Interview with
Joseph L. George
August 5, 1978

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Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello
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This is Ron Marcello interviewing Joseph George for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 5, 1978, in Little Rock, Arkansas. I'm interviewing Mr. George in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the repair ship USS Vestal during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. George, to begin this interview, just 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 very brief and general.

I was born in 1915 in Franklin, Georgia. I lived on a farm during those years until 1935, when I joined the Navy.

Why did you decide to join the Navy in 1935?

Well, it was kind of a grudge between my brother and I. My brother tried to get in in 1934, and he was disqualified; so to show him that I could make out, I just enlisted in the
Marcello: Navy and passed the physical and the mental test. I was accepted, and therefore it was my primary reason.

George: Why did you join the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Marcello: Well, at that time it was the leading service, I thought. You had to have a high school education. I preferred the sea duty in which you would travel a lot. Various other things that I thought I would like about it was that they had more opportunity as far as trades are concerned.

George: What part did economics play in your decision to enter the service? After all, that was in the middle of the Depression.

Marcello: That was a good question, because at that time the Navy—the Naval service—paid more for rank and rate than any other service. Your E-1 and E-2 and E-3 and E-4 and so on and so forth and drew more pay at that time... but it was apprentice seaman and seaman second... fireman first class and so on down or up, I should say. They drew more money than the Marine Corps or the Army. We didn't have an Air Force at that time.

Marcello: The service, I would assume, offered a certain amount of security, too. You had three square meals a day and a roof over your head and a clean bed to sleep in.

George: Yes, that's right, too, and liberty whenever you got a chance. Whenever you did hit the beach in those days, it was very seldom that you got liberty because we didn't have enough money
George

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

George: Norfolk, Virginia. It had just went back into commission about that time. Hampton Roads, I think they called it then.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time? Do you remember?

George: Let's see. Nine weeks, I believe--nine weeks.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need as part of the record, or was it simply the normal Navy boot camp?

George: Well, for myself, I got away with the rough part of the boot camp training because I was assigned to the "Lucky Bag" at the time.

Marcello: Now, what is the "Lucky Bag?"

George: That's where your clothes are confiscated and put in if you don't take care of them and stow them in your locker . . . or at that time, it was a sea bag. We didn't have no lockers in training station--just hammocks and sea bags.

Marcello: How did you get assigned to the "Lucky Bag?"

George: Well, I don't know. We just had a boatswain's mate second class, and he just liked me because I was a big guy and a farmer, I guess. He had his choice of going through the platoon and picking whoever he wanted, and I had no dealings with him otherwise. He just liked my looks because I was a big, overgrown kid, I guess.
Marcello: What advantage was there in being assigned to the "Lucky Bag."

George: Well, I learned more about leadership and discipline, although I missed out on some points that I should have gotten, like sailing and ... mess cooking, I did get away with that, which I was glad. You had regimental guard that I missed out on. Sailing and rowing, which I should have gotten, would have been helpful.

Marcello: What does one do when one is assigned to the "Lucky Bag?"

George: Well, you take care of the clothes that are brought to you by various masters-at-arms from the various barracks. You would take them and log them in your log book and put them back in the back. Whenever a man comes in and reclaims them, then he was given extra duty. That extra duty is considered working after 4:30 or whenever knock-off time is.

Marcello: Where did you go from Norfolk?

George: From Norfolk, I sailed on the USS Chaumont to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, through the Panama Canal, and up to San Diego, California. They dropped off some passengers--boots, I should say--and then I went on to San Pedro. I was dropped off there where the Vestal was tied up--where she was moored. She swung around a buoy there, and she was considered base force.

Marcello: She was considered base force?

George: Yes. That's where the ships that didn't participate in
maneuvers weekly or monthly at that time. As I said before, they didn't have enough fuel appropriated to even get ships on under way in them days.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going aboard a repair ship such as the Vestal? After all, you were fairly young, and I'm sure that such a ship would not necessarily be one of the glamorous ones, so to speak.

George: Well, at that time, I had no glamorous ideas about any Navy. I knew there were battleships; I knew there was "tin cans." But I was one of those kids that just lets nature take its course. If I had got assigned to a submarine or a battleship . . . if you wanted to be a sub sailor, you had to have extra qualifications for that. Of course, if I would have got assigned to "tin cans," or something like that, well, there would have been no difference.

Marcello: I would assume that being assigned to a ship such as the Vestal would have opened up the doors toward learning a trade or something of that nature.

George: Well, it did. They had welders, metalsmiths, coppersmiths, shipfitters, watertenders--that was the black gang--carpenters, patternmakers, watchmakers, opticalmen. They had many trades, but you usually had to have a certain IQ, and my IQ was not up to par. But yet in them days, you could go . . . they would assign you to the deck force if you didn't come out of a school.
In them days, if you didn't . . . although after you were assigned to the deck force, you could submit your request for a certain trade, and you had to be accepted by the leading petty officer and the division officer of that division. Therefore, I wasn't accepted . . . for some reason I didn't make out too well when I first went in the Navy. I was court-martialed quite a bit.

Marcello: What were you court-martialed for (chuckle)?

George: Well, various things—fighting. My problem was fighting. I entered the boxing team—I went out for boxing—and I got to where I thought I was tough, and I guess I was pretty tough. I was selected two or three times for All-Navy and also International Golden Gloves Champion. I have a nice scrapbook at home.

Marcello: Now, did all this take place after you went aboard the Vestal?

George: Yes, it did. I went aboard the Vestal, and when the boxing coach seen me . . . as I said I was a big farm boy—overgrown kid—and he looked at me, I guess, and he asked me to come out for boxing. I did and I did pretty good.

Marcello: So when you first went aboard the Vestal, you were assigned to the deck force.

George: That's correct.

Marcello: Those repair ships are interesting vessels. Like you mentioned awhile ago, there's virtually every sort of occupation aboard
George: Yes, there is. Also, you could learn a lot. If you can't make out in the other departments, you have to accept the deck force. I retired as a chief after twenty years in the Navy. I stuck it out for twenty years and made chief--E-7. Now, they're E-8's or E-9's. I retired in 1955. In them days, we didn't have the E-8's and E-9's. I did pretty good and retired at E-7. My pay wasn't too good, but I went on and did fifteen years in the civil service and got a pretty good deal in retirement.

Marcello: Now, when did the Vestal move to the Hawaiian Islands on a more or less permanent basis? Do you recall?

George: Yes, I recall. It was Fleet Problem 22, I believe. They used to call them fleet problems. Each year ships would get under way and cruise to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or Pearl Harbor. They would alternate every other year, I think, and sometimes they would go to the East Coast. Some of the ships would head for the East Coast, and that takes us to 1940. We went to Pearl, and they called it Fleet Problem 22, I believe, to the best of my knowledge--which it never ended, as far as I am concerned. That day at Pearl Harbor was a sad day. To me, as I see it, Fleet Problem 22 continued on and never ended.

Marcello: So when the Vestal got out to Pearl Harbor in 1940, it stayed there. Again, it did not go out on the daily exercises and
George: No, she more or less stayed tied up to Battleship Row or anchored out—they had buoys there at Pearl—to service ships. She was a cruiser division repair ship, and also she took care of the battleships. The Medusa was a battleship repair ship, but sometimes she was overloaded with work; and if we had less work to do than she, we would accept battleships or cruisers. The Medusa did likewise for us.

Marcello: But normally you handled cruisers?

George: Right, right.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Vestal?

George: Well, being a farmer when you used to have ... let's see ... gravy in the morning at my house. Maybe on Sunday morning we would have chicken as a meal, and that was considered a delicacy. My mother usually had to sell the chickens for staples such as salt and so forth like that to buy.

I considered the Navy food very good, but you would hear people griping about it. You'd go along with them and say that that food was lousy (chuckle).

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

George: Very bad. In fact, when I went aboard, I had a cot and I had to sleep in the mess deck. After the mess cooks got secured, then I think the hammocks went down. They had the hammocks. Normally, in the Navy, they would have hammocks on battleships.
Marcello: George:

George: and most of the cruisers in them days. We put our cots down there—when we hit the sack—until reveille the next morning. It was pretty rugged. When we'd go into the Navy yard at Mare Island, they'd tear the wooden decks out... at Mare Island, it rained a lot, and we got rained on. We just had to move place to place and try to find where it wasn't leaking or get you a piece of canvas and lay over you. So it wasn't really comfortable living as far as being a seaman. But after that I got made boatswain's mate and got a little seniority; I got better treatment, and I made it better for myself.

Where did you store your clothing and so on and so forth while you were sleeping there in the mess deck?

George: Well, we had a locker down on the second deck, and your hammock netting is where we stowed our bedding in the morning at reveille. At seven o'clock, I think, those hammocks were stowed. We took up our cots or bedding. The hammock netting was in the superstructure deck outside the captain's cabin... and also the galley and the bake shop.

In general, how would you describe the morale aboard the Vestal in that period before the war started?

George: Well, I'll tell you. Like myself, I just made second class, and it was pretty rough because you couldn't get any decent liberty out in Pearl. You would leave the ship and get on the beach there... when we first got out there in 1940, you'd have
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and the same way in wrestling. The base had a champion baseball team which I didn't participate in because I didn't play too well. We also had a whaleboat crew which won the Battenberg Cup. The Battenberg Cup was kept by the winner of the races, which were participated in by maybe all the ships—battleships, cruisers, and everybody. The Battenberg Cup was given... I think England started that way back years and years ago. Why they called it the Battenberg Cup, I don't know. But we did have that and a good basketball team. Other ships that had been assigned there also had good athletic programs.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned awhile ago that you were on the boxing team aboard the Vestal. At what particular weight were you fighting?

George: Heavyweight. I weighed 189 pounds when I went in the Navy, and I had to lose a lot of weight to get down to that weight when I first went into the recruiting office. I swam a lot and exercised a lot, and I still had a job back in the cotton mills in Georgia. In that six-month period when I was waiting, the recruiter had told me, "George, you had better lose weight or else we will have to reject you." I went back and did all this exercise on my own and still had an eight-hour job... or ten hours, I think it was, in them days.

Marcello: What sort of wages were you making in the cotton mills, just out of curiosity?
George: I think it was a dollar a day or thirty-one dollars a month, and that was pretty darn good wages, we thought—pretty good.

Marcello: What special privileges did you get as a fighter?

George: Well, in some ships . . . now, we did have special messes just before the fight, but we didn't have a training mess like a lot of the ships did.

Marcello: Did they give you special time off in order to train and so on?

George: Oh, yes. We got the afternoons to train, and this irritated our leading petty officer there. If you was an athlete, they missed you at your working detail, see, so you couldn't get too good of a treatment from them. But from the standpoint of duty, I thought I had a few special privileges, but when I got back to my duty, the petty officer would kind of work me over.

Marcello: Now, I do know that in the case of the Army, athletes received special treatment in terms of promotion. Did that help you any aboard the Vestal?

