

Pearl Harbor memories stirred up on anniversary

By Elissa Grossell
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Sixty years ago today — Dec. 7, 1941 — was “a day of remembrance” for all Americans. It was the day the Japanese attacked U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor.

But 60 years is a long time to remember, even for Pearl Harbor survivor Marvin Melius of Faulkton. For Melius, 82, the details may have gotten a little fuzzy, but one thing is for sure: It is still a day he will never forget.

Melius is one of 19 Pearl Harbor survivors in South Dakota.

At 18, during “the heart of the Depression,” Melius joined the U.S. Navy at a time the military wasn’t calling many people. In fact, Melius was one of only three South Dakotans called that month.

The Navy eventually sent him to Pearl Harbor, where he was stationed on the destroyer USS Ralph Talbot on the day that will live in infamy.

Early that Sunday morning, young Melius was tired, having been on watch the night before. He was just getting up for breakfast when the general alarm blasted, sending him running up to his machine gun

Day now compares to Sept. 11 attacks

on the deck of the ship. “The alarm (was) always kind of scary,” Melius said.

Across the blaring loud-speakers came the announcement: The Japanese are attacking. At that moment, Melius began breaking out ammunition and scanning the sky for incoming planes. He remembers shooting at planes, but most were too far away to hit.

He doesn’t remember being that scared. “The only time I got apprehensive was when someone said they were picking ships off,” he said.

At one point, his machine gun broke. There was also a time Melius ran out of ammunition.

As he kept shooting, Melius said he cannot remember hearing the sound of the machine gun. “I know I tried to keep busy looking for planes,” he said.

Reality really sunk in for Melius when he looked up and saw the battleship Utah turned bottom up. “That’s when I realized what was happening,” he said. Melius didn’t know it, but two torpedoes had slammed into the ship, causing it to capsize and 58 people to die.

Melius had just spent a week on the Utah training to use machine guns.

He also remembers looking over at the battleship Arizona and seeing “nothing but smoke.” The Arizona was hit by at least one torpedo and a bomb that ignited the ship’s supply of shells, ammunition and powder. The explosion broke the ship in half, and it quickly sunk. More than 1,100 people died.

Melius says he feels “lucky they weren’t after small ships,” like the Ralph Talbot. At the time, he said he had no idea how many people were dead or how much damage was done.

When it was over:

■ More than 2,400 were dead and another 1,200 were wounded.

■ 18 American warships, including all eight battleships, were sunk or greatly damaged.

■ 160 to 190 American planes were destroyed, and more than 100 more were damaged.

■ The United States downed only 29 Japanese planes.

It was all over in about 2 1/2 hours, Melius said. But it didn’t seem that long. “When war starts like that,” so unexpectedly, “time passes pretty

fast,” he said.

He said he “didn’t really think about” Pearl Harbor and being a survivor of the attack until much later, 15 to 20 years later, when people start referring to it as a “change in America.”

“Everything is measured before or after Pearl Harbor,” Melius said.

He called it “a day that everybody remembers,” and compared it to another more recent date: Sept. 11.

Though the events weren’t exactly the same, Melius said he “can’t help but think about New York” as he talked about Pearl Harbor. Melius said he and fellow survivors were asked once if they thought something like Pearl Harbor could happen again. Some said no, but he said yes, but “not the same circumstances.”

Melius said sometimes he’ll stop and think that it was about 60 years ago that he was up manning his machine gun on the Ralph Talbot. But he doesn’t plan on spending today any differently from any other day.

Things get faint, Melius said, and it’s harder to remember the details of the day. But he’ll never forget it. “I don’t think anybody would.”

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