

A PEARL HARBOR SURVIVOR REMEMBERS

*As shared by William Harten,
written by Valerie Harten Briggs*



Almost sixty years have passed since I experienced the terror and inferno that occurred during the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. The memories are vivid in my mind. My family has gathered to pay honor to me and the memory of that day, presenting me with a 12-inch G.I. Joe sailor that looks very much like me then, and wears the same Navy white sailor uniform and cap. The sketch of young Bill in sailor whites was drawn by Jeane (see end of story).

The circle is complete as my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren sit before me to listen while I share my memories of that incredible "day of infamy" when the world seemed to stand still.

I was just out of high school in September of 1940, a nineteen-year old kid who had enlisted in the Navy to further my education, as my parents had no money to assist me. Music and playing the trumpet had always held great interest and potential for me. I was Bandmaster in our Pocatello, Idaho high school band and had even written the school "fight" song, which they still use today.

During my military training, I attended the Naval School of Music in Washington, D.C. where in January, 1941 I had the special opportunity to perform at the presidential inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I graduated April 20, 1941 and in May was given the honor of playing "Taps" at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier after a Memorial Day speech given by President Roosevelt. Not too many years later I would play "Taps" at his funeral and also at the Inauguration of President Harry S. Truman.

For eight months I had been through boot camp, studying, rehearsing, and performing with about 75 select young Naval musicians and made many good friends. We received our assignments to various bands stationed with several Naval ships. Many of us served on two famous battleships, the USS Arizona and the USS West Virginia, which were with the Pacific Fleet out of San Diego.

It took us nearly a month to travel from Washington, D.C. across the United States on crowded troop trains. Then we boarded a troop ship for a month-long voyage to Pearl Harbor, arriving late in June of 1941. None of us had any inkling of what lay ahead just five months from then.

I was thrilled to be a part of the historic Navy band aboard the West Virginia, the largest battleship in the

fleet at the start of WWII, having been constructed at the end of WWI. Her four 16" turret guns were some of the biggest in the world at that time.

Approximately 1,800 men were assigned to this historic battleship. Having already seen over 20 years of service, any speed above 15 knots would cause the ship to shake severely, but she was home to us.

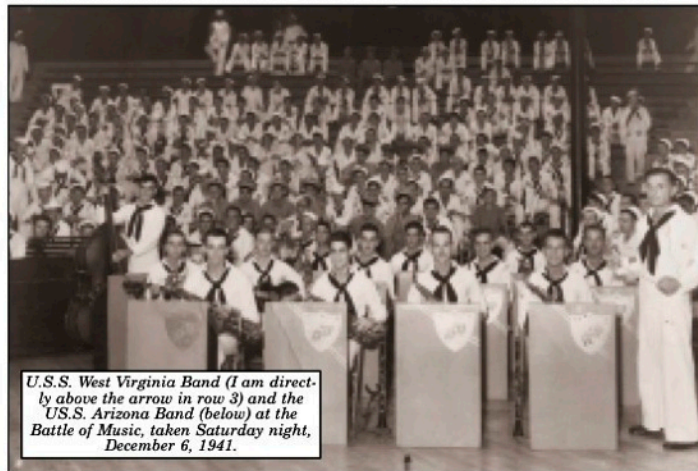
Ship's quarters for the twenty-one musicians were separate from the rest of the crew. We ate our meals on tables stored in overhead racks, rehearsed, and slept in those tight quarters, hanging our hammocks three deep from the ceiling. Privacy aboard ship was nearly non-existent, so I would head for the Crow's Nest where there was always plenty of privacy, and it would sway back and forth when the ship was underway. Usually there were two .50 caliber machine guns attached to the Crow's Nest, but they had been removed since it was peacetime.



In November, the West Virginia went for three weeks of training at sea, returning to Pearl Harbor along with six other battleships the first week of December, 1941. It took all day for the seven great battleships to sail into Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and dock -usually two abreast with service ships alongside. To the best of my knowledge, it was the first time that the majority of the Pacific Fleet had all been in the harbor at the same time. For safety, the general order was given to store all ships' ammunition several levels below deck to lessen the chance of accidental explosion. The West Virginia was tethered to the Tennessee, which was moored to two big concrete pilings.

