

Veteran Duane Reyelts

Pearl Harbor Navy Man Narrowly Escaped USS Oklahoma, Went on to Fight Throughout Pacific

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

In recognition of the upcoming 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Senior Times is devoting its monthly World War II veteran tributes to survivors of the attack living in Florida. Featured this month is Navy Boatswain Warrant Officer Duane Reyelts of St. Augustine.

Duane Reyelts is stretched out deeply asleep in his bunk on this fresh Sunday morning, having stayed on duty until 4 a.m. the night before, when an alarming wake-up stings his ears.

“All hands, man your battle stations!” the ship’s address system calls.

Reyelts has been in the Navy for almost two years, joining soon after graduating from high school in rural Iowa in 1939. But like most everyone at Pearl Harbor, the seaman second class is green when it comes to combat scenarios.

He and a bunkmate groggily figure someone has returned to the ship drunk and accidentally pushed the general-quarters alarm.

This theory, though, doesn’t last long.

“All of a sudden, a bomb hit,” Reyelts, 94, recalls today from his St. Augustine home of the chaos thrust upon his 19-year-old self on Dec. 7, 1941, “and then we knew it was the real thing!”

Not even having time to dress, the signalman runs to his battle station on the USS Oklahoma’s second deck in only undershorts, men yelling all around him, his heart pounding. He climbs up the final ladder to his battle station when — *Krshoom!*

It feels as though the battleship has been lifted out of the water, and Reyelts is sent swinging around the ladder. But he rights himself and continues.

Already at the assigned battle-station compartment are his supervisor, Andy Sauer, and other signalmen — a job whose duties include communicating information to other ships and elsewhere via visual transmission, like flags and Morse code with lights.

As anti-aircraft fire booms outside, fear is obvious in the signalmen’s faces. And then — *Krshoom!* Another torpedo hit to the ship, which again jumps out of the water.

She’s now obviously listing, and water can be heard rushing through the bowels below.

Still awaiting orders from the bridge, the signalmen finally get them: head to the safety of the better-armored third deck.

As Reyelts starts out, he comes face to face with an awful sight: Bob Young, skin and clothing covered in blood. Young had been topside for the morning flag-raising when the attack began, and he got hit by maybe strafing or shrapnel. Young won’t make it, and neither will 428 others on board.

By the time Reyelts, Sauer and many others make it to the third deck, the ship is listing about 45 degrees and swiftly sinking to the bottom of the relatively shallow harbor.

“Our ship was ready for [an] admiral’s inspection Monday morning, so all the hatches were wide open,” Sauer, now deceased, would remember in a 1990 radio interview. “And that’s why we capsized so fast: because each torpedo would fill those



Duane Reyelts, 94, stands in front of his St. Augustine home. As a 19-year-old signalman aboard the battleship USS Oklahoma, Reyelts managed to escape the ship as it rolled over and sank in the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

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compartments with water.”

In the third deck, it’s dark because of losses to power, but one ray of light from a window provides the men with just enough to see. They’re clinging onto one another, trying to stay on the high part of the increasingly vertical compartment.

And then, the situation grows drastically worse. The ship reaches such a severe angle that one man loses his grip and slides into the watery and oily darkness that’s now the bottom of the room. And then another man. And another. And another.

The orders to abandon ship finally come, and Reyelts and Sauer are one of the first of many to begin moving up the compartment’s ladder to escape.

Now above the third deck, the swarm pushes by Reyelts, who at some point loses Sauer but hears someone else say, “This way!”

He heads toward the voice but doesn’t spot anyone, so he ends up alone. And this part of the Oklahoma is also dark. And

gaining a foothold is nearly impossible because of the capsizing.

“I was having quite a time,” he says today, “and I couldn’t figure out how I could get out of there.”

But holding onto whatever he can, Reyelts presses forward with discovering a way out, and finally, through the door to the nearby sickbay, he spots one: a porthole, larger there than elsewhere on the ship.

“I looked up there and saw that porthole,” he recalls. “I said, ‘That looks like the only way out of this thing right now.’”

Once he maneuvers through the door, he leans against the wall on the other side — now essentially the floor — and plots if and how he’ll be able to climb through the hole — on what’s now essentially the ceiling.

Shaking, Reyelts knows he has one chance and can’t fail because if he does, he’ll fall back through the door and slam into the wall-now-floor of the adjoining compartment.

But his strength carries him through: He grabs onto an iron



(Clockwise from left) A recovered Japanese aerial torpedo used in the attack on display today at Pearl Harbor. The USS Arizona Memorial, as seen from the battleship USS Missouri, now a permanent museum ship there. A picture of the USS Oklahoma in Reyelts' home.



bar, swings toward the porthole, does a mighty pull-up, and pops his head, shoulders and full body through.

