

# First Hand Accounts of December 7, 1941 in Pearl Harbor

**William Brown**

*East Carolina University*

**Faculty Mentor: Wade Dudley**

*East Carolina University*

## ABSTRACT

*This project involves researching and writing a narrative combining the first-hand accounts of sailors in the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. The goal of the project is to gather the personal accounts provided in oral histories and to synthesize those into a narrative describing the emotions of that morning. This has been accomplished by examining the oral histories provided by five men who graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1941 and survived the Japanese attack. A sixth account is provided by Lt. Alexander B. Coxe, Jr., who was the executive officer aboard the U.S.S Breese. Each individual perspective provides a different angle to the horror that surrounded Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The research highlights the raw emotions as the Japanese planes flew above and the destruction and death surrounding these men.*

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the naval and aerial forces of the Japanese Empire secretly attacked the United States Navy at the naval base of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. For over two hours, two waves consisting of over three hundred Japanese aircraft destroyed the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy. Every ship along Battleship Row either took significant damage or sank during those early morning hours. Thousands of sailors in the United States Navy witnessed in horror as the Japanese bombed and destroyed their ships. These men, including Charles Merdinger and John Landreth of the U.S.S. Nevada, Archie Kelly of the U.S.S. West Virginia, Richard Wright of the U.S.S. Tennessee, Joseph Spitler of the U.S.S. Oklahoma, and Alexander Coxe, Jr. of the U.S.S. Breese, witnessed the events of December 7, 1941 and provide a glimpse into that tragic morning

by documenting their memory of the attack. Each of these men graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1941 with the newly bestowed rank of Ensign, except for Lt. Coxe. These men would begin their naval careers with the defining moment of Pearl Harbor. This group held a special bond as recent graduates of the academy and a new bond as survivors of December 7, 1941. Archie Kelly noted that a battleship is a "world in itself. You can be in the bow...and I can be in the stern and write down an entirely different history of what is going on."<sup>1</sup> By piecing together these first-hand accounts, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the surprise attack and discover the emotions,

---

<sup>1</sup> From the [Archie Parmalee Kelley Oral History](#), Collection No. O.H. 197. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 14.

feelings, and events that American sailors experienced at Pearl Harbor.

The prelude to the events at Pearl Harbor that began in 1937 as a standoff between the United States and the Japanese Empire took place over national interests in China. The Japanese advanced into northern China and Manchuria, breaching the long standing open door policy in China held supported by the government of the United States. If the government maintained the open door policy by providing the Chinese with significant financial help, it would lead to further escalation with Japan. The other possibility involved the government of the United States allowing Japanese aggression, maintaining its neutral status, but also risking all property and rights invested in China.

The government of the United States remained undecided between these two options as late as the end of 1937. Members of the government were unwilling to challenge an ever-growing Japan, but refused to forfeit all interests in China. In October of 1937, President Roosevelt announced a recommendation that "peace-loving states isolate aggressor states" in an attempt to limit possible Japanese advances.<sup>2</sup> The decision to avoid immediate relief to the Chinese would have possibly appeased the Japanese long enough to avoid armed conflict. Instead, President Roosevelt refused to invoke the Neutrality Act and Secretary of State Cordell Hull announced that "the existence of serious hostilities anywhere in the world affected the interests... of the United States."<sup>3</sup>

This policy towards the Japanese aggression was necessary for the United States as the Japanese planned to exploit northern

China for its expansive reserves of natural resources. Japan officially acknowledged in November 1938 that it would "not give assurances to the preservation of the open door."<sup>4</sup> This allowed for the Japanese to be "self-sufficient" and immediately decreased American trade in both China and Japan.<sup>5</sup> The American government refused to allow Japan to become increasingly powerful with the capture and exploitation of Chinese resources. While this hardening of Far East policy was clearly taken with the risk of future war, the concern for American interests in China resulted in the government of the United States requiring the open door policy to remain open, therefore aggravating an already frustrated Japanese Empire.

For over one hundred years, the United States adhered to the Monroe Doctrine, which interprets any attempt at colonization in the Western Hemisphere as an attack on the interest of the United States, requiring intervention. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Japanese Empire wanted to adopt this same form of continent monopolization on the Asian continent. Due to personal interests in China, the United States refused to allow the Japanese to have free reign over the Pacific, in fear that the Japanese would become too powerful. While the government of the United States gave themselves free reign in the Western Hemisphere, eventually extending their reach to the Pacific, they refused to give this same power to the Japanese Empire. The United States wanted to "claim an 'open door' in China, while maintaining a 'closed door' in the Western Hemisphere."<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hornbeck, the head of the State Department's Far

---

2 Frederick C. Adams, "The Road to Pearl Harbor: A Reexamination of American Far Eastern Policy. July 1937-December 1938," *The Journal of American History* 58, no. 1 (1971): 76.

3 Ibid., 75.

---

4 Ibid., 92.

5 Ibid., 77.

6 John Murnane, "Japan's Monroe Doctrine?: Re-Framing the Story of Pearl Harbor," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (2007): 508.

East Division, refused to acknowledge any form of a Japanese Monroe Doctrine by “dismissing any parallels between United States policy in the Americas and Japanese policy in Asia...”<sup>7</sup> The Japanese recognized this immediate double standard resulting in a defensive posture from the Japanese Empire with increased aggression and hostility against the United States.

The Japanese began to develop a strike force in late 1941 to annihilate the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy. While the United States tracked Japanese naval movements and anticipated a Japanese attack, it was impossible to know the date or time of the attack. The United States Navy used radio intelligence to track the activities of the Japanese military in 1941. Radio intelligence officers focused their efforts with the use of cryptanalysis, naval traffic analysis and intelligence reporting to gain knowledge of Japanese tactical plans. While many of these decoded messages revealed that “a strike force had been formed,” no exact data ever surfaced.<sup>8</sup> The United States Navy continued to track the strike force’s movements, but the date of attack was unpredictable. Many Americans assumed that war with Japan was inevitable, but had no way to guess the date and time of a Japanese attack. Without knowing the precise moment of the attack, these intelligence reports were useless to naval commanders. The Japanese struck swiftly in the early hours of December 7, 1941, preventing the American sailors from being fully prepared for the bombardment. This attack would forever change the lives of American sailors as they were suddenly shaken from sleep and thrown into the hellish morning of December 7, 1941.

For Charles Merdinger, the events of Pearl Harbor served as a brutal entry into the United States Navy. Merdinger

graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1941 and immediately took residence aboard the U.S.S. Nevada as an Ensign. His post on the ship was in the fire control division that “basically did the calculations for firing the main battery.”<sup>9</sup> This kept Merdinger in the bottom of the ship while the Japanese sprung their attack. Merdinger was still in his bunk as the bombardment began, so he went to his station in his bedroom slippers.<sup>10</sup> He struggled in the bottom of the ship until three in the afternoon relaying messages, keeping communication lines open on the ship.

As the Japanese fighters gunned down American sailors on the top deck, Merdinger sent half of his men to man the anti-aircraft guns.<sup>11</sup> These sailors faced a horrific dilemma because “the people who were going up thought they were going to get shot, and the ones who stayed thought they were going to get drowned.”<sup>12</sup> Merdinger’s men were incredibly disciplined and immediately answered his call to replace their fallen comrades. The remaining men continued to work the lines of communication despite loss of power, flooding, and loss of oxygen in the lower deck.

At three in the afternoon, long after the Japanese planes left the island, Merdinger and his men realized they had to evacuate. The metal plates surrounding the men began to buckle to water pressure and the remaining oxygen supply quickly became exhausted. Merdinger relayed the dramatic situation to the executive officer, informing him that his crew could “hold it about five more minutes” and requested permission

9 From the [Charles J. Merdinger Oral History](#), Collection No. [O.H. 121](#). East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 47.

10 *Ibid.*, 53.

11 *Ibid.*, 49.

12 *Ibid.*, 50.

7 *Ibid.*, 512.

8 Wilford, 38.

to come to the surface.<sup>13</sup> The men abandoned their stations with discipline as they would in a normal drill. As they climbed to the surface, the magnitude of the day's events quickly dawned upon them.

Merdinger faced the conflict of smelling "the most wonderful air" and looking across to see the harbor aflame due to the massive leakage of oil.<sup>14</sup> He witnessed hundreds of dead bodies covered in oil littering the waters of Pearl Harbor. As he witnessed the horror, he accepted the fact that he survived while thousands of others did not. An ironic thought struck Merdinger as he stood in awe of the "perfection" in which the Japanese executed their brutal attack.<sup>15</sup> He also witnessed the anxiety of the naval forces on the island as American planes attempted to return to the island, but were shot down in the assumption that these were Japanese fighters returning for another attack.

One of Merdinger's comrades on the U.S.S. Nevada was John Landreth. Landreth, also a member of the United States Naval Academy class of 1941, specifically asked for a commission on the Nevada due to its fame as a great ship for wrestling. Landreth was a wrestler at the Naval Academy, so this ship was a perfect fit for him. In the summer and autumn preceding the attack at Pearl Harbor, Landreth and the other members of the crew held wrestling tournaments on board as a means of friendly competition and a way to stay fit. Wrestling became part of Landreth's official duties on the ship as he was the wrestling coach for the other sailors.

Ensign Landreth was the eighth junior officer in the Sixth Division of the anti-aircraft unit aboard the Nevada on the morning of December 7, 1941. Like many of the sailors that morning, Landreth was

on his way to breakfast as the alarm on the ship sounded. He thought this to be a "low blow, having a fire drill (on) Sunday morning."<sup>16</sup> The Nevada conducted numerous drills in the weeks before December 7 and he assumed this to be yet another drill. As Landreth "half-heartedly loped up" the hatch to the main deck, machine gun fire assaulted the deck.<sup>17</sup> When he heard the firefight taking place above him, he quickly rushed to his post at the anti-aircraft guns. As he commanded his station, he caught his first glimpse of the horror that surrounded him. Landreth stood witness from his post as the U.S.S. Oklahoma capsized and the U.S.S. Arizona exploded directly in front of him.

Japanese dive bombers began to attack the Nevada as Landreth took his station at the anti-aircraft guns. Commander Robertson, leader of the Nevada, ordered that all ammunition boxes remain completely filled and guns remain in the ready position as he sensed the imminent attack. This order, although against Navy regulations, allowed Landreth and the other gunners to return fire faster than any other ship on the island. While the dive bombers began to swarm the ship, they dropped their bombs with little accuracy. Landreth survived these close encounters as two bombs missed the Nevada with a third hitting the ship, landing "eleven inches away" from him inside the protective deck of the ship.<sup>18</sup> While one of his friends on board congratulated him for being "cool under fire" by turning to adjust a setting in the ship's director, Landreth insisted that he only turned to "keep from watching that thing hit me."<sup>19</sup>

13 Ibid., 52.

14 Ibid., 53.

15 Ibid.

16 From the [John L. Landreth Oral History](#), Collection No. O.H. 119. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 23.

17 Ibid., 24.

18 Ibid., 26.

19 Ibid., 27.

As the Nevada attempted to escape the harbor, Landreth was clueless as to any movements the ship made. Landreth was on the port side of the ship while any landmarks to identify movement were on the starboard side. He also did not give any meaning or importance to the movement as "all (he) was doing was looking up at planes" as he attempted to shoot any Japanese fighter out of the sky.<sup>20</sup> In Landreth's opinion, if the Nevada remained in the harbor, and stayed under the cover provided by the smoke from the Arizona, Japanese dive bombers would not have seen the Nevada.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the ship took numerous machine gun hits and absorbed many casualties, before running aground at Hospital Point, as a result of the attempted escape.

Archie Parmalee Kelley had a family history of service to the United States Navy. His uncle, Bruce Kelley, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1925 while Archie graduated in 1941. They were both stationed in Pearl Harbor with Bruce serving aboard the U.S.S. Arizona and Archie aboard the U.S.S. West Virginia. Bruce Kelley switched duties the night of December 6, so he could be with his wife since she was also on the island. This type of switch was quite common while ships were in the harbor. The sailor who switched with Bruce Kelley died on December 7, leaving Bruce with incredible guilt for the rest of his life.

At 7:45 on the morning of December 7, calls of "Away, fire and rescue party" rang from the top deck as bombs burst on Ford Island, presenting the sailors with their first encounter with the beginnings of war.<sup>22</sup> The "away, fire and rescue party" call informed the sailors that there was fire on a nearby ship. Ensign Kelley was an assistant damage control officer on the lowest deck of the West Virginia. Kelley and

the rest of his shipmates viewed the call with skepticism. Immediately, a second call came, saying "General Quarters. Man your battle stations. No [expletive]!"<sup>23</sup> This use of language was necessary as the call to man battle stations occurred throughout the summer to initiate drill sessions and this was no drill.

Kelley rose quickly and hurried to his battle station. His job was to make sure that all watertight doors were closed to prevent further flooding in the ship. The West Virginia, like the other battleships, received seven torpedoes and three bombs.<sup>24</sup> The ship did not sink because of the quick reaction to close the watertight doors below deck. Kelley made this quick decision because, as soon as he reached his post, he discovered the compartment on the opposite side of his post flooding rapidly.

As Kelley closed the watertight seal, he immediately noticed four men entering the compartment. These men attempted to undo Kelley's work by opening the watertight door, but could not because of the many sailors locking it in place on the opposite side. Kelley faced a horrific moment away from the machine gun fire and bombs on the upper deck. He looked at his commanding officer with "the unspoken question of 'Shall I open the door?'"<sup>25</sup> Commander Harper looked at Kelley with a face that implied he wanted the door to remain shut. Kelley then heard the torturous sounds of the men screaming as they frantically fought for their lives.

Although the decision to shut the door was a bloodcurdling choice, Kelley made the correct decision. This watertight door was the only available door to the central station of the lower deck, so it was necessary to keep that area from flooding for as long as possible. Kelley also had forty

---

20 Ibid., 30.

21 Ibid., 27.

22 Kelley, 9.

---

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 10.

25 Ibid., 12.

men under his command in the central station. If he had attempted to save the four trapped men, the rapidly moving waters would have killed all of the men in the lower deck. These men were then able to escape, one at a time, through an escape tube to the top deck. They remained in the lower deck for an hour until the flooding water and oil reached their shoulders, forcing them to search for an escape. Drawing from the discipline instilled in him by the Naval Academy, Kelley made the difficult, but correct decision for the greater good of the men under his command.

After the men in his command reached the surface, Kelley and his crew immediately began fighting fires on board the ship. The U.S. Tennessee docked directly beside the West Virginia in the harbor. This location prevented any damage to the Tennessee, keeping its water supply clean. Kelley and his men attached hoses to the ship from the Tennessee to provide clean water for all firefighting efforts. They continued to battle the flames on board the West Virginia until Commander Harper issued a call to "Abandon Ship" at 1:30 in the afternoon.<sup>26</sup>

For Kelley, life in Pearl Harbor was never the same after the events of December 7, 1941. The island soon went under martial law with all cargo ships being used for military purposes. The government delivered gas masks and required people to have one with them at all times. As for the younger members of the island population, they "soon removed the mask and used the carrying bag for swimming trunks and towels."<sup>27</sup> As citizens with Japanese heritage on the island disappeared in fear of internment, fear of a possible Japanese invasion swept the island in the days following the attack. The beaches of Hawaii resembled the famed beaches of Normandy with "barbed wire fences and landing craft

obstacles."<sup>28</sup> Kelley held the responsibility of continuing the logbook of the West Virginia. For normal log records while at sea, the writer would start with "steaming as before..." but in the case of the West Virginia, Kelley had no other choice but to write "sunk as before."<sup>29</sup>

Joseph Spitler reported to the U.S.S. Oklahoma with the rank of Ensign after his graduation from the United States Naval Academy in 1941. Before going to Pearl Harbor, the ship took station in San Francisco, California for a holiday trip. The ship then proceeded to Pearl Harbor, arriving just before December 7. Spitler went ashore on December 6 and passed by the impressive sight of every battleship in the Pacific Fleet docked in the harbor. Spitler received an eerie order on December 6 to attack "any unidentified submarine," suggesting that "somebody knew something."<sup>30</sup>

As the Japanese bombardment began, Spitler walked to his living quarters after being relieved from working his early morning duty. Before Spitler could get settled, the call to man battle stations rang over the ship. As in the case of Archie Kelley, a few expletives from the division officer explained the severity of the situation to the sailors. Spitler hurried to his post in the fourth division in the number four turret. As he raced past the junior officer's quarters, he noticed that many of them were still asleep, ignoring the call to battle. A few moments after he ran past these quarters, a torpedo ripped through the room producing many casualties. This was a mistake in the Japanese attack plan resulting from a failure in reconnaissance. The Japanese used a scout plane to investigate whether

---

26 Ibid., 17.

27 Ibid., 19.

---

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 From the *Joesph C. Spitler Oral History*, Collection No. O.H. 125. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 9.

the American carriers were docked at Ford Island. The signal used to tell the attack squadron became compromised as one of the flares used as a signal “went into the clouds.”<sup>31</sup> The Japanese, under the assumption the carriers were at Pearl Harbor, attacked Ford Island, providing a small warning to the men on Battleship Row.

In his sprint to his post, Spitler noticed the Oklahoma beginning to turn over. The Japanese torpedoes were pummeling the forward section of the ship because this was the only section of the ship open to the harbor channel. As he ran, Spitler could feel the ship “jump up a bit” with each successive torpedo strike. As Spitler finally reached his post in the turret, the water level had already reached the middle of the deck and the commanding officer gave the order to abandon ship.

As he escaped from the capsizing Oklahoma, Spitler faced numerous close encounters with death. As he jumped in the oily water, he turned to look over his shoulder and saw the gigantic ship directly over his head. Spitler cleared the ship’s edge by a mere ten feet.<sup>32</sup> Once he passed this threat, he noticed Japanese bombers flying overhead preparing to drop bombs on them as he swam away. Luckily for Spitler, the Japanese did not drop any bombs then, as they “lost their point of aim.”<sup>33</sup> As Spitler finally reached land, the Japanese began to fire machine guns at survivors, but he escaped injury.

Once the Japanese attack ceased, Spitler and others returned to the Oklahoma; but due to the ship capsizing, they walked onto the hull of the ship. As Spitler and the other sailors walked, they heard tapping from inside the hull. Sailors, trapped inside the hull, and cried to be rescued. The sailors could not use the typical cutting

torch due to concern for setting the oil in tanks and surrounding the ship on fire. They began to carefully cut a hole into the metal to prevent the hole from flooding and drowning the sailors. The sailors then took a large sledgehammer to knock the plate out and create an opening to rescue the trapped men. As the plate broke, five men immediately “popped out of the shaft.”<sup>34</sup> The men had been trapped in the hull of the Oklahoma from Sunday morning to Wednesday afternoon. Spitler and the crew rescued thirty men from the horror of being trapped inside the capsized ship.

Richard Wright graduated from the United States Naval Academy with less than stellar marks. He struggled academically while at the Academy and was a “very ordinary midshipman,” graduating with a 2.7 grade point average.<sup>35</sup> Wright graduated in February 1941 and went to serve on the U.S.S. Tennessee with the rank of Ensign. Despite his academic struggles, he was more than adept as a sailor because “class standing did not have much to do with what you did afterwards.”<sup>36</sup>

On the morning of December 7, Wright awoke from sleep as the alarm rang at 7:55. Wright was furious that the alarm would sound so early because the Navy was not allowed to hold drill sessions on Sunday mornings. As he arose from bed, he heard the first explosion, informing him that this was a real attack. Wright sprinted to his battle station, but passed by the anti-aircraft battery and noticed there was no officer on duty. He then took this post, as it was vital to the defense of the ship and the harbor. As the Japanese planes swarmed the harbor, Wright realized that

---

34 Ibid.

35 From the [Richard M. Wright Oral History](#), Collection No [O.H. 202](#). East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 6.

36 Ibid.

---

31 Ibid., 14.

32 Ibid., 11.

33 Ibid., 12.

there “was no time to analyze” and that he had to do “what seemed like the right thing to do.”<sup>37</sup> Wright and the other sailors of the Tennessee had no warning of the events unfolding around them. The sailors had a “general sense... that a war with Japan was inevitable.”<sup>38</sup> Wright was not surprised that the Japanese attacked, but date and location of a possible attack had remained unknown.

As Wright climbed to his spot on top of the anti-aircraft battery, the reality of the war’s beginnings dawned upon him. From this post, he watched as the Arizona exploded, the Oklahoma capsized, and the West Virginia sank right beside the Tennessee. As the West Virginia sank, it wedged the Tennessee against the concrete pylons anchoring the ship. These pylons eventually had to be destroyed to allow the Tennessee to escape the harbor. While at his battery, Wright and other sailors fired back at the Japanese dive bombers, hitting many planes, with some being shot down. Wright gained incredible pride from the fighting spirit of his crew as he never noticed a sense of panic “or even fear.”<sup>39</sup>

After the Japanese bombardment ended, only three of the eight battleships in the harbor remained usable. The Tennessee, along with the Maryland and the Pennsylvania, left the harbor and sailed to San Francisco, California and Bremerton, Washington for minor repairs. Once receiving all necessary repairs, the ships sailed aimlessly, or so it seemed, through the Pacific until 1943. As Wright realized that the Tennessee was not getting close to the action of war, he requested a transfer to a submarine division. While Wright did not want to have a war, he decided that “if there was going to be

one, a professional wants to be in it.”<sup>40</sup>

While the ships on Battleship Row received most of the notoriety following the attack, there were many other ships in the harbor. Pearl Harbor was the home of the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy, so there were many other ships present that morning besides the battleships. One of the ships was the U.S.S. Breese, a light minelayer. Alexander Coxe, Jr. was the Executive Officer of the USS Breese on Dec. 7, 1941 and wrote a detailed report of the actions of the Breese.

Coxe called “away fire and rescue party” five minutes after eight on December 7, 1941 after seeing a loud explosion on Ford Island.<sup>41</sup> After watching another bomb explode, he sounded the general alarm and the Breese began to return fire at the Japanese planes at approximately 7:57 that morning, the first ship to return fire in the harbor. As he observed the events occurring in the harbor, Coxe estimated seventy or eighty Japanese planes engaged in the bombardment. The Japanese planes were painted with white underbellies to blend with the white clouds of the harbor, making them virtually invisible to the anti-aircraft batteries. Coxe watched as three Japanese planes burst into flame alongside the Breese because of the anti-aircraft fire. One of these planes took a direct hit and burst into pieces in mid-air while another plunged violently into the water directly in front of the ship. The third plane, still flying despite fire protruding from the body, enacted kamikaze tactics by intentionally flying into the side of the U.S.S. Curtis.<sup>42</sup>

While the attack continued from the air,

---

40 Ibid., 10.

41 Alexander B. Coxe, Jr., [Report on Japanese air raid], 9 December 1941, Alexander B. Coxe, Jr. Papers. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA. #194.3b.

42 Ibid.

---

37 Ibid., 7.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 8.

the Breese received reports of a Japanese submarine in the channel of Pearl Harbor. The Breese and the destroyer Monaghan immediately left their post in search of the submarine. The Monaghan attempted to ram the submarine while it was above the water, but as the ship approached, the submarine submerged before contact could be made. A barrage of depth charges was then dropped in the area, but did not result in sinking the submarine. A PT boat then informed the Breese that the submarine escaped to a different area. The ship sailed to this location and its sonar operator quickly discovered the location of the submarine. The Breese proceeded to drop five depth charges in the area, resulting in a massive amount of debris rising to the surface, implying the charges struck the submarine.<sup>43</sup>

The interviews of these five men and the report from Lt. Coxe provide just a glimpse into the horrific Sunday morning of December 7, 1941. The Japanese strike force bombarded Pearl Harbor for over two hours, crippling the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy. Increased hostilities between the United States and the Japanese Empire, beginning in 1937, culminated in the brutality unleashed on the Pacific Fleet and its sailors. While the United States held the ability to track the Japanese fleet and decode their communications, these sources proved to be unreliable. The intelligence reports provided by

the radio intelligence crew did not give a clue as to the date or the time the Japanese force would strike.

These six interviews allow for a greater understanding of the personal experiences of American sailors during the attack on Pearl Harbor. The overwhelming feeling of surprise forced the sailors to immediately rely on their disciplined training in order to survive. Their individual stories, from Archie Kelley making the gut wrenching decision to close the watertight doors to Joseph Spitler rescuing thirty men from a watery grave on the *Oklahoma*, are captivating. Nearly seventy years later, these stories provide incredible insight into that terrifying day and serve as a reminder of the events that took place at Pearl Harbor. Each of these young men were newly graduated Ensigns from the United States Naval Academy in 1941. Their rigid training and preparation at the Academy allowed for their individual survival and their excellent response in the face of the enemy. These green ensigns set an example for American warriors to follow as they held, then forced, the Japanese tide to recede. Without these first-hand accounts, the true experiences of American sailors would be lost and the world would never know the true terror of the horrific events that took place on December 7, 1941 in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

---

43 Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary

Alexander B. Coxe, Jr. Papers. #194.3b. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA.

Archie Parmalee Kelley Oral History, Collection No O.H. 197. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

Charles J. Merdinger Oral History, Collection No O.H. 121. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

Joesph C. Spitler Oral History, Collection No O.H. 125. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

John L. Landreth Oral History, Collection No O.H. 119. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

Richard M. Wright Oral History, Collection No O.H. 202. East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

Secondary

Adams, Frederick C. "The Road to Pearl Harbor: A Reexamination of American Far Eastern Policy, July 1937-December 1938." *The Journal of American History* 58, no.1 (1971): 73-92.

Murnane, John R. "Japan's Monroe Doctrine?: Re-Framing the Story of Pearl Harbor." *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (2007): 503-520.

Wiliford, Timothy. *Pearl Harbor Redefined: USN Radio Intelligence in 1941*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2001.