

Donald Ross Was Ready For Pearl Harbor Attack

Full Steam: The sailor kept his battling Nevada on the go

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For Donald Kirby Ross, preparedness was a way of life.

A Navy warrant officer machinist on the battleship Nevada in 1941, Ross embraced his responsibilities for keeping the ship powered and the crew protected, regardless of the conditions.

Those conditions exploded on Dec. 7, 1941, and Ross was ready.

For his actions during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he received the Medal of Honor.

Daughter Penny Ross told Tom Vogt of the Columbian newspaper in Vancouver, Wash., this year that her father practiced his tasks blindfolded.

That training became a matter of life and death on the day of the attack as Ross (1910-92) had to keep the forward dynamo room's engines and generators operating. He did it while blinded from smoke that also jarred breathing in heat that reached 140 degrees.

If the Nevada lost power in the forward dynamo, the ship would be a sitting duck, helpless against the Japanese aerial assault. Its anti-aircraft guns would be compromised, and communications would be lost too. Ross' efforts prevented the damaged ship from sinking.

Every ship saved was vital, as the Japanese meant to obliterate the Pacific Fleet. As it was, 2,400 Americans died in the attack that drew the country into World War II.

Honored To The Hilt

Ross' Medal of Honor citation tells the tale of his courageous selflessness: "When his station in the forward dynamo room of the USS Nevada became almost untenable due to smoke, steam and heat, Machinist Ross forced his men to leave that station and performed all the duties himself until blinded and unconscious."

"He had trained for that almost on his own," Vogt told IBD. "Ross was preparing for something he didn't know was going to be com-



Donald Ross was born in Kansas, joined the Navy in 1929 and by Dec. 7, 1941, had put the battleship Nevada's engine room on alert in Pearl Harbor.

Ross' Keys

■ Received Medal of Honor for valor during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Ross was named in his honor in 1997.

■ Overcame: Hellish conditions to do his duty.

■ Lesson: Will can carry you to a daunting goal.

■ "I didn't think about fear. I was frightened, but fear didn't control me. The most important thing was my men and the ship. These were more important to me than my own life."

So Said Ross

■ "Some of these glory-hungry people, they want everything for themselves,

Ross' forward dynamo compartment. The rear dynamo room was in better condition, so he transferred power there.

Ross kept his 27 men focused on running generators and air compressors to give the Nevada power to fire its guns and ship off.

Rear Adm. William Rea Furlong, from his flagship, the minelayer Oglala, ordered that all capable ships speed to sea. Moving out would disperse the concentration amid the attack.

The Nevada was the only battleship ready to move by 8:32 a.m., even while Japanese aircraft hit her hard. "Everything came our way," recalled Joseph Taussig, an officer on the ship, "but we kept firing back."

Fire raged on the Nevada, but the ship's gunners refused to leave their weapons. Every one of the ship's gun captains died, as did half of the initial gunners.

ing, but he wanted to make sure he had every ability to do the job, even under some pretty disastrous circumstances."

As Kent DeLong wrote in "War heroes," "On Dec. 7, no other ship ought back harder than the Nevada."

Ross' daring provided the ship's power for the fight. In April 1942, Adm. Chester Nimitz presented Ross with the Medal of Honor. The citation further reads:

"For distinguished conduct in the line of his profession, extraordinary courage and disregard of his own life during the attack on the fleet in Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, by Japanese forces. . . . Upon being rescued and resuscitated, he returned and secured the forward dynamo room and proceeded to the after dynamo room where he was later again rendered unconscious by exhaustion. Again recovering consciousness, he returned to his station where he remained until directed to abandon it."

"I love my men and I love my ship," Ross told a newspaper toward the end of his life. "They came first. They're more important than I am."

Ross went on to have a top Navy career. With the Nevada, he helped support the Normandy D-Day landings of June 6, 1944. After the war, Ross served as the Nevada's chief engineer in support of two atom bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific in 1946. He served on the carrier Kearsarge during the Korean War. After rising to the rank of captain, he retired in 1956.

Ross wrote two books on military heroes with his wife, Helen. The couple married in 1942, had four children and ran a dairy farm in Washington state. He also spoke publicly on American history.

Ross was born in Beverly, Kan., and enlisted in the Navy in 1929. Demonstrating deep commitment to duty from the start, he graduated with honors from boot camp, completed machinist mate school first in his class and joined the Henderson, a transport ship.

and if there's anything I detest, it's that kind of a leader."

■ "If you have a good man doing a hell of a good job, he needs recognition — whether he's a sailor or a young apprentice."

■ "We're a team, and it's a team on a ship that makes it a heroic ship."

For Ross, Dec. 7, 1941, sort of began on Dec. 5. That was the date the Nevada and fellow battleships Arizona and Oklahoma returned to Pearl Harbor after conducting night battle practice in open ocean.

When Ross relieved his superior at midnight on Saturday, Dec. 6, he was ordered to "put the engine room on alert. We need to be ready to answer bells with only a half-hour notice by morning."

Little did they know how good the timing of their drill would be. Normal time to get a battleship up and running from a cold start was 3-1/2 hours.

By 5 a.m. on Dec. 7, Ross had two boilers in ready condition and two more about to come on line.

The Battle

It was 7:55 a.m. when the Japanese attacked. "Bombs began hitting American planes on the ramps, and gas tanks were blowing everywhere," DeLong wrote. "Hell was in session."

Ross raced to the engine room and took charge of it. Chief Quartermaster Bob Sedberry, not knowing of the nighttime drill, could not believe it when Ross said they'd be underway in 30 minutes.

Disaster came at 8:05 a.m., when a torpedo ripped a hole in the Nevada near the forward dynamo room. The ship took on water.

Two minutes later came a tremendous explosion on the Arizona, which was moored to the Nevada's bow. Eleven hundred sailors died on that ill-fated ship.

The Nevada was almost ready to get underway when smoke filled

Blasted

Four more bombs hit the Nevada. Ross, standing under a ventilator, received a blast of fire into his face. His left eye was blinded, his right eye burning from smoke.

He was knocked into a daze but recovered and realized that his men were in the cross hairs of death: "Get out, men! Get the hell out of here!"

He said decades later, "I had to get my people out of there and run those pieces of equipment so the ship wouldn't die."

"The battleship's very survival depended on the efforts of the brave young officer," DeLong wrote.

Alone in the forward dynamo room, Ross couldn't see anything due to the black smoke and his eye injuries. Fortunately, he told DeLong, "I could find my way anywhere in that room by feel alone."

Ross was now a one-man crew. He tried to get the power transferred from the forward generators.

Just as Ross switched the power, he was heard to say over radio transmission, "God help me."

When he was rescued from the compartment, he was unconscious and not breathing. Artificial respiration helped him bounce back.

Ross now realized that the exhaust in the forward condenser was not secured. It could cause an explosion. So back into the forward dynamo he went, back into the smoke and heat that nearly had killed him. He managed to find the cutoff valve and save the ship.

At 9:40 a.m., while still in the harbor, the Nevada beached itself nose first. The landing prevented the ship from sinking.

Ultimately, the ship was repaired and continued to fight in the war.

The price that day, though, was 57 sailors dead.

The morning of Dec. 8, Ross went to sick bay. Eventually his sight cleared up.

Ross died at age 81. The sailor's ashes were scattered at sea from his beloved battleship Nevada.