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The 'Sacred Relics' of Pearl Harbor

By **BRIAN M. SOBEL**
 December 4, 2007; Page D7

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

On Dec. 7, 1941, just after 8 a.m., a 1,760-pound armor-piercing bomb penetrated the decks of the USS Arizona, striking the forward magazine. The resulting explosion was volcanic as nearly a million pounds of gunpowder erupted into a fireball of death and destruction. The Arizona would sink in nine minutes, taking to the harbor floor 1,177 sailors and marines. Just 337 crewmen aboard the Arizona survived the blast. The fire was so intense that it would burn for two days. By the end of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 21 U.S. ships had been sunk or damaged.



Brian Sobel


A piece of the USS Arizona with scorch marks caused by burning oil.

Sadly for the Arizona, after 229 bodies were recovered the Navy was forced to stop because of increasingly dangerous conditions. Not long after, a decision was made to leave the dreadnought where it lay and in the process create a lasting and powerful tribute to those who lost their lives and remain entombed in the ship. When the Arizona sank it also took well over a million gallons of fuel to the bottom. Now, at a rate of two quarts a day, tiny oil droplets, known as "black tears," rise to the surface every 20 seconds -- and will continue to do so for decades to come.

Not all of the wreckage is at the memorial on Ford Island. "After the bombing, the USS Arizona had much of the superstructure and metal above the water line cut away and sent to the mainland, either for use on other ships or designated for scrap," explains Agnes Tauyan, deputy director in the public affairs office of the commander, Navy Region Hawaii. Still later, additional pieces of wreckage, several tons of the Arizona, were removed from the ship during the construction of the memorial and transported to a spot across the channel from Ford Island, where they have been ever since, holding a silent and lonely vigil against time and the elements.

Daniel Martinez, National Park Service historian who has worked at the Arizona Memorial since 1985 and is an expert on the bombing of Pearl Harbor, says, "Someone, and we don't know who, since documentation does not exist, realized the importance of this wreckage of the martyred ship and put it in a place where it would be preserved." The specific location of what Ms. Tauyan calls the "sacred relics" is a closely guarded secret. The Navy will acknowledge for the record only that sections of the Arizona

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are on Waipio Peninsula, strictly off limits to the public and safely guarded in a storage area on a military reservation, but it granted access for this article to further tell the story of the famed battleship and its continuing contribution today.

To reach the site, a visitor must proceed through locked gates, down roads and deep into an area that is protected by wasps and the thickets and thorns of Kiawe trees. There, in a clearing, is a debris field that is not large but unmistakably contains a unique look into history.

Time and the elements have been unkind, and some of the rusting pieces of the ship are razor-like and dangerous. Pieces carpet the ground and crunch with each step. A close examination of the site reveals large and small sections of metal, some of it scarred by black scorch marks created by the burning oil and the intensity of the fire. Much of the debris is hard to identify as to origin, but here and there something -- such as one of the armored legs of the main mast, with a ladder still bolted inside -- can be recognized.



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One of the armored legs of the USS Arizona.

The talismanic pull of the "relics" and the story of the Arizona are clear to Mr. Martinez. "The site is very special," he says. "Touching the metal is touching history and is a constant reminder that the Arizona left an indelible mark on history. The site earns respect when you see it, and silently I believe it waits for another venue so that more people can see it."

Clarendon Hetrick, an 84-year-old USS Arizona survivor who resides today in Bullhead City, Ariz., echoes that sentiment. In 2006, after years of effort, Mr. Hetrick was finally able to visit the wreckage. "It is hard to explain my emotions," he says. "I guess it was that I never thought I would see the ship again above water, or pieces of it, at least. It was breathtaking, and the visit was incredibly important to me. I was just drawn to the remains." Ms. Tauyan, who was there for the visit as well, remembers watching Mr. Hetrick view the wreckage with his family alongside. "Initially, he was emotional and speechless, but he seemed strangely comforted, like he was finally home."

Over the years, some who knew about the wreckage at Waipio Peninsula, including Pearl Harbor survivors and others, asked the Navy for pieces of the USS Arizona to display. Most requests were turned down because of the Arizona's status as a war grave and because, as Ms. Tauyan says: "In the absence of a formal policy and specific criteria it was not possible to properly decide which groups should receive pieces of the ship."

Then, in 1994, the Navy and the National Park Service began a process that led to the first official donation in 1995, this after the Secretary of the Navy signed off on an order that delineated how pieces of the Arizona could be dispersed. Ever since, the above-water reliquary has been very quietly helping to supply memories to a host of carefully selected recipients, nearly 100 to date. Pieces of the Arizona have been sent near and far and are now on display in military museums, naval facilities, veteran's halls and municipal buildings in Arizona, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Hawaii and places in between. Very recently a section was given to the Department of Homeland Security.

Not all requests are granted and many have been turned down. "A good example," says Ms. Tauyan, "is

a case where a fellow said he was representing several veterans groups and requested pieces of the ship that he intended to have melted down to create medallions, which in turn would be auctioned off to raise proceeds for charity. That type of request is routinely denied." The careful vetting of each request is to avoid a mistake being made. "Our biggest concern is that a relic could somehow end up on eBay," says Ms. Tauyan, "and that actually happened once. However, the Navy was able to quickly recover the piece."

The pieces of the Arizona sent to recipients vary in size and type, but not in importance. The first donation to officially leave the site was a 7-by-8-foot section of the USS Arizona that went to the Arizona State Capitol Museum in Phoenix, where Brenda McLain, museum curator, says: "We have had the ship's section on display but were especially pleased last year to open a brand-new exhibit that has the piece on a pedestal in front of a picture taken before its removal from Waipio Peninsula." Ms. McLain says: "I have watched many people stand in front of the rusty and mangled steel, some becoming quite emotional, especially military veterans and survivors from Pearl Harbor who are moved to tears at the sight. Children, too, get it, and are mesmerized looking at an actual piece of the ship."

Mike Lebens, curator of collections at the National Museum of the Pacific War, in Fredericksburg, Texas, describes visitors looking at a hatch from the Arizona and being taken aback. "People are surprised an actual piece of the ship is here, and then we have a model of the Arizona with an arrow that locates exactly where the hatch came from. It is the highlight of the collection for many people, especially our school tours."

Yet another fragment is at the national headquarters of AMVETS, in Lanham, Md. John P. Brown III, national commander of the veterans organization, says: "Our piece of the Arizona is located in a room dedicated to the ship. Its presence helps vets let their minds wander to an important time in their lives and in the life of the nation. Looking at an actual piece of the ship strikes a certain chord."

Just as the attack on Pearl Harbor reminds the world of the worst of human nature, it was the heroism of those who fought back and later on to victory who live in America's memory. Now, as the ranks of Pearl Harbor survivors are diminished by time, the distribution of relics from the Arizona helps serve as a constant reminder of those who lost their lives on Dec. 7, 1941.

Mr. Sobel is a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers and an on-air political and military analyst for several radio and TV stations.

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