

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#395

WILLIAM HOWARD POE

FIRST DEFENSE BATTALION, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 5, 2001

BY CDR. BILL SCULLION & CAPT. MARSHALL HANSON

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

JULY 15, 2002

**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

(Conversation off-mike)

Bill Scullion (BS): This is oral history number 395. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Bill Scullion and Captain Marshall Hanson for the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C. and for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu on December 5, 2001, at 6:54 p.m. The person being interviewed is William Howard Poe, who was a corporal at the headquarters, First Defense Battalion, Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. Did I get that right, Mr. Poe?

William Howard Poe (WP): That's right.

BS: Okay. For the record, please state your full name, your place of birth and your date of birth.

WP: Full name is William Howard Poe. My place of birth is Faulkner County, which is the center of Arkansas. And place of, date...

BS: Date?

WP: Date, November 24, 1917.

BS: Okay. What did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

WP: Well, I joined in San Francisco. I didn't have a hometown.

BS: Okay. What were your parents' names?

WP: My dad's name was Harvey Poe and my mother had been dead for a long time. She died when I was six years old. Her name is Annie.

BS: Okay.

WP: Her maiden name was Flowers.

BS: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

WP: Yes, I have two sisters.

BS: Okay.

WP: One older and one younger. You want their names?

BS: Sure.

WP: Mildred was the older one and Silva—they're both deceased now. Silva was the younger one.

BS: Okay. And where did you go to high school?

WP: I didn't get into high school. I had to pass that.

BS: Okay.

WP: I went to college.

BS: Oh, where'd you go?

WP: At Arkansas State Teachers' College.

BS: Okay.

WP: Graduated in three years without any high school.

BS: Okay.

Marshall Hanson (MH): Was that before or after the war...

WP: After the war.

BS: Okay. Here's the tough one, where and why did you enlist?

WP: Well, I guess I enlisted mostly because of a job situation in 1938. I lost my job that I had. I had a fairly good job and didn't know how to go back to work and didn't want to go hungry any more.

BS: Okay. Why the Marine Corps?

WP: Because the summer before then, the navy refused to take me in. And they told me what to do to get in the navy or Marines, the doctor did.

BS: Okay.

WP: So I did what he told me. I had flat feet. And he told me what to do to partly cure it.

BS: Okay. And the Marines took you then, huh?

WP: The Marines took me.

BS: Where did you go after you enlisted?

WP: Well, San Diego for two years and then I went to Hawaii.

BS: Okay.

WP: Nineteen-forty I went to, 1941 I went to Hawaii and then I...

BS: What time did you arrive, what month did you arrive in Hawaii?

WP: In February.

BS: Okay.

WP: February of '41.

BS: And where were you assigned when you got to Hawaii?

WP: Where?

BS: Yeah.

WP: Right in the Marine barracks, wooden barracks in Pearl Harbor.

BS: What were your duties when you got here?

WP: I was a field telephone electrician.

BS: What's that mean?

WP: Well, we had to run a wire and switchboards and keep the communication by telephone one way or another.

MH: Did you also run combat wire when...

WP: Oh yes.

MH: ...the lines were down?

WP: I run a lot of combat wire after the first wave, running across Hickam Field. We're right across from Hickam Field.

BS: Okay. Let me back you up. Do you remember the sixth of December, 1941?

WP: That was on Saturday. No, I don't remember much about it.

BS: Nothing special.

WP: Nothing special to me.

BS: Okay.

WP: I heard lots of stories about the sixth, but the night of the sixth anyway.

BS: Did you have duty?

WP: No.

BS: Just nothing special.

WP: Just nothing special.

BS: Okay. Where were you on the morning of the seventh?

WP: I was right in front of the—well, I was in the barracks, just getting up.

BS: Okay.

WP: To go to chow. And I heard the—about simultaneous, I don't know which was first, hearing the planes or hearing the siren go off.

BS: Okay.

WP: And somebody said, "I wonder why they're doing that here on Sunday morning? They've never done that before."

I guess _____ 'til the gunnery sergeant came into the barracks where I was at and said, "That's the Japanese. It's the real war! They're bombing Hickam Field right now."

And they were. He told us all to get outside and take a rifle. But we didn't have any ammunition right then but it was only a few minutes 'til someone came up with a bandolier of ammunition, all tracers.

BS: Okay.

WP: You know, armor-piercing tracers? So you watched your bullets as they went up. And so I pitched a few to the other guys and about then the planes went over. One came over within about, I guess it's 250, 300 yards away from me. And I don't know how many times I shot, but about three or four times before I hit him. I don't remember.

BS: Okay.

WP: And the machine-gun, I watched his bullets too. It was mine and his the only two I could watch, because the others were all scattered out. You can always watch your own and I guess you know if you ever did any shooting

or watched them, they look like they're curving. Of course I was from Arkansas, a farm boy.

BS: Yeah.

WP: I shot at rabbits and stuff like that. You had to lead 'em.

BS: So you led this one too, huh?

WP: I led this one. When I hit it, I dropped right down and said, "I got him! I got him!"

MH: So where did you hit the plane?

WP: I don't know. Must've been the gas tank 'cause this big ball of fire, you know. But the plane was almost out of the fire at the time that he got spread out. You could see the flames out all the time. It went down at the [naval] hospital grounds at Pearl [Harbor].

BS: Okay. What kind of weapon were you using to shoot at it?

WP: Nineteen-oh-three, Springfield, thirty caliber [rifle].

BS: What happened after you saw the airplane go down?

WP: Well, I shot at a few other planes that went around but I didn't get close to any of 'em. They were higher and further away.

BS: What was happening around the barracks?

WP: Same as I was doing, trying to hit the planes with—I went in there and I was in charge of the telephone. Before I went outside, I went in and told the guy to stay on the switchboard, don't matter what. Because we got to get communication.

BS: Did you have communications during the attack?

WP: Oh yes, the telephone communications everywhere.

BS: Okay. Did they work?

WP: Oh yeah. According to him it worked, according to the switchboard. In the report back to me anyway.

BS: Okay.

WP: After the attack, after the second—I don't know whether it was before the second wave. Yeah it was, it must have been because about two o'clock, I guess. The second wave was over with. I was told to run a telephone wire across Hickam Field, they tore down the fence running across Hickam Field, to a gun emplacement they was sitting up over there. So I did, running right across the highway, over the top of the highway and on top of the railroad track and had to get up that night to go fix all that broken wire.

BS: Because of the railroad or...

WP: Railroad, train came in.

BS: That pesky train, huh?

WP: Those sugar cane trains.

BS: Oh, okay.

WP: Narrow gauge.

BS: Mm-hmm. Okay.

MH: Now, the barracks themselves...

WP: Wooden barracks.

MH: Wooden barracks. A lot of damage occurred over at Hickam [*Field*] from the attack...

WP: And none whatsoever, I think. It was said that they strafed the field across where we were, somewhere out there where we were, but I didn't know about that. Somebody said that one of the planes went over and, what do you call, strafed it. Nobody hit.

MH: Okay, and no one...

WP: I don't know of anybody, I never heard of anybody getting hit that was normally shore duty. In other words, except that is, on the mainland, other than the island itself, Ford Island, nobody got injured by the [*Japs*] that I know of.

MH: So the only Marines...

WP: By the Japanese.

MH: So the only Marines that you're aware of that got injured were either on the battleships or on Ford Island.

WP: That's right.

BS: Did anything at the barracks, was there any damage to the barracks?

WP: I never heard anything about it.

BS: Okay. What happened after you ran the wire? Did you stay at the barracks or were you...

WP: I went back to the barracks and had a few other duties to do. I don't remember what but I had to go eat...

BS: Yeah, at some point. Were you called out into the field at any point after the seventh? Did you go on maneuvers or did you stay at headquarters?

WP: No. We left Honolulu, we left Oahu Christmas Eve night, out to Johnson Island. We stayed there for thirteen months. You should've seen it.

BS: Why?

WP: Just little bitty thing about a quarter of, less than a quarter of a mile wide and not much longer than that either.

BS: Mm-hmm. What did you do on Johnson Island?

WP: Telephone electrician, running the wires and keeping communication around to the central office.

BS: Okay.

MH: Was there any action out on Johnson?

WP: Not after I got there. It's told that there'd been action before then, but the gun placement—this is hearsay now—their big gun blew up after the first shot. They had to repair it right there on the island. Repaired it, ready for the next bunch, but there wasn't any next bunch.

MH: Do you guys know? Is there any more recollections that you have specifically about the seventh that you want to share with us?

WP: I can't think of any, just hearsay, all of it would be hearsay.

MH: Okay. Nothing that affected you directly.

WP: That's right, not directly. I didn't, can't remember any.

MH: Now you said the day before Christmas is when you were sent over...

WP: That's right.

MH: What occurred between the seventh and the twenty-fourth? Was it pretty much routine or were there any special duties for you?

WP: I don't think it was any special duty. We were a little more on our toes than normal but I—well, maybe the fifteenth of December and down to Honolulu with a pistol on our hip.

BS: Why did they issue a pistol?

WP: They took our rifles. Because I had to be the telephone wiring situation and I couldn't carry the pistol and do that kind of work carrying a rifle.

BS: But you were issued a pistol to carry at all times?

WP: Yeah.

BS: Okay. Was there an invasion fear at that time?

WP: Yeah, there was. There was quite a bit of fear that they might go ahead and invade the area. Oh yes. That night, I did see something else too. Some planes went over the night of the seventh. Some planes came over and a bunch of the guys, including the guy that was at the switchboard, went outside and they shot at the planes, American planes.

BS: Did you know that? I guess you didn't know that at the time though, did you?

WP: Well, I don't remember but knew within just a few minutes after then anyway. We got it stopped.

MH: So the word spread pretty fast that they were U.S. planes then.

WP: Oh yeah. That's the way I remember it, anyway.

BS: Okay. Did you have to go out and tell some people to stop or were you...

WP: No, I didn't have the authority to do much telling as a corporal.

BS: Okay.

MH: And fear was rather high. They heard those planes and they were afraid it was another wave of Japanese.

WP: Oh yes. We thought it was more Japs coming in.

BS: How did the civilians react to this? Do you know how they reacted to this kind of attack?

WP: I don't know 'cause I wasn't with 'em except for that one day, the fifteenth of December.

BS: Okay. What were things like in the town?

WP: Well, one guy, one fellow came out there and started asking questions and they were questions like I didn't like to answer and so I reported him to the police.

BS: Okay.

MH: And you never knew what happened to him?

WP: Don't know what happened.

BS: Did the town feel like it was fearful, anticipating something, or what?

WP: I don't know. I really don't know whether they had that feeling or not. It seemed to be mostly nearly normal to me. The recreation circumstances were a little bit different but not a whole lot.

MH: Now, did you attend the fiftieth anniversary?

WP: No, I haven't been. This is the first time I've been back since 1943, February of '43.

MH: So this is your first visit back to Hawaii?

WP: First one, that's right.

MH: Now, have you had a chance to go down on any tours to the harbor?

WP: [Yes].

MH: Do you have any feeling of how you might feel when you go down there or are you...

WP: Well, all I saw about the ships was on the twenty-fourth of December and by the way, the last thing I wanted right before I went overseas, that is further away from Oahu, was a quart of milk.

MH: That's important.

WP: That's the first thing I wanted after I got back too.

MH: When you left on the twenty-fourth, I presume you boarded a ship?

WP: Boarded some kind of ship. I don't remember what it was.

MH: Okay. And then you...

WP: It was kind of an escort ship. I don't remember what it was. I thought it was the destroyer. That's the way I remember it, a destroyer.

MH: Now, having lived through December 7 and then recently the nation having experienced September 11 [*2001 terrorist attack on New York and the Pentagon*], do you have any feelings of comparing the two?

WP: Oh yes. I had feelings of comparisons, but mostly it was just kind of tightening of the stomach muscles, wonder what's going to happen next. That's mostly my feeling because I felt like pretty close to the similar feeling here to me and to the other people in the States. I think I had more feeling about Pearl Harbor because I was right there. When you're right there at the place, it would give you more feeling than it will if you're a long ways away from it, unless you've got some close relatives at the place.

MH: Of course.

WP: And I didn't have any close relatives. Well, I did have on in Washington, D.C., but not at New York. No.

MH: Now, you had said before we came into the interview that you were going to make a statement that you couldn't prove. Was this about the airplane and the shooting or is there something else?

WP: No, it's about the—it was reported the next day in the gram, that is the eighth of December. That's what I heard. I don't know that that was fact or reported that was the first plane that went down, the one that went down at the [*naval*] hospital grounds. As far as I've been able to find out, that was the first one. And he landed the plane but I don't know in what shape he was in. I never found out. I've heard two or three different stories about it so I didn't believe much of any of it.

MH: It was not in too healthy shape after...

WP: After he got down in his air[*plane*], I'm sure he wasn't in very good shape.

BS: But you don't have any doubt that you hit the plane?

WP: Oh, I have no doubt about it. Because you couldn't—it was shorter than an instant, just then. In other words, if you shot into a tank of gasoline half full with a bunch of, with fire in your bullet, it's going to set it on fire. It exploded. You know that big ball of flames just fire all at once. Timing-wise, it was just exactly the same thing and you could almost see the bullet going in if you hit it. No bullet went on. It stopped the bullet, something in the plane.

BS: Okay. About how high was the plane when you got the shot in?

WP: Appeared to be hundred yards, about 200 yards away this way and 100 yards up.

BS: Can you describe the plane in any way? Did it have landing gear down or up?

WP: I don't think it had the landing gear down at that time but really I don't know. I know it was not a big plane. Somebody said it was a Zero, but I don't know whether it was or not. I didn't know a Zero from a black cat...

??: (Laughter)

WP: ...at that time.

BS: Okay. Did you have any friends that were on the ships out there?

WP: Well, I had some out there. Yes, I did, but I can't—not really close friends. I knew a few of 'em but just not real close, none of 'em.

BS: Okay. Anything else you'd like to add to your statements?

WP: Not about that day.

BS: Okay, do you have something else you want to talk about?

WP: Well, after I was out there thirteen months at Johnson Island, a sure lonesome situation out there. And I got back to the States, the next six months after I got back, about four months after I got back, I took down with rheumatic fever and had a problem ever since, rheumatic fever with rheumatoid arthritis. Still got it bad. I think it's bad. It might not be bad to some people's thoughts.

BS: So you came back to the States with rheumatic fever then, right.

WP: I got the rheumatic fever in June.

BS: Okay.

WP: And it stayed for six months. They kept me six months in the hospital in San Diego. And then March of—that was in '43 and then I come back, got out in '44 and then went back in, in '45 at the Parris Island, [*South Carolina*] and then went to Dublin, Georgia. About ten months, that second stretch.

BS: Okay.

WP: I was told at one time that you'll never walk again, by the medical doctors. They said, as soon as he got outside, I said, "I'm going to walk again if I have to, whether I have to or not."

So I went to the bathroom.

BS: And you've been walking ever since, haven't you?

WP: Walking ever since, in spite of the pain.

BS: Doing real well, Mr. Poe. And we want to thank you for your service to your country.

WP: I did the best I could at the time.

MH: Well, we also want to thank you for sharing your story with us.

BS: Is there anything else you'd like to add to it?

WP: I don't know of anything else that would be of real importance that other people would like to know about.

BS: That's okay.

WP: I got surveyed, out of the service—at first, they sent me out after being in this army hospital that long, rheumatoid arthritis, sent me out and gave me a ten percent disability.

BS: Okay.

WP: I challenged it about three months later, I challenged it at [*the Veterans Administration, North Little Rock*], Arkansas and they awarded me forty percent. I got that forty percent through the teachers' college. Got a job as teacher and I thought it was great that I could make it, a four-year college in three years' time without any high school.

BS: Yeah, not bad. Did you teach?

WP: I taught for three years. I found out I wasn't a good teacher.

(Laughter)

MH: Well, Mr. Poe, we've all heard about the plane that came down and hit the [naval] hospital, at the point, it's an honor to meet the man who shot it.

WP: Thank you.

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF INTERVIEW