

January 12, 1985
Ernest Cockett #41

Q: Mr. Cockett, when did you first join the Honolulu Fire Dept.?

A: I first joined the Honolulu Fire Dept., July the 4th, 1935.

Q: What was your first assignment?

A: My first assignment was as a hoseman at the Palama Fire Station.

Q: Did you stay at the Palama Station until December 7th, 1941?

A: Just prior to December the 7th, I received a call from my Asst. Chief, [Edward] P. Boyle, to pack my things and go to Kaimuki Fire Station to relieve the engineer who was going on vacation for 30 days. After that, I should return to Palama Fire Station.

Q: What was your duties to be over at the Kaimuki Station?

A: I would be engineer on the rig that was on Kaimuki Fire Station.

Q: And what was the duty of the engineer?

A: The duty of the engineer mostly is to pump at all fires, connect up to the hydrant and so on. There's other duties to perform but that's your main... to keep that pump in good condition so that when there is a fire you will be able to furnish water to all the men that is fighting fires at the particular fires.

Q: Were you on duty there on the morning of December 7th?

A: On the morning of December the 7th, I was on duty and from my station which was way up on the hills in Kaimuki, I was looking towards Pearl Harbor on account of all the airplanes flying over one. And I noticed that the shots that were being fired from these planes are from the ground wherever it was, it was all black. Usually the smoke that comes out of these shots are white and when I saw this black smoke I says, "Doggone it, that's... there must be something wrong." And...

Q: Why did you think there was something wrong?

A: Because of the color of the smoke.

Q: Uh huh.

A: Then later, we could see big black smokes coming from the vicinity of Pearl Harbor. Then my told my Skipper, "Hey, something is happening down at Pearl Harbor." Up until that time, we did not know that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Then we got our first call: Move in towards Makiki Fire Station.

Q: Do you remember about what time that was?

A: Yes, that was a little after 8:00. We were on the road. And our way to Makiki Fire Station, I noticed these planes coming from the vicinity of Kaneohe, flying over the town. And under their wing, I could see that these planes had the insignia of the Rising Sun. And then I knew something was wrong, because we never have any foreign planes come to our Islands like that. There were many of them.

Q: You said you were called to Makiki Fire Station?

A: Makiki Fire Station.

Q: Why were you called to Makiki Station?

A: Because everybody was moving toward Pearl Harbor, so naturally we had to cover in. We're the farthest away from Pearl Harbor. Kaimuki's the last station on that side. We did not have too many stations during that time. There was no stations on the Windward side. There was no stations past Kaimuki, Hawaii Kai, all of that area did not have any fire stations. Kaimuki was the last station on the east side. Now they're moving the Companies towards town because everything was being concentrated toward Pearl Harbor.

Then after about 15 minutes, we get another call to move into Central. So now we're in the heart of town and there's not too many fire... too many Companies left in the fire station because they've all moved towards Pearl Harbor. And naturally, we got calls, whether it was bombs, or whether it was shots from our Pearl Harbor, or from Hickam Field, wherever these shots came from anyway, the calls come in and say, "A bomb just dropped next to my house!" So when we get up there, there's nothing.

Q: How did you first get the news that there was actually an attack going on?

A: Well, when we got at Makiki, I happened to go in the back of the station to get a mop, because I was going to mop the station. I heard the radio in the next door: We are at War! This is the McCoy! So I run to the Skipper and I say, "Capt. I think we're at a War!" He says, "How come?" I said, "I just heard it over the radio!" Then our neighbor jumps over the fence. He was a Lt. in the Honolulu Police Dept.. He says, "Hey Capt., we're at War with Japan!" Then we knew why all of these things were happening. We didn't know when we left Kaimuki. We found out when we were down at Makiki. All they said was, "Cover in." That was the order we got. "Cover in, in Makiki." So we came on down to Makiki. Then we got another call, "Cover in at Central." That's when all these false alarms were coming in. People were hearing shrapnel falling in this area. Here they say a bomb was dropped here, a bomb was dropped there. We were going all over the place and still we couldn't find anything, until we got a call that there was a big fire on King and McCully Streets. And when we got there, the whole block was on fire and I witnessed one of my friends home going up in a blaze, because he was off

duty. I don't know where he was that day, but his house was on fire. And it was pitiful because not enough men, not enough equipment and a whole block burning.... that's tough.

Q: About how many Units were on the scene there?

A: I think there were only two, one from Waikiki and the other one from Kaimuki.

Q: About how many men with each Unit?

A: Twelve maybe.

Q: Twelve men each. And how did you fight the fire? What did you do?

A: Well, we did the best we could. Let out as much hose as we could and after finishing at one spot, we try to move...which is pretty difficult, to move from one fire to the next fire and so on down the lane because once you lead out that's it. Then you'll have to repeat the whole procedure again when you go to the next one. That's why we had difficulty. You see, if we had enough Companies, we'd take one spot. Then next Company would come in; they'd take the next spot. Then you cover up the whole section. But with only Companies, it was pretty hard... kind of difficult.

Q: Were there any injuries there on that scene?

A: No, smoke inhalation would be about the worst, but there were no injuries because it was just out near a fires that we come in contact with all the time. We're used to contact fires. Residential fires isn't too bad.

Q: What about any of the larger buildings in the neighborhood, did they catch on fire?

A: Everything went down, right to the ground, the whole block. In fact, I think it was a block and a half.

Q: What do you remember most about fighting that fire?

A: My friends home.

Q: Oh yeah.

A: I felt kind of sad because I couldn't do anything to help it. I couldn't do anything to help because it was out of my reach and I just saw that thing go right down to the ground.

Q: What about any of the schools in the neighborhood?

A: Well, there was a school about a block away and that didn't burn. I think on Pumehana Street there was a school there, and that school didn't burn. It was just confined in that particular corner, King and McCully.

Q: What about after December 7th? What was the situation like right after the attack, in the next few days, couple of weeks?

A: Well, then the Office of Civilian Defense stepped in and we were assigned. We had a representative in the Office of Civilian Defense representing the Fire Dept. because that's where you got all your money to buy new fire equipment. But we increased from 8 stations to close to 35 stations. We used garages. We used schools... to build our fire stations, because every school was closed. There was no school... no school and the [Kamameha] School became a hospital. Punahou School became the Office of the Engineers. I think that was the main office and St. Louis became a hospital. Well, Tripler was just about being built at that time. The old Tripler was the main hospital here. And we increased from a mere, a little over 100 to over 500 firemen.

Q: That's a big jump.

A: Oh yes. We were really prepared this time. If they had come back we had the personnel to handle it a second time if they came back and a lot of people had said that Japan had just followed suit right after the bombing they could have taken the Islands.

Q: What was the feeling among people after the attack?

A: Oh, they were frightened. We went into blackouts. Our headlights on our apparatus was... they gave us a little... it was all painted you know. The lights were all painted and they left a little hole about that big.

Q: About an inch?

A: About an inch. And when we responded at night a guy would have to sit on the fender there and turn a searchlight. We had more light from the search light that we did from our regular headlight, because everything was blacked out at that time... no lights. No nothing. And it was tough responding. Instead of going 50, 55 mph, you were going just about 15 to 20 mph responding. And well, it was pretty quiet during that time because everybody is home now. Nobody leaves home. That's when you have fires, when people leave home. Everybody's home so they're watching their house. There's nothing to do but protect yourself. With all the extra equipment, with all the stations we had, we didn't have enough fires. Because when you have everybody home, everybody is watching. Pretty hard to start a fire in the home.

Q: Getting back to December 7th for a second, on your crew, you mentioned the Chief of your crew. Who was your Skipper?

A: Oh, Thomas Macy... Captain Thomas Macy. He was a good old soul, full of pep, lively, and he already had about 30 years on the job.

Q: So he was an old timer.

A: He was an old timer. He was an old timer.

Q: Was he the one who took you from Kaimuki to Makiki?

A: No, Chief Boyle was.

Q: That was Chief Boyle.

A: Chief Boyle, Asst. Chief on duty, sent me from Palama to Kaimuki.

Q: Who was the Senior man on your crew when you went from Kaimuki to Makiki?

A: Oh, that was Capt. Kipi. He's dead now.

Q: Do you know how to spell his name?

A: K-I-P-I. Captain Kipi.

Q: So this was a crew of 12 men we were talking about?

A: No, there was just about 6 men in each crew.

Q: Oh, 6 in each crew.

A: Yes.

Q: Uh, sounds like...

A: Today, they have a little more. I think they have 7 or 8. But they have three shifts, we had only two. They work less hours and they have better pay... much better today.

Q: Sounds like a day you'll never forget.

A: Oh yes, that was an experience. And then when I got back to Palama after my... after I got through the rig that I was working on still had bullet holes.

Q: Oh yeah?

A: Still had bullet holes. When they came down to strafe.

Q: Is that the same Engine that they still have today at the...

A: No, all of those rigs are gone. They're all in the junk pile.

Q: Well, I appreciate your sharing your memories with me.

A: Well, as I said, if you want to get down to the nitty gritty of this, the day it happened go and see Nagumi Namashita(??) because I believe he is the only member of that crew left today.

Q: Well, I've got him on my list to call.

A: Uh huh. And then another man would be Richard Young.

Q: Richard Young. I've got him on my list to call.

A: He was at Pearl Harbor. Nagumi was at Hickam Field.

Q: O.K., thank you.