

## **Despair and Visions: Birth of The Rescue Helicopter**

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### **PEARL HARBOR, DECEMBER 7th**

The tropical Sunday morning was quiet. A few sailors and marines stirred lazily about Ford Island and on the nearby moored ships. Lieutenant Frank A. Erickson, U.S. Coast Guard, the off-going Naval Air Station duty officer, watched through the window of the office as the marine color guard marched to the flagpole in front of the US Navy's Ford Island administration building. In a few moments, the record player would sound colors. His wife and two infant daughters expected Erickson home soon. They were planning to share a rare quiet day together in their tiny Waikiki apartment.

He continued to watch as Privates First Class Frank Dudovick and James D. Young, and Private Paul O. Zeller, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, stood at attention in perfect stillness-at the ready with the national ensign-then he glanced at the clock.<sup>0</sup>

Waiting.

Moments later the languid morning erupted to the sounds of the first thudding-crumps of exploding bombs. The clock showed 0753. Erickson looked up to see a plane passing over the "Ten-Ten" dock in the Navy Yard release a torpedo. Disbelief turned to reality when he saw the red "meatball" painted on the aircraft. Its deadly fish struck the bow of the battleship *California* (BB-44), the ship closest to the administration building, moored along battleship row.

The Marine color guard didn't wait for the recorded traditional bugle call. The flag went up immediately and a quickly substituted "general quarters" blared from speakers across the island. "All Hell had broken loose." The base commanding officer phoned demanding "what the hell kind of drills are you pulling down there?"<sup>1</sup>

Pearl Harbor was under attack. Ten days passed before Erickson returned to his family and a new life, changed by the events of the day.

Moments after he was relieved as duty officer while bombs still rained down on Ford Island, Erickson sprinted through showers of shrapnel and carnage to his general quarter's station in the landplane control tower. Ships' guns from around the harbor were now returning fire on the aerial raiders.

From his aerie in the tower at the epicenter of attack, Erickson "had a grand view of the battle." Beneath him lay all of Ford Island surrounded by the ships of the Pacific Fleet moored in Pearl Harbor. He watched the nearby Hickam Field to the south suddenly

erupt in billowing smoke and flames. On the horizon, up the hill in the valley to the north, he saw the ugliness of black smoke blot the morning's deep blue skies over the Army base at Wheeler. Closer, across the sugar cane fields to the west, more smoke and flames revealed a similar atrocity at the Marine Corps' air base at Ewa.

As he watched all this, helpless, an attacking Japanese plane—ablaze, flashed across his view. He saw it crash into the seaplane tender USS *Curtiss* less than a half mile away just to the north at the entrance to Middle Loch. The ship burst into flames. Turning and looking at the eastern edge of Pearl Harbor toward Aiea, he watched in wonder as a “huge flaming oil slick” drifted down on battleship row. Paint on behemoths flashed as the giant flaming ameba-like sludge enveloped the battleships rafted in a row alongside Ford Island. Men swarmed overboard from fiery cauldrons—driven from the internal hells into the oil-coated, burning water.

Many scientific and technical achievements came out of World War II. Remarkably, a significant aviation triumph birthed from the apparitions, viewed by Erickson this Sunday morning, of suffering victims struggling ashore—many unaided, from this infamous attack. Typical was one rescuer's observation as she described “a young man, filthy black oil covering his burned, shredded flesh,” labor for aid unassisted. “He had no clothes on, his nudity entirely obscured by oil. The skin hung from his arms like scarlet ribbons” as he staggered at the shoreline. “He couldn't speak. Oil clogged his throat.”<sup>2</sup> These visages—seen by Erickson—of helpless men struggling in the blazing harbor ignited his lifelong quest for a better method to rescue the endangered from the sea.

The following years did not ease or erase these views, seared into his memory, that he saw concentrated in the periphery surrounding him on this morning. Erickson witnessed more than two thousand men killed within a radius of a mile-and-a-half plus many thousands more wounded. He watched in helpless horror as lines of oil covered, mostly naked, and burned men struggled onto Ford Island. <sup>3</sup>

Erickson, a Coast Guard officer—trained and dedicated to saving lives—was frustrated on this fateful morning and swelled with emotions beyond the ignominy of the assault, with his inability to rescue ships' crew. He had no methods to recover the hundreds of sailors struggling and dying in the flaming waters of Pearl Harbor. This vivid scene of barbarism played over and over in every direction as he watched from his lofty perch on this once peaceful morning. Erickson could only witness—impotent. The feeling of total ineffectiveness he experienced in the few hours following the attack constantly re-ignited the fuel of his dedication throughout the following decade. Erickson's memory of that morning of all its terrors became the catalyst eventually forcing a unique new device into the aviation stable.

This was the rescue helicopter.

A few months earlier, the aviator discovered what he considered the perfect rescue vehicle for the Coast Guard. But now he was caught in the middle of the Pacific and in a war where he feared he could not explore what was already a dream embryo. In August 1941 the Navy absorbed Coast Guard units in the Hawaii area from the Treasury Department. At that time Erickson was assigned to the Coast Guard Cutter (CGC) *Taney*, flying the ship's Grumman J2F "Duck." *Taney* was in port in Honolulu, recently returned

from Alaskan patrols. With his new assignment in the Navy, Erickson transferred from *Taney* to Ford Island along with the ship's J2F. His new job was as base assistant operations officer and officer-in-charge of the Navy's observation squadron.<sup>4</sup> "When the first wave of Jap planes struck the Naval Air Station, on Ford Island in the center of Pearl Harbor, all Navy combat aircraft on ramps and parking areas and in the main hangars, were quickly put out of action. Only the two fleet utility squadrons, which operated from the old Army hangars on the Luke Field side of Ford Island, were spared." Since these were among the only flyable aircraft remaining on Ford Island after the initial attack, "these utility planes, armed only with rifles and shotguns, took off to search for the enemy carrier task force."<sup>5</sup>

Erickson's greatest fear was not the war itself, but that its duration would keep him in the Pacific Theater unable to pursue his new dream to affect a way to rescue victims at sea.

He had the solution.

He discovered it just weeks before after reading the August 1941, magazine *Aero Digest*. In it, an article described a small helicopter invented by Dr. Igor Sikorsky.<sup>6</sup> It was the helicopter, in Erickson's mind, that was unquestionably the ideal tool for Coast Guard and Naval Aviators. In the smoking aftermath of the butchery he witnessed at Pearl Harbor, a dream took shape and Erickson did not relinquish his quest over the next decade despite obstacles to his career through professional rivalry and dangers to his life in testing new machines. The specter presented to him on this day of infamy drove the intensity of his remaining military career. Erickson, with just a handful of dedicated followers, created—against enormous odds—the first of many generations of successful rescue and naval service helicopters. His costs were, like those of other perspicacious military officers, disgrace amongst his peers and an abbreviated career.

The rescue helicopter, now considered an icon to human survival, was Erickson's ideas created in 1942. His aspirations contrived in despair and accomplished in frustration and dangers are seen today in the newest helicopters dedicated to humanitarian service. Today, millions of saved lives are accountable to Captain Frank A. Erickson's dream born in carnage as viewed from the control tower on the tiny island in the middle of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941.

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<sup>0</sup> Frank A. Erickson, Papers, A personal account of Pearl Harbor attack, possibly delivered as a speech to workers at the Sikorsky plant about 2 July 1943, (Naples, ME: Stewart A. Graham papers, hereafter, Graham). Robert J. Cressman, J. Michael Wenger, "Infamous Day: Marines at Pearl Harbor 7 December 1941," Marines In World War II Commemorative Series, (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1992), 3.

<sup>1</sup> Erickson, account of Pearl Harbor attack.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Anne Ramsey, "Only Yesteryear." *Naval History* (Winter 1991): 24.

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, account.

<sup>4</sup> Erickson, Letter to Ole Henrik, 16 February 1976. (Edmonds, WA, Erickson Papers, Betty Erickson Bohs, hereafter, Bohs).

<sup>5</sup> Erickson, II, 8, 1

<sup>6</sup> Erickson, II-6-6.