

**N T S U**  
**ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**Number 264**

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
NUMBER  
264

Interview with  
William H. Eckel  
December 21, 1974

Place of Interview: Corpus Christi, Texas

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved: William H. Eckel  
(Signature)

Date: Dec 21, 1974

Oral History Collection

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Dr. Marcello:      This is Ron Marcello interviewing William Eckel for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 21, 1974, in Corpus Christi, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Eckel in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the heavy cruiser USS New Orleans during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

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

Mr. Eckel:      Okay, well, I was born in Koblenz, Germany, on June 23, 1922. My dad was a retired Army sergeant and, of course, met my mother over there. Before they could bring her back over here, well, I came along and she couldn't travel. When I was one year old, I landed in New York City. Of course, I was actually an American citizen

since I was born in a Army hospital--a U. S. occupational hospital over there. Of course, we came to Texas. Dad loved Texas. We lived in Texas all our lives ever since. I graduated from high school in 1939. I was one of the youngest in the class.

I was wanting to join the Navy, but they changed the age limit at the time. They couldn't take no more at seventeen, so I had to work a whole year. Of course, in those days jobs were hard to get, so I was a messenger boy for Western Union until I became eighteen and signed up and went into the Navy.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Eckel: Well, of course, my dad being a retired Army sergeant . . . and we lived right next to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. I had all of these base privileges, you might say--the movies and the swimming pools and so on. But seeing what the Army was . . . and, of course, I always loved to travel. I figured, well . . . of course, in those days the Navy was doing all the traveling, and the Army was staying put. It was just something that I wanted to do. I'd had this in my mind ever since I was about ten or eleven years old--to join the Navy. I kept looking forward to it, so when the time came, well, I was just anxious to join.

As a matter of fact, two fellows that was with me at the telegraph company, Western Union as a matter of fact, I talked them into joining the Navy. We was all going to go in at the same time. Some of those guys left a month before me. They got too impatient and left a month before I did. I had to wait till my eighteenth birthday before I could leave. One of them went on the heavy cruiser Astoria, and the other one was on the USS Honolulu. Of course, we all wound up to be cruiser sailors, you might say. We kept in touch with each other all the time.

Marcello: I assume you took your boot camp out at San Diego, California.

Eckel: Yes, 1940.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful from your boot camp experience that you think ought to be a part of the record? Is there anything that really stands out in your mind that happened there?

Eckel: Well, no, not that I would really talk about. Oh, I remember one little incident. Each training company either had to do a week of guard duty or a week of mess cooking. Well, I wound up as a mess cook. I was working in the galley, and there was a first class in there. Boy, he used to ride us boots all the time--

just one thing after the other! So one evening we had chili for supper. I was pouring this chili out into these big trays that go out to the steam table. He came over there and started riding me. He wanted me to move faster. He says, "By gosh, I want you to know that you're going to have to move faster than that. You're not home on a farm somewhere shoveling cowshit." This is when I really got mad. I says, "Well, back home we call them ranches and not farms! I'd much rather be home doing that than working here for you!" That was the last of it. I got kicked out of there. I had to go back and find me another job someplace else (chuckle).

But it was good training. It was very strict. I very well remember, also, we had to go through all of these calisthenics. You had to memorize every step, and if you . . . and after two weeks, they called you up front and you had to go through every . . . if you made one flaw, you went back in line and started all over again. Of course, the first time I went up, well, I remembered every step, and I didn't make any mistakes. So I got the rest of the day off.

Marcello: Did you go right from the boot camp onto the USS New Orleans?

Eckel: No, I came home on leave first. Coming home on leave, why, one fellow talked me into . . . a friend of mine

from San Antonio. He says, "Well, you don't want to take the train home. We'll take the bus home." Well, we took the bus, and it was crowded--all of these sailors going different places through Texas. We got as far as El Paso, and we started drinking a little bit. Man, you talk about sick son-of-a-gun! This was the first time in my life I ever got drunk. Of course, I was only eighteen. Boy, we was mixing wine and liquor together! I had no idea that there was an explosion like that! The next day, man, my head was hanging out the bus the rest of the way into San Antonio. I was about ready to die.

But when I came back from leave, why, it was just a matter of waiting for transportation. They put your name up on a bulletin board and told you where you was going. They would take the sailors in groups. It all depended on when you came back from boot camp. In fact, this friend of mine out in California, why, since his leave time was shorter on account of travel, why, all of that group of sailors went on destroyers. Then the group that I was on, we all went to heavy cruisers. Of course, the New Orleans was over in Hawaii, so we had to await transportation. From San Diego, we went by tanker--beautiful trip, just like a pretty day like this--all the way up to Long Beach. They kept us there

at Terminal Island for a couple of weeks, and then we finally went over on the Saratoga to Hawaii and then got transferred to the cruisers from there.

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

Eckel: Oh, I thought it was great! Man, I'm ready to travel anytime! It was wonderful. I thought, "Wow, this is going to be wonderful to go to a place like this!" Of course, I enjoyed every minute I was over there. The only disappointment was, being a young fellow, why, of course, unmarried, too, why, you were restricted to the number of hours you had on the beach. That was the only disadvantage.

Marcello: When did you arrive in the Hawaiian Islands? You may have to approximate this date.

Eckel: It was in October, 1940. I would say around the 20th of October.

Marcello: In other words, you were there for approximately a little over a year before the actual attack itself took place.

Eckel: Oh, yes, yes, right.

Marcello: Describe what the cruiser New Orleans was like as you can best remember, that is, so far as the living conditions aboard the ship.

Eckel: Well, of course, we had three turrets--two forward and one aft. We had a well deck in the middle that had seaplane launchers on it. All of our movies were held on the well deck. Of course, this was in 1940, first part of '41. Let's see, in '41, we went to Bremerton Navy Yard for a complete changeover.

Marcello: Among other things, I'm sure you got a lot more anti-aircraft weapons aboard that ship.

Eckel: Yes, but only just a few, though. But actually they weren't really operational in 1940 when Pearl Harbor came about. We had . . . we used to have . . . let's see, not cafeteria-style, but . . . what's the other style of cooking you have? Family-style, wait on tables. That was really great. We used to have a lot of fun sitting around in the mess halls at the tables and shooting the bull and so on like that. We always had a good time. We had to work hard.

As a matter of fact, when I first went aboard ship, I was assigned to the second division. Our working station and everything was up on the quarter-deck. So we had . . . and my battle station was in number two turret. You had to work your way up. The first job you got was down in the powder room, all the way down in the bottom. Eventually, as you got to know

everybody and everything, well, you finally worked your way up into the turret itself.

There was one incident there . . . as a matter of fact, my very first job up in the turret, I was a tray man. Everytime that the shell and powder came up and they wanted to reload the gun, well, there was a man that swung the barrel open, and he would inspect to see that the barrel was clear. Then it would come to a load position--automatically come to a load position. Then I had to drop the tray, and the shell and the powder went in there. I was so anxious to do my job right because I wanted to be up in this area that the first time that the man says, "Okay, this is what you do . . . we went through a few trials, and he said, "Now let's see how fast we can do it." I came down so quick that this coxswain--we called him "Ski"--I nearly cut his finger off. He had his finger right there at the barrel. I mean I really cut it way down to the bone. It took quite a few stitches to get it sewed up. I was so anxious to do my job right because . . . well, we had . . . it was just great.

**Marcello:** You mentioned this guy's name was "Ski." That was probably a nickname.

**Eckel:** Oh, yes, yes. It was a nickname, something like Rubaskowski or something like this. He was a blond-headed Polack, I guess you might say.

Marcello: I gather that when you went aboard the New Orleans you were probably on the deck force. Is that correct?

Eckel: Yes.

Marcello: Like you mentioned, your battle station was in the number two turret. What was your rank at this time?

Eckel: Well, of course, you went in as apprentice seaman and then seaman second class. Our working station was the quarter-deck. We had a whole slew full of five-inch antiaircraft guns clear across the quarter-deck. Of course, then, your gangplanks were on your port and starboard off the quarter-deck and the OD stood his watch in port on the quarter-deck. So this always had to be kept nice and clean. We holystoned the wood, you know. That was done with sand and a brick and a stick in the brick. We holystoned and washed the deck down. We had to wash the paint work all the time because the two stacks were right there--came up from the fire room. They would always . . . after you've been out at sea, well, those stacks were pretty well dirty, and you'd have to wash all of that paint work down. But as far as knowing anything about an anti-aircraft gun, all I knew was that it was there. Even though our cleaning station was on the quarter-deck, the gun crews always took care of the antiaircraft guns, so we just worked around.

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

Eckel: Of course, I got transferred down to the black gang later on. As a matter of fact, I got transferred in 1941 and went to the black gang, so I was actually a fireman third class. It was equivalent to a seaman second class.

They had a first class boatswain's mate, and his name was Jacobs. He was Jewish. He had a five o'clock shadow that was something. Well, walking around ship, I'd see these fellows in dungarees back there in the fantail. They were playing acey-deucey and other card games. Here we are out at sea, and they're lounging around. I thought, "Boy, what a racket! I need to get in a job like this." So I find out that these guys were from the engineering force. Well, I need a transfer. So I kept asking my boatswain's mate and kept asking my chief for a transfer. "No, no, no way. Just don't have it."

One day I'm up there cleaning up my work area on the quarter-deck. We got a whole bunch of new boots come in from boot camp. Jacobs lines them all up, and he says, "Alright, how many of you guys want to be transferred to the black gang?" Boy, I heard that.

He was giving these guys offers just like this, bingo. I said, "Boy, how come I don't get something like this?" I was really burned up. I just threw my tools down or whatever I had in my hand at the time, and I went over to my boatswain's mate, a man by the name of Miller. I said, "How come these guys get offers and I don't? Don't I rate before those fellows?" He said, "Well, do you really want a transfer?" I said, "I've been asking you for months for a transfer down there." He says, "Alright, fill out another chit. I'll take it over there and see if the chief will let you go." Well, the chief signed it, but the lieutenant in charge of the division kind of fussed and fumed about it. I politely told him, "Well, I feel that I should be entitled to transfer down there before these other fellows do." I said, "By gosh, I know a little bit about the ship and everything." So he reluctantly signed it. He said, "Okay, I'll sign you away."

So the first job I got was working in a compartment. I was then a fireman third class, got my rate changed. What we had to do, we had to go down where all the engineers slept. We slept in the far back end of the ship next to the chiefs' quarters. We had to rip up all the linoleum. We had this red linoleum all over the steel deck, but it was glued down. We had to

rip up every fraction of this until we got the steel nice and shiny. Of course, we found out later on the reason why. It was because they were going to take that compartment, and they were going to cut the whole deck out of it underneath and make it into the ammunition locker. We were getting some newer guns put on the fantail. This was just the beginning of the ship's conversion, so we got involved in tearing all of this linoleum up.

Marcello: In general, how would you describe the on-the-job training that you received on board the New Orleans in these pre-Pearl Harbor days? Was it excellent training? Was it thorough training? Just how would you describe it?

Eckel: Well, I'll tell you. It was real good training. Working in the engineering force, the chiefs and first class petty officers were always willing to help you out to teach you all about it. They gave you as much independence as you can imagine about it. Of course, some of the water tenders, second class water tenders, they'd ride the young fellows a little bit. But the older fellows, like the first class and chiefs, why, they'd explain things to you, let you go on your own. They'd give you a certain side of the fire room to

maintain and inspect behind you. When you were on watch, why, as long as you worked and did what you were told to do, why, they just left you alone.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale aboard the New Orleans in that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Eckel: Oh, I would say it was excellent. There was always something to do. They had ship's parties, although I never did go to one. We used to have recreation, plenty of it. For example, they had a recreation landing over at . . . right alongside Pearl Harbor. They made some vast improvements to it just before the war, as a matter of fact. We'd go over there and play football and baseball between ourselves, the different divisions and so on.

One thing I thoroughly enjoyed looking forward to was . . . there was a place on the west side of the island. It was called Nanakuli. It was a recreation camp. It was a tent city, fixed up. Well, we would go over like on Saturday morning--over to Aiea Landing--and catch the train. All the sailors . . . it was divided up into different weekends. Battleship sailors would go one weekend, then cruiser sailors, tin cans, and so on like this. Well, cruiser sailors, when we signed up for it . . . and we were allowed, say, twenty-five slots or fifty slots to go.

We'd go over to the . . . catch the train. The train would haul us all the way around the island, through the cane fields and everything, and dump us over there and say, "Okay, we'll pick you up Monday morning." Well, we'd sleep in the tents, and they had cafeteria-type serving over there. Beer was ten cents a can. Man, we could . . . they didn't care about what your age was. We'd just drink beer like all get-out! If you wanted to go swimming, you just walked across the highway--beautiful beach over there, nice sandy beach. If you wanted to go mountain climbing, we'd go way up into the mountains and climb up there and hunt mongoose and try to capture them. We would set up a little wooden box, you know, and then bait them and catch them like that. We'd have . . . the local girls would come by and have a dance with us on Saturday night and have hula dances. We had nickelodeons there playing all of the time. It was just great. I always kind of looked forward to that weekend when I could sign up and go for that.

Marcello: While we're on this particular subject, what was the liberty routine like for the New Orleans? Now I know that after you got over to Pearl Harbor, the cruiser division that you were usually went out on weekly maneuvers or training exercises. In fact, you would usually

go out on a Monday and come back in on a Friday.  
Now when you'd come back in, what was the liberty  
routine usually like?

Eckel: Well, it was port and starboard. As a single fellow,  
you had . . . you were able to go wherever you wanted  
to go, but you had to be back by midnight. Of course,  
you always . . . if we were tied up to the piers, well,  
then you had to catch the boats to the landing. Then  
you either . . . whatever way you could get to town,  
either by taxi, bus, or train . . . they finally set  
up a . . . in '41, they just ran a shuttle train back  
and forth. In every beer joint you had to show your  
ID to get in, so that left me out in position. So  
this is why I kind of looked forward to either going  
to Nanakuli or over to the recreation camp at Aiea  
Landing, because there was no . . . they didn't ask  
you your age. Of course, I loved my beer, so this was  
ideal for me.

Marcello: I assume that on a weekend in Honolulu that the streets  
were just packed with sailors, especially around Beretania  
and Hotel Street and Canal Street and that particular  
area.

Eckel: That's right, yes. It was just . . . from one place to  
another, it was just . . . especially into "Boy's Town"  
area over there. It was just packed with people.

Actually, I didn't really stay too much in downtown. We used to . . . I very seldom went to town by myself. I'd always go with some fellows whom I knew either from boot camp or from the ship itself. We would most of the time go over to Waikiki and walk around there or go through the zoo. They had a beautiful theater over there. We used to go to the Waikiki Theater and see some movies. They gave a good variety of food, too. We'd enjoy eating Chinese food and different varieties they had over there that . . . you got tired of eating the same old stuff aboard ship all the time. We used to have liberty on Wednesday afternoons, so you could knock off.

Marcello: That is, if the ship was in.

Eckel: Right, yes. Well, even when we was out at sea, why, Wednesday afternoons was kind of a relaxing day for everybody because Thursday was field day. You had to get everything all set up and really get everything in good shape because on Saturday there was usually always an inspection. After inspection on Saturday, why, that was it for the weekend unless you had the duty. Then it was just a light duty of something.

Marcello: Now, normally speaking, when you had been out at sea all week and you had come in and had gone on liberty, what was the normal condition of those sailors when

they came back aboard that ship after being on liberty?  
Now I'm not trying to imply that everybody was knee-walking drunk when they came back aboard that ship. But, in general, how would you describe the condition of those sailors when they'd come back aboard that ship from weekend liberty?

Eckel: Well, they all seemed to be relaxed. They always had something to talk about of what they had been doing or . . . no, I didn't see . . . very few of the fellows aboard our ship were drunk, you might say. They were . . . the ones who were of age to drink didn't really go into it too great. There might have been a few of them here and there, but as far as the black gang crew, why, it was just a quiet bunch. We always talked about what we had done and where we had been and so on like that. But we seemed to be more relaxed from getting away from the ship for awhile.

Marcello: I assume that this liberty routine did not change any right up until the actual Japanese attack itself.

Eckel: That's right, yes. It was the same arrangement.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk a little bit, then, about the training exercises that were undertaken during this pre-Pearl Harbor period. Like we mentioned earlier, the New Orleans usually left on a Monday--went out on a Monday--and stayed

out all week, and usually it came back in on a Friday. Now describe what the training exercises were like that the New Orleans engaged in when it was out for those extended periods of time.

Eckel: We would go out . . . actually, I'd say this much. Starting in January, '41, we traveled at night with darkened ship. All ships out there were darkened. You had no lights at all on topside except your running lights. That's all that was showing. If they ever caught you up there with as much as a light as a cigarette, boy, I mean, they really worked you over good for petty things like that--liberty restrictions and so on like that! They got your name written down, and if you continued on, why, you finally went up in front of the captain about it.

We were . . . if you were in the deck force, which I was for a short period of time there in the first part of '41, we was always having various drills--not so much abandon ship as it was training drills for general quarters and actual firing practice. We'd go out with several other cruisers, and we would run different maneuvers. At night we would anchor off one of the islands farther on down south where we would kind of just . . . oh, the whole squadron, you might say, would anchor off.

But during the daytime, why, then it was always . . . we'd launch our planes and recover our planes. As a matter of fact, this was one of the jobs I had when I was in the deck force, was in the plane recovery crew. The same fellow that I was telling you about, "Ski," that I almost cut his finger off? Well, we were standing up on the catapult, and when the plane is picked up off the water . . .

I may have to kind of explain that to you. The plane would come down, and we would swing a boom out. We'd drag a net. Then the plane would taxi up. On his pontoon they had a little hook, and he'd get caught in the net. The radioman sitting down with the pilot would grab the crane hook, hook onto the wing, and then we'd pick it up and swing it over the crane and then drop it onto the well deck onto a little cradle. Well, our job was to handle the lines, the rope, as they were hung off the plane to guide it down in a straight line so it was in between the two catapults.

Well, we were up there and as the plane went over, we would drop--we'd squat down--because there was a guard rail on both sides. "Ski" was standing next to me, and he was giving me instructions what to do. Of course, I had been doing this off and on for a couple of weeks. So

he nudged me, and I couldn't figure why he . . . I thought maybe I was standing in the wrong place or something, so I slid over. But what he was actually nudging me about was, I was standing in the loop of the line, and all of a sudden, ZIP!! I'm flying in the air, and I thought, "What in the heck!" I grabbed onto this guard rail, and I'm screaming like all get-out. What had happened was that this loop was around my left leg, and here I am swinging out over onto the well deck.

Fortunately, why, the coxswain who was blowing the boatswain's whistle to the crane operator saw it, and then he swung back to where he could pull me back down the catapult. I got a very severe rope burn on my left leg from it, so I limped on down.

As I got on down onto the well deck, why, I went by this one warrant officer down there. He said . . . of course, in the meanwhile, here comes all these corpsmen up there. They thought they had an injured guy up there and, man, he'd fallen down in the well deck. He'd got a couple of broken bones and so on like this. As I walked by this warrant officer, he looked at me and growled and says, "Why don't you be careful next time!" Boy, that sure kind of got me mad at him!

But getting back to our training exercises, though, we always had gunnery practice, either by shooting the turrets at a moving target that some tugboat would be pulling. We would have . . . well, you would have control planes that would be flying over. As a matter of fact, one of the crews shot down one of those radio-controlled planes, and, boy, I'm telling you, the skipper was mad! Oh, was he mad! This was something new--this radio-controlled drone plane that they used to fly around. They were very expensive, and, of course, operating how you did and for what little money you had, you might say, in those days, why . . . I'll tell you. That antiaircraft crew really got chewed out good for shooting that little plane down.

Marcello: Now I assume that you were working in conjunction with the rest of the cruisers.

Eckel: Yes. I would say about 75 per cent of the time, right.

Marcello: Did you work very often with the battleships or the destroyers and vessels of that nature--or the carriers for that matter?

Eckel: The carriers, no. We never did work with any carriers. Sometimes we'd have a complete fleet maneuver, but most of the time was either with tin cans or submarines or with the other cruisers.

Talking about submarines, this was one of the things that we would do. We would be out there at times as an independent with a couple of tin cans. And a submarine would come along and fire at us. We never knew when this would take place. Of course, the lookouts were on duty, and then they'd yell, "Here comes the torpedo attack!" Of course, they were firing dummies at us. The object was, you know, to avoid being hit by a torpedo. Well, we got bumped a few times. I'll tell you that for sure.

As far as training in the black gang, it was just a matter of lighting the furnaces and boilers and then securing them down again. Of course, one of the things we had to do, also, was change out the various burners. They had different spray tips, and the length of the burner was different, also. We would run through different speed runs, and we had to change these burners out in order to give you more steam power. Actually, in the black gang when you were out, if you were not on watch, with the boilers going we had nothing else to do. We would go back out on the fantail and lay around and play acey-deucey and just do nothing. It was too hot to work in the fire rooms, so you had off. The only time you were asked to go in there would be when you were on watch.

For example, there were a couple of times when we went out to Midway Island. We took some Marines out there for . . . who were being stationed out there and brought some back. On this one trip, we took . . . I was in the black gang at the time, and we did nothing on the whole trip. We had about an eight-day run. We would be on four hours watch, and then the rest of the time we'd be off. There might be as many . . . we had so many crews that we would be off as much as twenty-four to thirty hours before we'd ever go back on watch again, and we'd just lay around out back and take a sun tan and just have a good time.

Marcello: Where was your battle station after you had transferred to the black gang?

Eckel: Number one fire room. If you were not on watch in the fire room, then you were on the damage control crew, which was above the armor-piercing deck. All the fire rooms were below the armor-piercing deck.

Marcello: Once more, I gather that this routine, just like your liberty, really didn't vary too much as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941. The routine stayed more or less the same.

Eckel: Yes, I'd say so, yes. There was no difference.

Marcello: Now at this time, and as a young sailor, how much thought did you ever give to the possibility of the United States entering war?

Eckel: Well, I felt that it was going to happen, but when and where was the question. It was just a matter of time. You could continue to read on about the various things that were happening all over the world.

