

# MY INTRODUCTION TO WAR

Howard S. Reeves

I joined the US Navy August 13, 1940, and retired from the Navy in 1970, having served thirty years. I am now seventy-three years old, but the battle of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941, remains vivid in my memory.

There were four of us sailors from Paducah, Kentucky, on board the *USS Medusa* moored between two buoys in Middle Loc, Pearl Harbor, near the Pearl City landing. One was my brother L.W. Reeves.

Other ships in Middle Loc were four World War I destroyers, converted to mine sweepers, about fifty yards to our port, and the *USS Curtis*, a seaplane tender, about fifty yards to starboard. The old mine sweepers had just been outfitted with water-cooled fifty caliber machine guns, which are very effective against low flying airplanes. The *USS Curtis* was a new ship and had 5 inch-25 anti-aircraft guns, not very effective against low flying airplanes. (Five inch means diameter of the bore; 25 is a length-of-barrel formula.) The *Medusa* was an old ship with four surface, bag powder, 5 inch-51s useless against airplanes, and two 3 inch-50 anti-aircraft guns, one forward and one aft. My gun station was pointer on the forward, starboard 5 inch 51. (Pointer elevates the gun, controls the horizontal cross hairs, and fires the gun.)

My daily job as a seaman first class was coxswain of a fifty foot diesel motor launch with a crew of four. My motor launch was in the Navy Yard boat yard for periodical maintenance and was scheduled to be completed and launched on 8 December. On Sunday morning, 7 December 1941, I had scheduled last minute touch up work on the boat and was on the quarter deck waiting for an early boat to take us to work. I had a few minutes to wait, so I went below to purchase a Sunday paper and get something from my locker, two decks below. I was near my locker when the first bomb exploded.

This first bomb was close enough to shake the ship violently, rattling tools in the shop one deck above me. The general alarm went off and over the PA system came the word to man battle stations, this is no s. . .!

Pocket battle ships had been in the news lately and my first thoughts were that we were being fired on by surface ships outside the harbor. I had to run up one deck, through the shop with the rattling tools, cross an open steel deck to the port side and up to a teak wood deck to my gun station. It was while running across this wood deck that I first saw bullets striking the deck in front of me and behind me. I looked over my left shoulder and saw a very low plane crossing the ship with the rear gunner firing his machine gun at me. It has been over fifty-two years, but I can still remember the grinning mouth beneath the goggles and flying helmet. As a twenty-year old, this was my introduction to war.

The *USS Medusa* had just recently returned from a gun practice at sea and still had ammunition stored in top side ready boxes. The two 3 inch guns were able to start firing immediately. My gun, being a surface gun, was useless against airplanes, so we were put to work passing ammo to the 3 inch. We received several near misses; one member of my crew was struck by shrapnel. I saw the 3 inch gun explode a plane directly over my ship and saw the old mine sweeps down a plane directly to our port bow. This plane landed in the water; a man got

out and was shot while swimming from it. A burning plane struck the smokestack of the *USS Curtis* and she received a bomb hit through her hanger deck. With the *Curtis* burning fiercely my gun crew was ordered back to our gun to fire on a midget submarine that had surfaced off our starboard quarter in torpedo firing position to target the *Curtis*. The *Curtis* was firing at the submarine, but it was so close that their guns could not depress this low. The mine sweeps directed their machine guns on the sub, but the bullets only ricocheted off the hull. My gun was loaded, I had the conning tower of the sub in my sight, and was waiting for my gun captain to order me to fire when the 3 inch gun behind me fired and I immediately saw a hole appear in the conning tower. In the meantime, an alert signalman on the bridge had hoisted the flag signal of submarine attack. A destroyer coming down the channel veered off and rammed the sub. When I was ordered to fire, it was too late; in my sights was the stern of the destroyer, dropping depth charges on the sub. I later heard they salvaged the sub and found the 3 inch shell had killed the conning tower officer of the two-man sub. The *Medusa* received credit for downing two planes and the sub.

Battleship row was across Ford Island from us but we could see the masts of the ships. When the *USS Arizona* exploded, there was not a loud explosion, just a fireball and shock wave. I timed the capsizing of the *USS Utah* from torpedo hit at fifteen minutes.

The battle was over in a few minutes, but a solid black cloud from all the explosions and burning ships remained for some time. We were on our guns all day and all night, and on 8 December I was ordered to launch my boat and we started salvage operations.

