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Interview with  
Martin Matthews  
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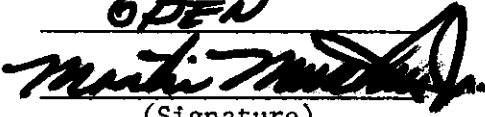
Place of Interview: Richardson, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Oral History Collection

Martin Matthews

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Richardson, Texas

Date: August 2, 1978

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Martin Matthews for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 2, 1978, in Richardson, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Matthews in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Arizona during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As a matter of clarification, I should mention that Mr. Matthews' permanent station was actually at Ford Island Naval Air Station, and he happened to be visiting a buddy aboard the Arizona on the night of December 6th and subsequently decided to spend the night on the Arizona.

Mr. Matthews, to begin this interview, just briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Matthews: I was born on October 14, 1926, in Shelbyville, Kentucky. My schooling was several places, but primarily most of my schooling was in Dallas.

Marcello: How did you get to Dallas from Shelbyville, Kentucky?

Matthews: Oh, I kind of migrated like everybody else did in the 1930's.

Marcello: Was the migration mainly a result of the Depression and economic difficulties?

Matthews: Economic . . . Depression. My family finally wound up down here.

Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Matthews: That was in the early part of October, 1941, just about my fifteenth birthday.

Marcello: I was going to say that you weren't very old when you entered the service. First of all, why did you decide to enter the service in October of 1941?

Matthews: It was quite by accident. A very good friend of mine--I don't remember his first name; his last name was Stafford--that I grew up with in south Dallas, which was considerably different then than it is now . . . but he was home on leave from the Navy, and I'd run around with him some. He was wearing a uniform, and it seemed like he got all the attention from all the girls, and I decided that was the route I wanted to go. At that time, the Navy was looking for personnel, and they kind of turned their head about

the age. They didn't pursue it to identify whether you were or were not seventeen or older.

Marcello: I was going to ask you how you got in the Navy at fifteen.

Matthews: I got my father, who was living at that time, to sign an affidavit to the effect that I was of the age of seventeen, but actually I was not but fifteen.

Marcello: Did this ever cause you any problems later on?

Matthews: Yes, my mother was not against me going in the Navy, but when the war broke out, naturally, she didn't want her son, who wasn't even sixteen years of age then, to be in the service and did make some effort to get me out, but it somehow never came about.

Marcello: Was it quite evident when you went through boot camp that you were considerably younger than most of the other people in your unit, or did you more or less blend in fairly well?

Matthews: No, there was more than myself who was fifteen. There was one in our boot camp there who was only fourteen, I remember. Very few of them were over a year or two different than me, so actually the year or two difference made very little difference as far as training was concerned.

Marcello: I assume that you took your boot camp in San Diego.

Matthews: San Diego Naval Training Station.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we should get as part of the record?

- Matthews: The only thing that I remember is that the discipline there was pretty hard; it was up early in the morning and late at night--more discipline than I have remembered. Also, it was twenty-one dollars a month.
- Marcello: How long was boot camp at that time?
- Matthews: Six weeks . . . no, wait a minute. No, they shortened it down; it was originally six weeks, and they cut it to, I think, three or four weeks.
- Marcello: That means that they evidently were wanting to get the recruits out into the fleet just as quickly as possible.
- Matthews: They were pushing to get them out of San Diego. Of course, most of us there were unaware of the reason for it; we were too young and didn't know any different.
- Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs at that particular time? After all, you were only fifteen.
- Matthews: None. The only thing I was keeping abreast with was primarily when I got a pass to go ashore and what girls were available.
- Marcello: When you thought of the country getting into war at that particular time, is it safe to say that you perhaps thought more in terms of Europe than you did in terms of the Far East?
- Matthews: At that age, I didn't even give the remotest thought

about the possibility of war; that was the farthest thing from my mind. That wasn't the reason I went in the Navy; that wasn't why I was in the Navy. Really, I'd given no thought to it. I didn't know that war was imminent until Pearl Harbor broke out.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Matthews: I was assigned temporarily to Sand Point Naval Air Station in Seattle, Washington, to metalsmith school. They transferred me there after the third or fourth day--and I don't know why--to metalsmith school at the Naval Air Station at Ford Island in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Marcello: So in other words, you really didn't go to metalsmith school in Sand Point.

Matthews: No, I was there very shortly, maybe two or three or four days at the most. I caught a troop transport ship out of Bremerton, Washington, and went to Honolulu.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going to the Hawaiian Islands?

Matthews: I was looking forward to it. Anybody fifteen years of age and who had been very little of anyplace in his life

would look forward to it, yes. It was interesting.

Marcello: I assume you had visions of a tropical paradise and things of that nature.

Matthews: Oh, yes, and girls in the skirts and the luaus and everything--very definitely.

Marcello: Now when you went to the Hawaiian Islands, did you go directly to Ford Island?

Matthews: Yes.

Marcello: And did you go to metalsmith school there?

Matthews: I was in metalsmith school there prior to and during the start of the war at Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What exactly does one do in metalsmith school? What sort of a Navy school is that?

Matthews: Actually, it was aviation sheet metalsmith school, which basically was repairing the fuselage on aircraft, replacing ailerons, structural damage, or pockets or metal fatigue--replacing that--etcetera.

Marcello: How did you manage to go to metalsmith school? In other words, were you simply assigned to it, or did you volunteer for it?

Matthews: No, in the Navy, one of the first things I learned was never to volunteer for anything. The Navy just decided they had to have so many recruits for each position, and I just happened to fill that slot with metalsmith school.



I certainly had no background for it.

Marcello: How long did that school last?

Matthews: Well, it would have lasted six to eight weeks. As it was, I think it was approximately ten days total (chuckle).

Marcello: What did Ford Island look like from a physical standpoint? In other words, describe your barracks and your living quarters and things of that nature.

Matthews: Very clean, very Navy, very disciplined. Of course, I was only then a first class seaman; I started in as an apprentice seaman. It was to bed early at night and up early in the morning with liberty basically reserved for weekends only and not during the week, because I was basically still a "boot," as far as the Navy was concerned. Everything was clean; it was kept clean mainly by the men who were in the Navy. The chow was good. When you grow up in the Depression days and eat what I had to eat, anything looks better. Of course, at twenty-one dollars a month, that's more money than I had ever seen in my life anyhow.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy? I'm perhaps asking an unfair question, because you really hadn't been in the Navy that long. But in that short time, that is, from the time you entered the Navy in October until the actual attack occurred, how would

you describe the morale of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Matthews: I'd say it was very good. The discipline was very strict which most of us, because of our age, was not used to. But overall, what the Navy had to offer was travel, excitement, interesting places and people. Everybody liked it. Nobody could have gone to Hawaii for the first time and not have liked it; there was too much to see and too much to do. Also, if you remember, that was the period of time when Hawaii was not thought about as a vacation spot or a travel spot. If you went to Hawaii then, basically you went by ship, and it was a matter of days getting there, not hours.

Marcello: We have to keep in mind that there weren't very many hotels in Waikiki Beach at that particular time, were there?

Matthews: The only hotel I remember there was the Royal Hawaiian. There were others there, but that was the focal point or the meeting place. If you were going to meet anybody in Hawaii and you didn't know where to meet, you'd just say, "I'll meet you in the lobby of the Royal Hawaiian," if for no other reason but just to say you've been there.

Marcello: What sort of reception did you get when you came aboard at Ford Island? In other words, you were still basically a "boot," so to speak.

Matthews: Well, a reception like any other "boot." We were given all

the menial tasks that nobody else would do, you know, which means picking up cigarette butts, picking up paper, cutting grass, picking up trimmings. When we wasn't in school, we were just kept busy all the time. We had very little time to decide whether we liked it or not, but for the most part, I did like it.

Marcello: I assume that they did keep you busy most of the time.

Matthews: Very definitely.

Marcello: What was metalsmith school like? Describe it.

Matthews: Well, it was good, but it's not like a school you would go to on a civilian basis. It's military-oriented, and you're in uniform. When you're talked to, you stand at attention; you're saluting officers all the time; and even to chiefs and first class petty officers you were saying, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," even though Navy etiquette didn't require it.

Marcello: Now was most of your training on-the-job training, or were there classes in theory and so on also here?

Matthews: Well, at Ford Island there, we did two things: we did shop work and experimentation if we're going to repair airplane fuselage; and then we also did work under our teachers on actual repair of fuselages on Ford Island. That was the type of aircraft then which most people would not even remember; it's non-existent today. These were the old days

before the Pearl Harbor attack--the PBY's and the old float system aircraft.

Marcello: Was this training to become a sheet metalworker rather intensive and thorough?

Matthews: Yes, in fact, it was approximately a sixteen-week course, and they had shortened it down to ten weeks because of the criteria. Had it not been for Pearl Harbor, I probably would have served on an aircraft carrier.

Marcello: In other words, again, Ford Island was more or less a temporary station so far as you were concerned. After you got out of sheet metal school, you fully expected to go some other place.

Matthews: Yes. Well, Ford Island was a permanent station, but it was temporary for me. I was only there for schooling. Now some of them, I'm sure, would remain at Ford Island for maintenance and repair, but for the most part, most of them were re-assigned to the fleet upon completion of the schooling.

Marcello: Let's talk about the liberty routine here at Ford Island. How did it work for you?

Matthews: It worked fine, except at that time, because of our boot training status, we weren't allowed liberty during the week--on the weekends only. But we were off from Friday evening until Sunday evening.

Marcello: In other words, you could stay ashore overnight if you had liberty.

Matthews: On the weekends only. There wasn't any curfew on there. There were strict regulations about your actions while you was ashore, and it was enforced by the Shore Patrol; but we were allowed overnight for the weekend, not during the week.

Marcello: What'd you do when you had liberty?

Matthews: Oh, like most other new sailors, I'd head for the nearest beer joint and try to find the nearest broad.

Marcello: I can assume from your answer, then, that you perhaps spent a little bit of time on Hotel and Canal and Beretania Streets?

Matthews: Yes, but most of the streets I really don't remember; it's been too many years ago. I just remember very little about it. I remember one particular word and that was the word, "Kanaky," which everybody referred to as white descendants, but I come to find out that "Kanaky" was not a very nice word to use for the Hawaiian.

Marcello: I see you don't have any tattoos. Does that mean you didn't spend a whole lot of time on Hotel or Canal Street where all the tattoo shops were and so on?

Matthews: I never had a desire for a tattoo.

Marcello: Many people like to assume that if the Japanese, or any other enemy for that matter, were going to attack the Hawaiian Islands,

the best time to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning. The thinking of these people is that Saturday nights were times of a great deal of partying and drinking and carousing, and that consequently the sailors would be in no shape to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you reply to an assertion or an assumption of that sort?

Matthews: The Japanese decision . . . now this is based after many years of reflection back on what actually transpired. But the Japanese decision to attack on Sunday morning at Pearl Harbor couldn't have been any better than if we'd have planned to attack for them. I mean, we were so totally unprepared mentally and physically and militarily. Nobody . . . maybe some of the top officers in the Pearl Harbor area were aware that there was a Jap attack, but for the most part, for the sailors that I knew at that time and I associated with, the possibility of war was one of the remotest things. There was no preparedness whatsoever.

Marcello: But again, on a typical Saturday night, was there a great deal of drinking and carousing, or is this a myth?

Matthews: No, there is a great deal of drinking and carousing on Saturday night--Friday and Saturday; of course, Saturday's always the biggest. Many of the sailors would come in on a weekend who had been out aboard ship on cruise or patrol

all during the week. They'd come in there and let their hair down on Friday and Saturday nights, because they wanted to get it out of their system because they knew they was going right back to sea Monday morning. This is tugboats; destroyers that were on patrol; even aircraft carriers that were out on patrol.

Marcello: Also, is it not true that we have to keep in mind that Sunday was normally a day of leisure, so to speak?

Matthews: For the most part, the Navy did take Sunday as a day of leisure unless you had the watch for that time, which means a tour of duty. You were given time to attend church services whether you went or not. You weren't required to; you could do whatever you wanted at that time. It was basically a day of leisure with no preparedness for anything.

Marcello: To use the Navy term, it was more or less "holiday routine" on Sunday.

Matthews: Sunday traditionally, except in wartime, has always been a "holiday routine."

Marcello: Now during that period, when you personally thought of an individual Japanese, what sort of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind? Did you even think about the Japanese at all?

Matthews: Very little. Especially down there, there were Japanese on the island, but I more or less kind of put them together with

the Polynesians who basically were the ones who inhabited Hawaii and who really established it. The looks was somewhat identical unless you looked closely. I doubt if most people could tell a Japanese from a Korean from a Polynesian.

Marcello: In your bull sessions, even in your wildest talk, did you or any of your buddies ever speculate on the possibility of the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor?

Matthews: None of the buddies that I knew in boot camp, from the time that I went in the Navy until World War II started, ever discussed the possibility of war. Maybe we were too young, or maybe we were too ill-informed. No, not at any time.

Marcello: Did you ever have the acquaintance of any of the old Asiatic sailors while you were there at Pearl Harbor in that period prior to December 7th?

Matthews: Only in that period where it delved around instructions so far as military procedures, drilling procedures, clean-up procedures, or in teaching if you were going to school. But generally, the younger men stayed away from the older sailors, because they were a little shy of them yet. We tended to stick together.

Marcello: I was wondering if perhaps you'd ever heard any of the old Asiatic sailors talk about the Japanese or anything of that nature from their experiences over in China or whatever.

Matthews: There was one or two I talked to who had served in China,



particularly in Shanghai. One of them was even on the Panay, which was involved with the Japanese back in 1937. But even then at my age and the others that were my age, we didn't even give it a remote thought to war. We were too young; we had other things on our mind, and it certainly wasn't war.

Marcello: Okay, I think this brings us up to those days immediately prior to the actual attack itself. Let me start by asking you this question. Did you, at any time, during the week or so before the attack detect any tenseness or change in your routine or anything of that nature?

Matthews: None whatsoever. In fact, it was even a more pronounced relaxed atmosphere in Pearl Harbor. There was plenty of liberty available. We didn't get as much as we'd like to, but we were in school and we were raw recruits. But there was a good time to be had by all if you had the liberty passes for the weekend or for the weekdays. There was no thought at all given to the pending possibility of war with Japan, certainly not from the ones that I knew. I'm sure that there were those that were older who discussed it. But the group that I eventually associated with, it was the farthest thing from our mind; we didn't even discuss it.

Marcello: So as far as you were concerned, it was business as usual right up to the actual attack itself.

Matthews: Very definitely.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us then to that weekend of December 7th.  
Let's go into that weekend in a little bit more detail.  
What did you do that Saturday, December 6, 1941?

Matthews: I was off for the weekend from Friday night until Sunday night. I believe I had to check in . . . I believe it was by . . . oh, I'm not positive . . . something like eight or ten o'clock Sunday night. The friend that I knew quite well in South Dallas at that time, his name was Stafford, and I don't remember his first name. He was a crew member aboard the Arizona. In fact, he was killed in that attack. But he knew I was at the station there; we'd already gotten together a couple of times basically on the phone and everything. We went out on liberty that Saturday night.

Marcello: What did you do?

Matthews: Oh, we drank too much beer and shot some pool and messed with the "Kanakies" and some things I would rather not talk about. But we did what a typical sailor would do on a weekend. But he had to be back at the Arizona by twelve o'clock midnight. He was a seaman first class.

Marcello: Most of the battleship sailors had to be back at midnight, did they not?

Matthews: That was the standard procedure for most of the crew who

were not chief petty officers or officers. If you were, I believe, first class seaman or below, you had to be aboard by midnight. I believe the way they ran it, if you were a petty officer, you were allowed until two o'clock in the morning; if you're a chief petty officer, you didn't have to report in until eight o'clock the next day. If you are married and living ashore, you could leave that evening and come back the next morning.

Marcello: Okay, so you and your buddy Stafford were out having a good time on Saturday night. Pick up the story at that point. Did anything eventful happen in Honolulu?

Matthews: No. Most of it was sightseeing. It was all new as it would be to any fifteen-year-old who had not been anywhere outside of his barnyard, you know. But I had expressed an interest that I'd love to go aboard the battleship that he was on. In fact, it was called Battleship Row there. But he had asked the officer-of-the-day before he left of possibly bringing a friend aboard and was granted permission; he said, "Certainly, as long as he's got proper credentials," you know, and uniform and so on.

Marcello: Battleship Row was a rather impressive sight, was it not?

Matthews: Yes, most people tended to think of it as a bunch of battleships moored up alongside of the dock, and this was not true at Pearl Harbor. On the Battleship Row there, for the most

part, battleships are moored to mooring buoys, which there's a Navy term for that; I can't think of it right offhand. But it's similar to a mooring buoy. They were tied bow-to-stern, bow-to-stern all the way down, and liberty boats were used to transport them from the ship to the shore. But anyhow, after Saturday night's general liberty, we got back on the Arizona about eleven o'clock.

Marcello: What sort of shape were you in when you got back aboard the Arizona?

Matthews: Well, I wasn't inebriated, but I wasn't sober, either. I was in a good mood.

Marcello: Now you were still fifteen years of age. How hard was it for you to get booze at that time?

Matthews: Well, at a lot of the places in Honolulu, it wasn't easy to get it, but there was more than enough places where booze was available if you had the money. It's just like anything else concerning vice of this country; if you've got the money, you can get it.

We went aboard that night. There was a different officer-of-the-day aboard, but word had been left that he was bringing a friend aboard. He asked then if I might spend the night, and they said, "There's no reason for him not to." I showed him my pass from Naval Air Station Ford Island and spent the night there.

Marcello: Where did you spend the night aboard the Arizona?

Matthews: On the aft part of the ship, which basically some of them call the boat deck or the boat well back in the back. That was where Stafford's quarters were, and I slept in a bunk below decks in his compartment. We went to sleep, because I was tired and he was tired. We got up fairly early the next morning about six o'clock. I got up earlier than usual, because of the excitement of being aboard a battleship, being as I never had been aboard a battleship before.

We were anticipating Sunday breakfast, which is usually light aboard the station and everything. Breakfast was starting at six o'clock. We were wearing dress whites, because we were going to leave that Sunday. Again, he was off that Sunday, and we were going to do some sightseeing.

I don't remember the exact time, but it was around seven or 7:30 in the morning. This is when the pandemonium broke loose, you know. Planes started appearing overhead; you could hear the noise. You'd hear . . . well, I thought at first it was thunder in the background.

Marcello: Now were you just getting out of bed when you heard all this?

Matthews: No, I'd been out of bed since about 5:30 and had been to breakfast with Stafford about six o'clock or 6:15 that morning. We were above deck at that time. In fact, Stafford

had taken me for basically a tour of the ship. At the time that the attack started, I was on the aft part of the ship with Stafford, which again was what we called the boat deck area or the boat well area.

Marcello: What sort of a day was it in terms of weather, climate, and so on?

Matthews: Just a typical Hawaiian day. It had rained some during the night that I remember, but it wasn't that morning. At least I didn't remember any rain. It was just calm and peaceful and quiet, you know, and there was very little activity going on at that time, because it was Sunday and Sunday was basically a day of rest in the Navy unless you had the watch or particular duty or were restricted to the ship.

Marcello: I gather in terms of weather and climate, it was a good day for an attack.

Matthews: It was a good day for anything.

Marcello: Okay, so you're on the aft part of the ship, and I'll let you pick up the story at that point. What time is this?

Matthews: Oh, we finished chow--breakfast as we know it--about 6:30 approximately . . . 6:15 or 6:30. I spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes to tour the ship with Stafford. Then we were back on the aft boat well around the neighborhood of seven o'clock or 7:15. It's hard to remember the exact time

but approximately that. Because I know what time we got up, and I know what time the attack started.

Marcello: Okay, so you're on the back part of the ship. Pick up the story at that point.

Matthews: Well, we had been for a tour around the ship and everything. Stafford and I were just talking in generalities, and I told him how much I enjoyed it, and I was looking forward to coming back aboard ship. Then I even said, "I wish I could get duty aboard a battleship," not knowing any better at that time.

We were going to go ashore again and spend some more liberty. I didn't have to be back to Ford Island Naval Air Station until approximately ten o'clock that night.

But then we heard noise over to our starboard side, which would be from our stern to starboard there. You could see a bunch of planes coming in; nobody's paying any attention to it. Then you hear what seemed like thundering in the background, which actually were bombs starting to drop at that time. But none of us thought about bombs, because we didn't even know what a bomb was. I had yet even to see one in my life.

But as these planes got closer, the thunder got closer, and then we started seeing clouds of smoke coming up from across the roads there, which would be roads that was the

traveling point that ships go in and out of. Then we see fire and explosions where they've hit. Well, we knew that something was wrong, but we thought maybe it was gunnery practice or something.

Marcello: So in other words, you're just spectators at this point and perhaps speculating among yourselves as to what possibly was taking place.

Matthews: We did not know, even at that time, that the Japanese were actually attacking us; it wasn't until after the first wave went across. There was no bombs that hit the Arizona during that first attack that I remember them coming through, but there was one bomb that hit a destroyer off of Ford Island. I didn't know it at that time, but I found out later that it was the Shaw. In fact, it broke her in half.

Marcello: It was a rather spectacular explosion, was it not?

Matthews: Very spectacular. Then I think, if I remember right, when the Shaw was hit and broke in half, that's when general quarters was sounded on the Arizona.

Marcello: Okay, now what does general quarters mean to you, because you obviously didn't have a battle station aboard the Arizona?

Matthews: A complete state of confusion. Stafford said, "I've got to go! I'll see you later!" I remember those words. I had no place to go; I didn't even know what general quarters was.

Marcello: I'm surprised that you perhaps didn't follow him.



Matthews: No, I just stayed back there, which was in the back part of the ship. Pandemonium broke loose; sailors were running everywhere. Guns that had been encased and not prepared at all for a possible military battle, they were having difficulty in tracking them, having difficulty uncovering them; many of the guns were plugged.

Marcello: Now up until this time, the Arizona had not been hit.

Matthews: Not then.

Marcello: Not by either a torpedo or bombs.

Matthews: Now put it this way . . . not that I remember, it hadn't. It could have been . . . there was a lot of explosion going on at that time, and she might have been hit by a torpedo, but I don't remember it. But it wasn't but fifteen or twenty minutes after that, which, if I remember right, would be in the neighborhood between 7:30 and 7:45, she evidently must have been hit with a torpedo. I didn't know at that time that it was a torpedo--I didn't know what a torpedo was--but I heard a thunderous explosion and fire went up on the starboard side.

Marcello: Did it shake you up or knock you over or anything of that nature?

Matthews: It shook me up. It shuddered the ship, but it didn't knock me over. I can remember several incidents, particularly on the aft battery there. The antiaircraft guns, which then,

I remember, were .50-calibers--they didn't have the more modern version--and I could see the gunners trying to get ammunition from the ammunition locker.

The boatswain's mate in charge of the ammunition locker, even with all the bombing and strafing and planes overhead--it was obvious we were being attacked at that point--they couldn't get ammunition from the gun locker because he refused to release it without the permission of the officer-of-the-day. Of course, nobody knew then even where the hell the officer-of-the-day was.

Finally, one boatswain's mate who was in charge of one crew there, I very well remember, he told this chief or something if he didn't get his ass out of the way, he was going to knock it out of the way. So he proceeded to do the same and did hit this chief and knock him out of the way and then broke the lock on the gun locker and took the ammunition from it to feed the guns to do some shooting with.

Marcello: What'd he use to break the lock--a fire axe or something?

Matthews: No, he used a marlinspike, which is common term in the Navy for using for splicing the ropes. Basically, marlinspike is used for steel cables more than it is with the line.

But shortly after that is when it got thick and heavy, and then the first bomb or two hit the Arizona. I think the second bomb that hit the Arizona was close to the aft deck

that I was on, and, needless to say, I was petrified at that time and wasn't trying to go anywhere or trying to come back.

Marcello: Describe, first of all, what you were doing all this time. In other words, were you simply being a spectator, or were you trying to get your rear end under cover, or what were you doing?

Matthews: I was basically just trying to get myself under cover, but, still, at my age and not prepared for any of this, needless to say, I was scared to death. This was not what I went in the Navy for, and this is not what I wanted. I had no place to go; I didn't have a general quarters station; I wouldn't have known what to have done if I went to one. I was too damn young to realize what was going on and didn't know that this was a war breaking out. I thought maybe this was just some big mistake that was being made.

But after the second or third bomb--I don't know which-- that hit the Arizona, and after the second or third torpedo that hit . . . I can't remember to this day whether it was the explosion from the bomb or from sheer panic within myself, but I wound up over the side of the Arizona in the water.

Marcello: Now is this before the bomb hit that did the fatal damage?

Matthews: Well, I'll put it this way. I don't know which bomb it was that would have done the fatal damage. The Arizona was hit

numerous times on the top deck and numerous times on the waterline with torpedoes, and it's hard to say which one really did the fatal damage. I mean, this is my reflection, and I don't say it's correct.

Marcello: Now did you say that while you were on the aft part of the ship that one of the bombs did hit very close to where you were?

Matthews: Maybe twenty or thirty yards in front of me just forward of the boat deck.

Marcello: Describe this incident.

Matthews: Just to put it into plain English, it just scared the living hell out of me, because I didn't know what I was up against, nor did I know how to fight it.

Marcello: What effect did this bomb hit have upon you? In other words, did it knock you over?

Matthews: I think it was the second or third one . . . the concussion from it did knock me down there a couple of times, but it was the second or third one that knocked me over. But, needless to say, my adrenalin was pumping about a thousand miles an hour like that and sweat was breaking out. I was scared. I wasn't experienced with war; I hadn't been trained for it. I didn't know what it was about or what to do about it. Then I wound up in the water.

