

#250 WILLIAM RODDA
USS *NEVADA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 5, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial at the Sheraton Waikiki, December 5, 1996 at 1:50 p.m. The person being interviewed is William Rodda, who was on the USS *NEVADA*, December 7, 1941.

Art, for the record, would you state your full name please?

William Rodda (WR): William Arthur Rodda.

MS: And where were you born?

WR: Marinesco, Michigan.

MS: And what's your birth date?

WR: March 25, 1921.

MS: Very good. All right. What was your hometown in 1941?

WR: Sutter -- Sutter, California.

MS: Sutter, California, okay.

WR: It was 1923 we moved out there.

MS: Wow. Almost pioneer. (Chuckles) Well, that's beautiful country out there. Now you joined the Navy when?

WR: October 10, 1939.

MS: And, why the Navy? What happened?

WR: Where I worked, you only got about twenty-five cents an hour and mostly agricultural.

MS: My gosh.

WR: So I told my mother, "There's going to be a war," the history teacher taught us that in school or told us that. I told her I had to get in the Navy so I wouldn't have to be in the infantry. I didn't want to be in those trenches.

MS: (Laughs) Besides the Navy has good food, huh?

WR: Yeah.

MS: (Laughs) So really, economics kind of helped to make your decision for you.

WR: Yeah.

MS: And where was boot camp?

WR: Where was what?

MS: Your basic training.

WR: Oh, San Diego, California.

MS: San Diego, okay.

WR: Yeah. It was eight weeks.

MS: Eight weeks. Did you tolerate it? Was it okay?

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: Yeah. How about the discipline? Was that pretty tough?

WR: Oh yes. It's different. (Inaudible)

MS: I bet. I bet. "Yes, sir. No, sir," huh? Now, did you get a ship right after?

WR: Yeah. I went on board the *NEVADA*. We got ten days' leave. I went aboard the *NEVADA* December 20 . . .

MS: And where was . . .

WR: . . . of '39. Long Beach Harbor.

MS: Oh, she was at Long Beach?

WR: Yeah.

MS: Okay. So you really didn't have that far to go.

WR: No.

MS: Now, that was before the fleet moved to Hawaii, wasn't it?

WR: Yes. We come on Hawaii May [1940] it was supposed to be a six-week cruise and we stayed seven months.

MS: (Laughs) A bit of a difference.

WR: We kept wondering were we ever going to get back to the states or not.

MS: Yeah. Yeah. So did you enjoy Hawaii as a port? Was it a good place to be?

WR: I can't say that.

MS: No. (Laughs) You didn't have good liberties and such?

WR: Oh yeah. We got liberty but didn't have much money to spend.

MS: Well, what was your rate?

WR: I was seaman first class when the war broke out.

MS: Okay. Okay. And where was your battle station on the . . .[NEVADA].

WR: Trainer, number four turret.

MS: Oh, okay. You guys, you were firing those big guns . . .

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: . . . and you didn't have a chance to use 'em on December 7.

WR: We took all our ammunition off Saturday.

MS: Oh. You ever put new ammunition on Sunday?

WR: [*We were going to put new ammunition on Sunday.*] We didn't have any ammunition, any projectiles.

MS: You didn't?

WR: Just the dummy projectiles is all we had.

MS: Did you have a ship come up and then pull a load off on Saturday?

WR: Yeah we unloaded all day Saturday we spent taking the main batter ammunition off.

MS: I'll be darned. Do you happen to remember what that ship was or . . .

WR: That took the ammunition? Oh, no. It was probably just a barge come along side. I can't really remember.

MS: Okay. Yeah, you're probably right. Well, so you were working all day of the sixth. You didn't have . . .

WR: All day Saturday, yeah.

MS: Yeah, you didn't have any leave or . . .

WR: And we had to bring 'em back on Sunday. We gotta work Sunday too.
[*We got Sunday off normally.*]

MS: Oh.

WR: We were loading up, getting new projectiles.

MS: Where was your place that you slept?

WR: In the fourth division, right back in the fantail.

MS: Oh, so you're really close to your battle station.

WR: Oh yeah, yeah.

MS: Now, what was the routine? What time did you guys normally get up on the weekend?

WR: We get up five o'clock in the morning.

MS: Every -- no matter what day it was?

WR: Yeah.

MS: Five o'clock in the morning?

WR: That was reveille.

