John A. Scocos Column: Wisconsin Remembers Pearl Harbor

FDR said at the time that it was “a date which will live in infamy.” It was an attack that surprised the United States and killed thousands of Americans. The attack hit our naval fleet bringing us into World War II, which had already been raging for years in Europe and Asia.

That infamous date was December 7, 1941. The empire of Japan attacked military targets by surprise on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, mainly at Pearl Harbor. In less than two hours, the Pacific Fleet was devastated. Twenty-one ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet were sunk or damaged. More than 2,400 Americans died and another 1,100 were wounded. All eight battleships moored on Battleship Row – the Arizona, California, Maryland, Nevada, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia – were sunk or damaged during the Japanese assault.

Seventy-three years later we still remember this day. Many of us know it as history from books and film. There are still a few among us who were there, including Wisconsin servicemembers. There are many others who died in the action.

Of the 2,433 Americans killed in the attack, one was Navy Captain Franklin Van Valkenburgh, commander of the USS Arizona. On just the Arizona alone the Navy lost 1,177 sailors. The USS Arizona itself was also lost and today rests as a memorial under the water in Pearl Harbor.

Another Wisconsinite who was there that day was Milwaukeean Cassin Young, the commanding officer of the USS Vestal. During the attack, Young manned the Vestal’s anti-aircraft gun and was blown overboard when the nearby USS Arizona was bombed, but not before he was able to maneuver his ship far enough away to survive.

Both Young and Van Valkenburgh were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions that day.

Those young men who served in Hawaii on that fateful day are now older, most in their 90s, but still carry memories of that day and remain witnesses to the tragic events that dragged the United States into WWII. Of the nearly 30,000 veterans of World War II still living in Wisconsin, a precious remaining few Pearl Harbor survivors are still with us as witnesses to that fateful day.

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(John A. Scocos is the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. He is an Iraq War veteran.)