Pearl Harbor: 70 years later, seniors remember

By Diane C. Lade, Staff writer

10:09 AM EST, December 7, 2011

They were in the street playing kickball, at the movies, listening to a New York Giants football game on the radio. There were weddings, birthdays. Soldiers were hanging out at their barracks, enjoying some weekend at-ease time.

In short, it was a perfectly normal Sunday on Dec. 7, 1941 — 70 years ago today — when people got the news that would change their world: that a place called Pearl Harbor, which many of them had never heard of, had been bombed by the Japanese.

"We all said, 'What's a Pearl Harbor?' " recalled Karl Victor, 83, of Boca Raton. He was having his bar mitzvah celebration when someone ran in, shouting the news. The guests then piled into the rabbi's study, which had the only radio in the building.

Today's commemoration ceremonies, including those in South Florida communities, will honor the roughly 3,600 who died or were wounded during the attack. These gatherings are growing increasingly poignant, with only about 3,000 members of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association nationwide — so few that the group is considering permanently shutting down.

Abe Stein, a 94-year-old Aventura resident who as a medic carried bodies into Pearl Harbor's morgue, was the only survivor at the annual wreath-laying ceremony in Dania Beach on Sunday.

The attack is what Florida Atlantic University nursing professor and researcher Dr. Patricia Liehr calls a "marker day," when millions of people can recall what they were doing or where they were in a single moment.

Marker days often involve loss or trauma, "although it's different for people who were touched from afar," Liehr said. "Still, they were touched in a very profound way."

Each generation usually has a marker day, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, or the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. For the men and women now in their 80s and 90s who fought overseas or protected the homefront during World War II, that day is Dec. 7, said Liehr, who specializes in combining story collecting with nursing care.

Arnold Swartz, 95, is the sole Pearl Harbor eyewitness scheduled to speak at the Wynmoor retirement community's event today in Coconut Creek. Swartz, who had left medical school when he was drafted by the Marines in 1941, was the officer in charge of security that day at Pearl Harbor.
He had just checked on the sentries a little before 8 a.m. when, looking up, he noticed "many, many planes in the sky," and assumed they were returning American bombers. Then one banked into a turn, he said, and Swartz saw the red "rising sun" circle of Japan on its wing.

"It got noisy and I could see flashes from the harbor as the bombs hit," said Swartz, of Coconut Creek, who gives lectures and shows his World War II artifacts at schools.

By the time it was over, a little less than two hours later, 21 U.S. ships had been sunk or damaged.

Ron Reyes, 77, also was near the harbor that day when three Zeros flew in over the mountains near his house. Reyes, whose father worked for Hawaiian Electric, was 7 and had snuck outside to play before his mother was awake.

The planes dipped and suddenly, bullets began bouncing off the pavement, with two grazing his legs, Reyes said.

"I ran down the street, barefooted and in short pants, and pounded on my front door until my mother came," recalled Reyes, of Davie.

Of course, Pearl Harbor is a touchstone even for those who were living thousands of miles away.

Isidor and Etta Becker, married the night before, were honeymooning at a Manhattan hotel on Dec. 7 when, like many in a time before ubiquitous television, they heard the news on the radio. They were confused: a broadcaster cut into the Giants' game transmission, announced there had been an attack, then went back to football.

The Beckers, now residents of Boca Raton, didn't realize the country was headed into war until the next day, when President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his "day of infamy" speech.

"We were so upset, we cut short our honeymoon and went back home," said Etta, 88. Within a year, Isidor was with an Army gun battalion in western Europe, and Etta was living with her parents.

Gary Mormino, a University of South Florida at St. Petersburg history professor writing a book about Florida and World War II, said those he's interviewed about Pearl Harbor often use the term "stabbed in the back," even though the base was a military target. But their collective memories of what they were doing that Sunday pre-attack paint a bucolic portrait of 1940s American rituals, Mormino said: They were at soda shops, coming home from church, listening to the radio with their parents.

After the bombs fell, things changed quickly. Men were drafted and boys like Hal Bulgach tried to enlist, although at 19 he was too young.

"I felt like I wanted to do something," said Bulgach, 90, of Coconut Creek, who did eventually get into the service but was sidelined by injuries. "I was a good kid in those days."