Did you...

TD: The *Solace* came out and relieved the *Relief* before December 7.

DM: Oh, so if that had not happened, the *Relief* would have been in Pearl Harbor?

TD: Yeah, yeah. I don't know where the *Relief* went, but it went.

DM: And you stayed on her for how many months?

TD: Well, I stayed on her until 1940.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: And in early part of 1940, I think it was around March or April, something in around in there, we made third-class pharmacist's mates. We took an exam and made Third Class Pharmacist's Mate. And then they took about fifteen or twenty of us and sent us out to the ships. Some to destroyers, some to cruisers, some to battleships.

DM: And you didn't have a choice of what kind of ship you would go to?

TD: No, no. We didn't have any choice at all! They said, "Go," you go.

DM: And you drew the *Hull*?

TD: I drew the *Hull*.

DM: And what'd you think of the *Hull* when you got over to see her?

TD: When I first got aboard her?

DM: Yeah.

TD: I almost dropped my sea bag into the water when I was going up the ladder.

DM: Tell me how that almost happened.

TD: Well, you know, you come in an open boat...

DM: Right.

TD: ...over there, and they've got this ladder, this stairs coming down. Stairs they call 'em. Anyway, there's a landing on the bottom and you get your sea bag on your shoulder and you start up these stairs. Well, I got half...

DM: How much does a sea bag weigh?

TD: I'd say about sixty to seventy pounds, at least.

DM: Okay, so you're going up the...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...gangway...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...there.

TD: And I don't know what it was, but it just leaned over, almost leaned over the side, almost dropped it in the water, but I didn't. I guess they thought some klutz was coming aboard ship! But that was one of the best ships I was ever on.

DM: Why was it so?

TD: Because it was just like a big family. You knew everybody was onboard ship and they knew you. They treated you with respect and you got over on the beach, you got into problems, all you gotta do is holler, "USS *Hull*," and you got some guys there helping you out.

DM: So that was an experienced crew, as I understand?

TD: Oh yes.

DM: You had people and chiefs and other people in position that had been at sea.

TD: Sure.

DM: And she was a DD, so she was a fairly well armed vessel.

TD: They had, at that particular time, four four-inch thirty-four, five-inch thirty-eights.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: And they had two aft and two forward.

DM: Were they open or case-mated guns, or turret guns?

TD: No, they were open. They were open. Two of 'em, I think, had coverings on top. But...

DM: Splinter shields.

TD: Yeah, yeah.

DM: And she was a pretty fast ship?

TD: Yeah, they were supposed to be able to go thirty-five knots.

DM: What was the captain like on that vessel?

TD: (Chuckles) Well, do you mean the one that was on there at the beginning?

DM: Yes.

TD: He was a very, very good captain. Matter of fact, all of the officers, except one clown, were very good officers. The reason I say clown is because I used to have to stand deck watch, as you know...

DM: Right.

TD: ...when we're out to sea. And at that particular time, I had a pretty good voice. And he would make me sing while I was on watch up there.

DM: Sing?

TD: Sing.

DM: What kind of songs did you sing?

TD: Oh, whatever came to my mind. Whatever I knew. I didn't particularly care for it, but there were times when they even had me as the helmsman, where I would steer the ship, you know.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: But...

DM: And you were the singing helmsman?

TD: Yeah, I was the singing helmsman all right. (Chuckles) But he was a reserve from up around Hollywood, I think, and he and I never got along too well. Although I got along fine with the doctor. The doctor and I got along good.

DM: Do you remember the doctor's name?

TD: I thought of it the other day and I remembered it, but right now it just skips my mind.

DM: No problem. If you think of it, that's fine. Now, I'm going to take you up to the events of December 7. The *Hull* went out on fleet maneuvers during that time, or was part of that. Or was it part of the Hawaiian detachment?

TD: It was, I think, part of the Hawaiian Detachment. I'm not really sure.

DM: Okay.

TD: Not positive.

DM: But it was home-ported at Pearl Harbor?

TD: I know we stayed right there primarily in the Hawaiian waters.

DM: Okay.

TD: We'd go over to Maui and you know around the island and patrol the island and things of that nature.

DM: Now, on the weekend of December 7, had you guys come in from being at sea, or were you guys there for some time before?

TD: No, we had been there for, I don't know, couple of weeks, I guess.

DM: Okay.

TD: In port.

DM: Now, did you have the duty on Saturday, December 6, or did you...

