

Remembering Pearl Harbor - and a friendship

Families have exchanged Dec. 7 messages for 70 years

By [Peter Rowe \(/staff/peter-rowe/\)](/staff/peter-rowe/) 9:04 p.m. Dec. 6, 2011

Wednesday, Solana Beach's Diane Tyson will remember Pearl Harbor — and recall how this tragic chapter in American history inspired a hopeful page in her own family's legacy.

Seventy years ago today, Japan's surprise attack killed more than 2,400 Americans and thrust the United States into war. Like 9/11, Pearl Harbor delivered a body blow to the nation. For the rest of their lives, men and women would recall the moment they heard the shocking news from Hawaii.

Diane was in a Staten Island kitchen, or so she's been told. She was two months old at the time, and her mother, Irene Duffy, was visiting her closest friend, Jessie Kelly.

Americans reacted to Pearl Harbor in various ways. Some prayed. Many enlisted. Jessie and Irene made a pact. No matter what happened in this unstable world, these friends would contact each other every Dec. 7.

They kept this promise for 40 years, until Irene died in 1982.

The tradition, though, survives. Today, Diane — Irene's daughter — will call one of Jessie's daughters. For the 70th consecutive year, their families will honor this day's losses and remember an enduring friendship.

"I wouldn't break this streak ever," said Diane. "Oh, no, no, no. Never."

Best of friends

Jessie Kelly and Irene Duffy defined the term "inseparable." Both members of Irish Catholic families, the girls grew up in the same building in Midtown Manhattan. As teens in the Roaring '20s, both adopted the Flapper era's long, straight dresses and head-hugging, brimless hats. Both married in the 1930s and by 1941 each had an infant.

Despite their initial fears, neither Jessie nor Irene lost a loved one in World War II. The two families grew and prospered. But in the postwar era, they faced another foe — distance. So after the Kellys moved from New York to Pennsylvania, Jessie and Irene organized interstate family visits and vacations. Year round, the friends remained in contact.

And every Dec. 7, Irene rang Jessie.

This era was decidedly P.C. — pre-cell, when long distance calls were uncommon and expensive. But the annual chat was priceless. After Irene's death, her husband, Joseph, tried to carry on the tradition. But he only outlined his wife by a year.

Late in 1983, Jessie was visiting a grown daughter when she suddenly noticed the date.

"It's December 7!" she said, close to tears.

Then the phone rang. It was Diane, reaching out to her mother's best friend.

"I talked to Jessie and I just cried," Diane said. "It just reminded me — I felt so close to my mother."

Into the future

Diane leads a full life. She spent years in a Manhattan law firm, first as a legal secretary and then as a paralegal. She took college courses whenever possible, earning a bachelor's degree in English in 1989 and a master's in 1991. After raising their son and daughter on the East Coast, she and her husband, Robert, retired to Solana Beach in 1999.

And every Dec. 7, she makes that call.

This morning, Diane will ring Jessie's youngest daughter, Rosemary "Roz" Morgan, as she has every December since Jessie's death in 1990. The two women will reflect on Pearl Harbor — in February, Diane made her first pilgrimage to this eerie, hallowed site on the island of Oahu — and catch up on the latest family developments.

Perhaps they'll discuss a multifamily trip, another tradition Diane and Roz have inherited. One year, Diane flew to Florida to meet Roz and Roz's sister, Kate. During a 2001 sailing expedition, Roz moored in San Diego to visit Diane.

Always, though, the conversation turns to Jessie and Irene, lifelong friends who made — and kept — a lasting promise.

How much longer will it endure? Diane is a healthy 70 years old, but she knows her family history. Her mother died at the age of 71.

Recently, Diane asked a favor of her daughter. Denise Tyson, a 45-year-old Los Angeles resident, quickly agreed.

"She's very happy about it, glad that she'll be able to do it," Diane said. "We're not going to let this drop. It will go on and on."

© Copyright 2013 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC. An MLIM LLC Company. All rights reserved.