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Pearl Harbor Survivor Left His Heart on USS San Francisco

By Cathy Dausman



From left, California State Senator Leland Yee with "Chief Johnson" during the 2001 USS San Francisco memorial service. Photo provided

Richard "Johnny" Johnson, until recently a Lafayette resident, turns 90 Dec. 6 but you wouldn't know it. The retired Navy chief still has a full head of hair and an unlined face. He was just a boy at 17, a self-professed high school dropout, when he enlisted with his mother's permission on his birthday in 1940.

"Join the Navy and See the World" - that was the poster which inspired the Minnesota farm boy and his older brother to enlist. "Chief Johnny" passed the physical, his brother did not.

In April, 1941, Seaman Third Class Johnson boarded the USS San Francisco in Pearl Harbor. He worked in the galley throughout his entire enlistment preparing meals for the crew, and never left the "Frisco."

Johnson recalled how Pearl Harbor was awash in young sailors as the Navy built its forces for the war they feared was coming. "Saturday nights in Honolulu were [so] packed with servicemen; you had to walk in the streets," he said.

The Frisco should have been in dry dock, positioned differently within Pearl Harbor. Instead, Johnson said, his ship was being repainted; half its food and all its ammunition was unloaded. The USS New Orleans was in dry dock in its place.

The morning of Dec. 7, 1941, Johnson was drinking coffee on the ship's fantail, preparing for a day on Waikiki Beach. He noticed planes flying overhead.

He waved, not realizing they were the Japanese fleet.

When the bombing started, the Frisco was overlooked, likely because it was unarmed. As for the response to the

attack, Johnson said, "We were just young, dumb kids." They couldn't quite believe what was happening. The rest of the country was angry, mad and frightened to death, he added.

Repair crews "flocked like bees to get the San Francisco ready," Johnson said.

For Johnson, the big picture was not as important as the personal battles he and his fellow servicemen fought to win the war: His buddy, Charlie, who survived naval fights aboard the USS Chicago and the ill-fated USS Arizona; a corpsman whose job it was to identify close to 200 dead and injured soldiers and sailors, most of whom were without dog tags; and another sailor who survived the sinking of the USS West Virginia.

Equally important to Johnson's Pearl Harbor experience was his involvement aboard the Frisco during the battle of Guadalcanal. Yet Johnson saves most of his reminiscing for military reunions, explaining Pearl survivors don't tell their kids about their experiences because "they wouldn't really understand."

Johnson founded the nonprofit USS San Francisco Memorial Foundation (www.ussanfrancisco.org) which conducts an annual memorial ceremony at Lands' End in San Francisco to honor the 107 sailors and Marines killed in action there Nov. 12-13, 1942.

Speaking as foundation president, Johnson said, "It is essential that this history is remembered for future generations."

To that end, Johnson keeps the flame alive, giving interviews, attending presentations and memorial services. Johnson has since returned to Pearl Harbor - his daughter lives in Hawaii - and calls the Japanese "really wonderful people" who first experienced liberty, freedom and democracy at the war's end.



Richard Johnson Photo Cathy Dausman

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