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World War II

At the age of 25, I was living in Pilot Point in Denton County, Texas. I joined the Navy on November 7, 1940, to keep from starving to death. Working on a farm, I only could make six bits or 50 cents a day maybe. From Dallas, I took 65 men on a train to San Diego for boot camp. I don't know why they put me in charge. During my second week at boot camp, I looked up one day and saw my brother. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

He said, "You beat me by a week."

After boot camp, my brother and I boarded the battleship USS California in Long Beach. I was assigned to the Fox Division (fire control) and worked on the catapult that launched seaplanes. My assigned battle station was in the plotting room. Officers could plan battles and even operate the ship and fire guns from there. I also served as a slide-rule operator for the main battery of 14-inch guns. At Bremerton, Washington, we went into dry dock. After workers had scraped the sides of the ship and repainted it, we left for Hawaii. They had decided to move the fleet to Pearl Harbor because it was more centrally located than Long Beach and more adaptable to the Pacific Ocean.

The war in Europe had already begun, but I really didn't have any idea what was to come. We just knew something was brewing. Of course, the military doesn't tell you anything. Though we figured the war would spread to the Pacific sooner or later, we felt safe at Pearl Harbor.

Our ship would go out for ten days or two weeks at a time for maneuvers and battle practice and then return to port to take on supplies. We continuously performed training missions. While in port, everyone would have liberty and go to Waikiki Beach or into Honolulu. Since we were in the Navy and on a ship with big guns, we didn't think anything could happen to us. The Army Air Corps also was there, so we thought we had all the protection we needed.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, my division was working, so I didn't rate liberty. It was a Sunday, and a chaplain was aboard. My hands were full of chairs I intended to set up on the front deck for church services, and an awning was already in place. As I approached the front deck, I heard the loudspeaker switch on. The boatswain tensely announced, "Man your battle stations! This is no drill." Japanese fighter planes and bombers suddenly were coming in from

every direction with their machineguns firing.

Chairs flew everywhere, and off I went to my battle station in the plotting room five decks below. As soon as we manned our stations there, we closed the integrity doors and the room became watertight.

Docked in an area known as Battleship Row along with six other battleships, the USS California took two torpedoes and one bomb. When the torpedoes hit, our ship bounced around like a top on a hardwood floor. Then the bomb hit almost midship and really rattled things, though the California was huge at 645 feet long and 105 feet wide. It pulled 35 feet of water and began to sink. Word was passed to abandon ship.

I was underwater, by water and above water. All I could think was *What am I doing here? What am I going to do? What's going to happen? How am I going to get out of here?* But the good Lord took care of me. Everyone in the plotting room escaped by climbing a ladder in a chute that ran up to the bridge. I ran across the deck and jumped overboard into the oily water. As soon as we jumped, the awning burned off. Thank God, the water around our ship never caught fire. That was a miracle.

The USS Oklahoma and USS Maryland were tied up next to our ship. The Oklahoma was leaning over on its side, and the Maryland had sunk. The USS Arizona was on fire. The USS West Virginia and USS Nevada had suffered major damage as well. The Nevada had started out to sea and was hit in the channel. (Later, tugboats had to push her to the beach so she wouldn't tie up the channel. If she had sunk in the channel, we would have been up a creek.) I could see smoke rising from Wheeler Field. Everywhere I looked, I saw damage. The submarine base was the same way. Though it was disheartening, it instilled a desire in me to do something about it.

I tried to swim to an airfield on Ford Island and was picked up by a whaling boat full of other survivors. They shouted for me to hang on to the side and they would pull me to the island. When I walked up on the beach toward the ferry landing, there stood my brother. "We'll get 'em," he said.

"How did you get off?" I asked.

"I slid down the large rope." That was the line that tied the ship to the dock.

My heart broke as I stood on that beach and watched my ship go down. It had been my home, so I knew that some of my best friends had been killed. I felt such a deep frustration, but there was nothing I could do. They wouldn't let us go back onboard to help because they were getting as many men off as they could.

Onboard the California, we had not had access to the firepower we needed to defend ourselves. Whenever we came into port, we always had to put our ammunition in the magazines below. All we had was some .50-caliber ammunition in a topside locker. We had lost power when the ship was hit, so there was no way to hoist the shells up from the magazines.

On Ford Island, we had no weapons. There was nothing we could do but seek whatever cover we could find. We slept on cots in a big hangar that night, what little we slept. There was mass confusion. When some of our planes came in the wrong way and failed to identify themselves, our troops shot them down. By that time we had machineguns and had rigged one up at the ferry landing. If the Japs had continued onto that landing field during their original attack, however, they would have taken Pearl Harbor with no problem.

During the first wave of the attack, 185 enemy aircraft flew over. About 175 planes came in on the second wave targeting the three air bases. By then I was on Ford Island, and we were scrambling. But they didn't do as much damage as the first wave.

I lost a lot of friends on the USS California that day. I believe 465 men died out of our

crew of about 1,500 sailors and Marines. Thank God, I didn't lose my brother. Many men did. The five Sullivan brothers died on the USS Arizona. In all, more than 2,000 men lost their lives. Though my brother and I had been Christians for a long time, we were drawn a little closer to the Lord after that experience. I prayed, "Lord, here I am. If you want me, you've got me. If you don't, I'm gone." Everything worked out.

The following morning, I was wondering *Why in the world did this happen to us? Why wasn't there a warning? Why didn't somebody in Washington, D.C. pick up this situation or decipher a code before it happened so we could have been prepared?* If we could have made it out to sea, we might have had a fighting chance. We would have had enough ammunition to fire at the Japanese as they attacked. That night we stayed in the same hangar again, and everything was quiet.

After Pearl Harbor, my brother and I requested that we be separated. He went aboard a cruiser, and I was assigned to the USS Astoria — a heavy cruiser with 5-inch and 8-inch guns. Everything was a mixed-up mess. We were not able to hear any news about the situation there or at home in the States, and it took three or four days to organize things and assign us to new ships. During that time, all the servicemen were spread out in case the enemy returned. That way, no great number would be killed at once. They knew they would need us later. Some men were assigned to the salvage effort in an attempt to raise some of the battleships and put them back in action. They managed to save the USS California. After patching it and pumping out the water, they took it to Bremerton for repairs. By the last part of the war, that ship was back in service.

If people in the United States had witnessed the turmoil at Pearl Harbor and seen the damage that was done, morale would have been so low that we never would have won the war.

My dad, a farmer, was still living when his two youngest sons joined the service. Mother had died at a young age, but my baby sister and big brother were still at home. The War Department sent a telegram stating that my brother and I had been killed in action at Pearl Harbor. When a memorial service for held for us in our hometown of Pilot Point, Dad and my older brother didn't attend. My father said, "It's not so. Those boys are alive."

About two weeks after the attack, cards were distributed to the survivors so they could check a box saying "I'm okay and everything's all right." Dad received our cards nearly a month later. He kept those cards along with the telegram from the War Department, and I still have them at home. I also have a map honoring Pearl Harbor survivors. It shows each wave of the attack, every ship that was there, and tells how many bombs and torpedoes hit them, and how many men were killed.

When I left my ship and walked to the gate in Shumaker, California, one day, a fellow walked up to me and asked, "Fritcher, what are you doing here?" He was a friend who I thought had died at Pearl Harbor. I found out he had been assigned to the USS Astoria, too, and we talked and had a good time together. The New York Times even interviewed us. Unless we saw a former crewmember in person afterward, we never knew for sure whether or not he had survived.

On May 7, 1942, The USS Astoria fought in the first South Pacific naval battle of the war — the Battle of the Coral Sea. The USS Yorktown, an aircraft carrier, suffered heavy damage that day. It crippled alongside us into Pearl Harbor afterward to be placed in dry dock, and we took on supplies and ammunition. When Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, asked how long it would take to repair the Yorktown, he was told about three months. He said, "Patch it, and let's go." Three days later, we were at sea heading for Midway.

One June 4, 1942, we fought in the Battle of Midway and lost the USS Yorktown despite

our efforts to protect it as the base for our planes. When the Japanese hit the aircraft carrier and inflicted severe damage, it had to be abandoned. Then one of our own submarines sank it. But we defeated the Japanese fleet, and the battle became the turning point of the war in the Pacific. We sank three Japanese aircraft carriers, a battleship and many cruisers and destroyers.

After the Battle of Midway, we were performing maneuvers at sea on the Astoria while troops were gathering to take Guadalcanal. The Americans needed a place to land their airplanes, so they had to take that island. In preparation for that attack, we transported troops and equipment to different islands and practiced beach landings. Then one day, they said, "We're gone."

We left for the South Pacific in early August 1942 and landed troops on Guadalcanal. As we bombarded it, I could see the trees falling. I imagine the United States paid for every tree. The troops met with no resistance, and everything went smoothly. That night, it was a different story. On our second day there, 35 planes from the Rabaul Japanese air base in the Solomon Islands showed up. As they came in, the men on our cruiser and the carriers shot some of them down. The carriers hit the rest of them as they left. I saw a 5-inch projectile explode into the nose of one of those planes. Though they tried to fire torpedoes at us, we made difficult targets as we zigzagged around the area and fired heavily. Not one Japanese aircraft returned to Rabaul, and they didn't send in any more airplanes.

On the night of August 8, 1942, we fought in a ship-to-ship battle with the Japanese fleet at sea. That was called the Naval Battle of Savo Island, and it was really some battle. There was such heavy gunfire that it appeared to be daylight. Positioned between the land and us, the Japanese fleet sank three American cruisers (Astoria, Quincy, and Vincennes) and one Australian cruiser (Canberra). It was the worst allied naval disaster since Pearl Harbor.

As a gun captain, I was by my gun topside on the Astoria and directing my crew to fire everything they could at the enemy. We really couldn't tell if we were hitting anything or not. Range finding was done in the plotting room, where they sent signals to me so I could direct the others. A shell had exploded nearby, and I was wounded in the face and right leg by shrapnel. Finally, word came down to abandon ship. Wearing lifejackets, we went over the side. Some men jumped, and some climbed down the sea ladder. We had been trained always to get away from the ship as quickly as possible because of the vacuum created when it sinks. One of my buddies had been critically wounded, and he kept hollering, "Don't leave me! Don't run off and leave me!" Three of us put him on a rubber mattress and floated him for ten hours in the shark-infested water.

With a lot of time to think, wish and pray, I found myself asking, "Lord, why am I here? Why am I not laying out flat somewhere? Do you have something for me to do?" Though we were all bleeding, no sharks attacked. For our first two hours in the water, the battle raged on. We could hear gunfire and thought the Japanese were shooting survivors. Actually our destroyers were shooting sharks to keep them away from the men. The four of us survived because the Lord took care of us. Many men were lost that night, but all my crewmembers made it. To this day, I carry shrapnel in my face from those wounds.

While in the water, we were paddling toward land. But by the next morning, the tide had carried us at least 10 miles out to sea. A destroyer finally picked us up. I was so weak that I couldn't climb the sea ladder. They threw me a rope to put under my shoulders and then hoisted me up. It actually was a blessing that we didn't make it to land because we would have been captured. On the destroyer, they treated my wounds but told me others were worse off and needed the hospital. I said, "I understand that. Just take care of my wounds, and I'll be fine."

What really hurt was hitting the air after coming out of the saltwater. That really burned. Though I don't recall the name of the destroyer, I do remember praying, "Lord, you saved me. I'm aboard this ship. Thank you!"

For the sailors whose bodies were recovered, we held burials at sea. That was hard. I had been very close to one man in my division. We went on liberty together and attended church together. Many times, he was the first person I'd see in the morning. He was always hollering, "Hey, Joe, how you doing?" We always seemed to hold each other up and help each other in our times of need. It broke my heart when I lost him at Guadalcanal. When I think about those things now, more than 60 years later, it seems like yesterday. I can picture everything in my mind and remember how thankful I was to have survived.

The destroyer took us back to Pearl Harbor, where I was sent to the States. From Treasure Island in San Francisco, I went to Port Smith, Virginia, to put a CV-9 aircraft carrier in commission — the USS Essex. We did a shakedown cruise, went through Panama and rejoined the war in the Pacific. I was a first class gunner's mate in charge of the number one turret on the front of the ship with two twin 5-inch guns. My responsibilities included maintenance of the guns and supervision of my gun crew.

I stayed in the Navy for eight years after the war ended and went to the South Pole on the Byrd expedition. After my discharge, my wife and I became active in the church. I was ordained as a deacon. When we moved to Fort Worth, a group of men held revivals where I preached as a layman for a long time. After working eight hours, I'd drive about 75 miles to preach and then drive back the 75 miles to go to work again the next morning. I felt that was what the Lord wanted me to do. As a layman, I believed I could reach men a preacher could not touch. For some reason, men seem to be afraid of preachers.

Today, there are only 26 men left in my chapter of Pearl Harbor Survivors. If 12 or 13 men come to our meetings, we're doing well. Many of them are too sick or disabled to make it. During World War II, I felt like God was with me all the time. It was almost like He had His hand on my shoulder. I wasn't a guy who had been saved and then wandered a long way away. In the service, I always looked for a place to go worship. When you turn and call the Lord, He's there. He's as near as you want him to be. You can brush him aside, but He's still there.