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Jack Snyder, 91, a U.S. Navy combat corpsman during World War II, bows his head during a prayer at a luncheon at the Sharonville Convention Center sponsored by The Urolovic Group to honor veterans Wednesday for the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

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4A THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2016 /// THE ENQUIRER

WWII veterans remember Pearl Harbor

Gathering offers insights into transformational moment in US history

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Seventy-five men and women assembled at the Sharonville Convention Center Wednesday to remember the battle that changed the world forever, and to thank a group of World War II veterans, now in their 90s.

The luncheon event on the anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor was sponsored by the Urology Group, after doctors realized many of their patients had served in WWII.

Doctors, administrators and staff of the practice thanked veterans of the Marine Corps, Navy, Army and the Army Air Corps, who shared their stories. Other speakers included University of Cincinnati professor Robert Miller, who has written about the war from a Cincinnati perspective.

"It was a game changer," Miller said of the Pearl Harbor attack. "Our world was not the same after that."

"That day, and the day after (when war was declared), is the moment of transformation," he said. "It's second only to July 4, 1776 in terms of the impact of creating a nation we are privileged to live in."

Gold-medal Marine

Robert Watson sat among dozens of comrades, though singular, as a representative of a historic unit of the Marine Corps.



THE ENQUIRER/CARA OWSLEY

About 75 veterans from the Cincinnati area attended a luncheon and patriotic program for the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

He wore a medal around his neck, bestowed by President Barack Obama in 2012 to members of the Montford Point Marines, the first African-American troops in the Marine Corps.

Watson joined the military after President Roosevelt set a directive that allowed African Americans to be recruited into the Marine Corps. The soldiers were sent to a segregated boot camp at Montford Point, within Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Led by white officers and trained by black drill instructors, Watson was a member of the 4th Marine Ammunition Co., and served in Guadalcanal, as well as Guam and Saipan.

Gary Kirsh, president of the Urology Group, singled out Watson, praising him for his service in the artillery unit, which he described as exceptionally skilled.

The Congressional Gold Medal, which reads "For Outstanding Perseverance and Courage that Inspired Social Change in the Marine Corps," was cast in bronze replicas for members of the unit. Watson, a Hamilton native, currently lives in Woodlawn.

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Single-handed heroism

Firmin Hingsbergen registered for the draft on Sept. 13, 1943, on his 18th birthday. By Dec. 2, he was in boot camp, training as a gunner.

Three days after 100,000 American troops landed on Leyte Island, Philippines, beginning one of the bloodiest battles of the war in the Pacific, Hingsbergen found himself serving as a gunner on a landing craft gunboat. It was Oct. 23, 1944.

The Hamilton native, now 91, remembered that day with clarity.

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"It was almost daylight, and this (Japanese) plane came across our gunboat, and dropped a bomb," Hingsbergen said. The bomb didn't detonate, making a splash in the water. "It was a miracle."

"He turned and came back, cutting his engine. I saw a blast of exhaust, and I shot him."

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When the sun rose, the downed plane was recovered and the pilot's body was brought to the gunship. Hingsbergen was permitted to retrieve items from the pilot's body, and he recalls collecting photos. In his mind, he registered the hit as a victory, saving his fellow soldiers and himself from death as the pilot had returned for a second attempt to bomb the gunship.

"You're excited," he said of the rush. Hingsbergen received a commendation for his actions that day.

Living history

Stories similar to Hingsbergen's were shared with Princeton High School students, as part of their International Baccalaureate program. Working with the school's film students, the two groups will create a living history chronicle. Princeton senior Rachel Moorman-Minton interviewed George Drysdale, 91. He enlisted in 1943, choosing the Navy because his father had been a POW in the Scottish Army.

While he didn't see battle, he served in the Philippines, Japan and China.

"He was younger than me when he enlisted," Moorman-Minton said of Drysdale, who entered the Navy at age 17. She was struck by Drysdale's insight, which rang true with her, despite their nearly 75-year age difference.

"His generation was goal-oriented," Moorman-Minton said. Drysdale noticed differences in today's youth.

"George fears for the future. He feels that God has been removed from America," she said, "and hopes we can solve some of the issues.

"I am passionate about that, too."

D-Day survivor

When Charles Geraci enlisted in the Army on Dec. 10, 1942, he had no idea how profoundly his life would change.

After basic training, he was stationed in England, in early 1943. He'd trained in artillery, but was deployed as an infantryman. That change took him to Wales.

"It was one big rush after another," he said. "I'd never seen so many troops, so much artillery lined up.

"I thought that England would sink."

By June 6, he was sailing across the English Channel to the beaches of Normandy. It was chaos, with Navy cover overhead, protecting the troops as they landed. Soon after arriving, Geraci was shot.

"I didn't look fast enough, and a sniper got me," he said. After he recovered, he was sent back to his unit. Soon after, he was wounded by shrapnel.

"They said, 'we'll tape it up and you'll be OK.'"

Finally, he was shot during combat. He was in Normandy for only five months, and credits his survival to God.

"I asked the good Lord to help me," Geraci said, pulling out the Immaculate Heart of Mary medal he wore then, and wears today. "People around me, and on the side of me, were shot and killed. We were there to do the job, and we did it. And I came back."

Upon his return to the United States, doctors told Geraci he would likely not be able to father a child because of the extensive wounds he'd suffered. The 91-year-old Norwood resident smiled as he told the story, looking to his wife, Helen.

It wasn't to be, she said. They have 16 children.

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