

#168 HENRY PEPPE: ARMY MAN AT FORT SHAFTER

Bart Fredo (BF): . . . and it was conducted on December 3, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel at about seven o'clock or so in the evening. Mr. Peppe now lives in Tucson, Arizona. My name is Bart Fredo and also in the room is Mark Tanaka-Sanders, who is with the National Park Service.

Mr. Peppe, let me start by asking you to tell us your name and where you were from back in 1941.

Henry Peppe (HP): My name is Henry Peppe and I lived in Barnbrook, New Jersey, which is a small town of about 10,000 people.

BF: What branch of the service were you in? What was your rank and job?

HP: Well, when I came into the service, I thought I was going to go into the infantry, but I ended up in the coast artillery.

BF: This is Army, then?

HP: Army, United States Army.

BF: When did you come to Hawaii?

HP: I came to Hawaii in August of 1941.

BF: So just a couple of months before the attack?

HP: That's right.

BF: Where were you assigned?

HP: I was assigned to Fort Shafter with the end battery, 64th Coast Artillery [Regiment].

BF: Let me take you to the morning of the attack, early that morning, before you realized it was an attack. What were you doing?

HP: Well, that morning, I went up, as I always do on Sunday morning, to go to church services. We had a chapel up on the hill, in Fort Shafter. And I asked two of my buddies if they wanted to go and either of one of them said, "Nah, this is my day off. You and so-and-so go," whatever his name was. So the both of us, we just took off. And we put on our civvies because we're both off that day.

BF: Civilian clothes.

HP: That's correct. And we went into church. But it was around, I'd say, about twenty minutes to eight, when we started walking. Of course, we had quite a walk to walk up there. By the time we got up there, it was about eight minutes to eight when all heck broke loose. We looked down towards Pearl Harbor, we could see the blasting, bombing, whatever you want to call it.

BF: You could see impact?

HP: We could see it very, very clear because it was so -- we were up high! And we thought maybe it was a maneuver or something, because we weren't on the

alert. And at the time when I saw all that, I saw a plane get hit, and I said, "Oh my god, don't tell me," because I was a machine gunner and we used to shoot at targets and once in a while we hit the plane.

BF: Where was this plane that you saw hit?

HP: We saw it over at Hickam, somewhere, in that area. We could see it down there, but it was in the vicinity between Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field.

BF: You saw it go down?

HP: I saw it go down in flames. We thought they were one of ours, you know.

BF: What happened where you were?

HP: Well, where I was at the particular time, people were going into the church -- officers, women.

BF: Were they aware of what was happening?

HP: They were like me. I mean, we were all puzzled. We didn't know what was going on.

BF: You still weren't sure what was going on?

HP: I really didn't know. I tell you, I was wondering what was going on myself. And then all of a sudden, Roy says to me, "Peppe, let's go. It's almost eight o'clock!" So we ran up the steps and went into the chapel.

BF: And then what happened?

HP: Well, while we were in the chapel, we could hear the explosions in the background. And our priest at the time was named Connors, I believe it was, Father Connors, Catholic priest -- I was a Catholic. And I imagined he realized there was something going on, but we were all stunned, really. And all of a sudden -- I'll say within about ten minutes of the Mass was going on -- and all of a sudden an awful explosion right behind the church. And the chandelier up on top there just shook right over me and I'm looking up and going, "Oh wow," you know, "this is something else."

Just about that time, I turned and I looked in the back and there was officers' wives, children crying, standing in the back of the church. And then an officer walks in, he walks right by, and right in front of me was Colonel Shea, which was our commanding officer in that Fort Shafter. And I heard him whisper, and he said, 'Colonel, we're being attacked by the Japs.'

And I went -- I was stunned. He got up, walked right out. Went to his captain. I stood there and waited until communion was served, which was right, almost instantly. The priest knew and he just gave us communion and we just went out. I walked right out that door and went right out there and there was a sergeant there. I don't recall if it was my sergeant or with K Battery, because I was in M Battery. And I could recall him saying, "Get out of them civvies, get into khakis. The Japs are boom, they're bombing us. They're in ODs," in olive drab uniforms, you know. "And go and put on the olive drabs on."

Well I started to walk across this parade field, which I would say was about 300 yards and it was palm trees.

BF: This is the parade field at Fort Shafter?

HP: Right in front of the chapel, not too far down. And all of a sudden I looked up, and there's a plane, he's Japanese. And they come down and it was one right after another. And they come down and they were firing. How they hit me, I don't know, there was three or four of us. They were actually trying to hit the people who were coming out of church.

BF: The rounds were hitting all around you?

HP: Right. You could see it popping up in front of us. We dived for the trees, but I started to run. At first, I was stunned. I couldn't run when they told me to go, go. But then, after that, I ran. And I remember remarking, I'll always remember this until the day I die, I says, "I could have been Jesse Owens." I got under the trees.

And there was another plane come circling around. And he started doing the same thing.

BF: Strafed you?

HP: So we took off for our barracks, and I got there. I could recall going into my tent -- I didn't have a barracks then, I had a tent -- and my locker was down, it was all smashed. It was hit with something, shrapnel or whatever. There was blood all over the floor from some of the guys that never made it out of there. I tried to get my locker open. It took two of us to pull the door open -- it was all jammed -- to get my khakis out. And I changed immediately and ran over to the quartermaster's office to get our guns to put 'em on the truck. The sergeant wouldn't open 'em. He said he didn't have orders to open it and all the ammunition was in there and everything else. And I could always recall that. And I told him, I had my rifle in my hand, the old three, and that was loaded, and I said, "Either you open it up, or I'm going to shoot."

He says, "You're going to be court marshaled."

I said, "To hell with it."

And another sergeant right behind me, he shot the lock off. We mounted all the machine guns on the truck and we took off, but we couldn't get through anything. The whole highway -- and that was King Kamehameha Highway at that time, right from Fort Shafter. I don't know what they call it today.

BF: Where were you trying to go?

HP: We were trying to go to Hickam Field. See, I was on the machine guns and our positions were at Hickam Field, to protect the searchlights battery, 'cause we were like, had units, and we were in that particular unit.

BF: Did you . . .

HP: Well, we tried to get out there and on our way down we had to go through rice paddies. We got stuck. The highway was completely jammed with people. I mean, you couldn't blame 'em. They were trying to get away from all that area in there. And they were scared.

BF: What finally happened?

HP: Well, after several, well I guess, what seemed to me like hours -- wasn't really hours -- we finally made it there. But in the meantime, while we were going down there, we were being attacked by the Japanese. I mean, there was three of us, three trucks, mounted fifty caliber machine guns on it. And they were firing at us, going after us.

BF: Were you strafed?

HP: And but we shot one down. I can't say I did it. I mean, tracers were going in, but the whole three of us were doing it. We knocked one down, it went right into a house. I remember that. It was not too far away from the highway. I can remember the women and children running out of that house. We could see that. I said, "Oh my god."

BF: Could you see the pilot?

HP: He was burnt right up in that.

BF: He didn't get out.

HP: He exploded right out of the plane. And then, another one went down, but I don't think we had anything to do with that. But we finally made our positions at Hickam Field. I never saw such disaster in my life.

BF: What did you see?

HP: Well, we seen men laying all over the place. We had to get out of the truck many times just to move bodies away from the road. Bodies burning, planes on fire. By the time we got to our position, it was all over. I mean, as far as the Japs were concerned, they already did their job. And then we stood there until about, oh I'd say, almost evening, and then we got orders now to move out and go back into Fort Shafter so that machine guns in the hills and I was on the fourth position, I remember that. And I remember this Lieutenant Tanimura -- now, he happened to be Japanese. The nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. And he says, "Peppe, son, let me tell you something." He says, "You're going to have to stay here." And he says, "There's going to be a machine gun up the hill about a hundred yards behind you. We've got orders to stop any Japanese that might come into this little channel." He says, "We understand that they're going to invade soon." And he says, "It's up to you to hold them back and if you can't," he says, "if you make one move back, the gun behind you got orders to shoot you down." In other words, we were on like a suicide mission, really.

Well, I tell you, I never saw a night in all my life like that.

BF: That's the night of the seventh?

HP: That was the night of the seventh. I could recall all night long, all you heard was firing machine guns, rifles, pistols firing. They were shooting at cacti. The guys were so panicky. They were shooting at anything that moved, really. And we kept ducking bullets. We could hear 'em winging by. And the next morning, we wondered why we didn't get any chow, and somebody went up the road and we found a jeep completely shot up. And our staff sergeant, who was our mess sergeant, tried to come up and take our food, he was killed. And I saw that, I said, "My god." And then the orders came up, anyone start firing their guns for any reason at all, they better have a damn good reason because they didn't have a good reason, they'd be court marshaled.

BF: Did you fire your weapon that night?

HP: Tell you the truth, I didn't fire it once. I fired the machine gun when I was on the truck.

BF: On the truck.

HP: But I never fired a gun that night, because I couldn't see anything to fire at. I mean, sure, I seen cacti, it looked like human beings out there under the moonlight. But in fact, it was dark. If I recall correctly, I don't think there was much of a moon out that night, it was so dark.

BF: What were the next few days like?

HP: Hell. Real hell because we had to stay up there in our positions for two days and the third day, they come up and they start building concrete and they started to say, "You're going to man this."

And they poured, actually poured bunkers up in there and we had to man a machine gun in there. And I can always remember, I went in there and I fired one round and I don't know if you know how the acoustics is in concrete. I couldn't hear for about an hour. My ears were shattered for about an hour. So we went out to the junkyard, we got cardboard and we lined the whole thing up with cardboard and you could smell the softness of the cement, it was still drying up on us. And then we were able to fire. We were up there in that position for almost a week before we decided that the Japs weren't coming back.

BF: How long did you stay in the islands after the attack?

HP: Well, I was fortunate. While I waited here, they looked up the record -- before I came into the Army, I was a professional painter. Not an artist, wallpaper and taping and painting and all the stuff like that. And I never thought that they would look up my record and they saw ladder work. And they thought, "Well, hell, this man will make a good fireman."

They put me in the Fort Shafter fire department because I had ladder work. And I always wondered why until I found out and they put me in that.

BF: So you were here a while?

HP: I was here with the fire department. I was here for almost four and a half years. The only time I've left the island was when I had some recruits, we had to teach 'em how to operate a fire truck because they were going on further, going on in the Pacific onto another island. And I had 'em for six weeks and I couldn't break 'em in and I remember the colonel was saying, "How are they doing?"

I says, "Colonel, I'm sorry. I have to be honest with you," I says, "they don't know this truck yet."

He says, "Pack your bag, you're going with 'em."

And I -- that's the only time I left the island. I never got off the ship. We went out in the Pacific and I taught them right on the deck. They had this fire truck on the deck and by the time they hit that island, they knew that

truck from A to Z. And I can't even tell you where the island was because they went by code numbers.

BF: So you were here a while, so you lived under martial law. How did that affect your life?

HP: Well, to be honest with you, the martial law didn't affect me at all. I imagine it affected the poor people in town. And I can remember going into town, I can remember these poor people out there with signs on them that says, "I'm no Jap, I'm Chinese." Now, that's how it was. And yet, some of my best friends were Japanese that were in the service. And you know, a lot of the boys here that were Japanese that formed their own regiment.

BF: How did your Japanese-American friends deal with this situation?

HP: Well, they were in the military, like I said, this Lieutenant Tanimura, he was in. In fact, he was such a nice guy that the next day, he come over and he says, "I want to send a cable gram or telegram to your folks that says that you're alive." But he says, "Only three words because," he says, "there's so many of 'em," you know, under his group.

And all I said was, "I'm okay," and we copy and that's all, and sent it out. And he paid for that.

BF: Your Japanese-American friends . . .

HP: That's right.

BF: . . . how did they deal with this . . .

HP: Well, he was . . .

BF: . . . immediate aftermath?

HP: . . . one of the lieutenants that went with that sort of group that they formed. He went with them, over in Europe. They took 'em right out of the Pacific area and put them in Europe.

BF: What is your most -- oh, I'll ask that, later. A lot of people, some people, who have survived the attack on Pearl Harbor on Oahu have some bad feelings still against the Japanese and against Japan. How about you?

HP: I had them feelings for maybe ten, fifteen years after I come out. I would refuse to buy anything made in Japan name on it. But since then, I mean, we mellowed and then we started realizing, hey, they were like us. They had to do a job. They were recruited like we were and got into the army, or whatever they were, navy, whatnot. And they fought just like we do. I seen these right here now in the hotel and I have no qualms against them at all. In fact, I even talked to them, if I could.

BF: What if you had the opportunity to talk to a Japanese survivor of the attack, let's say a pilot, would you . . .

HP: Well, I did have an experience about four days after the attack. They took me off the hill for about, oh, maybe eight or nine hours. And lieutenant says, "I want you to go up on post one," which post one, at the time, was the guard house off of Fort Shafter, at the main gate. When I went there, they had

a Japanese prisoner they got out of one of the submarines that they put up. And I saw the guy in there and he looked so pitiful laying in there. He stood there and they stripped him right down to a loin cloth, that's all they had, because they didn't want him to commit suicide in there, because they wanted to question him. And I looked at him and I says, "Oh my god. That could be me."

But I had no --- in fact, I, all I kept thinking about is god was good to me because I survived and a lot of my buddies didn't.

BF: Did you see a lot of your friends go?

HP: I saw two or three of them that were cut pretty bad. In fact, I saw one that wasn't too far away from me when they, one of the shells missed and I saw nothing but blue. And I didn't even know he was hit and I looked down and he was cut, just cut right open.

BF: Apparently a lot of U.S. shells exploded in the downtown area.

HP: Quite a few.

BF: Were you --- have an opportunity to see any of that?

HP: The only time I saw that was before we got on the truck to get out of there.

BF: So that very day . . .

HP: And that was . . . all this happened within the first hour or so.

BF: What's your most vivid memory of that day?

HP: Well, a vivid memory that sticks in my mind is that when I came back, and we had to go up into the hills, we had a movie house. And I could hear on the radio, they were saying that we didn't lose too many men, that more civilians were killed than there was army. And the officer said to me, he said, "I want you to go down there and call Lieutenant,"-- I can't remember his name now, Lieutenant Jones, I think, or something like that. Well, he was at this movie house, and I walked in there and I was shocked. They had sheets over these men that were killed. They had 'em lined up on either side of the walls of the movie house, on the aisles and down the middle, stacked five and six high there. They were dying in Tripler General Hospital, right across the way, and bringing those bodies right there.

That is vivid, lives in my memory more than anything.

BF: When you saw that . . .

HP: And they kept saying, "We only lost a few men." And I'm saying, "Oh my god, there's more than a few men there."

BF: When you saw that, how did you feel?

HP: I felt mad. I felt mad. I felt that I wanted to do something. I had to do something. I guess every one of us did at that time. I think we wanted to go into town and kill anybody that looked like a Japanese, but we got over that.

BF: You played a part in a major event in history. Has it affected your life?

HP: Well, maybe it has and hasn't. I'm one of those fellows that believe that we need defense, we need the big stick, as Teddy Roosevelt used to say. And with that, I figure we can deter something like that ever happening again. And I think we're the most fortunate country in the world right now, that we haven't had any big conflict since then. I mean, well, right, we had Korea, we've had Vietnam, but nothing like what's happened.

BF: Given that, did taking part in that day, being a part of that day, affect you from a personal standpoint, throughout your life?

HP: I can't say that it really did that deep, no. I mean, actually it would if I had a relative that was killed or something in there, but I can't -- right now, you see, we -- it's been so many years that I can't really say that.

BF: Let me ask you that same question another way. If you could somehow change history, would you put Henry Peppe back there at Fort Shafter, on December 7 or not?

HP: I think if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't want to change one iota, because I was one of those fellows that always took faith as it came. I didn't believe into volunteering anything. I felt if I had to do a job, I would do it to the best of my ability and I stuck to the Army manual.

BF: You're not sorry you were here that day.

HP: No, no, I won't say that at all. No. In fact, I still say that somebody higher than me must have been looking after me because when I was in Angel Island, California to ship over here, and the morning that they called us in and they asked -- we were going to get out. They started alphabetical order, they went from A all the way up to K, and they didn't get to L, M, N, O, P, see. And all those guys got on board ship and some of 'em I trained with, you know, some of the boys. And then, when the next day we come in, the rest of us got on board ship. We ended up in Honolulu, Hawaii, the others went to Philippine Islands. So they had it worst than we did.

BF: Taking part in the, being a part of the attack, being here that day, did it teach you anything about yourself?

HP: Yes. Yes, it certainly had. Number one, it taught me that I had more going for myself than some of my sergeants and officers. I had a level head about the whole thing, even though everything was going astray at the time. In fact, I saw some of my officers that ran around in circles, were calling out orders and they didn't know what the hell they were doing because they weren't prepared for that.

BF: What else did you learn about yourself?

HP: I learned that, well, I had the strength and the . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

BF: This Japanese airplane that you and the men and the other two trucks were firing at as you were trying to get to Hickam, tell us a little bit more about that.

HP: Well, as we were approaching, we noticed them peeling off. There was three planes up there and one started peeling off and we hollered, "It's coming down at us."

So I was on the lead truck and I started to fire and it come right down, straight at us. And I could see my tracers right at it. And then I noticed another pattern of tracers going into 'em, and another pattern. I would say within, oh, I guess, within about 500 yards of us, it blew right up. But it blew up and it circled to the right and came right down into the house. It didn't actually break up right away, but then, when it hit, then I said, "Oh my gosh." There was fire all over, every place.

BF: You saw it hit the house.

HP: It hit the house, right on the roof. I remember that. I remember that part of the roof went down and then we're seeing these people coming out. I remember this woman carrying a little baby in her arms.

BF: Was she and the baby all right?

HP: Yes, they got out alive. There was three of 'em. There was a little boy too. I remember the little boy running right alongside of his mother, I guess. I assume it was his mother, I don't know.

BF: Can you pinpoint the location of the house?

HP: It was about 150 feet off the King Kameha [sic] Highway, on . . .

BF: King Kamehameha Highway.

HP: King Kamehameha Highway, yeah.

BF: How close to Hickam? How much further was it from Hickam?

HP: I would say that it was no more than about a quarter of mile then we were in Hickam Field. There was a certain amount of homes that were built out there, I imagine for the employees that worked in the base. They weren't on the base . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

BF: Were you wounded at all?

HP: Yeah, I was hit and I didn't realize I was hit. And all of a sudden, they said, "You're bleeding."

And I says, "Where?"

And they showed me. And I said, oh, it's nothing. He said, "You better get to the doctors."

BF: Where were you hit?

HP: I didn't go to the doc -- I was hit right on the groin, right here.

BF: On the thigh.

HP: Right. I still got a scar there.

BF: What hit you?

HP: I don't know. Shrapnel, something, because when they were firing from that plane, it could have been something from the plane, because I didn't even realize until I got there -- I felt wet, I felt my side of my pants wet.

BF: At what point, when you were in the truck or before?

HP: I was in the truck when I felt the first sting that I . . . and I stood there all day with that wound, until that night and then I went into the Tripler General Hospital and all they did was wash the wound out and I saw more people that were being stitched up that needed more help than me, and I said, "Don't worry about it." I even bandaged my own leg and went back out again, and went up in the hills.

BF: Any other little gems like that?

HP: (Chuckles) You call them gems? (Chuckles) I didn't call -- because when you're fighting for your life, you don't even think . . .

BF: No, I know.

HP: . . . that was nothing! Forty-five years later, I could You know, I don't know, I don't know if I should say this or not, but . . .

BF: Well, say it.

HP: You'd better censor it. I was a married man when I went in. And I never patronized these, what they call cat houses here. And if it wasn't for those women, they're called call girls today, prostitutes and whatnot, I would say that half of them were working in the operating room, 'cause that's when I went in there and I was told by some of the nurses that I knew that if it wasn't for them, they couldn't handle it. They were working in there with blood running out there, they said like water, really. And they just stood right there. I think they were the only ones could handle something like that. And I always remember that, too. And my god, they, they were heroines and no one even gave 'em any credit at all.

BF: And when the job was done, they went back to Hotel Street?

HP: They went right back to Hotel Street. That's right. Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW