

# Harry J. Simoneaux Sr., Pensacola eyewitness to ‘Day of Infamy’

Local veteran watched history unfold from Pearl Harbor bombing to surrender signing

The bright, early morning Hawaiian sunshine dazzled off Harry Simoneaux’s white naval dress uniform as he waited for the motor launch to take him and the other Sailors from the USS Whitney (AD-4) to church service. He never could have guessed that in just a few short hours his crisp dress uniform would be black, ruined with soot and oil—America would be at war. Harry Gosport Staff Writer

As Simoneaux stood on the quay, he noticed something out of the ordinary—single-engine aircraft flying over Pearl’s installations on Ford Island. As one dove, a dark object fell from the belly of the plane. "One dropped what I thought was a sandbag. And I said, ‘They’re not supposed to be flying today. They must be practicing.’ Then the hangar blew up," Simoneaux said. Warrington resident Simoneaux, 84, saw America enter World War II that morning. Nearly five years later he would see the end of hostilities from the decks of the attack transport USS Bosque (APA-135)—as the Japanese delegation signed the instrument of surrender onboard nearby USS Missouri (BB-63).

## Pearl Harbor

On Dec. 7, 1941, Simoneaux was stationed on the destroyer tender USS Whitney (AD-4). He was just 20 years old, a carpenter’s mate from Donaldsonville, LA. More than 60 years later, he brought to mind the chaotic moments of the initial attack, a few minutes before 8 a.m.

"Then the planes came right over where we was, shooting, strafing and I went (back) aboard the Whitney, to my department, and I said, ‘Get to your battle stations—we got a war here.’ They (Sailors aboard) said, ‘Ah, shut up—let me sleep.’ And then the machine guns started going off right up above deck. They almost ran over me to get out," Simoneaux recalled. A Japanese pilot actually waved at Whitney’s Sailors after a strafing attack.

The aircraft hangars on Ford Island were among the first targets hit by the waves of Japanese carrier-based horizontal and dive bombers. More than 350 planes had just begun the early morning raid on Pearl Harbor’s shore facilities and ships at anchor. Simoneaux was witnessing the first wave of the attack, which was directed against the Army and Navy airfields in order to minimize American fighter aircraft response.

By 8 a.m., Japanese bombs were beginning to hit targets throughout the anchorage. Columns of smoke rose as ships were hit one after another. Simoneaux recalled the sight. "All the battleships were out of commission," he said.

Battleship USS Arizona’s after and mid-ships areas had taken bomb damage. USS Whitney, untouched by the attack, sent her damage control party over to the Arizona to help. Simoneaux, still in his dress whites, was in the group. "I got back to my battle station, which was damage control...I was in a motor launch heading over to the Arizona for rescue work. They had maybe over a thousand men still in it that couldn’t get out," he said. He said he will never forget what happened next.

"I was 40 feet away from the gangway, from going aboard when it happened. I saw a bomb go right down the number one stack, and fire just came out all over the ship. It must have hit a magazine," he said. The Japanese bomb, in reality a converted armor-piercing naval shell, detonated Arizona’s forward magazines. Of the 2,403 American dead that day, 1,177 were onboard Arizona. In the history of the United States Navy, no other ship has taken so many of her crew down with her.

Simoneaux had a close call. "If it was 10 minutes earlier, I'd have been in it," he said. The bomb was the last of nine bomb and torpedo hits. Pearl Harbor was too shallow to completely submerge a battleship; when the smoke momentarily cleared, shattered Arizona was seen resting on the bottom.

"I looked at the Arizona, and it had (settled). I closed my eyes and said, "Lord, whatever it is people are doing, spare me this day, so I can do my fighting. Then, Lord, I will be ready to go up with you," Simoneaux said.

The American Pacific Fleet had lost 21 ships sunk or damaged in the attack. However, all but three of those ships were eventually raised, repaired and put back in service. American aircraft losses that day were 188 planes destroyed and 159 damaged in the bombing and aerial combats which ensued.

The Japanese had lost 29 planes, less than 10 percent of the attacking force. American aircraft carriers were at sea and unharmed by the raid, a failure in the plan's execution the Japanese would later regret.

### **Destroyer action in the Pacific**

Simoneaux soon got his wish to retaliate against the enemy. "Right after the attack, the chief came down into our compartment. He said, "I need a volunteer to go onboard **USS Worden (DD-352)** to go in action. I said, 'I want to go. I don't want to sit around here—time to go after the enemy.'" Just two hours later USS Worden put to sea, joining a task force already under way. Worden's battle career would see her on anti-submarine duty for carrier USS Lexington (CV-2) and USS Yorktown (CV-6) at the Battle of the Coral Sea. In this first major battle between aircraft carriers, Simoneaux witnessed Lexington's sinking. The Japanese also lost an aircraft carrier in this battle.

Worden also helped protect carriers Hornet and Enterprise throughout the Battle of Midway. In the struggle for Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands, South Pacific), Worden carried out destroyer duties in dangerous waters. Simoneaux remembers working as gun pointer for a 5-inch gun crew. The destroyer carried out a shore bombardment with deadly effectiveness against enemy troops.

### **Danger in the Aleutians**

Many Americans don't remember the battles of World War II that took place on American soil—the campaign against the Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands off Alaska. A stubborn Japanese landing force was occupying Amchitka Island, and Worden was guarding the troop transport Arthur Middleton (AP-65) as she landed an Army security unit on the shore at Constantine Harbor. Besides the enemy, Alaskan waters offered other hazards, as Simoneaux soon discovered.

"We had 60-odd Rangers we were supposed to land, so they could wreck the Japanese radio station, that kind of stuff. But for three days, we couldn't come in. We had 50-foot seas. On the third day, the admiral said, 'Land those Rangers, regardless of what the cost is.' So we went in and landed them in Constantine Harbor," Simoneaux said. "It was pitch black at night, and we didn't have any radar either. On the way out of the harbor, the **Worden hit a pinnacle rock, and it broke in half**. This was cold weather—in January 1943—and that water was freezing. We had to jump overboard. Fourteen men got killed that day. I would've been the fifteenth one," he said.

**Worden had been sunk—as a result of a collision with a sharp rock formation**. Simoneaux recalled the details of the sinking. "When they pulled me out of the water, my head was under water. I was floating, and couldn't move a muscle. They were pulling bodies out of the water, to keep them from being listed as 'miss-ing.' They threw me on top of that pile of bodies. The good Lord must have made my fingers move, and that's when the bosun said, 'Get him off of that pile—he's not dead yet.' I was in bad shape. They thought my back was broken." Simoneaux was sent back to the United States for a lengthy recuperative period. Eventually, he was

assigned to another destroyer, the USS Cowell (DD-547), and later, to USS Bosque (APA-135), an attack troopship.

### **On Japan's doorstep**

On Sept. 2, 1945, from the deck of the Bosque, he had a view of the VJ Day surrender ceremony. "I was in Tokyo Bay. I could see them from where we were, signing the papers. I was real glad." "I had enough war, you see." He ended the war as a chief damage controlman, with eight medals, including one combat ribbon with two Silver Stars and three Bronze Stars.

Harry J. Simoneaux had participated in 26 military campaigns, including Coral Sea, Guadalcanal, Midway, Okinawa and the Philippine Sea. "It was a time in my life I'll never forget," he said. "Because when you think of what was at stake, it was the most important time of our lives."