



U.S. Coast Guard Aviation History

Despair and Visions: Birth of the Rescue Helicopter

By Tom Beard © 1998

Tom Beard presented this paper to the Eleventh Annual Maritime Archaeology and History Symposium, February 13-15, 1999, in Honolulu, Hawaii. The original article came from research to the prologue of his history of Coast Guard rotary aviation entitled *Wonderful Flying Machines: A History of U.S. Coast Guard Helicopters* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

The rescue helicopter accounts for the saving of millions of lives worldwide. The advent of this wondrous vehicle began as an idea during the carnage at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. United States Coast Guard Lieutenant, Frank A. Erickson, was an observer and described this infamous attack from his vantage in the airplane control tower at Ford Island. It is the image of this carnage that he experienced that drove him over the next decade to overcome overwhelming opposition and create an entire new wing of aviation—the helicopter—in his career-long pursuit of a better way to save lives.

The tropical Sunday morning was quiet. A few sailors and marines, in addition to those preparing to raise American flags, stirred lazily about Ford Island and on the nearby moored ships. Erickson, the off going Naval Air Station duty officer, glanced through the window of the office at "...about 0753 as the marine color guard marched to the flagpole..." in front of the U.S. Navy's Ford Island administration building. In a few moments, the assistant Officer of the Day would start the record player that would sound colors. Erickson's wife and two infant daughters expected him home soon. He planned to "...catch the 8 o'clock boat for the Navy Yard." 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 once more. Waiting. "There was nothing," Erickson later reflected, "to indicate that this morning would be any different from any other Sunday Morning in the Islands."

Moments later the languid morning erupted to the sounds of the first thudding-crumps of exploding bombs. "Almost simultaneously with the first note of the National Anthem....there were two heavy explosions." Erickson ran to the door. He saw a plane passing over the "Ten-Ten" dock in the Navy Yard just releasing a torpedo. Disbelief turned to reality. "There was no mistaking the marking which looked like balls of fire on each wing..." of the plane passing overhead. The deadly fish struck the bow of the battleship California (BB-44), the ship closest to

the administration building, moored along battleship row. "Within the next couple of minutes, Japanese torpedo planes had poured three torpedoes into the side of the California. Every ship down the line was hit first by torpedoes and then by dive bombers."

The Marine color guard did not wait for the recorded traditional morning colors. 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 Erickson's office demanding, "What the hell kind of drills are you pulling down there?"

Pearl Harbor was under attack. Ten days passed before Erickson returned to his family and a new life; a life now dedicated to a better way to save lives. His future, like everyone's, changed with the events of that day, but his changed in a way that would affect millions of people worldwide for decades to follow.

Among the first of the terror stricken refugees were "...[t]he families of the chief petty officers whose quarters were just opposite battleship row....[They]...streamed up to the Ad[ministration] Building. Many of the women and children were hysterical and completely uncontrollable." The captain and the executive officer arrived a few minutes later and Erickson was relieved as duty officer. While bombs still rained down on Ford Island, Erickson sprinted through showers of shrapnel to his general quarter's station in the landplane control tower. He later exclaimed, "I didn't think I could run so fast. Every gun in the fleet had cut loose by this time."

Erickson "...had a grandstand view of the battle" from his aerie in the tower at the epicenter of attack. Beneath him, lay all of Ford Island surrounded by the ships of the Pacific Fleet moored in Pearl Harbor. He watched as nearby Hickam Field to the south erupted in billowing smoke and flames. Up the slope in the valley to the north between the forested mountains to the right and dry barren hill in the west, he saw the ugliness of billowing 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 roiling smoke revealed a similar atrocity at the Marine Corps' air base at Ewa. As he helplessly watched all this, 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 toward Aiea and looking at the eastern edge of Pearl Harbor, he watched in wonder as a "...huge flaming oil slick..." drifted down on battleship row. "The old accumulations of paint..." on behemoths flashed as the giant flaming amoebae enveloped the battleships rafted in a row alongside the southern edge of Ford Island and "...burned with a terrific heat." Men swarmed overboard from fiery cauldrons driven from the internal hells into the oil-coated flaming water. Others continued "...blazing away at any airplane in the air..." from their gun stations aboard sinking ships now settling onto the harbor bottom.

