Experience of Chehalis Veteran Can Still Teach Us Important Lessons

GUEST COMMENTARY: Remember Pearl Harbor

We are about to hit another milestone in our nation’s history: Dec. 7 marks the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day. On that Sunday morning nearly a lifetime ago on a faraway island, thousands of young Americans were in the bilges of their still-warships, preparing for another day on maneuvers. Suddenly, they were stunned into action by fleeting alarms calling all to battle stations.

This was not a drill: those alarms were accompanied by soaring explosions and the pounding of impact against the sides of the ships.

There was virtually no hope of mounting a successful defense for the raid, the battle lay ahead.

In what way did this day begin (to its) 75 years after the fact? Most American today seem to know almost nothing about the Second World War and can offer only a basic retelling of the Pearl Harbor story — the story we all learned in high school history classes.

I would wager that, overall, our reaction to the Pearl Harbor attack is not as informed as we would like. Maybe we simply don’t understand how incredible a milestone marked by the Greatest Generation.

When young Americans sailed the Second World War, they were the veterans as they were the sons of the boys in blue. "We’ll Win," they vowed, and with fervor, without some of their service, but all of their heart, they went to war.

I think of my father, who was 21 in 1941. He was a seaman in the U.S. Navy, and I was more or less raised to understand that Pearl Harbor Day was a sacred date.

In December 1944, Buck was working on Utah as a civil engineer. He had been with the Navy for several years, and we were about to go to war. We were preparing to face the Japanese, who had invaded the Philippines.

Buck recalled, "The date is carved in the cement office building at the Naval Hospital in Honolulu. They had turned it around in those days."

I’d like to think that we’re prepared for this day, for this date.

But we’re not.

For Buck, the most poignant memory of Pearl Harbor came near the end of the war, when a truck arrived to wind up the cleanup in the raid and take the bodies for the fillers and buried.

That would be the last time there were covered with all. We were on the line, and everything was being held by a last-minute effort to get every last person in the water. ... A few of us were getting rowed away, the rest of us saw that it was terrible to look. War is a terrible thing.

And he experienced all of it through the United States Pacific Fleet in the shallow, oil-filled harbor. More than 2,400 Americans died that day. Most never even made it out of their ships.

This is why we remember Pearl Harbor.

Before that day, there had been considerable doubt among the American people about whether they should involve themselves in a war against Germany or Japan. But with Dec. 7, virtually all doubt was swept away, the horror of Pearl Harbor was the catalyst that launched us into the Second World War.

"Remember Pearl Harbor" became a rallying cry, a call to arms for millions of Americans who all stood together to defend our country.

Millions of young men from America’s generation fought our enemies, and today, the memory of those who fell is honored in different ways.

Buck’s story is a reminder of how we can honor those who served in World War II.

This photo was probably taken at Shafter, Calif., in 1943 when Buck Ballard was in the Army. He was a corporal serving as a bookkeeper for the records department.

For Buck Ballard, the tarnished photo is a reminder of how we can honor those who served in World War II.