

Pearl Harbor's Forgotten Hero: The Story of the USS *Utah*

By THOMAS O'BRIEN

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, left 2,403 Americans dead, 188 planes destroyed, and 8 battleships damaged or sunk. As legacies of that tragic day in world history, the hulls of two battleships—the USS *Arizona* and the USS *Utah*—remain in the waters of Pearl Harbor. The USS *Arizona* Memorial on the east side of Ford Island is the most visited World War II site in the Pacific. However, on the opposite side of Pearl Harbor's Ford Island, only a few visitors make their way to the memorial to the USS *Utah* where fifty-eight men lost their lives after the once proud battleship was hit by an aerial torpedo at 8:01 a.m. and capsized about ten minutes later. This paper will outline the history of the USS *Utah* and offer recollections of seamen on board the vessel when it and other ships were attacked at Pearl Harbor on what President Franklin D. Roosevelt called “a day that will live in infamy.”

The construction of the *Utah* was part of an early twentieth century arms race that occurred at a time when global military supremacy was determined by control of the seas. The rise of the battleship as the super weapon of the world's navies had roots in the era of wooden vessels, but commenced in earnest with the combat between the USS *Monitor* and the CSS *Virginia (Merrimack)*, during the American Civil War. The negotiation for a naval base at Pago Pago, Samoa, in 1878 and the establishment of a United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1887 followed by the Spanish-American War in 1898 with the acquisition of the Philippine Islands and Puerto Rico all added impetus for the further development of the U.S. Navy and reflected the emergence of the United States as a global power. With the

*The USS Utah at a naval review in
New York Harbor, November 1911.*

Thomas O'Brien is a freelance writer living in Orland Park, Illinois. USS *Utah* survivor Jim Oberto is his former high school teacher. He would like to thank Gregory Walz and the USS *Utah* Association for their assistance.

opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, the U.S. Navy at last had strategic mobility—battleships could be transferred at a few days notice from one ocean to the other.¹

The idea of building a fighting ship named *Utah* was first made public on May 29, 1903. During a visit to Salt Lake City, President Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech that, among other things, included an appeal for a stronger navy. He believed the navy was vitally important to protect the country's interests in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. He made the point that a strong navy was not only important for those that lived along the coasts but equally important for “the man who lives in the Mississippi valley or beside the Rocky Mountains.” Moments later, Utah Governor Heber M. Wells introduced Secretary of the Navy William H. Moody, who proposed to name a new battleship after the state. However, this offer did come with strings attached; Utah senators and congressmen were expected to support the appropriation to build five new battleships. The proclamation “awakened the wildest enthusiasm” in the huge crowd that had gathered at the Tabernacle.²

For six years the visit of President Roosevelt and the Secretary of the Navy's promises were all but forgotten. Then, late in May 1909, the Navy Department announced that one of the battleships approved the previous year would be named for the state of Utah. Already under construction at the New York Shipbuilding Company in Camden, New Jersey, the new warship, when finished, would be the largest dreadnought, or all-big-gun battleship, to be constructed at that time by the United States Navy.³

The hull of the *Utah* was laid down on March 9, 1909, at Camden and the ship launched on December 23, 1909, under the sponsorship of Miss Mary Alice Spry, the eighteen year-old daughter of Utah Governor William Spry. This event did not pass without controversy. Back in Utah, a group of non-Mormons came forward to charge that the launching of the *Utah* had been marked by religious overtones because the event had taken place on the 104th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith, founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The controversy reappeared once again when the traditional silver service presented to the ship by the state included an engraving of Brigham Young on one of the pieces.⁴

The *Utah*, commissioned on August 31, 1911, was the thirty-first of fifty-eight battleships built for the U.S. Navy. The first battleship, the *Indiana*, was built in 1895 and the last, the *Wisconsin*, in 1944. Utah's neighboring states were also honored with battleships named for them—Idaho

¹ Antony Preston, *Battleships of World War I* (New York: Galahad Books, 1972), 24.

² *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 30, 1903.

³ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (Washington, D.C.: Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval History Division, 1959-1981), 7: 431-24. Additional information about the USS *Utah* is available on the USS *Utah* Association's website: www.ussutah.org

⁴ Michael Eldridge, “Silver Service for the Battleship Utah: A Naval Tradition under Governor Spry,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Summer 1978): 303.



The *USS Utah* under construction by the New York Shipbuilding Company in Camden, New Jersey, in 1909. The battleship was launched on December 23, 1909, when Mary Alice Spry, daughter of Utah Governor William Spry, christened the vessel with the traditional bottle of champagne and words “I christen thee Utah! God Speed!” to the cheers of thousands gathered for the event.

in 1908 and 1919, Wyoming in 1912, Nevada in 1916, Arizona in 1916, New Mexico in 1918, and Colorado in 1923.

Battleships of the early twentieth century were direct descendants of two notable warships. The British Royal Navy’s *Dreadnought* (derived from ‘Fear God and dread naught’), completed in 1906 and the first “all-big-gun” (ten, 12-inch, 45 caliber) battleship revolutionized naval warfare by rendering obsolete all existing battle fleets of the world. Pre-dreadnoughts were generally armed with a mixture of weapons, including four to six heavy guns. The U.S. Navy’s *Michigan*, launched in 1908, featuring a superior centerline mounted main battery, established a general arrangement that was eventually adopted for subsequent capital warship designs. The *Utah* was the second ship built of the “Florida class” of battleship.⁵

⁵ William H. Garzke and Robert O. Dulin, *Battleships: United States Battleships, 1935-1992* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 2. The *Utah* and *Florida* belonged to a class of ships identified as the Florida class, which were improved ships of the Delaware class with three feet longer beams, nearly two tons larger, with rearranged smokestacks and masts (funnels between masts), and 5-inch .51 caliber secondary battery guns in place of the earlier 5-inch .50 caliber guns. Cost for building the *Utah* and others of the Florida class was approximately \$6.5 million per ship. The *Utah* and *Florida* were the first United States battleships to have steam turbine propulsion and four propeller shafts. The *Utah* statistics were impressive for Dreadnought ships. She weighed 31,825 tons that drew approximately twenty-eight feet. Her overall length was 521 feet 6 inches with a beam of 88 feet 6 inches. By comparison, the USS *Arizona*, commissioned on October 17, 1916, measured 608 feet long with beam length of 97 feet. *Utah*’s power consisted of coal-fired Babcox and Wilcox type boilers with 28,000 horsepower Parson’s direct-drive steam turbines driving four screws. The *Utah* was originally designed to have eight, 14-inch guns, but delays in supplying guns of a new type made this unfeasible. As a result, the *Utah* was fitted with five main gun turrets each armed with two 12-inch .45 caliber guns. Supplementing the main armament were sixteen 5-inch .51 caliber guns and two 21-inch submerged torpedo tubes. Steel armor plating 12-inches thick surrounded vital areas of the vessel. Like the British, American shipbuilders found the easiest way to keep abreast of their rivals in the dreadnought race was to duplicate and make improvements on previous ship architecture. See Preston, *Battleships of World War I*, 240-41; and Siegfried Breyer, *Battleships and Battle Cruisers, 1905-1970* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 199-200.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

The crew of the USS *Utah* numbered 60 officers and 941 men. Top speed for the vessel was 20.75 knots. After a shakedown cruise in the Atlantic and a cruise to Europe in 1913, the *Utah* saw her first major military action in the Vera Cruz incident a year later.

Before World War I, the United States policy toward Mexico was to keep its southern neighbor politically stable, militarily weak, economically dependent, and free of entanglements with any of the great powers of Europe. This foreign policy appeared threatened in 1910 when long time Mexican leader Porfirio Diaz was overthrown by a liberal coalition led by Francisco Madero. However, his extreme reforms alienated many supporters some of whom backed a counter-coup by General Victoriano Huerta, who shot Madero and seized power. Within weeks, an armed insurgency rose up against Huerta's dictatorship. President Wilson believed Huerta's politics to be immoral and considered his regime to be illegitimate.

Huerta retaliated by harassing and imprisoning a number of American nationals, and Wilson moved toward armed intervention. In October 1913, Wilson ordered Rear Admiral Frank Friday Fletcher to send a battleship division from the Atlantic Fleet and establish a presence in the Gulf of Mexico from Vera Cruz to Tampico, where Mexico's important oil industry was concentrated and where most American nationals resided. Among the battleships deployed were the *Connecticut*, *Minnesota*, *Florida*, and the *Utah*.

The Tampico incident led to the occupation of Vera Cruz. On April 9,

In 1914 the USS Utah was deployed to Vera Cruz as part of the United States intervention in Mexico. In this photograph, sailors from the USS Utah led by a boys school band march through the streets of Vera Cruz to seize the customs house and prevent the landing of a shipment of arms from Germany to Mexican president Victoriano Huerta.

1914, eight American members of a shore party were loading a whaleboat at quayside in Tampico, when they were arrested by Mexican troops at gunpoint and held for a short time before being released. Given the tense situation, foreign nationals were evacuated and on April 10, the *Utah* took 237 refugees aboard ship.

In the meantime American officials learned that the German steamer *Ypiranga* was en route to Vera Cruz carrying machine guns and ammunition destined for Heurta's army. Americans saw this as an attempt by Germany to establish a base of operations in North America.

The *Utah* received orders to search for the *Ypiranga*, but when it appeared that the arms shipment had already landed, *Utah's* orders were changed and troops were assigned to land at Vera Cruz, seize the customs house and not permit the war supplies to be delivered. Plans were drawn up for a landing to commence on April 21, 1914. The *Utah* landed a force of 17 officers and 367 sailors, under the command of Lt. Guy W. S. Castle. In addition, the *Utah's* Marine detachment joined with the Marine detachments from other American warships to form an improvised "First Marine Brigade." Nine Americans and hundreds of Mexicans died during three days of bitter fighting.⁶ The *Utah* remained at Vera Cruz for almost two months before returning to the New York Navy Yard for overhaul.

Meanwhile, war clouds gathered across Europe and broke loose in August 1914, unleashing a torrent of death and destruction that would last until an armistice was finally signed on November 11, 1918.

From 1914 until the United States entry into World War I in April 1917, the *Utah* conducted battle practices and exercises off the eastern seaboard into the Caribbean in preparation for war. However, when war came, the United States battle fleet had a limited role. The main mission of American battleships was to help strengthen the British Fleet and protect Merchant Marine ships carrying oil, munitions, supplies, and men from attacks by German submarines. Accordingly, the battleships *Delaware*, *Florida*, *Arkansas*, and *New York* were ordered to join their British counterparts.

In the summer of 1918, reports reached London that German leaders were preparing to order the fast German battle cruisers to break out from the North Sea into the Atlantic to join the U-boat fleet in attacking American troop transport convoys and British shipping. Responding to this threat, an additional force of American dreadnoughts that included the *Utah*, *Nevada*, and *Oklahoma* sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, on August 30, 1918, under the command of Vice Admiral Henry T. Mayo, Commander and Chief of the Atlantic Fleet.⁷ Ensign J.F. O'Hagan recalled

⁶ Robert Love, *History of the U. S. Navy, 1775-1941* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1992), 459-63. During the fighting, men of Utah's Bluejacket battalion distinguished themselves, seven earning the Medal of Honor: Lt. Guy W. S. Castle, company commanders Ensign Oscar C. Badger and Ensign Paul F. Foster; section leaders, Chief Turret Captains Niels Drustrup and Abraham Desomer; Chief Gunner George Bradley; and Boatswain's Mate Henry N. Nickerson.

⁷ Norman Friedman, *U. S. Battleships: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 170-72; Love, *History of the U. S. Navy*, 504-5.

the difficult voyage across the Atlantic:

It was an eleven-day journey through mountainous seas and terrific gales. Whale boats were carried away; the Admiral's barge, the Captain's gig, motor sailors and steam launches were punctured and wrecked in their skids; a large quantity of flour was ruined; 100 steel drums of gasoline were washed over the stern; water was shipped and found its way to fire and engine rooms; the ship seemed to be submerged much of the time; she was tossed about like a chip.⁸

The *Utah* arrived in Bantry Bay, Ireland, on September 10, 1918, and became the flagship of Rear Admiral Thomas S. Rodgers, Commander of Battleship Division 6. *Utah's* primary mission involved protecting convoys, and watching for any German cruisers that might elude the Allied blockade of the North Sea and enter the Atlantic.

One enemy that sailors on board the *Utah* were unable to avoid was influenza. The pandemic that took countless lives throughout the world struck the *Utah* in mid October 1918. William Rumpeltes, a sailor on the *Utah*, wrote of the severity of the epidemic.

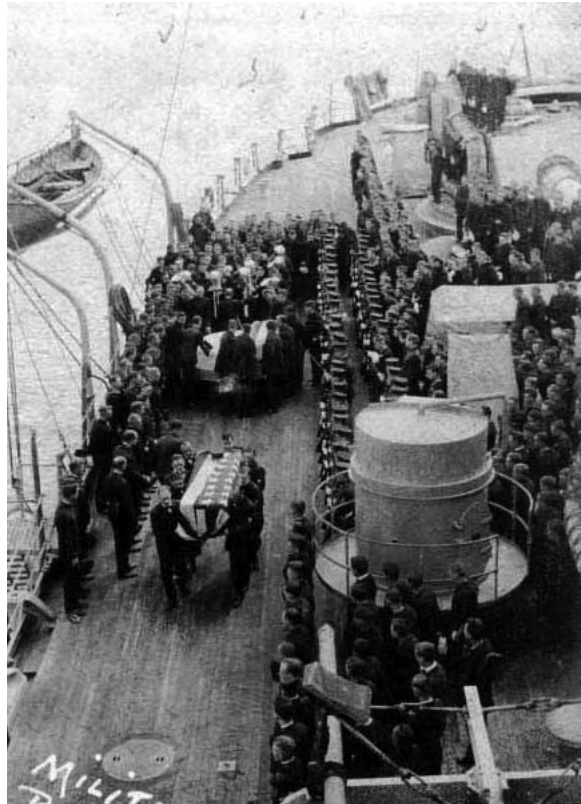
Oct. 16. The Sick Bay is full with sick men and are using the reading room it being Spanish Flu.

Oct. 17 There are about 130 in sick bay now with influenza

Oct. 19 I had the chills all day and a burning headache. It was a touch of Spanish Influenza but I pulled through without going to dispensary but while on watch 8 to 12 pm thought I would never stand it I was so bad.

Oct. 20 Still had a heavy fever and during the night had a worse fever dreaming and fussing around in hammock.

Oct. 22. Stayed on top deck most of the day. Still had a bad throat ache and cold and feeling weak.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

USS Utah victims of the flu epidemic are buried at sea October 1918.

⁸ J. F. O' Hagen, "The Part the U. S. S. Utah Played in the World War," Navy Subject File 1911-1927, Stack: 11W4 20/1/5, Box 1400, Folders 3 & 4 Desc. OS-US Naval Vessels "USS Utah," Record Group 45, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Oct. 23. Nevada and Okla are loosing lives from influenza. We have about 150 sick.

Oct. 29. Another man died today from "Flu" makes five so far and sick bay still full.⁹

Following the cessation of hostilities on November 11, 1918, the *Utah* visited Portland, England, and later served as part of the honor escort for the *George Washington*, which carried President Woodrow Wilson to the harbor at Brest, France. Wilson continued his journey to Paris to attend the Peace Conference where on December 13, 1918, world leaders completed negotiations for the treaty that ended the Great War.

Leaving France on December 14, the *Utah* reached New York City on December 25, 1918, and the next day her crew participated in a victory celebration.

Rumpeltes recorded the arrival of the United States Fleet in a diary entry for December 26, 1918: "We came in order, first Arizona, Oklahoma, Nevada, Utah, Penna(Pennsylvania), New York, Texas, Arkansas, Wyo.(Wyoming), and Florida. We passed the Statue of Liberty and the Mayflower where Sec. Daniels reviewed us about 10 a.m. we firing 19 salutes and of all the whistling and decorating was wonderful."¹⁰

The *Utah* was awarded two World War One Victory Medals: one for service with the Atlantic Fleet, and one for service overseas with the Grand Fleet.

Following her service during World War I, the *Utah* operated along the east coast of the United States and in the Caribbean. During the years of 1921 and 1922, the *Utah* was assigned to European waters to "show the flag" at principal ports of Europe. Two years later November 1924 found the *Utah* sailing for South America on a diplomatic cruise carrying a special mission headed by General-of-the-Armies John J. Pershing and former Congressman F. C. Hicks. In 1925 the *Utah* was employed as a unit of the United States scouting fleet, and in 1928 she carried President-Elect Herbert Hoover on the homeward-bound leg of his South American tour.

However, the ship's days as a battleship were numbered. While the *Utah* escaped the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty on naval force reductions, it was the subsequent London Treaty of 1930 that resulted in the *Utah's* conversion to a mobile target ship.

The Washington Treaty was an attempt at arms control not unlike present day treaties that limit nuclear weapons, the only difference was the "super weapon" in question was the battleship. It came at a time when the

⁹ William Matthew Rumpeltes, "World War I Diary of William Matthew Rumpeltes," copy provided to the USS *Utah* Association by Rumpeltes' grandson, William Geist. A copy of the diary is available on the association's website: www.ussutah.org/1918_war_diary.htm For the effects of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic see Leonard J. Arrington, "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919," and Robert S. McPherson, "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918: A Cultural Response," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 58 (Spring 1990): 165-200.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

major powers were suffering from postwar financial depression. For the United States, the treaty resulted in the scrapping of many older battleships and the cancellation of future battleships. It left the United States Navy on equal footing with the British Royal Navy with both having numerical superiority over the Japanese Navy. A mandated ten-year moratorium on capital ship building followed.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

**Gunnery practice on board the
USS *Utah* in the early 1920s.**

With the implementation of the London Treaty, not only were battleships further reduced but limitations were also placed on cruiser and destroyer construction. As a result, the United States had to give up the *Utah*, the *Florida*, and the *Wyoming*. Under provisions of the treaty three options could be followed: sinking the ships without possibility of salvage; disarmament by rendering engines, boilers, armor, and armament useless; or conversion for exclusive use as a target vessel.¹¹

The *Florida* was soon scrapped, but the *Utah* was saved from a similar fate. Upon decommissioning, she was selected as an auxiliary mobile target ship, in place of the decommissioned battleship *North Dakota*. The *Wyoming* was converted into a training ship.¹²

The *Utah* was designated a miscellaneous auxiliary ship effective July 1, 1931. Her conversion took place at the Norfolk Navy Yard where she was stripped of her guns and converted to a radio controlled ship. She retained the appearance of a battleship, her empty turrets remained in place and her casements were merely covered over. The magazines and handling rooms were stripped. The ship still possessed the capability of gun remounts if needed. The *Utah* was re-commissioned on April 1, 1932, and set sail for training a week later.

As a radio-controlled, or “robot” ship, the *Utah* was a sophisticated, technological marvel of her day. Under remote command with the use of a gyro pilot to keep her on course, she could steam at varying rates of speed, alter course and lay smoke screens. She could maneuver as a ship would during battle. The *Utah* broke new ground in the field of remote control, ground-work eventually used for guided missiles and future space exploration.

¹¹ Bryer, *Battleships and Battle Cruisers*, 72-73.

¹² “Dummy C1.3—OS,” Navy Subject File, 1911-1927, Stack: 11W4 20/1/5, Box 1400, Folders 3 & 4 Desc. OS-US Naval Vessels, “USS Utah,” Record Group 45, National Archives.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

During these years of service the ship's role was to duplicate the conditions of battle maneuvering that could test the skills of those who were being trained from air or sea. Planes from the carriers *Lexington*, *Saratoga*, and *Enterprise* practiced dropping inert bombs onto the *Utah*. Although the bombs did not

The rescue of the crew from the sinking schooner Margaret M. Wemyso in the mid-Atlantic, November 23, 1924.

explode, they did strike the ship with such velocity that they could penetrate steel decks. In an effort to prevent this, huge wooden timbers were placed on the ship's deck to absorb the impact and keep a record of "hits." Unfortunately, these same timbers proved deadly to many of the sailors when the ship rolled over and sank on December 7, 1941.

Surface vessels such as battleships, cruisers, and destroyers found the *Utah* useful in long-range firing exercises. Although they never fired directly at the ship, they did aim at target rafts towed by the ship. Submarines found the ship excellent training, because she responded like high-speed prey. Seaman Second Class "Cotton" Streeter described a typical training exercise involving the *Utah*.

As I remember, the *Utah* towed a sled behind with a flag on it. The subs set the torpedo depth so as it would go underneath ship, and if the wake came up from the stern and the tow it was a hit, observers aboard ship estimated where the torpedo would have hit the ship. After the torpedo had run its course it surfaced and was retrieved [by Destroyers].¹³

In 1935 the *Utah* was involved in an amphibious training exercise at Hilo Bay, Hawaii. Later in the year, the *Utah* was converted into an anti-air-

¹³ "Submarine Target Ship Days," History of the USS *Utah* Part II, The Second Life of the USS *Utah* AG-16 www.ussutah.org/submarine_target_ship_days.htm Copy also on file at the Utah State Historical Society Library.

craft training ship for the Pacific Fleet. Trainees from the battleships *West Virginia*, *Colorado*, *New Mexico*, and *Oklahoma*, and the cruisers *New Orleans*, *Phoenix*, *Nashville*, and *Philadelphia* attended advance anti-aircraft gunnery school on board the *Utah*.

Later the *Utah* was converted back to a target ship and on September 14, 1941, the *Utah* set sail for Hawaii for the last time. The routine aboard a target ship was vastly different from other naval vessels. Reveille was at 0530 (5:30 a.m.), followed by breakfast at 0600. The day consisted of four bombing periods that began at 0800, ending at 2230 (10:30 p.m.). It was a long sixteen and one-half hour day, with no overtime. Personnel in the conning tower, and other places with portholes or observation points could see some of the outside world. Most spent the day below decks with no sunlight and fresh air only through the ventilation system. Hours spent below listening to the thumps of “dummy” bombs striking the ship were followed by the dispatch of crews to the deck to inspect the accuracy of hits and to search for any possible damage to the ship or the protective timbers.¹⁴

The *Utah* returned to Pearl Harbor for the last time on Friday afternoon, December 5, and tied up at berth F-11, a spot normally used by aircraft carriers. The two aircraft carriers, the *USS Lexington* and the *USS Enterprise* were still at sea. The crew spent all day Friday and most of the day Saturday unfastening the timbers in preparation for moving the ship the following Monday to dry dock for off loading.

Lt. Commander Lindley Winsor, communications officer, recorded the last day of training for the *Utah* in a letter dated Friday Night, Dec. 5th: “Well, it’s over at least, and the old *Utah* has probably been smacked by her last bomb, as they don’t expect to use us for that any more. Just what they will finally decide is still open to question, but the mission most likely will continue to be a school ship.”¹⁵

The *Utah* was still “rigged” for service as a target ship, steel “dog houses” covered the ships’ guns to protect them from damage as sunset fell over Pearl Harbor Saturday evening, December 6. She was still carrying some of the world’s most advanced anti-aircraft weaponry, which was stowed below deck leaving the ship without protection and any effective weapons.

The Japanese attack plans on Pearl Harbor identified three primary target areas where battleships or aircraft carriers could be docked: “Battleship Row” located on the east side of Ford Island; the long 1010 dock at the Navy Yard; and the fixed moorings, known as “Carrier Row,” on the western side of Ford Island. On the morning of December 7, the seaplane tender *Tangier*, the *Utah*, and the light cruisers *Raleigh*, and *Detroit* were berthed on the west side of the island. By force of luck, the aircraft carriers

¹⁴ J. W. Warris, “USS Utah At Sea Plan of the Day for Tuesday the 14th of October 1941.” www.ussutah.org/bombing.pod.htm and at the Utah State Historical Society Library.

¹⁵ Lt. Commander Winsor’s letter and survivor story courtesy of Greg Winsor, Utah State Historical Society Library.



and most of the heavy cruisers were at sea. *Map of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.*

As the Japanese launched their attack, one of the first vessels struck was the *Utah*. Japanese flight commander Lt. Heita Matsamura had specifically ordered his men not to waste their torpedoes on the old ship, but inexperienced pilots pressed the attack, possibly confusing the *Utah* with the carrier *Enterprise*.¹⁶

Those sailors who were on deck or looking out a porthole had difficulty believing what they were seeing. Many believed this had to be some sort of training exercise. Even as the first bombs fell some thought that it may have been some sort of accident. Lee Soucy who was on board the *Utah* when the attack occurred recalled:

I happened to be looking out of a porthole in Sick Bay when I saw a large number of airplanes approaching a mile or two south of us. As I focused on a forward group of 5 to 6 planes, at least three of them started diving and dropped bombs on hangars on the southern tip of Ford Island. I watched large balls of flame and a black cloud of smoke

¹⁶ Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1981), 506. The attack on the *Utah* is difficult to comprehend given her different configuration from much larger carriers. The difference between the ships is even more noticeable when they are seen in profile from a torpedo bomber at a low altitude of fifty feet. Perhaps in the excitement of battle, the older ship may have been seen as a "target of opportunity" or perhaps simply sunk by mistake.

rising, my first thought was: 'Somebody goofed big this time. They loaded live bombs on those planes by mistake.'¹⁷

The reality of the situation became quickly apparent. The Japanese were attacking, ships were sinking, and men were dying.

Ensign Tom Anderson was the Officer of the Deck and recalled, "At about 0755 I and the rest of the watch saw 3 dive bombers come down and drop bombs and we were a little puzzled and surprised, but they used to make practice runs quite often but no bombs! A torpedo plane came past the starboard side going aft and banked and then I saw his Jap insignia and instantly I knew what was going on." Lt. Commander Lindley Winsler who was in his bunk in the officers' quarters preparing to relieve the watch remembered: "I reached my port for a quick look across the channel. One Japanese plane was close aboard in a zoom after completing its attack, and it was being followed in by another in level flight not over 50 feet above the water." James Clark, Gunners Mate Second Class, gazed out a porthole checking the weather. He later wrote: "Looking in the direction of Ford Island I noticed smoke rising into the air and heard the sound of explosions. Looking up, I saw Jap planes bombing Ford Island. Almost simultaneously a torpedo hit the ship on the portside."¹⁸

At 8:01 a.m., the first aerial torpedo slammed into the Utah's port side as the crew raised the flag on the fantail. Minutes later, the second, and possibly a third torpedo struck the ship. Water began to fill the ship rapidly, and soon she was listing fifteen degrees.

For the men below deck it started as an interruption to their peaceful morning routine. Some perhaps believed they had been bumped by another



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

The last minutes of the USS Utah before it capsized. This photograph was taken from the USS Tangier which was moored behind the Utah.

¹⁷ The U. S. S. *Utah* Association's website: www.ussutah.org contains twenty-seven accounts of crew members of the *Utah* including those of Leonide B. (Lee) Soucy, Tom Anderson, Lindley Winsler, James W. Clark, Jim Oberto, Harold Scott Richards, S. S. Isquith, Peter Tomich, Carl E. Lee, and William (Bill) Hughes cited in this article. Copies of these letters and memoirs are also found in the Utah State Historical Society Library.

¹⁸ Tom Anderson to Mother, Letter dated Dec. 18, 1942; Lt. Commander Winsler Letter dated Dec. 5, 1941; and "Eyewitness Report of James W. Clark, Gm2/c."

ship or maybe it was yet another training drill. This was quickly followed by the wrenching realization that something was seriously wrong with the ship. In a matter of seconds it became very clear that not only was the ship sinking, she was rolling over very quickly.

John (Jack) Vaessen had just begun his shift in the switchboard room deep within the ship. The switchboard room controlled the ship's electrical systems: "Just before I had gone down the hatch, I noticed a ship go by. So I said, 'Gee, they must have rammed us.' Then pretty soon I felt another thud, and more water started pouring in. Then the batteries started exploding. The power started dimming. I knew to keep the lights on."¹⁹

Jim Oberto was in his sleeping compartment with approximately twenty-five other men: "The deck of our sleeping compartment had split open, and thick black oil had begun oozing up through the crack. It wasn't long before all of us became aware the deck was no longer level. An alarming amount of seawater came cascading into the hatch opening just above our heads." Senior officer on board, Lt. Commander S.S. Isquith, realized that the *Utah* was sinking and ordered the crew to the starboard (high) side to escape the danger of the unrestrained 6 x 12 inch timbers pinning men down or striking them. By 8:05 a.m. the ship's list had increased to forty degrees. In less than five minutes after the impact of the first torpedo, the ship was lost. Shouts of "abandon ship over the starboard side" were heard over the bedlam.

With every passing second the old ship took on more water and continued her death roll. When the men reached topside they came under attack from strafing fighter planes. Jim Oberto reflected: "When we stepped out on the main deck, we were met by a scene right out of Dante's *Inferno*. Ships and buildings were exploding as far as I could see."²⁰

With the *Utah* pretty much on her side, some of the men simply stepped off the low side into the water, placing themselves at the mercy of the sliding timbers and the drag of the rolling ship. Others took the relatively safer route jumping or sliding down the high side of the ship. Because the ships torpedo blisters were barnacle encrusted below the normal waterline, it made for a rough slide. Lindley Winsler chose the high side hoping to ride out the ship as she rolled. "I hoped to be able to remain on the hull until things quieted down, but the slippery bottom of the ship took charge as she continued to roll and I skidded off into the water." Oberto, too, waited on the high side as long as possible. "I lost my footing, landed on my rear and went sliding down the rough, barnacle encrusted steel hull ripping the bottom out of my shorts and tearing skin off my rear in the process. I was

¹⁹ John Vaessen's story has appeared in several publications including John Vaessen, Robert S. LaForte and Ronald E. Marcelllo, ed., *Remembering Pearl Harbor* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Books, 1991), 165-70; Bill Kelly, "Please Don't Let Me Die in This Iron Tomb," *Sea Classics* 22 (December 1989): 37-41.

²⁰ James E. Oberto, "The Rape of Pearl," unpublished manuscript, Utah State Historical Society.

grasping at anything to slow this downward slide. But there was nothing to grab and I shot off the hull and into the water.”²¹

Harold Scott Richards recounted his ordeal in leaving the sinking *Utah*.

...the fuel oil from the oil storage tanks had floated to deck and it was almost impossible to stand. By this time there were many of us trying to scramble to the topside, because we knew we had to abandon ship. By forming a human chain of outstretched arms we managed to get to the topside. We had to run down the side of the rolling ship or run to jump overboard because the Japanese were machine-gunning all of the men. We hadn't been in dry dock for quite a long time and we had barnacles on the side of the ship. They were razor sharp. I cut my feet, legs and backside—every part of my lower body—against the ship's bottom as I slid. We had small boats picking up the survivors but the boats were heavily gunned, so I decided to swim to shore. Before I could get away from the ship, someone jumped on my left shoulder tearing the ligaments loose in my back and breaking my collarbone. Due to all the excitement I did not know at the time that my collarbone was broken.²²

The most physically demanding and perhaps most dangerous way of escaping the ship was to go hand over hand down the mooring lines that were securing the ship. Tom Anderson chose this option. “We slid down the mooring lines which were snapping like string in some places and got onto a mooring platform and called a nearby boat to pick us up.”²³

As the list increased, the timbers began to loosen and slide into the water, crushing men below and trapping still more behind jammed watertight doors. At 8:10 a.m., the *Utah* was listing eighty degrees when Lt. Commander Isquith arrived in the captain's cabin with two men for a last tour of the ship. Finding the door leading to the forecabin jammed by timbers, the trio made their way to the captain's bedroom where a porthole was open almost directly overhead. As Isquith made a final escape, the bed broke loose from under his feet and crashed into the bulkhead below.

At about 8:12 a.m. the *Utah* capsized after her mooring lines snapped. When the hawser lines broke, not only did the ship roll over but also the shock of the lines breaking caused one of Fox 11 quays to shatter, dumping many survivors back into the water.

Among the men trapped aboard ship was Jack Vaessen who recalled his ordeal:

I pulled the fans and all the power and headed to the hatch as the ship was turning over. I was hanging onto anything I could grab. The ship rolled over and I crawled over the amplidyne and go up to the bottom.

Every time I looked down at the water, I got more scared. With the wrench I hit the bottom of the ship. I hit it again and again, I kept it up for quite a while. All of a sudden I hear rapping noises on the outside and voices.²⁴

On shore, huddled among the survivors, were Warrant Officer Machinist Stanley Semanski and Chief Machinist Terrance Macselwiney. They became

²¹ Ibid., and Lt. Commander Winser Letter dated Dec. 7, 1941.

²² “Eyewitness Report of Harold Scott Richards, Sk3/c USN.”

²³ Tom Anderson to Mother, letter dated Dec. 18, 1942.

²⁴ Vassen, *Remembering Pearl Harbor*, 165-70. The amplidyne motor room controlled the ship's guns by keeping them in phase.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

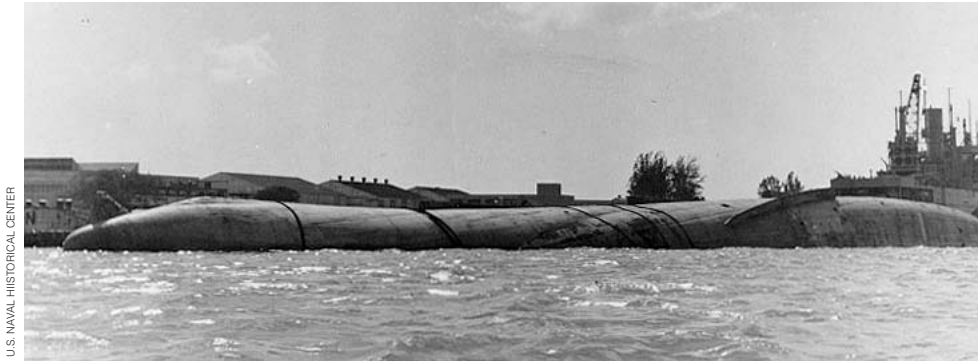
Peter Tomich was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery on board the USS Utah during the attack at Pearl Harbor.

aware of banging that seemed to be coming from the *Utah*. The men returned to the ship and climbed on the upturned hull and found the location of the banging. Semanski was determined to rescue the trapped men and rushed first to the USS *Tangier* and then to the USS *Raleigh* in search of help. The *Raleigh*, heavily damaged as she was, furnished a small rescue party. Back at the *Utah*, amid continued enemy strafing, the rescuers cut a hole in the bottom of the ship and found Vaessen.

Vaessen had been trapped for three hours. He was later awarded the Navy Cross for his efforts to keep the lighting system working so others could escape while the ship was sinking. Stanley Semanski and Terrance Macselwiney received Letters of Commendation for their heroic efforts in rescuing Vaessen.

Another sailor trapped below was Chief Water Tender Peter Tomich. Tomich was in charge of the *Utah's* engine room. As the ship was sinking, instead of escaping, Tomich headed down to his station where he ordered his crew to get out. Tomich was an immigrant from Croatia, and his crew was the only family he knew. Knowing that unless the boilers were secured they would rupture and explode, he ignored his own evacuation order and moved from valve to valve, setting the gauges, releasing steam here and there, stabilizing and securing the huge boilers that otherwise would have turned the ship into a massive inferno from which no one could escape. As the ship continued to roll, Tomich remained at his station. There was no explosion from the boiler and for his act of bravery and sacrifice, Tomich was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He is among the fifty-four sailors believed entombed inside the *Utah*. His is the only Medal of Honor since the late 1880s to go unclaimed. On January 4, 1944, Peter Tomich was awarded posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor on board the destroyer escort the USS *Tomich*, which was commissioned in 1943 and named in his honor.²⁵

²⁵ Peter Tomich's medal remained on the *Tomich* until it was decommissioned on September 20, 1946. On May 25, 1947, Utah Governor Herbert B. Maw formally made Tomich an honorary citizen of the state of Utah and his medal was given to the state as the official guardian of the dead hero. In early 1980 the navy requested the medal be placed on display at the Naval Academy. Currently it is in a small case in the Navy Museum in Washington, D. C. Over the years efforts have been made to locate the next of kin of Peter Tomich and recently some of his family have been located in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The navy, however, considers the matter closed. Paul W. Bucha, President, Congressional Medal of Honor Society to author, June 23, 1997.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

For the survivors of the *Utah*, once they reached the shore, the ordeal was not over. A second wave of planes continued to bomb and strafe Ford Island. Survivors of the *Utah* did more than just protect themselves; most did whatever they could to help others. Many were involved in preparing for the defense of Pearl Harbor from the next attack and the rumored invasion of the Hawaiian Islands. Some had the grim task of recovering bodies and assisting in salvage and repair.

The capsized hull of the USS Utah five days after the December 7, 1941 attack at Pearl Harbor.

Lee Soucy, a pharmacist's mate on board the *Utah* described his assignment once he was on shore.

I reached the beach exhausted and when I looked up the sky was filled with airplanes...all Japanese. Soon another Pharmacist's mate (Gordon Sumner) from the *Utah* hobbled out of the water in his bare feet. Before we could discuss what to do two young officers in a jeep hailed us. "Corpsmen come with us on the double!" Sumner and I were both wearing our Red Cross brassards, which were easily recognized from the road. On the way, they explained to us that a large number of casualties were huddled together on the deck of a concrete building with no medical personnel of any kind in attendance.

Upon arrival we saw oil covered men with a variety of bullet wounds, shrapnel injuries and severe burns—many of who were vomiting oil-streaked mucus and dirty seawater.

We quickly ran out of medical supplies. We were in dire need of alcohol to wash off oil covered wounds. We commandeered liquor from the officers' club and not only did we use whiskey, rum, gin, and vodka to wash wounds we discovered that okoliau was a good emetic. We felt an urgent need to induce vomiting so the exhausted men could get rid of the dirty water and oil so many of them had swallowed.

Late that morning medical personnel from the dispensary on Ford Island and the naval hospital relieved Sumner and me and took our patients out on stretchers to the hospital.²⁶

Other *Utah* survivors volunteered to do what they could. Carl E. Lee responded to "...a call for volunteers to fight the fire on the *Arizona* and *West Virginia* [*sic*] I went with this group. Arriving at the sight, it didn't take much to determine that nothing could be done about the fire and all we could do was to do what we could to help those coming off the burning

²⁶ "Eyewitness Account Leonide B. (Lee) Soucy, PhM2/c."



U.S.S. UTAH ASSOCIATION

Memorial to the USS Utah at Pearl Harbor.

ships. And come they did in every condition imaginable, oily, wounded, sick and some already dead being towed ashore by shipmates, some on fire.”

Lee spent the night on board the USS *Sacramento* standing watch from 10:00 p.m. to midnight. The next morning he

...was sent to some barracks to join other survivors. There we were assigned to burial parties and went by trucks to the cemetery in Honolulu. Pine coffins were brought in everything that could carry one. As we started handling the boxes we couldn't overlook the stench and blood

still running from the boxes. We placed 49 of these boxes to a trench (dug by bulldozers) and covered them with the American flag, then a chaplain would say a prayer. Then in the quiet and peaceful calm of the day came the most mournful and never to be forgotten sound I have ever heard before or since—TAPS. I don't remember how many trenches we filled that day. The next 2 days we went to a place called Red Hill where we were confronted with piles of bodies. There we placed the bodies and pieces of bodies in sheets of burlap and then into pine boxes and sent off for burial. The first lunch break we had the first day of this, we were taken to a school where food had been prepared and was in plates on the tables. We marched in, sat down, looked at the food and to a man, got up and marched out without touching the food.²⁷

A total of thirty officers and 431 men were reported to have survived the loss of the *Utah*. At best estimates, six officers and fifty-two enlisted men were lost, many trapped on board, others cut down by strafing aircraft. For many survivors from the attack on Pearl Harbor, victory was long and difficult. Radioman Third Class Bill Hughes recalled: “The long trek from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay lasted 3 years, 8 months and 25 days. I can truthfully state that I was where it started the day it started, and where it ended the day it ended. . . Tokyo Bay.”²⁸

Local reaction to the sinking of the *Utah* seemed to be low keyed. The *Salt Lake Tribune* ran a story on December 16, 1941, detailing the text of Navy Secretary Henry Knox's description of the losses at Pearl Harbor. Knox mentioned the condition of the *Utah* and the *Arizona* but there was

²⁷ “Eyewitness Report of Carl E. Lee.”

²⁸ “Eyewitness Report William (Bill) Hughes, Rm3/c USN.”

no statement about the battleship fleet at Pearl Harbor. Knox in his comments described the *Utah* as, “The old target ship, which has not been used as a combatant ship for many years.” Perhaps officials in Washington felt comfortable releasing details about the *Utah*’s demise, since it was ‘only’ a target ship and its loss was of no major concern.

An attempt was made near the end of the war to right the capsized *Utah*, but the ship was never re-floated and the navy had neither the desire nor the resources to salvage the forgotten ship. In the early 1950s, two small plaques were erected on and near the ship’s remains.

In 1960, with the support of the ship’s survivors, Utah Senator Wallace F. Bennett made a request to the navy that a flag be flown over the ship. The navy turned down Bennett’s request. Utah Senator Frank E. Moss also repeatedly asked Congress to approve a memorial to the ship. In 1966 Moss received much needed support from Hawaii Senator Daniel K. Inouye, but it was not until 1970 when Congress officially authorized the construction of a true memorial. On Memorial Day 1972 with Moss as guest of honor, the site was dedicated with a new plaque bearing the following inscription: “While we honor those who here gave their last full measure of devotion all of us hope and pray that the time will come when we no longer need to dedicate memorials to men who died in battle---that we will dedicate memorials to those who live in peace---to all nations and men.”

Today, the *Utah* Memorial is one of three national memorials at Pearl Harbor, the others being the USS *Arizona* Memorial and the USS *Nevada* Memorial. The *Arizona* Memorial and the USS *Missouri* are located on the more accessible east side of Ford Island. Also located at Pearl Harbor is the USS *Bowfin* submarine museum. Nearby is the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific often referred to as the Punchbowl.

The *Utah* Memorial is seldom mentioned in tour guides of Pearl Harbor, it being more difficult to visit because of its location on the west side of the military reservation. Visitors must make prior arrangement with the United States Navy before visiting the *Utah* Memorial.

The *Utah* is truly one of our country’s unrecognized war ships. Like most men and women who served their country, she did her work quietly, without fanfare, and did it well. She did all that was asked of her. During World War I she protected the convoys from enemy attacks and after the Great War she “showed the flag” of the United States around the world. But it was her service as a target and training ship that help shape our country’s history. She prepared America’s soldiers, pilots and sailors to fight and win the war in the Pacific.

Senator Frank Moss said it best: “In a sense the *Utah* was immortal. Her hulk a twisted mass but her spirit remained alive in almost every fighting ship and aircraft in the Pacific Fleet.”²⁹

²⁹ *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, December 7, 1971.