

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#377

WOODROW WILSON DUFFIN

USS *CALIFORNIA*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 5, 2001

**BY CAPTAIN MARSHALL HANSON &
COMMANDER ANTONELLIS**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

MARCH 25, 2002

USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Captain Marshall Hanson (MH): This is oral history number 378. The following oral history interviews are being conducted by Captain Marshall Hanson and Commander Jim Antonellis for the National Park Service at the Ala Moana Hotel on December 5, 2001 at 8:47 a.m. The person being interviewed is Seaman First Class Duffin, who was on the USS *California*, on December 7, 1941. Sir, for the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date, please.

Woodrow Wilson Duffin (WD): Woodrow [*Wilson*] Duffin, born December 5, 1921, West Fork, Indiana.

MH: Okay, what do you consider your hometown in 1941?

WD: Richmond.

MH: What were your parents' names?

WD: William C. and Lettie M. Duffin.

MH: Now, you said your hometown was Richmond. What state?

WD: Indiana.

MH: Indiana. Okay. How many brothers or sisters did you have and do you have now?

WD: Well, I had five brothers and three sisters. I now have one brother and two sisters.

MH: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

WD: I didn't.

MH: Okay. So where and when did you enlist?

WD: December of '39.

MH: Okay. So were you in high school at the time and decided that the navy was an option or...

WD: I didn't have no funds to go to high school.

MH: Okay. So what grade did you complete?

WD: Eight.

MH: Eighth grade? And then you decided that the navy was going to give you the education?

WD: Well, I kind of liked what they was doing. I talked to some of the guys that had been there and seemed like a pretty good job.

MH: Okay. I can't disagree with that. Can you tell us about your experiences on December 7? Were you aboard the [USS] *California* at the time of the attack?

WD: Well, on—I had been assigned to Captain [*Harold C.*] Train, whose chief of staff, [*Vice*] Admiral [*William*] Pye, gig as a signalman. And always on the mornings, we would always go over to Ford Island where we could get fresh water to wash the thing down and chamois it off, making it look sharp, you know and stuff. We just finished that operation and was on our way back to the *California*, which is only like 200 yards or 300, we heard these planes coming. And I was bow hoo along with Red SPID-DOHN. And he said, “Flyboys out early this morning. You hear the drone of the aircraft.”

And of course we were thinking—well, navy don’t fly much on Sunday morning. Maybe it’s the army. But anyhow, when you look at this coming down and they had a bomb range at the Ford Island where they had the big sandbar, where they dropped dummy bombs. And that first one hit and all hell broke loose. And the debris and stuff, “Well, my god, that’s not practice bombs! That’s the real McCoy.”

Then when we looked back, we could see the meatballs on their bows coming down. But oh Christ almighty, this is war!

So we gotta get to the ship and get to our battle stations. So from there we tied up to the boat boom, hit the boom down. And as I'm running forward, I know I got to go down to anti-aircraft ammunition handling, third deck forward. And I look across the ship as I'm going forward to the fo'c'sle deck to go head under, there was, I seen a Kate bomber coming down and still had a torpedo hanging on it. And it was close. Now, the pilot had his canopy closed, but the gunner sitting in the back had the windshields on his goggles and he was looking. And he had his little gun sticking out. My god, that mean-looking thing is a pretty plane, painted green with the big, red _____.

Of course, as I went forward, before I got to the fo'c'sle deck to go under, to get to go down, I turned to look back to see what happened to that plane and he'd made a left. And when he did, I think it was from the tug to the [USS] *Maryland* and [USS] *Tennessee* or two of the cage masted battleship that had fifty caliber machine guns up there, was a-shooting at him and that little guy in the back was shooting at them. And he went, of course, Ford Island.

