

Published November 6th, 2013

Mickey Ganitch - A True Man of Honor

By Laurie Snyder



Twenty-eight ribbons were earned during 23 years of service to America and the world by Pearl Harbor survivor and Orinda Masonic Lodge chaplain, Mickey Ganitch. "Do unto others. Make a better world," he urges. Photo Ohlen Alexander

Okinawa, a "torpedo hit the propellers on the right. Everything went up," he said, his head bowed, the pain an arrow from his heart to the listener's. "I had 26 quartermasters. I lost 20 of them."

He'd been up top writing home. "I was like a father to them. It was up to me to identify them, to contact their families." America signed the peace treaty in Tokyo Bay a short time later on Sept. 2, 1945.

Ganitch put 23 years in before finally retiring. After 16 years at the Disabled Veterans of America, he sees today's veterans opting for suicide because of unemployment, homelessness and post-traumatic stress disorder. He hopes readers will reach out to learn more about how to help.

He and two other Pearl survivors recently celebrated the return of Mount Diablo's beacon Oct. 22. Restored with help from California Assembly Member Joan Buchanan and Save Mount Diablo, the light was a guide for planes and ships from the time it was turned on by Charles Lindbergh in 1928 until the day after the Pearl attack. Lit each Dec. 7 since 1964 at the request of Pacific Fleet Admiral Nimitz, the beacon will shine again at sunset this year.

Ganitch's greatest joy, though, comes from talking to students. Using PowerPoint, he makes history stick to brains in ways even gifted teachers cannot. His reward - kids sitting spellbound. "Be responsible for your own actions," he tells them. "You're the future of our country."

"Behind every dark cloud, there's a silver lining," he said. "Think about what tomorrow brings, and see what you can do to help other people."

Join Boy Scout Troops 212, 234 and 246 for the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Moraga Commons Park Nov. 11 from 9 to 10 a.m. before heading to Main Street in Pleasanton to cheer on Mickey Ganitch as he marches in the Tri Valley Veterans Day Parade from 1 to 2:30 p.m. And don't forget to make the trek to Mount Diablo for the beacon's sunset lighting Dec. 7.

A Master Mason since 1969, Mickey Ganitch has been a member of Orinda's Masonic Lodge since 1992, and currently serves as its chaplain. He is also one of the few Pearl Harbor survivors remaining in America.

An Ohio farm boy who grew up driving a Ford Model T, he recalls his parents giving away a significant portion of the corn, potatoes and fruit they grew to hungry relatives during the Great Depression. He continues their goodness, helping with his church's pantry and serving Thanksgiving meals. He's been an usher for 46 years.

His hero's journey began before the Pearl attack even launched. "Germany was taking over so many countries. Japan was already expanding. I saw the handwriting on the wall," he said. He enlisted Jan. 16, 1941, joining the flagship of America's Pacific Fleet - the USS Pennsylvania. "We always had an admiral aboard."

That ship would have been one of Japan's first targets - save for serendipity. Propeller issues had forced the ship into dry dock. "We weren't in our normal place," he said.

Ganitch saw it all from the crow's nest. While readying for morning football practice ahead of a big game against the USS Arizona, the Pennsylvania's guns thundered. Clad in everything but helmet and spikes, he clambered up his ladder. One bomb missed him by just 45 feet.

The Downes belched a half ton of torpedo tube onto his ship's forecandle before being damaged by the Cassin's rollover. The USS Shaw exploded. The Nevada tried to steam clear - until ordered to stop before she could be sunk to block the harbor. A friend wriggled from a porthole on the Oklahoma. "It was less than 20 minutes before it was lying over on its side," he said.

America grew up. "We were united. We had to defeat the enemy." A seaman first class that day, he rose to chief petty officer in four months through study and diligence. As a quartermaster, he steered the 33,000-ton Pennsylvania. "We didn't have GPS," he said. "We had to use the stars and the moon." Once, he steered so hard over that an oncoming torpedo shot clean under her.

Kwajalein. Eniwetok. Leyte Gulf. While under repair in

To learn more about how you can help the Disabled Veterans of America, call: (510) 893-1666.

Photo # 80-G-19943 Wrecks of USS Downes & Cassin, 7 Dec. 1941



The USS Cassin shown capsized against the Downes in front of the USS Pennsylvania, shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Visible at the center in the distance is the rolled Oklahoma with the Maryland beside her. The sunken and burning Arizona billows smoke out of view behind Ganitch's ship; the California is partially visible, extreme left. Source: U.S. National Archives, photo 80-G-19943.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA