

Sharkey Theater

by Karen S. Spangler, Assistant Editor

Through the years, Sharkey Theater – located in the subbase area of Naval Station Pearl Harbor - has played host to a variety of activities. In addition to showing feature movies at special, discounted prices, Sharkey Theater offers a venue for such events as the annual Armed Forces Bodybuilding Championship.

It has also provided a place for awards ceremonies, all hands meetings, fund drive kickoffs and a myriad of briefings.

But the many people who pass through its doors almost daily – attending briefings or watching featured movies – are probably not aware of the theater’s colorful history.

The present historical building is quite different from the original, wooden open-air structure that in years gone by provided such entertainment as movies and “smokers.”

As early as 1921, Sharkey Theater was showing popular films of the day to movie patrons. In those days, it was an open air movie house and Rudolph Valentino in “The Sheik,” as Ahmed, the sexy desert Arab sheik, was just one of the famous faces who was featured on its “big screen.” Charlie Chaplin’s classic comedy, “The Kid,” and “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” were also popular films in 1921.

In 1941 - the same year that found Pearl Harbor reeling from the devastating attack by the Japanese - Sharkey Theater played host to such famous films as “Citizen Kane,” “The Maltese Falcon” starring Humphrey Bogart, and Gary Cooper in the role of “Sergeant York,” one of the most decorated soldiers of World War I and one of Cooper’s best films.

In May 2001, the movie “Pearl Harbor” was released. Here at Pearl Harbor where the “day of infamy” occurred, there were special showings at Sharkey Theater of the film which told the story of the Dec. 7, 1941 Japanese attack on the Navy fleet in Hawaii.

Prior to construction of the Submarine Base Chapel in 1944, Sunday mass was held at Sharkey Theater, which was still an open air theater at that time.

In the 1920s era, Sharkey Theater was also the site of the extremely popular and sometimes controversial “smokers” – or boxing contests. In 1921, Sharkey Theater became the first covered boxing rink in the Territory of Hawaii although at the time, boxing was prohibited by territorial law. The law was changed in 1929.

The U.S. Navy began to station warships at Honolulu in 1893. During the 1910s, Pearl Harbor became a major U.S. naval base. There were many Sailors who enjoyed the sport of boxing who were stationed on the Navy’s warships and boxing matches were held frequently.

According to an article in the “Journal of Combative Sports,” from 1918-1924, civilians and soldiers often attended the boxing bouts at Pearl Harbor. But this ended in 1924, when Rear Adm. John McDonald decided to close the Pearl Harbor boxing matches to civilians and soldiers. The article explained that the admiral felt that it was ungentlemanly for the audience to boo and make disparaging remarks about the contestants and referees.

As the story goes, “On one occasion, when Admiral McDonald attended, he told the audience to cease their booing and when they seemingly refused, he ordered the bouts stopped and the audience – which included civilians as well as Army and Navy personnel – to go home.” The article noted that once Pearl Harbor closed to civilians, the Hawaii National Guard began patronizing boxing.

It is believed that Sharkey Theater was named for Tom Sharkey, one of the most famous boxers of the time and destined to be a future heavyweight champion. Sharkey was a master at arms

serving aboard the USS Philadelphia at Pearl Harbor. He began his boxing career with a knock-out victory in Honolulu on St. Patrick's Day, 1893. He fought about 14 bouts in Honolulu and went unbeaten during his first three years as a pro.

That feat earned him a shot at Fitzsimmons' heavyweight title at Mechanics' Pavilion in San Francisco on Dec. 3, 1896. Considered the most significant sporting event to take place on the West Coast in 19th century America, the city spent a month preparing for the clash. Due to constant rows about each potential referee, Wyatt Earp was invited to officiate the bout about 24 hours before the first bell.

Three years later, Sharkey came close to winning the championship after going 25 bruising rounds with Jim Jeffries at Coney Island. The contest was the first that was ever recorded by a movie camera.

Various accounts describe Sharkey, of Irish descent, as a formidable opponent.

"He was short and squat with excessively broad shoulders and a huge, deep chest upon which was tattooed a colorful star and sailing ship," said Tracy Callis, boxing historian, International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO).

"Tom Sharkey was a great fighter who was very much like Rocky Marciano of the 1950s in physical size and fighting aggressiveness, power and ruggedness. He had the misfortune to fight when Jim Jeffries, whom I consider to be the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time, was champion. At any other time in boxing history, he probably would have been a champion," explained Callis.

The IBRO historian related, "His motto was 'Don't Give Up the Ship.' He used a straight-up stance, but at 5-9 he was still a low target. His nose was crooked and his left ear was cauliflowered. Face-to-face confrontations with several all-time greats only worsened the condition of the ear. It is said his hands were strong enough to bend silver dollars. In style, he was aggressive and ever striding forward towards his man, throwing powerful haymakers."

Later Sharkey moved out west, acted in some of Hollywood's silent films and was at one time, the mayor of Vallejo. He toured the vaudeville circuit with his former boxing opponent, Jim Jeffries, and among his many friends were such notables as Buffalo Bill Cody, Bat Masterson and Teddy Roosevelt. It is said that during the days when \$3 a week was a decent salary, Sharkey won purses totaling over a quarter of a million dollars.

After retiring from the boxing ring, he owned a bar across from Tammany Hall on 14th Street in New York City and also a place called Sharkey's Athletic Club on Broadway.

There is no hint of his illustrious career and rich life at his burial place in Golden Gate National Cemetery in California. The inscription on the standard-issue headstone reads, "Thomas Sharkey, California, MAAS US Navy, January 1, 1871-April 17, 1953."

More than a century after he began his boxing career, Tom Sharkey was posthumously inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in June 2003.

Sharkey Theater, like its alleged namesake, has led a colorful and interesting life. One of the most historic structures at Naval Station Pearl Harbor, it continues to serve the Navy community.

Perhaps here it is fitting to share a poem written by Tom Sharkey the Sailor during his stint with the U.S. Navy, "I've lived the life of a man of the world, I've had all its ups and downs. I've shook the false hand of the fair-weather friend, I've seen fortune's smiles and frowns. I've led a life of both pleasure and pain and I'd gladly live that same life over again."

(Some information provided by International Boxing Research Organization and Journal of Combative Sport.)

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