How Things Have Changed
By Dr. Richard Kelley

The shift from Chairman to Chairman Emeritus a couple of weeks ago was a major milestone in my life. Not surprisingly, it has brought forth hundreds of thoughts and memories. All week, my mind has been processing images of scenes and events that go back as far as I can remember. As I go through that gigantic cerebral photo album, the one thing that stands out is the unbelievable degree to which the world, Hawai‘i and our company have changed during my relatively short time (77 years) on earth.

So, instead of writing about deficits, supercommittees and taxes this week, I’d like to share a few of those mental snapshots with you. Some of these stories I have told before, but I think they are worth retelling. Others are brand new tales … even a couple of confessions. This week’s installment covers the 1930s and 1940s. I’ll bring back memories from other periods in future editions of Saturday Briefing.

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Growing up in Hawai‘i before World War II was like being born in paradise; at least that’s the way I remember it. The weather was warm but not hot. The trade winds almost always cooled homes and offices; no air conditioning was needed. You could take a swim or surf in the ocean almost any day of the year. Today’s busy Kalākaua Avenue was then a quiet street through Waikīkī. In many places the sidewalks were narrow, leaving room for a planting strip next to the curb. Usually neglected, that strip turned into brown powder during the hot summer months, and I took boyish delight stomping barefoot along the strip, watching and feeling the dirt squirt up between my toes. I had not a care in the world.

We lived in a small, wood-frame house on the Diamond Head-makai (southwest) corner of Seaside and Kuhio. An office building and shopping center, whose tenants include the Zanzabar [that’s how they spell it] Nightclub featuring “Sinsual Fridays,” now occupies the site.

Going towards Diamond Head from that intersection, Kuhio Avenue was not paved and terminated at a fence.
perhaps 100 yards away. On the other side of the fence were the support facilities (laundry, repair shops, boilers, employee housing, etc.) for the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, which had opened in 1929.

About 1939, my parents, Roy and Estelle, built a new house at 2270 Kuhio Avenue, near that fence. Roy’s architectural offices were on the ground floor, and we all lived upstairs. We watched the attack on Pearl Harbor from the third floor lanai of that house. The building still stands today, occupied by a number of commercial activities, including a Vietnamese restaurant and some “adult” establishments.

In the late 1930s, the clouds of war were gathering. In Europe, Adolph Hitler was delivering demagogic speeches to cheering crowds in Germany. After a series of aggressive military “incidents” that began with its invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Japan invaded China proper in 1937; Germany gobbled up Austria and began dismembering Czechoslovakia in 1938. The war in Europe broke out the next year when Germany invaded Poland; it would conquer virtually the entire continent before being defeated, along with its ally Japan, in 1945. Honolulu radio stations KGMB (AM 590) and KGU (AM 760) delivered some international news picked up from short wave broadcasts. For more information, my parents reserved seats at the Waikiki Theater every week to see the Movietone News, which included film clips and mini-documentaries of the horrors being perpetrated across the Atlantic and Pacific.

Going to the Waikiki Theater, completed in 1936, was an experience that is hard to imagine today. Fountains in the patio greeted guests on arrival. Polished metal plates embedded around the fountain contained the engraved signatures of movie stars. Usherettes dressed in “formal Hawaiian” — white slacks, white shirt, red sash and a red silk lei — would escort us to our spacious seats. The interior walls of the theater were lined with detailed, full-sized replicas of coconut palms, banana plants and other tropical foliage. A great rainbow, which arched over the proscenium, was bathed in soft, colored lights whose hues gradually changed. We tried to arrive at the theater early so we could listen to Edwin Sawtelle play the full-sized Robert-Morton pipe organ, which had been rebuilt and moved there from the Hawaii Theater in downtown Honolulu. As Sawtelle’s fingers glided over the keys, strong, deep sounds filled the theater while hidden equipment projected images of twinkling stars and drifting clouds across the dark blue arched ceiling. I can still visualize the clouds and almost feel the vibrations today.
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Roy Kelley had done most of the design work on the Waikiki Theater while working for architect C.W. Dickey. He loved to point out the details to his wide-eyed children when we went there. “Deathless architecture,” he would exclaim!

Roy passed on in 1996, and I am certain his heart would have broken if he had lived long enough to see the Waikiki Theater demolished in 2005 to make way for “progress.”

Paradise came to a screeching halt and there were drastic changes on December 7, 1941, and in the months that followed. While the fires were still burning at Pearl Harbor and around Honolulu following the Japanese attack, on that afternoon, over the objections of Hawai‘i Governor Joseph Poindexter, martial law was imposed and General Walter C. Short declared he was the military governor of Hawai‘i. The writ of habeas corpus was suspended, meaning the military could hold anyone in prison for renewable 45-day periods.

A day or so later, the two 14-inch coastal artillery guns at Battery Randolph at Fort DeRussy, Waikiki, were fired in unison. Flames and smoke erupted from the guns’ muzzles followed by a percussion wave that shook the plaster off the walls and ceilings of the neighboring YWCA cottages and Edgewater Beach apartments.

I remember entering one of the damaged apartments later and seeing the exposed lath on the ceilings and walls, chunks of plaster on the floors and a bare light bulb hanging by a wire from the ceiling. The apartments stood empty for the next four or five years, giving Roy Kelley an opportunity to buy the land about 1949 and start planning for the construction of the Reef Hotel from 1952 to 1955.

Throughout the war, Hawai‘i was a different place. Although in retrospect the imposition of martial law was probably unconstitutional, we had to live with it for three years. Under threat of arrest, we painted our windows black to obey curfew rules. Even our light bulbs were painted black, leaving only a clear spot at the end, which gave out a glimmer of light, decreasing the chance that you would run into the furniture while walking around the house at night. We were issued gas masks and received mandatory immunizations for typhoid, smallpox, etc.

Less than 24 hours after the attack, about 2 a.m. on Monday, December 8, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers abruptly took over Punahou School, where I was a student. According to the school’s history (www.punahou.edu), “Unaware of the engineers’ emergency authority, night watchman Dan Peres initially refused them access to the school buildings. When negotiations for the building keys bogged down, the engineers broke a pane of glass in the Cooke library door and admitted themselves.” By daylight, “they had some rotary ditch diggers in front of Alexander Hall, cutting zigzag trenches. Of course, they didn’t ask previously about the location of the power lines, sewer lines or water lines. They tore those up and sat there for almost a week without water, lights and sewage.”

The hedges of Night-Blooming Cereus surrounding the campus, which had been planted by the wife of missionary Hiram Bingham in 1836, were brutally hacked back, removed and replaced by barbed wire. Bulldozers, trucks and other heavy equipment further tore up the school grounds. Punahou students were sent to various buildings on the University of Hawai‘i campus until our own campus was returned to civilian use in 1945.

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More coils of barbed concertina wire were installed at beaches all around O'ahu, including Waikīkī. Fort Ruger, at the foot of Diamond Head, was also surrounded by barbed wire, and guards with loaded firearms manned the gates. In the area known today as Ft. Ruger Park and some of the adjacent land now covered by houses, the army had a live-fire training camp where troops would scale walls in full battle gear and slither under strings of barbed wire while machine gun bullets zipped just overhead.

Additional coastal artillery guns were installed at Black Point and the slopes of Diamond Head. Concrete “pill boxes” with machine guns were installed at beach level below. Periodic test firings really shook up the neighborhood!

Not wishing to be outdone, I decided to make my own “coastal artillery” out of a piece of galvanized quarter-inch pipe for the cannon and “artillery shells” I made out of cast lead. Mixing various chemicals with gunpowder removed from live ammunition I found at the Fort Ruger training camp, I could actually send a bullet out into the ocean! Today I know I was lucky not to have killed myself in the process.

As American forces began their island-hopping strategy, throwing the Japanese back out of the western Pacific islands they had occupied, thousands of troops were staged on O'ahu. MPs (Military Police) were all over the place and were not hesitant to use their night sticks to keep young soldiers, sailors and marines in line, particularly on Hotel Street in downtown Honolulu where government-regulated brothels were doing a thriving business (“three dollars for three minutes”).

We always knew when the next invasion of a Western Pacific island was imminent because the number of troops on O'ahu would rise even more, and the waters off Waikīkī would be filled with all sorts of ships as far as the eye could see.

After the war ended, Hawai'i quickly reverted to a sleepy string of islands in the middle of the Pacific. The neighbor islands were actually losing population. As I approached high school graduation, I realized that after college I could get a job with one of the “Big Five” agricultural firms, get a professional degree – doctor or lawyer – or move to the mainland. Since I was interested in science (and homemade cannons!), I decided to aim for medical school so I could return to Hawai'i.

In the meantime, I did what I could to help my father build the five-story walk-up Islander Hotel on Seaside Avenue next to our former house. When it opened, my sisters Jean and Pat joined me as front desk clerks who also served pineapple juice to our guests relaxing on the lawn under the kiawe trees next door.

I don't think any of us had even the remotest thought that the Islander Hotel would be the beginning of what is now Outrigger Enterprises Group with operations in far-flung locations encompassing more than half the globe. Nor could I envision that 64 years later, I would be Chairman Emeritus. It's been an incredible journey, and I'll tell you more tales at another time.

Aloha!