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John A. Scocos Column: Wisconsinites at Pearl Harbor

It is truly a day that has lived in infamy and brought the United States in World War II.

On December 7, 1941, at 7:55 a.m. the Pearl Harbor Naval Base, Hawaii, was attacked by Japanese torpedo and bomber planes. The attack ended just before 10:00 a.m. In less than two hours, the American forces at Pearl Harbor were 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.

Even the passage of 74 years cannot diminish the magnitude of the attack or the extreme sacrifice of the thousands of brave Americans who lost their lives during this attack. It is important for all of us to remember their legacy, some of whom were our friends and neighbors here in Wisconsin before leaving to serve in the military.

Dorwin Lamkin, a native of Hudson, was one of those who witnessed the attack first-hand and survived. A Navy medical corpsman assigned to the USS Nevada, he was sleeping late that day when a messenger came and told him the Japanese were attacking. Remembering only his shoes, Lamkin rushed to his battle station, the ship's sick bay, wearing only his skivvies. There he heard the sounds of the raging battle and then began receiving and treating the wounded. Then the Nevada was hit. According to Lamkin, the Japanese blew a hole "the size of a house" into the bow of the ship and before long his station began filling with oily water. One of the fortunate Sailors that day, he and the six others at his station were rescued, being hoisted up one-by-one before the ship sunk.

Mel Stapleton, of North Lake, was another Wisconsin native there that day. Stationed at Hickam Field near Pearl Harbor, he heard an explosion while on his way to breakfast and quickly realized an attack was underway. He ran with others to grab machine guns from the armory to fight back against the Japanese planes. At one point he was thrown by a close bomb blast and wounded by shrapnel.

Another Wisconsinite who was there that day was Army nurse Rhoda Ziesler of Manitowoc who was stationed at Schofield Barracks, some 20 miles from Pearl Harbor. When she first heard the sounds of low-flying planes that morning, she assumed it was a practice attack, but not long after she saw the fire and smoke and the Japanese planes that were attacking. Ziesler was the head nurse of a medical ward, supervising six nurses and spent that fateful day treating the wounded.

Many thousands of Wisconsinites served in World War II and days like December 7 each year are cause for remembrance, reflection, and celebration. We remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice – from Pearl Harbor right to the end of the bitterest fighting of the war. We are given the opportunity to reflect on the service and sacrifice our World War II generation and how they shaped our world. With each day of remembrance and reflection also comes a chance to celebrate the achievement of the generation that saved the world.