

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#422

WILLIAM REY

USS *PENNSYLVANIA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY COMMANDER BILL SCULLION AND KAREN BYRNE

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

FEBRUARY 5, 2003

USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Bill Scullion (BS): All right. This is oral history number 422. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Bill Scullion for the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C. and Karen...

Karen Byrne (KB): Byrne.

BS: ...Byrne for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001 at 7:22 p.m. The person being interviewed is William John Rey who was a seaman first class on the USS *Pennsylvania* on December 7, 1941. Did I get that right, Mr. Rey?

William Rey (WR): I would say so, yes.

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

WR: William John Rey, New Orleans, Louisiana. I was born, boy...

BS: That's okay.

WR: 3-22, 3-11-22 [March 11, 1922].

BS: And what did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

WR: New Orleans, Louisiana.

BS: What were your parents' names?

WR: William John Rey and Alma Ada BO-DEE.

BS: How many brothers and sisters did you have or do you have?

WR: We have, my brothers was Lewis, Peter, George and my sister was Alma.

So three brothers and two, one sister.

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

WR: FOR-CHAY, Louisiana.

BS: Where and why did you enlist?

WR: Well, it was the Depression at that time and I couldn't get into anything else. I was delivering prescriptions from CAT-IN-BES-OFF in Louisiana, New Orleans, Louisiana, for five cents a package. So I tried to get into the CCCs [Conservation Civilian Corps]. The CCCs would not accept me because I was making too much money, like twelve bucks a day. And so I thought I would try the navy and I joined the navy.

BS: Where did you join the navy?

WR: In New Orleans, Louisiana.

BS: And when was that?

WR: 4-8-40 [April 8, 1940].

BS: Filling out all those forms, right?

WR: Sorry?

BS: 4-8-40? Was that from filling out all those forms?

WR: Yeah.

BS: Okay.

WR: 4-8-40.

BS: Where did you go to basic?

WR: At San Diego.

BS: And when did you get to the USS *Pennsylvania*?

WR: Well, about eight weeks after that, after the basic training.

BS: Okay, so you joined her in San Diego?

WR: What's that?

BS: You joined ship's company in San Diego?

WR: No.

BS: Okay, where did you join up?

WR: In Hawaii. They sent us on the aircraft *Enterprise* to, from San Diego to Hawaii. But you know, at that time, all this crap about stuff, they had signs in San Diego, "Sailors and dogs stay off the lawn," in 1940. So anyhow, that was there. And then I went to Hawaii on the *Enterprise* and I went aboard the USS *Pennsylvania*.

BS: What division were you assigned to?

WR: Fourth Division.

BS: What were your duties?

WR: Actually gunners' mate striker at that time.

BS: What was life like on the *Pennsylvania*?

WR: Well, I enjoyed it very much. There was a lot of things I'd like to tell you, but at this time, I don't think I will. We went across the equator about that time, right after I joined the *Pennsylvania*, and President Roosevelt's son was aboard the ship and he was a marine. Franklin Roosevelt. And we went across the equator and I guess he, he was a big man and he, I imagine, thought that he was pretty tough but they beat the living heck out of him, going across the equator. And I think they might have put him in place.

BS: (Chuckles) I would've enjoyed that. (Laughs)

(Laughter)

WR: I'm a shellback now. I've been across the equator.

BS: Oh, I got my card too. We can compare later.

WR: Okay! (Laughs)

BS: I've got the scars on my knees to prove it.

WR: Yeah! (Laughs)

BS: Let me ask you a question we've kind of been asking everybody else. What were you doing December 6?

WR: December 6, boy. I don't think much, really. I, December 6, I was just staying aboard ship. That's about it.

BS: And where was the ship located at that time?

WR: Well, we had a peculiar situation. Admiral Kimmel was on our ship, the *Pennsylvania*, and we went Dock Ten-Ten.

BS: In the dry dock?

WR: No, no. Just hold on a minute.

BS: Okay.

WR: We went Dock Ten-Ten on Saturday and it seems as though the engineering officer at that time said we should go and get our rudder or propellers repaired. And I guess the Japanese spy, Aiea, called in to Japan that we were at Dock Ten-Ten. But that was on a, like a Saturday or so.

BS: Like a week before?

WR: No, not a week before. A couple days, no.

BS: Okay.

WR: And we moved the next day into the dry dock. And so they didn't have time enough to report to Japan that we had moved. And then the *Oglala*, *Helena* moved into our spot there. So it's hard to explain all this stuff but anyhow, we went into dry dock. And during the attack, they did attack the *Helena* and the *Oglala* at Ten-Ten. And we didn't get too much over at the dry dock. We did get one bomb, armor piercing, that came in and hit us and killed about twenty-nine on our ship, *Pennsylvania*. And lucky it hit the five-inch breach of a gun. And if not, it would've gone down to our magazines and it would've exploded into the same thing as the *Arizona*, but lucky it hit that breach of the five-inch fifty-one, which are broadsides. So we were very lucky in a lot of respects.

BS: Okay, Mr. Rey, let's talk about your experience, personal experience on the *Pennsylvania*.

WR: My experience. (Chuckles). I'd like to say...

BS: Well, on December 7. Let's just keep it narrow.

WR: Yeah, December 7. I'd like to say these things really. I was reading the paper and naturally I was making twenty-one dollars a month. I'd like to say I was reading the stock market report, but I wasn't. I was reading the funny papers! _____. I didn't have enough money to make the stock market.

So anyhow, I was reading the paper and all of a sudden the explosion went off and somebody said, "Oh, they're dynamiting out in the channel."

And so that didn't really bother me too much. So about a minute later, another explosion went off and it was close to our ship so it kind of shook us a little. And somebody said, "It's an earthquake! An earthquake!"

That kind of caught my attention. And so I went up to the topside and there, when I went up the topside, I could see explosions over on Battleship Row, on that side. And then I could see the Japanese planes coming very low, fifty feet or sixty feet high, coming in to those Battleship Row, mostly, not to our ship.

And about that time, our bugler was supposed to blow general quarters.

Well, he was blowing chow call, liberty call. He was just blowing as far as I was concerned. He was confused.

And so about that time I figured, well, something's going on. So I went to my fourteen-inch guns and I was a loader. I wasn't the main loader but I was the assistant loader...

BS: What turret was that?

WR: On the fourteen-inch gun. So I went back there and we loaded the fourteen-inch guns. The order came to load the fourteen-inch guns, which we did.

BS: Which turret were you...

WR: Four, Turret Four.

BS: Okay.

WR: I was in the Fourth Division. So about that time, something came over that to unload the fourteen-inch guns. Now, I don't know if you know too much about the fourteen-inch guns and the silk powder bags, but when you unload those things, it makes you pucker. It was terrible. I didn't, I was there helping unload it but when you do that, it's a very _____, it's, well, anything can happen. (Snaps fingers) A spark could go off and that's the end of everybody.

So we unloaded and then they told us to go, our turret, to help wherever we could help, 'cause they were not going to shoot the fourteen-inch guns. So they told us to go—we were in dry dock and the *Cassin* and *Downes* was in front of us. And they got blown all to bits.

Then they told myself and our Turret Four to go down to the dry dock—they put a rope around me and lowered me down with another rope to tie on the bodies. And they'd pull 'em up. And so that's what I did.

BS: How long were you doing that?

WR: Half an hour, I guess.

BS: Okay.

WR: In that respect. And after that, after I got all those bodies from the *Cassin* and *Downes* out, we came up and they said, well, go into the compartment where the bomb had hit the *Pennsylvania*, which killed about twenty-nine marines mostly. We had the five-inch fifty-ones which are broadsides and that's where that bomb hit. So with that, they took me up there and said, "Clean up this situation,"—I don't want to use the word mess but situation and they gave me a shovel, a wire brush, and a scraper and I shoveled up the bodies and put 'em in buckets. And then on the bulkheads, we took a scraper and a wire brush to clean off all the very small particles of bodies.

And it just—that's about what I did that day.

BS: Okay and that was after the second wave, the clean-up process?

WR: It, yeah.

BS: Okay, that was afterwards, yeah.

WR: Yeah, I can't really remember. First wave or second wave, I don't remember that too much.

BS: Were you in Number Four Turret the whole time of the attack?

WR: No, no.

BS: Okay.

WR: After we took, after we unloaded, they told us to go clean 'em up, you know, do this other job.

BS: During the attack?

WR: During the attack, yeah. Yeah.

BS: Okay.

WR: But we're down in the dry dock, did that, and then after that, go clean up this other bunch, the marines in the five-inch fifty-one.

BS: Okay. How many people helped you with that duty?

WR: I don't know. I really don't know.

BS: Okay.

WR: We just did it.

BS: After that detail was done, did you take time to look around the harbor, to see what was going on?

WR: Maybe I did. I can't remember. Really, the only thing I can say at this time, about 11:30 they told us to have lunch. And they had sandwiches and an apple and soup! Okay. And oh boy.

