

Fighting war in a submarine

Howie Rice was among the first American submariners in the Asiatic Fleet to learn that war had started with Japan.

Rice, a radioman at his station on the USS S-39 heading toward Legaspi, Phillippines at 3:30 a.m. Dec. 8, 1941, heard the Morse code clicks announcing that "Japan has started hostilities."

The S-39 was about a quarter of a world away from the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii that led to the entry of the United States into World War II.

"That alerted all of the Asiatic Fleet we were now at war," recalled Rice, 90, at a gathering of submarine veterans Dec. 7 at Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7383 in Cary.

Rice, who now lives in Walkertown, was one of about half a dozen World War II veterans to attend the event along with about 90 submarine veterans from other eras.

Earlier in that infamous week 66 years ago, the crew of the S-39 had known something was up, Rice said.

They were told to take the exercise heads off their torpedoes, fill the torpedo tubes and then fill the room behind the tubes. From that point there was only one way for the munitions to go.

"Once you fill a room with torpedoes you can't take the torpedoes out" of the tubes, Rice said.

Rice was on his second enlistment and ended up serving in the U.S. Navy until 1955. He went on three war patrols on the S-39, one of which was successful.

"You weren't successful unless you sunk something," Rice said.

Several of his six subsequent missions on other vessels also resulted in sinkings of Japanese ships.

After the S-39 ran aground in 1942, Rice was assigned to several other subs, including the USS Rasher. The Rasher was responsible for the second highest number of sinkings of Japanese vessels of any U.S. submarine during the war.

Rice earned a Bronze Star for detecting a pattern of Japanese ship movements that led to the sinking of two vessels.

The Rasher came in behind three vessels and torpedoed the rear ship and then the front ship, leaving the middle one.

"After it was over the captain came down and said, 'This is how they do it in Hollywood,'" Rice said.

Everett Morgan, 84, who grew up near Raleigh and attended school in Cary, joined the Navy in 1943.

He served on the USS Blueback and went on three patrols.

Conditions were cramped in the vessel, which like most of her sisters, was about 300 feet long and not even 30 feet wide.

“You were confined a little bit ... you didn’t have much space to run around in,” Morgan chuckled.

The sailors recalled that the water could get dangerous.

Harold Steed served on the USS “Virgin” Sturgeon for 15 months and made four combat runs.

But one of Steed’s most vivid memories came Dec. 27, 1941 when Japanese planes raided Manila, Phillippines.

The Sturgeon was in Manila Bay when the bombing started.

“We were doing 17 knots in the breakwater trying to find water deep enough to dive in,” Steed said.

Likewise, some of Joseph Kelly Ritter’s most prominent recollections involve escaping from danger.

The Holden Beach resident, 86, served on the USS Kingfish and USS Dogfish, going on five patrols.

Not that Ritter looked forward to the action.

“The less time I spent on patrol the better chance I had of coming back,” Ritter said.

His worst time was in the Straits of Formosa (now called the Taiwan Strait).

“We got caught in sort of shallow water and got worked over,” Ritter said.

The pummeling lasted for a day and parts of two nights.

“You couldn’t light a match, there wasn’t enough oxygen in the air. If they’d made one more run we wouldn’t have ...,” Ritter trailed off but making clear what his end would have been.

The Kingfish limped across the Pacific Ocean from Taiwan to Pearl Harbor.

“They said we were the worst beat up sub that had ever come back,” Ritter said.

Ritter, a past state commander and charter member of the U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II, said events such as the one at the Cary VFW mean a lot to him and are becoming dearer.

“It’s just great to get together with a bunch of guys like this,” Ritter said.

“We’re getting smaller and smaller all the time.”

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