



THE AMERICAN LEGION  
*Veterans Strengthening America*

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

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**Suggested Speech  
for December 7, 2021  
Eightieth Observance  
of Pearl Harbor Attack**

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December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. It is remembered as a date of infamy, but it should be equally recalled as a day of bravery.

Fifteen Medals of Honor were awarded to U.S. sailors as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fifty-one Navy Crosses were earned. Fifty-three Silver Stars.

Thousands of other acts of heroism occurred that day eighty years ago. Many of those acts were not recognized with medals because documentation was not a priority. Saving others and fighting another day in order to defeat those who brought the war became job one.

It was a tall order. Eight U.S. battleships were severely damaged during the surprise attack. 188 U.S. aircraft were destroyed. 2,403 Americans died.

Jim Leavelle (*pronounced "luh Vell"*) served aboard the *USS Whitney* during the attack. "We did have a good view of everything," he told The American Legion in 2017. "A mile-and-a-half at sea looks like 150 yards on the ground because you can see a lot further on the open sea."

Like the view of so many others that day, what Leavelle saw was horrifying.

"We saw some destroyers going out with big fires on the back end of them where they got hit," he recalled. "The battleship *Nevada* was trying to get out of there, burning on each end, front and back, and you could see the firemen fighting it, and they had their guns going. They made a lot of wartime movies later on, but none could match what the scene looked like to us."

Leavelle, like so many other members of the Greatest Generation, is gone now. But their eyewitness accounts are permanently etched in our history as “Remember Pearl Harbor,” became not just a war cry but a lesson for vigilance.

Upon hearing of the attack, the task ahead was not lost upon British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

“In all the war I never received a more direct shock,” he said. “As I turned and twisted in bed, the full horror of the news sank in upon me. There were no British or American capital ships in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific except the American survivors of Pearl Harbor who were hastening back to California. Over the vast expanse of waters, Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked.”

If Pearl Harbor simply ignited the Pacific war for the United States, it still would have been the most consequential event of the twentieth century. But it would also be the spark that would lead the United States to confront fascism and tyranny in Europe.

World War II shaped the community of nations that exist today. The attack on Pearl Harbor was intended to bring an end to America as a major power. Instead, it was as Japanese Admiral Yamamoto feared, the awakening “of a sleeping giant.”

Six months later, the U.S. Navy and its sister branches would stage a remarkable comeback with a resounding victory over the Japanese at Midway. It was a turning point.

“Remember Pearl Harbor” was the 20<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of “Remember the Alamo,” and would go on to inspire reciprocal victories by soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines yearning for payback.

It would inspire Americans to line up at military recruiting offices across the nation. It would inspire Hollywood productions, public servants and communities throughout America to “get behind the war effort.”

The American servicemembers in Hawaii on that Sunday morning were officially noncombatants since the nation was not yet in a state of war.

It did not matter to men like Dorie Miller, a cook and the first Black American to be awarded the Navy Cross.

While serving breakfast aboard the *USS West Virginia*, he was alerted by the “Battle Station” alarm and reported himself available for other duty during the attack. He carried his mortally wounded ship’s captain to shelter and later fired a .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun and brought down two Japanese planes despite having no training with the weapon.

Miller's actions were so inspiring that he would later be assigned to embark on a war bond and recruiting tour. In 1943 he made the Supreme Sacrifice, while serving on the escort carrier *Liscome Bay*, a vessel that would be sunk by a Japanese submarine during the Battle of Makin.

The passage of time has not erased the evidence of the sacrifices made. Even today, the military's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency continues to identify the remains of fallen Pearl Harbor veterans. Funerals of these heroes are still occurring in communities across the nation.

The reunion of these forever young servicemen with subsequent generations of their family – often in the hometowns that they left 80 years ago -- is the embodiment of American Legion National Commander Paul Dillard's pledge of No Veteran Left Behind.

They are not left behind for we still remember them.

*The USS Arizona*, launched in 1915, was one of America's first oil-fueled battleships. Small amounts of oil continue to percolate to the harbor's surface, just above where the ship rests in the shallow waters. The oil leaks are visible to those who visit the USS Arizona Memorial.

Pearl Harbor survivors – stoic, heroic and with great respect -- were the first to christen the Arizona's leakage as “black tears.” The crew that were lost on December 7, 1941, no longer feel pain but their tragic fates still touch those who knew them or knew of them.

*The Arizona* is not just a memorial. It's not just a shipwreck. It is a tomb for more than 900 of the ship's 1,177 crew who lost their lives.

We must remember Pearl Harbor not just as the opening salvo of a long war. We must remember it as it was – an ordinary Sunday morning in which unsuspecting American servicemembers displayed extraordinary heroism.



Eighty years later, we still remember them. For forgetting their heroism would be an additional act of infamy.

God Bless the brave souls of Pearl Harbor and God Bless America!

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