

USS Utah (BB 33), as she appeared before World War I.

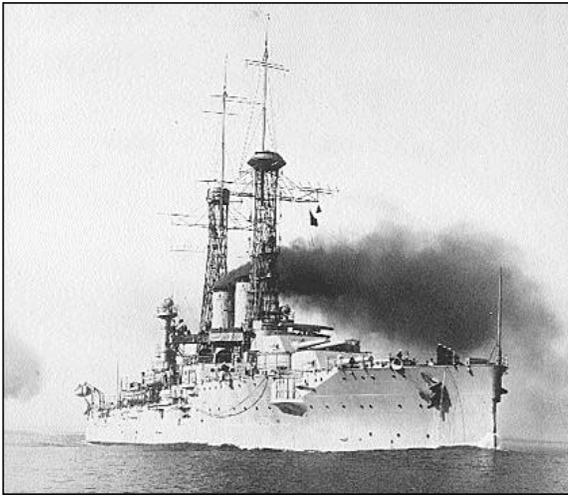


Photo courtesy of Naval Historical Center

Voices from the past

USS Utah

Pearl Harbor survivor Robert O'Hara remembers his shipmates aboard USS Utah (AG 16), during a recent visit to Pearl Harbor. O'Hara, a machinist's mate 2nd class aboard Utah during the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, shares his experiences from his old ship often, so people will remember the tragedy of that day.



PH2 Chad McNeeley photo

Pearl Harbor survivor carries on legacy so others may remember

By J01 David Nagle
HNN Editor

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "December 7, 1941?"

If you're like most, you probably think of the well-known white memorial off the shores of Ford Island, honoring the 1,177 men who lost their lives aboard the battleship USS Arizona during the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

What you may not realize is that on the other side of the island, a smaller memorial honors the crew of another of that "day of infamy." Like the Arizona, her hull and a portion of her crew remain submerged in the depths of Pearl Harbor. But, in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, USS Utah remains an overlooked footnote in our Navy's history.

One Pearl Harbor survivor hasn't forgotten the Utah. And, it's his hope that others won't forget her either.

"Utah is like a ghost ship, a forgotten ship," said Robert O'Hara. "Not many people know it's there."

O'Hara, who resides in Seattle, recalled his days aboard the Utah and his 58 former shipmates still entombed in the ship's sunken hull, during a recent visit to Pearl Harbor with his family.

"I was pretty shook up," he said, remembering how he felt seeing the Utah again. "These [men still entombed in the ship] were guys I went on liberty with."

The battleship Utah (BB 31) was commissioned in August 1911 and operated in the Atlantic during World War I. She made a goodwill visit to South America in 1924-25 and returned in 1928 to carry President-elect Herbert Hoover home from his South American tour. According to O'Hara, Utah boasts the Navy's first shipboard post office, and notorious criminal John Dillinger once spent time in Utah's brig.

The Navy converted Utah to a radio-controlled auxiliary and training ship (AG 16) in 1931. According to O'Hara, the Navy would bring new guns aboard and train crews on how to operate them. The auxiliary ship Utah also towed targets behind her, which destroyers and planes would shoot at for gunnery practice.

O'Hara checked aboard Utah in April 1939 as a seaman 2nd class, and initially worked as a mess attendant. O'Hara said he would frequently win a weekly prize from the captain for having the cleanest mess decks. He eventually transferred to the engine room, and was a machinist's mate 2nd class when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941.

"The night before, the [aircraft carrier USS Lexington

pulled out of port, and Utah berthed in its place," O'Hara recalled. Because Utah was frequently used to pull targets during gunnery exercises, the crew would put 12 inches of timber on the decks and one-inch steel doghouses on the guns. From the air, according to O'Hara, this made the auxiliary ship look like an aircraft carrier. "The Japanese thought we were the Lexington."

"I was asleep aboard the engine room hatch on an army cot," O'Hara continued, adding that in those days, the ship didn't have bunks. "We either slept on cots or our seabags."

"All of a sudden, I heard this 'kabang, kabang, kabang!'" he exclaimed. "Then old John Bowie woke me up and said 'O'Hara, the ship's sinking! We've just been hit by something, the engine room's flooding.' We went down to the engine room and water was rising. Then, all of a sudden, we heard [over the IMC] 'abandon ship.' So, Bowie and I went [topside], waking people up as we went. When we got up to the top, the enemy planes started machine gunning guys as they came out of the hatch. We went back down the hatch about three times to keep from being shot."

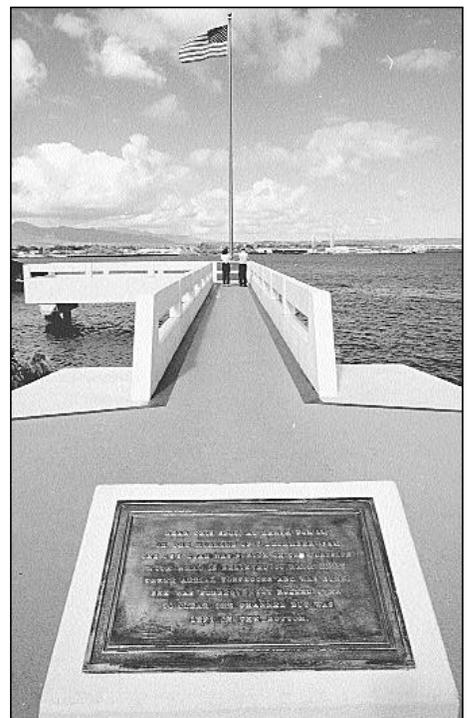
"I couldn't swim, so [instead of jumping overboard], I handwalked the lines to the pier. The line broke while I was on it, and the next thing I remember I was on the pier. Someone must have carried me there. To this day, I don't know who."

As a result of the attack, Utah rolled over and sank, trapping several crewmembers inside. Volunteers returned to the Utah after hearing knocking from the overturned ship's hull. Using a cutting torch, the volunteers freed 10 men, including Fireman John Vaessen, who had remained at his post in the dynamo room, to ensure the ship had enough power to keep her lights going as long as possible.

O'Hara transferred to USS Cummings (DD 365) after the attack, but his tour aboard Utah always held a significant place in his heart. He still has a copy of the deck log from the day he checked aboard, and the menu from Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner, which lists the names of all the crewmembers.

Seeing his old ship again brought back a flood of memories for this survivor, and strengthened his resolve to ensure the story of the Utah is not overshadowed by more familiar aspects of the December 7th attack. He tells of Utah's legacy every chance he gets, to ensure that legacy, and the memories of the 58 men still trapped beneath her, endures for future generations.

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



PH2 Chad McNeeley photo

Today, a small memorial on the north shore of Ford Island honors the Utah and the men who lost their lives during the Pearl Harbor attack, including the 58 still entombed in her partially sunken hull.