

# Lawrence Ruff – Pearl Harbor Hero

## Sean Kelleher, Town of Saratoga Historian

Every American knows the story of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, what President Franklin Roosevelt called “a date which will live in infamy.” What most people do not know is that the outcome of the Japanese attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor could have been much worse if it was not for the action of a Schuylerville man and his shipmates.

That man was Lawrence Ruff. Ruff was born 7 July 1905 in Troy to William G Ruff (Apr 1867 – 26 Nov 1936) and Josephine Bott (5 May 1866 – 2 Sept 1947). Ruff, a second generation German – American was the youngest of nine children. His family moved to Green Street in Schuylerville where his father worked as a merchant of seed and flour.

Ruff lived a pretty typical active life in Schuylerville. “Lawrence Ruff, a boy about seven years of age, son of Ruff, the feed man, while playing on one of his father wagons fell and cut his head badly. Dr. E. C. Gow attended him” according to the Saratogian 7 Oct. 1909 (The math in this article does not align as he would be age 4.) Ruff was the Bugler of Schuylerville’s Boy Scout Troop 1 and he received first prize for a farm building in the union school handiwork class at the 1918 Saratoga County Fair.

Ruff was not immune to the troubles of his time. In 1918, there was an epidemic in Schuylerville from “Spanish Influenza”. The Saratogian noted that Ruff was taken ill. The State Health Department sent a doctor to investigate the outbreak, with the promise that “every [business] will be closed to stop the spread of the disease.” The local schools were closed.

Ruff was a good student, graduating from Schuylerville High School with a Regents diploma in 1923. He also made life-long friends, who formed the Iota Theta Tau Club or the Last Man Club. The club included John A. Milligan, who would become a major league baseball pitcher, his brother, Albert Milligan, an electrical engineer; Harold Walenta, a future artist and director at the YMCA in Trenton, N.J, W. H. Smith, who would become the Saratoga Town Clerk, J. Leighton Cromie, proprietor of Cromie’s Pharmacy in Schuylerville; Harold Hitchcock, who would be active in the Division of Canals, Sterling VanDerwerker and Dr. Richard Bullard. The club continued for over 40 years with periodical reunions.

The September after high school, Ruff enlisted in the US Navy. Due to his abilities, Ruff was sent to the U. S. Naval Academy Preparatory School in Hampton Roads, VA to prepare for an appointment at the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD. Ruff suffered a leg injury at the Naval Academy and it took five years for him to graduate and he received his commission as an Ensign in 1930.

His first eight years as an officer in the US Navy were

typical. He served on various ships of the fleet including the USS Trenton (light cruiser), USS Arizona (Battleship), USS MacLeish, USS Hovey (destroyers), and the USS Sirius (cargo ship). Ruff continued his schooling including taking courses in chemical warfare and underwater sound detection. After eight years of service, he was commissioned a Lieutenant. He then spent three years on Battleships, serving on the USS Idaho and then the USS Nevada.

At the start of World War II, Ruff was a communications officer at Pearl Harbor on the USS Nevada. The Saturday night before the notorious attack, many sailors took shore leave. Some of them were buying Christmas gifts for their family and others were at bars enjoying what could be a last night out in Honolulu. Ruff decided to spend his night close to his ship watching a movie. He went to bed early and arose to a beautiful Sunday in Hawaii with high clouds and trade winds. Ruff decided to attend Catholic Mass on the hospital ship USS Solace. Before 7 in the morning, Ruff joined Father Drinnan in a launch, a small boat, heading for USS Solace where he waited in the Officer’s Lounge for mass.

At 7:55 a.m., Ruff and all the other sailors at Pearl Harbor were completely surprised by the Japanese attacked. In the harbor, all six battleships of the United States’ Pacific fleet were under attack. In the first 15 minutes of the war, the battleships USS Arizona exploded and the USS Oklahoma rolled over, entombing 460 sailors. Ruff commandeered a launch and directed it back to USS Nevada. While the small boat labored across the smokey harbor, Ruff had to avoid bullets, bombs and torpedoes from Japanese airplanes. It was war, less than an hour from his perfect morning

Ruff quickly climbed the ladder on to the Nevada. The ship’s bow had a 45-by-30-foot gash as a result of a torpedo. Ruff rushed to his general quarters stations in the communication room but then changed direction deciding he could be of more help in the navigation bridge. Ruff meet up with Quartermaster Chief Robert Sedberry, who had already ordered engineering to prepare the ship to get underway. Since Nevada always kept one boiler steaming, she could sortie when most of the other large ships were resting at ‘cold iron’ and could not. Ruff joined Sedberry in preparing the bridge, laying out charts and identifying navigable landmarks for a run to the sea. Ruff then worked out with Commander Thomas the command of the Battleship. Thomas would focus below decks counter flooding, dispatching firefighting teams and supervising engineering’s preparations to get underway. Ruff would focus topside on the sortie out to sea. A sheet of flames from the Arizona rode a slick of fuel oil toward Nevada’s bow. The Japanese attack continued with bombs striking the Nevada. It was now that the Ne-

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