Sixty-eight years after the attack, eight men who survived Pearl Harbor showed up for a memorial ceremony

Pearl Harbor: They were there

By Heather Stauffer, Sentinel Reporter, December 7, 2009

Some Pearl Harbor survivors told their stories Monday with an ease only time and much telling could bring.

Others left it at "I don't have anything to say."

But they all stood tall during a memorial service at the state capitol on the 68th anniversary of attack, performing salutes with as much pride as their younger selves might have displayed before they heard those planes.

"Honored Pearl Harbor survivors, we are in your debt — and in the debt of all World War II American veterans – for the freedoms we enjoy today," said U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Raymond Berube, who commands the Naval Inventory Control Point in Mechanicsburg. "Your legacy grows stronger with each passing year and with each generation you inspire."

Each of the eight Pennsylvania survivors present — George Grove, Hank Heim, Robert Leidhecker, Frank Navagato, Robert Moreo, Victor Petersen, Richard Schimmel and Ned Shayneman — wore a purple-and-white lei throughout the ceremony.

His experience

Heim, 88, of New Cumberland, eventually became a major in the Air Force and went on to fly 75 missions during World War II and 51 in Korea. He recounted how he heard "lots of planes" that morning in Hawaii and thought it was just poorly timed American maneuvers until he heard them starting to dive and then saw one coming at his barracks shooting.

"I hit the floor as he shot above me," Heim said. Then he quipped, "I never saw 55 men get out of bed so quick in my life."

Angry, he decided to get a machine gun and return fire at the Japanese from the turret of a downed plane, he said, but encountered strafing and then was knocked out when they dropped a 500-pound bomb near him.

Military personnel fill the East Wing Rotunda at the Pennsylvania State Capitol on Monday afternoon during the 68th Anniversary Memorial honoring the Pennsylvania survivors of the Pearl Harbor attack. (Jason Malmont/The Sentinel)

He eventually came to and was able to carry out his plan, he said, but ended up having to get out of the airplane when it was hit and caught fire. He went to get medical attention, he said, but didn't end up getting much.

"When I walked in, I couldn't take it," he said. "I saw men in there with arms blown off, legs blown off."

Getting prepared

Then, Heim said, he was mustered with other men to stand against what authorities expected would be a ground invasion. They were ready to fight to the death, he said, but the ground force didn't come.

So, Heim said without a trace of irony, "I didn't have to play the hero."

His wife, Kathryn Heim, said she has asked him if he would do it all over again.

"He says yes, in a heartbeat," she said.

The memorial means a lot, she said, but it is sad to see

the number of survivors dwindling every year.

One who has been there faithfully is Robert Moreo, 91, of Lower Allen Township. He stood afterward with his daughter, Patti Martin, and son Bob Moreo, who takes a day off work every year to be there with him.

Moreo fell into the “not much to say” camp. But when Harrisburg Mayor Stephen Reed came around and said, “I’d be honored if you’d sign my program,” Moreo did it gladly.

Note: This article and photography were reprinted with permission from The Sentinel.