

Pearl Harbor Memories Still Burning Bright

By Cathy Dausman



The event's Color Guard, from left: Seaman Apprentice Brandon Chang, Seaman Apprentice Andrew Waggoner, Seaman Christian Hickman; and Seaman Apprentice Andres Serrano of Lafayette. Photos Doug Kohen

Vivid memories of December 7, 1941 spill hurriedly from the lips of Ed Wallen and John Chapman, as well they might. Chapman, especially, fears the next generation will forget the stunning events that catapulted the U.S. into World War II. Both retired Navy men are Pearl Harbor survivors.

On a recent visit to an East Bay high school, Chapman says he asked his student audience when World War II began and who attacked on U.S. soil – “They didn’t know,” he laments.

Last Thursday a group of local veterans and the Navy League sought to honor servicemen and women and preserve their history during a Pearl Harbor Remembrance dinner at Lafayette Veterans Memorial Building. The dinner, now in its fifth year, hosted Wallen, Chapman and several active duty personnel. Guest speaker Coast Guard Rear Admiral Christopher Colvin introduced himself to the Navy veterans and listened to their stories. “As long as America continues to produce heroes like Ed and John we’ll be okay,” he said.

In 1941, Wallen, known to his friends as “Spike”, was a 20 year old Machinist mate 2nd class stationed aboard the Navy destroyer USS Monaghan when Pearl Harbor was attacked. His ship had “ready duty” December 6, and all hands were aboard. “If I’d had an apple or a baseball I could have thrown it at the [Japanese] planes [flying overhead],” Wallen said. His battle station was “shaft alley”—below decks in the area between the ship’s twin propellers. His first glimpse of the stricken harbor was “the saddest thing.” The Monaghan escaped the harbor and went on submarine patrol, returning December 9. Wallen later served in the submarine service; he and his shipmates fought in the Coral Sea and Midway battles.

John Chapman was a Shipfitter 3rd class on the battleship West Virginia. Only 19 during the attack, Chapman remembers debris from other ships raining onto the West Virginia’s fantail. The water was an oil slick six inches deep. He began reciting the 23rd Psalm and remembers hearing a voice saying “take charge.”

“I’ll get you out of there,” he promised his shipmates. Chapman went into the harbor. When the USS Arizona exploded, the captain’s gig (motorboat) that rescued him was blown six feet into the air. Chapman later became a deep sea diver and helped build the USS Arizona memorial. Chapman estimates he helped save 40 men during the attack. When asked about medals, he says simply: “They don’t give you medals for doing your job.”

Marine Staff Sergeants Louis Carter and Jonathan Garfin were in the audience. Carter, an Iraq veteran, said he felt good that Wallen and Chapman survived, noting there was enough patriotism “for the whole of Contra Costa County in this building tonight.” Garfin was impressed by the survivors’ legacy and “proud to wear a uniform.”



(L-R) Ed “Spike” Wallen, USS Monaghan, John Chapman, USS West Virginia

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