DAV marks 75th Anniversary of Pearl Harbor Attack

For more than 60 years, DAV life member Will Lehner knew his ship, the USS Ward, fired the nation’s initial rounds in World War II, sinking an enemy submarine a full hour before the first Japanese bombs hit Pearl Harbor, but it took six decades before the ship and its crew received the recognition they deserved.

At 6:30 a.m. during the sleepy Sunday of Dec. 7, 1941, the Ward’s crew sighted a submarine periscope operating in restricted waters.

“So we looked around, and all of a sudden we see the conning tower come up out of the water,” Lehner said. “But we didn’t know it was a Japanese sub; we didn’t know what it was. Then finally the whole thing was up, and we were only about 50 yards from it.”

The Ward’s captain, Lt. Cmdr. William Outerbridge, gave the order to fire.

“They fired the No. 1 gun, which was up on the bow, and I watched the sub. [The shot] went right over the conning tower and splashed right behind it.”

Then the second shot was fired.

“I saw it when it hit the conning tower at the lower part of it,” said Lehner. “The shell hit, and when it hit the sub rolled over and came back again and started going down.

“Well, that was an hour and fifteen minutes before the [Japanese] planes ever came over.”
The Ward’s captain made radio reports to higher headquarters, but the reports were largely dismissed; the enemy vessel was never accounted for.

“When I went to school after I got out of the service, I told different guys that we had sunk a submarine,” Lehner said of the fateful encounter.

At the time, his story was discounted. But in August 2002, Lehner and fellow sailors of the USS Ward were vindicated, all beginning with a phone call from a researcher with the Hawaii Undersea Research Laboratory (HURL).

“I talked to Terry Kerby [from HURL],” said Lehner. “He called me and says, ‘I think I found that one that you sunk. It’s got a hole just where you said. I’m pretty sure it’s that one. It’s laying on a little sand dune down there. You can get a good shot of it.’”

Kerby asked if the former sailor would like to join him at 1,200 feet below sea level to get a look at the submarine. Lehner jumped at the chance and was soon with Kerby in a small research submersible on the ocean floor, about five miles from the mouth of Pearl Harbor, face to face with his old foe after more than six decades.

For more than three hours, Lehner snapped pictures of the Type A Ko-hyoteki submarine that began World War II for the United States, remembering how he heard doubters remark that there was no proof his ship engaged an enemy vessel.

“Everyone said we didn’t sink it, but we did,” he said.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Ward was retrofitted as a high-speed transport. Lehner and the crew of the Ward became part of the task force responsible for troop landings in the South Pacific, where kamikaze attacks by Japanese planes were common.
“What they liked to do is come in on the fantail on the stern, and they’d skid along the top of the ships if they could and kill as many people on deck as they could first and then slam into the ship and then that would explode the gasoline,” Lehner said.

It was such a kamikaze attack that eventually led to the scuttling of the Ward on Dec. 7, 1944, three years to the day after it first engaged the enemy at the mouth of Pearl Harbor.

“Three of them came down on us,” Lehner said. “I was first loader on No. 4 gun, which was on the aft part of the ship. We were firing and we knocked down two of them, but the third one got through.”

Lehner and his shipmates abandoned ship and made their way to other friendly vessels before the destroyer USS O’Brien—coincidentally commanded by the Ward’s former captain, William Outerbridge—scuttled the damaged Ward.

Lehner was discharged and treated for the psychological wounds of war. After returning home from his military service, he experienced some of the same issues that have always affected some veterans.

“I didn’t talk about any of my experiences to my kids or to my wife for about 20 years,” Lehner said. “I had [post-traumatic stress disorder]. To me, I was just holding it in and just wanted to forget about it.”

But then a unique opportunity presented itself when he discovered his own children didn’t know anything about Pearl Harbor. He began speaking at schools and museums.

“Will, sharing his story for over 60 years, has helped correct the historical record,” said Department of Wisconsin Commander John Polk. “He was present at a critical juncture in our nation’s history, and his perspective on the Pearl Harbor attack is nothing short of a national treasure.”
“The VA estimates there will be as few as 257,000 World War II veterans by 2020,” said DAV National Commander Dave Riley. “DAV will never forget Will and his fellow veterans of what we rightly call our nation’s ‘Greatest Generation.’”

Lehner will never again have to convince doubters, or history, of how the Pearl Harbor attack actually unfolded. “I’ve got pictures,” he said. “I’ve got proof now.”

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