

Last Known Survivor Of Pearl Harbor Living In Ozarks Dies

News

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(newsleader.com) - William Martin was just 18 years old when Japanese planes bombed a U.S. naval base in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941.



He was the last known Pearl Harbor survivor living in the Ozarks when he died Thursday at 90 years old.

Martin was a gunner's mate, seaman 2nd class on the USS Nevada. He enlisted in the Navy on Dec. 9, 1940.

He spoke to the News-Leader in 2010 about that infamous day in 1941.

"We didn't know what was going on at first," Martin said. "We saw them bombing Ford Island, then we went to our guns."

He had plans to tour the Hawaiian island early that morning, but then everything changed.

Martin jumped behind his anti-aircraft gun and started firing at the aircraft that were bombing and strafing the base before being knocked unconscious, losing one eye and taking shrapnel. In the hours that followed, his family said he remembered being tagged as dead three times.

He spent six months recovering in a hospital in San Francisco before being discharged from the Navy and returning to Springfield.

Janice Martin, his daughter-in-law, said he carried shrapnel in his body his whole life, but "he never complained about it."

He is remembered as a caring man who never used his injury as an excuse not to live life to the fullest.

Martin died in the Missouri Veterans Home in Mount Vernon. He was suffering from emphysema, and his family said his heart was just not strong enough to fight.

"He lived a very productive, happy life," his daughter-in-law said. "He was so good to his family."

He was mostly quiet about his service but instilled in his family the importance of remembering the attack, in which 2,400 soldiers, sailors and Marines were killed and almost 1,200 wounded.

"We'll miss him greatly on Dec. 7 because he never wanted us to forget that day," Janice Martin said.

His daughter Eloise Magill said she did not know why her dad did not talk about his service. "I don't know if it was because it brought up bad memories, or if it was because he liked to dwell on the present ... or because there were other people who served longer than he did and he felt they needed the praise."

Though he was not initially recognized for his service, he was awarded a Purple Heart in 1988. His son, Kelly Martin, contacted then-Sen. Kit Bond's office inquiring about recognition for his father.

Bond came to Springfield to personally present Martin the medal.

"I think he was pleased, but he would have never asked for it himself," Janice Martin said.

Martin's granddaughter's husband, Jim Cox, said on a visit to Hawaii on Dec. 7, 2005, Martin talked about the attack on Pearl Harbor in a four-hour video interview by his family.

"I'd never seen him like that," Cox said. "When he went to Hawaii, he really appreciated the attention of the people who appreciated him."

Martin visited Pearl Harbor with his family on many occasions, including the 25th, 50th and 60th anniversaries of the attack.

When asked about his time in the service, family members all remembered the same story about Martin.

After she agreed to marry him, Martin shipped an engagement ring from Hawaii to his girlfriend since the seventh grade.

Dorothy Fenley was just a sophomore at Central High School back in 1941. A few days after getting the package, she was coming home from church when a friend, who heard the news on the radio, told her Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

She did not find out her new fiancé was alive for three weeks.

It took Martin six months to get home, but soon after that, he married Dorothy.

Though the engagement ring was safely on her finger, Dorothy Martin's wedding ring was lost in the attack.

On a visit to Pearl Harbor, Magill laughed as she remembered her dad saying, "Your mom's wedding ring is at the bottom of the ocean."

Dorothy Martin died June 10, nine days after the couple celebrated their 71st wedding anniversary.

"It's been very hard. She was his life," Janice Martin said. "And yet, he surprised us (with) that strong resolve to keep going that those World War II generation people have."

After the war, Martin worked as a traveling glass salesman. He was also very involved in his church, South Haven Baptist Church, where he served as a deacon. His family said he loved to travel, watch Westerns, garden and be outdoors.

He was also involved in a local Pearl Harbor survivors club. Even after the club stopped meeting regularly in 2008, he kept in touch with the men. He also would eat breakfast annually on Dec. 7 at the VFW Post 3404 in Springfield.

"I just remember all the fun times we had; we just spent a lot of time with family," his daughter Pam Morgan said. "He was someone we can always turn to. He was just wonderful."

Morgan said the family had planned to spend Easter with Martin at the veterans home in Mount Vernon.

"He was really looking forward to that," she said, crying.

Martin had four children, nine grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren.

Magill said Martin's grandkids were very important to him. When they asked him about his time in the service, he was open with them.

He would sometimes tell stories to his grandkids' classes in Springfield.

Some of his family currently serve or have served in the military.

Magill said her dad thought that serving in the military "taught discipline and he thought it gave them integrity. He believed that without the service of our men and women, we would not have the freedoms that we have today."

She said she is going to miss her dad terribly but is comforted about thinking of her mom and dad reunited in heaven.

At the funeral in Springfield today, Janice Martin said there will be military funeral honors including the presentation of the flag and a gun salute.

"It's a great loss for us," she said. "We've always been a very close family."

Magill said Martin taught her a lot growing up and as an adult, she realized what a good dad he was.

One of the most important thing he instilled in his children was caring for one another, and of course, to never forget that day in 1941 when so many good people lost their lives.

"We were raised as his children that that day was a day was should never forget," she said. "He believed that it was very important."