After we finished eating the apple, the lunch, the sandwiches and the soup, naturally when you make soup, you make it very early in the morning. And this cook that was doing the soup, it was hit, the bomb hit around there and his arm went in the bottom of the soup. Well, when it got to the bottom of the soup they said they found his arm so it took me about twelve years to be able to eat what I call soup. So that's about it.

BS: Okay. Now, do I remember correctly that the *Pennsylvania* was a sister ship of the *Arizona*?

WR: Yes.

BS: Did you see the *Arizona* after the day?

WR: Sir?

BS: Did you see the *Arizona* after the attack?

WR: No.

BS: No. Don't really recall anything about that?

WR: No, as far as, it was quite a ways away from us. We were at dry dock on this side and they were over here.

BS: What about the *Cassin* and the *Downes*? Did you see anything over there?

WR: Well they were right in our dry dock, the *Cassin* and *Downes*. And the *Shaw* was a little over in another dry dock...

BS: Right.

WR: ...type.

BS: Was the dry dock flooded at some point during the battle?

WR: Yes. Yes, it was. Yeah because as the oil came out of the *Cassin* and *Downes*, it caught on fire and it was making our powder go on fire. It was getting too hot and so they flooded the dry dock.

BS: What's the best memory you have about serving on the *Pennsylvania*?

WR: Hmm. I enjoyed the *Pennsylvania*. I kid around a lot about having ice cream, you know. The strawberry, vanilla and chocolate, if you ran out of chocolate ice cream, we'd come back in the port. That's only kidding around. I mean, but it was a good ship. And Admiral Kimmel, you see, I was standing about ten feet away in June, I guess, when Admiral Kimmel changed command of Admiral Richardson. And Admiral Richardson, he told Roosevelt that this Pearl Harbor was a death trap and it seemed as though Admiral, President Roosevelt didn't like that, so he changed Admiral Richardson and gave command to Admiral Richardson, Kimmel.

BS: Kimmel.

WR: And I was standing about ten feet and Admiral, at the change of command, and Admiral Richardson told Kimmel, “This is a death trap. Keep the fleet out.”

And I would say from that time on, Admiral Kimmel kept the fleet out, two-thirds out, one-third coming back in to recreational and refueling and stuff like that. And he did that from June ‘til about November.

At around, being on the flagship *Pennsylvania*, naturally the radio operators and that, they get information and the scuttlebutt was the Japanese fleet was out! Look and they are going out. And so I knew that in maybe November, as a seaman, so I imagine what the Admiral and President Roosevelt knew a little more than I do, I hope! But anyhow...

BS: What was the scuttlebutt about where the Japanese fleet was going?

WR: I didn't know that. They didn't know. They just knew that the Japanese fleet was out. Now, here's another thing, Commander. In 1937, they had war games.

BS: Yeah, I'm aware of those.

WR: And, yeah, okay. I'll go with this if you don't mind. And in 1937 this group came up—I don't know who was the commander or captain—said the best way to attack Pearl Harbor was to go up north because we always send our planes out to the west. Go up north and come down from the north and be on a Sunday morning at eight o'clock in the morning, church and a lot of other things. And the Japanese people followed that plan! So I don't blame 'em. If that's the correct way to do it, that's what they should do!

So anyhow, and I'm just a seaman, you know. So...

BS: Yeah.

WR: I don't know too much about that junk but we have the same thing today.

Really. I live in Arizona. We have one of the most powerful nuclear reactors in Arizona. Now, do we tell these people how to come in there and attack that nuclear reactor, in Arizona, like make out that you're covered wagon or something like that on a Thursday, or some Saturday? I don't know. But the same thing, crap is the same thing. And we should be aware of that. And history as far as I'm concerned, history is his story. And 2000 years ago these people said, "What's going on?" and we don't understand history. And history repeats itself to a certain degree and people should be aware of this.

Now, like the *Cole* over there. If I was a commander of that damn destroyer, I would not have, I would've had my motor launch out there, 100 feet, 200 feet with a machine gun. You're not going to come close to my ship!

BS: Yup. Mr. Rey, I'm going to turn my, turn some questions over to Ms.

Byrne. Byrne. Ms. Byrne wants to ask you some questions.

KB: Just a couple more questions then we'll let you go.

WR: Sure.

KB: When, after 1941, when was the next time that you were at Pearl Harbor? Is it this trip?

WR: After '41?

KB: Yeah, after '41.

