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Veteran who was nation's oldest Pearl Harbor survivor dies at 106

By PAM KRAGEN
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Ray Chavez, widely recognized as the oldest surviving veteran of the attack on Pearl Harbor, died Wednesday at 106.

Kathleen Chavez, who had been her father's live-in caregiver for more than 20 years, said he passed away peacefully in his sleep early Wednesday. His health had declined in recent weeks, and he was on hospice care.

Memorial services are pending, but Chavez said her father had asked to be buried at Miramar National Cemetery.

Ray Chavez surged into national prominence three years ago when fellow Pearl Harbor veterans recognized him as the oldest survivor of the 1941 Japanese attack that ushered the U.S. into World War II.

Since 2015, he's been an invited guest at the White House, attended numerous commemorative events in California and Hawaii, and was a frequent parade grand marshal.

"Ray was the epitome of the Greatest Generation," said Richard Rovsek, a trustee of the nonprofit Spirit of Liberty Foundation in Rancho Santa Fe. "He was always proud to be an American and proud of the military."

Chavez was born in San Bernardino in 1911 and grew up in San Diego's Old Town and Logan Heights communities, where his large family ran a wholesale flower business.

In his early 20s, he married and had a daughter. In 1938, at the age of 27, he joined the Navy and was assigned to the U.S. minesweeper Condor at Pearl Harbor.

At 3:45 a.m. Dec. 7, 1941, Seaman 1st Class Chavez's crew was sweeping the east entrance to the harbor when they spotted the periscope of a Japanese midget submarine. After depth charges were dropped to sink the sub in 1,500 feet of water, the rest of the morning passed uneventfully.

Chavez told the San Diego Union-Tribune that he was asleep at home in nearby Ewa Beach when the Japanese bombing raid began about 8 a.m.

"My wife ran in and said, 'We're being attacked,' and I said, 'Who's going to attack us? Nobody.' She said that the whole harbor was on fire, and when I got outside I saw that everything was black from all the burning oil."

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He spent the next nine days on continuous duty in and around Pearl Harbor and said the scenes he witnessed left deep emotional scars.

Over the next four years he rose to the rank of chief petty officer, serving on transport ships that delivered tanks and Marines to shore in eight Pacific battles. Although he wasn't injured during the war, he retired from the Navy in 1945 with psychological wounds from the terrible things he witnessed.

“He said that after a couple of the battles he saw, he started to shake,” Kathleen Chavez said. “First it was his hands, then it was his arms, then it was his whole body. By the time the war was over, his whole body shook.”

During his Navy exit physical, a doctor wanted Ray Chavez to spend some time recovering in a mental health clinic, but he feared it would affect his job opportunities. He declined and moved back to San Diego, where he got a job at a nursery. After two years of working outdoors in the fresh air, he got better, Kathleen said.

In the 1950s, he and his wife, Margaret, suffered an unimaginable tragedy when their daughter, son-in-law and 18-month-old granddaughter were killed in a car accident.

To help mend their broken hearts, the Chavezes adopted 5-year-old Kathleen from a San Diego orphanage in 1957. She, too, served in the Navy, from 1974 to 1991, and was recognized as the Navy's first female jet engine mechanic. She has lived with her father since her mother's death in the mid-1980s.

Ray Chavez spent 30 years as a groundskeeper at UC San Diego, then ran his own landscaping and groundskeeping business in the Poway area until he finally retired at 96. He was an avid reader of nonfiction books and loved to travel.

Kathleen said her father didn't speak about his Pearl Harbor experiences until 1991, when he was invited to attend the 50th anniversary memorial in Hawaii.

It was such a moving experience for him that he and Kathleen went back to Hawaii for the 55th, 60th and 65th anniversaries. In recent years, they'd gone back every year as the number of survivors dwindled.

“We went last year, and if he was still alive, we were going back again next month,” Kathleen said. “I think he enjoyed the experience, but he never saw himself as any different from the other men he served with. He'd always say, ‘I'm no hero. I just did my job.’”

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Chavez was the child of Mexican immigrants, and Kathleen said he did experience some racism and discrimination as a high school student and in the Navy. But he remained a proud citizen.

From the age of 21, he voted in every election. He told Rovsek that the only Republican he ever voted for was Dwight D. Eisenhower, an Army veteran.

Chavez's political leanings caused a minor kerfuffle in May when he was invited to meet President Trump at the White House, Kathleen said. The night before his Oval Office visit, Chavez was interviewed at his hotel by a CNN reporter and said on video aired nationally, "I didn't vote for that guy."

Nonetheless, Chavez charmed Trump the next morning, and the president lavishly praised Chavez during a public Memorial Day service.

"The crowd just stood up and erupted," said Rovsek, who escorted the Chavezes to Washington on behalf of the Spirit of Liberty Foundation.

Rovsek said he is planning a memorial wreath-laying ceremony in Chavez's honor at the next Pearl Harbor anniversary memorial Dec. 7 in Hawaii.

Kragen writes for the San Diego Union-Tribune.

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Pam Kragen

Pam Kragen is a feature writer who specializes in writing human interest, theater and opera stories. She joined The San Diego Union-Tribune staff in October 2012 after 27 years at the North County Times, where she served as the Arts & Features Editor, as well as the paper's longtime arts writer and theater/opera critic. She is the president and co-founder of the San Diego Theatre Critics Circle. She holds a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from San Diego State University and completed

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fellowships in theater criticism at the University of Southern California and opera/classical music criticism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She reports from the U-T's North County office in San Marcos.

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