

#220 KERMIT TYLER: FORT SHAFTER

John Martini (JM): Today is December 8, 1991. This is an oral history tape with Mr. Kermit Tyler. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Tyler was assigned to the 78th Pursuit Squadron, 14th Pursuit Group, pursuit wing of the 18th Group, Army Air Corps. That day he was working at Fort Shafter. He was twenty-eight years old at the time. My name is John Martini. This oral history tape is being produced in conjunction with radio station KH-- television station KHET in Honolulu and the National Park Service. We're at the Waikiki Park Hotel. And thank you for coming, Colonel.

Kermit Tyler: Glad to be here.

JM: All right. How'd you get into the Army Air Corps? When did you enlist?

KT: I enlisted on the ninth of October, 1936. I was attending, actually, I was attending University of California as a junior. I was studying engineering. I was about to flunk, I think. I had applied previously to, of course, to being a cadet and it was the happiest day of my life, I think, when I got the appointment and quickly departed for San Antonio, for the flying school.

JM: Did, did you simply want to be a flyer?

KT: Oh yes. Well, I enlisted at Hamilton Field and was flown down there in an old B-10. Couple of days, you know, immediately enlisted, took off right then down to flying school, for one year of training. Actually, primary basic at Randolph and advanced at Kelly.

JM: Where were you assigned before you were assigned out here to Hawaii?

KT: I was assigned to, at Hamilton Field.

JM: Hamilton?

KT: Actually, during flying training, I had been trained as an observation pilot, which is the sort of thing you cooperate with the Army, communications work, towing targets, adjusting artillery fire. It's quite a different thing than pursuit. So the base closed in October first. The Moffett closed and we were given the option of going to Salt Lake City and being bombardment or Hamilton and being pursuit. Pursuit interested me more, so I went there. And it was a hectic period. I, I got some, my first pursuit training there, that is, tumbling around the sky and some tactical training, you might say. But then, about that time, early in '41, they started forming new squadrons and it was pretty much disorganized. So when a certain Major Turlow invited my friend and I over for dinner one night and said, "Well, we have some openings for people who want to go to Hawaii."

I thought, "I'll get out of here and go to where things are more stable," and I always wanted to come to Hawaii anyway.

JM: Yeah, what kind of impression did you have of, of Hawaii and what life would be here?

KT: Oh, life was very pleasant indeed. I mean, it's -- well, it was truly a paradise. I mean, especially for an officer. Now, I think enlisted personnel had got a bad, they liked, you know, to have girlfriends and they're just weren't that many, so many sailors, particularly, but the officers had it good,

you know. We, we had all kinds of formal things and class. I mean, it's sort of a class structure that we got more than exists today, seemed like. What I'm saying is it was a, and then life is pleasant. I had always (chuckles) -- it's a minor thing, but I had grown up in Long Beach and I loved body surfing, and I dreamed of coming to Hawaii. So maybe that motivated me. I always wanted to get on a big surfboard.

So I did that. I mean, I got a board soon after I got here. And I've been in it ever since. That's just a sideline.

JM: That's okay.

KT: A little personal thing, you know.

JM: When you, when you first got here, you were living up at Wheeler? You were assigned quarters at Wheeler?

KT: No. As soon as we arrived, my friends and I, we had been -- at Moffett we were across the hall from each other, and so -- Charles McDonald actually turned out to be a tremendous war ace. But anyhow, we just paired up and, and found ourselves a beach house at Kawaiialoa. And we kind of retreated to there. We didn't get into social life and all that much. We just loved being, having our private life, although we had our friends out frequently, and all that. But we loved it there.

JM: And what, tell us what the rent was on that beach house?

KT: What, the rent was sixty dollars a month, which we shared. (Chuckles)

JM: And so, what year would this have been when you actually arrived?

KT: I arrived in February '41.

JM: February '41. And initially you were flying out of Wheeler, or were you out of Haleiwa right at the start.

KT: Oh, flying out of Wheeler all the time. Haleiwa, I've never landed there at all. It was only a mile or so from our house, but that was a gunnery camp and I didn't ever participate in the gunnery training. Not there, at least. I did later.

JM: See, in early December 1941, they assigned you another duty aside from your pursuit and fighter activities.

KT: Well, actually, the other did, the extra duty that you're talking about was at the information center, I take it.

JM: At Fort Shafter?

KT: Have to say a little before that, several weeks before, was my first introduction to radar. That is, when Major Bergquist in operations officer, took about fifteen pilots down to this newly formed information center, for orientation, just to show us what it was going to be like once they got in operation. My next contact with radar at all was when I flew a flight of P-40s, for, for ship flight, on what you call, see, was a radar mission just so they could coordinate their radar somehow. And then, I got the message from that, that it was probably, took a four ship flight to get some kind of a reflection.

That's, they didn't tell us what we were doing, really, but just go from here to there and so they can measure our location against the radar is what it amounted to.

And then, later, then my next contact was when I was assigned, I was at the head of the roster. The first man on the roster, duty roster, to be what they call pursuit officer at the information center. And I was detailed on Wednesday noon, before Pearl Harbor, the third. When I reported there, there was only a telephone operator and myself. Well, I knew that I couldn't do anything. There were no radar, there was no radar operating. There were, there was no one to plot, plot if they were there. No recognition officer, so I called Major Bergquist, asked him, "Well, why am I here?"

And he said, "Well, I'm trying to get this thing started but we can't, we're having trouble getting personnel. So I'm assigning pursuit pilots down there to learn what they can. If a plane gets lost, well then we go have somebody who's a little bit knowledgeable and say where they went down, help the recovery."

Well, obviously if I had no radar plots or any other help, I couldn't do anything. But I just went ahead putting my time, twelve to four p.m. on Wednesday.

JM: What's your understanding of how the information center was supposed to work, had Bergquist had it all working correctly?

KT: Well, the radar information was fed into plotters, sitting around a large table. There were about five at that time, and they would each sit there with a headset and we see this information and shove little markers around on the map to show where the planes were, and you could infer from this what direction they were traveling. You couldn't tell what they were, but they were there. And then there was a bank, of, on the upper floor, next to the controller, who, people who would identify these plots, that is, by what you call flight plan correlation. By eliminating the known ones, you would come up with unknowns. You couldn't all call an enemy. They were just unknown until there's a hostile act performed, pretty much.

JM: So your duties would have been if they get a plot line over the North Shore, you would know that it was a group of planes from Wheeler and you'd able to eliminate that one as an unknown?

KT: Well, if you had, well, as pursuit officer, you would know that, you see. You could eliminate those. Those are the only ones that I would have known anything about. We didn't have any pursuit planes flying at, actually, during the attack. So let's see, the next duty that I had was on -- I was assigned Saturday noon, and just before I was due to go down there, they called me and said, "Come back Sunday morning at four o'clock instead."

I never did know why this happened and I didn't particularly like it, but I just took it and said, "Okay, I'll do that."

And so I arrived -- well, I got up at about three in the morning and as I drove in, I heard music being played on the local station, which normally they, they didn't. I mean, the continuous music with no, no announcements. This told me that a flight of B-17s was probably coming from the mainland, because they used, they do this only when, when the B-17s were coming in.

JM: Did you have any, had you been officially informed about the flight?

KT: No. I was not officially informed of anything more than what Major Bergquist told me at noon Wednesday, preceding. No oral or written instructions. No flight plans. Nothing, see. So I had to glean whatever I could from it, well, newspapers or whatever I could on my own. I had a bomber pilot friend who told me this information. His name was Morris Shed, a fellow I had known at Hamilton, actually. And he had flown over and this was his thing. His mother, who lived here out in, by Diamond Head.

JM: So you just heard the scuttlebutt, you knew . . .

KT: It was kind of a scuttlebutt thing but it was real. I mean, you know, I mean, he, he, it was a fact, you see, and so I, I just used that information. Sometimes it's a little information that is not worth very much is dangerous, see. So this may be the case here.

JM: So when you got to the information center, was it, was there more crew there than you found the first time?

KT: Well, I was surprised to find that they had plotters there. They were sitting around the table. They weren't doing anything because there was no traffic. The radar was operating, there was no air traffic until about 6:30. And there were no, no, there was no controller, who was the headman. I was to be assistant to the controller. There were no identification people, at all. So we just sat there. I wrote letters and read "Readers' Digest" until, well actually, until just after seven. We did have a few plots, maybe about 6:30 if ever, traffic around the islands, but this didn't tell me anything. I had no way of telling what they were. And at seven, would be about 7:03 or four, I saw this young man go over and start working on the drafting table, which I was there a little early so I went over to see what he was doing and he said, "Well, this is for, to plot aircraft that are the beyond the range of the table, that you could see down below."

So he had a plot at 7:02 a hundred and thirty-two miles out, and about three degrees east of north. Well, I, at the time, I thought, well, it could be almost anything. It was probably the B-17s. That's it all could have been, carrier planes. You see, actually we had a flight of eighteen SBDBs that came in over Barbers Point that were not detected by radar. But the B-17s did come in and were badly shot up and arrived at the same time as the Japanese.

JM: What, some fellow who was working on that smaller table and you went over to look at what he was doing.

KT: I don't know his name. Is that what you're asking?

JM: No, I was going to say, where was he getting his information from?

KT: Well, he would get it, sent to one of the plotters who couldn't plot it on his table, so then he would give it to him and in turn would put it on the board.

JM: Was it, was this the call that came in from Opana?

KT: No, the call that came in from Opana was later, about 7:15. And in which, I don't know, Lockhard, didn't Private Lockhard say that it was the largest flight of planes, largest blip he'd ever seen, something to that effect, you

know. So I felt, you know, that they were, they were on new equipment, they were being trained for only a few weeks they'd been on it. They surely hadn't seen anything as big as a flight of B-17s, so it was easy to fit the two together as being the same and the same plot that I had seen at 7:02. So now . . .

JM: Can I go back for a sec?

KT: Sure.

JM: That plot that came in at 7:02, the fellow who was writing that down. Do you know where his information was coming from, or he was getting, was another radar station giving him that information?

KT: No, that would be the one from Opana.

JM: That would be . . .

KT: The same, the same plot, there's no doubt about it.

JM: The same plot.

KT: So I, you know, just because they were the same distance that Lockhard had reported to me, I connected the two immediately. There was no question about that.

JM: At what point did they, when Opana was calling in, did they call you to the phone?

KT: At what point did they? About seven. You mean timewise? Seven-fifteen, thereabouts.

JM: Yeah.

KT: Seven-fifteen, I would think, plus or minus a few minutes.

JM: So up until then, they were giving this information. Can you recall exactly how the conversation went?

KT: Oh, only that he had a large plot of planes that were larger than he had ever seen, at the same distance and time as, that had been reported before. And so now there was some question now. Interestingly enough, last night, I mean, I watched this Kurault, Schwarzkopf thing, and there was a question raised on that, that well, they came in from different directions, the Japanese and these B-17s. A week or so ago, I just took a rough map and plotted it out as to how many degrees off they could be and still arrive at that point. If they were four, less than four degrees off, they would have arrived at the same point. And this is just drawing a straight line. Now, if you draw a great circle, of course, which is what you do when you fly long distances. You fly a series of little loops, and you go around like this, so then, even more so, they would be right in that position. As you go, as most anybody knows, the, the long distance flights from, from San Francisco or Seattle to Japan, don't go west, they go up by the Arctic, you know, by the, by Alaska, coming to, in that direction. So I think that the, it's pretty evident that they could easily have been B-17s in that position. The fact -- and they came in at the same time, precisely.

JM: So you were . . .

KT: Coincidence, lucky for the Japanese.

JM: So you're, and that's when you told Lockhard over the telephone . . .

KT: I said, "Don't worry about it, it's okay," or vice, vice versa. "Okay," I said, "Don't worry about it." I don't know which.

JM: Yeah.

KT: And just when I, just when I got the Roberts Commission, on the twenty-fourth of the December, so that's the best I could do, you know, what I said.

(Laughter)

JM: Did you get -- so, after you got off the phone, did the plots keep coming in, as the, as the flight approached?

KT: No, there was no one to give the plots to because all these people folded up their equipment and left, or, at soon after seven, you see, and I was left alone with a telephone operator. That's why, when they called in, there was no, at first he couldn't find anyone to, to talk. First, Elliott called, the telephone operator, and he couldn't find me at all. Then when the telephone, telephone operator called back and said that he had found me, and connected me with Lockhard, I didn't call then. They called. He, the telephone operator called Lockhard who then talked to me, you see. That was the 7:15 call.

JM: So, so you, you didn't see any more, anything coming in . . .

KT: No, there was nothing more happening until about, oh, right around eight o'clock, I stepped outside to see what -- I heard a little noise and I stepped outside to see what, for a breath of fresh air, and see what was happening, and I looked over toward Pearl Harbor and saw some, a few planes diving. I thought, well, they're practicing dive bombing, you know, off, off the, kind off to the side, I thought. But it looked like anti-aircraft and I thought they were practicing too, so I was actually seeing the attack and not realizing that it was in progress. You see, I was five miles away at Fort Shafter, is what it amounts to.

The telephone operator called me and told me Wheeler field had been attacked, so I told him to call the people in. From then on, it was chaotic in the information center. We, Major Bergquist was asked how long did it take before the center was able to function?

They said, "A couple of days?"

And he says, "No, more like a week."

So, it, it took, you know, we had to get people in there who were cooks and other types, and train them over there. There were some people who were partially trained, but it was, it was really a chaotic situation. I stayed on until about three in the afternoon on Monday, that is, continuously. They brought us coffee and sandwiches for that period.

JM: You, you probably asked yourself a lot, you know, what if things had gone differently? What would have happened if you had asked more questions and

decided to relay this information up the line? What do you think the steps would have been? What do you think would have happened? What would have been the outcome?

KT: Well, okay . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes)

KT: I blame myself, I mean, in a way, I was there to learn something, that is whatever I could. And so instead of just jumping at conclusions to what was there, I think I should have asked the radar operator, "Well, what makes you think this is important, or why are you disturbed about this? Have you ever seen a flight of B-17s just, you know, go through?"

And having matured some or learned a lot, I wouldn't have done that now. But I was a pretty immature person in respect to a lot of things then, so I didn't. I mean, I, I, but I don't think -- you asked me the question, do I think it made any difference? I think if I had asked those questions, I still wouldn't have had arrived at any different conclusion because I don't think you could've told me that the number of planes. Now, if he had said there are fifty or sixty planes, that were out of the hundred and eighty that were Japanese attackers, that might have rung the bell and disturbed me. But anything less than that -- and he, he couldn't do it with his equipment. It is impossible to, to tell how many airplanes. All he could see was that it was a large blip.

JM: How did you feel when you found out that it had been a flight of Japanese planes and that you had . . .

KT: Well, I was stunned.

JM: . . . that information?

KT: Yes, I was stunned and I, I thought, oh, that's probably, that's probably the flight that was reported on radar. And I felt, well, I was stunned in this way, that the technology was there, the equipment detected it and all this, and apparently I was the one who blocked the, the information from going forward. But in retrospect, I don't think that what I did, I don't think I could have done anything. I don't think I could have recognized it in any -- I could have done the same thing a hundred times, and I would have arrived at the same conclusion, given the state of alert, or lack of alert, that we were in. The general atmosphere, everything. I could never have arrived at that, because my mindset was not that. And I wasn't alerted to do anything, so I could never have arrived at any other conclusion. If I had, if I had thought, well, now this is something serious, I would have called Major Bergquist. This, in his subsequent testimony, he said that's what he expected of me. He was the one who assigned me and I would have called him. He was in bed when the attack came. And given the information, giving him the same information I had, it's only a matter of conjecture what he could have done or would have done with it, because he couldn't have recognized -- I don't think he could have recognized that it was a threat. Maybe he could, maybe he couldn't.

JM: Do you, do you think that, given the situation at the time, the island would have immediately gone on full alert over a blip on the radar screen?

KT: No, I don't. I can't imagine, for instance, that the Navy would have gotten excited and gone to battle stations when they couldn't even do that with their having had a submarine sunk, you know, off the mouth of harbor at quarter

to seven. And they couldn't even get going on, on that, you see. Of course, Bergquist would have gotten some kind of authority to call alert, even. He could have probably got to Major, to General Davidson, and called an alert for the 14th [Pursuit]Wing, but I don't know what it would take to go on up the line and call an alert based on the sketchy information that he had, with no way of recognizing what they were, see.

JM: I know you had to testify a lot afterwards. There were hearings and you mentioned the Roberts Commission.

KT: Roberts Commission, the Army Pearl Harbor board and the Navy court of inquiry, all of which were part of the congressional record for the, what you call the congressional investigation into the Pearl Harbor attack.

JM: And did you think it had an effect on your subsequent career in the Air Force?

KT: Oh, I'm sure it did. I think in some ways it probably affected my self-confidence. I mean, it was a very jarring experience. I, I remember in '49, I served, '46 to '49, I was senior air instructor with the Utah National Guard. I got a superior report and, but it was endorsed by a lieutenant general that said, "This officer had shown inability to recognize operations or emergencies, which might affect his operation."

Well, this is like the kiss of death, I mean, you know, for further advancement. Actually, I got a promotion to colonel, to colonel after that, but that's as far as I went. So I do think it adversely affected my career. There's no question about it. A lot of other people suffered a lot more than I did, though.

JM: Kind of as a last question, the permanent image of Pearl Harbor is fixed in, you know, by media and books and all that. How do you think you've been treated by, by the media in history and your role in it?

KT: Usually the media, I have testified, I've furnished them interviews only a few times, when you think of it. It was maybe less than five, over all these years. Once, after the twentieth, to the Canadian Broadcasting System, and in that one, in every other case, they extracted something that was the most lurid thing you said, that I, they could have, like, saying. I said, "Forget it," which I, it wasn't in my character to do that.

But it is, it's splitting hairs, you see. But it's just a little bit more, well, too casual for me to have said. And so, and then they leave out anything that would explain my actions, my lack of training, these, lack of alert, all of the factors that might be mitigating and indicate that I used reasonably common sense. So I have been very wary of this. In fact, I was recently, I mean, most recently is this thing last Saturday. I was interviewed for about an hour and didn't even appear. Not that I care whether I did or not, except to rebut in some way the testimony that was, was given by Lockhard, who, who indicated that the planes were coming from opposite directions, or from different directions, which I, I categorically disagree with, that they were in fact coming very, very close together, or should have been. They were, whether they were or not, it was my opinion that they would be expected to, or could have, could have done so, and they wouldn't have to stray but a little bit to be in the same position.

JM: How did, what about the movie, "Tora, Tora, Tora?" That's a popular . . .

KT: Well, they have what you call artistic license, I guess, to portray me as sitting on a bar stool the night before with a pretty blonde, but that wasn't so. I went to bed about 9:30 because I valued my sleep.

JM: Okay. I want to thank you for coming and for talking with us.

KT: Well, I thought it was an opportunity to express my position, and I appreciate it.

JM: Thanks, Colonel.

KT: All right.

JM: Okay.

KT: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW