

#221 WILLIAM TANNER: KANEOHE NAS

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller. It's December 8, 1991, at 11:40 a.m., and we're here at the Waikiki Park Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. We're speaking with Mr. William Tanner. Mr. Tanner was ensign in Patrol Squadron Fourteen, flying out of Kaneohe Naval Air Station, on the faithful December morning in 1941. Mr. Tanner was twenty-five years of age and an Ensign in the United States Navy. Mr. Tanner, I'd like to thank you very much for joining us today and I'm sure we'll have a real interesting talk.

William Tanner (WT): Well Steven, it's a pleasure being here.

SH: Thank you, sir. Let me start off just by asking you briefly how you decided to join the Navy.

WT: Well, I grew up in San Pedro, California, with all the battleships out in the bay in those days, and so I was kind of oriented that way. A lot of the kids that I went to school with had parents that were on those ships, and I guess I kind of had a Navy background. After I finished college, I, people were beginning to get going to flight training. Some of my fraternity brothers had gone into the Army Air Corps, others into the Navy, and it just seemed like a pretty good idea to me. I wanted to fly and I applied for Pensacola and went down there to get my flight training.

SH: How did you get assigned to patrol work?

WT: Well, what happened, in, in those days, I went down there in 1939, about the middle of the year, and the war was heating up in Europe to the point where the United States decided that they needed to speed up flight training in order to get more aviators into the mill. And so the curriculum at Pensacola, that is the normal one-year flight training curriculum was reduced to about six or seven months. And whereas in the old days, everybody got both fighter training and big boat training, and torpedo training, and all that sort of thing, they began then to, to give us three, three weeks, three months of basic training, and after that you were told which branch of the service you were going to go.

So in my case, about the question of choice or anything else, I, I was moved onto patrol planes, and got that training, and naturally got assigned to a patrol squadron.

SH: Did you like flying the Catalinas?

WT: Well, it was all right, but I think most of us, at that time, would have preferred to be in a fighter.

SH: Where did your career take you from then and how did you get to Hawaii?

WT: As soon as I got my wings, I was issued orders to Patrol Squadron Fourteen, a PBV squadron based in San Diego, California. I went out there and that, that was about the middle of 1940 and early in 1941, our squadron was ordered to move in toto -- that is, the whole squadron moved from San Diego to be home ported at Kaneohe Bay, which had been a newly established Naval Air Station here on, on the island of Oahu.

SH: That must have been a particularly long flight for you out there. How long did it take?

WT: Yeah, that was. That was interesting. It's kind of funny, looking at it now, when you fly out here in five hours. Our first flight took us over twenty hours. I believe it was either twenty-one and a half, or twenty hours and a half. And in order to do this, we had to have extra fuel in the, in, in tanks that were put in the fuselage of the airplane.

SH: All right. When you got established at Kaneohe, what was the, the normal mission routine like, and what specific kinds of missions would you be assigned to? Close in work versus long range search, that sort of thing.

WT: Well, actually, we, we, we had the same kind of training that, that any patrol squadron would have. We, we did some bombing. We practiced with submarines occasionally, if we were lucky enough to get one. And learning how to make passes and detect submarines which are diving and through us out, and we were, developed tactics to do that. We were training new pilots. Occasionally we would fly a long range patrol, more or less for navigational purposes more than anything else. They were not really regularly scheduled operational missions at that time. And on the other hand, the one, toward the, toward the, about the time the war began to get eminent, I mean, when we began to get word that we might be in hostilities, we began to fly regular patrols around the islands. Three -- go ahead there.

SH: Excuse me. I didn't mean to interrupt but I was thinking in terms of as war became eminent, I was curious about the directions of, of the patrols. Of course, I'm driving at, towards the north. Did you ever go towards the north, where the striking force did come in, or did you always head south?

WT: No, we, we didn't really. We didn't specifically fly toward the north looking for anything. I mean, the few long range patrols we had like that -- and I'm now talking about going out five or six hundred miles training and seeing if we could get back and navigate properly without using radio gear. But we didn't go on operational missions out there looking for anything, any hostile elements of anybody's Navy.

SH: You personally didn't. Did you ever have any knowledge that other flights like that were ever, were sent out.

WT: No, no, I didn't.

SH: Okay. Well, why don't we start to close in a little on the, the events of December 7. Of, when the war warning message of, I believe it was November 27, was, was received, did that affect your normal operational routine in any way?

WT: Well, yes, it did and I, Steve, I'm not sure whether we weren't already doing this before the message you talk about. I recall the message.

SH: So that got down.

WT: Yeah, it got down.

SH: The word actually got down that, to the level that something different was in the air.

WT: It got down to the point where, where, on these patrols that we had every day. Every day, three airplanes went up and searched close to the islands. Not long range patrols, but about five-hour patrols in and around the island chain. And the purpose being to identify all the shipping in the area. And in addition

to, to show that we were really expecting something, we had live ammunition on the airplanes and we had depth charges. And we were ordered on those patrols that if we encountered a submarine, anywhere on our patrol, that was not in a designated submarine sanctuary, that we were to attack that submarine. So we were, you know, we were alert for, for a hostile activity, and we knew that, that something could happen.

SH: On the morning of, then on the early morning of December 7, what -- well, let's see, what did you do the day before? Anything out of the ordinary or the night before? You were getting up awfully early that morning.

WT: Yeah. I don't think, I don't recall what we did, but I, I don't, we must have gone to be pretty early because we had to get up at 4:30 or five to take off around six o'clock.

SH: Did an orderly come and wake you up? You had an alarm and shook yourself out?

WT: I didn't, no orderly. I, as a matter of fact, I guess we just had alarm clocks. That's as I recall it.

SH: You were in the barracks or officers' quarters? You were on base?

WT: Yeah. No, no. I was, heck, I was married and living ashore, but I, I don't really recall whether we were required to be on the base the night before. I think we probably were at the BOQ, and you're probably right. Somebody did awaken us to make sure we all got off at the right time.

SH: So this was in the, in the dark, of course. Why don't you just sort of describe, you know, the, the events as best you can recall that, leading up to your take-off and the early parts of that, the mission on that day.

WT: All right. I don't really recall any specific events, you know, before we got on the airplane and departed. There wasn't anything that wasn't completely normal about that, because we had done this before. But anyway, we took off at about six o'clock, six o'clock in the morning, about the time it got to being daylight. Three airplanes, that was the assignment, three airplanes every day from one or the, any one of the particular patrol squadrons in the area -- and there were six of them. One patrol squadron was assigned to duty that day, and this was VP 14's turn to fly the three patrols.

So the three airplanes took off that morning, at about six o'clock. Now, would you like me to describe my, my theories, my . . .

SH: Oh, very much so, please.

WT: All right.

SH: Very much so.

WT: My, my airplane, we had an assignment to circle the island of Oahu counterclockwise, just about a mile or two off shore. In other words, we leave Kaneohe on the, on the northeast side of the island. We pass, fly off shore, past Kahuku point, then around to the, toward the, toward the west, or to the western side of the island, Kaena Point. Finally, down around Barbers Point and then the patrol took us along the south shore of Oahu, then after that, over past the south shore of Molokai, south shore of Maui, circling Lanai, to the

right, and going further south, and returning on a, on a parallel path to the one that we took going out, but about twenty miles, or twenty-five miles at sea, toward, toward Oahu. Now, that was the assignment.

We, we rounded Kaena Point and Barbers Point, and as we approached Pearl Harbor, we could see the supply ship *ANTARES*. We didn't, at the time, we weren't sure what it was, but it was a U.S. ship, and a destroyer, the *WARD*, and in very close proximity to the entrance to Pearl Harbor.

SH: Excuse me.

WT: Go ahead.

SH: Sorry to interrupt at this point, but it makes me curious to know, did you get any kind of information about ship movements -- you're implying, you're implying not -- at a pre-mission briefing?

WT: I, you know, Steve, I don't recall anything about being briefed. We may have been, but I don't recall it. But it was obvious to us that these were, you know, there wasn't any problem with them.

SH: Okay.

WT: We recognized them as American ships.

SH: Okay.

WT: And as I say, the *ANTARES* appeared to be heading toward the entrance to the harbor, and I think maybe two miles from the entrance. The *WARD* was to the westward, and appeared to be heading in that direction, just more or less leisurely, as though she were observing what was happening. And then, as we progressed a little further, and they came further to the east, we detected a small object in the water that, at first, looked like a buoy.

SH: Who in your crew detected the object?

WT: It was either, it was either detected by me or my co-pilot, and I don't remember. I was sitting on the, in the left seat, and the co-pilot in the right seat.

SH: What was his name?

WT: His name was Don Butler.

SH: Okay.

WT: And we, one of us saw it, and we, I flew the airplane over toward the object. The object was closer to the entrance of Pearl Harbor than the, than the *ANTARES*, as I recall. I've heard a lot of different stories now about exactly where the ships were.

SH: Sure, we want to know what you saw.

WT: But in any event, the *ANTARES* wasn't aware, nor did the *WARD*, but I wanted to find out what this object was. As we got closer, very close, you know, within a quarter of a mile or so, and heading directly toward it, it became

obvious that it wasn't just a buoy or anything like that floating in the water. It was a conning tower of, of a small submarine.

SH: How high up do you think you were at that time?

WT: Oh, we were very close at that time. I mean, we must have been down around two or three hundred feet, just heading directly toward it. When we became aware that it was a conning tower, we obviously knew that we had a problem of some sort. And on that pass, since we were extremely close, we were able to drop two smoke pots. These are -- they emit smoke and they, they show you the location of anything you drop 'em on. And we dropped these smoke pots very close to the submarine. And in the direction that the submarine's conning tower appeared to be taking the submarine, and that is toward Pearl Harbor.

So the two smoke pots, and then we turned left in a, in a quick left turn to, to come back and make an attack on the submarine. Since the submarine was definitely in, in an unauthorized area.

SH: So you literally . . .

WT: I turned . . .

SH: . . . circled around?

WT: . . . turned left as quickly as we could and gained a little altitude there to come back and drop the bombs on the submarine. Now as we turned, we could see the *WARD*, at this time now, who had been maybe a half a mile away when we saw it, something like that. The *WARD* was now heading toward these, this object at full speed. I mean, she was really cranking it up. And as we, the turn progressed, we could see the *WARD* firing her three-inch guns at the, at the conning tower. The conning tower, at the time the *WARD* was firing, firing at it, was still showing on the surface. They had the smoke pots.

Now, then as we, as we continued our turn, the *WARD* had now closed very close to the submarine, and as we were about to complete the turn, and remember, I'm on the inside of this turn all the time, so I can see it all the way around. As we completed the turn, going around to the left, I could now see the *WARD*, which had already fired the gun, had now passed over the position where the submarine had been, and I believe at about that time, the submarine's conning tower had now disappeared under the surface. The *WARD* passed over the smoke pots, where the conning tower had been and dropped a big salvo of, of depth charges.

Now, when we saw this, we were armed and ready to go and we completed our turn and flew right down the path that we had had the submarine on, headed toward Pearl Harbor, and right over the, the, the, the explosion of the *WARD*'s depth charges, and dropped our four charges.

SH: As you're describing this, you sound -- well, let me just ask you rather than ask a leading question. Just, what was your, what was, what was going through your mind at the time when, when you were doing this?

WT: (Chuckles) Well, I'll tell you, Steve, I've been asked that question many times and I'll have to, I've got to admit that despite the fact that we were doing what we had been directed to do, and despite the fact that the *WARD* was doing what she had been directed to do, there was some, a little bit of concern. As a matter of fact, during the early part, when we first sighted it, in, in

retrospect, this is ridiculous, because we didn't have any submarines that small. But I didn't really know that at the time. One of my first thoughts was that when it became not a buoy but the conning tower of a submarine, why would a submarine be at that height in the water. Why would they, I wondered if it's a submarine in distress. And I wondered if the *WARD* had seen the same thing and is going over there to see if she can assist. That, that entered my mind. But when the *WARD* started firing, you know, I forgot all about that. And after the attack was completed, I was still concerned. Now, this is seven o'clock, this is, you know, this is an hour before anything really happened, and I've got to admit, it never entered my mind that this might be the precursor to something, the obvious and awful thing that happened an hour later. But that didn't enter my mind at all.

SH: Surely you sent off a . . .

WT: Yes.

SH: . . . a report at that time. That was done by key and in code. Is that correct?

