Eyewitness to history: 
75th anniversary recollections of Pearl Harbor 

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week, some of the few remaining survivors of the attack on Pearl Harbor are gathering on O'ahu with military and community leaders to commemorate the tragic events that took place 75 years ago. There will be services and tears as we remember and relive that terrifying day. Following is my very personal recollection of December 7, 1941, and its aftermath. These are some of my earliest memories, from just three weeks before my eighth birthday.

For the vast majority of those who read what follows, born after 1941, I hope this article will provide a glimpse into the life of those then living in Hawai'i and the confusing days that followed the attack. Perhaps recalling what occurred at Pearl Harbor three-quarters of a century ago will give us all a little more perspective on the events of September 11, 2001.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I was living with my parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, and sisters Jean and Pat in a small house on Kūhiō Avenue in Waikīkī. The building is still standing, right next to the former OHANA Surf Hotel, a tribute to my father's talents in architecture and construction.

That morning, my parents were looking forward to having breakfast with a young Navy officer, Commander John Henry Shultz, and his wife Martha. My mother prepared her famous Sunday waffles while my father carted my sisters and me off in the family car to Sunday School at St. Clement's Church in Manoa.

As we left home, looking toward Pearl Harbor, we noticed that the military appeared to be conducting maneuvers. Distant rumbles and occasional puffs of smoke in the sky were not unusual in those days.

We were dropped at the curb outside St. Clement's about 8 a.m. When we walked into the parish house, I distinctly remember there were no other children there. We were greeted by a worried lady, the lone Sunday school teacher, who asked, “What are you doing here? Don't you know there's a war on?”

“What's a war?” I asked.

It's hard to believe today, but in the pre-television era of 1941, I was not the only 7-year-old who did not know what a war was.
We soon found out.

On his way back home, my father must have turned on the radio and heard Webly Edwards’ now famous announcement, “This is no exercise! This is the real McCoy!” My father was back at the church in a flash. He scooped us into the car, and we went zooming down McCully, heading home. There we found that Commander Shultz had gone off to war in his dress whites. Despite the danger, curiosity got the best of us, and we went up to the third-floor lanai to see what was going on.

I can distinctly remember looking toward Pearl Harbor and seeing a huge black cloud rising from the ground. Aircraft were circling and diving into the cloud. Black puffs from exploding anti-aircraft shells filled the sky and louder rumbles told us that something really big was happening.

Then we heard a high-pitched whine for about a second, followed by a deafening roar as Kūhiō Avenue blew up in a cloud of gray and white smoke about a block away, and everything around shook. “My God, they got my building!” exclaimed my father, thinking there had been a direct hit on his three-story apartment building at the corner of Royal Hawaiian and Kūhiō avenues.

A jagged piece of shrapnel fell at our feet, and I still remember how warm it felt when I picked it up. Actually, the explosion was at the corner of Lewers and Kūhiō. The homes on all sides of the intersection were riddled with shrapnel, but miraculously, no one was hurt.

The explosion was probably not from a Japanese bomb. Most likely it was caused by one of our own anti-aircraft shells. In the panic of the morning, many shells were fired skyward without being properly set to explode in the air. Gravity returned them to earth all over O’ahu. Another one hit the corner of McCully and King streets, destroying the shops there, just after we had passed it on the way home from St. Clement’s.

At this point, curiosity turned to panic, and we scrambled for the protection of the half basement below the three-story wooden apartments my parents had developed across Kūhiō Avenue, where the Waikiki Trade Center now stands. We huddled between the suitcases and steamer trunks, not knowing what was next. My mother made several quick trips across the street to gather emergency supplies like soup and bandages.

We were relieved when night fell and there was no sign of further activity. However, with limited news sources, most of the civilian population had no real appreciation of what was going on at Pearl Harbor or in the civilian hospitals trying to cope with the heavy casualties. Many were sure that an invasion by Japanese ground troops would soon follow. We had nowhere to go.

That evening we had one more moment of fright. Apparently a formation of U.S. aircraft, en route from the mainland since early morning, finally arrived and, in spite of radio calls ahead, was greeted by a panicky fusillade of tracers and anti-aircraft shells. We kids were called from the basement to watch, and to this day, I have never seen such an aerial display. Sadly, we downed our own aircraft.

Again the night turned still and we settled down to try to sleep, not knowing what the next day would bring. Perhaps the expected invasion would come tomorrow.

We kids were thought to be fast asleep when five-year-old Jean sat bolt upright exclaiming, “I smell whiskey!” She certainly did. My mother and perhaps Martha Shultz, emotionally drained from the extraordinary events of the day, had broken into the “medicinal” supplies that had been brought over from across the street.

A couple of days later, Commander Shultz, who never had his waffles, came back still dressed in his whites, now covered with dirt, grease and blood.

I have little memory of the days that immediately followed. The perspective of a 7-year-old is limited, but I do remember being told there would be no Christmas trees that year. Instead, we decorated the branches of an ironwood tree.

Martial law was declared almost immediately, and all the freedoms we take for granted today were cancelled. Personal firearms were confiscated. Most families dug ditches for air raid shelters in their back yards. The Army Corps of Engineers took over Punahou School, and the lovely night-blooming cereus hedge that surrounded the campus was slashed back and replaced with barbed wire. The engineers made the classrooms their headquarters for the duration of the war.

Aside from the fear of another attack or even an invasion, there was a worry about being able to supply the Islands with basic necessities.
A call went out for as many women and children as possible to leave Hawai‘i, and my mother was relieved that we were able to book a flight in early February. My young mind was not happy with this because it meant I was not eligible to receive one of the gas masks issued to the civilian population. My friends paraded up and down Kūhiō Avenue with theirs, leaving me behind for lack of equipment.

Space on the flight out was precious. We left my father at the dock (that’s right; the old Pan Am Clippers were seaplanes, and you boarded from a dock). Architect Val Ossipoff was also left standing there, having entrusted one of his daughters to my mother. The plane was loaded beyond capacity, and it took several attempts to break free of the water and get airborne. There were not enough seats for every soul on board, for I also remember spending most of the time sleeping on the floor between the seats. The trip to Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay took 19-1/2 hours, and when we landed, we had to go through immigration before we could leave the plane!

When the men and women of the armed forces returned to civilian life, their experiences during World War II and the decade of economic depression and hard times that had preceded the war indeed made them a special generation. They became the leaders of the nation and led us through several other conflicts and into a period of unprecedented prosperity in the decades that followed. How many additional great leaders were lost during the war and never had a chance to achieve their potential?

Each year, fewer and fewer of that generation are here to answer the call on the morning of December 7. I hope the nation will not forget the sacrifices made by so many, and that it all started 75 years ago right here on O‘ahu one Sunday morning in 1941.