

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#413

CHARLES BEN CONLEY

USS *PHOENIX*, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY ART GOMEZ & COMMANDER BILL SCULLION

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Art Gomez (AG): The following oral history interview was conducted by Art Gomez, with the National Park Service, and Commander Bill Scullion, of the Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C., for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial. The interview was conducted at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu, on December 6, 2001 at 1:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is Charles B. Conley, who was a seaman first class on the USS *Phoenix*, CL-46, on December 7, 1941. Mr. Conley, for the record, please state your full name, place of birth.

Charles Conley (CC): Charles B. Conley, Bird County, North Carolina, July 2, 1922.

AG: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

CC: Washington.

AG: What were your parents' names?

CC: Robert Conley and Jane Conley.

AG: How many brothers and sisters do you or did you have?

CC: Three brothers and two sisters. And their names are Robert and Lee and Owen. My sisters' name was Amy and Fay. And they had the _____ too. One of 'em worked at Oak Ridge and I signed them up for the World War II Memorial.

AG: Where did you go to high school? Where did you go to high school?

CC: Washington.

AG: At what time did you enlist in the United States Navy and what caused you to enlist in the navy?

CC: Well, you know they wasn't too far to go and start drafting. And I had some friends in the navy and I liked the looks of the uniform pretty good. So I decided to go to Ashville, where I enlisted and took my chances. I was swore in in Raleigh and went on six weeks of training at Norfolk. It was a

mighty short time, but we learned quite a bit. Drills, which that didn't help us too much! Shoot rifles and I was a good marksman before I even went into the navy. And we got one nine-day leave, I went home and come back and went across the states on the train. And I didn't drink, didn't smoke. Twenty-one dollars a month is all you made then. So I went on leave and I had a little money left. Most guys spent it all and the guys that smoked wanted to borrow money. So what I did is bought two or three packs of tobacco, _____ roll it and I give 'em a cigarette once in a while. But went on to California and went aboard the *Phoenix* on...

AG: What year is this?

CC: Forty.

AG: What month?

CC: November. Thanksgiving Day is when I went aboard. I still got the menu from the dinner, still got it today. Good dinner.

AG: So you were assigned to the USS *Phoenix*?

CC: Yeah.

AG: And what was your duty station?

CC: I was _____ to become a lookout. And we went to Long Beach for two or three days, into Honolulu. And from Honolulu we'd go out gunnery practice and three crews would zigzag—see, we didn't have radar then. And you'd zigzag three cruises, you know a submarine couldn't pick you up too good.

And I got to be a helmsman. The deck crew, you had the division that would stand wheel watches but prior to deck crew, we'd stand wheel watches and I enjoyed it.

And we finally come back in and operated out of Honolulu 'til September of '41. And we started bringing supplies aboard and the boat deck, two fifty-foot motor launches and two thirty-foot and two whale boats. Pretty good

space for potatoes, top side, not in the freezer or nothing. We couldn't figure out where we was going. And you know how scuttlebutt gets started. And the captain said—the captain was Captain Fisher. You ever hear of him? Good captain.

And he said we was under sealed orders and they'd let us know when we got out to sea. Got out to sea and they told us we was going to the Philippines to escort an army transport full of supplies for the army and the marines in the Philippines. And hit a big tornado there, going over. Couldn't change course 'cause we got orders not to change course. And I didn't think we'd ever get out of the storm. And I was standing wheel watch, but before then I was seasick three months. And you could cut your brother's head off and not bat an eye. That's _____ ever been seasick. I got over it just as quick as I got seasick to startoff with. And we went, hit that hurricane, I felt good. And then those marines and the navy, there's a little bit of friction there. And when I was seasick they gave me, oh, hell. And we hit that storm, some that had been there twenty years got seasick. And it was my payback time!

But we went on the Philippines, we charted the waters around Zamboanga. They claim that on the charts they had to some of them islands what sailing vessels had taken. And they knew the fleet operated around it, knew the depth of the water and we done that with a lifeline, piece of steel just like an old weight on a line and markers up and down and you pull it out and you're just barely moving for two weeks we done that. And finally come back to the Pearl Harbor and we missed a gunnery practice. See, all the light cruisers goes out together in gunnery practice and we'd missed that and we had to go out by ourselves and practice.

Bill Scullion (BS): When did you return to Pearl Harbor, Mr. Conley?

CC: Huh?

BS: When did you come back to Pearl Harbor? Do you remember what month it was?

CC: You mean after the war?

BS: No, after...

AG: After the Philippines.

CC: About sometime late October.

BS: Okay.

CC: And it was in the heart of November when we was doing our gunnery practice.

BS: Okay.

CC: And I spotted unidentified object in the water, reported 'em. Never heard what happened to it.

AG: Now, did you say object or objects? One or two?

CC: Just one. Several times.

AG: And what did you think it was?

CC: I didn't know. I didn't hear of any midget submarines then. But I still say it was a Jap submarine.

BS: Is this in November or December?

CC: This is in November.

BS: While you were out doing the gunnery practice?

CC: Yeah. Gunnery practice. We went out several days for gunnery practice. And we got in—now, I can't remember this date—only two or three days before the attack. And I got Sunday morning, had duty. I never had duty on Sunday before. Never. Especially in port. And was assigned to a boat crew and we—I got up at six, ate chow. You walk below deck, you don't have to have a cap on. So I went up stern, up through the hatch without a cap and they called our boat away, so you follow orders, went on the Jacob's ladder

and got in the boat and went down the gangway and as soon as we tied up to the gangway, this marine officer had the officer of the day. And boy it was on, chewing me out, me being out of uniform. He said, "Shut your mouth and stand at attention!"

And that's what I done.

AG: Mr. Conley, before we get to the actual events of December 7, I wanted to take you back a little bit to the time you spotted the submarine. There are two questions I have in mind. One, what kind of training did you have as an observer to identify Japanese vessels or Japanese aircraft? Was there a formal training that they gave...

CC: Oh yeah. You had ships, the planes and the pictures of ship. You had to learn them and be able to identify. But in the water, these objects, you couldn't, there's no outline of the shape which is a sub or some big floating object. But nothing that big floats out there.

AG: And then once you had recognition of this unidentified object, what was the procedure for reporting?

CC: Over the phone, officer of the deck. See, all lookout stations had a phone next to it. Call 'em up and report it. This was two lookouts spotted it, not just me. Two of us.

AG: And the other two lookouts reported this as well?

CC: Yeah, they reported it. Same thing as I did. I was a pretty good lookout.

AG: So far as you know, though, nothing was ever, there was no response.

CC: No, nothing. Later on they said it wasn't no Jap subs out there at that time. But who knows. They could've been. And (coughs)...

AG: When you were in the Philippines and you were sailing to the Philippines, you said you had sealed orders until you got out to sea.

CC: _____

AG: What was the crew thinking at that time? Was there any awareness among the crew?

CC: The whole crew knew the war was just a matter of months. But nobody dreamed that it would be Pearl Harbor. They figured the Japs in China fighting, maybe hit the Philippines. Nobody. It was a surprise that they would be so foolish to come this far like they did.

AG: So when you had orders to sail to the Philippines, you were told that that's where you were headed. Was there any uneasiness among the crew that...

CC: No.

AG: ...something had actually started?

CC: No. Some of 'em, they were just glad to be going to the Philippines. Some of 'em had already been there. In fact, some of 'em had served on the old

destroyers, four-stackers, old, rusted. Wasn't even safe to be on let alone go out to sea. But they would tell about what a good liberty place it would be. We went to Zamboanga and that's where we charted the waters. And this officer, I seen the fiftieth wedding anniversary, he claims he didn't go there to chart the waters. He claimed we went there, the captain's mess cook was from there and he wanted him to have a little time with his family. Now, that's the say-so. This captain, he died two years ago.

AG: Let me go ahead and bring you now to the events of December 7. You told us you were not on the ship...

CC: No.

AG: ...at the time of the attack.

CC: The gangway.

AG: You were on the gangway and you had just been advised that you were supposed to have your cap on.

CC: Yeah, chewed out real good.

AG: And what happened next?

CC: Well, they piped colors down five minutes to eight always, the boatswain mate. Do they still do that?

?: Yeah.

CC: And they just got through blowing piping for the colors, maybe half a minute, and I seen the Japanese planes come—I forget which is west here now. Coming over the cane fields, just barely over ‘em, where most of the destroyers and where the carriers should have been anchored or tied up. And they hadn’t even dropped a bomb or fired or anything. You could see ‘em as they passed, big rising sun. Just like a new coat of paint had been put on it. And they, some of ‘em was fighters and I don’t believe there was any torpedo planes with that bunch, just bombers. And they come straight over, dropped the bombs, swing right over us and swooped back. And we got to

firing pretty early. There's a few ships was firing before we did, the destroyers. And we had ammunition up on the topside. These quads was open on the *Phoenix*, the five-inch and twenty-five caliber _____.

And we started firing and the explosion at _____ above explode. And you had to knock 'em down, you had to get a direct hit and then you don't get many direct hit with a five-inch gun. And we had (coughs) two fifty-gallon machine guns, these water-cooled, and we had three or four. And the marines brought out some of these rolled out thirty-caliber machine guns. And but they was crossing over us both ways, didn't fire a shot. We didn't even get a hit or a scratch. And we got a little steam up and—oh, it must have been an hour.

The first attack was practically over and we started backing out and we tied up to a buoy. And as we started to swing around, we got orders to tie back up. So we tied back up and that's when the second attack come in. And it was about 10:30 when we finally started moving out. And we went by the *Arizona*. You couldn't see her. Black smoke, that oil makes a real black smoke. We seen bodies all over. Oil, some of 'em. You couldn't see.

People don't realize how thick that oil is when a ship's burning. And in fact,

cold weather, it won't hardly run. We fuel at sea and some of it spill and they just lay on the deck in gobs. And when it's burning, it makes an awful black smoke. And bodies, all Battleship Row just bodies blowed off. Some of 'em alive. And we're getting up pretty good speed then. And the _____ we went out of the harbor at thirty knots. Of course I don't believe we had that much steam up to go thirty knots. Cruising speed was thirty-two knots. That's what's in the manual. But she'd go thirty-four.

AG: We're going to take you back again because now you're back on the *Phoenix*.

CC: Yeah.

AG: And you haven't told us how you did that. You saw the Japanese planes coming into the harbor. There has been a lot of discussion about how people were confused and even thought that the navy was doing some sort of training exercises. Did you feel that? Or were you pretty certain from your perspective this was an attack?

CC: I knew it was a real attack. The army never did fly over Pearl Harbor, as I can remember, practicing, or the navy, either one. The only planes flew would fly out to Ford Island from there, but not the army or navy. They claim it was, they was running practice, a surprise practice run, but that wasn't so. See, I say sixty percent of the navy people was still in their bunks. Sunday people don't, half of 'em wouldn't even eat. And people said, "Well, it's _____ to eat."

Some of the army, I hear, did make comments. They thought it was a practice. But that's not right.

AG: What was your next reaction? When, did you actually see those planes open fire? Or...

CC: Oh yeah, I seen 'em. See, I come, the main officer had us to come aboard and he told me to stay right there in case he wanted some messages run. And I stayed in the gangway. And they, you could see the bombs coming down. They don't fall that fast. And actually torpedoes, you can see 'em

way back here dropping the torpedoes, seeing all of that. It was just like it was right on top of you.

AG: Did you witness any of the battleships that were hit? Did you see any of the hits?

CC: I seen, I'd have to go around to the other side, but not being on the battle station, I was free to walk from side to side. And the captain wasn't aboard that morning. And I don't know when he come aboard really. And I jumped from one side to the other. And we had one five-inch gun started to getting bigger and bigger, right in the center of it. We had the five-inch, the short barrel. All of the rest of 'em, she's commissioned in '38 but after she's commissioned, they put longer barrels on 'em. But this one got bigger and bigger and they finally stopped—I believe the marines was on that five-inch gun. They stopped it from firing.

AG: How did you get back to your ship?

CC: How did I get back to the ship? Walked up the gangway. See, we turned the boat loose. We didn't even tie it up. And after we got under way, I had to go to my lookout station, which is on the superstructure on the stern, about forty feet up. And we went out and I was lookout then. I seen two torpedo wakes go by the *Phoenix* when we was going out. There was no, nothing in history. Nobody, but I seen 'em and the *Phoenix* dodged 'em going out.

AG: So it went across the bow of the *Phoenix*?

CC: Yeah. Final one...

AG: Oh, but you were on the stern.

CC: Yes. They were kind of went to starboard and they just barely missed us. And we looked for the Japanese four days and I was hoping we wouldn't find 'em. Wasn't _____ damn well with all those planes out there! We'd run across 'em. We was going to be sitting on the bottom just in a few minutes.

AG: You said there's a rather famous photo of your ship passing...

CC: The *Arizona*. It's in most of the magazines. The *St. Louis* used to argue that it was the *St. Louis* but navy history, it was the *Phoenix*. We got the photograph six months later, that it was the *Phoenix*.

AG: And by this time the *Arizona* had been sunk?

CC: Oh yeah. She's on fire and I guess she's already on the bottom. You couldn't even see, the smoke was so thick, you couldn't even see her. Or you, unless you see some of them Japanese photos, you don't realize how much smoke was out there. The whole row was smoke. And it went up 200 feet. And they, a guy standing, you could see battleship, every once in a while, a guy standing on the deck, throwing potatoes. I don't know why he's throwing that. The planes had already, before we come, and the second attack was already over when we went out.

AG: Okay, I was going to ask you that. So when you, by the time the *Phoenix* got under way, the second attack...

CC: Was over.

AG: ...had ended.

CC: They was over. There wasn't a plane in there when we went out. And of course we didn't know that's the way it was, but that's what happened.

AG: So did the *Phoenix* leave the harbor then?

CC: Yeah, she left the harbor. She...

AG: Where did you proceed from there?

CC: Four or five ships got together. *St. Louis* and some of the others already out and we got together, a small group, and looked for the Japanese fleet. It took four days. And we didn't run across 'em. Like I say, I ain't telling no lies, hoping we wouldn't find 'em. _____

not knowing what's going to happen if they spotted us out there. They might have _____ planes.

BS: Mr. Conley, you said you saw some torpedo wakes while you were exiting Pearl Harbor.

CC: Going out.

BS: Going out. Where were you when in relation to, where were you in the harbor when you saw those wakes?

CC: When what?

BS: Where were you in the harbor when you saw those wakes?

CC: Oh, we was going out. We was already out of the harbor.

BS: Oh, so it was outside the mouth of the harbor?

CC: Yeah, outside the harbor.

BS: Okay, it wasn't in the harbor.

CC: No. Uh-uh.

BS: About how far out of the harbor was it? Had you already cleared the net or were you...

CC: Oh yeah, we was out in the water about 300 or 400 yards.

BS: Okay. And you know which way they came from, from the west or the east?

CC: Uh...

BS: Or from the south?

CC: Going out of the harbor, it come this way. I can't get the—this is north?

BS: Well, when you came out of the harbor, did you go straight ahead or right?

CC: We started straight out first.

BS: Okay.

CC: But we swerved to the left to miss them torpedoes.

BS: Okay. The torpedoes came from the starboard side?

CC: Yeah. And about two or three guys that seen 'em. Nobody believes it. But I seen, we saw that out of a, we got on the other side of the Great Barrier Reef, and we saw that one time and missed a torpedo.

BS: Did it look the same way?

CC: Yeah.

AG: So you got back to Pearl four days later. What was the damage? Could you have seen...

CC: Oh yeah, you could see...

AG: ...how bad the damage was?

CC: ...smoke and no _____. You didn't believe your eyes. You didn't believe. Them battleships, sixteen-inch armor, hell, I didn't think nothing would tear them up. But they was sharp enough to know that it goes through the decks. And because they used _____ claims that no torpedoes hit the *Arizona*. They're all bombs. She was sunk by her ammunition room exploding. That's what we figured. Seeing how much smoke and flame. At first you see the flame 200 feet in the sky. I didn't think fire would go that far but it was powerful explosion.

AG: Well, before we wrap this up, Mr. Conley, I just want to ask you one question. You're here, you were here ten years ago, you're here now for the

sixtieth. That's great that you can keep doing this and what does this memorial mean to you?

CC: Well, I'm glad to come back and honor the sailors and soldiers, but I get mad! See, I wasn't scared, I was madder than hell! I'm going to tell you something, what I told the girl on the airplane. She said, "You wasn't scared?"

I said, "No, I was madder than hell."

She said, "Oh hell, you was too damn young! Nineteen." Says, "You too damned young to be scared."

Well, maybe she's right. But the first time—my son's a good driver. But he's wrecked five cars growing up. And he tailgates people too much, just like—now, I'm from the South and the North, if you ever drove in the North, they tailgate people up there. Well that's the way he drives. But he's been, he drives 200,000 miles a year. Lazy boy in Georgia. And never had a scratch on one since.

But I got scared of him driving around the islands the first time. And I tell him that, he gets madder than hell at me. Of course I tell the truth!

AG: Well, we're very proud to be here with you today to share this and share your story.

CC: I've got several books that was wrote about the *Phoenix* and the whole story about 'em. See, I didn't drink or smoke then. I was, been in three years before I would even drink a beer.

END OF INTERVIEW