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Interview with
Christopher Zett
July 12, 1977

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: *Christopher R. Zett*
(Signature)

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Oral History Collection

Christopher Zett

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Christopher Zett for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 12, 1977, in Austin, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Zett in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the target battleship USS Utah during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Zett, to begin this interview, why don't you very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Zett: Well, I was born on May 25, 1916. I went to grammar school . . . I didn't go but through the eighth grade. That's all the education I had.

Dr. Marcello: Where were you born?

Mr. Zett: I was born in Granger, Texas.

Dr. Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Mr. Zett: On June 11, 1940.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Zett: Well, it was Depression days and so forth, and there was three cousins---three of the Zetts---that joined in the service at the same time. We didn't have very much and couldn't earn any moeny, so we thought we were going to be called to service anyhow, the way that things were shaping up. So we wanted to volunteer in the Navy to get in the branch of service we wanted to be in. So we decided to go to the Navy.

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

Zett: Well, we thought that we'd like the Navy. I had an uncle in the Navy; he talked so much about the Navy in World War I. He was on the battleship Georgia, and he had a picture of it, and we always admired it. I thought that was a nice branch of the service to be in, so I decided to go Navy.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Zett: San Diego, California.

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

Zett: Well, not hardly. I done all right. It was rather rough though, but I had taken it. It didn't hurt me very much, since I was used to hard work and strict orders. It didn't bother me too much.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that one of the reasons that you joined the service was because of economic reasons. That's a standard

explanation that a great many people of your particular generation give for having entered the service. In other words, times were tough and jobs were scarce, and the service offered a certain amount of security in terms of steady pay, quarters, food, and things of that sort.

Zett: Yes, that's true, too. And I did save some money while I was in the service and invested it in a home that I got now in the present day. . . present time.

Marcello: At the time that you entered the Navy, how closely were you keeping abreast with current events and world affairs and things of that nature?

Zett: Well, I didn't have very much thought there. I wasn't getting around too much while I was in boot camp. I mostly went along with the regulations that tried to uphold the way of Navy life. I sort of stayed up with that point. I didn't have much in the way of studying world affairs. But later on when I was aboard the ship. . . well, the Utah was in the Navy yard. Well, I didn't take a leave; I wanted to get advancement and promotions, so I stayed and didn't take the leave. But I was told that the Japs were going to sink the ship, but I didn't think it was going to be anything to it. But they finally did.

Marcello: Now how long does boot camp last at the time that you went through? Do you remember how many weeks it lasted?

Zett: Eight weeks, I think--eight weeks.

Marcello: In other words, they had cut it down over what it had been.

Zett: Yes. They wanted to cut it . . . after the war started, they cut it down as much as, I think, six or either four weeks.

Marcello: And I guess this was because of the emergency nature of the times. They wanted to get you people through boot camp and out into the fleet as soon as possible.

Zett: Yes. As soon as possible, yes. And at that time I volunteered for the service, well, it was even stricter then, I believe, if you wanted to compare it to what it was after the war started. It might have not been, though, but it was pretty tough, my boot camp was.

Marcello: Did you go directly from boot camp to the Hawaiian Islands?

Zett: Yes. I volunteered . . . I could have gone to one of the schools, but I wanted to have sea duty, so I went on a ship named the Bridge. We floated on that to Hawaii, and we got in a storm about three days out. I didn't really get seasick, but I met up with the Utah in Pearl Harbor. It was at Pearl Harbor at that time.

Marcello: In other words, you volunteered for duty in the Hawaiian Islands.

Zett: Well, sort of like, yes.

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

Zett: Well, I thought about it being out of the United States--a foreign duty. And I think they paid a little better if you had foreign duty, so I was after the money, I suppose, to get a little more financial. . . but I just wanted to go to Hawaii; I'd heard so much about it. I really enjoyed it while I was there.

Marcello: Now what sort of a ship was the Utah? Describe it from a physical standpoint. What did it look like?

Zett: It was a battleship; it was a First World War battleship. They had 14-inch guns then, and then one time while we was in the Navy yards, it didn't carry them guns anymore; it had just the turrets. It had . . .it was a school ship and a target ship. The Marines and stuff had a school on it; they fired at sleeves and stuff like that. Airplanes would draw some sleeves, and the Marines would fire at them with anti-aircraft guns. It was more of a school ship. Then later on, we had lumber on it, and we used it as . . . the aircraft carriers would bomb us. We would have to be in general quarters, and they would bomb with these little dummy bombs. . . aluminum bombs. It had a hand grenade charge in it. It'd hit and penetrate into this timber that was your deck, and flames of different colors flew out. And then they would . . . they had personnels on the ship that would study what pilot hit which . . . what part it hit. . . hit the target.

Marcello: What sort of a reception did you get aboard the Utah when you first boarded it? In other words, did the old crew members treat you as a raw boot?

Zett: (Chuckle) It was pretty rough. The old salties were tough, but I got used to it. I obeyed. . . I always tried to obey, so I didn't have very much trouble. As I said, I was used to hard work, so when I would swab decks, I would really put myself into

it. . . ,or painting the decks or scrubbing the decks or scraping the rust off the decks. But I wasn't a seaman on the top deck to start with. But then later on, I volunteered for the engineering force--went into engineering force. I was in the boiler rooms, and it was pretty hot.

Marcello: Describe what the on-the-job training was like down there as a member of the engineering force.

Zett: It was pretty hard. It was awfully hot there for one reason. It was terribly hot in there. But they trained us; showed you how to do it. But I liked it on account of there was on a hot sun on top deck. But they worked us pretty heavy. . . they worked us pretty hard and just kept us busy. They didn't work us heavy, you know, but they wanted to keep us busy continuously. And we had . . . as long as we kept busy, we were doing all right. We wasn't told not to do . . . , we wasn't fussed at as long as we kept busy.

Then a warrant officer asked me would I want to go to diesel school or to go to school to get advanced. I said, "No, I think I'll go the hard way." So I went the hard way and learned my way up the hard way. We had to refurbish the boiler. So we had to carry the bricks from the boiler room in tote sacks up on the top-side deck and maybe carry twenty or thirty feet down from down below the decks, up the steps, up the hatch. And this was pretty hard work, but I didn't mind it because I was used to working hard when I was at home, and hard work didn't hurt me a bit.

Marcello: Now when you say you wanted to "go it the hard way" as opposed to going to school, I assume that you mean that you were more interested in on-the-job training than book learning as such.

Zett: Yes, yes. I was working from the bottom up.

Marcello: Did you find that most of the petty officers and so on aboard the Utah were quite willing to teach you thoroughly?

Zett: Yes, they was willing and cooperating. They showed us and explained things to us, and if you followed them, well, you could fix things up pretty well. And as long as you were willing to obey the orders and were willing to do what you were told to do, they wasn't too strict on you. But, like I say, you had to be alert at all times and be "on the ball" at all the times, because they would . . . if you were slacking out, you'd find out sometimes that it wasn't the proper thing to do.

Marcello: What were your living quarters like aboard the Utah?

Zett: I had a bunk when I was on topside, but in the boiler rooms we set up . . . we had to set up our cots at night for bunks. And we . . . then we had to get our cots out of the den, and we slept in the mess hall on tables raised up above . . . we slept in the mess hall. We had to set up our cots every night and take them down every morning.

Marcello: Now how many decks down was the area where your living quarters were located?

Zett: It was the second deck--from the forecastle to the deck.

Marcello: From the forecastle to the third deck?

Zett: Yes, down. Yes.

Marcello: Why did you decide to get off the deck force and go into the engineering force?

Zett: Well, I had experience with engines and such as that. I worked at a cotton gin before I entered the service when I was seventeen or eighteen years old, and I had that experience with diesels. We'd operate. . . we'd run this gin by a diesel, and I liked machinery so I thought I may be interested in the engineering force.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Utah during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Zett: Well, it was favorable. On the holidays, it was very good. But I didn't regret it because I ate all kinds of food at home. Some would dislike the food, but I ate it even though it wasn't probably the proper taste. But I enjoyed eating the food. It built my body up and kept me going.

Marcello: Did you participate in any of the athletic competition that was so prevalent in the Navy during this period?

Zett: No, we had . . . we just had the manual exercises everyday before breakfast for something like fifteen minutes, I believe. On the Utah we had exercises

Marcello: Let's talk a little about the training routine or the exercises in which the Utah engaged. Now how often would the Utah go out on training exercises?

Zett: Oh, we stayed out a whole week and then probably come in on a weekend.

Marcello: Normally, when would you go out? Like on a Monday?

Zett: Yes. We pull out on a Monday, and we'd probably come in Friday and then we'd have liberty. The starboard side would have liberty that weekend, or probably the portside. So we got to go ashore that weekend.

Marcello: What would you usually do when you were out on maneuvers?

Zett: Oh, we would scout around and . . . the Marines would always have their school there. We would be floating around slowly. We'd be underway, and these Marines would fire these antiaircraft guns at sleeves, and they would take the readings. We had boats to pick up the sleeves, and the markings on them would indicate what projectile hit it. It was marked different colors.

Marcello: And then you mentioned that the Utah was also used as a target ship, was it not?

Zett: Yes, it was. After we put the 5-inch antiaircraft guns in Bremerton, Washington, well, we was back at Pearl Harbor, and we put timber all over the deck of it and covered the guns, and then the aircraft carriers would bomb us.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you had gone back to Bremerton, Washington, to have the 5-inch guns removed or put on?

Zett: Put on before the war.

Marcello: I see. They were put on for the Marines for their target practice.

Zett: Yes. Well, they didn't use that 5-inch. We used it for our own protection.

Marcello: I see.

Zett: Well, we would fire at dummy targets, you know, and we would fire them with our own crew.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that the deck of the Utah was ultimately covered with railroad ties?

Zett: It was timber--maybe 4 x 8 or something like that in thickness, and it was all over the deck and all over the guns and all over the forecastle and all over everywhere--all over the decks. We put them on. I had to help them put them on.

Marcello: I assume this was a task that just about everybody on the ship had to engage in.

Zett: Yes, the whole crew had to take part in it.

Marcello: What sort of a routine would take place when the Utah would be serving as a target ship for these carrier-based airplanes?

Zett: What?

Marcello: In other words, what would your routine be?

Zett: I would have. . . when I was in the boiler rooms, well, I stayed in general quarters. We was down below our decks, about three decks down below, and we just had a. . . when we weren't standing a watch, we had to be undercover.

Marcello: Where was your general quarters located? What was your battle station?

Zett: In the boiler rooms.

Marcello: And you had to go to general quarters when these mock air raids would take place.

Zett: Yes, at that time. But then if we stood our regular watch. . . but then we had to relieve the watch, and then the watch came down below. We could sit around and have a conference with the chief engineer and stuff while this was going on. And we kept busy. It was sort of a confinement under the decks while the bombing was going on.

Marcello: Generally speaking, what was the morale like in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy?

Zett: It was good. It was good. I liked it. All the personnel seemed to incorporate pretty careful and well. They seemed to like one another and got along very well; they took orders fairly well. It was a nice crew, a regular crew, a real good ship.

Marcello: We were talking awhile ago about your training routine. Did this routine change any as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to get worse?

Zett: Yes, well, it changed.

Marcello: In what way?

Zett: I didn't know anything about it. No, I don't think it changed. It was the same routine as what we had before. We didn't know anything about it. We was out on a ship before the Pearl Harbor attack. We noticed. . . we got contact with submarines. We was

underway, and we was serving as a target ship. We was acting as a target ship then. So we had orders to come into Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: This was after the submarines had been spotted?

Zett: Yes. We went in there, and we was in there for that weekend.

Marcello: Now this was the weekend of December 7, 1941?

Zett: Yes.

Marcello: Okay, but actually your routine remained pretty normal right up until the actual attack itself.

Zett: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. It did, yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit about your liberty routine. How did the liberty routine work aboard the Utah during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Zett: Well, they had a port and starboard side. They had two liberty parties. The starboard probably would get first leave--liberty--and then the portside would get leave. When the starboard had liberty, they had to return back to ship at certain hours, and then the portside would take over.

Marcello: In other words, on a weekend one section would have liberty on a Saturday, and the other one would have a liberty on a Sunday?

Zett: Yes, I think they had Saturday and Sunday.

Marcello: I see.

Zett: Yes, Saturday and Sunday.

Marcello: But even if you had liberty--weekend liberty--is it not true that you had to be back aboard the Utah at midnight?

Zett: Yes, as a general rule, midnight.

Marcello: Do you know why they did that?

Zett: I think that they didn't have enough living quarters at Honolulu. They didn't have enough living quarters, and it was so many personnel there at that time. See, like that was Pearl Harbor thirty-five years ago. When I was there before the war, well, the whole ships would be in, and it would be just. . . oh, it'd be lots of personnel. I'd probably go to the YMCA, and it was just full of servicemen. . . Navy fellows. . . sailors. And there would be just every person . . . it was tremendous to see how much of us was there. The whole fleet was in there.

Marcello: I'm sure that on weekends downtown Honolulu must have been wall-to-wall bodies.

Zett: Oh, my! That was just nothing but white uniforms. And it was . . . well, we had something to do, but I would go down there to the YMCA and . . . or either scouting around. We took a tour around the island.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what you normally did when you went on liberty after having been out at sea for a week.

Zett: Yes, I generally went to the YMCA, and then we took a tour around the island on a cab. You couldn't go as far as you can go nowadays, but we went part of the way. The road wasn't built up as well as they are now at the present time.

Marcello: Let me ask you this question, and it's a rather important one.

I want you to think about it very carefully before you answer it.

Many people say that if the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor, the best time for them to have done so would have been on a Sunday morning. And what these people imply is that Saturday nights were nights of a great deal of drinking and partying and carousing and things of this nature, and subsequently the military would be in no shape to fight on a Sunday morning. How would you reply to that sort of thinking?

Zett: Well, I think that's true, too. There's a lot of people, you know. . . I wasn't drinking too much when I went ashore. . . but I liked to drink. I took me a drink with my buddies, and I enjoyed it very much. But I was on the saving side. I didn't waste my money. But I have to take this back. I believe some personnel stayed overnight at that Pearl Harbor time.

Marcello: I think what happened was that if you had an address or if you had a place to stay you could stay over.

Zett: Yes, yes. I would have stayed. Yes, you could because we had taken over. . . then after the war, well, we had taken over the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. The Navy had taken that, and I spent a night or two in there. But I think they could stay overnight.

Marcello: This is especially true, I think, of married personnel.

Zett: Yes, personnel that had a place to stay.

Marcello: Okay, now as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate during that period prior to December 7th, and as war between the two countries was a possibility, how safe

and secure did you feel there on the Hawaiian Islands?

Zett: Oh, I felt secure. I just figure we didn't know anything about it; we just didn't know if we had trouble with Japan. We personally wasn't notified. I didn't know . . . when the bombers hit Pearl Harbor, I was down below the decks. We was taking a reading of the boiler rooms this Sunday morning. Well, I thought the high pressure steam line broke, but it was a torpedo.

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

Zett: Well, I thought they was nice people. I didn't have any . . . they wasn't considered my enemy as far as I knew what they was, at that time I was in the service. But I kind of think that was probably was more of an uneducated point of view as far as I was concerned. I guess they didn't agree with us too well. I think that was a dirty trick what they pulled on us.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us up to those days immediately prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor. What I want you to do at this point, Mr. Zett, is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what the routine was for the Utah on that weekend of December 7, 1941. Let's start with the period when the Utah came in and docked. You mentioned that submarines had been detected during that last time you were at sea. Why don't you pick up the story from that point.

Zett: Well, that's what I heard after I got back--that we had submarines and we had orders to come in. We had this net that we went

went through. Finally, on a Sunday morning we found out that submarines--suicide subs--came in right in back of this . . . they figured that they was right in back of this screw of the ship. Before we closed that net, well, they was inside; I think they got a couple of them in the harbor.

Marcello: When did you come in? What day did you come in?

Zett: Oh, we came in on a Friday, I think it was. . . Thursday or Friday.

Marcello: And then what did you do at that point?

Zett: I had a duty on board the ship. I wasn't on liberty.

Marcello: In other words, you were aboard the whole weekend?

Zett: Yes, I was.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday? Do you remember?

Zett: Or did I go ashore? No, I don't think I did; I stayed aboard. No, I believe I did go ashore on Saturday if I remember correctly. But I had a watch on a Sunday morning.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday when you went ashore? Do you remember?

Zett: I don't remember too much, but it was something going on. Some of the personnel were saying. . . they was talking about Japs, saying they was going to have an attack. We had some kind of drinking parlor. . . and some personnel mentioned something about Japs. But I forgot about that; I thought it was just a matter of a conversation; I didn't think it was realistic, but it's true. But they said something about Japs--when they attacked or something--but it just passed my mind. I didn't even want to believe that was true.

Marcello: In other words, this was just more or less rumor or speculation on the part of these people?

Zett: Yes. Yes, I think so. But I don't think they had any sides. It was a fellow that was on the beach there. He mentioned that. He told us--the sailors. He was a civilian, I think, and he said that. But it was mostly rumors, I imagine. It never did hit me solid that it could be possible. As far as that, on December 7th. . .

Marcello: Well, what time did you get in that night of Saturday, December 6th?

Zett: Oh, I was back that night maybe at eight, nine, ten o'clock.

Marcello: Did you notice any more drunks than usual or any less drunks than usual coming back aboard the Utah?

Zett: Not too much . . . just the usual. But I believe the biggest part of them stayed on the beach that day. But it was a few that was "feeling good." I think I had. . . well, of course, I was on a gig, though, but I heard about that. I was on the captain's gig. But that was on . . . no, that wasn't that time; that was sometime before that. They were saying that . . . this officer said that . . . something was mentioned about that our country might get it. We overheard something; we was being on the captain's gig. But this was sometime before the attack. But when I was back . . . I imagine they sobered up by morning, though, from the first time they came by.

Marcello: Where was the Utah tied up at this time?

Zett: It was on the north side of Ford Island.

Marcello: The north side of Ford Island?

Zett: Yes.

Marcello: Now is it not true that you were in a place where normally one of the aircraft carriers would tie up?

Zett: I don't really . . . I imagine so. We was tying up in that lower area near the entrance. The battleships went farther in the harbor. That was where we tied up--a little before we got into the main part of the harbor.

Marcello: Now did you tie up where you normally or usually tied up? Or were you at a different location?

Zett: No, I believe it was in a different location. We was a little closer than always before that.

Marcello: And is it not true that from the air the Utah looked like an aircraft carrier?

Zett: Yes, that's what they mistook us for . . . with all that lumber on it.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that Sunday of December 7, 1941. Once more, what I want you to do is to go into as much detail as you can remember concerning the events of that day. Let's start with the time that you got up in the morning.

Zett: Well, we got up in the morning as usual and put our bunks up, and then we had our breakfast.

Marcello: Now did you have the duty? No, you had liberty.

Zett: No, I came back. I had had liberty. I was back and they assigned me up with Perifoy. He was a fireman, and Perifoy was above me, I remember that. He was in charge. They told us, "Zett and Perifoy, relieve the watch down below." I didn't think it was my duty, but I went down there and we stood a watch. We'd take the readings in the boiler rooms--all the meters--fifteen minutes to the hour. So I was taking the readings off the pressure meters and the machinery. . . steam gauges. . . boiler rooms.

While I was taking that, why, the first torpedo hit. It shook us and rolled us down, and I thought a superheated steam line broke. And another one . . . I heard a plane, and the intakes . . . I heard a plane. We was on auxiliary watch. Then the second one came by . . . another hit. So I knew there was something else. It shook the ship. . . sort of stunned it. Then there was a third one.

Marcello: Now by this time had general quarters sounded or anything?

Zett: No, I didn't hear it at the place there. And Perifoy. . . I mean, it might have rung, but I was busy on that . . . that power in the boiler room kind of gushed out, so I cut down on the fuel pump that was pumping the fuel to the boiler. I heard somebody holler, "Abandon ship!" and that ship was rocking, and I knew it was something else. And Perifoy left. He must have hollered at me to abandon ship. At that present time, I was stunned; I didn't realize it. I called the engine room--we had voice tubes--and I

called the engine room, and they said, "Yes, it's all hands abandon ship immediately!"

Marcello: And you had to go up three decks to abandon ship?

Zett: Yes. And I had to go up through the upper levels, and I had to crawl; it was leaning over and rocking. I had a hard time getting up in the hatch. I went in the boiler room and into the machine shop and up on the forecastle.

Marcello: In the meantime, has the Utah caught fire or anything like that?

Zett: No. No, I didn't see no fire on it.

Marcello: It had just been hit by these torpedoes.

Zett: Yes.

Marcello: Now how many torpedo hits did you feel?

Zett: I heard . . . to the best knowledge I have, I thought I heard three explosions.

Marcello: So what did you do at that point after you had climbed up on the forecastle?

Zett: I went in through the boiler . . . when I got out of the boiler room, I went to the machine shop. It was so rough, and the port-side was . . . fuel was in the living quarters and water was gushing in there, and it was rocking, and I had a hard time getting through the lathes.

Marcello: You said you had a hard time getting through the lathes?

Zett: I made my way through the lathes, you know, in the machine shop. The lathes was all laid out in there. I made it up to under the forecastle, and before we got in the forecastle, they held us all

back, and we didn't understand what it was all about. Then we went in the forecastle, and I think they hollered, "That chief engineer's got a pistol on us and is holding us back!" We couldn't understand why, but then they came back and machine-gunned us. When they machine-gunned us, well, he turned us loose. I didn't see that, but I could see the deck. I took my shoes off to slide off the ship. We slid off.

Marcello: You slid off because the ship was listing to port?

Zett: Yes, she was listing. There was several bodies ahead. . . I didn't dive in; I just slipped in.

Marcello: About how far were you from the surface of the water? How far did you have to slip in?

Zett: Oh, it was about . . . oh, I would judge maybe about eighteen of something feet.

Marcello: In the meantime, is the water full of oil and things of this nature?

Zett: It was right on that side. It was not on the starboard side, but it was on the portside.

Marcello: Which side did you slip off?

Zett: On the starboard side.

Marcello: You slipped off the starboard side.

Zett: Starboard side, yes.

Marcello: Okay, so when you got into the water, what happened at that point?

Zett: I had a hard time getting up to the surface to get my air because I went down so deep. Then I started swimming; the water was too

deep. Then the boats. . . they launched. . . it was a whale boat that came by and wanted to pick us up. I told them, "No, I'm doing all right." Then we swam. . . I don't know how far it was, and then we waded the rest of the way.

Marcello: In the meantime, are you coming under any strafing or machine gunning or anything of that nature?

Zett: Yes. Yes, yes, they were strafing us. But there was more after of the ship. Then we went in there. . . they had dug a water line . . . a trench dug down. . .

Marcello: Now were you swimming over to Ford Island?

Zett: Yes, Ford Island--the north side.

Marcello: North side of Ford Island?

Zett: Yes. And we got out there, and when we got on a beach, well, they had us to get in that trench. We swooped in there, and then I got the shivers. You know, I was cold and got the shivers from all the excitement. You could see them planes coming over, and they strafed us, but we was squatted down in there. There was a plane that came over. . . well, I could see those. . . when they was coming in, I could see them; I knew that they was Japs with them orange things under wings.

Marcello: How low were the planes coming in?

Zett: Oh, they was mighty low when they come on a dive.

Marcello: Were you able to see the pilots?

Zett: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what they looked like.

Zett: Well, with those helmets they looked like a danged gorilla to me (laughter). You could tell they was different personnel than the American personnel were.

Marcello: How long did you stay in that trench altogether?

Zett: Oh, we stayed there until after the attack. I seen the Arizona being bombed and smoke come up. We stayed there to about noon, I imagine. . . about noon.

Marcello: Describe the explosions aboard the Arizona, since you mentioned that you saw what took place there.

Zett: A big gush of smoke came up, and it busted up and . . . a big explosion. . . terrible explosion. I could feel it in the trench there from the concussion. There was a lot of smoke coming up, and the fuel was burning.

Marcello: Let me ask you this, and you would probably have to estimate this. When did you actually abandon the Utah? Do you remember? What time?

Zett: What time? I was taking the readings. I guess we were ready about fifteen minutes until . . . it was about ten minutes until eight, I thought, or maybe later when I was taking the readings. Then it didn't take me too long to get out. See, the ship itself, I think, sunk in about three or five minutes before they had much time to get out. I guess it was before eight o'clock sometime. . . about seven or eight minutes before eight o'clock.

Marcello: Now when people were abandoning the Utah, was everybody acting in a rather professional manner, or was there a great deal of panic and confusion?

Zett: Well, we was unsettled when we was held back because the bulkheads was rocking, so we couldn't hold our footage. We was falling over. They obeyed orders pretty well, and we obeyed what they told us to do, and we got out. But the first . . . I don't know how this was . . . they was crawling on top of the mooring lines. They was walking the mooring lines aft of the ship. I believe a mooring line broke, and they was machine gunned--some of them on the aft deck.

Marcello: Now when you abandoned ship, was there any danger of being hit by any flying timber and so on as it slid off the deck?

Zett: A friend of mine got hit. He was lowering a boat down or something, and he didn't make it.

Marcello: Now the timber would have been going off the other side.

Zett: It went off the opposite side from where I went off.

Marcello: I would assume that you more or less just kind of walked across the bottom of the deck until you jumped into the water as it listed over?

Zett: Well, it was pretty high on the front of the deck to where the water broke alongside of the ship, and I just went in and I slipped on barnacles. I slipped on one of the barnacles alongside the ship, and then it slung me off into the water.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned that you were in that trench there on Ford Island until about noon. What did you do at that point?

Zett: We was shaking. It was cold. Our pharmacist's mate brought us some alcohol to drink to settle us down. He told me, "Your two cousins are safe. Your two cousins are safe. They're out." But I didn't take a drink of the alcohol. I was shocked. And after I relaxed, I done worse than when I was in action.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that this corpsman came up and said that your two cousins were safe. Where were your two cousins?

Zett: They was in the back. One of them was a carpenter's mate, and one of them was a gunner, I believe.

Marcello: Aboard the Utah?

Zett: Yes, they was aboard the Utah.

Marcello: Now was medic also from the Utah?

Zett: Yes.

Marcello: And that's how he knew you?

Zett: Yes, he knew me, yes.

Marcello: So you mentioned that you're hovering in this trench, and you're cold and the corpsman comes out and offers some alcohol. Was this just plain . . . what sort of alcohol was it that he brought?

Zett: I didn't smell it, but he was a pharmacist's mate. He said the doctors or something gave him some to pass around for the personnel that was very shook up. He asked if I wanted some, and I said, "No," and I told him I could do without it. I don't know what

it. . . I didn't smell it. It looked white to me. It didn't look like whiskey. It looked like alcohol--pharmacist's, you know, doctor's prescription.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened at that point, then, after the corpsmen had come by?

Zett: Well, we stood there, and we just waited and waited until the planes went away, and then we had orders to get out--all clear. Then we went into a receiving building there. And then we laid in there and covered up, and we got clothing. We had to take our shirt off and put on an undershirt.

And then the plane came over again--another one. It was real late. But we stayed in there for a certain length of time. There must have been some lady nurses issuing those out for us.

Marcello: Were you covered with oil or anything of that nature?

Zett: Not then. At that time, I wasn't.

Marcello: How long did you stay there in this receiving building?

Zett: Not too long. Then we went to the other building. We marched on to . . . after it cleared up in the afternoon, we went to some other receiving station.

Marcello: Still on Ford Island?

Zett: Yes, still Ford Island. And then we received sandwiches and some clothing. . . and some trousers. They didn't have them. . . I had one that was so big. . . I had a size eight inches too big, but I was ready to get dry clothes on.

Marcello: What sort of an appetite did you have?

Zett: Oh, we ate pretty well. The sandwiches tasted pretty good. We ate pretty good. We didn't get too much of it, but what we had was very good.

Marcello: What sort of rumors did you hear that night?

Zett: Oh, my! Then we stayed in them barracks over there--the old barracks. . . Hickam Barracks, I guess, that wasn't filled up yet. We spent the night there, and then we was called off . . . we was sitting around. . . they had machine guns set up and were setting machine guns all the way around that night. But I went up on that . . . then that night I was on the Argonne. It was a receiving ship. And we was firing that night from the big planes.

Marcello: Oh, you were on the Argonne.

Zett: The Argonne. And we . . . there was . . . they couldn't issue us any clothing because they didn't have them. So then they started shooting at night, and a .50-caliber. . . we had separate . . . a shot came through the hull of the ship and killed the personnel . . . Utah personnel at the mess hall. And I had the shivers there. I don't know, it shook me. I got shivers. But I helped haul ammunition.

Marcello: Did you witness that firing that took place that night when those American planes off the Enterprise came in? Is this the firing that you were referring to?

Zett: I don't know. The Enterprise . . . they was firing at some planes that night, and I don't know whether it was our planes or whether

they was theirs. We considered . . . we figured they was enemy planes. I'm not sure. I couldn't quite get in on the whole story of it.

Marcello: Well, were you on one of the guns or anything that night?

Zett: No, I was passing ammunition. And then I passed out. I got the shivers, and I had to lay down and shriveled up because my nerves had got me so bad.

Marcello: Now I would assume that the next day you had a chance to get a pretty good look at the damage that was done there at Pearl Harbor. What did you see?

Zett: Oh, well, the fire. . . the next day, well, it was so much fire. The harbor was full of fire, blaze, and oil was burning, and we had them foam guns in fire boats to keep the flames away--the oil away--from the ships that was half sunk like the Oklahoma that was all sunk down. I was on that party there. And I went over there, but it didn't last too long. Then after that, well, I was on a burial party for two or three days. We buried our personnel. I was on the receiving end at the cemetery.

Marcello: Did they bury the personnel in mass graves?

Zett: Yes. We had bulldozers, and we built trenches--big, long trenches. We had big trucks loaded down with pine boxes. The blood would seep out of the wood. We'd place them alongside of each other, and then we would put a marking number on there. It was hard to identify some of the personnel off the Arizona, I imagine. The

doctors would try to figure out what teeth. . . study their teeth and so forth and then put the numbers on the markers. We would place these alongside each other and have them covered up for sanitation.

Marcello: What sort of emotions and feelings did you have when you saw the damage that had been done there at Pearl Harbor?

Zett: I thought I was gone. I thought I was drained out, like. It was sort of like I was drained. I couldn't hardly believe it, but we had courage. You have to keep going. We had courage.

Marcello: How did your feelings toward the Japanese change?

Zett: Well, it was so fast and sudden that I didn't much . . . I didn't like the idea very much. I didn't think they was human. Bombing was . . . a human had done it. Even if people had done it, it was so destructive. But we kept so busy that we forgot about it. We was ready to go capture them. I volunteered on the Fletcher. Then after that, I went on a ship--the Fletcher, a destroyer. I was on it.

Marcello: The Fletcher?

Zett: Fletcher, yes. It was the 360--a three-stacker--and I stayed right through on it. I did service on that. Then it so happened to be in a collision. It was put out of commission. It was involved in a collision, and the boiler rooms flooded, and the living compartment. I was laying down there in the bunk, and it knocked me off. We was at Pearl Harbor then, and we came in just

that night. Then we had a couple of months or three months, and we went back to the South Pacific.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Zett, is there anything else concerning the Pearl Harbor attack that we need to get as part of the record? I have plenty of tape, and if there's anything else that you can think of, why, feel free to talk about it.

Zett: Well, the Arizona and Nevada. . . I seen the Nevada when it was bombed and it was in the harbor, in the channel. The Nevada got bombed, and then the quartermaster managed to back it up against the beach to keep her from blocking off the channel. Then the officer would holler, "Man, we're going to have to save some of that meat! She's full of meat!" And they said, "We ain't got time to store that old storage meat!" The officers were all excited, and they were as shook up as the enlisted personnel were. But that was all a matter of surprise.

Marcello: Is there any other reactions you were able to observe while you were in that trench there at Ford Island? You mentioned the Arizona, and you mentioned the Nevada.

Zett: Well, I noticed when the destroyer ran into the submarine-- suicide sub. It was in the harbor there, and they rammed it. I noticed that some of the planes were going over. I could observe of the planes that went over the harbor from Ford Island towards the north, and it was shot, and he just . . . you could see how he was burning--that enemy plane.

Marcello: I understand that a lot of the personnel cheered when the Nevada was finally beached. Do you remember that?

Zett: Yes, yes. They hollered at it. That would have been a tremendous loss to us if we had the channel closed up. That would have been something.

Marcello: Now you mentioned awhile ago that certain officers were worried about the fresh meat that was stored aboard the Nevada.

Zett: The Nevada had a lot of meat. . . just loaded up with meat. I don't know what they were referring to. That's what one of them said.

Marcello: Now was this an officer that was aboard the Nevada?

Zett: I think he was on beach then. I don't think he was . . . he was on the beach.

Marcello: Was he there at Ford Island where you were?

Zett: Yes, on Ford Island.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Zett, I want to thank you very much for having taken time to talk with me. You've said a lot of very interesting and, I think, important things. Scholars are going to find this material very valuable when they use it to write about Pearl Harbor.

Zett: Well, thank you. I enjoyed having that little conference with you. Thank you.