TD: No, no. I didn't. I was over on the beach.

DM: Where were you at?

TD: (Chuckles) Well, I had a date with a little Japanese girl.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: Believe it or not. And we were, you know, they had dances over there, you know, in some of the taverns and stuff like that.

DM: Was that in downtown Honolulu or Waikiki?

TD: Yeah, downtown, down on Hotel Street.

DM: All right.

TD: And you know what Hotel Street is.

DM: I have a good idea. I certainly know...

TD: But anyway, they were...

DM: ...near Hotel Street is River Street.

TD: Yeah, right. Yeah.

DM: They have some fine accommodations...

TD: We had several favorite taverns, you know, that we used to visit down there.

DM: Uh-huh. What was your favorite?

TD: Tiger Inn.

DM: The Tiger Inn.

TD: Yeah, Tiger Inn, yeah, that was the Tiger Inn. And one place there, they served food up the street there, was a Japanese couple that owned the tavern and the restaurant. And they gave me a job as a bouncer.

DM: As a bouncer?

TD: Yeah, as a bouncer. So I would go up there every night and they had a little girl that worked there as a waitress. Oh, she was a living doll. She was a real beautiful [*kanaka*]. And you know, just help 'em out. If somebody get unruly, well they can throw 'em out.

DM: So on that particular night, were you working as a bouncer or just going out on a date on December 6?

TD: No, I was out on a date. I was, on December 7, believe it or not, that morning was one of the worst hangovers I think I've had in a long time.

DM: So you went out and had a great time?

TD: Oh yes.

DM: What time did you get back to the ship?

TD: We were enjoying ourselves and it's a funny thing, when I left this young lady—I don't even remember what her name was, but she was a real nice girl, from a good family. And she told me to be careful the next day. She said that to me. I didn't know what she was really talking about. I was half

in the bag as it was, anyway, you know. But it dawned on me later on that she had said that and I never did see her after that. So they must have sent her back to the states, to that camp that they kept the Japanese in back in the states. But I never saw her again.

DM: Did you ever get back to that bar again or...

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: Yeah.

TD: Oh yeah, yeah.

DM: Asked for her and say where you could see her? Nothing? You never came up with an answer?

TD: Mm-mm, mm-mm [no].

DM: So here you are, you're back on the *Hull*, you got back sometime. You went on a Cinderella liberty, were you, or you had to be back by midnight or anything.

TD: No, no. Not that particular time. I was, you know, naturally, before the war.

DM: And where was the *Hull* tied up? Was she nested?

TD: She tied up alongside of the *Dobbin*.

DM: Okay, the tender.

TD: Yeah.

DM: And there was several ships nested together there, right?

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: Several destroyers.

TD: Division One, first division.

DM: Now, when you came aboard the ship, you racked out, woke up. What time did you get up the next morning?

TD: It was very close to seven o'clock and one of the guys come running downstairs that we were being attacked by the Japanese. And at that particular time, the destroyers had portholes.

DM: Right.

TD: And I had a porthole right by my bunk. And he was saying we were being attacked by Japanese. And I looked out my porthole, I thought he was crazy, but anyway I looked out the porthole and I saw black smoke coming up out of the *Arizona*. And then I saw all these planes coming in, you know, with the nice, big...

DM: Meatballs?

TD: ...Rising Sun on 'em. So right away, fast, why, I jumped out of the bunk and put my pants on and ran up the top side to my battle station.

DM: Now, Tom, you said this was seven o'clock. You mean closer to eight o'clock, right?

TD: Yeah.

DM: And when the raid started...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...you got this hangover and could the doctor heal thyself?

TD: Yeah (chuckles) that's about it.

DM: So what was your battle station?

TD: It was right in the, right below third, gun three. And right in front of gun four. I had a gun on top and a gun right here.

DM: Right. And what was your job?

TD: Well, I had all the stuff there in case anybody got hurt or wounded or anything of this nature. But at that particular time, we forgot all about the battle. You know, we got started loading the ammunition. I was helping with the ammunition.

DM: So you were handling ammunition, passing it up. Now, those five-inch ammunition that was coming up?

TD: Yes.

DM: So they're fairly hefty shells?

TD: Oh yes. Yeah. Well, like I told you before, I was in pretty good shape at that, in that age. (Chuckles) And, no, we were passing it, "Praise the lord and pass the ammunition," that's what we were doing.

