

Book Review - Decent into Darkness, by Edward C. Raymer
Review by Walter S. Zapotoczny

In *Decent into Darkness* Edward C. Raymer a Navy salvage diver describes his experience in the attempt to save the lives of sailors and Marines and salvage efforts in sunken ships after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Raymer begins the Preface to his book by writing:

Descent into Darkness is a salvage diver's memoir of the attempts to save trapped sailors and Marines and the raising of the sunken battleships after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941...By reading this book you will see what it was like exploring and working inside the USS Arizona and the other sunken ships...I have tried to recapture a flavor of wartime Honolulu and Pearl Harbor by giving the reader a glimpse of how the divers lived and played in our off-duty hours.

The dive team was flown to Hawaii from the United States mainland shortly after the December 7, 1941 attack by the Japanese on the U.S. Pacific Fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor. Raymer's book is a captivating tale of inconceivable problems and horrors witnessed by the divers as they went about their jobs. *Descent into Darkness* is a fascinating story of personal courage and team work in the face of danger. In spite of intense fires and explosions, Raymer and his team entered the water, blackened by debris, oil and the corpses of the crew. The water was so black that the divers could not even see the faceplates of their diving helmets. They worked frantically trying to free trapped survivors from the abyss. Since the divers could not see, they had to memorize the blueprints of the ships receiving directions from the surface and feel their way in the midst of debris, sharks, unexploded bombs and corpses. The entire time they were doing this they feared another Japanese attack.

In the beginning of the book, the reader is spellbound by the story of Raymer's divers tapping on the hulls of the sunken ships in an effort to locate trapped sailors and Marines before they drowned or suffocated. *Descent into Darkness* starts off strong with Raymer describing his first dive and near-death experience inside the Arizona. He tells the engaging story of him entering the, black, oil-covered water, into the twisted remains of the battleship. The reader meets Raymer's eight-member dive team in the early part of the book. He describes them as the heroes of his story.

After a chapter about training in San Diego, the subsequent chapters are organized by the ships that the dive team worked on: USS Nevada, USS Utah, USS Arizona, USS California, USS West Virginia and USS Oklahoma respectively. The final two chapters cover the diver's experiences in Guadalcanal, working on the USS Seminole and their return to USS Oklahoma. The Navy divers played a significant role in returning to service the USS Nevada, USS West Virginia and USS California. The team also recovered important equipment and materials from the USS Oklahoma, USS Utah and USS Arizona. In each chapter, the reader will discover facts and stories about the salvage dives conducted on each ship. The reader will be interested in the many ingenious ways the divers overcame the many problems they encountered.

Once the divers were under water, they counted on their teammates on the surface to handle air hoses, life lines and telephones. The team members of the surface used the blueprints of the ships to guide the divers to the area they were to work. They talked the divers through many of the assigned tasks within the sunken ships. The dives within the USS Arizona were terrifying and horrific, as the corpses of the one thousand sailors and Marines who died during the Japanese attack remained inside the battleship. The reader actually feels like he is experiencing the dive as Raymer describes his first encounter with a corpse that is floating:

Suddenly, I felt that something was wrong. I tried to suppress the strange feeling that I was not alone. I reached out to feel my way and touched what seemed to be a large inflated bag floating overhead. As I pushed it away, my bare hand plunged through what felt like a mass of rotted sponge. I realized with horror that the 'bag' was a body without a head.

Descent into Darkness was written by Edward C. Raymer to essentially tell the story of what the Navy divers did during salvage operations following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The book portrays the hardships the divers experienced and the diving techniques they used in their work. Edward C. Raymer's principal content contains stories of diving under dreadful conditions and the effect on the divers of recovering bodies from the sunken ships. Raymer's secondary content involved telling the story of his team's work at Guadalcanal and the humorous accounts of what sailors do on their days off. The book is mainly a memoir of Raymer and his team experience. Raymer was an enlisted diver during World War II and retired after thirty years in the Navy as a Lieutenant Commander. Raymer's life was in the hands of his team mates on a daily basis. Their friendships grew as they worked and played together. Raymer writes that the friendships they developed are rarely understood by civilians.

After their initial work at Pearl Harbor, Raymer and his team were sent to Guadalcanal and the waters off the Solomon Islands east of Papua New Guinea. Staying out of the way of Japanese warships on the prowl, the divers repaired ships and helped re-supply the Marines stationed on the island. Raymer says the team gained a great deal of respect from the Marines as they endured many of the same conditions. Raymer tells of the pleasure of diving in the crystal clear waters of the South Pacific and the sinking of their repair ship, the USS Seminole. The team returned to Pearl Harbor to continue their work on the sunken ships. Raymer joined them after 30-days leave in San Francisco.

Descent into Darkness is a book worth reading. It tells the untold story of a group of brave men who assisted in the re-birth of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor after it was attacked by the Japanese. The reader will understand the incredible ingenuity used by the divers in order to accomplish their tasks in extremely dangerous conditions. Through Raymer's accounts, the reader will appreciate the bravery, patriotism and special friendships shared by this remarkable group of navy divers.