

# Arnold resident recalls fallen comrades by telling story of Pearl Harbor

By Craig Smith and Jessica Turnbull, Valley News Dispatch, Monday, December 7, 2009



Portrait of Pearl Harbor survivor, Steve Jager in his Arnold home. He is one of the Valley's last surviving Pearl Harbor Veterans from the infamous bombing. (Steve Dietz/For the Valley News Dispatch)

Sixty-eight years ago, Steve Jager, then a young U.S. serviceman based in Hawaii, was awakened when the building where he slept began to shake.

Jager, an Arnold resident, used the word "confusing" four times as he described the events unfolding around him that day -- the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

He and a friend, an 18-year military veteran, ran outside bewildered and saw planes above.

"When I saw the big flashes of fire, I asked him, 'Toby, what's happening? What's going on?' He said they were just doing maneuvers to fly over and drop things to get reactions from the troops," Jager said.

It was, however, a pivotal event in American history, catapulting the country into World War II.

Japanese planes hit the U.S. fleet and its base at 7:55 a.m. An hour and a half later, five of eight battleships were sunk or sinking and the rest were damaged. Several other ships and hundreds of combat planes were

destroyed.

The bombers killed more than 2,400 Americans that day. The attack pushed the United States into a war that would not end until 1945 after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Jager, 89, is one of seven Pearl Harbor veterans living in the Alle-Kiski area. He will speak at a ceremony this afternoon at the Tarentum VFW about his experiences that day.

There once were 34 Pearl Harbor survivors from the Valley. In addition to Jager, those who remain include John Vrabel of Lower Burrell, Mike Ostanoski of Har-mar, Harry Karp of New Kensington, Nelson Ferguson of Plum, and Joe Jezik and George Pann, both of Harrison.

Jager worked installing communications around the island. He said the attack happened on a Sunday morning when most military personnel were on break. He came in at 3 a.m. and slept only four hours before the building he was sleeping in started to shake.

No one from his building was injured or killed, despite being about 250 yards from Pearl Harbor, Jager said.

It is for those men that the veterans gather each year to pay tribute, he said.

"As long as we have a breath in life, we will remember that day," Jager said.

Other vets remember

Isaac George was pinned down in the control tower at Hickam Field 68 years ago today.

"I saw the (USS) Arizona blow up," said George, 88, of New Castle. "They were strafing us. ... I think about it a lot."

George, a former Army Air Force radio man, is one

of the approximately 100 Pearl Harbor survivors in Pennsylvania and among a shrinking number of World War II veterans alive to remind people how the attack that December morning changed America.

“Most of the kids in school don’t know what Pearl Harbor is,” he said.

The attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with the dwindling number of veterans have helped push World War II to the back of America’s memory, a retired University of Pittsburgh professor said.

“It’s going to be very, very hard to keep it going,” said Donald Goldstein, a retired University of Pittsburgh professor and leading expert on Pearl Harbor.

Paul Stinner was serving in the Army in Panama when the Japanese bombers started their deadly run.

Stinner, 87, of Robinson would spend the next five years fighting in Europe. He was wounded in battle, and suffered other injuries when a building collapsed on him in Belgium.

“Went all the way to the Bulge,” he said, referring to The Battle of the Bulge, the largest land battle of the war in which the United States participated and the last great German offensive.

Bernie Ordos, 90, of West Mifflin was about to be relieved from guard duty at Pearl Harbor that day 68 years ago when waves of attacking Japanese fighter planes filled the sky.

“A lot of people don’t know what Pearl Harbor is,” said Betty Ordos, 87, his wife of 69 years. While her husband was fighting in the Pacific, Betty Ordos lived with her mother-in-law and worked at a factory making gaskets for the war.

“I don’t think the new generation understands the magnitude of what happened there,” said Stinner.

Although the 3,000 Americans killed in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2000 exceeded the number killed at Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 attacks pale in comparison to the scope of World War II, said Goldstein.

More than 16 million Americans fought in World War II, according to the Department of Defense. About 2 million are alive but they are dying at the rate of about 900 a day. Some estimates put death rate for World War II veterans at 1,600 a day, Goldstein said.

Keeping stories alive

Keeping alive their stories becomes more difficult each year.

“We don’t teach history in schools. There will be some (veterans) out there, they’ll be in their 90s, but the problem is there will be less people to understand it,” said Goldstein, co-author of “At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor.”

The war played a big part in Pittsburgh’s history, he said.

“Pittsburgh was the arsenal for World War II. ... All the mills were pumping. We carried that war,” Goldstein said.

About 35,000 of the 150,000 living veterans in Allegheny County served in World War II, said Ron Conley, the county’s director of veterans services. A couple of thousand veterans die in the county each year, about two-thirds of them World War II vets, he said.

“I think it’s important that people understand,” said Conley, who urges veterans to record memories of their war experiences.

A tribute to Pearl Harbor survivors at the state Capitol in 2002 drew 25 survivors, said Mike Randazzo, event co-chairman. By 2005, just six survivors attended. Attendance has climbed since, but Randazzo said the numbers are dwindling.

“Each year, more and more invitations come back, which means, well, you know... And that’s sad,” he said. But if I can do my part to tell their story, I can’t think of a better way to honor any veteran.”

Note: This article and photography were reprinted with permission from the Valley News Dispatch