

# 30 DAYS OF HONOR ★ *A Salute to Local Vets*



## Pearl Harbor vet helped fire war's first shots

Willett Lehner's ship, the USS Ward, sank Japanese spy sub

By Dan Richter

For Gannett Central Wisconsin Media

**W**hiting — When Willett Lehner was 17 and joined the United States Navy Reserves in 1938, many of the U.S. Navy's ships still were relics of World War I that were powered by coal.

The United States had not entered World War II at the time he joined, but three years later, Lehner was there when the Japanese attacked on Dec. 7, 1941. On the date that lives in infamy, Lehner was stationed at Pearl Harbor.

Not only was Lehner there that day, but his ship, the USS Ward, may have fired the first shot of the war when it sank a Japanese spy submarine more than an hour before Pearl Harbor was attacked by air.

Lehner, originally from St. Paul, Minnesota, was among the first central Wisconsin residents to take a Never Forgotten Honor Flight, back in 2010.

**Question: What did you do in the service and where were you stationed?**

**Answer:** I started out in the boiler room and had to stay down below deck all the time. Later I was transferred to being a cook and eventually went up to first class and was in charge of the galley and the cooking. I was on the USS Ward my entire military career until it was sunk in 1944. We were stationed in Pearl Harbor and later Guadalcanal, New Guinea and the Philippines.

**Q: What is your most enduring memory from your time in the service?**

**A:** Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941 is a day I won't forget, and the USS Ward was lucky to not endure the damage the ships in port did... But what sticks out the most are the nine air raids we went through at Guadalcanal and in the Philippines. In June of '42, we faced an air raid of over 200 Japanese planes and there were ships sinking and bombs dropped all around us. Suicide bombers were coming at us and we shot the first two down, but the third dove into the side of our ship. Our ship was on fire, ammunition was exploding and we couldn't stop it, so we had to sink the ship so the Japanese couldn't get it. I was fortunate to have survived it all.

**Q: What do you most want people to know about the conflict in which you served?**

**A:** I think the biggest thing is us sinking a Japanese sub an hour and 20 minutes before the bombing of Pearl Harbor and no one believing us for 64 years. Even when I got back to civilian life, I would tell people about being on the ship that fired the first shot that day and they'd say "Where's the proof? I've never heard about that." There was no proof, because the sub was at the bottom of the ocean until the University of Hawaii finally found it in 2002.

**Q: Tell us about your life after the service and how your time in the military affected your civilian life.**

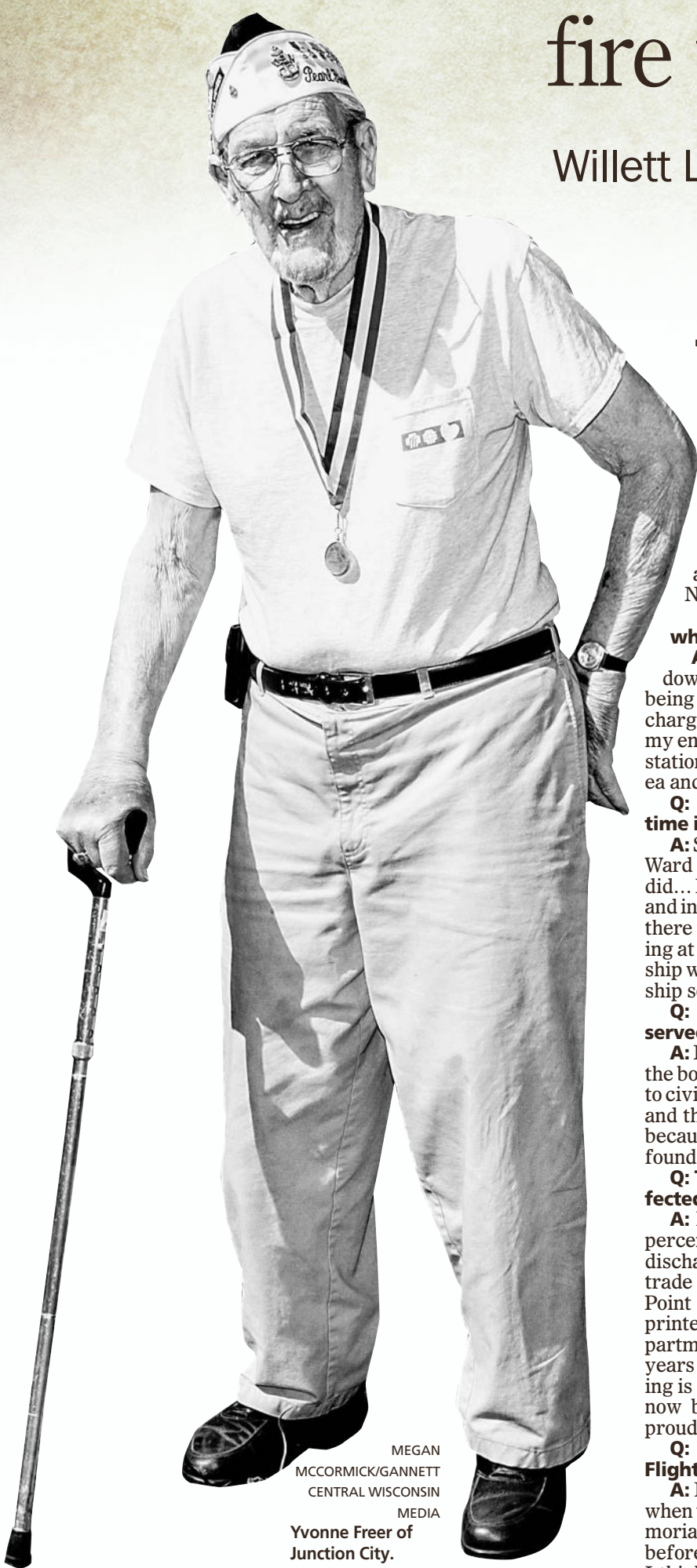
**A:** I enjoyed the service and I wish I could have stayed in but I ended up being 50 percent disabled and getting a medical discharge. After the Navy, I went to trade school and moved to Stevens Point in 1949, where I worked as a printer and managed the printing department at Worth Company for 32 years before retiring in 1986. My hearing is gone and it's hard for me to walk now but I don't regret it at all. I'm proud of my time in the Navy.

**Q: What did going on the Honor Flight Mean to you?**

**A:** I had been to Washington before, when they first started to build the memorial, but I hadn't seen it completed before. As it is today, it's just beautiful. I think every serviceman should take the Honor Flight if they can.

### ABOUT WILLETTE LEHNER

**Age:** 93  
**Residence:** Whiting  
**Conflict involved in:** World War II  
**Military branch:** United States Navy  
**Years of service:** 1938 to 1945  
**Rank upon discharge:** First class, acting chief of the USS Ward



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 Yvonne Freer of Junction City.



MEGAN MCCORMICK/GANNETT WISCONSIN MEDIA  
 World War II veteran and Pearl Harbor survivor Willett Lehner holds his government-issued Pearl Harbor medal at his home in Stevens Point Thursday, April 23, 2015.



### A FLIGHT TO NEVER FORGET

» The Central Wisconsin chapter of Never Forgotten Honor Flight celebrates its fifth anniversary this spring. Since April 2011, the Honor Flight program has flown to Washington, D.C. with more than 800 local World War II veterans, as well as dozens more who served in Korea and Vietnam, to allow them to view the memorials built for those wars.  
 » 30 Days of Honor is a project of Gannett Central Wisconsin Media to profile veterans who have taken an Honor Flight, or are scheduled, and to encourage more veterans to do so. Profiles will appear each day April 26 through Memorial Day.  
 » Veterans may apply for a free Honor Flight (or loved ones may apply for them) by filling out an application. The only qualification for a veteran to take an Honor Flight is to have served in any branch of the U.S. military during the periods of World War II, the Korean War or Vietnam War. Veterans do not have to have been in combat. The applications and more information are available at <http://www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org>

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