

Carrier remembers Pearl Harbor bombing



Retired Fort Smith, AR Branch 399 member Harold Mainer remembers the details of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. It's not something the 95-year-old would forget—because he was in the middle of it.

The surprise assault that brought the United States into World War II would send Mainer across the Pacific and then into its waters after the Japanese sank his ship nearly two years later.

Mainer had joined the Navy in October 1940 at age 19 after working in the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. He was about to be drafted into the Army, so he volunteered for the Navy instead because he liked it better.

He was assigned to the *U.S.S. Helena*, a light cruiser, but he missed the ship's departure from California and had to hitch a ride on the battleship *U.S.S. West Virginia* to rejoin his crew in Hawaii.

The *Helena* was one of more than 100 ships moored at the dock in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, a day Mainer

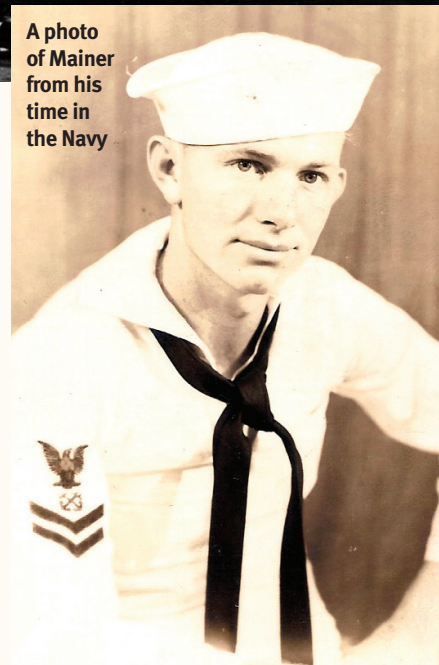
recalls as if it were yesterday.

"That morning, we had breakfast, and a buddy of mine was fixing to go ashore and celebrate his birthday," he said. Standing on the *Helena's* deck a few minutes before 8 a.m., he and his friend saw bombs exploding, first in the water, then at the airfield at Ford Island in the middle of the harbor and then among the ships docked near the *Helena*. Then they spotted the airplanes bearing the Japanese rising-sun insignia flying overhead.

That's when officials sounded general quarters, he recalled. Mainer ran to a position higher on deck to direct anti-aircraft fire.

"I was watching for planes and hollering where they were coming from," he said. The *Helena* was docked near Battleship Row and, from his position, he saw the battleship *U.S.S. Arizona* suffer a huge explosion and sink in the middle of the harbor 15 minutes into the attack after bombs hit her magazine. He also witnessed the battleship *U.S.S. Oklahoma* capsize after absorbing

A photo of Mainer from his time in the Navy



several torpedo hits.

Less than two minutes after general quarters was sounded, before Mainer and his crewmates could begin shooting back, a Japanese torpedo blasted a hole in *Helena's* starboard (right) side. Tied next to her was the *U.S.S. Ogala*, a wooden-hulled mine-layer, that was nearly blasted apart by the impact of the

U.S.S. Helena



Harold Mainer



explosion and had to be towed away so the *Helena* wouldn't be trapped against the dock. Though seriously damaged, the *Helena* remained afloat and her crew shot back at the Japanese planes until the attack ended.

The *Helena* lost 35 men in the attack. One was a sailor whose body was shredded by shrapnel, leaving blood on the deck. After the Japanese bombers had left, the chief boatswain's mate handed Mainer a water hose. "He told me to wash the blood off the deck of the ship," he said. "I asked him who it was, and he said, 'I didn't tell you who it was, I said clean it up.'"

Despite the chief's attempt to hide the identity of the dead man, Mainer recognized a shoe from the sailor as belonging to one of his best friends.

"Every man and officer observed on this ship conducted himself in a meritorious and exemplary manner" during the attack, the *Helena's* commanding officer wrote in a report to the Navy. "All were cool, determined, resourceful, vigorous and individually and collectively conducted themselves with no hint of confusion or hysteria and with no thought of danger to themselves."

Mainer said he was too busy to be frightened during the attack. "You don't know whether you're scared or not, because you're doing what you were trained to do," he said. "But that night, we got word that some more planes were coming in and that's when I got scared." But there was no second wave of Japanese planes attacking—the arriving planes were American.

The *Helena* was patched up and limped under its own power to California for repairs. It was back in action in six weeks, with Mainer still aboard. The *Helena* went on to fight 16 major engagements.

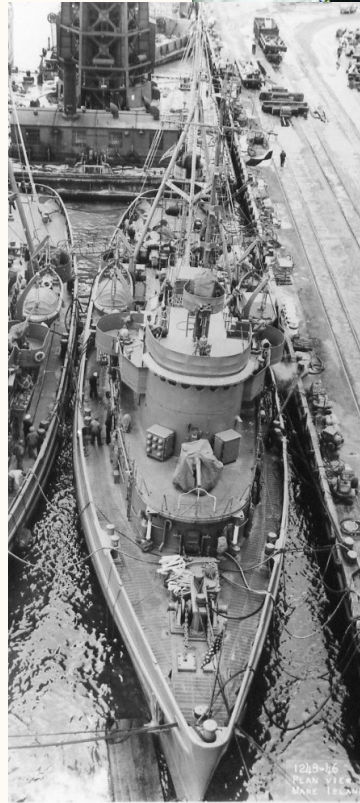
In 1943, on their way to defend

Marines invading the Solomon Islands, Mainer and other sailors aboard his ship heard Tokyo Rose—the voice of an English-speaking woman who taunted U.S. sailors over Japanese radio broadcasts—say that the *Helena's* task group of three cruisers and four destroyers should turn back or risk being sunk. For the *Helena*, Tokyo Rose turned out to be right.

Early in the morning of July 6, the American fleet encountered a group of Japanese warships. The *Helena* had run out of flashless gunpowder, which emits little light and conceals a ship's position at night. The ship bravely shot its guns using regular powder, lighting up the sky, betraying its position and attracting two Japanese torpedoes that sank her within 20 minutes.

"I stayed in the water four hours before they picked me up," Mainer said. He was lucky—some survivors spent up to 11 days in waters full of enemy ships, and some of those wounded in the attack died in the water. The engagement became known as the Battle of Kula Gulf.

After his rescue, Mainer was assigned to the *U.S.S. Munsee*, an ocean tug. When the war ended, he



U.S.S. Munsee

stayed with the *Munsee* to salvage ships near Okinawa until he was discharged in January of 1947. "I spent six years, two months and 27 days in the Navy," he said.

Fresh out of the Navy, Mainer worked a few jobs until landing a job at the Post Office Department in Oklahoma in 1951. "I started in California and didn't get any further than Oklahoma City," he said. After a few years of carrying the mail in Oklahoma, he transferred to Fort Smith, AR, near his birthplace, and carried

the mail until he retired in 1982. He still lives near Fort Smith.

Though his memory is sharp and he is proud of his Navy service, Mainer says sometimes forgetting some of the events of Dec. 7, 1941, and of the war that followed is a blessing, too. "I'll talk about it," he said, "but the bad part about it I try not to think about." **PR**