Remembering Pearl Harbor’s 75th Anniversary

By Dr. Richard Kelley

During the next two weeks in Hawai‘i, there will be an unbelievable number of activities, ceremonies, parades and memorial services as citizens, politicians, military personnel and visitors gather on O‘ahu to mark the 75th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Three quarters of a century after December 7, 1941, which U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt described as “a date which will live in infamy,” there are not that many people in Hawai‘i or anywhere else who can personally recall the events of that Sunday morning. However, my sister Jean Rolles and I are lucky to be among the few still alive who actually witnessed the black smoke billowing over Pearl Harbor, the attacking planes in the air and the thunder-like sounds as bombs fell and anti-aircraft shells exploded not only in and around Pearl Harbor but all over the island of O‘ahu as well.

Jean’s memories of that morning can be found in this issue of Saturday Briefing in a separate article on page 8. I’ll add my recollections to next week’s edition.

The dwindling number of living witnesses to the Pearl Harbor attack is reflected in the fact that the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association was formally disbanded in 2001. As the years pass, there are fewer and fewer mentions of Pearl Harbor in obituaries and memorial tributes.

The Honolulu Star-Advertiser recently published the obituary of Dr. Yutaka Yoshida, who passed on in September at the age of 104. The son of Japanese immigrants, he was a member of the Honolulu Police Department on December 7, 1941, and faced the wrenching task of accompanying FBI agents as they rounded up prominent members of Hawai‘i’s Japanese community. He later served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the famed Japanese-American unit – the Army’s most-decorated unit ever in terms of size and length of service – that fought German troops in Italy and France and later helped liberate part of the infamous Dachau concentration camp complex.

Another amazing story is that of Dr. Rodney T. West. Born in Wailuku, Maui, on December 23, 1910, he attended Pearl Harbor >> 2
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Punahou School on O'ahu. We became friends in the 1960s when he and I were both practicing medicine in Honolulu. Dr. West worked in obstetrics and gynecology at the Straub Clinic where I would occasionally fill in for the lab director when he was away on vacation.

Dr. West joined the Navy Reserve in January 1940. In his book, Honolulu Prepares for Japan's Attack, he described a little-known aspect of the time leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack — private sector preparations that were undertaken in Hawai'i as it became increasingly clear that war was on the horizon.

In the year preceding the attack, Dr. West was one of the organizers who trained the civilian population, particularly those in the health care profession, to be ready for the war that some people felt was becoming inevitable. Japan had invaded China, committing atrocities, such as the 1937 "Rape of Nanking," that were widely reported and condemned. It had also allied itself with Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy. The U.S. response to Japanese aggression was to forbid the export of scrap metals, oil and gasoline, among other punitive steps calculated to hit the Japanese economy.

As described in Dr. West's book, physicians and other health care workers in Hawai'i began storing bandages, medicines and other essential supplies. If an attack did come, everyone had an assignment. In Dr. West's account, these preparations were a constant uphill battle, but they proved extremely helpful following the attack, when medical personnel were able to respond quickly and effectively. I recommend his book to anyone interested in the history of Hawai'i and the Pacific.

Dr. West was always active in events commemorating the attack. Ten years ago at age 96, on the 65th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, he greeted families and survivors at the Arizona Memorial service. Sadly he passed away in 2008 at age 98.

This year, from December 1 through December 10, there will be many more activities, including memorial ceremonies and parades. Also included will be a performance by TV star and ardent supporter of servicemen and veterans Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band on Waikiki Beach followed by a screening of the memorable film From Here to Eternity. Country-western legend Garth Brooks will wrap up the activities with a performance at Blaisdell Arena on December 10. Net proceeds will benefit four organizations that support the mission of Pearl Harbor and WWII Pacific Theater Parks.

For details on all official Pearl Harbor 75th Anniversary events, visit https://pearlharbor75thanniversary.com/media/.
Pearl Harbor through the eyes of a 6-year-old

By Jean Rolles

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, I was just six years old, but I have some vivid memories of that day. The morning started with my father, Roy Kelley, driving us children to St. Clement’s Church for Sunday school classes. My parents had invited Navy Captain John Shultz and his wife for breakfast and took us to church early so they could enjoy a quiet breakfast together. As we drove along the Ala Wai Canal, I looked toward Punchbowl and saw small, puffy black clouds and asked my father what they were. "Maneuvers," he answered. We were so used to military exercises around the island that we really didn't question anything.

In Sunday school, I had been given the task of coloring Joseph’s "many-colored coat," and I had arranged all my crayons in a special order and was dutifully filling in lines with various colors. The next thing I knew, my father came racing into the church courtyard in our car, rushed inside and literally grabbed me and threw me in the car along with my brother Richard and my sister Pat. I was very upset because I had not finished my coloring assignment and did not want to leave!

With my father at the wheel of our car, we raced down McCully Street toward Waikiki. We had just passed the McCully Chop Suey House at King Street when a bomb (in retrospect, probably an unexploded American anti-aircraft shell that had missed its target and fallen back to earth) landed a short distance behind us. Farther down McCully Street we passed the Japanese School and moments afterwards a bomb landed there too. After we reached our home, near Seaside and Kūhiō avenues, another bomb hit, this one a block away. That all made a big impression on my memory bank!

Other memories of that week include watching the windows in our house being covered up with blackout material and sleeping in the basement for two weeks because we thought more bombs might be on the way. There were no Christmas trees that year, but we improvised by putting up a large branch from an ironwood tree and decorating it with ornaments. We thought it was the best Christmas tree we ever had!

One recent addition to these memories came when I was flying to Okinawa for an East-West Center meeting last year and the fellow across the aisle on the plane said to me, "My uncle lived a very long life because he had breakfast at your house that day!" That was Ed Shultz and his uncle was John Shultz, the Navy captain who had breakfast with my parents on December 7th and was thus not at Pearl Harbor when the bombing began!

And "now you know the rest of the story."