

Pearl Harbor Remembered 2008

By
Bill High, SDPHS member

This day began much as it did December 7, 1941. We arrived before dawn at Navy Kilo Pier. Navy personnel dressed in immaculate dress whites guided us to seating next to chairs reserved for those too few remaining military survivors.

As the sky lightened, an image slowly emerged from the shadows of Ford Island. Only the Battleship Missouri stood large along Battleship Row. Yet my mind took me back to 1941 when, on a fleet visit Sunday, we military children readied at dockside to ride ship launches to the numerous battleships receiving family visits.

Several thousand invited guests filled the temporary theatre. The Navy band played emotion stirring prelude music. Clock hands moved toward the 0740 moment when the remembrance was to begin. I have not seen so many high ranking US military officers as were now seated since my days in Hawaii so long ago.

The program was orchestrated jointly by the US Navy and National Park Service. The precision and timing was flawless. Our National Anthem was played by the Navy band and sung by a Navy enlisted man, very likely the finest rendition of our Anthem I have ever heard. Slowly the USS Chung-Hoon passed-in-review, its crew lining the rail in dress whites. At the correct moment, three Hawaii Air National Guard jets streaked low overhead to perform the missing man formation.

Brief speeches were presented by The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye (United States Senator), The Honorable James "Duke" Aiona (Lieutenant Governor Hawaii), and Admiral Robert F. Willard (Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet). Paul Deprey, Superintendent, National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial spoke of the diminished numbers of those who served on land and ship during the attack. He said our task, the children of those survivors and all others, becomes more important each day to ensure the importance of this day is preserved.

The featured speaker was Major Tom Griffin US Army Air Force (Navigator, Plane # 9 Doolittle Raiders). Major Griffin shared a brief chronology of the raid's history. Although frail, Major Griffin had a most sharp and remarkable way to share the spirit lifting story.

The formal dockside ceremony was concluded with a Marine Corps rifle salute then Taps and Postlude by the Pacific Fleet Band.

The Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors, Inc. was among 41 organizations that provided wreaths to be displayed at the Arizona Memorial. Because I was to be in Hawaii for related activities, I was asked by our organization leaders to represent SDPHS

at the December 7 formal ceremony and present our wreath on the memorial. For that duty I was allowed one person to accompany me. I selected Mark Gresham (USMC 1982-1991) a business colleague. Pearl Harbor survivors, representatives of the organizations laying wreaths on the Arizona Memorial and other dignitaries were transported by launch from Kilo Pier to the Memorial. There, an ensemble played moving musical renditions. The SDPHS wreath, set among others, lined the viewing pool. Each visitor was invited to cast a single orchid onto the oil glistening waters that enfold the Arizona. Later in the morning and throughout the day, the general public visited the Memorial and the many special wreaths.

Ten members of Seattle, Washington area military history preservation organizations were invited by a similar Hawaii based organization to assist them in a display as part of the Arizona Memorial Museum's observance of December 7. The Hawaii group display WWII military vehicles and dress in period uniforms. Our group included both men and women appropriately dressed to represent services of WWII.

Our Island hosts arranged for us to visit area historic sites. Shelton Tyau (Director of Sales and Marketing, Hawaii Army Museum Society), at Fort DeRussy Museum, provided a personally guided tour of the coastal artillery facility. The museum is one of the finest historic military history museums I have visited. I recommend it highly to everyone planning a visit to Honolulu. The historic coast artillery fort is conveniently located along the city beach. Another small military museum, Home of the Brave, is tucked along a city side street. The museum staff will arrange guided tours at several historic military bases including Schofield Army Barracks and Wheeler Army Air Field.

Saturday evening the Ford Island Pacific Aviation Museum hosted a fund raising banquet. Our group was invited to serve in our WWII uniforms as host and hostess greeters for the several hundred guests. The dinner/dance took place among the museum's aircraft displays. Major Griffin was present and autographed the restored Mitchell B-25. Many of the city's dignitaries attended along with representatives from Japan including a WWII Zero pilot.

Mark and I spent time at the Punchbowl National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. I to spend a few moments at the grave of my uncle, Cpl. Laverne J. Needham, USAAF Hickam Field, killed December 7. We then walked the pathway lined with many memorial plaques placed there by patriotic and military associations. Our own SDPHS plaque rests on a stone base beneath a tree.

SDPHS members seeking additional information about this journey or locations visited may call me at 425-486-2252 or email at: psicylinders@msn.com.