

A Young Sailor and an “Old Lady”

On the morning of December 7, 1941, Seaman 1st Class James E. Mason served on an old minelayer, the *USS Oglala*. It did not have the big guns identified with battleships. But just a few minutes after the Japanese attack began, her sailors were firing *Oglala's* 3-inch .50-caliber antiaircraft gun and her .30-caliber machine guns. While the ship sustained no direct hits, blasts from a torpedo and a bomb damaged her. Compartments flooded. Still, over the course of the two-hour enemy attack, the crew defended Pearl Harbor. In the words of the ship's Commanding Officer, the firing of the antiaircraft gun and machine guns “continued until [the] ship was abandoned. Machine gun crews report definite hits on the enemy plane.”

Some forty years after “the date which will live in infamy,” Jim Mason wrote down some of his recollections of that famous Sunday morning:

“I had stood a 11 PM to 7 AM Communication watch that morning & was asleep below deck when the attack occurred. Awakened, I went to the radio shack with nothing on but my shorts. Nothing much to do. All frequencies were manned & we were under attack. Planes flew so close that I could have hit one with a shotgun. We had a gun up forward; however, after a few rounds it jammed. We were tied outboard of the *Helena*. An aerial torpedo was launched at us, went underneath us & exploded against the *Helena*. Didn't bother the *Helena*, but it split some of our seams, & we began to sink. Tugs came alongside & moved us around to 10-10 dock. We tried to put lines to the dock to keep us from sinking, but we had taken on too much water. After the ship sank, some of us who had remained as long as possible swam over to the dock, climbed up & ran to a first aid station made up of the base of two ship-towing targets. All of us didn't make it. Later in the day I was able to pick up a deserters' sea bag over at the sub-base. During the war, [I] was in the armed Guard for two years--Gulf of Mexico, North Atlantic, Mediterranean, etc. Went to flight school. Member SEA. Was in the Pacific, Philippines, etc. the last two years of the war.

PS. [My] wrist was injured that morning. Was bandaged at the first aid station. Only time [I was] hurt during the war.”

Born James Elgin Mason on September 18, 1918 in Arkansas, this Pearl Harbor Defender spent only his earliest years in his birth state. The family moved to Kansas by the time he was seven. “Jim,” as he came to be called, was the oldest of five children. He literally stood apart from his brown-eyed, shorter siblings with his height of a little over six feet and his “crystal blue eyes,” as a granddaughter describes them. Jim left school after the eighth grade, a common occurrence with his generation and earlier ones. His granddaughter explains his decision to quit school by pointing out that the Mason family needed the income Jim, as the oldest child, could bring home. With the beginning of the Great Depression in 1930, economic conditions certainly would have affected the Masons. By the time of the 1930

Federal Census, the family had moved from Galena, Kansas to Lowell, Kansas. Alva worked in Lowell at an electric plant. In the spring when the census was taken, Jim was not yet employed. He was only eleven at that time. It was probably later in the year or the next that he dropped out of school to help the family financially. Perhaps Alva was able to get Jim a job at the electric plant where he worked. In any event, by the time Jim completed his World War II military service, he possessed technical knowledge in the field of electronics, acquired largely from his assignment to Navy communications.

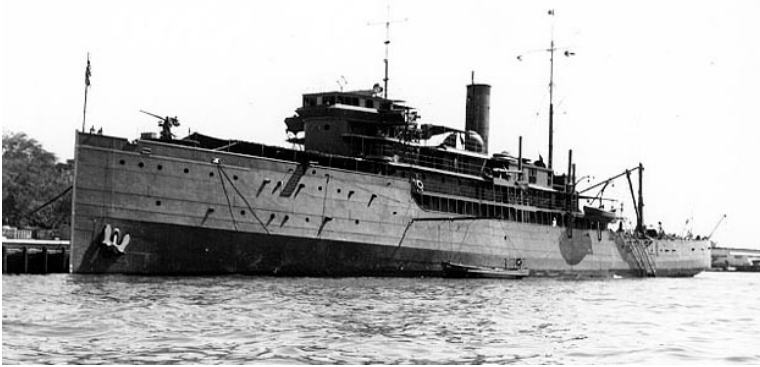
More than one factor may have influenced Jim's decision on June 6, 1940 to enlist in the Navy. World War II had broken out in Europe nine months earlier. Coupled with almost a decade of Japanese aggression in the Far East, Americans inside and outside of government talked of re-instituting the draft. Congress and the President did so in September 1940. Three months earlier, discussion of the upcoming legislation may have prompted Jim's decision to enlist in the Navy before he could have been drafted into the Army. Based upon Alva's answer to a question in the 1930 Federal Census, he was a World War I veteran. Having served in the war in some capacity, Alva may have shared one particular aspect of it with Jim--the horrors of trench warfare. In contrast, Navy service was identified with a clean cot to sleep in at night and regular daily meals. The expectation, therefore, that a draft law would soon be passed, the trench warfare experiences of World War I American soldiers, and the Navy's reputation for a different type of military service may have influenced Jim's decision to enter the Navy. Perhaps most significantly, though, by 1942 Alva worked for the Navy. This may have been the major factor behind Jim's 1940 enlistment.¹

