

The Edward Johann Story

Compiled by Don Porth with information from:

- Associated Press Writer Audrey McAvoy - December 7, 2009
- "A Real Nice Guy: Ed Johann Turns 90" - By G. Mick McLean - July 6, 2013
- "Salute To Veterans - Ed Johann, Pearl Harbor Survivor" - By Cassie Ruud - November 8, 2017
- "Pearl Harbor Survivor Cruises Local Trail Via Motorized Chair" - By Megan Stewart - August 17, 2022
- Ed Johann Himself! - December 2022

Born on July 11, 1923, Edward Allen Johann had no idea the path his life would take. He was born in San Fernando, California.

“My childhood wasn’t too good, and I wanted to get away from home and be one less mouth to feed,” Ed recalled. “I knew I couldn’t get a job because I was a scrawny kid, and a lot of big, muscled men were out of jobs in those days. It was during the Depression. My father worked at a produce packing house for 35 cents an hour,” Ed said. “But he was lucky to have a job. I knew that I could not get a job, but maybe join the Army and make a few dollars. My brothers and I sometimes got a nickel and for this 5 cents we could go to the movie on Saturday afternoon. At one of these movies, it featured two sailors singing and dancing. They also had pretty girls around so I joined the Navy in 1941. I was paid \$21 a month of which I had a \$10 allotment sent home to my family. At \$11 a month, I felt rich.”

After joining the Navy at age 17, Ed was assigned to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, serving on the USS Wright. Then came the fateful day in December, 1941.



Ed Johann - 1941

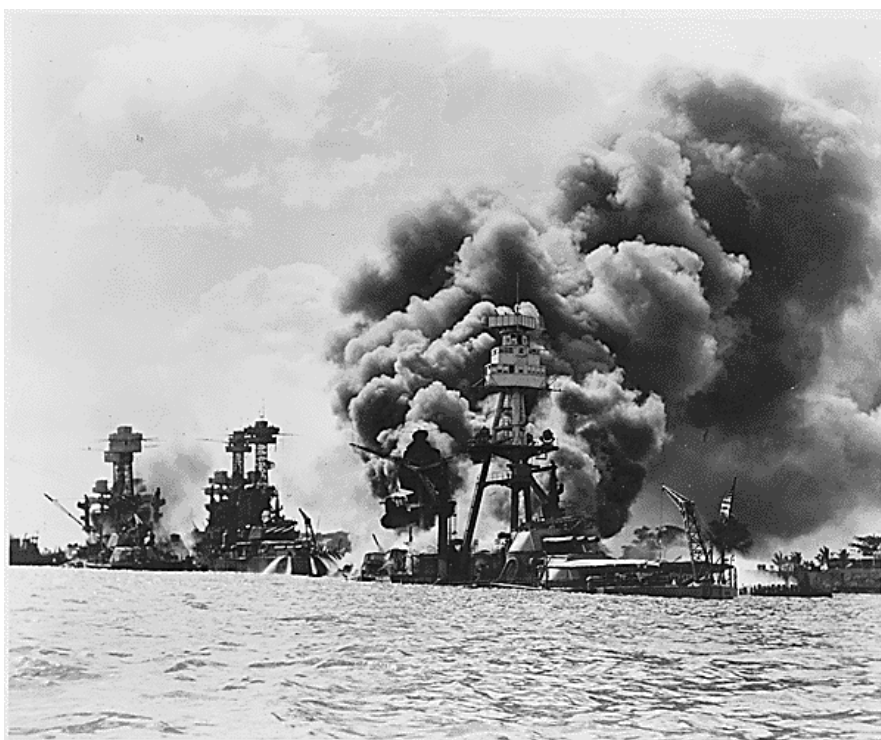
Johann remembers the December 7th bombing of Pearl Harbor with sharp clarity. While Ed was stationed on the USS Wright (a seaplane tender), he had been detailed to the hospital ship, the USS Solace, for a tonsillectomy. While he recovered, he and two other sailors were assigned to a 30-foot motor launcher that transported sailors to and from shore, much like a water taxi.

Ed spotted planes coming in over Pearl Harbor. He thought they were U.S. aircraft conducting drills until explosions and flames erupted from stricken ships in the harbor. “It was Sunday morning, and we were doing our work when the planes came over,” he said. “We didn’t wait for orders. We just took off over to the battleship and started taking in the wounded. Everyone was panicking and guys were jumping over each other.”

Then came screams of sailors; the stench of burning oil and flesh. Ed said that he and his crewmates would drop off a load of injured men on the USS Solace and go back out for more wounded. "We just kept saving people. That was our duty. We didn't even look up to look at the planes much."

He did see the armor piercing bomb drop on the USS Arizona. "It went down a couple of decks before it exploded. It went down to the powder room - the ammunition room - and it made a big, black plume of smoke in the sky." The dive bombers flew into the black smoke. "Boy, that black smoke... the Japanese pilot that dropped that bomb not only damaged the Arizona, but he also helped a lot of his fellow dive bombers by letting them fly into that smoke. You couldn't see them. You couldn't shoot at them because the smoke was so thick."

Ed's motor launcher rushed to the USS Arizona, which by now had been hit by several bombs. Already fueled and manned when the attack began, their 30-foot boat was the first rescue vessel to arrive at the scene.



They found the water littered with people. Some were wounded, some dead, some unharmed. Many were covered in the leaking oil from the ships. They loaded as many as they could and delivered them to the hospital ship before returning to the USS West Virginia for more.

"As we're pulling them out of the water, a lot of times the skin would come right off the arm," Ed explained. "They would just be black with oil, except maybe you could see the white of their eyes."

The planes kept coming. Dive-bombers plunged out of the sky, dropping bombs and strafing the water and ships with machine gun fire before roaring back up for another round. Torpedo bombers flew in level to drop their submersible weapons for underwater assaults.

The burning, sinking vessels at first lowered men into Johann's makeshift rescue boat. But some sailors started to panic and jump into their small ship, forcing it to pull away so it wouldn't sink. "Some of the sailors would be like in shock and some of 'em would be like going out of control, screaming and hollering," Johann said.

"I'm sure that the Japanese Zero fighters must have fired at us many times." Johann and his fellow servicemen attempted to save the wounded, while being shot at, dealing with small fires, explosions and smoke. Thirst, hunger and exhaustion were additional factors Johann said he fought against.

“We were in a harbor of hell,” Johann said. “We worked on regardless of the stench of the smoke and burnt flesh and the taste of the fuel oil that made you vomit. The sounds of explosions, aircraft motors, the yelling and screaming, the eyes seeing grotesque scenes of disaster, body parts. We never thought about our own safety, just kept going, saving others, some of them screaming out in pain, some quiet in shock staring at you, talking with their eyes. All during this horrendous day, we never took a moment to rest,” Johann said. “We continued to save sailors.”

The next morning, after nervously worrying the Japanese planes would return, Johann's boat unloaded men from the Solace who failed to make it through the night and delivered them to land. “We had them stacked like cordwood in our boat. The open end, where the feet were sticking out, were these big brown tags that said 'unknown, unknown,’” Johann said. The military hadn't adopted dog tags yet and many couldn't be identified.

“We didn't survive by any skill,” Johann said of his boat. “It was just luck, pure luck. Because all we were concentrating on was trying to save people, and not save ourselves.”

Johann said the days after the attack were extremely stressful because of the anticipation of more attacks. “All we heard were rumors for the next few days,” he said. “We saw what happened once. Could it happen again? It was terrible. It was a hell of a thing.”

The attack at Pearl Harbor sank four U.S. battleships and destroyed 188 U.S. aircraft. Another four battleships were damaged, along with three cruisers and three destroyers. There were 2,335 military personnel killed, including 2,008 Navy personnel, 109 Marines, and 218 Army. In addition, 68 civilians were killed in the attack, making the total 2403 people dead. The total number of wounded was 1,143, including 710 Navy, 69 Marines, 364 Army, and 103 civilians.

After Pearl Harbor, Ed continued his naval career, working on a seaplane tender and traveling to various parts of the Pacific Theater including Midway, Wake Island, the Fiji Islands, and Australia. Ed also joined the U.S. Navy boxing team. Ed received an honorable discharge in 1945, having been awarded the U.S. Navy Medal of Valor commendation for his bravery during Pearl Harbor.



Firefighter Ed Johann - 1951

Johann said his time in the Navy impacted him greatly. “I went into the Navy as a kid of 17 and got out as a man,” he said. “I learned more than I had bargained for, but I am quite proud of successfully saving many sailors lives on December 7, 1941.”

“Those who have returned are just as important as those we lost to wars and conflicts,” Johann said.

After leaving the Navy, Ed returned to California where he worked in sawmills before moving to Portland, Oregon. On January 1, 1951, Ed would become a

Portland Firefighter. Ed says the horrors he went through led him to become a firefighter. "I think I had it in my mind," Johann said, "I wanted to help people."

Ed's first assignment would be to Engine 17, located in Northwest Portland at 824 NW 24th Avenue. He would be transferred 7 months later to nearby Truck 3 at 1425 NW Glisan Street. Ed would move to Truck 8 in 1960. It was located in Hillsdale at 1505 SW DeWitt Street. In 1966, he would move to

engine company duties, being assigned to Engine 2 located near Oregon Health Sciences University at 630 SW Gaines Street. In November 1975, he would move to Engine 15 in Portland Heights at 1920 SW Spring Street. His final assignment at Engine 25 would begin in 1977. Engine 25 was located at 5211 SE Mall Street. He would remain at that station until his retirement on January 9, 1979.



Station 17



Truck 8 at Station 5



Truck 3

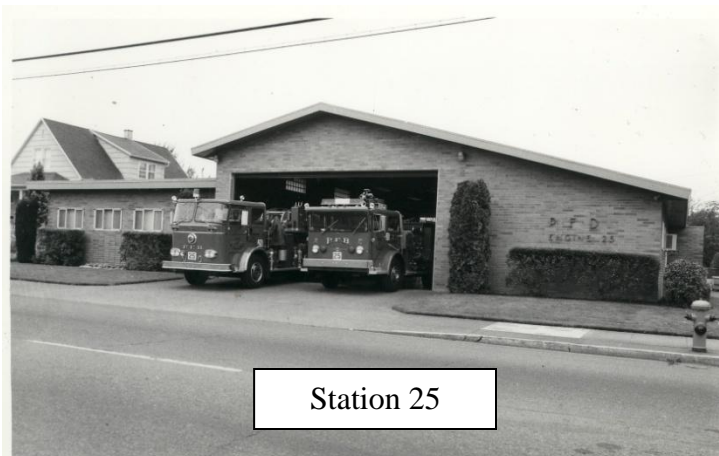


Station 2



Station 15

In a 2022 interview with Ed, he talked about his fire service career. Strangely, his stories of firefighting were less about heroics or notable emergencies than the stories of co-workers and station life in general. Of course, compared to the drama he experienced early in his Naval career, it would take a lot to stand out as remarkable. But he stood proud as he recalled his 28 years of service to Portland Fire and the citizens of Portland, Oregon.



During his firefighting career, and after, Ed became an accomplished mountain climber and mountain guide. He was involved in search and rescue operations. Of his mountain climbing, Ed relates “it usually involved bad weather and hazardous terrain,” he said. “I climbed many mountains around the world, including peaks in Canada, Alaska, Norway, Mexico, and Central and South America. I climbed a 22,205 foot peak in Peru, which is twice the height of Mt. Hood (in Oregon).”

The call of nearby Mt. Hood, in north-central Oregon, led Ed to the Mazama Climbing Club. “I have climbed many peaks, but the experience of leading six blind teenagers to the top of Mt. Hood is the high point of my mountaineering career.”



He loves to tell the story of how he led six teens ranging from age 12 to 18, to the summit of Mt. Hood. The students, who attended the Washington State School for the Blind, were accompanied by two experienced mountaineers assigned to each student. Ed would lead the group up the peak. They left Timberline Lodge around 2:30 in the morning on May 12, 1973. They would achieve their goal and reach the summit of the 11,235 snow-capped peak. They were able to summit, then return to the lodge,

in 12 hours. Along the way, Ed expected them to tire and ask to turn back. He was impressed that they chose to press on to achieve their goal of arriving at the summit.

Even with the incredible adventure resume Ed compiled in his life, he also managed a marriage of over 60 years and raised three children. He went on to co-found the North Lincoln Historical Museum in Lincoln City, Oregon. He would also serve on the Lincoln City, city council.

But this life was not without its baggage. Every July 4th, Ed goes to bed early to avoid the fireworks because they remind him of the Pearl Harbor's explosions. Reflecting back on his life, Johann said he is most proud of all the lives he saved, both in the Navy, as a firefighter, and as a mountain rescuer.

Ed has written four books, and two of them — *Hazardous Adventures I and II* — are available on Amazon. The books are about his life and adventures in the Navy, as a firefighter, as a professional boxer, and as a member of search and rescue.

Johann's granddaughter, Rachel Howard, might be partial but said Johann is a guy to celebrate. "He's every man's man," she said. "He has lived, loved, and has always been positive. It's amazing," she said.



While living an extraordinary and remarkable life, Ed's business card reads simply, "Ed Johann, A Real Nice Guy!"

Ed Johann passed away peacefully in his home at 7:25 pm on December 26, 2023. Ed is survived by his Granddaughter Rachel Howard, Great Grandson Benjamin Jennings, and Great Grandson Jason Jennings. Ed's ashes were scattered across Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in 2024.

December 7, 1941

By Ed Johann, U.S. Navy, USS Solace

In the quiet of a morning, as darkness is turning to semi-darkness,
streaks of gray penetrate. A new day is born.

Silently, as the sun rises, embracing our being, we realize we have
much to be thankful for.

The dawn continues to blossom. We taste, we hear, we smell, we
see, we feel, we partake; then suddenly repulsive violence is
slammed into our lives.

We were surrounded by grotesque sights of nauseating brutality. The
hideous sounds of loud explosions. The stench of burning flesh. The
ceaseless screams of pain from men horribly injured. Some, blown
apart.

I have fought in battles. I have seen men die. I feel no glory.
Instead I cry.

