

USS Arizona Memorial inspires photographer to capture Pearl Harbor images

December 4, 2012

By Warren Kagarise



Jerry Kaufman (left) hands a copy of his book, 'Renewal at the Place of Black Tears,' to U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, a World War II veteran. Contributed

The day etched into history for the brazen attack on Pearl Harbor and the tremendous loss of life — Dec. 7, 1941 — repeats often for Jerry Kaufman.

The photographer and Issaquah resident created a book of images dedicated to the steady release of oil from the USS Arizona shipwreck, or “tears of the Arizona” in Pearl Harbor lore. For years, Kaufman journeyed from Washington to Hawaii to collect images at the memorial for the eventual book, “Renewal at the Place of Black Tears” — photographs shot at the majestic structure.

The multicolored patterns formed by the intermingling of oil and water long intrigued Kaufman and provided inspiration for the book. “Renewal at the Place of Black Tears” also struck a chord among the throngs of visitors at the USS Arizona Memorial.

Kaufman, seated at a table near the memorial to sign books, listens to stories from Pearl Harbor survivors, family members, and tourists from the United States, Japan and other nations.

“In Hawaii, there’s an expression called chicken skin — chicken skin is what we’d typically call goosebumps,” Kaufman said. “There have been many chicken skin stories that I’ve heard from people. Everybody’s got a story.”

The oil droplets come from about 500,000 gallons of fuel oil trapped inside the deteriorating shipwreck. “The bubbling oil becomes like a metaphor for many people,” Kaufman said.

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor claimed more than 2,400 American lives and left almost another 1,300 Americans wounded. The offensive on the USS Arizona left 1,177 sailors dead. The shipwreck is the resting place for 1,102 men.

The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed Congress and, 33 minutes later, lawmakers declared war on Japan.

(The most-repeated line in the president's speech is often misquoted as "day of infamy," but Roosevelt actually uttered "a date which will live in infamy.")

Dec. 7 marks 71 years since the attack and the United States' entry into World War II.

World War II connection

Kaufman's connection to the conflict is a family bond. The photographer's father served in Europe during World War II. The elder Kaufman survived the war, but carried emotional scars for decades and seldom talked about combat.

Then, after falling ill, Kaufman's ailing father wanted to return to France, to the beaches at Normandy and the scene of fierce D-Day fighting.

"We're there on the beach by ourselves," Kaufman recalled from the trip to France. "My dad takes off his oxygen — actually rips it out of his nose — jumps out of the car, leaves his wheelchair behind, and I'm on the beach with a 20-year-old kid."

The experience brought father and son closer together.

"I realized a couple of things on the beach that day. One of them was that the trajectory of his entire life changed on that beach," Kaufman said. "The other thing that I learned that day was the power of place and being someplace, particularly where history has happened."

The return served as a powerful release for the World War II veteran.

"His emotions started bubbling up, and then snippets of stories, stories that I'd tried to pry out of him for 40 years that he'd never given up, he gave up that day," Kaufman said.

Before "Renewal at the Place of Black Tears" coalesced, however, a reflective journey for the creator occurred.

Kaufman arrived at Pearl Harbor in October 2001, not long after the elder Kaufman's death and as the nation struggled with grief and shock from the 9/11 attacks.

Long captivated by the oil droplets emerging from the shipwreck, he returned to Pearl Harbor in 2009 to document the scene in earnest.

Organizers invited Kaufman to speak at the memorial's 50th anniversary celebration in May, and in the remarks he recalled the experience with his father.

"Telling the personal part of that story was very powerful," he said. "It was the first time I'd ever done that in public, where I told my dad's story, which actually linked to Pearl Harbor. Here we are at Pearl Harbor, where World War II began for Americans, and he was in Normandy where, essentially, it started to end." Other veterans' family members appreciated the story and sought out Kaufman to share personal stories about the conflict.

"Telling that personal story got a reaction out of me and out of others that I didn't expect," he said.

What to know

'Renewal at the Place of Black Tears' is available on Jerry Kaufman's photography website, www.imagesofrenewal.com, and at the USS Arizona Memorial gift shop in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Kaufman also met U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, the chamber's longest-serving member. Inouye witnessed the Pearl Harbor attack, served as a medical volunteer in the aftermath and, during World War II, enlisted in the Army.

Inouye served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team — considered the most decorated infantry regiment in the Army's history — and lost his right arm during combat in Italy.

"I've had the opportunity to interact, literally, with people from all over the world," Kaufman said. "There were some expected things in terms of people with a specific Pearl Harbor connection — whether they'd be military people and family members. As I'm finding out, that's been four generations of people that I've been interacting with."