Jim signed up in San Francisco. His parents could have moved to the Bay Area by the time he did so. In 1942, his father Alva worked at the Mare Island Navy Yard. Alva's background in electrical work might have factored into a talent Jim probably exhibited on aptitude tests he took in boot camp. Based on those exams, after graduation he attended the Navy's radio school. Age twenty-one at the time of his enlistment, Jim committed himself to probably the standard four-year "hitch." United States entry into World War II, because of the attack at Pearl Harbor, of course changed that. The Navy did not discharge Jim until June 7, 1946. He thus served exactly six years and one day. That period included one of the most famous dates in American history, December 7, 1941. Jim's first World War II campaign was in defense of Pearl Harbor. He had arrived in Hawaii early in 1941 onboard the *USS West Virginia*. But Jim was not a crewmember; the battleship merely carried him to Pearl Harbor where he eventually became assigned to the *Oglala* as a radioman. As noted earlier, the *Oglala* was not built to be part of the Navy's battle line.²

A November 1945 Navy magazine identified the *USS Oglala* as an "Old Lady With a Past." It had been constructed in 1907 as a coastal steamer, with the name the *SS Massachusetts*; the ship carried freight between New York, Boston, and Portland, Maine. In World War I, the Navy took her over as a minelayer. Renamed the *USS Shawmut*, the vessel helped mine the North Sea. After the war, the ship

continued naval service, first as an aircraft tender and then as a minelayer. She

USS Oglala at Pearl Harbor, summer 1941

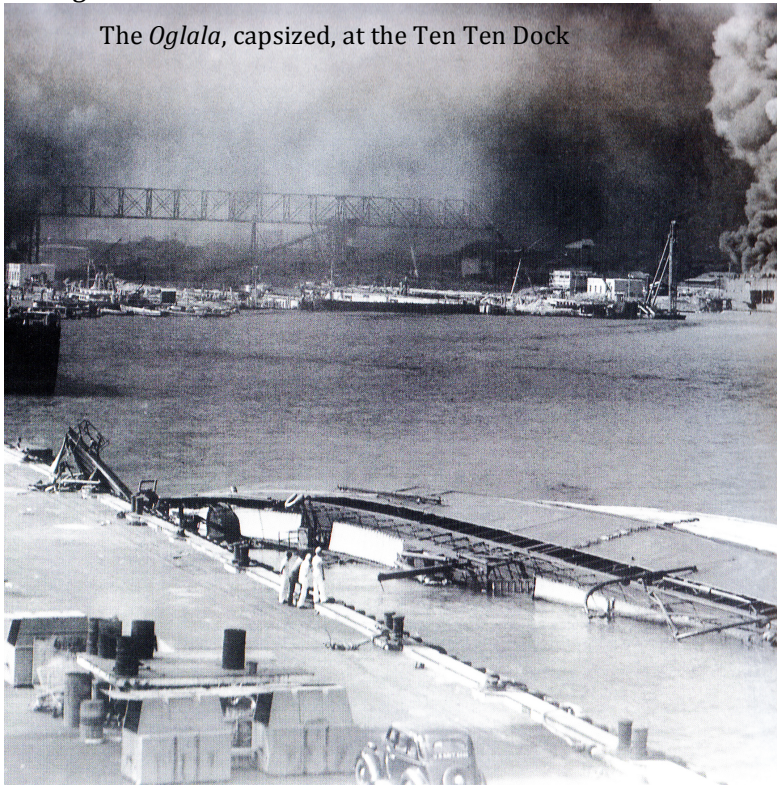


remained the *Shawmut* until January 1928 when the Navy renamed her the *Oglala*. The name itself derives from the Oglalas, a branch of the North American Dakota Indian nation. For Jim Mason, his assignment to the *USS Oglala* in 1941 might have struck him as a fitting billet. Family lore handed down to Jim spoke of Native American blood in his ancestral background.³

The *Oglala* was not any minelayer. In 1941 she served as the flagship for the Admiral who oversaw the Pacific Fleet Mine Force. That officer was Rear Admiral William Furlong. On the day of the Japanese attack, he would be the “Senior Officer Present Afloat.” Two days before the enemy struck, the *Oglala* had been refueled, so on December 7th, she held about 232,500 gallons of fuel oil. An explosion onboard would have been catastrophic for the ship and her crew. She was anchored at berth B-2, on the Ten Ten Dock, at Pearl Harbor’s Navy Yard. The dock was at the northern side of the yard. The *Oglala* was outboard of the light cruiser the *USS Helena*. Approximately eight feet separated the two ships. Near them was the *USS Pennsylvania*, in Dry Dock No. 1. It was the only one of the nine battleships based at Pearl that was not moored with the other battleships. They were anchored directly across from the Navy Yard, off of Ford Island. Docked near each other, their placement was known as Battleship Row. Conventional wisdom at that time judged battleships to be the premier force of any navy. As such, when Japanese planes made their descent on December 7th, their principal target was Battleship Row.⁴

As it turned out, the first damage to the *Oglala* and the *Helena* came from a Japanese plane whose pilot planned on dropping his aerial torpedo on the *Pennsylvania*. But Lieutenant Tsuyoshi Nagai, approaching the battleship at a low altitude, thought that the mooring slip would blunt the torpedo’s impact. He therefore targeted the nearby *Oglala*. The official report of the ship’s Commanding Officer (CO), written days later, gave 7:57 A.M. as the moment when the *Oglala* felt the force of the torpedo. It did not, however, hit the minelayer. The torpedo passed under the ship and then hit the *Helena*’s starboard side (i.e., the ship’s right-hand side looking forward), killing almost twenty men. The *Oglala* felt the blast on her port side (i.e., her left-hand side looking forward). As the CO’s report explained, “The force of the explosion lifted up fire room [boiler room] floor plates and ruptured the hull on the port side.”⁵

The *Oglala* immediately began to take on water. As Jim explained, the torpedo blast “split some of our seams, and we began to sink.” (The *Helena* did the same, but its crew was able to contain the flooding due to different shipboard conditions.) Around 8:00 A.M., perhaps only three minutes after Lieutenant Nagai dropped his torpedo, a Japanese dive bomber dropped a bomb that fell between the *Oglala* and the *Helena*. Its explosion impacted the minelayer’s port side, outside of the fire room or slightly forward of it. The blast from the bomb did not result in any new flooding inside of the *Oglala*. It did, however, increase the flooding that was already taking place in the fire room and in the engine room. Since the ship had lost power, pumping devices could not be employed. The *Oglala*’s list increased to almost twenty degrees. Admiral Furlong ordered a nearby tug and motor launch to move the *Oglala* to a vacant berth at the Ten Ten Dock, towards the *Helena*’s stern. (The



The *Oglala*, capsized, at the Ten Ten Dock

Admiral was concerned that the minelayer might pin the cruiser against the dock.) The small boats positioned the *Oglala* so that it could be secured to the pier, as Jim put it, to “keep us from sinking.” This was accomplished around 9:00 A.M. during a heavy strafing attack by enemy planes. Yet as Jim pointed out in his recollection, “We had taken on too much water.” The lines that held the ship to the dock gave way, and the *Oglala* turned over on its port side. She sank beside the Ten Ten Dock.

When the ship rolled over, its bridge and main mast struck the dock and fell off. About 10:00 A.M., the Admiral gave the order to abandon ship. Two hours had passed since the beginning of the Japanese attack. Enemy planes were finishing their last attack wave. With the *Oglala* on its side, the crew moved across the side to reach the pier. Jim indicated from his recollection that he and others “remained [onboard] as long as possible.” Once they left the ship, they “swan over to the dock, climbed up, and ran to a first aid station” as enemy machine guns fired down upon them. Jim added a short, telling statement to his account of reaching the first aid station--“All of us didn’t make it.”⁶

Decades later, Jim shared with his family one particular moment that may explain the meaning behind those six words. Jim was running for cover with a good friend. Machine gun strafing killed his buddy. In the word of Jim’s granddaughter,

that moment “traumatized” Jim. He never got over his dislike for the Japanese people, a feeling other Pearl Harbor Defenders understandably shared.⁷

Like many World War II veterans, Jim waited several years before he shared aspects of his World War II story with his family. Initially, he did not even spotlight his role as a Pearl Harbor Defender. His granddaughter believes Jim did not dwell on the December 7th event because other Pearl Harbor Defenders often made fun of the *Oglala*’s fate that morning. Refusing to acknowledge the damage sustained by the old minelayer because of the torpedo and bomb blasts, the men joked that the *Oglala* “died of fright.”⁸

But the ship did not “die.” Even though initially the minelayer was declared a total loss, the Navy changed this evaluation. The Command decided to repair it. At Pearl Harbor, between fifteen and eighteen divers spent almost two thousand hours underwater in salvage operation on the *Oglala*. She first returned to an upright position in April 1942, although most of the ship still had water in it. Due to mishaps



Oglala under salvage, circa April 1942

onboard during salvage operations, she sank three more times. Yet “the Old Lady” refused to die. In December 1942 the *Oglala* sailed out of Pearl Harbor for the West Coast where she underwent further repairs. She finished her wartime service as a repair ship. The *Oglala* was not decommissioned until July 1946, one month after Jim Mason was discharged after four years of wartime service in the European Theater

as well as the Pacific Theater. He had been in the Navy for six years, the *Oglala* for over twenty-eight years.

Like this first ship Jim had served on, he, too, displayed a strength of character in his postwar life. Probably using the educational benefits of the GI Bill, the boy who had dropped out of school in the eighth grade went on to attend college. Jim earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Redlands. He became a professor at San Bernardino Valley College, teaching in the Electricity/Electronic Department. Asked to describe Jim, his granddaughter used these characteristics—he was a “proud” man, “an avid reader,” a person who was “detail oriented,” one who picked things up “intuitively,” and a man who was “meticulous.” He may have acquired some of these traits while in the Navy. Undoubtedly, his World War II

service impacted him in more than one way. And the most powerful impact might very well have been what he went through on December 7, 1941.⁹



¹ Information on James Elgin Mason and his family background is taken from documents on Ancestry.com--the 1925 Kansas State Census, the 1930 United States Federal Census records, WW I as well as WW II Draft Registration cards, and WW II Navy Muster Rolls.

² Alva Mason filled out a draft registration card in 1942. At that time, he worked at the Mare Island Navy Yard. www.ancestry.com, WW II Draft Registration cards (accessed November 5, 2016).

³ *All Hands, The Bureau of Naval Personnel Information Bulletin*, December 1945, "'Old Lady With a Past," p. 37 (available online); www.navsource.org/archives/11/0604.htm (accessed November 5, 2016). The *Oglala* was decommissioned in July 1946, and it was sold for scrap in November 1965.

⁴ Information here and in the following account of the *Oglala* on December 7, 1941 is taken from two reports of the Commanding Officer, one dated December 11, 1941 and another December 31, 1941, www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/logs/CM/cm4-Pearl.html; and www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/wars-and-events/world-war-ii/pearl-harbor-raid/attacks-in-the-navy-yard-area/uss-ogla (both accessed November 4, 2016). On the *Oglala's* flagship status, see Van Der Vat, *Pearl Harbor, Day of Infamy, An Illustrated History* (Edison, New Jersey) p. 85.

⁵ On the name of the Japanese pilot, and his initial plan to target the *Pennsylvania*, see Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept, The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York, 1981), p. 507. The casualties onboard the *Helena* are taken from Ernest

Arroyo, *Pearl Harbor* (New York, 2001) p. 85 and the ship's Commanding Officer's report dated December 14, 1994 (available online).

⁶ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume III, The Rising Sun in the Pacific, 1931-April 1942*, pp. 116-117; Arroyo, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 85. CO's December 11, 1941 report; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, p. 536.

⁷ The CO's December 31, 1941 report states that for the *Oglala*, no lives were lost in the attack, although three members of the crew were wounded from the machine gun strafing. Because of this fact, Jim's friend must have been from another ship.

⁸ Prange quotes two Pearl Harbor Defenders who used that phrase, *At Dawn We Slept*, p. 536--the *Oglala* "had a nervous breakdown and died of fright."

⁹ The author thanks Acting Dean Odette S. McGinnis (in the Mathematics, Business, and Computer Technology Division) at San Bernardino Valley College for information on Jim Mason's tenure there.