

CHAPTER
16
Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE The Bombing of Pearl Harbor

On December 7, 1941, First Sergeant Roger Emmons witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. As you read this excerpt from his eyewitness account, think about the effects of the surprise assault.

It was a beautiful morning with fleecy clouds in the sky, and the visibility was good. Aboard the *Tennessee* the usual Sunday schedule prevailed. Many of the officers had gone ashore over the weekend. The Marine Detachment was drawn up on the fantail for morning Colors, mess tables were being cleared away, some of the men were getting dressed preparatory to going on liberty, while others “batted-the-breeze” over their after-breakfast smoke. In its beginning the day was just another peaceful Sunday at the United States’ largest naval base.

A few minutes before 7:55 A.M., several squadrons of mustard-yellow planes flew over the Hawaiian island of Oahu from the southwest, but this caused no alarm as military planes overhead were the usual thing. When those squadrons approached Pearl Harbor, they maneuvered into attack formations at low altitude over Merry’s Point. At 7:55 A.M. wave after wave of those war-planes streamed across the harbor and hurled their deadly missiles upon the unsuspecting battle fleet. Every plane seemed to have its objective selected in advance, for they separated into groups and each group concentrated on a specific ship.

When the first wave of attacking planes came over, I was in the Marine Detachment office on the second deck of the *Tennessee*. Pfc. George W. Dinning, the clerk, was seated at the desk making out the Morning Report. Suddenly we felt a violent bump which gave us the feeling that the ship had been pushed bodily sideways, and as I did not hear any explosion I remarked that some ship had run into us.

Immediately after that the alarm gongs sounded “General Quarters.” I was so surprised that I could hardly believe my ears, but the noise of explosions through the open ports forced it upon me. George never did finish that Morning Report; he jumped seemingly sideways through the door and was gone like the wind. Snatching a detachment roster from the desk, I dashed after him.

My battle station was on the 5-inch broadside guns where I could see what actually was happening around us. I had a hurried look round from the casemates on the starboard side and then went over

to the port side. The sky was dotted with black puffs of anti-aircraft fire. A plane, trailing a plume of smoke, was plunging earthward over Ford Island. Off in the direction of Schofield Barracks, there was a vast cloud of black smoke. At the same time, two billowing pillars of smoke arose from the Navy Yard and Hickam Field area. The sky was full of planes bearing the Rising Sun emblem of Japan. Overhead droned a flight of horizontal bombers at an altitude of about 10,000 feet. Some sixty enemy planes were diving at our ships.

Then a great many things happened in a very short time. The Japanese planes struck time and time again to get in the killing blows. First came aerial torpedoes, then heavy bombers and dive bombers. Within a few minutes of the commencement of the attack, we were hit direct two times by bombs.

One bomb bursting on the forward turret disabled one gun, and a fragment from it penetrated the shield on the bridge above, killing a sailor and severely wounding Ensign Donald M. Kable. The commander of the *West Virginia*, Captain Mervyn S. Bennion, was mortally wounded by a portion of this bomb when he emerged from the conning tower to the bridge of his ship. The second (a 15- or 16-inch projectile, which the enemy was using as a bomb) hit the aft turret, but fortunately, it did not explode, but pierced the top, killing two men under the point of impact.

At about 8:00 A.M., a terrific explosion in the *Arizona*, astern of us, fairly lifted us in the water. She blew up in an enormous flame and a cloud of black smoke when her forward magazine exploded after a Japanese bomb had literally dropped down her funnel. Her back broken by the explosion, the entire forward portion of the ship canted away from the aft portion as the ship began to settle on the bottom.

It was a scene which cannot easily be forgotten—the *Arizona* was a mass of fire from bow to foremast, on deck and between decks, and the surface of the water for a large distance round was a mass of flaming oil from millions of gallons of fuel oil. Over a thousand dead men lay in her twisted wreck. Among those who perished were Rear Admiral Isaac C.

Kidd and Captain Franklin Van Valkenburgh.

A few moments after this disaster, our attention was absorbed in the *Oklahoma*. Stabbed several times in her port side by torpedoes, she heeled very gently over, and capsized within nine minutes. The water was dotted with the heads of men. Some swam ashore, covered from head to foot with thick, oily scum, but hundreds of men trapped in the vessel's hull were drowned.

We had only been in the attack a few minutes when the *West Virginia*, about 20 feet on our port beam, began slowly to settle by the bow, and then took a heavy list to the port. She had been badly hit by several torpedoes in the opening attack. Incendiary bombs started fires which filled her decks and superstructure with flame and smoke.

In the midst of all this turmoil, the *Nevada*, the next ship astern of the blazing *Arizona*, got under way and headed for the channel. As she moved down stream, the vessel was a target of many enemy planes until badly crippled by a torpedo, and after that she ran aground to prevent sinking.

The next picture was a destroyer, name unknown, leaving the harbor under a withering fire from Japanese planes.

But to return to the *Tennessee*. The real story of this ship lies in the splendid manner in which the officers and men on board arose to the emergency. When "General Quarters" was sounded, all hands dashed to their battle stations. There was no panic. The shock found each and every man ready for his job. Antiaircraft and machine guns were quickly manned, the first gun getting into action in less than three minutes after the alarm.

For the next forty minutes, the *Tennessee* was the center of a whirlwind of bombs and bullets. The Japanese planes bombed our ship and then bombed again. They opened up with machine guns in low flying attacks. The ship's gun crews fought with utmost gallantry, and in a most tenacious and

determined manner. . . . Hostile planes swooping down on what they thought an easy prey were greeted with volleys from our antiaircraft and machine guns. After such a warm reception, the Japanese gave the *Tennessee* a wide berth.

So terrific was the noise of explosions and our own antiaircraft guns that one could not hear himself speak and had to shout in anybody's ear. The air seemed to be full of fragments and flying pieces. In the general din, there was a *whoosh*, followed by a dull *whoomph* of huge explosives which struck so close to the ship that she shivered from end to end.

from Roger Emmons, "Pearl Harbor," *Marine Corps Gazette*, XXVIII (February 1944). Reprinted in Richard B. Morris and James Woodress, eds., *Voices from America's Past*, vol. 3, The Twentieth Century (New York: Dutton, 1962), 148–151.

Research Options

1. Find out more about the attack on Pearl Harbor. How did the Japanese avoid detection? Why was the United States unprepared for a sneak attack? When did the Japanese formally declare war on the United States? How did Congress respond to Roosevelt's request to declare war on Japan? Prepare a brief oral report and share it with your classmates.
2. Find and read President Roosevelt's address to Congress on December 8, 1941 or the text of his December 9 radio broadcast to the American people. Then discuss with classmates whether his remarks were consistent with what he said in his "quarantine speech" in 1937.
3. With a small group of classmates, brainstorm an appropriate memorial for the men who were killed during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Then find out about the U.S.S. *Arizona* National Memorial to compare your ideas with this memorial at Pearl Harbor, Oahu.