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Interview with  
James F. O'Connor  
August 18, 1974

Place of Interview: Houston, Texas  
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
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Oral History Collection

James O'Connor

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Houston, Texas

Date: August 18, 1974

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing James O'Connor for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 18, 1974, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. O'Connor in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the heavy cruiser USS San Francisco during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. O'Connor: I was born in New Albany, Indiana, in 1921. I graduated from New Albany High School in 1939 and enlisted in the Navy.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

O'Connor: There wasn't any work around, and I couldn't afford to go to college. Really, anybody could afford to go to college, I guess, I found later. But at that time there just wasn't any money, and I guess I just didn't have the incentive to go.

Marcello: Well, you know, this is kind of a standard reaction that many people of your generation give for entering the service. It was a matter of economics in many cases. Jobs were still scarce, for the depression was not over by any means at that time. Why did you decide on the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

O'Connor: I had a friend who had joined the Navy, and I really wanted to get out and travel. My brother had gone into the Air Force. We graduated from high school at the same time. He enlisted in the Air Force, and I enlisted in the Navy.

Marcello: Where'd you take your boot camp?

O'Connor: Norfolk, Virginia.

Marcello: That's unusual. I think just about everybody else I've interviewed took their boot camp at San Diego, but I suppose you were far enough east that you went to Norfolk.

O'Connor: Right. Well, it was either Norfolk or Great Lakes, which was also open then. But I lived in New Albany. It's

right on the Ohio River. Therefore, I had to go to Louisville, Kentucky, to the recruiting station. That put me in the southern group, so they sent me to Norfolk.

Marcello: Is there anything eventful that happened during your boot camp days that you think needs to be a part of the record?

O'Connor: About the only eventful thing that I can recall is that I was there about the time that the Navy really began to expand. I guess the war in Europe and things had begun to build up. Therefore, the military also had begun to expand, and they had a lot of new barracks and things opening up on the base. The number of companies that were graduating had increased dramatically, and they were bringing more and more in all the time.

Marcello: At the time that you enlisted in the military, were you keeping abreast with world events, and did you perhaps foresee the possibility of the country eventually getting into war?

O'Connor: Not really. I suppose . . . you don't really have the communications that the youngsters are exposed to today. I guess a radio and a newspaper were about the only things that you had, and the youngsters don't get, really,

a whole lot out of reading newspapers because they're not interested in that type of thing, I think. At least then they weren't. Getting into a war or something like that was the farthest thing from my mind. I just needed to find something to do.

Marcello: When did you get out of boot camp, and where did you go after you got out of boot camp?

O'Connor: Well, I got out of boot camp in November, 1939, and I went directly aboard the San Francisco. She was tied up there at the Naval operating base in Norfolk.

Marcello: Was this a voluntary decision on your part, or were you simply assigned to the San Francisco?

O'Connor: Just assigned to it.

Marcello: What sort of a ship was the San Francisco? Describe it from a physical standpoint.

O'Connor: It was one of the few heavy cruisers that was built--one of the few that was built--because, you know, they had an arms limitation on of some sort. I'm not real familiar with it, but they were limiting things that various countries could build, and she was one that was built during this period of time. There was, oh, maybe half a dozen of them. They all looked alike. She was 10,000 tons and probably weighed a lot more at the time of Pearl. They added a lot of armament and other stuff.

She was a nice looking ship. She wasn't too big, and she wasn't too little. I really enjoyed that ship.

Marcello: What were you striking for after you went aboard the San Francisco? I assume everybody starts out on the deck gang.

O'Connor: Well, a good many people do. That's the normal thing, but the joke about this thing is . . . one of the reasons why I was able to get into the Navy when I first tried to enlist . . . see, I graduated from high school, and the Navy had a waiting list of God knows how many. One of the reasons that I was able to get in right away was the fact that I had graduated from high school. So when I got aboard ship . . . I'd always . . . I wanted to learn something technical. So I wanted to get into the engineering force. So I think there was a draft, oh, of maybe fifteen or twenty of us that went aboard. We were lined up on the well deck, and the master at arms says, "How many of you people graduated from high school?" And there was only two of us that held up our hands. So he says, "Well, you're going to be fire controlmen." I said, "Fire controlman? Well, that's something to do with the fire rooms down there. I'm going to be fire controlman. That's fine with me." So that's how I became a fire controlman.

Marcello: And I gather then that most of the training that you had occurred aboard the USS San Francisco, and it was basically on-the-job training.

O'Connor: Right.

Marcello: How would you describe that training? Was it thorough? Was it competent? Was there a lot of time to train you?

O'Connor: Well, in those days, yes. In those days we had professionals, and . . .

Marcello: When you say professionals, you're referring to the petty officers and people of this nature?

O'Connor: Well, I say the regular Navy--people who had enlisted. The draft wasn't something . . . I mean, I have nothing against people who were drafted, but they don't have the incentive, plus the fact that you get a lot of . . . just a lot of these in that nobody could use. But during that period of time, they were all regular Navy, and they all enlisted and they all seemed to have pride in the things they were doing. We were given course books, and we were assigned to various stations. You had a combat station for general quarters. You were thoroughly indoctrinated in your job at that particular point. As you went through various cleaning stations . . . you know, everybody has mess cooking and compartment cleaning. I cleaned up



the chiefs' quarters for about six months before I ever got out of there. The petty officers and others seemed to realize that the more you learned, the better off the ship was.

Marcello: Now most of these petty officers had a great deal of experience, also, did they not?

O'Connor: Yes, they did.

Marcello: Most of them had been in for a pretty long time.

O'Connor: Right. Quite a number of them had been in . . . oh, a first class petty officer would have two or three hash marks. Amazingly enough, we had this one fellow--and this was at the beginning of the opening up of the Navy when it began to rate people without having to spend a lifetime before you made third class--we had one guy they called a "slick-armed first class." He didn't have any hash marks. During his first cruise he had become a first class.

Marcello: Now this was an exception rather than the rule because I know that rank in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy was hard to come by.

O'Connor: It was, and this particular person was extremely intelligent. Well, he eventually . . . I saw him after the war, or right after the end of the war, and he was a full commander.

Marcello: And I would assume that there was plenty of time for training aboard that cruiser even in 1940. There really still wasn't a sense of urgency yet. There was plenty of time for you to learn your job.

O'Connor: Right, and training is one of the things that was emphasized--training and discipline. It was unlike today when somebody says jump and they all stand there and say, "Which way? How far? Why? What's going on?" When he said, "Jump!" you jumped because you were trained with the discipline to realize that the people . . . you respected the people who were leading you because you knew that they were professionals and they knew what they were doing. If they had a reason for telling you to do something, you did it.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy? And again, you can only speak for the San Francisco, I suppose.

O'Connor: Right. Well, up until the time that we began to get draftees aboard, I'd say the morale was excellent. Oh, the morale was even excellent with the first draftees we got, up until the period when they were supposed to go home and they wouldn't allow them to.

Marcello: How do you account for the high morale aboard the ship?

O'Connor: I think a lot of it is the treatment of the personnel from the officers--relationship between the officers and the personnel. My wife always says . . . she was in the WAVES during the war, and she had always had this civilian attitude toward officers, you know, that they were treated too well, too many privileges, and all this. But aboard ship, you had to have a separation of the enlisted people and the officers. You can't buddy-buddy with a person one day and give him an order and expect him to hop-to the next day. It just doesn't work that way.

Marcello: Are you saying in effect, then, that there was a great deal of respect by the enlisted men for the officers, and this in part certainly accounts for the high morale to some extent?

O'Connor: I think so, and this respect goes both ways. The officers respected the enlisted man and treated him fairly. You knew what to expect from a man. You knew that if you did something wrong you had to pay for it. If you did something right you got credit for it, and if you needed something you were listened to and treated fairly.

Marcello: Without trying to put words in your mouth, would it be safe to say the the San Francisco had a crew that was really a close-knit family, more or less, during this period?

O'Connor: For a big ship, yes.

Marcello: What was the normal complement of the San Francisco?  
Let me rephrase that question. Could you estimate what the complement of the San Francisco was before Pearl Harbor?

O'Connor: I would guess around 800, between 800 and 1,000, something like that.

Marcello: What would be the normal complement of the cruiser?  
I'm sure that it was understrength.

O'Connor: Right. The wartime complement, I would say, would probably be closer to 2,000.

Marcello: But again, like you mentioned, there were approximately 1,000 men aboard that ship, and it was still a relatively close-knit crew. When did you finally get to Pearl Harbor?

O'Connor: We arrived in Pearl Harbor on Easter Day of 1940, I believe.

Marcello: In other words, you almost went directly from Norfolk over to Pearl Harbor. You said you got out of boot camp in early 1940?

O'Connor: Late 1939.

Marcello: 1939.

O'Connor: Yes. We went aboard ship, and we went down to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba for gunnery exercises, and we went up to Mobile,

Alabama, for Mardi gras and this type of thing, and then we went through the canal to San Diego, and then we went on out to Pearl.

Marcello: And I assume you didn't waste any time at any of these stops. You didn't stay long there.

O'Connor: No, no, just a few days and then on out and refueled and things of this nature.

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

O'Connor: I liked it. My brother was there, by the way. He had been transferred from . . . he'd gone through school in the Air Force at Rantoul, Illinois. He had gone out to Hickam Field. He was stationed as a bombardier. So we went into Pearl, and I believe it was a Sunday around Eastertime, somewhere in that vicinity. I remember I was standing messenger watch at that time on the bridge, and I think it was that morning before we were due to get in--early in the morning. I had the four to eight watch. I was standing up there, and everything was quiet that time of the morning, nothing going on. We were running by ourselves. And the OD asked me if I'd . . . in fact, the OD was my division officer. He asked me if I had ever had the helm. I said, "No, sir." He

said, "Well, there's no time like now to learn it."  
He said, "Take the helm." Driving a ship like that is like driving an automobile only on a larger scale. You have to anticipate by watching a compass. You zig-zag all over the place before you get the feel of it. But after about thirty minutes he said, "You'd better turn it back over to the helmsman if we're ever going to get into Pearl today."

Marcello: That was your first experience coming into Pearl?

O'Connor: That was my first experience going into Pearl (chuckle).

Marcello: Now how great or how large was the build-up at Pearl at this time?

O'Connor: Well, it wasn't very much at that time. We were out originally . . . what they were doing . . . we were part of what they called the original Hawaiian Detachment. At that time we only had the four heavy cruisers, some smaller ships, and submarines. What they had done was exchange--as I understand--they exchanged two cruiser divisions. The one that had been at Pearl went back to the States. We were transferred out there as a permanent station, like the Asiatic station and so forth.

Marcello: In other words, the Pacific Fleet really had not yet been moved from San Diego out to Pearl Harbor.

O'Connor: No. It was still real good duty, and we had overnight liberty. It was really a home port type atmosphere.

Marcello: Well, let's talk a little bit about the social life in those pre-World War II days on the Hawaiian Islands. What was the social life like for a young sailor just out of high school--certainly just out of boot camp?

