

A Journey Down Memory Lane

The last-known Pearl Harbor survivor in Louisiana visits the National Museum of the Pacific War for the first time

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When Joe Richard left Louisiana on April 29, the last-known Pearl Harbor survivor in the state embarked on a trip down memory lane.

Accompanied by VFW Post 9903, American Legion Post 225 and Legion Rider Post 225 in Church Point, Louisiana, the 97-year-old World War II veteran departed on a 448-mile trek west to the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, for a special showing.

Every step of the way, Richard found himself escorted by a motorcade ensemble comprised of Louisiana State Police, Legion Riders, Patriot Guard motorcyclists and the Texas Highway Patrol.

“You can’t say enough,” said Richard of the support received along the way. “It’s unbelievable. Who’d dreamed that? Country boy done good.”

The trip across the state into Texas allowed Richard to bask in the pleasantries of fellow veterans and strangers encountered along the westward trip on Interstate 10.

Making pit stops at several VFW Posts along the way in Houston and Kerrville, Texas, Richard was inundated with support from younger generations of veterans as well as several WWII veterans.

“Around every turn and every city was a different surprise,” said Lee Daigle, commander of Post 9903, vice commander of Legion Post 225 and director of the Legion Riders. “Perhaps the biggest surprise was the five WWII heroes that joined us in just a few days to meet Mr. Joe on his travels.”

When the motorcade arrived at the Museum on May 1, Richard received a private tour with a local historian, followed closely behind by newspaper and local TV reporters.

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Once the tour was over, Richard spent the next couple of hours in a private interview for the museum, where he shared what happened on Dec. 7, 1941 — a day that would change Richard's life forever.

"It's like yesterday, you don't forget that," said Richard, who enlisted in the Navy at 16 years old and later assigned to the USS Rigel (AD-13), which was docked at Pearl Harbor on that day. "You try, but you can't."

In the weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, Richard, who was trained as a welder, went boat to boat searching for survivors. He's credited with helping rescue 33 from the USS Arizona (BB-39) and 3 from the USS Oklahoma (BB-37).

"The saddest part is the ones we couldn't save to get out of there," Richard said. "That just breaks my heart."

It's in admiration for Richard's storied life of service that Legion Rider and Post 9903 member Ted Stout first came up with the idea to bring the WWII veteran to the Museum.

"He was asking me about places I had been on my motorcycle, and I was telling him about the museum in Fredericksburg," Stout said. "He had never been, but had a desire to go. He's just a great fella, and I'm just so glad our paths have crossed, and I can spend some time with him."

Like Stout, many of the local veterans in Church Point have heralded Richard as their local hero, a living legend.

In helping the WWII veteran visit the Museum for the first time, Daigle said, everyone involved also came away with a valuable life experience.

"I think everyone on the trip was affected in some way," Daigle added. "Every Texas Highway Patrol, every veteran and every person we met got something from this trip. It was that little bit of lagniappe that makes life worth living."

Richard remains an active member of VFW and American Legion, explaining that he has no plans of slowing down. His recipe for longevity remains a concoction of "good loving, good whiskey and good food."

"You can't beat that," Richard added.