

## December 7, 1941—The Day the Honolulu Fire Department Went to War<sup>1</sup>

John E. Bowen

The telephone from the Honolulu Fire Department's (HFD) alarm bureau rang in the quarters of Engine Company 6\* in Kalihi at 0805 on Sunday, December 7, 1941, just as it had so many times before in this busy station. Lieutenant Frederick Kealoha answered and sounded the house gong. Despite the apparent normality of this routine, this was not just another alarm—Engine 6 was going to war. One firefighter would never return; others would be seriously wounded. The Japanese had unleashed their infamous attack ten minutes earlier upon Pearl Harbor, Hickam Field and other military bases on Oahu.<sup>2</sup>

Richard L. Young, then a rookie of eight months who was later to serve for three years as HFD chief, describe his company's summons to battle: "My shift had just reported to work at 0800. While standing in the back of the engine house, Lt. Kealoha and the five of us on duty that morning noticed anti-aircraft guns in action over Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field. And, of course, we had been following the situation in Washington and the international tension that had built up but we had never seen that type of activity before. So much concentrated anti-aircraft artillery going at one time and we suspected that something had happened at Pearl. We were just standing by for the signal

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\* A "company", in fire department terminology, is defined as a single specialized operational unit, consisting of one or two pieces of apparatus and the personnel who man this (these) vehicle(s). A company is designated according to its function: e.g., engine company (to supply water); ladder company (ventilation and salvage); rescue company, etc. The term "company" is often deleted in everyday usage so Engine Company 6 and Ladder Company 7, for example, will be referred to as simply Engine 6 and Ladder 7. All of Honolulu's engine companies in 1941 were "two piece companies", composed of a pumper (or engine) and a hosewagon (or simply wagon). Thus, Engine Company 6 consisted of Pumper 6 and Hosewagon 6. A single vehicle serves the purposes of both pumper and wagon today.

Also, a company is quartered in a station bearing the same number. Engine 1 responds from Station 1; Engine 7 and Ladder 7 both are quartered in Station 7.

to respond.” And that signal came very soon for Engine 6, the first-due Honolulu company at Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field under a mutual aid pact with the military fire departments.

Young continued, “We (HFD) assisted the military departments in any of their emergencies because of the mutual aid pact. At that time it was a simple instrument but it has since been elaborated upon. Whenever the military needed help, the City would send whatever help they had available within the perimeter of the military establishment, and vice versa for the military.”

Military training exercises were routine on Oahu in late 1941 because of the world political situation. The anti-aircraft training ammunition generated small puffs of white smoke in the sky, a common sight in those days. But, suddenly, the frightening reality dawned upon Honolulu’s firefighters on that bright Sabbath morning: the rounds that they were watching produced black smoke—the shells being fired were *not* training rounds. It was live ammunition. Oahu was being attacked.

Young continued, saying that “The alarm telephone did ring and we knew in which direction we were headed.” Engines 4 and 6 were initially dispatched to Hickam Field.

An off-duty Honolulu firefighter, Anthony Lopez, was enroute to church that morning. Suddenly he saw a low-flying plane with the rising sun insignia on the wings. Training exercises were so commonplace over Honolulu, though, that Lopez (now deputy chief of the HFD) assumed the planes to be part of another practice exercise, albeit a very realistic one. Explosions soon began to shake the church from time to time, but these too were attributed to the realism of the training drills. Lopez said that, “Twenty or thirty minutes later I heard sirens as the fire apparatus passed the church. Shortly afterward, more engines came by so I knew that a second alarm had been sounded. When I went outside I saw a huge column of black smoke from the vicinity of Pearl Harbor. The possibility of an enemy attack didn’t enter my mind. Instead, I figured that a fuel storage tank at Pearl had ignited.”

Knowing that a large fire would mean his recall to duty, Lopez sprinted to his car, turned the radio on, and headed home to get his turnout gear.\* On the way, a disc jockey announced that Oahu had been attacked by an enemy country. “Only then did I remember the plane with the red balls on the wings, and make the connection between it and the explosions at Pearl Harbor”, Lopez added.

It was about a 12-minute response for Engine 6 to Hickam Field so Young, Harry Tuck Lee Pang and Bill Tam, riding the wagon’s rear step, had plenty of time to contemplate what they were getting into. Young continued: “As we responded over winding Moanalua Road and Puuloa Road, we saw towering columns of black smoke with flames leaping hundreds of feet into the sky. The anti-aircraft firing had diminished considerably, causing us to speculate that

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\* *A firefighter’s turnout, or running, gear consists of helmet, rubber boots and rubber-lined canvas coat.*

the attack may be over. The narrow, two-lane roads were almost impassable because crowds of people, many of them apparently on their way to church, had stopped their cars to watch the inferno of death and destruction spread panoramically before their eyes. These people were just staring skyward, searching expectantly for some sign that the American forces were retaliating and, at the same time, fearing another wave of enemy planes. The cars had been parked all over the place, with no regard for other vehicles that might have to pass by. This really slowed our response to Hickam—but perhaps that saved some of our lives in the long run.”

When Engine 6 reached the main gate to Hickam Field on Kamehameha Highway, the bombing, strafing and anti-aircraft fire had ceased but there were no further doubts in the firefighters’ minds that the United States had been attacked. The first wave of Japanese planes had struck Hickam and every bomb and machine gun bullet seemed to have found its target. Many military men had been fatally wounded before they even had a chance to strike back. Dead, dying and wounded bodies lay everywhere. A multi-story 4000-man concrete barracks on the right side of the main street was bombed and burning fiercely. The underground gas main at the base’s entrance had been hit and was spewing flame dozens of feet into the air. Across the road, aircraft hangars and a quarter-mile long row of planes parked outside the hangars were also in flames. Ironically, the planes had been positioned like that to minimize the dangers of sabotage. Among the 70 bombers parked there were 12 of the new Flying Fortresses. Few were airworthy by the time Engine 6 arrived.<sup>3</sup>

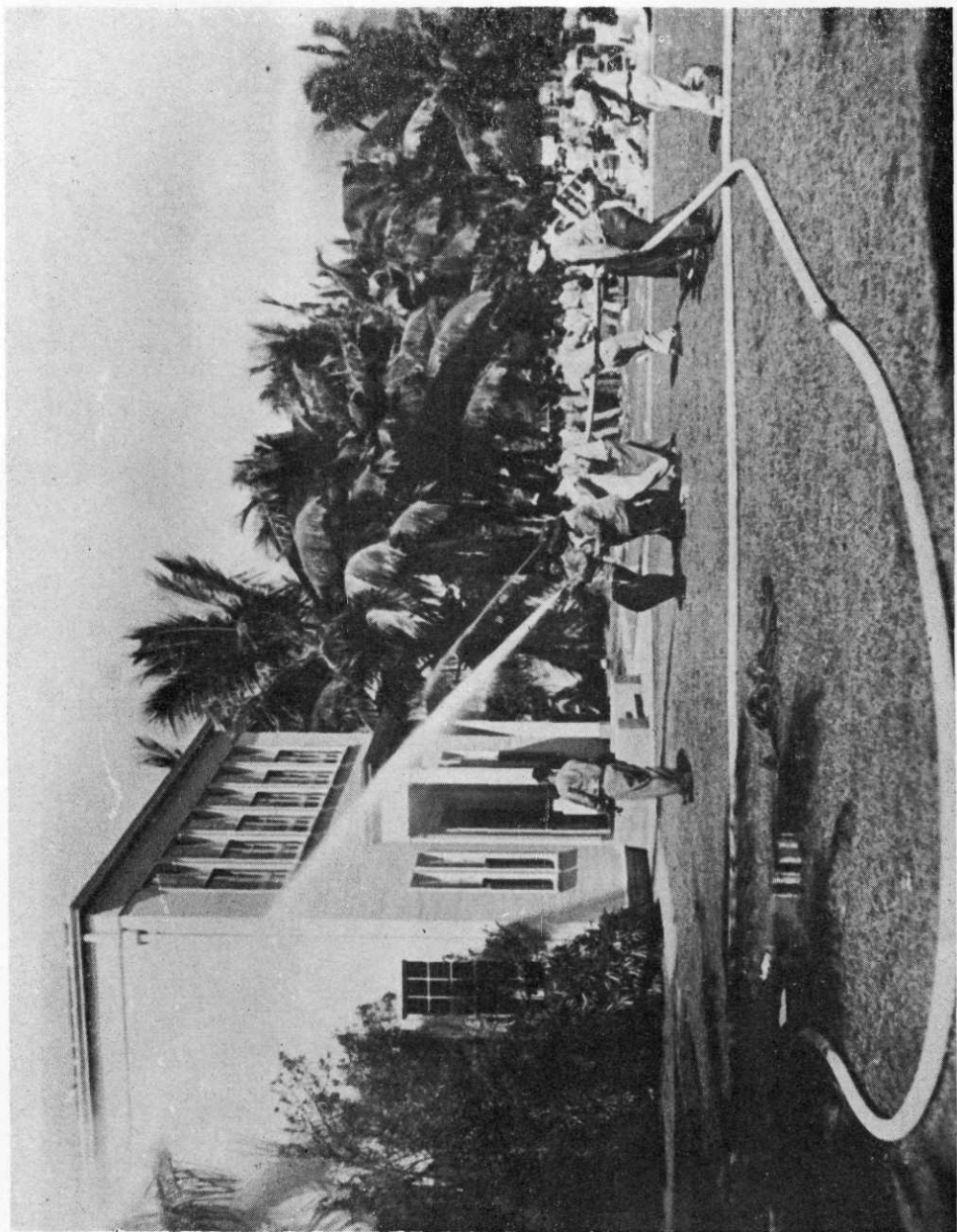
Engine 6 was to report to the Hickam fire station upon arrival but they discovered that the military station had also been bombed. One engine had been driven about 20 feet out onto the ramp, apparently trying to respond, before it was strafed by the low-flying Japanese planes. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel, dead. The other engine never got out of the station.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the 12 men of HFD Engines 4 and 6 suddenly found that they were the entire firefighting force available to handle the rescue, body recovery and firefighting tasks. In the absence of any properly authorized military officers, Lt. Kealoha as commanding officer of the HFD’s first-due engine company assumed authority and responsibility for the operations. Engine 1 from Honolulu’s central station on S. Beretania Street downtown arrived shortly afterward with six more men.

Hickam Field’s primary water main also had fallen victim to a bomb blast and the enormous crater was filling with water rapidly. No hydrants were functional. Lt. Kealoha recounts that “I had just decided to try drafting from the bomb crater when more Japanese planes appeared overhead, coming directly from the south by way of Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach. I screamed at my firefighters to take cover and they scattered in all directions. Young and Tam fled toward the burning hangars a couple of hundred feet

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*Destroyed American bombers at Hickam Field, adjacent to Pearl Harbor, after the Japanese attack of December 7, 1941. Hawaii War Records Depository, University of Hawaii.*





away; Pang and I went the opposite way, toward the barracks. Others tried to hide beneath the wagons and pumpers. “Young added, “For the next 15 minutes, hell rained down from the skies in the form of whistling bombs and screaming machine gun bullets, seemingly strafing everyone and everything in sight. That quarter hour seemed like an eternity to us as we tried to make ourselves invisible to the Japanese pilots and machine gunners. Finally, the onslaught of shrapnel and bullets dwindled and stopped. The second wave of the attack was over. The question in everyone’s mind was ‘How many more will there be?’ No one dared to even guess about that.”

The firefighters hesitantly emerged from their hiding places and began to assess the latest round of death and destruction. Three HFD members lay dead: Captain Thomas Macy of Engine 4; Capt. John Carreira, Engine 1; and Hoseman Harry Tuck Lee Pang, Engine 6. Lt. Kealoha and Hoseman Moses Kaliikane were critically wounded and three others were less seriously hurt. The remaining HFD members did little firefighting for a while, concentrating instead on aiding the injured firefighters and military personnel.

Their apparatus—all manufactured by the Seagrave Corporation and much of it 10 years old and chain-driven—had been repeatedly strafed and hit by bomb fragments. The chemical tank of Engine 1’s wagon was pierced by shrapnel and Engine 6’s pumper had too many bullet holes to count. Wagon 6 was afire. The pumpers of Engines 1 and 4 had been severely damaged by a hail of shrapnel. All six tires were punctured on Engine 1’s pumper. Radiators of several units were spewing miniature geysers of water through bullet holes.<sup>5</sup>

It was now about 0915. While the firefighters aided the injured men and got a few token hose streams on the flames, the third attack wave descended upon Hickam Field.<sup>6</sup> Once more the firemen dashed for cover with machine gun bullets literally striking at their heels. Fortunately, this attack was shorter than the earlier ones.

Civilian volunteers and uninjured military personnel had organized by this time and were tending to the wounded and dead. The injured Kealoha described his experiences: “I was thrown into an Army truck and taken to the hospital at Fort Shafter. I was kept outside on the grass all night. My wet clothes dried right on me.” He was ultimately to spend two months in the hospital and another month recuperating at home before returning to duty.

