

#210 DONALD STRATTON: USS ARIZONA

John Martini (JM): Today is December 5, 1991. This is an oral history interview tape with Mr. Donald Stratton. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Stratton was assigned to USS ARIZONA. He was a Seaman First Class and his battle station was the port side anti-aircraft gun director on the mainmast. He was nineteen years of age at that time. My name is John Martini and this tape is an oral history tape in conjunction with the National Park Service and television station KHET in Honolulu.

Thank you. Thanks for coming.

Donald Stratton (DS): Good. Thanks to be here. Thank you.

JM: How did you get into the Navy? When did you enlist?

DS: Well, I enlisted right out of high school, in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Wasn't much going on back then, in those days. It was pretty tough times back in the thirties, as you know. And I was born and raised around there. Graduated from Red Cloud High School and wanted something to do, I guess. A recruiter was there, so we, two or three of us, enlisted in the Navy. Went to boot camp in Great Lakes.

JM: Was there any waiting time? Was there a list, a waiting list for guys who wanted to get into the Navy then?

DS: Yeah, they was, there were quite a few people. We didn't have to really wait, but there was quite a few people that were in ours, that would be getting in the service at that time.

JM: When you finished with Great Lakes, was ARIZONA was your first ship?

DS: Well, we --- you know, boot camp, whatever, we go home for a little leave for a short time, maybe ten days or a week, or something like this. And then back to Great Lakes and then from Great Lakes, right to Seattle and Bremerton, on the ARIZONA.

JM: When was that?

DS: That was in the latter part of 1940.

JM: Nineteen forty?

DS: Mm-hm.

JM: Was ARIZONA in for overhaul or some major work then?

DS: Well, yeah, they were in for a dry dock at that time, but they hadn't went in dry dock yet. We went in aft-- after we were aboard, we went into dry dock there.

JM: Okay. What were you --- where was your berthing area aboard ARIZONA?

DS: I was in the number six casemate, which is port side, third gun aft on the broad side guns.

JM: Okay. What --- wasn't that also the Marine area, too?

DS: Well, the Marines manned the broad side guns . . .

JM: Mm-hm.

DS: . . . on general quarters.

JM: But it was a sailor berthing, otherwise?

DS: Right. The Marines were in the aft of -- just in the break of the quarterdeck.

JM: Did you have any . . .

DS: The Marine division.

JM: Did you have any choice of ships, or were you just assigned to ARIZONA?

DS: Assigned to ARIZONA.

JM: Did you want a battleship?

DS: Well, it just --- everything was all new to us old dry land farmers, you know. (Chuckles)

JM: How'd you like ARIZONA?

DS: I liked it very much. It was -- of course, you know, we had just gone aboard as a boot, and that thing was in dry dock with all the people hustling around and all the lines and welding lines, and electrical cables, and scraping the sides and the bottom and painting, it just, well, you know, I couldn't take six years of this, I don't think. (Chuckles)

JM: And was it different once you got to sea?

DS: Oh yes, quite different, you bet. And of course, everything squared itself away and everybody had their bunks and everybody had their general quarters stations, and everybody had their chow, where they had chow. And oh yes, it was very different, and very good. I liked it.

JM: When you got out of Bremerton, did you come directly to Hawaii, or did you go down the coast?

DS: No, we came directly to Hawaii that time. And of course, all kind of maneuvers here and on the outer islands and Molokai, and the Big Island, and around. Had maneuvers and whatever, and what island, fifty-foot motor launch, twenty miles away from the ship and rigged targets for the fourteen-inch guns. And then kind of a lot of experiences. And of course, we, you know, back into Pearl Harbor and then back out again, for maneuvers. And then, in June, 1941, we came back to Long Beach and dropped the anchor off shore there and they give two liberties, port watch and starboard watch, for a week at a time, which I didn't inquire for me to get back to Nebraska, so I stayed on board and done liberty whenever I could.

JM: How was Honolulu for liberty?

DS: Well, it was all right, I guess. It wasn't a lot to do for sailors down in the Hotel Street or whatever, and a few bars for a few drinks. But at the beach once in a while, for a little R and R, but as you know, at that time, the coral was pretty bad in Waikiki, and you couldn't get in there and swim a lot, or much at that time.

JM: Were you in any of the inter-ship competitions, or any . . .

DS: Oh yeah, I was on the football team and I was on the rowing team.

JM: Were there any special rivalries between individual ships, like . . .

DS: Oh yeah, sure there was. You bet.

JM: Was there an arch rival of ARIZONA?

