

The first glorious rays of the tropical sun flickered over the blue Pacific Ocean on the morning of December 7, 1941. A new day slowly unfolded on the calm and peaceful island of Oahu, Hawaii.

The United States Pacific Fleet had returned from sea. Task Force Two, which was made up of the battleships USS *Oklahoma*, USS *Arizona*, USS *Nevada*, the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*, and numerous cruisers and destroyers, had been operating at sea off the coast of Oahu for the past week. We were operating with Task Force One, which included the battleships USS *Maryland*, USS *West Virginia*, USS *Tennessee*, USS *California*, the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga*, and other cruisers and destroyers. Our operations that week were much the same as usual.

The *Oklahoma*, to which I was regularly attached and served aboard as second in command of the Marine Detachment, had just finished firing our short range battle practice. We were very proud of our score as we had made an "E" (Navy merit for excellent) on every gun of the broadside battery. The crew and officers were in the best of spirits and morale was high because of this excellent achievement. It meant prize money totaling several thousand dollars for the members of the gun crews. We were coming into port to celebrate our grand practice, and the officers of the secondary battery planned a party for that Saturday night.

Task Force One and Task Force Two joined up on Thursday night and formed what composed the main bulk of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. We fired night battle spotting practice Thursday night, and prepared to enter Pearl Harbor on Friday morning.

The entry into the harbor was much the same as we had so often done before, only on this occasion the entire battle line came into port. This fact must be kept in mind in considering the tragic results that eventually followed. Normally one of the two task forces stayed at sea while the other was in port, thus assuring half of our Pacific Fleet on patrol and at sea all of the time. I could think of no reason for the diversion on this particular occasion, as it hardly entered my mind. I remarked about it later, but rather casually. To this day I still have received no conceivable explanation—sometime later I may find the real reason.

As the battle line came into the harbor, the *California* was the first to dock. I might stop here to explain the difficulties encountered in docking one of our

steel monsters, "Battlewagons." Unlike smaller ships, they have very little maneuverability, and have to resort to tugs in the final berthing process. Usually two tugs are required to berth a battleship. As each one comes alongside the concrete emplacement, or island, to which it will be moored, the tugs proceed to push her in sideways. Once she is alongside the berth her lines are made secure. It is only through the use of these tugs that a battleship can be moored or unmoored. This fact is important in that it accounts for the fact that our battleships were immobile in the harbor.

The *California* was the first to be moored, and she was secured alongside the Naval Air Station landing. She was the leading battleship in the column. The *Maryland* was the second ship to be moored. She was secured alongside berth Fox Six. The *Oklahoma* followed the *Maryland* and was docked alongside her by lines. This little incident later proved to be the one thing that saved the *Maryland*, and conversely it was the one thing that bottled her up. Behind the *Maryland* and *Oklahoma*, the *West Virginia* and the *Tennessee* tied up side by side—the *West Virginia* being on the outboard side. Behind these two ships the *Arizona* and the *Nevada* were moored together. The *Nevada* was the outboard ship. [This was not the case. The fleet repair ship *Vestal* was moored alongside the *Arizona*. The *Nevada* was moored by herself, some 20 to 30 feet astern of the *Arizona*.—Ed.] This completed the mooring of the main battle line.

The heavy and light cruisers and destroyers were anchored at various places all over the harbor. The flagship of the fleet, the USS *Pennsylvania* was in the dry dock on the opposite side of the harbor. She had not gone to sea with the rest of the fleet, and had been moved the day previously from *Ten Ten Dock*. This is the reason the *Pennsylvania* was saved from sure destruction. The *Oglala*, a relatively unimportant maintenance and experimental ship was docked at *Ten Ten* at this time. The USS *Curtis*, a transport, was docked on the other side of the channel opposite the *Oglala*.

The mooring was completed by noon Friday, and the fleet "turned to" on regular port routine, which consisted of general cleaning and training.

