

INTERVIEW II

DATE: December 28, 1989

INTERVIEWEE: O. J. WEBER

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Weber's office, Beaumont, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's begin today, Mr. Weber, with a discussion of how that loss in the 1941 Senate race affected Lyndon Johnson. Any insights on that?

W: I'm afraid that I'm going to have a hard time in keeping my recollections from becoming co-mingled with some of the things that I've read that others have said. But my best recollection about it, just thinking about it and trying to put myself back in the time warp [of] when he came back, was that he was of course disappointed, but as far as the staff was concerned, he didn't let it show. He was upbeat, active. He was always a real dynamo of energy, as you know. Normally he wouldn't come down to the office in the mornings much at all unless it was kind of an unusual day. He'd call early in the morning from home wanting to know what was in the mail and what we needed to do, and he would give us instructions by telephone. Sometimes he might duck in for a short visit before, but then he'd get right over on the floor or wherever else he was going, and he always made, or generally made, it a practice of coming by in the afternoons. That's when he would have a chance to go over with whoever he wanted to talk with what had

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gone on, give us instructions, change letters that we may have written for his signature, and sign mail that he wanted to go out, and that kind of thing. As far as it making any real difference in the way he had operated before and after, I actually couldn't at that point in time tell any difference. I thought he was--of course, I think we all had the feeling that he might want to run again soon. He felt like the Senate race in fact had been stolen from him, and we were all up in arms about that. But we recognized that you had a senator who had been elected for a time--I believe he came up, however--that was a shortened term, wasn't it?

G: Yes.

W: He had to come back up again.

G: 1942.

W: I think we all recognized that there was another day down the way and that he might very well want to make the race again. We were curious about what kind of an operation Senator [W. Lee "Pappy"] O'Daniel was running over there at his office, but we knew of no way to go over there and observe it. We tried to talk to people who had been over there, and we tried to talk to members of his staff, but actually we were not able to learn very much.

As far as Mr. Johnson's activities were concerned--the war still was not on at that time, and he was booming and going.

G: One of the issues that came up soon after the election was the extension of the Selective Service Act. Any recollections of Sam Rayburn's role and Lyndon Johnson's role in getting that--?

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W: No, I don't have any recollections on that. I remember I think it was extended, if I'm not mistaken, by a single vote. I remember the issue being discussed. I recall, of course, all of us were for the extension. There were a number of speeches being made on the radio, if you may remember, at that particular time by certain senators who were the pacifists, and it was amazing to those of us who came from a state like Texas that this was going to be a close roll-call vote, and particularly I don't think that many of us thought it was going to turn on one vote, but it did.

G: Any recollections of the Pearl Harbor event and Lyndon Johnson's reaction to that?

W: Of course, we all know Pearl Harbor came on a Sunday. And I was at the House Office Building when I first heard anything about this on that Sunday. We all recognized immediately that this was not only the end of an era, but the beginning of our involvement in World War II, because I know nobody thought--at least I certainly didn't think--that we would be confining our fighting to the Japanese. We anticipated we'd be in the war in Europe also. I suspect my thoughts were not much different than many others. You tend at that age, many times, to put things in the smaller perspective of, "What does this mean to me?" than you otherwise might at a little older age, and I recognized immediately that I was not going to be going back to the University of Texas to finish up a Ph.D, not then or at any time in the foreseeable future. Also, I recognized that certainly I would go into some branch of the service reasonably soon, and I had given it no real thought up to that point in time as to what I would go into.

The main thing that concerned all of us on that particular day, as I think you know, is attempting to get some news, and not much news got out. Even in Washington, there wasn't any stuff going on up and down the halls. Of course, there weren't many

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people in the House Office Building on that day. We got very quickly, because of Mr. Johnson being a member of a Naval Affairs Committee, the true story and extent of our losses at Pearl Harbor. We learned those the next day. The White House, as I recollected it, called and someone there briefed him, if he hadn't already gotten the information. So we were well aware that it was a very, very heavy blow to American naval power in the Pacific.

From the personal standpoint, I believe Norman Heine, who was working for the Congressman at that time, had a U.S. Navy Reserve commission. He knew he was going to be going to active duty shortly, and all of us felt it was just a matter of time. I knew [John] Connally had a commission, and I knew Mr. Johnson had a reserve commission. I don't think any of us knew right at that minute that he was going to go into the service, but in view of the declarations that he'd made in the campaign, we figured somehow, some way he was going to get in. Sure enough, he did.

The events in the office after Pearl Harbor--as I recall it, Mr. Johnson was in fairly close communication with Jimmy Forrestall at a fairly early time after the war started. I know that he went down to the White House and that he was talking to Jim Rowe from time to time. Those are the recollections that I have.

G: Any insights on what role he wanted to play in the war effort?

W: I'm afraid I really can't contribute anything to you on that. Bob Caro interrogated me at great length implying, in fact stating, that in his opinion--and I haven't read this latest *New Yorker* article, but I'm sure he's got it in there--that Mr. Johnson wanted and expected to be appointed an admiral and to have vast powers to pull together people who had been part of the NYA program and others, perhaps the CCC [Civilian Conservation

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Corps] people, and to head up a manpower project. Now, if any of that was his idea, I never heard anything about it. What we--at least what I--in the office knew was when he got called up to active duty that he initiated this himself. I also knew--

G: Initiated?

W: His getting called up to active duty. He volunteered, told the press that he wanted to go on active duty. An amusing incident was that he wanted some Arrow shirts. I've forgotten the Arrow model. I remembered this at one time, but they no longer made it. And he was insistent--I think it may turn up in some of these letters here, that we may get him some of those shirts and so on. (Laughter) I contacted I believe it was Cluett Peabody [and Co.], the company that made those shirts, and they agreed to make up a batch of shirts for him to his size. He was very pleased at that.

G: These were military shirts?

W: No, these are white shirts that naval officers wore. A naval officer would wear a white shirt as part of the dress uniform.

G: Tell me about his experiences out in California; do you have any indication of what he was doing out there in late 1941, early 1942?

W: We were not filled in, to any great extent, on what he was doing out there. We may have been, and it's possible I have forgotten it. We simply knew that as a part of his volunteering for active duty that he had been sent there by the Navy Department and what his exact duties were, we were not able to ascertain. I had gotten the idea it was on some kind of survey mission on which he was reporting back to someone in Washington, possibly Forrestal, about the manpower situation out on the West Coast. I knew that Connally was with him because, of course, John started out answering these letters that

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we were writing out there by having Mr. Johnson dictate to him, and then he typed these letters up, until the scheme was hit upon of simply having Mr. Johnson make the notations on the margins. I think I suggested that to him, I think in a letter, and John had written me saying he was glad to get out of having to do the typing. But as far as knowing any details of what they were doing out there, we did not. I did not. I'm sure Mrs. Johnson may have known and probably did know considerably more, but all I knew was he had been sent there on some kind of a special mission.

G: He seems to have been going to a lot of shipyards out there.

W: I really can't speak to that.

See, this is a situation where he was not, obviously, coming in the office. He was not writing us any kind of informational letters. He was talking on the telephone occasionally and often to Lady Bird, I'm sure, but not to us much on the office staff. Every now and then he would call if there was something in one of these letters that sparked--or Connally would call. But as far as we knew, he was devoting himself entirely to the war effort in his capacity as a naval officer. We really knew very little about what he was doing other than that. Long distance telephone calling certainly was around in those days, but it was not nearly the commonplace thing that it is now, when you pick up the phone and call whoever you want to call whenever you want to call them. I can't be of any assistance to you on that other than what I've just said.

G: Do you think that he wanted to go overseas?

W: I never got any impression that he didn't. I know that Caro, when he interviewed me, was a bit tempted to imply or at least indicated that Mr. Johnson was a physical coward, and I think he may have written something about this. That was not our impression and isn't

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my impression now. Now, nobody willingly goes out and takes risks that endanger life and limb except that when your country is at war, and you're in the service, and you're at the beck and call of whoever wants to send you wherever they want to send you. I do know that we were getting those letters, just as I have indicated to Caro--we were getting a few letters jumping up and down about the fact that he wasn't in the trenches and we didn't have a congressman, either. I was under the impression that when he went out to the West Coast, that sooner or later he probably would be dispatched out into the Pacific into a battle zone, or into the war zone, but I did not know this for a fact.

When he got his orders to go out, we knew that he was going out to the area around Leyte, I believe it was, and what his duties were to be, I didn't know. I know it was my impression that that was probably not going to be a permanent assignment. He was going out there for the purposes of reporting directly to Mr. Forrestal or maybe to the President about how the war was going, as an observer. That was the impression I had.

G: Now before he left, I understand he executed a will which you witnessed; do you remember that episode?

W: I recall it, but vaguely. I remember executing the will as a witness. One would think I might have a better recollection about it than I do, because I had not been called upon at that time, when I was about twenty-one years old, to serve as a witness to many wills, particularly not one of a person of the eminence of Mr. Johnson. I remember executing and participating in the making of the will. I recognize, as you do, that when those witnesses are interrogated they've got to be there; they've got to be each in the presence of the other and in the presence of the testator. The testator has got to make the declaration

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[that] that's his last will and testament. All those formalities I recall were obeyed and gone through with.

We recognized the will was a significant instrument, but not anything that was unusual for somebody who was going to go out into the war zone. Of course, as you know, witnesses to a will may witness the will, but they have no right to read the will. It never occurred to me or to the other witness to say, "Let me see the will," because that wouldn't be (inaudible). But it was an event of--I recognize it as an event of momentous significance, and I suppose one of the things I do recall is that this is a solemn moment because this may be the last thing that this man ever does in terms of disposing of his estate. Everybody was well aware then of the gravity of the war. Everybody knew how we were getting kicked around out in the South Pacific. While we were optimistic, I also was in pretty constant communication with Norman Heine, who by this time was working down in the intelligence and cryptography office in the Navy Department. Of course, Norman was pretty circumspect, but I was picking up information, that was not out on the street, about how badly some of those sea battles were going out in the Pacific. It was a sobering thought. We all kept thinking, "The tide is going to turn sometime." But it was one of doom and gloom most of the time around there insofar as our navy was concerned.

G: Was LBJ also aware of this intelligence?

W: Oh, yes. He told us of what had happened at Pearl Harbor--I believe the very next day--in terms of the extent of the losses.

G: Was there any discussion of how the office would be run in his absence?

W: Yes, there was a good deal of discussion about that. My recollection is that Bill Deason was a large participant in that. I can't recall that Bill was up there, although he may have

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been, but there was a considerable discussion about how the office was to be run, who was to sign the mail, et cetera. The feeling was that we needed to keep the Johnson name and the Johnson stamp on that office as much as we could. Now in days past when the Congressman would be gone for a day or two or a week or two or whatever, when Connally was secretary, he'd sign most of the mail. When Jenkins was secretary, he'd sign most of the mail. On many occasions, those of us who were junior to these people would sign particular pieces of mail as congressional assistant. I've even forgotten the title we went by at that time. Signing the mail posed no problem in that time because the secretary, if it were John or Walter or whoever, or if I were signing it when he was gone, we'd say, "He's out of the office for a few days", et cetera. "We'll bring this to his attention immediately when he comes back."

They kicked around several solutions or several possibilities. One possibility was [that] by this time Jenkins was gone, and although I hadn't been there very long, I was about the longest full-time staffer that they had. And there was some discussion about my signing the mail as O. J. Weber, Secretary to Congressman Johnson. I think probably we did sign some of it that way. The solution was reached pretty early on that Mrs. Johnson should come down, spend a lot of the time, most all of her time, there and that it would go out over her signature and that this would sit very well with the constituents. At least it was the best face we could put on it.

G: Was this a decision that LBJ himself made, or was it Mrs. Johnson's decision or--

W: I would be hard put to say who made the final decision, but I think that it was the Congressman who made the final decision, and I think Bill Deason was a very influential person in bringing that about.

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I don't know if you've talked to others about this, but my recollection was that it was something that was kicked around for more than thirty minutes. It was kicked around maybe for a day or two. Of course, it was important that Mr. Johnson's name be kept before these constituents, and it was important that, if possible, some mail came out of there with the Johnson name on it. Lady Bird had not, in my recollection, spent all that much time in the office up to that time, but thereafter, she was practically an eight-hour-day-day worker. She really spent a lot of time there.

G: Was there a learning process?

W: Yes.

G: Tell me about that.

W: Yes, there was a learning process for her. And Nellie [Connally] was down there, too. I had forgotten this. Nellie said the other day, "Do you remember the time that I threw my pen and shorthand pad at you?" And I said, "No, I'd completely forgotten that, Nellie." And she said, "Well, you were dictating a letter to me, and I was trying to take it in shorthand, and I couldn't keep up with you. You got irritated, and I just threw the pen and the pad down on the floor." I said, "I've completely forgotten that." But I'm sure that happened.

Lady Bird was learning to type. Nellie was learning to type. Mary Rather was there. Mary was probably, in terms of secretarial experience, the most experienced person we had. Certainly she was an accomplished typist and took shorthand, and from time to time, I would dictate letters to Mr. Johnson to Mary, who would transcribe them. I can look at these carbon copies of these letters now and tell you which ones I typed and

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which ones Mary typed by the number of typing mistakes or erasures which came through on the carbon, because I was not nearly as good a typist as Mary.

Mrs. Johnson got to where she could type pretty well, and she did some of this. She wanted to, and we thought it very wise for her to, go and meet some of the people that we were particularly dependent upon. I remember Undersecretary for War--I believe his name was [Robert] Lovett--there was a particular project that she was interested in, and we were interested in, for the district, so we made an appointment for her to go down and meet Mr. Lovett. She got herself briefed as well as she possibly could on who this man was and what his background was. My recollection is that he came out of a large--Brown Brothers Harriman, I believe, is where he was from.

G: Robert Lovett.

W: Yes, Robert Lovett. Distinguished man, nice man too. So, Lady Bird went down and met him, was charmed by him, and I think he was equally taken by her. So she made a good contact, and we were able to go through Mr. Lovett's office on many of the things we wanted to get done through the War Department.

G: Do you recall what the particular issue or project was?

W: No. I wish I could because we thought it an important one, and it may have had something to do with Smithville, but I can't particularize.

Then, to play off that, she then went to see other people in high governmental positions from time to time and did it very well. She, as you know, was a beautiful, charming lady and knew how to handle herself. She could get things done down there very effectively.

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G: How about dealing with your Texas constituents, was she also a substitute for LBJ in this respect?

W: Probably not as much. Most of the calls that came in from the constituents would be handled by somebody in the office. By this time, we had some younger staffers, and I can't remember the names of those younger people. When I'm saying younger, I'm talking about people who were nineteen, twenty, or twenty-one, sometimes twenty-three or four. Some of them were older than I, but I had been around there longer than they had, and a lot of those calls would filter their way up to me, particularly if Mrs. Johnson hadn't come in or particularly if it was something that she was not up on. Mary would handle a lot of those calls. Nellie handled some of them.

I cannot recall the names--although I remember the faces of what they looked like--of some of the younger men. We had two or three young fellows that had come up from Texas that we were using on the staff there at that time. They didn't do much of the agency contacting. That was mostly done by me, Lady Bird, Mary. I think that by this time [J. J.] Pickle was already in the service, and I believe Singleton was already in the service because they both had reserve commissions, as I recall it.

G: What other sorts of things did Mrs. Johnson learn running the office, do you recall?

W: Well, I would say she learned just about anything that any other bright, young staffer would learn. She learned, generally, the make-up of the government. It takes a while to know which office to call for particular things. We had a directory, as I recall, that would list the various departments and agencies, et cetera. One of the things that I learned at an early time in my career there is to--if I had a call or a letter that I wasn't exactly sure where it went, of course, the obvious thing to do would be to ask John; if he wasn't there,

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to ask Jenkins. Jenkins was particularly adept at this. He really knew his way around Washington, and he knew as much about the various subagencies and organizations as anybody we had, maybe more. I began to pick up on that, too, and learned my way around reasonably well. When, for instance, you had a contact in the War Department, which was a vast operation in those days, what I would resort to doing--I can't recall their names now. But I had struck up a friendship with a colonel and a major, and if I had something that I didn't know exactly what part of the War Department I ought to talk to, I'd call those men, and they'd tell me. And they'd usually give me a name. I think Lady Bird did that same thing.

We had many more dealings with the War Department and the Navy Department after the war than we had had before, although they were active contacts, too. The inquiries, the whole deal switched around. Before the war, there were still people that wanted to get jobs. Now we'd get a lot of those job inquiries. We would get job inquiries from black people and white people who wanted to come to Washington to work. The printing office was the usual place that could take somebody on. The Agriculture Department usually could find a job for somebody who had any kind of a degree and experience. And you learned those places and those people. There would be people--I can't name them now--but there would be people there who would go out of their way to help anyone who called there from Mr. Johnson's office, whether it was placing somebody or getting information.

I'm sure Lady Bird learned those same things that we all had to learn about who do you call for what. The directory helped. And, of course, the directory then would be much smaller than it would be now.

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G: Did Mrs. Johnson make the administrative decisions involved in the office?

W: Well, I don't know what you mean by administrative. How are you characterizing that?

G: Well, in terms of who would do what?

W: I would say probably, generally not. Mostly that at this point in time would be sort of a consensus thing, or if we had a young guy like Wilbur [Jack?] Hight and so forth that came on--my recollection is that I made decisions like that as to what he'd be doing, who he'd be doing it for.

As I say, Mary was an invaluable asset. She occupied the desk right inside the office. When people would come in, she would give them that charming smile and find out what they wanted. She could take care of that beautifully. She also knew her way around Washington quite well, because she'd been a secretary for Senator Wirtz when he was undersecretary. She also knew Abe Fortas. Fortas was still down, I believe, in the department where Senator Wirtz had been. Fortas could give you a lot of information in a New York minute. Every now and then, Lady Bird would call Mr. [Thomas G.] Corcoran. He knew his way around too; while he was not in the government at that time, he certainly knew where to go to get things done.

G: Any recollections of that and your office's help--

W: I'd have to look at the correspondence on that. Do you have that handy?

(Interruption)

G: Any recollections on the question of whether LBJ would run for reelection to the House or whether he would run for the Senate in 1942?

W: That was a decision we knew was being brooded about. It was not one to which he took, as far as I know, any of us into his confidence much. What you would pick up would be

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more in terms of telephone calls that he might receive from somebody in Texas or things of that sort. But in 1942 we were already in the war, and while I am aware of the decision that had to be made, I am not aware of a whole lot of the thinking that was behind it and his coming to the conclusion that he did.

My recollection seems to be that one of the thoughts was that it's kind of an inappropriate time to be out there spending lots of money and time on politics when the country's at war, and that people's attentions are just not focused on who gets elected. They're focused on what's going on overseas.

G: Did LBJ talk about his experiences in the South Pacific when he came back?

W: Some. Of course, like anyone else, he talked more about them when he first got back, contrary to what Caro said, at least to us, than he did any later time. We were aware of, literally, the close call that he had had. We were not aware that it was as quite as close as it obviously was. We were aware that he was going to receive the Silver Star. Of course, his good, young, loyal staffers were very proud of him for that. We didn't realize, I think, the full significance of how rare that award is, which is a very high award. I believe [it's] second only to maybe the Congressional Medal of Honor or something of that sort. In any event, it was a very high award, and we were proud of him for that. A number of the members of the House, I remember, were very complimentary.

G: Was there ever any consideration on his part for declining the award?

W: I don't recall that there was. I recall that when he learned he was probably going to get the award, he was very interested in finding out--my recollection was he said, "Find out what this thing is. How does it rank? What it's given for? Who gets it?" and that kind of thing. I remember that we did make some inquiries, but the fruits of inquiries were that

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we learned it was a very high award, that it was not a common award at all, and that it was not one that was dispensed like beans at the corner grocery store. Of course, we were proud of him for that, and we relayed that information to him, and he was happy to learn what the award was going to be. I believe Colonel Sam Anderson also got that same award. And they were in conversation from time to time. I think that he picked up rather quickly from Colonel Anderson that this was a high award. He and Anderson--maybe they continued to be--for a time were close. They talked on the phone many times.

G: The Caro article in the *New Yorker* suggests that LBJ in retrospect felt that he should have been given an even higher medal or honor; did you--?

W: I never heard anything like that.

G: Never sensed that?

W: No. I do recall, as I say, that he was--not having been brought up in the service, he wasn't too well-informed about what this award was, and he wanted us to find out, and we did what we could. I'm sure that Anderson also had alerted him to it. And I never heard any indication that he thought he should have been given a Congressional Medal of Honor or anything like that.

G: Did he feel that the war effort was going badly out there? Did he seem--

W: You mean on returning from the South Pacific?

G: Yes.

W: Well, I think that, based on his own experience, he was concerned at what was happening, that you can't even go on a doggone observation mission without getting jumped by a bunch of Zeros. One of the planes, I believe, went down or made a forced landing, and the others barely staggered back to the bases. My impression was that this really brought

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home to him the fact that we were in a war for our survival, and that it was tough going out there. He conveyed that message to anybody who would listen to him. I don't know whether that's part of what Caro was implying, or attempting to say, when he said that Johnson in effect wore the medal all the time and bragged about it and all this kind of stuff, or whether that stemmed from the fact that he probably--and he was--talkative about what he'd seen.

G: Do you recall Sam Rayburn's efforts to get the congressmen back to Washington to serve in--?

W: All of the congressmen, plural?

G: Yes.

W: Yes. I remember that he was active in that campaign, as it were. He felt that these people could do more as elected representatives of the people that had sent them there, where they would be influencing the futures and destinies of thousands of people, rather than what any one of them could do when they were out there on active duty. He felt--as I recall it, [he] encouraged the President that these people ought to be called back to their posts of duty. And it ought to be made plain when they called them back that they were not calling them back to get them out of positions of danger but that they were calling them back to what the President thought was even a higher degree of service. Some of those people didn't return.

I don't know whether Vance Hartke stayed in the service or not, but one of the congressmen did. Maybe more than one.

G: Was LBJ himself involved in Rayburn's effort?

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W: If he was, I'm not aware of it. I suspect Ray Roberts might know about that, although Ray at that time was on active duty already himself.

Juanita died, didn't she--Juanita Roberts? But Ray's still around.

G: Yes, a couple years ago.

Now, describe LBJ's activities after he returned from the South Pacific.

W: My recollection about it was that his activities were pretty much in the same mold that they had been before. He was active, attended the sessions. [He] usually hit the office around four o'clock, frequently came by in the mornings, as I say, when he would go over to be on the floor. He was not ever one to eat lunch in the office. I don't believe I ever saw him eat a sandwich lunch at the office. He was usually out with people at that point in time. My recollection would be that his activities were essentially the same as they had been before except he was on [the] Naval Affairs [Committee], and he spent, as I recall it, much more time on that aspect, with things having to do with the war.

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G: --the naval affairs activities have to do with the war effort, shipbuilding or--

W: Yes, that's what I understood the--

G: --manpower issues.

W: That's what I understood it to have reference to. Not naval affairs in the strategic sense, but naval affairs in the sense of furnishing enough firepower in terms of vessels that were being sent and vessels that were being repaired to keep us going.

By 1942 we still hadn't--I don't think we had won a single naval victory except we'd had a draw, is my recollection, in one of the battles at the time I left. The concern was getting enough vessels built to replace those vessels that got sunk at Pearl Harbor. I

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remember one time going on the battleship *Missouri*; I went just before it was commissioned in New York. I'm having a hard time recollecting how that occurred, but it was a momentous occasion for me, and it was made possible--

G: How did you get to go, do you recall?

W: My recollection on that is pretty vague except that I believe we got invitations. This is my best recollection. We got invitations--two or three invitations or something like that--to come up and board the *Missouri*. She was up, I think, in the Brooklyn Navy Yard at that time. I went, and I cannot recall who the other person was who accompanied me. We were there under the aegis of the Congressman, and so we were treated very well and got a tour of what was then the mightiest battleship that was anywhere around, certainly the newest. It was impressive. I know the Congressman didn't go, and I think perhaps he thought that since he was on the Naval Affairs Committee, there ought to be somebody there from his office at this event. And he had a willing traveler in me.

G: Do you recall LBJ's trip to Alaska and Seattle during early August?

W: No, I do not.

G: With Warren Magnuson?

W: Of course, I knew of his friendship with Magnuson; they had been friendly for a number of years, but I do not recall that particular trip.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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