

#184 WOLFGANG E. KLOSTERMANN: USS *GREBE*

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay. The following interview is with Wolfgang Klostermann. It was conducted on December 4, 1986 in Honolulu, at about 7:15 in the evening. And Mr. Klostermann lives in El Cajon . . .

Wolfgang Klostermann (WK): Correct.

BF: . . . California, which is near San Diego. My name is Bart Fredo, I'm doing the interview, and also in the room with me is Mark Tanaka-Sanders, who is with the National Park Service.

Mr. Klostermann, let me ask you first, start by telling us your name and your hometown back in 1941.

WK: Well, in 1941, of course, I was already in the service.

BF: Let's start again. I'm going to ask you your name and what your hometown, where you were born, what you called your hometown back then. Just a second, okay. Why don't you tell us your name and where you were from back in '41?

WK: Yes, my name is Wolfgang E. Klostermann and I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, and entered the Navy in 1939, July 31.

BF: In December 1941, what was your rank and your job?

WK: I was then a Pharmacist's Mate First Class, on what they called independent duty. That means, or I should say, I was also a Pharmacist's Mate, a First Class Pharmacist's Mate, if I didn't say that, I'm saying it now. And when you're on independent duty, that means you're the only medical department representative that's aboard that ship. And that was my job, to take care of any medical problems [*that*] arose. If they were beyond my capability, it was my responsibility to see to get them to a doctor.

BF: So you were a corpsman?

WK: That's, well, yes, except that now they call 'em corpsmen, whereas then, after you had passed the hospital corpsman, first and second class ratings, you became a pharmacist's mate, third, second and first and chief.

BF: What ship were you assigned to, on December 7?

WK: This was the USS *GREBE*, AM-43, is its number designation, and it's a mine-sweeper.

BF: Let me take you back to the time of the attack. Before the attack started, or just about that time, where were you and what were you doing?

WK: Well, the actual time that the attack started, I was in the YMCA, in Honolulu, Army-Navy YMCA. I had spent the afternoon, the day before, and the evening on liberty and I had overnight liberty, and so that was the reason I was there.

BF: When did you notice something was amiss, something was up?

WK: I was, I awakened probably ten minutes of eight or thereabouts, and was engaged in dressing when, I think it was probably eight o'clock, or eight one or

two, when I heard the announcer on the radio down the hall and he was, his voice was very strident and loud, and he said, "The Japs are attacking Pearl Harbor! The Japs are attacking Pearl Harbor! This is not a drill. This is not a drill. All military personnel return to their ships or stations." And he kept saying it over and over again.

BF: What did you do?

WK: Well, I finished dressing as quickly as I could, ran downstairs. Strangely, the lobby was deserted, but I did see one fellow who was a second class storekeeper from my ship. He had his car in town and we both left within two or three minutes after that, and went out to the receiving station at Pearl Harbor, which is where we [were] quartered, living, while the ship was in overhaul.

BF: You were, the *GREBE* was in overhaul at that point?

WK: The *GREBE* was in overhaul, sure. She was all dismantled. She had had three-inch guns that were off, her machine guns were off.

BF: When you were going from the Y downtown, out to Pearl [Harbor], did anything happen?

WK: You mean on the way?

BF: Anything, yes, on the way.

WK: Well, the only thing that happened is that I heard a bomb go off and while we were still in the city of Honolulu. I understand later on, I found out later on that there was not too far from the Y, just as we were, shortly after we started to leave there, and probably within a block or two of YMCA, we heard, from time to time, explosions and so on, so forth. And of course, we didn't know what we were getting into at that point.

BF: When you got out to Pearl Harbor, what happened?

Wk: When we got to Pearl Harbor, we went to the receiving station, which is where we were quartered. We were told there that we should shift into dungarees and then go down to our ships or stations. So I quickly changed clothing and got my dungarees on, which I'd washed the day before and I started running across the field. And I got probably halfway there, I became aware that a Japanese plane was coming from behind.

BF: You heard it?

Wk: Oh yes. Yes. I looked back and I saw the markings on the plane that indicated it was Japanese plane. And so then as I was running, I could hear him and see him start firing, so I fell down on the ground, thinking I'd be less of a target if I was down rather than standing up. And as I -- after I'd done that, as I looked up and I saw the bullets stitching in the ground ahead of me. And as soon as he had passed, and made it, started going in an up loop, upward loop, I jumped to my feet and ran again, and then he went around, came around from behind once more and the same thing occurred and again I fell down. And the first time, as I fell, as I said before, I thought to myself, "Gee whiz, here are my nice clean dungarees that I washed yesterday are getting all dirty." So.

BF: You didn't . . .

WK: And then, after that, when I, the second go around had happened, I ran the rest of the way to the ship and he had taken off somewhere else. I guess he figured he couldn't hit me or if he could, or at least he had hit me, and maybe he could do better elsewhere. I don't know why.

BF: How close did the bullets come to you?

WK: Well, I would say that probably, oh, within, probably within fifteen or twenty feet, because they were right direct in line, so if they had been much further back, they would've gone right in on my spine.

BF: Could you see the pilot?

WK I could see him. He had goggles on, I remember. But I didn't look at him very long, so I couldn't really, I wouldn't recognize him or anything of that kind.

BF: Besides being concerned about getting your, your freshly laundered dungarees dirty, were you concerned about your own safety. (Chuckles)

WK: Well, I guess I must have been scared, but that was the thought that was in my mind and I was certainly frightened, I'm sure.

BF: So when you got to wherever it was that you were eventually you were running to, what happened then?

WK: Well there, I got aboard ship. As I say, she was in overhaul and everything was down, and there was, we had, we did have, I think, some rifles and some pistols, and some ammunition for those. But my recollection is we did not have any, I know we didn't have any of the big guns, the three-inch guns. Oh, later they were supplanted by five-inch when they got the new guns on. And I'm sure that we didn't have any machine guns in operation, but just rifles and pistols. And this is an odd occurrence too, as I got aboard ship and went aft, we had some stores that had been brought on and placed on the after deck there, and among them were some baskets of potatoes. And I knew a First Class Signaller, by the name of Hunt, and he was so frustrated and angered by these Japanese planes flying about and firing, that he reached in there and got some potatoes and threw 'em up at the plane.

And then another thing I noticed is that the various planes, Japanese planes that were flying, they would drop their torpedoes into the water, and then you could see the wake, you know, heading for the -- and they were heading for the battleships on Battleship Row there. And then you could see 'em strike and explode.

BF: Tell us about seeing these torpedoes strike Battleship Row.

WK: Well, the main, the only thing I can say is that I saw them explode and they didn't blow the whole ship apart, but they did certainly cause damage. Now I would say severe damage, but I would say that probably the distance must have been, oh, I don't know, say, three-quarter of a mile, mile, something like that, possibly even a little more. I'm not sure of the distance. But I could see it clearly, that the explosion would rip the hull open, you know.

BF: Did you see any of the ships go down?

WK: Not, not such right then, but I believe there were, oh, there were five, four or five or six battleships tied up. I don't recall their names, all their names. One of them was the *ARIZONA*, by the way, a good friend of mine is still in there. And . . .

BF: What's his name? What was his name?

WC: His name was -- he was a Pharmacist's Mate like I was. I had gone through Hospital Corps with him and I'm sorry I can't think of it right now, but . . .

BF: A lot of time has gone by.

WK: Yeah. It's . . .

BF: That's quite all right. Anything else stick out in your mind about the attack?

WK: Let's see, well, another thing that did strike me, that night, that evening, after it was dark, there were some planes that came flying in from the -- well, I don't know which direction it was -- and we were all concerned that these were more Japanese planes coming back for another attack. And actually, it was -- and, oh, incidentally, some Marines fired at them with our arms. I don't know which kind, what kind of guns they had, but they did knock one of them down, but they were U.S. planes.

BF: Did you see this plane get hit?

WK: Pardon?

BF: Did you see this plane get hit, this U.S. plane?

WK: Well, no, I didn't see it. But I heard 'em go over, overhead and I heard the gunfire, and then I heard later on that one of the planes had been hit. The other two had not.

BF: Back to the attack, did you see any of the (conversation off-mike) -- yes, okay.

It's now 7:25, you'll be out of here by 7:35.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

WK: . . . for purposes elsewhere, I think. That's my guess, yeah.

BF: Let me take you back to the attack. Where were you on the ship and was it under way?

WK: No, no, no. I said the ship was in overhaul, and it was tied up to Ten-Ten Dock. I think that was the dock, Ten-Ten Dock. And then the, the *ST. LOUIS*, I think it was the *SAN FRANCISCO*, were the other . . .

BF: Cruisers.

WK: . . . cruisers, they were right astern of us, you see, and we were just tied up there. And we couldn't -- well, we could move, but we couldn't do anything. We couldn't fire. I don't know, I don't think we could even move at

that time. I think they were overhauling the machinery too you know, as well as guns, replacing guns and things like that.

BF: Did you see any bombs falling around?

WK: Just the one that went down right behind us, or astern of us, and between the bow of, I think it was the *ST. LOUIS*, and the dock. That's the only one that I actually saw that close. I did see the torpedoes being dropped, as I said before, and running toward where you could see 'em explode. And of course, I think I undoubtedly saw other bombs and firing from planes, 'cause they were flying, these Japanese planes were flying all around, you see.

BF: This bomb that landed near your ship, what did it do?

WK: Well, it didn't harm our ship at all, it just rocked. But I understand that quite a hole was knocked into the bow, I think probably the port bow of that vessel, the *ST. LOUIS*, or the *SAN FRANCISCO*, whichever it was. It was one of those two ships, I think.

BF: Could you see any casualties, as a result?

WK: No, no. That, the ship didn't sink from that, whatever damage they incurred and whatever disability or injuries occurred from that, I don't know exactly what it was, but I understand there was some done, yes.

BF: Did you see any casualties that day, caused?

WK: No, god, I did not. No, no.

BF: Did you lose any men aboard your ship?

WK: No. No, we didn't. None of them were even injured.

BF: Did you have the opportunity to do your job as a pharmacist's mate?

WK: Well, I was always standing by, but I wasn't called upon to do anything. I expected I might have been called to go over to the *ARIZONA*. There was talk of that because they needed more medical help, but for some reason, they, I didn't, wasn't called upon to do that. I was told to stay where I was.

BF: Did you see any of the attacking planes hit and downed?

WK: Those Japanese planes being struck and downed? No, I don't think I can say I did. I can't recall that. Might have, but I don't recall.

BF: What's the most viv--

(WK coughs)

BF: What's the most vivid memory you have of that day?

WK: Well, I suppose that the shock of what I heard when I awoke would probably qualify for that, perhaps. The only other thing, I mean, the other thing I think of is when that plane strafed me, why, I was, that was very, that was grounded in my mind very, very deeply and that's something I'll never forget.

BF: Have you ever dreamt about it?

WK: Oh, yes. I've, sometimes, but I don't any more, from past years. I can't recall having dreamt of it lately. But I do remember for the first few years, it did come to me at night, dreams.

BF: You stayed in Hawaii for a little while after the, after the attack, roughly ten or eleven, twelve months, I think. Were you affected in any way by martial law?

WK: Martial Law, no. I don't think so.

BF: Affect your liberty, for example. When the attack started . . .

WK: Oh, well . . .

BF: . . . you were on liberty?

WK: . . . yeah. Well, we were restricted considerably on liberty. As a matter of fact, there was, I believe, they had curfew at around dark, about the time it became dark. And if you were married and had a family here, then you could go home, on liberty overnight, but other than that, you didn't, except in the daytime.

BF: Can you remember some of the places you went to, when you did go on liberty?

WK: Oh, well, you know, sailors in those days, they weren't invited to the best of localities, you know. And so you just went down the street and sometimes you went to a house with gals and I have done that. And the bars and had my, drank my share of liquor. Never got into trouble. Would have preferred other activities, if they were available, but they weren't. I mean, you just didn't mingle with the civilian population.

BF: Did you know many civilians back then?

WK: No, no, I didn't.

BF: Mostly shipmates?

WK: Yeah, they were mostly the Navy personnel and like this fellow that, on the *ARIZONA*, that died and is still in there. His name is almost on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite get it.

BF: That's fine. Do you remember any of the names of the places you used to visit in downtown or in Waikiki?

WK: Well, no, I can't think of any offhand. But they come to my mind from time to time, but I don't think of any right now.

BF: That's fine. You know, some people who survived the attack, some Americans who survived the attack, still, to this day, hold some bad feelings towards Japan.

WK: Yes.

BF: And towards the Japanese.

WK: Yes.

BF: How do you feel?

WK: I don't feel that way. Now, I had a brother, my only brother, and I was very, very fond of him. I loved him and we were very close. And he was a captain in the U.S. Army, and he died on "E" [*Iwo Jima*] Island, and killed by Japanese. This happened in 1944, I think, just shortly before the war was over, April of 1944, I think it was, or '45, whichever was April of the last year that the war was going on. And I feel that the Japanese people as a race are just as good as we are as a race. You got bad ones, you got good ones. I, they were only doing what they had to do, and I have never felt any animosity towards them as a race because of that.

BF: Even during the war?

WK: Even during the war, yes. And I was very, very deeply saddened by my brother's death, and I guess I, maybe, for a short time after that, I was, I was angered, you know, because it was Japanese that had killed him. But generally and speaking, and basically, I never, I didn't have animosity. I wasn't warped, let's say, because of that.

BF: Have you had an opportunity since the attack, since the war, to talk to anyone from Japan who took part in the war?

WK: Someone from Japan?

BF: Yes, a Japanese.

WK: No, I never have. Never have.

BF: What, if you could have such an opportunity, for example, to talk to an attacking pilot, December 7, would you, what would you ask? What would you want to . . .

WK: Well, I might ask how he felt about killing other people, you know, and what his views were as to whether he enjoyed being in the service, or whether he liked his professional duties in that respect, and so forth. And I don't know precisely what else I might think of something later on. But I don't think I would have any, specifically I can think of now.

BF: You played a part in a very important event in history. Has that fact affected your life in any way?

WK: No, I don't think I can say that. I -- if you tell me -- do you mean personally, my . . .

BF: Did it change you?

WK: . . . psychologically, or, or anything like that. I can't say, but I don't think so.

BF: You don't think the attack changed you. You're still basically the same person.

WK: I think so. Believe so.

BF: Are you proud of having been here that day?

WC: Well, I'm proud that the, the fact that I was, I was a part of it, I think. I would have preferred not to have been. In other words, I would have preferred it didn't happen, but I think I'm proud because I did, was there and doing my duty. Whereas some people never did go into service, you know, when they could have, should have, and didn't. I do think I'm proud of that. But it's something that I naturally would never have, I would have preferred never would have happened.

BF: If you could wave a magic wand and change history, would you take yourself out of December 7?

WK: No, I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I'm kind of glad in a way that it happened, because otherwise I, if, I might wonder how I would've functioned under the circumstances. And I think I did my job as well as I could and I don't feel that I would have wanted to shirk it and this way I know I didn't, and in that sense I feel proud of that, yes.

That it?

BF: Seven-thirty-eight. We'll get you out of here. You're tied down now, so don't move. We're gonna try and untie you.

END OF INTERVIEW