

Saluting Pearl Harbor's First State Heroes

On Dec. 7, 1941 — “a date which will live in infamy,” as President Franklin Roosevelt described it the next day — Millsboro native and Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class George Ames Penuel Jr. was aboard the USS *Shaw*. The destroyer was in dry-dock at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, for repairs when the base was attacked by hundreds of Japanese aircraft — an act of aggression that would pull the United States into World War II.

The ship caught fire after being hit three times, twice on its forward machine-gun platform and once on its port wing. Penuel, 22 years old and the third child and only son of George Ames Sr. and Ellen Pepper Penuel, was killed. “He was Delaware's first war hero of World War II,” his mother wrote several years later in a letter to then-state archivist Leon deValinger Jr.

Penuel was one of 23 Delaware men who were at Pearl Harbor that fateful day. Their stories are among those told in

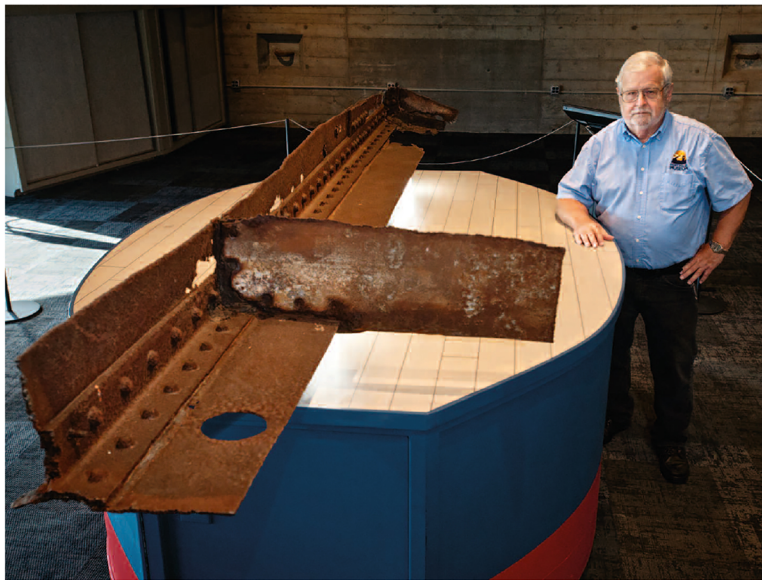
“Delaware's Role in World War II,” published by the state's Public Archives Commission (under deValinger's leadership) in 1955. The Pearl Harbor chapter of the book is the basis of an ongoing exhibit, “Oil Still



Millsboro native George Ames Penuel Jr. was killed when his ship, the USS *Shaw*, was bombed at Pearl Harbor.

Bleeds,” at Fort Miles in Cape Henlopen State Park near Lewes.

The title of the exhibit, curated by Heidi Nasstrom Evans of Horizon Philanthropic Services in Lewes, refers to the bombed battleship USS *Arizona*, which lies at the bottom of the harbor — along with the remains of 1,177 officers and



Cliff Geisler, member of the Fort Miles Historical Association board of directors, stands next to a 650-pound piece of rusty steel that was once part of the battleship the USS *Arizona*, sunk in the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. The artifact is the centerpiece of an exhibit, “Oil Still Bleeds,” at the Fort Miles Museum near Lewes.

crewmen who went down with it — and continues to leak oil at the rate of about two quarts a day. The centerpiece of the Fort Miles exhibit is a 650-pound piece of rusty steel that was salvaged in the early 1960s from what was the aft deckhouse on the *Arizona*.

The Fort Miles Historical Association asked the U.S. Navy for a piece of the ship in 2018, after acquiring a 16-inch gun barrel that had been on the USS *Missouri*. That battleship was the site of Japan's formal surrender to the Allied forces on Sept. 2, 1945.

“The *Missouri* was the ship that the war ended on, and the *Arizona* was sunk on the first day of the war,” says Cliff Geisler, a member of the historical association's board of directors. The *Missouri*, he notes, is docked just 500 yards away from the *Arizona* wreckage, “a bookends concept that the Navy did deliberately. We wanted to create that in miniature.”

“Oil Still Bleeds” will be on display at least through Dec. 7 of next year. The exhibit includes the letter that Ellen Penuel wrote to archivist deValinger, Penuel's service record — his pre-enlistment occupation is listed as “school boy” — and a studio photograph of the sailor. He is dressed in his white dress uniform with a precisely tied rolled black neckerchief, and he signed the photo, “To Mother & Dad, Love, Jr.”

Geisler, retired from a civilian post with the Navy, adds that, even after decades of studying the attack at Pearl Harbor and after many visits there, he is nonetheless touched by the exhibit at Fort Miles. “How can you read about those men, or look at the piece of rusty steel — knowing that it came from the graves of a thousand men whose lives were cut short in a huge explosion — and not be moved?” ■

— Lynn R. Parks



SEE FOR YOURSELF “Oil Still Bleeds” will be on display at the Fort Miles Museum in Cape Henlopen State Park near Lewes at least through Dec. 7, 2022. The exhibit is also viewable on the Fort Miles Historic Association website. Hours at the museum vary; for more information, or to arrange a special tour, visit fortmilesaha.org or call 867-6265.