

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#278

WILLIAM DAVIS COLLINS, Jr.
USS *VEGA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 8, 1998
BY JEFF PAPPAS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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Jeff Pappas (JP): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 8, 1998 at one p.m. The person being interviewed is William D. Collins, who was on board the USS *Vega* on December 7, 1941. William, for the record, can you please state your full name, place and date of birth?

William Collins (WC): William Davis Collins, Jr., Barnesville, Georgia, September 20, 1920.

JP: Good. Did you grow up in Georgia?

WC: No, we left there when I was about eight years old and moved to Florida.

JP: So you spent the first eight years of your life living in the state of Georgia before moving on to Florida.

WC: Right.

JP: Do you remember anything specifically about your childhood in Georgia?

WC: Oh yes. Large family, lived on a farm most of the time. Rural area, I mean, not on a farm actually.

JP: What did you—well, you went to some school there. Did you start your elementary...

WC: Yeah, went through the third, let's see, went through two grades, two elementary grades, first and second. But third I started there and then finished 'em up in Florida.

JP: Okay, what part of Florida did you guys move to?

WC: We moved to Lakeland.

JP: Lakeland? Tell me about your father. What was his vocation?

WC: He was a salesman. Primarily a salesman.

JP: What did he sell?

WC: Sewing machines, furniture, just about anything.

JP: Did he work for several companies throughout his career?

WC: Yes, quite a few.

JP: How about your mother?

WC: She was a housewife and mother, raising a lot of children. She had ten of her own. And she raised three stepchildren.

JP: And what was your father's full name?

WC: William Davis Collins, Jr. I mean, Senior, excuse me. (Chuckles)

JP: And your mother's full name and her maiden name.

WC: Her maiden name was—I'm trying to think of her middle name, but I just can't remember. But her first name was Carrie; Kell was her last name, maiden name.

JP: That was her maiden name?

WC: Yes.

JP: Very good. You had how many brothers and sisters?

WC: Yeah, I had five brothers and six sisters. Large family.

JP: Twelve total?

WC: Twelve children, right.

JP: Did you have any favorites?

WC: Well, my brother next to me, two years younger, we were the closest.

JP: What was your brother's name?

WC: Paul.

JP: Is he still living today?

WC: Yes.

JP: Okay. Still stay in touch?

WC: Oh yes.

JP: Is he living in Florida?

WC: Yeah, he lives in Trenton, Florida, near Gainesville.

JP: Mm-hm. So you moved to Florida, Lakeland, after your eighth year and you went to school in Lakeland. Did you stay in Lakeland long?

WC: No. Only a few months. And you want where we moved to from there?

JP: Well, wait a minute. Only a few months? It was just a transition for you or...

WC: Well, most of my young life was transition. We moved an awful lot.

JP: Because your dad was a salesman.

WC: Right.

JP: So you basically went where your father went.

WC: Beg your pardon?

JP: You just basically went, your family went where your father went?

WC: Oh yes. Yes, mm-hm. Well, some of the children were grown then and gone, but I was in the, oh, about the fifth youngest one. And some of the older ones had already left home.

JP: What would you call home, if you were to call home anything?

WC: Well, actually I lived longer in Miami, Florida than any other place that I lived so far. I'm getting close to that though now, place where I'm living now.

JP: So your childhood though, you wouldn't...

WC: No, no.

JP: When did you graduate from high school?

WC: I did not.

JP: Mm-hm. How long did you go? How far did you go in school?

WC: I dropped out in the tenth grade.

JP: Mm-hm. Did you go to work after that?

WC: Went to work.

JP: What'd you do?

WC: Mostly soda fountain work, soda jerk. And I tried getting in industry and at that time, during those years, it was hard to get in anything that was what you'd call a trade. And when I was seventeen I started trying to get into the navy.

JP: Now did your father—before we get there—did your father work throughout the depression, or was he getting laid off?

WC: Oh yes, he worked. And that's why he had to maybe work for a while here and a while there. Get laid off and find something else to do.

JP: Mm-hm. Had you been thinking about the Navy as a potential or possible career or just something to do with the time?

WC: Well, it mainly was—of course I noticed the posters, you know, Uncle Sam wants you, needs you. And learn a trade, see the world. And that there was intrigued me, I was...

JP: Had you met any recruiters? Were they actively recruiting at that time?

WC: No, not until I was seventeen.

JP: So you met a recruiter or talked to a recruiter?

WC: Yes, briefly. And he turned me down. They were not taking any new recruits at that time. So I worked about another year to try again.

JP: What was the—did he specify your deficiency and why he didn't take you?

WC: No, just that they were not taking any more.

JP: Did they mail you a letter, a rejection letter or they just tell you...

WC: No, they just told me flat, no.

JP: So you went to the...

WC: Went to the recruiting office, that's what they told me.

JP: You didn't try the Army?

WC: Nope. Was not interested in the Army. I was very small for my age and I didn't particularly think about an Army career or Marine for that matter.

JP: Oh, was it something about the sea or ocean service...

WC: Well, the sea was part of it and the fact that there was things to do on a ship that you could learn a trade from.

JP: Well, that's important. Why don't you talk about that? You had been thinking about developing skills in the Navy?

WC: Well, yeah. I didn't know what but I just knew that there was something that I needed to do and I felt like that was the best place for it.

JP: Yeah. So you were eventually accepted.

WC: Yeah, after two more tries, I finally was accepted when I was nineteen, but I was twenty before they even could get the paperwork finished and get me in.

JP: So you tried three times?

WC: Right.

JP: Total. Where did you enlist?

WC: Orlando.

JP: Orlando. So you finally got into the navy and by this time it's 1939...

WC: Forty.

JP: ...'40. Had you heard any rumors at that time about potential conflict with anyone, whether it be in Europe or in the...

WC: Oh yeah, read it in the papers. War was going on over in Germany, the Nazis and all.

JP: Mm-hm. So you were aware...

WC: I did think about that. I thought maybe it might help my chances for getting in the service.

JP: Was the navy drafting at that time? Did they initiate the draft? Do you remember?

WC: Oh no, no. The draft was not initiated until after I was in service.

JP: Okay, so you're already in before they had done that. Tell me about your training. Did the navy live up to—did you have any expectations for the navy?

WC: Nope.

JP: Nothing, you went...

WC: I knew nothing about it. I didn't know any sailors, just what I imagined that it might be like, that's about all.

JP: What did you imagine?

WC: Oh, maybe you would just travel and seeing different places.

JP: So was it a romantic image or was it...

WC: Oh no, not really. Historical more than anything. We traveled all my life, just about and but in a very small area. And I was anxious to see some of the rest of the world.

JP: So it seems to me that you were probably one of the most qualified individual at that time to join a branch of the service. You had been traveling your whole childhood. You were promised to do that in the navy, something you'd been accustomed to.

WC: Yeah, right.

JP: Did you find traveling in the Navy any more difficult than traveling with the family?

WC: No, I really enjoyed it.

JP: Even when you were a child, traveling with your family?

WC: Well, that wasn't really enjoyable. It was more moving than travel.

JP: A lot of work.

WC: Right.

JP: But this though, this was travel without the move. I mean, this was on a ship.

WC: That's right.

JP: So this was probably much more interesting than something than anything you'd experienced as a child.

WC: Very much.

JP: Yeah. Now of course, we're approaching the end of the depression. Had your family been affected by the Great Depression?

WC: Oh, greatly affected.

JP: Tell me about that a little. Tell me about some of the specific experiences that your family had gone through.

WC: Well, it was just a lot of people were going through it and looking back on it, we were not the only family that was poor and...

JP: Well, let's not look back. Let's try to place you back in the late 1930's, watching your family function in the depression time. Tell me about that. What was your kind of typical day?

WC: Well, I worked from the time I was ten years old at any job I could do.

JP: So you worked right through, essentially?

WC: Right.

JP: Did you have to hustle for those jobs?

WC: Oh yeah.

JP: Tell me about some of the work, some of the jobs that you had.

WC: Oh, selling cold drinks at boxing matches.

JP: You mentioned you were working for a soda fountain.

WC: Yeah, that was a little later.

JP: Yeah.

WC: Yeah, I worked at several places and several different cities.

JP: Well, several different cities. Did you go out on your own?

WC: Oh yes, I was on my own since I was sixteen.

JP: So you left home?

WC: Right.

JP: Where did you go?

WC: I went to Tampa.

JP: Sixteen years old, you took off for Tampa?

WC: Yeah, tried to break in the industry and I couldn't. I finally got into...

JP: Why Tampa? Was there rumors about the jobs there...

WC: Well, they had shipyards down there and canning plants and various other...

JP: So there might have been...

WC: And I did work in a canning plant for a while. Freeze came and froze all the fruit out, so I was out of a job again. I had to go back to jerking sodas.
(Chuckles)

JP: So where did you go after Tampa?

WC: To Orlando.

JP: Did you stay in touch with your family?

WC: Oh yeah. Didn't go home very often, but I was in touch with them.

JP: Did you write letters?

WC: Occasionally.

JP: Did you ever keep any of those letters?

WC: No.

JP: No, okay. Tell me about your mother. What kind of person was she?

WC: Well, she was an uneducated person that was very smart. She could work crossword puzzles real slick and she could write in a beautiful handwriting, and she taught the kids a lot.

JP: So...

WC: She was a good mother.

JP: So now you're sixteen, seventeen years old, when did it dawn on you, when did you seriously begin to think about joining the service?

WC: When I was seventeen.

JP: Seventeen.

WC: That was the age limit. And so I started thinking about it then.

JP: So basically you had worked for about a year. You had taken off, you had gone to Tampa and other places and finally you had thought seriously about—were your friends joining the service at that time?

WC: No. I didn't know anyone that had gone in the service.

JP: You had never met anyone either?

WC: No.

JP: So you just were impressed by the Navy literature, the signs, the posters?

WC: Well, yes, and the possibilities for learning the trade and various...

JP: Traveling?

WC: Mm-hm.

JP: Excellent. So where did you—you enlist in Orlando. Where did you go from there?

WC: Norfolk, Virginia.

JP: Okay, Norfolk. What kind of training did you go through at that time? Any training?

WC: Yeah. We had eight weeks of boot camp there and the kind of weather I hadn't been used to. It was in the fall of the year. I had a little snow and a little rain and cold weather, but it wasn't that bad, but it was different.

JP: How was your health?

WC: Good.

JP: Healthy young man. So the cold weather up there didn't cause any...

WC: No...

JP: ...health problems.

WC: ...no problems.

JP: How did you react to the winters? 'Cause you were there for eight weeks and you had gotten there in the fall of nineteen...

WC: Forty.

JP: ...1940? So you spent the fall and the early winter...

WC: Yeah, up in a total about, well, after boot camp, which was in December, I caught a ship there and then we went further north.

JP: What did you do, when you went on leave, during boot camp, if you had leave, did you go...

WC: Didn't have any leave at boot camp. No, not then we didn't.

JP: No. They wouldn't let you off base.

WC: No.

JP: So you basically stayed in Norfolk for those eight weeks. Didn't see anything beyond Norfolk?

WC: No.

JP: You went north after that. You got on a ship. What ship did you get on at that point?

WC: The *Vega*.

JP: Oh, you did?

WC: Yeah.

JP: So that's the ship that you stayed with until you went to, until Pearl Harbor.

WC: Yes, a little after that.

JP: What kind of—well, tell me about the *Vega*? What kind of ship was it?

WC: It was a cargo transport, sort of a versatile ship. They used it for a lot of things.

JP: What kind of cargo?

WC: Everything from hauling sixteen-inch rifles from Bremerton Navy Yard to Portsmouth for repair.

JP: It was all military equipment.

WC: Well, most of it was. And, oh, I can't think of some of the cargo. We've—before the war, I can't remember too much about the cargo because I wasn't really connected with that or really interested in it that much.

JP: That's okay. Well, what were you connected? What was your...

WC: I was in the boiler room. And I went down there the first day. And I was crazy about it; I liked it. And...

JP: About working in the boiler room?

WC: Yeah.

JP: What kind of propulsion did the *Vega* have at that time?

WC: It was a steam turbine.

JP: A steam turbine. Did you ever convert into any other system of propulsion?

WC: Well, electric motor. Steam turbines drive electric generators and then drive electric motors for the propellers.

JP: Tell me about working the boiler room.

WC: Well, it was something I really enjoyed. I seemed to like it, so I worked at it. (Chuckles)

JP: I suppose coming from Florida, you like all that hot, humid weather.

WC: Yeah, and it was always warm down there, even when the weather was cold.

JP: Felt like home, didn't it?

WC: Right.

JP: Just paint some orange trees on the side of the decks and feel like home. So you enjoyed the boiler room?

WC: Right.

JP: Did you stay with that throughout your career with the *Vega*?

WC: Yes sir.

JP: How many shipmates did *Vega* have?

WC: I think there was, oh, I went on with about forty recruits and I think they already had over 200. I think it wound up about 300, was the maximum.

JP: That's a pretty big ship, isn't it?

WC: Well, they had a lot of work crews to handle the cargo and that sort of stuff.

JP: Now, you went further north after Norfolk. Did you go to Brooklyn or did you got to...

WC: We went to Philadelphia, New York, Boston. Got to take a ride across Buzzard Bay and down to Cape Cod Canal.

JP: Right through Buzzard's Bay.

WC: Something very new for me. (Chuckles)

JP: You go under the bridges right there.

WC: Right.

JP: In Sagamore and...

WC: Yeah, beautiful.

JP: So did you, at that time, after boot camp, did you do any travel in New England on leave?

WC: No.

JP: Were you able to get out and do some traveling?

WC: I went ashore in New York City, but most of that was on subway and I was intrigued with that. We rode for hours on a nickel, you know, back in those days.

JP: What did you think of New York City in the early 1940's?

WC: It was just a big city, something I hadn't really been used to. Jacksonville had been the largest city I'd lived in.

JP: Jacksonville was a little town back then.

WC: Yeah.

JP: So you went to New York and now you're on the East Coast and what's the *Vega* doing there?

WC: We were picking up cargo, but exactly what they were, I don't know. I couldn't tell you that part of it.

JP: Now, what was your rank at this time?

WC: Fireman Third Class.

JP: Okay. So from Boston, you went up to Boston as the last part of your northern trip. Where did you go from there?

WC: Went back down to Portsmouth, picked up rifles for, sixteen-inch rifles for battleships. And we went to, stopped in Guantanamo Bay, both sides of the canal, San Diego, San Pedro, San Francisco and Seattle.

JP: To Bremerton?

WC: Bremerton.

JP: Was the *Vega* scheduled for an overhaul then?

WC: No.

JP: No.

WC: No, we unloaded cargo, reloaded. With what, I don't remember. And then we made a trip to Alaska. Went to Kodiak, Alaska and to Dutch Harbor.

JP: Do you know why? Why'd you go to Alaska?

WC: Just cargo, moving stuff.

JP: To where? What was up there?

WC: Oh, they had a Navy Base there. They had Navy at Dutch Harbor and also in Kodiak.

JP: Were you able to get out and see some of the countryside there?

WC: Not much.

JP: Just the view from the deck.

WC: Right.

JP: That's quite a change, isn't it?

WC: Yeah.

JP: And then from Alaska you came back?

WC: Came back, made a backtrack all the way to Norfolk, Virginia again.

JP: All the way back to Norfolk.

WC: And more rifles, more other cargo and back through the canal again, back up to Alaska again.

JP: For the second time?

WC: Yes, sir.

JP: You ever get seasick?

WC: Oh no. Never was seasick.

JP: No. It seems like you just made for the Navy.

WC: I seemed to fit.

JP: And you stayed in the boiler room for this entire...

WC: Boiler room the entire time.

JP: You must have been very proficient down at the boiler room. Were you assigned any specific tasks there?

WC: It was just one boiler room. We didn't have two like they do on some of the bigger ships.

JP: Right.

WC: And had three boilers and we had the watertender and a fireman and of course we had the petty officers running the shift.

JP: And what does a fireman do?

WC: Control the oil flow to the burners and keep the fire going, keep the pressure up.

JP: You ever have any mechanical problems that you can remember on the *Vega*?

WC: Nothing serious.

JP: Anything minor?

WC: Well, you always have minor problems, work problems, you know. But nothing—we'd clean boilers and...

JP: Well, such as—what are some of the typical minor problems that a ship like that would experience over time?

WC: Well, you'd have breakdown of pumps and have to repair those and clean boilers. Back then, it was every 600 hours, I think, steaming time. We had to take it down...

JP: It was required.

WC: ...and flush it and inspect it. Put it back on the line, do the next one, as we could.

JP: How many knots could the *Vega*...

WC: About twelve, fourteen knots at the most.

JP: So you continued working at the boiler room, became somewhat proficient in machinery at least, having been exposed to that. You'd been on the ship for how long now?

WC: Well, I was on there for about three and a half years and I started as an Apprentice Seaman down there before I even got Fireman Third Class.

JP: Mm-hm.

WC: When I left there, I was Watertender First Class in charge of boiler room.

JP: Did you leave any special women behind in Florida when you took off for the...

WC: Yeah, I had a little girl I went to school with in St. Augustine for a while. We eventually got married.

JP: Well, there you go. So you met your wife—had you—this was before your enlistment?

WC: Oh yes. Yeah, we went to school together.

JP: When did you get married?

WC: In '43.

JP: So it was during the war.

WC: Yes sir.

JP: So you stayed in contact with your future wife...

WC: Oh yeah.

JP: ...throughout this entire time?

WC: Mm-hm.

JP: How frequent did you correspond with your future wife?

WC: Oh, I don't know about the frequency but we kept in touch with each other all the time.

JP: Eventually married her in '43. So for how many years then had you been courting through this long distance correspondence?

WC: Seven years I knew her before we got married. (Chuckles) That's a long time.

JP: Sure is. Where did you get married?

WC: St. Augustine.

JP: St. Augustine.

WC: That was her hometown.

JP: And it was during leave, obviously, in '43. Wow. Ever have any children?

WC: Yeah. After I got out of service, we had one daughter in 1947 and another one in 1953.

JP: Let's go back on the *Vega* now and you're heading back through the Panama Canal. You went back to Alaska for the second time. Do you know when that was, what year?

WC: Yeah, that was in '41.

JP: Early '41 or...

WC: Mm-hm. Fairly early.

JP: Fairly early forty...

WC: Yeah, we made the trip pretty fast because we didn't do too much except sail. Two, three days in port was all we were in any of 'em.

JP: Well, tell me typically about the *Vega*, you're carrying cargo for just about up and down the coasts for all the navy operations. When did you first hear that you were heading to Hawaii? You didn't go, obviously...

WC: No.

JP: ...you didn't go as part of the Pacific fleet in '40?

WC: No.

JP: You stayed within the continent.

WC: That was in, I guess that was in November of 1941.

JP: Was that a surprise to you? Had you heard about possibly going to Hawaii before then?

WC: No. No, we loaded and they transferred us to different fleets, different areas.

JP: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

WC: And we were taking some cargo to Honolulu and to Wake Island is what it was supposed to be.

JP: That was the mission. Did you learn about that after the fact or did they tell you that you were going to Hawaii?

WC: Oh, they usually put out a schedule for us...

JP: They did?

WC: ...and we knew where we were going pretty well.

JP: So you guys knew in the boiler room what was happening?

WC: Right.

JP: So now you're heading toward Hawaii. This is mid-1941 or late 1941?

WC: That was in late December of '41.

JP: So this was...

WC: November, so, yeah, right.

JP: So this is just before...

WC: Right.

JP: ...the attack. Being a cargo ship, what sort of accommodations did they make for you at Pearl [*Harbor*]? Did you...

WC: Oh, we did not go into Pearl Harbor exactly.

JP: Right.

WC: We were at Honolulu Harbor. [*Note: At 1251 on 6 DEC1941 USS Vega, moored to Pier 31A, Honolulu Harbor.*]

JP: Right. Which is in proximity to Pearl, give me a kind of geographical lesson.

WC: I would say about five miles.

JP: Okay.

WC: It's not—if you're familiar with it at all, we weren't far from the Aloha Tower.

JP: Now, what's significant about that?

WC: Well, that was just in that harbor. That's where all of the cruise ships used to go into at one time and was—of course, we'd always heard about that. And...

JP: Now, tell me about Hawaii. This is the first time you'd ever been to Hawaii, but on ship now for quite some time. How much liberty did you get when you arrived in Hawaii?

WC: None.

JP: None. Were you planning—had they scheduled you to leave Hawaii soon?

WC: Well, no. We were unloading some cargo there. We had some ammunition for the Naval Base over there.

JP: Mm-hm.

WC: And we had some lumber and other supplies for Wake Island that we never got to.

JP: So you were en route to Wake Island?

WC: Right.

JP: And they had just basically a short stop in Honolulu [*Harbor*]...

WC: Right.

JP: ...to unload and then you were going to get going and head down to Wake Island. But something happened that prevented you from going down there. Tell me about that, tell me about the build-up to the attack, what you were doing.

WC: We got into the harbor there in the afternoon, on Saturday the sixth.
[*Note: Moored 1251 on 6 DEC 1941 at Pier 31A, Honolulu Harbor*]

JP: That's when you arrived?

WC: Yes, sir.

JP: The harbor being?

WC: Honolulu Harbor.

JP: Okay. On the sixth, so you're there on Saturday?

WC: Right.

JP: Tell me about—what did you see off-shore, just kind of...

WC: Well, the Aloha Tower is about all I saw really.

JP: As far as the view goes...

WC: Yeah, 'cause it's a lot of piers there and cargo spaces and that sort of thing.

JP: But nothing unusual was happening?

WC: No.

JP: So you didn't notice anything. You didn't—I guess you guys weren't told anything either.

WC: That's right.

JP: Maybe no one really seemed to know, so had you ever thought before that time, just on a whim, that there may be a potential conflict with Japan, or is that the furthest thing from your mind?

WC: Never even envisioned, no.

JP: Nothing. So throughout all your sailing career up to that point, the war of course going on in Europe at that time, it really didn't dawn on the crew of the *Shaw*?

WC: I never even...

JP: I'm sorry, the *Vega*.

WC: The *Vega*.

JP: The *Vega*.

WC: I never paid any attention to it at any rate. If there was anything, I didn't know about it. I never discussed it with anybody or...

JP: Tell me about that night. What were you doing? The Saturday...

WC: I stayed ashore, had to stay aboard ship.

JP: Stay aboard ship.

WC: Yeah. I had the duty that day. I was scheduled to go ashore the next day.

JP: You planned—oh, for liberty.

WC: Yeah. Yeah. So, to look around.

JP: So you planned a kind of quiet evening aboard?

WC: Oh yeah. I was just—oh yeah. Nothing spectacular.

JP: What was the weather like?

WC: Beautiful.

JP: Sunny, warm?

WC: Yeah, warm, sunny. Beautiful weather.

JP: So you fall asleep, you go to sleep and you wake up the next morning and tell me...

WC: Yeah, had breakfast.

JP: ...tell me about, in detail now, tell me about...

WC: Well, got up as usual. Had breakfast. And...

JP: What time would you normally have breakfast?

WC: About seven o'clock, 7:30, somewhere in that area. And after...

JP: Okay. What kind of—how did they serve breakfast on the *Vega*?

WC: They had home-style mess. They had the tables all set up in the mess hall and we had twenty men in the groups.

JP: Okay.

WC: And just sit down mess. Had benches at the table and after the meal was over, the mess cooks would take the tables up and the bunks let down, it was in the crew's quarter areas.

JP: Right. So let's continue. So now we're close. This is between seven and 7:30 in the morning, Sunday morning. You had planned on going liberty that...

WC: In the afternoon.

JP: ...in the afternoon. So you were scheduled to work that morning?

WC: No, we didn't have any special duties that morning. I didn't have any watches that day.

JP: Had they told you when you guys were shipping out yet, at that point?

WC: No.

JP: No. So you didn't know when you were shipping out?

WC: Didn't know how long we'd be there.

JP: Did you know you were going to Wake Island though after that?

WC: Yeah, we knew that.

JP: Okay, but you didn't know when.

WC: No.

JP: So I guess you were kind of still in limbo at that point. You really didn't know what to do, what was happening, when you were leaving or something.

WC: Right.

JP: Okay. Now fill me in. What...

WC: Well, I went over and sat down on my bunk and fluffed my pillow up and stretched out on the bunk, waiting 'til they cleared the messes. And then I didn't know for sure what I was going to do. Probably hit the showers and get cleaned up and maybe go on liberty.

JP: Okay, I think we're going to stop there for a few moments and put in a new tape and we'll continue, we'll pick up right before the...

END OF TAPE #35

TAPE #36

JP: ...*USS Vega*, which was at the Honolulu [*Harbor*] at the time of the attack on December 7, 1941. So roughly about 7:30 or so, you had finished breakfast and you had gone back to your bunk and stretched out for a while.

WC: Yes, sir.

JP: What happened then?

WC: Then general quarters sounded.

JP: Just like that?

WC: Yup.

JP: Had you heard any noises up to that point?

WC: No.

JP: Nothing. So general quarters sounds and what's general quarters?

WC: I went to my battle station, which was in the boiler room.

JP: Okay. That's where you were stationed.

WC: Yeah.

JP: So explain to me the event, not the event, but the condition of the *Vega* at this time. How many—everyone was on board at that time?

WC: Right.

JP: The whole crew was on board at that time.

WC: Right.

JP: So you went to your battle stations. So you think that this was just a drill?

WC: Well, we had no idea because we had drills all along so I expected that that's what it was.

JP: Now first, before we get into the attack, is there any armory, any artillery on the *Vega*?

WC: Oh yes.

JP: So you're equipped with what kind of artillery?

WC: We had two surface guns, one forward, one aft. Five-inch thirty-eights, I think they called 'em, but I'm not sure. They were five-inch guns, anyway. But only surface guns.

JP: Is everyone on the *Vega* trained on artillery, or is it just the...

WC: No, I was never trained on the guns at all. Now a lot of my boiler room shipmates were. They had gun stations, but I didn't.

JP: So you, the crew, they had trained on artillery?

WC: That is correct. We had four twenty-millimeter guns and four three-inch fifties.

JP: Okay.

WC: Anti-aircraft, all anti-aircraft.

JP: Okay. So general quarters had been sounded, you go to your battle station. What happened then?

WC: Well, my battle station was to go to the boiler room, prepare—if we were not under way, prepare to get under way if necessary.

JP: How long does it take the *Vega* to steam up, to get ready?

WC: We're always steamed up. Boilers were hot. We kept 'em—it's just a matter of building up the pressure.

JP: How long does that take?

WC: Oh, pressure didn't take long at all. Getting those turbines warmed up was the longest thing, but then we didn't even start the turbine, so...

JP: So you can get going on the click of the finger?

WC: Oh yeah.

JP: So how long would it take the *Vega* to get rolling at...

WC: Oh, if they had been ready with the lines and everything topside, we could be under way in ten minutes.

JP: Okay. So now you're down at the boiler station and quarters had been sounded. Continue, please.

WC: Well, I got everything ready, prepared to get under way and I was ready to go. And I was in charge of steaming watches at that time.

JP: Are you talking to anyone at this time? Talking to some of your friends on the ship?

WC: Only the two fire man helpers that I had down there.

JP: Remember what you talked about?

WC: Getting things ready. And then after we got it ready, I tried to call the bridge and I couldn't get anyone up there.

JP: Couldn't get anyone at the bridge?

WC: And then about that time, they started firing the guns. (Chuckles)

JP: Now, who's the commander at this time of the *Vega*?

WC: I can't remember his name. We had just gotten him as a skipper just before we left Seattle.

JP: Was a Captain.

WC: And he was...

[*Note: The commanding officer of USS Vega was K.L. Forster*]

JP: Commander?

WC: Lieutenant Commander I think it was.

JP: So you couldn't get anyone at the bridge.

WC: No.

JP: What went through your mind then, just...

WC: Well, that wasn't unusual but when the guns started firing, then I didn't know what to think. (Chuckles) I wasn't, I was really upset more than—I wasn't frightened. I was really upset.

JP: How frequent did the guns go off?

WC: They were going off pretty good, twenty-millimeters going off...

JP: This isn't like one or two shots. This was...

WC: Oh no.

JP: ...a barrage.

WC: Yeah, you could hear 'em going off. And I said, "My, firing guns on Sunday morning," I said, "what in the world's going on out there?"

JP: What did you think?

WC: I had no idea. No idea.

JP: So the guns keep going off.

WC: Yeah.

JP: And you're down below. No word from the bridge yet.

WC: No word from the bridge.

JP: You're not steaming up, you're not ready to get out of there. You're not moving.

WC: No.

JP: So what happens now?

WC: Well, that went on for quite a while. And I never could get anybody on the bridge to talk to me. And when, oh, a couple of hours or so later, a relief came down and...

JP: A couple of hours?

WC: Oh yeah.

JP: So you were in the boiler room, essentially.

WC: Yeah.

JP: The attack had occurred, had gone...

WC: Yeah.

JP: ...first, second wave coming on, you're down in the boiler room, you hear the guns. You don't know what's going on. No one has told you. You haven't talked to anyone on the bridge.

WC: No, sir.

JP: And someone comes down. And what happens then?

WC: He told me, he said, "You know, we're in the war."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

JP: Do you remember who you talked to?

WC: Not his name. He's just one of the firemen on the ship.

JP: Yeah. That's what he said to you?

WC: Yeah.

JP: And did he elaborate.

WC: Yeah, he says, “Bad up there.”

So I got relieved then and I went up and went all the way to the boat deck so I could see all around and I could see all of the smoke and the fire at Pearl Harbor at that time.

JP: How far is Pearl away from Honolulu [*Harbor*]?

WC: I’d say about five miles.

JP: You can see the smoke.

WC: Oh yeah.

JP: Interesting. So now you’re in the war. That’s the first thing that he said to you. What war? You hadn’t even thought about a war.

WC: Oh yeah, well he said Japanese...

JP: Oh yeah.

WC: ...had attacked, yeah.

JP: But up to this point though, you had told me that there was very little rumor about potential...

WC: Well, we trained all the time for war, but my training was to operate the ship inbound. Not to operate the guns or anything else.

JP: All right. So what was your first thought about now being at war against Japan? Of course, President Roosevelt didn’t declare war against Japan until the following day.

WC: Right.

JP: So but you just all assumed that that's what was going to happen. So what did you do afterwards? Did the *Vega*, was it to go to Pearl?

WC: No, they unloaded all the cargo there in Honolulu Harbor that we'd had scheduled for Wake.

JP: Mm-hm.

WC: And they loaded a ship with pineapples, canned pineapple—cases of it—sugar, automobiles on the decks, civilian passengers and then we took off for San Francisco to the...

JP: Civilian passengers? Wives of service men...

WC: Dependents.

JP: ...dependents of the U.S. military personnel.

WC: Right, right. I didn't, I never saw any of 'em, but I understood that they were aboard. I think most of them took over the officers' quarters.

JP: So you basically stayed in Honolulu [*Harbor*] at that time.

WC: Excuse me. About, I think it was at least two weeks before we left there. Maybe three.

JP: Oh, so you stayed that long after the attack?

WC: Yeah.

JP: And just basically just took on cargo.

WC: Right.

JP: What did you do though? Were you given any leave time during this two to three-week period?

WC: Oh yeah. After about two weeks, we were allowed to go ashore, but there was nothing over there to see or do. We went to the Y[MCA].

JP: But you must have been curious though. Did you go over to Pearl?

WC: No. We weren't allowed over there.

JP: You weren't allowed?

WC: No.

JP: Was that an order?

WC: Oh yeah. We were allowed to go on liberty, but there was no way, not even any transportation to go over there, that I knew of.

JP: Well, how much information had you gotten at this time? Two weeks after the fact, had you been told...

WC: Oh yeah, we knew, yeah, we knew about all of the damage that had been done.

JP: Did you have any friends that were stationed at Pearl at that time?

WC: No.

JP: You spent your time on the *Vega*, but did you know anyone in either boot camp or anywhere else that was stationed there?

WC: Didn't know a soul that had been there.

JP: Okay. And you weren't allowed to go over there?

WC: No.

JP: That was word from your commander.

WC: Well, that's the word from anybody. They had enough to do without sightseers coming over there. I'm sure about that. We went over to YMCA and took a swim.

JP: What was the feeling though? I mean, were you anxious at that time or angry, sad? What kind of emotion?

WC: Well, I'm really not sure. I don't think I had a lot of emotions. I don't—I never got excited real easy. And I'm not a warrior.

JP: Yeah.

WC: And I just tried to take things in stride.

JP: So you took on cargo?

WC: Yeah.

JP: All kinds of things, sugar, pineapple, coconut, civilians, cars, automobiles from dependent military personnel.

WC: Right.

JP: And two weeks after the fact, you took off, the *Vega*, and went stateside.

WC: San Francisco.

JP: San Francisco at that point. And basically unloaded the cargo.

WC: And then went back to Pearl [*Harbor*].

JP: You went back to Pearl. Did you take...

WC: I mean back to Honolulu [*Harbor*]. I don't know what cargo we had when we went back. I have no idea.

JP: How much time in between? You sailed after two or three weeks, you got to San Francisco, and then you went immediately back to Honolulu?

WC: Yeah, we were probably there about a week and went back to Honolulu Harbor.

JP: Did—obviously the *Vega* didn't take any, sustain any sort of damage...

WC: No, not at all.

JP: ...because you were completely out of the firing range.

WC: They were close and bombs fell in the harbor there.

JP: They did?

WC: Oh yes.

JP: Any...

WC: And they tried, guns were firing.

JP: Did you hear any explosions?

WC: Yes.

JP: Other than the guns that were rattling off?

WC: Yeah.

JP: Obviously the *Vega* had been firing, so you're firing at something.

WC: Yeah, there were some that fell in the water out there, close to us. I don't mean right alongside the ship, but close enough that you could feel the concussion when they went off underwater.

JP: So you're in San Francisco now, a couple weeks after the fact. You take on cargo. You don't know what that cargo, what it is.

WC: No.

JP: Okay, you go back to Honolulu [*Harbor*], basically dock at the same place that you did when you were there...

WC: Basically, yes sir.

JP: What did it look like there? Got a chance to see Pearl two, three weeks after the fact.

WC: Didn't go over there at all.

JP: Nothing.

WC: Mm-mm.

JP: Oh, the smoke pretty much died down?

WC: Yeah.

JP: Interesting. _____ tell me now a little bit more about the rest of your time spent in the navy during World War II. Did you stay on the *Vega* for the rest of the war?

WC: For about—I was on there a total of about three years. And we—let's see, we made another trip back to San Francisco with same type of cargo, automobiles, people. And then they assigned us again back to the Seattle-based fleet. Went there and then went to Alaska. And we spent the rest of that winter in Alaska and the following one, up and down. We didn't stay up there all the time. We'd come back to Seattle and then go back again. We helped build up the Aleutian chain, primarily Adak.

JP: Now Adak stands for?

WC: That was one of the islands.

JP: Right.

WC: That was an Indian name for the island, Adak, Atka, Attu, Kiska. They had all kinds of Indian names up there for 'em.

JP: Then you end up by getting married in 1943?

WC: Right.

JP: In St. Augustine. And raised a family in Florida after the war?

WC: After the war.

JP: Very good. I think we're going to stop here. We've pretty much satisfied our hour. I'd like to thank you very much for your...

END OF INTERVIEW