INTRODUCTION: Seventy-three years ago, Archie Kelley was 23 years old and a recent graduate of the United States Naval Academy. On that fateful day when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor without provocation, he was an Ensign, assigned to the battleship WEST VIRGINIA (BB-48). That Sunday he and his shipmates fought valiantly to save her...and themselves.

Ten years ago, he shared his story of survival with a patriotic organization in California that was solemnly remembering Pearl Harbor. With Archie’s kind permission, a condensation of his remarks on December 7, 2004 follows, with suitable sub-titles, plus some additional information and images furnished by me.

Six years ago, in early 2008, while researching the life story of his father, Admiral Frank Kelley, Archie and I became well acquainted via a series of telephone calls and emails. His father was the first captain of the naval transport USS WEST POINT (AP-23); originally built as the ocean liner SS AMERICA by Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS). The WEST VIRGINIA was also a NNS product.

Later in 2008, at my urging, Archie Kelley attended a reunion of the USS WEST POINT’s crew. Because the crew had been extremely fond of his father, Archie was honored to be the principal speaker on that occasion.

Archie Kelley is 96, but remains in amazingly good physical and mental health. He is, after all, a survivor...

Bill Lee
Sunday; December 7, 2014
PREFACE: In 2004, Archie Kelley began by describing why he was in Hawaii in early December 1941, and what he experienced there the day before a dastardly attack turned his world...and that of millions others...up-side-down.

"Normally, my Naval Academy class would have graduated in June. However, with war looming on the near horizon we were graduated four months early.

"Four of us were ordered to the battleship West Virginia operating out of Pearl Harbor. We were young, gung ho ensigns and delighted that after four years of tight discipline at Annapolis, we were free to enjoy surfing at Waikiki, rum drinks at the Royal Hawaiian, and dating the all too few "wahines" on the island of Oahu. This innocence was short lived.

"Saturday afternoon, December 6th, 1941, I had been invited to dinner and poker that evening by my uncle Bruce Kelley, USNA '25, Gunnery Officer of the battleship Arizona. Both Bruce and I had the duty the following morning; Bruce as Senior Watch Officer on the Arizona and I as Officer of the Deck on the West Virginia. Other guests that night were two of Uncle Bruce's fellow officers from the Arizona.

"I left about midnight and returned to the West Virginia. I was scheduled to relieve Ensign Roman Brooks as Officer of the Deck at 0800 AM."

THIS IS NO DRILL: That morning, WEST VIRGINIA was moored outboard of the battleship TENNESSEE in an part of the harbor called 'battleship row'; While Archie was still asleep, an American destroyer patrolling the entrance to Pearl Harbor sighted and attacked a suspect submarine. A radio message was sent to headquarters and processed, but got to the base's commanding officer too late.

"About 7:45 AM, I was awakened by an order issued by Brooks over the ship's loudspeaker system: 'Away fire and rescue party'. He had seen some bursts of fire and flame on Ford Island, but didn't know what they were. He had given the correct order, assuming that help might be needed on Ford Island. But what he didn't know was that bombs had been dropped by the first Japanese aircraft on aircraft on the ground."
"A few minutes later, Brooks announced 'General Quarters! Man your battle stations! This is no drill!' I pulled on my trousers and started running as the first torpedo hit the port side of the West Virginia.

"While running, I buttoned my jacket and strapped on my .45. I had on neither shoes nor cap. A second torpedo struck as I was racing down several ladders.

"My battle station was in one of the lowest compartments of the ship, well below the waterline. Called Central Station [location marked CS on following drawing], it was where orders were issued for controlling damage during combat. My job was to assist the damage control officer. I was the first one there, arriving just as the third torpedo hit the port side. I gave the command 'Set condition Zed!' over the ship's loudspeaker system."

"This was an order to close all water tight doors and hatches throughout the ship. I couldn't believe how severely these torpedo blasts shook that huge warship. It was as if a giant had picked up a toy boat and shook it violently.

