

## **Transcription: Ben Russell**

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*Today is Wednesday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Mr. Ben Russell. This interview is being done by phone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Russell is at the Courtney Veterans Home in Temple, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's very much an honor for us.*

**Ben Russell:** Your welcome.

*Thank you. And sir, the first question I usually always ask when we do these interviews is to just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your background before you went in the military.*

**Ben Russell:** Childhood is not really worth talking about it. It was rotten, all the way up until I was 17 years old, and I'd taken a few hobo trips and hitchhiking trips in my mid-teens, which were educational in a way, and not so educational in another. When I was 17, I bummed a ride downtown with a couple of other people to join the Navy, and that's about the end of it.

*Were you from Texas originally?*

**Ben Russell:** No, my roots are in Arkansas, Saline County, Arkansas, and I was raised and went to school in Memphis, Tennessee.

*In Memphis, yes sir. So when you're 17, you signed up for the Navy, what was it that made you want to go into the Navy?*

**Ben Russell:** Well all of my, well I can't say all of my life, but I can say from 9 or 10, something like that, I got a Navy fever sort of, and I never thought of anything else really as far as beyond school than joining the Navy, and that's what I did on June the 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

*Yes sir. At that time, the war was going on.*

**Ben Russell:** The war was going on in Europe.

*That's what I was going to say, in Europe, and then the Japanese were in China and places like that, but did you have any idea that the United States would be going to war at some point?*

**Ben Russell:** Yes I did. I had a faint idea of it because I had two years of ROTC in high school, and we were kept abreast of what was going on in Europe. I figured it was only a matter of time until we were either drug into it or jumped into it. As it turned out, we were forced into it.

*When you joined the Navy, did you sign up in Memphis?*

**Ben Russell:** Yes I did.

*Tell us a little bit about what that process was like.*

**Ben Russell:** Well, it was a two-day process really. We were afternoon and filling out a bunch of papers. I can't remember what they all consisted of, but we filled out papers and answered questions for the recruiter, and had a preliminary physical examination, and while this was being typed up, why we were filled in on a little bit on what was going to happen to us when they called us up. They said it would be three or four weeks before we'd be called up. Well, my parents were separated at the time, and I had to go find my father and get him to sign one set of papers.

*Because you were under 18.*

**Ben Russell:** Right. And then I took the other set home to my mother. In fact she, a neighbor had seen me riding in the police car, and that's who I bummed a ride off of, and my mother was kind of upset to say the least. But anyway when I showed her the papers and everything, why a sigh of relief and what not, she signed them. My father signed them, and it was only about a week before we were called. The next morning when we went down to finish up the enlistment process, it was a complete physical, and more talk about what the first couple of months would be like, and we were filled with the hype of Franklin D. Roosevelt about we were joining the two-ocean Navy. That was at the time he had instigated that thing with Congress, and that was about it.

*Where did they send you for your basic training?*

**Ben Russell:** They sent me to Norfolk, Virginia. Of course we went from Memphis to Nashville, and that was another day of complete physical training by naval officers, and they really put you through the mill for that. That night we had an overnight ride to Norfolk.

*You said you went in with a couple of your friends?*

**Ben Russell:** Yes.

*Did they get to go to training with you, or did they split you guys up?*

**Ben Russell:** One of them did. One of them went with me and the other two backed out. They didn't go. But we had I think there were seven of us from the Memphis area that night when we got on the train to go.

*What are your memories of basic training?*

**Ben Russell:** Well, I had no problem with it because like I said, I'd had two years of ROTC and I knew the military code of honor, the military discipline thing, and the military courtesy. I was well schooled in that and marching, that was no sweat. It was pleasant. I like the marching, especially to a band. Then of course we had book work and instructions, private instructions and group instructions from people that were running the group training process. Like I say, it was a breeze for me. I didn't have any trouble, but some of the city boys did.

*Were some of the recruits that were with you, were some of them peace time draftees, or were they all volunteers?*

**Ben Russell:** They were all volunteers in my group. There were 72 of us, or not 72, 72 was the number of our unit, our training unit. I think there were about 48 or 50, something like that in the group.

