

#204 ED PERRON: HICKAM

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel on December twenty-- December 4, 1991. It's about 4:40 PM. We're speaking with Edmund Perron, Perron. Mr. Perron was a corporal and crew chief in charge of maintenance of the P-40 fighter aircraft in the 72nd Pursuit Squadron, based out of Wheeler Field, however at the time of the attack, Mr. Perron was serving detach duty and was at Hickam Field. I'd like to thank you very much for joining us. First of all, we're doing this tape for the USS ARIZONA Memorial, and the National Park Services oral history program, and we're doing this in conjunction with KHET-TV, in Honolulu. So thanks for joining us, very much.

Mr. Perron, could you just describe for us a little bit how you got into the service and how you got over to Hawaii?

Ed Perron (EP): Well, I'm originally from Lynn, Massachusetts and joined the service in the month of September of 1940. We went to Fort Slocum, New York and it took us thirty days to arrive in Hawaii. We went by boat from New York, through the Panama Canal, over to San Francisco at Fort McDowell, and then over to Hawaii.

SH: Do you remember the name of the vessel you were on?

EP: That was -- the vessel was the [USAT] *REPUBLIC*, very large military vessel. We landed in Honolulu on Christmas Eve, December the twenty-fourth, 1940. And our destination was to be Hickam [*Field*] and that's the base we were assigned to. However, there was a spinal meningitis outbreak and they shipped us, on the Honolulu Trolley, up to Wheeler Field. Now, this --- we arrived there about two o'clock in the morning.

So they assigned us to various squadrons at Wheeler Field. I was assigned to the 47th Pursuit Squadron at that time. Within a few months, they were expanding the Army Air Corps and they formed the 72nd -- and they had renamed them, fighter interceptor squadrons, 72nd and 73rd and they took men from the 47th to make these new squadrons. So I was assigned to the 72nd [*Pursuit*] Squadron, fighter interceptor. And after a few months, I requested to be sent to the aviation mechanic school -- they call it the A.M. school -- down at Hickam Field. So I was assigned to duty down there. At the time, I was a crew chief on one of the P-40 Kitty Hawk aircraft.

SH: Could you tell us a little about the duties of the crew chief, and a little bit about that plane of yours?

EP: Well, the plane that I had, they allowed us to name the plane whatever name we wanted. I named it -- mine was BLUE EYES, after my wife, Bea. And the duties, as crew chief, we had sometimes between two and three men working for us and we were responsible for the entire maintenance on the aircraft at that time.

SH: What were the specialties of the other men that worked with you?

EP: The other spec-- the only other specialties I had were the armament men. We did not do any of the armament, but we were responsible for all other maintenance.

SH: I see.

EP: It's not like today, where they have specialized shops to do the electrician sawing, electric, hydraulic and electrical. We did all of that with the exception of the armament, the gunners.

SH: And that was done separately. I didn't realize that.

EP: So then at Hickam Field, we started the school and we were into the school probably for three or four weeks and approximately, I don't know the exact date, but it was about the twenty-eighth to the first of December, they stopped the school, and they had all of the fellows that were attending school, a ground defense force. And they made us -- we were responsible for guarding and patrolling all the strategic sections of the base -- the water tower and the various places on the base. I was a corporal at that time, so I was made corporal of the guard.

SH: Prior to this alert status, how were the aircraft parked out there, and what changed it that night?

EP: Well, at Wheeler Field, before I left, we had been working -- in addition to our mechanic duties -- we were making these revetments, or bunkers, and they were camouflaged. And I'll explain a little later on the -- how I found the aircraft all apart at Wheeler Field.

SH: Okay.

EP: So as a ground defense force . . .

SH: Back to Hickam now.

EP: Yeah. Saturday on December the sixth, I wasn't supposed to, but I had a jeep of my own and I, on my own, I rode up to Wheeler Field, to see my buddy, Joseph Saulnier, to see how he was doing and as I sat on this bunk, overlooking Wheeler Field, from the main barracks, all of the P-40s were lined up on the runway, or the parking apron. And I couldn't believe seeing that, because we were on a very strict alert down at Hickam. And I asked him what the aircraft were doing all on the apron strip.

And he said, "Well, the general, some general made an inspection of the, the guns, and he found a little bit of rust and he had all the aircraft pulled out of the revetments, parked on the apron. The guns were removed from the aircraft, all the ammunition was removed from the aircraft, and parked in one of the hangars, stored in one of the hangars."

Now, this was the afternoon of December the sixth. The next morning, that's exactly how the Japanese caught the airplanes. Now, all they had to do is strafe and they caught all the aircraft and the hangar was exploding for hours. The one with the ammunition in it.

SH: Back at Hickam, how were the planes parked? Were they similarly lined up?

