I am excited by the recent announcement that Outrigger Enterprises Group has reached an agreement to manage the Wyland Waikiki Hotel. Since I, along with many members of our 'ohana, have a long history with the property, it has a special meaning in my heart.

The historical connection actually goes back about 70 years to the mid-1930s, when Waikiki was a quiet bedroom community mostly populated by office workers who commuted to downtown Honolulu. My family—Roy and Estelle Kelley, my sisters Jean and Pat, and I—lived on Kuhio Avenue about two blocks from what is now the site of the Wyland Waikiki Hotel. It was a sleepy street in those days because it dead-ended about a hundred yards beyond Seaside Avenue.

Roy and Estelle became acquainted with Charles S. Marek, who owned and operated some small wood-framed apartments where the Wyland Waikiki Hotel now stands. Charles and Roy, besides being in the business of renting apartments, were both part-time artists, and they became fast friends.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, we were helplessly witnessing the bombing of Pearl Harbor from the third-floor lanai of our home, when we heard a high-pitched whine. A second later, there was a huge explosion about a block away in the direction of a modest apartment building my parents owned, close to Charles Marek’s properties.

“They hit my building!” shouted a panicked Roy, as he turned to run down Kuhio Avenue and inspect the damage or assist with casualties.

We never did find out whether the explosion was caused by an errant Japanese bomb or a U.S. antiaircraft shell that fell back to earth after failing to explode in the air. Whatever it was, it hit almost in the middle of the intersection of Lewers Street and Kuhio Avenue, leaving a substantial crater. Shrapnel riddled the houses all around, including the Marek apartments, but fortunately, no one was injured.

After World War II ended, Roy and Estelle started building hotels. Charles continued to rent his apartments but spent more and more time painting landscapes and seascapes and selling his art to supplement his income.

In the late 1960s, with the number of visitors to Hawaii exceeding a million a year and rising rapidly, there was an urgent need to add more hotel rooms in Waikiki. Roy Kelley, Charles Marek, and architect Ed Bauer struck a deal to build an economy hotel, the Waikiki Surf, on the site of the Marek apartments. The Mareks would contribute the land, Ed Bauer would contribute the plans, and Outrigger (then known as Hotel Operating Co. of Hawaii, Ltd.), would finance the project and manage it after completion. Roy insisted that every second unit in the building have a kitchenette, so the building could be turned back to apartment use, in case what he saw as perhaps just a temporary boom in tourist arrivals did not last.

With everyone so busy with other projects, Guy Marshall, a former Internal Revenue Service worker and a friend of Roy’s, and I were conscripted to supervise the General Contractor, Nordic Construction. I was still practicing medicine at the time, so I had to work around my duties at Queen’s Hospital. Both Guy and I were totally green when it came to construction, but we bumbled through, learned a lot, and the project was completed pretty much on time and on budget.

About the same time, our company acquired three residential lots one block mauka of the Waikiki Surf, and Guy and I were also assigned the task of drawing up the plans for the Waikiki Surf East Hotel. All units in the building would have kitchenettes because Roy was sure a recession would come, and the units would have to be rented on a monthly basis. The plans Guy and I drew up were hardly elegant, but they qualified for a building permit. Both projects were completed about 1970.

After that, the two buildings ran very successfully as economy hotels under the Outrigger flag. Mildred Courtney served as Manager for a number of years. Canadian visitors, who typically spent several weeks or even a month in Waikiki during the winter, particularly liked the kitchenette units.

In 1989, both hotels were sold to investors from Japan, but Outrigger Hotels & Resorts continued to operate them, first branded as Outrigger and later, as OHANA. Under Hotel Manager Bev Fidel, they consistently led their Waikiki peer properties in revenue per available room (RevPAR).

In 2005, the properties were sold to the current owner, who spent millions of dollars to convert them into a single boutique hotel with two towers, showcasing the beautiful marine-life artistry of Wyland. When it reopens later this month, it will be a winner!

So that is the perhaps little-known history of the Wyland Waikiki Hotel. It all started with a friendship formed about seven decades ago, survived the attack on Pearl Harbor, and in the process, involved a couple of architects, an artist, a tax man, and a physician. I am the only surviving member of that team, and I am glad that I am here to share the tale.