*When did you learn what your specialty was going to be in the Navy? Did you know when you went to basic training that you were going to be doing a particular role in the Navy, or were you just going to be - ?*

**Ben Russell:** No I didn't and neither did anybody else. We signed up for different things. I was interested in the aviation unit. Of course my school background washed me out on that. I was shy on mathematics, and mathematics was stressed, so I ended up just a plain swab jockey they called them on those days. When you went aboard your permanent ship, it was usually a year before they moved you to any specialty striping, like aviation or fire control, yeoman, or at that time they called the black gang, that was the engineering force. They kept you out so they could look at you and see how you answered to work assignments and what not before they separated you from a deck division and put you to where you wanted to go. So since I wanted to go into the aviation division, why I was put in the 5<sup>th</sup> Division which was the division of logic and recovering aircraft. I was on a cruiser, the USS Phoenix, and they had four airplanes at that time. I never was called to join the aviation division for some reason or another. They found another place for me.

*When you finished your recruit training, how long was it before you were in the fleet and assigned to the Phoenix?*

**Ben Russell:** Well they had two weeks of boot leave. I came back and it was only a few days until they put 25 of us on the USS Helena, at that time one of the newer ships we had, for further transfer to get us around the Mare Island to the Phoenix. We were booked into the Phoenix from Norfolk, and we went around to San Diego. They put us ashore there and we stayed there, I stayed there about a month, and worked with an old chief, Orlitzander, getting those old four piper destroyers ready for inland lease sling to England. Of course he liked the way I worked. He tried to get me transferred into a permanent position with him, but they wouldn't go for it. They said I was in a consignment, and that was it. They couldn't break that consignment. So after about a month, we were put on an old cargo ship, Navy cargo ship, and we went up to Mare Island. That's around the San Francisco area. And I had my first look at my new home which was to be my home for five years and eight months. That was October the 19<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

*What were your first impressions?*

**Ben Russell:** Well, not too good because the ship was in the Navy yard and Navy yard welding leads and air hoses and everything else that belonged to the Navy yard were spread all over the place. There was dirt and dust everywhere, and I made the goofy mark, I said what a mess, I says who is going to clean this up? One of the older hands pointed to me and he says you are bud, you are. And we found that out as soon as we got out of the Navy yards which is about three or four weeks later, and headed down to San Pedro, and everybody had a last look ashore at the fineries of the west coast. Then we were off to Pearl Harbor. We were based in Pearl Harbor with that district, I can't remember what it was, it was the 6<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> keeps running into my head, but anyway it was a naval district covering the west coast, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, over to and including the Hawaiian Islands.

*What are your memories the first time you saw Hawaii and Pearl Harbor? Was it what you expected?*

**Ben Russell:** I thought it was beautiful. Pearl Harbor, it was kept clean, and the ships did not leak oil that went in there. If they did, they were put in dry dock right away to find out why they were leaking oil, so your wash ashore was clean. You could see the bottom. In fact they had me on a special party for a dive for one time and he was working around the rudder, and we could see him all the way down to the bottom of the rudder. The depth of the harbor at the point where we were moored at that time gave me about 15-20 feet below the rudder was the bottom of the harbor. It was a good experience. Of course by the time we got to sea again, why I was qualified as helmsman and that was a job I liked very much.

*Tell us a little bit about your job as a helmsman, what you would do.*

**Ben Russell:** Well you went up and you steered the ship according to the orders you were given, and that was it. It took about two weeks of posting it, training it, and then they turned you loose and let you solo, and the guy that instructed me came up on his own and stood out at the hatch end of the pilot house to keep an eye on me until he was satisfied that I was soloing by myself. Then he left and the officers treated me as if I'd been doing the job for years, and I was well trained. I could follow their orders quickly and implicitly. I got along fine.

*Tell us a little bit, sir, about what the crew was like aboard the Phoenix.*

**Ben Russell:** The crew was a mixture of people from the northeast, everywhere from Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, a lot of them from Massachusetts, a lot of them from Brooklyn, and down the east coast, Philadelphia, and then we had the spread of people from the Midwest. You had a good general mix of the population of the United States, which that in itself was an education that I thought of later. I'd be thinking about how far I'd come, say a year and a half into it, and it was pleasant. We had a pleasant crew. We never had, there were sessions in boot camp and elsewhere on getting along with the people you work with.

*How many men comprised the crew of the Phoenix?*

**Ben Russell:** At that time there were 900 and something, I'd say 950 men, and about 65 officers. Then after the war started, they built the crew up to 1100 men and 85 officers.

*That's definitely a large amount.*

**Ben Russell:** Yeah, that's a lot of people and the main I suppose outside of ammunition and supply storage, the biggest part of your space on the ship was devoted to crew. Of course we never thought anything about it until you think about it later, like I say about a year and a half into it, when we got pretty good knowledge of how the ship was run. It was run exactly like a job because serving on a ship in the Navy was, it was work. Everybody had to work to keep the thing going. The two main enemies of a ship were rust and fire, and they concentrated on fire drills religiously, and they fought rust religiously. By that I mean when the little spots of dark brown showed up in the \_\_\_ work somewhere, you would scrape the paint for almost a foot around that, and repaint it.

*I think it's still that way today from people I've talked to in the Navy. Some things don't change. Well sir, I know that you were there aboard the Phoenix the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.*

**Ben Russell:** That's correct.

*I was wondering if you could share with us your memories of that day. I'm sure it's something you would never forget.*

**Ben Russell:** We got up like we did any time, any other time. I was, let me drop back a little bit, the captain of this particular ship, I don't know whether the other ships did the same or not, but he wanted everybody who did not have a specialty when they came aboard, he wanted everybody to have at least one three-month tour of what they called mess cook duty, and I was in the mess hall serving, cleaning up. Of course the cooks dished the steam table thing, and everybody else worked with either setting up to serve or after it was over, cleaning up after the meal. I was put in the scullery, in charge of the scullery, and it wasn't a bad job. It was a hot job.

*Yeah, I know it was hot.*

**Ben Russell:** But anyway, the gear was taken to, as I remember they were something like GI cans, and you scraped any residue from the tray, the metal trays, you scraped it into the one GI can, and dumped it in the next one, and then passed it in through a window into the scullery where three men at that window took over and cleaned, washed, rinsed and put them on the end tray in the racks and shoved them down, turned the corner with them and they went into the steam – can't remember what they called that thing – but anyway they went in one end, it was about 8 feet long, and it was a solid steam bath. That's where your heat came from. That thing rolled, they rolled, let's see, one rack of trays would be put in there and it would roll the 8 feet through the different phases of the steam bath and come out, and that's where I stood, my station, was to help the trays and bowls and cups, they had their special racks, and the hardware, knives, forks and spoons, at another set of containers, and you sorted them and let them drip dry. There was not much drying to be done after the heat of that steam, and then they were stored away. That's what I was doing the morning of the attack. I heard the emergency calls to battle stations, air defense stations, and we were drilled unmercifully almost, and I just thought it was another drill. The master at arms who was in charge of the entire mess hall operation came around, I was the last one there, and he wanted to know why I wasn't on my battle station. I says I got this stuff to clean up here and store away. I had about 20 minutes work left there to do. He says give me the key. He says I'll put it away for you. I says you understand of course that we have special mess gear for restricted people who are restricted for health reasons. And that has to be kept absolutely separate. He said I know all that. I know all that. Get out of here. So anyway I just slowly sauntered back to my compartment, changed clothes, and went up to the second deck. I sped over to the what we called the scuttle bucket, the drinking fountain, and that's when I heard the first one of our shots go off. Then I went out on deck. I went up to the main deck out on deck and I stepped through the hatch just as the Arizona blew up. That was my initiation to the whole thing.

*Where was the Phoenix in relation to the Arizona?*

**Ben Russell:** We were in berth C6 which was the last mooring berth, that was two mooring buoys. You went in with the ship in between them and run lines over aft and forward, and we were about oh, 1,000 feet from IEA Landing, which was a little village, and I would say a mile from the Arizona.

*So what was the first thing that you thought when you saw the explosion on the Arizona?*

**Ben Russell:** I saw the smoke and fire go up before I heard it or felt it, and then of course the concussion of it was just a pressure against my chest at the time. I remember thinking, I looked over in the cane field over above IEA thinking that that would be a good place to be sitting and watching the show go on. About the time I was thinking that, a Japanese plane that had been hit by our fire came down and burst into flames and set that field on fire, and then I changed my mind about that. I figured well there's no place other than right where I am to watch what's going on. But then we had our hands full then. We had to take in all lines and store away stuff that wasn't needed at sea, and that being done, we backed out and headed out to the east lock around Ford Island, and just before we made the turn to go south past Ford Island, they told us to get back where we came from and stay there. There was submarine action outside. So we did that. Then the Nevada was the first ship in battleship row. The Arizona was ahead of it, with a service ship alongside because they were due in to dry dock as soon as the Pennsylvania which was in dry dock at the time got out. The Nevada got underway, and then they told us to follow the Nevada. Well she was mortally hit as she passed the end left that went over towards the small craft landing below the Navy yard. Then they told us to go back again, and we didn't even get a line over that time until, stayed back ashore up around, up close to the old ammunition depot, and that cleared the way for us to get out, so out we went.