The ship is now totally on its side, and Reyelts is standing on the starboard portion of the hull. The sights — most notably the USS Arizona, which exploded from a bomb hit to its forward magazine and when it's all over will have lost 1,177 sailors and Marines — are devastating.

But the gunfire close to him has ceased, so Reyelts has time to throw a line dangling from what had been the top deck into the porthole for others to escape with.

He doesn't see anyone follow his route, though. "I don't know how come I was all alone doing that. It seems strange."

Meanwhile, men are screaming in the oil-and-debris-covered water around the ship as a small boat zips around to pick them up. Some of them are burned so badly that their flesh slides off from the grips of their rescuers.

In deciding where to go, Reyelts labels two options: the

rescue boat and the nearby USS Maryland, which is still afloat.

But Reyelts doesn't have long to decide, for in the distance, more Japanese planes are making their approach. So he finally dismounts the Oklahoma by taking the long slide into the water, wiping oil from his face once he resurfaces.

"The main thing that helped me get off the ship and everything is I followed all the instructions I'd had in case we got into battle and when we had our drills," he remembers. "And I think that's exactly how come I got off of the ship OK."

He instantly eliminates the rescue-boat option because it has so many men hanging on its side that it's rolling and taking on water. So that leaves swimming to the Maryland, and as he makes the tiresome trek, the battleship's guns are firing at the oncoming planes.

Once Reyelts reaches the side of the Maryland, he finds a line to hold onto and rest. He then gives climbing a go, but his oily and wet hands drop him back into the water.

The USS Missouri at Pearl Harbor today. Between 1895 and 1944, the Navy finished 59 battleships: The Oklahoma was the 39th, and the Missouri was the final one.



The second attempt is also unsuccessful, but the third is a charm thanks to someone spotting him and making the climb shorter by pulling on the other end of the line.

Aboard the ship, he joins the others — including several more saved crewmembers from the Oklahoma — in the defense, hoping in a line that’s passing ammo to a 5-inch deck gun.

“Everybody was doing their job like it was a drill and not the real thing ‘cause that’s the way we were taught,” he recalls.

The Maryland’s position between the Oklahoma and Ford Island shields it from torpedo hits and overall makes it less easy of a target, and it will end up as the least damaged of the eight battleships there.

Once the attack lets up by 10 a.m., Reylets is finally able to get a full set of clothes — thanks to whoever left theirs in a wash bucket on the Maryland’s deck. “They were sitting there, and I pulled them out and put them on.”

He also gets his first undistracted look around the tragedy that will lead President Franklin Roosevelt to declare Dec. 7 as “a date which will live in infamy.” The tragedy that has killed 2,403 Americans. The tragedy that will launch the U.S. into the greatest armed conflict of all time.

There lies the Oklahoma, still now after rolling 135 degrees from eight torpedo hits within the first 10 minutes of the battle and nine total, so badly crippled that it, like the Arizona,



The USS Oklahoma memorial at Pearl Harbor was dedicated on Dec. 7, 2007, 66 years to the day after the ship sank from Japanese torpedo hits. The memorial's 429 marble columns represents all those killed on the ship in the attack.



won't return to service.

The thought of those still trapped inside makes Reyelts sick.

Indeed, the stories of sailors entombed alive that will emerge from the attack are hard to consider.

Men drowning before their rescuers, who can't carve out large enough holes in time. Blow torches accidentally igniting

pockets of gas, causing deadly explosions. Three unrescuable crewmembers inside the battleship USS West Virginia eerily banging on walls for what will total 16 days before they finally run out of air.

But 32 of the trapped will be successfully rescued from inside the Oklahoma.

"Suddenly, I was no longer a boy of [19] but had become a man," Reyelts wrote of the experience in 1969 in a short autobiographical account, a document that helps fill in his memory's gaps of an event that will hit its 75th anniversary in December.

"There was quite a few lives lost on the ship that didn't make it," he recalled from his home, "and I feel very fortunate that I

had gotten through it all after that bad attack, especially when you looked around the harbor afterward at all these other ships sunk and burning up.

"I felt pretty fortunate."

But Pearl Harbor wouldn't be the only iconic moment for Reyelts in World War II.

Without a ship after the attack, the signalman was immediately reassigned to the destroyer USS Dewey. (World War II destroyers were swift boats that protected others by quickly responding to enemy threats: dropping depth charges on submarines, launching anti-aircraft fire at planes or shooting at shoreline emplacements.)

The Dewey would go on to serve in many of the critical battles and campaigns in the Pacific, including Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

In his autobiographical account, Reylts wrote that the Dewey fired the first shot — at Japanese torpedo planes — of the Battle of Coral Sea, though this doesn't appear to be noted in other accounts of the battle.

Fought in May 1942, Coral Sea is most remembered for being the first-ever carrier-versus-carrier battle; being the first in which only planes, not ships, saw the opposing ships; and halting Japan's expansion in the Pacific northeast of Australia.

But the U.S. suffered a major loss in the battle: the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, which sunk after being hit by seven bombs and two plane-launched torpedoes. Most crewmembers were saved, though, including 112 plucked from the water by the Dewey.

"This was hard to take, as she was our gallant lady," Reylts wrote of losing the Lexington.

But out of all the hell in fighting, a different force emerged for Reylts as the most hellish: December 1944's Typhoon Cobra, which struck several dozen ships about 300 miles east of the island of Luzon in the Philippines. The violent storm pushed out gusts of up to 185 mph, sunk three U.S. destroyers, greatly damaged many others, destroyed 146 planes and killed 788 Americans.

"The worst battle I was in out there really was a typhoon," he said. "We lost three of our ships in that thing."

Aboard the Dewey, Reylts felt rolls of up to 75 degrees or more, and the ship lost its steering control, lights and power. At some points, it nearly collided with other ships in its fleet.

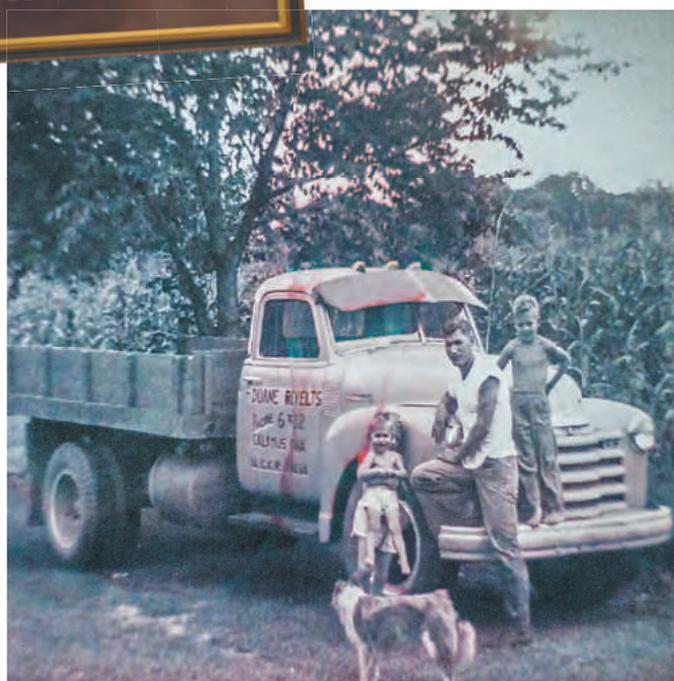
But overall, the Dewey made it through the war relatively unscathed, and Reylts returned to Hawaii at the conclusion, remaining there until he left the service in 1946 as a boatswain warrant officer. He and his wife, Doris, had their second son there, and they'd have four altogether, three of whom became Marines and the other a Navy man.

They'd also have many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren before Doris passed away in 2012.

For his career, Reylts worked at a creamery in Elsie, Michigan; with cars — building and selling — in Lansing; and did other jobs before retiring to Florida in 1987.



Reylts and his wife, Doris (left), had four sons, all of whom would join the military. Two of the sons — Robert (left) and Barry — stand beside Reylts outside his home and (below) are pictured with him as children.





In retirement, he's kept himself busy, serving as a custodian at his church, as a school crossing guard, and as the final state chairman for Florida of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association before the group disbanded nationwide in 2011 because of dwindling membership.

The high estimate of the number of living service members from the many, many thousands present for the attack is 2,300, said Rick Carrway, immediate past president of the Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors, which is now the primary organization carrying the torch of Dec. 7, 1941.

Past anniversaries attracted a good many survivors to Oahu, Carraway said, but the number has gradually shrunk in recent years. A few dozen, though, did still go for the 2015 anniversary, according to the Associated Press, and Carraway expects at least some to be there for the 75th this year.

Three living in Pensacola won't be able to make the journey, but Carraway said he plans to instead take them to the Na-

tional WWII Museum in New Orleans for a behind-the-scene tour and panel discussion.

"I don't think the 75th is the final anniversary of survivors showing up at Pearl Harbor, but is it the last [major] one?" he asked. "I think yes because the next biggest would be the 100th, and there won't be any there for that one."

In reflecting on the infamous attack, Reylets joked that talking about it — at schools, military events and the like — has "kinda got old after all these years." But nonetheless, "at my age, it is nice to be able to tell the story."

"You don't really forget it. [It's] something to remember," he said. "I just feel [good] that I made it, and I feel bad that some of them didn't." ■

If you know a WWII veteran in North Central Florida who would like to tell his or her story to Senior Times, please email Michael Stone at MichaelStone428@gmail.com.