

#145 RALPH BAXTER: STATIONED AT HICKAM AIR FIELD

Chris Conybeare (CC): Okay, this is an interview with Ralph Baxter. It's December 2. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki. It's about ten a.m. And Mr. Baxter lives in Fremont, Ohio. My name is Chris Conybeare and Dan Martinez is assisting us with this interview.

Just a little background before we start, where was your hometown? Where were you born and raised?

Ralph Baxter (RB): Belmont, New York. A little town of about 1200 people.

CC: So, small town, USA.

RB: Right. Right.

CC: And what was your name and rank on December 7, 1941.

RB: Ralph E. Baxter, Staff Sergeant, 6983465.

CC: Got the serial number too?

RB: Oh, I'll never forget that.

CC: How did you happen to be stationed in Hawaii at that time?

RB: Well, when I got out of school, I hunted around for a job, you couldn't find a job, so I joined the Army. And I was assigned to the 32nd Quartermaster [Company] in Fort Armstrong. Direct assignment. And I transferred -- a year and a half later I transferred from Fort Armstrong to Hickam Field.

CC: So you'd been in the islands a year and a half or so?

RB: Yes.

CC: Approximately.

RB: I'd come over in August of 1940.

CC: What was your job at Hickam?

RB: I was supply sergeant for the 39th Quartermaster [Company], Light Maintenance.

CC: And what'd that mean? What kinds of things did a supply sergeant do?

RB: Well, he made sure that all of his men had clothes and equipment, anything they have to have to do their work. You get it from the warehouse and keep them supplied.

CC: And on December 7, where were you and what were you doing when this attack . . .

RB: I was sleeping in bed.

CC: Yeah.

RB: I was laying there in the wooden barracks about a half a mile down from the big barracks, towards the main gate. I was trying to decide whether I wanted to go to the PX for breakfast or the mess hall for breakfast. And consequently, when I heard the bomb, planes -- which we thought were Navy planes, because they pulled dive bomb maneuvers on the barracks all the times. So I look out my window and I can see HAD [*Hawaiian Air Depot*] on fire, so I get up, get dressed -- I had been in the Roosevelt School to a long hair concert the night before and (coughs) -- excuse me. I got dressed in my class A's. Went downstairs and I looked out and I see one of the planes going over with a red circle on it. I said, "We're at war."

So I went back up, took my class A's off, hung 'em on a hanger in the locker, put on my fatigues. Took my gas mask and my helmet and I headed down to the repair shops. And on the way down, I ran into a tech sergeant's wife is coming into the base, trying to get back to the quarters. So I gave her my gas mask and helmet and went on down to the repair shops.

CC: What were the other people doing? I mean, did everybody immediately understand you're under attack or did you meet people that didn't know what was going on? What was it like?

RB: Well, they understood what was going on and what it was, but it didn't sink in. I saw so many people diving underneath barracks. You'd see the planes diving down and the bombs coming, well, you don't know how they're going to hit. So you're trying to find a place to hide. But I found out in a hurry that if a bomb looks like it's coming at you, stay where you're at. If it looks like it's going beyond you, you'd better run like the devil, because it's going to hit right where you're at. That's just the impression that you'll get from them.

CC: What kinds of things did you observe as you were trying to get from the barracks to the next point? Was that a duty station you were supposed to go to?

RB: Well, that's where we worked, our repair shops, where we repaired the vehicles, all the vehicles on the base. And it was very organized, in a way. We got all the trucks out, loaded up all the equipment in the shop and we headed out down Kam[*ehameha*] Highway to the salt flats, and that's where we set up our repair shops. Then I ended up going back hauling KVA oil to all the KVA units, which was electrical, you wanna say, transformers. And I hauled for them for about half a day. And that night I ended up as a runner for the 22nd, 23rd materiel squadrons. And I'll tell you, at night, it was a touchy place to be. If you didn't have to go outdoors, you don't move, you stay in the building.

CC: Lot of folks ready to shoot something.

RB: Oh yeah, they were trigger-happy all over the place. Because you never know, you didn't know what was coming back.

CC: Let's go back to during the attack. Did you observe the planes being hit or that kind of thing happening? They were all in a row, were they? Or how were the planes deployed at the field?

RB: Well, all of the -- all the bombers that we had at Hickam was lined up in a parade formation, right down the mat, side of the mat. And they just wiped them all out. They hit the whole works. And I didn't see any -- actually, I couldn't see any of our planes up there, because there were too many planes -- you know, you don't recognize -- you're too busy trying to keep all aware of the stray things and everything.

And -- what do I want to say here? We had no ammunition, no weapons. I think we had fifty pistols and ten rifles in the supply room. And you go down to get a weapon, the supply sergeant and supply room wanted to make you sign for them. (Chuckles) You threw him out of the room. But all of our ammunition was up in the crater, up in the salt flats, up there in the crater. That's where the ammunition all was stored.

CC: Was it pretty frustrating?

RB: Yes, it was. You stand down there and all you can do is think about throwing rocks at them, and that ain't going to help a bit!

CC: When you first realized you were under attack, how did you feel? I mean, did you think about it in any particular way?

RB: No. You just don't comprehend it. You just think, well, you go on like your normal work, your normal day. It's not -- to my way of thinking, that's all logic. You don't comprehend it because if I'd known -- if you comprehend what's going on, I would have never changed from class A's and hung them up like I would, like I was going out on a pass or going to work. And that's all I did, I just decided that, or thought that we should be at our repair, stations, work stations, and that's where we went.

CC: So is that a part of the function of training, you think?

RB: I imagine, yes. It's part of the army way of doing things.

CC: Did you observe people, you know, being hit or wounded or, I mean . . .

RB: No, because we were far enough away from the big barracks, towards the main gate, that we didn't see what was going on below us, down toward the other part. But afterwards, why, there was quite a mess down there because eight o'clock in the morning, that mess hall was pretty crowded and they dropped a bomb right square in the middle of it.

CC: And, your own personal history, you had been assigned to that big barracks at one time.

RB: I was on the top floor of it for a month or better, when I first come out there.

CC: And when were you transferred?

RB: In November, just about, I'd say, probably three weeks before the attack, we moved out of the big barracks, down across the parade grounds, into the wooden barracks, about a half a mile away. And our wooden barracks, all it had was one machine gun slung through the roof of it.

CC: So you might not be here if you hadn't . . .

RB: If I had been on that top floor of the barracks, I don't think I'd have been here.

CC: Do you -- you say after the attack was over . . . do you remember about what time?

RB: About ten o'clock.

CC: And what was the job then, what was the main task you had to take care of after the attack was over?

RB: Well, mine -- all we did is went out, like I said, I hauled oil for the various KV units, the temporary electrical, but a lot of them were back up in the main barracks and tried to clean up the mess. They went around with blankets and picked up what parts of the bodies they could find and put them in the blanket and tried to sort them out. We had -- well, we had one guy in the outfit who was on detached service to the fire station, which was just below the big barracks, and they got clobbered. And we had one sergeant, I believe, led us out to the salt flats on motorcycle, looking for a place to bivouac. He was going down the road, looked around and he looked back and it was three cars across the road and no place for him to go. He cracked up and he had one leg, one arm, all -- well, he was broken up pretty bad. And he had screws all through him, trying to hold him together. That was a Sergeant Hall. I never did find out whatever happened to him.

CC: Any other people you remember being with that day that you've been in touch with, or have you . . .

RB: That was wounded or hurt? No. There was only two men in our outfit that I know of that got hurt.

CC: What about the next few days after that? Was this feeling that people -- they were going to go back, still prevail. I mean, did . . .

RB: Oh yeah.

CC: . . . pretty uptight.

RB: They were uptight. Like I said, you didn't dare to walk out the door. I went that first night, I sat there in the command post to the 22nd Materiel [Squadron]. I thought I'd go get a bite to eat. I opened the door and started to step out and heard, "Halt," from about four different directions.

I said, "No way." I'll stay hungry, I'll go back in the room!

CC: The -- How about the rest of the war? What -- did you spend the rest of the war here in Hawaii, or did you move onto the Pacific theater?

RB: No. I went back to the States in 1943, May of '43. I was sent back to the States and I spent six months in the States. And it was, what you call a rat race back there. I went from Patterson Field at Dayton, Ohio. I was transferred from there down to Kelly Field, Texas. And we were down there, I think about a month. And they asked me if I want to go back overseas, and I said, "Get me out of this rat race!" A week later I was in New York, headed for England.

CC: So you went to Europe?

RB: Oh yeah. I was over in their ports for a year.

CC: Forty-five years ago, this attack happened at Pearl Harbor, and of course it's an event that -- a dubious distinction, I suppose, to be part of such an

historic event. But how do you feel about a forty-fifth -- if you look back forty-five years, has your thinking changed? How do you feel about it today?

RB: No, my thinking hasn't changed any. I think it was a hell of a deal and I can still picture what went on, but I'm just thankful that I got out of it. I think that's what changed my outlook all the way through. I got through that. So if I can get through that, I can get through anything. That was my feeling on the ships going to England. The guys would howl, "Well, the wolf pack is out," which was all the subs.

So what, they hit ya, they're going to hit you. But I'm enjoying today, I'm not going to worry. If you worry about that stuff, well, you aint' going to live long.

And same way in the bombing of England. I used to go down to London on passes and they used to buzz bombs over, and when you hear a buzz bomb coming over, well as long as you could hear it, you're alright. When the motor cut out, look out, 'cause it's coming down. And I'd go to the hotel and it's on the air raid -- or you go into the shelter. Why do I want to go in the shelter for? Hell, if they're going to get me, they're going to get me! I'm not worried about that. I'm enjoying myself!

CC: So, really, the Pearl Harbor attack really has been part of your philosophy of life?

RB: Right. I thought that way all the way through. I live today, tomorrow will take care of itself. And so far, I've been through a few scrapes, but I'm still here!

CC: What do you think about the way we teach history? Do you think the younger generation understands what happened at Pearl Harbor or World War II?