*Was all the crew aboard or were there some men on liberty.*

**Ben Russell:** Very few were on. The captain wasn't on the ship when we first, on our first two passes tried to get out, but between the second and third attempt to get out, why he got back aboard and we didn't, the only ones we left ashore were the crew of his gig, that's what his motorboat was called, and a party coming in from a liberty party that usually had a four-day stint up at camp about oh, 12 miles from Pearl Harbor. They were late getting back so they were missed, and so anyway we had about 8 people, the crew of the gig and those people coming back from that camp.

*Did you know instantly that it was the Japanese that were attacking? Did you see the zero's?*

**Ben Russell:** We were well aware of it because that big old round disk on the bottom wing and the side of the fuselage, because some of them were found real low over the water, launching torpedoes into the battleships. That's what they were after. They were after the battleships. They wanted big and they got it. They damped out of eight ships there. All were either seriously damaged or sunk.

*It was just fortunate that the aircraft carriers were out that day.*

**Ben Russell:** They were out because there was one old ship, the Utah, that was used for a target ship, with sandbags on the decks and everything, and she rolled over. Of course the Japs thought they got one of the carriers, but they were wrong. But they were on the east side of Ford Island. That was their berth, just like the battleships on the west side of the island, and then all the lighter ships were in the northern part of the harbor, and then the Pearl City, which was the base for the China clippers. Can't remember my directions too well now. But anyway, the Pearl Harbor itself was a good sized little body of water, and I think I'll let you question me more.

*That's what I was going to ask, when your ship, you got underway and you got out of the harbor out into the Pacific, how long did you stay out there before you eventually returned back to Pearl?*

**Ben Russell:** Sunday to Tuesday night, Tuesday afternoon. For some reason or other, they didn't want us coming and going into the harbor in daylight where those people that hadn't been rounded up from their spying stations, where they could see us. Anyway, to fill you a little bit, that couple of days we went out and joined forces with one carrier and a couple of cruisers, the St. Louis was one I remember, and then we patrolled there. We went out north and west, but we did not get the proper coordinates to get out and mix up with the taskforce that the Japanese had sent with the four carriers that they had, the three carriers I think.

*When you were underway at that point, were you able to hear President Roosevelt's speech or get word of his speech declaring war?*

**Ben Russell:** Yes, we heard that.

*You heard that, yes sir. Because I know it was pretty much, I guess it was the next day, it was pretty much instantaneous that Congress declared war and he gave that famous speech.*

**Ben Russell:** I believe it was Sunday night.

*I think you might be right. I'd have to look. But I know that's where he talked about this date that would live in infamy and very, I guess at that point what was going through your mind, what were your thoughts?*

**Ben Russell:** I can't really remember what I was thinking at that time. I listened to everything and heard everything, and of course the rumors were all over. Rumors had it that the Japanese had invaded one of the other islands of the group and I doubt if they had really known what they were doing, what they were doing to us. They could have invaded Oahu for one thing, and probably another one of the islands, too. Of course we'd have gotten them back, but that would've changed the whole face of the beginning of the war. But they didn't do that. They didn't do a lot of things. I've got a picture that was taken by the squadron leader of the lead squadron of the Japanese. He had dropped back to the tail end Charlie position of his squadron so he could monitor what they were doing in the first instance, first minutes of the attack, and that's what's shown in this picture. All right, what's shown in this picture is the tank farms and the submarine base and the shipyard. The only thing they did to the shipyard was torpedo the closure of the dry dock. They flooded that, but they did not do anything else to the tank farms, and if they had just got half a dozen of those tanks afire, why that would've spread to the rest of them. There were millions of gallons of aviation fuel, plane gasoline, and bulker oil for ships.

*It makes you wonder why they didn't target those.*

**Ben Russell:** Most people, most commanders would've given their people targets of opportunity, which means that if your primary target is for some reason can't be had, why you go to your target of opportunity and do what you can to that. All right, if they had set those tanks on fire, that was downhill, right into the submarine base. They never touched the submarine based. If they had knocked out say half of that tank farm, that fire burning oil and gas would have flowed right downgrade into the submarine base, and you can imagine without submarines and

without all of that fuel stored up there, we would have been set back at least a year, possibly two years.

*Yeah, even farther, sure.*

**Ben Russell:** ...in conducting the war.

*You said you returned back to Pearl on Tuesday. Did you come in at night?*

**Ben Russell:** We came in after dark, yes.

*Could you see much of the wreckage even at night?*

**Ben Russell:** Oh, it was sickening. The destruction was just about complete. They tore Ford Island, all of the hangars on Ford Island, and the shops and what not were completely devastated, and naturally all of those battleships, they were gone, and a couple of auxiliary ships and the Utah and one other big ship were moored on the, it would have been the west side of Ford Island. Of course the Utah was belly up. Just to see that, and the smell. There was still smoke and burning oil coming up as it bubbled up, why it was fired, it caught fire, and the smell. Over at IEA, there was a large stacks of black boxes 7 feet long and 2 feet wide with \_\_\_\_\_. You know what they were for. And that was one of the first things that hit all of us is to see those boxes out there all stacked up and ready. The bad part of it was the Arizona lost I think it was 1007 men, maybe more of them, it might have been 1107. But anyway if you go to the, if you have a picture available of the Arizona memorial, they have a very large, white screen up there with the names and ranks of all of the people that were still in that ship. Now as time went on and they made a memorial out of it, why any survivor, and there were about 380 surviving crew members for the Arizona, any survivor, if he wanted to, he was cremated and a diver would go down and cut a hole in the hull and insert the container with his ashes in it and weld a patch over that hole, which I thought was a very good thing to do.

*I wasn't aware that they did that. I've been to the memorial myself. I didn't know that they would do that.*

**Ben Russell:** Yeah, they did that. And as well as that, why even I now, I could be buried in Pearl Harbor, just cremated and the container dumped into the harbor. I don't know whether they are still doing that or not. I see no reason that they wouldn't. Also any ship that leaves the west coast is prepared to take the bodies of people that die, like me for instance, to sea and hold a burial at sea before they arrive wherever their destination is. I have or had a friend that made one of those trips with a group of maybe four or five people that were to be buried at sea. So there are lots of ways that our people are remembering what went on.

*When you got back to Pearl Harbor, when were you able to finally go ashore?*

**Ben Russell:** I didn't, I don't believe we had liberty. I don't remember. I know I didn't go, but it would've been my choice not to go, because we had every night liberty in the mess hall group, every night liberty and five dollars extra a month. At that time, five dollars a month was pretty good money.

*Sure. So after you got back to Pearl Harbor, do you remember about how long it was before you were back out at sea again for a while?*

**Ben Russell:** The next day we escorted two of one of the old Lurline ships on a freighter back to San Francisco. The Lurline ship was loaded with people that were not needed at Pearl Harbor, or in the Hawaiian Islands, in other words all visitors. The first thing they did was get rid of all visitors. So that's what they did with those first ships that arrived at Pearl Harbor, the passenger ships. They would load them with the people that were not needed, and all flights of the clipper ships, they were all cancelled west of the islands, and from Honolulu, they were taking passengers back to the States. In other words, what they wanted to do was strip the area of all non-essential people, officer-wise, families, and what not, get rid of them, send them back where they belong at home.

*Then I know sir, you said that you were on the Phoenix for over five years. Tell us a little bit maybe about some of the various places you went, some of the things you saw during the duration of the war.*

**Ben Russell:** All right, I say we made three, and I think Kameniki disagrees with me on this, but we made three round trips between the islands and San Francisco, escorting ships back and forth. Then our last trip back, we went into a service pier. We didn't go into Mare Island. We went into a service pier and they rigged the ship for extended running. Now we knew that that meant a long way off, and of course we weren't told until after we got underway to head southwest, that it was Australia that we were heading for. But anyway, they, in the parlance of the engineering people, they closed everything that was open and opened everything that was closed, to prepare us for that extended running thing, and they had, I think they had a couple of double bottoms that weren't used for anything else, they filled them with oil. When we left there, we escorted one of the old president liners out of San Francisco nonstop to Melbourne, Australia. When we got to Melbourne, we had less than one full day's bunker oil in the tanks. You can imagine how close they had that figured.

*Sounds like that.*

**Ben Russell:** But I believe that if we'd have ran, if there would have been some thought that we weren't going to make it, why they would have made arrangements with a tanker out of Australia to meet us wherever we needed to be met and fuel at sea. We'd done a lot of that.

*Now you mentioned, sir, Mr. Kameniki, who I know is a friend of yours, and he also resides in the Courtney Home and is a Pearl Harbor survivor, did you know him at that time when you were aboard the Phoenix?*

**Ben Russell:** I didn't know him. I had seen him because from my part of the ship back after including number 5 turret and all the way back was where my jobs were. And he had seen me probably more than I had seen him to notice him. I did know who he was and I did know what division he was in, but to actually get to know him, I didn't get to know him until 1988 when we had a reunion in Norfolk and he showed up at that reunion, and I found out then that he was from Temple, Texas, where I was living. So naturally we got together when I got back, or when we got back.

*Wow, that's a small world.*

**Ben Russell:** It is. I tell people that we go back 70 years or more. You mean 70 years and you're still friends? We differ a lot in our philosophy and our politics and what not, but we're still friendly with each other.

*Sure, well you were fellow shipmates and everything.*

**Ben Russell:** Now I just learned, too, that there are ten of these homes like the Courtney Home, and there are only three Pearl Harbor survivors in the whole ten. The other one has -

*There's a gentleman in El Paso that is a Pearl Harbor survivor, but he has Alzheimers. Yourself and Mr. Kameniki are the only two out of all the veterans homes that the Land Office runs, yes sir. That's why I was saying at the beginning of the interview, it really is an honor to be able to talk to you because more and more people have forgotten or don't know about Pearl Harbor and about the events of World War II, and it's important to be able to preserve those memories. We've lost a lot of World War II veterans or like the gentleman in El Paso with Alzheimers and they can't remember some of the things they did, and so it means a lot to be able to talk to people like yourself and Mr. Kameniki and be able to record these interviews and these memories. I was going to ask you too, sir, when was the last time you were in Pearl Harbor? Did you ever go back for a reunion at Pearl Harbor?*

**Ben Russell:** Well, let's back up a little bit. For the duration of the war after we headed for Australia, we did not come back to Pearl Harbor until after the war was over.

*So it was pretty much five straight years then just at sea, or being engaged.*

**Ben Russell:** With the exception of about three and a half months that we were, our machinery was wearing down and we had to come back to the States for overhaul and refitting. When we left San Francisco to go to Melbourne, we stayed in Melbourne I think about ten days, and then we picked up, it was either the Queen Elizabeth or Queen Mary, outside of Melbourne, and escorted her to the west coast. At Free Metal, she could not get into the harbor at Free Metal, it's too big. And they anchored her out, just outside the breakwater, and I remember seeing a tanker alongside of her to fill her up. Now this was a C3 tanker, and that tanker alongside of that big British, can't think of the company now that owned her, but anyway, that tanker alongside her looked like a motor launch alongside of our ship. That was the difference in size of them. The story was when we left Melbourne, our captain with the blinker lights asked the captain of the liner what speed he intended to maintain, and that crusty old man sent back, he says how fast can you go? Of course we couldn't keep up, if it had been a race, we'd have been left way behind. But anyway, they refueled her and sent her on through the Suez Canal and up to someplace around North Africa there where she was loaded with Americans and Australians for the North African campaign. Then after that, we stayed on the west coast of Australia for about seven months patrolling and escorting ships back and forth between Ceylon and the west coast of Australia. Then we went back to the east coast and were just in on the tail end of the Guadalcanal campaign, and we stayed there patrolling mostly out of the northeast corner of Australia into the sea below the Solomon Islands and that group out there. Then we came back to the States and we went back to the war zone. In the meantime we took one trip to North Africa to take Cordell Hull. He would not fly, so we took him to North Africa for the Casablanca thing.

*I think I remember now Mr. Kameniki mentioning your ship carrying Cordell Hull, a very prominent figure, and he'd been a Congressman from Tennessee and then at that time I believe was he secretary of state?*

**Ben Russell:** Cordell Hull was secretary of state, yes.

*What was that like when you had the secretary and his entourage aboard the ship? Did it change things much?*

**Ben Russell:** It didn't create much of a stir because we had had admirals spend time on the ship with us, and they usually had a staff of oh, eight or ten or more, and so we got used to that. We even, later on we joined the MacArthur's seven fleet, and we had him aboard. He used the Phoenix for a flagship for several of the island hopping things that we did in the year or so before we went back to the Philippines.

*During all this time, those five years that you were aboard the ship, did you have a pretty good feel for how the war was going and what things were going on?*

**Ben Russell:** Oh yeah, we were kept informed. We had a newsletter, the radio shack took all the news, and of course it was scanned and some of it was held back for say maybe a couple of weeks before it was put into the three- or four-page typewritten newspaper type thing, and passed out to the crew.

*Was there ever any doubt in your mind that we'd be victorious in the war?*

**Ben Russell:** No, not after Midway. See, Midway was the turning point in the war. If the Midway had gone to the Japanese instead of going to us, why there's chances the war would have lasted another couple of years. Or if, I've always admired English speakers, Prince Edward, was interviewed by Dorothy Kilgallen, and she asked him once if he ever had any second thoughts about what would have happened if he had stayed as King of England, and I remember his words. He said there was never any waste so great as the contemplation of things that might have been. Well these are things that I'm doing now when I speak of Midway. If the Japanese had won the Midway thing, why we would have been a long time, much longer ending the war. And also at the time all of the plans were just about set in concrete for our invasion of the mainland, and of course the two bombs killed that, and the emperor capitulated, and the war was over there around the 14<sup>th</sup> of August of whatever.

*Do you remember that day aboard the ship, were you told about it over the loudspeakers or any of that sort of thing?*

**Ben Russell:** I remember it very much.

*Tell us a little bit about it.*

**Ben Russell:** The captain at that time was Captain Challenger. He got on the speaker himself and he was choking up from time to time, and he told us that the war was over. He thanked us and he was just about out of steam at that time, and he said God bless all of you.

*Wow, that's amazing.*

**Ben Russell:** Then he called the commissary steward up, or commissary officer, and asked him, he says how much of that recreational beer have we got? That was the 3-2 beer in green cans that we carried for shore parties when we'd get a chance. So the commissary officer thought a little bit and then he told the captain, he said I think we've got enough for two cans for everybody at lunch. The captain just looked at him and said get rid of them. So that was the only time we legally drank aboard ship.

*That's great.*

**Ben Russell:** When he announced that, we were standing watches on two guns on two anti-aircraft guns on each side, and they were ready to fire just reaching up and putting a load in the tray and shoving it in. When Challenger got off the speaker, everything on the ship was deathly quiet for a little bit. Everybody had their own thoughts. And some nitwit grabbed one of those shells, 5-inch shells, that was fixed ammunition, he grabbed it, shoved it home in the loading tray and reached over and lifted the breach lock, reached over the shoulder of the porter, squeezed the trigger and fired it off. And nobody ever criticized him for doing it.

*And so from that point, how much longer was it before you were able to finally get back home and that sort of thing?*

**Ben Russell:** To show you, the reason I say we had this thing just about set in stone, they were down to such a fine point in the storage of fuel and ammunition and stuff, so we left the Philippines, and they only gave us enough fuel for Eniwetok. We got to Eniwetok, and they gave us just enough fuel to get to Pearl Harbor. Then at Pearl Harbor we got enough to get the rest of the way to the States. Now we were at the point there when the Japanese capitulated, we were well into the plans of going ashore in Japan proper. If we had gone into Japan, the war would have lasted at least another two years.

*Sure, it would have been very bloody as well.*

**Ben Russell:** Very. They figure that we would have lost a million men killed, and the Japanese would have lost men, women and children killed. So that's the way it went.

*Sure, absolutely.*

**Ben Russell:** And I've never had any qualms or second thoughts about Truman's decision to use that firecracker.

*I think every World War II veteran I've ever spoken to feels the same way as yourself. They don't have the luxury of being able to sit around and be an armchair patriot and second guess like some people do today. I think those like yourself that were there, they understand what the stakes were, yes sir. Well sir I asked earlier about when was the last time if ever you'd been back to Pearl Harbor.*

**Ben Russell:** Well, the time when we came back in August, around the end of August when we were there, and the next time I went over there was in '86. The Pearl Harbor survivors had their annual five-year convention over there. I went over for that. Then I went over in '91 for the same thing.

*50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary?*

**Ben Russell:** Yeah, and of course I took part in the End of the War Plus that we had down at Fredericksburg.

*OK, at the Nimitz Museum, the Pacific War Museum, the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg?*

**Ben Russell:** Right, correct, and of course I was in the parade down there and I had the honor of riding in the back of a truck with five of the survivors of the Indianapolis, which was the last ship sunk.

*Yes sir.*

**Ben Russell:** And that was an experience all in itself.

*That's really something.*

**Ben Russell:** I just stood there and listened to those people talk and I never said a word. I didn't even talk about it to anybody for a long time because those guys, they were blood brothers as far as their feelings toward each other. I sure wouldn't have wanted to be in on that brouhaha with those people because you couldn't have won.

*Yeah, I've interviewed a couple of survivors of the Indianapolis and what those gentlemen went through is horrific and it's amazing that they were able, some of them were able to survive and still tell their stories today. But sir I tell you, everybody here at the Land Office views you the same way, as a hero for your service to our country.*

**Ben Russell:** Now another little thing, we had the son of Captain McVeigh. He was a lieutenant JG on our ship.

*Captain McVeigh's son was on your ship?*

**Ben Russell:** Captain McVeigh's son was one of the officers on our ship, yes.

*Did you get to know him at all?*

**Ben Russell:** Well he was our division officer, but by that time, I didn't have too much to do with a division officer because when we were in port, I'd be working for the admiral's staff because most of the time in port, I was running small craft, and for the last year or so, I was the admiral's staff boat which meant that I carried members of his staff on the missions that he sent them on in the harbors, and oh, once every three or four days we had to make what we called a guard mail trip. That would be with one of the staff officers to all of the ships under command of the particular admiral that we had, which was Russell Berkey at the time. So I had a busy life.

*Yes sir. How did you get to Texas? What brought you to Texas?*

**Ben Russell:** Let's see. I tell people that when I got out of the service up at Mainbridge, Maryland, I spent all my money before I bought my ticket back to Memphis. Actually it wasn't that simple. I had planned on going back to Philadelphia and I had a couple of jobs offered to me already and anyway, I was going to reenlist, but I got interested in getting married first, and

the getting married won out. And I worked on the waterfront for a year and a half. Then I worked for the old Reading Railroad for 37 years.

*There in Pennsylvania?*

**Ben Russell:** Yeah. And when I retired from that, I'd had enough of knee-deep snow, sometimes hip-deep snow, and we had already decided long before that once I retired we were heading south. Anyway, my daughter had married a man from Missouri and he had gotten a job at Scott & White Hospital here. Then my son was at that time was in Denver, Colorado, at the air base there, and I knew that he probably wouldn't stay there. So we decided on coming to Temple. And we've been in Temple ever since, at least I have.

*That's great, yes sir. Well sir again, I want to thank you for taking the time to let us interview you and just know that on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office that we're all very thankful for your service to our country, and this program interviewing veterans, Voices of Veterans, is just one small, very small way of saying thank you for that. And like I mentioned before we started the interview, we'll be sending you copies of this interview on CDs that you can give to your friends and family, and we'll also send you from Commissioner Patterson a nice certificate and letter that he puts in a binder. So we'll be getting those to you.*

**Ben Russell:** I appreciate this and I appreciate you and the Land Board for all you've done for us, and thanks for being patient with me. You're a good interviewer.

*Well sir, this was a great interview. You were very easy to interview, so it was not hard at all. And hopefully when you see Mr. Kameniki again, tell him that I said hello.*

**Ben Russell:** I'll do that.

*I had a great time while I interviewed him and so well sir, Donna Huffman has all my contact info as well, so if you ever need to get a hold of me, just ask her and she can, she's got my number and everything.*

**Ben Russell:** OK, will do.

*All right sir, thank you very much and have a good day.*

**Ben Russell:** And I thank you.

*Yes sir, take care, bye bye.*

**Ben Russell:** All right, so long.

*[End of recording]*