

Teaching Pearl Harbor: Honoring the greatest generation

BY ANGELA JONES • For the Telegraph Herald
Dec 7, 2016



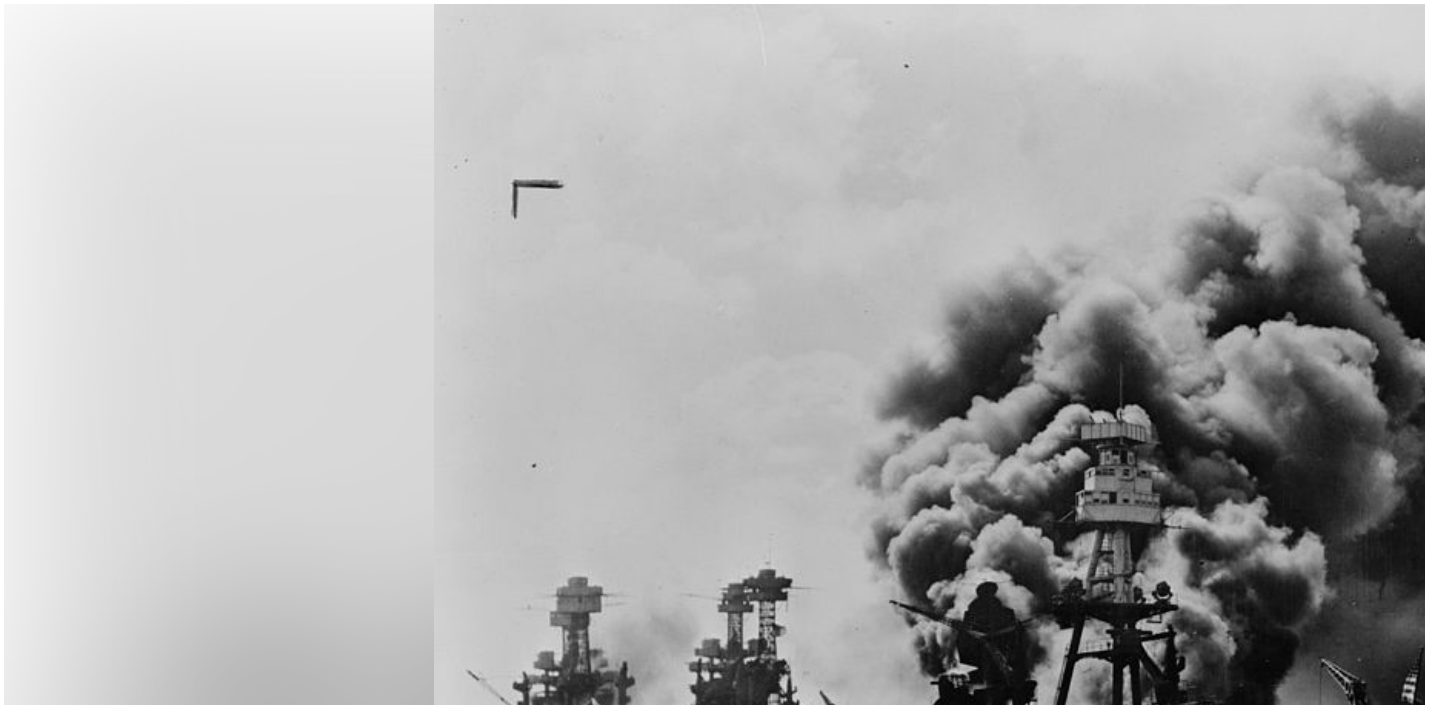
Michael Knock

Photo by: Contributed



Jenni Ostwinkle

Photo by: Nicki Kohl Telegraph Herald



In 2011, I recalled hearing about 110-year-old Frank Buckles, the last of the World War I veterans from the United States. With his passing, no American was left to speak about that war first-hand.

Now, surviving World War II veterans are in their twilight years. Few can still give us first-hand accounts of that “day which will live in infamy” — Dec. 7, 1941.

How do we continue learning the historic events and motivations of that day? How do students today learn it?

There are countless books, newspaper clippings and website pages. But new generations coming of age may be less likely to pursue such learning, and they are far less likely to know someone who participated in such a historic event 75 years ago.

And yet, if they do not know someone personally, they may know someone who knows someone who was there.

Michael Knock, professor of history at Clarke University, is one such person. His father was a boy during WWII and too young to go to war, but he does remember exactly where he was and what he was doing when he heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor.

“My dad was in a doctor’s office,” Knock said. “He had fallen out of a tree and broken his arm.”

This link, which might seem slight, can still help to personalize a time in history. Knock said his father would often watch movies and TV shows about Pearl Harbor.

Knock’s students are less likely to have such a connection to Pearl Harbor, of course, but their professor is in a prime position to help the historical event come to life.

He could do it with readings and discussions, but he chooses a more interactive method “to provide more context for the event.” It’s involves role-playing, with Knock playing the role of the Japanese emperor.

“I split students into two groups: advisers that need to convince me that the attack is a good idea, and advisers that need to convince me it’s a bad idea,” Knock said. “The second group does have it a little easier, though, because history proves them correct.”

Knock explained that teaching about Pearl Harbor from the Japanese perspective shows how that country’s leaders thought that, by attacking the U.S. without warning, they could force the U.S. into a negotiation.

“The Japanese had an advanced economy, equal to the U.S.’, and a military more modern than the U.S.’ — but we had potential,” he said.

On the world stage, the countries’ mutual interests in China and in the Mideast would inevitably lead to war because Japan wanted to maintain its sphere of influence in Asia.

Seeing the issue from a Japanese perspective, then, helps students understand that Japan wasn’t interested in conquering the U.S., but rather in forcing negotiation.

This lesson helps Knock’s students understand something they cannot easily access with some primary documents — for instance, the “resentment that Japan in the 1930s had toward U.S. and the West.” And how the West, in turn, did not look favorably upon Japan.

The exercise, then, helps students understand the background and motivation by getting to the perspectives of the time, Knock said. Looking at the U.S. from outside can help define a larger image of it and allow students to better understand American perspectives and motivations at the time.

It's incredibly difficult to feel close to historical events. If Knock can spark interest for learning and understanding history, though, then students might continue to pursue further learning on their own.

Although students — or anyone — can visit archives and historical societies, they are more likely to access information online, and numerous sites can help them extend their understanding.

One such site is ushistoryscene.com, which was co-founded by Rhae Lynn Barnes and Jenni Ostwinkle, a resident of Dyersville, Iowa. The site includes a page about Pearl Harbor with a link to a primary source investigative report by The Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack conducted by the U.S. Congress.

The site links to multimedia, primary sources and other materials, many of which could be used as teacher resources.

“People connect to stories and want to tell stories,” said Ostwinkle, a history graduate of the University of Northern Iowa who earned a master’s degree in history from Harvard University. “Videos and oral histories (for instance) contextualize why a situation is important.”

Further, videos and photos help bring events we have not personally experienced to life. It doesn't matter if we learn from a class activity or from the internet; what matters is that we try to understand history and that we keep the stories going, even when they live on in infamy and especially when the last of any generation is gone.