

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#297

WILMER FAUSTNUS BAILEY

15TH PURSUIT GROUP, WHEELER FIELD, SURVIVOR

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 7, 1998
BY JEFF PAPPAS**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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

Jeff Pappas (JP): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 7, 1998, at seven p.m. The person being interviewed is Wilmer F. Bailey, who was stationed at Wheeler Field on December 7, 1941. Mr. Bailey, for the record, would you please state your full name, place and date of birth?

Wilmer Faustnus Bailey (WB): My full name is Wilmer Faustnus Bailey. Born February 15, 1921 in Hamburg, Pennsylvania.

JP: Did you grow up in Hamburg?

WB: I grew up in Hamburg. I lived there 'til I was nineteen years of age. I volunteered, went into the army and somehow or another I was lucky enough, they had openings in Hawaii and I was shipped to Hawaii and I was thankful for that.

JP: Well, that's...

WB: Because the other group that went with me went to the Philippines. Some of them never came home after the Japs hit the Philippines.

JP: Well, let's stay in Hamburg for a while. I want to get to know a little bit more about you and your hometown.

WB: I wanted to get out of it. (Chuckles)

JP: (Laughs) Why, were you—you disliked Hamburg?

WB: Well, I didn't want to be a steel worker like my stepfather was. I didn't want to be a farm boy all my life either.

JP: Was that the assumed vocation if you lived in Hamburg?

WB: Around there. Well, there were knitting mills, but you had to know somebody to get aboard that. They had a plow works and all kinds of foundries there, both iron and special metals. And it was one way of getting out of town.

JP: Well, just locate Hamburg for me in Pennsylvania.

WB: It's—if people remember Reading, Pennsylvania, Luden's cough drops. Allentown, Pennsylvania is to the east and Harrisburg is to the west.

JP: So it's near Wilkes-Barre, Scranton.

WB: It's south of Pottsville and Wilkes-Barre is quite a bit farther north.

JP: Okay. But you didn't like, obviously, you were a bit frightened about the prospect of becoming a steel worker.

WB: Well, I just didn't want to be around home any more. I just wanted to get out. I bummed around a lot during the depression days. Go to New York City, Philadelphia, Harrisburg. And I wanted to get out and see a little bit more of the world. And I was more or less introduced to the Hawaiian Islands by one of the neighbors who worked on one of the farms there. He spent a hitch in Hawaii with the pack train up at Schofield Barracks. And one of the things he said, "That's a good place to go, but god, don't let 'em know that you were a farm boy."

JP: What's a pack train?

WB: Well, they had mules there and they used 'em for packing, you know, over the hills, supplies.

JP: So he was a civilian packer?

WB: No, he was in the army. He spent three years in the Schofield Barracks with the pack train.

JP: I see.

WB: Because he was a wrangler, if you want to call it that.

JP: Yeah.

WB: Muleskinner, or I don't know what they call it. But he spent three years of his time in Hawaii with the pack train.

JP: Very good. And he had told you stories about Hawaii.

WB: He told me stories about it and he says, "Don't let 'em know that you're a farm boy."

JP: Why is that?

WB: Otherwise I could've wound up on the pack train. So I did something better when I got to Hawaii. On shipboard, when I left the States, I happened to be in the part of the U.S. Army transport *Republic* that was pulling guard duty. And a couple of the boys were pretty old previous servicemen. They were sort of military and they talked about the military police. And when we got to San Francisco, I thought it over. I had a chance to go to the Philippines because they were looking for volunteers to go to the Philippines. I said, "No, I want to go to Hawaii," I signed up for Hawaii and I went there.

JP: Okay.

WB: And from San Francisco to the Hawaiian Islands, I was on that guard unit again.

JP: Well, let's go back to Hamburg again. Tell me a little bit about your father, his full name and his occupation.

WB: Well, my father—I'd rather not discuss that part. I mentioned my stepfather though.

JP: Very good.

WB: My stepfather, his name was Wink. And he was an electrician. He worked at the Hamburg Sanatorium in that part where they took the electricity and manufactured electricity. They had big units there that—pumps and whatever they did to run the dynamotors and made electricity for the Hamburg Sanatorium. And he had a leave there before Pinchot went out of

office and he wound up back in the steel mill. He had worked in the steel mill before he got this job.

JP: Of course, Gilford Pinchot happened to be the first forester, United States forester.

WB: Yeah. But he was also the governor of Pennsylvania.

JP: Also the governor of Pennsylvania, correct.

WB: And when the change of politics come along, there were a lot of fellows that lost their jobs in these nice places because they had other people that...

JP: Now, a change of politics...

WB: Yeah.

JP: Are we talking here about the Wilson administration or are we a little bit further into the 1920's?

WB: No. It was Duff that came in. Governor Duff came in.

JP: I see.

WB: I think it was Duff. I'm not quite sure. I don't remember just who came in. But Pinchot went out.

JP: And Pinchot, of course, was Republican.

WB: Yeah. And he had a beautiful mountain home not too far from Hamburg, out on the Ontelaunee River. And he was a very good-natured man. He was in the forest area of the mountains of Pennsylvania, had a beautiful place there. And it was just one of those interesting things that, how you fall err to things.

JP: Now back to your father though.

WB: Well, my stepfather, I got to working in the steel mill because they'd call in extra men when they changed the lining of the furnace. And it was manual labor. And I'd get on, I'd get a couple of hours of extra money that way, by going in and helping tear out the lining of the old furnace and somebody else would come in of course and re-line it with brick so that the metal wouldn't can come through there.

JP: Now, were you doing this during high school?

WB: After high school.

JP: After, so you already graduated.

WB: No, I never graduated from high school.

JP: That's right. You told me that.

WB: I never graduated from high school which was, sort of hurt me a little way too. I didn't particularly like the idea that I hadn't graduated from high school and I wanted to go to high school. But during that time we needed all the money we could get.

JP: Was that the primary reason for leaving school...

WB: Yes.

JP: ...was to support the family financially.

WB: Well, I helped.

JP: Yeah, yeah.

WB: Because I worked on farms that could handle horses and I handled horses. I could work horses other people couldn't. And this is why this one fellow had spent time in Hawaii, he said, "Don't let 'em know that you can handle horses."

And so, oh boy, what a deal that was. When I was going—after I got in the service, I did help take horses because right on my papers, it said that I was a farm boy. So I had a job one time of taking horses that had come in on the ship, on the transport, and take ‘em to Fort Hamilton.

JP: But it seems to me though, that...

WB: I had no problem with the horses. Heck, we just walked on the...

JP: Well, but the farm boy, let’s say, title doesn’t really, or didn’t really suit your particular skills though. You had been working in the mills at the time.

WB: Well, just part-time. That was just...

JP: I see.

WB: ...a couple of hours a month.

JP: So you had been working on the farms?

WB: Yeah. I worked on the farms. Before I went in the service, I also worked in a battery corporation for Price Battery Corporation, which had moved into town during the depression days, set up and hired a lot of us boys there. And I liked that. It got me away from the mills, as far as that goes, the steel mill, is concerned.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: And I was glad to be away from that.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: And then when I did get to go into the army, I soft-peddled the farm boy business. They knew that I had worked in the battery corporation. That was the last job I had before I went in the service.

JP: Well, tell me about that now. Why don't we move into your military career? When you decided to enlist in the service and what was the reason for you doing that?

WB: Well, part of it, I wanted to get away, leave the situation at home. I figured I could do something better somewhere else. A lot of us did that. It wasn't just a cut and dried thing. A lot of fellows did that, went in the service, did things like that. In fact, this fellow living in Colorado right now that is going back to California, where he got his degree and a few other things. His family is there, he and his wife's family live there and he grew up across the street from me for a time. He went in the navy after I went into the service. And surprising we met each other a couple of years ago in Grand Junction, Colorado, because he'd moved into Colorado. They wanted a new home or wanted to get somewhere where it was comfortable and cool. They moved there and I was surprised.

But anyway, a lot of us, there wasn't anything really to do there around town any more. The broom works was just picking up again with the old-timers. The knitting mill had their regular old-timers there and their sons or people that were in the family could go move right into the jobs. To get out of town was about the best thing. I could've gone to work in Reading probably or in Allentown, but they had the same problems there too during the depression days. A lot of people just out of work.

JP: Yeah.

WB: So that was the best thing. Besides, twenty-one dollars a month and clothes to wear and a place to be.

JP: Well, with your knowledge, knowing Mr. Pinchot, had you thought about joining the Civilian Conservation Corps?

WB: I was too young and my stepfather was working. So I couldn't get into that. Now I had an uncle who got into it. In fact, here in Nevada, Hawthorne, Nevada.

JP: Yeah, sure.

WB: And you know the place?

JP: I do.

WB: (Chuckles) He was on the Cat Creek Dam project.

JP: Okay.

WB: Does that ring a bell too?

JP: Well, I'm stationed at Yosemite. I'm not very far from Hawthorne.

WB: I'll be darned.

JP: Yeah.

WB: But anyway. I had tried to get into the Three C's [Civilian Conservation Corps], but I couldn't because my stepfather was working. I was living at home at the time. I wasn't living away from home, so that kept me from getting into it. I thought, well, if I can get into the army, okay.

But it wasn't that I wanted to get into the army right away. I first filled out papers for the navy, for submarine duty. I went to—I had an operation. I had a rupture operation. And I went to Philadelphia. I hitchhiked to Philadelphia. I went to the navy. I told where to report to customs house. And I went up there and the navy doctor checked me over and he says, "I can't take you for what you want to get into." He says, "They closed the doors on me, otherwise I'd let you go home for a couple of weeks and let you report to Groton Connecticut after two weeks are up."

JP: You had a rupture?

WB: I had a rupture and I had to have it...

JP: Which is a rupture of?

WB: Well, it was the varicocele rupture.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: And it was one of those things, I couldn't lift things too well, because it strained me. It pulled on my gut muscles. And I couldn't spread my legs because of the rupture, and bend down instead of out. Anyway...

JP: We had—many of your navy colleagues and friends have told us today how difficult it had been to enlist in the navy.

WB: Yeah.

JP: In the late 1930's.

WB: Anyway, I went back home and I went to the recruiting office and I told the navy man, "Well, they didn't accept me because I wasn't physically ready yet. Two more weeks, I could've probably gone."

JP: Yeah.

WB: But I walked right across the hall to the army recruiter because this one farm fellow had told me about Hawaii. I thought, hmm, let's go. So I went in there...

JP: So you didn't want to wait the two weeks to enlist in the navy?

WB: I wouldn't...

JP: You opted for the army instead.

WB: I went in and filled out the papers and went to my parents to make sure my stepfather, my mother, made sure all the papers were straight. And I reported back to the same customs house.

JP: This is in Philadelphia?

WB: Right across the hall from the navy, I took my oath into the army.

JP: In Philadelphia?

WB: In Philadelphia. And then from there to Fort Slocum, New York. And then to Brooklyn Army Base and from there, shipped across through the Atlantic down to the [Panama] canal, up to San Francisco for Hawaii.

JP: Well, let's stay in New York here for a few minutes. We've heard today and yesterday about navy boot camp, but we haven't heard many army veterans tell us about boot camp.

WB: Well, we didn't have any of that really there.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: What little training we had was just to get us in uniform and a little bit of drill work. But there again, I snuck out of a lot of things. The fellow that was with me, and I said, "Look," I said—I knew what the National Guard was like at home. And my stepfather was one of these fellows that, "Look, do your best. Volunteer."

And I said, "No volunteer."

He says, "Volunteer. Don't be afraid of the nastiest job that comes along. Volunteer." He says, "You won't be in it long."

And the National Guard boys said the same thing. So when I got to Fort Slocum, I met one formation in one morning. In fact, two of 'em. I shouldn't say just one formation. And he called. He called off our names to go K.P. That was one of the first jobs, first morning that I was out there, going down the alphabet and, boom, was with a "B," I'm right at the top of the list.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: I got into the mess hall and the mess sergeant or the bull cook—I don't know which any more—he says, "I need two fellows for pots and pans."

I raised my hand. I'd worked in a restaurant or in a diner, so pots and pans was not too unfamiliar with. And my buddy looked at me and he said, "What do you mean?"

"Let's do it."

We did pots and pans that one day. We were out of the kitchen at three o'clock that afternoon. We had one chore to finish. We did some potatoes and we had to clean the garbage cans. And the mess sergeant came around, he says, "You fellows did a mighty fine job."

And that taught me a lesson, this guy believed me from then on. The next day, the—well, whatever, the sergeant in charge of our little group, he called us out. He says, "Do you know anything about running a coal furnace, a stoker?"

I said, "Yeah," because we'd had some there in Hamburg and I'd been around them so I knew how they operated.

He says, "Well, I got a job for you. You have to keep the furnaces in top shape, keep the hot water. You have to get up and be ready at four o'clock in the morning to start 'em up and make sure the water's hot," and that's all there was.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: The rest of the time, he and I were at Fort Slocum, except where we had to go physicals and things like that. We took care of the furnaces in our building until we got on the little tugboat that took us across and over the railroad down to Brooklyn Army Base.

JP: Hmm. So from Slocum you went to the Brooklyn Army Base?

WB: Brooklyn Army Base. Now, at Brooklyn Army Base, the first detail I was on, I volunteered for, was spittoon detail.

JP: Can you repeat that?

WB: Spittoon detail.

JP: Spittoon detail.

WB: They were big brass pails or buckets. No, they were dishes, if you want to call it that, with a nice, sloping center to it. Big, black mat around the outside. And my buddy just about kicked me in the you-know-what.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: We did that one day.

JP: What is that?

WB: We had to clean those spittoons and polish 'em. We washed 'em. We took 'em into the latrine, scrubbed 'em down, polished 'em and put 'em back on the floor where they belonged, because everyone, a lot of fellows chewed and they were crummy.

JP: Chewed?

WB: Tobacco.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: SNOOZ.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: And we cleaned those up. The lieutenant came through on an inspection. He says to the sergeant that was in charge of us, he says, "You got something else for these boys to do?"

He said, "They did a good job."

He says, "We've got other fellows that need to do that too."

JP: So now, so basically you continued to volunteer for the most despicable sorts of details.

WB: I never pulled K.P. in those times.

JP: Hmm.

WB: All the other guys finished, except for that one day, when we did the pots and pans.

JP: Now, what did you think you'd get from all of this? Did you...

WB: Just, I didn't know whether we'd get into trouble or not, but we wound up as orderlies.

JP: Trouble? Why would you get into trouble though? You were doing a good service.

WB: Well, I know of other fellows that volunteered for things and wound up doing it for a long time.

JP: (Chuckles)

WB: Whether they did it good or not, I don't know.

JP: Right.

WB: I can't—but we got out of it after that one inspection, the lieutenant.

JP: So how long did you stay at Brooklyn?

WB: We were there two months.

JP: Mm-hmm, and now this is when...

WB: Because...

JP: ...what year is this now?

WB: This is 1940.

JP: Okay.

WB: July 1940 and August, well, August of 1940 and September 1940. In August, strep throat went through. And I wound up with about fifty other fellows going to army hospitals in the area for strep throat. The group that I was with wound up in Fort Totten, and all they did was feed us water and little white pills. That's all I could remember anyway. I was hungry and bored. They just—they wouldn't give us any food for a whole day.

JP: Now, this afternoon we had heard from a navy person that they had taken his tonsils. They had removed his tonsils, along with him—his and everyone else.

WB: I had no problem with that.

JP: Did they do that in the army?

WB: No, never did that I knew of.

JP: Okay.

WB: So we were shipped over. We were supposed to leave, I think, I think it was on the [*U.S. Army transport*] *St. Mihiel*, but we were in the hospital when embarkation day came and so we didn't go.

JP: Now, what was your rank at this time at Brooklyn?

WB: A buck private as you could ever have. As lowly as any recruit in the army. We were still considered as recruits.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: Well, on shipboard then we played around and because we were guard company, no K.P.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: I don't know, just lucky. I guess you can call it lucky all the way down the line.

JP: Yeah.

WB: But while we were in the, after we finished the spittoon detail that one day, the next day we reported to the orderly room and the sergeant gave us little jobs to do, carry papers here, there to the cooks and around the building. And the major happened to come in and he said, "Say, these guys look like they could clean my saber."

So he hauled out his saber and I swear that that major hadn't cleaned that thing in years. It was bad. But by the time this other guy—one of us worked the saber and the scabbard and we worked back and forth doing parts of it. When the major came in, he looked, pulled that saber out of the case, the scabbard, he looked at that. He says, "That's better than the day it was issued to me."

So we felt good again. We did the right thing. We did our best to make that shine all the way through.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: Well, that's—we got passes. The afternoon, we were free to go to Coney Island. We'd go up to New York City and Manhattan. Then we'd have a ball because noontime, after all the little chores were done, we were free to go. And the one day that we took the horses down to Fort Hamilton, we caught the—it was up topside then, it wasn't underground, the tube then. We got back to Brooklyn Army Base. We had the weekend off.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: So I hitchhiked back to Pennsylvania. It was about—oh, it took me about three hours, I guess, four hours maybe to get home. And it was only a little over 120 miles from Brooklyn Army Base.

JP: Now, when did you first hear about going to Hawaii?

WB: Oh, about a year before I went in, before I actually went in the service. I worked with the guy on the farm.

JP: I mean when you were in the military though, when you were at Brooklyn.

WB: Oh.

JP: Did you hear about your orders to go to Hawaii when you were at Brooklyn or...

WB: That's what I signed up for. I had orders to be shipped to Hawaii. That's what they did to us.

JP: So eventually you were going to go to Hawaii.

WB: I was going to go to Hawaii.

JP: Okay.

WB: The only place that I ran into a little bit of trouble was in San Francisco, because they wanted volunteers to go to the Philippines. And all of us raw recruits, we were told by the previous servicemen, "Don't go to the Philippines."

JP: Okay, so you had left, at this time, you had left Brooklyn.

WB: Yeah.

JP: And you're now stationed in San Francisco?

WB: No, we stopped off in San Francisco at Angel Island. The repo depot, or if you want, the replacement depot for overseas transshipment, if you want to call it that. That's what it amounted to.

JP: So Angel Island was an army base?

WB: Yeah. And we docked at Fort Mason and they tugged us over to, past Alcatraz, I finally saw the rock.

JP: Mm-hm.

WB: We got over to Angel Island and...

JP: You also saw the Golden Gate Bridge?

WB: We saw the Golden Gate Bridge and we were still lucky enough. This buddy and I, we finagled a pass. I don't know how we did it. We got it anyway, to go to Treasure Island. The Golden Gate Exposition was still on in 1940. I think it was the last year that it was showing. And he and I saw Sally Rand, the fan girl, and we saw a bunch of good acts that were going on at that place. We even got into the *Folies Bergeres*. And that was going big and strong at that time.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: We had a blast for that afternoon that we were off. We got back to Angel Island everything was fine.

JP: Well having been from Pennsylvania, you had spent some time in Philadelphia and New York and now you're in San Francisco. Can you compare the cities for us?

WB: It was too big.

JP: Both?

WB: New York City was bigger, there was no two ways about it. But San Francisco, all we did was get off of the tug that brought us into Fort Mason and they told us what streetcar to take to get down to—well, we went all the way across the first part of the bridge. I remember going on the bridge. And got off and went to the island. At that time, it was still—I guess it was navy property then already. But they had Treasure Island, it was used for the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition.

JP: Exactly.

WB: I guess the Golden Gate had opened up just before that or something like that, so they named it the Golden Gate Exposition.

JP: So how long was it from that point 'til you arrived in Hawaii?

WB: Five more days after we left Angel Island. And there again, why we all wondered what was going to happen. Of course, the infantry, all of us were scheduled infantry, unassigned. And going down the gangplank—I grew up around state police.

JP: Going down the gangplank, meaning?

WB: Yeah. Going down the gangplank, we were met first by the military police. Well, I grew up in Pennsylvania with the state police. They had a barracks not too far from—in fact, it was Hamburg that they had a barracks. They still have it, the barracks there, for the state police. And First Sergeant SHUM—I didn't know his name at the time—but he says, “You want to join the military police?”

And I thought to myself, anything to keep from going to the infantry. I got into the military police. I went through recruit training there and after a time, I pulled gate card and downtown duty. After we finished our recruit training and we fitted in.

JP: Now, you had done the recruit training in Hawaii?

WB: Right there in Hawaii. That's where we did our basic training, if you want to call it that.

JP: Okay.

WB: In Hawaii.

JP: Okay.

WB: Oh, we had a little military discipline along the way, you know.

JP: Right.

WB: And let's see. I got there September 29th in 1940, September 27th, 1940.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: And I think, yes, I know I went down there in December to Fort Armstrong on DDAT service with the military police. We were assigned as guard duty for the quartermaster warehouses at Fort Armstrong.

JP: And Fort Armstrong is where?

WB: Honolulu.

JP: Right.

WB: Just off of, not too far from the old Aloha Tower.

JP: Hmm.

WB: And we pulled our guard duty down there. And in January, the sergeant in charge of us down there. I think there were about, oh, I guess about twenty-four of us down there or something like that. He was an old World War I veteran. Went back into service because times were tough and because of his previous service, he moved up to sergeant pretty fast. And one day he called four of us in. He said, "I was going through your records." He says, "You guys might be interested. The air corps is looking for men at Wheeler Field."

"What's there?"

"Well, you had typing in high school and you had this," the other fellow had this and the other fellow. He says, "They want those kind of guys up there."

So he put in for it and we four put in for it. And sure enough, instead of going back to Fort Shafter and the military police company, we were transferred to Wheeler Field.

JP: So you were a military—you went to the air corps.

WB: Yeah, I went to the air corps.

JP: So you left the military police?

WB: Yup.

JP: And you went to the air corps in January of 1941?

WB: In January. I got there February 5th, 1941.

JP: Mm-hm. Okay, we're going to stop right here, Wilmer.

WB: Okay.

JP: We're going to pick up. We're going to change tapes.

WB: All right.

JP: And we'll pick up in a few moments.

END OF TAPE #29

TAPE #30

WB: ...the furnace. We didn't have to worry about four hours of work a day.

JP: Well, let's continue here then. At this particular moment in your career, your military career, you had gone from the military police and now you're an air corpsman, working at Wheeler Field.

WB: Yeah.

JP: And at Pearl.

WB: Well, it was north of Pearl.

JP: North of Pearl Harbor.

WB: Yeah, Schofield Barracks really.

JP: Schofield Barracks. And were still about, oh, ten more months away...

WB: Yeah.

JP: ...from the attack. Had you heard anything at this moment? Any rumors about potential problems with Japan?

WB: Not until I'd say maybe September, October, we got funny few static coming through, ground stuff that everybody, you know, chitchats about and you wonder what's, how much of it is fact.

JP: Well, how was that data interpreted then?

WB: Not to worry about it. We did go on—they classified us, let's put it this way, they put us into categories for alert status. Ten percent could be alpha base. Thirty percent or sixty percent could be alpha base, or you know, amounts. I don't remember what the percentages were any more. And it so happened, we'd pull little stunts. We were on the alert. Nobody could go off the base today.

JP: Yeah.

WB: And then the next day, of course, it was something different. And it just so happened that when [Japanese Ambassador Saburo] Kuruu was coming through the islands, we went on full alert. Whether that was one percent, two percent or five percent, or whatever, it could be off-duty at the time, or off-base at the time. I don't remember that part of it any more.

JP: Well, that's okay. What I'd like to know now though is what were some of your responsibilities and duties as an air corpsman and tell me a little bit about Schofield at that time.

WB: Schofield, I had nothing to do with Schofield. We were ostracized. Air corpsmen were just a no-no as far as the infantry boys and artillery boys because they lost a lot of good boys when they come to the air corps. They went up in rank. You never got above PFC within one hitch. If you got to be a corporal in one hitch, you were a brown-noser. Or...

JP: This is in the infantry?

WB: Yeah. You were somebody special. And a corporal, and to be a corporal, you had to be in your second hitch. Very few of 'em got to be corporals in the one hitch.

JP: But when you became an air corpsman, what happened to your rank?

WB: Well, I got private first class shortly afterwards because I could type. I went into communications section. I was a communications clerk and they—table of organization said the clerk was this rank.

JP: And of course an increase in salary.

WB: Yup. And I finally got to first and fourth. As that was a first class special of the fourth class, first class with a fourth specialty rating.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: So I got good money. When I made corporal, I lost money. But I was making more money as a first and fourth than I was as a corporal. But that didn't bother me any. I had the stripes. (Chuckles) And that helped.

JP: But you said the air corps though had been ostracized by the regular infantry.

WB: Right.

JP: Because infantry had lost a lot of good folks to the air corps.

WB: Yeah, and we went up in rank faster.

JP: Okay.

WB: We had a fellow that came down from the infantry that within a few months they were buck sergeants and staff sergeants. They were qualified. They had background and training, military discipline and they could handle it.

JP: Well, now tell me a little about Wheeler Field then, at this time. What's on Wheeler Field? What is there?

WB: Well, we had P-36's, P-40's came in, I guess, the middle of the year, somewhere along in there. We had P-26's. That was the old low-wing fighter with wire struts and solid landing gear, because the P-36's had retractable gear. We had AT-6's there of course. We had an old Grumman Goose there, an OA-9. And I think they brought an OA-8 up there a couple of times from Hickam Field. They used it, I guess, for air-sea rescue. It's similar to the Catalina, navy Catalina.

JP: Right. Was a reconnaissance plane?

WB: Just a more or less a reconnaissance plane and to go between inter-island or something like that. And we had OA-8's for observation purposes. There were camera—designed with big bellies to put cameras in to take pictures.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: And what else did we have up there? We had the 26's and 36's and the P-40's came in. And just before Pearl Harbor, as I recall, or did they come in after? I don't recall.

JP: One minute...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: Okay, so let's continue. You're at Wheeler and you were telling me a little bit about the wonderful baseball teams they had there in the army air corps.

WB: They had some good baseball teams. Both the army, the infantry, they had their own. The artillery boys had a good baseball team. Some of those boys

were professionals. In fact, I knew one of 'em. I'm thinking of one right now. That was, I guess he played with [Joe] DiMaggio. Or it was assigned, ready to go. He was going to play big league stuff when he got out of the service. Pearl Harbor stopped that. (Coughs) Excuse me.

It was a good life. Now, the 15th Pursuit Group lived in tents between Hangar Two and Hangar Three. It was sort of a parade field set up there between Hangar Two and Three, for formations anyway. And there was the Headquarters Squadron, the 45th, the 46th, the 47th and then we got the 72nd and 73rd Pursuit Squadrons came in there. So it was a pretty tight knit little organization. You couldn't run between the tents or you'd trip over all the ropes. _(mumbles)_. In the old World War I medical tents, big long tents and put eighteen men in it without any trouble. It was a good life. We'd go to town whenever we could.

JP: Mm-hmm. Well, let's now go to Pearl, to the attack. Recreate for me what was on Wheeler Field that morning, as far as planes and what you were doing then too.