DM: Yeah. Now, you were in a—were you guys outboard on the end, or were you in the middle of other ships?

TD: We were right next, tied alongside the *Dobbin*.

DM: Oh, you're right next to her? So...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...you guys had a little...

TD: You know, some of those show that the *Hull* was out, but it wasn't. It was right next to it.

DM: Okay.

TD: Because I walked from the *Hull* onto the *Dobbin*. And we would go aboard there to get supplies, you know, before we pulled out. And on December 7, I was picking up sides of beef that weighed up to 200 pounds and throwing 'em up on my shoulder and going aboard that ship. Carried it down there. There was no thought of how much it weighed or anything else.

DM: Now, why were you carrying sides of beef? Was this after the raid?

TD: Yeah.

DM: Just to get some...

TD: We were getting ready to go out to see.

DM: Oh, okay. So you were loading ship's stores, getting ready.

TD: Yeah. Yeah.

DM: Now, during the raid, that must have been limited firing range since you were next to another ship, right, so...

TD: Yeah, we fired a few shots through the mast of the *Dobbin*. (Laughs)

DM: Now, the Japanese, for the most part, didn't attack you guys.

TD: No. Well, if you consider how many guns are alongside of a supply ship like that. Like if you got five cans sitting there and each one has four to five guns...

DM: Right.

TD: ...five-inch thirty-eights and how much power is going up in that sky. They're not about to come and get you. But they were after the big ships anyway. They weren't after the little ones.

DM: Did you get, at any time, outside of the porthole, did you get a view of what was going on?

TD: Oh yeah. I was right up there.

DM: Oh, you were in the open air.

TD: Up on the deck, you know, closed all the hatches. Everything down below was closed up. We were all up top side there. We were...

DM: Did the Japanese ever come by and strafe you or did shrapnel hit around your...

TD: They jumped one off of the fantail and one on the cans, but despite what that one picture showed, that the destroyer was hit, it wasn't hit.

DM: Okay.

TD: It was just off of the fantail.

DM: It was a near miss, huh?

TD: Yeah. But we were credited with a couple planes. I know there was one coming in on over on the *Utah* side there, over this cruiser.

DM: By the *Raleigh*?

TD: Yeah. Right over the *Raleigh*. We hit it right smack dab on the nose and just, pppt, blew it apart. And we had a guy, he's here today, Carl Kaupp.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: He's a gunner's mate, second class. And he was on the fifty caliber guns. And the skipper hollered, "Cease fire. Cease fire," you know, when it lulled down a little bit. And old Kauppy [*Carl Kaupp*], he says, "Cease fire, hell, they're still coming!" He's pumping away with that fifty caliber. He was up there in his shorts!

DM: Is that right?

TD: Our ship was the one that had the deck watch that was firing the forty-five at that ship, at the plane.

DM: Uh-huh. As it flew over?

TD: Yeah. And the little boatswain mate, Doc Tolan was his name.

DM: We're going to stop right here and change...

END OF TAPE #27

TAPE #28

DM: Now, I understand that the *Dobbin* fired quite a few rounds up that morning. And you ran low on ammunition, did you try to get ammunition from any other ship?

TD: We tried to get ammunition from the *Dobbin* and from—the story that goes around is that when we got aboard ship, they were trying to get the ammunition, why the supply officer wouldn't give us any until we got a chit from our commanding officer requesting ammunition!

DM: For those that aren't navy types, what's a chit?

TD: Well, it's a request, you know...

DM: In paper?

TD: ...to get certain supplies, yeah.

DM: And it's signed off by someone?

TD: Yeah. Signed off by an officer.

DM: And that's what he wanted in the middle of this battle, right?

TD: Yeah. But it's a story. I won't say whether it's true or not, but.

DM: Now, during this whole time, Tom, were you scared at all or...

TD: Didn't have time to be scared. It didn't even come into your head of being scared.

DM: Is that right?

TD: I mean you did what you had to do.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: That was it.

DM: Now, there was a lull in the raid between the first wave and the second wave. And when the second wave of attack came on, what happened to you guys next? Were you starting now lighting off boilers, trying to get under way, or what was happening?

TD: No, we were still there because, you know, we had all our fires and everything else and the boilers were out. We were just at rest there, you know. It takes a considerable length of time to really get a ship up to where they have enough power to get under way and shove off.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: So, no, it was just sitting there waiting to get out.