Marcello: Do you recall why you ended up in the water? Did you jump over?

Had the abandon ship order sounded? Were you simply knocked overboard?

Matthews: To this day, I ask that question myself. I don't know whether it was the Bomb explosion while I was on the top deck that knocked me over or whether it was the inner emotion where I jumped over. I would not be a bit abashed to admit it if I jumped over, but I really don't remember. All I know is the next thing I know I was in the water. This could have been just a void, a blank, in how I got in the water, but I know the next thing after the second or third bomb, which must have been the third or fourth torpedo that hit the Arizona, I was in the water,

Marcello: Fully clothed?

Matthews: Full clothed. Of course, I lost my cap when I went in. Oh, man's desire for self-preservation . . . I swam away from the Arizona to the nearest mooring buoy. I hung on there for the balance of the attack.

Marcello: Now where was this mooring buoy located?

Matthews: This was astern of it and approximately twenty, twenty-five, thirty yards away.

Marcello: Was it a buoy to which the Arizona was tied?

Matthews: This was the buoy to which the Arizona was tied.

Marcello: Now at the point that you reached that mooring buoy, had the Arizona blown and gone under yet?

Matthews: No, not yet. She'd blown up and went under later. In fact, there was steel in the air; there was fire; there was oil-- God knows what all--pieces of timber; pieces of the boat deck; canvas; and even pieces of bodies that came into the water.

Marcello: Okay, so you reach this mooring buoy. How far a swim was this for you?

Matthews: Oh, it's not over twenty or thirty yards.

Marcello: Was there anybody else at the buoy?

Matthews: No.

Marcello: How large a buoy is this?

Matthews: Oh, approximately eight feet across and how deep, I would only guess. Probably it was ten or fifteen feet deep.

Marcello: Now are these buoys slick and slimy and things of that nature from plants and so on and so forth in the water?

Matthews: Very definitely. They had a lot of algae on it, green algae, barnacles, and everything. But I managed to get on the far side, and I did manage to hang on--out of fear only.

Marcello: Now in other words, when you reached this buoy, part of you was in the water, and part of you was out of the water, so to speak.

Matthews: I was basically out of water from a little above my waist. My head was above water. I would have gone on to shore at that time, except there was just as much havoc going on with

bombing at the Naval air station at Ford Island.

Marcello: How far away was it?

Matthews: Oh, three-quarters of a mile, a mile at the most, I mean, the best I remember it. But I was kind of between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't and I didn't want to go back to the Arizona, and from what was happening at Ford Island--I could see from the buoy--I couldn't and I didn't want to go there. So I was just more or less hanging on a thread for dear life.

Marcello: So you're clinging to the buoy, and you are still a spectator, so to speak. Describe the attacking Japanese planes. Do you remember their mode of operation or anything of that sort?

Matthews: All I can remember, it seemed like they came in constantly wave after wave, and it seemed like they were completely uncontested, unmolested. I saw maybe one or two that might have been hit and shot down.

Marcello: Were they coming in low?

Matthews: Very definitely low, because some of them came in after they made their bombing and strafing runs, which I didn't even know what bombing and strafing was at the time. But after the bombing and torpedo runs, they come in strafing after that. None of them was toward my area. I don't think they were paying any attention to me. Mainly they were

going toward the ships or anything of military value.

Marcello: Okay, so describe what you're seeing in the harbor so far as the attack was concerned.

Matthews: To me, complete pandemonium. I was too young at that time to fully realize what was going on, but to me it was . . . it's rather difficult to describe at that age. I can describe it now at thirty years of age, but it wouldn't be the same as when I was fifteen of age because I've had time to dwell on it.

But it was a comedy of errors from the word "go." The Navy was unprepared; none of the personnel I knew had been trained for an imminent attack. The gunners weren't trained; ammunition wasn't readily available; damage control wasn't available; watertight hatches were never closed. Even though general quarters sounded, most of the hatches never got closed for watertight security. It was complete pandemonium.

I saw very few of our planes that ever got in the air. Most of them that I saw, looking over at Ford Island, had been bombed and set afire or blown apart--that I could see from hanging onto the buoy. What ones that did get in the air were the real old-style planes. I can't remember if they were shot down or gunned down or otherwise within just a matter of minutes.



Marcello: I assume that you were a witness to the Arizona blowing up.

Matthews: Very definitely.

Marcello: Describe that incident in as much detail as you can remember.

Matthews: Basically, it would be like I've done in years past a few times and gone out to the Cotton Bowl here in Dallas, Texas, and watched a fireworks display. When the Arizona finally started blowing up, it was ammunition, gun lockers, and shells and fragments and pyrotechnics coming, it seemed to me, from all parts of the ship.

Marcello: Was it a deafening roar?

Matthews: It was a series of explosions; it wasn't just one deafening one. It come to one final one where she seemed like the middle part just raised up in the water and kind of half-buckled and then settled back down. Of course, she never completely sank, because the water at that time wasn't deep enough. But her bridge and her masthead were above water; I remember that after she finally sunk. This was about the time when the attack was just about over, and I decided to get the hell away from that mooring buoy.

Marcello: Well, I assume that since you were at that mooring buoy that there was a danger of your getting hit by all sorts of flying debris when the Arizona blew.

Matthews: Yes, but far less than if I'd been on the Arizona for the entire battle. Oh, there was debris coming around there.

Most of it was debris from the shrapnel of the ships that were going up in the air and coming down in the water. Of course, now I never got hit by any of it. I did have quite a bit of oil and sludge and diesel oil all over me. In fact, my white uniform didn't look white anymore; it was black.

Marcello: Were you in danger of being burned? Were fires close to you?

Matthews: No, most of the fire was confined to the actual ship area, which was fifteen or twenty yards away. If I was in danger of being caught afire, I didn't realize it. I saw a lot of fire, but it wasn't coming to me. But there was fire on the beach, too, and there was fire there. So again, I was between a rock and a hard place,

Marcello: Now did you mention earlier in the interview that at this time you were showered with pieces of steel and parts of bodies and things of that nature?

Matthews: I remember lots of steel and everything and bodies coming down, but I can't remember if any of them actually ever hit me. Evidently, they didn't, because I didn't have a scratch one when it was over with. But I do remember many parts of what you might call shrapnel or pieces of steel from the ship and even dismembered bodies. I saw a thigh and leg; I saw fingers; I saw hands; I saw elbows and arms. It's far too much for a young boy of fifteen years old to have seen.

Marcello: So what do you do after the Arizona blows?

Matthews: Well, after she blew and settled down and things had basically started . . . well, it hadn't quieted down, but it looked like the attack was basically over. This was maybe . . . oh, I'd say approximately an hour that I remember it; it couldn't have been much more than that. I thought it was time to try to head for shore. The only other incident that happened after that . . . I had to swim approximately three-quarters to one mile to shore.

Marcello: Were you swimming through the oil-covered water and so on?

Matthews: No, I bypassed that by about 100 or 150 yards and then started toward Ford Island. But the last incident I remember then during the attack is when I swam up on the island of Ford Island Naval Air Station, which was rocky and everything around the beach area there. The Marines were out on patrol, and everybody was trigger-happy because-- I didn't know at that time--they thought of a possible imminent invasion of the Japanese. Here I was, in white uniform, but it was more or less black. I had black oil and sludge all over me. You couldn't have recognized that I was a white man.

I remember crawling ashore from that and running into a Marine sentry who wasn't much older than I am, a year or two at the most. Fortunately, the guy looked at me . . .

because he was ready to shoot. He thought I was a Japanese trying to come ashore. Only when I screamed and hollered, "I'm Navy! I'm with the United States Navy! Don't shoot!" he didn't pull the trigger. But the rifle was aimed at me, and his finger on the trigger.

Marcello: Now as you mentioned, the attack is over by this time.

Matthews: The attack is over at this time. This was approximately an hour later. There was a lot of confusion still going on. To some people, they thought the attack was still going on, but I found out later that this was not true. Most of it was explosions from the hits that the Japanese had made. Ships were still blowing up in the harbor; hangars were still blowing up; gasoline was still blowing up; planes on the ground on fire were blowing up and rupturing their fuel tanks. There was confusion around there not only for hours but for days later.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens now when you get ashore, and they recognize that you are a member of the United States Navy?

Matthews: Well, basically, I was told just to stay in the beach area there. There was a lot of other ones there; some of them had been wounded and everything. There was not enough pharmacist's mates, doctors, or anything for all the injured at that time. It was such a state of confusion that nobody really knew what to do, where to do it, or why to do it.

Needless to say, I didn't know what to do, so I just stayed in the beach area for, it seems like, the next two or three hours when it came to clean-up time.

I went back to the station. There was many other ones that I was in school with at that time; we proceeded to try to clean some of the sludge off. We put some dungarees on, and we started then trying to rescue people who might still be alive, to remove damaged aircraft from the runways, and to do just about any and everything that was needed there--whatever could be done to put Ford Island Naval Air Station back in operation.

Marcello: I assume that the water supply had not been broken or ruptured in any way, since you said that you managed to get most of the oil and sludge cleaned off you.

Matthews: I cleaned it off basically with naphtha and stuff. I don't remember a water shortage. I know that I went later on to get water at a water spigot there or water fountain; there was water there. You couldn't use soap and water to get the sludge off me; I had to get it off with naphtha.

Marcello: Now by the time that you had more or less cleaned yourself up, was somebody giving orders? In other words, were things getting organized by that time?

Matthews: Everybody who had some official capacity was trying to give orders, but nobody really knew what kind of orders to

give and why they should do it. It was just, to me, a constant state of confusion and a comedy of errors. Nobody was prepared for this; at least the ones I knew wasn't. Maybe the top echelon were, but I certainly wasn't. Nobody was prepared.

We couldn't have done any better than if we'd told the Japanese to attack: "We're ready for you." Because planes were stacked wingtip to wingtip--they was just inviting them there--where they should have been scattered about. Probably 50 per cent less damage would have been done. If the ships had been scattered about . . . but they was right alongside or in a row. They was just sitting ducks for the Japanese.

Marcello: That afternoon, what sort of specific work did you do?

Matthews: You mean after the bomb attack?

Marcello: After the attack and after you'd gotten cleaned up, so to speak, what did you do at that point?

Matthews: After it was basically confirmed that I was not hurt physically and everything, we spent the rest of that day and late in the evening and the next day and for several days trying to remove the damage from the hangars; and we hauled the wrecked planes off, put out small brush fires that come up. Every now and then, we would come across somebody that was pinned in the wreckage that was still alive. In fact, one

time--it was three days later--there was a plane on the end of the runway; we went down there and was going to remove it, and we found out there was a pilot in it who had been injured and trapped in it for three days. I wasn't by myself; there was several on that party.

But it was basically trying to put some sense of reality back in the operation of Ford Island.

Marcello: Did you work right on through the night without any sleep?

Matthews: I went on through that night and the middle part of the next day. In fact, I wasn't by myself; very few people slept then. We were told that the Japanese were going to invade at any time. Whether this was true, I don't know; we found out later it was not true. But we chose to believe it at that time, because we didn't know any better.

Marcello: I'm sure that you believed virtually every rumor that floated around that night.

Matthews: There was rumors and then there was rumors and then there was rumors. We were told numerous times that the Japanese had landed. Then that rumor would be quelled, and then they'd say the Japanese had landed in another island. Then we'd be informed of the rumor the Japanese were going to attack again in the morning. Rumors were flying fast and furious.

Marcello: And I'm sure you believed every one of them,

Matthews: Every one of them. I had no reason not to, because nobody

had told me beforehand. Well, we just did what we could. I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Marcello: What sort of an appetite did you have?

Matthews: I did not have an appetite for a long time. We lived on ready-made sandwiches, which basically is what the Navy calls "horse cock," and occasionally we were lucky enough to get "shit-on-the-shingle." But after the third or fourth day, the chow got pretty well back to normal.

Marcello: What was the morale like in the aftermath of the attack?

Matthews: The morale basically was pretty good. It's amazing that something like this can be a common denominator and bring everybody together. You know, you can get a classroom of school chums who can fight and argue with one another, but you get a common denominator in a crisis, and everybody suddenly forgets their differences and works together. The morale was good even though we were disappointed in the Navy and were disappointed that we hadn't been prepared and everything. But the morale was good.

Marcello: Would it be safe to say that the principal attitude was one of anger more than fear or anything of that nature?

Matthews: After the third or fourth or fifth day, yes, because it took many of us that time to realize just actually what had transpired and what had happened and how much damage was done. Then, of course, later on, I read where Admiral Kimmel and



General Short were the scapegoats or held responsible for it and court-martialed years later. But it wasn't anger, because the Navy was so ill-prepared and the fleet, the men were so ill-advised and ill-trained for this; we were totally unprepared for it.

Marcello: Did you still feel that you could whip the Japanese, that is, in the days immediately following the attack?

Matthews: Never doubted it. Nobody in his right mind would want to admit to themselves before they started battle that they're going to get beat. You wouldn't and I wouldn't.

Marcello: I'm sure that Ford Island was just a shambles.

Matthews: There was very little left to resemble a Naval air station as far as when the bomb attack was over. You could see hulks of hangars and hulks of airplanes, but I don't think there was one plane that was completely intact at all after it was over. At least I don't remember it.

Marcello: Did you have to cannibalize parts in order to get some flyable planes?

Matthews: There wasn't really very many cannibalized parts to obtain. Within a day or two, we had planes that come in. This was the main reason we wanted to clean the area and clear the runway. We had planes coming in from an aircraft carrier. I didn't know which ones at that time, but I understand one of them was the Lexington. They were sent in there to give

Pearl Harbor protection from possibly another attack.

At that time, I understand the Japanese had considered another attack, but for some reason or other, they backed off from it.

Marcello: Now I do know that that night some planes off the Enterprise were coming in, and they were fired upon. Do you recall that particular incident?

Matthews: I did not know that it happened until after it happened; I was told about it. But I do remember that night, because there was antiaircraft fire constantly during the night. There was gunfire, rifle fire, constantly during the night; everybody was trigger-happy. Nobody moved unless they had to move, and they made sure they stayed crouched.

Marcello: I assume that you had to be working under black-out conditions and so on.

Matthews: Black-out conditions went in effect the very night of Pearl Harbor. It was observed, and it wasn't observed. It was again a comedy of . . . you get on one part of the station, and it was blacked out, and another part had lights going over it, and people were screaming, "Turn off that light! Turn off the light!" Sometimes it seemed like it would take an hour to turn off one damn light in the corridor.

Marcello: Did you ever give thought to turning yourself in and saying, "Hey, look, I'm only fifteen years of age. I want out!"

Matthews: No, not really, because once that it came to my senses of just what happened, I knew then that even if I had to wait the two years that I still would join up. Because it was my country, and I, at that time, and do now, believe in God, motherhood, and apple pie, you know, and I still wave the flag.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Matthews, is there anything relative to the attack at Pearl Harbor that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Matthews: Nothing much more that I can tell. But just when I was fifteen years old, there was little, if any, preparedness for that attack at Pearl Harbor. Nobody was remotely aware of it; nobody had been trained for it. I cannot believe that an attack such as that could have gone undetected in advance with such a massive attack. Who we hold responsible, I wouldn't like to get into personalities. History later on should hold somebody in the United States responsible for what happened at Pearl Harbor and for all the lives that were lost there needlessly.

Marcello: Okay, well, I think that's probably a good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that scholars will find your comments valuable when they use them to write about

Pearl Harbor.

Matthews: Thank you.