The American Legion

For God and Country

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PEARL HARBOR DAY SPEECH 2015

The American Legion
M&C DIVISION
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Simply calling our uniformed personnel of the battle of Pearl Harbor –"veterans," lends a nobility to the perpetrators of the sneak attack that they do not deserve. For unlike most veterans of battle, the servicemembers stationed at Pearl Harbor had no clue that danger was coming on the infamous morning of December 7, 1941.

They prefer to be called "survivors."

It was an attack like no other. Nineteen ships sunk or damaged. 188 aircraft destroyed. 2,403 killed. And a world awakened.

Bob Addobati was a 19-year-old signalman on the *USS Solace* that day. At last year's remembrance ceremonies in Hawaii, it was December 6, 1941, that he painfully recalled.

"There was a battle of the band contest in Chinatown that night. All of the ships had different bands," he said. "I spoke to several sailors from the *USS Arizona's* band. Eight hours later every sailor in that band was dead."

Addobati, who would later lose his leg in battle at the Admiralty Islands, vowed to never forget what he witnessed that morning.

He founded the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association chapter in Sacramento, California.

The decades have diminished their ranks but not their accomplishments. The survivors participated in the liberation of the entire world … and then rebuilt it … and then led our nation into the greatest period of growth and prosperity witnessed since the dawn of human history.

They witnessed the terrible carnage that claimed the lives of the more than 2,400 men, women and children that very morning, and wounded more than a thousand others – some of whom would die in the ensuing days.

These Americans gave all of their young years so that liberty might grow old.

And that's just what happened on "Day One" of a war that would drag on for 1,332 more days … a war that would be fought from the snow-covered Alps … through the jungles of New Guinea …and would eventually claim the lives of 405,399 American patriots.

And there are so many amazing stories that occurred that morning.

Aviation Machinist Mate First Class George D. Phraner, who was stationed aboard the *USS Arizona*, was assigned to a forward 5-inch gun as his battle station.

When the 1MC crackled with "Air Raid … Air Raid" and general quarters was sounded … he rushed to his gun and found no shells.

All the ammo was in the aft magazines … five decks below and astern.

Phraner ran below and began lifting 90-pound shells … and heaving heavy loads of gunpowder into the hoists.

That's when the forward magazine exploded … spewing 1,500,000 pounds of detonated gunpowder … fire … and steel into the Hawaiian sky.

The explosion demolished Arizona's bow – killing scores of sailors and Marines – including Phraner's own gun crew.

Phraner, down in the magazine, was left in total darkness – suffocating – as his lungs filled with the acrid smoke and minute particles of debris.

He groped for the ladder … found it …and began climbing as he was overcome by nausea.

He smelled the sickening stench of his own burning flesh … his hands were seared and sticking to the hot metal ladder.

Through the fog engulfing his brain,
Phraner heard the sounds of those dying.
Their whimpers and their screams.

He was unable to breathe. His lungs were aching and on fire.

“I just wanted to let go,” he recalled. “I was light-headed and it seemed okay to just let go.”

Yet he hung on.

Overhead he saw a shimmer of light swirling in the smoke. From somewhere deep within himself, he mustered the courage to live … and he crawled onto the main deck.

As he reached it, “A Marine lay dead beside me,” he said, “…his body split in two. I

began to realize there were dead men all around me. Some men were burning … wandering aimlessly as they died."

Phraner made it to the fantail and slipped into a sea alit with burning oil and dead bodies. Somehow …by the grace of God … he survived.

After recovering from his wounds, he was transferred to the "Gray Lady"… *USS Lexington* – for a date with destiny at a place called the Coral Sea.

Another man … Adolph D. Mortensen … a junior officer aboard the USS Oklahoma … popped from his bunk … wearing only pajama bottoms … and ran to his duty station in the boiler room.

As he passed through the dispensary, multiple torpedoes ripped through Oklahoma's hull, capsizing the ship.

Mortensen and four others were trapped in a compartment that was upside down … and rapidly filling with oily, salty water.

In his own words, “The tile deck was above our heads … so I searched below in the darkness. With my feet … I found a small porthole below the water.

“I was able to turn the porthole knobs by hand. Two men swam out quickly. The steward was hesitant … so I pushed his head through and he pulled himself out.

“The ship’s carpenter … Mr. Austin … a large man weighing over 200 pounds … knew he would never make it through the small porthole … so he ducked under the water and held it open for me.

“As I swam out … I scraped my hips squeezing through … and lost my pajama bottoms.

“Mr. Austin couldn’t make it out. His was the most noble and heroic act a man could perform … knowing full well that his minutes were few.”

That type of heroism was often remembered over the years by Navy Chief Petty Officer Ed Borucki, who served on the USS Helena, where 33 men lost their lives when a torpedo his the ship’s right side.

Up until very recently, Chief Borucki would call the newspaper editor in Southampton, Massachusetts and start the conversation with “This is Pearl Harbor Survivor Ed Borucki.” He would then ensure that the newspaper did its duty in covering all of the local veterans ceremonies and observances. On October 19, 2015, Chief Borucki, a past American Legion District Commander, joined his fallen shipmates for eternity. He was 94.

Their stories are many and some of their heroism is documented.

Fifteen Medals of Honor were awarded; 51 Navy Crosses; 53 Silver Stars; and other decorations for valor.

Even though all who were there were not decorated, they were all heroes. The survivors readily acknowledge the courage of others but they are reluctant to admit their own.

They deny that they themselves did anything noble. “I just did my duty” is what they usually say. No true hero actually believes himself to be one.

The motto of American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett, a West Point graduate, is Duty. Honor. Country.

No three words better describe the heroes of Pearl Harbor.

We salute them and we thank them from the bottom of our hearts.

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