

Harold Fishencord #107  
July 26, 1985

Q: Mr. Fishencord, when did you first join the Army?

A: I came to Hickam Field in 1939, and I was assigned to the 23rd Bombardment Squadron of the 5th Bombardment Group at that time. And later I was transferred to the 11th Bomb Group after the Midway Battle.

Q: So you were in the 5th...

A: When the War started.

Q: ... when the War started.

A: Yes. I've been here two years.

Q: O.K. So, what was your first assignment when you got here as a member of the 5th?

A: With the 23rd Bombardment Squadron, I was a gunner, tow-wheel operator, uh... just a little bit of everything, grease monkey... you name it. I was on flying status, flying in the B-18 and the B-17C's that we had. We had a couple of those in the Squadron at that time.

Q: So you had experience in both types of planes?

A: Yes.

Q: How would you compare the two?

A: Well, of course the B-17 had a much greater range and could carry a larger load. Now I might add that the old model B-17's, we didn't have the powered turrets. They were all hand-operated, and the fire power on the new aircraft, the B-17E, which landed during the attack, was much more effective, in that the power turrets, there was more guns. It was just a better aircraft.

Q: What's the difference in the way a power turret operates and the way a hand turret operates?

A: Well of course in the power turrets, they were electrically and hydraulically operated. So the gunner, in comparison, on the old B-18's and B-17's would have to manually turn the turret and operate the guns by hand. And in the power turrets, everything was done with a button or a stick (something like flying an aircraft). You could direct your guns in any direction just by pushing the button. And of course the later model B-17's had the twin .50's in the turrets, whereas on the old model B-17C's and the B-18's, it was usually .30-caliber hand held machine gun. So everything was done by hand then. Of course the E had much more fire power than the C's and the old B-18's.

Q: It sounds like you had a wide variety of duties there.

A: Yes, as a matter of fact, in the Battle of Midway, I was a tail gunner, in the B-17's and it was quite a shock to the Japanese because they had never seen a B-17E with tail guns in it. So most of their attacks were from the rear, or they was thinking there was no fire power in the tail of the aircraft, and they got quite a shock when they found out we had tail guns back there, that were very effective. So then they started making their frontal attacks, because the fire power on the E-model was very limited from the nose.

Q: What was your daily work routine like just before the December 7th attack?

A: It was quite normal. We were of course, five days a week... five and a half days a week, actually, Saturday was always reserved for inspection by our aircraft and a barracks inspection. And then Saturday afternoons and Sundays was a free day to do whatever we had money to do with, which wasn't too much at that time. But... and the rest of it was fairly routine. I can recall that two weeks prior to the attack that we had all gone on maneuvers and we had dispersed our aircraft in bunkers. And some of us had gone over to Bellows Field and some of the other outlying fields around too. And we'd go out and practice with the Navy on simulated bombing attacks. The Navy would set up fighters and so forth.

However, on the 6th of December, I can recall very very faintly... or not faintly... in that we lined all of our aircraft back up on Hickam Field, just like we did every day, in perfect alignment for our daily Saturday morning inspection, which to me, I always look back and say, "Why didn't we leave them in the bunkers and we wouldn't have lost all the aircraft that we lost on the 7th." Of course, I was just a yard bird, but I look back now and say that was ridiculous to pulling maneuvers two weeks and then Sunday morning have them all blown off the runway (which is basically what happened).

Q: Where were you when the attack began?

A: Now I was in the barracks when I heard the explosions. So I raised up out of my bunk (we could look out through the windows... the screen windows in the barracks) and just as I looked out I saw this Kate dive bomber making a pass right over the parade ground which our barracks was located adjacent to the parade ground.

And I can still see this little Japanese gunner up in the back with a flexible machine gun, spraying... strafing the barracks and the people who had run out to the parade ground. And I can always see that big red meatball on the side of the fuselage and they were so close that actually, I could see the pilot and the gunner.

And of course, at that time, I slipped my coveralls on and ran out of the barracks, and there was an officer coming down from the officers quarters, going like crazy. So I followed him over to the flight line which was oh, only a block or so from the barracks, and we hopped in a B-18 and taxied it down to the end of the runway.

And about that time we were all under attack of course, and shortly thereafter, there were some 17's that had landed and I've

forgotten the officer now, (I think it was Col. Godman, who I was with, who was a Lt. at that time) but at any rate, he told me to park that B-17 in one of the bunkers that we had at the end of the runway and stay with it.

O.K., after he told me to stay with the aircraft, the crew that had flown the aircraft in was of course, the aircraft was unarmed. But it did have bomb bay tanks in it, and I was familiar enough with the aircraft... with the older models. But at any rate they had bomb bay tanks in it. And he told my to get the bomb bay tanks out of there. Well, of course, I was all by myself and we're under attack. So I went up an get the salvo switch, the tanks were empty of fuel, thank goodness. But I salvoed the bomb bay tanks, got out of the aircraft, pulled them out (they were pretty heavy and I don't know how I ever pulled them away from the aircraft).

Then I got the wild idea, well I'll go back up in the aircraft, and not being that familiar with the E-model and the turrets, I sort of experimented, even though there was no ammunition in them. But I turned the main battery switch on, jumped up in the turret, flipped a few switches and at least got the turret going around like I was... had ammunition in it.

Q: Is that the turret on top of the plane?

A: The top turret. Well, there again, not being all that familiar with the aircraft, and during this attack, and I thought well, at least I'll scare somebody (laughter), which... but I run the batteries down, because they were hydraulically operated from the power system in the aircraft.

And then, of course there three main attacks that occurred, as most people know. So there was a revetment right behind the B-17 and about the only thing I could think of doing at that time was, the Naval ships and the artillery had begun to fire their ack-ack guns and about this time the shrapnel began to fall, which scared the living heck out of me.

And then somebody came along and said, we're going to have a big gas attack. So get your gas mask. Well, mine was back in the barracks. So I took off running from that flight line and I can't judge exactly how far it was. I know it was at least a half a mile or more to where our barracks. So I ran back to the barracks, went to my footlocker, got my gas mask out, had no sooner got out of the barracks, then the high altitude bombers had (I think it was on the third wave) had made a direct hit (thank God I wasn't in the barracks at the time) but they made a direct hit on our barracks, and they wiped out probably five to ten of my comrades who had stayed in the barracks for some reason.

But at any rate, I ran back to that aircraft, and I think I must have broke all records for 100-yard dashes getting back down there. And of course during the day it was strictly chaos. People giving orders, reascending orders, trying to upload aircraft, trying to get ammunition in them, trying to get them refueled. And of course, this went on; time just seemed to fly, and you did things... or I did seem to do things automatically that I can still recall to this day that I didn't remember doing.

And of course that night, uh, when some Naval aircraft were coming back off of carriers I believe, this entire Island looked like the 4th of July. They were shooting at our own aircraft and they did actually shoot two or three of them down with our own guns. And I think that was probably the scariest bit of the whole bit. During the initial attack, it was such a shock that of course I was very scared. But it hadn't had time to catch up with me. And of course that night we were all very, very afraid

that we were going to be invaded by the Japanese. So that night I think was probably the scariest part of the whole bit. Uh, of course, we hadn't had anything to eat, very very little water to drink.

And the next day was picking up the pieces, and trying to get organized, and getting assigned to crews, which we did gradually. And then... (outside interruption)... sorry about that...

(laughter)... usually they don't get here until 3:00. (people coming in to clean the room?)

Q: What did the scene over there at the hangar line look like?

A: It uh... some of our aircraft were actually taxied away from the hangar line, but the hangar line... we had the first hangar next to base operations, and looking down from base operations, if you're familiar with Pete Field... with Hickam Field. It was a total fire ball of the aircraft burning. Uh, there was a B-17 out there burning. It broke right in half. Many of our B-18's were on fire.

And another thing, of course, I'll never forget, is that one of the B-18's that had been taxied out into this area I was talking about, there was an individual trapped in that aircraft and the Japanese had strafed it and had set the fuel tanks on fire and I'll never forget his guy still screaming. He couldn't get out of the nose section of this B-18. And we tried everything in the world but the aircraft was just burning completely out of control and of course, he had panicked and couldn't get out the hatch. So that thing will always be on my mind I suppose until I die.

Q: Sounds pretty grim.

A: Well, it... when you look back on it now, of course I was young then and I don't suppose I had any better brains to know what really went on until well... a few days later it catches up with you. I don't let it bother me now because... But every now and then I will recall some little thing that I'd forgotten for uh... 45 years I guess. It'll be 45 years next year.

And of course, the buddies I lost up in the barracks, I think about them every now and then. We were very close. We went to town together and the beer gardens and so forth and so on. But as far as it bothering me psychologically, I don't think I'm ready for the whacko house yet (laughter).

Q: Things must have been pretty tense right after the attack.

A: Very tense, and there was a lot of confusion too, because people just didn't know what to do. There was just disbelief really. So uh... and trying to get reorganized because many Squadrons had lost people, crews; they had to reorganize crews to retaliate (or try to retaliate). And of course another problem was we couldn't get to the ammunition during the attack because the ammo rooms were locked up. But that afternoon we finally became a little organized and were able to load some of the new [B-]17's and they took off that afternoon to search for the Fleet. However they were off 180 degrees and went the other direction. It's a good thing they did I guess because they would have clobbered every one of them.

Q: Well, I don't have any other questions. Do you have anything else that you think might be...

A: No, I appreciate this interview and...

Q: Well, I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me.