



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 28, 2010

John Finn, Medal of Honor Recipient, Dies at 100

John William Finn, the last survivor of the 15 Navy veterans who received the Medal of Honor for heroism during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, died on May 27 at the Veterans Home of California in Chula Vista. Finn, who retired from the Navy in 1956 with the rank of Lieutenant, was 100 years old.



Finn was a Chief Petty Officer and chief aviation ordnanceman, in command of a 20-man unit whose primary responsibility was to maintain the weapons of a PBY Catalina “flying boat” aircraft squadron at the Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station, Hawaii.

On the morning that President Franklin Roosevelt would later describe as a “day of infamy,” Japanese planes attacked Kaneohe Bay, located about 12 miles from Battleship Row at Ford Island, in an apparent attempt to destroy the Navy aircraft located there before they could take off. Finn and his wife, Alice, were asleep at their quarters about a mile from the hangars and field when they were awakened by machine gun fire. In an interview with *The New American* magazine in July 2001, Finn recalled his first thoughts: “Who the h*** is firing machine guns today? Hey, it’s a Sunday!”

When a plane flew past his window, Finn at first thought it was a Naval training exercise, but the wife of one of his men knocked at their door to inform Finn: “They want you down at the squadron right away!” On the drive to the base, Finn spoke of hearing a “terrible roaring” as a plane with the “dirty red ball” (Japan’s Rising Sun insignia) beneath its wings flew overhead. When he arrived, he “saw all of our planes on fire and our boys running around all helter skelter and that’s when it hit me. This is the real deal, by golly!”

In another interview with CNN’s Larry Shaughnessy last September 15, Finn explained that one of the first things he did when he arrived at the base was to take control of a machine gun from his squadron’s painter.

“I said, ‘Alex, let me take that gun,’ ” Finn recalled. “I knew that I had more experience firing a machine gun than a painter.”

“I got that gun and I started shooting at Jap planes,” Finn said, using the nickname applied to the enemy back in the 1940s.

But, noted Shaughnessy, Finn’s machine gun was right out in the open, nothing protecting him from the attacking pilots.

“I was out there shooting the Jap planes and just every so often I was a target for some,” Finn said. “They were Japanese fighter plane pilots. I can remember seeing, in some cases, I could see their faces.”

While manning his improvised machine gun unit, with his .50-calibre gun mounted on a tripod intended



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for training purposes only, Finn received numerous wounds, including at least four shrapnel wounds to his chest. But he continued firing his gun for more than two hours until the enemy planes departed.

The official citation awarded to Finn with his medal reads:

Although painfully wounded many times, he continued to man this gun and to return the enemy's fire vigorously and with telling effect throughout the enemy strafing and bombing attacks and with complete disregard for his own personal safety. It was only by specific orders that he was persuaded to leave his post to seek medical attention. Following first aid treatment, although obviously suffering much pain and moving with great difficulty, he returned to the squadron area and actively supervised the rearming of returning planes.

Finn thought he had hit at least one plane during the attack, but had no way of knowing whether he had brought it down.

Chief Petty Officer Finn received the Medal of Honor on September 15, 1942, from Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, in a ceremony aboard the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* at Pearl Harbor. Admiral Nimitz cited Chief Finn for his "magnificent courage in the face of almost certain death."

A report in the San Diego *Union-Tribune* noted that Finn was the oldest of 91 living recipients of the Medal of Honor. Only 19 other World War II recipients of our nation's highest honor remain, the oldest being Barney Hajiro, 93, of Hawaii.

The report cited Dennis McAllister, one of Finn's nephews, who said his uncle was healthy and energetic until about a week ago, when he was moved from his longtime home in Live Oak Springs, east of Campo, to the Veterans Home of California in Chula Vista.

Finn and his wife, Alice, who died in 1998, had a son, Joseph, but also took in several children from the Campo Indian Reservation in San Diego County.

"He helped our people survive when our world was in turmoil and going through a changing process," said Monique LaChappa, Campo tribal chairwoman. One of her uncles was among those helped by the Finns. "Some of the older elders would tell about how [the Finns] would feed our people. He was part of our survival. He understood us — not that he felt sorry for us, but he understood us."

Finn received posthumous praise from many sources.

"His story will continue inspiring generations to come while also reminding us all about the contributions and sacrifices of America's greatest generation," said Rep. Duncan D. Hunter (R-Calif.), a longtime friend.

Other words of praise came from some who undoubtedly would have been unappreciative of Finn's decision to become a lifetime member of [The John Birch Society](#) (along with his wife) back in the 1960s. These included MSNBC-TV commentator Rachel Maddow, who not long ago was taking The John Birch Society to task for a variety of unfounded charges that were so stale they have been around longer than Maddow, herself. Maddow nevertheless narrated a glowing and much-deserved tribute to Finn.

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Though Finn's heroic accomplishments certainly transcend the world of politics, contrasting the views Finn held about government with those of the man currently occupying the Oval Office surely makes for one of life's more beautifully idiosyncratic moments — President Obama bestowing fitting praise on a



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life member of The John Birch Society:

Michelle and I were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Retired Navy Lt. John William Finn, the oldest living Medal of Honor recipient. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and loved ones at this time. Lt. Finn received the Medal for the heroism he displayed during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Under a torrent of gunfire, Lt. Finn defended his fellow Sailors, holding his position for two hours until the skies went quiet, despite suffering serious wounds. Like many of those who have served our nation with such distinction, Lt. Finn often said that he never intended to be a hero. Instead, he felt that he was simply doing his duty. But his modesty does not diminish his extraordinary conduct — or the incredible example he has set for our men and women in uniform and for all Americans. I had the privilege of meeting Lt. Finn last year, and I was struck by his warmth and humility. As we mark Memorial Day, and pay tribute all who have fallen in defense of this nation, the passing of Lt. Finn is a reminder of the sacrifices that generations have made to preserve the freedoms we hold dear.

Arthur R. Thompson, the Chief Executive Officer of The John Birch Society, also had fond memories of John Finn, inspired, he said, by the fact that “Finn was more than a war hero — he remained a patriot throughout his life.” A firm believer in the Christian concept of an afterlife, Thompson reminds us that the sense of loss he feels on learning of Finn’s death is only temporary, because we will all meet him again.

Thompson shared a favorite memory related to Finn, about the time he visited the *USS Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor. Each ticket to the memorial has a brief biographical tribute to one of the heroes of Pearl Harbor printed on its reverse side. When Thompson purchased his ticket, whose biography did he find printed on back? John Finn’s!

It is somehow fitting that this noble example of American heroic virtue passed on to meet his Maker just before Memorial Day weekend. On this Memorial Day, as we honor our fallen heroes, recollection of John Finn’s sacrifice will surely be at the forefront of our minds.

Thumbnail photo: John Finn

Warren Mass is editor of the Bulletin of The John Birch Society. This article originally appeared at [JBS.org](#) and is reprinted here with permission.

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