

'It was a rugged battle'

Pearl Harbor survivor remembers 'Day of infamy'



Los Reitz reads a passage from the journal entry he made on Dec. 7, 1941, when he was aboard the USS Pennsylvania in Pearl Harbor.

By Mary Rodrigue staff writer

"I was in the Seventh Division compartment at chow when it all broke loose on the outside."

"I heard an explosion and looked out the porthole across the channel to see some of our planes afire. It was then I saw an unknown plane make a circle and go over the hangar. Then I saw the shiny bombs go down from the plane. There was another terrific explosion."

"I was mad, everyone else was mad. It was no time at all that we were firing at them. It was a rugged battle while it lasted."

Lester Reitz was a 22-year-old machinist's mate 1st class aboard the USS Pennsylvania when he made that journal entry on Dec. 7, 1941.

Now 63, Reitz lives in Redford Township with his wife, Renee, and Amy, 25, the youngest of their three daughters.

His war memorabilia is neatly packaged to help recall those 41-year-old memories. There's a photo album showing sailors aboard ship at attention on deck, uniforms blowing in the breeze, and others of clean-cut young men playfully mugging under palm trees on the beach. Nicknames like

Razz and Chick and Army are scribbled under the pictures.

A pocket-size journal with entries from Jan. 13, 1941, through June 3, 1942, and yellowed papers of commendation and discharge recall another era.

It's a time that Reitz hasn't thought much about lately, he admits. Even his wife of 31 years says she has never heard some of the stories before.

With little prompting, Reitz's memory is back to Aug. 30, 1940, the day he enlisted in the U.S. Navy at Norfolk, Va.

"After boot camp, we went by train to Bremerton, Wash., where we boarded the Pennsylvania."

"We were in and out of Pearl Harbor many times," he said. "We'd be in port a few days, then go back at sea."

"At the time of the attack, we were in dry dock. When it came about that Sunday morning, I was serving chow. It was about 10 to 8."

"I heard the explosion and looked out starboard side porthole and saw bombs dropping — then a plane with torpedoes. I saw the red sun on the side of the plane."

Because of their training, Reitz says, there was no panic.

"Everybody went right to their battle stations. Nobody cried. I went to gener-

al quarters station and handled five-inch shell projectors."

"I was down there from 10 to 8 until 3 p.m. before I was allowed to leave."

When he stood on deck at mid-afternoon, the sight was devastating.

"The Oklahoma was capsized, the Arizona was sunk and on fire. The ship in the spot where we were supposed to be was capsized. The California was sunk. The Nevada was sunk, the West Virginia was sunk. All of them were doodling in the water."

Damage to the Pennsylvania was minimal.

"We took one 500-pound bomb starboard," he said. "We couldn't sink because we were in dry dock. Fifty-seven men were killed on our ship."

About 300 of the 3,000 men assigned to the Pennsylvania were off ship attending church services when the attack started, Reitz said.

Eight carloads of ammunition were spent during the battle.

"We got credit for shooting down 18 Japanese planes," he said. "They (Japs) didn't bother us much because we were in dry dock and they couldn't sink us."

"I lost quite a few buddies. Guys I went on the beach with a lot."

Reitz's journal indicates that the

Pennsylvania left Pearl Harbor on Dec. 20, 1941.

"We left the dock and out the channel we went, past the Nevada which was grounded in the channel and they sent up loud cheers to us to do our job. On we went out to sea — then it got dark and who knew what would come next. Would it be torpedoes, bombs or shells? We looked and watched for the enemy."

That particular cruise ended stateside at San Francisco, where the Pennsylvania was refitted with guns before returning to sea for battle.

Over the next four years, Reitz and the Pennsylvania saw action in the Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands in the north to the Marshall Islands, Salpan and Guam in the south.

"I never suffered any injuries, and the ship never suffered any more damage after Pearl Harbor," he said.

Reitz was honorably discharged July 12, 1946. Having contracted rheumatic fever in the South Pacific, he was discharged from the U.S. Naval Hospital at Treasure Island, San Francisco after doctors detected a heart murmur.

"I've never been back to Hawaii since the service," he said. "But I would go. It would be nice."

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Gout is a form of arthritis best known for involving the great toe. However the ankles, knees, and wrists are often the sites of an episode of gout.

The attacks are characterized by excruciating pain in the joint, with redness, heat and swelling of the surrounding area. The affected joint is so sensitive that a strong breeze over the joint may cause great pain.

The elderly are prone to gout as are men of any age who drink heavily. Persons taking a "water pill" as part of their treatment for high blood pressure or heart failure are at risk for gout.

In 400 B.C. Hippocrates taught that "menstruating women do not get the gout." That observation still holds true, and the reason is still unknown. With the exception of boys with a rare inherited defect, children are spared the threat of gout. The condition is also unusual in men under age 40.

If you think you have gout, you should seek medical attention. The acute attack is readily treated, and recurrences are preventable by a number of medications.

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