

10/08/1999
Veteran's Memories
Veterans NF-19
The Arizona Republic

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN
THE JAN 19, 1942 LETTER TO
PASS CENSORSHIP

Dear Veteran editor:

I graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis on February 7, 1941 and was ordered to report to the battleship West Virginia at Pearl Harbor. I had the duty as Junior Officer of the Deck and so was on board during the Japanese attack the morning of December 7, 1941.

The attached letter dated January 19th 1942 was addressed to my father, Captain Frank H. Kelley, USN (Naval Academy Class of 1910) who, at the time, was evacuating British civilians from Singapore as skipper of the navy's newest troop transport, the West Point.

The letter dated Jan 19, 1942 was the first opportunity I had after the blitz to sit down and write a letter to Dad. I knew that as a senior officer he would have better means to get my messages to mother and the rest of the family than I would have. Also by addressing them to the commanding officer of a ship, they had a better chance of not being held up by the censors. We had been warned that any letters that even hinted at revealing classified information (and almost everything was classified) would simply be trash canned without feedback to the writer. By writing to a senior combat officer, I was able to use the Clipper mail rather than the snaillike ship mail system.

Dad at the time (unbeknownst to me) was having his own problems. He had taken the West Point, unescorted by destroyers (they couldn't have kept up with her without frequent, and dangerous, refueling) into Singapore harbor to evacuate British civilians during an aerial bombardment by the Japanese. The West Point received one hit but with minor damage and was able to make it out with a full load of British including one woman who gave birth shortly after getting on board. Dad got a well deserved medal for this mission.

Definitions:

"G.Q." is general quarters or the bugle call to man your battle stations. Ensign Roman Brooks, to give it more emphasis, said on the loudspeaker system "General Quarters, No Shit!" I was scheduled to relieve Brooks at 0800, but G.Q. automatically changed that.

"fish" is, of course, torpedo (we received 7 of these specially designed aerial torpedos with enormous war heads) I played a role in determining the size of the warheads by transferring the name plate of an unexploded one found later during unwatering (raising) the West Virginia. The Japanese maid of my Honolulu girl friend (and later wife for 50 years) translated it for me, and I passed this info to my sister's husband, Joe Pearson, who was in Naval Intelligence in Honolulu.

"condition Zed" making the ship ready to receive battle damage (closing doors and hatches, setting up firehoses, etc. etc.

"D.C.O." damage control officer. LCDR Harper, my boss was third in command and with the skipper dead and the executive officer having abandoned ship in his pajamas at about 0830, Harper was now skipper. Harper saw me holding the water tight door closed against three men who were frantically trying to undog it from the other side and nodded approval, thus easing my guilt somewhat, over the death of these three, whose bodies we found after raising the ship in June, 1942.

"dog" the heavy latches surrounding the periphery of a water tight door.

"sound powered phone" The West Virginia had one experimental telephone circuit to the damage control parties (the men distributed about the ship who did the counterflooding of compartments on the high side). This is the only phone circuit that worked since the others were powered by a lead-acid battery that was flooded with salt water.

"bilged" flooded with water.

"counterflood" deliberately flooding intact compartments on the high side of a listing ship to reduce the list. The Oklahoma with the identical torpedo damage as the West Virginia rolled over with a heavy loss of life because they apparently were unable to set condition "Zed" and failed or were unable (no sound powered phones) to counterflood. We counterflooded so severely that we sank to the bottom of Pearl Harbor. But fortunately it was not deep enough to submerge the upper decks.

"escape tube"-Central Station was the lowest compartment in the ship-just above the double bottoms. The deck

above us was completely flooded, but fortunately for this letter writer and 39 other men there was a slender (30 inch) tube for electrical cables running vertically to the conning tower above the bridge of the ship. This tube had crude steel ladder rungs making it possible to escape to the unflooded portion of the ship above the water level, however this operation took over an hour and when the DCO and I took our turn (last, naturally) the compartment had only a one foot bubble of air left.

"first looney" another derogatory expression for the Damage control Officer.

"no mean pigeon" an obscure expression for "difficult".

"overhang" The West Virginia had four sixteen inch gun turrets. To counteract the weight of these enormous rifles there was an overhang at the rear of the turret which provided a shielded space on deck of roughly 20 feet by 15 feet.

Note: we were very lucky that the bomb hitting turret 3 did not explode since this was the corresponding bomb that apparently blew up the Arizona's powder magazines. The Japanese had made these bombs from 18" armor piercing shells. They went through the 9 inch armored turret tops without resistance and penetrated all the way down to the powder and shell magazines at the bottom of the ship. I believe that the same complement of bombs and torpedoes was selected for each battleship.

"Solace motor launch" The Solace was a hospital ship that had no damage. Her motor boats and launches cruised the harbor picking up survivors. Those that were wounded were taken back to the Solace, the rest of us were taken to the officers landing.

"Boyntons"-friends of Dad and Mother who had a daughter with one of the Honolulu newspapers.

"oke" - a native drink called Okolehau. The island was dry by martial law for several months after Pearl Harbor.

"kamaaina"-a residence of the islands for least 7 years. Before that time, you were a "malihini".

"War Plans and Operations"- my temporary job while awaiting orders to a new destroyer. I manned a top secret telephone circuit linking the several war operations offices at Pearl Harbor- the decoding office, the several fleet command headquarters, the Army radars, the ship movement plotting office, etc. etc. While the job sounds like nothing more than a "telephone talker" we had to use our own judgement on which info, among much gibberish and routine data to pass on to the duty officer. The job was considered too sensitive for enlisted men.

Ranks of officers were not to be mentioned, so I mention a few admirals who were friends of Dad. Stedman was the original civilian captain of the West Point (then named "America". When the navy took over the ship they made Dad the skipper and Stedman the exec. In spite of this demotion, they became good friends for the rest of their lives. The reasoning was that the civilian skippers of merchant ships would not have the requisite background in communications, gunnery, strategy and tactics of career naval officers.

The second letter, dated March 23, 1942, is of less historic interest than the January 19th letter, but adds further information about some of the senior officers known to dad. The captain of the West Virginia, Mervin Bennion, was killed in the attack and was a classmate of my father's. Vice Admiral Calhoun ("uncle Bill") was a good friend of the family and as Commander Service Forces, Pacific Fleet had a critical job for the rest of war. Captain Earle was Chief of Staff to Admiral Kimmel, who was later court martialed for his actions (or lack thereof) before the attack.

Not mentioned in these letters (and I am appalled at this omission) was that dad's brother, then Commander Bruce Kelley, was gunnery officer of the battleship Arizona, and had escaped certain death by swapping duties with the first lieutenant of the Arizona (who was killed) the night before the blitz. While both the Arizona and the West Virginia received identical ordnance from the Japanese (three 18" bombs converted from battleship armor piercing ammunition and seven torpedos), the Arizona was unlucky enough to have one of the bombs penetrated to the powder magazines near the bottom of the ship.

I include a copy of the envelope from the later letter, which may be of interest since it shows the censor's stamp and the "Via Clipper airmail" designation.

Archie P. Kelley
Capt. USN (Retired)
18526 Amarado Circle
Rio Verde, AZ 85263
(480)471-2322
nukesub@juno.com
Fax (480)471-7924

COPY FROM ORIGINAL ENVELOPE
(JAN 19, 1942 ENVELOPE MISSING)
BUT SIMILAR TO THIS

Ensign A.P. Kelley, USN
War Plans and Operations
14th Naval District
Pearl Harbor,
T.H.

Via Clipper airmail

Captain F.H. Kelley, USN
USS WEST POINT
% Post Master New York,
New York