"Adjacent to Central Station was the Main Battery Control compartment. It started to flood and about 35 men crowded into Central Station before we closed the water tight door connecting Central Station to Main Battery Control. We now had 37 men and three officers in a space normally manned by five"

**A LIFE OR DEATH DECISION:** Things rapidly got far worse in Central Station. Within minutes, Archie was faced with the toughest decision of his young life.

"Water began to seep into our over-crowded compartment from leaks around the water tight doors. On the other side of one door, three men were frantically trying to open that door. They managed to partly un-dog it, thus accelerating the inflow of water mixed with fuel oil, into Central Station."
"Two sailors and I held the dogs shut against the efforts of the men on the other side, who were screaming for us to open the door. It was apparent to all that had we opened the door for these men, we would not be able to close it against the pressure of water flooding the adjacent compartment.

"After over sixty years of feeling guilty about the death of my shipmates, only last month I read for the first time a report, written the week after the Pearl Harbor attack. In it, the ship's senior damage control officer not only commended me for promptly ordering the ship buttoned up, but he took complete responsibility for the men trapped on the other side of that watertight door."

**FIGHTING CAPSIZING; THEN ESCAPING:** For two hours, Archie and the others in WEST VIRGINIA's Central Station struggled to counter-flood compartments on the stricken ship's starboard side. During the first Japanese attack that day, six torpedoes ripped huge holes in the battleship's port side, resulting in a very serious listing condition that could have led to capsizing, if gone unchecked.

"We instructed a damage control party, using sound-powered telephones to prevent the ship from rolling completely over to port. Slowly, the inclinometer rolled back to zero from an angle of about 25 degrees. With the ship sitting on an even keel on the bottom of Pearl Harbor, we turned our attention to escape.

"We knew the adjacent compartments were flooded, and water was cascading down from the deck above us. Fortunately, Central Station had a tube about 30 inches in diameter which led from a bolted cover plate in the overhead to the West Virginia's conning tower. We presumed the conning tower's top was above water, after we unbolted the plate and found the tube undamaged and dry."

"By that time, the compartment was flooded to our shoulders with several inches of fuel oil floating on top of the seawater. Getting almost 40 men up that narrow tube, a distance of 70 to 80 feet, was like pulling teeth but everyone was motivated to climb up to fresh air and sunshine.

"The last man to leave Central Station was the senior damage control officer. I was the next to last. When I got to the conning tower, I peered through the slits in the armor and saw that the battleship Oklahoma was upside down. Looking aft I could see that the Arizona was nothing but a tangled mess of red hot steel with oil burning furiously. I thought...Goodbye Uncle Bruce!"
SECOND ATTACK: Around 9 AM, the Japanese launched a second attack. Archie had been ordered to go aft and help fight fires burning out of control there.

"The second attack consisted mostly of strafing the decks with machine gun fire and dropping armor piercing bombs. As the planes would fly over the ship at mast level, we would drop the fire hoses provided by the battleship Tennessee and run for protection. The Tennessee was moored inboard of the West Virginia and was thus protected from the torpedo attack.

"Much to my relief I saw my Uncle Bruce in civilian clothes on the quarterdeck of the Tennessee. He had called the Arizona after my departure the night before and arranged a duty swap with an officer who was onboard. The latter was killed during the explosion of the Arizona's magazines. Bruce felt guilty for the remainder of his life that he was responsible for the death of his fellow officer.

"One of the bombs dropped by the second wave penetrated the 9 inch armor on the top of Turret III, which killed most of the gunnery crew. I directed firefighting in this area until at about 1.30 PM, when the order to abandon ship was issued. I dove into the oil covered water on the port side and was picked up by a motor launch from the hospital ship Solace."

END OF A DIFFICULT & DANGEROUS DAY: Although the WEST VIRGINIA was resting on the harbor bottom and in no danger of sinking or capsizing, there was fear that another Japanese attack might result in a catastrophic magazine explosion like the one that had destroyed the ARIZONA. So the WEST VIRGINIA's ship's company was ordered to abandon ship and leave the fire fighting to the TENNESSEE's crew and several fireboats and tugs hovering on her port side.

"The Solace's motor launch landed me at the fleet landing near the Officers' Club. There were a large number of officers in their Sunday best civilian clothes waiting to be taken to their ships after the attack. They stared at me in disbelief as I was covered from head to foot with oil and spatters of blood from pulling injured and dead crew members out of Turret III.

"I proceeded to the Officers' Club where I was able to wash most of the oil from my hair and body, and obtain minimal clothing and personal effects. Otherwise, I was penniless as well as homeless, a condition I shared with a large number of other survivors of the attack on Pearl Harbor."
**SALVAGE AND REASSIGNMENT:** In addition to being struck on the port side by six Japanese torpedoes in the first raid, the WEST VIRGINIA suffered two direct hits from bombs dropped from a low altitude during the second (and last) raid on that fateful day. As a result, she ended up being sunk in 40 feet of water, but on an even keel, thanks to the efforts of Archie Kelley and his comrades.

But over a hundred of their shipmates died that Sunday morning.

"The next day I joined other survivors to help raise the West Virginia. As each deck was dewatered, we salvaged critical electrical and ordnance items by first flushing with fresh water and then coating them with oil. I successfully salvaged my 8 mm movie camera by this method, though everything else in my stateroom was lost to the fire and flooding."

"In April 1942, I received orders to report to a new destroyer under construction in San Francisco. I had just been promoted to Lieutenant after one year's experience."

**THE ROAD TO VICTORY...AND BEYOND:** Archie Kelley subsequently served as Gunnery Officer in that destroyer and later as Executive Officer on another. On New Year's Eve, 1943, he and his father were briefly reunited onboard the WEST POINT when both of their ships happened to be briefly in the same port.

After the war, Archie remained in the Navy and rose to the rank of Captain before retiring in 1956. Along the way, he attained a post-graduate degree in nuclear physics from MIT and became an early participant in the Naval Reactors' Program. Archie Kelley then worked in the aerospace industry for a number of years before retiring again.

The stoutly built WEST VIRGINIA was raised and repaired sufficiently to allow her to steam under her own power to the Puget Sound Navy Yard in April of 1943. In July of 1944, she emerged from the shipyard with a completely different profile, following an extensive modernization.

She then supported several amphibious landings with her big guns and participated in a historic battle at sea; the last time that battleships of opposing forces ever fired directly at one another. On September 2, 1945, when the war ended, she, quite appropriately, was anchored in Tokyo Bay when the Japanese surrendered.
The WEST VIRGINIA then helped bring war weary veterans home and, like hundreds of other American naval vessels not needed in peacetime, she was decommissioned in early 1946. After languishing in a reserve fleet for a dozen years, BB-48 was scrapped in 1959.

**POSTSCRIPT:** Before preparing this story of survival, I talked...at length with Archie...as we have come to mutually enjoy...to obtain permission to share his first-hand account of what he experienced on Sunday, December 7, 1941. As anticipated, he readily consented and encouraged me to share his memories of Pearl Harbor on this appropriate day.

Just ask people to Remember Pearl Harbor, he implored.

During that most recent conversation, I was delighted to learn that Archie, who now lives in a retirement community near Phoenix, Arizona, is still putting his nuclear know-how to good use. He currently works part time, providing testing services, apparently at no charge to detect any potentially dangerous build-up of naturally occurring radioactive radon gas in residences where he lives.

I was surprised by the details of this activity, but not by his enthusiasm to still be doing something beneficial. That what members of the Greatest Generation so often do, as we all know.

Captain Archie Kelley, USN, retired; thank you for your service!