

Richard W. Stoiber

Nominated by Marsha (Stoiber) Kennedy and Nancy (Stoiber) Jones

PEARL HARBOR SURVIVOR FROM MARSHFIELD,
WISCONSIN

Shipfitter Third Class Richard W. Stoiber, U.S. Navy from Marshfield, Wisconsin, was on the Battleship U.S.S. California in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He had just turned 20 years old and had been in the Navy almost one year by then. On June 1, 1941, he was assigned to the U.S.S. California. On Friday, December 5, 1941 he arrived in Pearl Harbor from Long Beach, California after two weeks of extensive training at sea. He was due to go on Liberty to Honolulu that following Sunday morning, December 7th and was preparing to go to Divine Services. Before he could get to Services, a seaman returned from the top deck saying that “real bombs” were being dropped on the Naval Air Station on Ford Island adjacent to where his ship was tied up. General Quarters were sounded and all hands dashed to their battle stations. Shortly after securing all doors and hatches, his ship was hit on the port side by an aircraft launched torpedo. Then sometime later they received another torpedo hit, the ship began listing to port about 25 degrees. Orders were given to counterflood voids on the starboard side to offset flooding to prevent the California from capsizing. The power went out and the air was heavy with fuel oil fumes from ruptured oil tanks.



A 500-pound Japanese bomb exploded on the deck not far from where he had been. Black smoke was billowing all around Battleship Row from oil fires on the surface of Pearl Harbor. Bullets from aircraft machine guns were ricocheting off steel bulkheads coming from all directions. Word had passed to abandon ship but Richard did not hear the order and remained at the battle station. Around 11:00 am Richard appeared on the Quarter Deck where he surveyed the terrible sight around him. Ships were burning, some sunk, others capsized, and burning oil floated on the water. Richard was told to jump off the ship and get into the motor launch which would take him to shore. After jumping off the ship, he was covered with oil and they could not pull him into the launch so he had to swim about 100 yards to Ford Island with burning oil all around him. After reaching shore at the Ford Island Naval Air Station he volunteered to man a machine gun nest on the airfield. Two days later he reported back to his ship and found out that they had mustered the crew and put him down as missing in action.

The Marshfield News-Herald December 16, 1941 issue reported that 20-year-old Richard W. Stoiber was Marshfield's first casualty of World War II. Ida and Raymond Stoiber received a telegram from Admiral Nimitz informing them that their son was lost in action in the performance of his duty and in service to his country. A requiem high mass was sung for him at St. John's Catholic Church in Marshfield.

On December 31, 1941 the Navy Department officially notified his parents that Richard had survived.

Richard remained a member of a skeleton crew that stayed with the U.S.S. California which was crippled and settled in the mud in Pearl Harbor. The ship was raised and rebuilt into a modern warship in Bremerton, Washington. While he was in Bremerton, his hometown fiancée, Virginia Braem traveled to meet him. They were married in Bremerton on October 2, 1943.

On May 5, 1944, the rebuilt U.S.S. California got underway with a newly trained crew. Their first operation after Pearl Harbor was in Saipan then Guam. They made an assault on the Philippines which included neutralizing the beach on the island of Leyte so General MacArthur could return to the Philippines. They had a revenge encounter with the Japanese fleet in the Battle of Surigao Strait, then on to the Lingayen Gulf Operation during which they were damaged by a kamikaze suicide plane. Then it was back to the USA for rest and repair.

On January 12, 1942, Richard was commended by his commanding officer for performance of duty in a highly meritorious manner during the attack and was advanced to Shipfitter Second Class. On July 12, 1942, the Board of Awards Pacific Fleet awarded him a citation for exceptional courage and judgment and performance of duty on the U.S.S. California during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He requested a change of duty in 1945. He was a Shipfitter First Class by then and wanted to see some other duty. He was assigned to the U.S.S. Ardent #16, a floating repair dock in the Philippines which repaired damaged ships in the Pacific Theater. These drydocks were responsible for keeping our Navy afloat. He was made Chief Master Shipfitter in the Spring of 1946 and that Fall decided to leave the Navy and was discharged at the Mare Island Naval Yard in Vallejo, California in December 1946

After his discharge, Richard returned to Marshfield to raise his family with wife, Virginia, and two daughters, Nancy and Marsha. After his discharge he was very involved in the VFW. He was a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association and was a role model for young men interested in military service. He was asked several times later in his life to recount his Pearl Harbor story to writers who were interested in the Pearl Harbor attack and his personal account. He attended several anniversaries of the attack in Hawaii where he met with many other survivors. He was an ordinary hero to his family, his church, his friends, and many young people. He was kind and would do anything for someone in need if he could. His experiences in the war made him appreciate every day of his life.

Richard Stoiber passed away on November 24, 2001.