

#211 ALONZA GRANT: USS *AVOCET*

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here at the Waikiki, the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 5, 1991 and it's 1:20 PM. We're producing this tape for the National Park Services, [*USS*] *ARIZONA* Memorial Oral History program, in cooperation with KHET-TV, Honolulu. And I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Alonza Grant.

Mr. Grant, what made you get into the Navy? Could you talk about joining the Navy?

Alonza Grant (AG): Yes. On the livelihood part of it, you know, it was having something to do or getting a job wasn't as easy. It meant a lot of overtime, so I volunteered to go in the Navy and first, I had to take a physical, written test and a physical, or whatnot. I had to show them my teeth and all that. And you passed it, then you go. I went from Charleston, South Carolina, to Raleigh, North Carolina, took another test and I went on to training in Norfolk, Virginia.

SH: Was the Navy something in particular you wanted to do, or let's say, compared with another branch?

AG: Yes, I was in the sea for a time, Navy with more shore, and the Army, 'cause we had a Navy yard, naval station there.

SH: Did you have anything to do with the choice of ship? Was *AVOCET* your first ship?

AG: No, *AVOCET* wasn't the first ship. My first ship was the *RALEIGH*, USS *RALEIGH*. Raleigh was in North Carolina, it was a cruiser.

SH: Right, right. She was at Pearl Harbor too.

AG: Yeah, that was behind the stations, Food Station M.

SH: Right.

AG: But I wasn't on it then.

SH: When did you join?

AG: March of '38.

SH: March '38, okay. How did you get out to Pearl Harbor?

AG: Into Pearl Harbor, on the ship, which was USS *RALEIGH*.

SH: You were on the *RALEIGH*?

AG: Yeah, but didn't stay there. I was transferred to the *WRIGHT*, which looked like the *SHAW* on the ship, same at both ends, but it was an aircraft tender.

SH: Okay. When did you join up with the *AVOCET*?

AG: I joined up with the *AVOCET* --- well the *AVOCET* -- got off to the *WRIGHT*, went to the *AVOCET*.

SH: And you were an officer's cook?

AG: Mm-hm.

SH: Could you just talk about the usual duties and . . .

AG: Well, on the Navy you have a special duty and a military duty. Military duty are to go to the gun stations and do the part we supposed, play the part we are supposed to play and then you have G.Q. Otherwise, you do your special duty -- I mean, our special duty was to maintain officers. That meant you cook. Of course it meant keep the quarters clean, and whatnot. That is your duty and you aren't supposed to be any other trade, you know, like [Boatswain's] Mate or Coxswain, or whatnot.

SH: Right, right.

AG: So you were barred from those.

SH: You were barred from those obviously because you are a black man and . . .

AG: Yes, uh-huh.

SH: . . . it was different times.

AG: But the Japanese, they were barred from it. Japanese was in the United States Navy at that time. They were college graduates and they wasn't in there for their health.

SH: So you obviously had some strong feelings about that. What did it feel like to be, you know, a black man in the Navy?

AG: Well, you have to just play along with the game and you can't win anything or do anything about the situation that you would survive. You play along with the game and try to survive and do a little change as time goes by.

SH: Did you feel there was any change as time went by?

AG: As time went by, they done some more changes. Other people got the idea that you always want to give two or three pursers to integrate the services. But then he got prosecuted for that later on, so you could pay like income tax, which is somebody gives, see.

SH: Could you clarify that again? You said . . .

AG: He gives purses from his plates . . .

SH: Right.

AG . . . to the government to integrate the services.

SH: Really, I didn't know that story.

AG: And later on, he got prosecuted for income tax, for the same thing that he gave to the government.

SH: Really?

AG: I mean, like anything, we asked the government do, it's fortunate. Better than Pearl Harbor, there was a PBY took off one day, and never made it -- or was as far as I am off the water. I flipped right back in the water, and I didn't know nothing about that.

SH: Uh-huh.

AG: Just a PBY going down. It was overloaded or something.

SH: And this was with . . .

AG: With people on it.

SH: Right. I'm sorry, I'm not sure I got the point of that and was . . .

AG: I mean, a gang of things, that the government do that they shove under the table.

SH: Okay.

AG: Of treating the blacks a certain way or whatever happened to their favorite ones that never publicized.

SH: And there were blacks aboard that PBY?

AG: No, I don't know who was aboard the PBY, no, but she was on the PBYS when they are serving duty, or whatnot, see.

SH: Oh, I see.

AG: Just like I said, we weren't allowed to do certain things.

SH: Got it, got it. Thank you. So your specialty was restricted . . .

AG: Yeah.

SH: . . . and you were an Officer's Cook. I'd like to talk about that for a minute. As an outsider, it would seem to be, I guess, an Officer's Cook is a better deal than being an enlisted cook [*Ships Cook*], or something like that. Did you feel that you were privy to any sort of -- were you able to listen in a little bit, or be privy to any more scuttlebutt than . . .

AG: Yes, I did.

SH: . . . other guys?

AG: Yeah, yeah. We have a whole lot of things that we have, you know, in the conversation, while the meals are being served and eaten, and whatnot.

SH: You said *AVOCET* is, of course, is a fairly small ship.

AG: Yeah. We had about ninety men, that's all. But the crew usually live, you know, as a family.

SH: Were there other black men aboard *AVOCET*?

AG: Yeah. We had the cook and then you have the steward and whatnot. And what they call the other, like seaman, but no, there was no ratings, see. But they took the officer's uniforms and their rooms, and whatnot, see, and their shoes.

SH: Am I correct in assuming that you all then would berth together?

AG: Yeah. On that ship.

SH: On that ship.

AG: Yeah. But on larger ships, you're on -- you weren't berthed together. Like, you know, battleship and cruisers and aircraft carriers, and whatnot. You weren't berthed together. But on smaller ships, you mostly berthed together.

SH: You told me before that you liked the service on the tug. Is that correct?

AG: Yes, uh-huh. And more of 'em like a family, you know, on smaller ships.

SH: Did you have, you know, relationships with the white enlisted crew at all?

AG: Yes, mm-hm.

SH: So it was . . .

AG: Yeah.

SH: . . . a family in spite of the . . .

AG: Yeah, in spite of this segregation and whatnot.

SH: Okay.

AG: Because BEARD wasn't informed as how the government had it set up.

SH: So you felt pretty good relations in general with your . . .

AG: Yes.

SH: . . . members of the crew. What was your battle station?

AG: Battle station was on, you know, passing ammunition, you know.

SH: Okay.

AG: 'Cause you couldn't be a gunner's mate or whatnot, see.

SH: Okay, okay.

AG: You go through GQ, you know, practices, you know, when there isn't anything happening, and whatnot. But in training, like I say, I went through training in Norfolk. We went through training, you know, took rifle training and go to the rifle range and all that. We took boot drill, swimming, and boarding, and all that see. But like I said, you weren't allowed to do but one thing, take care the officers and make sure they are -- everything is done for them.

SH: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Let's go back to the time of the attack.

AG: Mm-hm.

SH: Was anything special going on the day before, the night before? Was that just sort of duty as usual for you?

AG: Well, that was a weekend duty as usual, 'cause usually on every Friday evening or sometimes, the officers, they're gone, see, for the weekend. And they dropped the duty or whatever on to the lower officers, see. And this was done, you know, month end, weekend, month over, whatnot. And I figured, you know, the Japanese picked it, they picked all of that up, see. All the higher officers were gone for the weekend, see.

SH: But you were aboard?

AG: Yeah, I was aboard. We didn't have, you know -- a certain amount of enlisted got to be aboard.

SH: This just leads me to a slightly different line of questioning, actually. Did you like -- did you get into Honolulu a lot on liberty?

AG: Yeah, yeah, I got into Honolulu.

SH: So was it a good liberty town for you?

AG: Well, not so very good, but it wasn't too bad. Because like I said, it was Saturday, you couldn't do but so much.

SH: Did you encounter prejudice?

AG: Mm?

SH: Did you encounter prejudice in Honolulu?

AG: No, it's mostly American pub, you got some of very nationality and whatnot, see.

SH: Uh-huh.

AG: Yeah.

SH: Uh-huh.

AG: And back then, everything was much cheaper and easy-going and whatnot.

SH: Okay. So you were aboard the night before?

AG: Yeah, I was aboard the night before and that morning, I was . . .

SH: Yeah, what were you, what was the duty of the morning.

AG: I was preparing to get breakfast.

SH: What kind?

AG: And I was for the --- you could switch duties with, you know, different ship mates and whatnot. If you --- I'll take over your duties and you can go to shore if you want, and whatnot. And I was supposed to go ashore that Sunday, but before eight o'clock, I was serving breakfast and never got to the breakfast.

SH: What happened?

AG: The bombs just start falling.

SH: Is that the first thing you knew that something was wrong?

AG: Well, when I look up and I saw the red ball on the wing, then I knew something was wrong.

SH: What happened next?

AG: Everybody got to their stations and whatnot, because the only thing, the biggest thing we had was three-inch guns.

SH: Were you passing ammunition, then, for a three-inch gun?

AG: Mm-hm?

SH: Okay.

AG: The ammunition, you know, was down below, you see.

SH: Okay. So you went from -- you were feeding breakfast, you said . . .

AG: Fixing to get breakfast.

SH: Fixing breakfast, okay. And then what, you ran below?

AG: Yeah. Uh-huh.

SH: How did that go?

AG: That went over all right. But like I said, it was a gang of things, going on, you know. Shooting, and this and that, whatnot. After a while, the dock caught afire. Because they weren't shooting at this ship. This was a little -- - except maybe a quarter of a million dollar tug, see. But they was hitting big ships. I think they torpedoed and bombs hit the big ships.

SH: Now, let's clarify where was the *AVOCET* in relationship to these big ships? It was pretty close, wasn't it?

AG: Yeah. So if the battleships were tied up alongside that side there, we were tied up right on this corner end.

SH: Okay. You were near the . . .

AG: I was near the Battleship Row, Battleship -- we tied up at Ford Island every time we come in port. Because we were attached to the air station.

SH: Now, you said you went down below, is that correct?

AG: Yeah, uh-huh.

SH: So you were -- sort of had a restricted view of things during the . . .

AG: Yeah, last battle, yeah, yeah.

SH: . . . battle itself.

AG: After the battle starts, see, the bombing started.

SH: What did that feel like, in the middle of a battle and not being able to see out?

AG: Well, it felt all right because we weren't in much of a danger because, like I said, most of the hits were going to the [CALIFORNIA], the HONOLULU, and battleships and whatnot, the bigger ships.

SH: Not being . . .

AG: I seen the OGLALA roll over.

SH: You saw that?

AG: (Mumbles) we was right, looking right, see, over the Navy yard, see, from the Ford Island.

SH: What were you --- what did you see?

AG: See the HELENA --- see the thing was the HELENA that took away from the dock and took gangplank and everything along with it. And the battleship tried to get out of there, and they tried to sink it in the channel.

SH: Right. Did you have a view of that?

AG: Mm-hm. But see, the chief over there says to pull it to the ground, so it wouldn't sink it in the channel. And everything got smoky and fiery.

SH: Can you try to describe that picture in words, what that must have been like? It's hard for us to imagine, I think, these days.

AG: Yeah. That tends to be like the eclipse or something. You know, the sun hiding itself or something, because all that oil, that stuff starts burning on the water and every place else. And the Japanese couldn't, like, actually see what damage they had done, because so much oil -- that crude oil was burning.

SH: When you . . .

AG: And we had to get away from the docks and we went around the island, assisting all the other ships that were hurting and whatnot. We never got a scratch.

SH: Since your battle station was to be passing ammunition, once the fire was stopped and you were assisting other vessels, what did you . . .

AG: Then we got under way, see. The ship got under way. We left the dock, because the dock caught afire. We got under way and went out in the channel and started assisting on the ship, whatever needed to be done.

SH: What did you personally do then at that time?

AG: Well, they needed water, they needed whatever they needed, which, that we all got together and passed it, or doing whatever we can for them. The RALEIGH was in the back of the station, you know, back at Ford Island, on the dock then.

SH: Right, right.

AG: But we went that way, RALEIGH then went the other way, where most of the damage was, Battleship Row.

SH: Okay.

AG: We went down the back of Ford Island.

SH: I see, I see.

AG: And you came aboard the RALEIGH to help her out?

SH: Mm-hm.

AG: And not only the RALEIGH, any other ships, you know.

SH: You were on the RALEIGH?

