

GA Pearl Harbor Survivor Joseph L. George Receives Bronze Star of Valor



WASHINGTON (NNS) — The Navy recently authorized the posthumous award of a combat medal to a Sailor who was present at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack of Dec. 7, 1941, officials announced Dec. 1.

Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer awarded the Bronze Star Medal with V device for valor to Chief Boatswain's Mate Joseph L. George for heroic achievement while serving aboard the repair ship USS Vestal (AR 4). George, a second class petty officer at the time, saved the lives of several Sailors from the battleship USS Arizona (BB 39). He survived the war and retired from the Navy in 1955, but passed away in 1996.

The Bronze Star Medal will be presented by Rear Adm. Matthew J. Carter, deputy commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, to George's daughter, Joe Ann Taylor, on Dec. 7 during a 4:30 p.m. (Hawaii-

Aleutian time) ceremony at the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor.

"The presentation of the medals is not only appropriate but simply the right thing to do," said Spencer. "One of my highest priorities is to honor the service and sacrifice of our Sailors, Marines, Civilians, and family members and it is clear that Lt. Schmitt and Chief George are heroes whose service and sacrifice will stand as an example for current and future service members."

In addition to George's Bronze Star, the Secretary also awarded the Silver Star Medal to Lt. j.g. Aloysius H. Schmitt for action at Pearl Harbor while serving on the battleship USS Oklahoma (BB 37).

In 1942 George was officially commended by his commanding officer following the attack, but he was not awarded any medal. Lauren Bruner and Don Stratton, two of the USS Arizona Sailors saved by George's actions, petitioned for him to be presented a medal.

George's family is happy to celebrate the heroism of their loved one.

In keeping with the tendency of World War II veterans, Taylor says her father never really talked about Pearl Harbor or World War II when she was growing up. But after he retired, he started going to reunions and that is when she began to get the full story.

"It was kind of surreal. You grow up with your dad thinking of him as dad; you're not used to thinking of him as a hero," said Taylor. "But it's a wonderful story and I'm quite proud of him. Plus I've gotten to know the men he saved and have developed a real bond with the Stratton and Bruner families."

As recounted in an oral history interview conducted by the University of North Texas on Aug. 5, 1978, George said on Dec. 7 he was settling down to read the Sunday newspaper when General Quarters (battle stations) was sounded. That's when he realized there was an attack underway. To get a better sense of

what was going on, he went outside, and the first thing he saw was a Japanese plane going down. With no time to think, his training kicked in and he began to act.

With Japanese torpedoes passing under his ship then striking Arizona, fires were breaking out everywhere. George recalled that the first thing he did, with help from several of his shipmates, was remove the awning covering the guns so that Vestal could fight back. Then he ran across the deck from fire to fire to help put them out.

Meanwhile, Arizona was taking a pounding with explosions and fires encircling the Sailors on her decks.

There were “people over on the Arizona that were trying to get off, and there was fire all around,” George said. “I threw a line over.”

After securing the line as best he could, George returned to fighting fires and controlling damage aboard Vestal. When it became apparent Arizona was doomed, George assisted with getting Vestal underway and away from the burning and fast-sinking battleship. Arizona lost 1,177 crewmembers during the attack. Vestal lost seven.

George went on to serve throughout the war and retired in 1955 as a chief petty officer after twenty years in the Navy.

The Naval History and Heritage Command, located at the Washington Navy Yard, is responsible for the preservation, analysis, and dissemination of U.S. naval history and heritage. It provides the knowledge foundation for the Navy by maintaining historically relevant resources and products that reflect the Navy’s unique and enduring contributions through our nation’s history, and supports the fleet by assisting with and delivering professional research, analysis, and interpretive services. NHHC is composed of many activities including the Navy Department Library, the Navy Operational Archives, the Navy art and artifact collections, underwater archeology, Navy histories, ten museums, USS Constitution repair facility and the historic ship Nautilus.