



Dr. C. Douglas Kroll (left) and ETCM Melvin Kealoha Bell, USCG, Ret. (right)

Interview of **ETCM Melvin Kealoha Bell**, USCG (Retired)

WWII Coast Guard Veteran
Radioman in Hawaii on 7 December 1941

Conducted by **C. Douglas Kroll, Ph. D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary**

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Location of Interview: Westminster, CA

Biographical Summary

Born in Hilo, Hawaii on 25 January 1920, Melvin Kealoha Bell graduated from Hilo High School in 1938. Shortly after graduation he traveled to Honolulu on the island of Oahu with some high school friends. While there he enlisted as a Mess Steward aboard the USCGC TANEY (WPG/WHEC-37) on 5 November 1938. While there he struck and later was advanced to Radioman Third Class. A few months later he transferred to the USCGC RELIANCE (WSC-150), a 125-foot patrol boat, also in Honolulu. From there he was assigned to the Coast Guard Radio Station at Diamond Head Light, where he would be on duty on the morning of 7 December 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He received the teletype dispatch from the 14th Naval District directing him to transmit a message to all commercial ships and stations advising them Pearl Harbor was under attack.



RMC Bell, 1947

During much World War II he served as the U.S. Navy's Fleet Reporting Unit Pacific (FRUPAC) intercepting and copying coded Japanese messages and passing them to Navy cryptologists to break. He would be serving there when Navy cryptologists broke the coded message about the Japanese planned attack on Midway Island. Towards the end of the war, Bell was transferred to Coast Guard Intelligence Units in Florida and Long Island New York. During the war had advanced in rating to Chief Radioman (RMC), but since this was a temporary promotion, he returned to RM1 and would have to make Chief a second time.



His first post-war assignment was as the Radioman in USCGC SAGEBUSH (WAGL/WLB-399), homeported in San Juan, Puerto Rico. While serving in SAGEBUSH the Coast Guard created the Electronic Technician Rating [ET]. Bell transferred into that rating from RMC to ETC.

ETCM Bell, 2014

From there he transferred to the Coast Guard Training Center in Groton, Connecticut as an instructor in the new ET School. While in Groton he met Norine Velma Hamlin of New Britain, Connecticut. They were married in New York City (Brooklyn) on 25 May 1950. From Groton he transferred as the XO of

USCG LORAN Station Panay Island in the Philippines. His final assignment was to the USCGC CASCO out of Boston, Massachusetts. On 16 November 1958 he became the first Master Chief Electronics Technician (ETCM) in the Coast Guard and the first Master Chief Petty Officer of color.

On 31 December he retired from active duty and spent the next 45 years in the civil service with the Department of the Navy. He retired from that position in September 2004, with an unprecedented nearly 66

years of federal service, both military and civilian. He and his wife now make their home in Westminster, California. They have nine children, 26 grandchildren and 37 great-grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Where and when were you born?

BELL: On the island of Hawaii, the big island, in the city of Hilo, on January 25, 1920. When I went into the Coast Guard I gave them 1921, which is on my Coast Guard records.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me briefly about your childhood and include what high school you graduated from and the year you graduated and any childhood memories?

BELL: I went to Hilo Senior High School and graduated in June of 1938.

INTERVIEWER: What did your father do for a living?

BELL: My dad was a line chief for the Hawaii Telephone Company.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever help him when you were growing up?

BELL: Yes. He was very talented and besides working for the telephone company, he was a talented musician. He played in the band for the city and county of Hilo. He was a musician in the Army during World War I.

INTERVIEWER: What instrument?

BELL: He played the trombone. But there were several instruments he could also play. He also played in orchestras. Besides that he also repaired radios. That how I got interested in them.

INTERVIEWER: Did he do that in his home?

BELL: Yes. We lived behind the telephone company and had a radio repair shop in our garage. It was very difficult to get parts. If there was a defective transformer, he would put it in a pot of water and boil the wax off. Then he would unwind the wire on the transformer until he found the break and then re-solder that, and then rewind the transformer back. I would help him do that. We did that a home.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do immediately after high school?

BELL: A friend of mine that graduated with me from Hilo High and I took a cattle boat to Honolulu. I had never been there before. We stayed at the YMCA. We each found a job. I was an auto mechanic's helper. There were sailors and Coast Guardsmen that visited the YMCA. I became friends with them. They told us about the travel and adventure aboard ship. One day told us that we could join the Coast Guard. Since I had nothing better to do, I decided to enlist in the Coast Guard.

INTERVIEWER: Was the recruiting office in Honolulu?

BELL: There was no recruiting office; we just went right aboard USCGC TANEY in Honolulu. Our Coast Guardsmen friend introduced us on the ship. They took me to the police station to fingerprint me and make sure my record was clean. I was a mess attendant for about six months because there were no other ratings open to me.

INTERVIEWER: Were no other ratings available because you were native Hawaiian?

BELL: It was common knowledge at the time that the opportunities available for non-whites were limited. All the stewards and mess attendants were non-Caucasian—Filipino. There were no other individuals of color in

any other ratings aboard the ship. I just accepted it as a fact of life that my opportunities would be limited because of my race.

INTERVIEWER: It is my understanding that anyone who joined the Coast Guard in Hawaii was not sent to boot camp back on the mainland?

BELL: Yes. After about six months other ratings opened up, and I really wanted to strike for radioman. So part of my time was in the wardroom as a mess attendant and my free time was spent in the radio room.

INTERVIEWER: When you first got aboard the TANEY was there any training or orientation given to you?

BELL: I had to more or less learn it on my own, and from the crewmen who I became friends with.

INTERVIEWER: While you were on the TANEY did you encounter and discrimination or unequal treatment?

BELL: There were no bad remarks of any kind. I never noticed anything. I was treated the same as everyone else. There was no blatant racism of any kind. As I remember, the entire crew got along very well, regardless of race. Maybe that was because the Coast Guard presence was much smaller and located in close proximity to the multi-racial community of Honolulu, as opposed to the Navy's massive and somewhat isolated presence at Pearl Harbor.

INTERVIEWER: When you liberty in Honolulu, did you experience any discrimination or negative comment?

BELL: None.

INTERVIEWER: While you were striking for radioman, what happened that got you off the TANEY and made you a radioman?

BELL: I became friends with RM1 Carlton Tabor who allowed me to spend most of my off-duty time around the radio room on the TANEY. Because of the knowledge I had of radio/electronics which I had learned from my father, I had some credibility with the Chief and rest of the RMs. Right after I began striking for radioman we had a problem with the radio on the ship. The high frequency transmitter broke down. Mr. (CWO Henry) Anthony, the District communications officer, came down to the ship to see what the problem was. He and the ship's chief radioman were trying to find the problem. The transmitter had been down for almost a month and ship couldn't sail without it. If we went more than a thousand miles away we would have no communications because all we had that worked were low frequency transmitters that were no good for long distance communications. One day after the Chief and Mr. Anthony had worked on the transmitter and been unable to find the problem, they left the ship. It was a weekend as I recall. The Chief had a house in town, and Mr. Anthony had duty at the District radio station. As a striker I asked the radioman on duty if I could try to solve the problem. He told [me] I could and I started to trace down the problem. It wasn't easy!

INTERVIEWER: That's why they hadn't been able to find it?

BELL: Yes. I discovered the problem wasn't in the transmitter. It was external to it. That's what made it so difficult. The problem was under the floor deck of the radio room. I decided to open up the panel and saw all this electrical equipment and wiring there. I started tracing the wiring and discovered that a high frequency relay was shorted out making it impossible to operate properly. This explained why every time they turned on the high frequency transmitter it would come on briefly and then shut down when the high voltage kicked in. Fortunately we had replacement relay on the ship and I replaced it. When I was finished I told Tabor to turn it on. The high frequency transmitter then worked! Tabor was surprised! The duty radioman, Tabor, when transmitted a message to the District radio station in Honolulu advising them at the TANEY was back on the air. The officer on duty at the district was Warrant Officer Anthony, who was surprised and asked Tabor who had fixed the transmitter. Tabor told him that it was me, Seaman Bell, to which Mr. Anthony replied, "I want to meet this Bell." We had to go out on an escort the evening, and when we returned in the morning, Mr. Anthony was waiting on the pier.

Mr. Anthony was very impressed with me, especially because I was just a striker. He told me that he would get me radioman as soon as possible. I already passed most of the tests, including Morse Code. I don't remember how Mr. Anthony did it officially, but I do know he had a lot to do with my becoming an RM3. As District communications officer he had part in every one of my assignments and transfers in those years. He told me that he was going to make me radioman in charge on RELIANCE.

INTERVIEWER: When you became a Radioman 3/c [you] were transferred off the TANEY?

BELL: No, I stayed there for another two or three months. Then I was transferred to the Cutter RELIANCE, a hundred and a quarter feet long. I reported as the radioman-in-charge. My duties included tracking by radio the Coast Guard seaplane based out of Ford Island at Pearl Harbor whenever it made a flight. From there I went to the radio station at Diamond Head.

INTERVIEWER: What was life like on the RELIANCE?

BELL: We didn't have all the facilities like the large ships did. All the electrical equipment ran off of batteries. I had to make sure our batteries were always fully charged. We didn't make much fresh water so we couldn't take a shower very often.

INTERVIEWER: Was the food o.k. on the RELIANCE?

BELL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you transfer to after the RELIANCE?

BELL: From there I was assigned to the primary radio station at Diamond Head. It was located in the little house [Keeper's house].

INTERVIEWER: How many people were assigned to the radio station at Diamond Head?

BELL: About five of us, but not all of us were on general duty. We were in one room downstairs and there were a few others in the other room, but we never had any contact with them. We didn't know at the time what they were doing until Mr. Anthony included me in that section in addition to my regular duties.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the names of any of the Coast Guard radioman at Diamond Head?

BELL: Only two: Carlton Taber and George Atherton.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live while you were assigned to Diamond Head?

BELL: On the second floor of the building [Light Keeper's quarters].

INTERVIEWER: Did Mr. Anthony work there?

BELL: Yes, he was the District communications officer who worked in the District office in Honolulu, but he was also head of Coast Guard Intelligence and came to Diamond Head regularly to get copies of the position reports of Japanese shipping throughout the Pacific. This he did in the ante-room adjacent to the main radio room at Diamond Head. While I didn't work directly for him at first, I did see him from time to time. Then I became part of that section copying position reports. This was in mid-1941 way before the war broke out. We got along fine. Years later if I wanted a favor I knew who to contact. He later was assigned to Headquarters in D.C. I made radioman 1/c during my first enlistment, in three years. Shortly after that I became a chief radioman. Because these were temporary promotions, when the war was over I lost my chief's rating and went back to radioman 1/c.

INTERVIEWER: What was a typical day or watch like at the Diamond Head radio station?

BELL: Our primary job was to listen to the international distress frequency. We did that twenty-four hours a day.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me your memories of December 7, 1941?

BELL: I was woken up and radio operator told me that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I was going on watch at that time. Just as I came on duty, I received a teletype dispatch from the District office to transmit on the distress frequency to all ships and stations that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I transmitted the message by Morse Code three times at 500 kilocycles on the emergency distress frequency.

Shortly after I did that the local commercial radio station, operated by several shipping companies in Honolulu, called me and asked me if they could retransmit that message on a higher frequency. I told him that he could do so.

INTERVIEWER: Did Mr. Anthony come up the Diamond Head station at any time that day?

BELL: No. There were no officers assigned to the radio station at Diamond Head on full-time basis.

INTERVIEWER: What were things like in Honolulu or a day or two afterwards?

BELL: Since the city was not bombed there was no panic that I was aware of. However, since Diamond Head was right on the shore of the island [Oahu], they issued us side arms, .45 cal. pistols and the old Springfield rifles. He kept them on the table in the radio room. I guess they figured that in case the Japanese landed near Diamond Head, we should be able to defend ourselves. Only hours later the Army from Fort Ruger took over all coastal defense. They also issued us gas masks. Every time we went on liberty we had to take our gas masks with us. There was a city bus that passed by the lighthouse so we would take that into Honolulu. We had to observe black-out after December 7. They enacted marshal law.

INTERVIEWER: At what point did you get transferred from Diamond Head?

BELL: Several weeks after December 7th, Mr. Anthony got us together and we went to a Navy radio station about five or six miles south of us. We would attend a class on copying Japanese code. All the students were Coast Guard radiomen. This was a regular Navy radio station, that had been on Oahu for years. It was in Waialupe. We had Underwood typewriters with a single lever. To copy Japanese you had to type two letters at a time. Later on during the war Underwood came out with a new typewriter with two letters on a key.

INTERVIEWER: So you are listening to Japanese broadcasts in code?

BELL: Yes. We listened and typed out the coded message. After we typed it up we would send it by teletype to the Navy.

INTERVIEWER: So the people actually "breaking" the code were Navy cryptologists?

BELL: Yes. We had no contact with these people. We just sent them the coded messages. There were no Navy people with us. We were in the original Navy radio station and all the Navy people moved to a Navy radio station in a new location. We in the Coast Guard took over their building and set up our Japanese code copying operation. There were about ten of us Coast Guard people in this unit. We would send our copied Japanese code messages to FRUPAC [Fleet Reporting Unit-Pacific] in Pearl Harbor. Then several months later we got transferred into a Navy unit. We then moved to their facility at Wahiawa in a pineapple field. We worked in a long wooden building with no windows or single story construction. It was not far from the Army Base at Schofield Barracks. Of course there was fence around the field and it had a gate and it was guarded by the Navy.

INTERVIEWER: That's where you went after you all were transferred to a Navy unit?

BELL: Yes. Once there the watch officers were all Navy officers. There were about thirty or forty radio operators on duty at any one time.

INTERVIEWER: Was that called the Fleet Radio Unit-Pacific?

BELL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How many Coast Guard radiomen were assigned to this Navy unit?

BELL: Less than ten. Some of these operators had come from Navy ships and I wanted get on a ship, too. I made it known that I was available if they needed a radioman on a ship.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do at this Navy command [FRUPAC], the same thing you did earlier or something different?

BELL: We still listened to and copied Japanese code, twenty-four hours a day! Then a man would come by and teletype it to the code breakers. We never were involved with breaking the code, just typing it up.

At the Navy's Communication Intelligence Center at Waihawa one week in late May, early June 1942, one week before what would be called the Battle of Midway all liberty was cancelled throughout the Hawaiian Islands. After the war was over all of us Coast Guardsmen assigned to the Navy's Communication Intelligence Center were awarded the Navy Unit Commendation.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever work with JN 40, 152 or 167 MARU codes?

BELL: I have no idea what those codes were or are. We never knew what codes we were copying.

INTERVIEWER: Was Mr. Anthony a part of the Navy's Communication Intelligence Center?

BELL: No, he had nothing to do with that. About six months after [the Battle of] Midway, I was getting kind of restless and decided to go back to being a general radioman. I contacted Mr. Anthony, who now was in charge of all the [Coast Guard] intelligence units on the East Coast. A short while later I was transferred from the naval intelligence unit in Hawaii to the Coast Guard intelligence unit at New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Later I transferred to similar units in Southampton, New York. It is on Long Island and we lived [in] a mansion on the beach there, but our station was over a garage. We wore civilian clothes, never uniforms. Our work was highly classified. Then they built a station in East Hampton, where I was when the war ended.

INTERVIEWER: So you were at East Hampton when you learned the war had ended. Did you see Mr. Anthony during any of your time at the East Coast stations?

BELL: Just before the war ended he happened to come up to East Hampton so when I saw him again I asked him if I could get transferred to South America. We had a couple of stations there. He said "sure." But then the war ended and I never got there.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do at these Coast Guard intelligence stations in Florida and Long Island?

BELL: In the Hamptons, we were copying any radio messages that contained anything suspicious. They were broadcasting in plain language but with certain code words. We were copying radio messages come from a German safe-house in Manhattan. We were later told that we had a lot to do with a joint FBI/Naval Intelligence operation that broke up a Nazi espionage network in New Your City. It was later documented in a 1945 feature film entitled "The House on 92nd Street." Later we even went to school to learn how to copy Russian language broadcasts.

INTERVIEWER: Did any of these East Coast units have a number?

BELL: If they did I never knew it. I didn't have any administrative work, I just intercepted messages.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how you or other people reacted when they learned the war was over?

BELL: People were happy and celebrating.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go after the war was over?

BELL: About six months later I was transferred to the buoy tender [USCGC] SAGEBUSH out of San Juan, Puerto Rico. It went to St. Thomas, Cuba, and we went through the Panama Canal about four times. When we were in Baltimore, shortly after the war, I did go to the Coast Guard Yard in Washington, D.C. to see an officer, a commander I knew who was not stationed there to see if I could get my chief rank back. He made some calls and did some "back door" administrative work and shortly thereafter when we got back to San Juan, I was promoted to E-7.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for sharing your memories and for your service to our nation.

END OF INTERVIEW

