

HERO

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THE USS OKLAHOMA AND THE LOST 429

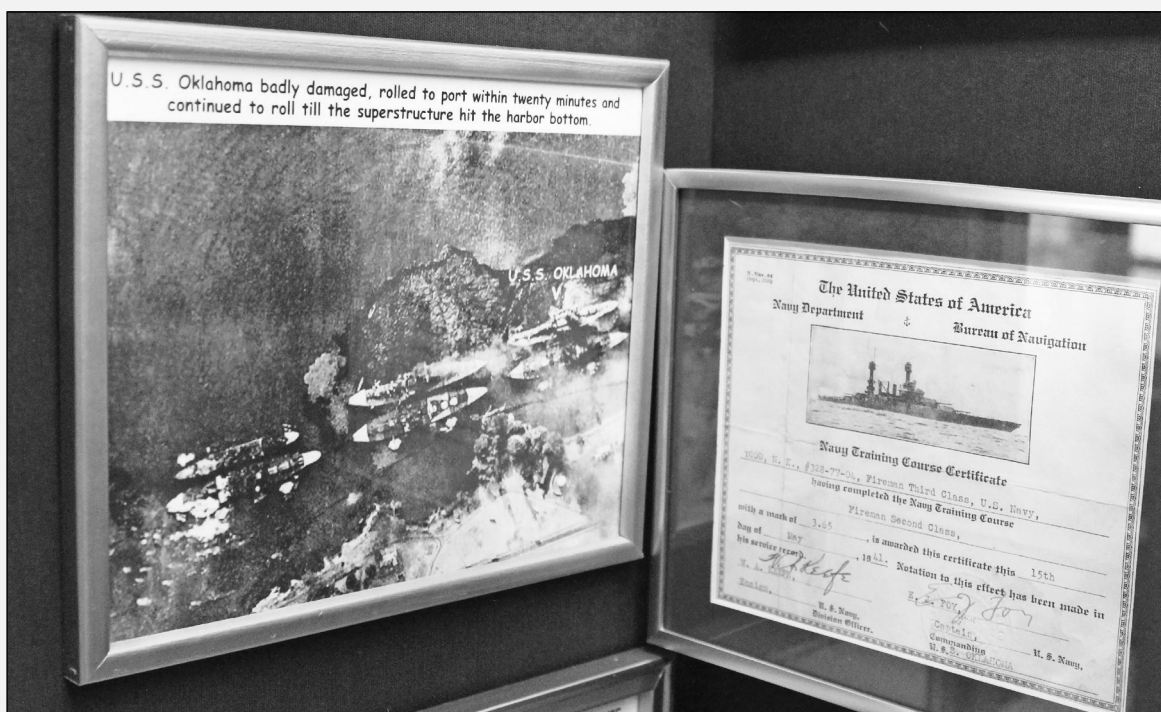
Gene Hughes, a public affairs specialist with Navy Personnel Command, shared the following information about the USS Oklahoma.

The Oklahoma was among the first vessels hit when the Japanese air force attacked. Commanded by Capt. Howard Bode, the ship was meant to be out at sea patrolling the islands, but instead was lined up with eight other battleships, awaiting an admiral's inspection the following day. When the first wave of Japanese aircraft struck at 7:55 a.m., many of the crew were sleeping in their racks below decks and never made it up to the main deck.

Hit by three torpedoes, the Oklahoma immediately began capsizing. As Japanese planes strafed the deck with machine gun fire, six more torpedoes struck, tearing the Oklahoma's port side open. Within 15 minutes, she had rolled completely over, trapping many crewmen inside her hull.

Men trapped inside started banging on the bulkhead to get the attention of passing boats. Holes were cut in the exposed bottom of the ship on Dec. 8 and 9, and 32 men were pulled out alive. Banging continued through Dec. 10, but nothing more could be done. The sound came from below the water line, and the sailors guarding the Oklahoma could only wait and listen until the banging stopped.

In total, 429 USS Oklahoma sailors lost their lives. Casualties included Aloysius Schmitt, the first military chaplain killed in World War II. The ship received one battle star for service in World War II. The attack led to the U.S. entering the war, which had been going on in Europe



Robin Fish / Enterprise/

Todd qualified as a U.S. Navy fireman on May 15, 1941 and was stationed on the USS Oklahoma, which was hit by Japanese torpedoes Dec. 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Todd was among 429 crewmen who died in the attack.

since 1939 when Germany attacked Poland.

The remains of 429 sailors and marines were recovered when the ship was righted in 1944. Only 35 could be identified at the time. The 388 unknowns were buried, then disinterred in 1947 in an unsuccessful attempt to identify more personnel.

In 1950, the unknowns were reburied in 61 caskets in 45 graves at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, also known as the Punchbowl due to its shape. A policy change in 2015 led to them being exhumed for DNA analysis. By 2017, 100 sailors had been identified. On Feb. 26, 2019, the 200th unknown Oklahoma sailor was identified. As of April 23, 2021,

327 identifications have been made.

For more information, visit the DPAA's profile page about Neal Todd at www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/News-Releases/PressReleaseArticleView/Article/2557850/uss-oklahoma-sailor-accounted-for-from-world-war-ii-todd-n. To learn more about that status of a POW/MIA sailors, family members are urged to email MILL_NavyPOW-MIA@navy.mil or call 1-800-443-9298.

including Todd's, were reinterred and classified as non-recoverable, the DPAA release said. However, recent advances in DNA analysis made it possible for many of the "Oklahoma unknowns" to be identified since 2015. Using these techniques, Todd's remains were officially accounted for on Feb. 11, 2021.

The Todd-Staffenhagen family went almost three months without knowing whether Neal was dead or alive. They didn't receive an official death notice until March 1942. Meanwhile, there had been reports that he had been seen and might be on another ship.

"It's nice to have a body, or some bones," Orville said.

"And to put closure to it," added his wife, Delores.

"It'll be nice to have him come home," said Orville in a voice thick with emotion.

"I think it's more of a relief for him than opening up the pain," Anthony explained.

"It's more of the relief of knowing that he's finally coming home after all these years."

Anthony recalled that when his parents were first contacted by DNA analysts seeking information about Neal Todd's next of kin, Orville teared up and said, "I thought I'd never see this happen in my lifetime."

"It's a pretty powerful thing to have happen to him," Anthony added. "It was a miracle in his eyes."

A family tradition

Eight of the nine Todd-Staffenhagen brothers served in the

military, five of them in World War II.

"It was a complete military family," Anthony said, adding that the oldest brother, Robert Todd, wanted to enlist but wasn't accepted for health reasons. The husbands of all three of their sisters also served in the armed forces.

Orville, who was 8 years old when Neal died, looked up to his older brother in uniform. According to Delores, Orville wanted to serve, too, but he had to wait until after his mother died before he could enlist.

According to Anthony, one of Neal Todd's brothers, Wesley Todd, was also on board the USS Oklahoma on Dec. 7, 1941, but he survived

the attack.

Brother-in-law Gene Stiffler of Akeley said Wesley was going off duty while Neal was going on duty when the attack hit, and that may have made the difference between death and survival.

"One of the torpedoes had sprung the hatch on one of the entrances," Anthony explained. "The bigger guys couldn't get through, so they ended up taking the little guys that they could squeeze through -"

Here, Orville interrupted to say the men greased themselves with oil that was coming in while the ship was sinking. With a pair of big, burly brothers pushing from behind, Wesley and some of his smaller crewmates were able to escape the sinking battleship.

Wesley later survived another torpedo attack that sank a destroyer off the coast of Australia, Anthony said.

What happens next?

Todd's name is listed among the World War II missing on the Courts of the Missing at Pearl Harbor. A rosette will now be placed next to his name to indicate he has been accounted for, the DPAA release stated.

Meanwhile, Todd will be flown from the DPAA laboratory to the family's choice of funeral home. On July 10, after a funeral mass at Our Lady of the Pines Catholic Church in Nevis, his casket will be escorted to the Akeley cemetery next to his brother, Alfred Staffenhagen, Jr., and as close as possible to his parents.

Karen Stiffler (nee Staffenhagen) of



Photos by Robin Fish / Enterprise/

Todd's medals and a folded flag are part of his permanent memorial.

Anthony called it a blessing for the whole family - "finally being able to say goodbye and put him to rest

next to many of his other family members, bringing him home."

This story is based, in part, on interviews conducted by staff reporter Lorie Skarpness.



Todd's mother, Irena Staffenhagen, was honored as a Gold Star mother because of her son's sacrifice. In addition, seven more of her sons served in the military, four of them during World War II.

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With regret
Carsonville Fire and Rescue
will be cancelling our
2021 Father's Day Picnic

We hope to see you October 16
at our Fall Fundraiser!

The Hubbard County DFL
invites you to celebrate President
Joe Biden and Vice President
Kamala Harris on Flag Day!

Monday, June 14th, 2021
4pm to 7pm
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