DS: Well, I think it was, worked into that, because we had the -- as I understand it -- the Hilton was Sixth Division, my division on the ARIZONA, and he was either our division heavy wrestling champ or the fleet heavyweight wrestling champ. I'm just not sure which right now, but huge man and very good.

JM: ARIZONA had been out on maneuvers and then she came back into port just a couple of days before the seventh, right?

DS: That's true. We should've --- my understanding was before, that we made our trip into Hawaii, or into Pearl, to tie up that we were supposed to have shot off, have test firing the following Tuesday. Instead we fired it on a Thursday, and we came into -- or Friday, I guess -- and we come in Saturday and we were there Sunday.

JM: Do you remember how you spent Friday night -- or not Friday -- Saturday night, before the attack?

DS: Well, no, just aboard ship is all. You know, whatever.

JM: Did you . . .

DS: I guess they had movies aboard and whatever, at that time. I don't remember exactly what I was doing at that time.

JM: How did the morning of the seventh start out?

DS: Well, just like everybody is up for reveille and -- which was 5:30 -- and I mean, I guess some of the people had permission to sleep in on Sunday morning. The band did, I think, because they were in the band contest the night before, which they came in second, but we were up and around. And of course, chow at seven o'clock and then quarters -- which was casemate six -- and just finished with chow and there was a few extra oranges laying on the table. I picked 'em up in my white hat and was going to take 'em down to a buddy of mine that just went down the day before to sick bay -- which was right below where the bomb hit the first, the big bomb. It was right below where the bomb hit the first, the big bomb. Went right through sick bay, as far as -- if my recollection of the situation of sick bay on the ship.

JM: When did you first know things were going real wrong?

DS: Well, I just come out, like I said, I had picked up some oranges and had 'em in my white hat and three or four sailors on the bow said, "Something going on there," gave us a yell and we went out and took a look, and I seen the bombs exploding on Ford Island and I thought I seen the water tower go over. But everybody kind of seems to tell me that there was no water tower there, but it was either the water tower or the fireman's tower, you know, where they practiced some of their stuff. But to me, it still seemed like the water tower, but . . .

JM: You could actually see planes?

DS: Oh yes.

JM: Did . . .

DS: And you understood exactly who they were, right away. I mean, you seen the Japanese rising sun on that. I just started immediately for my battle station.

JM: Had they sounded general quarters yet?

DS: No, not at that time.

JM: You just knew.

DS: Yeah. But then, I had, you know, you worked from the main deck up to the boat deck, and then up the ladder, past the bridge and on up to the sky control platform, they called it.

JM: And the gun director was right above the bridge, it was the small, boxy looking affair that . . .

DS: That's right, on the port side. Of course, there was one that's identical on the starboard side. And then the big T, was the director for the big guns, fourteen-inch guns.

JM: Guns were fourteen-inch. So you headed up there, did somebody give the bugle call for general quarters? What was going on the P.A. system?

DS: Oh yeah. "This is no drill. This is the real McCoy. Everybody to your battle stations."

Well, it takes ten men to mount the director and we were all there, so I mean, you know, as far as I know, everybody was at their battle stations.

JM: Did any of the anti-aircraft -- you were giving -- excuse me, I should back up. You were giving direction for the five-inch guns and the five-inch A.A. guns?

DS: Well, it's, you know, the director finds the range and they set the sights. And the pointer and the director gets on target, and they relay remotely to the guns, and they match the bugs and they're pointed in the same direction as the, as the range finder is, or the director is.

JM: Were you acquiring targets, attracting 'em?

DS: Oh, we were firing 'em. We had a ready box of ammunition behind every gun and we had to break 'em open and all the ready box ammunition, as far as I know, was fired, but -- and I don't remember, recall any more. I know each ready box, I think, held fifty rounds, but I think there was two behind each gun. But I, to recall, I don't know for sure.

JM: Go ahead.

DS: We were shooting at like ninety degrees, at some high altitude bombers, and we weren't reaching them at all.

JM: They were above you. Do you have any memories of any torpedo planes coming at *ARIZONA*?

DS: Well, I seen 'em coming in from Aiea. I seen the torpedoes in the water, but I just don't recall -- and the *WEST VIRGINIA* got hit. And of course, the *OKLAHOMA* got hit . . .

JM: What did . . .

DS: . . . three or four, and capsized. I seen her roll over.

JM: What was the impression of when those torpedoes hit? Did you hear 'em and . . .

DS: Well, yeah, we, of course --- everything was so -- it wasn't out of control, but it was -- you don't understand unless you were there, the noise factor and all the guns going off and everybody on all the ships, and whatever, you know. And all the explosions mixed in.

JM: Do you remember any bomb hits on *ARIZONA* before the big one?

DS: No, I don't. I --- we were tracking the target and sending some sights, setting some sights for the anti-aircraft gun, and I remember that we got hit. I didn't know what it was at that time, but it just shook the ship like it was a piece of paper. And then, it wasn't very few seconds after that, why, a huge explosion and it just enveloped us. I mean, I guess, the fireball went four or five hundred feet in the air.

JM: How . . .

DS: And it took the whole -- enveloped that whole foremast.

JM: How close were you to the explosion?

DS: Well, the bomb hit on the starboard side, right aft of number two gun turret. And of course, into the magazines, the explosion just literally blew 110 foot of the bow of the ship clear off, I heard. I mean, number one turret up in the air, and for a while there, they thought it was off the ship, but they -- I guess it went up and come back down into the cavity. But tremendous explosion.

JM: Did you stay conscious?

DS: Through the morning explosion? Oh yeah. And we were --- then, a little track control man standing along side of me -- of course we were all just inside the director and we were all just kind of burning up, gradually, I guess, you

might say. But he opened the hatch and jumped out, and I reached out to close the hatch, and that's where I got all of this, which I've been -- they just done a couple of skin grafts on me in the last couple of years. But anyway, we stayed 'til the flames kind of subsided and we had a little breather, kind of blown away the smoke and stuff, away from us, toward the *PENNSYLVANIA*, or the dock over there.

JM: What happened to the other men that were inside the director with you?

DS: Well, a couple of 'em were killed right there. There was six of us, or maybe eight of us. I'm not really sure, but they keep saying six, but seemed to me like there was a couple more sailors, but Dvorak and a couple of other -- Sorensen, and -- they died in the hospital the next morning after we had got into the hospital.

I think they --- excuse me.

JM: I was going to say you were kind of --- finally it died down and you got a little break?

DS: Well, yes and no. There were --- the *VESTAL* was tied up outside of us and her bow to our stern. And there was a sailor on the after decks with a hose trying to work on some fires, I guess. They caught a bomb, but it was a dead one, clear through and out the bottom. But anyway, we got his attention, and he threw us a heaving line and we pulled over a heavier line and tied it off on the *ARIZONA*, and then we proceeded to cross the line, hand over hand, to the *VESTAL*, which I guess she was about forty-five foot in the air and about sixty-foot across the deck and across the water, and onto the *VESTAL*.

JM: Can I ask what your injuries were, aside from the burn?

DS: That was all that, but I'm burnt over sixty percent of my body.

JM: Pretty amazing to go hand over hand over a line, even in the best of . . .

DS: After you're burnt, yeah.

JM: Yeah.

DS: Yeah. But I had a lot of help from up above, I guess, which I still have.

JM: Did you know how bad the *ARIZONA* was damaged, right away?

DS: Oh yes. Yeah. I knew she was -- I knew they broke her back. I knew that.

JM: 'Cause you canted forward, didn't you, during the whole massacre?

DS: Well, yeah, I guess it was just about that time we were, it was canning forward when we were going forward, across the line.

JM: When you got over to the *VESTAL*, what did they -- where they able to give you first aid and give you help?

DS: No, no. No. No, we stayed aboard there for a while and then they'd hustle us down the gangway and they got us on the motor launch, and took us over to the landing and they put us on an open air truck and took us to Naval

hospital there. Stayed there for three weeks, I guess. And they were sending some of the sailors back to the U.S. on the USS [HUGH L.]SCOTT. And they kind of bypassed me and I said, "I'm not going?"

"No, we don't think you're going to make it. You wouldn't make it right now. We'll have to give you some more medical attention."

I said, "I want to go."

He says, "Well, if you can get up out of the bed, help me change the linen, why, you can go."

So I got up. But when I laid back down, I didn't get up for quite a while.

JM: How long were you hospitalized?

DS: Well, I was hospitalized 'til September in 1942. I guess when I was capable of standing up, rolling over, and stand up along side the bed, I weighed about ninety-two, ninety-five pounds, or something.

But slowly, but surely, started to come back. I went to Corona, California for convalescence for a couple of months, and then my left arm and hand wasn't working very good, so I was medically discharged. So I went back to Red Cloud, Nebraska and was around there for about a year, and I reenlisted and went through the draft into the service again -- Navy -- which took me to Omaha, Nebraska and they held me there for ten days so they'd get permission from the Bureau of Navigation for me to have my same service number, the second time I was in the service, which was a good deal. I don't know how I was so smart in them days. I wouldn't have to fight the VA and all that for two numbers.

But anyway, they sent me back to service and I went through boot camp again in FAIR-GOOD, Idaho. They tried to convince me it was the best thing because I had to get my shots and all this, but it wasn't too bad because I was a recruit CPO for 120 men, Camp BUN-YEN, and cut through that all right. They wanted me to stay there and push boots through camp, and I said, "No way. It's not for me. I want to go to sea." I said, "That's where I want to go."

So I went to Treasure Island and I caught the USS *STACK*, DD406, one-stack destroyer. Immediately left there and proceeded to the South Pacific. We got in all the invasions down in the slot, New Hebrides and invasions of New Guinea and Biak and Wekak, and Salamaua, and both invasions of the Philippines and Okinawa.

And I left the ship, I was transferred to electrical hydraulic school in July of 1945. The war was over in nineteen -- well, I got back to the States in July and the war was over in August. And I had enough points to get discharged, but they wouldn't let me out until I finished the school. So I got out in December the fourth of, well, forty-six years ago yesterday.

JM: All right.

DS: St. Louis, Missouri, that's about it.

JM: Were you at home when you were initially discharged? The Navy didn't give out a lot of publicity about what happened here. I think it was like a year

before they told about the loss of the *ARIZONA*. Were you cautioned to talk about . . .

DS: No, they never said anything about it. Well, my people knew it and the people that I talked to, but they didn't have much -- they didn't question me or restrict me or anything, no.

JM: Being an *ARIZONA* survivor is --- actually the time of the fiftieth. I know you're getting a lot of people asking questions and a lot of attention. When you were on the *STACK*, later in the war . . .

DS: Right.

JM: . . . did -- were guys interested that you were an *ARIZONA* sailor?

DS: Oh yeah. Oh sure.

JM: They ask you about it a lot?

DS: Oh yes. We talked about it quite a bit, but you know, they were out there doing the same job while we were trying to do, so. That's the only --- the differential is nowadays -- and I want to put in a plug for our people in the Persian Gulf, they done one hell of a job, of course. But they --- one little complaint there, like they were complaining about six months overseas. Man, those guys -- I was overseas for two years, two different times. But we had one little gentleman that was on board that was in the service and the kid cruised forty-eight months, forty-four months overseas. So you know, you just, in World War II, you were just there 'til it was over with. That was it.

JM: Is it hard for you to talk about *ARIZONA* and what you went through?

DS: Well, not so much any more, but it sure brings back a lot of memories, but I -- this is --- it bothers me more than anything on the memorial, 'cause I know, I look down, and I know I'm one of the few people that's standing up there that walked those decks. And not a lot of my --- a lot of good sailors gave their lives. And I want to tell you something, only the good lord will only know, but a lot of 'em didn't even know what for. That's the bad part.

JM: Can I ask how you feel about your former enemies, the Japanese?

DS: Well, I just had, I don't have a lot of animosity. I don't have any animosity the younger generations, but still some of the old timers around and as long as they leave me alone, I'll leave them alone. But I don't buy any Jap cars and stuff like that, Japanese cars I should say, nowadays.

JM: And what about the individual airmen who were attacking Pearl Harbor that day?

DS: Well, they had a job to do, like, just like we had to do, but the simple thing is that when you get in a ring with a boxer or a fighter, you know who you're going against. But when a sneak attack like that, it's something you have to think about, really think about.

JM: Last question would be of everything you went through, with *ARIZONA*, before the war, the attack, what's the single most vivid memory you have of the ship, of the crew, or the attack itself? What really stays with you about the ship?

DS: Oh, it's just the camaraderie, you know, all the people I knew. I often go out there and I look up at that list and just picture the guy just vividly. Know his name and I can probably point out 150, 200 names of people that I knew. Very solemn, very sad occasion. Like I say, well, we do a lot of things, I'm sure there's a medium of exchange there, or something, whatever you want to call it, but I think maybe if there hadn't been a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, maybe they wouldn't have dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and so forth. But history will only tell, you know. Of course, we had a lot of problems with some of the sailors and some of the G.I.s and getting over some of this. And some of them were really shaken up, nerve-wise and whatever, but it's gotta happen, no war.

JM: I'm glad you're here today.

DS: Thank you. You too.

JM: Thanks for the time.

DS: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW