

Wilberding, John H 1922 - 2013

John Wilberding Green Card

IMMIGRANT IDENTIFICATION CARD
UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Wilberding
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The Morning Sun - December 7, 2009

This year marks the 68th anniversary of the attacks on Pearl Harbor.

The day is a tough one for many, including World War II veteran John Henry Wilberding of Shepherd, who reflects upon the lives lost on the Day of Infamy and his subsequent involvement in the war.

He was stationed in Hawaii at the time of Japan's attack on the U.S. base.

"I remember very clearly," he said. "I was a young man of 19 years old in the Army Air Corps. I was an armorer that takes care of the armor on the fighter planes, part of the 72nd fighter squadron."

On that morning, Dec. 7, 1941, Wilberding, was in his tent with his tent mates. As he woke up, he suddenly decided that he was going to go to Mass.

"I better get up and go," he said. "So I jumped into my uniform. And I went to the chapel and when Mass was over I came out and we heard airplanes overhead. We thought 'Sometimes the Navy would fly over to see how quick the Army Air Corps could get off the ground.' Then we heard machine gun fire and that was even worse."

As Wilberding looked up, he saw bombs coming and the Rising Sun on the belly and the wings of the airplanes. He recognized that they were Japanese and that they were bombing the harbor.

"I ran for cover, which was probably the worst place, next to the hangar, but I managed to survive there," Wilberding, now 87, said. "I finally ran to another place and saw something move on the ground and ran over and there was a manhole cover."

Some men had cut into the manhole and were hiding out.

"I jumped in with them and pulled the manhole cover over us," he said.

"We could hear the firing and some of the machine gun bullets were hitting the cover. When it was over we all crawled out and I went back to my squadron and it was pretty well torn up."

As he returned to his squadron, Wilberding discovered that 11 were killed. It was the heaviest toll of any of the squadrons.

According to Wilberding, the overall plan of the Japanese was to destroy the weaponry, the Air Corps, and then they could have much more freedom to do what they wanted.

"I made it through and as time went by I wanted to do something else," he said.

Wilberding has taken his entire family back to the harbor and savored a bit of his own history, along with sharing in the grief with the country.

"It's something you never forget, of course," he said. "It certainly was an education. As I look at some of the pictures I have hanging here, I say 'God, thank you.'"

As a member of the 9th Armored Division in World War II, named the "phantom division," Gilbert Turnwald of Shepherd had a lot of close calls.

"The first time we had a fight we went three days without anything to eat, I remember that real well," he said. "You get so hungry that you're not hungry anymore."

The 9th Division was one of several United States Army divisions that participated in Operation Fortitude, the deception operation mounted by the Allies to deceive the Germans about the real landing site for Operation Neptune, the amphibious invasion of Northern France.

The 9th was assigned to a camp on the British coastline opposite of the German defenses in Pas-de-Calais, as part of the First U.S. Army Group (FUSAG) under Gen. George Patton.

"It was a close call crossing the river one night and they had prisoners there and then I got shot right above my head," Turnwald said.

When the Germans launched their winter offensive on Dec. 16, 1944, the 9th, with no real combat experience, suddenly found itself engaged in heavy fighting. The Division saw its severest action at St. Vith, Echternach, and Bastogne, its units fighting in widely separated areas.

"We were the first ones to cross the Rhine River," Turnwald said. "After there we went to another town and a guy told me we had to take a prisoner back and I said, 'Nope, I won't do it.'"

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"My boy wanted me to write all this down and remember the names of specific towns, but I can't remember all that."

Turnwald was 23 years old when he entered the combat of WWII.

"It's like my mother always said, 'It's like playing cops and robbers but the only thing we were playing there was playing for keeps,'" he said. "There was a difference."

After the war had ended, Turnwald was supposed to get shipped home, but came down with rheumatic fever and had to spend three months in a German hospital.

"We got back home to New York and got food poisoning on the boat and had to spend another couple days in the hospital over here," he said. "There was just no luck."

Now 88 years old, Turnwald thanks God for keeping him alive during the horrific conditions.

"When you get back you wonder how in the devil you survived that," he said. "You just wonder how you get through something like that."

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John H. Wilberding

Memorial in Holly is Gratiot County Pearl Harbor survivor's 'last hurrah'

by Gus Burns | The Saginaw News

Friday September 12, 2008, 6:06 AM



John H. Wilberding, 86, of Shepherd holds his dog tags he wore while serving at Pearl Harbor and through his military career. Behind him are photographs from the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Melanie Sochan | The Saginaw News. While training at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, John Wilberding emerged from the holy sanctuary of an on-base church and stepped into the hell of war.

It was "a date which will live in infamy," as President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, and a defining moment in the life of Wilberding, an 86-year-old Shepherd resident and U.S. Army Air Corps, 72nd Fighter Squadron veteran of World War II.

As state chairman of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association of Michigan, Wilberding has led efforts to have memorials constructed at the two national cemeteries in Michigan -- Fort Custer National Cemetery in Augusta and the Great Lake National Cemetery in Holly.

With the help of state legislation in 2001, the group was able to rename a section of Interstate 69, between Perry in Shiawassee County and Swartz Creek in Genesee County, "Pearl Harbor Memorial Highway."

The Holly memorial is 24 inches high and reads: "Dedicated to the men and women who served on that infamous day in Hawaii." A dedication will start at 1 p.m. Saturday at the Great Lakes National Cemetery, 4200 Belford in Holly. Wilberding calls the memorial "a memory for once upon a time."

Born in 1922 in Germany, Wilberding felt the influence of war immediately. He never met his father, who died before Wilberding's birth from pneumonia induced by his exposure to mustard gas as a German soldier during World War I. Wilberding spent the first six years of life with his three brothers and mother in Germany.

An uncle had emigrated to the United States after the war, but years after his brother's death, he returned to Germany to marry his brother's widowed wife. The family came to America, and their boat docked at Ellis Island in 1928. The family settled on a dairy, grain and hog farm in Gratiot County's Shepherd, where Wilberding spent the next 12 years.

"I heard about Hawaii and knew you could see the world in the military, and I was bored. So I enlisted at 18 years old," Wilberding said.

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He was innocently yearning for adventure, but Wilberding soon witnessed the deadliest military battle of the 20th century on American soil.



Melanie Sochan | The Saginaw News

Wilberding holds a 50-caliber machine gun casing used from a United States P40 fighter plane on the left. On the right he holds a shell from a cannon used by the Japanese as well as a machine gun casing also used by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor.

The attack began with machine gun fire. Wilberding originally thought it was a Navy preparedness drill; then he saw the first bomb. As more bombs rained down, Wilberding took cover near a pylon beside one of the aircraft hangars. Later, he realized his mistake: The airplanes in the hangar were the primary target of the Japanese.

"I probably ran to the most dangerous place (on the base)," Wilberding said.

"Once when they zoomed by I could see the gunner, and I thought he saw me. But apparently he didn't, because I'm still here."

As he ran from the hangar, Wilberding noticed a manhole cover on the ground and realized he had found an impromptu bomb shelter. He quickly moved the heavy cover and climbed down into the drainage structure, where he endured the second bombing wave with several other soldiers and a bullfrog.

Wilberding survived the attack that killed more than 2,000 soldiers. He returned to the mainland and attended officer's school at Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga. He completed service as an infantryman, fighting in Europe from 1944 until the end of the war.

Returning in one piece, Wilberding focused on family. He and his wife had seven children, who in turn bore 17 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren. Since their marriage 63 years ago, the couple have always lived on the property where Wilberding's wife was born.

"I think every moment was happier than the one before," Wilberding said.

In addition to the demands of his growing family, Wilberding was a part-time commander of the Alma National Guard, a long-time barber, justice of the peace and member of the school board.

With a large family spanning several generations, Wilberding wants his offspring and all future generations to understand the impact of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He hopes the monuments will equate to symbolic footsteps in the sand, left behind by the soldiers involved. At 86, Wilberding claims he's the youngest of the known Pearl Harbor survivors in Michigan.

The state Survivors Association has dwindled to fewer than 10 members. Wilberding understands mortality, and as the members die or lose mobility, he hopes their sons and daughters will make sure the mission endures.

Saturday's monument commemoration has a special meaning for Wilberding.

"You might say it's our last hurrah," he said.

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The Morning Sun - November 17, 2013

John H. Wilberding, age 91, of Shepherd passed away with his family by his side on Friday November 15, 2013 at Maplewood of Mt. Pleasant.

Funeral Services will be Tuesday at 11 a.m. at St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Church in Shepard with Fr. Bill Rutowki and Fr. William Lugger officiating. Interment will be in St. Vincent DePaul Cemetery with full military honors. There will be a scripture Service Monday November 18, 2013 at 7 p.m. at St. Vincent DePaul Church. Visitation will be Monday from 2 to 5 and 6 to 8 p.m. at St. Vincent DePaul Church.

John H. Wilberding was born May 9, 1922 in Ruchendorff, Germany to Henry and Elizabeth (Glandorff) Wilberding. He married Ella Stahlman August 30, 1945 at St. Vincent DePaul Church in Shepherd. She preceded him in death 2010.

When John arrived in the United States as a child he was quarantined at Ellis Island before being united with his family in Shepherd where he has lived since. John enlisted in the [Army](#) Air Corp. prior to W. W. II. He was a server at Pearl Harbor. He later served in the European theater during W. W. II. John was a man of many hats, he was a barber, justice of peace, member of the Shepherd school board, postal carrier, and a deacon in the Catholic Church serving the St. Vincent DePaul, St. Leo's and St. Patrick's Churches. He retired from Colonel in 1973. Along with being father of seven children.

Survived by his 7 children: Liz (Mike) Nurmikko of Heartland, John (Ety) Wiberding of Whitewater, WI, Kathy (Jerry) Swedoraski of Gladwin, Thomas (Diane) Wilberding of Clare, Pam (Jim) Lamb of Lansing, Patrick (Theresa) Wilberding of Shepherd, Anne (Dan) Purse of Denver, CO; 19 grandchildren; and 22 great grandchildren; 3 brothers: Joseph (Joane) Wilberding of Birmingham, Norman (Carolyn) Wilberding of Alma, Jerry (Shirley) Wilberding of Zellwood, FL. Preceded in death by his wife Ella, and three brothers, Ben, Frank, and Henry Wilberding; and two sisters, Leona Wyrwal and Cecilia Elliott.

Memorials may be given to Great lakes Hospice. Arrangements have been entrusted to the Berry Funeral Home in Shepherd. - See more at:

<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/themorningsun/obituary.aspx?pid=168020388#sthash.17gJRVd.dpuf>