O'Connor: Basically, if you had transportation it was great. Fortunately, my brother, who was then stationed at Hickam Field, he had a car. I used to go in there all the time. In fact, up until the time the war started, not many people . . . there were civilian people that I knew who didn't even know I was in the Navy. They thought I was in the Air Force because we all wore civilian clothes. I was always hanging around with people in the Air Force. So we would drive around the island and go out to various beaches and swim, surf. We surfed with these logs that weighed 700 pounds, not these nice foam jobs that they surf with today. They would wear you out just getting the thing out there and have it ride you back in.

Marcello: As a young sailor did you frequent Hotel Street on occasion and things of this nature?

O'Connor: Oh, yes. That was . . . from the YMCA down to the canal, that was a great place to be.

Marcello: And again, I would assume that Hotel Street wasn't nearly so crowded at that time as it was to become later on after the Pacific Fleet moved over there.

O'Connor: Oh, no. We never frequented, really, that place so much. A lot of the sailors did because basically what happens is that you come to the end of bus transportation, and usually you spend most of your time there. But having had a car, we spent most of our time out in the Waikiki area. We swam a lot on weekends. We'd go around to the other side of the island and swim over there at some of the better beaches. At night we'd go to some of the better nightclubs and places around where nice sailors would wander in and people who lived there would come in.

Marcello: You mentioned the liberty routine awhile ago. What kind of liberty were you getting at this time?

O'Connor: Well, at that time I was getting all the liberty I could handle, pay-wise. I think we were standing, as I recall, one in four, but I never had any trouble getting standby because there were enough people there that they either didn't have enough money or they really didn't want to go because without transportation, like anyplace else, your mode of travel is limited.



Marcello: When you say your liberty was one in four, what exactly does that mean?

O'Connor: The crew is divided into four groups. Well, if I said one in four that was sort of misleading. It means one duty in four times. So the other three days you were available after work to have liberty.

Marcello: In other words, there would be one duty section and one standby section and two liberty sections. But usually the standby section could go, also.

O'Connor: They could a lot of times also go, and you could always get a standby, special liberty. Somebody would take your duty.

Marcello: Now normally, did you have to be back on the ship that evening at a certain time, or could you stay overnight?

O'Connor: No, we could stay overnight. The thing that ruined it was when they brought the fleet out.

Marcello: Well, I was going to say . . . I know that later on most of the personnel now had to be back aboard their ships at twelve o'clock, isn't that correct?

O'Connor: Right. See, this is prior to the time the fleet went out, and we were on a typical overseas Navy detachment that usually, like \_\_\_\_\_, the Asiatic Fleet, the European Fleet, and others where, before anything started up, you had excellent liberty.

Marcello: How about on the weekends? What sort of weekend liberty did you receive during that time?

O'Connor: Usually from Saturday noon until the following Monday morning.

Marcello: And again, it would be the one in four sort of thing again, where you would be . . . you would probably have liberty three weekends a month and probably have the duty section one time a month.

O'Connor: But then when the fleet came out, why, they limited the amount of time that you could go. I think then you had to be back at ten o'clock or midnight. I forget which. It was so crowded that some of the people wouldn't even want to go ashore.

Marcello: Okay, this brings up an interesting point, and I think we need to pursue it farther. After the Pacific Fleet was moved from San Diego, which I think was its home base, up to Pearl Harbor, how did your routine change?

O'Connor: We spent more time, I think, on maneuvers--fleet maneuvers and things of this nature--than we did before.

Marcello: How often would these maneuvers occur?

O'Connor: Well, the fleet maneuvers as such referred to back prior to the war . . . your fleet maneuvers usually were held maybe once a year or something like this where everything

was all together, and you had joint exercises. But when the fleet came out, well, we operated together quite a bit and in the same areas. I know when I was out to Pearl here two . . . was it two or three years ago when the thirtieth . . .

Marcello: The thirtieth anniversary would have been in 1941, I guess. It would have been about three years ago.

O'Connor: Thirtieth anniversary, yes. My wife and I went out then, and we flew over to Maui and drove up the volcano. When we drove down along the side of the island, I was driving along and I happened to look across this sugarcane field, and I saw this big cleft in the mountain as we went along. I stopped the car and got out, looked around, and sure enough--I was telling my wife--out in this big open area, Lahiana Roads, the fleet used to anchor there. I remember telling her that we'd be out on maneuvers and rather than go back to Pearl, why, we'd all anchor there overnight. We just sat on the ship and looked at the lights over there on the island and wondered what the people were doing over there, what it was like. The distinctive thing about this particular island is that it had this mountain range or this range that ran the full length of the thing, and it looked like

somebody had hit it right in the middle with a big ax. There was just a big "V" shape cut in it. I said, "I always remembered that, and here I am looking at it. So now I know where I'm at." I could look out to sea and see where all of the ships had anchored.

Marcello: Well, generally speaking, I think, in the months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, the ships at Pearl were actually staying out for the entire week, were they not, and then coming in for the weekend?

O'Connor: On the whole they were. Well, basically, they were alternating, I think. A lot of them would go out for a week, and others would stay in because it was so crowded. Pearl had a lot of places for ships--nooks and crannies to stick ships into--but the facilities probably weren't that great.

Marcello: Well, of course, what about . . . well, of course, this is one of the reasons, I guess, that the battleships were tied up two-by-two. It was a matter of space and room as much as anything else.

O'Connor: Right, space and room, and, frankly, that's probably the reason the carriers were in at one time and the battleships were in the next. They just didn't have much deep-water space to put them.

Marcello: What sort of activities would take place when you went out on these maneuvers during the week?

O'Connor: We would do gunnery exercises, antiaircraft firing, and we would do, basically, I guess, maneuvers, as far as the ships were concerned. The officers were just learning to be able to maneuver ships together and study the various plans and whatever they had. As far as we were concerned, we did a lot of . . . went to general quarters quite a bit, loading drills, and things that taught people discipline and how to fight your ship.

Marcello: What sort of armament did that cruiser have aboard?

O'Connor: She had three main turrets of three eight-inch guns each. She had the old five-inch twenty-five open mounts on the side. There was four to each side-- open mounts, unfortunately, because we lost most of our gun crews down at Guadalcanal. We had the 1.1's. We had some old three-inchers that they put on there, and they replaced them with 1.1's right after Pearl.

Marcello: I would assume that that ship had much more antiaircraft weaponry aboard after Pearl Harbor than it had before Pearl Harbor.

O'Connor: Well, basically, there wasn't anyplace to really put . . . well, she was built back in the old days of the broadside, and the aircraft wasn't all that famous.

O'Connor: No, they didn't. They really didn't, I think, or maybe we wouldn't have lost Wake Island. We went out there and pussyfooted around for about three or four days and left without doing anything. But who knows what was going on? But we did quite a bit of training, and, as I say, we had . . . our antiaircraft really wasn't all that good. We'd gotten some new antiaircraft directors that were fairly good. They were nothing compared to the new ones that were coming out. They were like a Model-T compared to the new things that were coming out. Most everything was manually controlled.

Marcello: I would also assume that very few of the ships had any radar at all. Maybe some of the battleships, and that was about it.

O'Connor: We didn't have any radar. We were getting radar, but we didn't have any. The gunnery exercises we had mostly were drills primarily--loading drills. On the turrets, for example, all three guns elevated together, and they all had to be loaded at the same time. You were in fairly close quarters because the turrets were not real big. The shells weighed about 250 pounds apiece. They used, usually, two bags of powder behind

them. Of course, you had to stick a primer into the breech lock when you closed the breech. It took quite a bit of coordination. They held a lot of drills on those ships that really paid off later on--gunnery drills.

Marcello: Where was your particular battle station aboard the San Francisco?

O'Connor: I was in the plotting room. I was a pointer on the main battery--gun director in the plotting room.

Marcello: In other words, would you have been in the turret with one of the eight-inch guns?

O'Connor: No, the plotting room is down in the center of the ship. It's down about three decks below waterline. You go up almost directly under the bridge structure, and then there's a big trunk about four feet square. You go down through two armored hatches into the IC room. Then you went out near the outside of the hull. In that area was the plotting room.

Marcello: You mentioned the IC room?

O'Connor: Yes, it's the electrical communications. Usually, it's a battle station where the electricians . . . and they have switches to control various power and things of this nature. We had power switches for all gunnery

circuits . . . switchboards, rather, to furnish the power for all the gunnery circuits. All the ship's communications were . . . the switchboards were located in that area, too.

Marcello: Generally speaking, then, I gather that in the months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, the San Francisco, as well as the other ships, was usually going out during the week and coming in on the weekend. Is that correct?

O'Connor: Primarily correct, for the most part.

Marcello: How secure, how safe, did you and your shipmates feel at Pearl Harbor?

O'Connor: As safe as I feel right here. I didn't know anything was going on. I didn't even know anybody was mad at us.

Marcello: If war did come in the Far East, did you perhaps think it would probably come in the Philippines rather than at Pearl?

O'Connor: To tell you the truth, in those days that was the farthest thing from my mind. Unlike today, where you're beat over the head with it everytime you turn the television on, you have to become aware of it. In those day, unless you listened to a radio or read newspapers all of the time,



you weren't really aware of everything that was going on. Being aboard ship . . . and if we were in port, we could get newspapers or maybe listen to a radio, but you didn't do that much reading or that much listening to the radio to become aware that something was going on out there.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

O'Connor: Well, see, I knew a lot of Japanese, having been in Pearl for almost two years before the war started. I had some very good friends who were Japanese--just people.

Marcello: Now you brought up this subject awhile ago, and I'll pursue it just a little bit farther. During this period there was also an influx of reservists and what have you coming into the Navy. How did this alter the ship's routine?

O'Connor: Not a whole lot because there really weren't that many of them compared to the majority. We had reserves that were called up and . . . for the most part, in those days these people weren't in the reserves to evade the draft or something of this nature. They were in the reserves because they wanted to be there. They learned something, and they were . . . they fit in very well.

- Marcello: From what you've said, then, I gather that the San Francisco did not really have a huge influx of reserves to fill out the ship's complement.
- O'Connor: No, not a whole lot prior to the war.
- Marcello: This, I think, more or less brings us up to the days immediately prior to Pearl Harbor. So consequently, what I'd like you to do at this point is to describe to me what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and then we'll go into Sunday, December 7, 1941. But let's start with the sixth, first of all, and I want you to use as much detail as you can remember from the time you got up until you turned in that night on the sixth of December.
- O'Connor: I happened to have the duty that weekend, or I probably would have been ashore.
- Marcello: Incidentally, where did the San Francisco tie up?
- O'Connor: She was . . . well, the unfortunate thing was . . . well, fortunate or unfortunate--depends on how you look at it. We were in the Navy Yard for a major overhaul. All of our ammunition was off the ship. They were in the process of changing over the battle telephone system. We had an old battle telephone system that used power. They were changing it over to the new sound power telephone system,

so all of our switchboard wiring was torn out and being replaced. The only communications we had were the regular ship service-type telephone that had the dial system tone just like you have here in a hotel. It was an automatic dialing system that you could dial in key stations throughout the ship. That's the only communications in the plotting room or even that we had aboard ship at that time. Everything was off and we were tied up in the dock. We were a few docks over from that big crane that sat out on the end of the dock there. We were tied up port side to . . . excuse me. We were tied up with the starboard side to the dock.

Marcello: Starboard side was tied up to the dock?

O'Connor: Tied to the dock. And directly across from us, I seem to recall that the New Orleans was tied up there. There was an old repair ship in that slip with the New Orleans that was tied up on the opposite dock over there. There was one of the newer light cruisers that was tied up across the water from us to the dock on the other side.

So as I said, we were in there for the regular Navy Yard overhaul that occurs every so often routinely for ships. They are updated and modernized and things of this nature. So we had taken off all of the powder

and ammunition from the magazines while the work was going on. So the ship was pretty well in a mess from all of the yard work and everything aboard.

Marcello: Now when you were in the Navy Yard like that, I would assume that watertight integrity is at an absolute minimum. Of course, normally, when you're in port the watertight integrity is at a minimum.

O'Connor: Well, watertight integrity, as pertaining to below the water line . . . in fact, it's usually maintained more or less as a normal routine because there's really nothing there. If somebody needs something--storeroom or things of this nature--it's always closed up again. So your basic watertight integrity below the water line usually remains intact just as a matter of routine. But there probably were a lot of open areas. Navy Yard workmen aren't the best disciplinarians in the world. The ship probably was in a--below decks where they were working--pretty sloppy state.

Marcello: Okay, let's get back to your routine again as to what it was on that Saturday. You mentioned that you had the duty.

O'Connor: I had the duty, and as I recall now, I was standing . . . let's see, no, I had gotten off. I had made third class

by this time--third class fire controlman. So I was standing \_\_\_\_\_ watches. I just had the duty, so I just had to be aboard. So my routine, usually, at that time . . . on Saturday morning, usually, we had an inspection except for the Navy Yard. It's usually cancelled. You usually do your routine work on Saturday morning, and then Saturday afternoon, well, you're free to do anything you want to. Back in those days you usually would go back to bed or lay down. There's no such thing as recreation aboard ship. They fixed up some of the modern ones sort of fancy so far as rec rooms and reading tables and things of this nature, but back then they were fighting ships, and they didn't need all of this recreation. So he spent time staying around in the compartment talking or walking around topside. Usually, one of my favorite things, especially on a Sunday after breakfast, was buying a Sunday newspaper and going up to one of the control stations and shutting the door where nobody'd bother me and just laying there and read the newspaper most of the morning. So on Saturday afternoons we didn't do anything but just sit around and talk and maybe sleep. Then in the evening you would have a movie on the well deck, attend the movie, and after the movie you'd go back to bed.

Marcello: Was this your routine on that particular Saturday, as you recall it?

O'Connor: Yes, that was what we did. Everything was peaceful and quiet.

Marcello: What time did you turn in?

O'Connor: Usually at ten o'clock.

Marcello: Let me ask you this question. Now on a Saturday night men, of course, would be coming back off of liberty. What usually was the condition of these men when they came in?

O'Connor: Well, for the most part, in those days you didn't have the mass liberty-type of thing. We had been out there for a long enough period, and the money wasn't all that great pay-wise, but most of the people who rated liberty didn't necessarily go ashore. We'd been out there long enough that most of them knew people, and they had other things to do rather than being strangers and going and hitting the first bar because they didn't know anybody and had nothing else to do. I think people think sailors are drunks, and all they do is hang out in bars. Primarily, back in those days, days of sailors and dogs keep off the grass, you were a necessary evil. Therefore, you didn't become acquainted too much with the civilian population

other than when you hung out at the bars where they accepted you because of your money--what little you had. So that's why you spent a lot of time at bars. You had no other place else to go.

Marcello: Can you remember anything out of the ordinary that particular Saturday night, that is, men coming back and being loud and obnoxious and rowdy and that sort of thing?

O'Connor: No, none at all. Things were routine, and as far as anything out of the ordinary, as far as the crew was concerned, they really weren't . . . the crews in those days, naturally, they drank and all like that, but the only thing that I can say is that most of the older crew--the people who had been in the Navy for quite awhile--they really weren't that type of person. Usually, the drunk loudmouths that you found were usually the kids who were fresh from home, and he's having his first fling, and he can't hold his liquor, and he doesn't know when to stop. Once he gets a few drinks, he feels like he's the big man. Since nobody pays any attention to him anyway, why, he has to let the world know how big he is.

Marcello: In other words, I gather that your Saturday night of December 6 was a rather routine one.

O'Connor: Quite routine. After the movie we stowed away the mess benches and went down and went to bed.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, and once more I want you to go through your routine from the time you got up until all hell broke loose.

O'Connor: Well, I got up . . . okay, they were serving . . . they served a brunch-type of thing usually on Sunday because quite a few of the crew was gone.

Marcello: This was a day of leisure, was it not, even for those aboard the ship?

O'Connor: Day of leisure, right. They didn't . . . you didn't have to put your bunks up or anything.

Marcello: Incidentally, were you on hammocks yet at this time, or did the San Francisco have bunks?

O'Connor: The San Francisco had bunks. They'd added the chain-link-type bunks that when you laid on your bunk, if the guy ahead of you . . . the next one on top of you was very heavy, why, you could thumb your nose and touch him (chuckle). It was almost that you had to slide out and turn over and get back in, that type of thing, because they'd added extra bunks on the thing to accommodate more people.

I'd gotten up and had gone down and had gotten breakfast in the mess hall. I sat there and I ate it.



I was just on my way back to the compartment and go back to bed again when the general alarm rang. Being in the Navy Yard with everything torn down, a Sunday morning . . .

Marcello: Up until this time you had not heard anything at all?

O'Connor: I hadn't heard a thing. The general alarm went off. When the general alarm goes, you expect something. I expected maybe a fire since we were in the Navy Yard, and it happens frequently. Or somebody . . . some emergency had happened. When they said general quarters and man your battle stations, I thought, "What are those stupid idiots doing?" They said to man our battle stations. There's nothing there, we've got no ammunition aboard, no communications, but when they said, "Man your battle stations," and when that general alarm goes, you're off like a shot. You just can't wait for them to say what's going on before you take off to do what you're supposed to do.

Marcello: Where was this Navy Yard in relation to Battleship Row?

O'Connor: It was almost directly across the harbor. I don't know if you're familiar with the harbor layout. Now when you come into the harbor and turn to the right to go around Ford Island, you pass Battleship Row. But if you turn a hard right, well, as you hit Battleship Row, off to your

right, there's a huge crane that sits there. There's a number of . . . there are a number of docks. As you go into the sub base, you'll pass a number of docks. Where this crane is, most of the area as you come in and hit the edge of Ford Island and come around to the right, most of the area to the right is part of the Navy Yard. But as you come on around and hit about the middle of Battleship Row, you can turn and go up into the slip toward the sub base, and you'd be passing most of the docks on your starboard side where all the ships were tied up.

Marcello: In other words, you didn't have a real good look at Battleship Row, then, from where you were tied up.

O'Connor: Oh, yes.

Marcello: You did?

O'Connor: I could see it real well. In fact, the planes that were coming down--torpedo planes--were dropping right down behind us and dropping their fish right in front of us. Because coming in that slip behind us gave them a wide shot at Battleship Row.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story from this point. General quarters has sounded.

O'Connor: Well, general quarters had sounded, so as a matter of routine, unlike today, you don't go up to the well deck

and get the officer of the deck and say, "What the hell are you doing ringing that bell? I'm sleeping today." You just automatically do what you're supposed to do. So I was still down below deck, so I took off to the entrance to the plotting room which is up forward and I was back aft. So I went up forward, went down into the plotting room . . .

Marcello: You apparently had a fairly long way to go, then, to get down to the firing room.

O'Connor: About two-thirds the distance of the ship. But still, Sunday and all, everybody was moving in double time. So I got up there and climbed down in and went into the plotting room. Other people were arriving--everybody that was supposed to be there. Soon as everybody got in, we dogged it down. Everybody else was looking at everybody, "What's going on?" You could hear and sort of feel a force of some sort, you know--maybe like a torpedo, something underwater, explosions going on.

Marcello: Was it jolting your ship in any way at all?

O'Connor: No, it was just something that you can sense when you're attuned to a ship. You can sense these outside things. I could even hear shells going through the ship, as they later did. You could feel that there were explosions

going on in the water because . . . so the officer in charge . . . we had this ship service telephone system. We had one of the phones in the plotting room. He started to call the forward control station and find out what was going on. He was just wanting some information so we'd know why they sounded general quarters and everything else. He picked up the phone, and he dialed the forward control station. Somebody answered and he said, "What's general quarters for? What's going on?" He was listening for awhile. Then he said, "Goddamn stupid idiots!" and hung up the telephone. We said, "Well, what'd he say?" He said, "Oh, the stupid idiots said they're bombing the battleships over there."

Marcello: What was your reaction when you heard this?

O'Connor: I thought it was a joke, like him. The stupid idiots are having fun, you know, and some nut rang the general alarm. We could continue to hear sounds, so we called up again. The officer in charge says, "Call them up again. Find out what's going on." So he called them up. I guess this time he convinced him. He was relaying the information. He said the battleships were all blown up, and the Japanese planes were all over the place. He said there were torpedoes all over the water. So he asked him, "How about us coming up out of here?" He said, "We

can't do anything down here." So I guess he asked the gunnery officer, and he said, "Okay." He said, "The people who are manning that station, close it up." So we went out into the IC room, and people had already left there. So we went up through these two armored hatches, closed up everything, and got into the Marine compartment. That was one deck below the main deck. So I ran back aft to the ladder and went up to the well deck where the OD stood his watches. I went up the ladder and ran out onto the well deck, and the first thing I saw when I ran out on the well deck . . . I heard these planes. I looked up and there was two, I'd say, dive bombers. They were diving right over the San Francisco. They dropped two bombs directly over the ship, but their momentum was such that they wasn't going to hit the San Francisco. I was standing there watching those things fall and wondering what the hell was going on.

Marcello: Did you know these were Japanese planes yet?

O'Connor: I had no idea what they were. I hadn't spoken to anybody. Everybody was just running up to top deck to see what was going on. I went out and the movement of the planes had carried . . . all these ships and everything in there. He dropped them . . . well, we were tied up starboard side of

the dock. This cruiser was tied up port side to the other side. There was nothing in the water ahead of him. There was an old repair ship sitting back over there. He dropped them in the water between everybody. When they went off, the fragments knocked some holes in \_\_\_\_\_ of this old repair ship. By that time I was looking around. You could see all this smoke and everything coming up from Battleship Row. You just didn't know what to do.

Marcello: Generally speaking, at this stage, how would you describe the reactions of the men? Was it one of panic? Perplexity? Confusion? Professionalism? How would you describe the reaction at this point?

O'Connor: I'd say that it was frustration.

Marcello: I think that's a good word to use. I've heard it used before by people.

O'Connor: Frustration, by not being able to do something.

Marcello: How about the antiaircraft weapons aboard the ship? Was there any ammunition there?

O'Connor: No, all the ammunition was off the ship. So the first thing I saw people doing from my ship is that the cruiser was attempting to get underway across from us.

Marcello: Which cruiser was this? Do you recall the name of it?

O'Connor: I'm not sure. It was one of the heavy . . . she eventually did get underway, I guess. Some of our crew and their crew went over and cut the lines so she could get out. We were looking for something to shoot. The only thing we had aboard ship were some .30 caliber machine guns from the Marine armory and some Springfield rifles. The Marines then issued these rifles to everybody that came by. We got one and a bandoleer of ammunition. We went up to the . . . some of the people went out on the fantail. I went up to after control station--the place where I worked--and it was a good vantage place where you could see everything. So I went up there with a number of other people.

You could see the planes. They were coming down from the area toward Honolulu. Then when they were going into the . . . dropping their torpedoes, they were coming in the slip that went up to where the sub base was. They were down just about the level with us when they were dropping their torpedoes. They were banking around that big crane that was on that dock over to the left of us. So when they were flying by dropping their torpedoes, well, we were shooting at them with Springfield rifles. I'm sure we weren't going to hit

anything, certainly nothing that belonged to them, anyway. We might have hit something that belonged to us. We must have fired at half a dozen planes.

Marcello: How many rounds di you think you fired altogether?

O'Connor: Oh, I don't know. You know, we got off maybe two or three shots. I might have fired about fifteen or twenty rounds. I felt better. I was doing something (chuckle).

Marcello: Was the San Francisco a specific target of any of these bombers, or did they seem to be going after bigger game?

O'Connor: I don't think that other than the battleships and the open area out there, they weren't really all that interested in anything else because they stayed away from the sub base and the Navy Yard. The only thing that I saw drop were those two bombs that fell out in the water there, that is, that actually hit around the Navy Yard. So on the outer perimeter of the Navy Yard on the channel side, they sank some ships out there, and over at the dry dock where the bigger ships were, they hit some over there. But inside the main Navy Yard, where most of the docks were, were mostly ships like cruisers and destroyers and things of this nature that were tied up. They didn't do very much to them.



Marcello: Now all of this time we're still talking about the first wave, I assume? At that time could you really tell when one wave had completed its job and the second wave came in?

O'Connor: Well, knowing later how aircraft operated, I couldn't really identify waves as such. I imagine that by the time we got up and were firing, it must have been at least two or three waves--if they had that many--that had gone by because by the time we got up and went up there, all of our ships were . . . the fires were so great over there that you couldn't see anything but smoke and flames and hear the explosions that were going on. By this time they were shooting back. It's hard to pinpoint it down to, you know, certain moves. Everything was one big mess.

Marcello: What sort of a scene was unfolding before your eyes? Describe what it looked like.

O'Connor: Well, it was just something that . . . it's one of these things that you see but you don't believe, that type of a thing. I really didn't see the full effect of it until I got that Springfield rifle. I knew something was going on when I saw those bombs drop. That about scared me out of five years' growth. I got the rifle and got up on the

control station where you could see. You could see the destruction that was going on or gone on already. You realized what could be going on because there was so much of it that was blacked out with smoke and stuff of this nature. There were ships trying to get out.

Just like in everything else, you see humor in the most disastrous occasions. I know one thing that struck us so funny is the motor launches and all sorts of small boats around battleships picking up people out of the water. This one motor launch had loaded and was coming back across the channel to drop them off over there, I suppose. When he was coming back across, there was a ship--I believe it was a destroyer--that had gotten up steam and was steaming out. She was really moving. This motor launch was going to cut right across in front of her. It looked like they were going to cut it right into her. Boy, all of the guys bailed out into the water again. Well, the motor launch kept right on going because the coxswain and everybody left it. The ship then went right between them and the motor launch. This struck me as rather funny.

Marcello: I'm sure, like you mentioned, that even in a serious situation like this, there was a certain amount of humor, whether it was accidental or on purpose. Are

there any individuals that stand out in your mind for the actions that they took on that particular day?

O'Connor: Not as far as we're concerned--my ship--because basically on my ship there was nothing anybody could do. Everybody was doing his routine job, what he was supposed to be doing. Everybody did what he could with what was available. Other than that, you didn't find people jumping off the ship and running other places--things like that. That wasn't their job. They were trained to do that. The ship was their responsibility.

Marcello: What sort of physical damage were you able to observe from your perch up there with your Springfield rifle?

O'Connor: Well, actually, we saw . . . by that time, most of the battleships had really had it. The Oklahoma was upside-down, and others were sitting on the bottom. Flames and smoke was covering so much that you couldn't see very much at that time. You could look back over other areas of Pearl. Over at the dry dock smoke and everything was coming from that area. You could look over towards Hickam Field, and smoke was coming from that area. It just looked like everything was going. I think that as far as we were concerned, other than shooting a Springfield rifle, all you could do was stand there and . . . first, there was frustration, and then, I guess, anger. But such a thing happened.

Marcello: Were the Japanese planes flying low enough that you could actually see the pilots and the gunners?

O'Connor: You better believe it! They were flying . . . we were shooting straight out at them.

Marcello: Describe what they looked like if you can remember.

O'Connor: They weren't paying any attention to us, naturally, because they were concentrating . . . because they were just right at the point of releasing torpedoes, and they were concentrating on what they were doing. We just watched the planes fly by with people in it. With an airplane or something of this nature in combat, you really don't think of people being involved.

Marcello: It's rather an impersonal thing?

O'Connor: It's an object only. There's a lot of difference in killing an object and in killing a person. So there wouldn't be a hesitancy about it. In fact, I think it would have been more enjoyable--or revengeful, I should say--if you could see a person that you could get your revenge on rather than an object, even though you knew that these objects contained quite a few people.

But other than that, it was just planes flying around and mass confusion, and nobody knew what was

going on. After we fired our Springfields and things began to settle down a little bit, all the planes left and a couple of our planes got off the field over there. Then there was nothing for us to do but sit there and watch it.

Marcello: What did you do in the aftermath of the attack?

O'Connor: Nothing. Actually, there was nothing we could do. They wouldn't allow us off the ship. My brother was over at Hickam Field and . . . they wouldn't allow us off the ship.

Marcello: In other words, they didn't even have you go with any of the rescue parties or anything of this nature?

O'Connor: No, they had plenty of people at the air station because there were no planes. So they had plenty of people available in boat crews and things like this. Ship personnel, usually--if there's a rescue-type of thing needed--they usually have people who are assigned to this particular type of thing. But as far as regular shipboard personnel are concerned, you were staying right aboard the ship.

Marcello: When was it that you were finally able to get in touch with your brother and find out what was going on over at Hickam Field?

O'Connor: It was almost a week later before I found out. I found out later that he'd come down to Pearl and had come in and had gotten, oh, maybe half-way down to where the ships were when they wouldn't let him come any farther, but they told him that my ship hadn't been hit. So he knew I was aboard ship, so he assumed that nothing had happened to me. It was a full week later--I think the next Sunday--before I got off the ship to go over there.

Marcello: Incidentally, at this time, how many officers would have been aboard the San Francisco? I would assume most of them usually took off on a weekend, did they not, especially those that had families there?

O'Connor: We didn't have . . . it was a lot different then than it is today. The family situation then wasn't really the way it is today. If the ship moves, they'll pack up bag and baggage and off we go, plus the fact that I'd say the large majority of them weren't married. Senior officers had their wives over there, families. But in the division that I was in, which was composed of maybe twenty or thirty men, I don't recall of a man having his wife there.

Marcello: So a good many of the officers would probably have been aboard the San Francisco on a weekend?

O'Connor: Well, there would be . . . well, those with the duty and . . . especially on Sunday morning because those that had been ashore . . . there's still not a whole lot to do if you don't live there. And if you're just going on liberty, you're usually back. We had a fair complement of personnel aboard if we'd had something to shoot.

Marcello: I would assume that after the attack was over that the area was one big rumor mill. What were some of the rumors that you heard?

O'Connor: Oh, that the Japanese were going to invade the island, naturally, and that . . . nobody knew what was going on, which wasn't really a rumor. It was the actual truth. They figured that something had to happen. They wouldn't just come in there like that and tear up the thing and then leave. Something just had to happen.

Unfortunately, everybody was trigger-happy. So that night when some of our planes came in, why, they made a terrible mistake of making a turn, and our gunnery was much better than it was when the Japanese came by.

Marcello: Did you witness those carrier planes coming in and being shot down? You might describe this incident. I think it's interesting and important.

O'Connor: Well, as I saw them, everything in the harbor was quiet. There had been sporadic shooting, you know, rifle shots, as you'll always have in a tense situation like that. We were up topside when these planes came in. They came in from the entrance to the harbor. They had their running lights on. They weren't flying very high, and they flew right down Battleship Row. Well, they were going to land, and this is the normal landing pattern. They'd come in and then they'd fly down, and then they would break off, circle around, and come in to land.

Marcello: They were going to be landing where, Ford Island?

O'Connor: Ford Island. But unfortunately they came in, and everything was just steady and quiet until they made the turn. The minute they made the turn in, all hell broke loose. They were shooting with everything but the kitchen sink. Unfortunately, they were flying so low that they didn't have a chance. But that's . . . aboard ship, you look after your ship. I know we shot a lot of our own planes.

Marcello: This was later on in the war?

O'Connor: Later on in the war. It was some of the best shooting we did . . . real proud of it.



Marcello: (Chuckle) In the aftermath of the attack, how did your attitude toward the Japanese change? Now you mentioned that prior to the attack that some of your best friends were Japanese, and you really didn't give too much thought to them.

O'Connor: As far as the people were concerned that I knew, there weren't any differences because they were Japanese living in Hawaii. They weren't to me any different than Portuguese or any other person, Chinese, mixtures, or what have you. After the war--in fact, when I was working for Texas Instruments--we were going to hire--or we did hire--a Japanese engineer. I guess maybe some of the people thought that I might be offended by the fact that . . . you know, they thought that I wouldn't want to work with a Japanese engineer. They more or less asked me how I thought about it. I told them that it didn't make any difference to me. I don't bear grudges against people who . . . just because he happens to be a Japanese or anything else. It's sort of stupid to hold a grudge against people who never knew what was going on. Those people . . . Japanese people as such, they didn't any more know what's going on than you and I do in this country. So why should I have a grudge against them? To

me it was a professional job that needed to be done,  
and you did it in the best manner in which you could.  
That was kill the enemy. The more you killed, the  
sooner it was over. It all wound up to that basic  
frame of mind.