RB: No, I don't, because I've talked to various groups -- when you say something about Pearl Harbor, "What's that?" They don't know, they've never heard of it.

This couple in front of me, the woman with me, she was about three or four years. Until she saw the movie out there at Pearl, she didn't realize what it was all about. She don't realize it. And I think that even your younger ones, they don't know what it is at all. Now, I was surprised -- a senior at the school, one of the schools there at Fremont, contacted me -- I don't know how she got my name -- but she contact me and wanted to know about -- she was writing an essay or a thesis on Pearl Harbor. And she'd been down to the library and I've got, of course, I've got my books and everything else. I gave them all to her and talked to her. But I was surprised because that's the first one I'd ever heard of that, you know, that wanted to know what Pearl Harbor was about. But I don't think that the younger generation really understands; it's not taught enough. They don't understand what happened.

CC: What would you -- okay.

Daniel Martinez (DM): Could you ask him what his feelings are, about Japanese as people?

CC: We're out of tape, okay. We'll put on another tape then.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

BEGIN VIDEOTAPE TWO

CC: Oh no, he'll be changing that. He'll be changing that.

So, when you first realized that you were under attack, you looked out. Did you observe the attacking aircraft?

RB: Yes. We could see 'em diving over the Pearl. And it turned daylight into darkness with the smoke and everything that was going on. And they'd swing down across Pearl and they'd come over across to Hickam and straight to the place. It was pretty frustrating.

CC: What did the planes look like? Do you remember how -- the colors or the markers on the planes?

RB: Well, they was silver with a nice big red circle on each wing, and one side, on the fuselage.

CC: And did you immediately know what that meant?

RB: Yes I did. I hadn't thought about it, but it automatically just sinks in, just like that, you know what's coming up.

CC: Had there been talk about an attack by the Japanese at all, or . . .

RB: No, I don't remember of any explicit talk about it. We were talking -- worried about the war and things -- we were going to fight the Russians before we were going to do anything else. We were afraid of Papa Bear.

CC: And you say you observed the smoke and . . . over at Pearl?

RB: Yes.

CC: What did it look like?

RB: Just like a big oil fire, refinery on fire. Black smoke and, like I say, it turned daylight into darkness. It was pretty black around there.

CC: And you observed that first, before you observed the planes coming back to strafe you, or . . .

RB: Well, no, actually the first thing I saw was the smoke from the Hawaiian Air depot, which was ATD, down at the end of the field, before you went over to Fort Kam[ehameha]. It was last -- the building you turned around to get over there. And it was, I'd say, probably about four stories high and -- like a big hangar, where they had all the air depot, air stuff. But that was the main -- that was the first thing I saw. And then when I got out, well, then I saw the planes diving. And the time I got down to the repair shop, where we was underneath the roof and were looking out at stuff, then you could see all the activity over at Pearl. Because there's only a wire fence between Pearl and Hickam Field.

CC: Forty-five years later, you look back, do you feel -- and now Japan is one of our allies. Do you have any feelings about the Japanese today, or how do you look at that whole problem?

RB: Well, the years has mellowed the animosity towards the Japanese and everything. I don't feel that -- well, I never felt too bad about them then. We had Japanese kids working on the base yet, even after the war started. In fact, one of them, I wish I could find him. I think his first name was Tom, but if I'm not mistaken, he was a lieutenant colonel in the Hawaiian National Guard. And they went to Italy and they done one hell of a job over there. In fact, they rescued a bunch of the Americans that was trapped; they went in and got them out. They were a gung-ho outfit.

CC: So it didn't turn into a racial kind of thing for you?

RB: No, not really. You gotta understand that, just like anything else, that you've got the good and the bad. Now the ones here are Japanese-Americans, which is entirely different. You might say an almost entirely different race than what the Japanese are. They were the ancestors of that, but they weren't the type that, "Banzai," and that's it.

CC: So you made a distinction. You were able to make a distinction . . .

RB: Right.

CC: . . . between the American Japanese and the enemy.

RB: I have.

CC: Not everybody is able to do that.

RB: No, because we've got one guy in our chapter that all you guys do is mention buying a Japanese car or something, and, man, he's right up in the air. You can't talk to him! Well, I understand that, I understand. Maybe the Navy feels different than what the Army does. That, I can't say. But I had some good friends that were Japanese on the island, and they proved out that they were Americans, that they weren't the wild and, what you would say, dedicated.

CC: They weren't the enemy.

RB: No, no. But I know a lot of the enemy that was a lot of the Japanese were killed on this island, by the next morning. Because I've seen places downtown where the Filipinos and Japanese, all of them live in the same area. And you were friends with them. Go down the next morning, "Oh, what happened to so-and-so over here, this Japanese fellow."

"Oh, he don't live here no more." They just went in and wiped them out.

CC: So that was another tragedy.

RB: Yeah, it was. Just a minute, if you have time to go over this. These Filipinos and some of these in the island here, they just took on a war of their own. They figured that a Jap here was a Jap there and they killed him. That's all there was to it.

CC: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW