

**Interviewee:** Mr. Vernon N. Branson, Age 83,

**Interviewer:** Allan Shields.

**Interview Date:** April 22, 2003

Mr. Branson achieved the rank of Chief Petty Officer, US Navy. He served from September, 1940 until December, 1946.

### **Interview Synopsis**

Mr. Branson enlisted with the US Navy for six years in September 1940. He said he enlisted to "see the world" two years after his High School graduation. Mr. Branson is a native of Asheville, NC.

Mr. Branson's combat experience consisted of Pearl Harbor during that fateful day of December 7, 1941.

Mr. Branson was sent to Norfolk, Virginia for his boot camp training, which he described as "tough". The training consisted of gunnery training and physical fitness training and becoming familiar with ship operations. After six weeks of boot camp in Norfolk he was assigned to a platoon in Bremerton, Washington navy yard. He was assigned to the USS Nevada and then transferred to the battleship USS Tennessee as Seaman First Class and one of the gunnery crew on a five inch .51 caliber casemate broadside gun. From Bremerton, WA he sailed to Pearl Harbor. Mr. Branson was at Pearl Harbor for approximately one year before the attack by the Japanese.

He made a couple trips back to the States on the USS Tennessee for additional gunnery training and for target practice. Target practice entailed another ship towing a target at some distance, "often almost farther than you could see" on the horizon and then the battleship would fire its guns to hit the target.

The USS Tennessee was tied up on "Battleship Row" at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor. It was positioned inboard of the USS West Virginia, aft of the Maryland and Oklahoma, and forward of the Arizona and Vestal.

The USS Tennessee had three amphibious auxiliary aircraft on the rear deck that were used to fly supplies in for the ship as well as take the mail back and forth to land. The rear deck was a short distance so these aircraft had to be launched by catapults. The catapults were loaded with an explosive and the planes shot off the back of the ship into the air. When the planes returned the ship would turn in a circle, thus creating a calm area of the sea for the amphibious planes to come up close to the ship. The planes were then lifted by crane back up to the top deck. Mr. Branson recalled one time when a plane was capsized by rough sea however, the pilot was rescued. There was one other time when one of these auxiliary aircraft crashed into the ship.

December 7, 1941

This Sunday began with the usual holiday routine. Mr. Branson was sitting with others in the mess hall having coffee and reading the comics while awaiting "Colors" when they heard planes overhead. Their first reaction was the planes were U.S. aircraft on maneuvers. He and others stepped out through the hatch just in time to see one of the hangers erupt in a huge ball of flames. His first reaction was that our planes on maneuvers had made a terrible mistake. But then he saw the Rising Sun emblem, to which they had given the nickname "Meatballs", of the Japanese on the planes and knew they were under attack. The dive-bombers, torpedo planes and fighters were flying low overhead, dropping bombs and strafing everything in sight. Several of the Tennessee crew were lost to the strafing attacks. He was ordered to his battle station but it became immediately apparent that the broadside guns could not be effective against the low flying attack aircraft. He was ordered below to load ammunition on hoists to be raised through shafts to the guns on top deck.

For the next 24 hours he remained in the watertight hold three decks below the water line loading shells. The hold where he was filled with black smoke from the burning Arizona and oily water so that they were ordered to put on gas masks. It became so dark that he could not see the person next to him, but the loading of shells continued by feel through the smoke. Down below where he was they could not tell what was going on. They were kept informed by "telephone talkers". With each blast or concussion that came down through the ammunition hoists imaginations ran wild.

The USS Tennessee took three bombs. The first ricocheted off one of the catapults on the rear deck and veered off into the sea and exploded. Had that bomb hit the deck it would have likely gone through the deck into the ammunition hold and the Tennessee would have blown up like the Arizona did. Two other 500 pound bombs hit the Tennessee but only one exploded. The other was a "dud" and was later diffused by a special crew and one of that crew's members Mr. Branson met at a reunion years later in the 1980's.

Mr. Branson recalled that he was told that when the USS Arizona exploded the entire ship was raised out of the water. He estimated the Arizona to be about the same weight as the Tennessee, which was 35,000 tons.

The first attack went on for approximately one hour according to Mr. Branson and then all was quiet. To him the attack "went on forever". However, he and the others loading the ammunition stayed at their stations during the lull not knowing what would happen next. Then a second wave of the attack started around midnight and lasted about the same length of time. The ships shot down some of US aircraft because they were firing at anything that moved. He remembers one pilot being killed and another crashed into the sea. He also recalled that there were civilians killed in Honolulu by US shells that landed in the city.

The Tennessee's anti-aircraft guns were firing continuously and so they never stopped loading the ammunition on the hoists. They were brought cold sandwiches while they kept loading. Finally on Monday they were released to go topside and help unload a "Lighter" which is a barge bringing more ammunition onto the Tennessee. That was the first time he had seen the death and destruction that had occurred. The USS Arizona was burning as was the oil-covered water. The USS Oklahoma had capsized with its screws tilting towards the sky and the USS West Virginia was listing over against the Tennessee. He saw bodies floating in the water face down. The sight was unbelievable to him. He talked of the people still inside the Oklahoma below deck and how they cut through the ship's hull to get the men out. "They were the lucky ones", he said. Some of the navy yard workers came over to the Tennessee to get water for the survivors. He remembers being in total darkness for more than 24 hours.

When asked how he kept in touch with his family Mr. Branson said that after the attacks they were given postcards to send home and the postcards had a checklist that they could check off their status i.e. "I am wounded but ok" or "I am alright". He said his sister recalls getting his postcard on Christmas Eve 1941 saying that he was alright and not wounded and it was the best Christmas present she had ever gotten.

The USS Tennessee was pinned between the West Virginia and the Arizona. Two to three weeks later the quay that the ships were anchored to were able to be dynamited to free the Tennessee. It sailed from Pearl Harbor and a torpedo was fired at her from a Japanese submarine but it missed its mark. The Tennessee sailed back to Bremerton, WA for repairs where Mr. Branson was transferred to submarine chasing school in Miami Florida. He was assigned to two other locations and was on a repair ship in San Diego, CA when the war ended. It was the biggest relief of his life. He completed his service with the US Navy on that repair ship in the Philippine Islands and was discharged from the Navy at the Jacksonville FL Naval Air Station.

After the service Mr. Branson returned to Asheville NC where he took a bookkeeping machine operator job and then went to work for the civilian department of the US Air Force Weather Service in Asheville. At that time the operation was located at the Grove Arcade but now is located in the Federal Building on Patton Avenue. He retired from there after 28 years of service.

Mr. Branson proudly showed me his Pearl Harbor ring with a blue spinella stone that symbolizes a bomb burst. "December 7, 1941, Remember Pearl Harbor" is engraved on the ring along with the Pearl Harbor Survivor Association. He also has a "I survived Pearl Harbor" license plate and he says he often gets honks and waves from people on the road.

Mr. Branson replied in response to my question "How did your experience affect your life?" with "I escaped with my life". As for lessons to be passed on to future generations he said "We can forgive but we can never forget".