

LIBERTY CALL

USS UTAH...

Dec. 7 tragedy should not be forgotten



PH2 Chad McNeeley photo

USS Utah survivor Robert O'Hara, a resident of Seattle, still grieves over the loss of his 54 former shipmates who died following the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. O'Hara and other survivors of USS Utah have made it their personal mission in life to ensure their ship is never forgotten. "Her story needs to be told," he stressed.

Story compiled by JOCS(SW) Phil Eggman
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The USS Arizona Memorial, honors the 1,177 Sailors and Marines who lost their lives aboard the battleship USS Arizona on the morning attack of Japanese forces, Dec. 7, 1941.

To this day, the USS Arizona Memorial remains an endearing symbol to the world of that tragic day at Pearl Harbor which brought the U.S. into the global conflict of World War II.

Yet little known to the general public, on the other side of Ford Island, there is another ship no less deserving of remembrance signifying the tragic losses on that "Day of Infamy" 59 years ago - USS Utah (AG 16).

Where the Arizona Memorial receives more than one million visitors every year, Utah lies rusted and silent about a mile away in an active military area on Ford Island. Unfortunately, only a handful of active duty servicemembers and former crewmembers pay their respects to the fallen Sailors and former shipmates of Utah.

"Utah is like a ghost ship, a forgotten ship," said survivor Robert O'Hara, a resident of Seattle, who has made it his calling in life to ensure that his 54 former shipmates still entombed on the ship are never forgotten. "Not many people know it is here."

"She was a valuable ship," he stressed. "Her story needs to be told."

Indeed it does. On Dec. 23, 1909, battleship No. 31 was christened USS Utah. The dreadnought slid down into the sea to begin her career as one of the U.S. Navy's most powerful warships. After a long and distinguished career, Utah saw action in World War I and later transporting Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover and other world leaders to troubled areas around the world.

In July 1931, Utah was modified for her

second career, becoming AG-16, a mobile bombing target and advanced anti-aircraft gunnery training ship. The ship was outfitted with heavy 6-12 timbers and a concrete deck to help bolster her armor against the non-explosive bombs she would endure. Electric motors to operate steering, throttles and valves were installed so that the ship could be remotely controlled from another ship.

Utah moved to California in 1932 and spent the next nine years performing a vital service to the fleet by adding realism to the training of naval aviators for the first big aircraft carriers, Saratoga, Lexington and Enterprise. She greatly aided the development of bombing tactics as the bomber pilots practiced high-altitude, dive and torpedo bombing of her decks.

Utah's value as an experimental development and training ship extended into many fields besides the key ones of air attack and anti-aircraft gunnery. She served as a high speed maneuvering target for submarines as well as surface ship gunnery, closely approaching battle conditions. She participated in several major amphibious training landings, including serving as a troop transport in 1935, landing Marines at Hilo Bay, Hawaii. The exercise marked the ship's first visit to the islands and made important contributions to amphibious techniques that were rapidly developing to play a decisive part in World War II.

Twice Utah went to Bremerton, Wash., to be equipped with five-inch guns and the first 20mm and 40mm anti-aircraft guns placed on any fleet warship. After completing an advanced anti-aircraft gunnery cruise, Utah returned to Pearl Harbor early in December 1941.

It was her final voyage, because at 8:12 am. Dec. 7, 1941, life ended for USS Utah and 58 of her crew.

One of the first ships hit, Utah did not have

time effectively to operate her powerful batteries. She took two torpedo hits from Nakajima B5N2 Kate torpedo bombers within five minutes of the beginning of the attack, listing so rapidly that her senior officer on board ordered "All hands on deck and abandon ship over starboard side."

Her crew made their escape, some coming out through ports in the captain's cabin as aircraft returned to strafe the ship and men in the water who were swimming for the nearby shore.

In 12 short minutes, the former battleship rolled over and was keel up, a total loss.

Thirty officers and 431 men survived the sinking of Utah. Six officers and 52 Sailors perished as a result of strafing attacks while the crew were swimming for shore or were trapped in their rapidly capsizing ship. Only four of those who perished were ever recovered and identified.

One Sailor did not attempt to leave Utah. Chief Watertender Peter Tomich remained below, ensuring that the boilers were secure. His successful attempts probably kept the ship from blowing up, which would have killed hundreds of his shipmates.

Moments after the Utah sank, Cmdr. Solomon Isquith, engineering officer, heard a faint pounding coming from the hull of the overturned ship. Amid flying bullets from the Zeros and with torches borrowed from the light cruiser Raleigh, Isquith and three enlisted volunteers cut through the steel and rescued 10 men. The last man out was Fireman John B. Vaessen, who had remained at his post in the dynamo room keeping power to the mortally wounded ship until it was too late to escape.

Utah ceased to exist as an active ship, but her legacy continued through the war. Though her hull was now a twisted wreck, her spirit remained alive in almost every fighting ship and aircraft of the Pacific Fleet.

Many of the Sailors, Marines and Airmen whom she had not trained directly were under the guidance of those who had gained fighting experience in one form or another by her service.

Following the attack, Utah was declared "ordinary" on Dec. 29, 1941 and placed under the Pearl Harbor Base Force to determine whether or not salvage and repair could be undertaken.

During the salvage operations that followed, her hull was partially righted by turning inshore to clear the approach to an adjacent pier. With all further salvage work abandoned, she was declared "out of commission, not in service" by the officer-in-charge of Vessels-In-Ordinary on Sept. 5, 1944.

In 1963, Sen. Frank E. Moss of Utah introduced legislation to anchor a flagpole in the rusting hull of the valiant warrior, which was stable, but listing 38 degrees to port and primarily submerged. Then on Memorial Day 1972, a more permanent Utah Memorial was dedicated with Moss as the guest speaker.

Today, the Utah Memorial is an elegant, white 70-foot concrete walkway stretched out from Ford Island, extending into the waters in front of Utah's partially exposed hull. A polished brass plaque commemorating the ship and crew stands watch at the base of a flagpole.

A Navy color guard daily raises and lowers the American flag in the corner of the 40-foot by 15 foot viewing platform in front of the ship.

Fifty-nine years ago, more than 2,400 men gave their lives for their country on Dec. 7, 1941.

While the Arizona Memorial stands as a majestic tribute to their memory, we should never forget that USS Utah deserves no less.



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file photo

The Utah Memorial is located on the Eva side of Ford Island, extending into the waters in front of Utah's partially exposed hull. A polished brass plaque commemorating the ship and crew stands watch at the base of a flagpole.