



Pearl Harbor hero is 100 years old today

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This edition of the Ramona Sentinel is dated the same day that Medal of Honor recipient John William Finn turns 100.

Some of you reading this will recognize who John Finn is. I suspect, however, that most of you will not.

John William Finn is our nation's oldest living recipient of its highest award for valor, the Medal of Honor (MoH). He is also the last surviving MoH recipient who earned his medal on Dec. 7, 1941, the last living recipient of the Navy's MoH from World War II, and the only MoH recipient having his Navy rating, that of an Aviation Ordnanceman, to ever be awarded the MoH in the history of the United States Navy.

John William Finn was born in Los Angeles on July 23, 1909. In July of 1926, as soon as John turned 17, he enlisted in the Navy. When, on Sunday morning, Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Hawaii, then a U.S. Territory, John was 32 years old and had attained the rank of Chief Petty Officer (CPO), then the highest enlisted non-commissioned officer rank in the naval service. John was stationed at Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay, about 15 miles east-northeast of Pearl Harbor, on Oahu's southeastern shore. Chief Finn had recognized the air station's vulnerability to possible air attack and had strongly recommended to his superiors that they take measures to establish anti-aircraft defenses to protect the naval base from possible attack, but his urgings, for whatever reasons, were ignored. So, when the attack came on that first Sunday morning in December, Chief Finn single-handedly mounted a 50-caliber machine gun on a stand on the base's aircraft parking ramp and began firing on any attacking enemy aircraft that he could bear on.

John's position was totally exposed to enemy strafing and bombing attacks, but he kept it up for more than two hours while under attack, despite being wounded five times and in severe pain. Fellow sailors implored him to seek medical care for his wounds, but John steadfastly refused to vacate his firing position until he received a direct order to do so from a superior officer.

Twenty pieces of shrapnel were removed from John's body by the base's medical staff.

John has remarked that, while he was scared, being exposed like that, he "was so damn mad" that what he feared might happen was now happening and that all his warnings and urgings had been in vain. He's said that his anger overruled his fear and he kept on shooting.

John's actions that Dec. 7th morning were briefly depicted by an unnamed and uncredited actor in the 1970 epic motion picture, *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

On Sept. 15, 1942, CPO John William Finn received his Medal of Honor, the first one to be awarded in World War II. It was presented to him by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz in a ceremony aboard the Big "E," the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise (CV-6).

Some 27 months later, on Dec. 19, 1944, Adm. Nimitz would receive a fifth star designating him a Fleet Admiral (FADM). Nimitz would become the last surviving FADM of the four FADMs who were appointed, when he died on Feb. 20, 1966.

And here he was, awarding the MoH to someone who would become the oldest surviving MoH recipient in our nation.

John was to subsequently gain "Mustang" status on becoming a commissioned officer and he would retire from the Navy in September of 1956 with the naval rank of lieutenant, having faithfully served our country as a sailor for more than 30 years.

The group of living MoH recipients that John Finn is the eldest member of is becoming ever smaller and more "exclusive." Why? Two reasons mainly.

There have been far fewer awards of the medal since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam in 1973 and, of the seven MoH awards that have been earned since then, all of them have been made posthumously.

Prior to the above stated time, and reckoned from the beginning of WWII, 61.09 percent were awarded posthumously. In combat actions since then, 100 percent have been posthumous awards.

And during the above stated period, the award of the MoH, based on the number of U.S. forces serving in a combative conflict, was 10 times what it's been since then.

As evidence of the shrinking size of living MoH recipients, here are some snapshot samplings:

- In 1996, there were 171 living recipients.
- In 2002, there were 103 living recipients.
- Today, there are 96 still living.

So, the membership of living recipients hasn't gained even one member for any of the country's combat actions that have taken place in more than the 35 years.

On Saturday, June 27, 2009, with slightly less than a month to go to his 100th birthday, John Finn was celebrated and honored at a ceremony held at the La Posta Café on Old Highway 80, just east of his home in Pine Valley. Among the many honors paid to John that day was the dedication of a monument and plaque presented by the John P. Squibob Chapter 1853 of the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus (ECV), the same organization that had presented a plaque to Ramona Town Hall on Saturday, April 25, 2009.

The chapter's Grand Noble Humbug, Paul Ketchem, a Ramonan, officiated at the monument's dedication to Finn. According to Ketchem, including wives and children, there were several dozen of Ramona clammers among some 200 ECV'ers who turned out for the event. And there were others from Ramona who were there who were not connected with the ECV. Julie Lamkin was there with her two children, James, 5, and Rose, 3.

When the day dawns on July 23, John Finn should be experiencing his birthday as a guest of former President George W. Bush and former First Lady Laura Bush. John has been invited to celebrate his becoming a centenarian at the Bushes' ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Here's wishing you, John, many happy returns of the day. And maybe, just maybe, a few more of your fellow Americans who've read this will know who John William Finn is and what he's done.

Thank you, John Finn.