The USS Rail

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Frank Susnik, a crew member aboard the USS Rail and Pearl Harbor survivor, recalls the tragic events of the Japanese attack on December 7th, 1941. The USS Rail was a minesweeper that helped the battleship, the USS Nevada, to safety at Pearl Harbor. The USS Rail continued to assist the crew of the USS Nevada for many days after the attack. Even though Pearl Harbor was a tragedy in American History, the USS Nevada and the USS Rail triumphed within two hours of the attack. The USS Rail successfully completed its mission to save the USS Nevada during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

World War II began with the German Army invasion of Poland in 1939. As Europe continued to fight, the relationship between Japan and America became worse. In early 1940, President Roosevelt moved the U.S. Navy Headquarters from California to Hawaii. This move was due to fear that Japan would attack the west coast of the United States. Soon after, America stopped selling war supplies to Japan. This angered Japan. In November of 1941, the U.S. government would receive a warning of an attack. The government thought the attack would be on the White House. Two years later and almost 7,500 miles away from the start of the war in Poland, the U.S. Navy Headquarters would be tragically attacked by Japan. “Until 1941, Americans had been divided over whether America should help defend their allies in a war that had already begun.” (Uschan) This attack on Pearl Harbor forced the United States into the deadliest war in global history.

“We were in a state of readiness, really for a war because we were repairing a lot of British ships that… came into Pearl to get overhauled, to get fixed up again… They
would be coming in there and we would be repairing their ships.” (Susnik, Frank.) Pearl Harbor was filled with U.S. navy ships; battleships, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, minesweepers, and 20 more different types--130 vessels in total. (Pearl Harbor Ships) The Pacific fleet was ready in case of war.

“We were out at Barbers Point laying mines and practicing for 3 days... Then about the 6th of December, which was a Saturday evening, about 10:00, we arrived at Pearl Harbor and they opened the submarine nets to let us into Pearl Harbor.” (Susnik, Frank.) It was unknown to the crew of the USS Rail and everyone else at that time, that a two-man Japanese submarine had followed the Rail into Pearl Harbor.

Frank Susnik was my great-great-uncle and worked in the engine room of the USS Rail. The USS Rail was a minesweeper stationed at Pearl Harbor. “... that morning at 2:00 am, I had to go on watch down in the engine room, I had the 2-8 watch. I was relieved about a quarter to 8:00, Sunday morning. I went up to the mess hall to have my breakfast. I heard a terrific explosion and I ran to the top deck and I saw a lot of smoke coming up from the area of Ford’s Island... Just then I heard some planes... I saw a plane coming at us. It was real low... when he came over... I saw the pilot; he had the canopy open and he was looking down at me... it was just a matter of 3 to 4 seconds he was going through there and he was looking at us... I saw the emblem under the wing, with the rising sun, it was a Japanese [plane].” (Susnik, Frank.)

Someone sounded the general alarm and the crew aboard the USS Rail ran to their battle stations. “I went down to the engine room, to my station, since we were already underway, they called all hands to take up ammunition and carry it up to the
guns... we finally got it up to the guns and we started shooting. From what I could see... some planes were being shot down. But there was so much hectic going on that I didn’t have no chance to look around, just go ahead and do what I was supposed to do.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The U.S. Navy’s battleships were lined up along Ford’s Island. This was known as Battleship Row. The 7 battleships were taken out by Japanese torpedo bombers. Twenty-one out of 29 Japanese torpedoes found their marks on these ships, damaging all and sinking four in less than 30 minutes as they were anchored in the harbor. (Remembering Pearl Harbor) The USS West Virginia and the USS Oklahoma sank quickly. The USS Arizona exploded and sank in less than nine minutes. The USS Maryland, the USS Tennessee, and the USS California all suffered damage eventually the California settled to the bottom. (Uschan) Only the Nevada was able to get underway. The Nevada was the oldest of the battleships at Pearl Harbor. When hit by the Japanese bomb, a large hole was created in the bottom of the battleship and water started to flow in. (The USS Nevada) After getting underway, the Nevada started to head down the channel trying to get to the Navy Yard.

“We waited for orders, and just before we got our orders, the USS Nevada... got underway... It came around the bend. It was, oh, it was a horrible sight. It was barely afloat. The main deck wasn’t any more than four feet above the waterline. That’s when we got our first orders.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The USS Rail’s orders were to go and give the USS Nevada steerage and forward motion to help run the battleship aground, so it wouldn’t sink and get stuck in
the channel. If the channel was blocked, no battleships or any other boats would be able to get into or out of the harbor. It was very slow moving and drew the attention of the Japanese pilots. “We assisted the Nevada as it didn’t have enough power to steer itself. And the Japanese bombers were coming in and bombing the Nevada very heavily.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The crew members tied both the USS Rail and the USS Nevada together so the Rail could give assistance to Nevada’s crew. The Rail and her sister ship, the USS Avocet, were able to turn the Nevada around and power her toward the shore. The USS Nevada finally sank in shallow water at the edge of Ford’s Island. The Rail was able to move the Nevada out the main channel.

“When we came around the bend, we could see what happened at Ford Island. They were all sitting on the bottom of the bay. Their decks were still up above the water. . . they couldn’t go down any farther. . . the [Oklahoma] was laying on its side. . . its topside was all underwater. It just made me so sick. You just couldn’t believe it.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The second wave of Japanese planes, high altitude bombers, fighters, and dive bombers—in total 167, arrived at Pearl Harbor. (Remembering Pearl Harbor) “We could see Hickam Field from where we were at, to our right, and the planes were dive bombing and bombing the planes and planes were burning and the hangars were all ablaze and on fire. No planes got off Hickam Field.” (Susnik, Frank.)

“They knew everything about what was going on at Pearl, they knew where every ship was. There was the Oklahoma, the USS Oklahoma was another battleship. It
wasn’t a first line battleship, it was used as target ship. And it was on the end of Ford’s Island. . . where one of the carriers was supposed to be, that weekend it was supposed to have been tied up there. They didn’t come in; they were about two days out, and they weren’t able to get there. That’s why they hit the Oklahoma hard, and it turned over, all you could see was the bottom side up.” (Susnik, Frank.)

“[We] were able to turn the thing around in the right direction and run assistance . . . We accomplished that without even getting bombed or anything. We were pretty fortunate.” (Susnik, Frank.) Despite the tragedy the USS Rail started to triumph in its mission during the attack on Pearl Harbor. “Even to this day, the Nevada, I noticed on a map, they named that point out there Nevada’s Point, it’s put on the map.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The crew of the Rail continued to assist the Nevada in any way they could over the next few hours. As the day went on, the aircraft thinned out and the bombings stopped. False reports of Japanese landings on the island where being broadcast on radios.

“We received many reports on the radio. . . that the Japanese were landing all over different points on the island. That made us take our anti-aircraft ammunition from the guns and take our surface ammunition up to get ready to fight them on land. Finally, about the middle of the afternoon, we finally got a report, officially, that the Japanese were faking this report to try and get us into chaos, and they really did for a while.” (Susnik, Frank.)
The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor lasted only two hours. “In that time, 21 ships were sunk or damaged including eight battleships; 164 planes were destroyed, with 159 more planes being damaged. Only 29 enemy planes were shot down. The number of soldiers and sailors killed that day was 2,340 and 1,143 were injured.” (Uschan.) The attack changed so many people’s minds and thoughts about the war.

“It was a shock. It was like everything just drained out of you—just a shock and the shock was so great I just didn’t have time to be angry. Just a shock and unbelief of, ‘How could this possibly happen?’ It just drained all the energy out of you. It was unbelievable—we couldn’t believe it.” (Susnik, Frank.)

The next day many people tried to save sailors trapped in the damaged battleships. Rescuers could hear if sailors were trapped inside the wreckage, because they could hear them shout for help or tap messages against steel frames from inside the ships. Eventually, 24 crew members of the overturned USS Oklahoma were rescued. (Uschan)

“The next morning, we saw two [United States] carriers come in, it really raised our morale let me tell you. Everybody was just a screaming and hollering and waving. Thank goodness they weren’t involved in the attack. There was a lot of salvage work being done, of course… a lot of these ships cleaned up oil and stuff like that. Nobody could leave the ship, everybody had to stay on the ship at least a week or two. There was a lot of clean up… We were there to help the Nevada, their crew.” (Susnik, Frank.)

That same day President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war against Japan. If the Congress agreed that America should join the war, America would not
only be fighting against Japan; America would also be fighting against Germany and Italy as well. The House of Representatives voted 388 to 1. (Uschan) America would be joining World War II.

The USS Nevada would survive the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Nevada would be repaired and continue to serve in World War II. She would see further action in the Pacific at the Battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The USS Nevada would be the only ship from Pearl Harbor to serve in both the Pacific and Atlantic theaters; including the D-Day invasion at Normandy on June 6th, 1944. The USS Rail would also continue its service throughout World War II. The USS Rail’s orders included service at Guadalcanal and the invasion at New George Island. The stories of these two ships and their crew members continue to inspire our country and triumph in the face of tragedy.
Annotated Bibliography

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This website is about what happened to the USS Nevada during the attack on Pearl Harbor.


This book is about how Pearl Harbor was attacked. The book gives information before the attack and after the attack, but the main part of this book is what happened during the attack on Pearl Harbor.