I was officer of the deck on the *Oklahoma* that first Friday night in port, having the mid-watch. It was a calm and unexciting evening. Inasmuch as the crew had just been paid, and it was our first night in port, most of the men came



aboard singing and staggering. I remember the happy smiles on their faces as they stumbled over the gangway to say, "Shir—I report my return aboard." Theirs is a hard life. Living aboard ship and working with them for two years, as

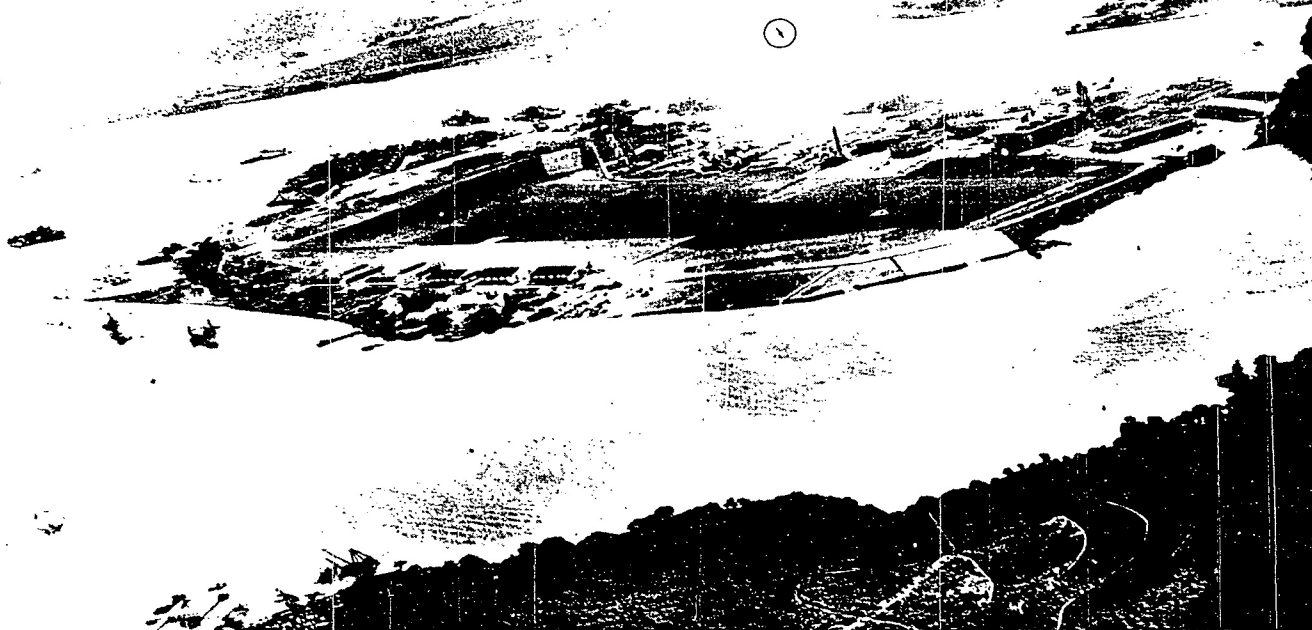


Remember Pearl Harbor

Story by LtCol W.G. Muller, Jr., USMC (Ret)
Photos courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center

This previously unpublished, eyewitness account was written on December 17, 1941, 10 days after the Japanese attack. It was written by 2ndLt William G. Muller, Jr., aboard the USS Maryland, where he was temporarily assigned after escaping from the capsizing USS Oklahoma.

Japanese photograph showing torpedo hit on USS West Virginia. Note the two Japanese aircraft in circles. The Oklahoma is just to the right of the water-spout caused by the explosion. Just forward of the Oklahoma and Maryland is USS Neosho (AO-23). The lone battleship to the right is USS California. Ford Island is in the center.



PEARL HARBOR (cont.)

I have, has given me an understanding of the sailorman and his sometimes eccentric ways.

On Saturday, the fleet went on with routine work. The *Oklahoma* was conscientiously engaged in preparing for the annual military inspection which was to start Monday morning, and last three days. An annual military inspection is given each ship in the fleet to determine its general condition and fitness for war. It consists of a personnel inspection, material inspection, a landing force operation, a damage control problem, and finally a battle problem. I spent most of the morning supervising the cleaning of our compartments and computing our final short range battle scores.

Liberty started for the crew at 1300, but it wasn't until after dinner on the 1930 boat that I was able to leave the ship. All of the secondary battery officers, Lt Birthisel, Ens Davenport, Ens Pride, Ens McFall, 2ndLt Gaver, and I, were on the boat. We were going to celebrate our fine score on the short range

battle practice. It was going to be a festive night and it surely was, but ironically enough, our last together. We started out at the officers' club in the Navy Yard, and ended up at a wild party in Honolulu. Coming home we were all pretty well under the weather and I don't really know how we made it back to the Navy Yard in one piece. When we reached the landing it was around 0230, and since we had missed the last motor boat, we climbed in the seats of adjoining cars and immediately fell into a heavy sleep.

We awoke about 0730 and started down to the landing to catch the 0745 boat. Lt Gaver, Ens Davenport and I were the only three left, as the others had all caught an earlier motor launch. I was suffering from the aftereffects of the night before. None of us looked too sharp. We arrived on board the *Oklahoma* at 0752, and Ens I.J. Davenport, (my old roommate) was officer of the deck. I started to stop and talk awhile with him, but my head hurt so much I decided to go down to my room and hit the bunk for the rest of the morning.

The activity was typical of a Sunday morning. A few men had turned to on

holiday routine, and some were writing home; others were just lying around sleeping. Save for an occasional sound of routine work here and there, all was very peaceful and serene. We had just entered the junior officer's mess, which was on the second deck, starboard side, when suddenly a highly excited and frustrated voice broke out from the loud-speaker system installed throughout the ship. I shall never forget those words as long as I live, and as I write this narration, I wonder just how long that will be.

"AIR ATTACK, ALL UNENGAGED PERSONNEL SEEK COVER! NO S— FELLOWS, THIS IS THE REAL THING!"

I was thunderstruck at the possibility of such a thing being even remotely a reality, but the tone of his voice convinced me that something was wrong, so I started moving. I turned from the mess and started for my room to grab my automatic pistol, which was a habit of mine by then. After fastening it on, I went to the port side of the ship to go down the hatch which leads to the third deck. I might devote a few lines here to explain that in an air attack, doctrine calls for the anti-aircraft and machine

guns to be manned—all other unengaged personnel are supposed to go down to the third deck, which is below the protective armour decking. They remain there until the attack is over.

Men were streaming down the hatch into the third deck. I don't believe at the time anyone actually believed that this was anything more than just another drill. As I started down the ladder, the first torpedo struck forward, about 10 feet below the waterline. It resulted in a violent explosion that shook the whole ship like a train which suddenly pulls out without any warning. I almost lost my balance but was holding onto the hand rails leading below. Everyone was thunderstruck. If there were any doubts left in our minds as to whether this was a drill or not, I am sure that first torpedo explosion expelled them.

Water burst forth from the gaping hole it left, and started flooding the lower decks. Another torpedo found its mark a few seconds later. I was just about opposite the communications office on the third deck at this time. The explosion seemed almost in the vicinity of my position, as I was knocked down by the violent concussion that followed. By this time water began to pour into the third deck compartments in torrents. The ship had already started listing badly to port. Before I realized it, the water was up to my knees.

I immediately started to get the hell out. I made my way up the ladder, as the water level had risen to my waist. Hundreds of men were with me in that third deck compartment and few of us were close enough to the ladder to make our escape in time. The only exit was this one small hatch which is less than 4 feet square. There were two other hatches just like this one in the after part of the ship, but I have no idea just how many persons made their exit through these. I do know it was tragic to see those hundreds of men trapped, fighting desperately to gain access to this one small hatch that led to freedom and life.

Just as I reached the top of the hatch, three more torpedoes struck us in rapid sequence—each one followed by a violent explosion. Again the word was passed over the loud-speaker system, only this time it said "All hands man your battle stations." How ironic and tragic that this word hadn't been passed first, before those hundreds of helpless and doomed men had climbed down into the third deck, only to be entombed alive.

By this time the ship was listing fast to port, and the decks were becoming extremely slick and almost impassable because of the oil, and their inclination. It was too late then to do anything but try and get out of there. The word to abandon ship had already been passed by this time, as it was obvious that the ship was

sinking, and fast. The last torpedo struck us at about the same place as the other five. Again this mighty steel monster shook like a boar that has been mortally wounded, and knows that life is slowly ebbing from her. All of this happened in less than six minutes, but to me it seemed a whole lifetime.

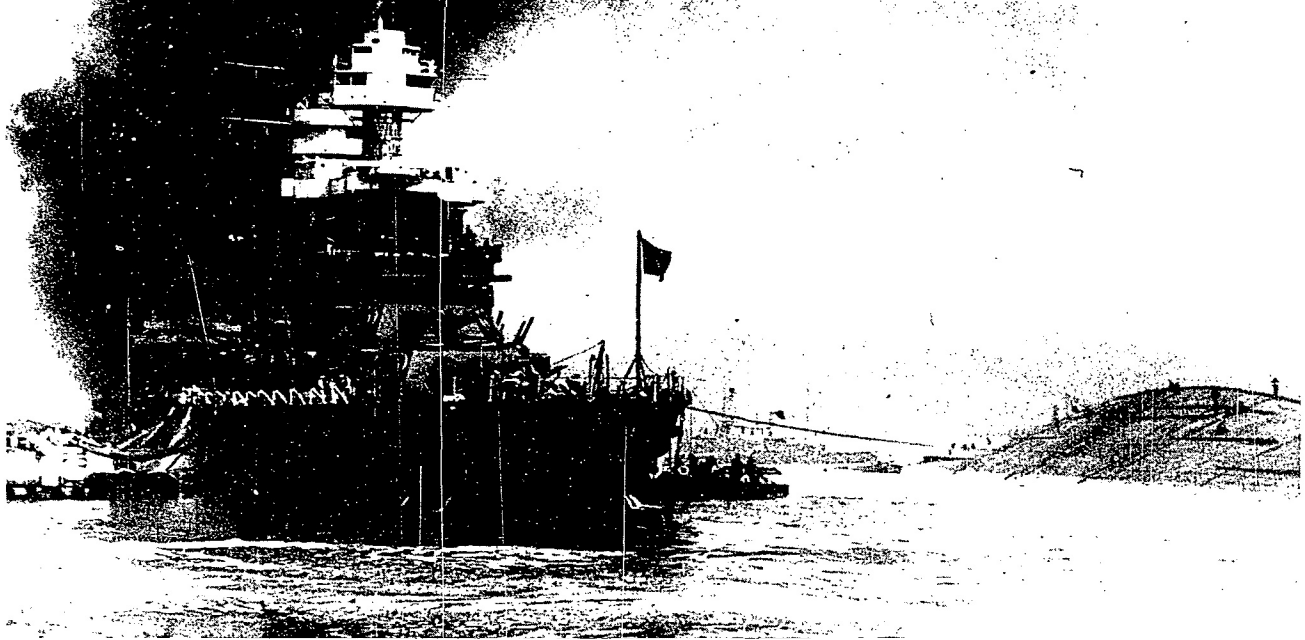
I tried to get topside, but the one hatch I managed to find had been closed, or dogged down as we would say aboard ship. By this time the decks were too steep to walk on. We were sinking, and turning over fast. This once proud capital ship was settling into her watery grave.

Two decks of steel below the fresh, priceless air that is God-given life, I saw the fate that was seemingly becoming mine. For the first time since the start of the attack, I suddenly became frightened. That supreme desire to live surged within me with all the strength of my 24 years of life. My escape seemed cut off; all I could think was, I am being entombed alive. Even in the hysteria that was taking control of me, I managed to maintain a certain clarity of mind. A hundred different ideas flashed through my muddled brain, until one finally struck a spark of light. All of this passed within the space of seconds, yet I could count the time in light years.

I remembered the porthole in my room and I knew I had opened it the



Photo (a) made as aircraft shows Battleship Row, between torpedo and all other ships. Ships wholly visible, from the left are Nevada, Arizona, West Virginia (top) and Tennessee, and Oklahoma (top) and Ford Island. Note the oil slicks spreading from torpedo hits. Ford Island is at the bottom of the picture.



View of the capsized USS Oklahoma alongside USS Maryland. The Tennessee may be seen on the left of the photo, astern of Maryland. Rescuers cut a hole in the bottom of Oklahoma's hull, saving 32 men trapped inside.

PEARL HARBOR (cont.)

day before in order to obtain better ventilation. The thought was like a shot of adrenaline in my veins, or like the feeling that comes over you when you find the lost collar button.

I tried to walk on the decks but the ship had inclined so much by this time that it was impossible. Determined, I worked my way over to the starboard side, by hanging onto the bulkheads and fittings. I finally reached my room and grabbed on to the sides of the porthole, which was by this time almost directly overhead. I might remark here that the standard size portholes on all battleships are only 15 inches wide. On trying to pull myself through the porthole I encountered difficulty in getting my hips to fit. At this point there was no possible chance of my turning back, as it meant either drowning in the fast flooding compartments, or at best the possibility of being entombed. The thought almost made me frantic. I immediately shed my pants, in a vain effort to reduce the size of my hips. I still didn't quite fit, but somehow I managed to mash my way out of that port. By that time it was either a question of making myself smaller or the port bigger, and I took the more plausible.

The ship was now over on her side, and men were swimming around in the water everywhere. Others were crawling over her sides like ants, and jumping into the oily muck that had now settled over the entire area. I slid down the side

and dove into the black water. When I came to the surface, I started swimming up the channel to clear the ship.

I was afraid the suction caused by the sinking of the *Oklahoma* might drag me under. Half-crazed men were floundering in the water everywhere. Some were drowning. Others were being cut to pieces by shrapnel and machine gun fire. Japanese planes were everywhere, strafing the water with a deadly stream of fire.

I could see that I didn't want to linger around here very long, so I started swimming as fast as I could for the shore. Several machine gun bursts followed me incredibly close. The water was so filled with oil slick that it was almost impossible to swim through it. Also this oil had ignited, and the flames were sweeping down the channel, consuming everything in its path. I think I swam most of the way underwater, in an effort to escape the strafing and keep clear of the fire.

On reaching shallow water, I stood there half-dazed, and surveyed the slaughter that was going on around me. The *Oklahoma* had her bottom above the water now; the *Maryland* was throwing out a deadly curtain of fire and was being subjected to a dive bombing and strafing attack. The *West Virginia* was being bombed to pieces by the Japanese dive bombers.

Planes were everywhere, diving from

nowhere and dumping their deadly cargo into the battle line. Just then I heard a tremendous explosion, and turning I saw the *Arizona* go up in flames. A bomb had hit her magazine, and there were pieces of her falling 500 yards away. Some 1,170 officers and men went up in that one puff of smoke and flame. The sight was tragic, and sickening, and I pulled myself out of the water onto the oily beach.

Just at that time I saw the *Nevada* getting underway, which was really a remarkable feat for a battleship. I still don't know how she was able to get up her steam so soon. By this time the *Arizona* was engulfed in one huge sheet of flames.

I started up the road when a truck of evacuees picked me up and took me to the dispensary at the Naval Air Station landing. Once there I started to catch my breath, and was sitting down inside the quadrangle when a low-flying Japanese dive bomber appeared immediately overhead. It dropped a bomb which I assume was intended for the *California*. The 500-pound demolition bomb exploded on the far side of the quadrangle a short distance from me. It shook the ground under me, and the concussion was terrific, knocking me down and temporarily stunning me. Again I was saved by a miracle. Examining the crater a few minutes later, I found it about 8 feet deep and 30 feet around in circumference. The effects of the shrapnel

and fragmentation were everywhere, but I was untouched.

About this time casualties were arriving by the hundreds. The *California* was all ablaze and men were being carried off of her. These poor individuals were burned to a crisp. I will never forget those horrible and gruesome sights of men coming in covered with oil, their skin hanging in shreds, their head and eyelashes burned to a cinder. Their cries were unbearable, and I was sick to my stomach by this time.

I decided to leave and try to gather some of my men together. I naturally expected something else to happen and I wanted to be of a little more help this time. As I started down the road again I noticed waves of high-flying Japanese bombers at about 15,000 feet coming over in waves of three. They were horizontal bombing, but I don't think their bombs were very effective. Our anti-aircraft batteries were pounding away at them, but the planes were too high to make our fire effective. Also the ceiling was extremely low that morning, which was a big factor in protecting and shielding the Japanese planes.

The battle line was a tragic panorama of destruction by this time. The *California* was ablaze; the *Oklahoma* sunk; the *West Virginia* and the *Arizona* blown to bits. The *Nevada*, which had gotten underway and tried to slip out of the harbor, had been bombed and split in two, just inside the harbor. She managed to beach herself, and thus save the channel from being blocked. The *Maryland* was still relatively undamaged, but she was immobile as the sunken hulk of the *Oklahoma* pinned her into the island.

Dive bombers were still pounding us heavily, and our ships were still returning the fire valiantly. I saw a Japanese plane burst into flames and crash a short way from me. I saw other planes crashing nearby, but the attack was beginning to slow down.

I found myself a truck with keys in the ignition lock and drove down to the edge of the beach, picking up survivors from the various ships. I then drove over to the BOQ (Bachelor Officers' Quarters). There I obtained some clothes, as I was clad only in my shorts at this time. I also managed to get a pistol. I proceeded to gather up a few Marines I could find and started to equip them with what arms we could get together.

Ford Island was a madman's utopia for the first few hours of the attack and through most of that first day. Survivors from the wrecked ships were swarming over the island, plundering and ransacking warehouses, armories and barracks.

Their purpose was essentially to obtain clothing and arms, but their means were almost barbarous. It was almost a miniature revolution, as disorder, havoc and fear reigned supreme.

Most of these young sailors had never had a rifle in their hands before, and others knew little or nothing about one. Yet arms and ammunition were issued freely and indiscriminately to anyone who looked big enough to shoot. In the excitement that naturally would follow such an unexpected attack, most of the sailors were "battle happy" and some were even shell-shocked. They created a greater threat to our own security than did a possible Japanese invasion. They shot at anything that had one dimension. Bullets were whizzing everywhere, as these would-be defenders ravaged the island in search of Japs. Some carried automatic rifles, and hadn't the slightest idea how to shoot one. Others were



Capt W.G. Muller, Jr., while serving with the First Marine Division.

equipped with sawed-off shotguns, pistols, and even machine guns.

What a day! I was more afraid of being ignominiously killed by one of those trigger-happy sailors than I was of the Japanese. I took some of their arms away and at least managed to make everyone I could find put his safety lock on.

These sailors commandeered every car, truck, motorcycle and vehicle they could find. They were speeding around the roads in all sorts of fashions, and several crashed into posts and ditches. One hit an ambulance in a head-on collision. All this was typical of the confusion that reigned supreme most of that first day.

Expecting that this first attack would undoubtedly be followed by an invasion of airborne troops, I stationed my Marines around the airfield and started digging small but effective foxholes. We had a fairly adequate defense set up when the third and fourth attacks came. We tried hard to bring down some

planes, but I rather doubt if we did much more than to keep them from strafing our planes on the ground. We were ready for anything now, as I think all of us had recovered from our initial fright.

Around noon, I went back to the BOQ where I looked eagerly for the sight of dear friends who had survived this initial tragedy. I will never forget the look on those faces as one man after another found his buddy and shipmate. I heaved a sigh of joy each time I saw one of my fellow officers alive.

By that afternoon, I had accounted for 45 of my 77 Marines, took command of them, and reported into the Marine Barracks, Ford Island for further orders. We bunked that evening in the airplane hangar on Ford Island, and provided machine gun and anti-aircraft posts to guard the field.

About 2300, planes were heard overhead and the whole harbor opened up with a barrage of fire. Two planes burst into flames and crashed a short distance from where I was standing. How tragic! They were our own planes that we had mistaken for the enemy. No adequate recognition signal had been arranged for our returning planes. Everyone was still so excited that if someone fired a few shots the whole damn harbor would open up. What a night!

The day after the attack I mustered my Marines, crossed the channel and reported to the Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor for duty. There I met Capt Ross, my commanding officer, who had managed to save himself, and turned over the command to him. At this time we had 60 men out of 77 accounted for. We were attached to the 3rd Defense Battalion, where we remained until Tuesday night. From there we received orders to report on board the USS *Maryland* for duty.

The *Oklahoma* was the first ship to be put out of action. She sank in about seven minutes with some 500 of my shipmates, officers and men, aboard her. The Japanese executed the destruction of the battle line with the utmost efficiency. We couldn't realize or believe what was happening. They caught us totally by surprise and we really didn't have a chance to fight back. Many of the officers were ashore and none of our batteries were manned. The ammunition was locked in magazines and I don't believe anyone knew just who had the keys.

It was tragic and no words will ever be able to adequately describe the horror of that Sunday morning attack.

