



## History and Recovery Efforts for the USS Utah (BB-31)

Shortly after 0800 hours on 7 December 1941, a torpedo hit the port side of the USS Utah, a former battleship converted to a target ship moored at Berth FOX-11 in Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii.<sup>1</sup> Just prior to this hit, enemy aircraft had been sighted by crew on board the USS Utah and orders given for all personnel to move to “bombing quarters”. As the ship began to list to port, a second underwater hit was felt, in the same vicinity as the first, exacerbating the USS Utah’s tilt (Figure 1). All personnel were ordered to the starboard side, anticipating imminent capsizing. Upon orders, those personnel who had made it to the upper decks began to abandon ship under ongoing aerial bombardment from aircraft. By 0812 hours, the USS Utah had completely capsized as evacuated personnel made their way to Ford Island. Meanwhile, at least one survivor still trapped inside the ship was freed when some of those who had escaped heard knocking from within the hull. With the Japanese aircraft still strafing the harbor and dropping bombs, Machinist S.A. Szymanski and a few volunteers from the neighboring USS Raleigh were able to obtain a cutting torch and equipment to rescue Fireman 2d Class (F2c) John B. Vaessen, who reported he had been the last man in that portion of the ship.



**Figure 1. Photograph of the USS *Utah* capsizing off of Ford Island on 7 December 1941.**



On 7 December 1941, 58 of the USS *Utah*'s crew, members of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Naval Reserve, lost their lives. Only 4 of these 58 casualties were recovered in the immediate aftermath of the attack. The remains of Seaman 2d Class (S2c) Pallas F. Franklin, Signalman 1st Class (SM1c) Douglas R. Dieckhoff, and Mess Attendant (Matt1c) George R. Smith were recovered in the days immediately following the attack and buried in the Nuuanu Naval Cemetery (Nuuanu) in Honolulu, Hawaii. Originally established as a civilian cemetery, the U.S. Navy had maintained a separate plot within this cemetery for several years.<sup>2</sup> Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the cemetery was enlarged to try to accommodate additional burials. Still, constraints on space meant that, after a few days of burials, all interment operations shifted to Halawa Naval Cemetery (Halawa) in Honolulu, Hawaii, which would eventually become one of the primary burials sites for Pearl Harbor casualties.<sup>3</sup> The remains of Ensign (Ens) David W. Jackson were recovered several weeks after the attack and buried at Halawa. As time passed, the remaining 54 casualties of the USS *Utah*, initially reported Missing In Action, were presumed to have drowned inside the ship.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, salvage operations began with those ships that had received the least damage and could, therefore, be salvaged and returned to operational capacity most quickly. In the 1930s, the USS *Utah* had been converted into a radio-controlled target ship and anti-aircraft gunnery training ship, her decks covered with heavy wooden timbers to offer protection during target training. Because of her status, the extent of damage suffered, and her position in a less critical part of Pearl Harbor, the salvage of the USS *Utah* was heavily debated. In assessing the



**Figure 2. Image of the capsized USS *Utah*, as seen on 12 December 1941.**



damage of various ships, hundreds of dives were conducted in incredibly difficult conditions. Much of Pearl Harbor was still saturated in oil and debris, making lights essentially useless in the murky water. Divers had to attempt to navigate the wreckage in the dark, attempting to memorize the blueprints of ships while simultaneously remaining aware for jagged edges and sharp pieces of wreckage that could threaten the air hoses that enabled the divers to breathe.<sup>5</sup> Air bubbles inside ships could contain trapped gases, such as hydrogen sulfide, that might ignite by the flame of underwater torches. Several divers were killed in these efforts, including one diving on the USS Utah.<sup>6</sup>

In early 1942, an initial assessment of the USS Utah was made, with the ship found to be firmly resting on the sea floor and determined to be stable enough to conduct some preliminary salvage efforts. Slowly, cutting into the ship's exposed hull, divers began to make their way into the ship, recovering a significant portion of the ship's ordnance. With hydrogen sulfide having been detected within parts of the ship, respirator masks had to be worn by all, even in compartments that had been pumped free of water. During this work, no trace of the 54 men still lost from the USS Utah were found.<sup>7</sup> By the end of February 1942, due to increasingly difficult conditions and concern for the safety of personnel working within the ship, further salvage of ordnance was halted. A year later, salvage efforts returned to the USS Utah, with hopes to use techniques employed in righting the capsized USS Oklahoma. After 13 months of preparations, however, the righting of the USS Utah was not as successful. Rather than rolling on top of the muddy bottom of Pearl Harbor, the USS Utah sank further into the harbor floor as the winches sought to pull the ship upright. Finally, the ship "had sunk to such an extent that it was not feasible to continue without taking further steps" and "it was decided that the cost and time involved in further action would not warrant the continuance of righting operations since for practical purposes the ship was in as favorable a position as would be needed."<sup>8</sup> For a few days, the ship was watched, to ensure that it was stable in the position where it had come to rest, with some dives conducted to verify the condition of the ship below the water. On 15 March 1944 all diving on the USS Utah ceased, marking the end of salvage operations that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Meanwhile, on 9 March 1944, a group of unidentified remains were interred at Halawa under the designation "Unidentified X-261".<sup>9</sup> The initial interment report noted the place of death to be the USS Utah. No personal effects were reported to have been found with the remains. No specific descriptions of the remains themselves were made in the unknown file at this time, although one copy of the report of interment notes the ancestry of the remains to be African. Other copies of this same report note that



ancestry was impossible to determine. The recovery details themselves are not included in the X-files, although given the date of burial it seems likely that they had been recovered during or shortly after the efforts to right the ship in late February or early March of 1944.

The disinterment of 1,516 remains buried at Halawa, including "Unidentified X-261", began in September 1947.<sup>10</sup> Shortly before disinterments began, staff at the Headquarters of the AGRS Pacific Zone requested the Quartermaster General provide "additional information" on missing personnel from the USS Utah, including documentation for those determined Missing In Action and "photostatic copies of tooth charts" of each individual still unaccounted-for.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, workers carrying out the disinterment of Halawa faced their own set of challenges. Not only did the depth of the burials made at Halawa require the use of heavy equipment for moving dirt, but initial workforce estimates left teams short-staffed.<sup>12</sup> Workers carrying out the disinterments discovered that the remains had been embalmed, leading to high levels of fluid retention in the remains.<sup>13</sup> Following exhumation, which drew to a close on 20 September 1947, unknowns were transferred to the U.S. Army Mausoleum No. 2 for processing at the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL).<sup>14</sup>

The assessments of "Unidentified X-261" at the CIL were conducted in July 1948. In this processing, the casket was found to contain the remains of 14 individuals. Fluoroscopic examination of X-261 revealed three additional teeth not previously observed.<sup>15</sup> Processing the remains simultaneously, skeletal elements were associated "on a basis of actual articulation, when possible, and by size, color, age, and general morphology."<sup>16</sup> The 14 resultant sets of remains were then classified by letter (e.g., X-261A, X-261B, X-261C, etc.), wrapped individually, tagged with their letter classification (e.g., "A", "B", "C", etc.), and returned to the original casket. Each set of remains was analyzed by anthropologist Dr. Mildred Trotter, who assessed each for height, age, and ancestry, in addition to creating skeletal and dental charts that provided visual representation of the remains. All 14 sets of remains were estimated to be of European or probable European ancestry and age estimates were also provided for each. Only two sets of remains did not have the necessary skeletal elements present to estimate height. Nearly all 14 sets of remains included a skull (or part of a skull) and only one of the resultant Unknowns noted that the teeth were absent and therefore impossible to chart.

Although X-261A-N continued to be associated with the USS Utah and the 54 unresolved casualties considered throughout their processing, no specific name associations were proposed for any individual unknown. In July 1948, roughly concurrent with Dr. Trotter's assessments, a telegram was issued from Fort Shafter, Territory of Hawaii, to the Quartermaster General in Washington, DC, again requesting





additional information – specifically dental information – on the unresolved casualties associated with the USS Utah.<sup>17</sup> At this point, it was reported that “not less than sixteen remains” were associated with X-261, but that it was “impossible to match upper and lower jaws without dental charts”.<sup>18</sup> It was noted that, if the requested information was not available, the AGRS Pacific Zone Headquarters planned to process the remains as a “known group burial”.<sup>19</sup> The records appear to have been considered particularly important, as scientific staff at the CIL reported that despite “thorough comparison of dental and physical characteristics” of X-261A-N, individual identifications could “not be established beyond a reasonable doubt...due to the number of people involved and the lack of conclusive comparable data contained in the records available”.<sup>20</sup> In particular, it was noted that all of the “up to date records” were on board the ship at the time of the attack and were “lost when the ship was sunk”.<sup>21</sup> Of the records available, it was reported that only 27 casualty records contained dental charts (from the individual’s entry into service) and 6 casualty records contained “no physical characteristics” whatsoever.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, the suggestion that X-261A-N be resolved through a group identification faced similar challenges. Although there are no other records noting a response to this request and no further discussion in the unknown files of the possibility of a group burial, other evidence suggests that a directive issued by the Quartermaster General limited the ways in which group identifications could be pursued. In February 1949, the Washington, DC, Office of the Quartermaster General issued instructions to the Commanding Officer of the AGRS Pacific Zone reiterating the definition of a group burial and noting several specific requirements that would end up preventing many of the Pearl Harbor Unknowns from being resolved in group burials. These requirements, which argued that group burials were meant to apply to aircraft, tank, and smaller vehicular losses rather than “large ship sinkings”, created additional limitations in how group burials could be used to resolve cases of unidentified remains.<sup>23</sup> More specifically it was noted that: 1) “the total number of remains...should closely approach the number of decedents represented by the group”, 2) “the evidence...should show conclusively that the remains of each decedent listed by name as a member of the group can not [sic] be presumed reasonably to be interred currently apart from the group burial”, and 3) at least one named casualty must be “associated conclusively with the remains comprising the group”.<sup>24</sup>

Given that the estimated 14 individuals present in X-261A-N did not approximate the 54 unresolved casualties associated with the USS Utah, the absence of further documentation suggesting the possibility of resolving X-261A-N through a group burial is consistent with these February 1949 directives. The same month that these directives were issued, each unknown associated with the USS Utah was determined to be



# The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency



*Updated 07 December 2018*

"Unidentifiable by Reason of Lack of Sufficient Identifying Data" and declared a World War II Unknown.<sup>25</sup> The following month, in March 1949, the 54 casualties of the USS Utah were declared "non-recoverable".<sup>26</sup> Unknowns X-261A-N were transferred to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (NMCP), where all 14 unknowns were interred in individual caskets across 7 graves on 22 June 1949.

Researchers and scientists at DPAA are currently re-analyzing the unidentified remains of more than 400 unknowns that have been disinterred from the NMCP since 2015 in association with the losses of the USS Oklahoma, USS West Virginia, USS California, and USS Nevada.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Homer N. Wallin, *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage, and Final Appraisal* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), p. 147.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Steere and Thayer M. Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead 1945-51*, U.S. Army, Quartermaster Corps, QMC Historical Studies, Series II, No. 4 (Washington DC: Historical Branch Office of the Quartermaster General, 1957).
- <sup>3</sup> Christopher McDermott, "Contexts of Death, Recovery, Identification, and Burial for the casualties from the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor," 28 February 2013. World War II Historical Summary, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), Word Document. The comparatively small numbers of Army and Army Air Force casualties were buried at Schofield Barracks Cemetery, with an even smaller number of Pearl Harbor casualties interred at Mokapu Cemetery
- <sup>4</sup> In addition to these losses, the cremated remains of Chief Yeoman Albert Wagner's infant daughter, Nancy Lynne Wagner, are also entombed on board the ship. Nancy died at birth and CY Wagner had planned to spread her ashes at sea and had placed the urn in his locker on board the USS *Utah*. However, these plans were disrupted by the attack on Pearl Harbor and, although CY Wagner survived, he was not able to remove Nancy's remains from the ship before it capsized. Mike Miller, "Funeral Held for Baby Entombed Within USS *Utah*", 16 December 2003, [http://navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=11004](http://navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=11004). Accessed 31 October 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> Daniel Madsen, *Resurrection: Salvaging the Battle Fleet at Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> On 22 June 1943, diver Tom Cary was deep within the USS *Utah* when he reported that the valve controlling his air supply had jammed closed. Although attempts at rescue were made, it would be one hour and forty minutes before his remains could be brought to the surface.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Madsen, *Resurrection*, p. 216.
- <sup>9</sup> V.L. Green, "Report of Interment" (QMC Form 1042), 25 September 1945, Unknown X-261A-N Halawa file (X-261A-N file).
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Steere and Thayer M. Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead 1945-51*, U.S. Army, Quartermaster Corps, QMC Historical Studies, Series II, No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch Office of the Quartermaster General, 1957), 525.
- <sup>11</sup> Maurice Matisoff, "Request for Additional Information on Missing Personnel from USS *Utah*," 23 August 1947, X-261A-N file.
- <sup>12</sup> Steere and Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead*, 531.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 531.
- <sup>14</sup> For more on the processing of remains through Mausoleum No. 2, see: Mildred S. Trotter, "Operations at Central Identification Laboratory," 1949. Digitally published by the Bernard Becker Medical Library, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO. <http://beckerexhibits.wustl.edu/mowihsp/words/TrotterReportpart1.ht>



---

<sup>15</sup> Richard R. Trask, "Fluoroscopical Findings for Identification," 7 July 1948, X-261A-N file.

<sup>16</sup> "Narrative," X-261A-N.

<sup>17</sup> Message Number M-27533, 9 July 1948, X-261A-N file.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cyril C. Disney, "Identification of Deceased", 14 September 1948, IDPF for Marshall. This same document is present in all IDPFs of unresolved USS *Utah* casualties.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> K.L. Hastings, "Transmittal of Board Proceedings," 18 February 1949, Mildred Trotter Papers, Bernard Becker Library, Washington University of St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.

<sup>25</sup> This official change in status is noted by stamp on the Identification Data forms (QMC Form 1044) prepared for each of the 14 unknowns.

<sup>26</sup> R.E. Hollister, Clarence B. Watts, and Cyril C. Disney, "Proceedings of Board of Review", 31 March 1949, Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) for William Marshall, 3566053 (IDPF for Marshall). This same document is present in all IDPFs of unresolved USS *Utah* casualties.