WB: The day before we had been on a full inspection. That was ordered by Fort Shafter. And somehow or another word got through that we could leave the airplanes parked, wingtip to tail, because that's the way we parked 'em for inspections. They could walk down the line and look at 'em and see if any oil was dripping or whatever they wanted to do. We left those there. We were more or less at liberty; we could not leave base. We were restricted. Two o'clock Saturday afternoon...

(Conversation off-mike)

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: All right. Okay now it's December 6, it had been a full inspection. The planes at Wheeler had been left out.

WB: Left out instead of being moved out into bunkers. We had bunkers or revetments all the way around the field and it was enough space for the 18th Pursuit Group and the 15th Pursuit Group in bunkers, all the way around the perimeter of the field.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: But we were told to leave 'em, at least that's what we were informed.

JP: And the planes were left over that night?

WB: They were left over that night and that's the way they caught 'em the next morning.

JP: Tell me, where were you that morning at 7:30.

WB: Well, as I said, the 15th Pursuit Group was living in tents between Hangar Two and Hangar Three. And the _____ quarters had a little separate tent, a little—what was it—about six-by-six, eight-by-eight, something like that. That's where I had to take care of people who were on the duty roster, people that did get permission to go on pass for the night, or for that evening. And that's where we lived.

Well, the next morning, the morning of December 7, I kicked the—if you want to call it that—I got the KP's up to report. I got those line people up that were going to go out on the hangar line, do what they had to do out there. And I went to early breakfast with them. And anyway one of the fellows, Red Mitchell, happened to go to early breakfast with us too. And his name will come up a little bit later.

JP: Now, what time is early breakfast?

WB: Oh, it's usually about 5:30, something like that. That was first breakfast.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: Because there was only a handful of men, maybe twenty men at the most, would go to that breakfast. And we were coming back to the tent area and were standing outside the orderly room and the _____ quarters tent. And Red Mitchell hollered at me about the newspaper, "Where's the Sunday paper?"

And I says, "It's not here."

He says, "Well, bring it to me. Bring it back to my tent when it gets here."

Well, he went on back to his tent, while we were standing there. We looked up and saw these airplanes, heard these airplanes going around above us. And we said, "Lookit," how those fellows are following each other around up there. Boy, everybody, all of us there, we knew what we figured was going to happen, flour-bagging. Now this was a little game between the air corps, the navy and the Marines. We'd catch them sitting down somewhere and it was very easy to put a five-pound sack of flour and then pull the canopy back and then, pllt, out the side of the airplane, let it go down and drift all over the airplane.

JP: So these were games that the services had played on each other from time to time?

WB: Yeah. And we could just see and the four fellows were mechanics. They said, "It'll take us a week to clean all that stuff out of those airplanes."

I mean, it was just—it didn't hurt anything, but it was just a mess!

JP: Right.

WB: Well, it turned out it wasn't flour. They took off toward, more or less, they peeled off at the west end of the field where we had our, at one time, our aqua system for refueling aircraft, which was underground and came up, and you pump it into the airplane. The last month or so, maybe a little bit more than a month, we started using tankers to refuel the airplanes.

JP: Above ground tankers?

WB: Above ground tankers. And that's the first thing that the bombs went into. We saw the plane dive and we said, "Oh boy, what's he doing way over there?"

And we saw him drop something. We didn't know it was a bomb until it exploded.

JP: You guys thought it was a sack of flour?

WB: Oh no, it was bigger. We knew it was more than a sack of flour.

JP: Yeah.

WB: And then the second plane dived in too and we looked up and we saw the rising sun on the airplane. All five of us, we said, "Japanese! What are they doing here?"

The second bomb went off. Well, by that time, the others were doing the same thing and moving up the hangar landing. They all had their assigned places to drop bombs coming up the hangar line.

Well, the first plane that went off, come over and started strafing. What's going on here? And I went into wake up the first sergeant and says, "We're being hit, under attack by Japanese!"

He told me, "Get the hell out of there!" in that plain English, because he'd given me instructions not to wake him under any circumstances.

Well after about the second or third bomb, as they were coming up closer to the hangar line, this shook the ground quite a bit and boy, he could realize something else was off. So he says, "Well, get all the men out of the hangar line out of the tents."

JP: This was the commanding officer at the time?

WB: (Coughs) Excuse me. The first sergeant.

JP: First sergeant. Do you remember his name?

WB: Oh, Sergeant Berry.

JP: Okay.

WB: First Sergeant Berry. He was a terrific guy. You couldn't have asked for an easier-going one. He give you the dickens when you deserved it, but otherwise I wouldn't call him a pussycat, but he was a nice guy to work for.

JP: Okay, so bombs are now...

WB: Coming up the line and getting closer to us. And he says, "Get everybody out of the tents that you can," so I did.

And finally, he says, "Get away from the COM-MOT," he was dressed up in—"you get away from the hangar line too."

