DIVE!

WORLD WAR II STORIES
OF SAILORS & SUBMARINES IN THE PACIFIC

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PART ONE

DARK DAYS

• 1941 •

To the Congress of the United States:
Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan . . .

—President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War against Japan
December 8, 1941

Washington, Dec. 11—The United States declared war today on Germany and Italy, Japan's Axis partners. This nation acted swiftly after Germany formally declared war on us and Italy followed the German lead. Thus, President Roosevelt told Congress in his message, the long-known and the long-expected has taken place.

"The forces endeavoring to enslave the entire world now are moving toward this hemisphere," he said. "Never before has there been a greater challenge to life, liberty and civilization."

—*The* New York Times

Execute unrestricted air and submarine warfare against Japan.

—Chief of Naval Operations
December 7, 1941

The USS *Arizona* ablaze after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Aerial photograph taken by a Japanese pilot during the Pearl Harbor attack.

WAVE AFTER WAVE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1941

Fifteen-year-old Martin Matthews woke before six that bright Sunday morning, even though it was one of the few times he could have slept in. Like many sailors based in Hawai'i in peacetime, he had weekend leave and didn't need to report back for duty until that night.

On this day, though, the teenager from Texas was much too excited to lie still. Of all the new experiences he'd had since joining the Navy two months before, he was enjoying this the most. He'd had the chance to spend the night on a real battleship, the USS *Arizona* (BB-39). After breakfast, he'd be treated to a tour of every nook and cranny.

Through nothing but an extraordinary coincidence, Martin Matthews was in the wrong place at the worst possible time.

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Just after his fifteenth birthday in October, Martin had lied about his age to join the Navy. A sailor friend home on leave had encouraged him, although it hadn't taken much to convince Martin. "He was wearing a uniform, and it seemed like he got all the attention from all the girls," Martin said, "and I decided that was the route I wanted to go."

Martin convinced his dad to sign an affidavit claiming he was seventeen. Since then, he'd already seen more of the world than he'd ever dreamed possible. He'd completed a few weeks of basic training at the San Diego Naval Training Station in California,

where he discovered he wasn't the only underage recruit—one boy he met was only fourteen. After a short stay in Washington State, Martin had boarded a troop ship from Bremerton to the US Naval Base in the territory of Hawai'i. Martin was delighted with the assignment. "Anybody fifteen years of age and who had been very little of anyplace in his life would look forward to it."

Martin was assigned to the Naval Air Station on Ford Island, in the middle of Pearl Harbor. In November he'd begun taking a metal smith course to learn how to repair aircraft. Everything was new—especially the strict discipline. "It was to bed early at night and up early in the morning with liberty basically reserved for weekends only."

There were definitely pluses, though. "The chow was good," Martin recalled. "When you grow up in the Depression days and eat what I had to eat, anything looks better. Of course, at twenty-one dollars a month, that's more money than I had ever seen in my life anyhow."

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On Saturday, December 6, Martin and a friend from the USS *Arizona* had spent the day in Honolulu, sightseeing and shooting some pool before returning to Battleship Row. Seven glorious stars of the Pacific surface fleet were moored there, with another, the USS *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), in dry dock nearby. Once Martin showed his pass, the officer on duty on the *Arizona* had given permission for Martin to stay overnight.

After breakfast on Sunday, Martin got his chance to explore the impressive six-hundred-foot-long ship. "'I wish I could get duty aboard a battleship,'" he told his friend.

That's when it began.

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When the young sailors first heard the planes, they didn't think much of it. Martin, now on the aft section of the *Arizona*'s deck, remembered that he simply glanced up. Nothing seemed amiss—it was just some planes in the sky. Even after it became clear that something was wrong, the reality was so unthinkable, so horrific, it was almost impossible to process what was happening.

"We heard noise over to our starboard side. . . . You could see a bunch of planes coming in; nobody's paying any attention to it. Then you could hear what seemed like thundering in the background, which actually were bombs starting to drop at that time," Martin said. "But none of us thought about bombs, because we didn't even know what a bomb was. I had yet even to see one in my life.

"But as these planes got closer, the thunder got closer, and then we started seeing clouds of smoke . . . Then we see fire and explosions," he went on. "Well, we knew that something was wrong, but we thought that maybe it was gunnery practice or something. We did not know, even at that time, that the Japanese were actually attacking us."

Martin wasn't alone in feeling confused. On the *Arizona*'s deck, Major Alan Shapley vividly recalled a sailor standing at the rail and remarking that this was the best drill the US Air Force had ever put on. Another sailor who spied the aerial torpedoes had a similar thought—it just had to be a mistake. " 'Oh, oh, some fool pilot has gone wild.' "

On shore, Rear Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the Navy's Pacific Fleet, understood what was happening in an instant. From the front yard of his house, he had a view of the

harbor; in the moments before his driver arrived to whisk him to headquarters, he had stared in horror as buzzing hordes of planes approached Battleship Row. " 'I knew right away that something terrible was going on, that this was not a casual raid by just a few stray planes. The sky was full of the enemy.' "

In fact, Kimmel (who was replaced in the aftermath of the surprise attack) was seeing the first wave of 183 Japanese planes—fighters, bombers, dive bombers, and torpedo planes—launched from six aircraft carriers about two hundred miles away. The pilots had instructions to target the pride of the US Navy's fleet: her battleships. The attack's mastermind was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of Japan's Combined Fleet, who hoped to decide the outcome of the war by landing a mortal blow on the first day. For the USS *Arizona* and her sister battleship, the *Oklahoma* (BB-37), the attack would indeed be fatal.

Frozen in fear on the *Arizona*'s aft deck, Martin heard the alarm for general quarters (GQ) sound. Martin's friend rushed to his battle station, leaving the young teen on his own. "Pandemonium broke loose; sailors were running everywhere," said Martin. "I had no place to go; I was basically just trying to get myself under cover, but, still, at my age and not prepared for any of this, needless to say, I was scared to death."

It was clear even to Martin's untrained eyes that the *Arizona* wasn't ready for battle. He watched as sailors rushed to uncover guns; another frantically tried to break a locked container to get at ammunition to load antiaircraft guns. No counterattack could save the *Arizona*. The ship had already been hit by one torpedo when a bomb fell on the starboard side. Martin could feel the deck beneath his feet shudder.

Then he was no longer on deck at all, but flailing in the churning waters of the harbor. It might have been from the force of the impact; maybe he had jumped—for the rest of his life, Martin was never quite clear. "I can't remember to this day whether it was the explosions or from sheer panic within myself, but I wound up over the side of the *Arizona* in the water."

The sea was salty and warm on Martin's lips. He'd lost his cap. He managed to keep his head above the surface, while his soaked clothes and shoes dragged him down. Gigantic plumes of dark smoke were now erupting along Battleship Row, spiraling upward into huge, roiling columns, like an army of angry tornadoes. Acrid smells of burning fuel oil singed Martin's nostrils and eyes. Black oil slicks spewed into the water from the *Arizona*. It's hard to know whether Martin could even hear the buzzing of the Japanese attack planes still overhead—or the screams and shouts of men.

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Instinctively, Martin made for cover, swimming twenty or thirty yards to a large mooring buoy that was about eight feet across and slimy with green algae. He reached the far side and held on, trying to put as much distance between himself and the *Arizona* as he could. "I was just more or less hanging on a thread for dear life."

Overhead, Japanese planes were still on the attack. "All I can remember, it seemed like they came in constantly, wave after wave, and it seemed like they were completely uncontested, unmolested."

Martin got a horrific, close-up view of the attack. "When the *Arizona* finally started blowing up, it was ammunition, gun lockers, shells, steel fragments, and pyrotechnics coming, it seemed to

The USS *Arizona* burned furiously as she sank on December 7, 1941.

me, from all parts of the ship," he said. "It was a series of explosions; it wasn't just one deafening one. It came to one final one where she seemed like the middle part just raised up in the water and kind of half-buckled and then settled back down. Of course, she never completely sank, because the water at that time wasn't deep enough. But her bridge and masthead were above water."

The *Arizona* had been struck by a bomb that had detonated in the forward magazine with an "indescribably fearful explosion and concussion that seemed to suck the very life out of the air." That blast alone killed nearly a thousand men. One ensign who survived said " 'the ship was sinking like an earthquake had struck it, and the bridge was in flames.' "

For Martin, each moment brought ever more terrifying sights and sounds. "There was steel in the air; there was fire; there was oil . . . pieces of timber; pieces of the boat deck; canvas; and even pieces of bodies . . . I saw a thigh and leg; I saw fingers; I saw hands; I saw elbows and arms. It's far too much for a young boy of fifteen years old to have seen."

Flames were leaping from the ship, yet somehow they didn't reach him. He might easily have been struck by debris and shrapnel, but Martin's luck held out. "I never got hit by any of it. I did have quite a bit of oil and sludge and diesel oil all over me. In fact, my white uniform didn't look white anymore; it was black."

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Martin wasn't quite sure how much time passed; he guessed he'd been in the water an hour or more when the attack seemed to end. He'd seen smoke and flames on Ford Island, and could only imagine the damage done to the planes on the ground. Martin figured his best chance to survive would be to swim to his base

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, mastermind of the attack on Pearl Harbor, sought to destroy the pride of the US Navy fleet on Battleship Row.

there, less than a mile away. Somehow he made it, despite the chaos, the smoke, and the oil-slicked water.

Martin clambered over the rocks and crawled onto the beach. That's when he faced a new danger: He was so covered in black sludge he was totally unrecognizable. As he scrambled to his feet, the young sailor found himself staring straight into the barrel of a gun. The sentry was nervous and not much older than Martin himself. In the chaos, the guard thought Martin might be an invading Japanese soldier.

Martin screamed, "'I'm Navy! I'm with the United States Navy! Don't shoot!'"

The sentry lowered his gun.

As he stood catching his breath, Martin got his first chance to take in the entire scene of destruction. "Ships were still blowing up in the harbor; hangars were still blowing up; gasoline was still blowing up; planes on the ground on fire were blowing up and rupturing their fuel tanks."

Exhausted and shaken, Martin made his way to his barracks. He peeled off his wet, oil-clogged uniform—the whites he'd planned to wear as he strolled through the Honolulu streets. Then he reported for duty. The destruction hadn't been confined to the ships on Battleship Row. The Navy planes on Ford Island had been parked wingtip to wingtip—like "sitting ducks" for the enemy's attack, Martin thought.

Now Martin and other sailors went to those planes "to rescue people who might still be alive, to remove damaged aircraft from the runways, and to do just about any and everything that was needed there—whatever could be done to put Ford Island Naval Air Station back in operation."

They worked throughout that night and into the next day without even stopping to sleep. No one knew what might happen next—was the surprise attack just the beginning? Rumors flew fast and furious. "We were told numerous times that the Japanese had landed," Martin recalled. "Then that rumor would be quelled, and then they'd say the Japanese had landed in another island. Then we'd be informed of the rumor that the Japanese were going to attack again in the morning."

Martin was kept busy: helping to put out small fires, assessing damage to hangars, and hauling away damaged planes. Crews searched the wreckage for survivors. "Every now and then, we would come across somebody who was pinned in the wreckage. In fact, one time—it was three days later—there was a plane on the end of the runway; we found out there was a pilot in it who had been injured and trapped in it for three days."

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That was the beginning of fifteen-year-old Martin Matthews's war. He probably could have petitioned to get out of the Navy because of his age. Instead he stuck with it. In an interview nearly forty years later, Martin reflected that being at Pearl Harbor that day had only solidified his determination to serve.

"I knew then that even if I had to wait the two years that I still would join up," he said, "because it was my country."