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Pearl Harbor, the Army Corps of Engineers, and Punahou's Cereus Hedge

FOR THE HONOLULU DISTRICT of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the fall of 1941, exactly 50 years ago, was a time of intense planning and vast preparations for what was an increasing possibility of a war in the Pacific. Indeed, it was the Pacific phase of the United States war against Spain 43 years earlier which had brought the first U.S. Army engineers to Hawai'i. On April 30, 1898, Congress had granted Hawai'i Territorial status. The next day Admiral George Dewey entered Manila Bay, launched a surprise attack, and destroyed the Spanish fleet as it lay anchored off Cavite Point. By July, volunteer Army engineers were camping in Kapiolani Park, ready to defend Hawai'i as America's bastion of its newly acquired Pacific empire.

It was, however, repairing Territorial lighthouses and drawing the first Honolulu harbor lines which had engaged the first Army engineers in Honolulu. These civil works projects began a partnership between the Army Corps of Engineers and the people of Hawai'i that continues to the present. The partnership began in 1904, when Lieutenant John R. Slattery established his headquarters in the Alexander Young Hotel on Bishop Street. Later, Honolulu engineers constructed coastal defense gun emplacements to defend O'ahu from seaborne attack by Pacific colonial

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powers. Forts Ruger, DeRussy, and Kamehameha contain some of the 18 coastal defense gun batteries constructed around Honolulu and Pearl Harbor during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1933, Honolulu district engineer, Major Stanley L. Scott, was appointed administrator of Public Works Administration (PWA) programs in Hawai'i. Funded by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), these programs included federal harbor projects in Honolulu on O'ahu, Kaunakakai on Moloka'i, and Port Allen on Kaua'i. Additional projects approved by the PWA included water supply systems on O'ahu, Moloka'i, Kaua'i, and Hawai'i. This program lasted until 1939, when the district engineer, Major Peter Bernal, became administrator of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) program in Hawai'i. Providing jobs for the unemployed, WPA funds built roads, trails, and airfields on O'ahu, Hawai'i, Kaua'i, and other islands.¹

By the fall of 1941, as the threat of war increased, two events had occurred that affected the relationship between Army engineers and Hawai'i. The first involved General Douglas MacArthur's request for more B-17s to aid in the defense of the Philippines if war broke out. In October 1941, the Honolulu district engineers began constructing a series of airfields from Hawai'i south through the Christmas, Canton, and Fiji islands to accommodate B-17s ferried via Australia to the Philippines. This emergency project added to the engineers' peacetime workload of airfields, flood control projects, and harbor improvements.

The second significant event in 1941 was the transfer of all Army Air Corps station construction from the Quartermaster Corps to the Corps of Engineers. Engineers of the Honolulu district were soon constructing gasoline and bomb storage facilities on Hickam Field. By December, the Corps employed almost 600 civilian workers, both from Hawai'i and the Mainland.

De Soto Brown's *Hawaii Goes to War* vividly portrays the shock, confusion, and destruction caused by the Japanese raid on December 7, 1941.² The city of Honolulu received widespread, sporadic damage. In addition to Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field, Japanese pilots destroyed most Air Corps aircraft on the ground at Wheeler and Bellows Fields and all of those parked at the Kaneohe Naval Air Station.

Because a follow-on air attack was considered possible, Honolulu district engineer Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Wyman Jr. moved his office from the Alexander Young Hotel to a pre-selected, less conspicuous, though certainly more odoriferous, location: the Tuna Packer's Cannery at Kewalo Basin. Although less congested than Honolulu, the basin was the only small boat harbor on leeward O'ahu and thus thought to be a logical site for a potential Japanese invasion. As a defense, therefore, the engineers dug trenches around the shore and placed machine guns on the cannery roof.

Realizing the vulnerability of the cannery, the district engineer sought a new headquarters location away from the coast. Faced with the district's increased construction work load, he needed a facility where he could immediately resume engineering operations. Historian Karl C. Dod writes that a trustee of Punahou School suggested that Wyman move the district office into the Punahou buildings for the duration.³ In fact, the engineers had already included the school, along with other sites, as possible wartime headquarters. By 3:30 P.M. on December 7, Governor Joseph Poindexter declared the Territory to be under martial law. The commanding general of the U.S. Army assumed the role of military governor. Shortly after midnight, only 18 hours after the Pearl Harbor attack, Wyman moved his headquarters to Punahou School (figs. 1 and 2).

The engineers considered the pre-dawn commandeering of Punahou a military necessity. Located in a valley with only one entrance road and with widely dispersed buildings surrounded by a lava rock wall, Punahou could easily be defended. The school, however, was a venerable and prestigious institution in the Island community, with a proud history pre-dating any school on the West Coast of the United States. Therefore the engineers' early hour arrival at Punahou, while "tactically very sound, politically was not," Lieutenant Colonel Willard P. McCrone, the district's executive officer, wrote in 1949.⁴ No doubt it would have been less confrontational had Wyman waited for a coordinated entry. The engineers, however, had come from an armed and tense Kewalo Basin barricade and were well aware, although the general public was not (because of radio silence), of the terrific toll the attack had

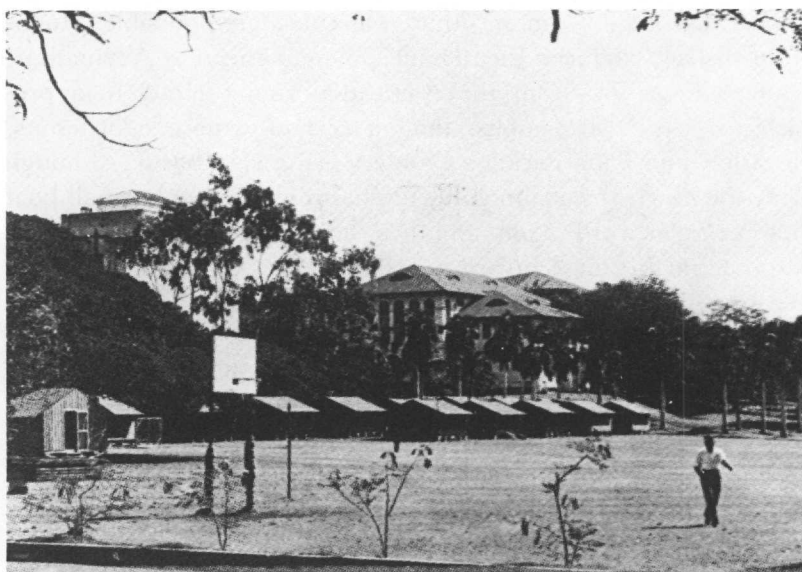


FIG. 1. Temporary buildings constructed on the Punahou campus by the Corps of Engineers, c. 1942. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo collection.)

taken on our forces. Waiting to obtain permission to enter the school grounds and buildings was secondary to getting to work and preparing for the expected next attack.

Versions of events following the commandeering of Punahou vary with the storyteller. What is clear is that the wartime emergency created a sense of urgency which initially led to confusion and misunderstanding. The first contingent of engineers and civilian construction workers arrived at the Punahou gate about 2 A.M. on December 8. Unaware of the engineers' emergency authority, night watchman Dan Pires initially refused them access to the school buildings. When negotiations for keys to the buildings bogged down, the engineers broke a pane of glass in the Cooke Library door and admitted themselves. The shattering of glass symbolically echoed the response of many in the Punahou community to being so abruptly and forcibly taken over. Punahou's response also reflected the significance of a special event that year, its Centennial anniversary.

Because 1941 was Punahou's 100th birthday, the school had been



FIG. 2. The Punahou athletic field becomes a parking area for military vehicles and a garden for plants to be used as wartime camouflage, c. 1942. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo collection.)

planning its celebration of the event for several years. In December 1936, the Board of Trustees authorized Mary C. Alexander ('96) and Charlotte Dodge ('02) to write a history of Punahou's first century. In 1938, a Centennial Committee of 34 members, the size of Punahou's first class, headed by community leaders Walter Dillingham, Clarence Cooke, Alfred Castle, John Waterhouse, and Frank Atherton, began planning centennial events. An Academy (high school) student group headed by Lydia Sutherland, worked on a year-long program of events within the school. During 1940, even the elementary school children joined in, planning to produce an aquacade in the Waterhouse pool, a tea in Montague Hall, a dance in Rice Hall, and a historical exhibit and costume party at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. The Hawaiian Historical Society gave its support by holding its annual meeting at the edge of the school's well-known lily pond.⁵

