

Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

Early Days

John Jacob Rhodes, Jr., was born in Council Grove, Kansas, on September 18, 1916, the youngest of three children of John Jacob Rhodes and Gladys Anne Thomas Rhodes. He remembered his childhood as “special,” particularly the holiday seasons. In 1927, when he was not quite eleven years old, he accompanied his parents on a trip to Washington, D.C. While there, he met Kansas Congressman Homer Hoch, who took John and his parents to the White House, where he met President Calvin Coolidge and shook his hand (he refused to wash that hand for a week). On that same trip, he sat in the gallery of the House of Representatives and watched that body in session. The experience made a great impression on him, and he thought that he would, one day, like to become a congressman and play a role in governing the country.



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After graduating high school, John Rhodes went on to Kansas State University, where he became a member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity (in which he remained active during his entire life), earned his Army Reserve commission in the ROTC, and majored in commerce. After graduation, he “went east” to Harvard Law School. As the time for graduation approached, John was called to active duty as a first lieutenant in the Army Air Corps on September 5, 1941. In an effort to aid the war effort, Harvard granted law degrees to its students, like Rhodes, who had completed two years of coursework and were called to military service; soon after, he was admitted to the bar in Kansas. In 1942, he managed to get a week’s leave and returned to Kansas to marry Betty Harvey—a marriage that lasted for sixty-one years until his death in 2003.

MY EXPERIENCE OF THE EVENTS OF DECEMBER 7, 1941

In introducing the following essay, John Rhodes wrote: “Arizona made a convert of me quickly. In fact, the first day that I served as officer of the day at Williams Field and saw the sun come up over Superstition Mountain put a hold on my desires for the future of my life that has never abated. I love the State, I love its people, and I feel very much blessed by the good Lord in allowing me to be here and to have some part in the development of both.”

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My Experience of the Events of December 7, 1941

After having been called to active military duty in the Army Air Corps in September of 1941, I, a First Lieutenant, was assigned to the 534th School Squadron at Mather Field, located near Sacramento, Ca. Shortly afterward, I was reassigned to Williams Field in Higley, Arizona. I drove to Phoenix with First Sergeant Edward Bush on December 1-2, and reported to the Army Air Corps Advanced Flying School Number Seven (ACAFS #7) on December 3. I registered, along with other servicemen, at the El Portal Hotel in Mesa on December 4 because there were no Bachelor Officers Quarters available at the base. On the morning of December 7, I heard a radio in the next room broadcasting the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I didn't believe it—I thought it must be some kind of spoof. I knocked on the door of the room from which the news was emanating and introduced myself to Major Keene. I said, "Is this for real?" We agreed that the news must indeed be true and reported to Williams Field, where we were immediately given assignments. Since I was an Infantry officer, I was told to teach our raw recruits (6 squadrons and the Base Group—about 300 men total) to soldier. We got 1903 Springfield 30 cal. bolt-action rifles from the Arizona National Guard. I asked for dummy ammo to teach the men to load, lock, and aim these weapons. I was told they had no dummy ammo and I would have to use live ammo. I shuddered, but said to myself, "This is war, so do what you must." I prayed that I could teach these youngsters fresh from civilian life to use Springfield rifles with live ammo—without killing or maiming anybody. My prayers were answered.



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The next day, December 8, I was named officer of the day (OD). We had posted armed guards around the perimeter of the camp, and as OD I had to check the guards every three hours. Everyone was

nervous, and I hoped not to be shot by a scared and trigger-happy GI. One of the guards reported that he had seen lights flashing in the distance. He thought it could be enemy signaling. With the news of the sneak attack at Pearl so fresh in our minds, we conjured up visions of an attack on ACAFS #7 in Higley, Az., possibly originating from Japanese ships in the Gulf of California.

The next morning I told the Commanding Officer (CO), Major B. A. Bridget, about the peculiar lights. At that time, we had several Arizona citizens on the base as civilian employees. The CO asked me to talk to one of them. I did. He asked me just where the lights appeared, and I showed him. He said, "Lt. Rhodes, in that location there is a curve in the road to Queen Creek. The flashing lights you saw could well have been caused by cars negotiating that curve." And so ended the "attack" on ACAFS #7, Higley, Az., without bloodshed.

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