

Pearl Harbor attack felt in Holyoke

Written by Chris Lee

Dec. 7, 1941 is a date many if not all Americans know. It was a day of grim horror for the United States.

Japan launched an early morning attack on the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor 68 years ago, which ultimately resulted in the United States becoming militarily involved in World War II.

The force of the attack was felt in Holyoke as three youths were lost.

“This community suffered a loss,” Lucille Miles said recalling the event. She was in Denver at the time and remembers heading down Colfax Avenue. The newspaper boys were announcing the story on the street corners.

“It took a while to soak in,” she said.

Miles’ husband L.B. was stationed in Sicily, Italy but knew John Zeiler, Richard Owens and James Lindsay who all died during the attack.

Lucille thinks L.B. went to country school with one of the boys but she knows he knew all three of them.

She mentioned it was a dying wish for L.B. to visit Pearl Harbor and see the names of his friends at the memorial. He never got the chance.

Holyoke loses three in attack

Printed in the Dec. 25, 1941 issue of the Enterprise was:

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“Reported as missing following action in the performance of their duties and in service to their country were John Zeiler Jr., Richard Allen Owens and James Lindsay. The three young men, all seamen in the United States Navy, were stationed on ships in the Pacific Ocean, according to last information received from them.”

It wasn't until February of the next year that the fate of the three was revealed.

As stated in the Feb. 5, 1942 issue of the Enterprise:

“Two young seamen, Richard Allen Owens and James Lindsay, sacrificed their lives in service to their country Dec. 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, Holyoke relatives were notified this week by the bureau of navigation of the United States Navy department.”

“Previous information, sent by telegrams the weekend of Dec. 20 and 21, stated the youths were missing in action following the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese.”

“Mrs. Winifred Rehfeld Lindsay, wife of James Lindsay, received a telegram Friday, and Mr. and Mrs. Roy E. Owens, parents of Richard Allen Owens, were notified by telegram yesterday morning concerning the fate of their sailor son.”

It was reported the two telegrams said “after exhaustive search, it has been found impossible to locate the seamen, and they therefore have been officially declared to have lost their lives in the service of their country as of Dec. 7, 1941. The department expresses to you its sincerest sympathy.”

In the following week's Enterprise, John Zeiler, Jr., elder son of Mr. and Mrs. John P. Zeiler of Holyoke, was reported to have sacrificed his life in service to his country.

The VFW would eventually be named Zeiler-Owens-Lindsay Post #6482 in honor of the three youth who lost their lives.

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The three weren't the only ties to Pearl Harbor from Holyoke and Phillips County. Many others were in the armed forces.

Kenneth Jonte, Merle Mutchie, William Dahmke, Stanton Smith, Herbert Oltjenbruns were all reported to have been stationed in and around the Pacific including the stations at Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field, two of the bombed places in the Hawaiian Islands.

Survivor interviewed by *Denver Post*

Dahmke was recently interviewed by the Denver Post for being a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack. In the article, it states he was stationed on the USS Tennessee, a battleship moored next to the USS Arizona. When the bombing began at 7:48 a.m., he was sleeping on a cot he'd towed on the captain's deck after returning from shore leave.

Dahmke said his cot tipped over a couple of times and he didn't realize what was going on until he stood up and looked over the side to see the planes coming in.

He said everything was on fire and he could smell the burning oil. He was asked in the article if he thought they would get hit. He replied with, "We thought we'd be dead. But they missed us."

Dahmke was also asked how long he was on the captain's deck. He replied, "probably four hours or so. When we went to general quarters, we fired some shots, but pretty soon they figured we couldn't really do anything, so they told us to stop. We stayed on that bridge and watched everything."

One of the big questions the Denver Post asked him was if he remembered seeing Zeiler. He said he saw him on the dock when they were coming back from Liberty. "That was the last time I saw him. He was on the Arizona," Dahmke added.

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When Dahmke returned to Holyoke he said he walked up to Zeiler's house but didn't knock. He wishes he had but he didn't know what he would say and still doesn't know what he would've said.

Marian Kaup remembers playing High 5, a game that doesn't get played too much anymore, at a card party when, through word of mouth, she heard about the attacks on Pearl Harbor. She said the evening was ruined. "Everyone seemed very quiet and shocked," she said.

Nelson Ekberg of Wray couldn't remember much about the tragic day due to a brain injury but enjoyed reading about a story about a Japanese war plane pilot in his Our Daily Bread book recently.

In the Holyoke Enterprise #2 story of the Century, "Three youths are reported lost in Pacific," in 100 Years, Celebrating a Century of Hometown News, it talks about the backgrounds of Zeiler, Owens and Lindsay. The story was recapped from the Dec. 25, 1941 edition of the Enterprise.

"Zeiler, an outstanding athlete, graduated from Holyoke High School with the class of 1940. Shortly after his graduation, he enlisted in the United States Navy. After receiving his preliminary training at the naval station at San Diego, Calif., the youth returned to Holyoke to visit his parents and other relatives and friends, prior to being assigned to a ship."

"Zeiler left Holyoke Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1940, to assume his duties on the ship to which he had been assigned."

The Dec. 25, 1941 article continued, "Lindsay, whose former home was in Pennsylvania, completed four years naval service last Sept. 19. Due to the war emergency, he was held in service. He had been stationed in the Hawaiian Island territory several months. The young Pennsylvania youth and Miss Winifred Rehfeld, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A.E. Rehfeld, were married in California. Mrs. Lindsay returned to Holyoke in the summer of 1940, and has since been at the home of her parents. Their son, Terrill James, was born in October of 1940. Mr. Lindsay last visited his wife and son in October, one year ago."

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“Owens enlisted in the naval service in June of 1936. On June 13, 1940, when he had completed four years of service in the navy, he reenlisted for another period. A graduate of Holyoke High School, he was employed two years in the Phillips County Courthouse prior to enlisting in the Navy. The youth last visited his parents and other Holyoke relatives and friends in July of 1940.”

War has and always will affect loved ones close to home. The 68th anniversary of Pearl Harbor is just one date in history when spouses, sons, daughters, mothers, fathers and all family members are remembered.