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RUSSELL R, ARGABRITE
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Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Oral History Collection

Russell R. Argabrite

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello Date of Interview: May 3, 1984

Place of Interview: Norfolk, Virginia

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Russell Argabrite for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 3, 1984, in Norfolk, Virginia. I am interviewing Mr. Argabrite in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the battleship USS California during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Argabrite, to begin this interview, 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. Argabrite: I was born in a small town in Ohio, and I enlisted in the Navy in Ohio. I graduated from high school at a small high school in Meigs County, Ohio.

Dr. Marcello: When were you born?

Mr. Argabrite: In November, 1922.

Dr. Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the service?

Argabrite: Well, I decided quite a number of months prior to my enlistment in the Navy. In fact, that's one of the things that I wanted to do long before I actually got in.

Marcello: And when did you join?

Argabrite: On December 30, 1940.

Marcello: So just a little bit less than a year before the attack actually took place.

Argabrite: Yes, just less than a year.

Marcello: Why did you want to get in the service?

Argabrite: Well, I don't really know. There was a couple of recruiters that came by there, and I guess mainly I was intrigued by the uniforms. The retirement aspects of the service and what-have-you and the way the recruiters explained it seemed like it was a rather bright and interesting avocation for me.

Marcello: So even at that time, you were thinking in terms of making the Navy a career--even before you actually got in?

Argabrite: Yes, that's true. In fact, when my father signed the papers, I enlisted for six years, and he told me that was quite a long time. I said, "Well, it didn't make any difference. If it was thirty years, it would be all right." I intended to stay, and I did.

Marcello: How difficult or easy was it to get into the Navy at the time that you enlisted?

Argabrite: Well, it was rather difficult in those days. They didn't just accept anybody. In fact, I think there were nine of us

that were gathered from different points in Ohio and sent to Cincinnati, the central location for enlistments, and out of a number of, I'd say, about forty, there were about nine that got on the train for Great Lakes that night.

Marcello: And I assume that you were bound for Great Lakes because that's where you took your boot training.

Argabrite: Yes.

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time?

Argabrite: I don't remember. I really don't remember. I think it was three months, I believe. Three months.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as part of the record, or was it the normal Navy boot camp?

Argabrite: Well, I think it was rather routine. I can't think of anything that really stood out. It was all strange to me, needless to say.

Marcello: How closely were you keeping abreast of current events and world affairs at that time?

Argabrite: Not very. To be honest with you, I wasn't aware of any of the political implications or any of the diplomatic goings on at that time, really. I was more interested in what was taking place right around me, and in boot training you don't have an awful lot of time to read and stay up with those things.

Marcello: Going back to your reasons for enlisting...I should have asked you this earlier. I know a lot of individuals have indicated

that economic factors played a role in their decision to enter the service at that time. Did that have any influence upon your decision?

Argabrite: Yes. Oh, yes. It definitely played a major role in my decision to go in.

Marcello: What did you have to look forward to there in this small town in Ohio in terms of employment?

Argabrite: Well, it was very bleak at that time. That was when there were a number of people on the WPA and relief. This was the Roosevelt era--the New Deal, so to speak, and what-have-you. Yes, the economic reasons were one of the primary factors.

Marcello: Okay, where did you go from boot camp?

Argabrite: I went directly to Seattle, Washington, and aboard the USS California.

Marcello: Now did you know before you left Great Lakes that you were going to be sent to the California?

Argabrite: Yes, we got the word there. The outgoing unit that they have after you complete your training...they put you in the outgoing unit, and you received your orders right there. A number of them go to one ship, and others go to another and what-have-you, and we were sent to Seattle, Washington, to board the USS California.

Marcello: So you had no choice as to where you wanted to go?

Argabrite: Well, I don't think at that time they even asked you if you had a preference. They needed people at a certain area, and

that's where they sent you.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of going aboard a battleship?

Argabrite: Oh, I anticipated going aboard. I was anxious to get aboard. This was all new for me. I was a country boy--raised on a farm, never been out of the state hardly at all except for the CCC camp that they had at that time. But other than that, I hadn't traveled any, and I was looking forward to "joining the Navy and seeing the world" bit and that aspect of it.

Marcello: You mentioned the CCC's a moment ago. Were you in the CCC's at one time?

Argabrite: Yes, directly when I graduated from high school. I graduated when I was seventeen, and I went to the CCC camp for six months, until I was old enough to join the Navy.

Marcello: I guess the reason I thought about the CCC camp is because we have a New Deal Project, too. When push comes to shove, and I don't get enough Pearl Harbor interviews, I might interview you again on your CCC experiences.

Argabrite: I'll be glad to. That was interesting.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you picked up the California in Seattle. What kind of reception did you get when you went aboard? I mean, after all, you were still basically a "boot" even though you may have thought you were "salty."

Argabrite: I wasn't basically a "boot"; I was a "boot" (chuckle). Well, I guess we were handled in the normal way they handled "boots" when they came aboard. I know that was one of the few battleships

that had bunks at that time, but they didn't have enough. The newer ones, those who were on board the shortest length of time, slept on hammocks until there was a bunk open for you to get a bunk, so we had to sleep in hammocks. At that time you carried everything, all your belongings, with you-- your bed, your clothing, everything.

Marcello: When you say "your bed," you're referring to your mattress?

Argabrite: Your hammock.

Marcello: Your hammock, rather.

Argabrite: Yes. You had to wrap that right around your seabag and take it with you wherever you went, so consequently you had your bed with you.

Marcello: Approximately how large a contingent went aboard the California when you went aboard?

Argabrite: I think there were six of us. There was a number of us who went across the country at the time. There were several going aboard the Saratoga, which was in the Navy yard there at Bremerton at that time. I don't recall what the other ships were, but there were several other contingents that were in this party that traveled on the train and then broke up and went to different ships.

Marcello: To which division were you assigned when you went aboard the California?

Argabrite: Third Division, the deck division.

Marcello: This was standard procedure, was it not, unless one had gone

to a school out of boot camp or something like that?

Argabrite: Yes. Unless you went to a trade school, you were normally assigned to either the deck force or the engineering gang-- one or the other.

Marcello: What kind of functions and duties did you perform when you went aboard as a member of the deck gang?

Argabrite: I was introduced to the holystone. We had teakwood decks, and you'd take sand and water and your fire bricks, which is a holystone, and you holystoned the decks.

Marcello: What was the purpose of holystoning the decks? The reason I ask that is because that's a part of the Navy that's no longer in existence.

Argabrite: I guess it isn't now, or wouldn't be. Well, actually, it's just like sanding a piece of wood. If you get a mark or the oakum comes up between the teakwood boards of the deck, why, you can clean that board and bleach them out when the sun hits it. It really does a job on them.

Marcello: What do you put on there to do the bleaching?

Argabrite: Well, the sand. We used sand. We had a sand locker, believe it or not, on the ship, and we put sand on there; and then you'd just wet it. So it was wet sand with that fire brick, which is just ultimately, I suppose, comparable to wet sand papering an automobile or something. You use wet sanding.

Marcello: And I assume you performed the other functions such as chipping and painting.

Argabrite: Oh, yes, that was part of the daily routine.

Marcello: Describe what your living quarters were like aboard the California, and let's start with the sleeping aspect of it. You mentioned the hammocks awhile ago.

Argabrite: Well, the newest man on board...well, we slept in a hammock. Later on, as time went by and you got a little time on board, why, you got a bunk when one would come open. But we first slept in a hammock, and the first cruise we made at sea, I slept in a hammock, and I was very thankful for that because when the ship rolls, the hammock stays still. So when the ship rolls, it's much easier on a new hand to sleep in a hammock than it is in a bunk.

Marcello: Now I gather that when you sleep in that hammock, it almost wraps up around you, too, does it not?

Argabrite: Yes. The clews and the way you trice it up to jackstays and billet hooks...it kind of wraps right around you, and you can snuggle up in that thing and get a real good night's rest in a hammock.

Marcello: Okay, what do you do the next day with that hammock?

Argabrite: Well, not the next day but early in the morning, (chuckle) you've got to take this thing down and roll it up and put it in the hammock nettings, which is like bins alongside the living space, and they had to be stowed in there. When reveille goes, you've got to get up and get it out of the way and get it put away because other functions take place

right there immediately after reveille.

Marcello: Such as?

ARgabrite: Well, the first thing, usually, is that the mess cooks trot out the coffee and the coffee cups for the morning watch sailors when they're out hosing down the decks and washing down the decks before breakfast. So that has to take place immediately after reveille. Then, of course, breakfast is served right in those same spaces. You have to utilize the same space for a different function.

Marcello: Where were the tables? Where were the mess tables?

ARgabrite: The mess tables were stowed right in the overhead on hooks to where it took two men to get a table down. You lifted one end out, and then the other end came out, and you put it down. The legs would be folded up, and they went right into the overhead, which was the ceiling in layman's terms. They were stowed right there, and, of course, your dishes were stowed in the scullery. They went to the scullery, where they were steamed and sterilized, and you had to draw them out for every meal.

Marcello: So are we to assume, then, that the quarters were rather cramped and crowded aboard that battleship?

ARgabrite: Well, I guess that's probably a fair statement, but there was ample room. It was utilized in such a way that you never felt that way, or at least I didn't. There was always room for whatever had to take place and for the routine that was

called upon aboard the ship.

Marcello: Did you pull mess cooking?

Argabrite: Yes. In fact, I was doing that the "immortal day."

Marcello: How did mess cooking work? Describe the mess cooking procedures.

Argabrite: Well, each seaman, usually the newer ones or the ones that just came on there...everybody usually got a turn at mess cooking, and it was for a three-month period. It was family-style feeding, where you had usually two mess tables, and they were usually filled. You had a mess captain. You fed the same individuals morning, noon, and night. They looked to you for their food and what-have-you, and the better job you done, why, it was just like a waitress. You got tipped if you done a good job; if you didn't, of course, why, you could usually expect some other type action other than tipping. But usually they were pretty well paid. In those times you were glad to get those tips. It made a lot of difference.

Marcello: So mess cooking wasn't really that distasteful then?

Argabrite: Well, it wasn't for me. I don't know how other individuals looked on it, but to me it was rather lucrative. I think at the time I was drawing \$36 a month, and that added...well, you got \$5 extra a month from the government as an added bonus for mess cooking, and then, of course, with your tips you really made as much as a third class petty officer or what-have-you. So it really was rather lucrative, so to speak, in those times.

Marcello: In your opinion, describe the quality of the chow served aboard the California.

Argabrite: Well, in my opinion it was good because I was raised on a farm, and things were pretty tough for us as children. For me it was three good squares a day, and I personally thought it was real good.

Marcello: Did you gain weight?

Argabrite: Yes, I gained a little weight. But, of course, you worked off a lot of energy, too, you know. But we were well-fed. I think it's fair to say that.

Marcello: One of the breakfasts that just still amazes me is beans and cornbread.

Argabrite: Yes, that was Saturday morning breakfast. Yes, that was the ritual, I think, throughout the Navy--beans and cornbread and figs. You could look forward to that.

Marcello: What was your battle station aboard the California?

Argabrite: Well, I had several of them, but at the time of the raid, I was in turret three. In fact, I was in turret three, I think, the whole time I was on the California up to that point.

Marcello: When you say that you were in turret three, that could be anywhere from the powder handling room for turret three all the way up to the turret itself, I gather?

Argabrite: At different levels, yes.

Marcello: In other words, when you were first assigned to turret three, you usually were down in that powder handling room.

Argabrite: You start out at the bottom. You have the lower handling room of the lower powder room. Yes, you usually start out down there.

Marcello: And then you progressed up through the gun to more responsible positions.

Argabrite: Yes. As you stay longer and get more experience, why, they move you up to supposedly more important jobs.

Marcello: And then by the time of the attack, where were you located specifically?

Argabrite: I was in the upper handling room--upper powder room--which is right below the shell deck--the actual gun level or loading level.

Marcello: And what were you doing in there?

Argabrite: I was a powderman in the upper powder handling room at the time of the raid.

Marcello: And more specifically, what did that entail?

Argabrite: Well, you had powder hoists, and the powder is sent up from the lower handling room. You have two hoists. Then at the upper handling room, it's spread out to where you have three guns--three hoists for powder to be sent up in charges, four at a time.

Marcello: Is this powder in the silk bags?

Argabrite: Yes, bagged powder--right. Then they were sent up. That was where I was at work. They were divided and sent up to each gun individually.

Marcello: Does this require a great deal of physical effort?

Argabrite: I think they were sixty-pound bags.

Marcello: And you in essence were putting them on the hoists?

Argabrite: Right. You had to put them in the hoists and make sure you've only got so many on there.

Marcello: Now after you got aboard the California, did it more or less proceed directly to Pearl Harbor?

Argabrite: Well, we had a little shakedown period off Long Beach, I think, about a week, and then we proceeded right to Pearl, yes.

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

Argabrite: Oh, I was fascinated. I looked forward to it. That was great.

Marcello: Why was that?

Argabrite: To see the world. That was one of my reasons for joining the Navy. I wanted to be able to say I'd been to Pearl Harbor, been to the Pacific, been to Hawaii. You know, that was great.

Marcello: As you look back on life aboard that battleship in that pre-Pearl Harbor period, how would you describe the morale?

Argabrite: Oh, it was great, great.

Marcello: What do you think accounted for it?

Argabrite: Well, I don't really know. There was a lot of pride. We had a lot of inter-ship athletics, competition--boat races, smokers, boxing, wrestling. And it was competition. If you had a fleet champion boat crew, well, that was great. That's the kind of ship you wanted to be on--one that had good boxers

and what-have-you and football teams, baseball teams. There was a lot of intramural activities among the ships, and it was fierce competition when it came to baseball or any kind of a game or any form of competition.

Marcello: I gather that the various battleships were especially proud of their bands, too.

Argabrite: Oh, yes. In fact, I think they had a band concert, and the Arizona, I think, won the fleet band championship, if I'm not mistaken.

Marcello: You're referring to that so-called "Battle of the Bands" that took place over at Bloch Arena the night before?

Argabrite: Yes, I think that was the night before.

Marcello: You've mentioned the boxing smokers. They were very popular at that time, weren't they?

Argabrite: Oh, yes. Of course, they passed out cigarettes and cigars, and they had hot dogs to eat. It was great. One ship would send their boxing team over, and it was outstanding.

Marcello: You just mentioned something that I should have asked Pearl Harbor survivors a long time ago and never have, and I don't know why. You mentioned that at the smokers they passed out the free cigarettes and cigars. I assume that's how they got the name "smokers."

Argabrite: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And everybody looked forward to that, and they'd pass around cigarettes and cigars. That was a big event--big deal.

Marcello: So the cigarettes and the cigars were on the house, so to speak?

Argabrite: Right, right. I think that's what really constitutes the pride and what-have-you and the morale factor that you had among ships at that time.

Marcello: Do you think that the fact that almost all of you were volunteers also had something to do with it? In other words, you were there because you wanted to be there.

Argabrite: Oh, yes. A lot of them were glad to be there because a lot of them was...well, in my case I wasn't exactly...you know, we were poor people. That was great for me. There was a lot of opportunities I had that I wouldn't have had otherwise, I'm sure.

Marcello: I've heard an awful lot of other individuals express that same opinion.

Argabrite: Yes.

Marcello: And I guess that's one of the reasons why I asked you earlier about economic conditions back home and so on.

Argabrite: It was definitely a factor--definitely.

Marcello: We were talking about competition a moment ago in athletics. Weren't there also other kinds of competition that would occur when you went on training exercises, such as for gunnery, engineering...I'm referring now to the "E." Do you remember the "E" pennant or the efficiency marker that a ship could earn?

Argabrite: Oh, yes. They had short-range battle practice, gunnery, engineering. Yes, there was quite a bit of competition. In fact, there was some very fierce competition.

Marcello: And I guess there was a great deal of pride, then, in being able to display the "E" or something. Wasn't it painted on the stack or something like that for a period of time?

Argabrite: Yes. Red if it was engineering, and white if it was gunnery or any other form of competition.

Marcello: Okay, you're in the Hawaiian Islands now, so let's talk about a typical training exercise in which the California would engage. For instance, on one of your typical training exercises, what day of the week did the California usually go out?

Argabrite: Well, just prior to Pearl Harbor, I think there was a number of ships that operated the same way. We went out on Monday and normally stayed two weeks and came back in on Friday, spent the weekend, and went back out on Monday. We did this for quite some time during that year, although we went back to the States in November, right before the attack. But that was the routine that we followed, I think, for at least that year that I was on board.

Marcello: Would approximately half of the battleships go out for this two-week period, or would they all be out during this two-week period?

Argabrite: Well, I don't know just how many, but there were quite a

number of them. In fact, most of them went out, I think.

Marcello: When you came in on the weekend, would almost all of them be in?

Argabrite: They'd all come in, yes. They all had their normal places to tie up.

Marcello: You mentioned that they all had their normal places to tie up. You usually went to the same place?

Argabrite: Normally, yes.

Marcello: With the Pennsylvania being over at Ten-Ten (1010) Dock since it was the flagship.

Argabrite: Well, no, I think it was in the yard, in the dry dock.

Marcello: Well, it was the day of the attack, but didn't it normally tie up over at 1010 Dock?

Argabrite: I really don't know. I don't know. I just happen to know where it was located then. I don't really know where it did tie up.

Marcello: Okay, what sort of exercises would take place, so far as you were concerned, there in the deck division when you went out to sea?

Argabrite: Well, in fact, we were in Condition Two right prior to Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: And what does Condition Two mean?

Argabrite: Well, Condition Two is where you've got half the ship's crew on duty at one time. In fact, in order to accomplish this,..we were in the Third Division. They transferred the

first and third sections of the Third Division to the Fourth Division, and the second and fourth sections were transferred to the Third Division from the Fourth in order to maintain at least half of the crew of one division on duty in the division and half of it on watch. And you can see why-- because, like, the Third Division manned turret three, so if you're in Condition Two, the whole division--every soul in the division--would be on watch at one time. So in order to negate this, they transferred half of them to the Fourth Division so that when turret three was manned, which would be one watch and then the next watch, of course, would be the other one, there'd only be half the division on watch, and there'd be two turrets manned at one time.

Marcello: Prior to this, would you be under Condition Three.

Argabrite: Yes, normally, before that we were under Condition Three.

Marcello: And what was the difference between Condition Two and Condition Three? In other words, describe Condition Three.

Argabrite: Well, you don't man all the turrets; you don't man as many battle stations. You man different ones. Like the antiaircraft is more of a Condition Three and is not the same percentage.

Marcello: So you do find your training routine changing, then, as one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941?

Argabrite: Yes, that is a fair statement, I think.

Marcello: What was the scuttlebutt going around the ship when you changed from Condition Three to Condition Two?

- Argabrite: Well, everybody was saying, "There's enemy this and enemy that," but I had no idea who the enemy was, you know, or who it could be. Of course, I was naive, I guess, at that time. I was kind of raw and countrified. I think everybody really had a premonition that something was going to happen. It was just kind of a tense moment all around.
- Marcello: Did the subject of the possibility of a Japanese attack ever come up in any of your bull sessions or anything like that?
- Argabrite: Well, I think that right prior to the attack, there was some British ships that came in there, and, of course, they were at war with Germany. One of them was hit with a bomb and what-have-you, and there was people passing the information around that we'd probably be in war before long. But I don't recall anybody thinking it might be Japan, or at least I don't remember anything of that nature.
- Marcello: Or specifically an attack at Pearl Harbor.
- Argabrite: No, no.
- Marcello: How much emphasis was given to antiaircraft practice when you went out on these training exercises?
- Argabrite: Well, we only had two scout planes, and we launched them every now and then for observation around, but it was just, I think, routine aviation practices. As near as I could see, there was no stepped-up order that I noticed at any rate.
- Marcello: What kind of antiaircraft armament did you have?
- Argabrite: Well, at that time we had 5.25's, which is a shorter version

of the 5.38, and we had 3.50's and .50-caliber machine guns in the crow's nest on top of the cage masts.

Marcello: So you didn't have any 20- or 40-millimeters at that time yet?

Argabrite: No, no 20's, no 40's.

Marcello: They don't come until after Pearl Harbor.

Argabrite: After Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: When you came back in off one of these two-week training exercises, describe what your liberty routine was like.

Argabrite: Well, we had Cinderella liberty.

Marcello: I know what it means, but for the benefit of somebody who reads this, describe that.

Argabrite: Twelve o'clock. Liberty was up at twelve o'clock for all the peons, and, of course, the officers and what-have-you held their big parties and what-have-you and, I guess, stayed until they got ready to come (chuckle). Normally, it was the Cinderella liberty for everybody. We'd come in every two weeks, and we got paid every two weeks, and we went ashore and did our thing, and we was ready to go to sea again.

Marcello: I guess about the only people that could stay overnight other than the officers were the married folks, and there weren't very many of those, were there?

Argabrite: And that had to be obtained by special permission. If you were married and if you had your family there, why, of course, you could do that.

Marcello: There weren't very many married enlisted personnel, were there?

Argabrite: No. In fact, I don't recall...well, I didn't know of any.

Marcello: I gather the Navy just flat discouraged that.

Argabrite: I think it is fair to say that they discouraged it, to say the least. Yet I don't guess they forbade it, but they did discourage it.

Marcello: What kind of section liberty did you have aboard the California?

Argabrite: I think we had four-section liberty at Pearl.

Marcello: Four sections. So at any one time perhaps, what, 50 percent of the crew would be ashore?

Argabrite: It even could be more than that possibly during those hours from four o'clock until midnight.

Marcello: What reason was given for imposing the Cinderella liberty?

Argabrite: Well, I suppose facilities and what-have-you weren't available, and the fact that nobody there had homes to go to or usually any friends to stay with like normally you would have if you were in another city.

Marcello: What did you normally do when you went ashore?

Argabrite: Well, we usually went over...a lot of times we went to the fights, and then we went over and went to movies and had us a few drinks and lived it up a little bit.

Marcello: What special significance did Hotel Street have?

Argabrite: Well, that was the brothel area, and that was well-attended by all the fleets. It was a real busy place, and they were government-inspected. It was really well-controlled.

