

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Bird's Eye View

The other night Isaura and I attended the annual fundraiser for Ripon's 4th of July fireworks display. Our friend Tom Vermeulen invited us to attend as his guests. The evening affair was held at Spring Creek Golf and Country Club's banquet room with roughly one hundred in attendance.

We have attended many fundraisers over the years and there is, predictably, a sameness to them. There are multiple ways for you to become separated from your money, but you know that going in, because, after all, it is a fundraiser. And if you are supportive of the organization, you gladly become a willing participant.

So, spending the evening enjoying a good meal and the excellent company of folks in our community who love America and all she stands for is a marvelous treat. But clearly the highlight of our time was our keynote speaker.

The gentleman who was introduced as our keynote speaker is a retired Navy Chief. That in itself is not particularly noteworthy. What makes this individual extraordinarily unique is the fact that he is one of only a handful (literally) of Pearl Harbor Survivors. CSM Delton E. "Wally" Walling regaled us with his Navy experiences, but it was his harrowing ordeal at Pearl Harbor that had us all transfixed during his 45 minute talk. Chief Walling served as a Signalmans, thus the Navy rank/rate CSM (Chief, Signal Man). In his day, signal flags were still the primary means of communicating ship-to-ship, especially when maintaining radio silence.

Wally, at age nineteen in 1940, hitch-hiked 190 miles from his home in Shepherd, Michigan to Detroit to join the Navy. During his physical he was declared 4F (not fit for service). The reason for this evaluation centered on a "stiff" finger from his boxing days. Not to be put off, he asked the Navy doctor, "How can I get into the Navy?" The doctor said, "Cut it off!" Wally's reply is priceless. "At your expense or mine?" "Yours," the doctor replied. So Wally went hunting for a surgeon in downtown Detroit. A doctor agreed to remove the finger at the middle knuckle for \$20.00. He told Wally, "You're nuts!" to which Wally replied, "I may be nuts, but I must join the Navy!" Seeing that Wally was not to be deterred, he went ahead and removed the finger. The doctor then gave him back three dollars so he could get a sandwich on his way home.

By the time the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, December 7, 1941, Wally was a bona fide Navy sailor assigned to the USS Pennsylvania (BB-38), a battleship which was also the flagship of the Pacific Fleet. In his 180 foot perch high above the decks of the ship he could see the entire fleet of ships tied to the piers in the harbor. Suddenly in the skies to the west came what looked like a swarm of bees, as Wally described it. Confused, he and others just stood there trying to figure out

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what this was. When dark shapes began to drop from under the attacking Japanese planes (torpedoes) everyone instantly knew they were at war.

Wally said the Japanese went about the process of decimating our fleet in a well-orchestrated manner. Three planes were assigned to each ship so that the damage done to our Pacific Fleet was accomplished in 15 minutes. He described specific ships that he witnessed sink or roll over from multiple torpedoes and bombs.

One ship that had anchored in the harbor had not been expected by the Japanese. It was a ship filled with fuel. Since no Japanese planes were assigned to bomb it, it was untouched. Wally said if they had blasted that ship the destruction at Pearl Harbor would have been far worse!

He served on other ships throughout the remainder of the war. His last ship was the USS Fayette (APA-43), a troop transport. He made six invasions on Pacific islands, the last one being Iwo Jima.

Wally and I had a chance to talk a bit later in the evening. I told him that I was a retired Navy chaplain, but that I had also served previously as an enlisted Marine. He soberly described how on Iwo Jima he and others were called upon to help the too-few Navy doctors care for the wounded Marines being returned to the ship for further medical attention. He said he figures he held at least 200 Marines in his arms as they died from their devastating wounds.

Today, Wally is 94 years old. He gives speeches to school children and organizations that want to know about Pearl Harbor. He also skydives once a year on his birthday which is this coming weekend.

In reflection, he said, "I hope I have done my little part to preserve the freedom of the people of the United States. God Bless America!"

You have, Chief Wally. And we thank you.

<To contribute to the Ripon 4th of July Fireworks Display, you may send a check made out to the Ripon Chamber Foundation, noting "4th of July," and then mail it to the: Ripon Chamber of Commerce, 929 W. Main Street, Ripon, CA 95366>