EP: No, at Hickam, they were sort of spread around and they didn't. I don't remember too much of how they parked down there.

But anyway, that particular night, Saturday, December the sixth, I was scheduled to be on guard from midnight to six in the morning.

SH: Before you went on guard duty, what . . .

EP: Right, before I went on guard duty . . .

SH: . . . what were you doing? What --- that evening?

EP: . . . every Saturday, they usually had the Golden Gloves boxing tournament at Pearl Harbor, which was right adjacent to the Hickam Field. And I vividly remember that they would also have what they call a battle of music. They would have one boxing bout and then on -- they had a stage adjoining that, and I remember the US[S] ARIZONA, they come out and put a big placard on a stand and then they would play music. And then they'd have another boxing bout, and then the USS PENNSYLVANIA and the other would come out and play their piece. The ARIZONA had one of the largest bands there that night.

So I had to leave about eleven o'clock to go on duty at midnight, starting December the seventh. Now, all through the evening, my wife had sent me a little portable radio, and I loved to listen to this Hawaiian music. But usually the Hawaiian radio stations used to go off the air about eleven o'clock. And we had noticed this prior to this date, that when they played music all night, we knew there were some airplanes coming out from the States, 'cause they used this as an additional radio guidance to enter the base.

SH: Was that common knowledge amongst the people . . .

EP: Yes.

SH: . . . on the base?

EP: Most of the people knew that whenever the music played all night, they said, "Ooh, we expect some airplanes in."

And . . .

SH: But it did not get specific word about . . .

EP: No.

SH: . . . that, or have an idea that there was these B-17s, for instance?

EP: No, I did see that one B-17 that landed at Hickam. There was a Japanese on its tail and he dropped a small bomb -- you probably see that, it's a very popular photo of the B-17 cut in half.

SH: Yes. Did you witness that?

EP: Yes, I did witness that.

SH: Well, let's talk about that in chronological . . .

EP: And then they pulled this aside . . .

SH: . . . order, but let's remember to get back to that.

EP: Okay. So I got off duty and being that I hadn't slept all night, I didn't feel like eating breakfast and I had to go to church. It was Sunday, so I --- the mess hall at Hickam was a large mess hall with glass roofing and the

Japanese did hit two or three bombs right into the mess hall, killed several people. So I felt I was lucky that I didn't eat that morning.

SH: What kind of --- what did you do on guard duty that night? I mean, was it . . .

EP: Well, on guard duty, all I had to do as corporal of the guard, I would go around to all of the men. I had about ten of them stationed in different spots, and I'd just have to check on them to see that they're not sleeping on the job. That was my duties as corporal of the guard, they call it.

SH: Okay.

EP: Now, after that, they had moved us from the large barracks. They had those large permanent barracks at Hickam, but when they assigned us to this ground defense corps, they put us in twenty-man tents, on the outskirts of the field. I don't know exactly where right now, but we were in these tents and they were on platforms that were probably up a foot and a half from the ground. And I had just got in bed, not going to eat or not going to church. And incidentally, the church was the theaters. They used to use the theaters as a church, and they bombed that out too. The only thing that was remaining was the galvanized piping and the safe, and the "Coming Attractions" sign. They didn't hit that. That wasn't ruined.

SH: Do you remember what the coming attraction was?

EP: No. But anyway, I finally got into bed and just about when they started, twenty minutes to eight, one of the fellows -- and he always was one of these jokesters -- he's running through the barracks, you know, saying. And he had the old World War I helmets on the harbor, and I can still see it, it said, he was saying, "The Japs are here. The Japs are here."

Well, I didn't really believe it because I was sort of groggy. But when I heard the noise of the strafing and the bombs, I lifted -- I was right on the end of the tents, so I lifted the panel up and I could see the Japanese on the -- their insignia. So I was dressed real quick. And they had some higher ranking non-commissioned officers and they were trying to get a formation of everyone, from the tents, to find out who could fire a thirty-caliber machine gun, who could fire, who was a fifty-caliber machine gun. Rifles, he didn't ask, 'cause we all knew how to fire the rifle. So by the time we got a formation, the Japanese was strafing. So we all get under the tents, under the roof platforms. They finally did get a formation enough and they put us out on these thirty caliber gun placements, on the edge of the field. And that's where I was. And I had just drank a lot of water. And they had brought out a bunch of G.I. blankets, laying on the ground. And then we got word to the command post that as far as they were concerned, all of the water was poisoned, "Do not drink any water unless it comes from the hospital and is boiled."

And I laid --- I remember laying on the blankets and I said, "I'm going to die of poisoning after living through the attack."

But fortunately, I didn't. Later, I was put on a supply truck to go out and see what kind of food or drink I could get and they allowed us to go into the main barracks, break down any doors and so on to pick up these cases of Coca-Cola. We did go onto the PXs, and there was a small commissary store that we're allowed to go into, and we just took everything off the shelves, to bring out to the troops that was scattered around, out on the edge of the field. I

mean, they didn't put us in the barracks for fear there was going to be another attack.

SH: How long did you stay out in the field, under those kind of field conditions?

EP: Three or four days. And then after that, when they found out that there was no invasion, we were put back into the large barracks and then we were assigned to -- being that we were mechanics -- we were assembling the P-40 parts that they had shipped over on aircraft carriers in two boxes. That they had one wing section and a fuselage section, so we had to put those aircraft together, at that time.

SH: Was this immediately then, just a few days after the attack and you were assembling new P-40s?

EP: Yeah. And that was on a twenty-four hour basis. We were working twelve hour shifts?

SH: Do you remember any attempt to salvage --- this was at Hickam now?

EP: Hickam Field.

SH: Do you remember any attempts to salvage the parts?

EP: That I didn't know. All I knew was, you know, that was our job to put these aircraft together and that's what we did.

SH: But back up a little bit about the, the events of the attack itself. You mentioned witnessing the B-17 from the mainland coming in. Could you describe that a little bit, what you saw?

EP: Well, the B-17 was just laying. That's the only one that was damaged, of the whole squadron. 'Cause when they came in, from what I understand, I saw some of the men that still had their winter uniform, so I inquired about what the status of the other aircraft was. They landed on all the other islands. This was the only one that come in, from what I understand, at Hickam.

SH: And what happened to it?

EP: And the Japanese Zero was right on its tail and he dropped a small bomb and it blew the aircraft apart. All of that crew were killed.

SH: And you actually saw the . . .

EP: Mm-hm.

SH: You saw the plane?

EP: Mm-hm.

SH: Drop that bomb. Did you have any other memories of Japanese planes that they also described opening the tent and . . .

EP: No, all that and the strafing. They strafed our tent area there, 'cause they saw a lot of the activity of the troops running around. And then of course, being that we're right on the outskirts of Pearl Harbor, we could see

all of that going on too, the smoke and the ARIZONA. We didn't know that the ARIZONA was burning, but several of the ships was heavy smoke.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of that day? What really stands in your mind?

EP: Well, the most vivid memory was, like I say, trying to avoid the strafing of the Japanese aircraft, because we had to scramble onto these wood platform tents, two or three times.

SH: What was going through your mind at the time?

EP: I really can't remember. We were so busy to try to, you know.

SH: Do you recall any of the feelings that you had about the Japanese and the attack at the time, or, you know, immediately afterwards?

EP: Well, naturally there was an animosity towards the Japanese because they did something like this. And the feelings stayed with us for quite a while, you know. But then we sort of realized they're in the service just like we are, and we have to do what we're told.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

SH: After you --- you said you spent some time assembling P-40s and getting the Hawaiian Air Force back into shape, essentially.

EP: After that, I was sent back . . .

SH: What went on after that?

EP: . . . to my fighter squadron, the 72nd fighter [Pursuit] interceptor Squadron.

SH: So you went back to Wheeler for some time?

EP: Wheeler Field. And then we were assigned to Bellows Field. All the squadrons moved out to Bellows Field, so we were on alert out there, sleeping in tents. And I believe that's when I got my orders, prior -- when I first arrived over here, I had put in an application to become a pilot. I wanted to go through flight training. And, as I mentioned earlier, I didn't think that they, after the war started, that they would want me to go back to the States. But luckily, I was accepted and it was in the early part of '43 that I returned back to the States.

SH: How did you get back? Do you recall?

EP: I went back on a boat, the [SS] LURLINE, one of the Matsonias [Matson liners].

SH: Sure.

EP: I can still remember on the LURLINE, they were transporting troops back and forth and they had plywood on all of the sides, and they had these bunks about seven or eight high, and yet the chandeliers were still the beautiful, big chandeliers were still hanging in there.

SH: Really? Was there a chandelier right above your head?

EP: Yeah, yeah.

SH: Where did you do your flight training?

EP: Well, when I got back to the States, they sent us to college first. We got some college training up in Ellensburg, Washington. It was called the Central Washington State Teachers College. It was a women's college. And I didn't spend the full time, 'cause they were running short of pilots. So they -- from there I went to Santa Ana Army Air Base, which is in Santa Ana, California. From there, we went to different bases, going through primary training, basic training, advanced training, and then into C-47 and C-46. Graduated -- we graduated out of Douglas Field, Arizona. And then we got on -- the C-47, C-46 training was at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, Texas.

SH: You mentioned some details of an interesting light that you took from . . .