The other HFD members returned to firefighting. They got their damaged apparatus functioning by using brown soap and toilet paper to plug the holes in the radiators. No one remembers exactly where these supplies came from; seemingly they just materialized, most logically from the toilets in the burning barracks.<sup>7</sup> (Similarly, no one can account for some coins later found in the driver’s seat of Engine 4—not one of the firefighters remembers carrying any money that day!)<sup>8</sup> Then the men began attacking the fires, particularly those

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*Honolulu firefighters attack fire at Lunalilo School, caused by a defective anti-aircraft shell falling back to earth during the Japanese attack. Hawaii War Records Depository, University of Hawaii.*



threatening to involve additional airplanes and hangars. Three pumpers dropped their hard suction hoses into the bomb crater that by now was filled with water from the ruptured main. Sixty-four hundred feet of 2½-inch line was laid by hand—a monumental feat in itself! Two-and-a-half-inch lines wyed down to inch-and-a-half ones became the sole method of attack. No master stream appliances of any type, portable or fixed, could be used because of the limited water supply. The firefighters had no mobility in their operations because there was only the one water source. This difficulty was compounded by the punctured radiators and flattened tires, of course.

Fires of the magnitude of those burning at Hickam that day would normally have been attacked with very large nozzles, discharging as much as 1500 to 2000 gallons of water per minute (gpm), supplied by multiple 2½-inch hoselines, each capable of discharging about 250 gpm. Limited water supply obviated the use of this first-line-of-defense weaponry, however. The 1½-inch lines they used discharged between 60 and 90 gpm.

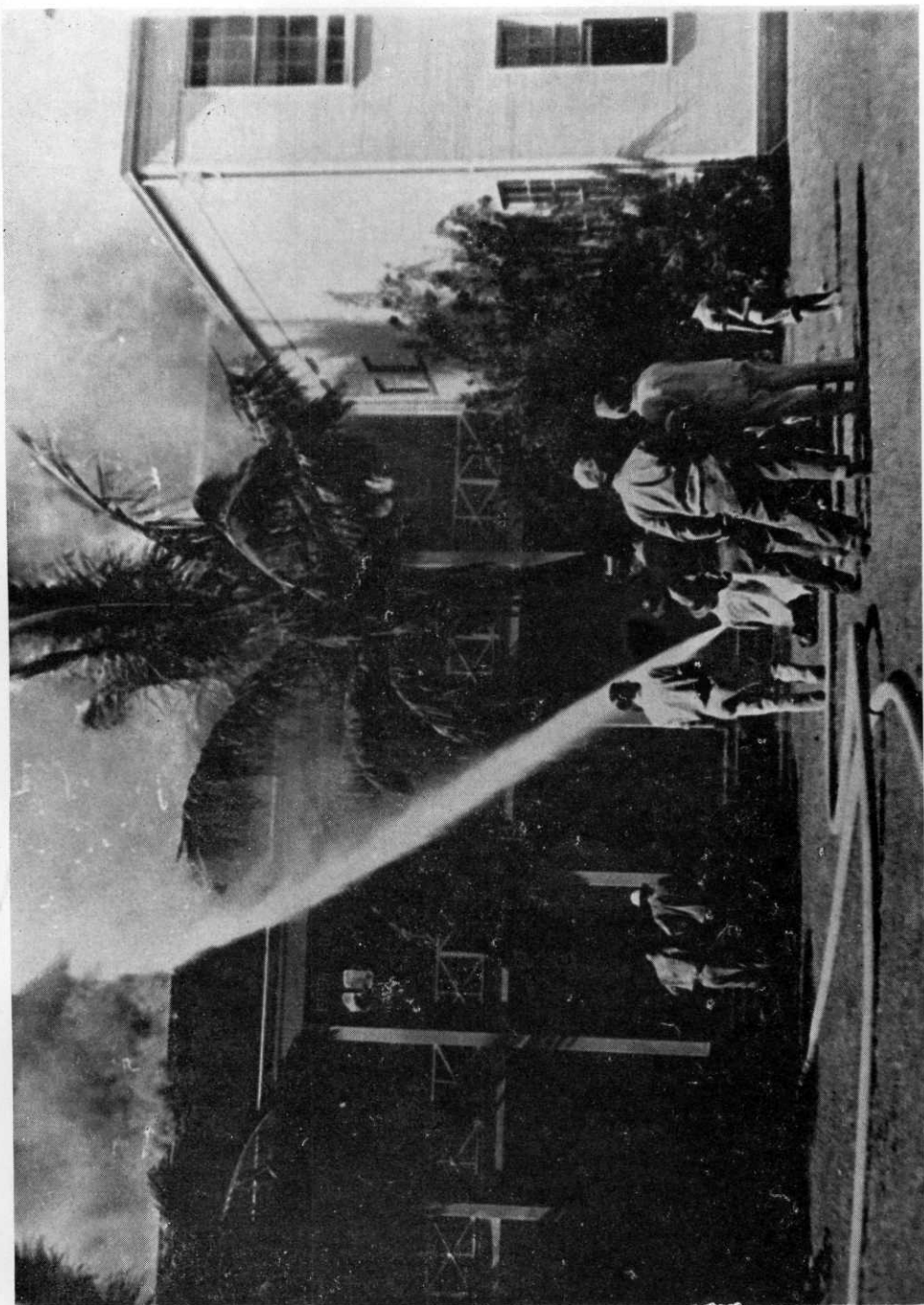
Hickam's water system was restored during the afternoon so the companies regained some maneuverability, within the limits of their hastily and temporarily repaired apparatus, and the fires were quelled without further incident after another 14 hours. The last HFD company returned to Honolulu at about midnight Sunday. They had fought aircraft and hangar fires, barracks and fuel storage tank blazes, and burning ammunition storage buildings. A lifetime of firefighting experience had been crammed into that single day.

