



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### An Alexandrian's day of infamy

*Alexandria Times, December 13, 2012*

Image: Cmdr. John S. Phillips. Photo, Library of Congress.

Last week's 71st anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor brings to mind the heroism of Alexandria native and Naval Cmdr. John S. Phillips, whose ship, the USS Neosho, had just finished offloading thousands of gallons of aviation fuel into the airfield storage tanks on Ford Island on that fateful day.

Phillips' tanker was moored not far from "Battleship Row," and the fumes in the ship's tanks made it a floating bomb. When the attack began at 7:58 a.m. PST, Phillips immediately ordered his crewmen to chop through the heavy lines tying the ship to the dock so that it could get quickly away from other vessels.

The photo seen here shows the battleship USS California in the foreground, hit and already listing, with the awning still over its deck for Sunday morning church services. The Neosho, center, is shown still tied to the dock. The torpedoed and capsized battleship USS Oklahoma is just visible behind the Neosho.

Phillips described his instinctive response to the sudden attack in his official report dated four days later: "Opened fire on Japanese planes at 0805 when in range. Fuses were set on firing against dive bombers (3.2 seconds). Immediate preparations for getting under way was ordered. Under way at 0842 after chopping lines to bollards on piles off each end of dock as no assistance was available for casting them off.

"In backing away from the dock, the Neosho barely cleared the USS Oklahoma, which had capsized to port. Proceeding during the third wave of the attack to Berth M-3, Merry Point engaging the enemy enroute as opportunity presented."

More than 3,500 Americans were killed or wounded in the Pearl Harbor attack. Thanks to the quick action and valor of people like Phillips, this toll was not significantly greater.



*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*