The first wave of Japanese planes attacking the Naval Air Station, on Ford Island damaged or destroyed all Navy combat aircraft on ramps and parking areas and in the main hangars. "The [Japanese] kept up a heavy pounding for about an hour then the bombing stopped....Most of the battleships moored along Ford Island were listing badly. The Oklahoma had already capsized. In the Pearl City channel the Utah had also disappeared from sight....Utility aircraft in from the old Army hangars on the Luke Field side of Ford Island, were the only flyable aircraft spared after the initial attack." During this lull a few Grumman J2F and Sikorsky JRS amphibians got out to scout for the enemy armed only with "Springfield's, shotguns, Tommy guns or anything available to throw into the ships before they took off."

They just got airborne "...when the second wave of the [Japanese] attack came. This attack was even heavier than the first." The USS Nevada, "...which had managed to get underway, took a terrific beating as a full squadron of dive bombers worked it over." There was a terrific explosion as it came opposite the seaplane ramp. From his unique vantage Erickson further observed, "[I]t looked as if it would go down on the spot...." This blast, however, was the USS Shaw exploding

in its nearby dry dock. The Nevada moved on slowly until it grounded. "...The battleship Arizona blew up in the meantime killing over half her crew."

World War II is credited with many scientific and technical achievements. Ironically, a major aviation triumph can be attributed to the excruciating apparition viewed that fateful morning by Erickson. He witnessed the suffering victims in their attempts to reach shore, many unaided, struggling and dying in oil coated waters. Typical was one rescuer's observation as she described "...a young man, filthy black oil covering his burned, shredded flesh..." laboring 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.... He couldn't speak. Oil clogged his throat." This was the vision a thousand times over—Erickson's image—of helpless men besieged in the blazing harbor that ignited his lifelong quest for a better method to rescue the endangered from the sea.

The following years did not erase these devastating events, which surrounding him, seared into his memory 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.

Erickson, a Coast Guard officer—trained and dedicated to saving lives with Coast Guard amphibian airplanes—was frustrated on this fateful morning and swelled with emotions beyond the ignominy of the assault in his eagerness to rescue ships' crew. He had no methods to recover the hundreds of sailors struggling and dying in the flaming waters of Pearl Harbor—a duty he dedicated his life to and performed for the previous ten years. This vivid scene of barbarism played repeatedly 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 dozen years. Erickson's memory of that morning of all its terrors became the catalyst eventually forcing a unique new device into the aviation stable. This new wonder was the *rescue helicopter*.

It was during the ten days following the attack when Erickson reflected heavily on the absurdity of *his* situation. He, too, was soon flying patrols in the innocuous (weaponless) amphibians—from among the planes surviving the raid—searching for an armed Japanese battle fleet. A few months earlier, this young aviator discovered what he considered the perfect rescue vehicle for the U.S. 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 an embryonic dream. 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, in port in Honolulu flying the ship's Grumman J2F "Duck." With this new assignment in the Navy, he moved from the ship to Ford Island at the Navy Fleet Air Operations Base at Pearl Harbor. He came with the ship's J2F and acquired a Coast Guard Grumman JRF-2 "Goose." His new job was "...as base assistant operations officer and officer-in-charge of the Navy's observation squadron."

Erickson's greatest fear was not the war itself, but that its duration would keep him in the Pacific unable to pursue his new dream to effect a way to rescue victims at sea. He already 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. It was the development of this revolutionary new vehicle, in Erickson's mind, that was unquestionably the ideal tool for Coast Guard Aviators. In the smoking aftermath of the butchery he witnessed at Pearl Harbor, a vision emerged. Erickson did not relinquish his quest from this moment on despite obstacles to his military career plus obvious dangers to his life flying a highly experimental aircraft during the following decade. The specter presented to him on this day of infamy drove him with inspirations that only chaos could illuminate. He, with a handful of dedicated followers, established against enormous odds, the first of many generations of successful rescue helicopters. As a result of this pioneering, he also lead the way for the development of helicopters for all purposes. His costs

were, like those of other perspicacious military officers, disgrace amongst his peers and an abbreviated career.

But he succeeded.

The *rescue helicopter*—now a common image, an icon to human survival—was Erickson's vision created in 1941 in the frustrations of battle. The newest helicopters today dedicated to humanitarian service reflect Erickson's aspirations inspired in despair by the attack on Pearl Harbor and contrived in frustration and humiliation through the next decade. Today, a legacy lives with the millions of saved lives accountable to Captain Frank A. Erickson's dream born in carnage as he viewed the attack from the control tower on the tiny island in the middle of Pearl Harbor on December 7th 1941.

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