

Pearl Harbor survivor:

Legacy must not be forgotten

By Randy Dockendorf
randy.dockendorf@yankton.net

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 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 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."

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."

USD Employee HOLIDAY HOOP-LA

USD Athletics is hosting
employee appreciation during:

COYOTE MEN vs. CANISIUS

Sunday, Dec. 18 at 2 p.m.

ONE COMPLIMENTARY TICKET FOR GAME.

Purchase additional family member tickets for 50% OFF (Adults \$5, Youth \$3)

The 2011 Employee Appreciation Offer includes:

- Raffle drawings during the game
- Drawings for Vermillion Bucks (Vermillion Chamber & Development Company)
- Special discount (25% Off) for USD Fleece Jacket at on-site Barnes & Noble
- Photos with Santa Claus and Charlie

SD
SOUTH DAKOTA
COYOTES

To obtain your
**EMPLOYEE
GAME TICKETS,**
bring your USD
employee ID to the
athletic ticket office in
the DakotaDome.

For more ticket
information, please
call 605-677-5959.

If you are a person with a disability and need an accommodation to participate, please contact Disability Services at 605-677-6389 as soon as possible, but at least 48 hours before the event.