

# 160 VERDUN NICHOLAS: STOREKEEPER ON USS NAVAJO

**Verdun Nicholas (VN):** Oh, I've seen it really change.

**Chris Conybeare (CC):** Yeah

VN: Can't believe it.

CC: Okay, let me -- we have a little official thing I gotta read here.

Okay, this is an oral history interview with Mr. Verdun Nicholas. It was conducted December 3, 1986, at eleven AM, at the Sheraton Waikiki. Mr. Nicholas lives at West Valley City, Utah. And my name is Chris Conybeare, conducting the interview. And we're not being assisted at this point, due to shortage of park service personnel.

Tell you how we'll start this, what was your name and rank? (BN coughs.)  
Name and rank on December 7, 1941.

VN: Verdun, Verdun Nicholas. I was Storekeeper Second Class.

CC: And on what ship?

VN: I was on the USS NAVAJO.

CC: What kind of ship was the NAVAJO?

VN: That was a million-dollar, sea-going tugboat.

CC: What were you doing that morning?

VN: Oh, that morning we were coming in with the barge and we had a hundred barrels of high octane gasoline, oh, and we had generators, five deep sea divers aboard, and our job, mainly, is to go out to the firing line, bring in the crippled ship to the harbor for repairs, or to repair it at sea, if possible. But usually when we're there at sea, we're like a sitting duck. So we try to bring 'em in to the harbors.

CC: And you said bringing it in, where were you coming from?

VN: Well, we were coming from the United States, or from mainland. And we had arrived in the area, [on] December the sixth. And I remember when our generator went out, for the movie. And so we didn't have any movies that night. And when we went back to my fantail and listened to the radio, and I remember very distinctly, they said it'll be peace or war with Japan, December the seventh.

CC: Oh, they were referring to the negotiations in Washington?

VN: Right, right.

CC: Now, when did you first realize that there was an attack going on? Do you remember where you were and what you saw?

VN: Yes. We were about, oh, entering the parallel of Hickam, well, we were right about the Aloha Tower, and then we were coming over into Hickam, because we were trying to get rid of the barge that had the gasoline. And the USS WARD came to us and said, "Man your battle stations. This is the real thing."

And that's when we . . . so we didn't even have time for breakfast. We were just trying to get cleared of that and we put ammunition all over the table and put in the portholes, secured and went to our gun stations, and that was . . . and then we started finally realizing that -- well, first we thought they were in maneuvers. And . . .

CC: What did you see? Did you see planes yourself?

VN: Yes. We saw planes. There were planes flying, the smoke from the ships. And we realized naturally then when one airplane was coming down, just nose diving, and he didn't come out of it. He was just streaming with black smoke. And that's when we realized this is the real thing.

CC: Did . . . ? Yeah. (Woman interrupts.)

Our microphone is very sensitive, so . . .

VN: Oh, I'm sorry.

CC: No, no problem.

VN: We manned our three-inch gun, the fifty-caliber and thirty-caliber machine guns. And then we stood by the depth charges and we assisted the USS *WARD* and a little later on the day, there was the USS *ST. LOUIS* with us. And we were searching for possible three midget submarines in that area, outside the entrance. And then, we dropped depth charges all around in there. We understood that the USS *WARD* got one of 'em. And we tried to get inside and the thing was blocked and that is the, what you call . . .

CC: Called the net?

VN: Net, yes. Well, when they did let us in there, and we had to get over by the sub base, there was two-man midget subs that entered in there. They got in.

CC: Do you remember what you did with that barge, with all that?

VN: Yes, we took it over to the fuel station, parallel of Hickam Field.

CC: So, during the attack, you still towed that fuel?

VN: Yeah. We were trying to get it there before all of this took place, you know. Then . . . because, naturally, we had to let go our cargo. And I remember, when we were by that station, I found this Coke bottle we had on board ship. And I hurled it -- wrote a note and put it inside and threw it over the side, hoping that maybe someone would know that I was okay, you know, to get word to my wife. We --- later that night, there was a plane that came over and he didn't identify himself. Of course, everyone was trigger-happy and we were shooting, you know, the things all over the place. But about 21:05, or 21:10, something like that, there was a plane that came in and didn't identify, and so we gave 'em all the works; every ship around in there just gave 'em the works. And he finally was knocked out, landed over in the sugar cane in Pearl City. The pilot, I believe, he bailed out, and was safe. But they kept that hush-hush for a long time.

CC: One of our own planes?

VN: You bet, yeah.

CC: Did . . . after the attack, you say everybody was kind of trigger-happy. Did you have any special duties after the attack? Did you assist with the clean up, or what was the type of duty?

VN: Yes, we were over to the *CALIFORNIA* and that was the late night of December the seventh, when we did all of this attack on that plane. And trying to get the water out of the *CALIFORNIA*. But our pumps didn't work, something there, so the skipper says, "Get away from here for all the good you're doing." So he says, "Go down to the *USS ARIZONA*."

Well, we went down to the *ARIZONA* and alongside, we're pumping salt water into it, four hours on, four hours off. Well, we did this, it was approximately three days before the fire was strictly out of the *ARIZONA*.

We had a man aboard our ship, by the name Ziegler. He was the chief quartermaster. He volunteered to go aboard the *ARIZONA* while it was still afire. And he cut the lines and then he jumped back. He could've gone between the *ARIZONA* and our ship, but he made it back and they made him ensign for that, because we got away about two hundred and fifty yards and then the bow of the *ARIZONA* blew up. Reason, I think, there was a paint locker and then, I'm not sure, about ammo up there. But anyway, the whole bow just blew right up. So we were, say, give him credit for being saved there by this man heroically going over to the *ARIZONA*, getting us away.

CC: What did you think about all of this? I mean, were you scared, or did you have time to be scared? What was going through your head?

VN: Well, at first, when the skipper on the *USS WARD* said, "This is the real thing," and it made you choke up to, right, you know, your throat, and wondered, "How come? How can they do this?" We thought we were pretty good allies, you know, to Japan and I was over in China for three years. And when I was there in 1935, they told us to keep everything secretly, but they were trying to find out information from us then. And so, it did kind of realize that, hey, we're in war with, you know, Germany and so forth that now we're with Japan, that this is something we just . . . it really angered inside and . . . to think that this had happened. We figured that when they were bottling us up there or did all of this to the ship, the fleet, then that they were continuing onto San Francisco and they would take care in that area there. But we . . .

CC: So, the night after the attacks, there were a lot of rumors and things going around, I mean . . .

VN: Oh yeah, said that they . . . we felt like that they were going to come back. In fact, the fifteenth of December, we thought surely they were coming back because they had an air attack and I remember going ashore and we had to carry gas masks. And if we didn't carry the gas mask with us, it would give us a . . . some were court-martialed, you know, for it. We had the attack, I was at the YMCA and we went into the shelter there until it was over.

CC: So you thought it was going to happen again?

VN: Oh yes. We thought they were coming right in on us again. I think that the turning point, though, was at Midway. And Midway, about the --- oh, it was in June of '42. And I think we had a turning point then. But . . .

CC: As you look back on this, forty-five years later, do you have any thoughts about it? Is it something you'll never, you know, that you've never forgotten or do you think about it all the time?

VN: Yes, I have thought of it often because I lost two shipmates on the USS ARIZONA. And in fact, one of them was going ashore, or going over to the ship and he -- to meet a buddy over there -- and he didn't get with him. And I guess we didn't ever find him again.

CC: So you mean somebody from your ship went over to the ARIZONA that day?

VN: Yeah, that's what went, right, uh-huh. Right. And we never did get in touch with him again.

CC: What do you think it means? Is there anything that we should learn from all this?

VN: Well, yes, that remember Pearl Harbor and to keep America safe. I think that's our main slogan.

CC: Okay, thank you.

VN: And it was something that I'm just hoping that my, well, all of our children or any of that will never have this happen again to us.

CC: Okay, thank you.

VN: Thank you.

CC: I enjoyed talking with you. Yeah, next time, I don't think it'll be quite the same, you know.

VN: No, no.

END OF INTERVIEW