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"Bill" Peilger

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Pearl Harbor survivor William W. "Bill" Pridgen of Goldsboro is pictured in front of the American flag at the Wayne County Museum.

News-Argus/KAYE NESBIT

Beautiful morning becomes a day of war

Pearl Harbor survivor tells of the day the Japanese attacked

By WINKIE LEE
News-Argus Feature Editor

There had been rumors for a week on the *USS Whitney* that there would be a mock air raid on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941.

That was not what happened.

William W. "Bill" Pridgen of Goldsboro was a hospitalman in the United States Navy and stationed at Pearl Harbor. It has been 60 years, and he still remembers that day vividly.

Seated in his room at the Pines, where he can look out his window at the home he and his wife used to live in, he tells about that fateful day.

THE *USS WHITNEY* was anchored about 100 yards east of Ford Island, the Navy air station at Pearl Harbor. It was a destroyer repair ship, and four destroyers were lined up beside it.

Pridgen had spent the evening working in the ship's sick bay on the main deck.

During the early morning, he sat typing his report in preparation for going off duty at 8. He took a short break to buy a newspaper but, finding it had not arrived, returned to work. A few minutes later, he was joined by a shipmate.

"Let's get a paper," he said. "They're not aboard," Pridgen answered.

The shipmate wagered that he could find two in two minutes. If he succeeded, he said, Pridgen had to give him 25 cents and buy his paper. Confident that would not happen, Pridgen agreed. Two minutes later, the shipmate returned with the papers.

Pridgen laughs as he recalls it. The shipmate had already seen copies before coming into his office and knew the bet would be a sure thing, Pridgen says.

THE HUMOR would be short-lived. As Pridgen kept typing, the shipmate went to the *Whitney's* fantail to relax and read.

"It was a beautiful, sunshiny morning," Pridgen says.

Suddenly, the shipmate was back. "One of our planes has gone out of control and crashed into a hangar on Ford Island," he said. "It's set on fire!"



News-Argus/KAYE NESBIT

Pridgen stands next to a display of newspaper articles about World War II.

He disappeared and returned again.

"It's not ours!" he declared. "It's the Japanese and they're bombing the hell out of us!"

An alarm sounded and Pridgen, who was also a member of fire and rescue, joined

another member named Timmer to collect first aid kits and equipment. The two ran to the gangway to be picked up and carried to Ford Island. That didn't happen.

"Here we stand and, suddenly, here comes a Zero — a

Japanese fighter," he says. The plane fired continuously as it flew by.

"Someone yelled 'Hit the deck,' and we did. No harm was done to our ship as far as I know."

The *Whitney's* officer of the

deck sounded the general alarm to man the battle stations, and Pridgen and Timmer dropped the stretcher and other equipment they had been carrying.

"I went all the way forward to the dental office, a small

room that was also my battle station," he says.

Initially, there was little for Pridgen to do. He and a first class hospitalman waited for the doctor they were to assist once the injured began to arrive, but the doctor never came.

Military personnel on the destroyers fired five-inch guns which roared so loud that Pridgen could feel his head vibrate. Now wearing hearing aids, he says he believes his hearing problems started that day.

The dental office, which had two open doors, provided a clear view of what was happening.

He saw Japanese planes dive in on the *Arizona*, blow it up and then attack the *Tennessee*, the *Maryland*, the *Oklahoma* and more.

"I stood there and watched the whole thing," he says. "I never did feel afraid. I don't know why."

He stayed in his battle station all day and, that evening, was assigned to the officers' quarters where he continued to hear firing. All of the lights and communication systems had been turned off, "so we didn't know whose planes they were," Pridgen says. He later heard that the planes being fired at were American but does not remember if any were shot down.

Following the attack, personnel were very alert to things going on around them. A day or two later, for instance, people ran to their battle stations when someone noticed that a motion in the water looked like a submarine heading for the *Lexington*. The cause of the motion ended up being soap residue from people taking showers and washing dishes, Pridgen says.

Pridgen spent the next several months repairing destroyers at Pearl Harbor and, in May, was sent to the Tonga Islands to repair destroyers there.

THE ATTACK on Pearl Harbor was not his only close brush with death. He was with the men who stormed Normandy on June 6, 1944 — D-Day. The first wave arrived at 6 a.m. His group followed about three and a half hours

Profile Getting to know ... William W. "Bill" Pridgen

Age: 84

Marital status: Married for 54 years to the former Hazel White

Children: Deborah Rossi of Houston, Texas; Denise Zagar of San Francisco, Calif.; and the late Rodney Pridgen

Grandchildren: Three

Parents: The late Thomas Walter Pridgen and Lillie Duke Carter Pridgen

Siblings: Huldah Hart, Dora Jane Joyner, Wilbur Robins Pridgen and Fred Carter Pridgen, all of the Elm City/Silver Lake community; Sarah Patricia Finch of New Bern; and

the late Richard Pridgen and Thomas Oleny Pridgen

Church: Salem United Methodist

Memberships: Golden K Kiwanis and Masons

Hobbies: Enjoying meals with friends, reading

Honors: Numerous World War II ribbons

Favorite TV shows: News, "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune"

Favorite music: Golden oldies, big band, bluegrass and light classical

Three people he would like to invite to dinner: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale

See Profile on 4D