

As I Remember Pearl Harbor , December 7th, 1941

By

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A destroyer is a crowded place to live. Compartments are small cubby holes which never seem to have enough room to move around in. Bunks are three and four deep. When a sailor crawls into one he has to turn himself sideways and sort of slide into it by holding onto the bunk on top of it. When the sailor finally gets settled he finds that he cannot turn over so easily because the distance between the two bunks will not permit it. If he turns over on his back he finds that a couple of unshaded lights are glaring into his eyes. That isn't nice. To prevent that, sailors used to unscrew the light bulbs and hide them in their lockers or perhaps in their bedding. So compartments were often darkened for the very human reason that sailors did not like glaring lights to stare at. Such was the case on the gloomy Sunday morning of December 7th, 1941. Sleeping sailors lay in their bunks and snored while Japanese carrier planes roared in to destroy them with bombs and torpedoes. I, by some chance of fortune happened to be one of those sleeping sailors. The ship I was on was a destroyer moored in the northwestern sector of Pearl Harbor.

Sunday morning aboard any U.S. Navy ship in port is a sleepy one. Our ship was no exception and destroyers , as compared to battleships, were notoriously lax at Sunday morning discipline. Then too, Sunday morning was always the "Hangover period" for most sailors. It always has and perhaps always will be. Sailors get drunk for the same reasons that other people do and Saturday night is a good time for it because they know that the next morning will be a good time to sleep it off. That was the condition many sailors were in on that disasterous morning of December 7th, 1941.

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Furthermore , it was a good time to lay resting in the bunk , just wondering what the folks at home were doing and to meditate upon the future. For myself there was no future except five more long years of hardboiled Navy life and I dreaded it . I had been one of those small town boys who was lured by the colorful posters at the postoffice steps. They told of many strange and faraway lands with swaying palms and even more swaying hula dancers. It had certainly sounded romantic, spicy ,and exciting. Actually I really did not believe it but I wanted desperately to find out what it was really like. So I had left my small Kentucky home in the hills and went in search of what I thought would be a better way of life. Naturally it didn't turn out that way.

The general alarm buzzer sounded and nothing happened. That was because it was used on every ship in the U.S. Navy before the Pearl Harbor attack. It had been used for everthing from man overboard to fire drill. It was a case of the cry "Wolf, Wolf" and no response from the sailors lying in their bunks. The buzzer sounded again and only then did some of the boys in the compartments begin to slowly arise from their sleep and put on their shoes, Some of the fellows sleepily remarked that the buzzer was set off because of a fire on the destroyer alongside of the one we were on. That appeared logical as it had happened many times before. So it was that many fellows lay and contemplated whether to get up or not. Suddenly a cry arose "The Japs are attacking". A sailor ran through the compartments passing the word and waking some men who were still asleep. I jumped from my bunk and throw on my clothes, ran up the ladder which led to the after gun shelter. From there to the main deck I passed through a hatchway. The attack was already underway and across the harbor at a distance of perhaps one thousand yards I witnessed an amazing scene of disaster. The old battleship Utah was slowly turning over. She had been hit below the waterline by

aerial torpedoes launched from low flying Jap torpedo planes. I
 stopped and gaped. The port deck of the old Utah was already
 under water and the starboard was high in the air. Her crew was
 helpless. Some of them were in the water and the remainder were
 trying to clamber to the starboard side. From there they could
 swim to Ford Island. They appeared dazed and some were injured to
 a state of helplessness. I suddenly realized that I should get to my
 battle station which was on the bridge. I was a Quartermaster and
 my duties at a time like that were to assist the officer of the
 deck to get the ship underway from the bridge.

Upon reaching the bridge I found everyone running around
 in a sort of hysterical race against time. We found that a large
 percent of our crew had not returned from liberty in Honolulu.
 They had been given weekend shore leave and were trying to enjoy
 the few diversions that the island of Oahu offered. Many of the
 officers were ashore including the captain, the flag commander,
 engineer officer, and the gunnery officer. The only officers
 aboard were four ensigns who were hardly dry behind the ears. They
 were just as confused by the sudden catastrophe as any seaman
 second class. One of them, who happened to be the senior officer
 aboard, took over the duties of the captain and thereby became one
 of the heroes of the day. It was merely a case of greatness being
 cast upon an ensign because the captain was not aboard. Much time
 was lost in trying to find out who was "Senior officer present afloat
 in the harbor". The communication system from ship to ship
 consisted of flag signals hoisted to the yardarm by signalmen on
 the bridge. That system was used by John Paul Jones and Perry in
 their day. Even today in the postwar Navy it is still practiced by
 our Naval strategists.

Our ammunition magazines were locked and it was some time
 before they were broken into and the ammunition passed up to the

gun battery. In the meantime a young sailor who had the gangway watch became excited and ran up and down the main deck firing his forty-five at the Jap bombers. At last the ammunition was reached and that was done in sufficient time to fire over two hundred rounds from the five inch battery. Our destroyer had five "Five-inch thirty eight" guns . There was also two fifty caliber machine guns amidships . Jap carrier planes were everywhere . They reminded me of a flock of hawks attacking a chicken farm in the Kentucky hills. The low flying fighters appeared to be doing the most damage. They were bombing our ships at tree top levels . The heaviest concentration of bombing was upon the group of battleships moored around Ford Island. I saw them dive and dive again upon the battleship Arizona until she exploded and great chunks of her hull were hurled through the air. I remember one of our signalmen yelling "There goes the Arizona"! Our ship was moored along with two other destroyers to the northwest of Ford Island. There were Navy ships of practically every type scattered throughout the harbor. I happened to glance across the harbor and spotted a motor launch plowing all alone through the water with bombs dropping all around. He was holding his white hat on with one hand and guiding the launch with the other. His raincoat was flying in the breeze. He looked so alone and pathetic.

Astern of us was the seaplane Curtiss. She was attacked two or three times by the fighter bombers . They could not seem to make a hit upon her. Two bombs came very close to her , so close that the splashes drenched her top deck. Suddenly a Jap fighter with its' tail on fire made a suicide dive onto her top side and exploded . The fighter had been hit by a large shell and its' rear section was a flaming mass. We learned later that the fire following the explosion was put out and the body of the Jap pilot

recovered from the tangeled wreckage. In his uniform they found a map of the scheduled attack upon Pearl Harbor and pictures of Giesha girls. He saw about six or seven planes go down after being hit by anti- aircraft fire from our guns.

The Naval air station on Ford Island Was knocked out in brief fashion. The hangers and planes were bombed and set on fire by the same low flying fighter bombers. During all this , our ship was fighting back as were most of the ships in the harbor. Two destroyers were in drydock and that meant they were helpless. That did not keep the Japs from bombing them into battered hulks. It was similar to shooting sitting ducks at close range with a shotgun. Some of the men who were on those destroyers were transferred to our ship at a later date . One of those men told me something of what it was like to be trapped like they were. The ships were burning after the attack and he told of two men on the bridge who killed themselves rather than be burnt to death by jumping to the bottom of the drydock. They had been trapped by the flames . A boatswains mate who had the gangway watch on the battleship Arizona told me something of what happened to that ship during the attack and it was not a pretty story. He said that when the first bomb hit , he was knocked down but recovered, jumped overboard and swam to Ford Island. He told of one sailor who calmly packed his sea bag as if he were getting transferred! The Arizona and the other battleships which were moored closeby were attacked again and again. The Arizona was hit hardest and she was so completely burnt and damaged that she remained only a skeleton of her former self. The battleship Oklahoma turned over as a result of the hits that she suffered and lay like a dead whale with its' belly shining in the air

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Our destroyer division was ordered to get underway. The orders came from the U.S.S. Raleigh, an old cruiser which also suffered enough of the attack to end up sitting very low in the water. Our engine room crew boosted up steam in short order and we were underway in about one tenth the time that it usually took us to perform that feat. The other destroyers alongside had to get underway first because they were moored to us. Just before any of us moved from our mooring, we received word that a Jap submarine had sneaked into the harbor and everyone became exceedingly jittery. Destroyers were equipped with sound gear for the purpose of detecting enemy submarines. When one of the destroyers of our division backed out from the mooring she made contact with that submarine and dropped a depth charge at low speed. The explosion brought a loud cheer from our sailors. The effect was disastrous for both the sub and the destroyer. It turned out to be a midget sub and was later recovered from the harbor. The destroyer was so badly damaged by the close explosion that she had to go into drydock for a long period and apparently was never quite the same afterwards. When we had left the mooring by simply cutting the buoy line, we felt more at ease. During all this action our ship did not receive any damages or hits beyond a few shell fragments though we were strafed two or three times by the Jap Planes. One bomb exploded harmlessly in the water about fifty yards from our starboard side, causing a great splash of water to spray the ship.

After getting underway, we headed down the western channel of the harbor past the burning and smoldering mass that was Ford Island. I saw a crumbled mass of hangers and planes that was still burning and exploding. During the passage down the channel our five inch battery had continued to fire intermittently at any Jap plane that they could see. Upon reaching the open sea we found a few destroyers

and a cruiser literally going in circles. Our ship was more confused than any because of the shortage of responsible officers . Also many of our crew were still ashore in Honolulu. Our senior officer had to acquire in short order a working knowledge of naval tactics and navigation. The senior ship present was the U.S.S. Detroit, a cruiser. She took command of the ships , orders flew thick and fast and the destroyers formed up. ~~xxxx~~. We cruised for some time in the sea area just outside Pearl Harbor. There was a bit of suspicious activity going on in that area . Two or three small motor launches were cruising about with no apparent purpose in mind but we did not get a chance to investigate them. They appeared to be Jap fishing boats. The formation was ordered to break up and go i in search of the enemy. At that time it seemed rather foolish to go in search of a large Japanese task force with only a pitifully small group of destroyers. Actually it was the only thing to do. Further , we had our orders and of we went in search of the Japs. Our ship separated from the group and operated alone for the rest of the day and part of the night . Our crew was short several men and that meant more and longer watches. We were operating at high speed on a choppy sea and we fully expected to run into some of the Jap fleet. Fortunately , perhaps for us we did not contact them and joined forces again the next morning.

The next night of December 8th our small force came back into Pearl Harbor for fuel , ammunition and the remainder of our crew . The Place was a shambles, a graveyard of what had once been a formidable Navy fighting force. About that time our crew was ~~xxxx~~ getting very tired and in need of sleep. WE moored for the night but there was little sleep because everyone was still tense from the attack. That night was a long and dismal one . Peacetime routine had suddenly been changed to wartime and all guns had to

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maintain full crew watches. Everyone expected attack at any time. Rumors were rife and before five men had handled a story it would grow to gigantic proportions. Such was the state of mind on that night when some radioman reported a Jap landing at nearby Wheeler field. The crews of all ships were called to general quarters. At the same time a report came out that a Jap sub was in the harbor. One of our fast torpedo boats began cruising about the harbor and dropped a few depth charges. Then everyone settled down for a long wait and nothing happened. Anyone could see that the men were already tired and weary of a war that was only two days old.

Some readers may wonder at this point how a ship such as the one I was on could come through the attack without a hit or casualty. The answer is simple. We were only small game compared to the mighty battleships. The Japs were trying to knock out the major part of our Navy in one blow. If the larger ships were destroyed then destroyers would be rather helpless in long range offensive attack without supplies and fuel. Destroyers are built chiefly for torpedo and sub attacks. They do not have the fire power for long range naval warfare. In other words, Destroyers are considered expendable ships in modern naval wars. That fact was brought home to us through the long years of Pacific war that followed Pearl Harbor.