

George Phraner's Brush with Death Aboard the U.S.S. Arizona

USS Arizona (BB-39)

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USS Arizona - (BB-39)

Battle Station; Forward 5 inch Gun

As usual, there was a warm breeze that Sunday morning. We had just finished breakfast and drifted out of the compartment to get a little air. This was our normal routine on weekends as we had no work station to report to. It was fortunate for us that we were able to sleep in until 6:30 as many of us had been out the night before. Just as we left the mess area we heard this noise. We went outside to take a look because it's usually very quiet. When we arrived we could hear and see there were airplanes. I looked across the bow of the ship and could see large plumes of smoke coming up from Ford Island. At first, we didn't realize it was a bombing. It didn't mean anything to us until a large group of planes came near the ship and we could see for the first time the rising sun emblem on the plane wings. The bombing was becoming heavier all around us and we knew this was REALLY IT!

At first there was a rush of fear, the blood started to flow real fast. It was then that general quarters sounded over the speaker and everything became automatic. My battle station was on a forward 5 inch gun and it was standard practice to keep only a limited amount of ammunition at the guns. There was only one ready gun crew on each side and mine wasn't one of them. There we were, the Japanese dropping bombs over us and we had no ammo. All the training and practicing for a year and when the real thing came we had no ammunition where we needed it. As unfortunate as this was, that simple fact was to save my life. Somehow the gun captain pointed at me and said, "you go aft and start bringing up the ammunition out of the magazines". The aft magazines were five decks below.

A few moments later I found myself deep below the water line in a part of the ship I normally would never be in. I remember getting these cases of ammo powder and shells weighing about 90 pounds each. I had begun lifting shells into the hoist when a deafening roar filled the room and the entire ship shuttered. It was the forward magazine. One and half million pounds of gun powder exploding in a massive fireball disintegrating the whole forward part of the ship. Only moments before I stood with my gun crew just a few feet from the center of the explosion. Admiral Kidd, Captain. Van Velkenburg, my whole gun crew was killed. Everyone on top.

Seconds after the explosion the lights went out and it was pitch black. Almost immediately a thick acrid smoke filled the magazine locker and the metal walls began to get hot. In the dark and not being able to breath, we made our way to the door hatch, only to find it shut and locked. Somehow we were able to open the hatch and start to make our way up the ladder. I was nauseated by the smell of burning flesh, which turned out to be my own as I climbed up the hot ladder. A quick glance around revealed nothing in the darkness, but the moaning and sounds of falling bodies told me that some of my shipmates had succumbed to defeat and had died in their attempt to survive.

Getting through that choking kind of smoke was a real ordeal, the kind of smoke that really hurt your lungs. After awhile I began to get weak and lightheaded. I could feel myself losing the battle to save my own life. I hung to the ladder, feeling good. I felt that it was all right for me to let go. At that moment I looked up and could see a small point of light thru the smoke. It gave me the strength to go on. After what seemed to me like an eternity, I reached the deck gasping and choking. I laid down for a few moments. The warm Hawaiian air filled my lungs and cleared my head. I glanced over to the forward end of the ship to see nothing but a giant wall of flame and smoke. Behind me, a marine lay dead on the deck, his body split in two. I began to realize there were dead men all around me. Some men were burning, wandering aimlessly. The sound of someone shouting "put out the fire" cut through the sound of the battle, but it was obvious the ship was doomed. I made my way to the side of the ship, which by this time was sinking fast and jumped off the fantail. The shoreline of Ford Island was only a short distance. There was burning oil all around the ship, but the aft was clear. After swimming to shore, I was taken to the naval air station. Every table in th mess hall had a man on it. After the attack was over, many of the battleship sailors, myself included, were taken to the USS TENNESSEE. I was there for one week and then transferred to the USS LEXINGTON and an appointment with a place called the Coral Sea.

George D. Phraner

George Phraner served aboard USS ARIZONA, USS LEXINGTON, USS NASSAU Medals include the American Defense with star, Asiatic-Pacific with four stars American Area, Victory and Good Conduct