

Solomon Bessel - USN

(1919-1942)

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A young Glen Cove seaman survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during which his destroyer, the USS *Shaw*, was sunk. He would later give his life in the Pacific theater.

Solomon Bessel was born in Glen Cove, the youngest son of James and Fanny Bessel. Both his parents predeceased him. He attended Glen Cove Public School, and in the afternoons after school helped operate the family's luncheonette and newspaper store next door to their home at 196 Glen Cove Avenue.

Bessel joined the US Navy just before the beginning of World War Two, and was assigned to the destroyer USS *Shaw* (DD-373) serving in the Pacific. Launched in October, 1935 commissioned on 18 September 1936, the *Shaw* was 1500 tons and measured 342 feet long. In November, 1941, after colliding with the USS *Sabine* during training exercises, she had put into port at Pearl Harbor for repairs. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on the morning of 7 December, 1941, the *Shaw* was in floating dry-dock YFD-2, raised out of the water for repairs.

Just before 8 a.m. in the morning, Bessel – then serving as Metal-smith Second Class – was resting on his bunk when he heard a loud explosion. The ship shuddered. Without bothering to dress, Bessel ran up on deck to see what had caused the jolt. Then general quarters was sounded, and he went to his action station as Japanese aircraft bombed, torpedoed and strafed the US Navy vessels lying at anchor in the harbor.

During the attack three Japanese bombs, each estimated to weigh around 250 kilograms, hit the *Shaw*. One went through the port side of the bridge, and two went through the forward machine gun platform. At least one of the bombs

ruptured the ship's fuel oil tanks, spreading fire throughout the forward part of the vessel. Bessel recalled "the Japs got quite a few of our crew... one of my best friends among them. I had loaned him a hundred dollars a few weeks before, but I'd gladly give that and more if money could bring him back." Twenty four of the *Shaw's* crew died in the attack.

In spite of the fire, some of the crew were able to grab a quick meal before being ordered to evacuate the burning vessel. "We had breakfast on board the ship but the eggs and bacon were a bit cold by the time we ate them. I was amused by one fellow who would not leave the ship until he had eaten," he recalled a few months after the attack. "We stayed with the ship for about an hour and a half, but were ordered off quite a while before the explosion."



One of the iconic photographs of World War Two, this image captured the explosion of the USS *Shaw's* forward powder magazine on 7 December, 1941.

Since the *Shaw* was in dry-dock, the ship had only limited fire-fighting capability. An attempt was made to flood the floating dock in the hopes that the ship would sink beneath enough water to put out the flames, but with only limited success. Finally the fire reached the forward powder magazine, causing an enormous explosion. The blast shredded the ship's superstructure and ripped off part of the bow. Bessel, who was standing at the sea landing watching the *Shaw* burn, was struck with a piece of shrapnel from the blast. It blew off his shoe, and tore one of his toenails off, but miraculously left the young sailor otherwise unscathed.

The *Shaw* appeared to be so badly damaged that the Navy initially wrote the ship off as a total loss. However, the Navy salvage team at Pearl Harbor thought they could resurrect the vessel and get her back into the fight.

Bessel was temporarily transferred to another ship. He saw action in the waters near the Marshall and Gilbert Islands, the Canton Islands, and spent part of Christmas Day, 1941 on Midway Island. Meanwhile the salvage teams at Pearl Harbor went to work to raise the *Shaw*. In late January, 1942 the ship was fitted with a temporary bow to replace the one that had been blown off. Bessel was recalled to Pearl Harbor along with his other shipmates, and the *Shaw* was given a shake-down cruise



in the waters around Hawaii to determine whether or not she was seaworthy. Finally, on 9 February, 1942 the *Shaw* was the first of the severely damaged vessels at Pearl Harbor to set to sea under her own power bound for San Francisco. After a rough crossing, the ship arrived at Mare Island Naval Shipyard to undergo a thorough overhaul.

In mid-April, Sol Bessel was back in Glen Cove on furlough. He gave an interview about his war-time experiences to the editor of the Glen Cove Record Advance, and led the annual Polish Day Parade through the streets of Glen Cove on May 10th. He even said a few words to the residents of the



US Army Signal Corps photograph showing Chaplain Morris M. Matthews conducting memorial services over the grave of Solomon Bessel and other American dead at Pearl Harbor on 11 November 1945. Photo courtesy of American Jewish Historical Society.

community from the steps of Pembroke Hall, on the occasion of the local Polish women unveiling their Service Banner for Glen Cove men of Polish descent serving in the military. He ended his speech by saying "I hope to see you all again when this war is over."

When his furlough was up, Bessel returned to the *Shaw*, which was then serving on a convoy duty between Hawaii and the west coast.

In mid-October, 1942, Bessel's brother Israel (who had stayed behind to run the family luncheonette and take care of sister Gertrude) received a telegram informing the family that Sol had been killed in an accident on October 13th. He was 23 years old. No further information as to the nature of the accident was provided.

Just days previously the family had received a cheerful letter from Sol, and enclosed in it was a bottle of Hawaiian-made perfume for Gertrude, ironically named "Heavenly Father."

"It seems that Sol was destined to be among his buddies who were the first to give their lives in this great war," wrote

the editor of the Glen Cove Record Advance. "and although he met his destiny a little late, he is one of that proud band that shall always make us "Remember Pearl Harbor."

Bessel was survived by brothers Abraham and Morris, who had enlisted in the army, and Israel, as well as his sister Gertrude.

A memorial service was held for Bessel in November, 1942 at the Congregation Tiffereth Israel temple in Glen Cove, which was then located on Continental Place. A large number of Bessel's friends attended, as did a large contingent of men from the James Erwin Donohue VFW Post. Nathan Zausmer was in charge of the service, with the prayer being offered by US Army Chaplain Rabbi Rudetsky. After the services it was announced that a special drive to buy war bonds in memory of Bessel had been started, and that \$10,000 had already been raised. That evening his friends contributed an additional \$8,200 in his name, "a tribute of support to the boys at the front who are carrying on where Sol left off." Bessel was inducted as the very first member of the Donahue VFW Post to serve in World War Two.

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