MS: Phew. (Chuckles)

WR: Yeah, regardless what watch -- or some of the mid-watch, they got to sleep in. The twelve to four watch. But there was so much noise; you couldn't really sleep anyway. The guys are, you know, going back and forth around you.

MS: Did they actually blow reveille with a bugle or . . .

WR: Oh yes.

MS: Okay.

WR: And we had a bosun mate, a man named Tucker. Man, he used to come down through there and he used to come down there and make everybody get up.

MS: (Chuckles) No doubt it was time to . . .

WR: The bosun mate of your division (inaudible). No problem about that. You got up.

MS: (Chuckles) Or else.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Were you in a hammock?

WR: No, we had bunks.

MS: Did you have bunks? Okay.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Did the *NEVADA* have anybody still left on hammocks at all?

WR: No.

MS: I know that a lot of (inaudible) were still switching over on some of the ships.

WR: Yeah.

MS: The . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes)

(Background conversation)

MS: So you were up at five o'clock on December 7?

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: And did you have your breakfast?

WR: Oh yeah. I had breakfast, yeah.

MS: And what were your duties about the time, just before the attack occurred. What were you doing?

WR: I was back in the fantail and I guess we'd already swept. We had to sweep the decks every morning and all that good stuff. But the band was playing the national anthem right across of the catapult from me. And then again, I was standing there saluting colors. They would've quit playing the last note, you know. You could hear these explosions and machine gun fire behind us and I was saluting, going like this.

(Laughter)

MS: Peeking over your shoulder, huh?

WR: I turned around and looked. A torpedo plane come right down through and dropped [a] torpedo. I said to the guy next to me, "Didn't that guy drop a torpedo?"

He says, "Looked like it."

And we stood there like dummies and pretty quick, the plane come right over me. You could see that it was Japanese. It was close. And torpedoed the ship. I thought it was the *ARIZONA*. They said the *ARIZONA* didn't get a torpedo. It must have been the *WEST VIRGINIA*.

MS: They're not sure about the *ARIZONA*. They're still some debate there.

WR: But I thought sure it was the *ARIZONA*. The *VESTAL* sat along side of them, but the *VESTAL* was shorter. It might've been the *ARIZONA*, but it could've been the *WEST VIRGINIA*, but . . .

MS: So there was no doubt in your mind that these were Japanese and it was war.

WR: We went to the battle station right then, number four turret. Hollering out to the guys down [on] the shell deck, and hollering down to 'em, "The Japs are attacking us," and of course I can't say the words they used, what they said.

(Laughter)

WR: They didn't believe us and well, in just a few seconds, the loudspeaker come on and said it wasn't a drill and that the Japs were attacking us. Then they believed us.

MS: So you had a general quarters that was a verbal battle stations or did you . . .

WR: It come over the loudspeaker they had sounded the alarm. And just some drills, but as soon as they sent the alarm that day too, of course. And with those guys, we got in the turret and told them before the alarm went off, they wouldn't believe us. They just started giving us these pet names and stuff.

(Laughter)

MS: Yeah.

WR: But they (inaudible) understood what we said.

MS: So that story about the *NEVADA* band continued to play until the very last note is quite true.

WR: Mm-hm.

MS: Did they seem like they were kind of hurrying things up a little bit before?

WR: I don't know if they did or not really. But they could see, I guess. Boy, they jumped up and took off running too, as soon as they got through. That plane went over. I mean, it was so darn close you just -- you could see the pilots, you know. You could tell it was Japanese.

MS: Right over the top of you?

WR: Yeah, they just going like, you know, an angle. And you could see the red ball there and everybody knew what it was as soon as you seen 'em. It's too late now.

MS: Yeah. Did you happen to notice, by the way, what the band did? Did they carry their instruments with them or they . . .

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: . . . they carry 'em off to their battle stations?

WR: They took off running with their instruments, yeah.

MS: Well, now, so you were basically in your battle station within seconds . . .

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: . . . of that moment. What next? What happened next?

WR: We got in the turret and you can't see nothing. We began to look out through the sights. See, I was a trainer, so I could. But we go on up there where they -- hollered, "Get away from there."

Their men had put the caps on, they couldn't see nothing. We just sit there, just like being in this room.

MS: And hear all the banging going on outside and wondering what in the world is going on.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Did you . . .

WR: Of course every time we got hit, the ship would shake and stuff that people had put up on different places come tumbling down. People like maybe laid a wrench up somewhere and forgot it, or a nut or a bolt.

MS: That was dangerous in its own way, huh? So you were certainly feeling it when the ship was hit?

WR: Oh yeah. Yeah, it would just rattle and shake, every time we got hit.

MS: Which was a few times.

WR: Yeah.

MS: And then you guys got under way.

WR: Yeah.

MS: And you were still in your battle station.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Okay. Did you feel that there was a good sign that you were able to move?

WR: Yeah, but you're wondering if any minute one might come right through where you were sitting.

MS: Yeah.

WR: Of course, you wouldn't have known it anyway.

MS: That's probably true.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Did you know that when you guys grounded, you know, after you kind of came around the corner there, and the captain said you . . .

WR: The captain wasn't aboard ship.

MS: Oh well. The person giving the orders at the time, he said to go ahead and ground, did you know that was happening?

WR: No.

MS: No. Did you have any idea then what in the heck was going on outside other than just rumors or . . .

WR: Yeah, they had over the inter-- they had those headsets, you know. The guys with headsets could tell us.

MS: Oh, okay.

WR: Yeah.

MS: So you were just kind of getting word of mouth what's going on out there. Then, after you guys grounded, how long did it take you to be told to go away from your battle station?

WR: Oh, I got told to go up on the boat deck and fight fire. That was, I don't know when it was actually. I couldn't tell you.

MS: But it was much later.

WR: Yeah.

MS: After you grounded.

WR: I think it was after we was grounded. Although the tug was along side of us, it was squirting water around us too. And I don't know if we was grounded then or not, really. I can't . . .

MS: So you went up on which deck to fight . . .

WR: Boat deck.

MS: On the boat deck.

WR: Yeah. And then the water quit running, we lost pressure.

MS: Oh, it did.

WR: What?

MS: It did, I didn't realize that.

WR: Yeah. The tug *HOGA* kept squirting [*water*], you know, putting fires out, but the hose I had, the water quit coming out of it.

MS: So what did you do then? Just have to drop the hose and get out of the way?

WR: Well, the raid was, I guess, practically over by then anyway. Still some guns were firing, but I think they had already -- most of 'em had left.

MS: So, did you regain the ability to fight fire with that hose, or . . .

WR: No.

MS: No. So, what'd they put you to work doing next?

WR: We started hauling the dead guy's back to the fantail.

MS: Yeah.

WR: (Crying)

MS: You want to take a break for a second?

(Long pause)

MS: We can take a break for just a second. We can do that. That's okay. We'll get you some water and some Kleenex, that'll help you a little bit.

WR: See, I didn't want to do this.

MS: I know.

WR: (Inaudible)

MS: It's difficult to relive that time, isn't it?

WR: I'm afraid I'm not going to be able [to] handle it, that's why I didn't want [to] do it.

MS: Yeah.

(Long pause)

MS: The whole complexion of the operation changed pretty quick when that happened, when you had to start taking some of your mates back to the fantail, huh? Everything kind of changed, I mean.

WR: Oh yeah.

MS: Things got real personal real quick, didn't it?

WR: Yeah.

MS: And I assume you knew some of those guys pretty well?

WR: I didn't know 'em personally. I knew their faces. You got -- we had a restroom in the back. They called it the head back in the fantail there and they'd come through there everyday, a lot of 'em.

MS: Yeah.

WR: And we seen most of the guys aboard the ship everyday. We don't know their names, but some of 'em we knew, but not -- it was about -- it must have been about close to a thousand guys on there. You only knew the ones in your own division personally.

MS: Right. Those were floating cities, those battleships, weren't they? So did you lose anybody in your division?

WR: No. No.

MS: So you guys were okay.

WR: The boat deck, the fifth and sixth divisions, the ones that lost most of 'em. That's where the bomb hit, up there back of the anti-aircraft guns.

MS: Yeah, they got really hit hard, didn't they?

WR: Yeah.

MS: So you had a pretty unpleasant thing that you had to do. Did that take the majority of the rest of the day, trying to get that, the casualties off and the guys that were killed in the back there?

WR: Yeah.

MS: The bodies transported off. Did you have any time to stop and slow down for a second and realize the things that were going on? Is that when all this whole thing started to kind of hit you?

WR: (Inaudible) two or three hours afterward [*when*] you realized that things really happened like that.

MS: And you didn't know what was going to happen next, did you?

WR: No, not really. We thought they were coming back. They should have, actually. They could have really pounded us if they'd come back.

MS: Did you guys have any inkling that the Japanese were going to do anything like this?

WR: Oh, we heard there was going to be war with Japan someday, but we didn't know it was going to be like that, start off with that.

MS: Yeah. Especially in Hawaii, huh?

WR: Yeah.

MS: So, it was a pretty long day for you guys. I know you probably worked awfully hard.

WR: Yeah.

MS: What was some of the duties that you had that evening and the next day?

WR: Well, we started manning the guns. One of the stations where the cane field was, five-inch -- anyway, those five-inch guns on broadside. We would sit there [*on*] gun watch on them in case they did invade, we could at least shoot, you know. We could still shoot those guns, in case they come by land.

MS: Was there any effort to bring ammunition on board for the big guns?

WR: No, they were useless. You couldn't have possibly done it.

MS: Okay.

WR: Couldn't have used them anyway.

MS: No, that would have been a tough one.

WR: Yeah.

MS: So how long did it take for you guys to get off of that point there?

WR: We got to shore with one of the motor launches.

MS: Oh did you?

WR: Yeah. We missed dinner.

MS: But you didn't think much about that, did you?

WR: Yeah. See, I called it supper yet. I'm a real old-fashioned guy.

MS: That's right. You had some dinner and then you came back to the ship?

WR: Yes. I went down to the turret and laying down there after dark, and all of a sudden, all hell broke loose up there. I went up to see what was going on. Our own planes coming in from the *ENTERPRISE* and they shot some of those down.

MS: Did you see them coming in then?

WR: No, I was down below decks trying to sleep.

MS: Oh, I see. So you . . .

WR: And heard all this shooting and I hurried up and got back up on top side and these planes coming off the *ENTERPRISE* and everybody opened on'em. They had their running lights on too, but they must have gotten -- they was gun happy by then, some of 'em, trigger happy.

MS: Did the *NEVADA* open up too?

WR: Yeah. Some of the guys did, yeah.

MS: Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it?

WR: Yeah.

MS: So you got a little bit of sleep that night?

WR: Yeah.

MS: And then, what about the next day?

WR: We started having these gun watches on the side, broad side, facing the cane field.

MS: Oh, just to kind of hold, continue that.

WR: Just in case they did invade, be able to shoot back at 'em.

MS: And then you guys were towed to another point across the way, weren't you?

WR: That was that tug, the one that's still left that they're trying to save.

MS: Yeah.

WR: It pushed us over there, up high and dry or up in the mud and keep from sinking in the channel.

MS: When was that?

WR: That was right during the attack.

MS: It was during the attack? Okay.

WR: Yeah.

MS: And then, were you with the *NEVADA* for the next . . .

WR: No, I got off the tenth of December.

MS: Oh, did you?

WR: Yeah.

MS: Where'd you go then?

WR: Went to the *ST. LOUIS*, light cruiser.

MS: Oh.

WR: They scattered us guys. They put us of on different ships, the ones that wanted to go. And I remember they said [*no*] petty officer just a seaman to step forward if they wanted a new ship. So most of us [*did*] stepped forward to get a new ship. But anybody third class or higher, they didn't take them yet.

MS: They had to have them around.

WR: I guess. They probably transferred them, you know, maybe the next day or two. I don't know about that.

MS: So, did you like the *ST. LOUIS*?

WR: Well, it was different.

MS: Very different from a battleship, isn't it?

WR: Yeah, and then we just slept whenever you could. I hadn't took my clothes off for about a month. You just lay on the deck wherever you could find a place to sleep. [*We took our clothes off long enough to shower and put clean ones on.*]

MS: The *ST. LOUIS* sailed pretty soon thereafter.

WR: Oh yeah, we went to the states. We went back to the states the sixteenth of December and got a -- there was an ocean liner. I don't know exactly which line it was. We took some Marines down to Samoa. We got back in Honolulu, Pearl Harbor, Christmas Eve we was there. And we had to stay at gun watch all night, in case the Japs come back. You know, it was Christmas Day. And then, we took off and went back to the states New Year's Eve. I got liberty New Year's Eve in San Francisco.

MS: Hey, that's a pretty good leave.

WR: Yeah. Yeah, I got back and got to go on liberty New Year's Eve.

MS: But you still missed a battleship?

WR: Yeah, I did. Yeah.

MS: Did you get back on one?

WR: No. I never did.

MS: Did you finish the war with the *ST. LOUIS*, or . . .

WR: Oh no. I was on there til April-- they shipped a bunch of us guys to new construction.

MS: Oh, okay.

WR: I got [*the*] old President Jefferson, they called it. The USS *HENRY T. ALLAN*.

MS: Yeah.

WR: And then we went -- we was in Aloha Tower when the Midway battle was going on. We sat up over here from Honolulu Harbor when the Midway battle was going. And then we went through the canal and went on [*the*] African invasion.

MS: Oh, okay.

WR: Yeah.

MS: Okay. Well, that European Theater was quite different than the Pacific Theater, wasn't it?

WR: Yeah. We headed for Africa and didn't know if it was going to be friendly or not. Of course, the Vichy French, I think it was, they fired at us a little bit. We got shelled a little bit by some old shore battery over there. But they didn't hit nothing luckily.

MS: Well, Art, it's been fifty-five years since that tough day that you lived through and you're back again.

WR: First time was in '64, I was over here, in January it was.

MS: So you haven't been back since '64?

WR: No.

MS: Have you had a chance to go out to the harbor?

WR: Yeah, I was out there yesterday.

MS: Okay.

WR: We went out to the harbor in '64. Went out there and just In them days, we come out, left the port here and went around, come in Pearl Harbor, went around Ford Island. We just tied up along side the Memorial. We didn't go aboard it.

MS: Oh, okay.

WR: Yesterday we got to go aboard it.

MS: Great. Great. What kind of feelings do you have about all that now? I mean, do you think about it or now that you've revisited, what do you . . .

WR: Oh yeah. You think about it everyday. (Crying)

MS: Is that some of the toughest memories of the war?

(Pause)

MS: If you had something that you'd like the young people, the kids that aren't even born yet, if you'd like them to learn a lesson from Pearl Harbor, if you'd like them to remember something, what would that be? What do you think you'd like them to know about all this?

WR: The way they're teaching them now, it was our fault.

MS: Well, we got to stop that, don't we?

WR: Yeah. Even I had a neighbor that used to tell me it was our fault, and he was about forty years old. Said we shouldn't have dropped the atom bomb, we should have done it some other way. Kill about another million of us.

MS: You think the atom bomb was a smart decision, then?

WR: Certainly. Best thing they could've done. They didn't have enough of 'em.

MS: So you have your grandkids, or kids that haven't been born yet. What do you want 'em to know? What's the lesson in Pearl Harbor to you?

WR: Well, they're going to drop their guard again if they don't straighten up. They don't seem to have any responsibility or care about anything, these young people.

MS: So you think the old adage to stay alert and keep America alert is . . .

WR: Yeah.

MS: . . . is that the lesson? Very good. What do you think about the Japanese these days? What's your feeling about them as a people or as a nation?

WR: Well, as I understand, they're teaching their kids that we was the bad guys and they were the good guys. They teach that, I believe, over there. That's what I've heard. Of course, I don't know for sure, but . . .

MS: They don't talk much about Pearl Harbor.

WR: Oh, they don't want to talk about it.

MS: No, they don't talk much about it.

WR: In fact, you see 'em looking at us here and you can tell they -- you know, you see 'em on the street wherever you go. And I don't think they like us.

MS: Well, do you have any animosity at this point?

WR: I don't care for 'em, I tell you that.

MS: You don't.

WR: I don't trust -- well, maybe I shouldn't say this, but I don't trust Orientals.

MS: (Chuckles) You say what you want to say. This is your interview.

WR: They'll bow to you and then you turn your back, you might have a knife between your shoulders. That's what I feel about it.

MS: Is there anything else that we haven't touched on, any other things that you'd like to tell us or any other memories you have that we didn't cover?

WR: Not just offhand. I just saw all those dead guys laying up there on the boat deck. (Crying)

MS: Yeah. Well, Art, you know, I know this was kind of tough for you and I got to tell you, we really do appreciate you sharing your feelings and memories with us because this is very important for us to know and for future generations to know about. So we'll do our best to keep the memories alive and thank you for your help and your sacrifice to make all this possible. We appreciate it very much. Thanks Art.

END OF INTERVIEW