

'Pearl Harbor Bill' kept the memory alive

Survivor brought memorial honoring veterans to Seaside

By R.J. Marx
Seaside Signal

Bill Thomas, who survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, spent much of his life making sure no one would forget the ones who died.

Thomas brought World War II history alive for new generations by sharing his experience and he led the way on a Pearl Harbor plaque on the First Avenue Bridge in Seaside that was dedicated in 2000.

On Saturday, friends and veterans will remember Thomas — who died at 95 in December — at Seaside's American Legion Post 99.

"Bill personified the proud patriotic soldier who was equally proud of his service and always wanted to keep the memory of the men and women who lost their lives in Pearl Harbor," Russ Vandenberg, general manager of the Seaside Civic and Convention Center, said Tuesday.

"Bill was clearly part of the greatest generation," state Sen. Betsy Johnson said. "He was a great American, a terrific guy and part of my parents' generation that made the world safe for democracy."

"Everyone knew 'Pearl Harbor Bill,'" his friend Eric Beal, an American Legion committee chairman and owner of North Coast Leather, said. "He would walk all over town. I was just one of the many places he'd stop

by. I knew him for years. Every day he would come in and say 'hello' for 10 or 15 minutes, then he'd go on to the next guy."

The attack

Thomas, a Seaside High School graduate, joined the military at 17.

The attack that killed almost 2,400 people and launched the U.S. into war took place two months after Thomas' 20th birthday.

"As a very young sailor in the United States Navy, Bill had a front-row seat to history," Capt. Bruce Jones, former Coast Guard Sector Columbia River commander said at the 2015 Pearl Harbor ceremony in Seaside. "But he was much more than a spectator. He fought back, returning to his ship, the USS Medusa, as the attacking Japanese aircraft swarmed overhead. And he manned aircraft guns alongside his shipmates, and in the midst of great chaos and devastation.

"He often told the story of looking up during the attack and seeing one of the Japanese pilots looking down with a sheepish grin on his face while showing his gold tooth," Vandenberg said. "He told me he will never forget the look on his face and how it later made him sick to his stomach as he recalled that fatal day."

"If you had a baseball or a stone you could have thrown it and hit a plane," Thomas told the Seaside Signal in 2011. "They were that close."

Thomas was severely wounded in action later in the war while serving aboard the USS Phelps, a ship that



EO MEDIA GROUP/FILE PHOTO

Bill Thomas, a Pearl Harbor survivor aboard the USS Medusa, salutes as Boy Scout Troop 642 lowered the flag to half-staff during the Pearl Harbor Day of Remembrance ceremony at the Seaside Convention Center in 2015.

fought at the Battle of Midway and protected forces at Guadalcanal.

Thomas was sent to Alameda, California, for convalescence, Beal said, and lived and worked in San Francisco for many years.

After travels on a dredge to Alaska and Vietnam as a civilian member of the Army Corps of Engineers, Thomas returned to the Northwest in a maintenance capacity for schools in Portland.

In remembrance

In the 1970s, Thomas moved to Seaside where he rallied for veterans and proposed a Pearl Harbor memorial

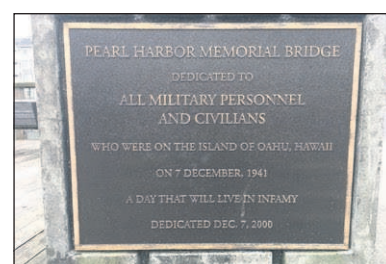
on the First Avenue Bridge, Beal said.

Thomas was "the impetus" for Seaside's Pearl Harbor remembrance, former Mayor Don Larson said in 2015.

The annual event brings the community together to reflect on the attack that left a lasting impression on the country's collective memory.

"The remembrance ceremony for him was one of the most incredibly poignant points of connectivity between current times and the dark days of World War II," Johnson said.

"Bill wanted to make sure the Pearl Harbor remembrance ceremony would continue long after he was



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A plaque honoring veterans of Pearl Harbor on First Avenue in Seaside.

gone so that the youth and citizens of our community would never forget the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country," Vandenberg said.

Thomas was "very involved" in the planning and scheduling of speakers during the annual ceremony, Vandenberg added.

"He knew more about naval history than most people forget," Beal said. "He had limited education, but he was self-educated. He was an amazing guy in a lot of ways."

Due to ill-health, Thomas was unable to attend Seaside's 2016 ceremony, but he was honored in a written statement from Johnson.

"Bill was only 20 when the world turned upside down," Johnson wrote. "He was tested in ways many of us never are. These young men and women understand that war is not a video game ... It's a pleasure and honor to say thank you to Bill Thomas."

A memorial for Thomas takes place Saturday at 1 p.m., American Legion Post 99, 1315 Broadway, Seaside.

SEASIDE POLICE LOG

Feb. 15
3:37 a.m., Avenue A: A theft is reported as well as a subject resisting arrest. The subject was charged with burglary in the second degree.

8:02 a.m., 900 block Avenue S: A burglary is reported, as well as criminal mischief.

8:42 a.m., 2400 block S. Roosevelt: A person who police are looking for on a warrant is pulled over while driving under the influence.

12:02 p.m., 300 block S. Roosevelt: A business owner reporting criminal mischief he said was perpetrated by another business owner regarding destroyed

signage because, he said, both parties are selling the same product, was deemed a civil matter after police spoke to both parties.

6:49 p.m., N. Hemlock: Police assist Cannon Beach police in an arrest attempt; the subject was unable to be located.

8:35 p.m., N. Hemlock: Police assistance was requested in Cannon Beach to assist in a foiled arrest that occurred a few hours earlier; the subject was taken into custody. Seaside police were no longer needed.

Feb. 16
8:49 a.m., 12th and N. Wahanna: An elderly woman riding a motorized vehicle was complained about by vehicle drivers for "falling

asleep at the wheel," and "obstructing traffic." Officers contacted staff at Suzanne Elise, who were advised.

9:33 a.m., Safeway parking lot: Caller advised he left his dog in his vehicle while inside the store; an unknown person opened the door and let the dog out. Caller called back to say he'd found his dog and police were no longer needed.

12:42 p.m., 1200 block S. Wahanna: Police assist a man in the throes of an anxiety attack. Subject was transported to Providence Seaside Hospital.

3:59 p.m., 900 block Avenue S: A theft in the third degree was reported.

11:02 p.m., Highway 101: A person was arrested and charged with driving under the influence of intoxicants.

Feb. 17
2:34 a.m., 600 block Duane Street: A person sought by police was apprehended on a warrant.

10:39 a.m., 400 S. Roosevelt: A motor vehicle hit and run was reported.

10:51 a.m., 300 5th Avenue: Caller reports an angry man frightening her. Police are unable to locate.

1:09 p.m., N. Columbia: Caller re-

ports a vehicle with two different license plates. Officers responding could not locate the vehicle.

5:38 p.m., N. Columbia: A found wallet was turned into the police department.

Feb. 18
2:04 a.m., 900 block S. Columbia: Police respond to a report of a small party who appeared to be lost. Upon police arrival, it turned out the group were lost as well as highly intoxicated and needing help locating their vacation rental. Police offer the group a courtesy ride to their lodgings and into the hands of a sober and responsible

member of their party.

4:45 p.m., 400 block 1st Avenue: A motor vehicle hit and run was reported.

7:06 p.m., Ocean Way: Mother requests welfare check on her adult son with mental issues. Officer searching the area was unable to locate the subject.

7:24 p.m., 1100 block S. Downing: Report of a verbal disturbance in a nearby residence involving yelling and cursing. Officers are unable to make contact with subjects and there are no further calls about it that evening.

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