I well remember in June--the 22nd of June, as a matter of fact, the day before my birthday--we were all sitting around in the compartment listening to a radio. They had a radio piped into the various compartments. We'd listen to all of the favorite shows--"Hit Parade," especially. Everybody always looked forward to listening to "Hit Parade" on Saturday nights. We were all sitting around. We were playing pinochle. Man, that was something that we really learned! Of course, the first class petty officers, why, they always taught the younger fellows how to play pinochle. We were all sitting there playing pinochle, and then they announced where Germany invaded Russia. Man, that was the conversation for about at least two days! "How soon are we going to go in?" "Man, are we ready to go!" "Let's get with it!" We were just real anxious and looked forward to actually going into war to be truthful with you. But we had hoped it was going to be on the basis where we would be in position to do something, you know, to really step out in there.

Marcello: You mentioned Germany. I assume that when you did think of war, most eyes were turned toward Germany rather than toward Japan.

Eckel: Oh, yes, right. Well, we knew there was a Japanese threat out there--we knew this--because of what all was taking place over in China and so on like that. But we had no idea. Of course, this is one of the reasons why most of the fleet was in Hawaii. Later on, I do remember that there was an order that came out saying that a certain percentage of the fleet would have to be out at sea over the weekends. Eventually, we did start staying out more on weekends. Only about every other weekend we would be in port. We would have to anchor out off the island somewhere. Or else we'd anchor off of Waikiki Beach at night rather than go in.

Marcello: In any of the bull sessions that you may have attended, did any of the old salts ever talk very much or discuss the capabilities of the Japanese Navy?

Eckel: No.

Marcello: I was wondering if perhaps you had had some old salts aboard that had formerly been with the Asiatic Fleet and if they ever talked very much about the Japanese.

Eckel: Yes, there were a couple of fellows whom I knew. I can't remember their names. But all they used to talk

about was all of the good times that they had out there and about the Chinese girls and how living conditions were and everything. But as far as . . . no, we never did talk about the Japanese at all.

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

Eckel: Well, I never had anything against them, to be honest with you, because I had some friends in high school who were Japanese. As a matter of fact, in San Antonio we have this sunken garden in Breckinridge Park, and it was called Japanese Sunken Garden. This family who had been maintaining and operating it for quite a few years, well, their boys were going to the same high school I was. I got to know them quite well. I never had anything against them at the time.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us up to those days immediately prior to the Japanese attack itself. What I want you to do at this point is to give me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and from there we'll go into the Sunday itself. But let's start, first of all, with Saturday, December 6, 1941, and give me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on that particular day.

Eckel: Well, I remember I had liberty.

Marcello: You would have probably come into port on a Friday.  
Is that right?

Eckel: No.

Marcello: You didn't come in that day.

Eckel: No, just let me brief you up as to what took place.

Marcello: Sure.

Eckel: First of all, we had just come back from Bremerton Navy Yard in a roundabout way. The first thing was, we were holding trial runs and so on like that in the Puget Sound. We ran into a sunken log and bent the propeller shaft up, so this kept us from going back. We finally went down to Long Beach and stayed a couple of days. Then we went up to Mare Island and went into dry dock. We had a new propeller put on and got the shaft all straightened out. I don't know if there was any damage to the shaft or not.

We left there and we went back to Pearl. The day before we got in . . . as a matter of fact, I had the evening watch in the fire room, number one fire room. Just before we got off watch, they sounded an alarm for man overboard. Well, this called for an additional steam required by the engine room to go into reverse, so we had to stop the ship and everything. Of course,

they had two different sets of turbines--one for forward and one for reverse. So we had to boost up the power, and . . . whatever took place, we don't know. I found out later on that there was a fellow that actually did go overboard, and they never did recover him. Now who it was, I have no idea because it was somebody up on the deck force. I understand it was somebody they wanted to get rid of. Now I don't know anything about it. So anyway, everybody had to go to quarters. They had to count everybody and see if everybody was there.

This is when the whole thing started. They found out later. Anyway, they stripped one of the turbines all to pieces. So when we got into port, we had Navy intelligence and the F.B.I. come aboard ship, and the engine room was out of bounds. Nobody was allowed down there except the Navy Yard engineers and the investigators to find out exactly why this turbine was this way. They did find out that the turbine . . . somebody . . . the Navy Yard workers in Bremerton had left a bunch of metal . . . now if there was actually sabotage by Navy Yard workers, or was it just from carelessness? We never did know because the investigation stopped after Pearl Harbor started.

So we were in a position to where we actually couldn't go to sea unless, you know . . . we were handicapped. We did finally go to sea after Pearl, but we only operated . . . we had four screws and only operated on three. We were in Pearl at least two weeks beforehand. We did not go out. We were first tied up at the . . . our normal buoys over at Aiea. We were there for about two days, and then they moved us to the shipyards. They were going to rebuild all of the turbines and everything right there in the shipyard.

Marcello: Now where was the New Orleans, then, in relation to Battleship Row? Where were you tied up that weekend of the attack?

Eckel: Well, we were actually opposite from them. We were in the Navy Yard itself. Without looking at the map, we were tied up alongside the dock where there was a big, huge crane--the biggest crane in all the Navy yards was out there. We were tied up alongside this crane. We were tied up against different ships for awhile, and then finally a couple of days beforehand they moved us around to the . . . alongside the dock by ourself. We were on . . . we still had a boiler lit to operate our own generators for power and so on

like this until they moved us alongside the dock, and then we took all of our power from the dock. So we secured the boilers down. We were getting all our water and power and everything from the docks itself.

So we were still under a normal routine as far as working conditions go. As a matter of fact, the fire rooms and engine rooms were still in a complete mess from the Navy Yard where we were still . . . because they had rebuilt all the boilers, had rebuilt all of the steamlines. We were still painting and cleaning up, and, man, we were cleaning up like everything! Everything that you can imagine was being painted. And, of course, as you were painting, why, you would find out where this valve went and this pipeline went. They all had to be restenciled--every one of these pipelines. So you were learning as you were working, you might say.

Marcello: Okay, so this brings us up, then, to Saturday, December 6, 1941. As you mentioned earlier, you were due to go on liberty. So pick up the story from that point.

Eckel: Saturday morning, as usual, was always inspection day. As a matter of fact, our division--I don't recall if all of the divisions were--but our division was involved with locker inspections. All your clothes had to be just

right. You had to have nothing out of the ordinary in there--in other words, no food or no girly pictures. You had to hide all of those. They'd come through and inspect your lockers and be sure they were all properly cleared up.

Then after inspection and everything, why, then liberty time came. It'd usually start about noon hour. I went ashore because I needed a few things for my own personal self. I went on to town and picked up what I needed at the various stores because a lot of things aboard in small stores, ship service didn't handle. I don't even ever recall going into the Navy Exchange in Pearl Harbor at all because I felt like . . . I enjoyed going to town. So I would walk around through the dime stores downtown and pick up little things like envelopes and stationery and soap and so on like this that I would . . . then I came back early. I remember that because I was . . . we used to have first-run movies aboard ship all the time. The movies usually started about 7:30 or eight o'clock, so I came back in time enough to see the movie on the well deck before I went to bed.

Marcello: Do you recall what the movie was that night?

Eckel: No, I sure don't because we had a different movie every night. There is no way to recall it.

Marcello: Incidentally, when was payday?

Eckel: The fifth and the twentieth. So this was payday weekend, you might say, and this is the reason why probably I might have gotten fifteen or twenty dollars for pay, possibly. I probably paid off some of my debts and so on.

Marcello: You say you only got fifteen or twenty dollars. Were you letting some of it ride on the books or what?

Eckel: Well, I had . . . my insurance was coming out, and I had an allotment which was going home. Of course, then you had to . . . automatically, why, the chits that you ran up at the "gedunk" stand, why, that came out of your pay, also. Then, of course, your barber. You had to have the chits in order to pay for your barber shop and your laundry and so on like this. You had to pay for all of that, you know. So this was, like I say, the first liberty after payday. So I looked forward to hitting the beach and getting a few things I needed.

Marcello: You mentioned that you came back aboard the ship relatively early and watched that movie. Then I assume you went to bed?

Eckel: Right, yes.

Marcello: Was there anything out of the ordinary that happened that particular night that you recall? In other words,

was there more than the usual number of drunks coming back aboard the ship or anything of that nature?

Eckel: No, I wouldn't say so. It was quiet and routine. You know, actually, most of the time when fellows who did heavy drinking and come back, when they hit the compartment they were pretty quiet. They never bothered one another. There might be a few rowdies, but they never disturbed another fellow. They would be drunk enough to where they'd come in and flop in their sack and that's it. They'd never make a loud noise of any kind.

Marcello: And, normally, would a person of this nature--or a person in this condition--be ready to fight the next day if the situation arose?

Eckel: Oh, yes. Yes, you bet. It would just be a . . . with reveille the way it was, why, you were up and ready to go to work the next day. Yes, you never saw anybody, you know, work in a hangover of any kind.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us to the Sunday of December 7 itself. So, again, pick up your routine as events unfolded on Sunday.

Eckel: Okay. Well, let's say as far as routine goes, we had went into a cafeteria-style eating aboard ship. This was done while we were in the Navy Yard. The serving line was set up in the mess quarters. We had two big

compartments where we usually . . . one was for the serving line. It was set up with tables. The other compartment was where the "gedunk" stand . . . and all serving tables were in that area. The serving line went up the ladder and out onto the well deck. Well, the Sunday routine was that you could sleep in as late as you wanted to. They had kind of a brunch-style Sunday morning breakfast. We would . . . you could eat up to about ten o'clock, if I recall correctly. I might be wrong.

I always woke up early enough to where I'd go down and eat my breakfast and probably get ready to go to church. I had a bunk in the engineering compartment that was way up against the outer wall of the ship. It was kind of a crammed-up little bunk back in there. It was hard for people to get in and out of, so nobody ever bothered me back in there. I was a little hermit all by myself back in there. I would sleep in as late as I could. But if you stood in line--just to show you--if you stood in line and if you were up on the well deck and colors sounded, why, you would have to turn around, stand at attention, and salute back toward the fantail. Well, these little nitty-gritty things in my own mind, "Well, to heck with that. That's for the birds." So my habit was that I'd

wait till I'd hear the call for colors, five minutes till eight. Then I knew the Marines were all lined up back there. So what I'd do . . . I knew that nobody'd be in the chow line, so I'd slip on my clothes, and I'd run up through two sets of ladders, out onto the fantail, across the well deck and the hangar and everything, and then get down in the chow line before colors would go off at exactly eight o'clock. That way I'd be served and everything, so this was a good deal. But it didn't work out that way that morning.

Marcello: Incidentally, what sort of a morning was it in terms of climate, weather, and that sort of thing?

Eckel: Well, I saw very little at that particular time. But you hardly had any wind in the mornings. It was very calm and very little wind. Usually, the wind picked up in the afternoons with the rain clouds up against the mountains. But it was a warm morning. I know that. Our uniform of the day . . . see, the black gang wore dungarees all of the time. But on the weekends, in order to eat chow and in order to be on top-side, you had to be in uniform of the day, which was undershirt and white shorts. That was it.

Marcello: Okay, so get back to your routine, then, on December 7.

Eckel: Well, so, of course, I was laying in the bunk, and I heard the call for colors. I thought, "Well, I'd better hurry up and get over into the chow line." So I jump up and I . . . of course, I always just slept in my underwear, so I just put on my shorts and my socks and my shoes and ran up two flights of stairs until I hit the fantail. Just as soon as I hit the hatch cover on the fantail, why, all Marines were standing across the back underneath the canvas getting ready to raise the colors. The bugler was back there, and a few fellows were standing around on the fantail-- not too very many to speak about. I looked over there and saw this Japanese plane come right down . . . Japanese torpedo plane come right down.

Marcello: Did you know instantly that it was a Japanese plane?

Eckel: Well, I heard the plane first, and it sounded real close. I swung around and looked, and I saw the plane. At the angle I could not see any markings on it. I thought to myself, "Now what the heck's that crazy fool doing down in the air?" because I knew that it was not a flight pattern for Ford Island.

Until the plane came up to where I could look at the side of it and I saw that big red ball on it, then I knew right then and there that it was a Japanese plane.

I thought, "A Japanese plane?" You know, I'm stunned. I'm standing and looking at it. Then when I saw that torpedo . . . and at the same time he dropped this torpedo. It was the first torpedo plane that flew in. I knew then and there. I said, "Well, it looks like this is it!" I mean, it was just the shock of seeing it. Everybody was still standing there watching them planes. We still hadn't moved any. I actually stood there with the rest of the fellows and saw the torpedo run through the water and hit the battleship over there.

Marcello: What battleship was this?

Eckel: Well, without looking at a map to say, I don't know. I don't know. To me, it looked like it was the Oklahoma.

Marcello: Anyway, this plane was completely ignoring the cruisers over there and was heading right toward those battleships.

Eckel: That's right. That's right, yes. That was the very first plane that flew in there. They had no indications. Nobody had said anything. There was no word being passed that the airfields were being bombed or anything. As a matter of fact, they hadn't even started on Ford Island. It was the very first plane to actually come into Pearl itself. But I understood later on that they had hit Hickam and Wheeler Fields before they even came to Pearl.

Marcello: Well, anyway, you're all watching the show take place. What were your thoughts and what was your reactions when

you saw the torpedo drop and head for the battleship and perhaps even hit the battleship itself?

Eckel: Yes, I stood there and watched it hit the battleship itself as the plane veered off and saw the geyser come up. I said, "Gosh, darn! We're at war with Japan! What can I do? I need to do something! Should I be going to my battle station?" Of course, at the same time it was running through my mind that I needed to go and do something.

It was blowing . . . the loud speaker system went on and said, "All hands man your battle stations! Man your battle stations!" I said, "Well, I guess I better get to my battle station!" So I proceeded to start running then. I started heading off, so I started running off towards my battle station. I figured, "Well, this is where I need to go." I got as far as the . . . I'm running across the well deck where all the planes and everything are kept, and the catapult launchers. Everybody started running in different directions.

Marcello: In the meantime are more Japanese planes coming in by this time?

Eckel: Well, I couldn't see, to be truthful with you. I had more on my mind of doing something than of actually looking around to see what was actually taking place.

I knew that we had all of our canvas spread across all the guns and everything. The only thing I would say that would be exposed to being used would be machine guns, which were up at the bridge level or above in the crane area. If there was any ammunition there, I don't know because I knew nothing about guns as far as my experience goes. But I knew all the canvas was in the way.

Well, I saw quite a few fellows running up to the quarter-deck. I thought, "Well, maybe I can do something up there. What can I do down below?" So I go up there, and somebody says, "Oh, let's cut this canvas down!" We're all wanting to do something. So I reach in and grab my pocketknife. We started cutting all the different ropes that were holding this canvas on. I'm up there and the OD is standing there, and he's saying, "Well, we'd better get underway! We'd better get underway." I thought, "Well, if we're going to get underway, I don't know what the heck I'm doing up here. We don't have any fire rooms lit or boilers on. What are we going to do?"

Marcello: Where were you getting power from at this time?

Eckel: Oh, from the dock itself. Our electrical power, our water--everything was coming from the dock. So I thought, "Well, I don't know anything about this job up here, so

I'd better go down to where my battle station actually is, and that's the number one fire room." By this time, there was getting quite a few fellows over there. Well, we were actually in each other's way. I said, "Well, I'm getting out of here! To heck with this!"

So I go on down--down to number one fire room. I get down there and all . . . we've got this armor-piercing deck cover which is flush with the deck. These are all opened all the time except when you're at sea. When you're at sea, well, then they're kept closed. They were all open. There was not a living soul down there in that number one fire room.

So I decided, "Well, if we're going to do something, maybe somebody ought to get on the telephone and see if somebody else is coming down here." I picked up the telephone, and I get all plugged in, ready to receive any orders. Nobody . . . I don't hear anything. I figured, "Well, what if something actually happened to the ship, and here we've got all of these hatches open?" So I go off to the two sides and close these hatches down and get everything secured down. Whatever the case may be, if something should come through the side or one way or another, why, this compartment would be separated from the rest of it.

So I'm sitting down there waiting for action to take place. I've got all of the hatches closed. I'm

standing there with the earphones on my ears to where I can listen to any orders. Still nobody shows up, and all of a sudden everything goes black. All of the power is cut off from the beach.

Marcello: This is when, I guess, somebody had probably cut the cables or what have you from which you were getting the power on the ship.

Eckel: Right. I understand that somebody yelled at somebody over there, and this civilian came along with an ax and cut the darn thing with an ax and says, "Okay, you're on your own!" As a matter of fact, I heard later on that they even let some of the lines loose and let the ship drift on out for a little bit. Here I am, hoping to get a boiler started with no help.

Marcello: Nobody was down in the fire room yet.

Eckel: No, no. They were all still topside. As a matter of fact, nobody showed up for at least an hour. Of course, I didn't know whether to leave or to actually stay. So I decided, "Well, I'm trained for one thing. This is my battle station. I'm here first and I'm going to stay right here and see if I can be of any help in my area rather than be up there where I don't know how to do anything." So that's about all I actually done, was sit down there in that fire room in the pitch dark hoping

for somebody to finally show up to tell me what to do or what else to proceed to do.

Marcello: Incidentally, on this weekend how many officers . . . were most of the officers ashore at the time of the attack?

Eckel: Well, I don't know. I can't answer that.

Marcello: What were your thoughts when you were down there below decks while all of the action was taking place up topside?

Eckel: Well, I was just hoping that nothing would get to me. I figured, "Well, it's war and I hope it isn't that serious an attack that we can't overcome it." I was actually thinking about what my duties should be. "What can I do to get a boiler lit? I've got no matches!" You had to . . . you have a rag on a long rod. You've got to light this rag, and then you stick it into the . . . and then turn on the fuel in order to light it. I've got no matches to get it lit with. I think somebody else should be down here with me to give me the authority to go ahead and do something. I figured, "Well, what can I do if something does come through the side of the ship? How am I going to save myself?" That's about the only thing I thought about. As far as leaving the area, I'd say to myself, "I'm not leaving! I'm just not going to leave!"

Marcello: Could you hear any of the explosions or the noise and what have you that was taking place on topside?

Eckel: Yes, I could. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I could feel the vibration of the ship from the antiaircraft guns being fired. Of course, our air comes from up above, so all of this noise is being transmitted down through the blowers. I could feel the vibration of the ship from the various bombs that were dropping around the ship. I would say that . . . well, gee. Of course, with the bombs coming down, I still told myself, "If I'm going to be any value, I should be right here to assist. What valves can I close off to save the ship from sinking?"

Marcello: Why was it that nobody else in the black gang was coming down there? Did you ever find out why?

Eckel: Yes, I did. Because they were all up on the deck above helping move the ammunition. There was no power, so all the hoists for the five-inch shells were not being operational. So everything was being moved by hand from one area to another. I was one of the first engineers to be up out of the compartment and one of the first ones to be up on topside while everybody else was still in their bunk sleeping. So I'm actually the first engineer to head for the fire rooms. I'm ahead of everybody else.

So I go below, and then I just . . . as a matter of fact, when I went up from one side of the fire room to the other to close the armor-piercing hatch covers, I look around and I don't see a soul at all in the compartment area. Of course, I figured, "Well, maybe they just haven't got up." This is all within ten minutes of the attack, so I'm just securing everything all down and getting it all ready, hoping that somebody . . . I said, "Well, any minute somebody's going to show up, and here we're going to be doing something." But nobody ever showed up.

Marcello: How long was it before you finally got topside again?

Eckel: Oh, I'd say at least four hours.

Marcello: What did things look like when you finally did get up on topside?

Eckel: It was complete shock. I was just absolutely stunned to the amount of damage I saw everywhere, especially to the battleships. I just couldn't believe it.

Marcello: I assume that prior to the war that Battleship Row was a rather impressive sight.

Eckel: I would say so, yes, with the ships running around all the time, and the crews. Especially on Saturday morning you see all of the various crews lined up for inspection and all in their whites and so on. It was real impressive.

Marcello: Of course, things changed when you emerged on topside again.

Eckel: Oh, man, it was . . . the oil and the burning and the sunken ships. I just couldn't believe it. I went back there to the well deck, and I just stood there for at least thirty minutes to an hour before I could even move to walk back to go do something else. Of course, we weren't fed or anything.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what sort of an appetite you had.

Eckel: Well, I never was hungry to be truthful with you. When I finally did get around to eat it must have been about two o'clock in the afternoon, and they still were serving breakfast. Of course, everything was cold by then because it still was . . . we went back to auxiliary power again. We had to finally get the fire room lit. They weren't able to cook up too much at the time with what power they had, so it was a pretty cold breakfast.

Marcello: What sort of a task did you have or what sort of jobs were you doing in the aftermath of the attack?

Eckel: Nothing. Not a thing. We stayed aboard ship. We were restricted to the ship. We could not go anywhere or do anything. We actually stayed there. Now if any other divisions went anywhere . . . we didn't know if we were actually going to get underway or not. It was just a

matter of standing by for orders. The rumors were that we were supposed to get underway, and all of the engineers were to stay put and prepare the ship to get underway, possibly. We had no idea.

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

Eckel: That the Japanese were out there. They were out searching for them to see exactly where they're at so we can . . . we were actually waiting for military flights to come in to give us a report and what procedures to take. But we were putting ammunition aboard ship. We did all of that . . . actually, all of our ammunition had been taken off--I forgot to mention this--because all of the ships that went up into the dock area had their ammunition taken off. We had some ammunition, but it was just kind of ready ammunition. But in the main lockers they were taken out. So this is what we did Sunday afternoon, was bring all of the ammunition back aboard ship.

Marcello: Well, where were you getting the five-inch ammunition and so on that you were firing during the attack itself?

Eckel: They were in the lockers locked up on the quarter-deck and in the various places around the guns. As far as down below, there was very little, very little.

Marcello: In the aftermath of the attack, how did your attitude toward the Japanese change? Or what was your attitude toward the Japanese now?

Eckel: Well, they were the enemy. That was still the way I looked at it. It was just something that we had to do. I hated them for what they did. As far as the Japanese today, I still . . . even though I buy a lot of their products, I still have this resentment against them very much. Of course, just like now, I know how much the Japanese own in Honolulu as far as hotels and so on like this, and I kind of resent the fact. I think the government should say, "Well, we don't mind you owning an interest, but you're going a little too far." But as far as your engineering goes today, I say they're doing outstanding work.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Eckel, I want to thank you for taking your time to come and talk with me. It's been a very enlightening interview, and I think you've added some things that are certainly going to be of historical significance and importance later on for researchers.