

# remembering the disaster at WEST LOCH



Bill Montague, Jim Reed, Alex Bernal and Calvin D. Frawley, four survivors from the accident at West Loch in 1944, view a memorial plaque that describes the events of the day. The site of the accident, which lies on Naval property at Naval Magazine Pearl Harbor is not accessible to the general public. Due to the secret classification of the incident and the great expanse of time since the accident, it is virtually unknown and forgotten to most outsiders.



West Loch survivor Calvin D. Frawley takes a moment to reflect on the events of May 21, 1944. Frawley was stationed onboard one of the LSTs that caught fire at West Loch that day. Frawley battled the fire but eventually was forced to retreat and abandon ship by jumping into the water which was also on fire from spilling fuel from the ships.

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In the wake of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, in which thousands perished, another tragedy just as crippling and equally as devastating, yet virtually unknown, afflicted the Pacific Fleet.

And to remember and pay tribute to the virtually unknown event, four survivors revisited the tragic accident site recently - most for the first time in more than 50 years.

Survivors Bill Montague, Calvin D. Frawley, Alex Bernal and Jim Reed returned to West Loch at Pearl Harbor where 163 of their fellow service members died and 396 were injured on a similar Sunday, three-and-a-half years after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On May 21, 1944, the armed forces of the United States prepared to invade Saipan and Guam. While ships were being loaded down with combat stores, ammunition, and fuel at the Naval Ammunition Depot at Lualualei in West Loch, a huge explosion occurred on one of the many LSTs (Landing Ship-Tank).

"The incident that occurred here in 1944 was nothing less than catastrophic," said Naval Magazine Pearl Harbor (former-

ly known as Lualualei) Executive Officer, Cmdr. Butch Kirkland.

The first explosion occurred shortly after three o'clock in the afternoon on the bow of LST 353 where troops were handling ammunition.

"I was on the bridge of my ship when the first explosion went off," said survivor Montague. "I remember getting in touch with the bow and the stern of my ship, telling them to cut the lines of the ship that was moored to our port, because they could-

we were out about 30 or 40 yards, and it [fiery debris] still rained in our boat. I told the personnel to get into the water where they would be protected."

Montague remembers what the explosions were like, "The powers of the explosions were like mini atomic bombs. They could be heard throughout the entire island."

As fire crews from the ships tried desperately to fight the ongoing chain of events, many of them were blown overboard by the massive explosions that rocked the ships.

"I was forced onto the fantail from the fire and just jumped over the side," said Frawley. In all, six ships were

blazing afire with their deadly cargo onboard, making the fire fighting efforts virtually impossible. The other ships in the harbor were able to get underway to safety or were towed to Walker Bay on the northern end of West Loch.

"The ships were nested together so closely in West Loch that when one caught fire, it lead to another and another and another. Some of those ships burned for days, they weren't able to get them out," said Kirkland.

Fortunately, since it happened on a Sunday, a lot of the crew was ashore on liberty. "A lot of lives were saved because this in-

cident actually happened on a Sunday. Had it been a regular workday, there would have undoubtedly been more lives lost," added Kirkland.

Despite the hugeness of the event, the incident remained virtually unknown for more than 50 years.

"The country was at war," said Kirkland. "The staging that all of this happened around, the buildup to go to Saipan and Guam, was unknown to the Japanese," he added.

In fact the Navy didn't make the first public announcement of the accident until four days later. There was a court of inquiry on the event held later that year, but the findings were classified as "Secret" by the Navy and were not declassified until 1960 and by that time the disaster was ancient history.

"No one knew that such a thing occurred," said Montague. "As a matter of fact even the Veterans Administration didn't even know."

The court of inquiry later found the reasons for the disaster as "the stowage of gasoline in the immediate proximity of high explosive ammunition" and "the nesting of numerous combat loaded vessels at one berth."

However, in a later review of the courts findings, Adm. Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet disagreed with the recommendations that

ships avoid being nested so closely together and noted it was "a calculated risk that must be accepted."

Despite the tragedy, the invasion fleet was able to set sail, delayed by only one day.

"The country was interested in bringing the war to a close," said Kirkland. "The spirit that existed in this country at that time and how interested every citizen in America was to seeing an end

to World War II - [it was] because of that they steamed a little faster and met their objectives in Guam and Saipan and the assault took place on time," he added.

The men who gave their lives that day are remembered by a simple diagram on a memorial deep in the heart of Lualualei that describes the events of the day. The survivors don't see themselves as heroes.

"The guys that died that will never come back, they are the heroes."

"War is not pretty, and this country was at war in 1944," said Kirkland, sizing up the importance of the disaster coming to light.

"This occurred in the United States' effort to stop Japan's expansion program in the Pacific. The invasion of Saipan and Guam was a major campaign. These LST's that were here were essential to that mission. I think that this story being told is something that is overdue."



LST 480 sits on the bottom of West Loch as a reminder of the horrific accident that occurred there in 1944.

"The powers of the explosions were like mini atomic bombs."

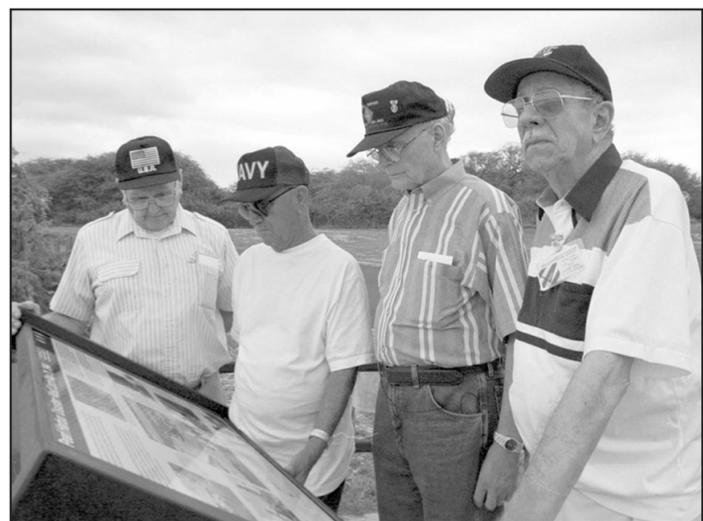
Bill Montague  
West Loch survivor

n't cut them loose," remembered Montague.

"Then all hell broke loose. Parts and shrapnel flew onto our deck and started fires on the canvas that the Marines had strung up to keep out of the sun," he added.

When the explosion occurred it sent fiery debris of metal and wood from the ship flying onto the decks and into the holds of nearby moored ships causing a chain reaction of fire and fury.

Bernal, who was operating a gray boat involved in rescuing crewmen from the water, remembers the explosions, "When one of the explosions happened,



Calvin Frawley, Alex Bernal, Jim Reed and Bill Montague view a plaque showing a timeline of the events that took place that day in 1944.