

VETERAN CASS PHILLIPS | HOLIDAY TREE LIGHTING | HEALTHY EDGE

Senior Times

75 years after Pearl Harbor

*Survivor Cass Phillips
Reflects on That
Fateful Day*

DECEMBER 2016 seniortimesmagazine.com

PRRST STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #827
Gainesville, FL

INSIDE

HELPING ON THE HOLIDAYS

The Gift of Giving
Through Volunteering

MUSICA VERA

Holidays with a
Renaissance Twist

Veteran Cass Phillips

In Pearl Harbor Attack, Unarmed Navy Flyer Took Cover But Would Go On Offensive In The Pacific

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

In recognition of this month's 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Senior Times is devoting its World War II veteran tributes to survivors of the attack living in Florida. Featured here is Navy Lt. Cmdr. Cass Phillips of Pensacola.

It's the night of Dec. 6, 1941, and Cass Phillips and friend Bruce Smithy are winding down the Saturday evening out with two lady pals.

The two men, quite new to adulthood, are Navy radio operators for PBY Catalina seaplanes, which take off and land aquatically and patrol for enemy boats and subs with machine guns, depth charges and bombs.

Before taking the women home, they head to a beach near their base on the east side of the island, Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay. On the sand, maybe 20 yards away, is a group of people of Japanese appearance, celebrating.

"They were having a very riotous party out there — a lot of shooting firecrackers, fireworks of all kinds, lot of laughing, lot of talking," Phillips — 21 then, 96 today — remembered from his Pensacola home. "And it was more than just a casual meeting, we thought."

Indeed, Hawaii is home to a sizeable population of Japa-

nese-Americans, and as tensions between the two countries are at their boiling point, the U.S. military's top brass fears sabotage.

So after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and other Oahu military installations the next day, Phillips figures the beach party to be of a nefarious origin. "A little bit later, when we got to thinking, we couldn't help but believe that those people knew that the attack was going to happen the next morning."

On alternative theories to Pearl Harbor, Phillips said he does "see some validity" to the theory of foreknowledge of the attack — from the Japanese, which has been proven with at least one anecdote of a spy, but also from within the U.S.

A long-hypothesized theory is that the U.S. — namely President Franklin Roosevelt, who received a memo three days prior that suggested Hawaii as a potential conflict point — knew the

attack was coming but let it happen as a reason to enter the war and aid ally nations, especially embattled England.

"And I understand that, but the American people didn't want to go to war," Phillips said. "Consequently, [af-

ter Pearl Harbor] everybody wants to go to war, and they can all act as a group together and do the thing that's necessary to beat them, which fortunately we did."

But regardless of the backstage workings of the attack — which hits its 75th anniversary this month — Phillips doesn't remove the significance attached to it and continues to tell his story at schools and other organizations.

"So then we started to realize that someone was attacking us and for real."



Cass Phillips outside his Pensacola home. As a seaplane radio operator at Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Phillips endured Japan's surprise attack on Oahu 75 years ago.



(Left) Phillips and his wife, Lydia. He's in his Navy uniform (above) and, posing with a Catalina PBY seaplane crew (below), is second from right in the middle row.



“Special occasions like the attack on Pearl Harbor are significant enough that we need to remember them,” he said, “and we need to remember why they were important to us and what happened and why it happened. And we need to make sure that history stays true.”

Phillips’ story of Dec. 7 starts about 7 a.m., when the radio-man second class got cleaned up and dressed and headed from his barracks to the base’s exchange for food with Smithy.

As they walked, a plane flew in front of them.

“It was painted kind of dark green, had what we called meat-balls — round red circles — on the side and under the wings,” he recalled, describing the look of a Japanese fighter plane. “The Army had been having maneuvers for a couple of weeks before that, and we were used to that going on. So I commented to

[Smithy] that they were really making it look realistic.”

The two spotted another one, but they didn’t realize the true situation until after arriving at the exchange, where a worker directed them to look out a window toward a hangar. Smoke billowed up from it, and people were running in that direction.

“So then we started to realize that someone was attacking us and for real.”

Launched from its fleet north of Oahu that morning, Japan’s first of two waves of fighter, bomber and torpedo planes hit the airfields across the island first before striking the ships in the harbor at the island’s south end.

Except for the small auxiliary Haleiwa Field, all Oahu airfields — Bellows Field, Ewa Marine Corps Air Station, Ford Island Naval Air Station, Hickam Field, Kaneohe and Wheeler

Field — will be attacked by strafing and bombing and will suffer at least one death each.

At the sight of the attack, Phillips and Smithy headed toward the hangar. There, they found wounded personnel, a bomb hole in the hangar's roof, and several damaged or destroyed PBVs (only three — ones that were out on patrol — of the 36 there will be flyable by the attack's end).

Japan's first swipe at the base had ended, so Phillips helped transport wounded by vehicle to the nearby dispensary and moved the less damaged planes away from burning ones.

But then, "someone looked up toward the north," Phillips remembered, "and they said, 'Here they come again!'"

Kaneohe's guns that could be wielded by hand weren't readily accessible, he said, and neither were ground mounts needed to properly fire the PBVs' large machine guns.

"You try to hold it and shoot it and hit anything, forget it, because you can't hold it steady enough to do that," Phillips said of using the guns without a stand.

But one man, Chief Petty Officer John Finn, found a machine gun on a makeshift mount made of pipes and, in the open, fired until the attack ended.

"He stood out there during the entire second attack firing at those planes, being wounded I believe it was 22 times, wouldn't leave, stayed there, and consequently, he was given the Medal of Honor, which he absolutely deserved," Phillips said of Finn, whom he knew of but not personally.

(Finn, who died in 2010, was the first of the war to receive the U.S.'s highest military honor. Of the 15 who'd eventually receive it for actions at Pearl Harbor, 14 were rescue efforts while Finn's was the only one for combat.)

Not having anything to shoot with himself, Phillips headed for cover in a concrete compartment within the damaged hangar.

"Well sure enough, while we were there, they dropped a bomb right in the middle of the hangar again, and it blew," he said.

From his position, Phillips could see a man sitting elsewhere in the hangar when the bomb hit.

"He kind of stood up, and then he sat right back down. And he didn't move anymore," Phillips recalled. "So after that bomb had gone off and after the whole thing was over ... we started checking people. He's still sitting there and not moving.

"So what had happened when that bomb went off, a very, very tiny piece of shrapnel went into his chest directly into his

heart, and he was killed instantly."

The young man was one of 20 people at Kaneohe — and one of 2,403 overall — killed in the attack, which ended by 10 a.m., about two hours after it began.

Many others were left with terrible injuries, including a man Phillips tended to before he was taken to a medical facility.

"His leg was really torn up, and he couldn't get comfortable," Phillips said. "And so he would say, 'Move my leg,' and so I would kind of move it. He'd say, 'Oh, that's better.' But almost immediately, it would start hurting again."

All the while, the potential for another attack kept apprehension high.

"We thoroughly expected them to come back, and we thought they'd maybe invade," Phillips said. "But luckily and happily, that did not happen."

In preparation, one person's snap decision was for everyone at Kaneohe to dip their white clothing in a pot of tea.

"What that did was dye them" a brownish color, Phillips said, "and that was supposed to be a camouflage."

He wore his clothes wet the rest of the day.

Later, another radioman delivered what he thought to be an important alert.

"Men, men," he says, "I've sniffed the mist, and it's gas!" Phillips remembered. "Well, what it really was was this ... fog that forms in the evening

out there at certain spots in low areas."

That night, a rainy and cold one, the anxiety didn't relent, and it led to friendly fire against U.S. forces.

Six F4F Wildcat fighter planes from the USS Enterprise — which like the other two aircraft carriers in the Pacific had been out to sea during the attack — were searching for the Japanese fleet. With the loss of daylight and fuel, they were forced to make emergency landings on Ford Island in the harbor, but in the day's confusion, U.S. forces opened fire.

Five of the six planes were shot down, and three of the six pilots died.

Maybe two or three days after the attack, Phillips flew aboard one of the few operational PBVs to Ford Island. From up high, he got a full look at the blow delivered to the Pacific Fleet: 16 damaged ships plus three — the battleships Arizona and Oklahoma and the old target ship Utah — struck so badly they'd never return to service.

“He stood out there during the entire second attack firing at those planes, being wounded I believe it was 22 times, wouldn't leave, stayed there, and consequently, he was given the Medal of Honor, which he absolutely deserved.”



(Clockwise from top) Phillips' Pearl Harbor Survivors Association shirt and hat. Visitors inside the USS Arizona Memorial in 2015. The World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument sign at the entrance at the park at Pearl Harbor. The outside of the USS Arizona Memorial.





(Top) A statue honoring Chester Nimitz, who commanded U.S. forces in the Pacific, at the entrance of the USS Missouri Memorial at the harbor. (Bottom) Oil still leaks today from the battleship Arizona, which serves as a tomb for those killed in her as well as survivors who later elected to be interred with their shipmates.



“The damage and seeing those ships on their side and on their top — it was really a sorry sight to see and something that made you feel terrible,” Phillips said.

They were ships that he’d seen plenty of time in their full glory.

In 1938, soon after graduating high school in Riverside, California, Phillips joined the Navy at age 18 and became a radioman aboard the USS Argonne, an old transport and support ship.

At some point prior to the attack, the Argonne moved from the States to Pearl Harbor, putting Phillips among the Pacific Fleet’s build-up in Hawaii as Japanese-American tensions grew.

But with ambitions for aviation, Phillips requested and received a transfer to join a flight squadron. So he was sent to VP-11 on Ford Island before the squadron moved to Kaneohe.

In February 1942, two months after the attack, Phillips was accepted to pilot school and headed to the mainland for training. This likely saved his life, for on April 5, the crew he’d been a radioman for accidentally crashed their PBY amid bad weather into a hillside at Makapu’u Point at Oahu’s southeastern tip.

After graduating as a pilot that July, Phillips joined squadron VP-61 and eventually headed for Alaska’s Aleutian Islands, two of which — Attu and Kiska — were held by the Japanese.

Along with the duties of strafing, bombing and dropping depth charges on enemy vessels, the PBYs — larger planes with crews of seven to 10 — had the tasks of reconnaissance and landing on water to rescue downed airmen.

Another thing Phillips recalls them doing: dropping propaganda leaflets over eastern Asia meant to demoralize the Japanese forces.

“Like the [kiri] leaf, which falls at a certain time, the bombs from the United States will come and drop on you,” he remembered one leaflet saying.

Phillips said his PBY hit one Japanese ship in the Aleutians with depth charges, immobilizing it until it could be captured by a U.S. boat.

The U.S. had the Aleutian Islands fully cleared by August 1943, and Phillips eventually moved on to fighting in the far Pacific, including over waters off the Philippines and New Guinea, where he switched to piloting the similar PBM Mariner.

Phillips recalls his plane bombing two ships, which burned up from the blasts, but another incident turned more visibly gory.

Patrolling over Philippine waters, the crew came across three rafts carrying maybe eight to 10 Japanese each near

Japan-occupied islands. The plane radioed back to base and received orders to strafe the rafts.

Phillips' navigator didn't want the plane to follow through. "They had a lot of professors and so forth who learned to navigate. He was standing right over my shoulder [and said], 'Cass, don't do this. Please don't do it.' But I couldn't listen to him."

"Those people were virtually defenseless," he added, "but they're going over toward [a Japanese-controlled island]. And if they get over there, somebody's going to have to kill 'em over there or fight them or be killed by them."

So Phillips took the plane in, and the crew opened fire, killing many or all on the rafts before the base ordered the cease-fire, red from blood visible from the plane.

He didn't feel remorse for the ship and raft attacks.

"That was our job then," Phillips said. "You can't afford to worry about them. That's your job. War is killing people. That's all war is — nothing more. If you can kill them faster than they kill you, you're going to win."

Rotated off the front lines, Phillips was at his parents' home in California when the war ended. He found out about 3 a.m. from his sister and brother-in-law, who shook him out of bed.

"What are you doing in bed? Get out of there," they said. "Don't you know the war is over?"

He stayed in the Navy as a career officer, remaining stateside during Korea and the beginning of Vietnam and leaving in 1960 as a lieutenant commander.

He retired to the Navy-rich city of Pensacola with his wife, Lydia, whom he met as she served in the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES, during the war.

Once golf and boats lost their excitement, he got into real estate and operated laundrettes before he eventually really

retired. He and Lydia, who haven't moved in their 56 years in Pensacola, have two children, three grandkids, and four great-greats.

In retirement, he became active in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, which once had a large Pensacola contingent but is now down to three: Phillips; the battleship Pennsylvania's Frank Emond, who was the oldest member of the ship's band at the time of the attack and is now its only living survivor; and Marine William Braddock, who was on duty on Ford Island during the attack.

Though members like those in Pensacola stay friends, the association disbanded in 2011 as membership has dwindled

"Anybody who's been a victim of these sorts of attacks, you want to learn from their living links to these major events."

(the estimated high mark of living survivors is 2,300 from the roughly 84,000 service members there for the attack).

"Anybody who's been a victim of these sorts of attacks, you want to learn from their living links to these major events," said George Esenwein, a University of Florida associate professor of history who teaches courses on World War II. "And I think we also want to honor them in the sense they had to withstand the pressures of war in ways that most of us never have to."

Those who took part in another great hardship during the war, the invasion of Normandy, somewhat knew the struggles that lay ahead, Esenwein said.

"But the people at Pearl Harbor were taken off guard," he said. "So the victims here were obviously the sailors and others who were in the harbor and who were just completely unaware of this potential threat."

Yet throughout the years, Phillips has never come to consider himself a hero.

"They call you one, and they say they think you are," he said. "But, of course, we who just happened to be there when it happened, we did what we could and what our job was and that was about it.

"That doesn't make you a hero."

While still enshrining the trials of that day, Phillips' priority has remained on what can be learned from them.

"To think that we allowed that to happen — that's really the bad part is to know that our people who should've known, should've done something, should've had people ready for that didn't," he said. "You can't just forget that." ■



WHEN IT COMES TO SKIN CANCER, IS YOUR *mind at ease?*

Our board certified dermatologists are experts in the effective removal of melanoma. Schedule a consultation today and start off the new year with added peace of mind.

(352) 332-4442
www.gainesvilleflderm.com

GAINESVILLE DERMATOLOGY & SKIN SURGERY