

Pearl Harbor And Wake Island

In September 1941, I was assigned to Fleet Oiler USS NECHES AO5 for duty in San Diego, CA. Soon after boarding, we got underway for refueling exercises, with trips taking us to Alaska, Pearl Harbor, and Midway Island. On 28, November 1941, we departed from San Diego, towing a Destroyer bound for Pearl Harbor. on the morning of 7, December, we received a radio message "air Raid" Pearl Harbor, This is no drill. Captain Fletcher C.O. in "NECHES" gave immediate orders for us to sink the Destroyer in tow. It took us a long time to sink it be cause we were short on live ammuniton and ordered to use inert 3"/50 caliber "Loading Drill" (Brass) ammuniton. We fired all rounds below the water line, when the Destroyer rose on each swell. This was probably the only time that a USN Destroyer was sunk by another USN ship. We entered "Pearl" on the morning of 10, December and couldn't believe our eyes, "Total devastation" was every where. At the entrance to the harbor, I saw three green "Zeros" that had been shot down. The water in the harbor was covered with a thick blanket of fuel oil and countless boats were running in all directions. Three colors are still memorable, "Black, "White" and "Red", Black was the color of the White uniforms of dead sailors covered with oil, Red was the color of blood soaking the bodies that were stacked like cordwood on 40' motor launches being taken ashore for burial. After tying up, we were ordered to assign men for guard duty at "Ten/Ten dock. I was given a rifle & bayonet with an extra belt of ammo. Our orders were to "Kill On Sight" any body seen the dock, "After Curfew". It was pitch black due to an Island "Blackout" and it was impossible to navigate in the harbor without using a compass, because all landmarks had disappeared in the darkness. Rumors of an invasion were very strong. During the day, I watched welders cut a hole in the side plate of the "OKLAHOMA" and saw two sailors lifted out of their watery grave. An incident hard to take, was the discovery of (15) sailors found dead in the "WEAVY" USS WEST VIRGINIA, they had survived with trapped air and Battle Lanterns and had marked a calendar from 7, December to 16, December, it was a horrible way to die. Similarly, during the battle of "Midway", three sailors were trapped below decks in USS YORKTOWN CV5, while sinking, they were called by phone and asked "The Question Quote, Do you know what kind of fix your in? Answer, "Sure" came the reply, but what a hell of an acey duecy Game were having down here right now. USS YORKTOWN CV5 rolled over and sank on 7, June 1942, taking the three brave sailors with her.

Our first operation out of "Pearl" came very soon, we were assigned into Task Force 11 to operate with "SARA" USS SARATOGA CV3 in conjunction with Task Forces 8&16 which included the "LADY LEX" USS LEXINGTON CV2 and "Big E" USS ENTERPRISE CV6, respectively. The combined Task Forces were to converge from three different directions and make an attempt to rescue the US Marine garrison which was under siege by Japanese landing forces. We crossed the Int'l Date Line on 24, December and had Christmas on the next day. Task Force 11 was (450) miles from "Wake" when temporary (CINCPAC) Admiral Pye ordered a cancellation of orders for the rescue attempt by the combined Task Forces. It was learned later that he had made a wrong decision and we could have saved the marines, but Admiral Pye had been too cautious, not knowing that the three Task Forces had outnumbered the Japanese Task Forces at "Wake". So go the fortunes of war. On board "SARA" the marine pilots, who had expected to engage the enemy and help rescue their fellow marine pilots, were so furious when they found out that the rescue attempt had been canceled, that they nearly became mutinous and demanded to fly off "SARA" regardless. Admiral Fitch denied their demands to help their fellow marine pilots and were ordered to cease and desist.

Our Task Force was ordered back to "Pearl" and we were assigned to Journey back to "Pearl" with the Destroyers USS BLUE DD387 and the USS HELMS DD388. Our detachment was due to our lack of speed, due to the flank speed used by "SARA" on her way to "Pearl". The "HELMS" was soon detached from us and joined "SARA" back to "Pearl". That afternoon we were attacked by a Japanese submarine who fired torpedoes at us, but missed. The "BLUE" attacked and suppressed the sub allowing us to escape. We never got a chance to thank them, because she was sunk on 22, August 1942 in "Iron Bottom Sound"

Guadalcanal. On our return to "Pearl" we crossed the date line again and had our second Christmas on the 25th of December 1941. After our arrival we started to take on new crewmen from the sunken battleships, who were very happy to get an assignment, for some it would be their last one. They were demoralized and very sad because they had witnessed the destruction of our first line of defense, "Battleships" of which they had been a part of and now they were assigned to a Fleet Oiler.

On 22, January 1942 we were ordered to join "SARA" for the first raid on the "Gilbert Islands". As we departed from "Pearl" we were surprised to see four Destroyers escorting us out of the harbor, but were even more surprised to see them disappear hull down in late afternoon, now we were alone. Just before sunset, myself and others spotted a periscope and determined that it was probably a Japanese sub. Many of us were so sure, because that evening at mess many crewmen were paying off debts owed and the mess cooks were serving us with more food than we could eat, this was an amen of our awaiting fate. It was hard to accept that we had been left alone to rendezvous with "SARA" on our own, carrying a full load of three million gallons of fuel oil and (175) thousand gallons of high octane gasoline. Perhaps the answer could be found here, During the period between December 1941 and December 1942, all "Pacific" and "Asiatic" naval units were known as the "Shoe String Navy" because there were so few categories of ships to hold the battle line. Our Destroyers, who disappeared, probably had other priorities.

At (0319) 23, January 1942 we were knocked out of our bunks, by the first of three Japanese torpedo strikes, launched by an enemy sub. USS NECHES started to sink, listing to starboard side, while engaging in counter battery with the sub. It was pitch black and it was very difficult to see the submarine, later known to be the I-72. Our greatest fear was "Sunrise" where we would be exposed in rafts and boats to the submarine machine guns and cannon fire. We had lost many of our new shipmates, for a total of (57) killed in action. It was our lucky day, in another way, our (SOS) had brought a PBY2 to our rescue, landed and picked up our most critically wounded. About noon, the entire crew was rescued by the Destroyer USS JARVIS DD393, USS NECHES had finally sunk at (0437) hours. Again, we had been saved by a Destroyer, "The Lucky Ones". I'll never forget the "JARVIS" crew members, they literally gave us the shirts off of their backs. We did not neglect to thank them all. Fate deemed a terrible end for the "JARVIS", She disappeared with all hands in November 1942 off of the Solomon islands. No trace was ever found of the officers and crewmen.

Ironically, two other Destroyers, USS EDSALL DD219 and USS PILLSBURY DD227, were sunk earlier in the war, during the "Battle of The Java Sea" on 2, March 1942. This also included the loss of the entire complement of officers and crewmen.

USS NECHES survivors given quarters at "Bloch Center" in "Pearl" were now awaiting transfer orders, we lucked out and boarded the President Liner SS President Hayes for new construction assignment in "Mare Island" Ca. We were accompanied by the Destroyer USS SHAW DD373, who took a terrible pounding in rough water, due to a temporary bow that she had been fitted with at "Pearl". The "SHAW" had lost her bow from Mt. 52 forward due to a bomb hit in her forward magazine while she was in dry-dock, in Pearl Harbor on 7, December. I didn't think that she would make it to Mare Island, which was a trip of over two thousand miles. Those "Can" sailors had a lot of guts taking such a pounding for two thousand miles plus. My journey ended in San Diego, CA, where the city opened their arms to us and our skipper CDR Fletcher, allowed us to take a dungaree liberty in San Diego. All the bars were giving us all the "Free" drinks we wanted, the dungarees were accepted as being worn by survivors of the USS NECHES. We left by train for San Francisco, CA and ended up in Mare Island for new construction. I left the USA in July 1942 and went to Australia on USS SPERRY. After spending two years and eight months in the "South Pacific" combat zones, I returned to the USA in March 1945.

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Foot Note

USS NECHES did not catch fire or explode, we all considered it a "Miracle".