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Interview with
William L. Bierschwale
August 24, 1974

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

William Bierschwale

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing William Bierschwale for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on August 24, 1974, in San Antonio, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Bierschwale in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS Maryland during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Bierschwale: Alright. I was born in Fredericksburg, Texas, on December 4, 1921. I went to school there, graduated from high school, went into the Navy, and returned after the war. I went to St. Mary's University here

in San Antonio under the GI Bill and got my degree in business administration.

Marcello: When did you enter the service?

Bierschwale: I entered the service in 1939.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the service?

Bierschwale: I joined the service because some recruiting officers from San Antonio came to Fredericksburg, and two or three of us high school boys were interested. We took the examination after we graduated. A week after graduation, we were on our way to San Diego. We had passed our tests, and they said, "You're in the Navy." So we joined the Navy because there were two or three other boys that had joined the Navy ahead of us, several years ahead of us. So we were excited for travel so we joined.

Marcello: I was going to ask you why you selected the Navy as opposed to one of the other branches of service.

Bierschwale: Because the other boys ahead of us had joined the Navy, so we followed.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened during your boot camp experience that you think ought to be a part of the record, or was this more or less the normal Navy boot camp?

Bierschwale: No, when I joined in 1939, England went to war. After I got out of boot camp, I could not go home because they

anceled our boot leave because England went to war. So we went right out of boot camp right . . . I went right on the USS Maryland.

Marcello: At the time that you entered the service, and even in September of 1939 when England went to war, how closely were you personally keeping abreast with world events?

Bierschwale: Oh, not too close--reading the papers. Not paying too much attention, just, I guess, average keeping up with world events.

Marcello: I would assume that when you thought in terms of the United States going to war your eyes were turned toward Europe, and you probably had no comprehension whatsoever of a possible war in the Far East.

Bierschwale: This is true. We were concerned and we thought we probably would be involved in some way in this war.

Marcello: You mentioned that you were assigned to the battleship USS Maryland. Was that voluntary duty?

Bierschwale: Yes, we could voluntarily pick the ship we wanted.

Marcello: Why did you decide to go aboard a battleship.

Bierschwale: Because I had two buddies of mine that were on the Maryland from Fredericksburg.

Marcello: Was there a certain amount of glamour associated with being aboard a battleship?

- Bierschwale: At that time, yes--battleship Navy or the destroyer Navy or the cruiser Navy. I guess the distinction was a battleship in those days.
- Marcello: What were you striking for when you went aboard the Maryland?
- Bierschwale: I was assigned to the first division, which took care of turret one. There were four sixteen-inch turrets. I was striking for gunner's mate.
- Marcello: I would assume then at the time that you went aboard the Maryland you were probably a seaman apprentice striking for gunner's mate.
- Bierschwale: Yes, this is correct.
- Marcello: What was the Maryland like? Describe the ship in a physical sense as you remember it.
- Bierschwale: Well, the Maryland was one of the biggest ships--I guess the biggest battleship--in those days. It had good living quarters. We slept in either hammocks or the regular canvas cots which were made up every morning and stored. The mess tables were on the overhead and had to be taken down and replaced every meal, every time they were used. The wash rooms and living quarters were more modern, so to speak, than the other ones. The Maryland was a fairly comfortable ship.

Marcello: And like we mentioned in our conversation before the interview started, it was one of the newer battleships.

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: Do you remember when it was commissioned?

Bierschwale: I believe something like 1932.

Marcello: So again, we're talking about a ship that was no more than eight or nine years old at the time you went aboard.

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: How spit-and-polish was the Navy in those days? And again, I'm referring to your experiences aboard the Maryland.

Bierschwale: Well, it was a spit-and-polish Navy. The brass had to be shined. Everything had to be . . . especially in the battleship Navy, everything on according to regulations--no dungarees. Blue or whites were the uniforms of the day. It was a real polished, strict Navy in the battleships. The cruisers and the tin cans probably were not that strict, but the battleship was strictly Navy.

Marcello: Why was it that the battleships were perhaps more spit-and-polish than the cruiser divisions or the destroyer divisions?

Bierschwale: I guess because of the prestige. If they were a big ship, they were the thing in those days.

- Marcello:** Describe what your on-the-job training was like aboard the Maryland. Now you mentioned awhile ago that you were a gunner's mate striker.
- Bierschwale:** Well, when I got on the Maryland, of course, I was an apprentice seaman. We had to . . . I immediately started to study to become a first class seaman. I was assigned to the first division. I worked on the decks. I worked in the mess as a . . .
- Marcello:** As a mess attendant, I think, it was called.
- Bierschwale:** Mess attendant. Then an opening came as a striker in turret one for a gunner's mate. Then I passed my exam for seaman first and started to study for gunner's mate third class while I was working in the turret. I passed my exam for that, and I started for gunner's mate second class. At the time of Pearl Harbor, I was a gunner's mate second class.
- Marcello:** From what I gather, the training that most of the strikers received in those pre-Pearl Harbor days was rather thorough. In other words, there was a lot of time. There was no sense of urgency, and the old salts aboard those ships apparently took a great deal of time in teaching an apprentice the ropes.
- Bierschwale:** Yes, they were very thorough. We had our duties to do, you know, our brass to shine. I was assigned first of

all on the ammunition deck. It was all steel. We had to shine it, keep all the brass. I worked from there on up through the turret to the handling room and finally up to the gun room. Each department had to be gone through, so I got from the bottom up, so to speak, till I got to the gun room. So I knew that turret from bottom to top.

Marcello: And this was standard procedure, was it not?

Bierschwale: Right, this was standard procedure.

Marcello: In other words, you could have probably done any of the jobs that were required in the operation of that turret by the time you were finished.

Bierschwale: That's correct.

Marcello: And I would gather that most of the petty officers under whom you were learning at this time had been in the Navy for a good many years.

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: Rank, from what I gather, was very, very slow in coming in that pre-World War II Navy.

Bierschwale: It was. You had to pass the exams. You had to study. You had to work. It was slow. You earned your pay, so to speak, or your rank.

Marcello: I was kind of surprised when you mentioned awhile ago that you had made gunner's mate second class by the time

you got to Pearl Harbor. You apparently advanced sort of rapidly.

Bierschwale: Well, yes, I did. I studied for it. I worked for it. If you didn't work or study for it, you just didn't get it. It was that simple. If you wanted to get ahead, you got there. But if you didn't, you just didn't get there.

Marcello: When did you go to Pearl Harbor?

Bierschwale: We went to Pearl Harbor . . . for the first time are you talking about?

Marcello: Yes.

Bierschwale: Oh, that was back in 1940--my first trip.

Marcello: Now how did you like the idea of . . . well, let me just back up here a minute and ask you this question. When was the Maryland assigned permanently to Pearl Harbor? Now was this sometime in early 1941 when the Pacific Fleet was moved from its home base in San Diego to Pearl Harbor?

Bierschwale: That's right. As I recall, I think it was around September of that year. We went to the so-called . . . oh, patrol duty, they called it. I think they had two divisions at that time, including two or three battleships and cruisers and destroyers. We were to go on patrol duty for two weeks while the other divisions stayed in. We would relieve ourselves at sea before

the other division went in for its two-week stay. This started in September, as I recall, of that year.

Marcello: Then when you came in off of your patrol or maneuvers, you docked at Pearl Harbor.

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: What'd you think about the idea of being stationed permanently, more or less, in the Hawaiian Islands?

Bierschwale: Well, it was fairly good duty. We were at sea for two weeks and in for two weeks. The two weeks we were in, we had some recreation. We couldn't go ashore and stay overnight unless we had special permission.

Marcello: I gather that the only people who could stay overnight were those who had families or some sort of a permanent residence ashore.

Bierschwale: This is true. Otherwise, you had to get a special pass to stay overnight.

Marcello: How did your liberty run during the week when you were at Pearl?

Bierschwale: Oh, you could go during the week at night, but you had to be back, if I recall, by one o'clock. You had to catch that twelve o'clock motor launch to get back.

Marcello: What sort of liberty did you have? Was it the one and four at that time, or just exactly how often could you get liberty?

Bierschwale: Yes, I think it was one and four, as I recall. You were either on the starboard watch or the port watch. It was fairly good liberty.

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

Bierschwale: Oh, I'd usually go to the beach. I recall going to the Army-Navy YMCA. They had very good frog legs. I liked frog legs. I went there. I went to the beach and went swimming. That's about it.

Marcello: I would assume that your social activity would have been somewhat limited because of the low pay. Now in your case, at least, you were not a seaman or a seaman apprentice, so I would assume that as a gunner's mate third class, and later on as a gunner's mate second class, your pay was considerable higher than those below you. Nevertheless, there still wasn't a whole lot of money that you could spend.

Bierschwale: No, and like over there . . . oh, I guess you could spend it all if you wanted. to. But on my liberties, I had a friend from my hometown who was stationed on a Navy Yard tug over there, and he had a car. I would go over and visit him on the tug, and we would go with his car, which was quite a privilege in those days. Most of the battleship sailors didn't have that. His name was Lewis Wahrmond. Lewis used to be on the Maryland, but he was

transferred over to the Navy Yard tug stationed at Pearl Harbor. He is, incidentally, still there.

Marcello: I would gather that when the fleet was in a great many of the sailors usually hit Hotel Street, did they not, especially on the weekends?

Bierschwale: Yes, Hotel Street in downtown Honolulu . . . in fact, all streets were . . . it was very crowded anywhere you went--anywhere.

Marcello: And I gather this was especially true on a weekend.

Bierschwale: Yes, especially on a weekend.

Marcello: Now as relations between the United States and Japan grew steadily worse in those months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, how did the nature of your maneuvers or your alerts or patrols change, or did they change?

Bierschwale: Yes, they changed. I recall several times where the lookouts would report seeing submarine periscopes. They were just overlooked. They just never paid any attention. "You're seeing things." Then things got tightened down a little more, but still certain incidents were reported and forgotten, so to speak. We never heard anymore. We could tell that things were getting tighter and tighter because we'd patrol more, have more drills, more target practice. It was drill, drill, drill all the time.

Marcello: Now did the frequency or . . . let me put it to you this way. Did your schedule change any? I know from talking to some of the other people that their particular ships would go out on a Monday morning and perhaps come back on a Friday. Were you still continuing to stay out for two weeks at a time even during this period?

Bierschwale: No, I recall our patrol was usually scheduled for two weeks. Perhaps sometimes we'd get in early, or they would relieve us early, but ours were pretty well two-week patrols.

Marcello: What was the morale like aboard the battleship during this period?

Bierschwale: Well, everybody was griping about the drills. "Why do we have to keep the watches? Why don't they pay attention when we see something?" It was getting a little touchy and edgy. This is why a lot of times when we'd go in for our two weeks, man, it would get . . . we'd go ashore and they'd drink more. It was getting touchy.

Marcello: By this time were you realizing that there was a possibility that war could break out between the United States and Japan? In other words, were your officers and senior petty officers perhaps making you aware of this possibility?

Bierschwale: Yes, yes, they were. Everybody wasn't too surprised, I would think, that it was the Japs that were attacking us because I remember that morning the first thing somebody said was, "The Japs are attacking us!" It wasn't mentioned anything else. It was the Japs. The submarines and things we saw, we didn't know they were Japanese submarines, but who else was out there?

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

Bierschwale: Well, Honolulu has got a lot of Japanese now and at that time. They was just people, and I didn't have any particular, oh, I guess, picture or anything about the Japanese. They were just another race of people. There were just a lot of them there in Honolulu.

Marcello: Did you ever talk about the possibility that these Japanese living in the Hawaiian Islands might represent some sort of a threat so far as sabotage or fifth columnist activities were concerned? Did you and your buddies ever talk about this sort of thing?

Bierschwale: No, I don't recall that we talked about things like that. When we were in we just talked about, you know, where we were going to go on liberty and what we were going to do. I don't think we talked about that.

Marcello: How secure or safe did you feel at Pearl Harbor?

Bierschwale: You mean before the attack or during the attack?

Marcello: Before the attack, yes. In other words, did you think that there was a possibility that some potential enemy might be able to attack those installations there? Of course, theoretically, anything's possible but . . .

Bierschwale: Oh, during some discussions we talked about it, yes. You know, we've got all of these ships in here. Somebody could clean up. We never did feel very comfortable in Pearl Harbor because it is a bottleneck. There's only one way in it by ship, and one way out.

Marcello: And I assume in those weeks and months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor that harbor was a beehive of activity. There were well over a hundred ships in there, or there could have easily been over a hundred ships in there at one time.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes. I know going in and out . . . for the whole division to go in and out, my gosh, it took practically a day to get all the ships coming and going just to get them out of there. So it was a beehive.

Marcello: When the Maryland docked at Pearl Harbor, where did it usually tie up?

Bierschwale: We usually tied up at one of the quays along Ford Island. That was usually our berth.

Marcello: Did you normally tie up alongside of the same battleship every time?

Bierschwale: Oh, no. It was usually different ones.

Marcello: Generally speaking, however, it was standard operating procedure to tie up the battleships two-by-two, isn't that correct?

Bierschwale: Yes, we usually would.

Marcello: Why was this done? Was it a matter of space?

Bierschwale: Space there. We used the space, yes.

Marcello: Now generally speaking, also, isn't it true that it was usually standard policy not to have all of the battleships in there at one time?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes! Like I said before, we were in two divisions, and we always relieved ourselves at sea. But that particular weekend both divisions were in.

Marcello: Was there ever any reason or excuse given for the fact that both divisions were in?

Bierschwale: No, not particularly that I know of. Perhaps it was because that Saturday we had admiral's inspection. Perhaps they wanted to inspect both divisions at the same time. But we did have admiral's inspection that Saturday.

Marcello: This is an important event, and I want to come back and talk about the admiral's inspection later on. Now I've

also heard that one of the reasons that all of the ships were in was because this was done as an economy measure. It cost money to keep those ships out there. I gather that at that time the Navy was operating on a rather limited budget. This is some of the other speculation that I heard as to why all of those ships were in there.

Bierschwale: Yes, I would say that that's a fairly good reason. They were beginning to tighten down because of economic reasons. It takes money to hold a whole division at sea for two weeks.

Marcello: Do you remember the submarine nets across the entrance to the harbor?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes.

Marcello: How exactly did they operate?

Bierschwale: Oh, I don't know exactly how they operated. They put the nets out, and if a ship was coming in or going out, of course, they had to take the nets out and then put them back. But exactly how they operated, I don't know. I do know that the nets were there. You could see the tugboats open them and putting them back.

Marcello: Well, the point is, like you mentioned, that normally those nets were closed and then were only opened when ships were entering or leaving the harbor. But on that Sunday the nets were open, I think, were they not?

Bierschwale: I believe they were open.

Marcello: Otherwise, those midget submarines couldn't have gotten in.

Bierschwale: Well, yes. Those midget submarines could have gotten in between ships coming and going while the nets were open.

Marcello: Well, this is true, too.

Bierschwale: This is a possibility that they could have gotten in there at that time. Also, probably some time elapsed between a ship going and another one waiting to come in or vice versa, or not being quite ready to leave, and they'd maybe wait for it to come or get out. But just exactly how they operated the nets, I don't know.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us up, I think, until the days immediately prior to Pearl Harbor. What I want you to do at this point is to describe in as much detail as you can remember what your activities were on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and then from there we'll go on and talk about that Sunday itself. But at this time describe in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on that Saturday, December 6, 1941.

Bierschwale: Well, let me go to Friday because Friday was a field day.

Marcello: Okay.

Bierschwale: A field day in the Navy in those days was a day where you prepared for the Saturday inspection.

Marcello: Okay, what time did you come in on Friday?

Bierschwale: Well, Friday . . . we worked all day Friday. I was on board ship Friday.

Marcello: I mean, did the Maryland dock on Friday?

Bierschwale: Oh, we were there! We were there . . . oh, yes, we were there before . . . we were in our two weeks, as I recall.

Marcello: I see.

Bierschwale: It was our turn there for two weeks, and the other division came in.

Marcello: I see.

Bierschwale: See, because we were tied inboard. We were there first, and then the other division came in and they tied outboard.

Marcello: Well, that's logical, yes.

Bierschwale: See, so we were in there. So that Friday was a field day, and we prepared for the admiral's inspection. We had to clean and polish and shine everything in sight. Everything was supposed to be in its proper place, which we did. We put everything in a proper place. This was on Friday. Then Saturday morning was admiral's inspection.

Marcello: Now the admiral would usually pick out one ship to inspect personally. Isn't that correct? All of the ships were inspected, but Kimmel usually selected one ship that he would personally inspect.

- Bierschwale:** Yes, he would personally inspect . . . the other admiralty staff would inspect the other ships, yes. But he had a staff that would do that. But the ship that he inspected, I don't recall that morning. I don't think he was aboard the Maryland. One of the members of the staff was aboard the Maryland.
- Marcello:** Now normally, when one of these inspections took place, what was the state of watertight integrity aboard a ship?
- Bierschwale:** During inspection? Well, they had men assigned to watertight doors. Of course, the inspection party would have them opened and they'd inspect. During the actual inspection I would say the watertight integrity . . . there wasn't any. It was just opened during the inspection.
- Marcello:** And then I would assume that after the inspection some of these watertight doors were closed.
- Bierschwale:** Oh, yes.
- Marcello:** Especially those below the water line.
- Bierschwale:** Oh, yes. Everything was closed again after the inspection party was finished, yes.
- Marcello:** Now, of course, the doors and hatches leading from one compartment to another usually wouldn't be closed, that is, your living spaces and things of this nature.

Bierschwale: Well, no. Living spaces, of course, was up on the main deck. Down on the third deck, which was the water line deck, those compartments were closed according to the condition set, the watertight condition set. Of course, during an inspection, no, they were open. But after inspection party they were . . . watertight conditions were set according to the condition we were in.

Marcello: What sort of condition were you in on that particular weekend?

Bierschwale: Well, on that particular weekend I'd say condition two. I think that was what it was in.

Marcello: And what is condition two?

Bierschwale: Well, certain compartments had to be closed. I think third deck . . . you could go all the way around on third deck. The storerooms and magazines, of course, were all closed. But you could go all the way around on the third deck.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story from this point. Now you were getting ready, and then you had the admiral's inspection on Saturday morning.

Bierschwale: Alright, after the inspection, which usually, I think, broke up around eleven or twelve o'clock in the morning, then liberty call went on. I went ashore, I guess, around

one or two o'clock that afternoon and spent the afternoon and evening ashore. I caught, I guess, the last motor launch back--eleven or twelve o'clock motor launch back. I stayed . . . the turret crew stayed in the turret. We slept in there. We had all our cots in the turret. We had a radio in the turret and a coffee pot. So when I got back that night it was about midnight. I went in the turret, and some of the fellows were playing cards. I had some mail, so I thought, "I'll read my mail," and got a cup of coffee. "Tomorrow morning is Sunday. We'll just sleep in. Nobody'll bother us, so to speak, in the turret." So I read my mail and drank my coffee, and it was finally perhaps one o'clock or two o'clock before I finally got to bed.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that as these maneuvers intensified that there was a certain amount of griping because of all of the alerts and drills and what have you. As a result, when a great many of the sailors did go ashore, they seemed to drink more heavily than usual. Do you recall anything about the state of the condition of the men who were coming back aboard the Maryland that particular night?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes! It was the regular routine. A lot of them were drunk. The shore patrol over there would call the big motor launches in and just put all the battleship sailors

on this motor launch, and they'd order this motor launch to make all the battleships and unload. Then they'd call another motor launch in to make all the cruisers. This is because the docks were very crowded. Everybody was coming back. This was always the same routine. Then they'd get perhaps even in fights--one battleship sailor and another battleship sailor. Oh, I recall . . . I don't know whether it happened that night. But a lot of times the coxwain on the motor launch would just stop and say, "Alright, quit your fighting! Until you do, we don't move!" So they'd get going again. But this was regular routine, I guess. The motor launches coming back from liberty were crowded. This type of deal existed, yes.

Marcello: Generally speaking, however, would it be safe to say that even most of these sailors who came in drunk would be in relatively good condition to fight the next day if the occasion arose?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes, I would say so.

Marcello: What did you do in Honolulu that particular day?

Bierschwale: Oh, I recall I went to the YMCA and ate frog legs, which I liked. I went to the hotel at Waikiki, the Royal Hawaiian, which is where we usually went. We had some

drinks and talked and went on the beach. That's about all I did.

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned you came back aboard the Maryland and went to the turret and read your mail and had a cup of coffee and this sort of thing. What time did you say you turned in?

Bierschwale: Oh, it was about 1:30 or 2:00, as I recall.

Marcello: Okay, I think this mostly covers most of the events on that Saturday of December 6. I guess from this point we can go in and talk about the seventh. Once more I want you to go into as much detail as you can remember in recounting the events of December 7th.

Bierschwale: Well, I mentioned we slept in cots. I slept in a cot on the starboard side of the turret in the gun room. What woke me that morning was the general alarm, general quarters.

Marcello: Now you were tied inboard of the Oklahoma, isn't that correct?

Bierschwale: Yes, on the quay. Our starboard side was toward Ford Island--the Navy air base. On the outboard side was the Oklahoma. So the general alarm woke me up. Like the rest of us, we were wondering what they were doing having a drill on a Sunday morning.

Marcello: Sunday was usually a day of rest and relaxation.

Bierschwale: Usually, yes. This early in the morning, "What are they doing having another drill?" So by that time though, the torpedo hit the Maryland right in the bow, which was just about seventy-five or eighty feet from where I was at.

Marcello: Now that torpedo didn't apparently have too much of a target to hit since you were inboard of the Oklahoma.

Bierschwale: No, that's right. The Oklahoma, I think, took seven torpedoes. This torpedo missed the bow of the Oklahoma but hit the Maryland.

Marcello: The Maryland was apparently a little bigger than the Oklahoma, is that correct?

Bierschwale: Yes, the Maryland extended out, and it hit the bow of the Maryland.

Marcello: What did it feel like when that torpedo hit?

Bierschwale: Well, the ship shook and quivered and felt like it just raised out of the water. The bow raised out of the water and then settled back down. By that time the crew was coming into the turret, and everybody was hollering and saying that the Japanese are attacking us.

By that time I had just gotten my cot together . . . threw it together. Smoke was coming up from inside the turret. The chief came in and said, "Hurry up and get the electric leads together! Let's get this thing together!"

Well, to get the turret ready for firing takes quite some time. To get everything hooked up . . . and we didn't get the powder up and the ammunition up because there was no ammunition, no powder, anything in the handling rooms. Everything was in the magazine.

Marcello: Locked up.

Bierschwale: Locked. The only people who had keys to those locks were the gunner's mates in charge of the magazine. They weren't in the turret. By the time the general quarters was sounded, you know, and the torpedo hit and the smoke was coming up through the turret, the only way they could get there was either through the turret or the third deck. The third deck had its watertight being set because the water was coming in from that torpedo. So you couldn't really get to the turret one ammunition magazines or powder magazines because of the watertight condition that we had to have because of this torpedo.

Marcello: Now up to this time you had not had a chance to look out and see what was going on yet?

Bierschwale: Oh, no. I didn't get out at all except after the second raid started. Myself and another man were . . . we were gunner's mate second class at that time, but we were also qualified gun captains for the five-inch twenty-five antiaircraft guns. So they took us out of the turret and

put us on the antiaircraft deck as gun captains of the antiaircraft guns.

Marcello: Okay, so during the initial attack now, you're in the turret. How would you describe the reaction of the men during these initial stages of the attack? Was it one of panic? Perplexity? Confusion? Or were they already acting with a certain degree or professionalism?

Bierschwale: No, they were acting with professionalism. The chief said, "Hurry up and get this thing hooked up!" and the gunner's mate and the gun crew . . . we knew what to do. We went right away to work, and the other crew came in and they pitched in. We said, "Do this, Do this." It worked fairly orderly, really no panic. The chief was getting his power phones on, and the speaker system in the turret was working, and he was giving orders on the loud speaker system to the turret. We were working frantically trying to get the turret ready. Reports were coming in from the bridge, and he was relating them to us.

I mentioned that the Oklahoma had turned over. And they needed blankets. So the blankets that we had in the turret for our bedding, we just gave them . . . threw them out because they were getting the sailors off of the Oklahoma. The Oklahoma, of course, was already turned

over, and they were actually having cutting torches cut through the hull of the Oklahoma and were getting men out.

Marcello: This must have occurred between the first and second attack. Is that correct?

Bierschwale: Yes, yes.

Marcello: Can you remember anything about the Oklahoma turning over? You probably didn't see it. Did you feel it?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes, we could feel every time a torpedo hit the Oklahoma--the explosion. The reports we were getting from the speaker system, from the chief, was that the Oklahoma had turned over and the water was on fire. This was another bad thing. The oil had spread on the water. It was on fire. The fourth division back there was fighting the water--the fire. They had water hoses and foam out there trying to keep the fire away. Of course, the Arizona behind us was causing all the smoke. The wind was such that it drifted right over Battleship Row. It was . . . you couldn't hardly see. Everybody was black because of the soot and the smoke, that is, everybody that was on topside.

Marcello: In the meantime, all during this first attack you were staying inside the gun turret.

Bierschwale: Yes, I was still in the turret. We were working and we finally had the guns ready. Of course, what were we going to do with the sixteen-inch guns . . . but the word was that they may invade. We were waiting for that because we could help quite a bit with our sixteen-inch guns in case they would come in close enough for an invasion.

Marcello: Okay, so what happened from that point? By this time, was the first attack now more or less over?

Bierschwale: Yes, the first attack was more or less over. They were still getting . . . well, by that time they had the antiaircraft ammunition up. Then the chief called me and another man up to the boat deck. They needed gun captains for the five-inch twenty-five's. Then I went out.

Marcello: This is the first time you'd gone outside.

Bierschwale: It was the first time I'd been outside. When I got outside of the turret, I could see the Oklahoma had turned over, and I went up to the gun deck. I was gun captain on one of the five-inch twenty-five's. By that time brass ammunition shells were laying all over the deck. We were trying to get them out of the way and get more ammunition up and waiting for the second raid.

Marcello: Now when you first went outside, were you really able to survey any of the damage that had occurred, or were things still happening too fast for this sort of thing?

Bierschwale: Well, I couldn't really survey too much because I was busy getting up there to my gun. But I did survey. One of the things that I looked at was . . . I could see the fire and oil everywhere. I thought that the captain would perhaps abandon ship. What would I do in case of abandon ship? There was a big pipeline that was on stilts, concrete stilts, that they used to pump the dredging out of Pearl Harbor, which was between the ship and Ford Island. I looked over there at some of the gun crew, and I told them, I said, "If they ever give the abandon ship, the only way we can go is to the starboard side. I think the best thing to do is jump in the water and head for that pipeline as fast as you can get there. But we never abandoned ship.

Then we got ready for the second raid. They were coming. Radar had them picked up.

Marcello: By this time I would say that all the panic had more or less subsided, or the confusion?

Bierschwale: Yes, the confusion. We knew who was our enemy. We knew that they were attacking us. Everybody was working

frantically. They were either getting people off of the Oklahoma, fighting the fire, or they were on the gun crews. The gun crews were getting ready, and we were waiting for the second round. They weren't quite as brave. They stayed up pretty high.

Marcello: Now during the second round were there mostly high-level bombers coming in?

Bierschwale: They were bombers. Now in the second round is where the Maryland got its bomb hit. The first round that hit us was a torpedo, and this second round was where they also hit us with a bomb right in the forecastle. The torpedo hit us and this bomb hit right on top.

Marcello: How close were you to where that bomb hit?

Bierschwale: Well, I was on the gun crew by that time. I'd say I was about a hundred feet or so or more.

Marcello: Now was this five-inch twenty-five out in the open, or was it in a turret, also?

Bierschwale: No, no, out in the open and up on the antiaircraft deck.

Marcello: Did that bomb have any effect at all upon the operation of your particular gun at that time?

Bierschwale: No, no.

Marcello: In other words, you weren't hit by any of the shrapnel or anything of that nature.

Bierschwale: No, the deck of the Maryland was wood. The top part was wood. It hit that wood and, of course, splinters and wood flew in every direction. Again, there was an explosion. The ship shook. By that time, though, the watertight integrity was set so the bomb didn't do any damage as far as our watertight was concerned because it was already set. The water got up to the magazines at turret one. It didn't go beyond that. So the bomb didn't do too much damage.

Marcello: You might describe some of the resistance that your particular gun crew put up during this second wave.

Bierschwale: Oh, fantastic! The port side, the antiaircraft, were picking them up as they came in. On my side, the starboard side, we would follow up as they passed it. We kept them up pretty high. I think the Maryland got credit for some seventeen or eighteen planes that we shot down.

Marcello: How many shells would you estimate that your gun crew fired that day?

Bierschwale: Oh, I don't know. The gun deck was just littered with brass. I don't know. It was fantastic. We kept them high.

Marcello: Did I hear you mention awhile ago that you were picking up these planes on radar as they came in?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes! They had radar going. We had radar going, and we could tell when they were coming in.

Marcello: The Maryland apparently didn't have radar too long because the whole process of radar was more or less in its infancy at that particular time.

Bierschwale: That is correct, but we did have some radar, yes. We did. They picked them up. The twenty-millimeter's and the five-inch twenty-five's kept them pretty high. In the third round they weren't brave at all.

Marcello: There was a third wave?

Bierschwale: Yes, there was a third wave. In fact, in that third wave they were up so high that we could barely see them, but they were still dropping some bombs. But the third raid they made was very ineffective.

Marcello: Now during the second and third raids would have been when that five-inch twenty-five would have been most effective. I would assume during the first wave against those torpedo planes, which were coming in so low, that those five-inch guns would have been virtually useless.

Bierschwale: Yes, the twenty-millimeters would have been, but there was no ammunition. I think we had one seaman on a .30 caliber machine gun, or .50 caliber machine gun that was writing a letter. That was the only gun, I think, that was actually shooting at that first wave. He just reached over there and loaded the machine gun and did some shooting.

Marcello: I gather, then, that there must have been some ready ammunition around those machine guns.

Bierschwale: Well, yes. They were in the magazines with the twenty-millimeters. The machine guns had some ready magazines. They had ready magazines which were mounted around the gun mounts. There were magazines loaded in there. This is what happened. He broke the lock and put some ammunition in the machine gun.

Marcello: I would assume that while these attacks were occurring that crewmen and so on were coming back aboard the Maryland rather steadily.

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: Some of them, I'm sure, had been on liberty.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes, on liberty. They were getting ready to have church call. The motor launches were taking some men over to the different ships and to the base for church services.

Marcello: Were there many officers aboard the ship that day, that is, during the actual attack itself? In other words, I assume that most of the officers went ashore for the weekend?

Bierschwale: Yes, I would say that the officers were rather limited. They had some rough times trying to get back because of

the great confusion and the motor launches. Trying to get back was just . . . it just took a lot of time. They couldn't get back for quite awhile.

Marcello: Awhile ago we were talking about the antiaircraft defenses aboard the Maryland. Now even though you were transferred from the Maryland . . .

Bierschwale: From the turret.

Marcello: Yes, from the turret, but actually from the Maryland later on after the attack was over. I would assume that all of those ships had a lot more antiaircraft weapons aboard them after Pearl Harbor than they did before Pearl Harbor.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes, yes.

Marcello: I think it would be safe to say that the Japanese did teach the United States Navy a very expensive lesson that day--that the airplane was going to be the principal offensive weapon in that war.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes. In fact, they mounted twenty-millimeters and forty-millimeters on the forecastle in front of the turret and way in the back of the turret, too. Forty-millimeters and twenty-millimeters were just everywhere.

Marcello: I would imagine that after Pearl Harbor every available space had an antiaircraft weapon of some sort mounted there.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes. Yes, the antiaircraft weapon was the thing after that.

Marcello: Okay, what happened now in the aftermath of the attack? The first wave has passed, the second wave has passed, the third wave has passed. I gather that the Maryland really didn't sustain very many casualties.

Bierschwale: No, we didn't sustain very many casualties. Most of the casualties in . . . the paint locker was really one that was hit with a torpedo and the bomb. The torpedo did kill some people up there. The bomb did not because the people were gone from that section because of the watertight condition that was there. Then there were some people killed by strafing up on the deck.

Marcello: Did you ever come under any of this strafing when you were out on that five-inch gun?

Bierschwale: Yes, during the second wave we had some strafing.

Marcello: You might describe what this was like.

Bierschwale: Well, it wasn't a good feeling because you knew you were being shot at. We, of course, wore our helmets and all we were doing was loading the guns and shooting back. It's not a good feeling to get shot at.

Marcello: How low were these strafing planes coming in?

Bierschwale: Oh, the second wave there . . . oh, I don't know how high they were. You could see them. They were within strafing

height. But the third wave, they were up. They really kept their distance. There was no strafing in the third wave.

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

Bierschwale: Well, we stayed on the gun. I stayed up there on that gun all that day and all that following night. The mess cook brought us some sandwiches and something to eat. But I stayed on that gun deck till the next day when a tug, Navy Yard tug, came and took us out--pulled us out from behind the Oklahoma and took us to the Navy Yard. We were getting ready for that. We were getting ready to have the tug come over and take us out of there. Then we were working desperately on the Oklahoma getting people out. Everybody was either on a gun crew or working on some kind of detail.

Marcello: Now I would assume that it was the following day before you really got a good chance to survey the damage that had been done there at Pearl. What were your emotions or feelings when you were able to look out and see what destruction had occurred?

Bierschwale: Oh, everybody was mad. Everybody was just mad. They'd seen their buddies killed and all the damage. Everybody was just mad! They were fighting mad! We were wondering

whether they were going to follow up with invasion. This was the next thing. Are they going to follow up? They never did. Everybody was just wanting to get ready and get out of there and follow them. Of course, we couldn't get out because they had to patch us up. They took us to the . . . we finally eased on out of there and went to the Navy Yard. They put big sheets right over the hole, and with the underwater welding they started welding the damage on that torpedo hole.

Marcello: A torpedo does quite a bit of damage, does it not?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes.

Marcello: How big was that hole in the side of the Maryland?

Bierschwale: Oh, gosh! Like a train! You could drive a train through it--a big hole. Also, on top they put big metal sheets over the top and on the sides and welded them. We left Pearl Harbor on December 15. We stayed over there in the Navy Yard patching up and repairing. On December 15 we left there to head back for the Bremerton Navy Yard.

Marcello: I would assume that in the immediate aftermath of the attack that there were all sorts of rumors floating around that ship as to what the Japanese were going to do next.

Bierschwale: Yes, there were.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that you heard?

Bierschwale: Well, "They're going to attack us." "They're going to invade the island." "They've already taken the other islands, the Philippines." All kinds of rumors were going on. One of the things that we got to do right after the attack was . . . in fact, that Sunday afternoon, I guess it was, when they got our things together. We were allowed to write a postcard home, just a postcard, saying "I am well and fine," and sign our name, which I did. I wrote my father saying I was well and fine. That was all. That was all that we were allowed to do. Then in the next day or so after that, we were allowed to write some letters, but the only news at first was just this card.

Marcello: Were you on the gun crew that night when those carrier planes from the Enterprise were coming in?

Bierschwale: Yes.

Marcello: Can you describe that particular incident?

Bierschwale: Oh, it was a happy sight. It was a very happy sight to see some relief coming in. Everybody cheered. Everybody was in good spirits like "Well, we're going to get them now!" "We're going to really go after them!" So it was very good news.

Marcello: But I'm referring now to the planes that were shot down that night. Do you remember those planes coming in? There were a couple of planes that were accidentally shot down that night when they came in.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes. That was true. Well, yes, I recall. There was just no identification. Everybody was . . . well, I don't know if you call them trigger-happy, but all the planes we saw up there before were Japanese planes, and we shot at them. If they didn't give proper identification, well, we just shot at them. These things happened during that time and during the rest of the war. It was unfortunate, but nothing could be done about it.

Marcello: I understand that that harbor lit up like the Fourth of July when those planes did come in.

Bierschwale: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Did your five-inch crew fire?

Bierschwale: Oh, yes, we fired. We fired because there were . . . our man on the phone said, "Planes are coming" and we just got ready for them and shot them.

Marcello: In the immediate aftermath of the attack, how did your attitude toward the Japanese change?

Bierschwale: Well, very bad. Everybody was down on the Japanese. Everybody was down on them. There was no good word at

all. They were sneaks and there was just no good word at all.

Marcello: Did you ever blame any of your superior officers, or did you ever try to find any scapegoats for what had occurred? In other words, did you hold anybody responsible?

Bierschwale: We could see across the bay from us the Pennsylvania, which was the admiral's flag ship. The Pennsylvania was always decorated up. You could see parties and things going on over at the Pennsylvania. Everybody said, "Well, they're having a good time over there. Everything seems to be going fine." Right away, everybody says, "Well, what's the admiral doing over there? Why didn't he know about this? The Pennsylvania was all decorated up." Right away, they said, "Well, why didn't the admiral do something? Why didn't he tell us?" And right away, this is where the word got out. "Why didn't the admiral tell us something when we had admiral's inspection this Saturday, yesterday? Somebody should have known something."