George: Never, ever! I don't believe in my time, when I was in training and boxing and going out for sports, that anybody in the Navy got any promotions for that reason. They got them because they earned them, and that was it.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the . . . well, let me ask you this question. I do know that the so-called smokers or boxing events were always well-attended in the service. Was that true aboard
George: Well, we had them inter-competition with the cruiser division. We were in a cruiser division, so, yes, they were well-attended, and a lot of betting was going on. It was the same with your... well, there was a lot of betting. Our boatswain, he drew more money than the "old man," but they didn't pay him that. They held it on the books because nobody on the ship could draw more than the "old man." But he would put twenty dollars in them days on the whaleboat crew or me in particular, which I done pretty good. I fought a lot of amateurs on the beach, too. They also showed up at those bouts and cheered for me.

Marcello: I understand officers as well as enlisted men attended these smokers?

George: That's correct. They did, because each officer... well, like myself, the division officer attended, and so did his close associates, too.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that you fought some amateur bouts ashore. I assume this was to make extra money.

George: Well, it could pay extra money. They gave you a prize and then bought it back from you. I guess you're familiar with that?

Marcello: Well, I've heard of the system. What sort of a prize would you normally get?

George: A watch or a ring. They would give you five dollars and buy it back from you, because you couldn't accept money. In the
Navy, amateurs couldn't accept money so they would give you a watch, and they would buy it back from you. The next fight on the program, they would give you the same watch probably and buy it back. They used to fight two or three times a week in various clubs. It wasn't for the money; it was just for kicks.

Marcello: You were talking briefly about the liberty routine awhile ago, so let's go back and talk about it a little more. How did the liberty routine work aboard the Vestal at that time? In other words, when would you get a liberty?

George: We had a port and starboard, see, which meant every other night and every other weekend. You had a "Rope Yarn Sunday," which a lot of people don't know what that means. To a lot of these sailors nowadays, if you mention "Rope Yarn Sunday," they don't know what you're talking about. That was Wednesday afternoon. On Wednesday at noon, you went ashore. But that was set aside actually in the Navy many years ago to ready your seabag and get them shipshape for inspections. But then they used it as a liberty . . . well, they designated it such as that when I was in. But if you didn't pass your sea bag inspection the next time you had a sea bag inspection, that "Rope Yarn Sunday," as they called it, would be taken away from you.

Marcello: And this is called "Rope Yarn Sunday?"

George: Yes, sir. Then some of the people had three-out-of-four liberty.
That was watchstanders and special ones such as that.

Marcello: Did you ever pull mess cooking when you were aboard the Vestal?

George: Yes, I did. I had my tour of mess cooking. I was in the scullery, in fact. The scullery was the hottest place on the ship, I guess. They had the steam water running, and I had these trays running through steaming them and rinsing them. That was the hottest place on the ship.

Marcello: I assume, then, that the food aboard the Vestal was served family-style.

George: Well, it was . . . let's see. They changed over to a cafeteria there after I was aboard three or four years. But I still mess-cooked . . . I got two tours of that. Sometimes you had two tours unless you had enough recruits; sometimes you would get your ship's complement, and if you didn't have some recruits coming out of the training station, you might get it the second time around on that, which I did.

Marcello: Did you like mess cooking?

George: Well, in them days they paid you $5.00 extra a month; had the old-style which they called family-style--the old-style mess cooking. You had your little soup bowl that you would put in the center, and they would tip you. Also, you got that $5.00 extra each month. If the mess cooks could get the food from the cooks, you made out good there.

Marcello: What did you normally do when you went on liberty?
George: Well, I'll tell you, I don't think I could speak out on this since it is to be recorded. Well, I hit the bars mostly. For some reason, that was mostly what we did. Sailors in them days had no people that they knew, and I guess if you were an up-and-coming sailor, you could have found more entertainment than I did. But I preferred bars, and that was my liberty routine.

Marcello: Is this where you got into trouble?

George: Well, some of it, yes. Most of it was on the beach.

Marcello: I guess if you go out looking for trouble, you can find it pretty easily in a place like Honolulu, especially if you're down on Hotel Street or Canal Street or one of those places.

George: Honolulu or San Pedro. See, back in the thirties ... I went in the Navy in 1935. Our home port was then San Pedro, California, and our liberty was mostly overnight, which would start at 4:30 until 7:30 the next morning. I made San Pedro my liberty town, and on weekends I went to Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Marcello: Now, is this where you got into most of your trouble, that is, here in San Pedro and Los Angeles?

George: That is correct—in the barroom brawls and just almost anywhere.

Marcello: Did you spend a great deal of time on Hotel and Canal and Beretania Streets when you were over in Honolulu?

George: Well, in them days I didn't prefer and I didn't have a desire to go ashore. Like I said awhile ago, you stood in line for
taxis or buses, or even sometimes to even get ashore; it took forty minutes or maybe fifty or maybe an hour sometimes. When you got ashore, the same thing would happen. When you got downtown and got ready to come back to the ship, the same thing would happen—you would have to wait forty or fifty minutes to an hour to catch a bus or a cab back, and that wasn't very desirable.

Marcello: I guess as we get closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as the build-up of personnel accelerated there in Honolulu, downtown had lines for everything, did it not?

George: Yes, it did.

Marcello: Whether we're talking about the bars or the whorehouses or whatever it might be.

George: To even get into a bar . . . you couldn't even get in a bar. The whorehouses was a line-up, too. Everything was a line, and, me, I never did like to line up. Now, I cannot line up. I go to Disneyland . . . my wife and I go to Disneyland with the kids, and when I see a line, what do I do? I say, "I'll see you in the car." The same way with the World's Fair in New York City in 1965. We went to that, and I seen them lines. "Out!" I don't go in any lines.

Marcello: Now, on a Saturday night in Honolulu, was there a great deal of drinking and carousing around?

George: Well, that's about all a sailor had to do over there.
Marcello: In other words, were there a lot of drunks that would come back aboard the Vestal on a Saturday night?

George: Oh, you're darn right! Saturday nights, yes. On a Saturday night, the only people that got overnight liberty or weekend liberty was the married men. That's all you had to do, was to go down and get yourself "soused." In fact, liberty was up at one o'clock or twelve o'clock at night. A lot of people had to be "poured aboard" when they got back to the ship.

Marcello: Were you in that category from time to time?

George: Oh, sometimes, yes. I have to admit I was.

Marcello: What sort of shape would you be in the next morning to fight, let us say?

George: Well, I'll tell you, in them days I could go ashore and come back and fight in a bout the next day even with a hangover. I guess it was because I was a kid. I couldn't now. I just had different physical abilities then—myself.

Marcello: Now, did your routine or training change any as one gets closer and closer to December 7th and as relations between the United States and Japan continued to get worse? Were you able to detect any changes at all in the routine of the Vestal?

George: Well, I'll tell you, I always had a habit of reading the papers even before I went into the Navy, and even now. But in them days I went and bought . . . they had two papers—one in the morning and one a little later—and I used to read a lot about these
dealings that they had going on in Washington with our politicians and all the ultimatums and so forth they were giving each other. It wasn't no surprise to me—when you asked if there was any change, I think.

Yes.

Yes, there was changes. But actually, we wasn't alerted... well, I guess they was. I have to take that back. There wasn't no changes as far as routine goes, because we still got our liberty until midnight, and personnel didn't have any... I don't think there was any change.

Did you or your buddies in your bull sessions ever talk about the possibility of a Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor? Did this thought ever enter your mind?

Yes, because they had information in the papers that two Japanese spies were up in the hills. I don't know if you have been to Honolulu or not, but there's a lot of hills around there. They said there was Japanese spies up there in the hills. You know how much bullshit the newspaper put out. By God, I never even realized what a war was or what it would be like if we was in one. It aroused my curiosity, yes, that we could possibly get into a war. It didn't surprise me when the attack came about.

When you thought of a typical Japanese, what sort of person usually crossed your mind, that is, in that period prior to December 7th.
George: Well, I never gave it a thought, because I used stand quarterdeck watches in San Pedro, and I used to go out and dip the colors to those sorry Nipponese. They would sail ships in and out of San Pedro Harbor with our scrap iron, and I never gave it any thought; I had seen a lot of Japanese already in San Pedro. In fact, there was a lot of Japanese joints there. In fact, you would see them on the street a lot.

Marcello: Did you say that in San Pedro, as a Naval courtesy, you would dip the colors to these Japanese ships when they would go out?

George: That was a normal policy for foreign ships. Also, to your own ships you would dip the colors. That was the international code of ethics, I think.

Marcello: What rank were you at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack?

George: A second class boatswain's mate.

Marcello: Where was your battle station aboard the Vestal?

George: My battle station . . . I kept thinking tonight before I came down here that you would ask that question, and I said, "By golly, I used to be on the only antiaircraft gun we had. I was the first loader." But on that particular morning, I didn't even go back there. I helped throw back the awning on the forecastle. You know, Captain Cassin Young was the first person back there, I guess. He was skipper of the Vestal. He was one of the first people to get the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II. As I say, my general quarters station was on that 3-inch gun
for a while, and I can't figure yet why I didn't go back there instead of helping furl the awning.

**Marcello:** Now, when you say ... well, we'll come to that later when we talk about your furling the awning. I would assume that the **Vestal** was not very heavily armed?

**George:** Well, no. She had--let's see--one, two, three, four broadside guns, 5-inch .51's, I believe. Surface guns, they called them. They were broadside surface guns--surface only. But yet we manned them in general quarters just as though there were surface vessels coming, although there was possibly some subs coming down the harbor that morning.

**Marcello:** Now, as one gets closer and closer to December 7th, did you seem to be having more general quarters drills and things of that nature?

**George:** No, there were no more general quarters. As far as we were concerned, we were no more alert than we had been at any other time. As far as I know, none of the rest of the ships were, either.

**Marcello:** Okay, this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941. Now, we know from the record that the **Vestal** was tied up close to the **Arizona** during that weekend. Let's talk about that weekend of December 7th. Did the **Arizona** tie up next to the **Vestal**, or did the **Vestal** tie up near the **Arizona**?

**George:** Well, we tied up outboard of her. She was on Battleship Row,
and they had these big ballards, as they called them, fore and aft and amidships, and they usually had the battleship inboard. We tied up outboard. You talked about when I went ashore on December 6th. In fact, I fought in a smoker. I participated in fighting events because we had smokers there at the recreation center in Honolulu to entertain the troops or sailors or whatever you want to call them. I participated in one and went downtown with one of my buddies and got in a fight with him.

I came back aboard and old Captain Young said, "George, I'd like to take you over to a mast." They brought me back—the Shore Patrol—and I went to a captain's mast. The captain gave me a summary court-martial. He said, "I wish I could take you on the forecastle and have all hands kick the shit out of you; but since I can't, I'm going to give you a summary court-martial." If it hadn't been for the Japs, I'd have been probably a seaman in Leavenworth.

Marcello: What does a summary court-martial mean? What is usually the punishment for a summary court-martial?

George: Well, you can get time in the brig and a stiff fine. In fact, I could have probably got kicked out of the Navy, I'm sure.

Marcello: Of course, if you have to spend time in the brig, that's "bad time"; that doesn't count toward your regular service time.

George: That's right. I had seven days in the brig one time, and for some reason or another, when I retired they didn't catch that
time, and I didn't have to make it up.

Marcello: Now, what sort of repairs did the Arizona need? Do you remember?

George: Well, general repairs, I think. Most of your ships have routine repairs even in the Navy yard. A lot of times they would go into the Navy yard with nothing major wrong with them—just routine repairs.

Marcello: When did the Vestal tie up to the Arizona?

George: Friday before the raid on Sunday. We tied up to her.

Marcello: Now, you mentioned that you had liberty on Saturday evening and that you fought in a smoker and then later on that you got into a fight with your buddy. Had you been drinking, and is this the reason you perhaps got into a fight with your buddy?

George: Well, I tell you, I was in the fight, and I was knocked out on my feet, and I wanted to fight by knocking him out. It's funny if you've never had the experience—how you can keep a hangover. I was drinking after I got downtown, but I was still out on my feet partially, and that helped to get me drunk easier than it would otherwise.

Marcello: Well, let's back up here. I don't quite understand what you're saying. You went to the smoker that night, and you boxed in the smoker. How did you make out in that bout?

George: I won it by knockout.

Marcello: Okay, then I assume you went out celebrating?

George: Well, I didn't celebrate. I rated liberty and just proceeded on
and ashore. The smoker was over, I guess, at nine or ten o'clock, and the barrooms in Honolulu were still open until two o'clock.

Marcello: Now, where did the smoker take place?

George: It took place right inside the Navy yard, in fact. It was in the recreation center inside the Navy yard.

Marcello: And then from there you hit the bars.

George: That's right—downtown Honolulu.

Marcello: As you mentioned, you had been drinking, and this was when you got into the fight with your buddy.

George: Yes. He came up and hit me behind the head, and I woke up swinging. I just raised up swinging; I was half-out. That happened to be the captain's gig coxswain. His name was Hudgins. He's a Texas boy; he lives in Texas. I would like to run into that guy. I don't know how I could get in touch with him.

Marcello: So he knocked you down, but you were able to get up again, and then you knocked him out.

George: That's right.

Marcello: At this point, I suppose, the Shore Patrol came in.

George: Well, no. My buddy... I knocked him down. I beat him up, and I cut up his face. But in the fight—the smoker I fought in—I was knocked out on my feet. If you get knocked out on your feet, you constantly carry on and you don't realize what's happening—you keep fighting. But, yes, I knocked him out in
the last round.

Marcello: I see.

George: That was at the recreation center before we went downtown with my buddy Hudgins. He's a Texas boy.

Marcello: You went downtown with Hudgins.

George: Right.

Marcello: Okay, so you got into this fight in the bar. Pick up the story from that point.

George: Well, I was picked up by the Shore Patrol and brought back to the ship. This was Friday night, and Saturday morning I went to the captain's mast.

Marcello: Did you put up a struggle when the Shore Patrol was taking you back?

George: No. I had that much sense. I never fought the law. I always restrained myself when I was apprehended by anybody with authority. I do that yet.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened when you got back aboard the Vestal?

George: I went to the captain's mast on Saturday morning, and that's when he told me, "I'd like to take you on the forecastle and let all hands beat the shit out of you; but since I can't I'm going to give you a summary court-martial." That was Captain Cassin Young, who, as I said, was one of the first men or officers to get the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Marcello: Now, this fight took place when—Saturday night?
George: Saturday night, right.

Marcello: And when did the summary court-martial take place--on Saturday, also?

George: This was Friday night. I beg your pardon. On Friday night, the smoker took place, and it was Friday night when I went ashore and got took back to the ship. I didn't go to the captain's mast until Saturday morning. They didn't usually hold captain's mast on Saturday, but they did this particular Saturday just for me.

Marcello: So what happened after the captain's mast was over?

George: I was put on report and made a "PAL" and restricted.

Marcello: What do they call you?

George: PAL--prisoner-at-large.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

George: So I had to muster at seven o'clock at night and 10:30 at night. But our chief master-at-arms excused me, because I was a boatswain's mate second class at that time. He excused me because I slept in the forecastle--in the bunkhouse that was provided for the leading petty officers in the deck force. I was excused from the ten o'clock muster. By the way, he was the first guy I seen killed on December 7th. A bomb fragment went right through his guts.

Marcello: Who was this?

George: Buck Dwane.
Okay, so evidently since you were a prisoner-at-large, you couldn't get into any trouble on Saturday night. You spent Saturday night aboard the Vestal.

Right. I spent Saturday night aboard the Vestal; I couldn't go ashore.

Did anything out of the ordinary happen that night aboard the Vestal that you remember?

It was routine. Everything was routine just as if nothing was going to occur and nothing ever occurred.

What time did you go to bed?

I went to bed early. I would say it was approximately eight o'clock or 8:30, because I missed the ten o'clock muster when the chief gave me permission to do that.

Okay, so pick up the story, then, on Sunday morning from the time you got up until all hell broke loose.

Well, I wasn't out, in fact. In fact, I had just got up... yes, I was. I had gotten up and went down and got me some breakfast. I had "sunnysides," cold French fries, and bacon; and I got me a Sunday morning paper, and I had returned back in my sack--bunk.

Where were you sleeping?

On the forecastle. Now, that bunkhouse was made purposely for petty officers, and they had three bunks in there. When general quarters went, I didn't know... I thought... I just got
back with the paper and laid down and was fixing to read it when somebody hollered, "General Quarters!" I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Marcello: You did not hear anything outside at that time?

George: No. In fact, I jumped up and the first thing I saw was a Japanese plane coming down. The first torpedo, I think, that was launched at Pearl Harbor that day down the channel was launched at the Helena, and the Oglala was tied up outboard of here. The torpedo went under her and exploded and sunk the one little wooden-bottom ship--a minesweeper--and she blew up, and she tilted over and sank.

Marcello: Now, did you see this?

George: Yes, I did.

Marcello: Describe that Japanese plane as it came in to make its torpedo run.

George: Well, as I said, I didn't believe such a thing could happen even though I had been reading about it. When the man come up hollering "General Quarters," that's the first thing I saw when I went out to get a better view of the outside defenses. We had those awnings rigged over us, and I had to go all the way to the lifeline to see the sky or even the horizon. I'll tell you, you don't know how many thoughts went through my mind. My conscience scared me all the rest of the day.

Marcello: So what happened then? What did you do after general quarters
George: After general quarters sounded, I went right back down below and aroused everybody out of their sacks that I could and got them on topside. That was my duty as a petty officer in the deck force. I aroused them and got them on topside to their general quarters stations.

Marcello: How was general quarters sounded aboard the Vestal?

George: By mouth because we didn’t have no PA system on there.

Marcello: Okay, so what did you do, then, after you aroused the rest of the crew?

George: Well, I’ll tell you, the only thing I could say about myself that day—the funniest thing, believe it or not—my conscience was my guide. I carried on without actually knowing very much what I did the whole day—the whole time. It says right here, you can read it yourself (refers to Continuous Service Record). I was commended for helping save men’s lives and fighting fires. All that time, from 7:55 or eight o’clock when the attack came about and from then on until, oh, way in the afternoon, I participated in a lot of things. But I’ll be damned if I can remember what they were (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned that one of the first things you did was to furl the awning.

George: Yes, that was one of the first things I did—to clear the guns so that they could fire, although those guns were surface guns,
Marcello: How large an awning was this?
George: Oh, it covered the whole forecastle, and it had a beam of about forty feet—about forty feet by a hundred feet, I guess. It was one awning, and you had your strongback which was like a roof on a house which the awning would come down each side, and you had your ropes to tie it down with.

Marcello: Okay, now I'm looking here at your Continuous Service Certificate, and it mentions here that you were commended by your commanding officer for outstanding services rendered during the Japanese attack on the Vestal. What did you do to earn this commendation?
George: That's when I did what you see there on the certificate. I actually can't... I remember the glass windows in the silvering shop, and there was a fire there. I kicked the door open because it was locked... kicked out the glass. I put the fire out. There was also glass, and everything was burning. I didn't put it out; I smoldered it some. I seen people, as I say, over on the Arizona that were trying to get off, and there was fire all around. I threw a line over. One of these books written about Pearl Harbor mentions the unknown sailor on the Vestal throwing a line over to the Arizona sailor. I'm that unknown sailor that whoever wrote the book didn't find. The author didn't find the right guy to ask the questions to.

Marcello: Were you the guy who threw the line over?
George: I'm the guy, yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's back up here a minute, because we're kind of jumping around and we're not keeping this thing in any sort of a sequence. General quarters sounds; you rouse the men; you then help to furl this awning. How long did it take to furl the awning?

George: Well, you had so many men at that time, so I'd say it took at least fifteen minutes. You had to furl it and then tie it to the strongbacks to clear the decks. In fact, I don't think we were so tidy with it that morning. Normally to furl an awning, you would furl it around the strongback, and then you would lash it off like you would a hammock—to clear the deck and make it look neat.

Marcello: Now, are you furling this awning so that the guns could fire?

George: That is correct. They were surface guns, and I see no reason they would have fired them at aircraft.

Marcello: Were you ordered to furl that awning, or did you just go ahead and do it?

George: That was one of those routine things we knew to do in case of general quarters.

Marcello: And as you mentioned, you never did go to that antiaircraft gun which was actually your battle station.

George: I don't know . . . I didn't go to that.

Marcello: Now, how long after you furred the awning did the Arizona blow up?
George: I'll tell you, as I said a few minutes ago, I don't really know when it blew up. I really don't.

Marcello: Do you remember it blowing up?

George: I do not remember it blowing up.

Marcello: Do you remember whether or not the Vestal was hit by flying debris when the Arizona blew up or anything of that nature?

George: No doubt she was, because everything was on fire on the Vestal. That's when I did travel from bow to sterns, and I cut the lines on the bow. Who cut them on the sterns, I don't know. But in the bow I did cut the lines. Our executive officer jumped all over my butt about cutting the lines, but there was nobody over on the Arizona to cast the lines off. That's one time in my Naval career that I ignored an officer when I got chewed out.

Marcello: Okay, now the Arizona blew up, and as a result of the Arizona blowing up, the Vestal caught fire. Is that correct?

George: That's correct.

Marcello: You mentioned that you fought one of these fires aboard the Vestal in some of your comments a minute ago. Where was when you fought that fire?

George: In the silvering shop. As a matter of fact, the ship was on fire almost from stem to stern.

Marcello: Now, what shop is this?

George: The silvering shop.

Marcello: Silvering shop.
George: That's the silvering shop, where you coat . . . you usually chrome-plate something, don't you? Okay, you got the silvering shop to take . . . well, you've got this silver-plated china, you know. Well, this is what it did, only it wasn't chinaware. It was silvering for other things that they did. They had silvering shops, watch shops, and everything aboard.

Marcello: So the Vestal was on fire from stem to stern, like you mentioned.

George: Almost, yes.

Marcello: When it caught on fire, is that when you started to fight that specific fire there at the silvering shop?

George: That was the first thing that I noted, and it was the first available hose that I got hold of. It was the first fire.

Marcello: How long did it take you to control the fire there at the silvering shop?

George: As I said, I smoldered it. Whether I got it out, I doubt it very seriously. Acid, see, was in there, and there was a lot of stuff that could re-catch after I thought I had it out. But I continued on to where the bigger blazes were.

Marcello: Then where did you go after you left the silvering shop?

George: As I said awhile ago, I do not remember too much. I don't even remember it exploding, and that should be one thing that I should remember because the skipper was blown over the side, and the whole gun crew. A lot of people were blown over the side, as a matter of fact. The captain said he was blown over the side. I
hate to say this, but I don't think he was.

Marcello: What makes you think that he wasn't blown over the side?

George: Well, I'll tell you, he was like a lot of the rest of the people. He didn't think we had much of a chance of saving the ship . . . this will be recorded, I know that. He went over the side himself, over the gangway, to my estimation; but his Congressional Medal of Honor said, no, he was blown over the side. The explosion occurred on the aft part of our ship, so that would be about amidships for the Arizona, because that was a battleship and we were just a little repair ship. But I think he figured he had no chance of saving the ship—like mostly everybody else—so he jumped over the side, and he started to swim across that oily harbor, and he didn't figure he could swim that so he came back aboard and saved the ship and got it underway.

Marcello: Now, why was it that you decided to sever the lines between the Arizona and the Vestal?

George: Because they had given orders to pass the word to get the ship underway. Our stern was already down, because we had one bomb that went all the way through it. The torpedoes that were launched at the Arizona all went under us. When I said I seen the first torpedo while we were clearing the awnings, the Arizona was getting torpedoed, and all of them were going underneath us. That's something I couldn't understand, either, because all those
torpedoes were coming toward us, and nothing ever exploded because they were going under us and hitting the Arizona.

Marcello: The Arizona was inboard of you?

George: Yes, she was inboard of us.

Marcello: Now, do you recall when you threw that line over to the Arizona?

George: I was on the superstructure deck, and that was up in the area where the silvering shop was. That part of the deck was about the only part of the deck that was even with the Arizona. The Arizona, although her main deck was maybe lower than ours, she drew more water. But at the particular place that these people were trying to get over, they were surrounded by fire on the Arizona. This was on the superstructure deck where the Vestal was in correspondence with the level and height of the Arizona. They were stranded on the ship, and they were trying to get off, and they was surrounded by fire.

Marcello: And so this is when you threw the line over?

George: That's correct.

Marcello: How many people came across on that line? Do you know?

George: I'll tell you, I didn't wait to see because I secured it on my ship as tight as I could. They fore-handed themselves over, because I couldn't help them. I went on about my business. I'll tell you one thing, I remember what time that I started to furl the awning or the time general quarters went. Some things like that, I do recall. But there was a long period
of time from 7:55 until almost . . . oh, hell, I didn't go
to bed until midnight that night, I guess.

Marcello: Now, did you fight other fires aboard the **Vestal**, also?

George: I did fight fires all the way from stem to stern, as I
said before.

Marcello: In other words, you just fought fires wherever you were needed?

George: Wherever I saw fit to fight them. I used my own judgment.

Marcello: Nobody was giving you any orders?

George: No, sir, because there was nobody . . . I was the petty officer,
and I didn't have to have any orders to carry on that particular
morning—although this executive officer named John Toole was
on my butt about cutting the lines.

Marcello: Why didn't he want you to cut the lines?

George: I do not know. I suppose he wanted to save them, because he
figured we might have use for them later on.

Marcello: Obviously, the only way the **Vestal** was going to get out of there
was if the lines were cut.

George: That's the only way, because there wasn't nobody on the **Arizona**
to throw them off. See, we had ballard to ballard or bits to
bits to tie up, and unless you cast them off the ballard over
there and pull them through the chocks, it wasn't going to get
loose. So the only man I saw alive on the **Arizona** after I threw
the lines over and let them people off the superstructure deck
was one man laying down on the blister gasping, and he was on
Marcello: How did you cut those lines?
George: With a fire axe. They had fire axes throughout the ship.
Marcello: Now, since the Vestal was on fire, did it ever get out of there?
George: Oh, yes. We had a fire also in the forward part of the ship. A bomb had hit and went all the way through the ship aft, and we had this one bomb explode in the GCH, which was next to the magazine?
Marcello: Where did it explode?
George: In the GCH—that's the general cargo hatch.
Marcello: General cargo hatch?
George: Right. They kept rags in there; they kept steel plates and steel beams. It was just a general cargo hatch for repairing ships. That was next to the magazine, you see, and that was on fire, and it was getting the magazine hot. They asked for volunteers to go down to salvage the ammunition, and I didn't volunteer for that job (chuckle).
Marcello: Okay, so what happens at that point? Now, where does the Vestal go when it finally gets out?
George: It went in the shallow part of the area of the harbor there where they usually had "tin cans" tied up.
Marcello: Now, was it still ablaze when it was moving over there?
George: Sure! It was burning a lot of places. The stern was almost
down. She was run aground to keep it from sinking, because the bomb went all the way through in the after part but didn't explode.

Marcello: I assume that these bombs were intended for the Arizona rather than for the Vestal?

George: Well, I assume that was what they were after. They came after the capital ships.

Marcello: So what happens at that point then, that is, after you beached the Vestal over near the destroyers?

George: Well, we tried to get all the antiaircraft guns working. I guess the doctors and medical officers were taking care of the injured. They was trying to get volunteers to go ashore to dig trenches; and that I ignored because I was going down with the ship if I had to go down--die. We had got word that the Japanese troops were landing on the islands, and we were supposed to go and dig trenches, and I declined to make myself available for that.

Marcello: So what did you do then? Did you stay aboard the Vestal?

George: Yes, I did.

Marcello: What did you do aboard the Vestal?

George: There was nothing that you could do except sit there and wonder what was going to happen next.

Marcello: Were the fires out by this time?

George: The fires were all out, and they were putting a cofferdam on the rear, and all the repair places were down there--the ship's
repair force. They had shipfitters there, and then they put a cofferdam on it, and they pumped it out and refloated it. The stern was all the way down.

Marcello: When did they begin refloating the *Vestal*? On that same day or was it later on?

George: It was immediately that night. They did it that night.

Marcello: What did you do that night?

George: As I said just a few minutes ago, I kept myself lost most of the time because I was pretty groggy and was trying to think things out and what had happened. They was asking for volunteers to go over and dig trenches, and I didn't volunteer. I just stayed aboard.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that this is perhaps the first time that you had a chance to become scared?

George: That is correct! It was the first time I had any free time. That is the first time, as I said a while ago. It took me all that time ... I don't remember much of what happened except the instance of throwing the line over there and fighting the fire in the silvering ship.

Marcello: I guess during that initial period, you were more or less reacting automatically.

George: That's right! I was carrying on subconsciously.

Marcello: Did you get very much sleep that night?

George: Well, I'll tell you, I was so exhausted that I did. But I had
Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that there were rumors that the Japanese had already landed. I'm sure that there were all sorts of rumors floating around.

George: Yes, there was. There was also rumors that our aircraft carriers were sunk. As a matter of fact, that night it was either the Saratoga or the Lexington that was coming in. They launched their planes, and we had the biggest barrage of antiaircraft fire that night that I had ever seen.

Marcello: Did you actually see this?

George: Yes, sir! We were firing at our own planes.

Marcello: Were the guns on the Vestal firing away, too?

George: I think they had the one firing. The only antiaircraft gun we had was a 3-inch .50-caliber. We had some .50-caliber machine guns. We didn't count them as antiaircraft guns, but they were firing.

Marcello: I understand that had that particular incident not been so serious, it was a pretty sight to see all those tracers and so on go up.

George: Well, I don't know. In a case like that, it was ... if somebody was to see it as fireworks, I would say, yes; but in a case like that, I wouldn't say it was exciting.

Marcello: What did you do the next day?

George: Well, the next day it was getting the ship cleaned up so that

a few nightmares and bad dreams.
Marcello: We could get about it. There was many things we had to do as a deck force. That was my job—to maintain and upkeep the ship. We didn't have much to work on, but in them particular times we did start out from scratch. We got oil off the ship, and the debris. That was the main object.

Marcello: I guess that ship must have been one helluva mess.

George: Oh, it was! You couldn't describe it unless you seen it.

Marcello: Now, did you simply make temporary repairs there at Pearl Harbor?

George: Well, we refloated the ship ourselves—the ship's force—which was the gang in the repair party... repair department, I should say. As I say, we had everything on our ship—silvering shop, watch shop, optical shop. They got the ship afloat and got her steam up, and we got ready to go into dry dock to put a permanent patch on her.

We went in dry dock... and by the way, we got in dry dock, I think, in the middle of the night, and we was all aroused and had to get underway. The Saratoga had come in, and she had got a "fish" from a Japanese submarine outside the gates there at Pearl. We got underway... put a temporary patch on right quick and got her away and went back out in the harbor. The Saratoga came in and got patched up and went back out, and she would go back out and get a "fish"... we'd go back in the dry dock, and then we'd have to come out so she could get repaired. I think they almost had the Japanese run out of torpedoes on account of that (chuckle).

Marcello: So you did even go into dry dock that same night, that is, December
7th?

George: No, no. It was six weeks.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

George: Six weeks because, as I say, it took us at least that long to get the things back in the order so that she could even get steam up.

Marcello: When did the Vestal finally get out of Pearl Harbor?

George: June . . . let's see . . . I left the ship in June. I was transferred back for new construction.

Marcello: This was in June, 1942?

George: It was '42, right. She had already been in dry dock there in the Navy yard three or four times, as I said before, with the Saratoga running her out each time she got a "fish" from the Japanese. We would have to get underway and get out and let her get repaired. I got my orders for new construction, and I didn't turn that down.

Marcello: I guess you wanted to get out of Pearl Harbor as fast as you could.

George: I got back to the States and went through all the war on a Navy seaplane tender. We were down in Millington, Tennessee--the wife and I--in 1951, and she says, "I hope you get your orders for Honolulu." I said, "If that's the only way you ever get to Honolulu, I hope you never make it!" So it was about December, 1951, that I got my orders for Pearl Harbor, and I said, "Good Christ!" But she wanted to go to Pearl Harbor.
Marcello: Now, is that the first time you would have been going back since June, 1942, or did you pass through there on some other occasion?

George: There were other occasions. I came through there in '45 coming back from Okinawa and that area when the war ended. There and then I said, "I hope I never see Pearl Harbor again!" We came back to the States, and that's when I got a tour of shore duty at Charleston, South Carolina. Then I went back to sea for a couple of years, and then I went back to Naval Air Station at Memphis, Tennessee. But that was supposed to have been a school, and I spent almost three years there.

Marcello: Well, that's probably a pretty good place to end this interview, Mr. George. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You went into a great deal of detail, and I'm sure that the scholars are going to find your comments quite valuable when they use them to study Pearl Harbor.

George: I hope I didn't exaggerate about myself. Somebody might say, "That dirty stinker! Good Christ, he must have been very hipped up that night or hopped up or something!" But I didn't mean to make myself look good. But I did perform well, I thought, after it was all over.

Marcello: Well, this is probably a pretty good place to end this interview, and I want to thank you very much for having participated.