

Pearl Harbor Attack: Survivor S. J. Hemker Remembers



by Rees Lloyd

December 7, 2021

December 7, 2021, Pearl Harbor Day, marks the 80th anniversary of the Japanese air attack on U.S. naval and air installations at Pearl Harbor, HI, at 7:53 a.m., Dec. 7, 1941 – without a declaration of war.

It was then the worst attack on American soil in history: Some 2,403 died, 2008 of them Navy personnel; another 1,178 were wounded

Eighteen Navy ships, including the U.S.S. Arizona, were sunk or damaged. Almost all the planes at the island bases were destroyed or damaged while still on the ground.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt memorably called December 7, 1941, “a day which will live in infamy” in his dramatic speech to Congress, which then declared war on Japan.

Only the sneak attack on America by radical Islamic terrorists on 9-11-2001 in New York resulted in more deaths. But for many Americans of this generation – and millions of immigrants, legal and illegal – the meaning, the significance of Pearl Harbor, is not fully known, or appreciated.

One American for whom the Patriot Harbor attack did “live in infamy” for all of his long, productive, and patriotic 100-year life time was, Pearl Harbor survivor Shelby John (“S.J.”) Hemker of Banning, California. Although he has now

gone to God, his story reveals the nature of those Americans who served at Pearl Harbor—indeed, his story reveals the nature of America— then.

Shelby John (“SJ”) Hemker, a poor “country boy” whose childhood was the Great Depression, joined the Navy at 17. He was at Pearl Harbor near the end of his first four-year tour of duty when the Japanese attacked. He survived that horror, and went on to be a three-war combat Navy veteran – WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. After retirement from the Navy, he continued to serve America in peacetime as a life member of The American Legion.

Hemker, by his giving, patriotic life of service to God and country in war and in peace, was an exemplar of the Greatest Generation of WWII. Beloved by his comrade wartime veterans and his community, S.J. Hemker was honored by both on January 10, 2019, at a celebration of his 100th Birthday.

Representatives of the linked San Geronimo Pass cities of Banning and Beaumont in Riverside County, presented him with Proclamations honoring him; commendations were presented by his American Legion Post 428 and other Posts, and veterans organizations from as far away as Patriot Outreach based in Kansas.

Many words were spoken there about Pearl Harbor, its horror, and its meaning, then and now. The most poignant of those words were those of S.J. Hemker, himself, in a remembrance of Pearl Harbor, and of what it should mean, in an earlier interview with me. It was my honor to read those words of S.H. Hemker about Pearl Harbor at the celebration of his life, and is an honor publish his own words here:

“Ordinarily, we would have been at sea, We were at Pearl Harbor because we had to repair an engine that had been sabotaged at the shipyard back in California. I was up on the fantail of our ship, the USS New Orleans, a heavy cruiser,

with the Chief Master at Arms. The Quartermaster was there, getting ready to raise the flag," S.J. Hemker recalled in an interview with me.

"It was 7:53 a.m. when we saw the Japanese planes. They were flying so low I could see the pilots' faces in the cockpit. They were grinning at us as they went down toward Battle Ship Row. Grinning at me and the Chief. They were so close, you could have thrown something at them and hit them. A potato, maybe. They were that close. Just skimming the top of the water. Torpedo planes. The pilots grinning at us," Hemker reluctantly, but vividly recalled.

"The loudspeakers blared: 'Man your battle stations – the Japs are attacking'. All hell broke loose... It was terrible, horrible, ...," he said pausing in his remembrance.

"I spent the next eight hours down in the magazine loading for our five-inch anti-aircraft guns. We fired everything. If we had been hit, that would have been it for us in the magazine. We would have been blown up. We had a big crane over the top of our ship. I think that's what saved us," he stated matter-of-factly as to his own circumstance, then somberly related:

"The Arizona capsized. Thirteen hundred men went down with her. Half the guys I was with in boot camp died on the Arizona. That's where the Memorial is today. They say that oil still leaks out every day. Those guys...they're still down there," Hemker said quietly, his voice trailing off, as if physically turning away from a memory, and reality, which was still too painful to talk about.

Getting Hemker to talk about it at all was no easy task. Like many of his fellow World War II veterans, he didn't talk about his war experiences, never expected any thanks or gratitude, and never, ever boasted about it, despite the fact that after Pearl Harbor he served America in battles and combat zones for the duration of WWII, in the Korean War, and in Vietnam.

Hemker, a widower, roguishly handsome into his 90's and possessed of a sly sense of humor, for years charmed the ladies in the American Legion Auxiliary with his country gallantry. He was universally admired by his comrade veterans in the American Legion. "I'm not able to do what I used to do, but I do what I can," he said.

Hemker's beloved wife died more than 30 years earlier. For the last thirteen years of her life, Hemker's wife was bedridden, unable to perform the most basic of everyday tasks of life, totally dependent. It says a great deal about the kind of man S.J. Hemker was, that for all of those thirteen years Hemker cared for her, saw to her every need, lovingly dedicated his life to her care, until her death did them part.

Hemker had four sons. All four, like their father, are veterans who served in the Vietnam war. Hemker had no biological daughter. But, in his declining years, he had for more than fifteen years lived in his own room in the home of a loving "daughter-in-fact" if not of biology, Sue McConnell, and her husband,

No daughter has rendered more loving care to a father than had Sue McConnell to S.J. Hemker.

"I call him my 'Dad' because he is that to me. I couldn't love him more," Sue, told me. She had known Hemker for thirty-seven years, during which she had often risen up in fury when the VA had not done its duty "to this great man, this hero, my Dad."

Reflecting on Pearl Harbor seventy-seven years after surviving it, Hemker, who had lost his eyesight, but not his vision for America, observed.

"We Americans should never forget. If we forget our past and those who died, we won't have a future. A free one, anyway. Look at what happened on 9-11. More people were killed on that day than were killed at Pearl Harbor. It can happen again," he warned.

“I don’t think people remember Pearl Harbor and what it means, the way they used to do,” Hemker concluded. “That’s too bad. A lot of us can’t forget. An awful lot of really good people died to keep America free. They shouldn’t be forgotten.”

These are the last words of S.J. Hemker, veteran and self-described “ordinary American...just a common man,” about the attack on Pearl Harbor, that “day of infamy” on Dec. 7, 1941; about those who died in it; and about those who survived it and continued to serve until victory in WWII, preserving our American freedom.

Hemker, sad to say, is no longer with us. Although reaching his 100th Birthday on January 10, 2019, Hemker later in the year “transferred to Post Everlasting,” as we, his American Legion comrades, say.

Although S.J. Hemker may no longer be with us physically, he can be and should be with us spiritually—the spirit of patriotic love of country and service in its defense that he exemplified, as did and do so many others of the WWII Greatest Generation. Neither his life nor his words should be forgotten, if, as he warns, we Americans are to remain free.

May the God that S.J. Hemker served so faithfully bless and keep him. May the country he served so faithfully for all of his 100 years on earth, always honor and remember him.

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