

The University of North Texas Oral History Program holds copyright in this interview. It has been reprinted with the permission of the Program's Director

University of North Texas
Oral History Collection
Number 563



A. E. "Lefty" Miller

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Austin, Texas

Date: May 14, 1982

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing A. E. ("Lefty") Miller for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on May 14, 1982, in Austin, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Miller in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was aboard the cruiser USS Helena, during the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Miller, to begin this interview, give me a brief 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. Miller I was born in the area of Smithville, Texas, on December 21, 1916. Shortly thereafter, my family moved to Waelder, Texas, where my father was in the hardware and plumbing business. I graduated from Waelder High School in 1934. I went to Abilene Christian College for one year, and then I had a year in which I kept books for my uncle in Bastrop. Then I went to Southwest Texas, at that time State Teachers College, in San Marcos. I only went there one year, and then I worked in San Antonio and Houston. I joined the Marine Corps in March of 1941, before the draft, because it seemed evident that the United States would eventually become involved in the war.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Marine Corps as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

Miller: I don't know. I suppose it was a young man's idea of an outfit that had a high esprit de corps, and I wanted to move around, and I certainly wanted to be with, if war did come, with a unit that had the ability that Marine Corps history indicated.

Marcello: Did the stories that you had heard about World War I have anything to do with your decision not to join the Army?

Miller: No, I don't think so. I had relatives that were in World War I, and to me World War I was, as far as the services were concerned, exacting on everybody. Of course, the Marines, being people that kept a real good history, they had a colorful record in World War I.

Marcello: Where did you take your boot camp?

Miller: San Diego.

Marcello: Was there anything eventful that happened in boot camp that you think we need to get as part of the record?

Miller: No... I don't know. The Marine Corps boot camp certainly had an initiation that, from a psychological standpoint, I think prepared the "boots" for eventual combat. They didn't say, "if you had"; it was more or less a thing along the lines of "when you have."

Marcello: How long did boot camp last at that time? Now, again, we're talking about March of 1941, and things are beginning to heat up a little bit by this time.

Miller: It seems to me that it was about eight weeks. I forget the exact...

Marcello: When you thought of the United States getting into a war at that time, did you think more in terms of Europe or the Far East – in March of 1941, when you first joined?

Miller: I certainly thought of the war as being in Europe.

Marcello: Where did you go from boot camp?

Miller: I went to Mare Island, California, the Navy yard at Mare Island, California to do guard duty with the Marine barracks.

Marcello: How long did you remain there?

Miller: Until August of 1941.

Marcello: What happens at that point?

Miller: Well, the USS Helena had just come back from touring Hawaii, and this seemed a glamorous thing to me, so I went in to the 1st sergeant... I knew that they were going to need replacements for the USS Helena, as far as the Marine detachment was concerned, and I asked him if I might be able to go aboard the USS Helena, and fortunately it turned out that way.

Marcello: In essence, then, it was at that time that you became a sea-going Marine?

Miller: Correct, yes.

Marcello: What special training did you undergo in order to become a sea-going Marine?

Miller: I had no special training as far as sea duty. Ordinarily, they take people who had sea school, but I had had no sea school.

Marcello: What special qualifications did you have that allowed you to become a sea going Marine?

Miller: I don't know that I had any special qualifications (chuckle), but I'd have to possibly brag a little bit there. I certainly was what I would call "gung-ho," and appearance-wise, I think I presented a pretty good picture of a typical Marine.

Marcello: Why was it that you wanted to become a sea-going Marine?

Miller: I wanted to travel. And I wanted to move around. I wanted to see some of the world.

Marcello: Describe exactly what your function was when you went aboard the Helena.

Miller: Because of some of my background, the 1st sergeant selected me to be the company clerk.

Marcello: Was that basically what your function remained while you were aboard the Helena?

Miller: Yes, until...of course, later on...but this would be going beyond the Pearl Harbor area. I later on became a ship's service steward aboard the Helena and handled ship's service activities and so forth. But that's going beyond Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: What other duties did you have aboard the Helena other than simply service as a clerk.

Miller: I did some guard duty, and then most particularly, I was training as a machine-gunner in the bow battery, which the Marines handled in anti-aircraft-type duties.

Marcello: Was this a .50-caliber machine gun?

Miller: Yes, .50-caliber, water-cooled.

Marcello: Describe what the Marine quarters were like aboard the Helena at that time.

Miller: Well, we had a relatively small compartment. There were forty-two Marines -- actually forty enlisted Marines -- and then the 1st sergeant and the gunnery sergeant and platoon sergeant lived in the chief's quarters. So that would cut that down to thirty-seven Marines that lived in the relatively small compartment, which was two decks down from the main deck.

Marcello: What was the food like aboard the Helena?

Miller: Well, by this time, I'm pretty well tuned into service food. I thought the food aboard ship was good food -- well-balanced diets and well prepared.

Marcello: In general, as you look back to that period before Pearl Harbor, how would you describe the morale aboard the ship? Maybe you need to speak in terms of the morale among the Marines on the Helena.

Miller: I felt that the Marine detachment had a high morale. The general morale aboard the USS Helena, I thought, was very fine. They seemed to have a real spirit of working together, and it was most pleasant.

Marcello: What do you think accounts for this high morale?

Miller: I would say that it was leadership. I feel that there was a high degree of leadership in both the Navy and in the Marines.

Marcello: When was it that the Helena first moved to Pearl Harbor after you got aboard?

Miller: It was August or September – I've forgotten which –that we went to the Hawaiian operating Area.

Marcello: What did you think about the idea of being stationed more or less permanently in the Hawaiian Islands?

Miller: Well, of course, I had no reason to believe that it was permanent. The Helena had had one tour in the Hawaiian Islands, and I thought of it as being a spot where they would stay and then maybe moving to another area. Of course, I always seemed to be fascinated with the Far East, and I was hoping that maybe they would head that way.

Marcello: By the time that you got to Pearl Harbor, relations between the United States and Japan were obviously in a state of decline, and the countries were headed toward war. During that period, after you arrived in the Hawaiian Islands, describe a typical training exercise for the Helena would be like. In other words, more or less take me through a typical training exercise in which you were engaged during that pre-Pearl Harbor period, after you moved to Pearl Harbor.

Miller: We were in a light cruiser task force operating out of Pearl Harbor. As I recall, it seems that it was almost on a week-to-week basis, and we would go out and become involved in training's of various types of simulated attacks. We certainly had a lot of target practice, both with the large guns...the Marines...our normal battle station was manning the number three turret, which was...the Helena had 6-inch guns, and the Marines manned the number three turret. So, we had a lot of target practice with these 6-inch guns, and then as far as antiaircraft was concerned, why, we had a lot of target practice. Planes were pulling sleeves, and the various gunners would be shooting at these sleeves with colored tracers so that you could see what your actual score was as far as your marksmanship was concerned.

Marcello: How much emphasis was given to this antiaircraft practice?

Miller: Oh, I would say it was at least equal to the practice with the large guns for sea battle, naval battle.

Marcello: As you look back upon that period, however, do you think that people actually realized how important airplanes were going to be in this coming war?

Miller: I don't think so. We hadn't read about Billy Mitchell too much.

Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as relations between the two countries continued to decline, could you detect any changes in your routine?

Miller: I don't ...well, of course...there were some unusual incidents. The general feeling of the enlisted men was that we would eventually go to war with Japan. It was just a matter of when. Then some of our information that we received...well, we didn't receive a lot of information, but there were incidents of submarines operating in the area and this type of thing and that the situation with Japan was a tense situation.

Marcello: In other words, when you were on training maneuvers, there would be submarine alerts, and you would be called to general quarters?

Miller: Right, correct.

Marcello: And these were allegedly the real thing?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: Did you notice that you had more general quarter's drills as you get closer to December 7, 1941?

Miller: I didn't get any registration that way.

Marcello: When you thought of the typical Japanese during that pre-Pearl Harbor period, what kind of person did you usually conjure up in your own mind?

Miller: Well, someone that was certainly from a different culture. I more or less thought of the Oriental as being, well, for the lack of a better term, a treacherous type of individual living by a different code than we lived by.

Marcello: If war did come between the United States and Japan, did you and your buddies have any thoughts about the outcome?

Miller: We certainly didn't think we would lose it (chuckle).

Marcello: In your bull sessions, did any talk ever arise about the possibility of the Japanese hitting the Hawaiian Islands?

Miller: No.

Marcello: Do you think this was perhaps because of the distance that the Hawaiian Islands were from Japan?

Miller: This is quite possible.

Marcello: You mentioned awhile ago that your training would occur on a weekly basis. What did you mean when you said that?

Miller: Well, as I recall, we would go out for a number of days of training, and then we'd come in, and then we would have liberty and recreation and so forth.

Marcello: Would the Helena usually go out on the same day when it went out on maneuvers and come back after the same specified number of days each time?

Miller: I don't remember the sequence on that.

Marcello: Was there any particular day of the week when you would usually go out?

Miller: Well, it seems to me that most of the time we would be in port on weekends.

Marcello: So it didn't take any genius to figure out that most of the ships would be in Pearl Harbor on a weekend?

Miller: No.

Marcello: Was this the general routine up until December 7?

Miller: As I recall, yes.

Marcello: In other words, there was nothing unusual about all those ships being in there on that weekend of December 7?

Miller: Well, at my particular echelon in those days, we were back in for a material inspection that we were preparing for, and that's the way I recall it, and that's what we were in for at this particular time. We had had an admiral's inspection prior to this, but this was something that was to be...of course, I didn't know what was involved as far as a material inspection was concerned, but that's what we were in for, anyway.

Marcello: Okay, when the Helena came in off the maneuvers, you mentioned that the ship went into a liberty routine. How did the liberty routine work aboard the Helena during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

Miller: Well, it was a rather liberal leave program, of course, alternating as far as liberty is concerned. They always kept a skeleton crew aboard ship. As I recall, about 50 percent of the Marines were allowed liberty at one time, and, of course, you might have it one day, and then the next watch would have it another day. You would have a port-and-starboard watch. Was there anything else that you were getting at there?

Marcello: Basically, the point that I wanted to get into the record was just how many men would be aboard the Helena at ant one time.

Miller: As I recall, it was a port-and-starboard-type liberty.

Marcello: When you went on liberty, what did you usually do? What was your liberty routine?

Miller: (Chuckle) Well, my liberty routine was rather simple because I was a PFC in the Marine Corps, and so I was making about \$30 a month, and I think at that time Marines were allowed \$5 a month if they qualified as an expert rifleman. So it was confined to having a few beers and maybe going by the YWCA and possibly visiting a house of prostitution, if you had enough money. There was no such thing, of course, as anybody without rank being able to date anybody. The girls just weren't there, and so one of the things that we liked to do is go to the old Moana Hotel and have a few beers in the garden there. I remember on Saturday afternoons they used to have a radio program that they called "Hawaii Calls," and so sitting there drinking beer and having this broadcasted back to the United States, you almost felt like you were having a type of visit back home.

Marcello: We have to realize that radio was a fairly new thing at that time, was it not? It wasn't really too old.

Miller: Really not too old.

Marcello: What did that "Hawaii Calls" consist of? What kind of radio program was it?

Miller: It was certainly typical of what we'd call typical Hawaiian music, and they had...I don't remember how many pieces, but it was certainly well enough to get a pretty wide broadcast in the United States because I heard the program in the United States before I even went to Hawaii.

Marcello: Was the music live or was it recorded?

Miller: It was live.

Marcello: Where was your favorite place of entertainment when you went on liberty? Was it at the Moana Hotel in terms of your favorite drinking spot?

Miller: Yes. Of course, you always hit a few of the dives downtown, where you ran into most of the people, but whenever I had the opportunity, I liked to go out on Waikiki and wander around and look at the glamour, anyway.

Marcello: Have you ever heard of the Black Cat Café?

Miller: Yes. I can't remember...the night before the attack on Pearl Harbor, it seems to me that that's where I got high – in the Black Cat Café. Anyway, we had quite a party there, the Marines. But I've certainly been there.

Marcello: What was the attraction of the Black Cat Café?

Miller: I don't know. It was just camaraderie and drinking beer and this type of thing, as far as I knew.

Marcello: Was it also near the YMCA?

Miller: Well, I don't think that the YMCA or any of the downtown area was too far apart, and, of course, we didn't mind walking in those days.

Marcello: Awhile ago, you mentioned houses of prostitution, and I assume that you're referring to the Hotel and Canal Street?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: Prostitution was legal in Honolulu at that time, was it not?

Miller: This is correct, yes.

Marcello: I gather that there were long lines when the fleet was in at those houses of prostitution.

Miller: Well, they were fairly active, yes.

Marcello: Do you recall the names of any of those places?

Miller: No, I don't.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into those days immediately prior to the attack itself, and let me ask you some specific questions about that particular weekend of December 7, 1941. The Helena was in port; the record indicates that. Where was it docked on that weekend of December 7, and why was it where it was?

Miller: I really don't know why it was where it was. Ordinarily, we were moored out...and I forget the name of the area, but we were generally tied up alongside the Honolulu and maybe the Saint Louis in this area, but I didn't know the reason why we had come in and docked at 1010. I don't know whether we were going to take ammunition off or what for material inspection. I just don't know.

Marcello: When did the Helena come in that weekend?

Miller: As I recall, it was just a day or two before December 7.

Marcello: So, it would have probably been either on that Thursday or Friday perhaps?

Miller: I think this is probably correct.

Marcello: Did the Helena undergo any kinds of repairs or refurbishing or anything of that nature when it came in that particular weekend?

Miller: Not that I was aware of.

Marcello: What did you do that Saturday, December 6, 1941? Describe for me, as best you can, what your routine was on that Saturday.

Miller: Well, the only thing I really recall was going on liberty, and, of course, we had to be back aboard ship...at my rank, we had to be back aboard ship by twelve o'clock midnight. I don't know but I think possibly you had to be staff sergeant or above to have liberty beyond twelve o'clock midnight. I don't really remember the name of the place, but I spent most of my liberty hours drinking beer with a bunch of Marines, and I think it was at the Black Cat.

Marcello: Did you notice anything unusual happening in downtown Honolulu that particular Saturday evening?

Miller: No.

Marcello: In other words, it was a routine Saturday evening?

Miller: As far as I knew, to me it was.

Marcello: What kind of shape were you in when you came back aboard the Helena?

Miller: At this time I was up in my twenties, and I drank within my capacity. So I had had a lot of beer, but I would not consider myself as having been drunk.

Marcello: What would be the usual state of the personnel when they came back aboard ship after having been in Honolulu on liberty?

Miller: I think most of them were high.

Marcello: On the other hand, what might generally be their shape the next morning?

Miller: They bounced it off. I think the people could perform real well the next day. In fact, when you were on liberty, you didn't have too many hours before you were going back on duty, and certainly you would have to be in pretty good shape to do that.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that morning of December 7, 1941. What I want you to do at this point is to describe for me the activities of that day as they occurred from the time you woke up until all hell broke loose.

Miller: Well, I don't know what time I got up, probably six o'clock or six-thirty more or less, and relaxed as far as when you got up on Sunday morning. You did have to get up at a certain time in order to eat chow. I did get up and eat chow, and I was going to play baseball later that day. Being the company clerk, I had to make a morning report which went up to the executive officer's office. The 1st sergeant had come into the office, and I had finished typing up the report and was fixing to take it up to the executive office, and General Quarters sounded.

Marcello: Up until that time, you had not heard anything?

Miller: No.

Marcello: Was there very much activity aboard the Helena at that time? For example, you mentioned that if you wanted breakfast, you had to get up at a certain time. I assume that if you didn't have the duty, you could stay in the sack.

Miller: This is correct. It was a relaxed Sunday morning, as far as being aboard ship is concerned.

Marcello: Would there normally be very many people at breakfast on a Sunday morning?

Miller: I think a pretty high percentage of people would eat breakfast.

Marcello: Okay, you mentioned that you are on your way to the executive officer's quarters when the General Quarters sounds.

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: Describe what happens at that point.

Miller: Because I thought it was a drill, I said to the 1st sergeant, "Goddamn, they think of everything on Sunday morning, don't they?" I don't know what the time lapse was, but it was just, I guess, a second or two that word came over, "Japanese planes attacking Ford Island!"

Marcello: Did this come over the public address system?

Miller: P. A. system, yes. It sounded the condition for personnel to man their anti-aircraft stations. Then about that time, we had this terrific explosion, which was the torpedo that hit the forward engine room of the USS Helena. All the lights went out. I was behind some bunks, and I assumed that they had blown the hell out of the compartment. There was a sleeping compartment right outside the Marine office there, and so in retrospect I feel that I was blown over behind those bunks because they were not torn up.

Marcello: Describe what the sensation was when that torpedo hit the Helena.

Miller: I can't recall what my sensation was; I mean I had a feeling of expediency to try to get to my gun station.

Marcello: Was there a sharp jolt or loud noise or anything of that nature?

Miller: It was more or less a whooshing-type sound with a lot of air, and the compartment just aft of us had a number of people that received flash burns and this type of thing.

Marcello: Where was the Oglala berthed in relation to the Helena?

Miller: The Oglala was moored alongside us out in the stream. We were dockside, and the Oglala was moored alongside.

Marcello: In other words, the Oglala was outboard of the Helena, and that torpedo passed under the Oglala and hit the Helena.

Miller: This is evidently correct, yes.

Marcello: I assume that you did not see the torpedo plane that launched that torpedo.

Miller: No, (chuckle).

Marcello: You mentioned that you were evidently knocked off your feet or at least that you were jolted and jarred around quite a bit. What happens at that point?

Miller: I felt that the best way for me to safely get topside to my gun station was to go down one deck and get into the number three turret and get up topside because I would be protected, at least until I got topside, by heavy armor. So I went up through this...I felt my way down, and then, of course there were some auxiliary lights down in the turret, and so it wasn't too much of a problem to then work my way up through the turret to get topside.

Marcello: Approximately how long did it take you to get to your battle station? You would have to estimate this, of course.

Miller: I don't imagine it was more than two or three minutes.

Marcello: What did topside look like after that torpedo slammed into it?

Miller: Topside, of course, had not been disturbed as far as any explosion was concerned. I saw no evidence of the explosion topside. Of course, there were a lot of people running around everywhere up there.

Marcello: When General Quarters sounded, was there a great deal of confusion, or did everybody act in a professional manner, that is, in the manner in which they had been trained?

Miller: I felt that everybody really operated in the manner in which they had been trained. I don't recall running into anybody. We had port-and-starboard traffic, and through training, it pretty well operated. So if you were going forward, why, it was port; and aft, it was starboard. So I don't recall anybody messing up there.

Marcello: By the time you got to your battle station, had the Helena already begun to list?

Miller: She was being pulled over, as far as I could tell, by the Oglala. I recall stopping briefly to help some people with the lines to...I don't know whether they were cutting them or pulling them off to get a release from this. I wasn't aware...maybe the torpedo caused the listing. I don't know, but from my standpoint of awareness, we were feeling that we needed to untie ourselves from the Oglala. Maybe they were pulling her back. I don't know. I just stopped and helped somebody on my way to my gun station.

Marcello: Evidently, the concussion of that torpedo hitting the Helena had burst the seams of the old Oglala, and, as you mentioned, she was going down. I guess in part, perhaps, that plus the torpedo may have caused the Helena to list a little bit. What happens when you get to your battle station?

Miller: Well, the only person that I saw up at the battle station at that time was the gunnery sergeant, Doyle New. He was out there trying to get the...we had a quad of .50-caliber machine guns on the bow of the Helena that the Marines manned.

Marcello: So what happens then?

Miller: I wasn't too much of a mechanic – I was just a gunner – and he seemed to need some wrenches and so forth in order to get the machine guns filled with water, get the jackets filled with water, and so he asked me if I would go back to the turret or somewhere and see if I could get some wrenches or something to get them undone. I went back, and I looked around as best I could, and I couldn't find anything, so then I went back up. There was a lot of help there by this time. Really and truly, I'm not aware of how much time

was involved, but it seemed to me that somebody had already gotten the ammunition up there out of the lockers and everything else, and so it was just a matter of loading the machine guns. By this time we were having some dive-bombing.

Marcello: Describe the action as it took place, from what you remember.

Miller: Well, my particular gun was the forward machine gun on the port side, and so we had quite a few planes that, I felt, were pulling out shallow because of our gun fire. On those .50-calibers, I think we had about one-in-three as far as tracers were concerned, so they could see us shooting at them, and I think they felt some of it, too.

Marcello: Describe the pattern of the Japanese attack. In other words, describe these planes coming in.

Miller: Well, it was a typical dive-bombing-type attack, and, of course, I was manning my quarter. I don't know how many planes came in, but I just know that I felt that none of them ever came through to a complete attack. I saw one drop a bomb, and in seeing the bomb fall, you kept watching which way it was going, and it hit the dock right beside us and blew up what we called the "geedunk" stand there. I remember, at that particular time, we laid down on the deck just to keep any debris from hitting us.

Marcello: Now, what exactly was your function on that gun?

Miller: I was the gunner.

Marcello: You were actually doing the firing?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: During this period, is there a lot of talking as the crew is going about its business, or is everybody more or less silent? What's happening there at the guns?

Miller: There's conversation going. To me, anytime I've been involved in combat, you have to talk a little bit, maybe a little on the blasé side to keep your morale up, because you are scared to death, really. I was fortunate enough to hit...I don't know whether anybody else or not shot, but I feel that I shot down one of the Japanese planes. Of course, this was going at an angle; it wasn't coming in on attack. I remember the loader for my...I burnt up one barrel from firing and had to change barrels, but this was done very quickly.

Marcello: Was the spare barrel right there at the gun mount?

Miller: It was close by. The maintenance on this thing...most of my duty, really was as a company clerk, so it was only in firing...I didn't have too much to do with the mechanics. It's just that I was the gunner, and so the firing was the only thing that I knew about. I didn't know how they got that barrel there that fast. But, anyway, it was there, and I remember that the loader for my machine gun was another Texan by the name of Troy Boles from the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I remember there was a sergeant who had the gun just aft of him, by the name of Paul Abinett. I saw him one time after I came back to Texas. He was a house detective for the old Baker Hotel. But, anyway, he got a little over his area there, and he kept shooting over Troy Boles's shoulder; and Troy was a little fellow, and he just beat him down to the deck almost there because of the concussion from the barrel coming right over his shoulder.

Marcello: You mentioned that you believe that you were responsible for shooting down a plane. Describe this activity.

Miller: It was a plane that was going at an angle. I don't know my directions there, but I think it would have been going forward toward the bow at an angle over past the big smokestack there at Pearl Harbor. As I recall, one of our 5-inch guns put a hole right through the middle of that smokestack tracking on that plane. Anyway, it was going over toward the Marine Barracks, I would say, at an angle, and I was able to watch my stream of fire come into it. I don't know whether anybody else did or not. Anyway, some of my buddies brought me a piece of it the next day.

Marcello: Okay, you feel you hit this plane. Could you see this plane smoking and going down?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: Describe the demise of this plane.

Miller: Well, of course, it wasn't too high. It was over about smokestack level, and I just pulled my stream of fire right into the nose of it, and it started smoking, and it went down fairly fast over in the area of the Marine Barracks somewhere.

Marcello: What kind of a feeling did you have when you saw this take place?

Miller: Oh, extreme elation! You just feel that you were a part of maybe deterring them a little bit. There was utter devastation everywhere, and the general feeling was...we were mad for being caught with our pants down this way, and so anything would lift people.

Marcello: Was there a lot of yelling and cheering when the plane went down?

Miller: Well, yes, around me.

Marcello: While all this is taking place, describe what the noise level was like.

Miller: It was terrible. Particularly the machine gun fire had such a sharp crack to it that it really hurt your ears. Booms and this type of thing...we had so many exercises that it wasn't unusual.

Marcello: Could you detect a lull in the attack? Normally, we think of the first attack as being carried out by torpedo bombers and the dive-bombers, and then supposedly there was a lull, and the high-level bombers came over. Do you recall a lull, or does it just seem like one continual action to you?

Miller: I'm only aware of the part where the dive-bombers were coming in when we were on the machine guns. I do not have any registration on the high-level bombing as such. It seems to me, too, that I saw some things that happened to the Pennsylvania when she was in dry dock, and the Cassin and Downes. I definitely remember seeing the explosion of the Shaw when it happened. In fact, we felt some of the debris might hit and we were watching for this to hit the deck.

Marcello: Describe the blowing up of the Shaw. I think that is one of the most spectacular pictures of the entire Pearl Harbor attack.

Miller: I have never seen anything like it. I just didn't realize that there could be an explosion like that. Of course, I didn't know what size ship it was. We hadn't been in that area long enough for me to know what was there. I just remember seeing that explosion, and I don't know that I've ever seen anything like it.

Marcello: Describe that explosion.

Miller: Well, it just looked to me like the complete disintegration of the ship with the magazines and everything going up in the air and the ship just blowing apart. I was amazed that they had anything left.

Marcello: Is it not true that they put a temporary wooden bow on that ship and ultimately towed it back to the West Coast and fitted a new bow on it?

Miller: Yes, it's terrific, yes. I wondered if that was done for a morale factor. Cost-wise, I think they could have built a new destroyer cheaper (chuckle).

Marcello: The explosion must have been deafening, the roar. Do you recall?

Miller: Yes, it was not just one; there were just a series of terrific explosions.

Marcello: Was there a lot of fire, a fireball or anything like that?

Miller: Oh, yes, real fireball. I have never seen anything like this before, just a mass of flames.

Marcello: How high in the air would you estimate the flames and the smoke to be?

Miller: It looked like to me that they went a hundred, maybe two hundred, feet in the air.

Marcello: About how long did this last, that is, this explosion or the series of explosions that you saw?

Miller: Not very long.

Marcello: Approximately when did you cease firing?

Miller: I don't have a real good registration on time on that. Naturally, at that time it seemed like an awfully long time. I remember feeling like I had cotton in my mouth, and I'll never forget a Sergeant Hogan was bringing me a cup of water, just to get that dry taste out of my mouth. But I think that attack probably lasted an hour or so.

Marcello: You must have been knee-deep in shell casings by the time it was all over.

Miller: Well, we had a crew clearing them off.

Marcello: This perhaps seems like a foolish question, but what do you do with all that brass while the attack is going on? You mentioned you had a crew cleaning them off.

Miller: I imagine they were throwing it over the side. I just don't know.

Marcello: In peacetime, I guess you would keep that brass, would you not?

Miller: Yes, and, you know, in something like this, I remember... and I forget what the executive officer's name was. He was a commander, I believe the ship's captain's name was English. I know the executive officer of the ship was up in the 5-inch gun area and not having anything to do in a battle station. I was told that he was throwing 5-inch shell cases over the side with his bare hands, and he burned the hell out of them. I've forgotten the Navy commander's name. It might have been Richardson, but I don't know.

Marcello: According to the record, that torpedo hit set off the ship's gas alarm system, and there was a steady blast from it that added to the uproar. Do you recall the setting off of the ship's gas alarm system?

Miller: No, I don't. Maybe being topside, I wasn't aware of it.

Marcello: What did you do in the aftermath of attack?

Miller: Well, we more or less laid around and waited for another attack because we assumed that this was just a preliminary.

Marcello: So you stayed at your battle station the rest of that day?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: What did you talk about?

Miller: I don't recall. A lot it is just bull, to keep everybody going.

Marcello: As you're at your battle station and the attack is over, describe the scene that you are able to see from your battle station.

Miller: Well, just complete destruction to me. You become aware of what has happened to Battleship Row and the ship in front of us. As far as the area was concerned, we were wondering if we hadn't lost the war, to begin with, the first day.

Marcello: What in particular stood out in that destruction that you saw?

Miller: I don't recall anything particularly. It was just the utter...the whole thing, the whole picture. I wasn't looking at it, as far as any one thing was concerned.

Marcello: How far were you from Battleship Row?

Miller: Across the channel, in yards, I don't know. I don't know how far it was across the channel there from 1010 Dock to Ford Island.

Marcello: Did you have a pretty good view of Battleship Row from where you were?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: What did you see over there?

Miller: Well, of course, we saw the Oklahoma turn over, and then just the mass of battleships over there...some of them were on the bottom. I didn't have any field glasses or anything, but I just felt like there was complete destruction over there.

Marcello: Could you actually see that the Oklahoma had turned over?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: In your wildest imagination, could you ever imagine that happening to a battleship?

Miller: No. I didn't know how it happened. Of course, we speculated that they got hit with many torpedoes at one time that it just flipped over. Then, of course, later the Helena got, I think, about ninety of the Oklahoma's personnel aboard, and, of course, it was really something to know the time that they spent in getting some of those people out of the bottom by cutting through the bottom there. It would be a hairy experience to be inside something like that.

Marcello: Describe what the water was like in the aftermath of the attack.

Miller: Well, of course, it was very dirty, covered with oil and debris and everything.

Marcello: How about smoke? Describe what the atmosphere was like in terms of smoke.

Miller: I guess there was a lot of haze. I don't really have much registration on the smoke. As far as being able to see the sky and things like this, I don't recall that being a real problem.

Marcello: Incidentally, what kind of day was it when it first started out – in terms of climate and weather?

Miller: It was a balmy day. I was up topside with just a T-shirt on, and I don't recall it being unusually warm. It was just a typical day in December in Hawaii.

Marcello: You mentioned that you were topside with a T-shirt on. I guess after that day, you found out that it wasn't a good idea to go into battle with shorts and a T-shirt on.

Miller: We really did because there were a lot of people that had flash burns. Where they got burned was where they had bare arms and bare skin.

Marcello: What did you do that evening?

Miller: That evening we were more or less laying around. We were still topside in the proximity of our gun stations. Of course, they opened up the "geedunk" stand, and they were serving ice cream and drinks and things like this to all the people.

Marcello: Was this the "geedunk" stand aboard the Helena or one that had been hi ton shore?

Miller: No, this was aboard the Helena. That evening we were...I remember laying under the number three turret when some of the planes from the United States were coming in, and we thought it was another bombing attack. But I guess somebody was shooting at them or something because it was a terrible thing. I remember when they were setting up guns on top of some of the buildings around Pearl Harbor to effect an anti-aircraft defense, and anytime somebody would test fire a weapon, it seems like some trigger-happy person might open up somewhere. It was just a general feeling of tension, and I guess some people who haven't been trained a lot along that line have a tendency to get a little too excited.

Marcello: You mentioned that there was quite a bit of fireworks that night when those planes off the USS Enterprise came in. describe that scene.

Miller: Well, I was under a turret and staying undercover at that time. There was no way to man or fire a .50-caliber at that time, and so I was under the turret, and I was just aware of all the noise and this type of thing, and I didn't see actually what happened.

Marcello: You weren't able to see the tracers or anything like that?

Miller: No.

Marcello: Battle stations did not sound again?

Miller: No.

Marcello: You mentioned that you didn't go to your gun because it wouldn't have been any use in that situation. Why was that? I don't understand that.

Miller: It was just a nighttime thing, and we had no way...the Marines just didn't man those guns. I don't know why. Maybe our communications were such that they didn't think it was enemy planes.

Marcello: What did you do the next day?

Miller: I don't remember anything specific about the next day, the aftermath of this. I don't recall being too depressed. It was just a matter of we were at war and I guess we had maybe a little hope because there wasn't a Japanese landing that followed the attack.

Marcello: What kind of rumors took place that night? What sort of rumors did you hear?

Miller: I don't recall a lot of talking that night. I remember one time laying under that turret with a bunch of Marines under there, and I got to shaking. To relieve my own tension, I said, "I don't know whether I'm cold or scared." Of course, it kind of caused a laugh there and kind of calmed me down a little bit.

Marcello: Were you full expecting a Japanese landing?

Miller: Yes.

Marcello: I guess you had no reason to think otherwise, considering what you had been through that day.

Miller: No, I couldn't see why anybody could have a plan like that and have it turn out so successful without following through with a landing.

Marcello: When did the Helena get out of Pearl Harbor, keeping in mind, of course, that it had taken a torpedo hit, so the damage would have to be repaired?

Miller: The Helena sailed back to Mare Island in January. I forget...the date that comes to mind is January 13, but I don't know whether that was when we got back to the United States, or the mainland, I should say.

Marcello: Did you ever see the hole that the torpedo had put in the Helena?

Miller: No, I never really got down and looked at it. I knew there was a hole down there, but I did not see it.

Marcello: Do you have any idea how large it was?

Miller: No, I do not.

Marcello: Had the Helena taken on very much water?

Miller: I wasn't aware that she had. I assume that the watertight integrity was set real fast. I really don't recall how many were killed on the Helena. It doesn't seem that we had a lot that were actually killed. I know we had one Marine that was killed, a Marine by the name of Johnson, and then we had one that was burned very badly. These were Marines that were in the color guard back on the fantail at the time the attack started, and they were merely trying to get back forward to their quarters and stations.

Marcello: What happened to the Helena when it got back to the mainland?

Miller: Well, she was rigged with radar, and, of course, the engine room was repaired. There's a funny thing, getting into my personal life a little bit here. I got meritorious

recommendation for OCS, and the Marine Corps regulations at that time were that you could to OCS if you were meritoriously recommended and you happened to be a non-commissioned officer. I was just a PFC, so the word came back from Washington that they would hold my recommendation in abeyance until such time that I made corporal. We had a pretty tight TO aboard the ship, and it was, I guess, in April of 1943, after the Helena had already gone back to the Pacific, that I made corporal and then I just immediately came up to the States for OCS and got my commission.

Marcello: You talked about a TO awhile ago. Is that Training Officer?

Miller: Table of Organization.

Marcello: You were talking about the Helena being re-outfitted when it got back to the West Coast. Where did it go?

Miller: To Mare Island. They got a radar and put aboard and...

Marcello: I bet you got a lot of 20 and 40-millimeters, too, did you not?

Miller: They got rid of those .50's, you bet, and the old 1.1's, the pom-poms. I can still hear those pom-poms going.

Marcello: Where did the Helena then go from Mare Island?

Miller: She went down to the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands.

Marcello: Did it participate in the naval battles of Guadalcanal?

Miller: We sure did on – October 13 and November 11, the first and second battles of Cape Esperance.

Marcello: Well, I guess that's probably a good place to end this interview, Mr. Miller, because that's another story altogether, and unfortunately we're only interested in Pearl Harbor. I want to thank you very much for having participated in our project. You said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that students and historians are going to find your comments most valuable.

Miller: Thank you, I enjoyed it.