

James W. Duncan #111

July 26, 1985

Q: Why don't you just tell us about your experiences here, Mr. Duncan.

A: Well, the thing that I'd like to lead off in my conversation with is I was a Private. And the significance and importance of that is the fact that the majority of the overview, or of the big picture was not particularly known to me at the time the attack came about.

I enlisted in the Service in 1940 and came to Hawaii as a Private in the Army Air Corps. I took my basic training here and I was very happy with the substance and the surroundings that I was associated with at the time.

December 7th was obviously a shock to me because of perhaps a little lack of preknowledge of what the overview was in the political arena at that time and the military standing between the United States and Japan.

The basic thing I remember is the fact that I was stationed at Hickam Field in the 11th Bomb Group, 42nd Bomb Squadron, as a Private. I was in Air Operations, which was no more than scheduling flights of a local nature.

And on December 7th I was in the barracks at Hickam Field on a Sunday morning, anticipating going to the beach. My first thing when I got up in the morning was thinking about going down and getting some breakfast and possibly catching a truck out to Nanakuli at about 9:00 in the morning.

However, as I was sitting on my bunk, waiting for my friends to come out of the shower, and going down... getting ready to go down to the mess hall to get some food, we became aware of the fact that there was some bombing going on at that time, and we thought it was the Navy doing a little experimental work, until we suddenly discovered the bombs exploding close by. And the first indication that I knew that it wasn't the Navy was a bomb exploded in a hangar close to the barracks called the Hawaiian Air Depot.

And about that time, looking out the window, and being on the third floor, we saw the aircraft go by that were bombing and strafing Pearl Harbor. We knew that this was not a Navy Maneuver, that it was simply, we were under attack. It didn't really dawn on me or register in my mind as such, that the Japanese were attacking us because I couldn't comprehend or realize that we were at such great odds with the Japanese Empire.

About that time, I got out of my bunk and started down the hallway and the barracks was hit with several bombs. Then I knew that this was reality. We were under attack. I distinctly recall going down the hallway and down the steps out of the barracks, and my first impression was to report to my duty station which at that time was the operations building, and I did.

By the time I got there the whole field was under attack. The aircraft had been strafed and bombed. There wasn't anyone on my office, and I decided to go back to the ordering (??) room section to get instructions from my 1st Sgt. And on the way back through that area, I ran into a friend of mine who was in the... fellows name was Beckler(??) and he was a radio operator and he was going up to an emergency section for operating a generator, and he had two five-gallon cans of gasoline in his hand and he asked me to help

him. We took the gas up to the generator and it so happened it was a lull in the attack.

And so we got the gasoline to the generator and I went back to the barracks, which by that time was burning. And I saw my 1st Sgt. and I expected to get some instructions from him as to what to do because my area of operations wasn't functioning. At that time we came under attack again and we were bombed in the immediate vicinity. And of the 21 people that were in the immediate area getting instructions from the Sgt., 17 of them were killed. I happened to be one of the people that wasn't killed at that time. (emotional pause) The 1st Sgt. was killed.

And then I went to another area and I was instructed to draw some weapons and we did...(pause)... and it appeared that the raid was at an end. Then I was instructed by the Sgt. to take my material and weapons and go down to the Harbor where the Officer's Club is; the entrance to Pearl Harbor, where I was assigned guard duty. That was my basic activity for the day.

Q: What did the scene out on the flight line and the hangar line look like?

A: Well as I recall, at the time I was going up the flight line with my friend Beckler, the B-17's, and B-18's were on fire. They had been strafed, bombed, the barracks had been hit. But we were apparently at that time under a lull.

As far as the attack was concerned there was a little confusion ("a little" is quite the wrong description)... a lot of confusion. The Command was in somewhat of a disarray. I said my 1st Sgt. was killed. The basic essence of the people that were there (I'm talking about the troops) were to report to their sections and perform the duties as they were instructed.

My particular area of performance was not functioning, and as a consequence I was at somewhat of a loss for direction. However, when I did find a Sgt. that gave me the directions to go, we proceeded accordingly.

The field was under attack. We were... the aircraft was basically destroyed, the hangar was hit, the barracks on were on fire, the mess hall was destroyed. These were the reflections that I had at this time.

Q: Did you see any of the B-17's that came in while the attack was still on?

A: I saw one B-17 land that was hit and the crew apparently got out. I saw several people running from the aircraft. It was struck and later, from a distance, I saw it burning. I don't know the number or the name of the aircraft, nor did I ever become acquainted with the people that flew it in. I believe that a fellow by the name of Edmundson (??) was the pilot. I'm not positive. [Note: This most likely refers to Captain Raymond Swenson]

Cpt. Edmundson brought a aircraft in at that time, and he could have been the one that was in that aircraft. I never obtained the correct information on that. So I really don't know.

But I did see the aircraft burning, probably 15 minutes after it landed. I left the area immediately. I took some people over to the hospital at that time. And when I came back, I remember the aircraft was destroyed.

Q: What was the scene over at Hickam?

A: Hickam Hospital was a rather chaotic scene in the sense that uh... a friend of mine, his name was [*Carmel R. Calderon, PFC*]... (emotional pause)... [*Carmel*] and I took several people to the hospital... that were dead and dying, and we put them in what would be the outer patio, or the deck, as you came into the hospital. And at that time a doctor was present, performing a, what I've come to later know as a triage. He was deciding who to treat and who not to treat, who was dead, and who was going in for treatment.

It was quite a chaotic scene in that there were probably 50 people laying around in the various stages of being wounded and not being wounded. And as the doctor checked them, he said to me, "Are you wounded?" and I said, "I don't think so." He said, "Take off your shirt." and I did. I was covered with blood from handling these people, as was [*Carmel*]. And we took off our shirts and our pants while he examined us. And there was nothing wrong with me and he told me to leave, which I did. Uh, [*Carmel*], at that stage of the game had a broken arm and he was told to stay and I've never seen him since...(emotional pause).

The reason I feel so strong about this guy... is that he helped me carry these people in...(pause)... with a fractured arm. I realized he was in shock, but he did it out of pure basic training and guts.

Q: That's quite a feat.

A: Yes. I'm sure he's alive... or he was, after the War, but I've never been able to meet him. It was after that session that I reported to a Sgt. and went to a guard duty position at the entrance to Pearl, and that was....

Q: What did the Harbor look like?

A: Well at the time, the Harbor... we were assigned to duty at the entrance to the Harbor, and obviously you could look back into Pearl and see all the debris and all the ships still burning. And as I recall, we saw the three destroyers (and I can't think of the names of them now), *Cassin* and *Downes* were two of them, as they blew up in the dry dock. They had been hit and they were burning and that was to the right of the entrance as you go into Pearl. To the left, you could see the major vessels, the battleships burning, and obviously the most emotional one was the *Arizona*. But as I recall one of the ships was under way and I don't know which one it was, but he didn't get out of the Harbor... or the ship didn't get out of the Harbor. It veered off to the right and apparently grounded itself. And I believe it was a major vessel, possibly the *Utah*, or some other vessel of that capacity. But at that stage of the game I didn't know the names of the ships that were struck, or sunk, or sinking. The only thing that I could see was this tremendous smoke billowing from the vessels that had been hit. And the only thing that I could think of at the time was that we were instructed to repel the enemy. At that stage of the game, we were told that they had possible landed paratroops across the channel, next to Ford Island. And that's the position I was in at that time.

Q: Things must have been pretty tense about that time there.

A: They were. They were very tense in the sense that the

instructions that we were receiving obviously not to authentic. There were a lot of rumors, a lot of things that were going on that we really didn't understand, and the fact that we were without an immediate supervisor (I'm talking about an officer) to explain what the situation was. We were in a position, rumor was almost controlling what we did. We stayed overnight, and obviously there were no paratroopers, there was not attack developed on that side of the channel.

The next day, we were assigned duty on the other side of the Base. But it was a very traumatic evening in the sense that any time something moved, everyone fired their guns. I distinctly recall some Navy patrol aircraft coming in over the channel, late at night, and they were fired on because they didn't identify themselves. I later learned that they were shot down by our forces. But under the circumstances, it was a natural reaction, as wrong as it may have been. But the evening was very confusing with rumors and (I'm talking about the evening of December 7th) ... rumors and nonfactual happenings with the fact that we had rumors that there were civilians that were going to try to breach the area coming in over the fence. There were rumors that there were paratroopers landing on the opposite side of the channel. We were really in a state of confusion at stage of the game. If anything moved we simply shot it. And as I recall I fired two bandoleers of ammunition out of a 30 ought 6 that I'd been issued and purely out of ignorance and lack of proper guidance.