

WILL LEHNER

Joining the Navy in 1938, Lehner served on the USS Ward during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. The USS Ward was later sunk by the Japanese in 1944.

How old are you right now?

I am 81 years old

Where were you born?

I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota.

How old were you when you first served in the navy?

I was seventeen when I joined the navy December 5th, 1938.

What was your rank and station in the navy?

At the beginning of the war in Pearl Harbor, I was a fireman second class, or ammunition handler, but later I was a cook. I was a ship's cook.

What ship did you serve on?

I was aboard the U.S.S. Ward, it was an old four stacker, a destroyer, and was built in 1917.

What was a general day like?

I'll say after the war started I was still a fireman second class. My job was working in the fire room on the boilers. We had different duties also, like we had the four to eight watches. At four o'clock in the morning we'd go on duty and we'd work until eight-o clock, and then we'd probably get a little rest, then get up again. Then you'd have a four to eight in the afternoon again. When I was a cook, my job was cooking food. And I would cook the evening meal, and then I'd cook breakfast, and then the lunch for the next day. Then I'd be off for one day and then I'd go back on again and do the same thing.

What did you do during your free time?

You didn't have much rest time in the navy. You were busy all the time. If you had any rest, it was usually while you were sleeping. That's about the only time you had rest. And of course, in wartime, you never had any rest. You were either on the guns or whatever your duty was.

Can you tell us your account of what happened at Pearl Harbor on December 7th of 1941?

Sure. At about three o'clock in the morning we went to general quarters. We just had a new skipper on board. He came aboard the fifth of December. And our duty was to patrol the entrance to Pearl Harbor.

and we went out Saturday morning at seven o'clock to relieve the other ship that was out there. Our duty was to patrol the entrance to Pearl, and we did that for seven days. And after the seven days were up, then we would be relieved by one of the other ships. We had four destroyers in our group. Well, at three o'clock in the morning, we went to general quarters - which were battle stations - and we thought it was awful unusual to go to general quarters at three o'clock in the morning with a new skipper. Nothing happened, we went there, and we didn't see anything. At about five thirty or so we were allowed to leave from general quarters, and nothing happened. About six o'clock we were called to general quarters again. Well, we thought this was kind of a tough skipper, a new guy and kind of a tough guy to call us to general quarters Sunday morning at three-o clock in the morning, then again at five thirty or six o'clock in the morning. Well at six o'clock we did know why we were in general quarters. We saw an unidentified object in the water, and it looked like a submarine to us; it was on the surface. So the skipper says if we got a chance we're going to sink it, because its not supposed to be there. The number one gun had ammunition in the chamber and they fired one shot at the sub, and it went over the top of the gunning tower. Well then the next one was number three gun, that was the next gun that had a chance to shoot it, and that one hit it right between the gunning tower and the hull right on the surface of the water. My job was ammunition handler, and I was back on the starboard side, which is the right side, back aft, and I saw the shell when it hit the submarine. Shortly after that the sub started going down and it went down right by where I was standing underneath the ship. So I saw it as it went down. We were going about twenty knots, or twenty, twenty-five knots at that time, zigzagging. And we dropped four depth charges on top of it. We thought we were on top of it, but we found out that we were going so fast and the submarine had gone down below and we had passed over it. So the depth charges that we had dropped didn't do any good. I found that out this past year when we went down and looked at that sub. Shortly after that, it was about twenty minutes to seven in the morning. The Pearl Harbor attack didn't start until five minutes to eight, so that was an hour and twenty minutes before the attack. Shortly after, we saw a lot of planes over Pearl Harbor. We were only about three miles from Pearl Harbor. We saw a lot of planes diving down and we thought that the army air force was practicing again. We didn't know what it was. This was about eight o'clock then, and shortly after that, two planes came over us and they were so low that you could see the pilots in the plane. They dropped bombs on each side of us, but missed. Then we saw the big red ball, which signified they were Japanese planes. Well then we knew we were at war. We didn't know the extent of everything until we went in about one o'clock in the afternoon. We had to go in for more ammunition, so then, when we went in we saw all the destruction at Pearl Harbor. Fire was burning in the water, ships had been sunk there, and it was an awful mess. And we didn't really get to see the full extent until the following week, when we went in after our job was done patrolling. That's when we really saw all the damage.

What happened in the years you served after Pearl Harbor?

After Pear Harbor in 1942 we took the ship back. This was a destroyer and we took it back to Washington. They took the forward fire room out of it and made it into a fast transport, so our job was to haul troops. They made an area where the troops could sleep in the bottom where the two boilers were. Then we took troops on and we made landings on different Japanese islands. We back to Pearl and then out to the Guadalcanal in the Solomons. And then we made all the landings from Guadalcanal all the way up through the Solomons. When those were secure we landed all the troops in those islands. Then we went over to New Guinea, and we started the push from New Guinea all the way up to the Phillipines. We landed troops all the way through Guadalcanal all through the Solomons and then all through New Guinea into the Phillipines. We went into the Phillipines three days before the big landing force came. We landed army rangers on a small island outside Leyte in the Phillipines and then we swept mines for three days until the big force came in. That was our job - landing troops.

Were you on the U.S.S. Ward when it sunk on Dec. 7th, 1944, after being attacked by Japanese kamikaze fighters?

Yes, I was. I served on the Ward the whole time until we were sunk.

Could you tell us what happened that day?

That day we had just landed troops behind Japanese lines and we had just gotten our troops off. It was about nine thirty in the morning, and we saw a bunch of planes coming over. We found out that they were Japanese planes and they attacked some of our other ships. Three of them started towards us. They were twin-engine bombers, two engines like a big plane, and they started down on us. And my job was first loader on the number four gun. They were coming right down towards the number four gun. Now what they usually would do is they would try and come in on the stern and hit the deck on the back end and slide along the deck and kill as many men on top- side as they could before they crashed the plane. Luck for us we were zigzagging, and as we were zigzagging he had his course set. Now when we were firing at it we were hitting the plane and shells were going right through the wings. We could see that, but he still kept coming. He hit us on the port side, right where the troop space was, and the plane went into the side of the ship and one engine broke off and went through, right through the other side of the ship. There was fire and of course we couldn't put out the fire. The ammunition was exploding and so the skipper said we gotta abandon ship. We had to get off the ship.

Did a lot of people die?

No we didn't have anyone other than maybe one person was killed. He was burned so bad. He was right above where it went in and he was sprayed with gasoline. I was on another ship that picked me up and they brought him aboard and they had him wrapped in a big sheet when they brought him aboard. He was burned from head to foot.

After your term in the service was over, what did you do?

I came back to St. Paul. I was born and raised in St. Paul and I came back. I went to school back there. I went to an industrial arts school. I went to school there and after school, I went to work as a printer. I was a printer all my life. So, I worked for the Worth Company for thirty-two and a half years and retired in 1986 as head of the department there.

How did fighting in the war affect your life? Was there any emotional or physical strain?

Yeah there was, there was a lot of emotional strain. I had gone from 220 pounds down to 157. I spent about six and a half months in the hospital trying to regain my strength, and I was medically discharged from the navy in 1945, because the war was just about over, and they were getting rid of a lot of us then. I got 50% disability.

Is there any other particular experience that stands out in your mind about the war?

Yeah, we had a lot of things happen; different attacks and we were on different landings. We were on Guadalcanal. Things were pretty tough then. We had a big air raid. There were over 120 planes, and the skipper said all planes in the air are enemy planes - pick your targets. So we didn't have any of our own planes. We shot down three or four of them, so we had a pretty good record - the ship did - before we got sunk.

Was it scary when that happened?

Oh yeah, you can't say that you weren't scared. You were too busy at the time, but when it was all over, that's when it really bothered you more. We saw other ships get sunk and that bothered you a lot too. We had ships on each side of us get sunk at different times. We were lucky we got through it all. We spent

three years without getting sunk, and finally three years to the day, Dec. 7th '44, we got sunk, so that was quite ironic.

Are you still in contact with any of your friends from the war?

Oh yes. We formed a club, the First Shot Naval Vets in St. Paul, Minnesota. We were a bunch of reserves that went, so there were eighty-five of us from St. Paul that went together, and we all went aboard the same ship. We still get together now. I go back to St. Paul once a month and have breakfast with some of the boys. I leave here at five o'clock in the morning, and I get up to St. Paul at nine o'clock, and I have breakfast with them and we talk for a couple hours, and afterwards I turn around and come back home. It's a 250-mile trip. To have breakfast!

Do you find it hard to think back to the war? Are there painful memories?

Not now it isn't. Two years ago I went over with Bob Ballard, who found the Titanic, looking for that sub that we had sunk. I spent fourteen days on the ship looking for that submarine. He had found the Titanic and he had found the Bismarck and he found J.F. Kennedy's P.T. boat shortly before. But we never found it. Another fellow and I from the ship both went with him and he was looking in the wrong position. We told him we thought we were too far out. And he says "Oh no I know where it is, I know where it is." But we looked for fourteen days and never found it. I was with Japanese. At that time that was on a submarine that brought one of the little mini subs over, and I talked with him - Kichi Dawa (sp?) - and it was quite an experience for me. I don't have any animosity now. I went back last year for the sixtieth anniversary, and I met five of the Japanese fliers that flew against us. I got all their signatures and I talked with them. Time heals everything, I guess.

What did serving your country mean to you while in active duty and now, looking back as a veteran?

Well, I think that I'm proud that I was able to serve. I always wanted to be in the navy, and being in the navy, being there at that time, was a great honor for me. Of course at that time I was just a kid, and I thought that it was a lot of fun, but it wasn't fun. I saw a lot of people get killed, and it was not as fun as I thought it might be. I'm glad that I served. I'm proud that I am a veteran.

Would you recommend that people our age when we get out of high school join the navy?

Yeah, I think I talked to some other kids from Stevens Point. I talked to them at school and there are some of them that already signed up. One girl was going in the navy and, and she said I'm already signed up and I'm leaving in July. So she left this July. I think it's a good thing.

I hate to see the war come again though, and I'm afraid it will, because it sure looks its going to happen. We're gonna have to do something with them over there. In order for it to be free for all of us we had to fight. If we hadn't of served in there we wouldn't have had a free country today. Germany and Japan would have had the United States. I think that we're lucky that we're still free and we still have our freedom.

"I'm glad I served. I'm proud I am a veteran."

Anything else you would like to share?

This past August the University of Hawaii was doing some navy diving with a three-man sub, and they went down and they happened to find that submarine that we had sunk sixty years ago. They called me and asked me if I'd like to go down in a three-man sub, twelve hundred feet down, and look at that. I said that I'd be right there. Lucky for me, the Discovery Channel picked it up, and they're doing a documentary, and they took me over there to Pearl Harbor. I was over there for a week. There were three of us that went down on a three-man sub, and we were down for three and a half hours, twelve hundred feet on the bottom of the ocean, and they took movies. It's going to be out sometime in March of this

year. When that all takes place of course I'll let the newspapers here know about it, and then they can see that. That was a wonderful experience. I took a lot of pictures while I was down there. It was just kind of a closure for me, because I saw it when it got hit, I saw it when it was going down, and now I went down and saw it laying on the bottom. They say that the two men - it was a two-man sub - they say that the two men in there are still in there. They're Japanese. And the live torpedoes are still in the sub, and they didn't have a chance to fire those, so we saved some ship probably by sinking it. I'm proud of that.

Will attended a Technical College to become a printer after the war, he then worked at a print shop for over 25 years before he retired. He enjoys hunting and fishing and has 3 children, 4 grandchildren, and 3 great-grandchildren.

