

66 years later, Pearl Harbor still resonates

As survivors' numbers dwindle, some of the few who remain gather to commemorate the anniversary of the attack.

By Cecilia Rasmussen, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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President Franklin D. Roosevelt called it a "date which will live in infamy," words that still resonate strongly for the dwindling few survivors of the attack that propelled the United States into World War II.

For those servicemen, the six decades since the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the thousands of miles between the mainland and Hawaii, fall away.

Benjamin Crickette, now 84, can bring himself right back to the sunny Sunday morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when he was an 18-year-old private in the Army, trained to repair machine guns and load ammunition into planes. At Wheeler Army Airfield on Oahu, Crickette was walking to the mess hall for hot cakes when he and three buddies heard the rumble of engines overhead. One of his friends remarked that it seemed funny that Navy fliers were out so early.

"Then, just as I saw the rising sun on the planes, they began firing," said Crickette, who was born in Montana and now lives in Hesperia, near Victorville. "I yelled, 'Take cover!' "

He didn't have a gun, he says, so he ran to hide behind a palm tree. He believes the tree saved his life.

"It was a pretty good size tree, at least 4 feet round," Crickette said. "When the planes turned around and came back, I moved to the other side of the tree."

"I probably shouldn't tell you this," he continued, "but there was also this very pretty, well-endowed PX girl, who I remember seeing running naked out of her house when the Japanese attacked. I never found out if she survived or not."

Amid heavy anti-aircraft fire, Crickette and others tried to load ammunition into a truck to take out to the airfield.

"But bullets killed the truck's engine," he said. "We kept moving the ammunition from one truck to another but were held back each time by more flying bullets."

On Friday, the 66th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, Crickette put on a Hawaiian shirt, white pants and a two-cornered garrison cap, and joined a handful of other survivors, Navy

personnel, local and state politicians and a few hundred invited guests at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Norco for a commemoration of the event.

Despite pouring rain, nearly two dozen war veterans attended, including Ray Ogas, 86, one of several transported to the event by local nursing homes. In 1941, Ogas was on a ship that pulled into Pearl Harbor a few days after the attack, event organizers said. Ogas and the crew helped pull bodies from the bay and put out fires.

On Friday, the 6-foot-3 Ogas stood as one of the tallest in the crowd, wearing a baseball cap and shaking hands with everyone.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and other military bases on Oahu lasted less than two terrifying hours, leaving about 2,400 Americans dead and 1,178 injured. In all, 21 U.S. ships were heavily damaged or sunk, and 323 U.S. aircraft were damaged or destroyed.

Roger Marron of Riverside was a Navy chief petty officer and electrician assigned to the receiving station at Pearl Harbor, where 250 men were staying that fateful day as they awaited orders to ship out.

On the night of Dec. 6, 1941, Marron had stayed up late working at the recreation hall, helping out at a dance that featured a battle of bands from four ships. When the explosions started, Marron was asleep. By the time he rushed outside, he said, "the Japanese planes were flying so low that we could see the pilots' faces." Within half an hour, he was ordered to the battleship Pennsylvania to help haul ammunition to its anti-aircraft guns. The ship couldn't be torpedoed because it was in dry dock, but it was damaged, he said.

"From a distance, I watched in horror the [battleship] Arizona blow up," he said. "Then I was transferred deep into the bowels of the ship. It was worse than anything, hearing what was going on but not being able to do anything about it."

After leaving the Navy, Marron went on to work for 36 years as an electrician for Southern California Edison Co. But he remained haunted by thoughts of the band members who played at the dance.

"I never stopped thinking about all those musicians stationed on ships anchored in the bay," he said.

Returning to Pearl Harbor with his family in 1975, he said, "I wept seeing the Arizona and the names of some of my boot-camp buddies in marble."

Crickette, the Hesperia resident, never returned to the scene of the attack.

"I always meant to go back but never did," he said.

After Pearl Harbor, he was stationed in an Army repair shop in the Midway Islands. When he mustered out of the Army as a staff sergeant in 1945, he returned home to Norco, where he lived at the time. He later became a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Assn.

Crickette's daughter, Lynn Johnson, 54, said her father has loved talking about the war lately "but is slightly self-conscious about his minor role."

"He always said, 'The pilots who got off the ground that day deserved most of the credit,' " she said.

The group that assembled Friday represents a small fraction of the estimated 2,000 to 3,000 survivors still alive nationwide. Many are ill or too frail to travel.

Membership in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Assn., the largest national organization for survivors, is dropping rapidly. Chapters are closing as members die.

"We're getting pretty extinct. Only about six or seven remain in my Victorville group," Crickette said. "And only two of us are mobile."