

#224 WILFRED TETLEY: SCHOFIELD BARRACKS

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here on December 8, 1991, at 2:40 p.m. We're in the Waikiki Park Hotel and I'm with Wilfred Tetley. Colonel Tetley was the commanding officer of Signal Company Aircraft Warning Service for the Department of Hawaii, Hawaiian Department, working out of Schofield Barracks. He was a Captain at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and his change at the time was thirty-one. We're producing this tape for the USS ARIZONA Memorial, and the National Park Services oral history program in conjunction with KHET-TV, Honolulu. And Mr. Tetley, I'd like to thank you very much for joining us here today and having a conversation about the interesting role that you had in the fateful events of that time. So thanks for joining us.

Wilfred Tetley (WT): It's my pleasure.

SH: Good. Could you describe for us a little, just a little bit of how you got into the Signal Corps? Was that an interest of yours, or an assignment that was made by the Army?

WT: No, I happened to be a cowboy man.

SH: Really?

WT: And I was then -- many times they cross trained our, the cowboy men an the infantry men with the technical branches. The Army, at that time, had essentially two directions to go, the technical, professional direction and the strictly military direction. But they had a very fine program, where they would cross train you, in a, in a technical specialty. And I had been a quasi-radio amateur for a long time. And I was pretty interested and pretty knowledgeable in radio technology. So I said, "Why don't you try cross training me in that," which they did.

And then, I was interviewed in the Presidio, San Francisco, and they asked me, "How would you like an assignment in Hawaii, in the radio field?"

And I said, "Yes, I think I'd like that."

So suddenly, got a wire from Washington D.C. to report to the commanding general, Hawaiian department, in the office of the Signal Corps, which I did.

SH: When was that?

WT: That was in the late fall, or early winter of 1939.

SH: What duties did you find awaited you when you came out to the Hawaiian Department?

WT: I beg your pardon?

SH: What duties awaited you when you came to the Hawaiian Department?

WT: Oh, that's very interesting because I was put on hold, as they say. And there are a lot of reasons for being put on hold, and I never discovered what the reasons were until much, much later. And if you are interested in the reasons, I'll give them to you.

SH: Well, why don't you elaborate a little bit on that?

WT: Well, it so happened that on, in December of 1939, the new electronic device called a -- not called a radar -- it was called an RDF. It was one of the acronyms that was used for that particular type of technology.

SH: Did that mean radio direction finder?

WT: Radio direction finder.

SH: Okay.

WT: And that, that came from the British, because the British wanted to keep the, the idea that this thing also picked up range. They wanted to keep it secret. And the term, direction finder, had been used for years and years. So that it really didn't violate any, anything new. So they refused to use the term radar. The term radar was made an official acronym of the U.S. government, oh, about, about three years later, when, when Admiral Stock issued a proclamation that the word radar would be part of the lexicon of the, both the, of the Navy, and then of course, the Army went along with it, so did the Air Force.

SH: So point of clarification, you were referring to what we know call radar?

WT: Radar was what we call it now, radar direction and ranging. But the principal of radar ranging goes way, way back. It's not, it was not a new, as we say in the, in the symposium, there was no mystery about it. It had been being done for a long time. BTU it was not being done with the enormous electrical power needed to pick up targets at a great distance. And it did not become practical until we started building metal aircraft. If we'd never used metal aircraft, the range of the radar would have been very, very limiting.

SH: Good pint.

WT: So we can thank Mr. Junk, Yonkers and the, the end of World War I for designing an all-metal modern plane.

SH: Sort of . . .

WT: Some of the, some of the roots of this go quite a way back.

SH: It's an interesting connection, that, well, I haven't heard made before. How was this, what were your duties on the radar and how is it integrated into the aircraft warning system for the Hawaiian Department?

WT: Well, to start with, we had no company. We just had me. So the Eleventh Signal Company, which was a standard signal company, vis-a-vis, the aircraft warning type signal company, was directed to send ten good men to me. And I must say one thing, they really sent, they really sent twenty-five good men, actually. And they were, they were very good because the, the commander of that signal company was a former artillery man, and my being a former cavalry man, we had a sort of a empathy towards each other. And he was very decent, very, very decent indeed. He sent me some of his best people.

SH: You referred to a standard company in aircraft warning . . .

WT: No, not a standard aircraft warning company, a standard signal company. A signal company with every infantry division, there is what is known as standard

signal company. And early on, they decided that the standard signal companies would not fit this new, this new technology, so they had to redesign this, the particular type of signal company, and fitted it in. It worked out quite well.

SH: So how did they redesign this signal company for radar . . .

WT: They, well, you see, the new, the new signal company needed plotters, and plotter tellers. And that type of people. And they also needed radio, radar technicians and the technology of the radar was pretty far advanced, so they needed pretty, pretty good specialists. So they needed much more training than you'd require in an ordinary field signal company.

SH: How many radar units were assigned to you, your company?

WT: Oh, now this is very interesting because when, when the department commander received his directive, they prescribed two radar sets for the island of Oahu, two. Of course, we ended up with, I think, twelve in the final analysis. And matter of fact, they ended up with far more than twelve when they, after the war they went into this overkill and they put radars on every hotel. But that's, that's not part of the story. But anyway, we started off with two. And when this aircraft warning board was formed, they immediately decided they needed many, many more than two. So they put them on hilltops, on mountain tops.

Now General, General Short arrived, I believe, in 1941, the beginning of 1941. And he did away with the old aircraft warning board, created a new one. And of course, they undid everything that the previous board had done. That's, that's natural. But they did make an enormous improvement, and in, in the disposition of the radar search. And the biggest improvement, however, was to combine with the information center a control center. So now we had, we have two concepts we have to talk about.

SH: Okay, now describe some of the overall chain of operations as it was supposed to work.

WT: Yes, well, the, originally, when it was, when they had more or less excluded the Air Corps from this, and they were, they felt excluded. There was a, there was a disappointment on their part. That's putting it mildly. But that was a disappointment on their part. So what the aircraft warning service was to do was to be plotted on a large board and a group of decision makers from the various branches of the service would look at it, and they decided what kind of a situation had occurred.

SH: This large board you're referring to . . .

WT: A large board, a large plotting board was . . .

SH: This is the information center that was . . .

WT: At the information center.

SH: Okay.

WT: Now, when that became an information and command center, the theory of command and control is involved. And so that the, the, the Air Force, the Army Air Force, at that time -- this is interesting too, because at this particular time, the Air Corps was undergoing a metamorphosis. General Arnold wanted to

redo, redo the structure of the Army Air Corps. And he ended up by getting a general staff of his own, and he got up like it was a change in name. Became the Army Air Force. You see, so the Army Air Force then was something to contend with because they had a, they had an organization that had a chief of staff and he had more or less equal rank on the, on the joint chiefs of staff. So he, he became very powerful, and that turned it around.

SH: Yeah.

WT: As soon as that happened, why, they became command and control centers with the Air Force running them. You see. Now we're going to lead up to what happened on December the seventh very quickly, so if there are any other questions you want to ask in the meantime, why . . .

SH: No, I think you're doing fine. As I understand it then, we've got a service, a system that's evolved now from simply a, a warning, from a warning system, to a warning system that would be an information center that would act as a distribution point for orders to units involved. Am I correctly summarizing things?

WT: Yes, we can sort of draw a diagram in our mind. At the top we have a, an environment with radar sets in it.

SH: Okay.

WT: And those radar sets, they know everything that's in the air space, let's say. They don't know who they belong to, but they know they're there. And one of our Achilles' heels was the fact that we could not identify those aircraft. We could see they were aircraft, but see they were, actually see there were objects in the air space. That then was plotted on a board. Then there was a very large liaison section that worked with the, worked with the bomber people, worked with the Navy, and it worked with everybody who had aircraft flying . . .

SH: Including . . .

WT: . . . coast guard . . .

SH: Including pursuit people . . .

WT: . . . coast guard, Navy. You see. So they would say, "Ah, that's my flight,, or that's my flight. And then we've got this one over here, nobody's owned it. So what are we going to do about it?"

Well, he would be an intruder, so we had to find out whether or not he was a friendly intruder or not. So the action then would be to go out and take a look at it. So the 14th Fighter Wing then would be, they would do the -- senior controller being from the 14th Fighter Wing, he then would pass it down to his pursuit officer and tell this pursuit officer to, to investigate that particular flight.

SH: I think that describes how it's supposed to have worked very clearly, had it ever been put fully in action before.

WT: Yes.

SH: I understand so.

WT: Absolutely, yes.

SH: And how often and when?

WT: And it was, I thought, very successful because the Navy attacked us. And of course, the Navy attacked us the standard way that Hawaii was supposed to be attacked. They would arrange a plan. So, I mean, it was, it was, we were sitting waiting for 'em. And anyway, we found, as soon as he scrambled off of his carriers and got to altitude, he was picked up and that was about eighty-something miles away. And he was technically shot down by the time he got within thirty miles or twenty-five miles of our coastline. And every senior officer in the department of Hawaii was personally, watched this exercise. I'm often glad it worked, but we were lucky in some respects, because none of the sets broke down. They all worked perfectly. The communications held up. Communication is very, very important. And of course, the identification problem didn't exist. That was, that was just a, it didn't exist, so we avoided that whole pitfall.

SH: Well, you described how it was supposed to have worked, and you described . . .

WT: How did it work on the seventh?

SH: Now, you . . .

WT: Now you have it.

SH: Okay, let's go into that.

WT: Prior, just prior to the seventh, on November the twenty-seventh, I received written instructions -- very unusual for me to get written instructions, because I, I was in the headquarters. Normally it was just told to me by some senior officer in the headquarters. And then, being commander of the signal company, I would then tell myself to do this, see. I was telling myself what to do. I was in a very enviable position in that respect.

Well anyway, I got this very interesting strange instruction that you will establish a time window between four o'clock in the morning and seven o'clock at night, and all radar would operate during that period, from now on.

SH: Where did you get that instruction from? Were you . . .

WT: I got that instruction, if I recall, I had to receipt for it. That was unusual too. I had to sign a receipt for these instructions but they wanted to be sure there was no mistake, which I found interesting at the time. Matter of fact, it was, it turned out to be a reason for it, which I'll go into, perhaps.

Well, anyway, so we put every sets, all our sets on that alert. The trouble was that the 14th wing did not get matching instructions. So what happened?

Tyler was sent down on the night of the seventh. He had absolutely no tools to work with because that part of the command and control system wasn't manned. So all he did was sit and watch these plots come up on the plotting board, because that portion, the, the information center portion was working, but the control, command and control section was, wasn't even manned. There was nobody there.

SH: So you're saying that, that, you're referring back then to the fact that the 14th pursuit wing had not gotten, to your knowledge, the . . .

WT: They were not . . .

SH: . . . corresponding orders . . .

WT: Normally, they would have been given matching, matching instructions. And so they would have had a, they would have had a crew in the information center, which would have made it a command and control center. Because that, that part of the crew was present, and they would have had some squadrons there. They'd probably have two or three squadrons on readiness, ready to go.

SH: We have to go and do . . .

--: Standby.

WT: Are we ready to go?

--: And Steve.

WT: We have to go back somewhat, because prior to the Thursday before the seventh, the, Admiral Bellinger had his PBYS sweep an area directly north of Oahu. And agenda, when he was planning the Japanese task force, was very much afraid that they'd be spotted north of Oahu when they got within seven hundred miles, by these PBYS. But what happened was that Thursday was the last day that these PBY sweeps would be made.

So the radar, the three radars north of Oahu -- the one at Opana, and the one at Haleiwa, and the one at Kaaawa, were all in operation. And the Japanese task force would have flown through three radar sets. And think of how that would have added up, added up on the plotting board. With three, three massive plots on the plotting board, and I'm sure that Kermit Tyler would have, would have been quite concerned about that.

SH: As it was, what was manned on that day?

WT: What was manned on that? Well, we have to go back again.

SH: Okay.

WT: We have to go back to the, the launch time, the launch, the Japanese launch time. If you read the record, you find out that the weather was awful, and the weather, weather delayed them a little bit. Delayed them as probably as much as twenty minutes. And if that hadn't happened, they would have taken off twenty minutes early and they would have flown into those radar when they were in their particular time window of 0400 to 0700. And that would have been a different story.

SH: Because the other two radio, radar stations had shut down . . .

WT: They had shut down.

SH: . . . and closed up.

WT: Actually, Opana had shut down and Elliot was, Elliot was new to the, to the operation, and he desperately wanted to learn. He was an eager beaver, as far as learning was concerned, so the night, the day before, he talked to Sergeant Murphy, who was the station NCO, and said, "I want some time on the scope."

So they agreed that he would be given time on the scope, after seven o'clock, after the time slot had expired, for about perhaps an hour, as long as it, as long as they wanted to, because they had to get the truck, get on the truck and go back to, get their breakfast, because the truck was going to bring another crew up. We always keep, kept people on the site, because it was a classified site. So there were always people on the site. So the truck that we heard about took, being a breakfast truck, was not a breakfast truck, it was bringing in relief, the relief crew in.

So they stayed on the set until the relief crew got there. He got about almost three-quarters of an hour scope time. And it was not easy to run the scope. That was not something you'd just sit down and do. It required quite a bit of standing because of the multitude of echoes that were everywhere. Echoes everywhere, and you have to know how to pick out of all this, this grass, as they called it, what was a target. And they got very, very skillful after a while, they really did, because the average person would go in and look at it and say, "My god, what's this?"

As a matter of fact, General Short, General Short went into one of the sets and he barely came out shaking his head and he couldn't figure out how on earth a target could be discerned with all that mess on the screen.

SH: That's an interesting insight.

WT: But you see, the operators learned to do this. Each site was different. You had to learn the site. First of all, they have to learn to take signals out of the grass. Then you have to learn how to take signals out of the grass at his particular site, because you see, the, the interference patterns at each site were different. So it took a while to break an operator, and you didn't like to switch operators from site to site, unless you could, unless you really had to do it. And we were fairly short-handed on these particular type of specialties, and we were glad to get Elliot, because Elliot came in from the Air Corps. And he came in, I think, about a month before this, so he was just finishing up his operator training.

SH: And what were your personal experiences on that day?

WT: Well, again, we have to go back. And the reason we have to go back is because I was scheduled on the Pacific coast, in the spring, in air defense exercise. And General Short, and General Marshall had arranged to exchange some people. And that was delayed and delayed and delayed because of the reorganization on the Pacific coast, because of this business with the, sending the interceptor commands to the Pacific coast and giving them the air defense responsibility. See, it put the air defense responsibility in the hands of the Air Force, where it really belonged. Where it really belonged, and took it out of the Army's hands. And of course, this took a little bit of, a little bit of changing. They had, they had to trade some aircraft warning companies to the Pacific coast. They had to set up their information centers, and then they had to set up command and control centers because they were, they then became an Air Force responsibility. So it was their division. So we had, this exercise,

where the Navy was going to attack the Pacific coast, was postponed and postponed and postponed. And of course, it was postponed until December.

And General Davidson, who was the commander of the 14th Wing, he went over probably for, I think, about two weeks. And the orders came that the two officers who had been ordered in the spring with, "Be on the *Lurline* on the fifth of December to sail."

And I got these orders, I think, on the third. So I turned the company over to Captain Tittle, who was very, very capable and who was second in command. And I had breakfast and I made the last round of all the disperse sites, and they had started to bring the aircraft in and put them on the aprons, at that time. Before that, they were all over the island. That was a wonderful setup. They, they had a fine setup for, for a fighter command. And of course, when General Davidson found out what had happened, he, he could hardly believe it. He really could hardly believe it. But by that time, BUR-LIN-ER and I -- Major BUR-LIN-ER was the anti-aircraft man -- and I were on the *Lurline*. And it was something funny on the *Lurline*. It, it didn't seem right. It wasn't the luxury cruiser to, one would expect.

So on the morning of the seventh, the cabin steward said, "Sir, no coffee this morning, we just -- Pearl Harbor has just been blown up."

I said, "Oh my god. Pearl Harbor's been blown up."

So we got something through the grapevine, that not only had Pearl Harbor been blown up, but they'd sunk a ship between us and Seattle. A Christmas tree ship. We called it, they called it the Christmas tree ship.

SH: The lumber schooner, [SS]GEORGE OLSEN.

WT: Yes.

SH: That's the one?

WT: Yes, that's right. So we spent the rest of that trip on, under fourth draft, in life, in life preservers.

SH: Let me clarify, you were going back for this exercise?

WT: I was going back for that exercise. BUR-LIN-ER and I going back to the exercise, as participants in an exercise on the Pacific coast.

SH: And the C.O. of the wing was already back?

WT: He was already back, and apparently he was the one that had the orders issued that we would get on the next boat and, and, and go.

So I ended up by going to Hamilton Field immediately I landed. And I was given the distinction of being a waist gunner on a B-17. And we ran out of fuel halfway across, just about.

SH: Back to Hawaii?

WT: Back, yes. Because they were running on marginal fuel, there was just marginal fuel to get them to Honolulu, you see. So we ran out of fuel and the shark repellent was given out. And all of the things that you do, everything

that was movable out of that B-17 was jettisoned. They, they were able to conserve enough weight, and they had enough fumes left in the tank that we landed at Hickam Field, and I landed back on the eleventh. So I really missed the action, so I'm not really a true survivor.

SH: Well, nevertheless you certainly had a very fascinating involvement in the, the rest of the time and quite an interesting insight that you were able to give us about those, that day.

WT: But wasn't ironic of it, they would run an exercise on the Pacific coast when we were on the verge of war. Don't you find that rather, rather ridiculous?

SH: Well, not only ironic, but tragic in the sense that it pulled the -- what you're saying is that it, because it pulled the commander of the wing away, do you feel that had implications in terms -- what if . . .

WT: They did not have their top anti-aircraft man, and they did not have their top -- I was the top radar man, and BUR-LIN-HER was the top anti-aircraft man.

SH: Plus, the commander of the fighter wing was out also.

WT: And the fighter, he had just, just returned. That was General Davidson.

SH: That's true. So he was there at the time.

WT: So he was there at the time. But it was a little late for him to do much, because the aircraft had already been boarded on the tarmac.

SH: We don't have very much time left, just a couple of minutes on this tape. So let me ask you to, I guess, just in summary, your rather unique perspective on the events of that day. Can you just then, you know, share with us what your feelings are about, just your feelings are about what went wrong with that, that attack?

WT: Actually, there was naivete on the part of the general staff, of the extent, the magnitude on our defense operation. I think they felt that an air defense operation consisted of having radars turned on. And they didn't realize that, that the technique we were using was radar controlled ground intercept procedure. It was brand new. We had inherited it from the RAF, and the RAF developed it, I think, in hill, way, way back, at the beginning, before the Battle of Britain. And it was tested and found to be very satisfactory at the Battle of Britain. And it involved an entirely new use of fighter aircraft. You used them differently. You kept them on the ground and you sent them, you sent them aloft when you had to. Prior to that time, they were aloft on a sort of continuous basis, which was, you see, there was a great change and there was certain mathematical calculations that were needed when you had aircraft aloft and you wanted to intercept another aircraft. You can see that's a little, that's a mathematical problem, in geometry. And they had to develop a simplified way of doing this, in order to, in order to get in on a short, on a short detection, when you didn't have much time to make that, make that calculation. So I think that was naivete on the part of the general staff in Hawaii, and they didn't realize the extent of an air defense operation, and they, through just a sheer administrative oversight, which later became a tragic error, they failed to give the fighter wing the same instructions that they gave me AWS.

SH: Well, with that very succinct and clear point, I think we'll wrap it up. I'd like to thank you very much for your time you've taken to talk with us today, Mr. Tetley. It was really a interesting and very insightful experience to be speaking with you, so thank you so much for your time, sir.

WT: Well, as I said, it's my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW