Ensign Francis Charles Flaherty

**Rank and organization:** Ensign, U. S. Naval Reserve

**Unit:** USS Oklahoma (BB-37)

**Place and date:** Pearl Harbor, HI, December 7, 1941

**Born:** March 15, 1919, Charlotte, Mich.

**Died:** December 7, 1941
(Posthumous Award)

**Accredited to:** Michigan

By mid-1941, the United States' relations with Japan stood at the breaking point. In response to continued Japanese aggression in China and southeast Asia, Congress had passed the two-ocean Navy bill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) had placed an embargo on aviation fuel and scrap iron the previous summer. Then, in the summer of 1941, after Japan had overrun the rest of Indochina, the United States froze all Japanese assets in the United States and stopping all trade with Japan, including oil. These developments played a crucial role in Japan's decision to attack the United States a few months later. Although the Japanese Imperial Navy stood 7:10 in a relative strength to the United States Navy in the summer of 1941, that ratio was destined to decline precipitously as the American construction program took effect. The oil embargo was equally important since Japan depended upon the United States for some 80 percent of its oil imports. Without American oil, Japan feared it would soon exhaust its oil reserves unless an alternative source of oil was acquired.

Since Japan did not have the economic resources to defeat the United States in a prolonged war, Admiral Yamamoto, commander of the Japanese fleet, devised a plan to destroy the U. S. Pacific Fleet in a surprise attack using carrier-launched aircraft. His objective was twofold: first, to dishearten and discourage the American people and, second, to provide the Japanese military with a free hand in the Pacific by destroying the only force capable of stopping it. With the U. S. Pacific Fleet out of the way, Japan would be able to expand throughout the Pacific, thus gaining control of critical sources of raw materials and establishing a buffer zone against the expected Allied counterattack.

A Japanese strike force set sail on November 26, 1941. Its target was the U. S. fleet in Pearl Harbor. The American forces in Hawaii were totally unprepared and the first wave, which struck at 7:55 a.m. on December 7, 1941, was a complete success: all eight battleships were either sunk or damaged, 10 other ships were either sunk or damaged, and many airplanes were destroyed on the ground.

Moored outboard of USS Maryland (BB-46), USS Oklahoma (BB-37) was hit almost immediately by three torpedoes and quickly developed a 30 degree list. There was no time to either establish watertight integrity or counter-flood to keep the ship upright. Even as an announcement was made to abandon ship, Oklahoma
was hit by two more torpedoes and began to roll to starboard. Among those on board USS Oklahoma was Ensign Flaherty. Assigned to one of the ship's turret crews, Flaherty ignored the order to abandon ship and remained on station holding a flashlight so that the rest of his turret crew could see how to escape the sinking ship. Within 20 minutes, Oklahoma had capsized and was lying hull up with her masts touching the bottom. Twenty officers, including Ensign Flaherty, and 395 enlisted men were either killed or missing, 32 wounded, and many more were temporarily trapped inside the hull of the ship. Flaherty was one of two Naval Reserve officers who earned the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions that day.

View of USS Oklahoma capsized, December 7, 1941.
Above and beyond the call of duty...

"For conspicuous devotion to duty and extraordinary courage and complete disregard of his own life... When it was seen the USS Oklahoma was going to capsize and the order was given to abandon ship, Ensign Flaherty remained in the turret, holding a flashlight so the remainder of the turret crew could see to escape, thereby sacrificing his own life."

...received the Medal of Honor

Series 1.5  
Ticket design by: Zack Anderson
One of our country’s very first heroes during the opening hours of World War II was born in Charlotte on March 15, 1919. He graduated from Charlotte High School in 1936.

His name was Francis Charles Flaherty, and he was one of only 13 Michigan men to be awarded the “Congressional Medal of Honor” during all of World War II ........ He was also the first. (George Ham Cannon from Ann Arbor was also awarded a Medal of Honor for bravery during December 7, 1941, but he is not recognized as the first Michigan recipient. Cannon was at Midway, not Pearl Harbor.)

The Medal of Honor, which is sometimes referred to as the Congregational Medal of Honor, is the absolute highest military Medal our country awards for valor in combat against an armed enemy ........ It is very rarely awarded, but when it is, it is presented only to individuals whose bravery under fire against an armed enemy of the United States goes way above and beyond the call of duty.

To give you an idea of how rarely the Medal is awarded, as of today (3.15.07), only two Medals of Honor have been awarded for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Army Sergeant Paul Smith of Florida and Marine Corporal Jason Dunham of New York. Both posthumous. There are others being considered, but so far these are the only ones awarded.)
• **Today you might** stand a better chance of being elected Pope than you would of receiving the Medal of Honor. (Slight exaggeration). It involves a very lengthy and detailed investigation and approval process.

• **Francis Flaherty lived at 212 East Harris Street**, ...... **In the big white house** just **east** of the parking lot behind **Sharon’s Restaurant**.

• **Francis was quite active in high school** ........ **He was** on the **Honors Banquet Committee** ...... **He was** on the **Charhian Staff** ...... **He played** football during ’32 and ’33 ...... **He was** “Publicity Manager” and he was a member of the “Hi-Y”, the “Travel Club” and the “Science Club” ........ **And he** attended “St. Mary’s Church” in Charlotte...............

• **After he graduated** from High School, **Francis** attended and graduated from the University of Michigan .......... **Then he** entered the **Navy** as an Ensign in the Naval Reserve .......... **He planned** to return to college to study **medicine** after the service.

• **Francis was stationed in Hawaii** .......... **He was** probably quite pleased with that assignment .......... **Warm weather** in December .......... **But it really wasn’t a good place to be on December 7, 1941**.

• **Francis was on-board** the Battleship U.S.S. Oklahoma when it took about **9 direct** and fatal hits from **torpedoes** that were dropped from airplanes during the **first wave** of the attack by the Japanese.
- As his ship was capsizing, an order was given to abandon ship .......
  Francis ignored the order ....... He stood his ground in his gun turret.

- In almost complete darkness, he grabbed a flashlight and shined its beam on the corridor exit while guiding his crewmates to safety.

- One of the officers said the last time he saw Francis, Francis was knee deep in water pushing his men toward the exit ....... and the water was rising at a rapid pace.

- While the ship was filling with water and turning completely over, he helped a lot of men escape certain death ....... The ship capsized, but it didn’t sink.

- Francis saved a lot of lives that day, but he lost his own in the process ....... He never left his gun turret during the entire battle.

- This act of extreme heroism earned him the Medal of Honor ....... Unfortunately, it was a posthumous award ....... He was only 22 years old when he was killed in action at Pearl Harbor.

- Francis’ body was never recovered, but there is a rather plain and simple tombstone with his name on it in the back area of Maple Hill Cemetery in Charlotte ....... His grave is empty, of course, but the marker does indicate that he is a recipient of the Medal of Honor.
• The Battleship Oklahoma was eventually righted and sold for scrap for somewhere around $146,000, but it sank to the bottom of the ocean 540 miles northeast of Pearl Harbor while it was being towed back to the United States in 1947.

• In Francis’ memory and honor, a monument acknowledging his (and Sgt. Michael Hudson’s) act of bravery was erected in front of the flagpole on the lawn of Charlotte’s historical courthouse on Memorial Day 2000. .... Our American Legion Post also bears his name.

• The money for the monument project was raised in less than two months. ....... Just goes to show you that the folks who live in Charlotte are very generous and patriotic.

• Francis Flaherty is just one example of the folks we proudly refer to as “The Greatest Generation”.

( Francis Flaherty’s Medal of Honor and Purple Heart along with several other medals are on display in Michigan’s Own Military and Space Museum in Frankemuth)
Hi Amanda,

Sorry I never gave you some info on Flaherty. Will do within the next couple of weeks.

The guy who contacted you is welcome to contact me. Is this a new inquiry? Some guy contacted me last year. Had lots of questions and wanted to get together with me, but he never followed through. You might have referred him to me. Whatever.

I'm giving a talk about the monument and Flaherty this Sunday at the Congregational Church as part of Ben Fulton's Eagle Scout Award ceremony.

Incidentally, Francis Flaherty was an Ensign in the Naval Reserve, not a Sergeant.

Take care.

Don

-----Original Message-----
From: Amanda Pearsall [mailto:AmandaPearsall@ameritech.net]
Sent: Wednesday, March 14, 2007 4:50 PM
To: dcolizzi@cablespeed.com
Subject: Flaherty

Hi, Donald,

We have had a man from out of town who is looking for information on Sgt. Flaherty. At one time you were going to give me copies of what you had. I don't think you ever got around to it. Could you please get some stuff together so we can make a file here? It seems that we have very little documentation even for World I and WW II. You could come here and print off whatever you want to give us at no cost to you. We really would appreciate it.

Amanda

No virus found in this incoming message.
Checked by AVG Free Edition.

3/15/2007
FRANCIS C. FLAHERTY

At approximately 8:00 A.M. the USS Oklahoma's loudspeaker crackled, "Air raid! Air raid! This is a real attack, real planes, real bombs. All hands man your battle stations!" Moments later, as sailors were dashing to their posts, three torpedo explosions rocked the Oklahoma. Water gushed through the ship's vents and the massive 583-foot battleship began to roll over.

Manning his post in a gun turret was twenty-two-year-old Ensign Francis C. Flaherty of Charlotte, Michigan. Flaherty had enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve in July 1940 and was commissioned an ensign in December. He had only been on the Oklahoma for a few months on December 7, 1941. Water rushed into Flaherty's gun turret and power was lost as the Oklahoma was hit by another barrage of Japanese torpedoes. When the abandon ship order was heard, Flaherty stayed in the turret and held a flashlight so his men could swim to safety. The turret filled with water, preventing his escape. For Flaherty's heroism he posthumously received the congressional Medal of Honor, becoming Michigan's first World War II serviceman to earn the medal.

"The Japanese came in so low they couldn't clear the