

## Pearl Harbor

Sunday, December 7, 1941 dawned bright and warm with only a few puffy white scattered clouds, a typical Hawaiian day. As a Seaman First Class stationed aboard the battleship USS Tennessee and assigned to a topside deck division, I awoke on that particular morning to the usual Sunday "holiday routine". At about 0755» as we were sitting around the mess tables relaxing over coffee and the comic strips and awaiting Colors, we were all startled to hear a series of heavy explosions a few feet away on Ford Island. Several of us stepped through an open hatch to the main deck just in time to observe one of the hangars erupt in a huge ball of flame and black smoke as a great many Japanese dive bombers, torpedo planes and fighters swept low over the harbor, dropping bombs and strafing everything in sight. My first reaction was that they were our own planes and the pilots were making a terrible mistake on their bombing practice. We realized right away that this was the real thing and not a drill, when the rising sun emblem became clearly visible on the wing tips. Our ship, being tucked away inboard of the West Virginia, aft of the Maryland and Oklahoma, and just forward of the Arizona and Vestal, was in one of the best protected positions of any of the battleships. However, we still received major damage from several bomb hits, one of which killed the captain of the West Virginia, Captain Bennion, as he stood on his signal bridge.

My battle station was a part of the gun crew on one of the 5 inch 51 cal. casemate broadside guns, which would have been ineffective since it could not be brought to bear on the attacking planes. A number of us were sent below to the magazines and assigned to pass ammunition at the various anti-aircraft gun hoists. During the next 24-30 hours, we were dogged down inside this water-tight compartment about three decks below the water line. Most of us were dressed in the uniform of the day which was white shorts, skivvy shirts and black shoes. Unable to see the carnage topside, we were more or less kept informed of the progress by telephone talkers who were in communication with several gun mounts, not to mention the use of our own imaginations with each blast and concussion coming down through the ammunition hoists. The air inside our compartment became so fouled with oily smoke from the burning Arizona and West Virginia that we were ordered to put on gas masks. It became difficult to see the man along-side of us, but we continued to keep the ammunition supplied to the gun mounts. When the Arizona blew up, a rumor spread that the explosion was that of our own main batteries being fired at an enemy aircraft carrier outside the harbor.

Next morning, Monday, dawned bleak and overcast, a gloomy cloudy day, and some of us were released to go topside as a working party to transfer ammunition from a lighter to our ship. Only then did I realize the amount of death and destruction everywhere. The West Virginia settled to the bottom with its superstructure ablaze and listing precariously toward the Tennessee, the Arizona lay twisted and burning furiously in a grotesque mass of steel, the Oklahoma lay only yards forward of us, capsized, her keel and screws pointing skyward, many of her crew still alive and trapped inside. The devastation and havoc was almost beyond comprehension.

Vernon Branson