

#199 STEPHEN WEINER: BELLOWS FIELD

John Martini (JM): Okay. Today is December 4, 1991. This is an oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Weiner. Mr. Weiner was at Bellows Field assigned to the 86th Observation Squadron on December 7, 1941. He's also the first interrogator of Ensign Sakamaki. My name is John Martini. I'm an oral historian and ranger from the USS ARIZONA Memorial. This tape is being prepared in conjunction with the National Park Service and KHET Television in Honolulu.

And, Mr. Weiner, what I guess the first question I always ask everybody is when did you get to Hawaii?

Stephen Weiner (SW): August, I think, of '41.

JM: August of '41?

SW: Yeah, I think so. I came over on the -- in fact, we were -- there were a number of military personnel, I think, primarily officers, who were allowed to go on a civilian cruise ship that we were passengers aboard. And that's how we arrived in Hawaii from San Francisco.

JM: When you were, when you first got over here, was Bellows Field your first assignment?

SW: No, Hickam.

JM: Hickam.

SW: Mm-hm.

JM: With the 11th com group?

SW: Headquarters Squadron, I think, first.

JM: Headquarters.

SW: Right.

JM: And then, when did . . .

SW: Then I was transferred to Bellows, oh, I think, a month or two before December 7. I guess it was soon after.

JM: How did duty at Bellows compare to duty at Hickam?

SW: It was quite a difference. I was really flabbergasted because Hickam was in a whole new world for me, coming from a small town in Pennsylvania, finding that there was such a life as formal dining, formal clothing in the officers' club after six o'clock. Dressed formal to go to the base theater. I didn't know from that kind of lifestyle. And when I got to Bellows, it was from the sublime to almost the, not the ridiculous, but very rustic life in Bellows.

JM: Well, I'll bet.

SW: We had, other than our 86th observation squadron, we always had a visiting fighter squadron for gunnery practice, if they could. The day of December the seventh, there was such a squadron at Bellows.

JM: Bellows?

SW: Yes.

JM: How did you spend the last day before December 7? Do you remember what you did Saturday night?

SW: Well, it was --- the pattern was that Saturday night was the day of the dance, to howl, it was a fun day. And big thing in the island was the officers' club dinner dance, and for whatever reason I didn't have a date that weekend, and I stayed at the base. I was rested for the morning of the seventh. (Chuckles) Most of my friends were exhausted.

JM: What was happening to you on the morning of the seventh itself?

SW: Well, we were awakened by the sound of motor engine airplanes flying over the base. It seemed like they were buzzing us.

JM: Do you know about what time this was?

SW: Yeah, it was some time before the attack, 7:55, I'd say, 7:30 to 7:40.

JM: Mm-hm.

SW: The --- it was very unusual for a motor engine airplane to buzz our field or come with any intent to land because it was a short strip. Motor engine planes never landed at Bellows and so minutes after the initial buzzing, the plane crash landed at the end of the runway. And we ran down, those of us who were in the BOQ. We ran down to see what was going on, and we found the crew of the plane semi-hysterical because they had been attacked, they said, en route to Hawaii. But they didn't know by whom and we were scratching our heads with the crewmembers then, who were literally bleeding and the plane was shot up. They couldn't fight back. They had guns but Cosmoline only in the guns. And they had no ammunition.

But while we were standing trying to puzzle out their predicament, a flight of Japanese fighter planes came in, began strafing everything in sight, including our position at the end of the runway.

JM: At the time of when the planes came over. All right, you said that the B-17 who didn't know who had attacked them, had just been shot up and crashed -- did you know whose planes the planes were when they first flew over?

SW: No. Isn't it odd? None of us did. In fact, I would guess it was a half an hour or longer before somebody said, "They're Japanese."

We clearly could see the pilots' faces. The rising sun on the wings and on the fuselage was apparent, but nobody dreamt that it could have been a Japanese plane, because they were so far away. Who dreamt that planes then would be transported by carrier for an off-base attack?

JM: Do you remember what the airplanes looked like, aside from the big round Hanamura?

SW: They were fixed landing gear, oddly enough, which was very strange. And they looked to be of an era even before the planes that we had at our base. We

had P-40s and it looked further, much further advanced than the Japanese planes that they used in this instance.

JM: Were they --- you said they started to shoot? Were they shooting . . .

SW: Yes. They were firing at random, up and down the runway, across later, and they shot up all the planes, with the exception of two or three that attempted to get off. One crash landed at the end of the runway. Another one never got in, got the plane revved up, was shot stepping into the cockpit. And I've forgotten what happened to the third who started to leave the, to fight back.

JM: What's running through your mind at this time?

SW: Confusion. We thought surely can't be our Navy. Who else has planes? Who would attack us? We never dreamt that it would be a hostile attack by a nation, another nation. But ultimately we did understand that it would, they were Japanese indeed.

JM: The attack lasted, you know, approximately two hours. What was going on with you guys there at Bellows? How did you spend the night?

SW: Well, after that wave, we were issued, or we were, at least, threw open the ammunition shack and they said, "Take what you want."

We each took forty-fives and a rifle, but there was no supply of loose ammunition for the rifles. So we took bandoleers, thirty caliber bandoleers, and wrapped 'em around us, similarly to the Mexican bandits, if you remember seeing in the movies.

JM: You want to describe the level of training and proficiency you had with these weapons?

SW: Well, sorry to say that there was very little of that. Personally, I had never been trained in side arms, had never fired a gun in my life, up 'til that moment.

JM: But you were an officer, you were Second Lieutenant.

SW: Yes. It was surprising that we hadn't had no advanced training.

JM: What was the scuttlebutt that was running around Bellows at that time? Were you expecting more air attacks or what?

SW: Well, oddly enough, and I have read very little about it, but the Wednesday before the Sunday, we were put on an A-1 alert. And we were told -- it was around noon on the Wednesday -- that we were not to leave the base. Few of us knew what an A-1 alert meant, but we were told we were confined to the base. Do anything you want to, and after lunch, we started a card game at the officers' club. And soon thereafter, within an hour or two, the alert was called off. And, in retrospect, after the attack on the seventh, I began to appreciate that there must have been some advanced information, or somebody had decided that an alert was necessary. I was never privy as to what the inside scuttlebutt on that.

JM: Worry of warning that something might happen with Japan had been sent out. You were at the very end of, got the end of, you were the received end.

SW: Actually, we weren't aware of Kurusu who was in Washington at the time, I don't think.

JM: The Japanese negotiator?

SW: Yeah, negotiation. I think --- it was after the fact. We learned about that when there was a complete breakdown.

JM: What was that night like, or that afternoon and night, what did they have you doing?

SW: Well, we were told that there was, as you can imagine, it was quite a bit of confusion and disorganization, as it seemed to be the SOB. And we were told that the Japanese were landing at Barber's Point, that we should dig foxholes, pair off, two to a foxhole. Dig your own hole and be prepared for hand to hand combat. I paired off with a lieutenant who was a pilot from my squadron and I'm sorry to say I've forgotten his name. I'm not sure he's still alive. Most of the pilots from my period lost their lives in the first year of the war. But anyway, we paired off and we dug a foxhole. It began to rain. We weren't sure how deep to dig the foxhole. It was our first experience, and as we dug, we would sit down in the ground. We'd say, "Wait a minute. It's not deep enough. Our heads are sticking up. Dig a little more."

And so we finally reached a point where we thought we might be safe and we sat there, side by side. In view of the fact that it was raining, my companion was wiping his rifle with his handkerchief. And he accidentally fired the rifle across my lap and burned my thigh. And I screamed at him. And he said, "Jesus, don't tell anybody. The guys will razz me."

And he said, "You almost made me a the first, one of the first Purple Heart [Medal] awardees."

But anyway, it was . . .

JM: You spent the night with literally expecting the invasion to happen?

SW: Right. We were expecting that the next thing is that we would be fighting for our lives. But I would guess that around nine, ten o'clock, it was dark. We see two figures approached us.

JM: This would be at night, or the next morning?

SW: No, at night. The night of December the seventh. Two figures approached us from the shoreline. We were approximately a hundred yards from the shoreline, the end of the strip. And the strip ran from the shoreline to the -- inland. And we see these two figures approach us and soon we recognized the sergeant who was posted down at the end of the runway, Sergeant Kui, who I'm sorry to hear had died last year. But he was leading an Oriental [*Ens. Sakamaki, IJN*], who was nude with the exception of a loincloth. And when he got close enough, we said, "Where did you get him?"

And he says, "He came right out of the water."

And he turned his prisoner over to us. Well . . .

JM: You were the officers encountered.

SW: Right. So we took our prisoner to the operational shack, which was adjacent to the runway, hoping to find a senior officer that we could discharge our responsibility. And at that, there unfortunately was only another one or two other second lieutenants and a couple of enlisted men, and one was a sergeant. And we proceeded to put Sakamaki into a chair, wrapped a blanket around him, because he had been in the water for a long, long time.

JM: Was he --- how was he acting? How did he look, aside from, you know, he had a weapon and a loincloth?

SW: Amazing. He was in control and defiant, and we gave him a hard-boiled egg because he was literally exhausted. His skin was wrinkled as though he had been in water for many hours. And we also gave him a shot of whiskey. And we said, "Cooperate with us," -- oh, incidentally, I forgot to tell you.

We took turns holding a forty-five to his temple. Trying to harass him, perhaps frighten him into telling us, if he could, where, who he was and where he came from.

JM: To clarify, at this time, you didn't know that he was a Japanese sailor?

SW: We weren't sure. We suspected, but it's conceivable he could have been a fisherman. And so after some time of this grating and harassing . . .

JM: Yeah, what -- can you explain? What did you offer him? What did you tell him when you said you were harassing him?

SW: Well, that it would make him more comfortable, give him more to eat and we would be more kind to him. And that whatever we could, came to our minds at the time. We had had no experience or practice in interrogating prisoners. So who --- he spoke a different tongue, or as we weren't even sure that he spoke at that point. He said nothing. And so we decided to send the sergeant, who was in the room, into Waimanalo, which is the little town adjacent to the base, to pick up an elderly Japanese. And he came back in a few minutes and we told the Japanese gentleman what to ask our prisoner, and when he spoke to the prisoner, he, he shook his head and turned to us, and said, "He speaks a different dialect."

So we accused him of being a traitor, that he's lying, and we pushed him into the corner of the room, and we said, "You sit there."

And we told this sergeant, "Go back into town. Pick up a small Japanese boy, ten year old or thereabouts," because perhaps this man is outwitting us.

And so, sure enough, he brought back this young man, young boy, and when he said to us, "I don't understand him," then we realized perhaps both of them were then telling the truth.

And so we continued then to -- our tactics that we had used previously, of trying to provoke him into answering us.

JM: Did --- was this any type of training that you ever had, or did you just kind of make it up as you went along?

SW: Went along. We thought perhaps this is what you would do if you were in a movie. (Laughs) But out of the blue, our prisoner said, "Give me pencil and paper."

JM: In English?

SW: In English. And on the desk, there happened to be a manila envelope, and we had, gave that to him, gave him a pencil and he proceeded to write, "I am Japanese naval officer. My name is Ensign Kazuo Sakamaki. My ship catch in coral. I jump into water, swim to this airplane land. No tell about ships. Kill me in honorable way," and he signed his name.

And with that, that was the end of our communication. But we were flabbergasted that he wrote this in English.

JM: How do you remember so well what he said?

SW: 'Cause I've been over this so many times in my mind. And I have been interviewed several times at the Admiral Nimitz foundation, last April. And I repeated this story, perhaps, six or seven times. And thirty years ago, I mentioned the K.A.K.A. program in Pittsburgh. I was part of that program and I think I told this story pretty much the same.

JM: What happened to the sheet that he wrote out?

SW: We turned Ensign Sakamaki over to G-2, Fort Shafter, in the morning. We advised them that we have this prisoner, and we gave 'em our document. Unfortunately, I understand, it's disappeared.

JM: How did Fort Shafter react when you said you had a Japanese POW?

SW: I wasn't the one that told them about it.

JM: This is the first prisoner that was taken.

SW: Yes.

JM: How did everybody react to him? Were they mad at him? Were they curious, or feel bad for him, what?

SW: Well, I wouldn't say hostile other than trying to interrogate with a mission in mind. But with respect. And I might add that Ensign Sakamaki showed a great deal of courage. I'm not sure that I could have handled myself as well as he did, under the circumstances. I admired the man. I later got to know him and met him in Texas and we sort of became friends. I've written him before and he's answered me. We exchanged gifts in Texas and he's a gentleman.

JM: Did he remember you, when you met him?

SW: At first, not really, but after we communicated and retold our stories, some of it was coming back. He admitted that the first day or days were a haze in his mind. And he didn't remember clearly.

JM: Looking back, after, you know, fifty years, everything from the air raid to that night, to the next morning. What's the most memorable thing about all those events? What really sticks out?

SW: In retrospect, thinking, the whole war or just that one day?

JM: Just that one day.

SW: Well, I guess the experience interrogating Sakamaki. It was something that, new to me, and I -- it stays with me, even now. I remember it well.

JM: This tape is going to be part of a collection that historians will be looking at it and will work from, you know, a couple of months from now, maybe fifty years. What would you like to say about your experiences, or what happened that day for researchers and historians in the future, to realize what happened at the human level?

SW: That's a difficult question. I have to think about that. Well, we're fallible people. We make mistakes, whether the Japanese hadn't, were justified in attacking Pearl Harbor, United States, I'm not prepared to answer. I'm sure that there are many Japanese who feel that this situation was provoked and they have a reason for their logic. Naturally, I can't appreciate it. There's more I don't know.

JM: I want to thank you very much. See you over at the *ARIZONA* Memorial.

SW: Right.

END OF INTERVIEW