

Attack on Pearl Harbour

Account by witness James Wallace Donald, aged 17 at the time.

On December 7th 1941 I was living with my mother at 56 Wylie Street, a few miles above Honolulu in Nuuanu Valley. 56 Wylie Street was a boarding compound with several small cottages and a main house that included the dining room for the compound and a large sitting room where all the residents could gather together. My mother and I lived in one of the small cottages.

Sunday morning I was sound asleep when I heard loud explosions that woke me up. I thought to myself that if this were England those explosions would be real warfare, but I decided it must be military manoeuvres that we had been hearing for about a month from ships offshore. I looked at a clock by my bed that said 8.00am. Somewhat later my mother came running into my bedroom. "The Japanese are bombing Pearl Harbor!" she cried. "Nonsense, I said, it's only military manoeuvres." Then there was a loud screeching sound and an explosion. I ran into our small living room and turned on the radio. The announcer was crying in a loud, trembling voice "The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor!" Later I discovered the loud explosion was an American anti-aircraft that missed the kitchen window of the main house by about 10 feet and dug a hole in the grounds.

I ran out to the garden in front of our cottage and looked up. Soon a Japanese fighter plane flew overhead low enough for me to be able to see the pilot's head turning and looking at the ground as he flew straight down the valley toward Fort Armstrong guarding Honolulu harbor. As he flew up and over the fort, anti-aircraft shells exploded around him, none hitting him as he flew out to sea. Several shells landed in our neighborhood, exploding on contact. Apparently the anti-aircraft guns were being handled by many men who had not been trained to operate them. They did not set the shells to go off in the air. Consequently our neighborhood suffered damage from our own troops. Later that day our elderly Japanese yardman showed up crying "Oh! I so sorry. I so sorry!" I told him not to worry. Nobody would hurt him.

A woman living in one of the cottages drove out to the heights overlooking Pearl Harbor. She was a journalist. When she returned later in the day she said the whole Pacific fleet was lying on the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

My mother told me to get dressed to go to church in St. Andrews Episcopal Cathedral. I told her we couldn't go, there was a war going on. Planes were flying over our house. She said she would call Father Bray, a canon of St. Andrews, who was taking the 10am service that Sunday morning. She called him as he was sitting in his office at St. Andrews. She asked him if we should go to church that morning. Surprised, he said sharply of course we should go to church. She said nothing about the Japanese, hung up and told me that Father Bray said of course we should go to church and I was to get dressed for church at once. Apparently in his secluded office he had no idea what was going on. Scared, I started to get dressed when the announcer on the radio said the streets were closed to anything but authorised traffic. With vast relief I cried out to my mother that the military governor had ordered us off the streets and we could NOT go to church. Very well, she said, we would go to the main house and have breakfast.

Planes kept flying over our house until about 10.30am... That morning I drank my first cup of coffee.

That afternoon I was scheduled to go with friends to a picnic on the north shore. Later that week we learned that the young pilot who planned to join us for the picnic had been killed, gunned down by a Japanese aircraft as he was running to get his plane.

Later that week I dug an underground shelter about 3 feet wide and six feet deep and 8 feet long that we could run into if the Japanese came back. They never did but a month later I heard machine gun fire in the nearby mountains--never did learn what that was about! And about that time a Japanese submarine surfaced offshore near the town of Lihue, Kauai, and shelled the cane fields between Lihue and the sea. My sister's house was in those cane fields (her husband worked for the plantation) and was the only visible target in the area. The shells fell around the house but fortunately didn't hit anything. Shortly US planes flew up and the submarine submerged and disappeared.

That is my report on Pearl Harbor Dec 1941

James Wallace Donald