WR: Phew. Maybe I came back after the war. You mean, en route, back? I was at Okinawa. Another thing too, on the *Pennsylvania*, we were at Okin—I wasn't, I left the ship—but the *Pennsylvania* was at Okinawa in the last day of the war. And that ship, the *Pennsylvania*, was supposed to be the ship to sign the surrender because they wanted to show the Japanese, here's an old battleship over here and you're going to kowtow to it. The last day of the war, in Buckner Bay in...what that was? It was hit by a kamikaze at that time. And so the *Pennsylvania* said, "Hey, we can't take that ship to Japan."

President Truman said, “Hey, send the *Missouri*.”

And that was a little history type of thing. At Buckner Bay...

BS: Okinawa.

WR: Okinawa. And so things happened like that. But the *Pennsylvania* was supposed to have the signing ‘til she got hit the last day of the war in Buckner Bay in...

BS: Okinawa.

WR: ...Okinawa. I put about forty-eight years, I can’t remember that name! I was on _____ at that time.

BS: Okay.

WR: On picket duty out there.

BS: Okay.

KB: So this is the first time you've really been back to visit?

WR: Not here.

KB: Not here?

WR: No, I was here, I think, a couple of times.

KB: Okay. Okay. Have you been out to the *Arizona* Memorial?

WR: Yeah, I was out there yesterday and very touching.

KB: Hard to go out there?

WR: Yes.

KB: Tomorrow is the...

WR: And I think when I—I'm eighty years old now and it's really, I think back if I was nineteen years old and I was dead or snuffed out, whatever you want to call it, I wouldn't have had a wife and five kids. My whole life would've been just a different thing. So I really think of that lately.
_____ where you get to this age.

KB: Right. So when you go out there, it makes you really feel grateful for what...

WR: Oh yeah.

KB: Yeah.

WR: Oh yes, definitely. And to see the oil coming out the *Oklahoma* and there's still bodies in there, yes.

KB: Since 1941, have you ever really talked about your experiences at Pearl Harbor?

WR: Yes.

KB: You have?

WR: Oh yes. I've been, Arizona, and we go to schools and we make speeches and talks and tell them about Pearl Harbor. And it's really a shame that history is not being taught in school. And because it does repeat itself to a certain degree. And President Bush is coming out with some certain program for veterans to go and talk into schools and I'm going to write him and tell him about our program in Arizona and the talks that we do. Because I think they should know that people, like I told you before, history repeats itself and it's—like this last thing with the [Osama] Bin Laden.

BS: September 11[, 2001 terrorist attack on U.S.]

WR: September 11. Okay, he sent these people over here months ahead of time on a credit card. They stayed in motels. They went to Boston, took the plane on credit cards. Traveled across the country, timing. What time did it

leave Boston? What time would we be in New York? Stuff like that. It didn't cost him hardly anything. The plane, full of gas, ran into the towers. It didn't cost him anything! So that whole procedure when it happened, didn't cost him too much.

Now, I just came back from Russia in June. And when I got back home in June, I got a call from my credit card, "Mr. Rey, you know somebody's spending a lot of money in Russia. Were you there?"

I said, "Yes."

Now, the crap that they can do for me, a little peon, check on me and all those people spending that big money, they can't do that. The other thing is, I came into Arizona, Phoenix. My wife bought some caviar over in Russia. One can, like the size of the damn tuna can. When we came through, she put down that caviar. Went through the guy, the last thing he asked is, "Do you have any food?"

We said, "No."

All of a sudden he hit the ceiling! “What do you mean? You’ve got caviar!”

And he really put us through the third degree because I’m a blonde, blue-eyed profile. And these goddamn—excuse me—these other people, if they get caught, they scream, “Oh, they’re profiling me!”

Well, they profiled me! And I’m not—okay, I have no problem with it, if they do that. But these other people get away with crap and it’s about time this stuff stops to a certain degree.

If we’re Americans, we’re Americans. And I’m not afraid of somebody listening to my phone calls, my cell[ular phone], tel-cells or what the hell it is. I don’t do anything wrong but if they want to listen to it, fine. And these other people say it’s against our something, I don’t know.

BS: It’s okay. I think we’ve got another question for you.

WR: Okay.

KB: Just, I just want to follow up with you, going out to the schools. That's obviously good for the students to be able to hear the stories of what happened during the war, but has that been a good experience for you? Has it helped you to go out and talk about it over the years?

WR: I don't know if it really helps me. Yes, I like to tell my story if that's the answer. But I went to a juvenile prison.

BS: Detention center?

WR: Huh?

BS: A detention center?

WR: A detention center for juvies, from nine years to fifteen. And after I got talking, these kids, one, at the age of twelve, came up to me and asked me, "How does it feel..."

END OF INTERVIEW