

Remembering Pearl Harbor: Former sailor recalls Dec. 7 attack

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson

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LAKEPORT — The sun rose over Pearl Harbor at approximately 6:28 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941. {sidebar id=111}

The USS Tennessee's routine schedule for the day called for the day's duty to begin at 8 a.m., with the port side of the quarterdeck to be rigged for church at 8:30 a.m., right about the same time as the Seventh and Second Divisions' softball teams were to leave the ship. Quarters were to muster at 9:30 a.m.

It was another Sunday in the busy Naval installation, where ships, planes and people moved all the time, remembers Henry "Andy" Anderson, 90, of Lakeport, who was a first class seaman aboard the Tennessee.

Anderson — whose father served in the US Army in France during World War I — joined the Naval Reserves as a 17-year-old. He had reported in January of 1941 to serve out the rest of his enlistment on active duty. He had started out on Goat Island in the San Francisco Bay, where he received his orders to report to the Tennessee, which was at Pearl Harbor.

Assigned as a commissary storekeeper to the Fourth Division, along the way Anderson had taken an exam for first class seaman along with about 4,000 other sailors. He was one of 68 to pass.

While stationed at Pearl Harbor, Anderson said the Tennessee and its 1,500 crew members came and went regularly, spending one to two weeks at sea at a time before returning. "We were always moving someplace";

The Tennessee was used as a kind of training ship for Pearl Harbor, with trainees assigned to the ship before being transferred to other assignments, Anderson said.

Life at Pearl Harbor wasn't tinged with anticipation of danger, although they knew things were coming to a head. "We didn't have any idea that we were going to be attacked," Anderson said.

On the morning of Dec. 7, the Tennessee was moored in "battleship row" alongside Ford Island, which sits in the middle of Pearl Harbor and houses a Naval Air Station. The Tennessee was tied ahead of the USS Arizona, and alongside the USS West Virginia.

At 7:55 a.m., Anderson and other Tennessee crew members were traveling across the harbor in a motor whale boat to pick up supplies.

Not long before, a fleet of PBVs — a large, multipurpose flying boat — had landed at Ford Island, so when a group of planes came in over the harbor the same way as patrol planes, it didn't initially raise concern, Anderson said.

It was the minesweeper USS Oglala that sounded the alert, opening fire on the planes as they came sweeping low over Pearl Harbor just before 8 a.m.

At first they didn't know who was attacking, said Anderson — "until they got over the harbor and you could see the red spots on their wings, then you knew who did what";

Over the course of an hour and a half, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in two waves. The first, said Anderson, lasted about 20 minutes, and according to historical reports included 183 Japanese planes and targeted battleships and carriers.

The second wave had 171 Japanese planes, which began their assault on Ford Island and Wheeler Field. Anderson recalled the second wave of the attack began after a short intermission.

As Anderson and his fellow sailors tried to get out of harm's way, the Tennessee was attacked by Japanese planes at 7:58 a.m., according to a Navy chronology of the attack.

The Tennessee was hit twice, with a bomb hitting turret two; a second bomb hit and penetrated the top of turret three, killing a gunner's mate, said Anderson.

A chunk of metal created by the explosion when the Japanese bomb hit turret two went right through the seat where Anderson would have been sitting at breakfast had he not been on his errand for supplies.

"How lucky I was," said Anderson, who still has that chunk of metal today.

After the Tennessee was hit, the Utah was attacked at 8:01 a.m. by a torpedo and bombing plane. Minutes earlier, the Oklahoma had been observed capsizing and the West Virginia was in trouble.

The USS Nevada got under way in an effort to clear the channel. "They didn't make it very far," said Anderson. "They got a torpedo in the bow and that was the end of that";

The Navy's minute-by-minute attack confirms that the Nevada was hit at 8 a.m. by a torpedo or mine. A minute later she was hit by a bomb, and a minute after that a torpedo hit her port bow. At 8:05 a.m. the listing Utah was abandoned.

Then, at 8:08 a.m., the USS Arizona exploded. She would take with her 1,177 sailors to an ocean grave. Anderson said all of those men were wiped out "within minutes";

"It all happened so quickly," said Anderson.

Anderson and his fellow sailors on the whale boat tried to get to the sub base, but made it to the fleet landing instead, where they picked up some men from the Tennessee and transported them back to the ship.

He wouldn't step back on the Tennessee until 4 p.m. Much of the day for Anderson consisted of plucking men from the oil-covered waters of the harbor. He said his suit of whites was turned black from helping the oil-soaked men from the water.

Meanwhile, a call had been put out throughout Honolulu, notifying all sailors to report to their base because an attack was under way. Anderson said sailors were streaming into the base amidst the chaos.

Back on the Tennessee, he reported to a lieutenant about his activities that day. With the ship tethered to the badly hit West Virginia, Anderson said the sailors were cutting the lines between the two ships so that if the West Virginia rolled over it wouldn't cave in the Tennessee's side.

Oil leaking from the Arizona had caught fire which had moved toward the Tennessee's stern. Anderson said the sailors used hoses to push the fire back.

The Tennessee would eventually move out of the mooring keys, as her engine hadn't suffering damage in the attack, he said.

Within the week, the Tennessee set out for Bremerton, Wash., where she was repaired, new guns were installed in her damaged turrets and other weapons were added to her arsenal, said Anderson. The retrofitting took a few months to complete.

When the Tennessee first arrived in Washington, a British warship was there, said Anderson. He and some of his crew members tangled with the British sailors, who he said were "pretty ornery";

"They had to be taught a lesson or two, and we were just the guys who could do it," he said. "We were in no frame of mind to take guff from anybody."

Once the repairs were complete, the Tennessee went back to Pearl Harbor and then back to the Pacific Theater.

He remembers fellow sailors and their anger at the Japanese over the attack. "Once you step on the lion's tale, watch out."

Anderson would go on to sail to the Coral Sea and Aleutians aboard the Tennessee, and later to Australia aboard the USS Barnes. He served in Okinawa during 1945, the year of the island's brutal major battle. In October 1945 he was discharged.

He went on to raise two sons with his wife, Mary, worked in construction, served on the Modesto City Council and was chief building inspector in Napa, retiring in 1977.

He has memorabilia of his time in the Navy, including documents such as a menu for the Tennessee's July 4, 1941, dinner — turkey was on the menu — to the Tennessee's routine schedule for Dec. 7, 1941.

He's also got pictures of himself and fellow crew members. "I remember all these guys, just like it was yesterday," he said, looking at one of the pictures.

Today, living in his home in Lakeport that overlooks the water, Anderson said a lot of people have been interested in hearing his story over the years.

"Just going over it in my mind, it was quite a day," he said.

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