

# An aging survivor heads to Hawaii

Central Oregon resident Dick Higgins returns to Pearl Harbor

By **KYLE SPURR**  
The Bulletin

BEND — The room in the quiet house on Harvard Place in Bend is full of memories, but when Dick Higgins needs help bringing the oldest ones into focus, he'll often grab a magnifying glass.

At 100, Higgins won't let himself forget how he survived the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. He has surrounded himself with handwritten notes, books and black-and-white photographs at a table in the home he shares with his granddaughter and her family.

His hand shakes as he holds the magnifying glass to a logbook he used as a 20-year-old Navy radio operator in Pearl Harbor. He turns his attention to a nearby stack of history books about the attack full of his written descriptions in the margins. One note reminds Higgins of how he sought cover under a plane filled with 1,500 gallons of fuel. The plane could have easily exploded.

"Not a good place to be at the time," Higgins wrote.

Higgins has made it a point to honor a promise that Pearl Harbor survivors hold close to their hearts: to remember what happened that day and those who died in the hail of death delivered by Japanese warplanes on an otherwise quiet Sunday morning in Hawaii.

The blue ball cap Higgins wears nearly every day helps with that.

As long as his family can remember, Higgins has worn the cap that identifies his naval squadron, VP-22, and is embroidered with the words "Pearl Harbor Survivor." There are seven pins on the cap, including one that reads, "Remember Pearl Harbor."

People notice the ball cap when they see Higgins in a grocery store, at a restaurant or on the streets of Bend. He always stops to share his story, just as he did 15 years ago when he was president of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association chapter in Orange County, California. Back then, he often spoke to schoolchildren about the attack.

The last time Higgins was at Pearl Harbor was on Dec. 7, 2016, when there were three known survivors living in Bend. Now he is the only one.

The other survivor in Central Oregon is 99-year-old Marvin Emmarson, of Sisters, who served in the Navy during the attack.

Ever since his trip in 2016, Higgins has vowed to attend Tuesday's ceremony honoring the 80th anniversary of the attack. The great-grandfather isn't planning another trip. His family knows he has longevity in his veins, but the reality is that if Higgins lives to see the 85th anniversary, he will be too frail to travel.

For the centenarian to stand on the edge of the harbor this week, at the place where his life was cemented into history, is a moment that will never happen again.

"I want to reminisce and see the beach down there again," Higgins said. "I'll try to figure the details



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Angela Norton reads a handwritten note back to her grandfather Dick Higgins, who at 100 is the oldest living Pearl Harbor survivor in Central Oregon, that describes what he was doing near the time the photo was taken as they look through a book on the attack on Pearl Harbor together on Oct. 7, 2021.

**MORE INFORMATION**

To read the entire story of Dick Higgins and his trip back to Pearl Harbor, log on to [lagrandeobserver.com](http://lagrandeobserver.com).

of that day and honor the people who lost their lives."

Going back to Pearl Harbor honors the dead who never got a chance to live the kind of full life survivors did. In the years after the attack, Higgins pursued a career in radio engineering, got married and raised two children. In the 1960s, he briefly ran a Winchell's Donut House in Southern California. Today, he has two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, who are all accompanying him on the trip back.

All the men in Higgins' barracks survived the attack. But Higgins still witnessed the destruction that killed 2,390 Americans.

Higgins served in a 130-member squadron and was assigned to a flight crew as a second class radioman on Ford Island in the center of Pearl Harbor. He often flew on missions in PBY Catalina amphibious aircraft.

The devastation sticks with the survivors. Some have even returned after death, their ashes interred by divers on the sunken hull of the battleship USS Arizona, which lies on the harbor bottom below a gleaming white memorial. More than 900 Arizona crewmen remain entombed in the ship.

Emily Pruett, a spokesperson for the Pearl Harbor National Memorial, whose great-uncle survived the attack, said the survivors are living links to that era.

"It's so meaningful for everybody to have that tangible access to the past," Pruett said.

Their motivation to return inspired the National Park Service to host an 80th anniversary event, despite the complications created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Pruett said. Last year's anniversary was done virtually due to the virus.

Pruett expects Tuesday's



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin, File

Dick Higgins smiles while talking with a visitor during his 100th birthday celebration in Bend on Saturday, July 24, 2021.

ceremony to host between 150 to 250 World War II veterans, including about a 40 Pearl Harbor survivors. Their presence is especially meaningful because, for many, it will be their last visit. The youngest Pearl Harbor survivors today are 98.

"Their willingness to travel speaks to their generation's character," Pruett said.

Their attendance is impressive for another reason. No more than 75 survivors are thought to be alive, said Kathleen Farley, the California chapter president with Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors.

Farley said the first ceremony at Pearl Harbor was held in 1966 to mark the 25th anniversary of the attack. Before then, the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association formed in 1958 and held a reunion Dec. 7, 1960, at Disneyland. The association disbanded in 2011, due to the survivors getting older, leaving Sons and Daughters chapters to keep the memories alive. Today, there are 13 chapters in 12 states.

Farley, a retired high school teacher from Concord, California, has worked with the Sons and Daughters group for more than 30 years. She has dedicated her life to preserving the legacy of those who fought and died that day. Her father, John J. Farley, was aboard the USS California during the attack. He survived for one reason.

"He knew how to swim,"

she said.

Farley went back to Pearl Harbor with her father for the 50th anniversary in 1991, and again every five years until her father's death in 2007. She has gone back every year since to honor him.

The site of the attack is sacred to the survivors and the need to return is powerful, Farley said.

"I have heard from many survivors that they will return to Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7 to be the voice of the survivors that didn't make it," Farley said.

For most of the last 80 years, the Pearl Harbor survivors have returned to mark each anniversary. They joined diplomats, admirals and presidents. They brought memories to share and children — and later, grandchildren — to share them with.

The 50th anniversary drew more than 2,000 survivors, who were feted with a parade through the streets of Waikiki. Time has thinned their ranks, however.

By 2016, an estimated 300 survivors returned for the 75th anniversary. About 15 arrived in 2018 and a dozen the following year.

Their annual pilgrimage has been called a last hurrah for several decades, but it may finally be true in 2021.

Higgins has returned to Pearl Harbor several times.

His first trip back was in 1991 with his late wife,

Winnie Ruth Higgins, to mark the 50th anniversary of the attack.

He went back five years later, and he was there for the 60th anniversary, less than three months after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. About 800 Pearl Harbor Survivors returned that year and the presence of an estimated 600 New Yorkers — police, firefighters and their families — linked both surprise attacks.

"When the planes went into the towers I was really ticked off," Higgins recalled. "Very familiar feeling to Pearl Harbor."

He would return three more times — in 2006, 2011 and 2016.

When he traveled to Hawaii to mark the 65th

anniversary in 2006, he wanted to see where he was stationed on Ford Island. It can be reached by bridge but is not open to civilian traffic.

Higgins and other survivors were invited to the island for a tour of the newly opened Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum. He went with his granddaughter's husband, Ryan Norton.

The two strayed away from the tour to visit the site of a hangar used by Higgins' squadron that was destroyed in the attack. But they wandered too far from the tour and missed the bus back to their hotel.

At that moment, an officer stepped out of a nearby building, thinking Higgins and Norton were trespassing.

"He looks at Grandpa and says, 'Stay there,'" said Norton, a 46-year-old loan officer in Bend. "He went back inside and we thought we were in trouble."

Instead, having realized Higgins was a Pearl Harbor survivor, the officer brought six sailors to meet him. The sailors were no older than Higgins was when he was serving in Hawaii. They gathered around to hear Higgins' story.

"It was really so cool to see these guys listen and Grandpa describing exactly what happened," Norton said. "They stayed with us for an hour."

After talking with the sailors, the officer drove Higgins and Norton to their hotel.

Every trip back to Pearl Harbor makes Higgins feel like royalty. On other trips, Higgins was stopped for photographs with people, has signed autographs and met strangers who offered to pay for his dinner.

**dish** BRING EVERYTHING YOU LOVE TOGETHER!

Blazing Fast Internet! ADD TO YOUR PACKAGE FOR ONLY \$19.99/mo. where available

2-YEAR TV PRICE GUARANTEE \$69.99 MO. for 12 Mos. America's Top 120 Package 190 CHANNELS Including Local Channels!

CALL TODAY - For \$100 Gift Card Promo Code: DISH100

1-866-373-9175 Offer ends 4/13/22.

All offers require credit qualification. 24-month commitment with early termination fee and activation. Prices include Hopper Duo for qualifying customers. Hopper Duo or Hopper 3 55 mos. min. (offer fees may apply based on credit qualification)

Careers that make a difference  
Work with people with disabilities!

[www.ImpactOregon.careers](http://www.ImpactOregon.careers)

**impact**

Prepare for unexpected power outages with a Generac home standby generator

SCHEDULE YOUR FREE IN-HOME ASSESSMENT TODAY!  
877-557-1912

FREE 7-Year Extended Warranty\* A \$695 Value!  
Offer valid March 16, 2020 - June 30, 2020

Special Financing Available  
Subject to Credit Approval

**GENERAC**

\*Terms & Conditions Apply

A Smarter Way to Power Your Home.

**GENERAC PWRCELL**  
SOLAR BATTERY STORAGE SYSTEM

REQUEST A FREE QUOTE!

ACT NOW TO RECEIVE A \$300 SPECIAL OFFER!  
1 (844) 989-2328

\*Offer value when purchased at retail. Solar panels sold separately.

Charles & Eileen Stewart

10304 A 1st St.  
Island City, OR

cstewartpc@gmail.com  
541.910.5435

Pay cash or Rent to own

**OLD HICKORY**  
BUILDINGS & SHEDS

Authorized Dealer

Turning 65?  
We're here to help!

Joel Myer  
[jmyer@valleyinsurance.com](mailto:jmyer@valleyinsurance.com)

Valley INSURANCE

1603 Washington Ave, La Grande  
(541) 963-3121

Let us take the mystery out of Medicare for you!

Kathy Rienti  
[krienti@valleyinsurance.com](mailto:krienti@valleyinsurance.com)