

Medal of Honor Series



Valor at Oahu

By Tim Frank

On 7 December 1941, America was thrust into war when air units of the Japanese navy attacked U.S. Pacific Fleet ships and military installations at and around Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The strike caught the American soldiers, sailors and airmen off guard and inflicted severe damage throughout the island. Chief Aviation Ordnanceman John W. Finn had been asleep in his quarters at Naval Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, when the attack started, but soon found himself in the midst of the chaos. Undaunted by numerous wounds, Finn met the enemy head on, becoming one of the first Medal of Honor recipients of WW II.

Finn was born on 24 July 1909 in Los Angeles, Calif. When he was 15, he heard his uncle tell his cousin about an opportunity to enlist in the Navy and even try for the Naval Academy. Finn recalls, "We were poor people and this was a good chance to go to college, but the Naval Academy didn't interest me."

A few weeks before he turned 17, Finn went to the recruiting station, where a chief gave him a few tests and told him to come back after his birthday. Finn ran home to tell his parents he was a Navy man, even though he still had two weeks to go. When he returned after his birthday, the chief asked Finn if he was absolutely sure he

wanted to join the Navy. He didn't have to ask, because Finn couldn't wait to "see the world." On 29 July 1926, Finn was sworn in.

Trained as a gunner's mate, he found his calling in mid-1934 when he successfully completed the exam for aviation ordnanceman. Following an assignment with Patrol Squadron 14 at NAS North Island, Calif., he was transferred to Kaneohe Bay in 1941.

Finn remembers 7 December in great detail. Since it was Sunday, he and his wife were asleep at their quarters one mile from the air station when the attack started. "The first thing I heard was machine gun fire. I thought, 'I'm the chief ordnance officer, who the hell is firing machine guns today? Hey, it's Sunday!'"

When a plane flew past his window, he first thought the Navy was staging a mock attack, as it sometimes did. Then he thought his men might be testing a malfunctioning machine gun. Still unaware of the attack, he put his whites on and walked out to the car. His neighbor joined him for the ride to the base.

“We didn’t even say ‘Good morning’—just got in the car, drove the base speed limit, even stopping to give a kid a ride.” About halfway to the base, Finn heard a “terrible roaring” and saw a plane streak by with a red dot on its underside. “I threw that old Ford into second gear and tore down to the corner, almost running over some Sailors,” he recalled.

Just as he turned the first corner into the station, the first hangar was starting to flicker and blaze. Some of the planes on the ground were also starting to burn. Before the car stopped, he said, “I ran like a deer to the armory. I immediately got one of the guns and moved way out on the ramp so I could see the planes.” Meanwhile, all 33 patrol planes and their hangars had caught fire. Finn ordered his men to retrieve any usable machine guns, but most were burned beyond use. The Sailors used whatever was salvageable to fire on the attacking Japanese planes, even though they had no mounts for the machine guns.

Throughout the attack, the Japanese were shooting and dropping bombs all around Finn. “Pretty soon, I picked up quite a few hits—18 to 21, some of them just scratches,” he recalled.



AOC John W. Finn

Despite his wounds, he continued to man the gun and return fire.

When the attack was finally over, Finn refused medical attention and supervised the repair and installation of machine gun pits around the station. Although most of the weapons were designed for aircraft, Finn said, “if the Japanese had come back, they would have had one hot reception from all those machine guns. Somebody would have hit them.”

After making sure they were prepared for another attack, he finally agreed to go to the aid station about 0200 the next morning. Finn said, “I needed rest and sleep. I was hurting all over.” He went to sick bay and found the doctors were taking care of the seriously wounded, so he decided to wait. He went home to check on his wife and reported to sick bay a few hours later.

He entered the hospital on the 8th and stayed until the 24th. After he was released, he went on with his duties until 15 September 1942, when his commanding officer called him in. He informed Finn that he was to receive the Medal of Honor. That same day Finn was designated an ensign for

temporary service, ranking from 15 June.

About a week later, Finn and his wife were brought to *Enterprise* (CV 6), which was undergoing repairs at Pearl Harbor. “Just before the ceremony started, they shut off all the noise. Right off the bat, Admiral Nimitz stepped up to the little lectern and he gave a nice talk, one that made me really happy.” Finn remembered Nimitz commenting:

“Do not think for an instant that we have the enemy on the run. He is a tough, aggressive, seditious and determined enemy. However, we are making progress.”

There was a war going on and little time to spare. “The minute the ceremony was over, all those jackhammers and everything started back up banging and crashing, and the flight deck looked like a mess.” Some photos were taken of Finn, and he went on with his duties.

Finn’s WW II service continued with several shore assignments, followed by duty aboard *Hancock* (CV 19) from April 1945 to December 1946. He retired as a lieutenant on 1 September 1956.

Today, Finn is still proud of his days in the Navy, but does not consider himself a hero; to him, the Medal of Honor is but one aspect of his years of naval service. But his actions above and beyond the call of duty during the attack on Pearl Harbor embody the spirit of valor and sacrifice that the Medal of Honor represents. ✈

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