

Norco event honors Pearl Harbor veterans

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NORCO - Survivors of the attack on Pearl Harbor are "getting about as scarce as the dodo bird," but that does not mean they are forgotten and unappreciated, 84-year-old veteran Mal Middlesworth said Friday.

"There seems to have been an upswing in emotion, in gratefulness in the last several years now that our membership is declining so fast," said Middlesworth, a decorated former Marine who served for four and a half years.

Still, he conceded, "Most schoolchildren do not know where Pearl Harbor is or what happened."

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Mark Zaleski / The Press-Enterprise

Pearl Harbor veteran Mal Middlesworth, 84, salutes as the National Anthem is played during the Pearl Harbor Day of Remembrance in the Norconian Club of the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Norco on Friday. Middlesworth served on the USS San Francisco in Pearl Harbor when the attacks took place.

Some of them learned Friday. Almost a dozen military veterans and naval-hospital workers came to the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Norco for the first public remembrance on the base in recent memory.

Official Appreciation

Those who had served were applauded and thanked by about 150 guests and officials, including Assemblyman Todd Spitzer, R-Orange; Corona Mayor Jeff Miller; Norco Mayor Frank Hall; and Capt. Robert Shafer, who commands the Norco base.

The veterans were honored in what was once the lakeside pavilion of the old Norconian hotel. Outside, the day was gray and cloudy, as if acknowledging the solemnity of the event.

A moment of silence was observed at 9:55 a.m. Pacific time, the time of the Dec. 7, 1941 attack by the Japanese on U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor. The Norco High School Air Force JROTC performed a drill and the school's jazz band played the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Assemblyman Spitzer told the veterans they have set an example for Americans who are defending our country today. The world of today may be more sophisticated and filled with complex problems, he said, "but we're better prepared because of what you did, and for that we are forever grateful."

War on Horizon

Anticipating U.S. involvement in World War II, the Navy bought the property that is now the Norco base the day before the Pearl Harbor attack and made it a hospital, Shafer said.

The hospital accepted some of the first wounded soldiers from Pearl Harbor and continued to serve amputees, people with tuberculosis and polio, and other patients until it was closed permanently in 1957.

Inspired Volunteer

Vicki Dean, 87, remembers those days. As a Navy volunteer from 1945 to 1947, Dean did nursing and office work, and conducted guests such as Helen Keller on tours when they visited the hospital.

On Friday she wore her original navy blue jacket with anchors embroidered on the lapels, and she laughed as she recalled being sent to chilly New York for boot camp, then frigid Bethesda for hospital training. She was delighted to end up in the warmer climate of Southern California.

"I was thrilled, I was inspired -- one of these eager beavers," she said. "Everybody was very patriotic at that time."

Also attending Friday's ceremony were Warren Fowler, an 85-year-old Navy veteran, who was on Ford Island in the middle of Pearl Harbor when the attack came, and Benjamin Crickette, 84, who was in the Air Force and kept from being shot by dodging behind a tree as Japanese planes strafed the harbor.

Historic Site

Kevin Bash, an historian now working on a book about the Navy in Norco, was one of several volunteers behind Friday's event.

Several veterans said they were there because Bash personally invited them.

After the ceremony, Bash explained why he put so much effort into it.

"You see those Boy Scouts with those Pearl Harbor veterans?" he said, gesturing toward a group of children asking questions of the older men. "That's why. People should know about this, and these guys get to tell their story."