

Pearl Harbor survivor:

# Legacy must not be forgotten

By Randy Dockendorf

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When he just turned 17, back in 1941, Darrel Christopherson signed up for the U.S. Navy and was assigned to a place called Pearl Harbor.

The Vermillion teenager hadn't heard of the Hawaiian station but looked forward to serving his country and seeing the world.

He didn't realize he would become caught in history, as the Japanese launched the attack Dec. 7, 1941, that drew the United States into World War II.

"Fortunately, most of us (on my ship) lived through it," he said.

Christopherson paid tribute to those who lost their lives by sharing his experiences at Saturday's third annual "Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day" at the Yankton VFW Post. The program was sponsored by the Society of 40 Men and 8 Horses (40 et 8) veterans organization.

During Saturday's program, Christopherson — proudly wearing his Pearl Harbor Survivor's cap — vividly recalled the bombing, as if he were still that teenage boy.

Christopherson was serving on the USS Vestal, tied to the USS Arizona that would meet its ill fate as Japanese bombers strafed the harbor.

"On that Sunday morning (of the attack), we were supposed to do minor repair work on a vessel," he said. "But on that Sunday morning, the Japanese had other ideas of what we were going to do."

In a matter of minutes, the attack claimed nearly 2,500 lives and wounded another 1,300.

"It seems funny to this day, I don't remember hearing loud exploding or feeling the ship rock back and forth from the explosion," he said. "I don't know if there's too much going on, or what."

But Christopherson immediately knew there was trouble. The attack left the Vestal with a hole in the bottom of the ship.

"We were hit twice, once on the fore and once on the back," he said. "We started taking on water. Our skipper was blown over the side. He swam back to the gangway and crawled aboard our vessel."

The executive officer had ordered

evacuation of the Vestal, caught in the line of fire. The skipper, back on board, would have none of it.

"Our orders were to abandon ship. But the skipper said, 'Hell, we're getting under way,'" Christopherson said, barking the skipper's order with a wry smile. "As soon as the lines were cut, we started to move away from the Arizona."

The skipper ran the Vestal into the mud flats until the attack was over. The Vestal crew was ordered to patch the hole in the bottom of the ship immediately and report for duty.

The Vestal, described by Christopherson as looking "more like an old tramp steamer than anything else," sailed the Pacific for two years as a basic repair ship working on 400 vessels.

Seven decades later, Christopherson is preparing to return to Pearl Harbor — this time as a veteran paying homage to fallen comrades.

In a separate interview with the *Press & Dakotan*, Christopherson said he and Konrad O'Hearn of Sioux Falls will make the trip Jan. 16. The journey is made possible thanks to Bill Williams of Sioux Falls and others raising funds to cover all expenses for the two veterans.

"The people in Sioux Falls are doing it because they feel the Pearl Harbor survivors should go back for the final memorial," Christopherson said, believing it will be the last official commemoration. "This will probably be the last chance for any of us to get back to the memorial."

The fact was driven home Saturday evening with the announcement that the National Pearl Harbor Survivors Association is turning in its charter after Dec. 31, 2011, because of the veterans' age and lack of support for the organization.

At age 87, Christopherson is one of the youngest Pearl Harbor survivors, adding urgency to next month's trip to Hawaii.

Of the five remaining South Dakota survivors, two Rapid City men are unable to travel for health reasons, Christopherson said. A Brookings survivor and his son will attend the Dec. 7 ceremony at Pearl Harbor.

"They couldn't raise the money and make the arrangements for us (last two) by Dec. 7, so we're going in



Vermillion resident Darrel Christopherson shared his experiences as a Pearl Harbor survivor during Saturday night's program at the Yankton VFW.

(Randy Dockendorf/P&D)

January," Christopherson said.

Rick Christopherson, Darrel's son, attended Saturday's program and noted his father's attitude toward the Pearl Harbor attacks.

"For the 50th anniversary commemoration, they gave my dad a medal as a Pearl Harbor survivor," Rick said. "They had Dad go up and speak. He said, 'Don't blame the Japanese people of today for what happened in 1941. Their kids don't know any more about it than our kids do.'"

Saturday's program featured remarks by another World War II veteran, Harold Reinschmidt. He served in Europe during 1944-45.

Reinschmidt spoke of his experiences, including the rigors of being transported in the 40&8 boxcar.

The name, later given to the veterans organization, refers to the boxcars that were supposed to hold 40 men or 8 horses.

"It was a solid box car, and there wasn't enough room for our 40 men," he said. "We drilled holes in the car. We didn't know if there were Germans outside, waiting to blow you up."

The soldiers never knew who to trust, Reinschmidt said. "One time, there were no German soldiers, just 40 kids who were 12 years old and in uniforms — and they were taught to shoot," he said.

Saturday's keynote speaker, Lt. Gov. Matt Michels of Yankton, said the evening provided a time to honor all those who have fought for liberty.

"When we remember Pearl Harbor,

it is fitting to thank and honor every American who has answered the call to duty and served in the military, especially those who have served during times of war," he said.

On its 70th anniversary, the Pearl Harbor attack remains, as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called it, "a day which will live in infamy," Michels said.

"The attack on Pearl Harbor remains one of the greatest tragedies that has ever occurred on American soil," Michels said. "America was wounded that day, but we were not broken. Out of the flames and rubble emerged a nation united in spirit and purpose, to defend our freedom at all costs and preserve America for the next generation."

The nation wasn't ready for or even in agreement on another war, but it rose to the challenge of a strong, well-prepared enemy, Michels said.

"Those who served in the armed forces or lived during World War II are rightly referred to as our 'greatest generation,'" he said. "They bore incredible sacrifices at home and abroad, and (they) defeated an enemy that represented one of the greatest threats to our liberty we have ever seen."

Michels said he felt the emotions still present while visiting the Pearl Harbor memorial and remained in horror upon witnessing the site of the Bataan Death March in the Philippines.

"Through their sacrifices, Americans from the greatest generation turned one of our nation's greatest tragedies into one of our finest hours," he said. "They are a true testament to the power of American liberty."

Those sacrifices continue today, Michels said, noting last August's funeral in Yankton for U.S. Army Spc. Dennis Jensen, who was killed in Afghanistan. The 21-year-old Jensen not only volunteered to serve, but he did so with another unit.

Such sacrifices must never be forgotten, said Darrel Christopherson.

"It's important to hear our story, that we were able to listen to it, to see it on TV and read it in the papers," he said. "It's very important that we get the story out."

## Tree of Light fundraiser raises over \$4K

by Travis Gulbrandson

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For the past four years, the Dakota Hospital Foundation has hosted the Tree of Lights fundraiser.

The event allows community members to purchase a light on a public Christmas tree — located at the intersection of Main and Plum — in honor of someone dear to them.

This year, the event was expanded to include a wreath-decorating contest that drew 24 entries from area businesses, organizations and individuals — and raised approximately \$4,675 at auction Thursday, Dec. 1.

The money raised will go toward funding diagnostic equipment for the radiology department at Sanford Medical Center in Vermillion.

"We were very excited ... that the business community really stepped up and did a great job, and the individuals did, too," said Mary Merrigan, director of public relations at Sanford Vermillion. "There's so much talent. The wreaths are really phenomenal."

The wreaths were on display at the Al Neuharth Center the night of the



Onlookers inspect the wreaths that were decorated as part of the Dakota Hospital Foundation's annual Tree of Lights fundraiser. This was the first year wreaths were decorated and auctioned as part of the event.

(Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)

auction, drawing many interested on-lookers.

Joanne Ustad, Dakota Hospital Foundation board member, said she hoped Thursday's viewers would be inspired to participate in the

event next year.

"If they see what's here this year, we certainly hope that it'll grow next year as people get ideas of what it is, and just kind of spark their interest in

it," Ustad said.

Merrigan agreed, adding, "It's a really nice crowd, and considering this is the first real cold day that we've had I was a little nervous about that. But it's not bad at all, and I'm sure the bodies will keep coming in."

Sixteen of the entries were designed by businesses or organizations, with the remaining eight decorated by individuals.

The wreaths were judged by a committee consisting of a Dakota Hospital Foundation member, a member of the Sanford medical staff and a Vermillion citizen.

Merrigan said entries were judged based on four criteria: Appearance, creativity, balance and "wow" factor.

"They all scored on those categories and came together and deliberated, and I tell you what, they had a tough job," she said. "It was really hard. They were there for almost over two hours coming down to the final decisions."

The judges' results were:

- Best of Show: Dakota Realty/Nadeen Peterson
- Individual: Gayle Bliss
- Business/Organization: Sanford Clinic Vermillion

## Steve Brown to lead USD Foundation

The University of South Dakota Foundation announced today that Steve Brown will serve as President and CEO effective Jan. 9, 2012.

A fundraising executive with more than 20 years of experience, Brown replaces former USD Foundation President and CEO Bryan Benchoff, now at Ohio University. As vice president for development at the Indiana State University Foundation in Terre Haute, Ind., he has extensive

campaign experience and served as the architect for Indiana State University's first comprehensive campaign.

Brown, a native of central Indiana, earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Indiana State University. He worked in development for Junior Achievement, Wabash College and Franklin College before returning to his alma mater in 2005.

### su/doku Solution

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### SDCUC announces board nominations open

The South Dakota Corn Utilization Council (SDCUC) is a progressive organization which has visionary and influential producer leadership throughout the state. The 14-member board manages and invests South Dakota's 1-cent per bushel corn checkoff fund.

The SDCUC is announcing director positions that are open in Districts 1, 3, 5 & 8. A SDCUC director's position consists of a three-year term beginning on March 1, 2012. Each director can serve up to two-terms resulting in a six-year directors position.

If interested in seeking a board seat in one of the open districts you must obtain and file with the corn office a nominating petition. All nominating petitions must contain at least 15 "participating" corn producer signatures from your district. (A "participating" corn producer has not requested a refund of their corn assessment since January of 2010). Eligible candidates who wish to seek a director's position cannot have requested a checkoff refund from the SDCUC since January of 2007. Nominating petitions must be returned back to the SDCUC office by 5 p.m. on January 6, 2012.

To request a petition please contact the SDCUC office in writing at 5109 S. Crossing Place, Ste. 1, Sioux Falls, SD 57108 or call 605-334-0100.

If more than one nominating petition is received by the SDCUC office for any district, a special election will be conducted for that district. The elections will be held February 6-10, 2012 at the local extension offices in those counties.

The counties assigned to the districts accepting nominations for director positions are detailed below:

- District 1 — Clay, Lincoln, Turner, Union & Yankton
- District 3 — Brookings, Codington, Deuel, Hamlin & Kingsbury
- District 5 — Brown, Campbell, Corson, Harding, McPherson, Perkins & Walworth
- District 8 — Bon Homme, Davison, Douglas, Hanson, Hutchinson & McCook



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