DM: And as the raid progressed, you guys continued your anti-aircraft fire and...

TD: Oh yes. As long as they were coming in, we were shooting at 'em.

DM: When it ended at ten o'clock, you guys, did you have a chance to then take stock of what had happened and look around?

TD: No, not really. We just were getting under way and that was it. Just like any day's work, you know. You get under way, you go out of the harbor and we

went out and this is one thing I've never heard anybody tell about it, but we had a, our skipper was on the beach.

DM: Right.

TD: Our regular skipper was on the beach. And we had a lieutenant commander off of a different ship that was onboard ours. And when we got out of the harbor and we were going to escort the *Lexington*, you know, to find the fleet there, we saw these planes coming on and off of a ship. And we didn't know whether it was our or whether it was somebody else's ship. So this guy that was a lieutenant commander made this speech, you know, to give the recognition signal otherwise we'd blow 'em out of the water. Well it's a damned good thing they gave us the recognition signal, because there was a cruiser sitting behind us waiting to blow us out of the water, because they didn't know who we were. It was kind of messed up after, you know, when we got out there, trying to get together and, you know, organize.

DM: Form up and...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...be a battle group.

TD: Yeah.

DM: Now what time did you guys get under way?

TD: Well, it was still daylight. It was in the afternoon sometime.

DM: Later that afternoon.

TD: I'm not exactly sure, yeah.

DM: Now, did you guys go out your traditional way at slow knots or...

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: ...quick?

TD: Oh yeah, we went out.

DM: Now, did you witness the incident with the *Monaghan*?

TD: Oh yeah. The *Monaghan* was right in front of us.

DM: Tell me about that.

TD: Well, we went out inside of the *Utah*, where the *Utah* was anchored. And they were in front of our ship, not too far. I can't give you the exact distance, but when they got over the submarine, they started dropping depth charges. And even our own ship was going...

DM: Rocking?

TD: ...up and down and the waves were really rocking us, you know. So they apparently got the submarine, so they went on out and then we went on out right after them.

DM: They went out pretty quick.

TD: Yeah, well, so did we.

DM: Yeah.

TD: We got out of there as soon as we could.

DM: When you guys formed up out there and finally got everything organized, did you now head for the Japanese to try to find the Japanese fleet? Was that the whole idea?

TD: I haven't the slightest idea what they were doing out there. They didn't...

DM: How long were you at sea?

TD: Well I think the first time we were out to sea about three months. 'Cause we were escorting the *Lexington* down in the South Pacific, you know, when O'Hara made his big showdown there, shooting down all the...

DM: Yeah, Butch O'Hara?

TD: Yeah.

DM: Yeah.

TD: We were there watching him. Yeah. It was down to Bougainville.

DM: Oh, you got to see that whole...

TD: Oh yeah, yeah. We were standing out on the deck watching him up there knocking 'em down.

DM: Quite an aviator.

TD: Oh yes, yeah. He was from my neck of the woods, St. Louis I believe he was from.

DM: Now, was anybody injured on the *Hull*, wounded, or had an accident you had to treat?

TD: Well, it was later on we did. We had one...

DM: But I mean on December 7?

TD: No. No. No.

DM: When did you finally get to treat a real injury out there?

TD: Well, we had a coxswain by the name of Sullivan that was also took care of the laundry. You know, and he was a great man. He, matter of fact, he was a professional fighter out in Hawaii.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: And he used to ride a motorcycle. And he and I were great friends. But anyway, I was back in my battle station there. I think it was in Guadalcanal. And he come in there and he says, well, he says, “Decker, you finally got me.”

He had a bullet that went through the back of his leg, you know, through the muscle in back of his leg. I says, “Yeah, I finally got you.”

So I took a swab and I think I put Mercurochrome or iodine or methyrate or something. But I just ran it right through the hole. Took him right down.
(Laughs)

But anyway, later on, we had to operate on his leg because the casing of the shell was still in there.

DM: Okay.

TD: So we gave him a bunch of girlie magazines to read while we took it out. And then we had another man who was the...

DM: Did you put a local anesthetic or how did you...

TD: Yeah, yeah. We had another one that was had his arm severed here by shrapnel, right by the elbow. And we had to amputate his arm. And of course we had to have somebody come in and hold him down. We had some of the bigger guys come in and hold him down while we did the amputation. I gave him the anesthetic and generally they'd only last about five minutes in there and out the door they'd go and somebody else would come in.