He gave us permission to leave. So we took off and we started across the street when they bombed the hangar next to us. And the three fellows, four fellows, whatever it was that were with me, we all hit the deck. In fact, the bomb blast helped us hit the deck because it just sort of took our feet out from under us.

We went underneath the mess hall after we got up, which was off the ground. It was a wooden mess hall. We come out the other side and headed to get away from the hangar line as far as we could. We cut across the street in the first three graders quarters. But we never got there.

It so happened that there was one plane coming down and we saw him drop a bomb and there was a building there. There was about that much room to crawl under. We dived under that thing and the bomb went off across the street and the dirt and everything come over. We were going under, we couldn't get out. We had to come out the other side of the building. They were strafing. We ran away from the area and we got to what was supposed to have been a pit, or a hole dug for the septic system for the dental office. And we were ready to jump into that, but there was about twenty other fellows down in this thing already. They told us not to jump, so we hit the deck and stayed on top. And then as soon as the aircraft, when we saw the aircraft leave, we reported back to the tent area. Some of 'em were burning. And Red Mitchell, god rest his soul, was killed in bed. Bob Shaddock was killed in bed. Tiny Walker was in the latrine. And a piece of sheet—when he was coming out of the latrine, a piece of sheet metal cut him. I helped carry him over the dispensary, he died on the way. I'll never forget 'em. He

taught me to play chess, taught me to play cribbage. We did it a lot of times, up at the group headquarters. It hurt. It still does.

Well after things had settled down, the sergeant says, “Go report to your duty station,” so I took off for group headquarters. And that’s the first time that I could actually—because group headquarters was higher part of the ground. We could look into Pearl Harbor and the smoke and the flashes and stuff like that, they were still going on. They was doing ...

JP: So it was the first time you had seen Pearl.

WB: That’s the first time we seen what was being done to them down there.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: Now, that time lapse is so short, it’s hard to put a handle on it. We at Wheeler say we were hit at 7:45, ten minutes before they ever went down, because they had to do something up there. They knocked out our fighters. They hit Bellows Field before they hit Kaneohe. They may have bombed or did some strafing over at Kaneohe when they were hitting Bellows because they’re right next to each other. If you’ve ever been there, you know they’re adjacent to each other.

JP: Do you recall any of the planes at Wheeler [*Field*] ever getting off the ground?

WB: None of ‘em got off there.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: The pilots that we did, that were able to get off drove all the way to Haleiwa [*Field*] because one of the squadrons was out there on gunnery practice. And they were loaded with ammo to go out, shoot towed target and whatnot, or strafing or whatever they were supposed to do in gunnery practice. And [*Second*] Lieutenant[’s] Welch, Rasmussen, Brown—I don’t know who all made the trip out there—Jones and they all made the trip out to Haleiwa and got into their aircraft. But I didn’t know anything about that until it was all over with.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: When I got up to group headquarters, our officer in charge up there, he says, "The quartermaster warehouses behind us, there are guns and everything. Get down there and get some."

Well the quartermaster wasn't about to let us in. We did get in with a little persuasion. One of the first things they got out was a big fifty caliber, air-cooled, I mean water-cooled machine gun. They loaded that thing before they had the hoses and everything, and the fighters were coming back. And they just jammed it real quick. It didn't take many rounds to go through that barrel before it swelled to the point where it wouldn't...

JP: It just seized like an anchor.

WB: Yeah, it seized. You couldn't fire it any more.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: That's when we realized we were supposed to have water for the damn thing! I wouldn't check out in one of those things. I had forty-five caliber training when I was in the military police. I had rifle training when I was in the military police. But I didn't think about a water-cooled machine gun, especially a fifty caliber.

JP: Mm-hmm.

WB: Anyway, that didn't help us very much. They finally got another unit out there. We sandbagged it and everything like that. The fighters were coming back from there and returning north. In fact, the anti-aircraft boys from Schofield Barracks set up two guns. They owned the road and boy when they saw the planes coming back, they just, pllt, stopped wherever they were and they spread those panels out and they started firing the anti-aircraft guns at 'em. I don't know whether they got any, did any damage or not, but we weren't concerned about that. That was their job.

Communications was our job and we set up, made sure that all our contacts around the field were in good use. The fellows that were out at the bunkers, we contacted them to make sure their phone system worked. Sergeant WAS-SEN, who was in charge of the radio communications, he made sure that that was all working properly. And basically that's where I wound up at after the attack, at group headquarters in my communications section.

JP: Well, I think we'll stop there then. It was a very good interview. Thank you very much.

WB: Well, thank you.

JP: Thanks for spending the time with us.

END OF INTERVIEW