

Florence Washburn #58
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Q: Mrs. Washburn, what kind of work were you doing in 1941?

A: I was doing accounting work with the recreation office in Fort Shafter.

Q: What did that sort of work involve.

A: It involved taking care of all the post headquarters and enlisted men with their recreational activities. We were in charge of the theater, the bowling alleys, the post library. We also had the enlisted mens club. We had sports; the major sports we had were baseball and football. We competed with other service men on different bases like Schofield, Hickam Field, (there weren't too many at the time of course.) But we did have sports competing with other groups on the Island.

Q: Where were you living at the time?

A: I was living at the time up on Round Top Drive, and we had a house that was high enough to overlook the whole Island, and we had a beautiful view of Pearl Harbor, Mt. Kaala, the Waianae Range, Hickam Field, as well as the Coast Guard area and all of Honolulu. It was a beautiful view.

Q: Do you remember looking out from your house on the morning of December 7th, what the weather was like that morning? What kind of day was it?

A: The weather as I recall was a beautiful day because I was as usual on the weekends, I usually wait and watch the dawn patrol come in. That was one of my favorite things to do on the weekend when I was home, because it was such a beautiful sight seeing these planes come in over the Koolau Range, the Waianae Range. And this one morning, it was a beautiful view too and I saw the planes coming in as usual on time.

Q: About what time was that? Do you recall?

A: It was just about daybreak. I would say a little after 5:30, pretty close to 6:00 in the morning. But then I noticed something unusual happening and it looked at though they were coming in unusually fast and then I noticed shortly after that, the anti-aircraft guns being fired. Of course we had a lot of those in those days and I got quite concerned then.

Q: Why did you get concerned?

A: Well, it was unusual from the regular dawn patrol that I watched coming in almost every Sunday morning. I had never seen anything like that happening; all these rocketing of smoke or whether it was artificial or real. But the anti-aircraft guns,

we fired, I watched them on practice. But this was very unusual for a Sunday morning... and at the same time when I noticed a lot of traffic coming up on Round Top which is also very unusual for a weekend, or Sunday morning. And watching the cars going up and up to the top of Tantalus, I noticed there were a lot of Orientals. At the time, I didn't know what was going on. But there were a lot of cars going up there. And I continued to watch and I called Margaret Deitz(?) who I was sharing a house with and I told her to come on out. I said there must be something wrong. I said look at all of those guns going off. I said there's something wrong. So she ran downstairs (it was a two(c)story house)... she ran downstairs and by our garden and we looked out from the ridge where we could see everything and she said, "Oh my God, I think we're being attacked!" I said, "I don't know but there's something wrong." And...

Q: As you looked out, excuse me, as you looked out over Pearl Harbor, what did you see?

A: I could see it more from Hickam field where those anti-aircraft guns were coming. But from Pearl Harbor at the time, it was just covered with smoke. I didn't see any explosions at the time. And all of a sudden as we looked up there was this plane that went overhead over uh, Tantalus and Round Top, and when we looked up there was a raising sun underneath the wing. And I started to call her. I said, "It's a Japanese plane." And she said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yes the Rising Sun is underneath." And then we turned the radio on and then we started to hear the broadcasts about our being attacked an all. And then we saw all the explosions going on in Pearl Harbor. We didn't know at the time whether they were ships, or whether they were rockets, or whatever was going on, but we could see all the smoke... black smoke going up into the air. Then we saw planes up into the air. And of course by the time... oh by noon, or a little after that, things had simmered down, There were no more planes but we could see the smoke continuing forever.

And then we were being called over the radio to those who could come back into their posts. And I called in then, to Fort Shafter and asked if I could come in, or if they wanted me in and they said, "Well, come on later this afternoon. But we will send a driver for you." And so I... then I asked Margaret Deitz(?) that I would move down into town and that's on Wilder in the Makiki area; that I had better move down there. It would be more convenient for the military to pick me up rather than coming up to Tantalus and Round Top and try and find us, which she did. She took me down and I stayed at the Colonial Hotel there.

Q: Where was the Colonial...

A: It was right on Pensacola Street. And she also moved from her house because she was frightened, over to Tantalus Drive with her sister. We had a beautiful home on the top of the hill there. And I got settled in the Colonial Hotel and later a driver was sent for me and I let them know that I was there and they picked me up and drove me into the post.

And at the time Tripler Hospital was just across the street from Fort Shafter, and they were in need of a lot of help. And so we started pitching in doing what we could do. And they were bringing in bodies

evidently from the lagoon area where people had gone out fishing that morning and it was a regular routine for a lot of families to go out fishing in that area there. And so bodies were being brought in and we were helping at Tripler Hospital, the best way we could. And finally by the end of the day or late evening I also had a Red Cross girl that was on the post that was helping (we were both very good friends; she lived in Waikiki) and we were busy helping, whatever they needed us to do... moving bags. And then I noticed a lot of these duffel bags in the hall way. Didn't know what they were, but they were being brought in and filed there. And about... oh it was after dinner. We didn't eat. I couldn't eat. I fell asleep right in the hall way against these duffel bags and I just went out. And when I did get up, I found my back wet, and a cold eerie feeling against my back and I was... So I started to look around and felt the bags, only to discover that there were corpses in a lot of them that they had brought in.

Q: How grizzly.

A: Oh, that frightened me. But then not enough. I was still evidently in the state of shock or something, but I continued. And then later on I was driven home.

And the next day, of course they brought me back into the post and it was then that they tried to do a lot of the clean up and all. But I stayed right in Fort Shafter and continued to help out there.

And then, oh, within a matter of days, they had evacuated they had evacuated all of the Engineer Corps out of the posts. A lot of the civilian employees were moved out except for myself, the librarian, and the Red Cross worker. We were the only three civilian employees left on post. And the others, a lot of the employees in the Signal Corps were moved out of the post too. Those were orders that they move right out. The Engineers was relocated on the Punahou campus now, and the Signal Corps was moved outside of Fort Shafter on the Middle Street area entrance there. That's where they were. And of course the car that was furnished for me was through the Signal Corps. They handled the transportation.

And I went on with my regular daily duties from day to day after that. But there was that one and only incident and the neverything just went off.

Q: As the tempo picked up and more and more troops were brought to Hawaii, there must have been an expanding need for therecreation program.

A: Yes, there was more and more work for me, but I enjoyed every minute of it. I started organizing, well, you would say a hostess club, where I contacted Punahou, McKinley High School, Roosevelt High School, Lewers and Cooke (that was a very big company at the time), also there was another company that I contacted and we had them organize the counselors at the schools, were in charge of all the girls. They were seniors, most of them... a few juniors. But they were authorized by their parents and we used them as hostesses on the posts, when we had dances and all, to meet some of the needs. We had quite a few of them. I had 600 girls and transportation was supplied by the Signal Corps; Police Dept. participated where we used to chaperon them out to Haleiwa. There used to be a beautiful Officers Club there right on the ocean; in Haleiwa Bay there.

Q: O.K., you were mentioning about the Officers Club out at Haleiwa.

A: Yeah, and we would take the girls out there and they would

dance with a lot of the officers out there and when it was over we were escorted back. And it was black out at the time. We were escorted back by the Police Dept. and each girl was taken and dropped off at her own home and then the chaperons were the last ones dropped off. And after that was through, my work was through for the day. But then another day began and as things settled, we started picking up on games... football, more so baseball. We had a lot of pro baseball teams who had been the pro teams, playing with us. We had a lot of boys who had been drafted and called into active duty from college. So we had a very very good corps of young people at the time. Families were very cooperative here and entertaining them in their homes. I had no problem. I used to let them have the boys who were off duty on their days off. I'd let them go to my house and make themselves at home. We had no trouble with service men in those days. They were a very fine group of young people.

My work was... I also prepared special parades on the post to entertain them, which was typical of Hawaii; like on the 11th of June Parade where we had floats and all. Kamehameha School voluntarily participated with us in putting on the shows with the girls. I also had... I was allocated so much money to spend each month, and of course with the Government, if you don't spend that, you lose it the following month. So what I couldn't spend,

(it was very hard to get recreational equipment at the time because things were so tied up), and what I couldn't spend I would tie it in entertainment; like all the outstanding entertainers we had here, like all the Hawaiian entertainers (of course a lot of them have passed away) and the different hula troops that we had. And then along came the 300th Battalion with Major Marshall who was in charge of them. I don't know whether you're familiar with him. He was one of the outstanding band masters with the Harlem band that they had, and he was the Major in charge of the all black unit that came into the Islands for the first time, and they were stationed out at Sand Island. And so we had a big luau for them on the post at Fort Shafter (had it in the gym.) The people here were very cooperative and volunteering their services in putting on the luau and all. We had Hawaiian entertainment and all like that. We also in fact, Hickam Field Signal Corps used to come in and ask us for help too, although I was supposed to take care of post headquarters only. There were other organizations in dire need of entertainment. And wherever possible, with the approval of my commanding officer, we went ahead and supplied them with the needed materials. And uh, it was a very busy moment for me, but I enjoyed every bit.

Q: It sounds like busy years for you.

A: It was.

Q: I guess the black out must have made things even more difficult with all the things you had to do at night.

A: However, it was very good because people stayed in and there weren't people all over. I think the only ones who violated it were those who were going from club to club or something like

that. But they were in the military so it didn't matter. But I abided by every rule and regulation that was set down and as a result, I mean they trusted me with a lot of responsibilities and I continued. Then eventually came in all the entertainers from the mainland. I had Bob Hope. I had Martha Ray. They put on all their performances in the theater, (Fort Shafter Theater) and there were many of the old timers who have passed on that came into Fort Shafter. They all stayed at the Royal Hawaiian because the Royal Hawaiian was taken over by the military, and we housed them at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. And then we'd go out and pick them up in one of our vehicles, with my driver and bring them onto the post. And then we had them up at the Officers Club for lunch or something. But in many cases, they were very happy to dine with the enlisted men in their kitchens and all, which was very nice. We had a few who didn't want to, and of course we didn't do anything about that. We took them up to the Officers Club.

But my responsibility was the enlisted men. But often I would have calls from Schofield where they wanted a dance party or something for the young officers who had come in. And with the approval of the Commanding Officer, we did go out and they were a very fine group of men. As I say, we had no problems at all.

I had strict orders with my girls and with the chaperons, that when we hit the dance hall, the gym (we used Schofield Officers Club a lot) when we hit those places, no one leaves those places until they go into their vehicles, because they were young girls; and they were very cooperative. Occasionally we had a girl who would sort of stray away, but that's normal, and I was always there in time to catch them before they even got out.

But the men that we worked with during that time were a very, very fine group of young men. A lot of them as I said, were taken out of college and shipped out. Because I had three brothers who were also pulled out to service, and so I knew what it was.

Q: Those first few months after the attack must have been pretty scary with people not knowing what's coming next, uh....

A: Yeah, well, I think we... as far as I was concerned, being right in Fort Shafter, being tied up with a lot of the officers which you need to, I was perfectly comfortable and all. Although we did have a lot of enlisted men who were on edge; who were quite jumpy.

At the time we also had all the letters... what do you call it now.... they were.... oh.... they were censored, and of course I helped. The post office was just across the street from my office, and when they needed help, there were times when I helped them with censoring of the enlisted mens letters back to their families. And it was rather cute because a lot of them would tell their parents that we were being attacked. The planes are over head. But there was no such thing happening. It just happened that one day, but this was several months after these young people came in and they, you know, they would put these things in their letters back to their families. And of course those were all censored. But it was very interesting to see how they felt about the War, even though they hadn't seen the Attack. They had their own hallucinations of what happened and so forth.

Q: What sort of things do you remember? Any of them?

A: Beg your pardon?

Q: Do you remember any of those particular stories?

A: Well, uh, as I said, they would tell them that the Japs are overhead and we are being attacked. We have to take cover. And no such thing was happening. Just things like that, that was going on. Uh, nothing about the natives here or anything.

And of course when we had the first black Battalion come into the Islands. And that was a little disturbing to some of our white boys in service. But they wear down and eventually they got to mixing with them. It was disturbing to some of our people here too. But it didn't bother me at all, because they were people here fighting for our country too, like my brothers were, and I didn't think that we should discriminate against them. But there were some of our local people who didn't like the idea. But after getting to meeting them, and that's why I threw a big luau immediately. And some of them performed, music was entertained, and I had Major Marshall sit at the head table with me and my Commanding Officer. My Commanding Officer was from the south.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: Yes, it was Colonel Leard(?) and he thought the world of me. He was a wonderful person. And he was a little bit disturbed. Whatever I wanted, I would call him and I'd say, "We're going to do this." "Fine." he said, "I'll be right behind of you."

But when we had that luau he said, "I'm not going to sit there." I said, "I don't care what you're going to do, but you're going to sit next to me, and Major Marshall is going to be on my right." And he said, "O.K. I won't argue with you." And I really didn't have any trouble with him at all.

I had a pass to the Officers Club any time I wanted and entertained friends up there any time I wanted. But I never took advantage of any of them. I did go up to the Club every day for lunch. Sometimes for dinner, depending on the hours that I was on the post.

But for the first time we had intermingled a lot of our white soldiers with the black and it went over great, and we had it in our gym up in Fort Shafter. And after it was all over, of course my Commanding Officer said to me, "That wasn't bad after all!" And the Major, being of an educated caliber that he was, he was very, very courteous, polite, and just spoke when he was spoken to by the Colonel, and enjoyed very much the entertainment. And the men were well behaved and I was very happy, and proud of that. And they were all stationed on Sand Island where the Coast Guard is now. They were out in that area.

But everything.... I guess the good Lord was with me; everything went very well with all of the work I did, with the entertainers I had. I had no trouble at all. I had total cooperation from schools like Kamehameha and needing help to serve, or to perform activities. Even their parents volunteered their services to come out and participate. Punahou School was another that was very much, uh, where families entertained the service men. Central Union Church was another very fine source of... uh,

I was very active there before the War and they entertained a lot of our service men. Those who were off duty, they would have them down at the church for lunch or to intermingle with the families here. They did an excellent job and although there were other organizations that did too, but I'm not too familiar with them. But those three, Punahou, Kamehameha, Roosevelt High School parents there too, they were very, very helpful, entertaining our young men.

One of my duties was to travel around the Island too. Today the thing that amuses me is right across the Castle Junction where Hawaii Loa School now stands, right in that particular area, we had a whole group of service men in there. We had concrete bases and then tents over them and it was the Signal Corps that was in there too. Today a lot of people are saying they must have been some old ancient heiaus. They weren't. Our men were stationed in there. Out in Kahuku, where they have the Park now, that was another base for our service men and it was one of my jobs to drive out there and see what was needed and the way of recreational commitment. So I covered all of that area and then all the way out into Mokuleia, where the Dillingham Field is now. We had men out there too.

One of the incidents I had was going up to Koko Head. You know they still... that run way that goes up, that car that goes up, I went out there with a 2nd Lt. that worked in our department and he was a very fine boy. He was from Chicago, of Jewish background, and he loved to play with cameras. And so I said to him, I said, "Lt. Olson, why don't you someday start a camera club for our boys, so they could have a place to go and develop their pictures and learn about taking pictures." He said, "That's a good idea." So we also started a camera club in Fort Shafter and he was solely responsible for that.

He even managed to get a trip to go back home and pick up... because cameras were very difficult to get here, he went back home, I think his mother or his grandmother was very ill. So he went back to see her and then brought back a lot of cameras and things where our men were able to buy their own cameras and then take pictures and all. And that was a very, very good recreational activity for the men. They loved it. We had men from out of base asking if they could come in and use the camera club. And of course he did permit them to come in only after the regular men were taken care of.

But there was always a lot of room for the outside service men to come in and we went up one day, another Lt. and the Dept. of 1st Lt., we went up one day to Koko Head to see the boys on the top of Koko Head to see what we could get them. There wasn't very much we could get them except maybe a volleyball, or some games, or things like that. I did have a baseball bat and a ball in my hand and we got on this cable car and headed up. We went half way up and of course the Lt. was sitting in the front seat. I said, "You better sit in the back. I'm sitting in front." And so he sat in the back. I sat in front. We were half way up and it broke. We went flying down to the base of it. Fortunately I was in the front.

Q: Must have been really frightening.

A: It was frightening. After it was over, we landed down the bottom there and my seat just crashed right into... but we were jolted pretty good. But outside of a few bruises it wasn't too bad. But that was an experience for me; a horrible one.

And uh, there were other incidents where we went up into Nuuanu Valley. We used to go up there and gather tei leaves and I would get some of the service men who were off duty to learn to gather some of the things from the forest and how to proceed in the forest and all. There were certain taboos that we had.

These were taught to them, to respect the land and the property and all. And we went up into Nuuanu Valley, the Old Pali Road and went across the streams there, where they used to have the mud slides (which we don't have any more) and taught them some of the experience of mud-sliding which they enjoyed very much, and gathered our tei leaves, banana leaves and all, and brought back to the post when we were preparing for a luau or something like that. It was really an enriching experience against what came later.

Q: Well, I thank you very much.

A: I don't know what else I could tell you.

Q: Well, it's very kind of you to share what you have.

A: It was a very happy experience with all of our boys...

Q: Good.

A: ...and we learned a lot. We shared a lot. In fact, one of my brothers was in the first group of SeaBees that went out of here. His Commanding Officer came out of Ft. Huneme. We became very close friends for many years. He still lives in Sacramento, California, and he is now 83 years old. He comes back occasionally and visits with me. And when he does come back, we go to every base and sort of retrace the steps of WWII, and it has brought many friends also.