

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
429

Interview with
James A. Sierman
July 8, 1978

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: James A. Sierman
(Signature)
Date: 7-8-78

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Oral History Collection

James A. Sierman

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing James A. Sierman for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 8, 1978, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Sierman in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the destroyer-minesweeper USS Wasmuth during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Sierman: Well, I was born on April 9, 1921, in Oklahoma.

Dr. Marcello: Did you go to school there?

Mr. Sierman: Yes. I went to Kaw High. You know, the name of the city was Kaw City, Oklahoma.

Dr. Marcello: When did you enter the Navy?

Sierman: When I was eighteen years old,

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

Sierman: Well, you know, that's a strange thing. I've never really known why. It was just something that came to me that I wanted to do. I had already gone and signed up; of course, I needed the folks to sign the papers so I could enter the service. That's when my older brother--he's six years older than I was--decided he wanted to go, too, so he had me to hold up until we went in together,

Marcello: What year was that?

Sierman: 1939. Actually, we went into the service on December 7, 1939. I retired from the Navy on December 7, 1959. Everything seemed to happen on the 7th (chuckle).

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Sierman: That's something I really have no idea about. Well, I guess for one thing, I kind of looked at the Army . . . if a man went into the Army, he'd be sitting at some camp at some town for all the time. You know, back then, too, it was different than it is today. You know, it used to be that the Army done the work, the Marines got the credit, and the Navy got the pay. Maybe that's the reason. The Navy was the highest paid, you know, and the Marines were

always the glory boys (chuckle), and we didn't have an Air Force then. It was just the Army,

Marcello: How hard was it then to get into the Navy at that particular time?

Sierman: It was pretty difficult. There was only a small percentage of those who tried to enter . . . even my brother was touch-and-go for some time before they was going to take him or not; and when they finally approved him, we were both taken in together. Like I said, it was December 7, 1939 (chuckle).

Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs at that time?

Sierman: Well, right after boot camp, I became more familiar with things, because at that time Hitler had begun to make a lot of moves; and it hit me that actually it was a matter of time until we would be in there, so I felt the more training that a person had, the better chance he had.

Marcello: When you possibly thought of the country getting into war, were your eyes turned more towards Europe, however, than they were toward the Far East at that stage?

Sierman: Yes, I never thought of trouble with Japan. For one thing, I kind of always looked at it that Japan, killing off the Chinese like they were . . . mixing with them was about all they wanted. I never thought of them coming. I thought

more in the lines of Europe, I knew it was just a matter of time we would have been in the European war; I couldn't see how we could keep out.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot training?

Sierman: San Diego.

Marcello: Did you go through with your brother?

Sierman: Yes.

Marcello: Were you both in the same company?

Sierman: Yes, we both went from there and went on the same ship together. You know, they always used to keep you together until after the Sullivan boys were killed on that cruiser and you lost so many out of one family at one clip. Then they started to break them up. Of course, that was way late in the war.

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

Sierman: No, it was routine. It's probably run about the same way as today, I imagine. It might have been a little more military then than it is today; it's probably a lot more lenient today. I think that's one thing we're losing in our military people, is the military bearing. I don't know . . . of course, I look at things in one way . . . you could take World War II, and you could look at how many men we had that was taken prisoner-of-war. Yet,

look how many gave comfort or aid to the enemy. Now take Korea for an example--only ten years later--and a way smaller number were taken, but look how many turn-coats there were. Remember the turn-coats? I wasn't too happy with the picture of Vietnam. I think militarily this country is degrading. Maybe I came out of a different mold and am kind of set in my own ways; but I don't believe that the young boys today, unless there was some radical changes, would put up and really fight the war with the same enthusiasm that was carried on a few decades ago.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Sierman: Well, we had our home port there in San Diego--right in boot camp there. We were both stationed there on the USS Wasmuth.

Marcello: You went right aboard the Wasmuth from boot camp.

Sierman: From boot camp, yes.

Marcello: What sort of a reception does a young "boot" get when he goes aboard a working ship such as the Wasmuth?

Sierman: Well, then it was a spit-and-polish Navy, you know. All the brass work . . . you had the brass plates around the doors and brass knobs on the doors, and even under your ladderways was covered with a sheet of brass. You know, we used to keep it polished like a mirror. Every brasswork was polished. You had a certain section of the ship the day you walked

aboard; you were assigned this section and you were responsible for the cleanliness of that section any time. And the muster-at-arms better not come through there and find it dirty or messed up. Of course, if you caught somebody messing up your area, you had the right to make them clean it up. They don't go off and leave you a mess. But you were responsible, and that means that when they'd come through, the brightwork better be shined, and the paintwork better be clean; and if it was dirty, you had better be scrubbing on it.

Marcello: In other words, when you went aboard the Wasmuth, you were more or less put in the deck force at that point.

Sierman: No. A cleaning station didn't make any difference what division you were in, but automatically all new men on the ship would be in one of two divisions--either deck force or in the engineering force below decks.

Marcello: In your particular case, which one were you put in?

Sierman: I went to the deck force.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you get from the older people aboard the Wasmuth when you first went on?

Sierman: Well, they didn't initiate you or anything like that. You were assigned to your jobs, and you were accepted once you proved yourself to be worthy.

Of course, I remember one of the first things that

happened when I come on the Wasmuth there was my brother, and only the two of us went aboard. Of course, in boot camp we had been taught to keep a lock on our locker, see. So when we was finding a place to put our sea bags and everything--our clothing--we put it away, and I stuck a lock on mine, and about the time my lock snapped, an old chief boatswain's mate jumped me. He said, "There's no thieves on the Wasmuth!" I turned around and looked, and there wasn't another locker with a lock on it (chuckle). I guess you know I took mine off (chuckle). It was that way on there; no matter what you had in your locker, you never had to lock it. I've had guys come up and tell me, you know, "Oh, here's ten bucks. I got it out of your locker one day. You wasn't there and I needed some money, and I'm giving it back to you." I don't think I ever lost anything, either. You couldn't do that today.

Marcello: What were your quarters like aboard the Wasmuth? Describe what your living spaces were like.

Sierman: Well, we didn't . . . a lot of ships, you know, they slept in hammocks. We didn't have no hammock; we had the spring-type bunks, Your bunks were three bunks high. Now under the bottom bunk, there was these wooden lockers that you lifted the lid and put your clothes in. We later on got some small metal lockers that would stand upright. That

was pretty nice.

Everything was family-style feeding. You sat down at the table, and it was brought down in family-style. Of course, if you were out at sea and it was a little bit rough, you'd hold onto something with one hand and try to eat with the other (chuckle).

Marcello: Generally speaking, were your living quarters comfortable?

Sierman: Yes, I think they were just as good as they are today. Any ship is compact, and you had a limitation. Of course, we used to have portholes, and that made it much nicer. They have now done away with those on ships. Of course, once in a while, you'd wish you had one closed if a boat went swinging by fast and through a wake and shot some water through your porthole (chuckle) and into your bunk (chuckle).

Marcello: You mentioned the food awhile ago. What was the food like aboard the Wasmuth?

Sierman: Well, now I would have to say there . . . I would have to say it was good. I hadn't been on the Wasmuth very long until I was assigned mess cooking, and after I spent three months of mess cooking, why, I put in for a transfer to go and become a commissaryman--a cook. Of course, that shook the chief boatswain's mate up; he wanted to make a boatswain's mate out of me. Anyway, they approved the transfer, and so I was one of the cooks on the Wasmuth.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about mess cooking here. Everybody when they go aboard a ship has to serve a certain period of time as a mess cook, isn't that correct?

Sierman: Well, primarily they did then, but I understand there's a lot different system that is used anymore. It used to be that they rotated around. Of course, when you came on a ship new, the next time there was mess cooking, you did spend three months on it. Of course, there at that time you used to have to wash the dishes . . . you had a certain table with certain men there. Every man had a certain place he sat at that table. You'd come down there, and if there was one or two places vacant, you knew who it was. You could find out where so-and-so sat. If they went ashore, you'd know to pick up their gear; if they were on watch, you'd know that you were going to have somebody to feed late. Of course, all the utensils you would wash by hand.

Marcello: I've heard it said that some people actually even volunteered for additional mess cooking duty, because of the tips and the extra liberty that went with it.

Sierman: Oh, if you took good care of your table and you kept it scrubbed real clean and nice, oh, yes, when it came payday, there would be a bowl there sitting on the table with money in it. Usually, it would be decided by whoever the

senior man was at your table--whether he was a boatswain's mate or a gunner's mate or whoever the senior man was at that table. He would decide whether he thought you deserved tips or not. If he didn't think you deserved anything, then you didn't get none. But if he thought you deserved it, he was the one who sat the bowl up and put something in it and started it down the table.

Marcello: Did you get better liberty as a result of being a mess cook?

Sierman: Well, no, I wouldn't say better liberty. Actually, you got worse liberty, because your liberty would start after the evening meal. They might start liberty at 1300, but if you were a mess cook, you had men to feed. Now sometimes we used to work it out between mess cooks; if a lot of people were going to shore, one would take care of two tables. But that was worked out between the guys themselves.

Marcello: Why did you decide to become a commissaryman?

Sierman: You know, you use the word "commissary" because that's what they are anymore. Of course, they used to be cooks, bakers, and butchers, you know, I don't know. It's like a lot of things when I look back. I wonder why I did this or why I did that. I really don't know.

Marcello: Did working around food just appeal to you, perhaps?

Sierman: I guess. Or one thing, I liked the two cooks that we had aboard there. At the time before I went into the department,

I liked the chief commissary steward. He seemed to be a nice guy to work for when I was mess cooking. I guess that had more to do with it than anything else. You did have a dry place to work (chuckle). I've seen it sometimes . . . just like my brother used to say when we first got on there and went to sea a time or two, "A multi-million-dollar home and not a dry place on it!" (chuckle).

Marcello: How would you describe that morale aboard the Wasmuth during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Sierman: Well, to give you an example, I remember one man on there-- he was a gunner's mate by the name of Wagner--and he'd been on the ship for seventeen years, and he'd even had a "go-round" a couple of times and went to request mast to see the captain so he wouldn't be transferred. Men used to be on a ship, and they never wanted transfers. We had a lot of men that had been on there their entire careers so far.

They used to have pride in their ship. Back then you never heard anybody say anything against his ship, and nobody else better say anything against it. It was a whole different ball game.

Marcello: Athletics played a very important role in the life of that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy, did it not?

Sierman: Yes. Well, we always had our softball teams, and we always

thought ours was the best; even though we would lose a game, we thought we were the best. We just had some bad breaks (chuckle).

Marcello: Boxing was evidently a big sport at that time.

Sierman: Yes, I used to box some in smokers, I never was much good at it. I was never much good at anything (chuckle), but I used to like to try.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the activities in which the Wasmuth would engage. First, when did the Wasmuth move out to Pearl Harbor? Now you mentioned that you went aboard there probably in early 1940.

Sierman: I believe it was in April of 1940 that we went to Pearl Harbor on maneuvers and remained out there. Actually, it was a strange thing, because we had been out there for a long time. We got back to the States one time between the time we had gone out there on maneuvers and when they kept the fleet there. I often wondered then why they kept the fleet there. It never dawned on me it was because of the Japanese. I guess there wasn't enough put in the paper or put in the paper where I would have understood it.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed in the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis?

Sierman: Well, we first went out there, like I said, for six weeks for maneuvers. Then when they extended it, it was just extended

indefinitely. We used to enjoy . . . I loved it out there. It's one of the most ideal places in this world for climate the year round. We went back out there a year ago last December, you know, for the thirty-fifth anniversary. In two more years, we'll be going back, I guess, if we're still here.

Marcello: I guess there wasn't very much tourism over there in 1940 when you first arrived,

Sierman: No. You didn't have the tourists then. Of course, you used to have the flying boats come in there, but most of them came in there by ship. One of the ships, I remember, was the Lurline; it used to come in there a lot. There was another one; it was a Japanese ship. We knew what ships were coming in and when they was coming for the mail and when the flying boats--that was those seaplanes--would come in.

Marcello: That was a pretty big deal when that Pan American Clipper would come in there.

Sierman: That's it--the Pan American Clipper. I used to call it the flying boat, but that's it. Of course, they brought in the mail. Then, if I remember correctly, air mail was twenty cents to send a letter on that Pan American Clipper.

Marcello: You know, we're not talking about ten or twelve flights a day coming into Hawaiian Islands. In fact, I guess there probably

wouldn't have been any more than one or two a week, would have there?

Sierman: I think there was about . . . it seemed like it was every other day or so you got air mail. We used to know . . . of course, that's going back a long time, but we used to know what ships were coming in--when to expect the other mail. In the meantime, it was no use looking for any mail. We used to watch them come in and land; of course, it was always seaplanes; it wasn't land-based planes like today. With jets . . . , my God, that place out there is . . . it's a different island, too; it's not the island that we knew. The island we knew is what they would like to show the tourists today, but it doesn't exist. It's commercialized.

Marcello: I guess the time that you were out there, there were really only two major hotels--the Royal Hawaiian and the Ala Moana.

Sierman: Yes, You could always get booking in either one of them. They was never overflowed,

It was a good thing. We always enjoyed it out there. I never heard people complain because they were stuck on the island out there or didn't enjoy it. Of course, you know, the thing of it was, like I said, we got back one time between the time we went out there for maneuvers, and that was when the secretary of the Navy came out there to Pearl Harbor for , , . I was trying to think of his name . . . yes,

it was Frank Knox. So when he flew back across the Pacific, every so far there was a destroyer based all across the Pacific.

Marcello: In case that plane went down?

Sierman: I don't remember just how many miles it was from destroyer to destroyer, but there was some, like, every hundred or two hundred miles or something like that, and we were one of the destroyers that was put in there.

Then after the plane went over and had gone on, we took out and we headed for San Diego; we rendezvoused with the other destroyers of our division and went into San Diego, and we were in there for two or three weeks. We hadn't been there for quite a while, and, of course, we renewed some old acquaintances. Then we went back to Pearl Harbor.

But we were slated . . . actually, I was one of them in on a party for saying good-bye to Pearl Harbor for a while. Our ship was listed as supposed to leave on December 8, 1941, and come to Mare Island Navy Yard for a Navy yard overhaul.

Marcello: Now the Wasmuth was an old ship, was it not?

Sierman: Yes, it was. She was an old one. I said an old ship . . . she was built around about World War I. It was about twenty years old.

Marcello: Was it a four-stacker?

Sierman: It was a four-stacker, which means half of the time you should draw submarine pay, and the other half flight pay when it gets rough, because we would go over one wave and under the next (chuckle).

Marcello: Over one wave and under the next wave (chuckle). Let's talk a little bit about the training routine of the Wasmuth after it got to Pearl Harbor. What was its function? What did a ship such as the Wasmuth do?

Sierman: Like I say, we had just been converted to a minesweeper. Now a minesweeper--they called them "high speed minesweepers" at that time--would be ships especially designed to sweep in ahead of an invasion force when you're going to invade--like, for a landing party or anything, where you'd sweep out the field ahead of the troopships and that there. You would clear the way of any mines, and you had both gear that picked up the magnetic mines as well as the floating-type mines.

Marcello: Is that the sort of training in which you were engaged on a more or less frequent basis after you got to Pearl Harbor?

Sierman: Yes,

Marcello: Where would you do most of the training?

Sierman: In and around the islands. We learned how to put out the paravanes and sweeps and all of this, and then you had your kites. You had the thing that pulled the cable down deep;

it was back close to the stern of the ship, and then she swung out. In other words, if it hit a cable like on a mine, it would ride down, and it had a cutter that would cut it loose and it would float to the surface, and then you would fire on it with a rifle or something to ignite it, blow it up.

Marcello: Now do you as a cook have any other functions aboard the ship during these training exercises?

Sierman: Yes. You all had a general quarters station.

Marcello: Where was your general quarters station?

Sierman: I was the number four .50-caliber machine gunner. The captain, after we had tried out on the machine guns firing at targets, he took the ones who made the highest scores with the machine guns and made them gunners. There was two of us. The other man, I don't remember his name, but he used to have the number six machine gun. A lot of guys used to bet whenever we was going to fire on the sleeve as to who'd get the most hits, him or me. We used to be pretty good at hitting sleeves. I'll never know how good I was at hitting planes, because I never, in all of my time throughout World War II, Korea and everything, I never had a chance to ever fire on a plane when I was the only man firing.

Marcello: How heavily armed was the Wasmuth?

Sierman: Well, at that time our main battery was 4-inch guns. I believe they were 4-inch .50-caliber. They were not dual-purpose; they were strictly surface-type batteries.

Marcello: In other words, for antiaircraft protection you had to use machine guns.

Sierman: All we had was .50-caliber machine guns, and we had six of them--two on the bridge, two on the gunnery deckhouse, and two on the after deckhouse.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that after December 7th, that the Wasmuth had a lot more antiaircraft weapons aboard than it did before December 7th?

Sierman: We never got the additional antiaircraft guns on there until after the Battle of Midway. We then went back to Mare Island Navy Yard, and then they put on 3-inch dual-purpose guns. Then they took off the .50's and they put on 20-millimeters. While we were there in the Navy Yard, actually I went to school, and we were out there on the range and did a lot of shooting with the 20-millimeters.

Then, of course, when we took her out, it was only a short time thereafter that she was sitting on the bottom, so that ended her. We lost her running a blockade on Kiska and Attu in the Aleutians. After the Battle of Midway we went into the yard to get repaired, and then we went back out up to Alaska and operated out of Dutch Harbor.

They don't know . . . they list her as "lost, unidentifiable underwater explosion." Of course, the initial explosion, we don't know what that was, but we do know the secondary explosion was the one that destroyed us. It was right at the port screw guard on the first explosion, and the port depth charge rack went over, and it went up. That store is 140-some feet off the stern of her. With a ship that's a little over 300 feet long, that leaves her in bad shape.

Marcello: That spelled the beginning of the end for the Wasmuth.

Sierman: Yes. We had to abandon her.

Marcello: Did you have a particular set schedule for training aboard the Wasmuth during that pre-Pearl Harbor period? In other words, did you have a particular time when you went out and a certain amount of time that you stayed out?

Sierman: Well, most of the time we went out on a Monday morning, and you came back in on Friday.

Marcello: And this was pretty routine?

Sierman: Pretty routine for most all the ships. Then on Saturday and Sunday about everything would be at anchor.

Marcello: In other words, it didn't take a genius to figure out when the ships would be going out and when they would be coming in.

Sierman: No. We used to go out, like I say, on Monday morning;

everybody started getting underway. You used to go out and run around the islands. Most of the time you would be within sight of the islands.

Marcello: Did this training routine change any as one gets closer and closer to December 7th?

Sierman: The only thing that I would say that really made any changes was probably . . . there was a period of time . . . I don't know . . . maybe it was three . . . it might have been as much as six months when we started operating with darkened ship, lights out, and things like this at night instead of the ships being all lit up.

Marcello: Did you seem to have more general quarters drills?

Sierman: Yes, we had quite a lot of them. We had quite a lot . . . what we done was more or less drills for submarines. See, our type was a little different now than some of the others like on a regular destroyer or cruiser or something. They had more general quarters where we would have more mine-sweeping drills sweeping into the beach. It was like if you were going to sweep in for a landing force to try to get into shallow waters without running aground. That's what our primary purpose would have been, and some of the division later on did sweep in some of the landing forces in other places in the Pacific.

Marcello: Did you conduct these training exercises in conjunction

with other minesweepers and so on?

Sierman: Yes. We had a division there. There was four destroyer-minesweepers that we used to operate together with--the Perry and the Wasmuth and the Zane and the Trever.

Marcello: As conditions continued to deteriorate between the United States and Japan, how much thought did you and your buddies in your bull sessions ever give to the possibility of an attack at Pearl Harbor?

Sierman: Never did I ever hear any mention of anything--no indications that I know of. That's the reason why I often wondered why they was keeping us at Pearl Harbor. I thought they should have had us on the Atlantic Coast.

Marcello: Why did you think you should have been on the Atlantic Coast?

Sierman: I figured our troubles were going to be in Europe; I figured that Hitler was the boy that we was going to have to go after. Of course, Hitler didn't really have a navy other than submarines, but destroyers could really drop some wicked depth charges, you know, which we threw a lot of depth charges.

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

Sierman: Well, of course, you know, there was a lot of Japanese in the Hawaiian Islands. Now I say Japanese--I never could tell the Japanese from the Chinese. There's a lot of

Filipinos and stuff that I still can't tell from the Japanese or the Chinese. They're more or less the yellow race . . . well, I guess maybe they look at us and say, "Well, white people all look like white people." (chuckle). There's some people who say, "Oh, no, that's strictly Japanese," or, "That's Chinese." I never could look at them and really tell them apart. Maybe I didn't look for the little things that you can tell them by .

Marcello: Did you have any "old salts" on the Wasmuth who had previously been on the Asiatic Station, and, if so, had these people ever come into any contact with the Japanese?

Sierman: Yes. Who was that that we had? I know he used to talk about he used to be on the Yangtze Patrol going up the river there. Because I know before Pearl Harbor was attacked, it was in about July or August--somewhere along in there--of 1941 that we made a goodwill tour to Brisbane, Australia, and I remember he was the only one that was a "shellback" on the ship, so we didn't get initiated. He couldn't take on the whole crew (chuckle). So we got across the equator without getting initiated.

Marcello: I gather those Asiatic sailors were a different breed altogether, were they not?

Sierman: Yes. I've got a good friend here in Corpus Christi, John Hensley, who's a retired Navy chief, and he was with the

Asiatic Fleet, and he was in Manila when the Japs attacked the Philippines,

Marcello: Evidently, most of those Asiatic sailors were tattooed, and a lot of them had a gold earring and this sort of thing.

Sierman: No, that was a picture that people had of them. I seen some guys that would put an earring in to lead people to believe he was Asiatic, but the ones that I actually knew . . . I don't know of one . . . John Hensley don't have no tattoo, and he don't have no earring, either. I don't think he has got any pierced holes in his ears, either (chuckle). But I've known people that have served in the Asiatic Fleet, but I never knew one that wore the earrings and all of that stuff, that is, the real Asiatic sailors. A lot of them used to have things like dragons done on the inside of their cuffs of their jumpers.

Marcello: Embroidered on the inside?

Sierman: Yes, embroidered on the inside. But those were guys that was trying to set up a front--something that he wasn't. No, I never saw no great distinction between the people. Of course, there might have been some.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the liberty routine of the Wasmuth. Where did it normally tie up?

Sierman: Well, usually, we moored at a buoy there right off from Pearl City Landing there in the harbor. That's where we

was when they bombed us. We was tied at our buoy there. I would say it was about, oh, 200 yards right off from where Pearl City is--right off of the beach there.

Marcello: How did the liberty routine work aboard the Wasmuth?

Sierman: Well, most of it was port and starboard, which means half of the crew would have the weekend off and half would be on duty. Now it wouldn't exactly be all the way half, because there's some that would fall in a different category. You take, like, in the commissary department, even though you had the duty, after you served the evening meal, you could go to shore if you wanted to, as long as you were back in time to put out breakfast the next morning. So in that case there was people that not even half of them would be aboard.

Marcello: Now you said awhile ago that there was a port and starboard liberty, and you mentioned that half the crew would get the weekend off and the other half would have to remain aboard. This was a little bit different than the way in which a lot of the other ships operated. I think in a lot of the other ships, you could have either a Saturday or a Sunday off, but usually not both. But on your ship you could get the full weekend off.

Sierman: Yes. Well, you could go ashore and get a hotel room or anything. Now after the war broke out, that was a different

category entirely. But before the war, sure, you had weekend duty.

Marcello: And you could stay overnight?

Sierman: Yes. We had men that even had their wives out there. There was families out there. They shipped them back, of course, after Pearl Harbor. No, there was no restriction.

Marcello: I guess, given your limited pay, the number of times you could stay ashore overnight would have been somewhat curtailed.

Sierman: Yes. I was a third class petty officer at the time Pearl Harbor was bombed, and at that time a third class petty officer made exactly sixty dollars a month. You got a small clothing allowance on top of that.

Marcello: What did you normally do when you went on liberty?

Sierman: Oh, (chuckle) about like anybody else, I guess--movies, maybe a few drinks. A lot of times you didn't even leave the base. See, there at Pearl Harbor we used to have a place over there . . . it was a tin building.

Marcello: It was called the Tin Roof, as a matter of fact.

Sierman: Yes. I sat listening to it rain many times drinking a beer there.

Marcello: Why did you particularly like that place? Was it because it was close by?

Sierman: Well, I guess it was like anything else; it was where a lot of your friends would go, and beer was a little cheaper than

it was on the shore. Primarily, a lot of sailors are classified as drinking people. I know an awful lot of people like myself who didn't drink to get drunk; you were a sociable drinker. I'm still that way today. I'll take a drink, yes. Even now, I'll go out on New Year's Eve, and I might have three or four drinks in the night. But to go in and sit down and shoot the breeze and to have a beer or two, we usually went where we could get it cheapest (chuckle)--at the Tin Roof.

Marcello: I guess downtown Honolulu on a weekend was wall-to-wall bodies, was it not?

Sierman: Yes . . . well, not before the war. Now after the war, it was more that way, because they brought so many military men in there that you couldn't even hardly walk down the sidewalk; and you couldn't hardly get into a joint if you wanted to get a drink. I seen it where they had guards at the door because they couldn't let nobody else in because they had everybody in that the fire marshall said could be in the building. It was no fun to actually be on liberty in Honolulu after the war broke out and they brought all the military men in.

Marcello: A lot of people like to say that if the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor, they could not have picked a better time than a Sunday morning. How do you feel about that?

Sierman: Well, Saturday morning would have been just about the same. It would have been bad for them to have picked the Friday, for example. Of course, now on Saturday some ships used to have their inspection on Saturday. We used to have ours on a Friday. But I know a lot of times on Saturday morning, you'd look up and see all of them sailors lined up on the deck, you know, for a personnel inspection and all of that.

I'll tell you one thing that they should never do again. They are bringing out something that I think is wrong, and that's the short sleeve shirt. You see, we even had it where a skivvy shirt . . . it was regulation to wear just a skivvy shirt, and then you had these short cut-off whites about half-way to the knee. You know, a lot of those people in shorts got burnt and everything. I don't think they should even have the short sleeves, let alone shorts. I don't think that shorts should ever be part of the uniform.

Marcello: Shorts and T-shirts were more or less the uniform-of-the-day in many instances during that pre-Pearl Harbor period. Like you pointed out, I think they did learn a rather tragic lesson about having exposed skin, so to speak, in battle conditions.

Sierman: Well, now they are going back to short sleeve shirts, you

know, I don't think that any military uniform should have a short sleeve or a short pant leg.

Marcello: Was there a lot of drinking that went on during a weekend when you were in port? Now I'm referring to the pre-Pearl Harbor period.

Sierman: Yes, there was drinking, just like the night before Pearl Harbor was bombed--on Saturday night. Like I say, we were supposed to leave for the States on December 8th. We had quite a little party and were telling a lot of our friends that we knew on the Islands good-bye, because we was going to be gone for a while. You do make friends and get to know people when you're around for a long period of time. We still had a couple of bottles that we was passing around on the after deckhouse when the attack started.

Marcello: I guess maybe we can get into the weekend of December 7, 1941. Did you come in on a Friday again?

Sierman: I don't remember whether we had gone out that week at all or not. I wouldn't say exactly when we came in, because I know we was getting ready to leave, and we was to leave on December 8th to go to Mare Island Navy Yard. So I know that on the weekend we decided to have that party, and there was a whole bunch of us there that used to chum together. We were going over to tell our friends good-bye, and we did it on Saturday night, and, of course, you do it with a few

drinks, and a couple of bottles wound up back on the ship. We were on the after deckhouse, actually, having a little nip or two and "shooting the breeze" when it happened.

Marcello: Let's go into a little bit more detail on the party that you had on that Saturday. Describe the party in terms of where it was held and what went on and that sort of thing.

Sierman: It wasn't held in any one place. We more or less made the rounds of places where we used to go and drink and so on and so forth.

Marcello: About how many of you were there?

Sierman: Oh, about seven or eight of us. I couldn't even tell you who all was there now. But I do know that we finally wound up back at the ship, and we had never even gone to bed yet.

Marcello: What time was it when you got back aboard the ship?

Sierman: Oh, we came back out to the ship there about six o'clock in the morning.

Marcello: So far as you were concerned, it was a rather uneventful night other than the fact that you had this party.

Sierman: It was just telling our friends good-bye and having a few drinks and being all over the place.

Marcello: What sort of shape were you and your buddies in when you

got back aboard at six o'clock in the morning?

Sierman: Well, I wouldn't say that any of us were what you'd call drunk. Of course, we'd all been drinking and still had some stuff to drink with us, as far as that's concerned.

Marcello: Was there a problem getting it back aboard ship?

Sierman: Oh, not then. Nobody ever . . . they would check the package coming aboard the ship. Of course, you wasn't supposed to bring liquor aboard ship, but, like, on a weekend we only had one officer aboard. He was the OD, but most of the time he would be in bed; so whoever was the assistant OD--petty officer, second class, third class, first class or chief--would be at the gangway, and they never shook you down.

Marcello: Okay, so you come back aboard ship at six o'clock in the morning, and this would be Sunday morning. What do you do at that point?

Sierman: Well, we went over . . . I think we went and got some coffee in the galley. Then we went up on the after deck-house. Like I say, we still had a couple of bottles, and I think we were going to make some coffee royals with it or something and have a nip or two (chuckle) and decide what we're going to do from there. In other words, we didn't have no plans.

Marcello: Were you kind of thinking about going back ashore again?

Sierman: Well, there was a good possibility that we would have probably wound up back on shore.

Marcello: Okay, so you're back in the after deckhouse having another little nip or two. Pick up the story at that point.

Sierman: Well, all of the sudden, we saw planes coming in, and they was coming in at the target ship Utah. We'd seen planes attack her at sea, and one of the guys says, "Look, they're attacking her in port now!"

Marcello: Were these planes flying right over your particular ship?

Sierman: No, they were not flying over us. We was looking out at a distance; you couldn't see no insignias.

Marcello: Could you see Battleship Row from where you were?

Sierman: No. They was on the opposite side of the island. But it looked to us like they were coming in to the target ship Utah, and we had seen them attack her at sea, and we thought it was our planes, you know. But we'd never seen them attack her in port.

Then they let go, and we seen that first explosion, and then I said, "Boy, somebody's in trouble; that was a live round!" That was the explosion at the Utah when she was hit. About that time there was another explosion, and then about that time a plane came winging over to where you could see the red ball, and a guy hollered, "Japanese!" Somebody else hollered, "General quarters!" I don't know

who hollered that.

Marcello: When you say they hollered, this was done verbally or over the PA system or what?

Sierman: Yes, verbally.

Marcello: What was your immediate reaction at that point?

Sierman: Well, they yelled, "Japanese," and then hollered, "General quarters," and I went heading for my gun. On each .50-caliber, we had about three or four cans of ammunition for each gun in a metal cabinet.

Marcello: Which would be about how many rounds?

Sierman: I'm not sure how many rounds is in one of those cans on a .50-caliber. It seems to me like it was 150 rounds. I wouldn't swear to that.

Marcello: And these cans were right there at the guns?

Sierman: At the guns . . . in a metal cabinet.

Marcello: Okay, so general quarters sounds, and you run to your battle station, which is the number four .50-caliber machine gun mount. Pick up the story at that point.

Sierman: Naturally, I started firing at the first plane that came in sight. Of course, from now on all I seen was like a small patch, because we was in the center of this group of destroyers, and my field of fire was limited and up.

And it was about . . . I guess it was about halfway through the attack--the first attack--when I saw the first

plane actually go down that we was firing on. I don't know how many other guys were firing on him. There was several streaks of tracers flaring up around him, and he started smoking, and he went down right across from Pearl City.

Later on when we came back in and was in the harbor there--I guess it was ten days to two weeks later or something--some of us took a boat over there, and we found some pieces of the plane. A lot of it had been eliminated, but we picked some up and we had on the ship there several pieces of that Jap plane. We figured we helped shoot it down, because at least three of the .50-calibers on the Wasmuth was firing on him.

Marcello: How many planes did you fire at that day?

Sierman: I have no idea. I know that I fired on enough. Even though it was a water-cooled .50-caliber, the gun got so hot that even though I had ceased firing, every once in a while I let go a round from the heat. Actually, they had to replace the barrels on them .50's--all of them--because we burnt them up even though they was water-cooled. We fired enough ammunition fast enough to cause that.

Marcello: Did you get additional ammunition?

Sierman: Yes. Now this is where they kind of messed us up, because the chief boatswain's mate there just grabbed about anybody

he could, you know, and had them start belting that ammunition. You used to have the metal clips, you know. When you laid the metal clip in the gun, you put a round in, you know, as soon as you put it in there. Those guys were opening a case of ammunition and started belting it. If there was tracers, that's all you were firing--was a streak of fire. If it was armor-piercing or common ammunition, you didn't even have a tracer; you was trying to feel where you was firing. So lots of times you really knowed where you was firing, and other times you had to guess.

Marcello: Like you mentioned, you did have a very, very limited field of fire. In fact, probably it was mostly straight up, was it not?

Sierman: Well, it was pretty close to that. Of course, I did sweep over a little bit, and we did shoot just about all the halyards down off the ships, and all the tops of the stacks had holes punched through them and everything. We did crowd our range of fire. All the superstructures were shot up. Of course, there was no stops on a .50-caliber. In other words, you could turn a .50-caliber right around and shoot your own ship if you wanted to. The gunner was the one that they depended on for controlling his fire.

Marcello: How many men are on one of these crews?

Sierman: Well, there would be the loader and the gunner, and then, of course, the water pump man would pump water for two guns; he would stand there and operate that hand pump. So there was five men operating two guns.

Marcello: Do you talk about anything at all while you're operating these guns?

Sierman: No, you never get a chance much to talk. You're either firing at a plane, or you're more or less looking for targets. Of course, there was a gunner's mate there that was more or less directing the fire, because if he saw a plane coming in that maybe you didn't see, he'd jump back and point at it (chuckle) to get you to pick up something in a different direction.

I only seen, like I say, that one plane that we was firing on that went down. There was two others that were trailing smoke, but I never seen what happened to them afterwards, because once they fly out of your field of fire, you're looking for something else and not what happened to them.

Marcello: What sort of emotions do you experience under those circumstances?

Sierman: None, really. You're concentrating on one thing; you're firing with intent. If I would have done really what I was trying to do and with the intention to do, every

plane that I fired on would have been in the "drink."
You don't think in terms that it means a human's life, even though they could be enemy, when you fire on them. You're liable to hear a cheer go up when you see a plane start trailing smoke and spiraling out of control. But of all the planes that I've seen shot down by even anti-aircraft fire-- .20-millimeter and .40-millimeter and .50-calibers--all during the war, there was only one plane I ever seen shot down when I credited it to one gun, and that was on a destroyer, and I can't even tell you the name of it. But it was during the invasion in the Philippines, and this was a suicide plane that was diving at that destroyer. But when that 5-inch gun went off and that plane blew up, the smoke was intermingled. Over the intership communication, the ship reported slight damage from falling wreckage. I call that the best shot I seen in the war--with a 5-inch gun.

Marcello: Am I to gather that planes were coming over fast and furious?

Sierman: Quite a lot. They was using that flight there . . . I guess when they come down and was hitting Battleship Row and everything, as they would come out of there, they was coming right out over those tin cans. We wasn't getting a chance to get them before they unloaded. We were shooting at the planes after they had unloaded.

Marcello: Were they firing back at you, let's say, from a rear gunner or strafing or anything of that nature?

Sierman: The only way I could . . . I couldn't tell you for sure whether it was . . . I heard some people say that it was the Japanese machine gun bullets hitting. I don't know whether a lot of it was from their guns or . . . you know, when anything goes up, it has got to come down. Now you have flak up there and you got a lot of machine gun bullets going up, and when they come back down, they come down with a pretty hard rap. But I've heard some guys say that actually some of that was Japanese planes shooting at us.

Now I never actually seen the "winks" of the fire on the machine guns. Of course, again, if they had strafed us, they would have done it before they got in my field of fire.

Marcello: But you did mention that you fired to the extent that you burned up the barrel on the machine gun,

Sierman: Yes. But actually I was getting short bursts at them, you know, because you didn't . . . they were flying low, but when you realized that you're sitting here and there's only a short field that you've got here that you can fire, they don't cover very far. You'd get about two good bursts at a plane. Of course, now there were quite a lot of planes.

Marcello: How long did this firing go on?

Sierman: You know, I never ran a clock on it. I know that it must have lasted for some period of time.

Marcello: Could you detect two different waves of planes, or did it seem like one continual action?

Sierman: It more or less seemed like one continuous action to me. Of course, there would be blank times when there would be nothing, and I'd be swinging that .50-caliber around and watching for something to hit within my field of fire. I would definitely not say that I saw two different patterns or that there was a definite break. I couldn't say that. There was lulls at times when maybe nothing was in my field of fire. But you still don't go looking off in other places; you still concentrate on your field.

Marcello: In this situation, do you have a chance to observe the so-called "big picture," or is your experience limited to just one small area, so to speak?

Sierman: A very, very small area. I imagine you could probably get fifty guys off the Wasmuth and have fifty different stories of what they seen, because every man was probably looking at something different.

Marcello: In other words, you didn't really have time to observe the damage that was being done to the other ships and so on..

Sierman: No. The only time that I did observe any damage done was after we got underway. Now when we got underway, we got over there and we were held up a few minutes, because the Nevada had started to get out and she was setting in the channel. And, at one time, the skipper called for the fire control party to man the nozzles, and he was going to come up alongside and try to help fight the fire on her, and then they ordered us back, and then they put that Nevada in reverse and backed her right down on that mud flat. Then we took off.

Marcello: Did you actually observe the Nevada trying to get out the channel?

Sierman: She was in the channel, yes, blocking us; we couldn't go past her.

Marcello: Now by this time had the Japanese attacks on the Nevada eased off, or were they still working on her?

Sierman: There was no planes flying . . . no planes flying at all. Now I seen a lot of smoke and stuff from Battleship Row. We were still at general quarters, and I was still at my gun. But I had a chance then to more or less look around at the damage and stuff after it had been done.

Marcello: Now while you were still firing at the Japanese planes and so on back in that destroyer nest, was the smoke and the explosions and so on beginning to limit your visibility?

Did that play a role from where you were?

Sierman: Well, not that I recall. It never bothered me. I can't recall if it ever restricted my visibility. It seemed to me that more or less most of the smoke was going straight up . . . more than spreading out. Of course, now in close it's naturally going to spread. But you must remember from Pearl City Landing where we was tied up and up to Battleship Row must have been about a half a mile. It's a good distance there. And there was no ships . . . the closest ship hit to us and damaged was the Utah. Right in behind there was an old cruiser that got hit. What one was that? I can't tell, but there was an old cruiser sitting there next to her that got hit, too--one of them old, old-style cruisers.

Now when we got over to go out the entrance to Pearl Harbor, then there was a tremendous amount of smoke there. Of course, the Nevada was burning, and the Oklahoma, Arizona, and what-have-you up there.

Marcello: What sort of feeling did you have when you saw the destruction that was being done as you were passing out through the harbor?

Sierman: Well, my main thought was that I knew that there was a lot of good men lost, and it was the loss of the manpower that hurt us, not the ships. Ships are replaceable.

Marcello: Were you worried about your brother, or did you know that since your destroyer hadn't been hit that he was okay?

Sierman: My brother was no longer on ship.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Sierman: Well, actually my brother had been transferred off the ship a few months prior to that. Somebody had to go, because those orders come aboard . . . and they didn't used to name anybody by name; they just sent a set of orders to a ship to transfer a certain rating. Usually, they would start in with the oldest man aboard ship; and if he wanted it, he could have it. Then they would go right down the line. Well, if nobody wanted it, the junior man was stuck with it. Well, anyway, it was a set of orders to go to the Alameda Naval Air Station, Alameda, California, and . . . he didn't like sea duty so well, anyway. He used to get seasick. I never did get seasick in my life. So he was at Alameda Naval Air Station.

Marcello: But was it a rather sickening feeling when you saw the damage being done as you left the harbor?

Sierman: I never look at damage as sickening to me, whether it's an automobile smash-up or if it's bomb damage or what-have-you. I usually look at the individuals, because usually there's individuals hurt, and that's the bad part-- the people that are killed or maimed.

Marcello: Am I to assume that one of the first things that the Wasmuth tried to do was to get out of that harbor-- to get up steam and get out of that harbor as quickly as possible?

Sierman: No, because we were in the center of the nest, and the other "tin cans" had to get underway before we could move.

Marcello: But nevertheless, as soon as they moved out, you were going to move out, too.

Sierman: And then, of course, we only had one officer aboard, and we went to sea with him aboard--that was it. Mostly, actually, the chief quartermaster done most of the operations, because this young ensign more or less let him handle it, you know. So actually, the chief quartermaster took us out.

Marcello: Approximately at what time did you pull out of there?

Sierman: You know, I never looked at a watch; I couldn't tell you.

Marcello: Was it during the morning?

Sierman: The attacks were over. There was no more planes; there was no more bombing or nothing by the time we got out of the harbor.

The only thing we had was the suicide submarines. Us and one of the other ships of the squadron . . . and I believe it was the Perry, but I wouldn't swear to that.

Anyway, this was right after the Pearl Harbor attack-- at sea. When we got contact on a submarine, we kept trying to get it, and we chased it onto the shore, and the Army captured it. They brought it to the States and used it for a bond drive. So we were trying to get it, but it got into too shallow water (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit more about this incident. There are reports that the two-man midget submarines had entered the harbor. Did you have any experiences with them as you were leaving?

Sierman: Well, in a way I knew about one, but I didn't actually see it because, like I say, it wasn't in my field of fire, and mostly what I know about it was what I was told. I believe that was the Perry that fired on it, because the conning tower was stuck up. But there was also another ship that also was firing at it--two of them--and the other one, I believe, was the Curtiss. I think they credited the Curtiss with putting the shell through the conning tower. Now the Perry tried to say it was her shell. Now who put the hole through the conning tower . . . (chuckle) but somebody put a hole right through that conning tower. They had that one up on display over at the submarine base for a while.

Marcello: Now you actually did not see this incident; you just heard

about it?

Sierman: That's right. I didn't see it; it wasn't in my field of fire.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens now when you clear the harbor?

Sierman: Well, as we clear the harbor, there was two-man submarine contacts out there. We unloaded every depth charge that we had that day on attacks. We had to come back into the harbor that evening and pick up more depth charges. At the same time we picked up our skipper and the other officers that was on the beach.

Marcello: Were the fires and so on still burning when you went back in?

Sierman: Oh, sure, there was still smoke and fire.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors going around on the ship in the aftermath of the attack?

Sierman: Oh, most of the rumors was how long would it take us to get rid of them, how long would it take us to whip them. We figured we was in for a fight. There was no choice; that was it. We knew that it was war. There was no . . . we knew we were at war before they ever declared war. We knew that there was no way that you couldn't help but to declare war from that.

Marcello: Were you fully expecting an invasion or a landing?

Sierman: Well, I don't know. I just never did feel like there was

one. I know a lot of people who thought that the Japanese made a big mistake by not making one. I think there would have been a big mistake had they made one. A lot of people said, "Well, so much of our Navy and Air Force was knocked out," But we still had our carriers; they hadn't hit a single carrier. We had carriers operational. I think the war would have been shorter had they tried to invade us.

Marcello: Were there any morale problems in the aftermath of the attack, that is, the immediate aftermath?

Sierman: I definitely didn't see any, because they just didn't come out of that mold. That was what they was trained for.

Marcello: Would it perhaps be safe to say the general feeling was one of anger more than anything else?

Sierman: Yes, that and the fact . . . well, when you get a bunch of ships around together and guys making liberty, they make acquaintances and friends; there was a lot of those ships that I knew people on. Some of them we even went through boot camp with that were on different ships and things like this, and you are concerned about your friends and whether they're all right or not, especially when you see a ship that's really tore up. But the men were the ones that I was more concerned with.

Marcello: You mentioned that you came back into the harbor that night to load more depth charges. Did you go right back out again?

Sierman: Yes. We picked up our officers, and we picked up depth charges, and as soon as we got the boat loaded, we took right off back out to sea.

Marcello: Was it that same night that you went out?

Sierman: Yes.

Marcello: What did you do the next day then after you got out there?

Sierman: Just regular patrol . . . looking for submarines.

Marcello: Did you have very many submarine scares?

Sierman: Well, they put a lot of things out there that, we'll say, took up a lot of your time. They even rigged some things like . . . well, you say, like a broom handle, and they put like a can on one end and a weight on the other. So it would sit up about so high out of the water, and it would flash if the sun hit it like a periscope. Of course, we shot at a lot of those and found out they weren't the periscopes (chuckle). It's a kiddish thing, but you'd be surprised . . . it can take up time, because you got to make sure on each and every one for a silly thing like that.

Marcello: You are a little jittery and a little jumpy, of course, under those circumstances.

Sierman: Yes.

Marcello: How long did you stay out there thrashing around looking for submarines?

Sierman: And then, of course, you did stop any boat that was out

there, and any sampan or anything had better not try to run because you'd open fire. We felt that the suicide subs . . . the only way they could survive for any period of time would be if they had help.

Marcello: Now you did mention that during that night of December 7th, you did drop a considerable number of depth charges on one of those midget submarines.

Sierman: Well, at them, yes . . . or on submarine contacts.

Marcello: And you possibly helped force one of those midget submarines toward shore.

Sierman: Well, it was actually fact that it was chased ashore, and the Army captured it the next morning. It was actually used on bond drives in the States; they hauled it around on a flat car.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Sierman, is there anything else relative to Pearl Harbor attack that we haven't talked about that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Sierman: No. Like I say, I seen very little as far as actually seeing when it happened.

Marcello: Well, you said quite a deal, and you've gone into quite a bit of detail, and I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk to me. I'm sure the scholars will find your comments quite useful and valuable when using them to write about Pearl Harbor.