



Ret. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Roger Wilsie, a Pearl Harbor survivor, visits the Arizona Memorial with his wife Marge and son-in-law, Dr. Mark Hubka.

Returning to remember

A Pearl Harbor survivor reflects

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As Ret. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Roger Wilsie prepared to celebrate his 80th birthday this year, his family decided to make it a very special birthday observance for the Pearl Harbor survivor. In honor of his special day, they brought him back to Pearl Harbor – to reminisce, to remember, to reflect – and to share his memories of his experiences with them.

Although it took almost a year to plan and coordinate the trip to Hawaii – accommodating work schedules, school calendars and other activities – the Wilsie children were determined to make it happen. It was a major undertaking – to plan for the group of 19 family members, including the retired Navy Lt. Cmdr., his wife Marge, three daughters, a son, their spouses and all of the grandchildren – to make the trip to Hawaii.

And when they did – history-making events came alive as they accompanied him to many places in Hawaii that he had seen during World War II. They were entranced as he relived and recounted what he had witnessed during the Dec. 7, 1941 attack.

Wilsie, who was a 19-year-old shipfitter serving aboard the USS Whitney (AD-4) at the time of the attack, remembered the day that the Hawaiian skies darkened with Japanese planes. About 1,000 Sailors were assigned to the destroyer tender Whitney at the time of the attack. According to Wilsie, he and about 50 Sailors who worked in the shipfitters' shop were in the ship's magazine.

"My battle station was down in the bottom of the ship in the magazine," he recounted. "We didn't even know what was going on. All that we knew was that we had to stay there."

"We didn't know what had happened until we got up there about noon when they secured general quarters and we could get out and see what was going on," he continued.

The retired Navy lieutenant commander described the scene. "It was terrible – all of the smoke and fires going on and the sinking of the ships. Luckily our ship didn't have a lot of damage."

"I knew a lot of the guys who were in the thick of battle and they had a real rough time," he reflected. "We sent people out to do what they could and help with the rescue."

Even before the visit to Hawaii, 13-year-old Kelsea Hubka took special interest in hearing her grandfather tell about his experiences during his duty assignment at Pearl Harbor. In an essay titled "Pearl Harbor Memoir", a bio-

graphical account of Roger Wilsie and his remembrance of Dec. 7, 1941, she wrote, "Roger says that he would never forget that terrible time that changed his life, and he hasn't yet."

Another excerpt from the memoir related, "Roger said that he remembers going up to the deck of the ship and seeing fire everywhere. Even the land was covered with tongues of red flames. The ships that were hit were leaking oil and the bombs blew up the oil. The water looked as if it were on fire itself."

Although Wilsie has returned to Hawaii since the war, visiting Oahu and Kauai, this was his first time to revisit Pearl Harbor. "I never dreamed that Pearl Harbor would be so beautiful and as popular as it is now," he said. Wilsie and his wife, whom he met while stationed at the Naval Supply Center in Oakland, have been married almost 50 years.

Wilsie and his family also spent some time on Maui during their recent visit to the islands – on this especially memorable occasion that he was happy to share with them. "Living with our family all around us, we see them quite often. We really love to have our family with us," he related.

Traveling and logistics with a large group can be a challenge. It took some planning to coordinate transportation, to meet timelines and to ensure that everyone's luggage had been retrieved. When asked what the high point of this trip was, Wilsie joked, "The high point of the trip was getting all of the bags off the airplane."

But the trip to Hawaii was quite a meaningful one for the whole family. His children and grandchildren were excited to be able to see Pearl Harbor through the survivor's eyes and as one commented, "it's like a living history lesson."

Wilsie and his family were guests of the Navy at Pearl Harbor as they were escorted on a narrated harbor tour with a stop at the Arizona Memorial. They also visited the USS Utah Memorial and the Battleship Missouri Memorial.

Following a 27-year Navy career, Wilsie retired in 1968. He subsequently worked for Stanwick Corp. near Washington, D.C.

As he prepared to leave the islands and return to his home in San Diego, Calif., Wilsie looked forward to sharing memories of his birthday trip to Hawaii and Pearl Harbor with his former shipmates at the USS Whitney Survivors' Association Reunion – an event made even more meaningful with the 60-year anniversary of the Dec. 7 attack on the Navy's fleet just a few months away.



Ret. Lt. Cmdr. Roger Wilsie salutes a Sailor as he arrives at the Arizona Memorial. Wilsie returned to Hawaii almost 60 years after he served aboard USS Whitney during the attack on Pearl Harbor.



Above: Rear Adm. Robert T. Conway Jr. presents Ret. Lt. Cmdr. Roger Wilsie with a letter from President Bush.
 Right: Ret. Lt. Cmdr. Roger Wilsie gazes at Pearl Harbor.

