

# Pearl Harbor Remains

## 80th anniversary of Pearl Harbor brings end to victim-identification program

The six-year Pentagon project identified nearly 400 who died on the USS Oklahoma in 1941.



View of "Battleship Row" during or immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. The capsized USS Oklahoma is in the center, alongside the USS Maryland.

Twin brothers Leo and Rudolph Blitz were 16 when they applied to join the Navy. They were so young that their father had to go to the recruiting office in Omaha and give his permission. Rudolph wanted a Navy career. Leo wanted to learn a trade. It was 1938. Times were hard and the boys lived with their family in a two-bedroom house in a neighborhood of Russian immigrants in Lincoln, Neb. They enlisted that May. Three years later, on Dec. 7, 1941, they were killed when their ship, the USS Oklahoma, was sunk during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

For 78 years, they rested among hundreds of the ship's fallen who were recovered but never identified, buried as unknowns in a cemetery in Hawaii. Then, in 2019, a remarkable Pentagon forensics project identified them as part of an effort to put names with all of the ship's unknowns. Now, after identifying the bones of the Blitz twins and almost 400 other Oklahoma men over six years, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) is closing down the program.

On Dec. 7, the 80th anniversary of the attack that plunged the United States into World War II, the last of the remains that could not be identified will be reburied in Honolulu's National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific known as the "Punchbowl." "It marks the end of the project, of all the work that we've been doing" said Carrie B. LeGarde, the lead DPAA forensic anthropologist on the program. "Not to say that identifications [couldn't] still occur someday in the future. But our active effort will be over." "It's going to be ... a little bit of relief, and excitement, and I think a bit of sadness too," she said in a recent interview from the DPAA laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base outside Omaha.

"All the families that we were able to give these answers to," she said. "It's pretty emotional. It's been such a huge part of my life over the last few years. I'm actually getting kind of choked up [talking about it]."

"We've done so well, but also thinking about those we weren't able to individually identify ... [is] a little disappointing," she said. "But we knew that would happen."

The battleship's loss of life at Pearl Harbor totaled 429 sailors and Marines — second only to the 1,100 lost on the USS Arizona, whose wreck remains a hallowed historical site. Most of those killed were recovered from the tangled wreckage of the ship, which rolled over after it was torpedoed by enemy planes, entombing hundreds inside. With the limited technology of the time, only 35 of the dead were identified during and after the war. Six more were identified in the early 2000s, the DPAA said.

Six years ago, remains of what turned out to be 388 individuals were exhumed from the Punchbowl, where they had rested as unknowns. They were taken to the DPAA lab in Nebraska and to one in Hawaii for analysis. Of those, 355 have now been identified — meaning that eight decades after the attack, only 33 of the 429 killed on the Oklahoma on Dec. 7, 1941 have not been individually identified, the DPAA said.

### **A complex identification task**

More than 5,000 DNA samples were taken in the quest to identify the men, according to Timothy McMahon, director of DNA Operations for the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System. DPAA experts had to inventory almost 13,000 bones that had been on the ship and in the oily waters of Pearl Harbor, sometimes for months, LeGarde said. After their recovery during the war, they had

been buried, then exhumed for initial examination, sorted through twice, and reburied. When they were exhumed again in 2015, they were found wrapped in white cloth bundles fastened with big safety pins.

The bundles were in 61 rusty caskets in 45 graves. Each casket held five to seven bundles. But one held 22, the DPAA has said. One casket held nothing but upper arm bones. Another had neck vertebrae from five different people. Often a single skeleton was found to be made of bones from multiple individuals. Some of the bones still smelled of oil. Among the remains were those of:

- Navy Musician 1st Class Henri Clay Mason, whose wife, Mary May, lived on Park Road, in Washington's Columbia Heights neighborhood. He was identified in 2018.
- Also, the remains of Navy Chief Petty Officer Albert Eugene Hayden, 44, of Mechanicsville, Md. He was identified in 2016 and was buried beside his parents in St. Mary's County.
- And Marine 2nd Lt. Harry H. Gaver Jr., 24, who was born in Annapolis and whose father had taught math at the Naval Academy. He was identified in 2017 and buried in Arlington National Cemetery.
- There, too, were the bones of the Barber brothers — Malcom, 22, Leroy, 21, and Randolph, 19, of New London, Wis. They were identified last June. And the Trapp brothers, Harold, 24, and William, 23, of La Porte, Ind., who were identified in 2020.

### **'A chance to see the world'**

Leo and Rudolph Blitz had lived in a house that may have been built by their father, Henry, a German-speaking carpenter who had emigrated from Russia, said Mike Powell, 68, of Aurora, Colo., a nephew of the twins. The house was located on "A" street in a community of German-speaking Russian immigrants called the South Bottoms, in Lincoln, Neb. The Blitz family was a blended one. Henry's first wife had died after childbirth, and he had married Marie Rebensdorf, whose husband had been killed in a railroad accident. Both had children with their firstspouses, and then had several together, including the twins. They raised a total of 12 children — six boys and six girls.

Joining the Navy was a probably a good opportunity for the twins, said their niece, Sandra Rebensdorf. "It was a chance to see the world," she said in a recent telephone interview. "But also, coming out of the Depression in a large family, it was a job with pay." "As long as the children lived at home, they brought their paycheck to their dad," she said. "If you lived in a home, your wage went to the betterhood of the family. They worked for the family. They did not work for themselves." Leo and Rudolph, who were identical, looked so much alike that they could almost change places with each other.



**A Blitz family picture taken around 1933. Leo Blitz, in a light colored sweater on the left, is standing behind his father, Henry, and Rudolph, in a light colored sweater on the right, is standing behind his mother, Marie.**

“One letter we had from a shipmate said that one of them had a girlfriend, but they didn’t know if the girlfriend knew there were two of them,” Rebensdorf said. Even today, family members said, it can be hard to figure out how to tell them apart in old photos. In one picture, they are posed together in their dark Navy uniforms, wearing caps that say “U.S.S. Oklahoma.” They look exactly the same, except for their facial expressions.



**Twins Leo Blitz, left, and Rudolph Blitz were on the USS Oklahoma when it was sunk in the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.**

On Sunday morning, Dec. 7, 1941, the twins, then 20, were among the 1,300 sailors and Marines aboard the Oklahoma, which was moored beside another battleship, the USS Maryland, at Berth F-5, in Pearl Harbor. At 7:45 a.m., the ship’s 24-member band, like the bands of other ships in the

harbor that day, had assembled on deck for the morning colors ceremony. Lt. j.g. Aloysius H. Schmitt, a Catholic priest from St. Lucas, Iowa, had just said Mass. Suddenly, the first of more than 300 Japanese planes appeared overhead and began bombing, strafing and dropping torpedoes. Three torpedoes were seen streaking through the water at the Oklahoma, according to a Navy summary of the attack on the ship. They quickly hit home.

“I felt a heavy shock and heard a loud explosion and the ship immediately began to list to port,” Commander Jesse L. Kenworthy Jr. wrote. “Oil and water descended on deck and ... the shock of two more explosions on the port side was felt.” Another blast followed. “It was now obvious that the ship was going to ... roll over,” Kenworthy wrote. “Men were beginning to come up from below through hatches and gun ports and from them it was learned that the ship was filling with water in many spaces below.” Word was passed to abandon ship. As the Oklahoma rolled, sailors scrambled over its slippery bottom and jumped into the water.

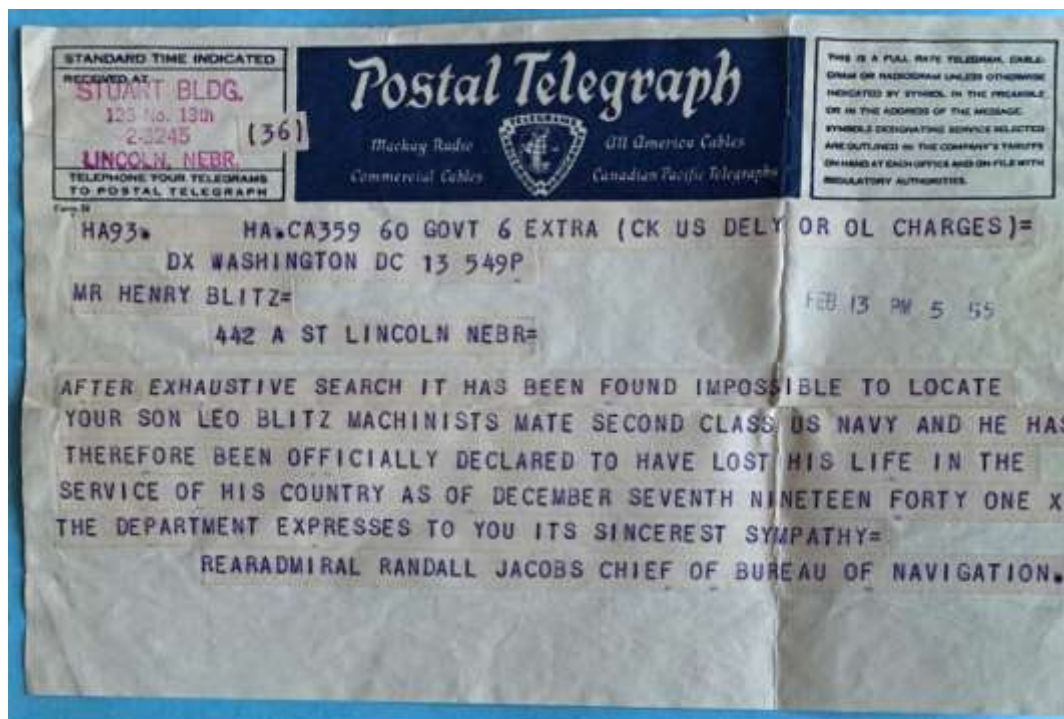


**The capsized USS Oklahoma and the USS Maryland are shown after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack.**

Pearl Harbor was now a tableau of wrecked and burning ships, and dead and injured sailors, soldiers, Marines and civilians. The final toll of the attack would be 2,403 killed and over 1,100 wounded. Two days later, in Nebraska, Lincoln’s Evening State Journal ran a picture of the Blitz brothers on the front page, saying they were believed to be aboard the sunken Oklahoma. The paper noted that the family was awaiting word of their fate.

On Dec. 23, Henry Blitz got a telegram from the Navy. “The Department deeply regrets to inform you that one of your sons is known dead and that the other is missing,” it said. But the Navy didn’t know which one was dead and which one was missing. On Christmas Day, came another telegram. This one reported that Rudolph was dead. “Regret no additional information available concerning your other son Leo Blitz,” it added. Not until Feb. 13, 1942, was the Navy able to inform the Blitz family that “after [an] exhaustive search” Leo could not be found, and had been “officially declared to have lost his life in the service of his country.

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**The telegram received by Blitz family after the Navy declared Leo dead following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.**

Rudolph’s body was apparently not found either, even though the Navy had declared him dead right after the attack. In 1944, the Navy returned to the family some of Leo’s personal effects: a cigarette case, a bracelet, two pipes, and 90 cents. Back in Lincoln, relatives all put photos of the brothers in their homes, family members said. “As long as my grandparents kept house, the twins’ picture was prominently displayed in the living room,” Sandra Rebensdorf said. But Henry always felt responsible for their deaths, because he had let them sign up, she said.

In a window, Henry and Marie hung a small banner with two gold stars, signifying the loss of their sons.

### **Home to rest**

The skull in the DPAA laboratory in Nebraska was in good condition. It was probably that of a White male, who was over 18, based on an examination of the teeth and facial structure. Three

front teeth were missing, and the unhealed sockets suggested they were lost at the time of death or afterward. Research showed that dental records for Leo matched the teeth, according to a DPAA report on the case. A DNA sample was obtained from a bone in the skull.

Members of the Blitz family had been contacted about the USS Oklahoma project, and several had given DNA samples in the hope that they might find a match. The lab had another skull and jaw, and a complete spinal column that it thought might be connected to the twins. DNA was extracted from a tooth, a vertebra, and bones in the skull for comparison with the family. Examination showed the teeth matched Rudolph's old dental records. And when the DNA from both cases was compared to DNA from the family, it, too, matched.

Here were the remains of the twins.

"It was beyond a dream, or even a hope," Rebensdorf said. On Saturday, Aug. 10, 2019, they were buried in Lincoln Memorial Cemetery, where their parents rest, and a few miles from the house on "A" street where they grew up.



**The USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 2017.**

[Source: The Washington Post | Michael E. Ruane | December 5, 2021 ++]