The men of Engines 1, 4 and 6 had more fire than they could handle at Hickam Field. Any one of the burning barracks would ordinarily have drawn a three-alarm assignment. Since the firemen knew for certain that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, and probably other bases as well, these structural fires were ignored while the airplanes—the symbol and instrument of retaliation—were burning. As they labored at Hickam, they could see the ominous towering smoke columns at the adjacent Navy base. Actually, the planes with the Rising Sun emblem had struck with even greater force at Pearl Harbor. Although the Navy was party to the mutual aid pact with the City, no HFD units were dispatched to Pearl Harbor—there simply were none available. All firefighting and rescue work done at Pearl Harbor was carried out by Navy and Coast Guard personnel and by civilian volunteers. Many of the latter were second and third generation, U.S.-born American citizens of Japanese ancestry. The carnage and destruction from this attack on Pearl Harbor are well known and little repetition is needed here—18 ships sunk or seriously damaged, 188 aircraft destroyed and 159 damaged, 2403 people killed and 1178 wounded.<sup>9</sup>

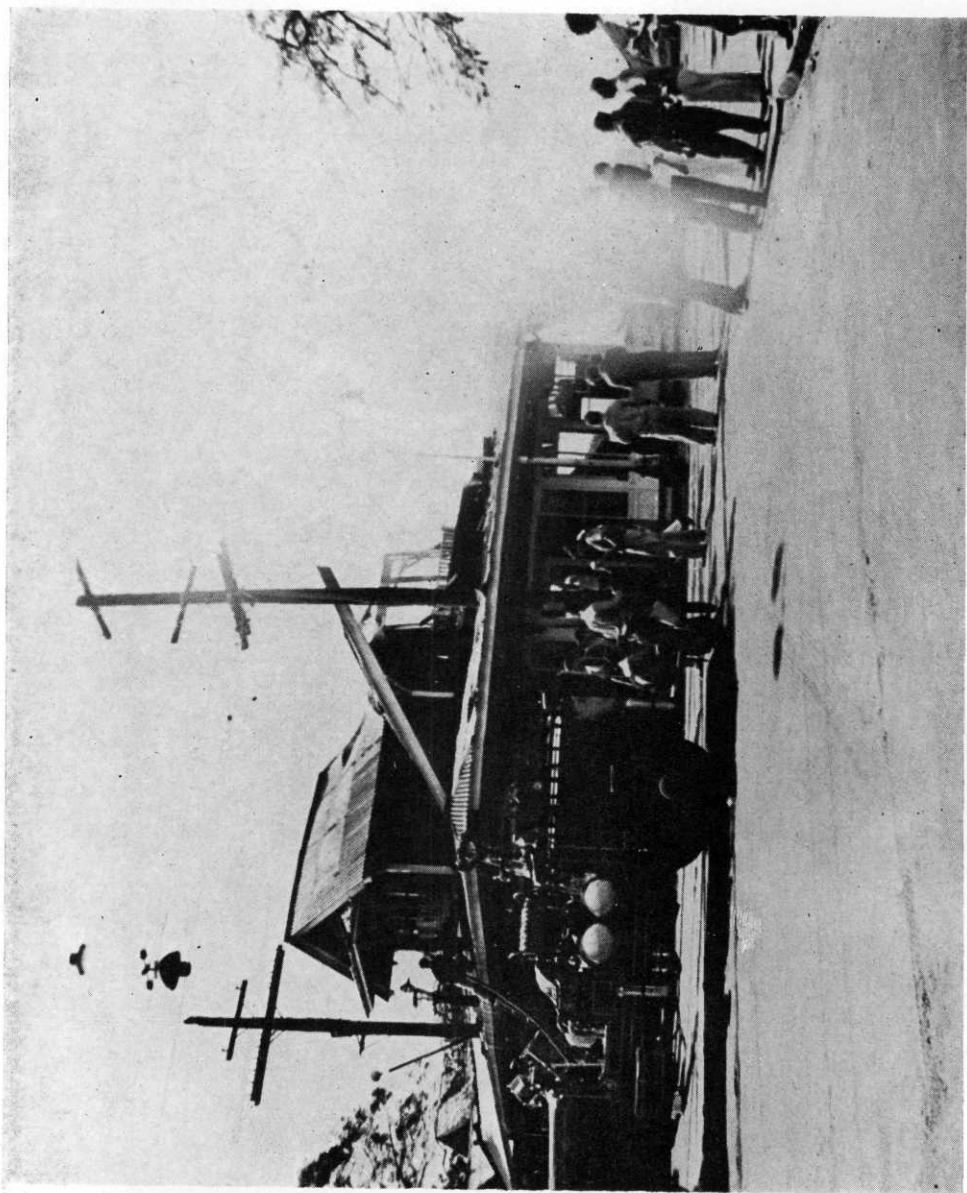
The HFD responded to 39 alarms on that fateful Sunday, although not all of the fires were caused by enemy action.<sup>10</sup> The HFD's resources were being strained severely so the five two-piece companies still in quarters were split. Only one unit was initially dispatched on each alarm for the next three days.

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*Members of Honolulu Fire Department's Engine 5 attack fire at Lunalilo School during Japanese attack on Oahu. Hawaii War Records Depository, University of Hawaii.*







All off-duty members had been called back to work by commercial radio broadcasts by 0830 and most of the 161 officers and men were on the job two hours later. Nine commercial trucks were also commandeered, loaded with 2½-inch hose and placed in strategic locations around Honolulu. Each was commanded by a trained firefighter and manned by civilian volunteers. Thus, five pumpers and five hosewagons with professional crews, and nine wagons with largely untrained crews, were left to protect Honolulu.<sup>11</sup>

The bombs had barely stopped falling when the HFD alarm bureau became deluged with calls for assistance ranging from reports of live electrical wires down to bomb strikes to serious building fires. Lopez said that "There were so many fire alarm boxes being pulled that one round was coming in on top of another." Thus, HFD Chief W. W. (Bill) Blaisdell ordered his alarm bureau dispatchers to ignore all box alarms and respond apparatus only to addresses given by telephone callers—a critical strategic decision since it could conceivably mean that no apparatus would respond to a citizen's urgent plea for help. However, so many false alarms were being pulled, presumably from sheer terror and panic, that it would have been impossible to dispatch even one company to each alarm. Thus, Blaisdell based his decision on the probability that should an emergency incident actually be occurring, the box alarm would likely be supplemented by telephone calls.

The first call was logged in the official HFD records at 0833<sup>12</sup>—a shell had hit a two-story wooden residence at 2683 Pacific Heights Road. And then the avalanche of alarms started:

- 0844 Lewers and Cooke Department Store downtown struck by a shell;
- 0925 Depot Road, Waipahu—enemy plane crash;
- 0926 1630 Leilehua Lane—shell exploded in a wooden cottage.

And so it went throughout the morning. Reports of explosions and injured persons were coming in to the HFD alarm bureau from all over Honolulu. One occurred on the grounds of Iolani Palace; another killed a man at Washington Place. Four civilian employees at Pearl Harbor died when their car was hit on Judd Street—they had been trying to get to work. A woman died from shrapnel wounds in upper Nuuanu Valley, eight miles from the military targets. Several amateur boxers were wounded or killed while eating at a saimin stand at Nuuanu and Kukui Streets. The toll of civilian casualties rose rapidly, most of the people being victims of bizarre accidents as they sought to protect their families and property. Some of the survivors have very frightening stories to relate about their harrowing experiences. One person tells about shrapnel shearing off a telephone pole six inches above his head;<sup>13</sup> another of walls falling where she had stood seconds before.<sup>14</sup> A third speaks

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*Thirteen buildings were destroyed by a fire at King and McCully Streets in Honolulu, probably caused by an enemy bomb. Members of Honolulu's Engine 5 and civilian bystanders fight the flames, assisted by Wagon 7 from Waikiki. Hawaii War Records Depository, University of Hawaii.*

of shrapnel breaking a window in front of her just as she stumbled over a curb and fell headlong to the ground.<sup>15</sup>

Alexander Beck, an off-duty hoseman at Engine 4, reported to his station and found that his company had already gone to Hickam. He and two volunteers put a reserve pumper into service. Beck said, "I realized right away that I was both officer and apparatus driver. Almost immediately (at 1050) we were dispatched to the Honolulu Gas Company in Iwilei for a gas storage tank fire. One of their two huge tanks was burning. Engine 2 was already there and I told my volunteers to give me a hand with the hose. I really wondered how we were ever going to get that fire out. A bomb or maybe an unexploded anti-aircraft shell had blasted a hole in the top of the tank. Gas was shooting up through this hole and was burning spectacularly. Employees from the Gas Company and my volunteers helped the firemen carry sandbags to the top of the tank. We built a dike around the hole and then filled it with water and foam to extinguish the fire. It took about two hours and, by then, a third of the gas had escaped and burned."

Three major structural fires occurred almost simultaneously near the intersection of King and McCully Streets, a light commercial and residential district about eight miles from the military bases. One caused heavy damage and death at Lunalilo School and another burned three houses at Hauoli and Algaroba Streets. The most serious of the three burned a block of stores and residences occupied by 31 people.<sup>16</sup>

The experiences of the men of Engine Company 5, and of Ernest Cockett in particular, typify those of the five HFD engine companies that did not respond directly to the military base at Hickam.

Cockett, strangely enough, was glad to be working at the King-McCully fires rather than with his company of two days previously. Cockett recalled his experiences as Engine 5's engineer (apparatus driver): "I had been with the HFD since 1935 and had finally gotten a promotion. Now I was an engineer and had just reported for my second day of work at Engine Company 5 on the *mauka* side of Diamond Head in Kaimuki. Previously, I had been assigned to Engine 4 in Palama. You know, I almost turned down that promotion! It meant a terribly long trip from my home in Kalihi. I came that close to being in the middle of the attack on Hickam with Engine 4."

Like virtually everyone else in Honolulu, Cockett and the other men of Engine 5 were watching those ominous black smoke puffs over leeward Oahu, also realizing that they were from live ammunition; their worst fears of an enemy attack were confirmed by commercial radio broadcasts. Engine 5 was HFD's most distant company from Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field, but this company was quickly transferred to Engine 3's quarters in Makiki and then to Engine 1's downtown. From there they responded to numerous calls, including a working fire\* at Liliha and Judd Streets. Soon reporting themselves

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\* A "working fire" is a descriptive term for any fire that, in the estimation of the first-arriving chief officer, firefighters already present are unlikely to be able to control and extinguish. It is an alert to the alarm bureau dispatcher that additional companies may be needed.

available, Hosewagon 5 was next dispatched by telephone to the King-McCully fire near their own quarters. After a five-mile run back across Honolulu, they arrived to find a row of buildings heavily involved. A shell had detonated in a corner drug store, injuring a woman and setting the store aflame. Hosewagon 7 from Waikiki was already operating on McCully Street and just about had the fire contained, so Wagon 5 worked to halt the advancing flames at the other end of this block. Portable and deck-mounted deluge sets\* and 2½-inch handlines were manned by firefighters and civilian bystanders. There were no pumpers at the scene so hydrant pressure had to suffice. Although it was reasonably adequate, 13 buildings were leveled before control was established. One of the houses burned belonged to a fireman who was with his company at Hickam Field.

A second major fire broke out at about the same time at Hauoli and Algaroba Streets, a block from the King-McCully intersection. Wagon 5 quickly picked up and responded but several houses were already totally involved.

While Hosewagons 5 and 7 were committed at these two fires, several people raced up to the exhausted firefighters, shouting that Lunalilo School on Pumehana Street three blocks away had been bombed as it was being filled with civilian evacuees and was now ablaze. The school was a large two-story, woodframe building built in a U-shape. Subsequent investigation proved that the "bomb" was actually a defective American anti-aircraft shell that exploded upon impact when it fell back to earth. Three civilians died and 15 were hurt in the explosion. Cockett recalled that "People were yelling for us to respond to the school but there was no way we could do that right away. We had every length of hose laid out and charged. We had our fire just about out, though, so we did pick up as quick as we could, leaving two men at the Hauoli Street fireground." By that time, though, Lunalilo School was heavily involved on the second floor and roof at the bottom of the "U". Wagon 5's short-handed and exhausted crew moved in with four 2½ inch handlines and managed to hold the flames at that point, once again relying solely upon hydrant pressure.

It is interesting to note that Honolulu's fire losses for December 7, 1941, accounted for sixty percent of the loss for that entire year.<sup>17</sup> This does *not* include the military losses which were tallied separately.

All HFD members were on continuous duty until the morning of Tuesday, December 9th, when each man was given four hours off. From Thursday, December 11th, through Sunday the 14th, the two shifts alternated working eight-hour stints. The regular 24-hour tours of duty followed by 24 hours off were resumed on Monday, December 15th.<sup>18</sup> However, there was a standing order for all off-duty firefighters to report to work whenever the air raid sirens sounded.

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\* *Hose streams are categorized as either handlines (which are usually held by 3 or 4 men) or master stream appliances. The latter may be removed from the engine and strategically located at the fire, or they may be permanently mounted on the engine (deck-mounted). Deluge sets are one type of master stream appliance. Handlines flow from 15 to 250 gallons of water per minute (gpm); master stream appliances, 500 to 2000 or more gpm.*

Hawaii's Governor Joseph B. Poindexter issued a proclamation of martial law at 1630 hours (4:30 p.m.) Sunday afternoon, just 30 minutes after Emperor Hirohito formally declared war on the United States and Great Britain. Poindexter authorized and requested Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short, Commanding General of the Hawaiian Department of the U. S. Army, to "exercise all powers normally exercised by me as Governor". The HFD was also placed under the command of Military Governor Short and his successor, Lt. Gen. Delos C. Emmons, for the duration of the war.<sup>19</sup>

Lopez remembers finding two territorial guardsmen assigned to their firehouse when they returned to the Waikiki station around dusk that Sunday. "One was stationed in front, the other in back. Each fire captain was issued a .45-caliber revolver and ordered to shoot any saboteur or anyone else who interfered with firefighting operations. We heard a rumor that Japanese planes were parachuting troops into the Koolau mountains and that the Japanese fleet was right outside Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile our two guards had opened fire on a car that failed to heed their order to stop. The driver turned into the firehouse and screamed that some fools were shooting at him. Later, the two guards surprised each other while patrolling outside the station and fired several rounds at each other before realizing their mistake. That is one day that I'll never forget!"

Throughout the war years, the HFD joined with the Army and Navy in an exhibition of unity, courage and calm self-control that will stand forever as a tribute to the Honolulu Fire Department. This was epitomized on that unforgettable December morning in 1941. Six Honolulu firefighters were later awarded Purple Hearts,<sup>20</sup> a commendation usually reserved for service personnel wounded in combat. Three of these were awarded posthumously. The HFD had earned the distinction of being the only civilian fire department in the United States to fight fires caused by enemy action under combat conditions.<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon tape-recorded interviews with the following people: Richard L. Young, Anthony Lopez, Frederick Kealoha, Alexander Beck and Ernest Cockett. The tapes and partial transcripts are in the author's possession.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Barker, *Pearl Harbor* (Ballantine Books, 1969) p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> E. S. Sheehan, *Days of '41, Pearl Harbor Remembered* (Honolulu: Kapa Assoc, 1976), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Young and Anthony Lopez (personal communications to the author).

<sup>5</sup> H. A. Smith, *History of the Honolulu Five Department* (Privately printed 1950), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Young, recorded interview, April 20, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Young and Frederick Kealoha (personal communications to the author).

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Beck, recorded interview, June 6, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Barker, p. 158-159.

- <sup>10</sup> W. W. Blaisdell, *Honolulu Fire Department 91st Annual Report* (Honolulu, 1941)  
p. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> HSB, December 8, 1941, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Blaisdell, p. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Blaisdell, p. 2-3.
- <sup>18</sup> Blaisdell, p. 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> HSB, June 14, 1944; Smith, p. 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 22.