



History and Recovery Efforts of the USS Arizona (BB-39)

On the morning of 7 December 1941, a fleet of Japanese carriers launched an air strike against the U.S. Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor, on the island of Oahu, Territory of Hawaii (see Figure 1). The attack decimated the ships and personnel of the fleet and thrust the United States into World War II. At the onset of the 7 December 1941 attack, the battleship USS *Arizona* (BB-39) was moored at berth Fox 7 on "Battleship Row." The repair ship *Vestal* (AR-4) was on the port side; and the starboard side faced the northeastern shore of Ford Island (see Figure 2). Just before 0800 hours, the ship's air raid alarm was sounded and the crew was ordered to general quarters. During the attack the battleship was struck by as many as eight aerial bombs, including one 1,700-lb armor-piercing shell which penetrated the deck near the Number 2 Turret and detonated in the smokeless powder magazine, causing a "cataclysmic" explosion "which destroyed the ship forward" and ignited a fire which burned for two days (see Figure 3). It is thought that most of the *Arizona* crewmen who perished in the attack died instantly during the explosion.

Search and Recovery

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, surviving crewmen struggled to escape the burning wreckage and evacuate the wounded, many of whom succumbed to their injuries shortly after being received onboard a nearby hospital ship. One officer leading an impromptu rescue party noted that "most of the men who were burned were unrecognizable"; however, they succeeded in moving many of their shipmates off of the flaming wreck and pulling others out of the nearby waters.

Within one week of the attack, divers surveyed the submerged portions of the ship to determine which parts could be salvaged. There was no mention in the initial salvage report of attempting to recover any human remains, most of which were effectively cremated by the explosion in the forward magazine and the resulting fire. The remains of those crewmen who were evacuated and subsequently died of their injuries were interred, like other Pearl Harbor casualties, in one of two cemeteries on Oahu reserved for naval personnel, Halawa and Nuuanu. Subsequent salvage efforts also recovered some human remains.



After salvage crews removed the main turrets and the 14-inch guns, which were repurposed for coastal defense, as well as ordnance, hazardous materials, and other parts of the superstructure, it was decided that the wreckage should remain untouched as a memorial to the men who lost their lives. In 1950, the ship was symbolically "re-commissioned" when then-Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Arthur W. Radford, ordered that the colors be raised over the sunken wreckage of the *Arizona*; subsequent legislation designated it as a national shrine and a historically-significant site worthy of preservation. In May 1962, the USS *Arizona* Memorial was dedicated to the memory of the deceased crewmen.

After World War II ended, the War Department assigned the American Graves Registration Service (AGRS), U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps, the responsibility of recovering and identifying the remains of deceased U.S. personnel in the Pacific Theater. In September 1947, members of the AGRS exhumed approximately 170 sets of remains from the Halawa and Nuuanu cemeteries that were tentatively associated with the *Arizona* and transferred them to the Schofield Barracks Central Identification Laboratory, also located on Oahu. The laboratory staff worked to confirm the identities of those buried with name associations and to make additional identifications from those who had been initially interred as unknowns. Ultimately, over 100 crewmen from the USS *Arizona* were identified as a result of this work. The rest of the men were declared non-recoverable. AGRS personnel buried those remains believed to have been from the *Arizona* but for whom no positive identity could be established, in 76 separate grave sites at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific as "unknowns."

In 2015, the Deputy Secretary of Defense issued a policy memorandum directing the disinterment of unknowns associated with USS *Oklahoma*, and establishing thresholds to be met in pursuit of other disinterments of unknowns from World War II and the Korean War who are currently buried in our national memorial cemeteries. While the policy does not apply to servicemen lost at sea or to those "entombed in U.S. Navy vessels that currently serve as national memorials" it does, however, extend to remains "affiliated with losses from national memorial Navy vessels that are buried in a national cemetery" and that meet the same disinterment criteria as other unknowns.



Next Steps

Historians and archivists must first collect the records of *Arizona* crewmen potentially interred as unknowns, including their Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs), and Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) which contain valuable medical and biological information which could aid in the identification effort. If the records indicate that a particular set or group of remains has potential for a match with one or more of the crewmen, DNA samples will be requested from the appropriate family members.