All plans and preparations led to a festive Centennial Week,

which began on June 22 with a Sunday service at Kawaiaha‘o Church. Numerous events occurred throughout the week, including Governor Poindexter’s declaration of a Centennial legal holiday for the Territory, a concert in Montague Hall dedicating the new organ donated to the school by the Atherton family, a historical exhibit in Old School Hall, and a celebration of the birthday of the 100-year old tamarind tree planted by the boys in Punahou’s first class.

The key event, however, was the long awaited Centennial Pageant, held on June 24 and 25, presenting ten decades of Punahou history. As the pageant opening ceremonies on Alexander Field evoked the blessing of Kane, Hawaiian god of life, the skies over Mānoa Valley opened up. Although the shower drenched the spectators and performers, it did not dim their pleasure and pride in the pageant, which was performed two evenings in a row by the cast of 1,000.

The final event in the week-long celebration was the giant lū‘au held on Sunday evening, June 29. A great tent covered the 61 long tables at which 3,000 guests feasted on 1,300 pounds of chicken, 1,700 pounds each of pork and beef, and 2,000 pounds of poi, topped off by a giant birthday cake complete with 100 candles.⁶

After working several years towards Punahou’s centennial and enjoying the week of celebration, the academic community undoubtedly looked forward to the summer of 1941 as a time for relaxation and enjoyment and to the fall of the school year that would introduce Punahou’s second century. Although headlines in the Honolulu newspapers carried articles about growing tension between the United States and Japan, the trouble seemed only a distant concern to many. The Pearl Harbor attack changed that concern to tragic reality.

While still recovering from the shock of Pearl Harbor, Punahou faculty members Pearson Goddard Dean, John (Jack) S. Slade, John Nelson, Frank Berger, and others rushed to deal with the engineer’s early hour arrival. School president, Doctor Oscar F. Shepherd, was on Maui with the Pun’s football team for a game with Baldwin High School scheduled for December 7.

Punahou was quickly converted to wartime service: a library room became the district engineer’s office; the reading room, the

administrative office; the cleared book area was converted to sleeping spaces; and the basement became a temporary officers' mess. The remaining district officers were set up in other buildings on campus. The school cafeteria was pressed into immediate service as its director, Peggy Brown, was ordered to provide meals for 750 men. About two weeks after the attack, the small Pleasanton Hotel, across Punahou Street from the school, was rented to provide a larger mess and accommodations for military families prior to their evacuation to the Mainland.

The commandeering of Punahou was deeply resented by the school's board of trustees, faculty and staff, and students and their parents. Perhaps this accounts for several stories concerning the hectic first hours of occupation which have persisted over the years, some more probable than others. It was rumored that in their haste, engineers threw library books out the windows into the rain. But Norris Potter, long time Punahou teacher and school chronicler, tells us that no books were removed that night, and, in fact, the weather was clear. When books were removed, it was school librarians who packed them for storage in the Bishop Hall basement. It was also rumored that Punahou was commandeered by mistake and that the engineers meant to go to the University of Hawai'i campus or to McKinley High School and merely entered the wrong grounds.

One event did occur, however, which caused a great deal of ill feeling between the engineers and Punahou. While erecting a barbed wire barricade upon its lava rock walls around the school, workers injured part of the night blooming cereus hedge on these walls (fig. 3). This hedge had been planted by Mrs. Sybil Bingham in 1836 when she and Reverend Hiram Bingham lived on the grounds. "For two or three days," wrote Shepherd, "it seemed as if the Pacific War were a small event compared to the partial destruction of the cereus hedge."⁷ As soon as Wyman heard of the damage, he ordered Ralph Wooley, a Punahou alumnus and horticulture expert, to replant the destroyed part of the hedge and prevent its further damage.

Like the cereus hedge, relations between the engineers and the Punahou community also needed repairing. After meeting with Shephard, Wyman appointed a liaison officer who helped make



FIG. 3. Barbed wire covers the cactus hedge on the Punahou wall during World War II. (Cooke Library Archives, Punahou School photo.)

subsequent transactions smoother. The two communities gradually restored order from confusion and harmony from confrontation.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, and with the Islands under martial law, schools throughout the Territory were closed, not only to avoid the danger of concentrating many children in one place, but also because of war emergency tasks assigned to teachers. Punahou faculty members registered residents, processed fingerprinted identification cards, and issued gas masks and gasoline ration books. Punahou was not alone. Twenty-six public and three private schools were commandeered into wartime service, and more than a dozen schools were converted into temporary hospitals and dormitories.

As soon as military authorities allowed groups of children to meet, Punahou began holding classes in any spaces they could find. Senior Academy students met in Central Union Church.

The Junior School students attended classes in Mānoa Valley homes of Doctor Douglas Bell, Walter Grace, and Arthur Brown. Others met further up the Valley in the homes of Doctor Stewart Doolittle, Campbell Crozier, Montague Cooke, and John Walker. Students also met in the Waterhouse home on upper Ke‘eaumoku Street and in Henry White’s garage. By February 1942, the threat of another Japanese attack lessened, and larger class gatherings were permitted. Grades seven through 12 then moved into the Teacher’s College at the University of Hawai‘i where they held classes for the duration of the war.⁸

Punahou students’ support of the war effort was not limited to relinquishing their beloved campus to the Corps of Engineers. Their activities included working in the pineapple fields in the Food Production Corps, serving as hospital aides, and manufacturing recreation kits for service members. Perhaps the most impressive task was their raising a total of almost \$2,000,000 in war bonds and stamps. These sales purchased several bombers and a P-47 fighter plane, all named by the students after Punahou students killed in the war. One bomber was named “Peter,” the nickname of Montague Waterhouse, and another “Red Jack,” after Jack Johnson. The fighter plane was named “Red Head” after Robert Twitchell.⁹

During the summer of 1945, with the Pacific war having moved far to the west and martial law at an end in the Territory (as of October 24, 1944, except for some phases), the Army restored Punahou for return to its students and staff. Engineers removed the barbed wire fencing, gun emplacements, and radar sites. Tunnels which had connected buildings were filled in. After tools, equipment, and furniture were replaced, the engineers and school officials completed an inventory of school property.

Japan formally surrendered to the U.S. on September 2, 1945. On September 10 at the turnover ceremony, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Walter F. Dillingham, summed up Punahou feelings:

A cry was raised that the beauty of Punahou had gone for all time. When you looked through barbed wire or the guarded gates you may have believed that, but the Army lived up to its pledge. Never

have these grounds looked more attractive. They turned the same energy and ability to rehabilitating they gave to winning the war. It is my great pleasure to accept, on behalf of the Punahou trustees and all other groups, these grounds for rededication and to thank the Army for this privilege of serving.¹⁰

NOTES

- ¹ Erwin N. Thompson, *Pacific Ocean Engineers: History of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Pacific, 1905-1980* ([n.p.]: Pacific Ocean Division, 1984) 27-9, 67-8, and 101-2. Photographs designated "figs. 1 and 2" appear in this volume.
- ² DeSoto Brown, *Hawaii Goes to War* (Honolulu: Editions Limited, 1989).
- ³ Karl C. Dod, *United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Japan*, (1966, rpt. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1987) 341. See, also, Gwenfread Allen, *Hawaii's War Years, 1941-1945* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1950).
- ⁴ Willard P. McCrone, *The Honolulu District and Pearl Harbor*, ts., 8, Pacific Ocean Division History office, Fort Shafter.
- ⁵ Charlotte Peabody Dodge, *Punahou, The War Years, 1941-1945* (Honolulu: Punahou School, 1984) 1-11.
- ⁶ Dodge, *Punahou, The War Years* 10-1; Norris Whitfield Potter, *The Punahou Story*, (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1969) 60.
- ⁷ Dod, *United States Army* 358.
- ⁸ Dodge, *Punahou, The War Years* 17-9.
- ⁹ Dodge, *Punahou, The War Years* 26-9.
- ¹⁰ Potter, *The Punahou Story* 98-9.