DM: How did that wound, how did that person get that wound?

TD: Well apparently a piece of shrapnel fired by one of the times we were attacked at Guadalcanal.

DM: Oh, okay. So that happened at Guadalcanal in '42.

TD: Yeah. Because we every time we went into Guadalcanal, which we were escorting the spy ships from Espirito Santo to Guadalcanal...

DM: Right.

TD: ...back and forth, you know. And every time we'd go in there, why the Japanese would come over and drop bombs on us, try to get us.

DM: Now, you fought in the Pacific for, what, three years?

TD: About three years, yeah?

DM: And then you were transferred from that ship?

TD: Yeah. I got transferred to the naval hospital at Pearl. I was over there, I think it was about two or three months. And I made first class over there. And then they transferred me back to Great Lakes.

DM: Mm-hm.

TD: And I stayed at Great Lakes, got married at Great Lakes. I got married on the eighth of January and got shipped out the twenty-eight.

DM: And where were you headed now?

TD: They sent me to Lido Beach in New York. Starting out, I had sixty pharmacist's mate that I was training.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: And my wife went with me because I was going to be there a short period of time. But they put us on LST's. I took sixty Pharmacist's Mates on LST over to England. And if you've ever ridden on an LST, that is the worst damn ship you can ride on. It's got a flat-bottom, you know.

DM: Slammed around, didn't you?

TD: Yeah. So anyway, when we got over there, they split the guys up into thirty on one LST and thirty on another LST. So I had thirty Pharmacist's Mates on this one particular LST.

DM: And where were you heading?

TD: The invasion of Normandy.

DM: So were you involved in the...

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: ...landing and did you go ashore or were you...

TD: No, no. We just dropped the front end there. We brought—well, we first we started picking up wounded out in the open, where they had to bring 'em up in an open boat.

DM: Where did you land at, Utah Beach or Omaha?

TD: Omaha.

DM: You went into Omaha after...

TD: Yeah.

DM: ...after the troops had secured the beach?

TD: Yeah. Yeah.

DM: And then they brought an LST right up on the shoreline?

TD: Yeah.

DM: To drop you guys off?

TD: Well we took army guys on in England and then transported them in there. And then we took the wounded and mostly almost all of them were German.

And also we had a bunch of prisoners of war. There was, I would say, close to 150 of them that we had herded on the LST.

DM: Now the pharmacist's mates went ashore and did you guys stay ashore?

TD: No, we stayed on the ship...

DM: And set up...

TD: ...they brought 'em on to us.

DM: I gotcha.

TD: Yeah.

DM: But we've read so much about Omaha Beach, how bad was that place?

TD: Well, I didn't get to see too much of it because I was just, you know, just too damn busy. But it must've been hell there because the wounded they brought aboard, being German prisoners, I could care less about a German prisoner at that particular time. So...

DM: Did you treat some American wounded there at all?

TD: I think we had a few American, but not very many. We had mostly prisoners of war.

DM: Okay.

TD: And then we had a German colonel that was there that had his arm wounded. And we had about 150, I would say, prisoners. And there was one Japanese in there too.

DM: Japanese?

TD: Yes. In that bunch that we took.

DM: What was he doing there?

TD: I have no idea. I didn't speak Japanese so I didn't ask him. (Laughs)

DM: But that seems odd. I've never heard that before.

TD: Yeah. I know you didn't, but he was there.

DM: Was he in uniform or...

TD: No. He was kind of bedraggled, you know.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: You couldn't tell whether it was a uniform or what it was.

DM: Interesting.

TD: Yeah.

DM: So you go all the way from the Pacific and you end up seeing...

TD: Yeah, I hit both sides. I thought they were trying to get rid of me.

DM: Did you stay in Europe 'til the end of V-E Day?

TD: No, we stayed, I think, what was it? We made two or three trips over there and then they took and gave me orders to take these thirty Pharmacist's Mates up to Scotland.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: So we went up there for a week at R and R. And then from there we came back and got aboard the, I think it was the *Albemarle*, which was a seaplane tender.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: And came back to the States.

DM: And then where?

TD: Well, let's see. I went to, we put in at Boston. I had thirty days' leave. I went home for thirty days.

DM: Uh-huh.

TD: And then from there, they sent me down to Norfolk, Virginia, Camp Bradford to learn, to find out what I was supposed to be doing on an LST.

DM: (Chuckles)

TD: And this particular time, I was a Chief, you know.

DM: Right.

TD: So I reported in and I told the chief, I says, "I just came off of an LST with thirty Pharmacist's Mates." And I says, "You're going to tell me what I was supposed to do?" I says, "I know what I was supposed to do."

DM: Right.

TD: He says, "Well, you just report in, in the morning and then go ahead and go back on the beach," because my wife was down there.

DM: Right.

TD: And next day, why, just report in every morning, you know, and then take off. But from there I went out to Camp Bradford, which is an amphibious base. And they were going to send me to Bahia, Brazil.

DM: Brazil?

TD: Yeah. And I says, "No way am I going to leave the United States," because my wife was pregnant and she was going to have a...

DM: That was your first child?

TD: Yes. But my only child. Anyway, I told the ensign down there, he's a, you know, Mustang. He'd been through the ranks. And I said, "I'm not going no place until after the kid is born."

So I stayed at Camp Bradford as ship's company. I was master-at-arms at a clinic over there. And a funny—well, I don't know whether you want to hear it or not, but the funny incidents, there were, when you come in there, they send you to barber shop right away. So I sit in this barber's chair and this barber says, "I don't like Pharmacist's Mates."

So he gave me a butch haircut. And I knew I was going to be ship's company the next day, so when he got finished, I says, "I got news for you. I'm going to be ship's company tomorrow." I said, "Be prepared, buddy, because you're going to get your shots all over again."

So the next day, I got his health record, all his shots came out. I said, "Go over and get this guy and bring him over."

He got all his shots! (Laughs)

DM: I bet he was a little sore.

TD: He says, "I'll never say that to a pharmacist's mate again!" he says. And I saved that guy's neck later on because he got his orders to be shipped out and he was scared to death. He didn't want to leave his wife. So I got him off. I...

DM: Fixed it.

TD: Pulled some strings, you know, and put him in the hospital and fixed him up.

DM: Did the war end when you were still stateside?

TD: No. They sent me down to Charleston, South Carolina. They changed my orders and sent me to Charleston, South Carolina and put me onboard a converted DD, the *Endicott*. It was converted to a DMS, destroyer

minesweeper. And that had just come back from Germany, from over in Europe.

DM: Yeah.

TD: And we went down after she was refitted and everything and fixed up. We went down through the canal and as we were between Panama and San Diego, the war in Germany was over.

DM: Right.

TD: Ended. So we celebrated a little bit there. But they were holding my rate at that particular time. They wouldn't release me. I had more points than the skipper of the ship had! You know. So we heading to San Diego and I got beat up by a bouncer down in San Diego while I was on liberty. (Chuckles) And at captain's inspection the next day and he says, "Oh, you've been on the beach!"

I says, "Yes sir, I sure have!"

But anyway, from there we went on to Hawaii and they held my rate even then. And then after we left Honolulu, or Pearl Harbor, the way out to the South Pacific, they released my rate.

DM: And what did that do?

TD: So it dropped me off on out there in Eniwetok, in Perry Island, where there's one palm tree up there.

DM: Right. Right.

TD: And I sit there for thirty days waiting for transportation back to the States.

DM: Basically you were heading out to sea to probably be part of the invasion of Japan?

TD: That's right. That's right. Yeah.

DM: And the war ended and you were...

TD: Yeah. They were going to sweep mines up off the Philippines. Yeah.

DM: So after such a long and distinguished career, when did you retire from the navy?

TD: I got out October 31, 1945.

DM: And what did you do after the war?

TD: After the war, I went home.

DM: And what did you do with your life from that point on?

TD: Well, I worked for civil service at Great Lakes for thirty-one years.

DM: Oh, that's when you started that?

TD: Yeah, as a matter of fact, my boss at Great Lakes was Captain Norman, who was a boatswain mate second class onboard the *Nevada*, December 7, 1941.

DM: I think I know him.

TD: Did you ever meet him?

DM: Yeah, I think so.

TD: He's quite a man.

DM: He's quite a guy.

TD: Yes.

DM: [Ensign Joseph] Taussig.

TD: Oh yeah, he's the one that saved Joe.

DM: Right, yeah.

TD: Yeah.

DM: And I met Captain Norman out in Hawaii. I was very impressed. The Pearl Harbor Survivors—I'm just bringing this to a close—the Pearl Harbor Survivors has been a very special part of your life.

TD: Yes, since 1966.

DM: You've held many offices and everything.

TD: All of them practically, except secretary and treasurer.

DM: What does the Pearl Harbor Survivors mean to you, after all these years?

TD: Well, we try in our own little way to keep the memory of December 7, 1941 alive. And we've gone out to colleges and high schools, you know, and things like that, and told them of our experience on December 7. And we try...

DM: What's the purpose of that?

TD: We try, we have to keep it alive so people remember it, so that they're prepared when they should be prepared. Of course, our motto is, "Remember Pearl Harbor. Keep America alert."

DM: Right.

TD: And we had tendencies, you know, to cut the navy, to cut the army, cut the Air Force the way they do.

DM: Right.

TD: They're going to be back right where they were before 1941.

DM: So preparedness is a central theme?

TD: That's right. That's right. And remember the guys that were lost out there on December 7.

DM: I've asked some of the survivors that I've interviewed today if events that unfolded fifty-seven years ago are vivid, that you can remember parts of it. Is that true with you?

TD: Well, you just heard it. I recall quite a bit of it. I hadn't talked about it in a long time.

DM: So it is, I've come to the conclusion that for you guys, this was the defining moment in your life?

TD: Yes, it was, I would say, the most outstanding moment in our lives, unless you take Guadalcanal afterwards. That was quite a battle too.

DM: Sure.

TD: And Midway, Coral Sea, all of those were...

DM: But it was your baptism of fire?

TD: Oh yeah. Yeah, that was the beginning. That's when I think I became a man. (Chuckles)

DM: Is that right?

TD: Yeah.

DM: The Pearl Harbor Survivors Organization is a limited club with a dwindling membership because of age and attrition. What do you hope will be the legacy of the Pearl Harbor Survivors?

TD: The legacy? Well, we just hope that we try to impress on people to remember that particular day, December 7, and I know the President of the United States signed a proclamation that's...

DM: A national day of remembrance.

TD: Yeah, but there are a lot of people that, on calendars, don't bother to put it on there. Like the *Readers' Digest*, they didn't have it in the calendar that they put out.

DM: So you as an organization go and—there's so many calendars produced these days, are you...

TD: We write to 'em. We tell 'em.

DM: Right.

TD: We say, hey.

DM: Are they responding?

TD: They said they wouldn't put it in, believe it or not, the *Readers' Digest*. I had at my high school, they put out a, you know...

DM: Calendar?

TD: ...calendar. And you know, you send so much money and each day they pick out a name and give you twenty-five dollars or whatever it is. And when they sent me the calendar and December 7 wasn't marked Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, I wrote to the guy that was in charge of it and I told him, from now on, if he doesn't have it in his calendar, don't bother sending it because he won't get a donation from me. And it's the same way with "*Readers' Digest*". I informed those people, if they wouldn't put it in their calendar, forget, cancel my subscription.

DM: Well, it seems like you still have some uphill battles, but...

TD: Oh yes, yes.

DM: But it seems that that's part of what your organization is about.

TD: A lot of people could care less.

DM: Yeah.

TD: They could care less. I know when we went out, the fifty-fifth reunion, this friend of mine from Wisconsin who was state chairman, John Weinberger. He's going to be interviewed tomorrow night. He and I and the wives went onboard the *Arizona*, oh, we went down to the *Arizona* Memorial shore side facilities. And sat through the movie and then when we left, they showed us all the respect in the world. Nobody would leave the auditorium until John and I and our wives got out first. And we went aboard your little shuttle.

DM: Right, our boat out to the memorial.

TD: And the little gal that was the helmsman on there gave me a salute as I came aboard.

DM: How'd that make you feel?

TD: Oh, it made me feel wonderful. It really did. And then when we got onboard out to the memorial, John and I started talking out there, you know, about the names and things like this and about the hull underneath. You should see the crowd that gathered around us and were listening to us. And when we get finished talking about it, this one young man, he must have been about twenty-one years old, something like that, he came up to me and he had tears in his eyes. He says, "You know," he says, "this is the first time that I ever realized exactly what Pearl Harbor meant." He says, "Listening to you guys talk about it." And he thanked me for it.

It was, that really meant something to me.

DM: Well, I'd like to thank you for this interview and for sharing with us your memories of Pearl Harbor, your career in the navy, which I know you're very proud of.

TD: Oh yeah.

DM: And your experience of the greatest struggle man has gone through and it was called World War II. Thank you very much.

TD: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW