



Art Buell

United States Navy

Machinist Mate 1st Class

Pacific Theater

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Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer: Rick Randle

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Rick: Tell us a little about where you were born and growing up and how you first decided to join up in the armed forces.

Art: Well it was 1935 in the depression and unemployment was impossible at that time so many of the young folks like me had their eye on the service, the Army or the Navy. That was in Belmont, California.

Rick: You grew up in California?

Art: That's about 80 miles east of Los Angeles and I grew up there until I joined the Navy.

Rick: Then you joined the Navy and did you have basic training?

Art: Yes I went to the basic training school in San Diego, the naval base.

Rick: Okay, tell us about shipping overseas.

Art: There's a little bit before that. I was assigned to the aircraft carrier Lexington and we'd go out on maneuvers and come back in Friday night. And every time we'd come back into port I saw the Medusa sitting there and I thought, "*That's for me.*" So I couldn't transfer to that ship, there was a lot of red tape and so I waited until I shipped over, I could request at that time my duty. So I requested the Medusa and I was granted and I wasn't on there very long and, "*Zoom!*" the Medusa was assigned to Pearl Harbor permanently.

Rick: The Medusa was a cruiser?

Art: No, the Medusa was a repair ship and a repair ship being a ship with the foundry, machine shop, eclectic shop, optical shop, and things of that nature. So it was not a fighting ship although we did have guns.

Rick: So you were originally on the aircraft carrier Lexington, what were your duties on the Lexington?

Art: I was in the engineering department. I was in the air compressor gang.

Rick: Then you switched over to the Medusa and then as soon as you got switched they sent you right to Pearl Harbor?

Art: That's right and I got training, I didn't mention this, but I was trained in San Diego for a machinist to operate a lathe and so on and that's the type of machinery they had on the Medusa. Radial drills and lathes and metalworking apparatus.

Rick: So that was right up your alley?

Art: I like it.

Rick: What year was it that you arrived at Pearl Harbor, '41?

Art: No, 1940. I spent a couple of years there before the Pearl Harbor.

Rick: Tell us what pre-war Honolulu and Pearl Harbor was like.

Art: Very nice. Honolulu was always a nice town and it was a mid-sized town about the size of Salt Lake City and it was a very nice town. Pearl Harbor was about 6 miles from town so we'd spend some time riding bicycles and various swimming and laying on the beach and it was nice.

Rick: Was there any hint or mention in those days that you might ever be fighting the Japanese or did you ever suspect any kind of action?

Art: I would say, and I was an enlisted man, and I'm unable to say what was going on in diplomatic circles, but as far as I was concerned no – we had no inkling of any problem at all.

Rick: Is there anything else you want tell us that happened before December 7th?

Art: I think I should describe the ship maybe at this time. The ship was commissioned in 1924, it was an older ship and it was about 585 feet long which is about roughly 2 football fields long and about 80 feet wide and the space about 8,000 tons and had a draft of about 22 feet. It was built as a combination cargo and passenger ship; it was not built for a fighting ship. Guns were very little, we had 5 inch guns and two 5 inch guns and several machine guns, so it was not a prime target but we could take care of ourselves.

Rick: Tell us just what you were doing on that infamous day.

Art: On December 7th -I'll have to preface. I was a machinist mate first class and we had bunks available but most of the people in the shop, machine shop and I was in the machine shop, got cots and just spread them down in-between the machines and so I was down there when the war started I was down in my cot in the machine shop.

Rick: And that was at the bottom or the base of the ship, is that right?

Art: That was down near the waterline, it used to be a cargo area but it was made into a machine shop.

Rick: Take us through your experience there; did you just hear noise first?

Art: I'll have to, that's quite vivid. I was laying in my cot, I was awake it was around 7:30 in the morning and I heard some noise, we had the portholes open, and I heard noise and that was Sunday morning it was supposed to be quiet on Sunday morning. So I

looked out the porthole and I saw smoke rising, now the Medusa was tied to a buoy near Pearl City on the opposite side of the Navy yard in-between was Ford Island and the battleships were all in battleship row, they were not anchored they were moored. And so I didn't have a direct view of them, but I did have a direct view of the USS Utah and a couple of cruisers were on our side of the island. And I heard a noise and I saw the smoke and my first thought was, "*God it must be the Army holding maneuvers.*" Because there was nothing scheduled and I just happened to look out the porthole and I saw an airplane, several planes flying around and I saw the red orange colored circle on the wing and I thought, "*That's a Japanese plane, what are they doing here?*" And we didn't know anything about; see the diplomatic circles were a little bit different than the maybe the machine shop talk. So it didn't take long, of course then the general alarm sounded and we closed the portholes and couldn't see anymore and we were, I'd say there was about pretty close to 50 people assigned to that machine shop and that included the electrical shop. We were not ships company, now ships company had duties like ammunition handling and gun control and gun stations and so on, and we were in the repair gang and the repair gang we had a couple of valves to close and the main task was to stay out of the way, let the other people do the job because they knew what they were doing. So we really had nothing to do so I climbed up the ladder and I could see the Utah and the Utah was already part way over, part way tilted and I could tell it had been torpedoed and was starting to sink; and it finally capsized turned completely over. We were kind of out of the way and we were not in the main line of fire, fortunately I'm here and the people that were in the main line of fire are not here, so it had some advantages. But being out of the line of fire we could just see what was going on and it didn't take long to realize what was going on. And after that we had a miniature submarine almost got us but not quite. The destroyer saw it about the same time we did and we started shooting at it and the destroyer ran right into it and sank it and it was in the inside the harbor so the talk about miniature submarines is true because I saw one in action and we were not damaged, the ship received some machine gun fire but that's all, bombs hit all around us and we were just lucky.

Rick: When they hit that Utah and it was partially tipped, did you see it actually go under the water?

Art: No. I got out of the way of the ship's company and at that time the air was full of shrapnel, we call it "*flack*", and they were heavy pieces and they were likely to drop on people and I didn't have a helmet so they shoed me down below. But I could see what, after that I couldn't tell really what was going on until the shooting ceased about a quarter to 9. It started about 5 minutes to 7 to 8, 7:55 and ended about 9:45, we didn't know it had ended but it turned out that way.

Rick: There was a second wave that came in then, did it cease for a while?

Art: Yes, that's true, about 15 minutes it seemed like there was nothing happening and then the second wave came in around 8:30 or 9 o'clock, I'm talking Honolulu time which is different than our time. But they came in and they all left about 9:30, at 9:45 the all clear was sounded and at that time we got a chance to look around and see what had

happened. It was pretty dramatic; there were men in the water and oil burning on the water and so on.

Rick: We want to hear the details about that. So after that all clear sounded you went up on top on the deck of your ship, did you get off your ship?

Art: No, I went back down.

Rick: Then tell us in detail about the carnage and what you saw after that all clear had been sounded.

Art: One of the problems is that people don't realize, in my case I saw what happened and I went down below and all I could see was the inside of the ship, I don't know what was happening outside. And an example, I used to live here in Salt Lake, a man that was on the USS Oklahoma and he was on another ship that capsized also and that was on Sunday morning and he wasn't rescued until about Tuesday morning following. He was on there and people asked him, "*What happened?*" and he says, "*I don't know what happened, I didn't see anything happen, all I know is that ship turned over and I almost drowned.*" So I can't really define specific items, I know there were, of course we heard later on of acts of courage and so on.

Rick: But you did see, at one point, the oil slicks in the water and men in the water?

Art: Yes, most of that occurred where the battleships were, on the other side of the island on the Navy Yard side. But the ships that were on our side, on the Westside of Ford Island, there were men in the water and ships were sunk and the Utah was capsized and we were not in the center of the activity but there was plenty going on.

Rick: Were they going to prepare then for a Japanese invasion right after that?

Art: Yes, that's quite interesting. There were a lot of rumors going around of course, and the rumors were that the Japanese had landed on the other side of the island and they were coming over. Nothing happened so we got at night, in the evening we got all of the, and I was included, all of the leading officer's gave them a gun but it was an old Springfield single shot rifle, and old 3030 – not very much in this modern day. But it was something, and I went ashore at Pearl City and we spent the night, every once in awhile you heard a twig snap in the dark and you'd feel like, it turned out nothing happened but there was a lot of anticipation at that time. We figured that we're gone and we had the attitude of, "*We're gone but we're going to take them with us.*" And nothing happened, nothing actually happened.

Rick: After that happened then were you assigned to still stay at Pearl there to fix and repair ships?

Art: Yes, see we were a repair ship and of course, we had working parties to go to the other ships and we had a welding party and welding equipment and other equipment and we repaired some of the equipment in our shop, electrical and mechanical mostly. And

we stayed there until it was about the 1st of April of 1943 before we left Pearl Harbor and then we went down south to Guadal Canal and down in that area.

Rick: Were you part of the invasion of Guadal Canal?

Art: No, see we went down there in 1943 and the invasion happened in 1942 about a year before that.

Rick: Your duties down there were just to continue to repair ships?

Art: The same, repair and there was no Navy Yard there, the nearest Navy Yard was down in Sydney, Australia and so we did a lot of work there. Machine shop work, Navy Yard work aboard ship.

Rick: After that where did you go?

Art: We were in unfamiliar islands and the ship rendered ground, damaged the bottom somewhat, not seriously but enough so it needed to be repaired so we went to the nearest Navy Yard which was Sydney, Australia so we went down there and that was kind of a break. Australia was very nice; they treated us real good down there. Then after that I went, personally went in different ships, I was transferred to the LST and Amphibious and we prepared for the invasion of Japan which never occurred and I'm glad I didn't. People now say, "*That was pretty mean to drop those bombs on Hiroshima.*" But it saved my life, I would've been gone if that hadn't happened and so would thousands of other Americans. Somebody had to die and it was either Japanese or Americans and so that was the choice, so President Truman and us chose to have the Japanese, they started the war so at that time we were antagonistic toward anything Japanese. And since then of course I and most of my compeers have mellowed and we like the Japanese now, they're very nice people.

Rick: Where were you when you heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped?

Art: I was in Guam, we were getting ready for the invasion and getting the ships ready and making sure that they had the supplies and were loaded, were prepared for the invasion. We were still there, we were just waiting for everybody to get ready, then we heard, "*The war is over.*" Boy that was a good feeling.

Rick: So you were in Guam then when VJ Day occurred? Tell us what happened on the ship and on other ships when that happened.

Art: Guam was a staging area, I guess you could call it that, many ship down there, Navy ships and on the LST's we carried Army Troops as well, invasion troops. And we were prepared but we didn't go, and we meaning all of the other ships also.

Rick: After VJ Day did you sail home fairly soon or did you still stay over there?

Art: No we stayed over there and repatriated the Japanese soldiers back to Japan and the Koreans back from Japan to Korea and things of that nature. Stayed there for about a year and a half or so afterwards. There were quite a few Navy ships, some ships most of the men that were demobilized came back by airplane and there were some passenger ships, but the fighting ships and the repair ships all stayed over there for about 2 years until everything was sort of settled down.

Rick: Did you stay in the service after that?

Art: Yes, I retired in 1958.

Rick: So you were over in Japan during the repatriation kind of?

Art: The Occupation, yes. And we were considered in the Occupation Army Group, the Occupation Group and we thought, our thought was that General McArthur was in charge and did a good job and I was surprised, I heard when he got back to the United States he was rather looked down on for what he did, but I think he did a good job.

Rick: Did you get to go ashore quite a bit during the Occupation?

Art: I think so, yes.

Rick: What was the attitude of the Japanese people?

Art: It was very good. They were mostly, diplomatically I don't know, but the people that we met on the streets and the bars I guess were good to us and they were good people and they didn't hold, at least they didn't show any resentment. They were and they still are good people.

Rick: When did you come back to the United States?

Art: It was about 1944-45, quite awhile afterwards.

Rick: Did you sail back on the Medusa?

Art: No, I was off of the Medusa at the time, see I had transferred to the Amphibious Force. So I kind of lost track of the Medusa, I checked up later on to find out what happened to it of course, and I found out that after the war the need for it had deteriorated somewhat and the ship was decommissioned as being surplus and so the Navy, we took all of our machinery off of it which was good and that was done in Bremerton, WA at the Navy Yard and then it was scrapped, when we say scrapped we mean it was either sold to a private shipyard or given to somebody. See the ship at that time was quite old, almost 50 years old and when a ship gets about that age, to keep it up its cheaper and more efficient to scrap it and start over again with all new equipment. And that happened here I noticed with the City County Building, do we scrap it or build a new one, same thing. Not the same thing, but the same principle.

Rick: Were you in the Navy during the Korean War? And did you serve over there?

Art: Yes. I was in the Navy, I was on a destroyer at that time – I have been on several ships, and one of our problems and its still a problem, they all look alike. The North Koreans and the South Koreans if you look at them they look alike and you don't know who is your friend or if he's going to stick a knife in your back and that was our job to keep the North Koreans from moving by sea to South Korea and we didn't know whether they were North Koreans whether they were good guys or bad guys so we got a Korean Officer onboard the ship and we intercepted quite a few of their boats and so that was one of his duties to determine if they were North Koreans or South Koreans. That was quite an interesting...

Rick: Let's go back to the morning of Sunday, December 7th.

Art: That really doesn't seem so important but now that I think about it, as I mentioned I was sleeping on a cot rather than a bunk. There were bunks up in the living quarters, in the fresh air and quite nice, but sailors like it down there they kind of congregate down together down in the machine shop or down in the shop somewhere. So I was sleeping on a cot and I was actually awake and I heard this noise through the corridors and I could hear the noise, it's pretty hard to determine what a noise is, if it was an explosion or what it is. But it sounded like explosions, so I got up and the other fellows got up to and said, "*What's going on? What's going on?*" and, "*I don't know, let's take a look and see.*" So we looked out the hole and we were down by the water line, maybe 8 or 10 feet above the water line, and being in port we had the portholes open and the sound came in. Most everybody has seen the portholes at least if they haven't seen them they've seen pictures of them, there's only room for one person at a time at a porthole and I looked out and I could see several planes in the air and they were flying around. When an airplane is flying, unless you see a profile or the side of it you can't really tell what it is, whether its coming or going or who it belongs to, and when this plane backed up into the sunlight and I could see the Japanese insignia on it and that was quite a shock. And then General alarm sounded and of course part of our job was to close the portholes, close the glass and put the heavy metal and then bolt it shut and then you couldn't see anything and that's when I went up and talked silent so I could see the Utah, I would guess it was about a quarter of a mile away, that's pretty hard to determine between a quarter and a third of a mile away. And you could tell that there were Japanese ships and since our ship, the Utah, was sinking it sort of looked like it was going to capsize and we didn't see the actual that happen before I got up there because the ship was starting to sink but then it kept on going and I did see it sink. Let me explain something, Pearl Harbor is not very deep, its only about 40-45 feet deep and a ship is more than 45 feet, so that's what happened to the battleship California and some of the others, they went down, straight down but they're still in sight, you could still see them and they were on the bottom. So if they'd been out at sink they would've sunk out of sight but being in the Harbor they hit the bottom first before the ship sank out of sight, and that happened to the Utah and I think the Utah is still there I haven't been over there for several years, but its completed rusted out its of no value at all, the guns have been taken off and everything there salvageable has been removed from it for use in the navy yard on other ships and so on.

Can you describe to me, was there a lot of smoke in the air, what was the air like when you finally did get above deck?

Art: I have to admit that in the pictures you see of Pearl Harbor you see a lot of smoke and there was a lot of smoke, but the wind was blowing and we were off to the side so the smoke did not, we could see the smoke but it didn't cutoff our vision, it went down over about a half a mile away where most of the smoke was coming from the battleships that were burning. There were 8 battleships and all 8 of them were damaged.

In the days and weeks after that and you got a chance to get off the ship, did you get to go see where those battleships were, did you get to go look?

Art: Its very hard. At first our first concern was to save lives, get the people out of the water so we didn't go aboard any of those ships that day, it wasn't until the next day. Most of the oil was still burning, and the navy fuel oil makes black smoke and it was quite dramatic the smoke. In that area, no in the area of Medusa, in the area of the battleships it was smoke and fire and the oil was on fire.

Rick: Did you have any real close calls of getting shot at or anything during the entire war there?

Art: A rather humorous incident, while I was on deck a piece of shrapnel came down and it hit my foot and just a piece of shrapnel about 2 or 3 inches long and I thought, at that time it was pretty hard to tell, so I picked it up and it was still hot and I could read on it that it said, US Naval Depot Crane, Indiana. I thought, that's one of our own shells that exploded. That was our first face of what they later on called "*friendly fire*". That was one of the reasons that I was directed down below, I didn't have a helmet on and those pieces weighed 2 or 3 pounds a piece, they're not heavy but moving through the air, they're dangerous.

Rick: This was a Japanese shell that was manufactured in the United States?

Art: No it was one of ours, we fired at the Japanese planes and our own shrapnel fell on us. We were the victims of friendly fire.

Rick: Did you think that it was all over that day, when you were on that ship were you scared?

Art: I was scared and everybody was either scared or he's a liar one or the other, and we were scared, I was scared. And of course that didn't keep us from doing our duty, but it was when we didn't really know what was happening on the other side we thought maybe the Japanese had landed and they were coming over land and we were going to be a hand to hand fight pretty soon. And fortunately, it was bad enough, but none of the rumors developed.

Rick: As you were watching the Utah capsize, tell me about the rush of feelings that you had, tell Rick.

Art: It's a little bit different. The Utah was one of the regal ships, it was commissioned in 1911 and it was quite an old ship and it was converted into a target ship before Pearl Harbor so it was not an active battleship at the time. And all the active battleships were on the other side of the island and that may have been, it's hard to say. Now I was from the old school where one of the things we were impressed with back in the '30's was a battleship is the ultimate, a battleship cannot sink and that's the ultimate its even better than a carrier but nowadays carriers have superseded the battleships. I thought that can't be true, the book says that can't happen to a battleship and there they were damaged by aircraft and burning and sinking and its awful hard, looking back on it its easy but at the time it was very difficult to assume that.