WT: It was keyed and encoded. That's right. That's how we did everything that way and again, and in retrospect, it would have been great if they had known everything that was going to happen. A plane landed, it would have been wonderful, you know. Now, we sent a coded message saying, "Sank enemy submarine, one mile south of Pearl Harbor."

That message got to our headquarters and they immediately asked us to all authenticate the message, which is the system whereby they, they make sure it's sent by one of their airplanes, as opposed to somebody else's.

SH: How did that, how did that work, sir?

WT: Well, it's a coded thing that only we would know, only a U.S. force would know how to authenticate the message they sent to us. We did that and they told us then to stay in the area and, and report any further developments.

SH: Did you see or relate in any way to any of the other two PBYS that were operating over Oahu at the time?

WT: No, those, now that's, those two PBYS were on different, they were on similar assignments, but in different directions.

SH: Right.

WT: So they were, they were fast in taking that elsewhere. Pierson was in one of those in airplanes.

SH: Right.

WT: George Pierson, he was the co-pilot on one airplane. And I, but I don't remember exactly where their tracks took them, but a similar type thing, but in a different direction.

SH: Yeah, but you don't recall seeing them.

WT: No. No, they wouldn't, they weren't there. There weren't any other airplanes there. We, we, we did observe the *WARD*, of course, in the immediate

area, staying there. And of course, I know now that the, the *WARD* also sent a message to, to headquarters, reporting the same thing.

SH: Was there any other unusual activity that you observed between the time you dropped the depth charges and the time you noticed something very unusual was going on?

WT: No.

SH: Why don't we just work our way into that?

WT: No, as we, as we flew around, you know, maybe for fifteen minutes or so, in response to their direction to, to, to remain and report, they were, you know, we didn't notice anything.

SH: When did you notice something?

WT: Well, then what happened shortly thereafter, fifteen minutes later, they told us to resume patrol, which we did. And as we, as we were somewhere out near the end of the patrol, rounding Lanai or somewhere like that, we began to get all these messages indicating that we've got a war going on.

SH: You said they told you to resume patrol. That was Ford Island?

WT: Don't ever -- my base, Kaneohe base.

SH: Your base, Kaneohe. And the messages that you referred to that made you know something unusual, was that just sort of chatter that you picked up?

WT: Oh, it was chattering. It was more or less chatter, more than, than anybody sending us a specific message.

SH: Right.

WT: It was messages from various places that the radioman picked up and said, "Hey, we've got a war."

SH: What did you observe around the time of the raid?

WT: Well, the only, the thing we observed, because about that time, we were, we were south of Oahu, maybe fifteen or twenty miles. We had almost completed the, the, about ready to return to base. And we could see smoke and that sort of thing. And about that time, we received a message, and about that time, we were wondering, "Hey, how are we going to for another -- we can't go into Kaneohe Bay if all these things are happening."

And about that time, we were told by our base to search -- the three plane, now this was directed to all three airplanes -- three airplanes worked in a squadron -- "Search to the west and north of Oahu to the limit of your endurance."

This meant that we had to divide that ninety degree sector into three thirty-three sectors. Fly in the midpoints of each thirty-three sector, as far as we could go and then return to -- you know, far as we could go, before returning to base.

SH: Approximately what time did you get the order to, to go out on the search?

WT: At, to the best of my recollection, it was right around nine o'clock, or, or somewhere about that time. And we went on the search and in my case, since I was further south and furthest west and, again, I don't recall exactly where the other airplanes were, but my sector was the westernmost sector, from two hundred and seventy degrees west through three hundred degrees north. And so I flew on that heading all day, about five hundred miles out and returned at about 4:30 that afternoon.

SH: What was going through your mind on that, that long search?

WT: Well, we, it was pretty obvious from the traffic we had received that it, it had been a Japanese carrier attack. And you know, I wondered and we all wondered, I'm sure, how soon are we going to start the task force. And that's what we were sent out to do. Try to find the Japanese fleet and report it.

SH: You came back to Kaneohe then, I assume?

WT: Right.

SH: What did you see then?

WT: There was a, an awful lot of damage. I mean, everything was even worse than we had anticipated from what we had picked up on the radio.

SH: Do you recall any of the reactions of you or the crew, or the people on the ground, when you got in?

WT: Well, they, they, it was a, it was kind of total devastation. I mean, it was very horrible. I mean, you know, everywhere you look, I mean, the airplane that had been on the ramps were, were just totally inoperable and this is, you know, five or six hours, or eight hours after the attack is over. Everybody was busy trying to get things cleaned up and all that sort of thing.

SH: What personally did you do at that point?

WT: Well, we, as I recall, we, we landed and we had the beaching crew was able to get us back on the beach. And the other two airplanes landed about the same time. And I don't recall too much about that night, except that it was pretty hectic. And the next morning, we took our three airplanes, which were completely operable, of course. And I think we had two other airplanes that had not been damaged. Flew those to Pearl Harbor, to Ford Island -- or they had two or three airplanes that were not usable, or that were usable. And we took those six or seven airplanes and flew 'em twenty-four hours a day, by rotating crews, out of Ford Island, looking for the fleet. And, and nothing happened, of course. We never did find 'em.

SH: I think we only have a few minutes left. Could you describe your subsequent wartime career? What happened to you after you, well after the attack and after you did these patrols on VP-14?

WT: Well, shortly after that, immediately after that, we went to the South Pacific. I think the squadrons were all going to fly there, but later I was assigned to a squadron in, in Alameda, in 1942, that had the latest anti-submarine warfare equipment on it.

SH: What kind of equipment was it?

WT: It was called, it was called A-S, it was called MAD equipment, which is magnetic airborne detection equipment. And that equipment is still being used, I noticed the other day, at Barbers Point. The idea is that it's a magnetic and that you fly close enough to the surface of the water and the submarine is close enough to the surface, you get a signal, you're able to track 'em and sink 'em.

In any event, we had the latest equipment at that time, when we were, we were sent to England. And flying out of Pembroke dock, which is in Wales, on the south coast of England, I was unfortunate enough in looking for German submarines to run into some JU 88 fighters and then, and was shot down.

Following that episode, I had a normal job, after the war. I had decided to stay in and I had the normal jobs. I later commanded a couple of patrol squadrons. And I, in air station, and had another tour of duty out here in Honolulu, at the headquarters of the commander-in-chief of the Pacific fleet. I guessed I had a great time in the Navy. It was a wonderful life.

SH: When you look back on the events of December 7, what's your most vivid memory of that day, and can you sort of paint a little word picture about that?

WT: Yeah, I, I guess the most vivid thing that I can recall is that I, I think we were all amazed at the audacity of the Japanese to do something like that to the United States. We couldn't get over the fact that anybody that was thinking at all couldn't, couldn't help but wonder why in the world -- even though they were strong, they could fight pretty good, even though they were, had run, overrun southeast Asia -- why in the world would they deliberately provoke us into a war? And even though the attack was completely successful from their viewpoint, they, they created terrible havoc. I mean, they made the mistake of, of getting the United States into the war and they sort of made a bad mistake. And that's, I think, what we thought about that day, "How could they do this?"

SH: Do you have any, do you have any reflections or, upon that event, from the perspective of fifty years?

WT: What do you mean, about why they did it or, or . . .

SH: Oh just -- I'm not quite sure, I guess just is there any change in your feelings about the audacity or the kind of sense of the attack, or, or your, perhaps your feelings towards the, you know, Japan, and the, after fifty years.

WT: I'll tell you how I feel about it. I, I, we were surprised and we shouldn't have been, because we were alert. We knew that war was a possibility. And my feeling is that we shouldn't have been surprised, and therefore, and I think, I think the President said this so beautifully yesterday, that, "As we get ready to reduce our nuclear stockpiles," and that sort of thing, what we've got to do is to make absolutely positive that as we reduce our armed forces, that we keep the capability, in our intelligence community and our diplomatic community, and in our military, to really dig out these things anywhere in the world, and to respond immediately, whether we do it preemptively, or whether, rather than waiting for something to happen to us. And I think the other, the bad mistake we made is underestimating a big country and a country with a lot of capability. Now, we've got a lot of small countries around now that have some capability, and they've got, some of them have got leaders that are, are crazy. So we even have to worry about those guys, not just the big, big country with a great military.

SH: Well, I'd like to thank you very much for sharing your time with us. It's been a very interesting interview, and it's been a real pleasure, indeed an honor to be speaking with you.

WT: Steve, I'm, I've been delighted to do it.

SH: Thank you, sir.

WT: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW