

#200 TOM CHILD: USS CASSIN

--: Don't mean to be impolite

--: No, no I understand.

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller. And we're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 4, 1991 at two PM. And I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Tom Child. Mr. Child was an Ensign and torpedo officer aboard the destroyer, USS CASSIN, which was at Pearl Harbor, of course, on December 7, 1941. Mr. Child was twenty-two years of age and I really do want to thank you very much for taking the time to come up here and talking with us today. It's been very interesting hearing your story and I'm anxious to get into it, Mr. Child.

Tom Child (TC): Proceed.

SH: Proceed. Yes sir. How did you get into the Navy?

TC: Well, I got a telegram in the summer of 1940, telling me that the two years of college I had at that time qualified for an attempt to become an officer of the Navy. The telegram said that if I were successful, I'd be paid a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, which I thought was a mistake. Anyhow, I did join up on the thirteenth of August, 1940 and shortly later, took a cruise on the USS ARKANSAS BB-33, and went to Panama. And we got back through Panama when they passed the draft bill -- selective service they called it then.

I came back and went to midshipman's school in New York. It was on the old battleship *ILLINOIS* hulk. It was not much of a battleship. It was just a school ship. Graduated there as an ensign and found that the hundred and twenty-five dollars a month was for real.

SH: You meant that was good, or that was bad.

TC: Oh, that was actually good.

SH: Okay.

TC: That was excellent pay in those days. Probably more for us then than an ensign gets today, in real value of money. I never been on a destroyer, never even seen the inside of one, but I knew that's where I wanted to go and I asked for destroyer duty while I was in school, in New York. And got orders to go to the USS CASSIN, DD-372. I got to her in April of 1941.

SH: Where did you join up with her?

TC: At Pearl Harbor.

SH: How did you get from New York to Pearl?

TC: I came out here on the USS WHARTON, formerly the [SS] SOUTHERN CROSS. Still running kind of like a passenger ship. Nice, nice, nice ship.

SH: Did you go through the canal, or . . .

TC: No, no. I picked her up in San Francisco.

SH: I see.

TC: The first night we got in here, we walked out to the, or came up to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, twelve dollars a night. We decided not to stay. In those days, of course, there were only two good hotels on the beach here, the Moana and the Royal Hawaiian. The rest of this area was all wide open. Much different than today.

We operated out of -- you want me to continue on here?

SH: Oh yeah, please. Sounds like you're leading into what I wanted to ask about, was what did -- if you could just discuss a little about what your usual duties were when you got aboard the *CASSIN* and what the, sort of the peace time routine was like.

TC: Well, we operated out of Pearl Harbor all the time, until the war began, the *CASSIN* did. We, I remember, we steamed with the *LEXINGTON* quite a bit and it amazed me that she ran backwards, in reverse and landed planes over her bow. In other words, the damage control exercise was very interesting to me. The *SARATOGA* and the *LEXINGTON* were electric drive and therefore could put as much power, horsepower forward, or in reverse they could forward. Steam driven ships cannot do that. They only can reverse with maybe not more than maybe twenty-five percent of their power. But those two ships could put it, put very good speed going and starting.

SH: That's an interesting detail. I didn't realize that.

TC: Late in November, we thought the war had begun when . . .

SH: How so? How so?

TC: Well, we were operating in the Hawaiian area here, but it was an emergency situation. I think it was about the twenty-seventh of November. I have to check my diary to see that. But I knew we got out the ready ammunition and ran the ammunition hoist and got the five-inch stuff up on deck. And we were told to sink anything that we encountered. And this was over a pretty broad area.

SH: You were at sea at the time?

TC: At sea, yes. But then that all quieted down and the next day we didn't hear any more about it. Then we came in. And then after a few days in, back in the harbor, we reported to dry dock number one. It was called the grating dock. We were put in along with the *CASSIN*, along with the *DOWNES* and the *PENNSYLVANIA*.

SH: What was the work schedule to be done on the *CASSIN*?

TC: Well, as I recall, we were to get a radar platform. Radar was only on a very few ships. The only ship I recall being on in those days was the *WEST VIRGINIA*. Probably on others. Also, a lot of the hull plating on both the *DOWNES* and the *CASSIN* was removed, to put on heavier plating. I don't recall why, but the hull plating on the *CASSIN* and *DOWNES* was quite wrinkled. You could see the ribs of the ship through the, through the hull plating. And apparently, it was to make it, to put on a heavier, or at least replace a lot of the hull plating. Go ahead.