Now, of course, that's the last thing I seen. And as I was running forward, I heard one of the five-inch go off right above, which they set on the deck right above us. And of course, that's all I seen. From then on, I'm down on the third deck and I remember taking the big torpedo headfirst. Jarred us pretty good. Went along, we got another one. And then after that, I don't remember. I think where we were at, we were right under the armor deck of where the 2000-pound bomb came down. Probably the concussion knocked me. 'Cause I didn't come out of it until around eleven o'clock and the oil was coming in pretty bad then. And I know I can't get out forward, I have to go aft. And then of course, as I'm going back, there were several guys down. And I had oil all over me, crude. And I got in some guy's locker and got a towel and wiped part of it off. And then when I got aft of where I'm going to come up and I forget the location on that—it was in the armored deck there, but there's a hatch you could go up back aft and it was dogged down except one dog was loose. And I'm trying on it, I can't move 'em. But they got the loose one and I got to making an SOS with the code thing. And pretty soon I heard guys talking. I don't know who they were. And they said, "There's somebody down there. Let's get this open."

He said, “Well, if we don’t have no power, you have to manually open it.”

And of course, I was covered with crude. Had my arm stuck through one of the rungs of the ladder. And then of course, when they got me out on deck—I remember—don’t know what time it was, but I know the sun was directly overhead. I’d been down there in the dark for a long time. Man, it was a bright sun. And they took me to hospital. And I spent about three or four days over there, getting fixed up a little bit. And before I left there, when I was ready to get out, there was a Japanese plane shot down right out by Hospital Point and I thought to myself—well, I’d been wanting to fly and took some lessons. I remember going out to take a look at that plane, which they had fired up pretty good. Kind of STEN-SHE she was sitting cocked up like that a little bit. And in that cockpit, there was a little compartment to the right side that had a sack of rice in it, about that big around, about that long. And that fire on that had cooked enough that it opened the sack and part of it was rolling out. Now for a long time I couldn’t eat rice after that. But I made up my mind I didn’t want to fly after seeing what happened to that guy. Too rough.

So from there we went back to the—I got a boat, went back over to Ford Island, near the *California*, where she'd been abandoned. And found my crew and they'd made a, they got a fifty caliber Browning [*machine gun*] off one of the PBYS and they'd got sandbags and they made a pit like thing is, oh, four, five foot deep and had that thing mounted in the middle. Had plenty ammo. That's where they was staying. So that was tail end of that one.

MH: Now, basically your crew had created this station then and they were basically ready for any additional wave or...

WD: Oh yeah.

MH: ...forces that...

WD: Oh yeah.

MH: ...were coming in.

WD: It was on the golf course and I don't know which sand pit this was. They burrowed the sand out of it to make their—now, they were waiting for anything to happen.

MH: Now, were they bivouacked out there and actually camping out?

WD: Oh yeah. Well, they had no other way to go.

MH: Because the ship was basically down.

WD: Well, the *California* was sitting on the bottom by then and pretty bad shape. You know, she almost capsized.

MH: Mm-hm. Now, revisiting your general quarters station, you said you supported an anti-aircraft gun and you were down...

WD: Anti-aircraft ammunition handling forward, starboard side.

MH: So how many decks were you down below the main deck?

WD: It's three down.

MH: And what type of job were you doing down in that?

WD: Handling the five-inch ammos that goes through the conveyors to go up to the guns.

MH: So you're taking it from the box and putting on the conveyor?

WD: Yeah, out of the magazine.

MH: Okay.

WD: Yeah.

MH: So during the two waves of attacks that occurred, I imagine that kept you quite busy with sending ammunition up there.

WD: I'd say the adrenaline flowing pretty high. You knowed what you was into.
I mean, it's all new, but you know you're into it.

MH: Were you getting reports from above on what was being seen or...

WD: I wasn't involved on any reporting that came up or down by telephone.
That's somebody else's job. I was doing what I was told to do.

MH: Now you said when the bomb hit the deck, the concussion probably caused a
concussion.

WD: That's the best I could piece together after it was over with and then, you
know, you're inquisitive as to what occurred. You didn't get to see much.
You're down below. But of course, being a signalman, we talked to the
signal tower across Ford Island all the time, pretty well acquainted with
them. And the report from him was that that bomber was coming right
directly to his nose and he said there was gunfire off the *California* that hit it
directly and exploded it. I don't know whether that was the gun that went

off that I heard or not. I didn't see that. But you're trying to put pieces together.

And the Kate that was coming down with a torpedo and still hanging on it, hadn't used it, the only thing we could surmise is she probably was assigned the *Pennsylvania*, which had went into dry dock the day before, so he had no target. So when his target's not there, of course, he turned to go, try to figure out another one, I suppose. I don't know what is in his mind. But it always was amazing, why was this particular torpedo bomber hitting nobody, and it had to about be the *Pennsylvania* that moved into dry dock the day before. And of course, Admiral Kimmel's flagship was the *Pennsylvania*. She usually tied up at dock over here. He didn't like to ride in boats. (Chuckles) So if he could, he'd find a mooring on the beach.

MH: Now, you said the concussion knocked you unconscious.

WD: As far as I'm—best we could figure, about timeframe it was. It was about the same time when that happened.

MH: When you woke up, you basically found yourself—because the power was out—in the dark.

WD: Oh yeah. Well, you had your battle lights on, your little red, real dim lights. You know. Just enough to see things.

MH: And you said there was oil in the space?

WD: There was crude, yes. She got hit with two torpedoes and of course that ruptured the tanks and it was coming in. She was listing pretty bad by then. And it was up on us.

MH: Now, was your space then flooded somewhat with oil, or...

WD: Yeah, parts of it was. And then as you went aft, it hadn't got through that passageway yet. It was living quarters and it was lockers along the side of it.

MH: Now, the direction you went, was that your normal escape route?

WD: Well, I'd been aboard the ship two years and pretty well acquainted with it and I knew where the various hatches and passages were, you know. I knowed I couldn't go out forward, 'cause it's all oil. See that went out at midship's when you went forward. And I looked through there and that oil was all the way up to the overhead. So then you're—I know I gotta get out of there. I knowed if I went aft, there was another hatch back there that went through that armor deck. I think it's about eleven inches of armor. I don't remember. I know it was heavy.

MH: Now, in your departure aft, to the back hatch, did those battle lights sustain the pathway so you could see your way, or did you lose the power and have to go through darkness at some point?

WD: Well, no, you see, you had your battle lights were on. It would be the battery-powered, red glow lights. And once your eyes is accustomed to that, you can see pretty good. Probably wouldn't want to read a paper, but you could see enough to know where you was going. That's the way best I remember. It happened sixty years ago. (Laughs) You're checking on an old man's memory now too, you keep that in mind!

MH: You got out, you were sent to the hospital. Did they find any other injuries besides the concussion?

WD: Well, I had a—they showed up the second or third day when I finally got the oil off of me. Incidentally, those people running that hospital were magnificent people. And we were, a lot of fellows in there and they was taking ‘em out two and three every hour, that didn’t make it. I was laying next to a Marine off the *West Virginia* that had a misfire on a 5 [*inch*] 51 [*caliber gun*]. And he went and opened the breach and when he did, of course the thing ignited. And it got his hands all the way up here to the side of his face pretty bad. A hard Marine. A little nurse was taking that blankets. And he pulled ‘em up little pieces of that, trimming that off, and you could see the leaders and the blood vessels in his hand.

MH: Yeah, burns are tough.

WD: Oh, the same time he’s trying to get together with the little nurse.

MH: (Chuckles)

WD: I'm trying to figure out. They must have pumped a lot of morphine in him or something.

MH: He's also a Marine.

WD: (Laughs) _____ the wrong things!

MH: Now, going back to—you had just washed the gig down and were taking, you're going back to the *California* when you saw the first planes come in on that first wave. And you indicated that there was a bomb explosion. Now, you're basically coming around from the freshwater source, so you're just outside of Battleship Row or was the water down by the seaplane?

WD: Well, no. See, we was tied up Fox Three. And starboard to stern was about 200, 300 yards. It was a freshwater over at our little boat dock thing that they had on Ford Island, where we went. Now, the aircraft hangars and stuff is forward and to her right.

MH: Correct. So you're down by the oiler? The freshwater was down along the piers and the oiler was down in that direction, because this was astern of the *California*.

WD: Well, that's to start with.

MH: Mm-hmm.

WD: Oil?

MH: No.

WD: Okay. Misunderstood you.

MH: You had the *California*—and what was the name of the oiler?

Jim Antonellis (JA): [*USS*] *Neosho*

MH: Just the ship that was behind the *California*.

WD: Oh, *California* was Fox Three and then Fox Four was normally an aircraft tender.

MH: Mm-hmm.

WD: And I don't remember whether it was [USS] *Curtiss* or [USS] *Antares*. I don't remember the name of that ship. And after that was Fox Five, Six, Seven and Eight, and the first two battleships—well, one was moored to the quay, the other, top alongside. And there was three of those doubled up. And then after that was the *Arizona*, with a repair ship aboard. And in back of it would be the *Nevada*. I kinda remember but I get mixed up on which ones were where because we normally tied up about the same way every time when we came in.

MH: But you were coming from Ford Island, the freshwater, and you were coming up astern of the *California*.

WD: Well, we're coming up to the starboard side of it, starboard quarter.

MH: Starboard quarter.

WD: No, we don't go astern of it.

MH: Okay. You're coming inboard towards the island because the bow was pointed out towards the harbor end.

WD: Yes. Always turned 'em around, headed 'em to sea before we tied 'em up.

MH: And you saw that first plane come in.

WD: We saw the first group of 'em coming down. One was usually normally about behind the other one.

MH: What direction were they coming from?

WD: That would be Ford Island being northeast and southwest, they were coming down at that angle.

MH: So they were kind of going parallel with Ford Island?

WD: Yeah. More or less to the east side of it, or southeast.

MH: Okay. And you remember that first bomb blast because you thought they were going after...

WD: Well, we know it was not practicing. That thing went off, I mean, you know, part of the buildings and planes went skyward. I mean, you know. Of course the next guy in, of course he's popping the same area. What they had tied up immediately was the [*PBY*] Catalina's in that area.

MH: Okay. So the first bombs you saw were down in the Catalina.

WD: Yes.

MH: Great. You have any questions, Jim? Do you have anything else you want to say? Anything?

WD: Not to my—I'll never let that happen again!

MH: Well, I think it was a good lesson that we need to re-learn.

WD: And we lost it, didn't we?

MH: Now, what are your feeling in comparing the events of December 7 and now having seen the events of September 11?

WD: Well, vigilance. You know, we're talking about freedom here. It doesn't come cheap. It's expensive. It costs lives and lots of money. And you got people that don't like us. The only thing I hate about it, we understanding people well enough. They hate our guts! And we're not sharp enough to figure that out, we're talking about intelligence now. You've got to be able to get inside their heads a little bit. You see if you can avert that type of operation, it's rough.

MH: It is rough.

WD: See, the thing that always aggravated me the most was, was the people that said it can't happen here. The hell it can't! It can happen anywhere, any time, if you're not vigilant. You've got to be careful with them people, all of 'em. Trust none of 'em.

MH: And you've had to experience it twice.

WD: Well, I became a member early on of the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association. I didn't like the name, but stayed with them a couple of years and then I lost my buddy that was always wanting to go and I kind of give up on it. But there was one of those things that we decided we should do early on, that's talk to our Congressmen and to our Senators, to make for sure that the military has enough funding that we don't get caught in World War II with World War I equipment. And that's what we did. We're setting down there with a few fifty-caliber machine guns for anti-aircraft protection. We did have some 5 [*inch*] 51 [*caliber guns*], which was dual purpose. And

then we had some 5 [*inch*] 25 [*caliber guns*], which would reach up maybe 17,000 feet. You see, all that stuff should've been changed into forty-millimeter, 5 [*inch*] 38 [*caliber*], forty-millimeters, twenty-millimeter [*guns*] and so forth. We didn't have that. We didn't have enough funds to do that, I guess. Had we been strong enough, them suckers would never have attacked us. The reason we attacked us, because they knew we were weaker than they were. That's the way they're feelings were. That's the reason they laid it on us. Now, if we'd had the fleet out here, that we had by mid-'43 or '44, them suckers never would have attacked us! We'd have been too powerful for 'em. That's the truth. That's my thinking. You ask me, I'm telling you.

MH: Well, thank you. Well, if there's nothing else, I, first of all, like to thank you for your service to the country and also like to thank you for sharing your story. And as I said, this will be archived with both the Park Service and a copy of the transcript will be included in the Naval Historical Center.

WD: _____.

MH: So, thank you very much.

WD: Thank you. We had a lot of fun after that though.

END OF INTERVIEW