Marcello: How much did a trick cost before the war?

Argabrite: I think it was \$2 if I remember correctly.

Marcello: There were also a lot of tattoo parlors there on Hotel Street, weren't there?

Argabrite: Yes, I visited one there.

Marcello: (Chuckle) I was going to ask you where you got your tattoo.

Argabrite: Yes, that's where I got it.

Marcello: Your first liberty?

Argabrite: Yes, probably. If it wasn't the first one, it was the second one because, you know, everybody felt like he ought to have at least one tattoo. I'm glad that I didn't go overboard like some of them did.

Marcello: I understand that a lot of those Asiatic sailors had lots of tattoos.

Argabrite: Yes, that was a big thing. Well, some of them had quite a number of them.

Marcello: Did you have very many of those Asiatic sailors aboard the California?

Argabrite: Yes, there was quite a few that had been in the Asiatic Fleet. In fact, that was everybody's objective. In fact, I volunteered for the Asiatic Fleet and was due to go in a couple of months. So if the attack hadn't come, well, who knows? I might have done my tour over in the Asiatic Fleet, myself.

Marcello: What happened? Did they pull that Asiatic Fleet out of China and so on when things began to heat up?

Argabrite: Well, they didn't pull it out of there, but it was practically annihilated over there. You had the Marblehead, the Houston,

and a couple of cruisers in there that never made it back to the homeland, and I suppose there were several destroyers or what-have-you. I don't even know what all they had over there, but I know the Marblehead never did get back. The Houston was over there at the time.

Marcello: Why did you want to go to the Asiatics?

Argabrite: Well, I think it was "monkey see, monkey do." (chuckle) You know, everybody wanted to go, and, there again, I wanted to see the world. That was really a primary factor in my...you know, I just didn't want a cruise in the Navy and not even go to sea, so to speak. You know, it was quite a feather in your hat if somebody you knew said, "Well, you've been to China." That was quite a prestigious thing--to have that Asiatic Fleet behind you.

Marcello: What did you think of those Asiatic sailors?

Argabrite: Well, I was fascinated by them. Everybody likes sea stories, and they certainly had a lot to tell (chuckle). A young sailor is all ears and believes everything he hears--some things that you don't see and what-have-you.

Marcello: Generally speaking, in that pre-Pearl Harbor Navy, was there an excessive amount...this is almost like a leading question, but I don't know how else to ask it. Was there an excessive amount of drinking ashore when these ships came in off those two-week cruises, or would this kind of thing vary from person to person or from ship to ship and so on?

Argabrite: I think that would be a better way to put it. I'm not saying that there wasn't a lot of drinking, but wherever you'd go you've got a lot of drinking. I don't think it was an excessive amount of it. Certainly, you had the people that drank, and there was a number of religious people on there. I suppose the percentage would probably run about the same as it would anywhere else. I wouldn't say it was rampant as far as the service went, no.

Marcello: Okay, I think this more or less brings us into that morning of December 7, 1941, and obviously we want to go into as much detail as we can concerning these events since that's what the interview is all about. First of all, when did the California come in?

Argabrite: On Friday.

Marcello: Which would have been December 5, 1941?

Argabrite: Yes.

Marcello: And where did it tie up?

Argabrite: Right adjacent to the hospital on Ford Island at Fox Three, which is the foremost ship in Battleship Row. We were moored singly, where the rest of the battleships were doubled up. There was only room for one battleship up where we were--at the head of the line.

Marcello: You mentioned Battleship Row a moment ago. That must have been a rather impressive sight.

ARgabrite: Yes. In fact, everybody on a battleship was kind of proud

of the fact that he was a battleship sailor. That was not exactly the worst assignment you could get--to be on a battleship.

Marcello: It was still one of the more prestigious ships in the fleet at that time.

Argabrite: Yes. We were the flagship of BatDiv Three, and Admiral Pye was on board. So we had quite a bit of "pull," so to speak, to get a good berth there.

Marcello: I've heard several sailors remark how impressed they were at night, when they would see this row of battleships with the lights and all that sort of thing.

Argabrite: Well, it was impressive to me. Yes, I was really proud of the fact that I was in the Navy. I thought that was real good. In fact, I liked it and was real glad to be a part of it.

Marcello: We're talking about the weekend of December 7, 1941. You've been in the Navy for almost a year. Had you already decided that you were going to make it a career? You'd only been in it for one year at this point.

Argabrite: Yes. Well, I really think I made up my mind when I went in and long before I went in. When I told my father that if it was for thirty years, I didn't think that was too long, but, of course, I was young, and he didn't take much stock in that remark. But I really think I made up my mind, and I did make it a career.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday of December 6, 1941?

Argabrite: The ship had a landing party drill, and we disembarked off the ship at the landing, marched to the Fleet Marine Headquarters there on the island, had a pack inspection by the Marines there, and then went back aboard. We had a landing force drill.

Marcello: This was Saturday morning?

Argabrite: Yes, landing force.

Marcello: What was the reaction of the crew to that little exercise?

Argabrite: Oh, well, there really wasn't much to it, when you look back on it. I don't even know what size of field guns they were that they took ashore with them. We might have been able to fight off some Boy Scouts that maybe would've come around there. They didn't have too much going for them.

Marcello: So it wasn't especially taken seriously?

Argabrite: Well, not really. I don't think anybody had any misgivings about the fact that they wouldn't last very long as a fighting force, no.

Marcello: And this took place over on Ford Island?

Argabrite: No. Oh, no, at the Fleet Marine Headquarters, which is on the main island.

Marcello: I see.

Argabrite: Ford Island is the little island right in the center. No, this was not on Ford Island.

Marcello: As I recall, the California was due for an inspection that Monday. Am I correct?

Argabrite: Yes.

Marcello: What did that mean in terms of doors, hatches, covers, man-holes--all that sort of thing?

Argabrite: Well, we had to open all of our voids. A void is just an empty space that could be used for ballast in the event it was necessary. They were all open. We were ready for inspection the next day, so we were pretty well vulnerable, as far as any watertight integrity. That certainly reduced our capabilities.

Marcello: And these spaces are open simply because it's very convenient to go from one compartment to another, from one deck to another, in this inspection. Is that correct?

Argabrite: Well, they're bolted down. The void covers are bolted down to where you can't...it would take a week for somebody to inspect your spaces. You've got to have them open prior to this inspection, so they had this all taken care of, naturally, before the inspection was to take place because the inspecting officer is not going to wait a week to get the hatch covers undone to let him look in there.

Marcello: For the benefit of the readers of the transcript and the listeners of this tape, when we talk about these covers over the voids, how large are they?

Argabrite: Oh, I'd say probably maybe two square feet. They're rectangular, and there's about maybe, I'd say, fifteen or twenty bolts where they are actually bolted down--the void covers

are. It's just merely an access to that space, which has no use other than to be able to ballast if necessary.

Marcello: And these are quite heavy, I guess?

Argabrite: Yes, they have a lot of weight.

Marcello: Okay, what did you do that Saturday of December 6, 1941? Do you remember?

Argabrite: Well, like I say, we went over for this landing force, and we spent the biggest share of the day over there doing it. We went over in the morning, and we had pack inspection. We had to pack and carry our packs and go over there, and the Marines inspected it. Of course, they're supposed to be experts on these field packs and what-have-you, and we got inspected and marched back in quite a smart manner (chuckle), we thought.

Marcello: Now what time was that activity over?

Argabrite: OH, I'd say, maybe...well into the afternoon, probably three o'clock or so.

Marcello: Then did liberty commence?

Argabrite: Yes, shortly thereafter.

Marcello: Did you have liberty?

Argabrite: Yes, I think I went ashore that evening.

Marcello: Do you recall what you did?

Argabrite: No, I don't recall offhand what I did. I normally went to see a movie or the fights or something of that sort, but I don't recall what I did that night. I was on mess cooking, and I had to get back early the next morning because

I had to get my mess set up. Of course, we had to be in at midnight, but you had to get up early, so I didn't want to press the issue.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that morning of December 7, 1941, and, of course, here again, we want to go into as much detail as you can remember. What time did you have to get up for mess cooking?

Argabrite: Well, we had to feed around seven o'clock, and we had around twenty-some men that you had to feed--two tablesful.

Marcello: Which meant you had to get up at what time?

Argabrite: Well, I think I got up around thirty minutes before reveille because you had to get your coffee out for the morning watch--you always had morning watch--before breakfast. So you had to get your coffee cups out and your coffee and serve that, and then you had to go get them cleaned and set up your mess and have breakfast. This is Sunday morning, so there really wasn't much going on. But you still have to feed.

Marcello: And I guess aboard a battleship, with all those hammocks and so on, there's really no such thing as sleeping in on Sunday mornings, is there?

Argabrite: Well, they usually let the mid-watch sleep in, but if you slept in a hammock, your chance of sleeping in were very slim because you've got to clear that space out. There's just no extenuating circumstances where you are able to swing around up on that overhead there while somebody's

tyring to eat. You can just forget that.

Marcello: Okay, so continue with your routine.

Argabrite: Well, that's where I was. I completed feeding my group of men that I fed, and I was cleaning up the mess. In fact, I'd already put my tables up and put my dishes in the scullery and was getting ready to read the Sunday paper--funnies and what-have-you.

Marcello: And where were you? Were you still there in the scullery?

Argabrite: Yes, I was right on the mess deck getting my paper--getting ready to find a corner there where I could crawl into to read the funnies. The next thing I knew, they were sounding General Quarters.

Marcello: But you hadn't felt or heard anything at that point?

Argabrite: No. No, I was as content and peaceful as all get-out there.

Marcello: Okay, General Quarters sounds.

Argabrite: Yes. I thought, "Well, hey, this is a Sunday. I mean, let's have a heart here!" Then with the way it was sounded, it removed all doubts that this wasn't just something routine.

Marcello: How was General Quarters sounded?

Argabrite: The boatswain's mate passed the word: "General Quarters! We're being attacked!"

Marcello: It came over a PA system?

Argabrite: Yes, the normal way that they usually pass the word. Of course, everybody...I was nineteen at the time, just barely, and, needless to say, I hurried on down there.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens at that point?

Argabrite: Well, I hadn't even gotten hardly settled down at my battle station until a torpedo hit us.

Marcello: And the records indicate this may have been sometime around 8:05.

Argabrite: Well, that could be. I really didn't take notice of the time. For me to say it was 8:05 would be asinine. It was in the neighborhood, yes. I'm sure of that. But other than that, I don't know what time it was.

Marcello: Describe what you felt, that is, the impact and so on after you were hit.

Argabrite: Well, it's quite a jar when a torpedo hits a ship. Over a period of all this time, you know, they'd been working on the guns and everything, and there's bolts, nuts, screwdrivers, and what-have-you laying on the angle irons up in the overhead. When that torpedo hit, this rained down around you, so you really don't know what's happening to you. I didn't.

Marcello: Was there noise? Could you hear a loud noise?

Argabrite: Yes, you could hear the noise--definitely a noise. It got your attention. There was no doubt that you'd been hit with something big. No sooner than that happened than I think there was another one that hit right directly. I think there were three of them that we got hit with.

Marcello: And they hit in the aft part of the ship, is that correct?

Argabrite: No, I wouldn't say all of them were. There was some of them

that did, yes. One hit pretty well forward, I think. They were pretty well distributed.

Marcello: The number three gun would have been aft.

Argabrite: Aft, yes, just aft of the brig.

Marcello: I know at least one of those torpedoes did hit aft.

Argabrite: Yes. In fact, it was fairly close to the turret there where we were.

Marcello: So is there an ear-splitting noise or anything of that nature when that torpedo hit?

Argabrite: Well, I wouldn't describe it that way. It wasn't a deafening noise, no. It wasn't a deafening noise--not to me--but it was loud enough that there was an explosion, and you were aware that...like I say, debris from the days of people putting things on the overhead were coming tumbling down on you.

Then, of course, after three of these torpedo hits, we started listing a little bit. We're all sitting in there, and, of course, we're in the turret. You don't see any water. This is all guesswork, as far as where you're at and what's happening outside. You don't know what's going on.

Marcello: What do you talk about?

Argabrite: Well, you wondered. There was very little talk. You're not talking about liberty or things like that. There was something going on, and those kind of things just don't come up at that time. You're thinking about maybe getting out of there, or are you going to get out of there and what-have-you.

There's other things to occupy your mind rather than telling some sea story or something--not at that time.

Marcello: Is it rather disconcerting to be in there under those circumstances and not know really or exactly what's taking place outside?

Argabrite: Well, I couldn't say about anybody else, but to me it was definitely disconcerting, and that was one of the things that was uppermost in my mind. One of the things that gives you apprehension is that the list from the torpedoes is on the one side, and the ship lists, and you're sitting on the deck, and then you're sitting on the bulkhead, part of it. Like I say, this is in the uppermost part of your mind: "Are we underwater? Are we out?" You don't know this because it wouldn't necessarily have to flood where you're at, and you could still be underwater. That was one of the things that decided me to be a topside sailor and a boatswain's mate--as a result of that one day.

Marcello: Did you lose power, that is, lights and so on?

Argabrite: Not right then, no. No, we didn't lose power for quite some time. In fact, right after the torpedoes hit and everything, they passed the word down through there for volunteers to pass antiaircraft ammunition, and I volunteered and got out of there because I was really anxious to move a little bit and see maybe what was going on.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens, then, when you got out?

Argabrite: Well, they asked us to go to the third deck, which was not necessarily out but it was out of the turret and up on the third deck passageway. We were passing 5.25 ammunition up to the guns--the antiaircraft guns--so they could supposedly fire at these planes and what-have-you.

Marcello: Now when you're on the third deck, you're not really outside, are you?

Argabrite: Oh, no, no.

Marcello: In fact, the third deck is about three decks down, isn't it?

Argabrite: Yes, it's three decks down from the main deck. No, you're definitely not out of it yet.

Marcello: But at least now you have something to partially occupy your time.

Argabrite: Yes, you're doing something, which is really, I think, the... well, you have at least a beneficial way to pass your time rather than just sit there and think about something.

Marcello: Now I know that at about 8:25, the California took still another hit, and this one caused fires and all that sort of thing, especially on the second deck. Do you remember that?

Argabrite: I believe that was a bomb hit.

Marcello: Yes, it was.

Argabrite: Yes, that was right in the vicinity where I was at, although I was on the third deck, which is below the armored deck, which is the second deck. But when it hit, that's when all functions stopped then. There was no passing of ammunition; there was

no...in fact, the compartments filled up with smoke, and you couldn't even see the wall and with a flashlight that close to it. It was just so dense with the smoke.

Marcello: This is a black smoke?

Argabrite: Yes, it was black, and it filled the compartment, and you couldn't see anything.

Marcello: You were saying that you couldn't even see the wall with a flashlight three inches away.

Argabrite: No, you couldn't even see the bulkheads. No, you couldn't.

Marcello: Describe what you remember from that bomb hitting.

Argabrite: Well, the minute it hit, the compartment immediately filled up with smoke. I don't know how many people were in that compartment. There must have been thirty, but I thought I was the only one in there. Nobody was saying nothing. The conversation stopped, and, like I say, I could have been there by myself just as easy as...and so my thoughts were, "Well, I've got to get out of here."

I felt my way along to a ladder going up. I crawled along, and, "WHAM," I hit my head on the hatch. You couldn't open them hatches. They were spring loaded, and you had to open them from topside. So you just said, "Well, I hope somebody comes along here in a minute."

Marcello: No panic yet?

Argabrite: Well, I hadn't given up the ship yet. I never did reach that point to where I felt like I wasn't going to get off of it.

But needless to say, when somebody opened that hatch, I was glad to see somebody open that hatch.

Marcello: It must have been extremely hard to breathe down there, too.

Argabrite: Yes, it was choking. It was terrible. Some of them put gas masks on when that smoke got in there. They thought it was gas, you know, and they were afraid they were going to be not only asphyxiated but also be poisoned, so they put their gas masks on. They had that tape over the cannister, and they couldn't get no air, so they were worse off than they were if they were in the smoke (chuckle). So, you know, it really...sometimes you think of things out like that, and sometimes you don't.

Marcello: Well, when this bomb hit, was this ear-shattering?

Argabrite: Yes, yes. I'd say that's an accurate description of the way it was, yes.

Marcello: That was a lot louder than the torpedoes slamming in.

Argabrite: Oh, yes. We were maybe thirty feet aft of where the bomb actually exploded on the next deck above, so there was a little bit of shaking going on there.

Marcello: Did it knock you off your feet or anything like that?

Argabrite: No, I don't think it knocked me off my feet, but I lost my balance. It shook you up there, yes.

Marcello: Okay, so you're on this ladder, and you can't get out this hatch. What happens at that point?

Argabrite: Well, there were people...you could hear the people up above

running along yelling, "Abandon ship!" Of course, there wasn't nowhere to go (chuckle). Finally, somebody opened the hatch, and it was what they called the meat hatch.

Marcello: The meat hatch?

Argabrite: Yes, which is really...it's hatches on three decks straight down, so that when the meat came aboard--provisions--and they had to be struck below to the reefers, well, they went three decks down, naturally, to where the reefers were. So that's what they called the meat hatch where you could strike the stores straight down three decks to the reefers.

So when they opened the hatch, you could see sunlight, and that was a welcome sight there. I was glad to see that sun.

Marcello: I assume you didn't waste any time getting out.

Argabrite: I don't even know who opened the hatch. Normally, you'd say, "Well, hey, this guy opened the hatch." But no way. I had a one-track mind right then, and that was getting off the ship.

Marcello: You had heard somebody say, "Abandon ship."

Argabrite: Yes, you could hear them up above. That's what caused so much concern and anxiety, was that here you were, in a helpless position, really, and action was urgent there. They were saying, "Abandon ship," which normally signals time for action, to get a move on and do something.

Marcello: Okay, so pick up your story.

Argabrite: Well, as soon as that hatch opened, I got off. I got the heck up topside and dove over into the water.

Marcello: You did not stop to see what was going on?

Argabrite: Oh, of course, you had to look over the side because of these boats and everything else that were picking up people from the ships. There was fuel all in the water and everything, but the beach was right over there. It wasn't a question of whether you was able to get to the beach. It wasn't that far to swim over there.

Marcello: And you would be swimming to where? Ford Island?

Argabrite: Ford Island, yes.

Marcello: Okay, so you did dive into the water?

Argabrite: Oh, yes.

Marcello: Did you take off any of your clothing?

Argabrite: No, I didn't take off a thing.

Marcello: You went in with shoes and all?

Argabrite: Yes.

Marcello: Did you have on shorts?

Argabrite: Yes, we had white shorts and an undershirt and a white hat. That was the uniform. I lost my hat in the long run there somewhere.

Marcello: Now which side of the ship did you go off of?

Argabrite: The starboard side. We were moored on the starboard side. We went off the starboard side, which was...it was listing a little bit, so you...they counterflooded during the attack,

so there really wasn't much list on the ship. We were on fire from that bomb that hit us, but we didn't have near as much list as some of the other ships did.

Marcello: You mentioned that there was oil in the water. Describe what that oil was like.

Argabrite: Oh, God! It was black fuel oil, and when that stuff gets in the pores of your skin and in your hair...I think it took me a month to actually get it out of the roots of my hair.

Marcello: What is its consistency?

Argabrite: Oh, it's really gooey, and it's really uncomfortable, and it's slick. You can't stand up. You got over there, and it's on the soles of your shoes, and you can't hardly stand up. Well, you know what oily things are like, so there's no need to go into that. It was really something. That was a mess.

Marcello: Was there any fire on the water when you dove in?

Argabrite: Yes, but not around where I was at, of course, because there was so many people. I think it was due to the swimming. When you swim, you tend to break up the flames, you know, and at least get them away from you. So there really wasn't any right where I was at, but there was fire on the oil, and that's something to be concerned about. It'll induce you to move at a high rate of speed if it's possible.

Marcello: Okay, so what happens when you get ashore?

Argabrite: Well, we went over to the mess hall over there on Ford Island,

and that's a sight I'll never forget there. In that mess hall--you know, the tables--I guess they could feed maybe-- I don't know--500 people, I guess. But every table in there had somebody laying on it--wounded.

Marcello: Already at that stage?

Argabrite: Yes, yes. And some of them had been burned, and there was just flesh hanging off of them. You've never seen nothing like that. I'd seen a guy cut his thumb once, and that was the limit of what I'd seen before that. You can imagine. I'm a country boy here that maybe sees a guy get his foot cut on a bottle or something. I hadn't seen nobody burned or nobody killed or machine-gunned or anything like that. This was all trauma to me, and something you don't forget very quick.

Marcello: So is it safe to say that you didn't stick around there too long?

Argabrite: Well, we went right on through there, and they were passing out dungarees and trousers and shirts at the small stores because we were a mess. So they were passing these out, and they gave each guy a uniform.

Marcello: In the meantime, is the attack still going on?

Argabrite: Yes, there were a few high-level bombers or what-have-you. They were still dropping bombs, but for all practical purposes, it was over.

Marcello: Incidentally, when you hit the beach there at Ford Island,

was somebody giving you orders to go to that mess hall?

Argabrite: No, everybody was following their noses to find someplace, and then, of course, they had somebody in the mess hall; and as soon as you went in there and they saw you were in one piece and didn't need medical attention or something else... like, we needed clothes and a place to get cleaned up, so they sent us right on through. Somebody said, "Right on through there, you can get clothes." You know, they directed you over to the...well, it was right off the mess hall there in the barracks, just right there adjacent to the mess hall. So they directed us right on through there. In fact, they insisted that we move on through there.

Marcello: So what happens once you get this clothing?

Argabrite: Well, we got scrubbed up a little bit and cleaned up, and we even felt normal then. You had a better perspective of things. You felt like that maybe things weren't going to be too difficult for you. Every now and then they'd try to get crews together because, as you can imagine, you've got people off the West Virginia and off of all these ships running around there. They're saying, "If you're off the California, go to a certain place." "If you're off the Oklahoma, go to a certain place and check in." Because they didn't know whether you was dead or alive or otherwise.

So then I think it was that same day that they had a card that they gave each person. I think it had about five statements

on the card. One of them was, "I'm well, not hurt, and in good shape." Another one would be, "I'm in the hospital, but I'm not...." You know one would actually fit your status if you could write. So you had a box there that you checked, and that was the communication you had and were permitted to send home--nothing else. You couldn't say, "It was rough," or "I did this," or nothing. No explanations, just one box: "I am all right."

Marcello: Was this card filled out or completed on the day of the attack, or did this occur the day after?

Argabrite: I'm not sure about that, but it was shortly...it was either that day or shortly thereafter. I couldn't swear to the time element, but I was under the impression it was the day of the attack. But it could very well have been the next day.

Marcello: Is it not true that there was an Abandon Ship order, and then later on they called some people back aboard the California to try to save it?

Argabrite: Well, we went back aboard it but not that day. I didn't go back aboard that day, but, in fact, I served on board the California all during the war.

Marcello: What did you do the rest of the day?

Argabrite: The rest of the day?

Marcello: Yes.

Argabrite: After we got cleaned up and everything, well, there were some people saying, "Well, if you don't have anything to do, you

can go down to this hangar and report down there, and they'll assign you a machine gun nest where you can get in there, and you can get around the airstrip and carry sandbags and build you a machine gun nest. So that's what we did. We went down to the hangar, and the guy said, "Yeah, you go down there to the end, and there's some guys that have got a .50-caliber. We're going to fill that truck with sandbags down there and load her up and pile them around that gun. Then get as much ammunition as you can and stay fast." So that's when I wound up down there at the end of the airstrip.

Marcello: So you were down there all that day and into the evening?

Argabrite: Into the evening, yes, and that night. All that night.

Marcello: What rumors were going around?

Argabrite: Oh, everybody was saying, "Well, they're going to come back." Of course, every plane that came through there, we thought they were theirs, but they were actually our planes--most of them.

Marcello: When those planes came back off the Enterprise that evening, did your machine guns open up on them?

Argabrite: Yes, we fired a few rounds at them, but there was no fire control, and once you determined they were ours, naturally, you didn't fire no more.

Marcello: I guess it was like a chain reaction. When one gun opened up, the rest of them opened up.

Argabrite: Well, yes, that's what really happened. Once one gun opens

up, then it's like you say--a chain reaction. That ignites everything.

Marcello: Describe that situation as best you remember it, that is, that incident when the Enterprise planes came in.

Argabrite: Well, it was like the Fourth of July, you know--tracers. The whole sky was lit up. It was the biggest battle ever fought right there, and there wasn't the enemy in sight.

Marcello: We were mentioning rumors awhile ago. I assume you had no reason not to believe those rumors?

Argabrite: No. We listened good to everything they said, and, of course, there was a certain amount of credence you could lend to each one. But, you know, nobody knew. Somebody said, "Yeah, well, there's a force landing on the other side of the island," and you don't know that that's not the case.

Marcello: I guess it wasn't too safe to walk around that night, either, was it?

Argabrite: Well, it wasn't so bad that night as it was later on. See, right after that, they sent all of us to the receiving station, and we stood watches on the California because when it sunk, the starboard side of the 5.25's were out of the water, and we had enough ammunition that we could have fired a few rounds in the event that the planes came back. So we stood watches on here. I stood watches on there for about, oh, I guess, maybe a week-and-a-half or two weeks after that. We'd ride a boat over there, and that's when it was really rough.

You didn't dare walk around because there was somebody...if you even rolled a gravel when you stopped, boy, that ol' boy would go on that gun. I think everybody was more afraid of them than they was of the Japs--you know, getting shot.

Marcello: Now things were obviously still tense that evening and that night of December 7, 1941. Did you and your buddies talk about anything while you were down there manning that machine gun?

Argabrite: Well, the only thing we talked about was the Japanese and how quick we was going to win the war and all that stuff (chuckle). I think everybody figured it would be about a week before the war was over. Nobody had any idea what to expect.

Marcello: Had you eaten at all that day yet?

Argabrite: No, I didn't even think about eating. The next day, of course, you were hungry for some breakfast. They'd set up some field kitchens over the island. There was several of them, most of them in these outdoor theatres that they had over there in Pearl. You know, they'd have an enclosure, and they had moviés outside over there because that's nice weather over there. They set up a field kitchen in there. I think they had hard-boiled eggs and corned beef hash. That's all they had for a week. That's all I ate, I think. I can't remember eating anything else. I got sick of that.

Marcello: On Monday, December 8, 1941, take me on a tour of the harbor. What would we see as we walked around from the shore or whatever?

Argabrite: Well, it was devastation, in one word. We were, like I say, at the receiving station. We rode a boat from Merry's Point to Ford Island and went aboard the California to where those guns were. That was the only thing sticking out of the water. The California was resting on the bottom. We made trips through there. You know, we went over there on watch the next day. The Nevada was beached over there.

Marcello: What did the Arizona look like?

Argabrite: Well, you couldn't see much left. It was just a piece of warped sheet metal over there, you know, tangled metal. That's all you could see.

Marcello: Was it still smoldering and smoking?

Argabrite: Well, yes, there was smoke trickling out of there. There wasn't much left.

Marcello: Did you see the Oklahoma?

Argabrite: Yes, it was turned over, bottom side up. It was right aft of us. In fact, it was to the next aft of us--the Oklahoma.

Marcello: In your wildest dreams, did you ever think a battleship could turn over like that?

Argabrite: No. That's one of the first sights that greeted me when I came up out of that hatch, was that Oklahoma turned bottom side up. Right then it struck home to me that we'd had quite a set-to here today.

Marcello: Was there any other damage that you were able to observe or that you can remember after you had a chance to take a look

at it? Now on December 7, things were going pretty fast and furious.

Argabrite: Yes, it all didn't sink in, but yet, like I say, the Oklahoma was definitely a prominent sight there in the harbor. And 1010 Dock and the Pennsylvania and the Cassin and the Downes ...all were just...you know, you could see all of this when you rode a boat, really, over there to the watch. In the next few days, that's what we did.

Marcello: That's basically all you had to do there on the California, was stand watch?

Argabrite: That's what we did, yes. For a week or so, I think, we stood watches on there.

Marcello: I guess it was obviously quite a contrast in that harbor between what it looked like on Saturday, December 6, 1941, and what it looked like on Monday, December 8, 1941.

Argabrite: Yes, I think that's an understatement definitely because there was no comparison to what it did look like. It was so peaceful, serene, and blue water. It was real pretty over there--a pretty place. But it was devastation and oil. It was just terrible. It was really terrible. One attack changed the appearance of things, definitely.

Marcello: Did you have any thoughts or feelings toward your own ship?

Argabrite: Oh, yes.

Marcello: I mean, I gather you had kind of fallen in love with the California.

Argabrite: Oh, I was happy with the California. I liked it, and I went back aboard it. That was my ship all through the war. Yes, I was definitely put out--angry--to say the least. I was ready to fight. I was definitely ready to fight.

Marcello: Did you actually take any part or play any role in the refloating of the California?

Argabrite: Yes, that was one of my primary jobs. We were assigned to that when they started.

Marcello: That has to be one of the most amazing things to me--refloating one of those ships.

Argabrite: The idea behind it and what-have-you and the way they did it was amazing, yes. It wasn't a very pleasant task, to say the least, because it was tent city and tank suits and oily compartments. It wasn't a very pleasant thing.

Marcello: And I guess there were still bodies and all that sort of thing aboard too.

Argabrite: Odors, bodies. The odor was just terrible.

Marcello: I've heard other people talk about that.

Argabrite: Then, of course, every compartment was just black with...the bulkheads was black with oil, and we had to take steam machines and steam clean each compartment. Then you'd drag all the debris and stuff out of there. It was terrible.

Marcello: I guess before you obviously can refloat one of those huge battlewagons, you have to take off all the weight you possibly can, do you not?

- Argabrite: Yes. They stripped it down pretty good, and then they boarded it up where the torpedo holes were with planking, and then they built a cofferdam around the thing, and they put pumps on there. They never did pump all the water out, of course, but they pumped enough to where it was buoyant enough that it raised off the bottom, I guess barely, just enough to where it was actually floating.
- Marcello: That must have been a rather exhilarating moment, however, for those of you who had really fallen in love with the California.
- Argabrite: Oh, yes, yes. We were glad to see it. In fact, I think we were one of the first ones to be refloated. In fact, we might have been the first one. I don't know, but I'm pretty sure. We were among the first ones to be refloated. We went, of course, right straight across the harbor to the dry dock, and there were, of course, the barnacles and everything. We had to chip her all down, and then, of course, they put temporary patches on the bottom, and then they got her ready to go back to the States.
- Marcello: For the benefit of those who read this transcript and listen to this interview at some future date, describe the physical, outside damage that one of those Japanese torpedoes could do. I think a lot of people couldn't be able to imagine...
- Argabrite: The size of the hole?
- Marcello: ...the size of the hole.

Argabrite: Well, you could drive a big truck in one of them. This is a hole where...oh, my goodness, it's a big hole. You could drive a "semi" truck through one of these holes easy.

Marcello: And the California was hit by how many of these torpedoes?

Argabrite: Three.

Marcello: Three torpedoes.

Argabrite: But the guy, really, that I think done the job there was the guy that counterflooded us and kept us from having the same fate that the Oklahoma had because we were damaged as badly as they were. But they didn't counterflood, and they just went on over. That's what would have happened to us. I think the carpenter on there--Carpenter Jensen, I believe--counterflooded, or they said he was responsible for it. We never knew who was responsible for it, but, anyway, the guy that did it, in my opinion...well, he might have even saved it. You don't know the extent of the value to put on the fact that we didn't tip over and capsize.

Marcello: Was refloating the California a twenty-four-hour-a-day job--a constant job?

Argabrite: Oh, yes, everyday. We worked everyday, and we worked right on up to...in fact, they had different shifts, I think, on there.

Marcello: That's what I meant. There were different shifts working on that thing twenty-four hours a day.

Argabrite: Yes. Of course, we couldn't live on board or anything, and

we had a bunch of tents set up right over the...they had a causeway built out to the deck of the ship to where you could go from "Tent City," they called it. That's where we stayed --in tents.

Marcello: What was your specific function during the refloating process? What were you doing?

Argabrite: Well, I was mainly cleaning compartments and cataloguing materials and stuff that we'd find in lockers, and in some cases we were trying to maybe find the owners if you could.

Marcello: Did you find any of your own possessions?

Argabrite: None. One of the first things that I did was go to my locker, and my wife's class ring and mine...I had both of them. She had just given me hers. We weren't married, of course, but I was going with her. They were both in there, and that's one of the things that I wanted to find. But I never did find anything that belonged to me. Somebody else must have, I guess, got to the locker first and threw it out.

Marcello: You actually did get to your locker, and it was empty.

Argabrite: It wasn't there.

Marcello: Oh, the locker wasn't there.

Argabrite: No. Somebody, I guess, had already hauled it off. I don't know what happened to it, in fact. But that's one of the first things I did--try to locate that--and I never did. I guess it may be still at the bottom of Pearl Harbor for all I know.

Marcello: How long did it take to make the California seaworthy again?

Argabrite: To get back in action?

Marcello: Yes.

Argabrite: I think it was in Bremerton for about eighteen months.

Marcello: You were with it all that time?

Argabrite: Oh, yes, yes. In fact, before they started raising it--right after the attack--we went to different localities on the island and set up guns--antiaircraft batteries--and trained Army soldiers--they were naval guns--to fire the guns. Then we'd move on and set up another one.

Marcello: So you did accompany the ship back to Bremerton, then, where the final refurbishing took place?

Argabrite: Yes, where we refitted and put new guns on and everything and made it ready for action. We felt like when that thing was finished that we were a topnotch ship then.

Marcello: Of course, you had all the 20-millimeters and the 40-millimeters and so on aboard then.

Argabrite: Oh, yes. We had 5.38's, and we had the works--40-millimeters, 20-millimeters. Yes, we had the works on there then.

Marcello: How did the California get from Pearl back to Bremerton? Did it go back under its own power?

Argabrite: Oh, yes. It steamed back. We just had the bare essentials. In fact, one of the righting fins on one side was blown off by one of the torpedoes, and it rolled a little excessive on one side going back. Yes, we steamed her back.

Marcello: Did you have opportunities to transfer from the California?

Argabrite: Yes, there were several times. Everybody put in for new construction, you know, new ships coming out. But I didn't have any desire to leave the California.

Marcello: And where were some of the places and some of the actions that the California participated in after Pearl and after it was seaworthy again?

Argabrite: Well, we went directly from there back to Pearl, and then Saipan and Tinian and Guam. We participated in all the invasions except Iwo Jima. We got hit again...we got hit at Saipan by a shore battery, but nothing serious. Then we got hit by a kamikaze off the island of Luzon in the Philippines. But we participated in all of them--the Battle of the Surigao Strait, the surface battle--all of them except Iwo Jima. We missed that because we got hit, and we had to go back for repairs. So we missed Iwo Jima.

Marcello: You know, one of the discouraging things to me about these interviews is that we only cover Pearl Harbor. For instance, you mentioned the kamikaze attack awhile ago, and you also mentioned the Battle of the Surigao Strait. I think what, of course, is historically significant about the Battle of the Surigao Strait is that it was the last surface battle fought, was it not, ship-against-ship? It was the last time that ships were caught "crossing the T,"

Argabrite: Yes, that's true. That probably will be the last naval surface

engagement. It's kind of ironic, really, because we were an old battleship, and we played a definite role. And that was a specific role--to bombard the beaches to soften up the resistance for the landing party. Everybody on board figured, "Well, that is our job. We'll not worry about surface engagements. The 3rd Fleet and the new battleships with high speeds will take care of that as it comes up, and we don't have to worry about that." Then when they passed the word that we were going to meet the Japanese fleet probably along...one afternoon they passed the word to strip the ship for action, that they contemplated on having a surface battle around two o'clock the next morning. Everybody laughed, "Hey, what is this? We're not supposed to be a surface fighting ship." But as it turned out, we were right in the middle of it, really. The "crossing of the T" was the ideal situation.

Marcello: Again, for the benefit of the record, this simply means that you could bring every gun to bear.

Argabrite: Well, the enemy is steaming in column toward you, which constitutes the column of the T, and then the top of the T is your force, which is steaming back and forth.

Marcello: Right. You could bring every gun to bear...

Argabrite: ...all your guns could bear, and all he can fire at you is his foremost guns. So that's the idea of the situation.

Marcello: I guess that's probably a good place to end this interview because I guess we can kind of say that the California got

a little bit of revenge there.

Argabrite: Well, as far as I'm concerned, they did.

Marcello: Well, I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project and for being interviewed. I think you've said a lot of really interesting and important things, and I'm sure that scholars and researchers and students are going to find your comments most valuable.

ARgabrite: Well, thank you.