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

**USS Arizona (BB-39)**

**George D. Phraner**

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 the 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

**Glossary:**

**Magazine**: place where ammunition is stored. **Succumbed**: to fail to resist.

**Disintegrating:** breaking up into parts. **Fantail:** the deck on the back of the ship.

**Acrid**: strong and unpleasant taste. **Aft**: the area near the back of the ship.

**"Suprise Attack Succesful!"**

**Commander Mitsuo Fuchida led the first wave of the air attack and published his recollections in 1951. These were later published in English in 1955. We join his story as he approaches the Hawaiian coast:**

"One hour and forty minutes after leaving the carriers I knew that we should be nearing our goal. Small openings in the thick cloud cover afforded occasional glimpses of the ocean, as I strained my eyes for the first sight of land. Suddenly a long white line of breaking surf appeared directly beneath my plane. It was the northern shore of Oahu.

Veering right toward the west coast of the island, we could see that the sky over Pearl Harbor was clear. Presently the harbor itself became visible across the central Oahu plain, a film of morning mist hovering over it. I peered intently through my binoculars at the ships riding peacefully at anchor. One by one I counted them. Yes, the battleships were there all right, eight of them! But our last lingering hope of finding any carriers present was now gone. Not one was to be seen.

It was 0749 when I ordered my radioman to send the command, 'Attack!' He immediately began tapping out the pre-arranged code signal: 'TO, TO, TO...'

Leading the whole group, Lieutenant Commander Murata's torpedo bombers headed downward to launch their torpedoes, while Lieutenant Commander Itayay's fighters raced forward to sweep enemy fighters from the air.…My bombers, meanwhile, made a circuit toward Barbers Point to keep pace with the attack schedule. No enemy fighters were in the air, nor were there any gun flashes from the ground.

The effectiveness of our attack was now certain, and a message, 'Surprise attack successful!' was accordingly sent to *Akagi* [Flagship of the Japanese attack fleet] at 0753. The message was received by the carrier and duly relayed to the homeland, ...

The attack was opened with the first bomb falling on Wheeler Field, followed shortly by dive-bombing attacks upon Hickam Field and the bases at Ford Island. Fearful that smoke from these attacks might obscure his targets, Lieutenant Commander Murata cut short his group's approach toward the battleships anchored east of Ford Island and released torpedoes. A series of white waterspouts soon rose in the harbor….

My level-bombing group had entered on its bombing run toward the battleships **moored** to … Ford Island. On reaching an altitude of 3,000 meters, I had the sighting bomber take position in front of my plane. As we closed in, enemy antiaircraft fire began to concentrate on us. Dark gray puffs burst all around. Most of them came from ships' **batteries**, but land batteries were also active. Suddenly my plane bounced as if struck by a club. When I looked back to see what had happened, the radioman said: 'The **fuselage** is holed and the **rudder** wire damaged.' We were fortunate that the plane was still under control, for it was **imperative** to fly a steady course as we approached the target. Now it was nearly time for 'Ready to release,' and I concentrated my attention on the lead plane to note the instant his bomb was dropped. Suddenly a cloud came between the bombsight and the target, and just as I was thinking that we had already overshot, the lead plane banked slightly and turned right toward Honolulu. We had missed the release point because of the cloud and would have to try again.

While my group circled for another attempt, others made their runs, some trying as many as three before succeeding. We were about to begin our second bombing run when there was a **colossal** explosion in battleship row. A huge column of dark red smoke rose to 1000 meters. It must have been the explosion of a ship's powder magazine. [This was the Battleship *Arizona*] The shock wave was felt even in my plane, several miles away from the harbor.

We began our run and met with fierce **antiaircraft** concentrations. This time the lead bomber was successful, and the other planes of the group followed suit promptly upon seeing the leader's bombs fall. I immediately lay flat on the cockpit floor and slid open a peephole cover in order to observe the fall of the bombs. I watched four bombs plummet toward the earth. The target - two battleships **moored** side by side - lay ahead. The bombs became smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. I held my breath until two tiny puffs of smoke flashed suddenly on the ship to the left, and I shouted, 'Two hits!' ….

As the bombers completed their runs they headed north to return to the carriers. Pearl Harbor and the air bases had been pretty well wrecked by the fierce **strafings** and bombings. The imposing naval array of an hour before was gone. Antiaircraft fire had become greatly intensified, but in my continued observations I saw no enemy fighter planes. Our command of the air was unchallenged."

**Glossary:**

**Moored**: anchored.

**Batteries:** groups of artillery (guns).

**Fuselage**: the central part of a plane where the crew is.

**Rudder**: device used to steer a boat or aircraft.

**Imperative**: urgent, necessary.

**Colossal:** huge

**Strafings**: machine gun or cannon fire from aircraft