The young man's hands were sweating as he turned the knob of the radio to the right, adjusting the volume.

"Yesterday, December 7th, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."

It may have been a cold December day when the speech from President Franklin D. Roosevelt aired across the radio waves, but the 22-year-old was warm with anger, confusion and worry.

He had joined the Army right after high school. He and his buddies had been shipped all over the country for various training. Many he would never see again.

The witty farmer's boy had traded his garden hoe for a gun. He was in the Army now, and he wanted to make his momma proud.

He had a wife at home. She was busy managing the family grocery store with assistance from other family members. He talked with her the night before when they heard about the tragedy at Pearl Harbor.

Now he and his friends were huddled around the radio on December 8, as FDR delivered his speech to the nation.

"The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu."

The young man began to run hundreds of names through his mind. He couldn't remember if he had any close Navy friends stationed in Hawaii or on those ships at sea.

"As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us."

That is when it hit him. He would be going to war, no doubt about it. Where would he be shipped? Regardless, he knew his ticket was ready. His training would be put to use, and he was scared to death.

“No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.”

The fear left the man’s body. It was that one line that seemed to make everything better. Would he be killed?

Possibly, but that wasn’t the point. His country was hurting, and he wanted to do something about it.

That same country boy fought in Germany. He saw many of his friends die in front of him, many violently. He even held a few as they took their last breath before picking up his weapon and carrying on.

He went on several missions. One dying German in broken English even told him he would see him in Heaven one day.

He went many days with little food and sleep, but he never complained. Surprisingly, he never cried.

His heart hardened a little. His soul may have stretched thin a few times.

But he never lost his laugh. Even when the cold air swept through Germany onto him, he managed to make a joke or two about a Mississippi boy surviving such temperatures.

“If you can’t laugh, you got nothing,” he once told his granddaughter.

And really, laughing was about all he could do sometimes to keep his sanity.

His name was James Howard Jackson. And he was my Paw Paw.

Paw Paw shared a few memories about his time in World War II. He didn’t like to reflect on it too much. Maybe I was too young or maybe he didn’t want to remember it.

He was my hero, and the way he lived his life is why he was a part of what has come to be known as the Greatest Generation.

He didn’t fight for fame or money but rather because it was “the right thing to do.” And then he returned home with visions and nightmares of war only to hold his head up and rebuild his life.

He supported his family, raised his children, loved his wife and cared for his neighbors. And, he never lost his laugh.

For me, he made me who I am today.

As I look back on Sept. 11 ten years later, I can’t help but think about how he must have felt all those years before.

It makes me proud of all our veterans from the past and those who are fighting today. I can’t put into words the gratitude I have for them.

I can only pray that they come home safely.

And that they can remember to laugh.