

# I wish they were all still alive...



(Top) Former USS Oklahoma (BB 37) Sailor and Pearl Harbor attack survivor August VanGampelaire makes his way to the Arizona Memorial for the first time since the attack Dec. 7, 1941. (Right) VanGampelaire tearfully puts flowers into the Arizona Memorial well. (Far right) Vangampelaire wipes a tear in front of the Arizona Shrine Room wall. (Below) With the assistance of Agnes Tauyan, COMNAVREG deputy-public affairs officer, VanGampelaire takes a look at photos hanging in building one taken during Oklahoma salvage efforts after the attack.



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"I wish they were all still alive ..."

August VanGampelaire, a former USS Oklahoma (BB-37) Sailor and Pearl Harbor attack survivor, spoke these words - his blue eyes welling with tears - in front of the 1,177 names on the Arizona Memorial Shrine Room wall.

He sobbed audibly, his voice and hands trembled, not because of his 78 years of age, but because of the powerful rush of memories filling him again.

After more than half a century of life experiences, the events of Dec. 7, 1941 are still vividly burned into his memory.

"I was taking a shower at the time (when Pearl Harbor was attacked) and I thought it (torpedo or bomb impacting Oklahoma) was another ship that hit us," he recalled. "She started listing. I started going up the ladder and into the passageway. The soapy mess water made it very slippery. I don't know how I made it out of there."

He recounted how difficult it was to make it out of his Seaman's berthing below decks. Once topside he realized they were under attack, and how he wound up in the oil and fire-filled waters of Pearl Harbor, struggling for his life.

"I looked up and saw the Japanese aircraft flying in formation over us and I knew then that we were under attack," he said slowly. "I saw the Arizona go up. It was like striking a match. I saw the flash and that was all. Afterward, I didn't hear anything."

By the time he made it to the weather decks, the ship had begun capsizing.

"I slid down the side of the ship and started swimming, but was getting tired," he recalled. "I went down and came up two, three or four times."

His eyes began welling again and he paused. His voice cracked as he recalled how he was rescued just at his strength's end.

"I don't know where the ... the launch came from ... I think it was from the hospital ship ... They picked me up and took me to Ford Island."

Oklahoma sank in open ocean while being towed to the west coast. She was one of only a

few ships, including Arizona and Utah, unable to be repaired to fight against the Japanese.

This past December, photographic evidence came to light showing a Japanese midget sub launched a deadly torpedo attack against Oklahoma. She capsized almost immediately after the attack; 449 Oklahoma Sailors were killed. Thirty-nine others were trapped inside, banging on the ship's outer hull and were later rescued.

Wednesday, Mar. 1, VanGampelaire, or "Augie" as his friends call him, set foot aboard the Arizona Memorial for the first time since the attack. On his first trip to Pearl Harbor in 1973, the Memorial was undergoing renovations and was closed to the public.

This day, he was proudly wearing a blue Oklahoma ball cap, matching Oklahoma shirt and two leis as he made his way to the Memorial.

As if completing a pilgrimage, he determinedly navigated through scores of visitors, walked to the front of the Arizona Memorial's Shrine Room and stood in front of the stark, white marble wall inscribed with the names of the fallen Arizona Sailors and Marines.

He stood erect, gazing at the wall, looking from one side to the other, but after a moment, his memories came rushing back.

His slender frame began to shiver, forcing him to turn away to sit on his wheeled walker, sobbing for those lost Servicemen.

"They should still be here..." he said tearfully.

Many others in the crowded space were also moved to tears, whispering to those around them and him, asking who he was, then

thanking him for his service.

He turned and slowly left the Shrine Room. He made his way to the Memorial's well. He took off one of the leis and placed its flowers, one by one, into the waters above the Arizona with the aid and camaraderie of a Naval officer, Lt. Ken Mulder, Naval Submarine Support Command, who was also moved and honored to assist the elder Sailor.

They spoke of decades-old battles fought, of friends and times gone by, sharing in the com-

tragedy that, years later, ended in triumph.

After leaving the Memorial, he visited Pearl Harbor's Building One, the work site of the intelligence unit who cracked a Japanese code - helping to turn the tide of the war in the Pacific. Their work made the naval victory at Midway possible.

VanGampelaire stopped at Building One to see some of the remnants of Oklahoma. An auxiliary steering wheel and black and white Oklahoma salvage photos are almost all that is left of the once mighty fighting ship.

The photos depict Oklahoma in her pre-war years, in her glory days at sea while other photos show the massive capsized hull of Oklahoma being righted.

Nearly completing his voyage of reflection and remembrance, VanGampelaire gazed across the harbor.

Berthed where the Oklahoma was struck and capsized proudly rests 'Mighty Mo', the battleship on which representatives of the Allied Forces and the Japanese signed the instrument of Japan's unconditional surrender.

"That's a beautiful battleship," Augie said speaking of the Missouri. "They don't make them like that anymore."

Passive preservation in the information management term used for letting historic artifacts rust in the elements.

Heavy, welling tears covered his blue eyes, escaped and ran down his cheek. He wiped them away slowly with a white tissue he held tightly in his once youthful hand. He tearfully recalled the joy he felt when, after fighting battles in Coral Sea and the Marianas, his ship returned to port to cheers from harbor workers and salutes from fellow Sailors. He also recalled the joy and relief he felt when the war was over.