AG: I used to be on the RALEIGH.

SH: Yes, as you said.

AG: Yeah.

SH: Did you have friends still aboard?

AG: Yes, uh-huh. Mm-hm. I had a hometown friend that got killed on the ARIZONA.

SH: What was going through your mind at the time of this attack, with all this?

AG: I was wondering why it happened or whatnot. 'Cause as I said, I had no other indication of the relationship between Washington and Tokyo, or whatnot. It was just one of those things. They said that, you know, the relationship was going on opposites, not on the edge.

SH: Do you recall any feelings that you had towards the Japanese at the time?

AG: Well, I had some harsh feelings because I was about to be packing up and leaving out.

SH: Oh yeah, you were telling about that. Explain that a little more.

AG: I had my --- my time would have been up in March. I had only --- I had -- let's see, clothes made from the California Tailoring Company, in Honolulu, and different stuff. And I had to go and get all of those. Pack it up and send it home.

SH: Oh, you mean civilian clothes . . .

AG: Yeah, yeah.

SH: . . . you had made right . . .

AG: Yeah, mm-hm.

SH: And you weren't going to be using them for a while, huh?

AG: That's right.

SH: AVOCET must have kept pretty busy for a good long time.

AG: Yeah, mm-hm.

SH: Did you --- when did you get to knock off, finally?

AG: We got to knock off then late that night because everything was burned and they said everybody must, you know, stay inside and black out. And our view, because we, AVOCET, or any tug or small ship that didn't have any doctor, we didn't have any movies, whatnot. So before the attack, we used to go over to the air station to see the movies, or go to the, whatnot, the land. You know, the Marine was shooting and then asking, "Who goes there," later.

SH: Mm-hm.

AG: And so, I said, "Let's stay and play cards. We ain't going out there." And they won't shoot me and ask me, "Who goes there," later.

SH: What kind of card game were you playing?

AG: We play any kind of cards, game we want to play. Because we were on a small ship, you're mostly free to do some of anything.

SH: Uh-huh.

AG: You know, within, means.

SH: You said your skipper was ashore. Do you recall when . . .

AG: Yeah.

SH: . . . when he got back aboard?

AG: No, I don't recall when he got back, that I know. That was mostly routine, you know. All of the captain, admiral, or whatever, they -- different ships or whatnot -- they'd get the weekend off, see. That's 'cause they had their family living over here and all that, see. I didn't say that was against regulations and whatnot, but I mean, that's the way it went down.

SH: Yeah. Yeah, I understand. What did you do days after the attack?

AG: Well, days after the attack, we had to wait for the announcement from the upper echelon to see what we'd be able to do, you know. That would be --- we'd black out during the night and then they go to town. When they were allowed some liberty, you had to be back by a certain time. And that was the thing

until, you know, you'd get back on track. Then I have leave and go on to . . . transfer and went back to the States, and went to Philadelphia to get the USS *COLUMBIA*. So they usually send half old crew and half new crew to get the new ship. USS *COLUMBIA* named after Columbia, South Carolina.

SH: Right. Did you --- when did you leave the *AVOCET* then, to join the *COLUMBIA*?

AG: Well, soon after they got settled, you know, after the bombing, you know.

SH: Mm-hm.

AG: Mm-hm. So I went back to the States twice, then. After I got the *COLUMBIA* out here and after we went out to Guadalcanal and different other places, and get that sent into water, lot of war, like. And I go on back to San Francisco to get the *RENO*, the USS *RENO* named after Reno, Nevada.

SH: That was a light . . .

AG: That was an anti-aircraft cruiser, like the . . .

SH: Like *COLUMBIA*, and on the *RENO*?

AG: Yeah, right. And *RENO*, uh-huh. And I was on the --- and at the end of the war, I was on the *CUSABO*, which is another sea-going tug that was built in Charleston, South Carolina. They called it the *CUSABO*, C-U-S-A-B-O. That was the name.

SH: How was it --- you said that . . .

AG: That was a million-dollar tug.

SH: Million-dollar tug. You said you enjoyed being on the family-like small tugs.

AG: Small ships are the most family like.

SH: So what was it like on the cruisers?

AG: Cruisers, like I say, you have more fighting, more, you know, mess routine one -- crew in the other and whatnot. And they aren't getting along all the time. And there's some people you never know, or never would see.

SH: Were you --- you continued to be an officer's cook aboard those . . .

AG: Yeah, uh-huh.

SH: . . . cruisers?

AG: Yeah. Nothing changed until after the war, or little after the war, okay?

SH: In terms of integration, you mean?

AG: Yeah, in terms of integration.

SH: When did --- how long did you stay in the service?

AG: Seven years, nine months, and some days, or something like that. I've been out -- when they got in San Diego and they dropped the bomb . . .

SH: Yeah.

AG: . . . after we come through the Panama Canal, we got off in San Diego, I said I wasn't doing the Philippines again, and I didn't have to.

SH: You --- at the beginning of the conversation, we were talking a little bit about things changing. By the time you spent your seven years, did you feel there was any significant change in the attitude or, you know, of the Navy towards . . .

AG: No, they . . .

SH: . . . blacks?

AG: No, there wasn't any at that time, so that's why many of them, you know, came out, you know.

SH: There was a famous incident aboard the *WEST VIRGINIA*, where a mess attendant named Doris Miller . . .

AG: Dory Miller, yeah.

SH: Yeah, Dory Miller, who won the Navy Cross [*Medal*] for his heroism at the time. Did you have some particular reaction to that, or, you know, as a black sailor? Did that . . .

AG: Well, that was fine and everything, but he isn't here today, see.

SH: No, he's not.

AG: The name of the game, a few survived, you can always do something. But when you go down deep six, or whatnot, there's nothing you can do.

SH: Do you think Dory Miller's example made a difference?

AG: It didn't make any difference. Because astronaut didn't make any difference. The astronauts themselves didn't make any difference. The one that got blew up with the rest of 'em, he was from North Carolina.

SH: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

AG: I know a gang of blacks who they should have made a difference, down in Australia. The Booker T. Washington club down in Sydney, Australia during the war. That didn't make a difference.

SH: What was this Booker T. Washington club?

AG: He was the black educator.

SH: Yes, I know who he was.

AG: He was in Sydney, Australia. I was down there during the war, cooling off during the war, you see?

SH: Oh, I didn't realize that.

AG: Then the *COLUMBIA* and the two destroyers I met down there is from the war zone, so for ten days, we was supposed to have one dance. When they got there, change to two dances -- one for the black and one for the white, in Sydney, Australia.

SH: And then they were . . .

AG: As I was saying, anybody want to know anything about the black and the white, I've been here seventy-two years today and I can tell 'em.

SH: Fifty years have gone by since then.

AG: Mm-hm? And we are marking time. No progress. They had discriminations in the FBI, the few blacks they got there now. You can count 'em on your thumbs and whatnot. No advancement, you got a level right there where you stop at. So if you're Thomas, all of his crew is white. The --- there's this fellow that succeeded Thurgood Marshall, in the Supreme Court.

SH: Mm-hm, go on.

AG: I mean, look at things, and you can tell there ain't nothing changed. There ain't a whole heck, a heck of a lot of change with Hugo on the east coast, when that came through. But after Hugo was gone, everything went back to much like it was. This is facts. It may not be written in no book no place, but it's facts. I have lived Hugo. I was there from start to finish, and I hoped by myself. I lived December 7, here.

SH: After fifty years after December 7, if there's one thing that you'd want people to remember about that day, or about your experiences during the war, what would that be? We only have a couple more minutes.

AG: That would be I would do it all over again, but I would say that the United States should give more consideration, more credit to the people that fight for it and lose their lives for it and whatnot, yeah. We go on right back under the shroud of quietness. Over here, the Gulf War, everybody come back saluting them and whatnot. When they have a -- some of everything, see. You brought the bowl up to this time. So it's been given to them and they got the credit. You didn't get none at all, or we didn't get any at all.

SH: Well, I hope perhaps in some small way, you taking the time to be able to tell us a story, even from the -- in a small way, do something people see that other side of the story.

AG: I hope so.

SH: I hope so too and I do appreciate very much you taking the time to talk to us, and to be so frank with us also. It's a pleasure talking to you.

AG: A pleasure talking with you and divulging what I had to say. I'll tell Chaney that I was out there today too.

SH: Thank you sir.

AG: You see, we've -- okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW