

# Raritan's Finest Hour

"The Story of Raritan  
During World War II"



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## The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor stuns the U.S.

December 7th, 1941 was a clear, sunny, yet cold afternoon in Raritan, New Jersey. The previous day's weather was unseasonably warm, in the 50s, but on this Sunday, winter had begun. It would be a high of just 34 degrees — seven degrees lower than the usual average temperature. That morning in the small patriotic town of Raritan many would attend church. *The Church of St. Ann* held 4 masses. *St. Bernard's Church* held three.

On that day playing at Raritan's local movie theatre, *The Raritan Playhouse*, which was on Anderson Street, was *Life Begins for Andy Hardy*. It featured two young stars of the era — Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. The other local movie theatre back in 1941 was *The Cort Theatre* in Somerville—which was located across from the court house. That afternoon at *The Cort Theatre* Clark Gable and Lana Turner starred in the movie *Honky Tonk*. Nationally, Disney's *Dumbo*, was the most popular movie of the day. The top song of the week was by the top band of the era. It was "Chattanooga Choo Choo" by the Glenn Miller Orchestra. That Sunday was the final day of the National Football League's regular season.

Those reading *The New York Times* on Sunday morning of December 7th, 1941, saw the possibility of war right on the front page. The top headline read "Roosevelt Appeals to Hirohito." (Hirohito was the Emperor of Japan.) Also on the front page was another article giving false reassurance to the American people. The headline read "Navy is Superior to Any, Says Knox". This article was about a newly-released Navy report from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. It stated. "I am proud to report that the American people may feel fully confident in their Navy. In my opinion, the loyalty, morale, and technical ability of the personnel are without superior."

Others who read the local paper *The Somerset Messenger Gazette* that Friday, Dec 5th, may have read an editorial that stated that we may be at war with Japan in a few days.

### SMG Editorial Dec. 5th, 1941 — The Prospect of War

The attitude of the people of the United States, in regard to the war with Japan, is truly amazing. It is readily admitted by almost everyone that we might be at war with Japan within a few days. There is as much as a 50-50 chance. Yet no one seems to give it a second thought. There is Christmas shopping to be done. We are confident that our Navy is strong enough to keep the Japanese occupied in foreign waters. The greatest and most tragic mistake made by happy people, however have been to decide that wars would be short and easy. ... Japan looks like a soft touch now, but we wonder how things will seem a year from now if we are involved in a war.

## Raritan Residents Recall The Day of Infamy

On December 7th, 1941 Raritan residents were attending to their usual Sunday routine. Many, after going to church, settled in with family or went to the movies. Anyone old enough to remember can recall where they were when they heard the news that the Japanese had attacked the U.S. at Pearl Harbor.

Ann Navatto recalled that that Sunday had started out like most Sundays. Their home at 4 W. Somerset Street (where she still lives today) was the hub of the family. As was often the case, friends and family were over playing cards. The radio was on when they heard the announcement about the Japanese bombing the U.S. at Pearl Harbor—a place they were not familiar with. So they pulled out some maps to see where Pearl Harbor was. Most of those present sat in bewilderment, but Ann remembers her mother was hysterical. Home that afternoon was her brother, Albert, who was already in the army. He was due to return to the base at McGuire later that night. But he quickly contacted his fellow army buddy who was due to drive them back that night and they agreed to return to the base immediately.

James Sorace, who would later own the *J&J Barbershop* on Somerset Street in Raritan, was 17. He went to New York City to see The Woody Herman Orchestra at The Strand Theatre. In the middle of the concert, the music stopped and an announcer said that the U.S had just been attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor—and that sailors from a Navy ship that was docked in the New York Harbor would need to report back to their ship immediately. The band then resumed playing to the stunned crowd.

# Dec 7th, 1941—Pearl Harbor Day

## Raritan Residents Recall The Day of Infamy

At 2:30 PM the radio networks broke the news to the stunned American homefront.



**James Sorace**

Was at a big band concert in New York City. The concert was interrupted and an announcer informed the crowd of the attack. All military men present were told to go back to their base.



**Ann Navatto**

Remembers that the “day of infamy” started off as a nice Sunday afternoon with family.



**Tony Hudak**

Like many Americans, the Hudak family, which was gathered together that Sunday, wondered where Pearl Harbor was.



**Anthony DeCicco**

The DeCicco family knew exactly where Pearl Harbor was as their son Michael DeCicco was stationed there.



The *Somerset Messenger Gazette* editorials during the World War II years were written by President C. Palmer Bateman and Editors G. Wallace Conover and C. Stewart Hoagland.

### **Somerset Messenger Gazette** Editorial -Dec 9th, 1941 *War With Japan*

It is doubtful if Japan could have begun her war with the United States in a way better designed to arouse and unite our people. This announced brutal attack on a territory of the United States decided for us the course we must adopt—heavy, effective retribution at a favorable time. We expected nothing better from a member of the Axis. Whatever advantage they may have been gained from this partial surprise will be lost in the fury of the reaction in America. We have been plunged into war ... we must hit and hit hard, with everything we have.

### **Somerset Messenger Gazette** Editorial—Dec 19th, 1941 *One Good Thing*

Most of us have taken our country for granted during the past 20 years or so. Many millions of us have gotten around to a point where we wonder what our country is going to do for us next, rather than what we are going to do for our country. Organized labor, the unemployed, farmers, veterans, and others have many reasons why the United States should extend a hand towards them.

But now most of us are on the giving end. Our recruiting stations have been swamped since Pearl Harbor. Thousands of us are giving an impressive amount of time to spotting airplanes, fire and police reserves are being trained. Air raid wardens are being organized. Auxiliary nursing services are being formed. America is swinging into action. There are not many good sides to war, but this is one of them.

Former Raritan Councilman and Mayor Anthony Hudak recalled that after attending church at St. Joes his family went to his grandparent's house at 91 W. Somerset Street. Many aunts and uncles also attended this traditional Sunday afternoon family get-together. While listening to the radio that afternoon, a special bulletin interrupted to announce that the U.S. had been attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. Since some initial news bulletins did not say Hawaii, there was confusion and debate among the family. They, like many in the U.S., were wondering, where (and what) is Pearl Harbor? As more radio reports came in the next hour, it was learned that Pearl Harbor was a naval base in Hawaii.

At 10 Anderson Street in Raritan, where the DeCiccos lived, there was no doubt about where and what Pearl Harbor was for their son Michael was stationed at Pearl Harbor. He was enlisted in the Navy, serving aboard *The Helena* which was then docked at Pearl Harbor. A 7-year-old Anthony DeCicco, who would later serve as Raritan's Mayor, recalled his mother and his two sisters crying as the ongoing radio reports were bringing to light the gravity of the losses that the U.S. had suffered. The fate of Michael was unknown and would not be known for days.

On the Battlefront at Pearl Harbor serving in the Navy on Sunday December 7th, 1941, was Raritan's Michael DeCicco. His ship was *The Helena*—a Navy Destroyer which was docked at what was called the "1010 Harbor". It was across from "battleship row" — where the US Navy's largest battleships were docked. It was 7:55 AM.

Michael DeCicco was setting up chairs for a church service on the deck of his ship. He observed many planes approaching at an unusually low attitude. As they came close by, he saw a red circle on the side of each aircraft. This symbol was unmistakably "The Rising Sun" which belonged to Japan. He immediately realized what this meant. Within three minutes of the first Japanese bomb exploding, the attack came his way. One enemy plane released a torpedo aimed at *The Oglala*, an old mine layer, that was docked in front of *The Helena*. Most ships were docked two-deep at Pearl Harbor. The torpedo went under the bottom of the smaller *Oglala* and hit the engine room of *The Helena*, killing 20 engineers and electricians. One engine room and one boiler room were flooded. Some wiring was severed—cutting power to some of the guns. The sailors immediately responded by closing the watertight doors and hatches throughout the flooded areas. This kept the ship afloat. An additional generator was started and power was soon restored to all guns. The debris that broke apart from the two ships now covered the dock. But quickly Michael DeCicco and the other crew members started to fight back, firing the anti-aircraft guns at the Japanese planes. Michael helped to ready the ammunition that was being fired at the attacking aircraft. The attacking enemy aircraft fired back, inflicting more casualties on *The Helena* sailors. Michael saw one man that was running to his battle-station blown to pieces by shrapnel from a bomb. Several Japanese planes flew toward *The Helena*, but when they saw the intense anti-aircraft fire many of the planes turned away. One plane did come within several feet of the ship. Michael Decicco recalled "One of the planes swooped down so close and a little yellow belly leaned over the cockpit and grinned at us."

There were many challenges during the battle. The initial torpedo blast on *The Helena* was so great that it burst the seams of the ship next to it, *The Oglala*. Thus, that ship started listing heavily and her signal flags drooped over *The Helena*'s bridge. Sailors responded by getting a tug boat to clear the listing ship away so it would not interfere with the anti-aircraft fire.

*The Helena* would shoot down at least one Japanese plane and perhaps as many as three. In the confusion of battle it is hard to determine exactly which ship fired which shot. Michael summed up the battle "If we'd only had a couple of minutes notice we could have done a lot better. They caught us with our pants down." Even though they were surprised, the sailors fought well. They would be later commended by Navy Secretary, Frank Knox who felt their intense and immediate counterattack saved a battleship. While the attack lasted just under 2 hours, the sailors at Pearl Harbor would stay on watch all evening and through the night. But the Japanese never returned. Their planes had withdrawn to their aircraft carriers. While the Japanese were —at the moment— the proud winners of the surprise attack, by the end of the war, every Japanese ship that participated in the Pearl Harbor attack would be sent to the bottom of the ocean. *The Helena* was soon repaired and the crew along with Raritan's Michael DeCicco would return to battle the Japanese again at Guadalcanal and other battles.

# Raritan's Michael DeCicco was at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7th, 1941. He help fight off the Japanese attack.

## FIRST SAILOR BACK FROM PEARL HARBOR TELLS HOW MATES FOUGHT OFF SWARMING JAP PLANES

Certain specific information is purposely omitted from the story which follows in line with wartime practices of the press. The name "U. S. S. Raritan" has been substituted to mask the identity of the ship principally mentioned.—Editor.

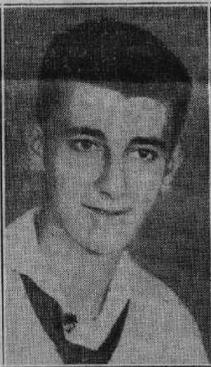
Three minutes until 8 o'clock Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, and sailors aboard the U. S. S. Raritan, anchored in Pearl Harbor, were scrambling into clean "whites" and knotting neckerchiefs for church call.

Then a deafening crash and the deep roar of a blast of high explosive. Those of the Raritan's crew below decks rushed topside to see hangars of the air station on shore burst into flames as 30 Jap planes, in waves of five, zoomed over the channel. They waited for no more. Even ahead of the old pipes and the barges, sailors were breaking down life lines and stanchions.

### First Ship in Action

"A-I-I h-a-n-d-s clear ship for action! Man yer battle stations!" Awnings were being ripped from their fastenings to clear the way for anti-aircraft fire and in seconds the crews started throwing a hail of lead into the sky. The Raritan's guns were the first to bark at the invaders.

Eight o'clock, and a torpedo blasted the forward engine room, killing 20 engineers and electricians. The ship jarred, then



MICHAEL DECICCO

Thursday morning. He is on furlough while his ship undergoes repairs in California.

"As soon as I saw the air station burning I ran to my gun station," Mike related. "But when I found out this was going to be an air battle I went to help feed anti-aircraft ammunition. Our gun got three Jap planes.

### Jap Pilot Cringing

"One of the planes swooped down close and a little yellow-belly leaned over the cockpit and grinned at us. As he made to go over a battle-wagon at anchor only a few hundred feet from our ship, I could see his torpedo shining under the plane.

"But the Jap flyer never let that torpedo go. Bursts from the Raritan's guns caught the plane and he crashed there in front of our eyes. Four other Jap planes, apparently with orders to sink the battleship, were forced to turn back before they got the same reception."

Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox later commended the Raritan's crew for saving a capital battleship.

"There were 12 Jap planes in all shot down by the boys on the Raritan," Mike said. "But we had to watch the Oglala, a mine-layer, sink right next to us. We saw the Oklahoma capsized and a destroyer blown up.

(Please turn to page eight)

(Continued from page one)

"We lost about 30 men on our ship, and about 100 were wounded. I saw one man blown to pieces by shrapnel from a bomb as he ran to his battle station.

### Fought Off Three Attacks

"The old spirit was tops with the gang at the gun I was on, but we didn't talk much during the three attacks. Each one lasted an hour. Between scraps we lined up our ammunition and waited and kept hoping they'd come back for another dose.

"There was plenty of cussin' while we stood and waited," Mike confessed with a grin. "If we'd only had a couple of minutes' notice we could have done a lot better. They caught us with our pants down. They weren't very good shots. A lot of their bombs plunked in the water."

The battle was over at 1 p. m. All night long Pearl Harbor soldiers and sailors stayed on watch, but the Japs never returned.

One false alarm sounded. Three days after the attack the captain called the Raritan's crew together and made a speech citing his men. Mike has a mimeographed copy. This is what the Raritan's skipper had to say:

"I want to take advantage of a little lull after the treacherous attack of Sunday morning to express my gratitude to all my shipmates for the magnificent manner in which each of you, to

the last man, upheld the traditions of the Navy on that historical occasion.

### Enemy Couldn't Take It

"The Japanese, while hiding behind a peace mission in Washington, cowardly sneaked the first blow by striking us with bombs and torpedo before the battle was on. But this was their last blow at the Raritan. Our guns were in action so quickly and so furiously they didn't any longer have the guts to face the music.

"Every man did the right job at the right time. Every man stood unflinchingly by his station. Our engineers kept us in power for our guns; our damage control kept our ship machinery intact; our lookouts and bridge details kept the Japanese planes spotted, and our gunners stood by their guns as veterans. In spite of early serious material casualties and the loss of many shipmates, our fire was continuous and decisive.

"Instances of personal courage are too great to enumerate here. Let it suffice that the Raritan has definitely won her place in history as a fighting ship which can give it always, and take it too when this must be done. I am proud to be your captain and shipmate and we are all proud of the good old fighting Raritan. Let us look to the future with a grim determination that our shipmates who were lost shall not have died in vain."

The island was blacked out every night after December 7. Leaves were granted for only a few hours at a time until the Raritan pulled out of Pearl Harbor January 5 for a West Coast base.

"On the way back we thought we spotted a Jap sub and dropped depth charges," Mike said. "But we never heard anything from it."

### Four East on Leave

As soon as the Raritan reached port members of the crew were given a 14-day furlough while the ship was being repaired. Mike headed East with Chester Vagroski, a shipmate from Perth Amboy, who had left his car in a California garage when the Raritan was sent to Hawaii a year ago. With them were two other sailors, Anthony Szeg, also of Perth Amboy, and Frank Dombkowski of Three Rivers, Mass. Teaming up again at an arranged meeting point, the four sailors start back to California today by train.

Mike attended Somerville High School and later drove a truck for the Redfern Lace Works here. Two years ago he enlisted in the Navy. He has two sisters, Mildred, 18, and Phyllis, 10, and two brothers, James Jr., 11, and Anthony, 8.

Mike confessed last night that he was "kinda anxious" to get back aboard the Raritan. "She's a real fightin' ship," he said.



Even before the U.S. entered the war, many Raritan guys were in the military. This picture was taken in Honolulu, Hawaii in April of 1941. The five Raritan guys are: L to R, Jimmie Tozzi, B. Paliani, Michael DeCicco, William Hratko, & Joe DiMaggio.

The day after the attack at Pearl Harbor, December 8<sup>th</sup>, a Monday afternoon, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) gave a brief speech before Congress asking for a “Declaration of War” against Japan. The majority of the U.S. population—a record 65 million people—listened intensely to this broadcast which was carried by all the major radio networks. Even the children at school listened to his now famous speech. John Pacifico vividly recalls that on that next day at Somerville High School, at 12:30 PM, all the students were ushered into the auditorium for an important assembly. There over the school sound system they heard FDR’s speech.

His words, with his usual eloquent delivery, hit home with the American listener. The speech today is considered one of the finest of the 20th Century. The highlights of his seven-minute speech include:

*“Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date that will live in infamy -- the United States was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. ... No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory ... Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces -- with the unbounded determination of our people -- we will gain the inevitable triumph -- so help us God.”*

The next evening Tuesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, FDR would give a more detailed talk to the American people about what had transpired and what now lay ahead.

With the shock of the attack at Pearl Harbor, Raritan families, like all families across America who had sons in the vicinity of Pearl Harbor, wondered if their sons were there that day. If so, did they survive the attack? While today the damages sustained by each ship can be viewed with a few clicks of a mouse, the details of what ships were damaged or destroyed were slow in being told to the public. The initial announcement simply said “extensive damage” was done to the fleet. Casualty numbers would slowly be mentioned with Roosevelt first using the word “thousands” a few days after.

The *Somerset Messenger Gazette*—which came out two days after the attack on Tuesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>—made an attempt to list the Raritan guys that they thought were in Hawaii. It listed that at Pearl Harbor was Frank Del Rocco of 9 Doughty Street (aboard *The USS Astoria*) and Alfred Kachic of 8 Lincoln Street (aboard the *USS Pennsylvania*). William Hratko from 9 Nevius Street was listed as being with the Army Air Corp stationed at Hickman Field in Oahu, Hawaii, just outside Pearl Harbor. (Hickman Field was known to have been hit hard by the Japanese.) James Barbato of 11 Anderson Street and Frank Jacobs of 2 Railroad Avenue were also said to be in Hawaii. Joseph Balitski from 100 Thompson Street was said to be on *The USS Pecos* with the Pacific Fleet – and most of the Pacific Fleet was at Pearl Harbor. This news no doubt put their families and the local Raritan residents in distress. Relief would come as telegrams slowly arrived from the GIs to let their loved ones know that they survived the attack. After a couple weeks all the boys in Raritan would be accounted for. The small community would lose no men in this battle. That would not hold true for future battles.

In the next few days, weeks, and months towns throughout the country mobilized for war. It was reasoned that if the enemy could bomb Hawaii, they could also attack us stateside. To plan for such an event, each town designed air-raid wardens to help plan and organize in the case of an enemy attack by air. The new local airport at Solberg in Readington and the flying fields (as they were called) at South Somerville and Basking Ridge were closed temporarily until all worries subsided.

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