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PEARL HARBOR - HICKAM NEWS

June 4, 2010

Remembering hero of Dec. 7, 1941 John Finn

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Contributing Writer

Navy Lt. John William Finn, the oldest living Medal of Honor recipient, died May 27, two months shy of his 101st birthday, at the Chula Vista Veterans Home in Chula Vista, Calif.

Finn was also the last survivor of 15 Sailors who received the Medal of Honor for heroism during 1941 surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Upon his death, fellow WWII veteran and Hawaii native, Barney F. Hajiro, became the oldest living Medal of Honor recipient at 93 years old.

Born July 23, 1909 in Los Angeles, Finn dropped out of school in the seventh grade. He enlisted in the Navy in July 1926, shortly before his 17th birthday. By April 1927, he was assigned to Naval Air Station North Island and initially worked in aircraft repair before becoming an aviation ordnanceman and working on anti-aircraft guns. Finn served on a series of ships, including the USS Lexington (CV-2), the USS Houston (CA-30), the USS Jason (AC-12), the USS Saratoga (CV-3) and the USS Cincinnati (CL-6).

In 1936, he was promoted to chief petty officer and worked with patrol squadrons in San Diego, Washington and Panama. As a chief petty officer, he was eventually stationed at Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay and was there during the Dec. 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Oahu.

On the morning of that fateful Sunday, Finn was in bed with his wife Alice, about a mile from the aircraft hangars, when he heard the sound of gunfire. He dressed hurriedly and drove to the naval station.

In a 2009 interview with Larry Smith for "Beyond Glory," an oral history of Medal of Honor recipients, Finn described that at first he complied with the (at the time it was a naval air station) base's 20 miles-per-hour speed limit. But then, "I heard a plane come roaring in from astern of me," he recalled. "As I glanced up, the guy made a wing-over, and I saw that big old red meatball, the rising sun insignia, on the underside of the wing. Well, I threw it into second and it's a wonder I didn't run over every Sailor in the air station."

When Finn arrived at the hangars, many of the planes had already been hit. Finn explained that one of the first things he did was take control of a machine gun from his squadron's painter. "I said, 'Alex, let me take that gun'...I knew that I had more experience firing a machine gun than a painter," he recalled in the 2009 interview.

Finn then grabbed a .50-caliber machine gun on a makeshift tripod, carried it to an exposed area near a runway, and for the next two and a half hours, he fired away at the enemy, while also getting hit with shrapnel from low-flying Japanese planes.

"I got shot in the left arm and shot in the left foot, broke the bone," he said during the interview. "I had shrapnel blows in my chest and belly and right elbow and right thumb. My scalp got cut, and everybody thought I was dying. 'Oh, the old chief had the top of his head knocked off!' I had 28, 29 holes in me that were bleeding," he added.

After the first attack ended, Finn returned to the hangar to await a possible second attack despite his wounds. He was hospitalized the following afternoon.

For his heroic actions, Finn was awarded the first Medal of Honor and was presented the medal on Sept. 15, 1942 by Adm. Chester Nimitz aboard the USS Enterprise (CV-6). To date, Finn is the only know aviation ordnance man to receive that distinction. During his 30-year military career, Finn earned eight other medals, including the Purple Heart.

Finn retired from Navy service as a lieutenant in 1956. Upon retiring, Finn resided on a 90-acre ranch in Live Oak Springs, Calif. with his family and made numerous appearances at events honoring veterans.

Most notable was his appearance on March 25, 2009, when he attended National Medal of Honor Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery and stood beside newly inaugurated U.S. President Barack Obama during a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Known for his heroism at Pearl Harbor, Finn also became a namesake at both Marine and Navy installations in Hawaii. In 1999, the Commander Patrol and Reconnaissance Wing Two (CPRW-2) Headquarters building at Marine Corps Base Hawaii at Kaneohe Bay was named in his honor.

On April 7, 2009, Naval Station Pearl Harbor and the National Park Service activated the first USS Arizona Memorial biodiesel ferry boat, named after Finn. The new John W. Finn ferry boat was the first of five biodiesel boats built to replace the existing 20 year old, Navy-operated tour boats that transport 1.5 million visitors per year to and from the USS Arizona Memorial. Finn visited his boat on Dec. 6, 2009 at historic Ford Island, where he was met by Rear Adm. Dixon Smith, commander, Navy Region Hawaii and Naval Surface Group Middle Pacific, and Capt. Richard Kitchens, then commanding officer of Naval Station Pearl Harbor. "Thank you for everything that you have given to our country. It is a privilege and an honor to present this boat to you, said Smith. "Welcome to your boat sir."

Finn is survived by his son, Joseph. His wife, Alice, died in 1998.

Despite his numerous military accomplishments, Finn said that he always felt conflicted about his "war hero" status. "That damned hero stuff is a bunch of crap, I guess," he said in a 2009 interview. "You gotta understand that there's all kinds of heroes, but they never get a chance to be in a hero's position," Finn said, words that only a true hero would say.

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