

How Elvis Helped Save the USS Arizona Memorial

By

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USS Arizona underway.

The Imperial Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 inflicted a brutal blow on the U.S. Pacific fleet but only two active ships were a total loss – **U.S.S. Oklahoma** and **U.S.S. Arizona**. **Oklahoma** was eventually refloated but was too badly damaged to repair and return to service. **Arizona**, however, had been devastated by a cataclysmic explosion caused by a bomb crashing through the deck and igniting the ship's forward magazine. Nearly 80 percent of **Arizona's** 1,512 crewmen were lost with most of them being entombed in the sunken ship.

The wreck immediately became a memorial as passing ships rendered honors to the **Arizona** and her crew throughout the war. Proposals to erect a permanent memorial were promoted as early as 1943 but it was not until 1949 that an organized effort began to take shape following the creation of the Pacific War Memorial Commission (PWMC). As the PWMC considered ideas to formally recognize the role of Hawaii during the war which would include a memorial to the **Arizona**, Admiral Arthur Radford had a flagstaff placed on the wreck in 1950 and ordered that the colors be raised at the site every day.

This modest memorial was later expanded to include wooden platforms and a commemorative plaque. Requests for Federal funds to improve the memorial in the early 1950s were denied because U.S. military actions in Korea were deemed a priority. In 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower signed Public Law 85-344 that allowed the PWMC to raise money on the Navy's behalf for the construction of a memorial to the **Arizona**. Several designs were considered before architect Alfred Preis's plan to build a concave marble bridge that straddled the wreck was selected.

A fundraising goal of \$500,000 was set and the initial response from the public was promising. An episode of the popular TV series 'This is Your Life' dedicated to Medal of Honor recipient Rear Admiral Samuel Fuqua sounded the initial call for donations, generating \$95,000. However, the project quickly stalled as donations dried up. By the start of 1960, only \$155 000 had been raised. The drive was in desperate need of a swift and hard kick.



USS Bennington passes the wreck of **USS Arizona** on Memorial Day, 1958

"Colonel" Tom Parker read about the struggling campaign in a newspaper and spotted an opportunity. As Elvis Presley's manager, he was eager to get a bit of positive publicity for his client who had been out of circulation for a couple years after being drafted into the U.S. Army. Parker surmised that a benefit concert for the USS Arizona Memorial would raise much-needed awareness of the fundraising campaign while also demonstrating that Elvis still had drawing power. Elvis was not only pleased to be able to perform for an audience, he was a patriot who genuinely believed in the cause and wanted to help.

The PWMC accepted Elvis's generous offer and began making arrangements with the Navy to use the 4,000 seat Bloch Arena at Pearl Harbor as the venue for the concert. It was the same arena that had hosted the "Battle of Music" the evening prior to the attack in 1941. The "Battle of Music" was a spirited competition to determine the best ship band in the Pacific Fleet. Although they had been eliminated from contention, the band from **Arizona** was present and played dance music for the attendees. They would never perform again. The entire band was killed in the explosion on the ship the next morning.

With the venue secured and the show scheduled for March 25, 1961, Parker set ticket prices ranging from \$3 to \$100 and announced that everyone would have to buy a ticket to see the show. Rank usually has its privileges but Parker seemed to take pleasure in rebuffing admirals and generals who approached him about complimentary tickets. When he said that everyone had pay, he meant everyone had to pay. Even the performers. Elvis bought a \$100 ticket for himself then bought dozens more to give to staff and patients at a military hospital.

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Saturday **MARCH 25TH**
8:30 P.M. DOORS OPEN 7:15 P.M.

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Admission Prices: \$2.00, \$3.00, \$5.00, \$8.00
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NOTICE THIS IS A GUARANTEED 100% BENEFIT PERFORMANCE NOTICE
Absolutely all receipts from ticket sales must go to The USS Arizona Memorial Fund.

RCA VICTOR
Recording Artist

EXCLUSIVE MANAGEMENT COL. TOM PARKER

To reduce out of pocket expenses, Parker tried to sell networks the rights to broadcast the concert as a television special but was unable to secure an agreement. Fortunately, Paramount signed Elvis to star in "Blue Hawaii" which paid for him and his entourage to relocate to Honolulu for the filming of the movie which coincided with the benefit concert.

It is apparent that Elvis did not view the concert as merely a career enhancing photo opportunity. He came prepared to give the audience the best performance he could. He brought a talented band including several members from a group of accomplished session musicians known as the "Nashville A-Team." Guitarist Hank Garland, bassist Bob Moore, pianist Floyd Cramer and saxophonist Boots Randolph (whose "Yakety Sax" has become synonymous with comedian Benny Hill) joined Elvis's regular drummer DJ Fontana and guitarist Scotty Moore. Moore was no stranger to Pearl Harbor, having spent time there while serving in the Navy

years earlier. The show would also include performances by the local comedic act Sterling Mossman, Elvis's backing vocal group the Jordanaires and Grand Old Opry star Minnie Pearl.

After a brief introduction by Rear Admiral Robert Campbell of the 14th Naval District, Elvis took the stage as hundreds of teenagers screeched in excitement. The King looked resplendent in his signature gold lame jacket with silver sequin lapels. He let out a brief screech of his own in response to the ecstatic audience before launching into his hit "Heartbreak Hotel." All accounts state that Elvis was in peak form, giving an enthusiastic and energetic performance that included favorites "All Shook Up," "Don't Be Cruel," "Are You Lonesome Tonight" and "It's Now or Never." He finished the show with a rollicking version of "Hound Dog" during which he slid across the stage on his knees. The 15 song set and 45 minutes of stage time were among the longest of his career. The concert would also be his last for 8 years.

The benefit was a resounding success. Ticket sales accounted for \$47,000 with additional donations (\$5,000 coming from Elvis) pushing the total take to over \$60,000. Funding for the memorial was still well short of its target but the electricity of Elvis had generated the jumpstart the campaign needed. Money began to flow from other sources. The combination of public funds and private donations (including \$40,000 from Revelle raised through sale of model kits of the *Arizona*) reached the goal of \$500,000 by September, 1961 – just 5 months after the concert. Construction on the memorial was completed by the end of the year.



The USS Arizona Memorial was officially dedicated on May 30, 1962. Elvis certainly took pride in his role in building a permanent memorial to the crew of the **Arizona** and made several visits to the site on subsequent trips to Hawaii. The memorial has reached its own iconic status and welcomes 1.5 million visitors a year.

Elvis did not forget the **Arizona**, and the Navy did not forget Elvis. When Elvis passed away in 1977, the Navy showed its gratitude by placing a wreath for him at the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial.

He's your uncle, not your dad

He's the best friend you ever had

So, come on, dig, dig, dig in until it hurts

Just remember Pearl Harbor

The Alamos and nothing could be worse

— Elvis Presley, "He's Your Uncle, Not Your Dad"

AGS