

Lester Williams #92
July 15, 1985

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

A: July... middle of July, '39.

Q: '39? And how did you come to be in the [Army] Air Corps?

A: Well, I was out of a job and I actually wanted to go to Alaska and they only wanted PS men to go to Alaska so they said, how about going to Hawaii in the Army Air [Corps], at that time. So I said, O.K.

Q: When did you first come to Hawaii?

A: What's that?

Q: When did you first come to Hawaii?

A: Oh, we got here about October, '39.

Q: What were your duties here at Hickam?

A: I was a crew chief, mechanic crew chief.

Q: In the 11th Bomb Group?

A: Yeah.

Q: Which squadron?

A: 26[th] Bomb Squadron.

Q: What kind of planes did you fly in?

A: Well, B-18's mostly. We got some 17's in just before War started, not too many of them.

Q: How would you compare the B-18 to the B-17?

A: Well, there was not really any comparison. Uh 17's a 4-engine job, B-18 was a 2-engine job. It was old. It was obsolete. Of course, the 17 I guess was getting obsolete by the time they got them over. The airplanes go, by the time they get them out to the field, why they're obsolete I guess.

Q: What would a typical work day for you be like, before the December 7th attack?

A: Oh I'd get up around... I guess they rolled us at around 6:00 in the morning for role call and then you went to chow. Then probably around 7:45 you lined up, marched off to your work detail, which would be down the hangar from me. Then you preflight your airplane, or whatever was going on, if there was any maintenance why preform the maintenance.

Q: What kind of work did you know when you preflight an airplane?

A: Oh, drain the 'sumps', drain the gasoline sumps, wipe the oil off the props, put oil on the props the night before, (corrosion control) and run them up, run the engines up and check them out, kick the tires and all that sort of stuff, make sure the struts was up and check the control sources; look the whole plane over you know.

Q: What were you doing on the morning of the 7th when the Japanese attack began?

A: I was sleeping. I'd been out late the night before. You want to hear the whole...

Q: Sure, the whole thing.

A: Well, we had been on maneuvers, see, previous to this, and we came off maneuvers Friday night, Friday afternoon, brought the airplanes in, cleaned them up a little bit, and lined them up and secured them for the night.

Next morning we was relieved, off... on pass, and that was the first time we'd had off since pay day. We got paid on the 1st, but we didn't get any pass because we was on maneuvers. So it was first time since pay day we got to town.

Me and a couple of buddies went down. University of Hawaii was playing I believe it was S. Calif, at a football game. So we took that in. And then there was some kind of a Hawaiian show and dances, hula dances and stuff, in conjunction with the football game. So then we went out and had some chow and proceeded to do a little drinking. Used to go down the Kau Kau Corner and bought sit-ups and drink some good old Seagram-Seven.

So we stayed up pretty late, In fact we... it was a... let's see, radio stations generally went off around 10:00. They went off the air, but they stayed on the air, and they were on I don't know, I guess it was on until we finally went to bed. So we fooled around until about midnight and then we got some chow, came back to the barracks and went to bed.

So next morning they woke us up with a whole lot of noise. At first we thought it was a post artillery. Every once in a while they'd go on maneuvers or something; fire them big coastal guns and shake you out of bed. They generally didn't do it in the day time. They had to do it early in the morning, you know, so we figured they was up to their old tricks.

And then of course we went out of the barracks and saw the planes flying over and we saw the Rising Sun on the insignia and we knew what it was. We made jokes about radio stations being on the air. We said they were sending beams to the Japanese to come in and bomb. And of course we thought it was all a big joke.

I don't actually know why the 'higher-ups' weren't more alert to the feeling because among the enlisted men, why we figured the Japs would be around sooner or later. And so when we woke up Sunday morning, there they were, you know?

Q: What do you remember seeing of the attack?

A: Well, I remember, first thing, we were standing in the doorway of the barracks, two wings like outside on each side of the walk and this guy come strafing up the walk, and you could see the tracers you know? So we stepped back inside the cement doorway and said we better do something about this. So we beat it up to the supply room, got a helmet, gas mask, and a couple of us decided we better go down to the hangars and see how the planes was making out.

These guys was strafing up and down the flight line, creating a lot of ruckus and of course they was bombing Pearl Harbor too, and I saw a guy fly over HAD [*Hawaiian Air Depot*] hangars (big hangars) and supposedly they was built in a curve to where if anything but a direct hit would bounce off. This guy had a torpedo and I don't know, he didn't make any direct hit but she sure went inside and blew the whole thing wide open. Oh I saw the one flight of bombers come over, perfect formation, and the Navy cut loose at them, and I guess they was about 2000 feet below, there ac ac was about 2000 feet below the bombers. Oh we saw planes flying all over there at will you know, because we didn't get any fighters in the air from Hickam. There weren't any there anyhow. So they had quite a field day down there and at Pearl Harbor too I guess.

Q: What were you doing during the attack?

A: Well we went to the hangar and I got a B-18 that I used to crew. We hoped to tug on it and tote it out across the landing field and out into the revetment. Then we came back and picked up a B-17 and took that out. We wanted to get the planes out and off the flight line, out the revetment. A guy, one of them Japs got after us when we was going across the runway and I just got off the tug and run off and when he got through messing around I got back on the tug and continued on. It was kind of exciting there for awhile.

Q: Yeah, I'm sure. What was going through your mind this whole time? How were you feeling?

A: Well, I was feeling I was... I wanted to get out of the way of them bullets mostly and get my airplane in commission. That was about my main thoughts. I wasn't mad at anybody or anything like that you know. Maybe, well I think I was too busy to be scared. I didn't jump and shake my fist at them or anything but when they came in on a strafing run why I lay down on the grass wherever I was and make as small a target of myself as I could.

Q: The next few days after the attack, what did you do during that period?

A: Well I had to get a fuel tank, replace a fuel tank in my plane, and that took most of the night and that was kind of interesting working up there. You had to crawl up in there, and one reason I had the job was I wasn't quite so stout as I am now and I could get up in them little holes. Took you five minutes to crawl up in there with a tank half way in and every fifteen minutes somebody would run by and say, "They're coming back! They're coming back! Get that flashlight out!" and all this and that BS.

Well we finally got the tank in and then they brought some rifles around and told us to guard the airplane. They thought they might make a landing in the dark and come across the swamp out there at the end of the field. So we was out there ready to go and hearing all kinds of noises and... Three planes came in, three Navy planes come over I guess around, I don't know, 9:30, 10:00 and all of Pearl Harbor lit up with bullets and tracers and kitchen sinks and whatever else they was throwing at them (laughter) I don't know. Maybe it was toilet paper.

Q: I guess folks were pretty tense then.

A: What's that?

Q: I guess things were pretty tense then.

A: Oh yeah, they... not that the Navy was any more ticklish than us because some of our boys shot at our B-18's which is... they knew that plane. They knew the silhouette and they had seen them. That's practically all the planes they had ever seen. They still put a few holes in ours when they was coming back. We got some couple of three B-18's off and couple of B-17's off that afternoon and gad it was worse trying to get back into the field than it was if they going over.... course they never found the enemy. Yeah, things there was kind of jumpy.

Q: What's the one thing you remember most from December 7th?

A: Well, probably standing there in the doorway and it finally dawned on me that them little red balls bouncing up that sidewalk would hurt quite a bit if they hit you. Of course it was all... that was probably... I remember going by the guardhouse. They blew the corner off that. One of my buddies was in the guardhouse, so when they blew the corner off he came out and came down, was helping us fellows out, which was his job. That's... It was almost you know, it was almost too much to have one outstanding...

Q: Well, I appreciate your taking the time to share this with me.

A: Yeah, well I guess this is about the first time I've really... well this is the first time I've ever talked officially. Not that I mind talking but I just never had the opportunity and as far as newspaper people went, why I had kind of a dim opinion of them. The first time I came home from down this way, a guy met me and even in those days, newspaper people in my opinion weren't too constructive. So this is about the first time. I don't know whether I've contributed anything to...

Q: Sure. You have.

A: ... your situation, but...

Q: Well, you have and I thank you for it.

A: O.K.