

#234 WALTER LEIGHTY
USS *TUCKER*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 4, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky from the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki, December 4, 1996, ten o'clock in the morning. And our person being interviewed is Walter Leighty, who was on board the USS *TUCKER*, number [DD] 374, on December 7, 1941.

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

Walter Leighty (WL): My name is Walter Leighty and I was born March 30, 1919 in Hammond, Indiana.

MS: And what was your hometown in 1941? What would you consider . . .

WL: My hometown was Mount Vernon, Ohio.

MS: Okay. Now, you joined the United States Navy when?

WL: In December of 1939.

MS: Thirty-nine, okay. Why did you join the Navy?

WL: Well, when I got out of high school, there wasn't many jobs, it was during the depression and I decided that I would go into the military, so that's when I had signed up. And there was a waiting list at the time of about 125 people. And I didn't get in until 1939.

MS: Where did you get your basic training completed?

WL: At a naval station in San Diego, California.

MS: Oh, did you think that was a pretty good duty station for . . .

WL: Really good, I really liked it out there. Yeah.

MS: That's where you got your assignment for the USS *TUCKER*?

WL: Right. We trained four months at that time, in the Navy and then they assigned you to a ship.

MS: And your job aboard the *TUCKER* was?

WL: Well, when I first went aboard, you -- it was you either had to sign up for the seaman or what they call the "black gang." So I was in the engine

room at the time, in the fire room, and that's when I was striking to be electrician or electrician's mate.

MS: I see. And that was your basic job through most of your military service . . .

WL: Yes, I was electrician all the time.

MS: Now, your rate then was what officially?

WL: You mean when I first went in?

MS: Well, first went in and then later on.

WL: Well, when I first went in, you was a fireman, first class. And then you went on to Electrician Third Class, Second Class, First Class, and then Chief.

MS: And during the attack, you were what?

WL: I was just a Fireman then.

MS: Still a Fireman.

WL: A Fireman.

MS: Okay. Now, you were in San Diego when you picked up your ship and then the fleet moved not too long after that?

WL: Yeah, when I first was in training, the Pacific Fleet was stationed on the West Coast. And after training, and was assigned to the USS *TUCKER*, oh, we operated out of San Diego for several months or something like that. And then at that time, they moved the whole Pacific Fleet over to Pearl Harbor.

MS: Was that considered to be a good move on your part?

WL: Well, yes, it was something different, you know, from the West Coast and after we got out here, we really enjoyed it.

MS: What were some of the things that you enjoyed doing while you were here when you weren't actually working?

WL: Well, we'd go ashore and swim on Waikiki Beach, and just, you know, regular things that the sailors did.

MS: You mentioned earlier about you were taking the bus down, you had a little routine where you'd go to the Y?

WL: Yeah, we'd go down to the Y, and that's where the bus in Pearl Harbor moved, you know. It brought fellows down and we'd go to the restaurants and run around, hunt women, and (chuckles) a few things.

MS: What was your -- you mentioned a certain place after the YMCA, a famous . . .

WL: Oh, that was called the Black Cat restaurant. And we always used to go down there and it was just a hangout for sailors. We had -- as I told you before, we had a menu that, oh, you'd get a good meal in there for thirty-five cents. (Chuckles)

MS: That is a good deal. So you'd go around the Honolulu area and . . .

WL: Yeah.

MS: . . . investigate the nightspots?

WL: Yeah, and then, you know, like on weekends, we used to -- oh, they had tour buses, you know, took you around all over the island and different places and out on the sugar cane fields and different places of interest, you know, around in the island.

MS: That's great. Did you ever have any particular buddies that you would hang with or . . .

WL: Yeah, I had a good friend of mine that him and I trained together and he was from Omaha, Nebraska. Paul Thompson was his name. And I used to correspond with him and went out to see him in about 1950 and I hear from him every now and then. I'm kind of hoping he may be here. I don't know.

MS: I hope you find him.

WL: Yeah.

MS: Sure. Now, you also mentioned that since you left, after the attack, you haven't been back to Hawaii?

WL: No, this is my first trip, fifty-five years ago.

MS: And then, how long have you been involved with the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association?

WL: I joined the Pearl Harbor Association in about 1969, I think it was. And we have reunions and we have four chapters in the state of Ohio, and I belong to Chapter Four in Columbus, Ohio. And there's one in Toledo, one in Cleveland, one in Youngstown, one in Cincinnati. And now there's one in Dayton.

MS: Did you ever have an interest to come back and just didn't, or did you just not think about it?

WL: Well, yes, I thought about it, but you know, when we got out, we raised two children and I had a job and I thought about it, you know, back then, but just never really, you know, took the time to come out, I guess.

MS: Well, going back to that very famous date, you were where and doing what when you got rousted out?

WL: Well, I was in our bunk at the time, when they rang general quarters. And as I told you before, we couldn't go in the engine room, which was my battle station, so we all came up on top, topside and the fantail of the ship, which is the rear part of the ship, you know. As I told you, they had a machine gun back there, and that's where most of the guys were standing around watching the Japanese torpedo planes come in. Then, well, we just helped out, is what they wanted us to do and when the attack kind of slacked up, why, you know, they got all the crew together and told them we had to get the parts together back on the ship, you know, so we could get under way.

MS: Now, your battle station was in the engine room, but you didn't go there and . . .

WL: No, no, we didn't go because there was no power or anything on the ship.

MS: Okay. You were next to a tender?

WL: Next to the *WHITNEY*, USS *WHITNEY*.

MS: Okay.

WL: Our whole division was tied up alongside of that.

MS: So you folks were under repair, so you couldn't go to your battle station, so you had a . . .

WL: Well, some of the fellows went, you know, the ones that could get to their battle stations were on guns. And as I told you that they manned the guns, you know, and had to operate them by hand, instead of any power.

MS: The fifty didn't have any water -- was it a water-cooled fifty?

WL: Yeah, it was just a -- it was on the fantail and was the old style, you know. It had cartridges on a belt and the guy that manned it, you know, they had handlebars on that hung down and pointed it with that.

MS: And it didn't stay in use for very long?

WL: No, I mean, you know, the barrel got so hot it just quit.

MS: Because there was no water . . .

WL: Yeah, that's right.

MS: Well then, did you -- what did you feel like then? You couldn't even shoot back at that point, at the ship? What were you . . .

WL: Well, most of the action then, you know, after they had hit over on Ford Island, which is right across from us, that was the air station. And then the high altitude bombers, you know, they were doing a lot of bombing, but most of the planes that had the strafing and the torpedo planes that came in, you know, they were gone then.

MS: Was your ship hit?

WL: No, no. They didn't hit any in our division.

MS: So you weren't strafed or anything?

WL: No, no. It wasn't a thing.

MS: So did you have an excellent view of everything else that was going on around you?

WL: Well, yeah, we could see, you know, we weren't too far from Battleship Row and we knew right away that that's where they were concentrated on the battleships. And also, the Navy yard, which the USS *SHAW* was evidently bombed, they hit the ammunition section of that ship.

MS: And the *SHAW* was your sister ship?

WL: That was the sister ship of the *TUCKER*.

MS: Excuse me, what things seemed to stand out about the attack? Did you have any moments that seemed to stand out more than others?

WL: Yes. The thing that was really surprising to most of the guys is when the planes came just skimming over the water, and they were just probably thirty-foot high, and you could see the pilots sitting in there and see the rising sun on the airplane. That was something that was really outstanding.

MS: Did you know immediately it was the Japanese, or . . .

WL: Oh yeah, we knew, yeah. They -- I would say that, you know, before the war, we used to go out and practice sonar system, you know, especially with destroyers, because we had depth charges, you know, on the fantail. You know, for submarines. And you know, they used to pick up different sounds and they figured that they were enemies, submarines, you know, at that time, that was -- they figured they were Japanese submarines because our submarines were out there too, but they weren't operating in that area.

MS: So you think you probably might have picked up something going on . . .

WL: Probably, yeah, yeah.

MS: So things weren't quite as big a surprise to you personally, or did you feel . . .

WL: Well, really, I don't know. I mean, I don't think the majority of the sailors were under any threat of being bombed.

MS: Did you feel war was coming, eventually?

WL: No, I didn't. I really didn't. You know, I just don't think that the average sailor did realize that there was any danger of an attack.

MS: So when it finally came and things were going, what kind of feelings were you having at the time? (Inaudible)

WL: Well, I mean, after we realized that it was the Japanese that were doing the destruction of the fleet, we knew right away that we were in war.

MS: Did you have any particular feelings that -- any special kinds of anger, or anything else going on, or were you just too busy?

WL: Well, really, yeah, we were, yeah, too busy and we just really didn't have any idea what the, you know, what the next step was going to be.

MS: Was there any predictions on what was going to be the next step? Did you think that maybe there was going to be an invasion in Hawaii at that point?

WL: Well, several days afterwards, they thought, you know, to do this, maybe an invasion, but then they ruled that out in a couple days, you know, because at that time, you know, all the carriers were out at sea and they were in scouting distance of any enemy ships that could have been out there.

MS: So how long did it take you folks to get the engine and everything going?

WL: About four to five days.

MS: Wow.

WL: You know, until we got everything under control and everything. So we could get the power up and steam up and everything to go out to sea.

MS: And then what was your duty when you finally left?

WL: We escorted several battleships, we made two trips. I can't just tell you the name of the ships, the battleships, that were hit, you know, damaged. They took 'em to Long Beach, California and stopped there, you know, and then we came back and got another one or two battleships and took them over for repairs.

MS: Now, you served in several different theaters of operations during the war and such, but you ended up at the end of the war where?

WL: At the end of the war? Well, at the end of the war, when it was signed that the war was over, we went to Hokkaido, Japan, which was a northern island, from Tokyo. And it was a kamikaze base. And we stayed there, oh, I would say, a month and a half, something like that. And we just kind of operated out of there.

MS: Now that you had time to reflect -- you know, so many years have gone by now. Do you have any reflections, any special feelings about, you know, that day, your participation, the way the war started? Is there anything you'd like to share with us right now?

WL: Well, not really. I mean, I know it was a surprise to everybody and it was, you know, a sneak attack. And I really think that somebody in, you know,

our government or in the military forces really knew that there was something going, something that was really going to happen before, you know, before the December 7 attack.

MS: Do you think it's important for us to continue to remember this and teach . . .

WL: Oh sure, I really do. Yeah. To be, I think, you know, we should be prepared, you know, throughout the world. Because, you know, we've got the atomic bomb and we've got the missiles, and there's countries that, you know, it wouldn't take a drop of the hat if they thought they could get over here and do something, they'd try it.

MS: So, for you, is that -- or is it something a little bit different than that, kind of the lesson of Pearl Harbor, if there is one? Is it that national preparedness?

WL: Yeah, yeah. I think we should be prepared.

MS: What about your great-great-grandkids? What would you like them to know or remember, or think about all of this?

WL: Well, I think that they should know that it cost a lot of people their lives, you know, especially on the *ARIZONA*. And not only that, but through Okinawa and the European Theater of war, that it's always a possibility that it could happen again. And I think our grandkids should, you know, should really study that and understand what could happen.

MS: How do you feel about the Japanese in 1996?

WL: Well, it's an all new generation, you know. The young people that, the Japanese today, and we live in a world of free trade and I don't really think that the younger Japanese -- I don't think it sticks in their craw that, you know, this happened. Because we've got lots of industry, you know, (inaudible) the Japanese. And they --- industries over here and it's a world trade thing. And I don't -- I think that the average person, you know, don't have anything sticking in there, you know, that really holds it against the younger Japanese generation, I should say.

MS: There's a whole lot of stories and perspectives about Pearl Harbor and we sure appreciate your viewpoint on this whole thing. Not just what you saw that day, but your feelings about things afterwards. Is there anything else at this point that you'd like to share with us? Or any other thoughts?

WL: Well, I'm glad that this is my first time over here in fifty-five years and I'm going to take the trip out to the *ARIZONA* and over around Aiea, where our ship was and really enjoy myself while I'm here.

MS: Maybe get some of that pineapple juice.

WL: Okay. (Chuckles)

MS: I appreciate this.

Daniel Martinez (DM): Just -- did we get his age today and how old was he before the war?

MS: How old were you in 1941?

WL: Nineteen forty-one, I was twenty-one years old. I was born in 1919, and I was about nineteen when I served, twenty-one.

MS: Okay. And today, you are?

WL: I'm seventy-seven. I'll be seventy-eight in March.

MS: Okay. Great. Very good. Thank you very much, sir.

WL: Thank you.

MS: Before we get up out of this . . .

(Background conversation)

MS: And that's 1941, the photo was taken, Walter?

WL: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW