

William Ermolovich #26
December 6th, 1984

Q: Mr. Ermolovich, when did you first join the Navy?

A: September 23rd, 1940.

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

A: Newport, Rhode Island.

Q: How long was boot camp in those days?

A: 8 weeks.

Q: What was your assignment after you finished boot camp?

A: My first assignment a cross-country trip to the Naval base at San Diego, California.

Q: What did you do when you got there?

A: When I got there, I chipped paint and whatever, on old four stack destroyers. An momentarily, or almost immediately, I was assigned to the USS *Whitney*, a destroyer tender. And the ship had just left San Diego, and eventually we were guests aboard a destroyer, the USS *Helm*, 388, and they transported us to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where I boarded the USS *Whitney*. That was my first duty station.

Q: When was that?

A: I would guess it's almost exactly a year, like December 7th, 1940.

Q: To what duty were you assigned?

A: Well, originally, being a new recruit, I was first designated an apprentice seaman, and my duties were primarily chipping paint, washing the decks. We used in washing the decks, why uh, what would happen would be, we'd get up at 6:00 in the morning. We were awakened and immediately there were some individuals that hooked up the hoses; they wet down the decks which were made out of wood, I believe 4-inch planking. And then, we'd have another individual that had a bucket filled with sand which they would sprinkle over the deck. And my duty was, primarily, to "holy stone" the deck, which means we had a piece of granite, roughly six inches square, with an indented hole in the center, and we had a mop handle as you would call it, and we would put the handle into this indentation. It wasn't permanent; we would kind of go back and forth down it. It acted as an abrasive on the wood.

Q: What was the purpose of "holy stoning" the deck?

A: Well, to keep it clean and neat, evidently, and to keep us busy I'm sure. And with the salt water, eventually, as it dried, it would bleach the decks and they were beautiful. You could almost eat off the decks.

Q: How did you and the other seamen feel about that kind of duty? Was it your favorite duty?

A: Well, it was great at the time, being in Hawaii, a young boy from the hills, a coal mining area of Pennsylvania, to go out to Hawaii was just the greatest. I'd probably still be there if it wasn't for the War, probably.

Q: So you really enjoyed being there.

A: We enjoyed it terrifically...tremendously.

Q: And how did you feel about "holy stoning" the decks?

A: Well, I thought that was pretty good. It was a very good experience. At least we got to eat early. Usually, I think we had breakfast at approximately 0700.

Q: Was the deck "holy stoned" every day?

A: Every day. Whether we were in port or out at sea, and evidently it was probably to keep us busy, because it could be boring after you're out to sea for weeks at a time.

Q: What other sorts of things did you do?

A: Well, I was very fortunate. I did some baseball playing back there in Pennsylvania and of course the Whitney had one of the better ball clubs, what I thought was in the Hawaiian fleet. And when they made the announcement to the recruits, if anyone was interested in playing baseball for the *Whitney*, to assemble at such and such a place. They issued some uniforms and we went out for a practice session. And incidently, Capt. Corn, who was our Skipper...

Q: Do you remember how to spell his last name?

A: C-O-R-N. In fact, he would attend our practice sessions, and I would think, from my own opinion, that sports was a great thing in peace time. It was competitive and what not, and I'm sure the officers had their little side bets or whatever. Well anyway, we'd get out to the practice field. I watched the ball team work out. Immediately I says, "There's no way I can make this ball club. These guys are fantastic!"

After the team had practiced their hitting and whatever else, they asked for the recruits, like myself to go to the position which I'm, you know, attempting to make the ball club. So I went out to shortstop, and they hit so many balls to me, back, forth, this way and that way. And after that session, I was approached by the manager and a few of the other people...the coaches. And the first thing they asked me, was I a professional baseball player.

And I was stunned. I had no idea what they were driving at. I says, "No." The next one was, was I a college baseball player. I says, "No." Third one was, "What did you play?" I says, "Well, I played high school baseball." And back in those days, which was the late 30's, during the latter part of the Depression, we played on what you call... we never played on sand, I mean grass infields. We played on what you call almost hard pebbles, on the thing. Well, anyway, I explained that to them, and of course then they says, well... at least then I found out that the shortstops name was Dougherty. He was from Massachusetts. And as I learned subsequently, he did play professional baseball, and he was the captain of the team, so there was no way that I could dislodge him. So they said, "Well, how about third base?" And I said, "I played a little bit of that." So they worked my fanny off, to get accustomed to 3rd; hitting slow rollers, right, left, this, that and the other thing. And finally they says, "Well, looks like maybe you got the position."

I had a competitor. I think his name was Amatto, from Philadelphia, and he had played college baseball. And he tried out for that, third base, but they selected me, and at that time I didn't know. When they first asked me about, you know, things like that, I figured they were trying to pull my leg or something. But anyway, I did make the team. We played in the Honolulu League, two or three nights a week. We beat practically every ship out there. We might have lost one or two games. We lost one to the USS *Hull*, which was a submarine tender.

Q: Sounds like sports was pretty competitive and a major part of life in the fleet there before the War.

A: Oh, was it! Oh, yes. It was, it was. Evidently, there wasn't too much more going on. We would spend time at Waikiki beach swimming, and being kind of young, there was no such thing as drinking or carousing at that time.

Q: Sounds like all in all, it was a pretty good life.

A: Oh, I loved it. Oh, I almost said I'll never leave this place.

Q: What were you doing that weekend of the attack?

A: Well, that was Sunday morning. O.K., I usually slept down in the fore part of the ship, down one deck below the main deck. And normally, being Sunday, was kind of a leisurely day. Now we evidently would probably go out and play baseball which would be like 1:00 or so. We would get up late in the morning on Sunday, and go in and have some breakfast, and then go topside if we didn't have anything to do, and kind of lounge around.

Well anyway, we were awakened by this clanging noise. And so my first response was, "What the heck's going on!" And what I got from whoever it was, says, "They're bombing the shit out of us!", and I says, "Who?", and he says, "We don't know!". But what they were doing see, we were sleeping above the ammunition locker and they didn't have the key to get in, so they secured a sledge hammer to break the lock.

Q: So the first news you had of the attack was the sound of the ammunition locker breaking?

A: The lock. They were trying to break into the ammo locker to get the ammunition. So, immediately, we went topside, and my battle station was a 5-inch, .51 caliber gun.

Q: Is that on the port side or starboard side?

A: It was on the port side boat deck. And what had happened, being a destroyer tender, which was the USS *Whitney*, we had five destroyers alongside, which we were servicing. And therefore, so we went to our battle station and we couldn't use the gun because I believe it was a surface gun and we couldn't train it too much anyway. So what we had to do is just stay there. In other words, so we could not obstruct the other people on the other guns and what not, see. That was our battle station. O.K., so this was still quite a surprise. So I could remember relating in our discussions and the one big thing was this, we started to get a little fear subsequently. And the only thing on our minds was this, if a bomb hit, we were almost hoping that we would get killed immediately because we had fears of the splinters from the wooden deck, you know, entering our bodies... and that was the only thing we were fearful of.
Well anyway, since we could not actually do much of anything...

Q: Were you watching the attack during this time?

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: What did you see? What was the scene like?

A: Well, the first thing was this, when we first went topside, we had to go up the port side because in the Navy it was up starboard, down port, see.

Q: Traffic rules.

A: Yes. And just recently, it came to mind, I could not figure out why I went up the starboard side, up the starboard ladder. Then it dawned on me, up starboard, down port. We couldn't go up the port ladder, see. So we went up the starboard ladder and got off on the starboard side and the first thing we saw was this, we saw what was going on around battleship row because we were like at 11:00 toward the USS *Arizona* was. And till this day, I swear that we saw the bomb drop on the *Arizona*, and at the time we all felt that the bomb went into the stack. But now there's a controversy because the ammunition locker blew up on the *Arizona*, right? So, alright, we saw that, and then of course we were looking up there, the Japanese planes are flying every which way. Alright, well the fact that we could not use our gun, we kind of... well, we didn't get bored, but we said, "Well, what are we going to do?" If we were able to keep busy it would have been fine; we'd be occupied. So what we started to do was this, when the Japanese planes, when they would strafe on the port side, we

would run clear around to the starboard side, because we were protected above. We had a deck above the boat deck. And this is what we did, we would kind of go back and forth. Well anyway, at that time, we weren't scared. It was just one of these things, we couldn't figure out why or what. Alright, so the first wave of planes come in and they left. And then about, I forget how long, maybe a half hour or so the second wave come in, but then we couldn't do much of anything and we just kind of stayed at our battle stations, or kind of run from the port to the starboard side, O.K? Well alright, then as things settled down a little bit, we were quite scared. There were rumors that the Japanese were landing of the Island, plus a lot of other things. So anyway, so during the day we kind of stayed at our battle stations, or close by. And the reason why we stayed above, either on the main deck or above was, by this time we found out, or got word that there were Japanese submarines in the Harbor. So unless you had to be below decks, you didn't dare go down there. So this went on, oh well I forget for how long. Well subsequently, we got in motor launches, certain people, work parties or whatever, and we kind of headed for battleship row. But you couldn't get near the place because the oil on the surface was burning, so we couldn't do much of anything, O.K? And so finally we went back to the ship.

The next morning we got up and being in the shipfitter division, we went over to the dry dock where the *Cassin* and the *Downes*, and USS *Pennsylvania* were located. So we went over there to see if we could do something. So we get down into the dry dock; there's no water in it, and the *Cassin* and *Downes*, our destroyers are capsized and what not. And by that time they already had cleared most of the individuals that got killed, this, that, and the other thing. Well, there's nothing that we could have done, so what we did, we went over to the morgue.

Q: Where was the morgue located?

A: The morgue was located pretty close there, I'm not sure. And the reason we went over there, we thought that perhaps they'd have a list of the casualties of the men who had died or had been severely injured. And there wasn't much again. We didn't see anybody. O.K., now as far as time goes, it's difficult to explain how long it took, but it must have been moving either...well, I can't figure...slow or fast or whatever, right?

So we went back to the ship. And so, well by this time being December the 8th, the five destroyers alongside had already left that night, see. When they come in for repairs or service, they would cut all power off. We would furnish destroyers with their water and their fuel, and what not. And this is like a comical scene now, then we had men coming over to the Whitney grabbing valves and just about anything, taking back to the ships so they could cast off. Well, they did that, but for the following day we went over to the birth where the carriers would tie up. The carriers are out to sea. And we tied up behind the USS *Raleigh* that had taken a bomb and maybe a torpedo; to go over there to see if we could assist them.

Subsequently, it got dark, and as soon as it got dark, we could visualize a ship in Pearl Harbor(it was awfully dark) and not knowing for sure what it was, all the guns were trained on

it. So they were almost ready to fire on it and finally they turned a spotlight on it and it was one of our heavy tugboats.

Q: Sounds like a close call.

A: Oh, that's true! Now to go back to Dec. 7th, as the Enterprise or which ever carrier was that was coming in, there were three, four, or five of their airplanes come in, just about the time it got dark. And supposedly, from what we heard, the air station was going to give us the signal if they were enemies or whether they were ours. Well, being jumpy and whatever, it only took one shot. Everything opened up and we blasted our own airplanes. So I mean, that's a matter of record I think.

Well anyway, that was the 7th and the 8th. O.K., immediately we were blacked out. We could not mail any letters home, or what not, for a whole month or so. But something else... well, not knowing this, we were issued what I thought were WWI gas masks, immediately. So we carried them with us. And well those were the first two days. After that it was just helping out on the damaged ships and what not. And well right now I can't, you know, this is as much as I can relate now, without really going back and making notes or whatever.

Q: Sounds very interesting.

A: So that's my, you know, my story on this thing or whatever. You know, there's a lot of other things, but it might be repetitious, this, that, and the other thing.

Q: What stands out in your mind more than any other single thing about December 7th, 1941? Your most vivid memory.

A: O.K., now the most vivid, even though we could see where the Arizona was, we were in east lock. We were tied to a buoy and I can't say how far away we were from it. And with all this excitement, it's hard to say whether we heard any booms or what not, as the Arizona blew up. But one thing is this, and I still haven't found anybody that could explain it, there were 29 Japanese planes shot down, I believe. And this one airplane, it was a Japanese, and being assigned to the port gun which we couldn't use, alright, well we could see these Japanese planes. So this plane either, I don't know if it was a dive bomber, or a fighter, or whatever, and we had assumed that it dove down on the Naval Air Station which was an island right in the center of Pearl Harbor. And as it crossed over there, then it swung around through the channel, strafing. And this is unbelievable, the Japanese plane, it's like it stopped in the air. It might have got hit by one of the 5-inch-.38 caliber's off the destroyer. And you could see the Japanese pilot just either roll out or whatever. But then, we never could see him hit the water, because we were obstructed by these five destroyers.

Q: Do you mean he fell right out of the plane?

A: Well, when he got hit, he either fell or jumped or something. And that in particular is the one thing that seemed, you know, like it was a fairy tale or something. And there were numerous

other ones there, and to this day, I only heard of one instance where a Japanese pilot, he went down around battleship row. He was alive. He swam to shore. And the word I got the other day here, that one of the chief petty officers on Ford Island or somebody, had a .45 and he immediately shot him. And that was the first, the only one I heard of, where they had either located or whatever, either a dead Japanese pilot or a... well, the submarine people. See these two-man subs were in the Harbor and there again, we never heard anything.

Now another thing about those two-man subs, see, that's what got us scared after the attack. We had this fear. And then, during the day, (as I keep talking here things come to mind), we had torpedo boats, and they're kind of locating the two-man subs.

And the *Solace*, which was between the *Whitney* and the *Arizona*, which was our hospital ship, well anyway, with the *Solace* being there, the torpedo boat kind of honed in on this two-man sub. And to show you that the Japs either had everything down pat, was this two-man sub snuggled underneath the *Solace*, being a hospital ship they knew they weren't going to drop any depth charges.

And let me see... well really, you know, that, plus the *Arizona* blowing up, but that was from a distance, maybe two miles let's say, something like that. But with that airplane, that was the thing, that to this day, I can't figure out exactly what happened.

Q: That's amazing....

A: Let me tell you, that night, as soon as it got dark, we were just so scared, oh you don't know. We were all... and another thing, that night, well when we shot our own planes, which were off of the *Enterprise*. That night I had either the 8 to 12 watch. And of course in peace time, you know, there's no .45s on the officers, maybe the officers, they carried one. Well we got up there and I don't know who this officer was, whether he was a Ensign, a Lt.(jg.), full Lt., or what, and he had his .45 strapped to him. And I relate this to many people, and I kind of laughed, I said, "Well, what does that mean?" Well, when you're in peace time and you get up there and he gives you the word. He says, "Look, you better do your job. Don't shirk. Or if you do anything wrong you could be cited or whatever." But we were so scared and so we just stayed there. And when we opened up on the airplanes, God knows, maybe we had a part in shooting them down or whatever. Now what else there might be, it's hard, you know at this point, I mean things come to mind. I could sit here all day, you know, and I'd hear about this, and this, and this.

Now, well I could relate to something that happened in March, and I didn't know about when. At first, I thought it was a dream but then my son had bought me a subscription to "The Proceedings" from the Naval Institute. And there was an article on that about the Japanese bombing Honolulu, or the Island of Oahu. And I never dreamed that it was true. I thought maybe this was something I concocted in my mind or whatever. And there was a article in "The Proceedings" about this specific date and it happened on March 4th, 1942.

So, just about everyone, the higher ups or whatever information we could get, they couldn't figure out what had happened. Well, the way these planes got in though, there were

two big patrol planes, or whatever. They flew from either the Marshall Islands or somewhere, and they were refueled by submarines about a thousand miles outside, and they flew in there. They dropped their bombs, cause I know that night we were just scared to death. We figured uh oh, what's happening again.

Q: Did you have an alert that night?

A: Oh yes! Definitely! We had that but there again, it's one of these things that came about. Still, you know, we didn't know what to do. We were using old equipment and what not. We were using .50 caliber machine guns, probably WWI vintage. We had 3^a inch anti-aircraft guns. And as the planes were flying over, we had no way of knowing whether our range finders or the trainers on the guns, you know, would know exactly how many miles up they were.

One of the other things I gotta relate to, cause just about every story I read they talk about a sunny morning. There wasn't a sunny morning. It was overcast, see. So, there was no way, I'm not good on distances even till today. I had no idea how far they were up there. But you could see our projectiles exploding in the air. So they could have probably been up there anywhere from 5000 to 10000 feet, maybe not that high, but you know, it's a possibility.

Q: Are you talking now about the March raid or December 7th?

A: This is December 7th. See the March raid took place at midnight or thereabouts, see? But here again, this is on December 7th during the second wave of the attack, because I believe the first wave were torpedo planes and dive bombers. Then the second wave, I assumed they were going to come in and wipe us out. But when they come in the second time, we were like prepared for them as well as we could. And talking to several of the survivors, we... well anyway, they had figured that the USS *Phoenix* did a lot to save us, because the *Phoenix* was tied up close to Aiea Heights, in that general area, and this wave was coming that way. And the reason I say they could have saved our hides was that Lloyd Johnson, a warrant officer, who was married, he lived in Honolulu and he was coming back to the *Whitney* aboard a motor launch. And he said there were so many empty casings out there that he assumed, or whatever it was, that they must have did a fantastic job. Because I think it was a light cruiser and they were better equipped and what not.

And another thing, we kind of reminisce and talk about things.

If the Japanese had wiped out all our tenders, we'd have been in trouble. Because we were actually like a city aboard the *Whitney*. I believe we had like 800 enlisted men and...

Q: Would have made it pretty difficult for the destroyers to Operate.

A: Oh, it would!

Q: And if the destroyers couldn't be available to escort the carrier, the carriers would have had a tough job.

A: Definitely. See, because being a destroyer tender, we did everything. We had our machine shops, we had our foundries, we had ship fitter shops, carpenter shops, and you name it. And we would actually construct equipment, or what not, because actually, everything had to be like, tailor made, because the destroyers, they originally , they were built, they had diagrams, they had blue prints and everything. But somebody would come out with an idea and let's do it. And that's why to this day, I don't underestimate our young military people. Here we were, 17,18,19,20 years old, and here we are, doing these things. And our torpedoes, we had a torpedo shop. So when the destroyers come in, and hadn't used their torpedoes after a certain time, they would bring the torpedoes, and they would over haul them, and what not. And then we also carried extra torpedoes plus depth charges I believe. In other words, we would have everything for them. When they tied up alongside, the power was shut off and everything. You would see all kind of hoses and what not leading to the destroyers.

Oh, let me see now.... I could be mixing things up here, and I don't want to jump from one day to the other.

Q: Why don't we pause here for a minute.

A: O.K. (pause to replace cassette)... You know, I was just thinking here, if we had a group of people here... but maybe it's better this way see, so you don't have any influence. Because a friend of mine here, a survivor, he tried to reconstruct a lot of things, and he didn't read anything that was published that had to do with the attack on Pearl Harbor. In other words, he researched everything and what not, so that he would be able to have, you know, something original and not be influenced. And when he first talked to me, he asked me questions like, "How many planes did we shoot down." Well, that's very difficult to say, because you might have had every ship in there, plus land based AA guns, and the what, firing. So, it's very difficult as to who would get the credit for, you know, what was shot down. And being young, we were not familiar with a lot of these things. We were all a bunch of young kids like I said, 17, 18, 19, 20 years old. So we just followed orders. It was strictly military and we obeyed all the laws. We never questioned anything. But the life was nice before the attack, especially being in Honolulu and Pearl Harbor. It was fantastic.

