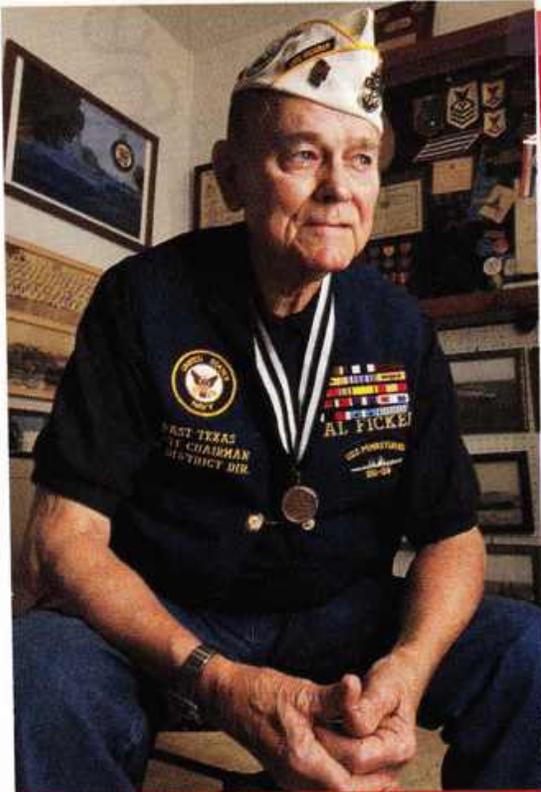


People weekly

May 28, 2001 Vol. 55 No. 21

upfront



50 UP FRONT "It was total mayhem," recalls Pearl Harbor vet Albert Fickel.

50 Up Front

Pearl Harbor survivors remember the devastation and heroism the day bombs rained from the sky

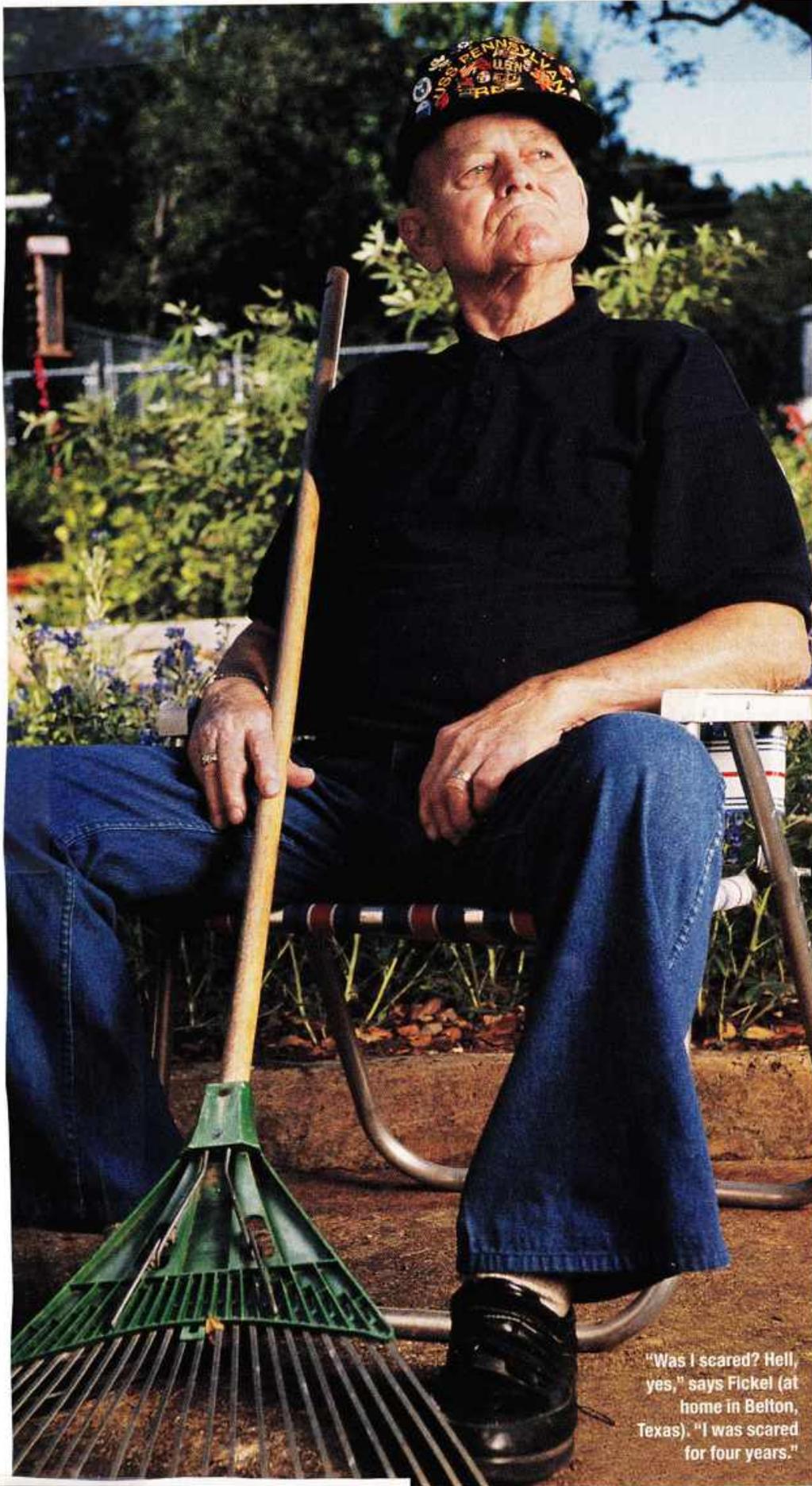
☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆



Ben Affleck plays a pilot in *Pearl Harbor*, one of the most expensive films ever made.

At first a pilot figured the racket was a drill. A sailor below decks guessed coral reefs were being dynamited. "You don't expect on Sunday morning," says another former sailor, Robert Varill, "to have Japanese torpedo bombers on your doorstep." But there they were. At 7:55 a.m. on Dec. 7, 1941, the first of more than 300 Japanese planes appeared over Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, home of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The surprise attack killed 2,390 U.S. troops and 49 civilians and thrust America into World War II. What President Franklin Roosevelt called "a date which will live in infamy"—dramatized nearly 60 years later by the movie *Pearl Harbor*, opening May 25—was for all involved a day of fear, bravery and searing memories. Here are some of their stories.

Those who were there remember the horror and heroism that defined a bloody Sunday morning at Pearl Harbor

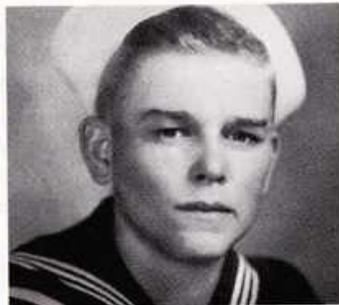


"Was I scared? Hell, yes," says Fickel (at home in Belton, Texas). "I was scared for four years."

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

ALBERT FICKEL

A birthday bash postponed



COURTESY ALBERT FICKEL

Fickel (in '39) says shipmates did "more cussing than praying."

A fireman on the battleship *USS Pennsylvania*, Fickel was looking forward to a heck of a 21st birthday on Dec. 8. His plan: a three-day date with a girl in a beachfront cabana.

The celebration never got started. Scheduled for leave starting at 7:45 a.m. on Dec. 7, the Texan heard thuds as he waited in the dry-docked ship's engine room. Then his relief man burst in, yelling, "They're strafing us!" Fickel climbed to the deck. "The *Oklahoma* was starting to list," he recalls. "It was total mayhem, and no one looked like they knew what to do." Retreating to the bowels of the ship, "all we could really do was sit and wait," says Fickel, 81. "When you don't know if you're going to be hit at any second, you just grit your teeth and brace yourself."

Eighteen men were killed on the ship, but things could have been worse. The *Pennsylvania* had traded places the day before with the *USS Arizona*, which lost 1,177 men and sank. Now living in Belton, Texas, with his third wife, Billie, 71, Fickel retired from the Navy in 1959, after many years stationed in Japan, where he worked through his need for vengeance. "I feel safer walking the streets of Japan," he says, "than walking the streets of my own country."

Written by: Samantha Miller and Anne-Marie O'Neill
Reported by: Leslie Berenstein, Jennifer Frey, Pam Grout, Anne Lang, Jeannie McCabe, Nobuko Matsushita, Don Sider and Bob Stewart