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Fremont man shares story of gift from President Harry S. Truman

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Fremont man shares story of gift from President Harry S. Truman

Tammy Real-McKeighan/News Editor FremontTribune.com | Posted: Monday, July 2, 2012 11:30 am | (0) Comments

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Harry S. Truman's wristwatch, left, and Niles Peterson's pocket watch. Truman gave Peterson, of Fremont, the watch after he was late delivering a locked briefcase which said, "for eyes of President Truman only." (Tony Gray, Fremont Tribune)



Niles Peterson will remember two American presidents in a way few others ever will.

The Fremont man, assigned to PT boat 143 during World War II, told future President John F. Kennedy to leave a storage room.

Peterson got chewed out by another president, Harry S. Truman, who then gave his wristwatch to the young serviceman.

Truman told Peterson to take care of that watch — which the 88-year-old man still has more than 65 years later. Peterson's daughter, June Cardwell, said her dad plans to hand the watch, engraved with letters "H" and "T," down to his great-grandchildren.

Peterson was 17, under the draft age, when he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in November 1941.

"My dad had to sign for me," he said.

Peterson, a chief motor machinist's mate, had the job of maintaining the engines aboard PT-143.

He was working in the engine room when two guys came in and began rummaging through it. Peterson asked what was going on.

Kennedy said they were scavenging for spare parts to get a boat back into operation. Peterson told the men that they could look for all the parts they wanted, but not there. And if they did want anything, they should ask first.

Then he told them get out.

Kennedy apologized.

Peterson did give the men some anti-freeze, because a boat's engines ran so hot that water would just boil away.

Future encounters proved more agreeable.

"I gave him some more stuff then," he said.

He found Kennedy to be a nice person, "like an old shoe, just comfortable to be around ... He was a good guy."

Not all of Peterson's war memories are so pleasant. In the spring of 1943, American and Australian planes attacked a large convoy of Japanese destroyers and other vessels with troops sent to reinforce enemy garrisons at Lae and Salamaua. Allied planes also fought enemy planes in what was called the Battle of the

Bismarck Sea and, as history records, returned to attack enemy survivors in the water. Peterson said Gen. Douglas MacArthur ordered that no survivors be allowed for Allied troops to have to fight another day.

"The sky was full of aircraft," he said.

PT-143 and PT-150 were ordered to clean up what was left, leaving the men with some miserable memories.

One of Peterson's better recollections involves a Japanese pilot who cried out, "Don't shoot! I'm an American." Peterson asked Lt. Commander Barry Atkins if the man might not have some interesting information for them.

"Aw, pick him up," Atkins said.

The man was married and had two children. After the family went to Japan for a vacation during a college break, he was forced to serve as an enemy pilot.

"He was in between a rock and a hard place," Peterson said, adding that the man's family was still in Japan.

The man, injured when he ejected from his plane, gave his prayer belt to Peterson, who brought it home. Peterson's wife, Geneva, later threw the blood-stained belt away.

After the war, Peterson was stationed in Bremerton, Wash. His job included courier duty and he was commissioned to deliver a message to President Truman. The information was put into a locked briefcase and handcuffed to his wrist.

"It said on that case 'for eyes of President Truman only,'" Peterson recalled.

Peterson, who by then was a chief petty officer, went on a troop train across the country to Washington, D.C. The train was late and it was a cold, damp day when he reached the nation's capital. Coming out of the depot, he was stopped by two men in long black coats who asked his name.

"I thought something was wrong," he said.

One of the men told him to get into the backseat of a long, black car.

Inside was Harry Truman. The car's interior was dark and when he stooped to get in, Peterson, coming out of daylight, couldn't see very well.

"We nearly bumped heads. He said, 'whoa!'" Peterson remembered.

Truman told Peterson to get in the car, then after determining his identity asked why he was late.

"The train was late, sir," Peterson said.

"You know, time is valuable and I don't have that much time anyway," the President said. "You should have been here on time. Don't you have a watch?"

Peterson had a watch, but tried to explain it wouldn't have done any good, considering that the train was late.

But Truman persisted, asking what kind of watch he had.

Peterson pulled out a pocket watch.

"Do you mind if I ask how much you paid for that?" the President asked.

Peterson had bought it for \$1.

"You paid a dollar for your watch?" Truman asked.

The President continued to press the issue of Peterson's tardiness.

"He really chewed me out — up one side and down the other — for being late," Peterson said.

Finally, the President said: "Young man, you need a good watch. I've got a couple here."

Truman had a watch on each wrist.

"I'm going to give you my best watch, my oldest and best-kept watch. That's the best one, because I know how to run it. The other one I don't even know how to run yet."

Truman's other watch showed what time it was in other countries.

"He took his watch off and handed it to me," Peterson said.

Peterson tried to say that he couldn't take the watch.

"Well, I want you to take it and you just be good to it, because it's a good watch," Truman said.

"If anybody gives you any trouble with it, you just tell them to call me in Washington, D.C., and I'll see that it's straightened out real quick."

Peterson thanked Truman and took the watch back to Bremerton.

All these years, he's kept his old pocket watch along with the one from Truman.

"They both run yet," he said.

Peterson served six years in the U.S. Navy and another six in the Naval Reserves. He and his wife, now married 68 years, came to Fremont in the late 1940s. He worked for the Fremont Police Department and Northwestern Railroad, before working for Hormel Foods Corps., for 34 years.

The Petersons had three children, Gordon, who died in an automobile accident in Utah in 2005; Karen Marquette, who died of cancer in 2008, and June Cardwell of Fontanelle, six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

He still marvels that Truman gave him the watch.

"A President giving me a watch? Why would he do that?" Peterson said. "I think he was ashamed of himself, because he chewed me out so much."

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