

#203 JOE SAULNIER: WHEELER FIELD

**John Martini (JM):** Today is December 4, 1991. This is an oral history interview with Mr. Joe Saulnier. It's 4:15 PM. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki Honolulu. My name is John Martini. Tape number twenty-five.

On December 7, 1941, Mr. Saulnier was at Wheeler Field with the Army Air Corps. He was the staff sergeant, personnel office. He was twenty-four years old at the time. And I want to thank you for coming and sitting down with us.

**Joe Saulnier (JS):** I'm glad to be here.

JM: All right. Welcome back. First question would be, how did you get into the Army Air Force?

JS: My buddy that's outside, him and I worked in a restaurant. And I got a little disgusted and I says, "I'm going to join the Air Force [*Air Corps*]."

And he says, "Wait a couple days and maybe I'll join you."

So we enlisted together and we have consecutive serial numbers. (Laughs) I rank him.

(Laughter)

JM: So when did you enlist?

JS: September 24, 1940.

JM: Nineteen forty. And when you enlisted, did they give you any option where you were going to end up?

JS: The first option was we're going to West Overfield, Mass[achusetts]. After we signed the papers, they said, "You can either go to Philippines, Puerto Rico, or Hawaii."

So my buddy says, "Well, let's go for the grass skirts."

(Laughter)

JM: What kind of impression did you have of what Hawaii was going to be like?

JS: Actually, we got here Christmas Eve, 1940. Rode the Tuna Girl trolley to Wheeler Field. And it was pretty lonesome, I'll tell you, Christmas Eve.

JM: You might want to explain. What was the Tuna Girl trolley?

JS: The Tuna Girl trolley was -- I think they call it the pineapple or banana railroad. It goes through Kipapa Air Field and in through the woods there.

JM: How did you like -- besides Christmas Eve, how did you like being in the Air Force on Hawaii and those pre-war years?

JS: Well, I'll tell you, the first six months I was a sick puppy, but after I got used to it, I mean, it didn't bother me because I finished with twenty years.

JM: What made you sick?

JS: What's that?

JM: What made you sick?

JS: Being away from home. See, I come from a family of eleven, and I was the third oldest. So being away, I mean, and thinking of home, Christmas, you know, not being around. That kind of made a deep fear in my thought, did I do the right thing?

JM: Did you --- when did you get your stripes? Was it soon after getting here?

JS: Well, I went up fairly fast, I mean, because I made PFC and then I had what they call a specialist rating, first and fourth, which paid more than a corporal. So when I made corporal, I lost two dollars a month. (Chuckles)

JM: That was a lot back then.

JS: But I had the super-- you know, a supervisor rather than being a PFC. Then I made sergeant and I made staff. And eventually I went to E-7, which is a master.

JM: Was --- what did your duties involve?

JS: I was in personnel. I worked part of the time as a first sergeant and sergeant major, so I was in personnel. As they always says, I was a pencil pusher.

JM: When, then --- but before December 7, some of the guys were talking about that being enlisted at that time in Hawaii, it was kind of a segmented society, officers only in one area, enlisted men kept to another area. What did you guys do for recreation? Where did you go?

JS: Well, maybe I was a little lucky. I knew a lot of 'em, but I played ball. So I played in the base team and we played at Pearl City, downtown Honolulu, Kolekole Pass, Wahiawa, Bellows Falls, Hickam. And that way we got to see a little part of the islands, I mean, and invited out on a lot of times to -- when we played ball -- to a supper or something like that. So it helped to pass the time away.

JM: How did you spend December 6, Saturday before? What did you do that night?

JS: December 6, actually, the Friday night, we went on alert Friday night. And we were on alert 'til four o'clock Saturday. Then they brought all the airplanes in and made 'em look nice, all lined up straight, and we were free to go. If we wanted to go into town, we could go into town.

JM: Did --- there had been an alert Friday night?

JS: Friday night.

JM: The December the fifth?

JS: Fifth.

JM: Yeah, did you know what the alert was for, or just . . .

JS: No, all we knew was when you went in for supper, they made an announcement over the P.A. system to report to your duty station after the meal. Then when we got there, we found out that we had to go our designated area for more or what have you.

JM: You also mentioned they brought all the airplanes back and lined them up. What had they done with them during the alert?

JS: They put them in the revetments, all camouflaged.

JM: Oh really? And then they brought them back?

JS: They lined them up in a straight line nice.

JM: Why was that?

JS: Well, that was the orders that came from topside. I mean, we thought it was funny, you're on an alert and all of a sudden it's called off and then this happens.

JM: Was there talk about a sabotage attempts? That's one of the explanations for putting the planes like that, to protect them from saboteurs.

JS: No, there wasn't any -- that is, down to our level. I mean, if there was at the higher level, we didn't know.

JM: During this time, the guys, that was the 18th pursuit group up there?

JS: Well, I was in the 18th air base. Prior to that I was in the 47th Pursuit Squad[ron].

JM: Mm-hm.

JS: Which they took a nucleus and transferred us to [a] different unit, which I ended up in the 25th Materiel Squadron.

JM: What were --- the alerts that came down, that caused them to move 'em out and put 'em back in. If --- was there talk that the island might seriously be attacked?

JS: I didn't hear any. I mean, if there was, I didn't hear anything about it. And I mean, I never talked to anybody that even knew that. I mean, if it was.

JM: It doesn't seem to have filtered that far down, that what was happening. The reading is that they were getting inklings that Japan was going to do something. That's why you were juggling airplanes around.

JS: Well, there was talking in Washington like, you know, they're trying to get along. And then the first thing, boom, I mean . . .

JM: Yeah, let's get into that. How did December 7 start for you?

JS: I had come back from church and I went into the mess hall to eat. And me and my buddy were waiting to eat and then we heard this bomb drop. So we went

to see what it was, and where we had been standing, about three minutes before that, all the windows just came blowing through the whole mess hall. And if we had been still in the mess hall, I wouldn't be here today.

JM: When you ran out, what did you see?

JS: Well, we ran out and they were bombing the field. Then I went to the supply room and they had all the guns in Cosmoline to protect the guns themselves. And they says, "You know anything about this?"

I said, "No, but I can learn."

So, for three days, I didn't even go to the ordnance run. In fact, I went for mail and I saw this letter for me that says, "Missing in action."

I says, "What's this doing here?"

And the fellow says, "Oh, he's missing in action."

I said, "Do I look like I'm missing in action?"

He says, "No."

I said, "Well, that's my letter."

(Laughter)

JM: When you ran out, kind of give me a step by step. What did you --- what was the first type of things that you saw? And what went through your head? Specifically, did you have any idea what was going on?

JS: Well, we knew it was an attack. I mean, because they built the hangar that was right next to the mess hall, just happened -- we found out later -- was the only one that had any ammunition. 'Cause one of the organizations was getting ready to leave and go to another place. So that's the one that was hit, which, evidently they knew the layout of the field and where everything was. So when we heard that -- which was a pretty good one. After all, the ambulance, you know, we immediately went to the supply room to get some guns or do something.

In fact, there was one man, a fellow by the name of Bill BAY-UM, that got a machine gun and put it on a porch and started firing it. So somebody came along and says, "You can't fire that gun. That's a water-cooled machine gun."

He says, "Well, you watch me."

So he fired it. And after he fired it a little while, the muzzle just went down, just like a rubber band, 'cause it wasn't water-cooled. It got so hot.

JM: That --- you were, you know, twenty-four years old and all of a sudden you were thrown into the middle of this thing. And you hadn't had any training for how to handle an air attack. What went through your mind? Was it confusing, scary?

JS: Well, I'll tell you, maybe I was lucky in being a little older, but the kids, eighteen and nineteen, I mean, really got shook, you know. And they're

going around yelling and everything. And if you give 'em a little tap on the chin, kind of shook 'em up and straightened 'em out and had 'em realize that this was the real McCoy, this is no joke.

JM: When you said give 'em a little tap on the chin, did you actually have to grab a couple of 'em?

JS: I don't remember grabbing any, but I can remember hitting a couple here, like I've done to my kids since then. It's just a little --- and it really woke them up, I mean.

JM: This is when the stripes made you take charge?

JS: Yeah. I mean, in the . . . we had quite a few of the young kids, you know, eighteen, nineteen. They figure, oh, get away from home and let us see the world and everything else. So they were the ones that you had to worry about, because you never knew if they were going to jump off from one of the porches or something else, you know.

JM: When you went to the . . .

JS: Supply room.

JM: . . . supply room, got the ordnance out?

JS: Yeah.

JM: And where'd you head then?

JS: Well, I was there for about three days, taking the guns, cleaning them up learning how to put the belt on the gun and make sure it was working. And just as soon as you get one clean, there was somebody waiting for one.

JM: How close was that ordnance issue room? How close was that to the hangars and where all the bombings were?

JS: Oh, that was only about 300 feet.

JM: Did you see a lot of what was going on out there, on the runways?

JS: No, because, see, our first thing was let's go to supply room . . .

JM: Mm-hm.

JS: . . . and get a gun. And when we got there, it seemed like nobody knew what to do. I mean, here's the crates with guns, and the crates were nailed shut. So you gotta get something to open 'em and they weren't, I mean there was no finesse to open 'em. You opened it the best way you could, then take 'em out, clean 'em out and then give 'em to somebody so that they could use 'em. And then they started, "I need you for detail. I need you for detail."

In fact, I remember one night that this officer told four of us to go upstairs and bring the ammunition and disperse it up through the building, which they had evacuated. This was a four-story building. So after we start bringing the ammunition up there, they says, "This is not a very good place to be at this time of the," you know, in case they came back.

And during the day, they went up and got the ammunition and brought it back down to the supply room.

JM: Why were they taking it up there?

JS: Well, I guess they were going to disperse it so it wouldn't all be in one area.

JM: Oh, that's why.

JS: The front of the fourth floor and the middle of it, and then the other side, and all the floors.

JM: What are your images of the action that was going on around you? I mean, you're busy handing out stuff. You have kids running around. Everything is kind of messed up. What's your strongest image of those two hours of the attack?

JS: Two hours was like the full day, I mean because somebody would ask you for something and where to get this and where to get that, and how to direct 'em. And a lot of people that worked down to the line with the airplanes, were not permitted with the -- only sleeping quarters. And where they kept stuff, they didn't know, so they'd come over and ask you. And you get them on their way, and I mean, then you could go on with your stuff.

I know I had never handled guns in my life, so how I knew how to clean these guns and put a sling on 'em and everything, I'll never know. But I think it's something that you know you gotta do something, so you do something anyway.

JM: Adrenaline. So you were in there for a couple of days, handing this stuff out.?

JS: Right. Three days.

JM: Three days. What were the guys -- where were they going after you gave them their guns, when the attack was over?

JS: Well, they took people and they put 'em out in ground defense and others went up like the communication building, and around headquarters. And then you were -- wherever they need 'em, they called up and they said, "Well, I need five men here," then a truck would pick them up and bring 'em out there.

Then you had the gates. See, Wright Avenue, Wheeler Field is a civilian thoroughfare, so you could come and go as you pleased. Then that got a little touchy, then after a while, the war started, you might as well say.

JM: Would --- that night, did you think they were coming back?

JS: We were expecting it. I mean, in fact, there was things that happened that you thought they were coming back, then again you didn't think they were coming back. And . . .

JM: What kind of things?

JS: Well, it was confusing. I mean, it's like I remember one day, we had blue fatigues. So they says, "Get in your blue fatigues."

We had them on for about two hours and they said, "Get in your suntans, because they have blue fatigues."

Oh boy. And then we were told if they had made signs with arrows in the sugar fields, you know, the all the fields with big arrows pointing to the bases. You know, which is the rumors which you heard, I mean.

JM: What did you think of that rumor? That was all over.

JS: Well, it could have been. In fact, I was supposed to be on the ARIZONA that night, December 7. 'Cause see, the sixth, we went downtown, and that's how I met this fellow from the ARIZONA, and he says, "Saturday night," he says, "I'll meet you downtown at Waikiki Tavern."

So I says, "Okay."

So we go down to Waikiki Tavern, he wasn't there. So I saw a couple of his buddies and asked them if they saw him and they said, "No, we haven't seen him, 'cause he left ship with us."

So we went back to the ARIZONA to see if we could find him, we couldn't find him. And so we came back and took the bus and went back to Wheeler Field instead. I says, "Can't find him, so."

JM: So you could have been on the ARIZONA?

JS: I could have been on there.

JM: They would have let you spend the night on there?

JS: Yeah, because Pinot, this guy that was one member of the crew, asked me to go and stay overnight with him.

JM: Did he survive the attack?

JS: I never did find out, you know. In fact, I was somewhere the other day, and I saw something about the ARIZONA, you know, and I was trying to get a hold of the list to see.

JM: Yeah, we can check outside.

JS: Yeah.

JM: There was, yeah, did you hear any rumors that there were Japanese landing on the island, or paratroopers? They had more rumors that went around. Did you get wind of any of those?

JS: I heard one that there was a milk truck that was going into Kaneohe and that he had a transmitter that planes could have followed and followed him right in. Now whether that was true or not, I don't know.

JM: Does it --- the FBI was running down all these leads afterwards. Somebody pointed out, especially the arrows in the cane fields, they're pretty hard to miss Wheeler Field or Pearl Harbor, if you had a halfway decent map of Hawaii. You didn't need an arrow.

Obviously, you joined the Air Force [Air Corps], you must have liked flying or just the whole, like, all the romance of the air and all that. What did you think when a couple of days later, you got down to the flight line and saw what had happened?

JS: It was a pretty sick feeling. I mean, to see what was supposed to be protecting you in flames. I mean, that's the way you felt, you know, real sick.

JM: Did you lose any friends there?

JS: No. We lost one buddy just before that, in November. He was in old forty-seven and went in. In fact, his serial number was one before us. There was three of us.

JM: Three of you guys.

JS: He was from the same town as I was.

JM: What was his name?

JS: Lauren French.

JM: It's fifty years, you know, coming back. Go back fifty years. How'd you feel right then about Japan and the Japanese?

JS: I didn't feel too good about them being in Washington, talking like they're serious and then have somebody attack you.

JM: Fifty years later, how are the feelings now?

JS: Well, I think the bitterness is gone, but you can't help but think back what happened, and I know when I get back to the States that I never want to see any of that, movie like that for quite a while, any war movie or anything like that. That was my cup of tea.

JM: What are you going to be doing over the fiftieth? Are you going to go to any of the commemorative ceremonies?

JS: Yes.

JM: Up at Wheeler, or?

JS: Yes, we are going to Wheeler. Yup.

JM: So this tape will be part of our archive. One of the other fellows that was here said that December 7 wasn't a battle of machines, it was a battle of people, and human emotions. If you wanted to sum it up, on a human level, on a personal level for someone who is going to be looking at this tape, maybe in five years, or maybe in fifty years, about what it was like to have been on Hawaii that day, what would you say?

JS: It was just an unbelievable feeling. I mean, you saw it happening before your eyes, but you couldn't believe it. I mean, it was like a real vivid dream, but it wasn't.

JM: And how soon after it was all over did you realize you'd been at a point in history where modern history turned? Did you know right away, or did it take a while to realize that this was a turn?

JS: Well, things changed, you know what I mean? I mean your duties changed and the people that you're, were used to seeing, you didn't see 'em that often, because you might be over here and they might be over there. In the meantime, transferred to another base because of the base requirement. In fact, my buddy was at Wheeler and he went to A.M. school and he was there and incidentally, December 7 was his birthday. So I never forget that birthday.

JM: Thanks a lot for coming.

JS: Okay, you're welcome.

JM: All right. And, last . . .

END OF INTERVIEW