

#254 JIM VLACH
USS ARIZONA, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 5, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
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(Background conversation)

Robert Chenoweth (RC): The following oral history interview was conducted by Robert Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 5, 1996 at five o'clock p.m. The person being interviewed is Jim Vlach, who was **on board** the USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

[Note: "on board" actually used; however Jim Vlach was not physically on board, at the time attack started. Would have been Killed In Action in conning tower if on board.]

For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

Jim Vlach (JV): Vincent James Vlach. I go by the nickname of Jim. Place of birth was St. Michael, Nebraska. It won't be found on current maps. That postal place was taken over by Ravenna, Nebraska. And I was born on June 19, 1917.

RC: Could you tell me, in 1941, what place did you consider your hometown?

JV: Ravenna, Nebraska.

RC: Okay. Could you talk about the time when you entered the service and when that was, and what that experience was like?

JV: Actually, I accompanied a fellow [*who*] wanted to get in the Navy [, *that was*] was [*in*] 1936. He was colorblind; couldn't pass the test. The chief in the recruiting station in Hastings, Nebraska said, "Why don't you take this test; "it won't cost you anything."

Anyhow, I took it, passed it and they began sending literature and finally in January of '37, they indicated that the entire company from Nebraska would go to San Diego for training. My sister was in Los Angeles, and I talked the folks into signing the papers and I joined the Navy at that time, January 12, 1937.

RC: How old were you?

JV: I think I was 19 at that time.

RC: So, then you went to your boot camp?

JV: In San Diego, right.

RC: What happened when you finished your boot camp?

JV: I knew one person went to grade school with me, Elmer Pershing Schlund. His name is in the shrine room on the *ARIZONA* Memorial. So asked for USS *ARIZONA*, and it was granted. And in 1941, when my time was up, January of '41, I decided I would try a civilian job. Before I got to Long Beach, I took about six or seven days getting from Bremerton, Washington to Long Beach; A letter arrived saying, "You're classified 1-A."

One-A meant married, no job and no children. And I tried three or four places without any luck getting a job and I decided I'd get back in the Navy, ask for the *ARIZONA* again, fill the vacancy that I'd created when I left the ship in Bremerton.

RC: So did you just go back up to Bremerton and . . .

JV: No, no. The ship was in Hawaii, so I came out. And in those days -- , I'll backtrack a little bit. My wife and I were married in March of 1940. One month exactly, one month later, the President sent the entire, Pacific fleet from the Mainland to the Hawaiian area. And the cruisers, they changed the homeport for the [*Hawaiian*] cruisers [*Detachments*] to Pearl Harbor [*in 1939*]. The battleships, homeport remained at Long Beach. Anyhow, it must have been about the second year after we were married that we'd be out here for six months, supposed to be a six-week cruise, but it was extended to six months. Then we'd go back to the Mainland for a period of about three months. And we [*would*] usually go to Bremerton for battle improvements. Anyhow, the wife kept saying, "Why don't I come out to Hawaii?"

And this telegram that I showed a little while ago was -- actually on that [*date I*] found out the ship was going to return to the Mainland on the [*13th*] of December, 1941, and the [*Executive Officer .. He*] even put the message in the box so that I'd be sure to see it. He wanted me to cancel my planned trip for the wife. So I got permission to get ashore on the 27th of August; I intended to tell her not to come out to Honolulu. For some reason or other, when I entered the Mackay radio station in Honolulu, I changed my mind and sent [*the*] words, "Come on out. Love, Jimmy."

If I hadn't sent that, I would have been aboard in [*the conning tower*]. There were no survivors in the [*the conning tower*] [*Note: I actually said in "that area". However, Hein escaped from the bridge, which was only a few feet away .. so request that wording be changed as indicated.*]

RC: Now, why would you have been aboard?

JV: If I'd had been aboard, it only took a couple of minutes to get to the battle station, so . . .

RC: Otherwise you'd have been probably living in . . .

JV: Aboard ship. Yeah, right. But since she was out here, I was living in Waikiki, not too far from here.

RC: Now, did you meet your wife in the Navy or did you . . .

JV: Yes. I was in the Navy when I met her. Met her at Long Beach.

RC: On the day of the attack, you just said that you were here in Waikiki.

JV: Yes. We had -- there were five of us on the ship [*living in the same apartment complex*]. I spotted the apartment being built on Cleghorn, practically built out of plywood. It's not much of an apartment building. And found out who the owner was -- a Chinese gentleman. And he agreed that I could have the apartment as soon as it was finished if I'd paint the inside. And I told some of the shipmates and there were five other fellow moved their wives in.

We all got to the Kalakaua Avenue, and [*took*] the trolley to the Y and then we took a jump seat cab down to Pearl Harbor. By the time we arrived on December 7th, I think it was about nine a.m. or shortly after that. And the Japanese planes at that time were working on the *NEVADA*. They were flying over [*Merry*] Point to get a shot..[*a*] run at the *NEVADA*. And I would say there were about 150, 200 people on [*Merry*] Point landing trying to get back to their ships.

In my case, I saw [*an*] *ARIZONA* motor launch coming in and I started helping some of the people out. One person recognized me. I grabbed hold of his arm to help him up. His skin came off in my hands. He'd been burned pretty [*bad*].

RC: Had you gotten a look at the *ARIZONA* by then? Could you see it from the . . .

JV: We went down a little ways from [*Merry*] Point and we could see the capsized *OKLAHOMA*. Before that, we could see smoke coming off from *WEST VIRGINIA*, *ARIZONA*, and so on.

Anyhow, I realized that there would be a lot of casualties on the *ARIZONA* and since I was an in the Executive Officers Office I, knew I'd be involved in that. And I sure didn't realize it would be as bad as it was, 1,177. That was the heaviest loss of life on any one ship in the history of the US Navy.

And we talked to Admiral Bloch, Com 14. I went over with our Executive Officer and we told him that we couldn't notify the next of kin. Our records went down with the ship and we said about all we could do was feed [*in*] the names of the survivors we actually saw. So he sent that message for us, or a letter to that effect, and the Navy department sent the notification to the next of kin.

When [*the*] messages came out from the Navy department, they went to 46 states, Guam, the Philippines. We even had a couple [*of*] stewards from China. As a result of that, people began flocking to the recruiting stations. And as you all know, the slogan [*became*], "Remember Pearl Harbor," they [*added*] some music to that tune later on.

RC: What went through your mind when you saw the *ARIZONA*?

JV: Well, like I say, I knew we were going to have a lot of casualties and I knew that would be one of my jobs. But, well, seeing the *OKLAHOMA* was almost unbelievable, the big bottom of that ship there. And [*the*] raging fire on the *ARIZONA* [*was*] just heart breaking. We didn't think -- a lot of us felt that, the, battleships were unsinkable at that time. What a mistake that was.

RC: Immediately after the attack, what . . .

JV: Well, for about half a day, I was running around like a chicken with [*it's*] head cut off, helping people coming in. Well, when it was time for the noon meal, I went -- started of going through the chow line and the master of arms wouldn't let me go; my whites were bloody and oily and everything. He said, "You can't go through the line. Go down and get some clean clothes."

They issued me dungarees that were too big. They gave me a line to hold them up and so I used those for three or four days until I could finally get home and change clothes. The other clothes were on the ship, of course. They went down with the ship.

RC: What were your duties after . . .

JV: I remained on the closeout detail. I think there were about fourteen of us that were still attached to the *ARIZONA* until about the middle of April 1942. And, oh, we had a mail orderly person picking up the mail. We were getting hundreds of books. He'd turn those over to Com 14. I was working -- (coughs) excuse me -- personnel [*reports*] most of the time and, like I mentioned, we didn't have any records.

Finally, about Christmas time, the divers got down [to] the pay office and they brought up the pay records and we used those for our 31 December 1941 report. We thought that was going to be a real accurate record to BuPers.. BuNav. Actually, some men were rated on December 1 and the pay office hadn't had a chance to take those rates up on their records, so we had about 15 or 18 errors on our 31 December report.

RC: So these were people that had actually been promoted . . .

JV: Promoted on 1 December.

RC: But the paper work had not caught up.

JV: Not caught up in the disbursing office, right. So we caught that later on. The BuNav had received the report of changes showing that they had been promoted and, later on, we got a copy of that report.

RC: Could you talk a little bit more about your duties on board the *ARIZONA*?

JV: Well, first four, let's see, about three and a half years, I was in the exec's office, all personnel work. Then the Chief Yeoman said since I was First Class that I would soon be eligible for Chief. He said, "You've got to have more experience," so he transferred me to the gunnery office.

And shortly after that, I was supposed to go to the First Lieutenant's office, which I did for a couple of weeks. And then later on, I was going to go to the Captain's Office, but that never did happen.

After the ship was closed out, I received orders to Commander Cruiser Scouting Force. I was supposed to go aboard the *CHICAGO*; the *CHICAGO* had a Captain Sullivan, Fleet Maintenance [*Officer*] for the cruisers. And about that time, they were taking so many other personnel aboard, they didn't have room on the *CHICAGO*, so they set the office up in [*the*] Pearl Harbor Navy Yard. And when they [*got*] reports of a bow being blowing off the cruisers, [*would*] have a new one built by the time that damaged cruiser arrived from the South Pacific in Pearl Harbor.

After that, we were merged into the Fleet Maintenance Office and that's where I received my commission as an Ensign. I reported to the USS *GAMBIER BAY*, which was also sunk. Again, I was transferred off of that just before that battle, [*where*] it was sunk.

RC: Okay, let's – [*stop a minute*].

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

JV: ...I'm sorry, I got a croaky voice too.

RC: Did you stay in the Navy after the war?

JV: Yes. I put in twenty-three years in the Navy.

RC: And when you retired, what rank were you?

JV: Retired as a Lieutenant Commander and then I went to work for North American Aviation. That outfit was merged into Rockwell International. So I put in 23 years with that -- 23, 23. And then I called it quits.

RC: That's plenty. You, I assume, have been a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association since as long as it's been existence.

JV: Well, for quite a few years, I think it was [*in*] existence for a couple of years before I joined.

RC: Then this is fifty-five years since the attack took place and since you went out that morning and saw your ship sitting on the bottom and when you talk to people about your experiences, about your career in the Navy, if someone asked you why is Pearl Harbor important, why is this story important, why should people know about it, what's the lesson to learn from Pearl Harbor, what do you tell them?

JV: I think that they should realize that it could happen again, that weakness invites attacks by -- there's a lot of bully people in this world and even if we didn't have a presence in the Middle East, I think there would be a lot more irresponsible acts going on in that area. So the U.S. has kind of taken on the job as policeman of the world, even though we don't like it. And I think people should remember to keep our nation strong. That weakness invites [*attack*].

RC: What about the Japanese? How do you feel about the Japanese?

JV: Well, the war crimes commission took care of the ones that were mainly in the jobs of responsibility and ordered the attack. On one of my later assignments, we were training the Japanese and we were nice to them, they were nice to us; had the job of helping instruct -- Japanese Navy captain -- on some administrative items and we got along as swell.

RC: All right. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, particularly about that day, December 7?

JV: No. That's --- I think we've pretty well covered it.

RC: Okay.

JV: Thanks very much.

RC: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW