

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#372

**DEMETRIUS JOHN VELLIS &
CORALIE ANASTASOPOULOS VELLIS
USS *WEST VIRGINIA*, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 1, 2001
BY JERRY GREENE & KAREN BYRNE**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Jerry Greene (JG): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jerry Greene for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Tapa Tower, Room 329 on December 1, 2001 at 10:15 a.m. The person being interviewed is Demetrius [*Jim*] Vellis.

Coralie Anastasopoulos Vellis (CV): Vellis.

JG: [*Captain*] Vellis. And his wife, Coralie, who was—[*Vellis*] was an ensign on the USS *Dale* [(*DD-353*)] on December 7, 1941. Jim, I have a few standard questions that I'd like to pose to you before we begin the interview. For the record, could you please state your full name, place of birth and birth date?

Demetrius Vellis (DV): [*Captain*] Demetrius John Vellis. I was born in San Francisco, June the eighth, 1916.

JG: Jim, what did you consider your hometown, San Francisco?

DV: San Francisco.

JG: In 1941. What were your parents' names?

DV: First names are John Vellis, my father, and Rose Vellis, my mother.

JG: How many brothers and/or sisters did you have?

DV: I had one brother and he died at the age of forty-nine.

JG: Where did you go to high school?

DV: Lowell High School in San Francisco.

JG: Where did you enlist?

DV: I didn't enlist. I went to [*the U.S.*] Naval Academy. Oh, before that, I enlisted in the Naval Reserve in San Francisco, and I was in Naval Reserve for about two years before I went to the Naval Academy.

JG: And when did you graduate from the Naval Academy?

DV: Nineteen forty.

JG: Nineteen forty. And where were you stationed immediately...

DV: My first station was the USS *Colorado*, a battleship. I was in engineering there.

JG: And where was...

DV: And then shortly after that—I had requested destroyers, so shortly after that, they picked an engineering officer, [*an Ensign*] off of [*each*] one of the battleships, so about eight or ten of us all went to destroyers. So that's when I went to the *Dale*. But I wasn't [*in*] engineering there.

JG: What were the circumstances that brought you to Hawaii?

DV: The *Dale* was assigned to the Hawaiian Detachment and we had a Hawaiian Detachment staying out here. And then the fleet came later. The fleet came on a fleet exercise and R and R and was supposed to go back to West Coast. But I think the President wanted to keep up pressure against Japan, so he made us stay here. Now Admiral [*James O.*] Richardson who was the CINCUS, Commander In Chief, U.S. Fleet, he went back to Washington two or three times trying to get us out of here, saying the fleet was landlocked and so forth, and he couldn't train [*the ships in Hawaii*] and so forth. He had no [*training*] facilities. But he was overruled, he was retired. And the next thing they picked up a junior admiral like [*Husband E.*] Kimmel and put him up on top and made him CINCUS. And so I kind of feel like they made him the fall guy. My feeling.

JG: When did you arrive in Pearl Harbor?

DV: Ooh, let me see.

CV: May, May of '[41].

DV: I think '40. Latter part of '40, I think. Forty-one, okay. My wife knows those things. I don't know.

JG: Jim, we're very interested in your experiences here at the time of the attack on December 7 and can you kind of lead us into what you were doing at the time and where you were located in the area?

DV: I was ashore and I had a room with another officer on my ship, at the Moana Hotel. Across the street they used to have cottages. We were in a cottage there. And we got a phone call in the morning from the girl that the other officer had been out with that night, saying, "I don't know what's happening," she says, "but they're calling all officers [*back to*] all ships."

We got to Pearl Harbor and they wouldn't let us in with the car so we dropped the car and just ran down to the [*Merry Point*] Landing. And that's when we saw the whole [*group of sunk or burning*] ships [*in*] the background. See, everything was very sickening to me. Seemed like it everything was sunk or burning or black smoke and it was a hard thing to take at that time.

But then we jumped in a boat and they were going to drop us off at our ship. They were taking everybody in there, drop 'em off at [*their*] ships.

Halfway there, in the middle of the harbor, the second wave came in. And again they started picking on the big ships. I've always wondered, I wished I could be a painter 'cause our bow hook, a young sailor, had a rifle, he was shooting at these planes and crying, big crocodile tears, I think. And it really expressed, I think, a feeling of all of us, the frustration we all felt.

Anyway, another officer and I got him, put him down before he killed somebody with that gun. But I'll never forget that.

Then I joined another ship in my squadron was just ready to leave and I got aboard that. And I forget the name of it. The *Hull* [(*DD-350*)] or *MacDonough* [(*DD-351*)]. But there were three skippers aboard there and lots of other officers on there. I think there were four torpedo officers. I was a torpedo officer on my ship. And so we were loaded when we went out.

My ship, the *Dale*, was the first ship really out of the harbor because they [*always kept*] a ready duty destroyer, which was the *Monaghan* [*daily*.] And [*on*] the ready duty destroyer, nobody went ashore. They had a full complement. Everybody remained aboard, ready to go. And they had steam up and ready to go. So after the attack, why, they got underway [*immediately*] and they went out, going out the North [*Channel*], they saw a submarine and rammed it. While they were chasing this submarine, the *Dale* went right by it. And so that's why it happened to be the first one out.

And then I remember later on, [*the Dale*] went out with an ensign [*in command*]*—*what's his name?

CV: [*Radel*].

DV: [*Ensign F.M. Radel*]. And he was the duty officer that day, but when he came back [*in*], he had—it was Sunday, so he had dress whites on and it was all splattered with mud and everything else. They tried to get him in the channel going out. He said, "I always wanted to go out this channel at thirty knots," and he did.

And I don't know what we did out there. I just remember that night I stood a watch on the torpedo tube all night long. Of course they had shifts, but then we come [*into Pearl*] the next day. We got off of Pearl Harbor, the entrance, and transferred a lot of people back and forth. We finally got our skipper on [*board*] the *Dale* and I went to the *Dale*. Then we went back in. And I recall it was dusk and by the time we got in it was dark. And the skipper was having trouble trying to see the dock to land and so he had the—it was all darkened. So he had a signalman put a searchlight on the dock. And he did. And some guy started yelling, "Turn off the light! Turn off the light!"

We paid no attention to it. The next thing, they start shooting it out. They were punchy. Everybody was trigger happy, I think, in Pearl [*Harbor*] for about two or three days anyway.

I was also a communications officer and I had to go over and get new publications because—wartime publications. I had to walk all the way from

the dock around to the headquarters in the 14th Naval District, communications center. And I had my assistant with me, another ensign. And [*it*] seemed like everywhere, about every ten feet where someone would say, “Halt!”

And I could feel a bullet in my back. But we stopped and the next thing they’d come up and they checked us. But all the way around going to 14th Naval District, I was stopped about five times I think. But it shows you the tension that was existing in Pearl Harbor at that time.

JG: This is the day after...

DV: The day [*or next day*] after.

JG: ...Pearl Harbor?

DV: The day [*or next day*] after, yes.

JG: You were doing this. Do you have any memories of some of your colleagues and comrades at the time, what they were doing and seeing them and what their reactions were to what was going on around them?

DV: No. I lost several of my classmates on the *Arizona*. One of my roommates was on the *Oklahoma*, and he got off, fortunately. Bob Bishop. But they lost a lot of men too. But I don’t know too much about others. The destroyers, we didn’t see too many. We were just a small group on each ship [*and we were berthed at buoys [X-14 & X-14S] to the north of Ford Island.*]

JG: Jim, what were the subsequent days like after the—you mentioned the eighth of December, but say the next week. What were your activities?

DV: Yeah, we went out—I forget what day it was. A carrier came in. A carrier came in and then we went out with a carrier. And we had a carrier—I think it was the *Yorktown*. We had two cruisers and seven destroyers and we were out looking for the Japanese. And the lucky thing we [*didn’t find*] ‘em, they’d have killed us. Because we didn’t have much. But I remember doing that for several days and then we came back in again.

JG: What was the condition and the activities of the ships that you remember in Pearl Harbor at the time and, you know, the subsequent two weeks or so afterwards? What were the activities?

DV: Well, I remember the [USS *Nevada*], I think [a] Lieutenant Commander [W. L. Freseman] [tried to take her out, but the Japs] tried to get it [in] the channel. He was trying to go [out] the channel and rather than get [bombed and] stuck in the channel, he deliberately [beached] it.

CV: Ran aground.

DV: [He] ran aground and cleared the channel. And so they were there for a long time. Every time we'd go out and come back again, we kept saluting the *Arizona*, I mean, *Nevada*. But the interesting thing, I operated with the *Nevada* later on, up in the Aleutians. How they recovered most of that fleet, [was miraculous] I [was] with the whole fleet [of battleships] one time [while] they were in San Francisco. We went up in the Aleutians at one time [later,] and we had all these battleships up there [with us at] that time.

JG: Do you have any—can you give me a description of your subsequent service in the navy following Pearl Harbor?

DV: I spent my whole time in the Pacific. I went from Noumea in the south to the Aleutians in the north. I was on the *Dale* for quite a while. I went to the Aleutians twice and we got, in the Aleutians, we got into the Komandorskis Battle. And the Japanese were trying to come in from the top. They had landed in Kiska. At first—we landed in Attu. And I was offshore patrol [on *Dale*] in Attu for a long time, back and forth. Lousy weather. The fog was [thick and it was] rough [at times]. Then finally I got detached to go to a new destroyer [in San Francisco.] So that's what's interesting. I was trying to get in touch with Coralie, 'cause I had written to Coralie before [that] I was expecting to go to Pearl Harbor. And [then] I got these orders through the mail from BUPERS [Bureau of Personnel] that changed everything. So I had to go to San Francisco. So in those days, they censored everything you [mailed] so I had a heck of a time trying to get word to Coralie that I'm not going to Pearl, you're coming to San Francisco.

Within four days, Coralie came from Honolulu [*and*] I came from the Aleutians and [*inside of four days*] we got married. My father did an awful lot [*for the wedding;*] how he did it, I don't know.

JG: When did you leave Pearl Harbor after the attack?

DV: Well, I think we went on our first raid to the Gilberts with the carriers. See, I don't know. I can't remember dates very well. But very shortly afterwards. Of course, they couldn't use the battleships, but the carriers were all we really had and the cruisers. And going [*in for an attack*] that day. I remember [*we were intercepted by*] some high level bombers, that's all [*the Japanese*] had [*there.*] And we kept shooting. Everybody would be shooting and these high level bombers were way up [*high. We*] could see these [*small U.S.*] fighters up there, a couple of 'em. All of a sudden, a bomber [*starts to*] come down. The next thing, another bomber [*would*] come down. That was [*Butch O'Hare who was one of the fighter pilots. It we he*] they named Chicago's O'Hare Field [*after*]. I knew his wingman [*he*] was in my company [*at the Naval Academy*]. But they did a terrific job! But nobody got hurt except the Japanese and then we turned back. But I think we learned something that day. We made a run-in on the objective during the day, but from then on we made our run-ins at night. And launch [*aircraft*] in the morning.

I was with carriers most of the time through the Pacific, except the time in the Aleutians. [*Also*] when I was down in Guadalcanal [*area*].

JG: Is there anything else that you want to tell us about your experience on the seventh?

DV: No. I don't remember too much about the seventh, except the shock I had of seeing everything. Did I say I was fortunate? I was on the destroyers and we were away from it. And we got out of there fast. So I can't give you too much of [*about*] all the horrible things that went on in there, except [*that little*] I remember [*and*] saw.

JG: Jim, I think we want to ask Coralie to show us some of the artifacts that are related to your experience here at this time.

CV: Would you like me to say my experience or do you want to show this first or...?

JG: No, you talk about your experiences.

CV: Okay.

JG: We want to hear 'em.

CV: Well, my sister and I had awakened in the morning and we heard the same [gun] practice way out in Pearl Harbor that we had heard every weekend, the guns firing and whatever was happening. This is what we thought was happening. We were reading the paper in bed, my sister and I, [when] one of the neighbors, a friend of mine, yelled for me and said, "Please come to the window!"

I went to the window and she said, "The Japanese have just come through Kolekole Pass and they have just absolutely riddled the field at Wheeler Field. My father is there on weekend maneuvers and he's just called to tell us the Japanese have attacked us."

Well, I ran into my father's room and my father was in disbelief. "You know" [he said,] "They're just making this as realistic as possible because, you know, they want us to be ready". We had gone through [blackout] practices, I mean, we were having real blackouts. I mean, the civil defense people would really be after [anyone whose property showed some light.] We were up on a hillside, on the slopes of Punchbowl so we had a very good view of what light [could be seen.]

My father [continued to say it was practice.] We turned on the radio [KGMB] and Webley Edwards was hysterical. He was the radio announcer at the time. He [was saying], "Take cover. It's the real McCoy. Fill your bathtubs. Get buckets of sand if you can."

Well, on a hillside, we didn't have any sand, but we certainly filled the bathtubs with water. We just couldn't believe it. [The announcer continued to say,] "Please take cover," so we did go down into our basement.

We fortunately had a basement. What good would [it] have done with a bomb falling? But we went down to the basement [anyway.] My mother took the icon of Mary and Jesus and the bottle of brandy and we all went down—my grandmother, my mother and father and my sister and I. We had called up my aunt from next door and another aunt from one door removed, and they all came over into our basement. We had a finished basement there. We started singing. Started singing patriotic songs and religious songs. We sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, I'll never forget it. It was like I was in a movie. I was fifteen and a high-strung kind of person, actually. And we were all calmed by being together.

All of a sudden we heard this tremendous noise. It was just a tremendous noise. And we knew it had to be a bomb but we didn't realize it was a bomb that fell across the street and down a few doors. It was his Excellency's, Bishop Sweeney's residence. He wasn't in the home at the time. And fortunately the bomb hit the corner of the home and just made this tremendous hole in the earth. We didn't go out of our homes. I think we must have left our homes [feeling safe], maybe two days later. We went down to see what this was all about. And I found this marvelous piece of shrapnel. In fact, Daniel Martinez the [historian at the USS Arizona Memorial, National Park Service], has said that this is one of the most wonderful examples of shrapnel ... and it isn't from an enemy bomb! [*The shrapnel*] is from our own artillery!

Let me go back to December 7 [for a moment.] [When we heard the noise of the bomb,] I went out and looked up [at that moment] there was a plane, a Japanese plane, with the big rising sun on the wings of the plane. And that was pretty something because it was so close. It was so close to us.

About 10:30—this happened to us at ten of eight, like in there. And at 10:30, a reconnaissance, army reconnaissance truck came in front of our home and my—he wasn't my husband at the time, but my husband had a cousin who was stationed, a captain at Wheeler [Field], at Hickam Field, and he had his wife there and his sister had come to visit. Well these two women, the sister and the wife of the cousin, and five military officers' wives, came running up the forty-four steps to our home. And they fell into my parents' arms because they had just experienced the—I guess the mess hall. They were eating breakfast, these young, wonderful young men. And

most of them were wiped out. And those who were left, they couldn't save too many of them, but those they felt they could, they doctored up or bandaged, or whatever. They did whatever they could at the time.

They were pretty, pretty well shook up. They stayed with us. Everybody stayed with us about three or four days and then we found a place for the wives, just down the street for a rental. And they stayed there.

We didn't dare go out for a couple of days, as I said, and when we did, there were, there was an army gunner at almost every corner that I remember and we'd go by and give the victory sign, you know. We didn't get [*back*] to school until about two months later. [*At that time*] barbed wire was all around the schoolyard. Of course [*by that time all the beaches, schools, and*] military establishments [*were surrounded with barbed wire.*]

DV: And on the beach too.

CV: On the beach. My husband at the time was an ensign. He's a J.G. [*Lieutenant Junior Grade*] here [*in this picture*], but this is what Jim looked like (chuckles) during those years.

DV: Ravages of time.

CV: And the years go on. (Chuckles) And nine months after the attack—(I told my husband he proposed to me when I was sixteen and he says no, but it's true). I was engaged when I was seventeen. This is the picture of us on our engagement [*day.*] I'm wearing his academy ring at the time.

So, you know, [*here*] in Honolulu, we [*had a small taste of war*] on December 7th.] But I'm going to tell you those were some of the most precious years I have ever experienced. We had people in our home from private to general and from seaman to admiral. And we danced and we sang and we ate and they were wonderful years, wonderful messages from servicemen thanking us for hospitality. Thinking at first, what is this, you know. Can't believe that they're inviting me to their home. But we did, and we [*met*] a wonderful group of young men.

And that was it. That's about my story.

JG: Well, Coralie, in line with that, I'd like to, if you would, give your full name and your maiden name...

CV: Yes.

JG: ...and your place of birth and birth date, if you don't mind.

CV: Yes. I'm a first generation American, which makes me that much more appreciative of what my father found when he came from Greece. My name is Coralie Anastasopoulos Vellis. And I was born in Honolulu on June 3, 1925.

JG: I think this has been a great interview and I really appreciate your participation. Karen, do you have any questions?

Karen Byrne (KB): I'd like to follow up a couple of things with Coralie. Coralie, you all were courting at the time of the attack. Is that correct?

CV: No.

KB: You hadn't met yet.

CV: No, we had met but I was going with a schoolboy...

DV: She hadn't grown up yet.

CV: (Chuckles) He's nine years older and at the time, you know, he just thought I was a cute little thing flitting around.

KB: I see. So do you remember, you knew him?

CV: Yes.

KB: Do you remember when you actually heard that he was safe and had not been harmed?

CV: I'm glad you brought that [*up*], Karen, because I was going to say [*it and forgot*]. Jimmy may have forgotten. I know he must have gone out to the Gilbert battle shortly after December 7. But I'll never forget the cab stopping in front of our home on a Sunday morning, January the eighteenth, 1942, and up the steps came Jim with his whites on and we were just so happy. I've got chicken skin here. (Chuckles) We were so happy to see him. He was well. We didn't know before that what had happened. So that was on January the eighteenth.

DV: May I say something? You ask, implying that I robbed the cradle, of course I did. But at the time, after the war, there were thousands of navy and army coming through this area. And of course, she had a lot of guys looking at her. So I'd go away on a deployment then I'd come back and she knew several other guys around. So this one time I got back, I was lucky. I got there first! (Laughs)

KB: Coralie, you mentioned it was several days before you and your family felt safe to leave the house...

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF TAPE #1

TAPE #2

DV: I'm just on him now.

CV: Go ahead and say it.

DV: No. I was talking about something else.

JG: Go ahead, Karen.

KB: Coralie, we were discussing you and your family were essentially trapped in your home for several days after the attack. Do you remember listening to the radio? What kind of information you were hearing there...

CV: No.

KB: ...about what was going on?

CV: Just that they told us the toll and what ships had gone down. The *Arizona*, the *Utah*, I think it was. And several other ships. We just couldn't believe it. Of course, [*our islands*] immediately went into martial law and so we had to be off the streets by, well, in December, it was like five o'clock, because it grew dark early. And we were then given ration stamps shortly thereafter.

Life pretty much went on the same except that my father had gone down and signed up as American Legionnaire and our friend who was staying at the house was a Shriner and he went to sign up. And that's when they heard the bomb. They were in an area of town where, after they left there and were in the car about five minutes, the whole block was blown up [*where they had been.*] And that was a bomb that [*destroyed*] a lot of stores [*and killed a few civilians.*] So my father was very fortunate.

We did finally start normalcy, but we didn't go to school for a while and I think it's because they were using our school for—the army engineers—I'm not sure about that. I know they were at Punahou and several other schools. But we managed to catch up with our studies.

And a lot of our, my class, I was a sophomore, I think... I was a junior. And a lot of my class went into the service. Or they went to work in the police station because a lot of the police officers had to go to war. So we had a much smaller class that graduated.

KB: You spoke in your neighborhood about the damage to the bishop's house. Do you remember any other damage immediately around your home?

CV: No, that was it. About three weeks later, my father had an air shelter built underneath the steps, the last part of the steps going to our veranda. [*One evening, actually*] it was two o'clock in the morning, the [*sirens*] blew and we all went down into the air raid shelter. And we never found out anything about it, but we did find out after the war that a Japanese plane had tried to come in and I don't know much about it other than that.

My father had two restaurants and one of them had a car [*drive*] up in front [of it] and a one-man submarine [*beached itself near*] Kaneohe. [*The occupant of the submarine was being taken*] up [*to*] the FBI [*Federal Bureau of Investigation*] office. But other than that...you know, I think I'll probably think of a lot more things at another time, but that's about it. We did very well here though. Boy, we all just, as the country did, the whole country came [*together*], as we are now, [*since September 11th*], with this war on terror.

JG: Did you have any sense of the rumors that circulated at the time of the attack among the civilian population?

CV: Yes. We heard that one of our friends of German extraction had been taken into custody and several Japanese had been taken into custody. A McKinley High School ring was picked off of one of the pilots that was killed. I can't think of anything else. We were very close-mouthed, extremely close-mouthed. What we heard, you know, we didn't say anything. I'm amazed at what's happening now because nothing was said [*then*], nothing. For Jimmy to say to me that he was going to go down on a ship to get to our wedding, he said to say, "All my love," that meant by ship. (Chuckles)

JG: Our secret code.

CV: So that was our own little code. But we were relatively a very happy bunch throughout the war here. Serious but happy also.

DV: May I say one thing? You said it before, you were overrun by soldiers and sailors. Of course, they just piled in here and for some reason...

CV: You forget the Marines.

DV: The Marines too of course. So this became kind of a stronghold in a way. And I think of all the men they've had here.

JG: Is there anything that either of you would care to contribute at this...

CV: I just want to thank the [*National*] Park Service for doing this and for having it go down for posterity and I think that's wonderful. And we appreciate that very much.

JG: Well, thank you. We'd like to thank you for your help this morning. We really appreciate you coming in.

DV: Well, I'm glad that people are paying attention to this, what happened at Pearl Harbor. I think it's—young kids don't know anything about it and so forth. You're bringing it back and letting Americans know what really happened and that's good.

KB: Do you feel, do you think you've noticed any revived interest in that sense you were alluding to the movie [*Pearl Harbor*] coming out this year?

DV: Oh.

KB: Do you feel like...

DV: Oh, with the movie, I thought that made a big difference. Yeah. And now, of course, the attack on New York made everybody conscious of—so this makes everybody in America conscious of what people can do to you, I think. We never were attacked like Great Britain, took a beating during the war. We didn't get that.

CV: Except for December 7.

DV: Except December 7, yeah. But that didn't hit the, really, didn't hit the civilian population very much. You had a little, a few people killed, didn't you?

CV: Yes. Yes, we had about forty-five or something.

DV: Forty-five or fifty or something like that.

CV: Oh, it was terrible. Our friend was in charge of caskets. He was up at—we didn't have Punchbowl [*National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific*] at the time. And these bodies swelled before the caskets arrived. And they were

too small for the bodies, so they were lying around for some time before they could bury them.

There's one more thing I do have to say and I'm very glad that that movie, *Pearl Harbor*, came out. I'm a late bloomer from college. I graduated in '97 from the University of Hawaii with my granddaughter. And I'd mentioned this December 7 and it was like, "Why?" I mean, duh? You know, they just didn't know December 7. So hallelujah for that, that we did have the movie and it's all been brought back. Made us all a little more appreciative of our country.

JG: Well, thank you so much.

(Phone rings)

DV: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW