

Beacon Hill Byline

December 11, 1997

Remembering Pearl Harbor

“A date which will live in infamy!” That is a quotation familiar to all of us, whether from grainy film clips or from living through the events of Dec. 7, 1941. It is a day that is kept fresh in our memory by the annual reports on television news programs.

Longmeadow’s Andrew Fitzhugh took the opportunity presented when December 7 fell this year on a Sunday to remind the churchgoers at St. Andrew’s Church of the anniversary. Col. Fitzhugh was stationed at Pearl Harbor on that date, and he donned his World War II uniform in tribute.

The date marks the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and entry of the United States to World War II. So long as Americans remember the date, we will retain our belief in the necessity and propriety of fighting that war. But will future generations of Americans still remember?

Articles appearing in the press recently have asked that question. It seems that historians who were educated in the ‘60s or ‘70s are not convinced of the need to declare war in 1941. They would teach a revised history instead of the reality that was lived by the veterans who endured the experience of war. Their version might differ from the memories of Nick Pellegrino, another Longmeadow veteran. Nick was held prisoner in Japan after the Death March on Bataan.

The thought that anyone could endorse such “scholarship” seems impossible. But other incidents of historic revisionism give credence to the premise. The history of the use of atomic weapons has been revised by no less an institution than the Smithsonian Institution in a planned museum display of 1995. The Institution planned an extensive display that delivered the message that the use of the bomb was unnecessary.

The plans of the Smithsonian were derailed by one obstacle, the professional administration did not consider – the soldiers of the war in the Pacific. An active offensive mounted by veterans forced to change in the display. Those veterans had first hand knowledge of the events leading up to using the bomb. They knew of the considerations of alternate methods of ending the war and costs in human life of those alternatives. But what will happen when those veterans are gone? The people who planned the display may try again in another 25 years.

The Council on Aging sponsored an extensive commemoration of the end of World War II. If you remember the war years, will you continue to talk about them with youngsters? If you do not remember, will you join me in continuing to talk with the veterans, read the stories and watch for signs that academia is challenging their validity?

I come from the generation that still refers to World War II as “The War,” and some of my earliest memories related to the conflict. The lives of all of us have been framed in some fashion by the Americans who fought in that war. It is up to us to protect that heritage for our children.