

Writer’s Block: A storyteller is silenced

Editor’s Note: This column originally ran in the Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan.

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On his 17th birthday, Darrel Christopherson joined the U.S. Navy. The Vermillion teenager was so young that his father had to sign for him to enlist.

It was Feb. 12, 1941, and Christopherson was later assigned to a place called Pearl Harbor. He 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 on 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 was serving on the USS Vestal, a repair ship tied to the USS Arizona that met 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.

Seventy years later, Christopherson returned to Pearl Harbor. This time, he went as a veteran paying homage to fallen comrades.

He made the trip to Hawaii last month with Konrad O’Hearn of Sioux Falls. With only five remaining Pearl Harbor survivors in South Dakota, they were part of an elite – and rapidly fading – fraternity.

On Sunday, the fraternity lost one of its most honorable members.

Christopherson died in his sleep, six days after returning from visiting the Pearl Harbor Memorial in Hawaii and 14 days before his 88th birthday.

Somehow, it was if Christopherson held on long enough for the trip.

I last saw Christopherson in December, when he spoke at the third annual “Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day” at the Yankton VFW Post. Christopherson said the trip to Pearl Harbor was 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 would 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 that evening with the announcement that the National Pearl Harbor Survivors Association was turning in its charter after Dec. 31, 2011, because of the veterans’ age and lack of support for the organization.

Because the funding and arrangements weren’t complete in time for the Dec. 7 anniversary, Christopherson and O’Hearn went the following month.

On Jan. 16, Christopherson made his last trip to the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu, accompanied by his wife of 66 years, Beatrice; daughter Kathi Larson of Yankton; and grandchildren, Kaleb Christopherson and Kourtney Christopherson.

“(Darrel) was warmly welcomed on every airline flight, and he was treated like a hero throughout his visit in Hawaii,” his obituary said. “On his final trip, he

was thanked for his service to his country, signed people’s books about W.W.II and Pearl Harbor, and had his picture taken with strangers who just wanted to have their photos taken with a true American hero.”

During his Yankton appearance last December, Christopherson – proudly displaying his Pearl Harbor Survivor’s cap – vividly recalled the bombing, as if he were still that teenage boy.

“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, and the craft started taking on water. The executive officer had ordered evacuation of the Vestal, caught in the line of fire. The skipper, who was blown over the side but swam back on board, would have none of it.

The Vestal crew was ordered to patch the hole in the bottom of the ship immediately and report for duty. The Vestal sailed the Pacific for two years as a basic repair ship working on 400 vessels.

Darrel and Beatrice visited Pearl Harbor shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Christophersons later received a flag that had flown over the USS Arizona memorial. The couple displayed the flag at different events, eventually donating it to a museum at the University of South Dakota

(USD) in Vermillion.

Rick Christopherson, Darrel’s son, 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.’”

After surviving Pearl Harbor, Christopherson served 20 years in the Navy, then returned home to serve 23 years with the Vermillion Police Department. He was active in the American Legion and VFW, and he taught Americanism and flag etiquette in the Vermillion schools.

At age 80, Christopherson retrieved the missing piece of his life’s puzzle by graduating with the Vermillion High School Class of 2004. He took advantage of a change in state law allowing school districts to award diplomas to World War II veterans who did not complete high school because of military service.

At the commencement ceremony, he received a long standing ovation from the capacity crowd in Slagle Auditorium on the USD campus.

“I think it’s real nice,” Christopherson told me in an interview. “When I retired 18 years ago, I never thought I would go back to high school. But now I’m graduating, and the school even furnished the cap and gown for me.”

Rick Christopherson said

he wasn’t surprised by his father’s desire to receive his diploma. “Then again, so many things Dad did in the past didn’t surprise me,” Rick said.

Darrel grew up in a family of about a dozen children during the Depression, leaving high school and entering the Navy to help support his family, Rick said. Darrel’s desire to receive his diploma was spurred on by his continuous contact with students interested in his Pearl Harbor experiences, Rick said.

Christopherson could have privately received his diploma the previous year, but he wanted to walk down the aisle with the rest of his “classmates.” Darrel’s participation in the graduation ceremony sent a powerful message to the other graduates, Rick said. “A lot of what he has already done has given those kids the freedom to walk across the stage,” Rick added.

NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw, a Pickstown and Yankton native who graduated from USD, bestowed Christopherson and his World War II mates with the title of

“The Greatest Generation.”

Christopherson credited his military service with creating a lifelong impact.


“I didn’t go to high school, but I have an education in life,” he said. “My 20 years in the service molded my way of life. I learned to take orders, do things on my own and take initiative. Those are things I never would have learned on the outside.”

In the 2004 interview, Christopherson didn’t have any pressing plans for his life after receiving his sheepskin. “I won’t be going to college, and I don’t think I will be applying for a job,” he said with a chuckle.

Christopherson said he welcomed speaking invitations, particularly to counter inaccurate or incomplete stories about Pearl Harbor.

“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.”

And now, with Christopherson’s passing, one of those storytellers has fallen forever silent.




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