SH: You said you were torpedo officer.

TC: Yes, I became torpedo officer a few months after I was on the *CASSIN*. That was part of the gunnery division. The *CASSIN* had three torpedo mounts, four torpedoes each mount, twenty-one inch, twenty-one foot long. And on the islands, that's my work with torpedoes. You want to get on closer to the war now?

SH: Sure. So there it was, the morning before. Why don't you say --- what did you do the day before? Anything special . . .

TC: Well, the last time I remember being ashore was the second day of December, when I went to the Honolulu library and took out a library card. Poked around the library and enjoyed it, and I expected to go back for more. I liked the things in the library there in Honolulu. Never did get back. But I don't think I was off the ship any until the war began.

The day of, the early morning of December 7, starting at midnight, I had the -- I was the O.D. on the quarterdeck of the *CASSIN*. So I had the watch from midnight to four o'clock. After that, I turned in. And I slept, I was asleep. When I heard the general alarm on the *DOWNES*, next door . . .

SH: Where were your quarters?

TC: My quarters, my room, I was in a room on the main deck level of the *CASSIN*, forward of the ward room, approximately under the number two gun.

SH: Okay.

TC: Under the five-inch number, the five-inch thirty-eight number two gun, on the starboard side of the ship. So my porthole open, I heard the alarm screaming on the *DOWNES*. And just then my roommate came in, who was just coming off of watch.

SH: What was his name?

TC: His name was Wesley P. Craig, C-R-A-I-G. And he had just been relieved. The watch was ordinarily relieved about a quarter before the hour. So Craig was in, shuffling around the room and I heard the alarm go off. And I said, "What goes, Craig?"

And he said, "Some dunderhead on the *DOWNES* must have sounded the general alarm."

Now this was no surprise at all because the general alarm on all ships in the Navy, in those days, was used to call all the crew to quarters or to muster at eight o'clock in the morning, every day except Sunday. However, it was not at all unusual to hear an alarm sounding someplace across the harbor, because somebody would forget it was Sunday and turn on the general alarm. So it was not a surprise.

So I rolled over and thought nothing about it and within two or three minutes, Craig was back in and speaking in a pretty severe voice, said, "Wake up. Get up, Child. We're being bombed. The Japs are bombing us."

Well, I --- in those days, we wore a white jacket, no ties, no shirts. It was easy to get up in a hurry. And so I put on my helmet and my pistol, and I got out in a hurry and the skipper, I ran into the skipper on the main deck,

just outside the ward room. And he was in a hurry to get the magazines open so we could get some five-inch ammunition up, but soon realized that our guns were out of commission, due to some work in the yard.

So there was not really much for me to do, so I went up on top of the bridge, on the director platform.

SH: Excuse me, as a torpedo officer, wouldn't your normal battle station have been with the torpedoes. Obviously, you weren't going to be firing torpedoes out of dry dock. How did it go that you chose a different station?

TC: Well, my station would not be on the bridge, as a torpedo director. But our torpedoes were of no use in a dry dock.

SH: Obviously.

TC: No place to fire 'em, no one to shoot at.

SH: Right.

TC: So I was really unemployed for a little while. I went up on top the bridge, out on the level that the director, the fire control director is.

SH: You must have had a pretty good view up there. What did you see?

TC: Well, the thing I'll remember most, I think, is the high level bombers in a V-shaped formation, I believe five planes for each, going from left to right, as I observed them. In other words, more or less in line with where the battleships would be. And we could very clearly see the bombs falling. There, the sun reflected from the bombs as they fell, and we could see them as they came down, especially when they first left the airplanes.

Our forward machine guns commenced firing at a target and some of us on, with me, realized they were shooting at a B-17 that was trying to land at Hickam Field, which was maybe about seven hundred yards or less away. And we got them to stop that, of course.

I don't recall much else, really, except they continued high level bombers going by. I did not see any of the torpedo planes. That was all over with. Although, the first thing I did see when I came out on deck on the starboard side, outside the ward room, it was a plane, a Japanese plane, I can very clearly see, that crashed over near the hospital, the Pearl Harbor hospital, naval hospital someplace.

Then after a while, we got word, from the skipper, who was either on the bridge or where I was, anyhow I remember that he called up and said, "They're going to flood the dry dock. The dry dock is going to be flooded."

With the plating having been removed from a good deal of our ship forward, I knew that my room was going to flood. And having nothing better to do, I thought I would go down and look around and see what I might want to pick out of there. I was ward room mess treasurer at the time. I remember dialing the combination on my safe, opening up my safe and seeing the ward room mess money in a cigar box, and I thought, well, I'll just -- this money, there's no use to carry that around. All kinds of thoughts went through your mind. Do you understand? This is the first day of the war. We hadn't had to make this

decision before. I wondered should I get my clothing out, should I -- what should I rescue?

Well, I decided to pick up my diary. I kept a pretty good diary in those days. I took the diary out, tucked it under my belt, and went back up on the platform above the bridge. I hadn't been up there very long until it got very, very noisy where we were. We were being strafed and bombed. And I remember seeing a pretty good fire start back under the port side of our ship and I remember seeing men on their hands and knees and I was trying to scramble away from the flame. Now, I thought certainly we've lost some people here. But we were being machine gunned too. It was really noisy. But the fires were, were really raging now on the *CASSIN* and the *DOWNES*. And our skipper, Daniel Francis Joseph Shea, lieutenant commander at the time, said, "Abandon ship."

And that's what we all did in a hurry.

SH: How did abandon ship go on a ship that was in dry dock with a little bit of water coming in . . .

TC: There was no water, as I recall, in the dock, at that time, yet.

SH: Was there a ladder from the . . .

TC: No, we had a, we called it a brow. The Navy calls it a brow, B-R-O-W. It's what most people would call a gangplank. It was a platform that connected the port side of our ship. It ran approximately level and we went across that. It had rails on it. It was probably maybe three feet wide.

SH: And it went to the side of the dry dock?

TC: Right.

I remember going across that, there was a hole, about a twelve-inch hole in the brow. In other words, the bomb had gone through that. Now, most of those bombs were delayed action, and they don't go off the first thing they hit. Matter of fact, as far as I know, most of 'em, or maybe all of the bombs that hit the *CASSIN* and *DOWNES* went through and into the dock. I don't believe any of them exploded inside the ship. I have a bomb damage report of *CASSIN* and *DOWNES* that explains all of this pretty well.

SH: Well, then perhaps we can -- we have the opportunity to put that on film later.

TC: If you'd like to see some of it . . .

SH: I would.

TC: You would. There was no place to hurry to really, so we just trotted away from the ship. I remember there was no hurry to get any place because you may be running into more of a problem than you're running away from. I was with a radioman from the *CASSIN*. I don't recall his name. I wouldn't know him if he were walking in here today. We were at thirty or forty yards from the ship when there was an explosion behind us. And it was a hit on the side of the dry dock, between the ship and where we were. Matter of fact, I have a picture of that in this bomb damage report. It shows the yard workmen standing in the crevice. Anyhow, some of that debris, I remember, hitting me on the helmet. Shortly, as we were trying to consider what happened here, why, we came back around the dry

dock and by that time, there were people squirting water on the depth charges of the *DOWNES*, to keep those depth charges from maybe blowing up under the nose of the *PENNSYLVANIA*.

I didn't think that I had much to do there; there was nothing for me to do. So I went on back along the dock and onto the *PENNSYLVANIA*. I went onto the starboard side of the *PENNSYLVANIA*, crossed the quarter deck and inquired was there anything there I could do. They really didn't have anything for me to do, so I kept going on across the, off the other side of the *PENNSYLVANIA*, down ten-ten dock to the *HELENA*, light cruiser. I stepped onto the *HELENA* to see if there's anything I could do with them. I had just seen the *ST. LOUIS*, the *ST. LOUIS* steaming out, and I thought, "Boy, that's the place to be, is on a ship that's going out."

Well, the *HELENA*, the officer of the watch on the *HELENA* told me that the *HELENA* had just been torpedoed, had been torpedoed. She didn't appear to have been torpedoed, because she was square in the water. But anyhow, she wouldn't go any place, so I left.

Just then, somebody came along and wanted to know in a hurry where or how they could get to the fuel docks or to the fuel, the controls that allowed the fuel to be pumped into a ship. For some reason, I knew something about that. I don't know who this guy was or where he was going, but I anyhow took him, I took him. We flagged a car down and we went toward the submarine base and I got this guy to where he thought he wanted to go.

Then I went onto the submarine base. There were several torpedo bullets roaring their engines, alongside the submarine base here, and I stepped aboard one of them and asked, "Could I go along?"

The skipper of that ship was Lieutenant J. G. Harry Parker. And Parker looked at me and he said, "What can you do?"

And I said, "I'm the torpedo officer of the *CASSIN*."

He looked around and he said, "My torpedo man is not here. Come with us."

So I, not wanting to just be lost someplace when that torpedo boat didn't come back, I stepped back on the barge. It was kind of a living barge that was a utility craft for these people. And there was a fellow sitting at a desk there and I said, "Hey, mark this down, please." I told him, "I'm Tom Child from the *CASSIN* and I'm going on *PT-22*." If *PT-22* didn't come back, I wanted somebody to at least know where I'd gone.

We shoved off and went, started through the harbor. We were between Ford Island and the Navy yard. Crowded closer to the Navy yard, because of the dredging piping that was strung out across the harbor. And as we were abreast with the *SHAW*, her forward magazine, which had had a fire in it for some number of minutes, blew, detonated. And some of the *SHAW* came down on *PT-22* and went through the engine room of *PT-22*, I mean through the main deck and into the engine room. I remember going down there later that day and looking up and you could see sunlight through this wound that she had on her main deck. And this fact is reported in the log of *PT-22*. I got a copy of that just last year. And see where I was logged on the PT boat, and I'm also logged off the PT boat. I kind of wanted that on my record, just out of fantasy. It shows the log that I was there.

SH: What did the PT boat proceed to do?

TC: Oh, we picked up some officers that were in their civilian clothes, came along, and we took 'em up to, to a light cruiser. I think it was the *ST. LOUIS*, and off loaded them onto the *ST. LOUIS*. I remember, it must have been toward ten o'clock that a Japanese plane came down fairly low over the harbor and we took a shot at it. That was the last plane I saw. A little later, we got orders to go, the PT boat 22 got orders to go to West Loch ammunition depot, to pick up fifty caliber ammunition. We pulled along a pier at West Loch and while we were waiting for the people at West Loch to pull a carload of ammunition out from a bunker, along where we were, I got off the PT boat and looked around. I saw an old destroyer, old four stack destroyer, along the pier close by. So I thought, well, I better, I might as well be talking to those people than standing here by myself. So I walked over and saluted the officer of the watch on the quarter deck and asked permission to step aboard and the officer of the watch said, "Sure."

So we stood there, under the canvas awning rigged on the wharf. Destroyer number 136, maybe, 139. What is it Martin? [*USS WARD DD139*]

(Conversation off-mike.)

TC: One thirty-nine, pretty sure. Anyhow, the officer of the watch -- I think his name was Andrews -- told me this story that I could not believe. That this ship had, that morning, sunk a Japanese submarine. He said that their number one gun fired and missed the target. That would have been the first shot that we had fired in the Pacific war. Then number three gun shot, fired, and hit the conning tower of the submarine right square and they knew it was a kill. They did go on over and drop some depth charges. Apparently she dropped most of her depth charges because she took on, I think, seventy-five there, while she was at West Loch that day.

Well, that was most of the memory I have of that, my experience with the war. Later that afternoon, we returned to the pier at the submarine base.

SH: The *WARD* or the . . .

TC: No.

SH: . . . the PT boat?

TC: *PT-22*. No, I was just on the *WARD* for a short visit, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. But I probably had the first interview of, on that ship. I probably knew about that long time before most of the people at Pearl Harbor knew about the *WARD*. I really felt like I really walked into a lot of very interesting situations that day.

Well, anyhow, I get back to the submarine base, and there was a commander on the beach there. And he looked at me and he could tell that I was not a PT boater, because I was still wearing whites. And he said, "What ship are you from?"

And I said, "The *CASSIN*, sir."

He said, "The *CASSIN* is no more." He says, "You go into that submarine base," the closest building there, which I knew, of course, and he says, "you go into the first office on the left and turn that pistol in."

And I said, "Aye, aye, sir," and saluted him.

And I went up the sidewalk to the submarine base office. Right past that office that he told me to go in, up the stairway, back along hallway, to the other end of the building, down the stairway and up. And we returned to the wreck of the *CASSIN* in graving dock number one, with my pistol.

That night, most of us stayed at the submarine base. I think it was kind of a mattress on the floor situation. And I remember, well, after dark that night, a lot of airplanes were coming back and they were told, we were told they were friendly airplanes. And I'm sure that the word was pretty well passed around, that these are friendly airplanes coming back, but somebody fired a shot. And when one shot goes, everything goes. And I don't recall how many, but several of these airplanes were knocked down. Now they were from carriers off-beach, off the shore, that were returning airplanes to Ford Island.

SH: Right, the *ENTERPRISE*, I believe.

TC: I think it was *ENTERPRISE*. A tragedy. But of course, we did that all through the war. I mean, shooting down our own planes, it just happened a great deal.

SH: Let me ask you about the crew of the *CASSIN*, now that you've sort of been reunited, did the crew of the *CASSIN* stay together and was sent to man the rebuilt vessel? You had . . .

TC: No, no.

SH: . . . something to discuss about how the . . .

TC: The *CASSIN* . . .

SH: . . . *CASSIN* was salvaged.

TC: The *CASSIN* crew started to be sent away shortly as replacements. Many ships, in those days, were shorthanded. As far as I was concerned, I stayed with the *CASSIN* for, 'til the twelfth, I think it was the twelfth of December. During that time, the *CASSIN* crew, or what was left of the *CASSIN* crew, our duty was to put, to run the security patrols on the graving dock number one. Except for that duty, I was free to roam.

And the next day, Monday, I was really messed up. I was using the *RALEIGH*, and my uniform was a mess and I went in to a Marine quartermaster, small store, shop. And said, "Hey guys, I need some clean clothes."

And they said, "You sure do. Help yourself, take what you want."

So I fitted myself up with a Marine uniform, new shoes, everything I needed. Had --- I kept my World War I helmet and my pistol. And I didn't have any problem around the *CASSIN* crew because they knew me and we could run our watch duty there all right. But well, as I roamed around the Navy yard, I was incognito, and which was a great thing for me, because I could drift around where I couldn't go as a junior officer. And I really had a great time. Matter of fact, I got over to the *CALIFORNIA* and spent a couple of hours on the *CALIFORNIA* before she finally sank. I took my meals wherever I was. I remember going on the *SACRAMENTO* for a couple meals. The receiving station near the main

gate was a good place to get meals. One day, I went over to, on Ford Island, and looked around there a good deal. When I was returning on the ferryboat, no problem getting over to Ford Island, on a regular Navy yard ferry. But when I got on the ferry to return to the Navy yard, two Marines called my attention and said, "You can't take that pistol from Ford Island."

And I said, "Well, this pistol was issued to me."

And they said, "Are you an officer?"

And I said, "Yes."

They said, "Sir, you may be an officer, but you don't look like an officer to us, sir. You cannot take that pistol away from Ford Island."

I said, "I'm going to stay on Ford Island."

So I got off the ferry and I stayed on Ford Island until I found a ride in, a regular ship to board across the other side.

SH: Mr. Child, we only have a couple of minutes to go on this tape, so perhaps what I should do is just ask you, what, to ask you just to reflect on the hindsight of some fifty years, which has passed since those events and ask you what you think the most important lesson of that day would be for us?

TC: Well, that, we can't do that in five minutes. I -- it seems to me like things were wrong in Washington. I can't help but believe that when Roosevelt said the night before, after he had read thirteen parts of a fourteen-part message, that the war had been declared. All he was waiting for was the time. He's --- and George Marshall certainly knew about it. George Marshall shouldn't have disappeared the next day for five or six hours horseback riding and Roosevelt should have told Stark about it, but I think that Roosevelt was so hungry for us to get in a good war and have us all united, and this was undoubtedly the best way to do it. So that was the goal he got accomplished. I have never felt friendly to Roosevelt, since that time. Now you're going to cancel me out for saying that.

SH: No, we're not. We're not canceling out yet. About sixty seconds to wrap it up, if you'd like, but I appreciate you sharing with us those feelings. And I definitely appreciate the time that you spent. You've been a very interesting man to listen to and I want to thank you very much for being with us.

TC: It's my pleasure.

SH: Thank you, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW