

A torpedo, then darkness at Pearl Harbor

An interview by David Venditta Of The Morning Call, December 7, 1999

Pittsburgh native James W. Murdy moved to Allentown in 1936 and joined the Navy four years later to learn a trade. His father saw him off, saying, "You go in that Navy and get kicked out for any reason at all, don't you ever come back to my house."

Young Murdy was assigned to the light cruiser USS Helena and became an electrician third class. On Saturday, Dec. 6, 1941, the Helena replaced the battleship USS Pennsylvania at Pearl Harbor's repair dock. A minelayer, the USS Oglala, tied up alongside the Helena. The next morning, Murdy was up early.



Former Sailor James W. Murdy of Allentown in November 1999. (Morning Call file photo)

A bunch of us were chewing the fat in the electrical shanty, roughly amidships two decks down, when they called away general quarters. All hands had to go to their battle stations. It was 7:57.

I started running down a passageway to my station, which was forward of the anchor windlass room. I was mumbling: Why the hell were they doing this to us? We'd been at sea for two weeks playing around with those guns. Why should we have to be doing this on a Sunday morning?

Half a minute after general quarters, all the lights went out on the ship, and I felt a swaying. It was like you're on some kind of vessel and you go against a wharf, and the wharf gives. I didn't know it at the time, but that was when a torpedo hit the forward engine room.

I was in a passageway going through a sleeping quarters. That taught me what it must be like to be blind. I couldn't see. I was feeling my way around, hanging on to bunks.

But I was not afraid. I knew what I had to do.

When a ship goes in darkness, it's an electrician's job to make his way to the nearest generator and get that thing on line. I knew which way to go, so I just kept working my fingers down this bulkhead toward the forward diesel generator.

I started to see a little bit of light and had just put my leg over a hatch when I heard the diesel start to rattle -- rab rab rab rab. Then the power came back on. Two guys in a forward compartment had gotten the diesel going in less than two minutes.

Above me, a 5-inch anti-aircraft gun came to life, BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! She was really popping them.

I went right to my general quarters repair-party station, where I was in a small compartment by myself. A first-class petty officer came in, and I said, "Hey buddy, what happened?"

He said, "You damn fool, we're being bombed by the Japanese!"

"We are?" I said. "What the hell did we do to them?"

He looked at me with disgust.

Being two decks down, I never saw or heard any Japanese planes.

But soon I felt something else happen to the ship. A 500-pound bomb had hit the water and blown up, right by the hatch where I'd come up. It missed the ship by not more than 18 inches.

Later I found out that five or six men were killed when the torpedo hit the forward engine room. The hatch at the top of the room was open. When the torpedo went in, the flame exhausted itself up through the hatch, then up through two ladders to topside. Anybody who was in that area was catching temperatures of 2,000 degrees. That's why we lost people. It was "flash burn," and it's murder on sailors.

One guy told me that he was about 25 feet aft of the engine room. The impact lifted him off the deck about

18 inches.

Right above that area was the ship's library. When the torpedo hit, one guy standing at a table flew up and hit the overhead, and it killed him.

Over in a corner there was a large settee, where one Jackson boy was on one side and one was on the other. They got flash burn and were taken to the hospital. They survived, but when they came back, their faces were pitted from the burning.

A guy was on a "quad 40," a mount that has four 40mm guns. He was supposed to "train," or turn, the mount right or left. There was a plane coming in, and the bosun mate in charge of that gun hollered, "Train!" But the guy didn't move. They figured he was frightened. "Train, damn you, train!" the bosun mate yelled and hauled off and hit him across the shoulder. The guy fell down on the deck.

He was dead. I was told he had seven machine-gun bullets down his belly. He was on the gun when the planes first came in, and they shot him.

A fella was supposed to be in the high No. 4 turret. He was climbing the ladder to get there, saw a plane coming in and hesitated to watch it. A bomb fell on the Oglala, and parts of the shell flew and tore off his shoulder. He fell dead on the deck.

We had a man named Hamilton, a first-class electrician who'd been in the Navy about 10 or 12 years. His brother, only 17, wanted to be with him, so they put him aboard in the Electrical Division. He had been with us only two or three weeks.

The boy's bunk was on the other side of mine. He was there before the attack, when I went to the electrical shanty.

About 10 o'clock his older brother said to me, "Did you see my brother, Jim?"

"Yeah, he was in his bunk."

He said, "I think that kid's down in that engine room. That was his general quarters station."

"I don't think he had time to get out there," I said.

But evidently he got out of his bunk after I left, got dressed and at general quarters went forward into that engine room, and that torpedo came through and killed him.

Two weeks went by, and we were in dry dock.

A lieutenant from the base went down to inspect the engine room. He was on a walkway and started to slide, and he reached over to grab a stanchion to keep himself from falling.

But it was Hamilton's brother's arm. The boy had floated over a steam line.

When the lieutenant pulled on the arm, the boy plopped onto the deck in front of him. So they got him into a bag and brought him up and called for Hamilton to lay down to the electrical shanty, where I happened to be.

"We think we have your brother here," they told him.

The boy's hand was sticking out from the bag.

"Yeah, that's my brother. I can tell by the ring on his finger."

"Do you want to see his face?"

"No, I don't want to see it," Hamilton said. "I don't want to see it."

The torpedo that struck the Helena had gone underneath the Oglala, never touched it, because that ship only drew about 7 feet of water. But the concussion blew a hole in the old Oglala, and she sank. They cut the lines that tied her to the cruiser.

The Helena settled about 5 feet because of all that water in her. Later, when they got her in dry dock, they had to cut out some of her ribs to get at the damage. Maybe one-and-a-half to two Mack trucks could've driven in alongside of each other.

For me, the great battle of Pearl Harbor lasted 15-20 minutes, then the Japanese went on to other targets.

When general quarters was secured about two hours later, I went up a ladder and opened a hatch, and I

couldn't believe what I saw.

There was the battleship USS Oklahoma upside down, and there were men walking on the bottom of it.

The battleship USS Arizona was burning.

In the old days, the sky used to be so red around the steel mills. But I never saw a steel mill that was as red as the Arizona burning.

It burned for three days.

The Helena's old man took the horn and announced, "Gentlemen, we had a rough time today. We had 35 men killed, and there's 105 men put in the hospital, and there's a number of those who are not going to survive.

"This is probably going to be a long war. And the one thing I will tell you is: Make your every move count. We will win! But make your every move count!"

A few months later, Murdy came home on leave and was interviewed by The Morning Call. "Savage assault by Japanese Dec. 7 Jim Murdy's first taste of action," the headline said March 6, 1942.

"The family had no inkling that he was en route home ... until he walked in on them Monday morning at 1 o'clock. So surprised was his mother that on seeing her son, she was under the impression that she was still asleep and that it was a nightmare.

"After full awakening, her pleasure naturally knew no bounds."

Murdy left the Helena to attend Naval Mine Warfare School and spent the rest of the war aboard a mine-sweeper. He was discharged in March 1946 as a chief electrician's mate, the highest rank he could attain as an enlisted man.

The Helena was sunk by a torpedo during a night battle with a Japanese destroyer. About 260 men were lost.

Murdy worked part time at Donmoyer Electric and full time at Bethlehem Steel Corp., where he retired in 1983 after 35 years. He and his wife, Mary, live in

South Allentown and have a son, James A. Murdy, two daughters, Rosemary Murdy-Haber and Patricia Murdy-Cressman, a granddaughter and a step-granddaughter.

In the 1970s, Murdy returned to Pearl Harbor for a visit. He is 81 and president of the Lehigh Valley-Pocono Chapter No. 5, Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. Dick Schimmel of Allentown is vice president, and Paul Moyer of Quakertown is financial secretary. The group has about 22 members.

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