EP: And then, after we trained, they trained us as a complete crew -- pilot, co-pilot, radio operator and mechanic -- on the C-46. This was the new airplane that they used over --- also an engine over the hump. And instead of shipping us out as passengers on a boat or an aircraft, they used us as crewmembers to ferry new aircraft over for replacement in the Pacific. So we had a brand new C-46 we threw out of Mather Air Force Base, up by Sacramento. And the flight, they had to put on extra tanks, 'cause this just has a two engine aircraft, and it took us thirteen hours flying with very strict cruise control from Mather Field, over to Honolulu.

SH: These extra tanks were in the fuselage then?

EP: In the fuselage, yeah, right. Then when I landed here, they had to give us at least an eight-hour crew layover and I inquired -- the security was very strict because I inquired about the 72nd, my old fighter squadron, and no one knew where they were.

SH: Did you land at Hickam?

EP: I landed at Hickam. And then, from Hickam, we jumped from -- I don't know all the -- but we jumped from island to island until our final destination was [Wewak], New Guinea, on the island of Guinea. And that's where they had all the replacement aircraft. And from there, they took all the complete crews and assigned us to various locations.

SH: So where did you get assigned?

EP: I was assigned to an outfit in the Philippines.

SH: Which outfit was that, do you recall?

EP: I think it was the 335th, troop carrier. I jumped with so many squadrons, it's hard to remember all these numbers.

SH: You said you spent some time training for parachute operations. Is that correct?

EP: Right. Training at Bergstrom Air Force Base was hauling a full complement of paratroopers or pulling two gliders full of troops. So we did extensive training before that, and we were ready to go and the mission that we were told that we were going to do was -- where we were supposed to invade the southern tips of Kyushu Island. There was an air base down there and then we were training for a very strict cruise control to see -- for gasoline consumption. And our instructions were that we were supposed to either drop two gliders full of troops or paratroopers, and circle around, waiting for them to take the airfield, for us to land. If they didn't take the airfield, we just had to go out as far as we could in the ocean and ditch, and wait for the Navy to pick us up.

Fortunately, we didn't have to do this because, just prior to that time, we were -- I remember very vividly -- we were watching an outdoor movie, and they stopped the movie and told us that they had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. So they pretty well explained it. From then on, our mission changed completely. What we were doing is they shipped us to Iwo Jima. And at Iwo Jima, I finally found my squadron. And one of my -- I found one of my crewmembers that come over to Hawaii originally as a private. He was a master sergeant, he was the line chief of the 72nd fighter squadron. All of the fellows that I had known, the older, higher ranking men had rotated back to the States.

So when we got to Iwo Jima, our job was to fly into Atsugi Air Force Base in Japan, and we were flying fifty-five gallon drums of gasoline. And the reason for that, they had no fuel in Japan at all, that's why the, you know, we won the war, I guess. We were flying fifty-five gallon drums on gasoline, for the C-54s on that air transport command. They were coming in with passenger airplanes and the Japanese, when they dropped that atomic bomb, they just let all of the prisoners of war go and told them what bases to go to. And while we were at this Atsugi [Air] Base, they had no barracks or anything, so we were sleeping in the factories where they made the kamikaze airplanes, right there at Atsugi. So all they give us -- they gave us a cot and then we used these aluminum sheets, big aluminum sheets to separate the floor and so on.

SH: You mentioned that when you left to Japan -- I'm not sure if it was that first time -- but you mentioned that you went by -- was it Hiroshima?

EP: We had to fly over both Hiroshima and the other city there.

SH: Nagasaki?

EP: And I was just -- it was just devastating to see these, 'cause we could fly all over then. We didn't have, you know, we didn't have to worry about any Japanese fighters. But it was quite a sad thing to see, the devastation that an atomic bomb could do. And when you think about what could happen if a hydrogen bomb were exploded, which is hundred times as powerful as an atomic bomb.

SH: Fifty years have gone by since, at least since Pearl Harbor. From looking back fifty years later, what's your most vivid memory about the war?

EP: Well, I think the most vivid memory was the experience of going into Japan, being one of the first aircraft in Japan, and seeing the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

SH: In a sense, I guess you could say, you were there at the beginning and . . .

EP: Yeah, and at the end.

SH: . . . and at the end.

EP: And I --- what I forgot to mention is that my wife had had our first child while I was away, so when they -- we were rotated back to the States on a point basis. Well, I happened to have all kinds of points 'cause I was over here before the war, and I had all kind of points being in war zones. So I got the telegram when I flew back into Iwo Jima -- back and forth to Japan -- telegram that our first daughter was born on August 28, 1945.

SH: Yeah, that must have been a happy moment.

EP: Yeah.

SH: Happy way to end it.

EP: So I rotated back to the States.

SH: Good. Mr. Perron, thanks very much for sharing your story. It was really interesting, good of you to take the time. A pleasure to talk with you.

EP: Thank you.

SH: Good one. Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW