

No Safe Harbor

A sweet yellow Harley, a night in the brig and December 7, 1941

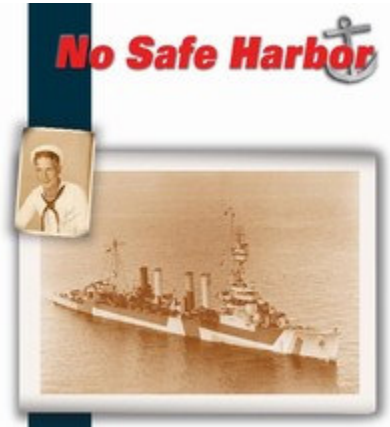
by Phil Smith

Warren Miller, a 17-year-old seaman from Denver, was asleep in the brig of the USS Utah, docked at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Suddenly, a series of horrific explosions jarred the teenager awake. The Utah shuddered as blast after blast heralded sunrise, December 7, 1941.

The ship trembled until one particularly violent paroxysm catapulted Warren from his bunk and into the bars of his cell. He felt a large bump on his head and noticed for the first time the scratches and bruises on his body. His arm was in a sling; bloody bandages covered his head.

Frightened cries and a shrill litany of alarms created a dissonant harmony that echoed through the ship. The young man hugged the bars of his cell as another massive convulsion thundered deep in the Utah's bowels.



The USS Utah capsizing at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.



Seaman Warren Miller

Smoke blurred his vision. Lights flickered. Cold water poured in, covering the floor of his cell. The teenager quickly understood: The ship was sinking, and he was locked inside it.

All because of a motorcycle.

It was a terrifying moment that lasted just long enough for the memory of the previous night to come into focus.

There had been a confrontation at a bar, challenges issued, then a brief ride, followed by a crash.

"I was going down with the ship," Miller says, recalling that historic morning six decades ago, "because of a sweet yellow Harley. Other guys got into trouble over a woman or gambling; I had to get thrown in the brig because I couldn't keep my hands off another guy's motorcycle."

Fortunately, the immediate danger didn't last.

"I breathed a sigh of relief when the Officer of the Deck sounded, 'Release all prisoners,' " Miller says. "But our guard, a young kid from Minnesota who was greener than me, headed topside."

"I hollered at him to unlock our cell. He just said, 'Save yourself,' and tossed a ring of keys in my direction."

As he unlocked the cell, Miller still faced the fact that he was aboard a sinking ship in the midst of an enemy attack. Pearl Harbor would become a defining moment for an entire generation. For Miller, though, it was truly a life-or-death situation.

Now approaching 80 years old, Miller was only 17 when he enlisted in the Navy in the fall of 1941. After basic training, he was assigned to the Utah, an aging battleship that had been refitted for a training role. At Pearl Harbor, its crew of more than 500 was responsible for maintaining the ship mostly as a target for planes dropping dummy bombs.

It was hardly the Navy life Miller had imagined, but that was all to change very quickly.

On Saturday night, December 6, Miller and a few of his shipmates were on shore leave in Honolulu, in a small bar called the Blue Moon. Except for the Utah crewmen, the bar was empty. Then, he recalls, two young Japanese men rode up on motorcycles, parked their machines and walked into the bar. They were outfitted in shiny boots, aviator caps and goggles.

Relations between the United States and Japan were already very strained, but Miller says that he and his friends engaged the men in friendly banter until the two bragged that they were the hottest riders on the island.

Miller, who'd been riding since he was 10 and had sold his '38 Harley when he joined the Navy, rose to the challenge. He countered that he could outride both of the Japanese men. And when they responded with laughter, he walked out and hopped aboard the yellow Harley Knucklehead one of the men had ridden in on.

He fired the V-twin motor, revved it a couple of times, then burned a couple of figure-eights in the parking lot. But that, he says, was just the warmup. Moments later, he was accelerating onto the street, shattering the peace of a Honolulu night.

"I had the bike up to 60 in no time," Warren recalls. "When I got to the courthouse, I tried to take the bike up the steps. I guess I just wanted to show off in front of my buddies.

"I got halfway up, then the bike cut out, twisted and flipped over, sending me and it all the way back to the street.

"When I woke up," he adds, "I was in the back seat of a Shore Patrol jeep, head aching and bleeding. The Japanese guy was screaming that I'd stolen his bike and totaled it."

The Shore Patrol rescued Miller from that confrontation, but delivered him back to the ship, where he faced the wrath of the Navy.

"My commander was so mad I thought he was going to have me shot at sunrise," he says. "They patched my cuts and bruises, then threw me in a cell. I went to sleep and didn't notice a thing until I got knocked out of bed by the explosions the next morning."

Ironically, the attack on the Utah was actually a mistake. Japanese naval officers knew it was nothing more than a target ship and told their pilots to ignore it. But in the opening moments of the attack, one pilot couldn't resist and

released a torpedo that slammed into the ship's port side. A few moments later, a second torpedo hit near the same location and the ship began to take on water.

Within moments, the senior officer on board, Lt. Commander S.S. Isquith, ordered all hands on deck and signaled for release of the prisoners. By the time Miller and a second prisoner were racing to a ladder that would take them topside, the ship was listing badly.

Miller says that as they reached the deck, a Japanese plane strafed the ship, killing the other prisoner instantly. Miller avoided that attack, but there were plenty of other hazards.

One of the prime dangers came from loose timbers stacked on the deck to protect it from the dummy bombs dropped by American planes. A number of crewmen were killed or injured as the lumber shifted. Miller, like other survivors, made his way to the starboard side, which had raised up as the Utah rolled further to port. From there, many of the men were able to escape the ship and jump into the harbor.

Even after all these years, Miller recalls the scene vividly.

"After I hit the water," he says, "I headed for shore. I hung onto a piece of wood from the Utah that had floated my way.

"The sky was alive with fire. Powder magazines were blowing on many ships, but I remember a warehouse loudspeaker on the island was still blaring out a Sunday morning music program from the radio station in Honolulu. I bobbed in and around the pilings of the pier to the strains of 'My Blue Heaven.'

"Nobody knew what was going on," he adds. "Men everywhere—some swimming, some, like me, hanging onto anything that would float.

"When I got ashore, I found my commander and asked him what I should do. This was the same officer who dressed me down the night before because the Navy would probably have to pay for a new motorcycle to make up for my Saturday night fling.

"But now, I guess the price of a mangled motorcycle seemed insignificant. The commander stood in front of me and smiled. 'Well, Miller,' he said, 'I'm not sure whether we ought to court-martial you or give you a commendation. It looks like you were the first U.S. sailor to strike a blow for America, and you didn't even know it.'

Within days, Miller had been assigned to a new ship, the USS Detroit, where he remained through much of the war. When he returned to civilian life, he married, started a career with the Union Pacific railroad and, like a lot of other World War II veterans, gave up motorcycling while he raised a family.

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that Miller bought a new Harley. By then, he was able to go riding with his daughter, son-in-law and nephew. And he was able to give a ride to a woman who had been one of his first passengers—his mother.

He recalls the first time she rode with him on his bike:

"I was just 17, and it was a month before I joined the Navy," he says. "Mom was a spitfire who would try anything once.

"My Flathead had a sidecar, where Mom rode as we headed into Denver. I was pretty cocky in those days, and I was taking corners at pretty scary speeds, which meant that the sidecar would lift off the ground.

“For my mother, it was like a carnival ride. She was screaming at the top of her voice: ‘Warren Miller, you put me down this instant!’ ”



Warren and his mom in the '80s.

In spite of that harrowing initiation to motorcycling, Miller says his mother remained interested in riding until the end of her life.

“The summer before she died,” he says, “at 86, she still had a yen to ride. She was never afraid of life. I suppose I inherited her spirit.”

Miller, too, has retained his enthusiasm for motorcycling over the decades. In 1987, he was one of the founding members of the Omaha chapter of the Harley Owners Group, and in the years since, he has served as its road captain and tour leader for many club-sponsored trips.

He still travels extensively on his bike, making an annual pilgrimage to Sturgis and venturing to Milwaukee for last year’s 100th anniversary party.

In 2002, at the age of 78, Miller earned the Mileage Award for the Omaha HOG chapter. And at 80, he’s planning a ride to Daytona for Biketoberfest this fall.

“When I see people my age sitting in rocking chairs just growing old in front of a TV set,” Miller says, “I’m glad that I’ve been nuts about bikes.”

Miller notes that he almost fell into the trap of a sedentary lifestyle.

“When I retired, I didn’t know what to do with myself,” he says. “I’d been a railroad man most of my adult life, and that’s a part of who I was.

“After I retired, one passion replaced another, I guess. My love of bikes, I believe, saved my life, and made my retirement years exciting and meaningful. Now I’m too busy to think about getting old.”

And 60 years after his inability to stay off a motorcycle almost cost him his life, Miller wouldn’t think of giving up riding.

“Some say I’m too old to be on a motorcycle, that I should act my age,” he says. “But I think life is about following your passions. You’re never too old for that.”