Q: Have you ever been back there since?

A: I went back in 1981 for the 40th year and I went to Pearl Harbor. We went over to the Memorial and the strangest feeling came over me, and my wife and our other friends were with us. They went back to the visitors building, or whatever. So I just stayed there for I'd say an hour maybe, just kind of looking out there. It was like being subdued in a way, and just trying to visualize now, you know, about certain things; what could have been if it was different. And the thing is that struck me at the time it was strange, there was many Japanese to visit, and in my own mind, you know, I would say to myself, gee this is, you know, how do you justify this? Well, I talked to my son who is a Navy pilot right now - flies the F-14 Tomcat, and my son I guess he's

pretty sharp; so he says to me when I mention this, you know, that it kind of disturbed me. He says, "Dad, don't let it bother you. They're spending money." In other words, you know, really! You know, it makes sense doesn't it? And this is what he said see.

But, of course, there were a lot of Japanese in Honolulu before the War, but that never disturbed us. You know, being young, we just accepted things. It was a nice life... especially playing baseball which was my love at the time. Of course, it had its drawbacks too, since some of the older...the old sauce as they call them, like the Chief Master at Arms, and what not, figuring that I was shirking my duty because I was playing baseball. So I ended up with more mid watches from 12 to 4 in the morning. You name it I had it.

Q: So, they cut you any slack then?

A: They gave you nothing...strictly military. In fact, there was a time I was detailed to work in the scullery, and we had a very important baseball game that day. Well, the ball team was about ready to leave the ship and there's no Bill around! So finally, somebody found out I was in the scullery. So immediately the Officer of the Day, or whoever it was, the word come through, passed down, hey, you better release him. And I guess this kind of upset some of these chiefs, or whatever, you know, figure that well why should you be able to skip your duties, while the other ones have to take your place.

But as I said, I was assigned for example, I was bow hook on the officers motor boat. So all night long, we would go in and pick up the officers, bring them back to the ship. I was also messenger for the Officer of the Deck. Well, anything that you could name, I did, but it never bothered me. I knew I had to do it and of course I came from a family where my father was the boss, and right or wrong, you know, my father was right. So I never answered back or whatever. I just accepted what I had to do. We were strong willed and everything. Whatever was kind of handed down from him to us was just accepted, and says hey, there's probably a reason why we're doing this. So we never questioned it, right or wrong. We used to have a saying aboard ship; there was two ways to do it, the wrong way and the Navy way. You probably heard that maybe. But uh...let me see, what else could I tell.

On our way from the ship, now I'm going back to Dec. 7th and the 8th, as we left the *Whitney*, the motor launch drove us over to the dry dock to go aboard the *Cassin* and *Downes*. And at that time, it was only recently when I read about the *Pennsylvania*, at one time we had the feeling, or we never really knew that the *Pennsylvania* got hit while it was in dry dock. And I think they did lose a goodly sum of men. And we went over to the sub base. We went over to where the *Oglala* had capsized. Of course the Shaw blew up so we didn't go over there. Well, the after effects was we were just scared to death. But during the attack, it was such a surprise, we didn't know what was going on. And that's why I say, when I relate to the young kids today in the Service ^athey're dedicated. They're very dedicated.

Now, of course subsequently, we left for the South Pacific, but that again, that's another story.

Q: O.K. Well, I appreciate your sitting down and talking to me about Dec. 7th. It's been a good interview.

A: Well, I hope so... Well, I get kind of hung up on this thing. In fact, back home we have a Navy Club. It has nothing to do with Pearl Harbor. It was just members that were in the Navy. We have submariners from way back right after WWI, and we just have, it's just like a social club and we kind of kick things around. We talk about where we were during the war or what's that saying about the kid says to his dad, "What did you do in the War?", something like that? But, well I don't know, I feel like what I've said, if you can make something out of it fine, if not, why..

Q: Well, it's going to be available for anybody who wants to do some research and I'm sure there are things you've given us that can be useful to somebody.

A: Well, let's hope so.