

#180 TOM BATES: USS RAMSAY

**Chris Conybeare (CC):** Okay, this is an oral history interview with Mr. Tom Bates. It's December 4, 1986. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu. It's approximately 3:25 p.m. Mr. Bates lives in Santa Rosa, California. My name is Chris Conybeare and I'm being assisted in this interview by Mark Tanaka-Sanders.

Mr. Bates, the question we have for everybody at the very top of this is could you state your name and rank as of December 7, 1941?

**Tom Bates (TB):** Well, my name is Tom Bates, and my rank is, at that time, Boilertender [*Boilermaker*] Second Class. Now, they have changed that rank now. It's a boiler technician, or something of that order. I don't know exactly.

CC: But in those days, it was . . .

TB: Boiler tender, in charge of the boilers.

CC: And on what ship?

TB: This is the USS RAMSAY.

CC: And what kind of ship was that?

TB: One of the 1918 model flush deck destroyers, four stack.

CC: And you and the RAMSAY were commissioned about the same time?

TB: Right, same year.

CC: How did you come to Hawaii? How did you get into the Navy, and how did you get over here?

TB: Well, I joined the Navy in January of '39. I went to training in Norfolk. While I was there, it was known as Norfolk. I wound up going through machinist school in Norfolk and just about the time I completed machinist school, they decided they were going to recommission quite a few of the old destroyers. And I came out and put the RAMSAY back in commission. I consider myself a plank owner.

CC: And the RAMSAY then was assigned to Honolulu, or how did you get . . .

TB: No, no. Actually we were assigned to a new challenge, to patrol up in the Puget Sound for a terrific duty at Port Angeles, Washington, and I think the Navy lost us, but they found us and sent us out to Pearl in the latter part of 1940.

CC: What kinds of things had the RAMSAY been engaged in, prior to December 7? What kinds of activities?

TB: Prior to December 7, she had actually been converted to a minelayer, a light high-speed minelayer. And we had had some mine laying practice and we had been on patrol just a few days before that, I think, in the Lahaina area. And we just came back in the last few days.

CC: What were you doing the morning of December 7? Can you describe how that morning started for you?

TB: Well, I didn't feel like breakfast, strangely. I don't know why. It might have been the late liberty I had the night before, and I just happened to be leaning on a handrail around five minutes to eight, or ten minutes to eight - - whatever it was at the time -- when I saw these planes. I heard these planes diving, had to dive, and I thought they were just practicing bombing or something, but I saw some explosions on Ford Island. And I thought it was kind of strange that they were doing it anyway, and on a Monday, Sunday morning. And a little puzzled on that, but just a -- I don't know -- I lost track of the time exactly. I just happened to see a column of water next to the cruiser *RALEIGH*.

Well, I could see the ship had been hit, so . . . . And, and amongst that time, some time or other, I did see a Japanese torpedo plane pass our stern, just barely off the water. She had already reached this torpedo when I saw him.

Well, I didn't wait any longer, I just started down into the fire rooms, 'cause I knew we were going to have to get under way. And I started (sobbing) . . . see, I can't . . .

CC: It's okay. Take your time.

TB: I just can't . . .

CC: Take your time.

TB: Well, I helped them to reach steam. And then, we did get under way and we'd go out the passageway, I think there was one Japanese plane strafed us, but we didn't have any casualties at all. And then we patrolled for submarines for the next three or four days.

CC: How did it feel, going down in, under, out of the way and below the water line, when all of this was going on?

TB: Well, I don't know. Actually, I always felt kind of safe down in the fire rooms in a small ship like that. I mean, we had pretty good, high-speed and shallow draft, so I really never worried too much about torpedoes. I mean, I know some of 'em hit with torpedoes later on. No, I felt safe in the fire room, actually. I guess (long pause) . . .

CC: Do you remember when you first put it together and it connected that you were at war?

TB: Well, I knew we were at war for the next three or four days. I guess the saddest thing I ever saw, when we came back in four days later. (Sobbing)

CC: What was it like when you came back?

TB: Well, we just couldn't realize how much the other things torn up, I mean, you know, devastated. I mean, just everything you can think of floating in the water and oil all over, and to see the ships that were sunk and half sunk, and so forth. 'Cause actually, we didn't know -- we knew everything was bad just outside of Pearl, of course -- but we didn't know exactly what was bad, but we knew it was bad. Like I said, I was -- it hit you.

CC: How long did it take you to get under way from the time you first went down to the fire room?

TB: I think, I -- well, we were ready, I think, in something like about twenty minutes, twenty-five minutes. However, we didn't get orders or something. It took us about forty-five minutes before we actually got started out, but we were ready before that.

CC: So you steamed out while the attack was still going on?

TB: Yes, yes.

CC: And before that, did you see any of the other ships get their guns into play, or anything?

TB: Uh . . .

CC: Were you under, were you . . .

TB: No, because I had left the deck very fast. You know, just a matter of a minute or so, and I went down to the fire room and starting raising steam.

CC: What kind of a crew would you have down in the fire room? How many men were down there?

TB: We would have -- let's see, one, two, three, four men in each fire room at that time.

CC: Do you remember what you guys were talking about at that time?

TB: Well, we just couldn't figure what was -- we knew it, we could hear the explosions, feel the explosions, but we . . . . I don't know. I mean, it [came] too fast to really have you scared, I guess, at the time. Later on, you realize[d] you were scared, and you didn't know about it, I guess.

CC: What kind of duty, what was your assignment when you did finally get under way? What were you doing out there?

TB: We just stayed just off shore running mostly between the channel and up towards Waikiki and back, submarine patrol, and the submarine sounding. And actually, they constantly kept contacts out there for the next three or four days and we more or less said, "Aw, it's just jitters," and all. You know, they thought they had contacts and all, but reading Japanese records after the war, they had up to about thirty submarines in the area. So, I mean, actually we may have gotten a few, quite a few contacts and didn't -- I don't know if we'd sunk it if we did drop some depth charges. But I couldn't say if we sunk it, you know.

CC: But I imagine it gave you quite a[n] interesting reaction whenever you go to general quarters.

TB: Oh yeah.

CC: That was something could be happening.

You said you had a late, late liberty. What kind of, what kind of liberty . . . .

(TB laughing)

CC: What kind of liberty would you . . .

TB: Well, routine sailor liberty. I mean, go in and have a few drinks and so forth. And I got back, actually I got back about thirty minutes or something over leave, which would bring a reprimand on a normal time, but it never was brought up, strangely enough. (Laughs)

CC: Somehow it seemed a little unimportant the next day.

TB: I guess so, yes.

CC: When you say "normal kind of liberty" -- we're just trying to get an idea of what did you -- did you like to go out to clubs where there was live music and dancing, or what kinds of places would you . . .

TB: Well, clubs and little dancing and so forth, you know. And of course, I mean, we always had a few drinks and something good to eat. A nice steak once in a while, 'cause I can remember, we used to buy a steak. I think it was something like sixty cents at the time, for a nice steak. Of course, that's all relative. I mean, well, salary was too, I guess.

CC: What kind of salary were you making?

TB: I was making seventy-two dollars a month and saving money. (Chuckles)

CC: Oh, that's pretty good pay in those days.

TB: Yeah.

CC: What about] girls? Was there any chance for a single sailor to meet some girls?

TB: Oh, you had to be a pretty sharp cookie to make out with girls in Honolulu at that time because of the, between the, what the heck, I guess they had forty or fifty thousand soldiers alone on this. . . area, you know. And then the extra sailors that was piling in constantly, with more ships coming in all the time. You had to be pretty sharp. I never was too successful, a little bashful.

CC: Pretty big ratio of men to women.

TB: Hoo boy. (Chuckles)

CC: When, on that duty at sea for the next four days, were you pretty much at general quarters all the time, or . . .

TB: No, no. Just when we'd have submarine contacts, which would, might be once or twice, three times a day, you know, but they would just be briefly, half hour or so, or something. Maybe an hour.

CC: When you did steam back in, is that the first time the extent of the, of that really hit?

TB: The real seriousness of it, yes. I mean, like I said, it really shocked you.

CC: Hard to believe that it was real?

TB: Oh man, I'll say.

CC: Yeah. How about later on in the war? What kinds of -- did you stay on the RAMSEY, or . . .

TB: No, I stayed on the RAMSAY until spring of '43. We left Pearl in, I think, in February, or January of '42. And we went south and laid mines in Samoa, Fiji Islands, Tonga, I think, around Noumea. And I don't know when we came back into Pearl, but I think it was right about September we came back in and loaded up, load a mine and took a, headed directly for the Aleutian Islands. And if I never see the place again, I'm happy. (Laughs)

CC: Why is that?

TB: It was the most miserable weather you ever run across in your life. I mean, it was terrible and for a small ship like that, I mean it was, it was -- I couldn't -- I don't know why anybody would fight for the place. (Laughs) But I guess what really made it miserable was after being in a tropical area for a year and a half or two years, in those fire rooms, where the temperatures run, at that time, a hundred, hundred and ten degrees, and when we headed up into the Aleutians, they said, "Well, we're short one gun crew on deck," and they made up a gun crew of engineers and I was one of 'em, and I had to wind up on deck, where the temperature in the fire rooms dropped to about seventy degrees. (Chuckles)

CC: And the temperature on deck was?

TB: The temperature, well, two or three times our gun fold was up, it was useless anyway. I mean, we weren't able to use it.

CC: When you look back at that event, forty-five years ago, how do you look at it today? Have you changed how you feel about it, or . . .

TB: In, in which way, I mean . . .

CC: No, just when you think about it today. How does it -- does it make you feel any particular way, or . . .

TB: No, I don't think so. No.

CC: Why do you come to the reunions? What, what's the . . .

TB: Tell sea stories with all these other sailors and everything, and swap sea stories and see somebody you've never saw in quite a while, and it's pleasure.

CC: How long did you stay in the Navy?

TB: Just a little under eight years.

CC: Did . . . (phone rings). Oh, let's wait for that.

There's some, there's some discussion under way that at the fiftieth reunion, they might invite some veterans of the Japanese military to the reunion. How would you react to that?

TB: I have no animosity to the Japanese. No. No. I guess they were doing for their country what I do for mine.

CC: So it actually, could it be interesting for you to talk to somebody that saw it from the other side?

TB: Possibly, yeah.

CC: You're a fairly open man.

TB: I guess so. Yeah.

CC: Why do you think -- what might be interesting? What would you want to find out if you had a chance to talk to somebody that had been on the other side of things?

TB: I would have to think it over. I don't know really. I mean, I know that they have, I think, in the forty-fifth reunion, I believe, that there was -- not at the forty-fifth -- this is the forty-fifth.

CC: Right.

TB: I think after the fortieth, I thought there was a discussion that there was a, one of the pilots or something wanted to come out and talk, but they didn't want him. Well, I guess not, but -- I mean, like I said, I don't have any animosity to them now. I mean, it's all over.

CC: Okay. Thank you. Do you have anything you'd like to . . . ? Okay, it's good. It's great.

END OF INTERVIEW