Many of my buddies were nearby since the Arizona was moored right behind the West Virginia. We all looked forward to the big Battle of Music, and had shore liberty until midnight. Bands from as many as ten different ships and cruisers would do their best to out-shine the others in an all-out contest.

It was late into the evening after we'd all given our best performances when they finally announced that the Arizona band had won. What a celebration we all had!



U.S.S. West Virginia Band (I am directly above the arrow in row 3) and the U.S.S. Arizona Band (below) at the Battle of Music, taken Saturday night, December 6, 1941.

Sunday morning, 0755 hours: Aboard the West Virginia all port holes and watertight compartments were open and the atmosphere was relaxed. Many of the men had been Christmas shopping the day before and were looking forward to mailing presents home to their families. All of the enlisted men and most of the officers were back aboard ship. We'd just finished eating breakfast when the alarm sounded.

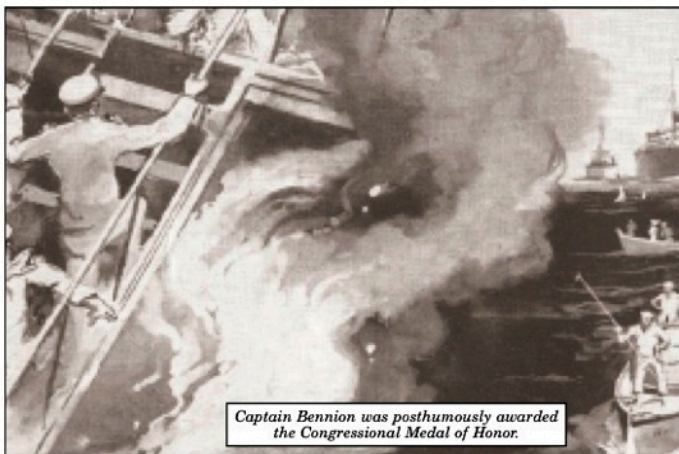
The first alarm indicated "fire and rescue," which seemed very unusual to me. We'd practiced this drill many times before, but never on a Sunday. I scurried down the ladder leading to Sick Bay which was three decks down beneath a thick protective deck of armor plate, about 20 ft. below the water line. My battle station was close to the base of gun turret number three where my specific responsibility was to receive and relay messages over a shipboard telephone system and to administer first aid.

Just as I reached the second deck I felt and heard a horrific explosion. The great ship quivered and shook, as mess tables fell from their overhead storage racks, china crashed, and paint began chipping off the bulkhead. Just thirty seconds after the first alarm, the signals for General Quarters (final preparation for battle -all hands to battle stations) was sounded over the ship's intercom.

The emergency bell shrieked, and you could barely hear the boatswain's mate yelling the order over and over and over at the top of his lungs. We'd all heard it many times before, but this time it had an especially motivating effect. The force of the explosion stunned the men who were streaming down hatchways to take up their battle stations. I ran aft (back) heading to my battle station, passing Captain Mervin S. Bennion of Vermont, Utah, Commander of the U.S.S. West Virginia, who was running forward to his station.

Within minutes, a piece of shrapnel struck him in the stomach. He refused to be carried to safety and continued to direct the action of his crew, and when the bridge became a burning inferno, he gave his last order: Abandon ship.

I began dogging (tightening latches) down a door to lock it shut when a second deafening explosion, about two compartments forward, violently wrenched the door from my hands and slammed me against the opposite



bulkhead. Everything was thrust into darkness as the ship's lights went out. This explosion had also knocked out all communications, plus the water pressure we needed for fighting fires. My head was spinning and my mind went blank. Exploding powder, dust, and nauseating oil fumes, together with shock, made me sick and weak.

Men were groaning in the blackness. Oil and water were coming in fast into our compartment and rising around my legs. The effects of the concussion left me dizzy, and as I tried to get up, I repeatedly fell in the slippery, oily water. The West Virginia was listing starboard (right). If not soon corrected, she would roll on her side. All sense of direction had left me and the stifling fumes sapped my strength, but I knew I had to get out of there fast. Everything was covered with slippery oil, but groping in the darkness for something to pull me toward the escape hatch, my hand came upon a pipe. Somehow I found the strength to pull myself up, hand over hand, to a door leading to the starboard passageway.

Another terrifying blast from an exploding torpedo jolted the ship! My hands slipped off of the vibrating pipe. I doubled up and fell onto the coaming (a raised frame around a door to keep out water). I laid in the darkness, feeling more dead than alive, my mind swimming, my legs weak. Breathing was difficult. The many layers of paint on the bulkhead were beginning to burn. I held on, but doubted I could muster the strength to pull myself up that slanting passageway another time.

The ship's deck was now so steep that men on the upper side were slipping and falling against those on the lower side. When the ship listed to the point it seemed it would roll over, it stopped and began to right itself. She was tethered to the Tennessee which had kept her from going belly up in the water. Someone soon realized that if the port side of the ship was counter-flooded, the West Virginia could establish some sense of balance.

Then I heard the sound of feet splashing, and in the dim light of a flashlight, saw several dark figures down the passageway. Seeing my shipmates gave me the will to keep going. One wrong turn in the darkness could put you into a room that might shortly be sealed shut. I tried to stay in the corridors, feeling my way along the hot, burning walls. Everyone seemed to sense that there was little time to escape. But regardless of the danger, there was no pushing.

By the time my turn came to go up the ladder, I had to will myself upward. Escape seemed very near now. Upon reaching the second deck I saw an even longer line of men moving slowly towards an open hatch. The escape hatch had buckled shut from the explosions, but fortunately the supply hatch was open, and I could see daylight. I climbed up a steel beam through the open hatch and forward out onto the starboard (right) side of the quarterdeck.

All around me, men were screaming. What I witnessed was heartbreaking! Just ahead of us the battleship Oklahoma lay on her side, with her screws showing above the surface of the water like the fins of a gruesome dead whale. Men were clinging to her barnacled side and some were swimming for shore. (Later I learned that the bowels of that ship had entombed almost 400 of the Oklahoma's crew.)

I could now see enemy airplanes crisscrossing the sky and recognized the awful magnitude of what was happening. We were under attack. I recognized on their wings the big red rising sun of the Japanese Imperial Army.

In the fresh air my head cleared, my strength returned, and I knew I could make it. The West Virginia was nearly abandoned now. There had been no time for lifeboats, and men had jumped into water blanketed in burning oil and gorged with debris, grabbing at whatever they could to stay afloat. The enemy had dropped seven torpedoes that had ripped her open while her huge 16-inch deck guns remained silent, with the



ammunition being so far below deck.

Just after I climbed to the main deck, a bomb landed on the number three gun turret which killed eight men inside of the turret and sprayed flaming gasoline from the ship's catapult airplane all over the area where I was standing.

The concussion from the bomb's impact knocked me to the deck, but for some unknown reason, the bomb itself did not explode. I had been sprayed with gasoline and realized that I was in jeopardy from all the fires aboard. Decision time! Do I stay on board and continue to risk death by bombs and torpedo fire, or jump overboard and swim in water that was covered with burning oil! I had been an excellent swimmer all my life, and was strong. I felt my chances were greater in the water, even if I had to swim underneath the flaming oil to keep from being burned.

The ship was sinking beneath me. To clear the oil burning close to the ship, I had to gauge my jump so I could hold my breath long enough to reach an area of safety from the flames. I knew that taking a gulp of burning oil would kill me, so I took in a deep breath and exhaled. Then I took in the deepest breath of my life and jumped feet first like we'd been taught, to avoid cracking my head on debris in the water.

It seemed like an eternity as I went way down into the water, then I came back up and started swimming below the surface for an open patch of water. I'd calculated well and when I finally surfaced, I had cleared the flames. Torpedoes and bombs were still exploding all around the ships, and I knew I had to reach the comparative safety of Ford Island in the center of Pearl Harbor.

But it wasn't a straight swim, and during the course of a half hour, I swam about three-quarters of a mile through burning oil around two long battleships to reach the island. Nearing the shore I came across a young sailor who was struggling, too exhausted to swim any further. I rolled him on his back and towed him along with me the rest of the way.

As we struggled out of the surf, two Red Cross ladies came to help us. I was covered with oil and little else. They gave me a pair of pants, a towel, and a bar of soap for which I'm still grateful to this day. Relief and thankfulness washed over me that I was still alive, but I was exhausted. It was now 0850 hours, nearly an hour since the first explosions.

From Ford Island, which had taken direct hits to the huge fuel tanks, I could see the terrible devastation of the attack which continued for almost another hour. From that close distance I witnessed the explosion from the boilers on the Arizona and the blast from a bomb dropped down her smokestack that killed 1,200 men and sank that great battleship. With horror I realized

that many of my friends and band mates were gone. They lay entombed beneath the waters of Pearl Harbor to this day.

The West Virginia lost 250 men, one of them being the clarinet player from our band. Many had died from injuries, or because they lacked the strength needed to climb up the ladders, or because they were too afraid. Some men drowned, while others locked themselves inside airtight compartments and suffocated. When the West Virginia was raised from the shallow water into which she sank, the bodies of three sailors were discovered who had scratched 16 marks on the bulkhead to indicate they were alive from the day of the devastating attack until the day before Christmas Eve.

Just a short distance away at Hickam Army Air Field, American planes were lined up in neat rows, their ammunition having been removed and stored inside depots. During the thick of the fighting, a squadron of B-17's, Flying Fortresses arrived. One was shot down, but the rest landed relatively safely.

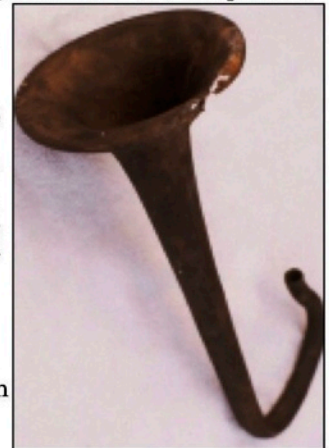
Of 273 planes, the Army lost 23 bombers, 66 fighters, and 8 other planes during the two-hour attack as Japanese planes strafed the airfield, the barracks, and even civilian areas. Honolulu had 57 civilian dead. The Navy casualties totaled 2,729 killed, and 656 wounded. Military losses for the Japanese were 48 planes and 3 small submarines, two of which entered the harbor and were sunk there.

That night, suffering in shock and horror, we slept on wooden benches in a large auditorium. Then we were moved into Navy barracks for several weeks. Martial law was invoked over the whole territory of Hawaii with an army general in charge. Barbed wire was stretched across the picturesque beaches, and machine gun nests were placed all around the island's perimeter as an invasion was expected, but fortunately never happened. If the Japanese had followed through right after the initial attack on Pearl Harbor, they could have taken the entire island.

My photographs taken during this time of necessary military censorship show a stamp on the back to indicate that they had passed muster. We could rent a little Brownie camera for twenty-five cents from the YMCA, which provided some nice little extras for the servicemen who were so far away from home and families.

Three days after the attack a deep-sea diver friend of mine was on salvage duty and dived down to check the damage to the West Virginia. I asked him to look for our instruments if he was able to get near the band compartment. When he finally surfaced, he brought up what was left of my trumpet, a much-loved companion of many years.

The German silver stem and bell were charred and blackened, the upper stem having curled in a half circle from the heat. The solder had melted in the heat causing the brass mouthpiece, valves and fittings to fall off. Now, sixty years later, I hold this battle-scarred relic of history, another survivor of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and an evidence of miracles in my life. I have it always in view, mounted in a clear case, to remind me that the Lord was with me that day.



As I think of the tragic events I witnessed, especially

around Pearl Harbor Day, December 7th each year, I ponder what might have happened to me on that fateful day that brought the United States into World War II. I could have been confined in one of those airtight compartments, or been burned, drowned, or blown up. The bomb that landed near me in the turret could have killed me, but it didn't.

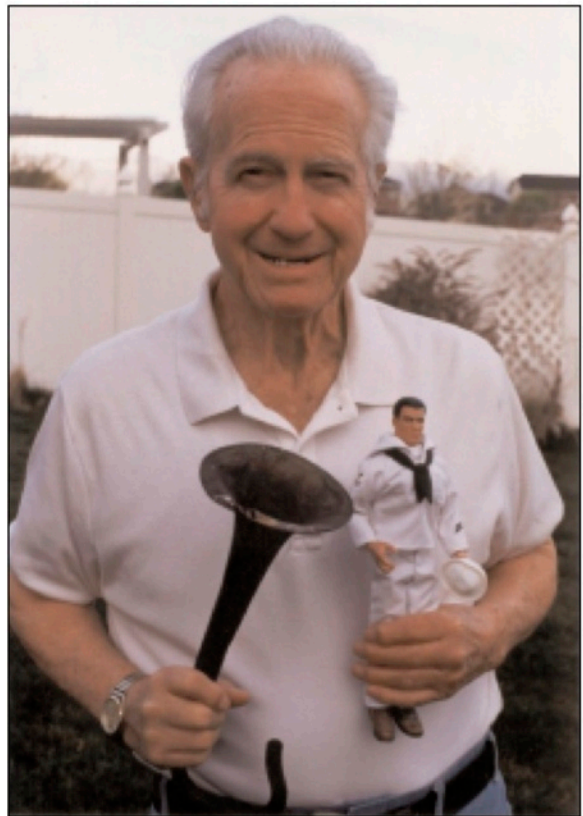
I had been with the Arizona band for a time, but in God's ultimate wisdom I had been assigned to the West Virginia four months before the attack. All twenty-one of my former band mates on the Arizona were killed that day, never knowing what hit them.

Had the wind been slightly different, the bomb that destroyed the Arizona could have hit the West Virginia moored only fifteen or twenty yards away. Perhaps I was spared because I was meant to come home and marry Jeane and have our family, just like I did. The day of the attack, she heard the horrible news on the radio, but refused to believe the announcement that her high school boy friend had been killed on the West Virginia. She immediately sent me a pen and pencil set, which I still have, engraved with my name, so that I could write and let her know I was alive and well. She also sketched me from a photo I'd sent my mother, so she'd have a picture of me, since it was uncertain when I could get one to her.

I was transferred to the Submarine Service to help provide rest and relaxation for the submariners who would enjoy leave on Oahu. I served three years as a bandmaster with the Navy band in Hawaii, performing in various radio broadcasts and USO shows that entertained the troops during the war. Early in 1945 I was transferred to duty in Washington, D.C. I immediately traveled to

Pennsacola, Florida, where Jeane was stationed as a Naval WAVE, teaching aerial gunnery to pilots and crews of the B-17's. Within three days we were married, and we've been together over 56 years now, having raised two children, with 7 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. By sharing my experiences with them I hope they can

appreciate what it takes to maintain freedom, to serve their country, and to be a survivor for better days.



Pearl Harbor Remembrances of WWII Veteran

by Jeane Lowe Harten

That Sunday morning everything stopped as news of the attack on Pearl Harbor reached us. I was sitting on a little cushion in front of the radio at home as President Roosevelt gave his famous words about this day that would live in infamy!

I spent hours waiting for news of a good friend and fellow high school musician who was stationed there. Later an announcer said that a Pocatello boy, Bill Harten, had gone down on the U.S.S. West Virginia, and was presumed dead. I refused to believe Bill was dead, and I knew that he would need a pen to write me a letter to tell me he was all right.

It was Sunday so none of the stores were open, but I ran and got the man who owned the local jewelry store, had him open up, and I bought the most expensive pen and pencil set he had. He engraved Bill's full name on it. Two weeks later I received my first letter from him that told how close he had come to death. The letter was signed, "Love, Bill," the first time he'd ever written "love" in a letter to me. And the rest is history...

*William and Jeane (Lowe) Harten are the parents of
Valerie Briggs*

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