

Benjamin Heal #90
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Q: Mr. Heal, why don't you start off by telling me when did you first go into the Army?

A: Well, I went down and enlisted, and at that time you could pick a job from the board. In other words, there were enough jobs with the numbers and you pick out where you wanted to go, and I picked out the ordinance at Hickam Field, and that was April of 1941.

I went over on the Washington to Hickam. That was the first trip that the Washington had made through the Canal up to San Francisco and then into Hawaii. And we had our training at Hickam Field.

And then about (to get on with it), about a week before Pearl Harbor Day, December the 7th, we maneuvers; what we would call maneuvers. We had our guns out and we placed guns around and loaded sand bombs. And our particular job, one of them, was to load a sea(c)going barge that was supposed to go to the Philippines. We loaded it with about... well I don't know how many million rounds of .50 and .30 caliber ammunition, and 300 and 500 lb. bombs.

Q: You mentioned sand bombs. What's a sand bomb?

A: Well, a sand bomb is a... for practice. It's a sheet metal bomb that when it's empty it doesn't weigh... it weighs only a few pounds, and it's got tail fins on it, and in the tail there's a 3-lb. charge of black powder. But you fill the container with sand and so that when it comes out of the bomb rack, it comes down and it's armed, and when it hits the target, the black powder makes a big plume of smoke which black powder does. It's not very... as far as explosives, it is explosive but not in the terms of a bomb. So they used those for targets.

Q: What kind of targets did they use?

A: Well, they used to go out and practice bomb on the *Utah*. They'd come down and practice on that with these bombs and then also practiced off between Hickam Field and John Rogers Field. That was a civilian field. Well, they wouldn't do any damage as far as the damage unless they hit something that wasn't structurally sound or if it hit a person.

Q: You mentioned the barge that was loaded up with ammunition and explosives....

A: Yeah, well, we loaded that up, when I say so-called maneuvers, I don't think you would actually call them maneuvers but that's a get ready or whatever you want to call it, and we were loading the ammunition and bombs for the Philippines. It was a sea-going barge and that was anchored, or tied up at the end of our Hickam Field, which is at the entrance of Pearl Harbor.

Then there was the HAD hangar, which is the Hawaiian Air Depot hangar, that they assembled planes and worked on engines. Any planes that came in from the states, we'd assemble them there; put the wings on them and work on them and that we right alongside where this barge was tied up.

And December the 7th, they bombed the HAD hangar. In fact, I think they even put torpedoes in that, and they would fly right down almost through the rigging of this sea-going barge. But as far as I know they never hit it. I don't even think they strafed it. I'm not sure but I don't think they did. If they'd have blown that up, I don't know what would have happened to the entrance ... whether it would have harmed the entrance to Pearl Harbor or not. I don't know that much about it.

Q: What were you doing on the morning of the attack... uh, when the attack started?

A: Well, usually I used to walk over to Pearl Harbor and I'd take a picket boat out to get on a boat, on a ship, and have breakfast, because they had baked beans on Sunday for breakfast, and we never got baked beans, and I like them.

So, but that morning, it happened that another fellow and I were going to take a trip around the Island, so I didn't go over to Pearl Harbor. And while I was waiting for him to get up, and get ready, I heard these strange motors that I didn't recognize and I went over and looked out the window and I saw these ... I'm not sure whether it was three planes or four planes. It seemed to me, as I remember it now, it was three planes in a formation, and one plane was off to the... would be to the right and further back.

Then as I was watching them I saw these bombs come out from underneath them and I told the fellow, I said, "Look, they're bombing the *Utah*, right in the Harbor!" and about that time, when they hit, then I saw the red, looked like red rust, or it could have been dust from misses. By then all smoke and fire and pieces flew all over everything. And then those planes seemed to come down while I was watching, they came down and lost altitude, and then more planes came in from the same direction, smaller planes...

Q: Which direction was that?

A: Well, it... trying to think of whether it was... it was from the mountains. They came in; there was... they were burning sugar cane that same morning and they came in as far as I could see, the first ones came in from the mountains end of Pearl Harbor.

In other words it would be the same, almost the same direction as our entrance route into Hickam; almost the same entrance, or the same line as our runways would be. And battleship row was in the same, as I remember, it was in the same line. And that's... they came in from that direction over from mainland, over Ford Island, and then swung out toward Barbers Point and then swung back over the land and that's when they would come in and strafe Hickam Field; bomb and strafe it. And then, let's see, uh..

Q: What did you do during the attack?

A: Well, during the attack, we all got together, and ran out. We had bomb trucks and trailers, which we were all assigned to as crews. And we ran out and loaded... and we went down and got guns and ammunition. And while the attack was going on, some B-17's were landing in from the mainland. And we went out with this ammunition and bombs to try and load them. We thought that's what we were supposed to do. We didn't know we were supposed to get out of there until the attack was over. So our whole ordinance... whole Company was out running around the runway, with our bomb trucks and trailers.

Q: From what you were telling me a few minutes ago, it sounded like you were looking.... you looked pretty conspicuous.

A: Yeah, well at that time all of your trailers and bomb trucks, all of your bombs, and everything was painted yellow. Uh that was to show that it was dangerous and could be explosive or anything like that. And not realizing it, every plane that we went up to, why the Japs would come down and strafe the plane. Of course we'd grab everything off that we could and put it back on the truck and go to another one.

Our trucks were capable of... they were Ford trucks and they were half-ton, I guess you would call them half-ton trucks with a crane over the back end; something similar to a wrecker. That was to lift the bombs up and they were capable of doing about 90 mph. And I think that's what we were doing that day, as fast as we could go, and missing the craters. And at first, of course, there weren't too many craters, but later there was.

We... when the attack was over, we went down to our bomb dump and we set up camp down near our bomb dump in the woods, and we wouldn't be conspicuous down there because of the trees. And then that evening or that night, they wanted to know if anybody knew anything about communications, and I told my commanding officer, I said, "Well I set up the bell system in a small hotel when I was a kid, bell-hopping in the summer." "Well," he said, "come on with me. We're going to put a command post out near the runway for communications."

Well we started that and it got darker and everybody started shooting at us, so we crawled back and off of where we were and got back in the woods again until morning to do it. Then we dug a hole out there and put a we got the telephone equipment from the Signal Department and that's where we had our communication system out there, under ground.

Well, there wasn't anybody in our Company that was... that got hit. We had a lot of close ones and everything but none of our Company, even though we were all out on the ramp running around, none of us got hit.

Q: Which Company was that?

A: 482nd Ordinance. We had the 482nd Ordinance and the 481st Ordinance. They were two aviation ordinance companies. That's the two companies that were together that I was with, but I was in the 482nd.

Q: What rank were you at the time?

A: I was a Private. Yeah, at that time, why you didn't get any raise or anything for quite a while and I'd only been there, well, about 9 months. So that wasn't much time to do it and they didn't hand out ranks very good before the War. After the War, then you stepped right up. But then you didn't... I don't know... well, I'll tell you, the... of course they were all kind of rumors; everything was rumors.

Q: I can imagine.

A: And they had rumors that the reason they were burning the sugar cane up there, they said they had arrows pointed in the sugar cane, pointing to where the planes were supposed to go. Well, I thought that was kind of foolish because I figured the Japs knew where everything was anyhow. They need arrows to point, and then they said that they had sabotaged the water. Well most of the water pipes were broken anyhow, or a good many of them were, but they said that they had sabotaged the water and we weren't allowed to drink water.

So after everything was over, the first attack, while the attack was over, I took a bomb truck down to what we call "Snake Ranch"; it's the beer place and it was all banged up and hit and everything was bad around there. So I went in and got cases of beer and cases of soda to drink and I also got cigarettes for the fellows and brought them back. The ice cream was all melting by that time. But there was no... we didn't have anything to eat or drink for I don't know how long. It seemed when I at the time, it seemed like the attack took all day, but actually it was only like a couple hours, but uh...

Q: Longest two hours you ever spent probably.

A: Yeah, it seemed like it was all day. You lost all track of time. You lost all track of everything. But as far as I know, as far as December the 7th, that's about what I remember.

Q: Well, thank you. I appreciate your sharing your time and your memories.

A: Mmmhmm, yes.