

The Vintage Voice

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Pearl Harbor Memoir

The Rev. David Edman

He doesn't look his age. Lean and straight, he regards you with the sort of acetylene blue eyes that reveal his Welsh ancestry. When he reads a lesson at the Eucharist or serves as usher, his friendliness shines through. He is optimistic about the Church. Good times come. And so do hard times. Don't become unglued, he advises. God is good. Nor does he forsake the resolute, however dark or dangerous the circumstances.

He ought to know! Bill Williams, member extraordinaire of St. Paul's, Gainesville, was present on that memorable day in December, 1941, when the imperial forces of Japan attacked our naval installation at Pearl Harbor. His recollections, as I took them down, remain both fascinating and instructive.



I was born in Ohio in 1921. Not long after, my family moved to Harlingen, Texas where my father was in the insurance business. Ours was a large home located in what was known as Silk Stocking Row. My upbringing was standard middle-class American, though somewhat shadowed by the Great Depression. In high school, I went out for the boxing team and in my spare time worked in the stock room of the local Woolworth's.

For as long as I can remember, I'd wondered about those "far-away places with strange-sounding names, far away over the sea." I wanted to enlist in the Navy after high school, only my father refused to sign the necessary papers until I managed to get one of his friends to plead my case. That was 1940. I was so eager to join that I paid my own way to Houston for the physical. Then I found myself on the verge of being turned down because of problems with my teeth. I expressed disappointment to the examining dentist, adding that I'd paid my way to the recruiting center. "In that case," he said, "I guess we'd better let you in."

Boot camp took me to San Diego. It was very tough. Afterwards, I was sent to radio school, then assigned to a 1350 ton destroyer named the USS Aylwin, located at Pearl. It was one of four moored together in a "nest." War did not seem imminent, especially since we were located so far from the trouble spots of that time. Still, most of us knew that, sooner or later, we would have it out with Japan.

Saturday, December 6, 1941, I arose early for duty in the radio shack. As on every Wednesday and Saturday, our breakfast was brown bread and beans with plenty of coffee. The ship was quiet since about three-quarters of the crew were ashore for the weekend.

Sunday, I drew liberty. I was looking forward to the day because I'd arranged a date with a real cute girl of English, French and Japanese descent. I got up around seven, showered, and began to make myself look my best for a day in town. At 7:57, the flagship hoisted the "Flag Prep" three minutes before the ceremony of the colors (raising the U.S. flag aboard all ships). In those intervening moments, I heard a muffled explosion followed by the bosun's mate racing

down the passageway shouting, "Away, Fire and Rescue Party!" That meant that there had been a major accident aboard one of our ships. I recall shouting, "Ha, ha, you guys! You got the duty! I get to go ashore!"

There were more explosions. Then suddenly the bosun's mate was running back, hollering: "Man your battle stations! The Japs are attacking!" I grabbed the white trousers I'd set out for my date and raced for a ladder topside that was angled about 60 degrees. At the bottom, my pants were in my hand. At the top, they were on. Don't ask me how it happened!

By the time I got topside, all hell was breaking loose. As I came into the open, the first thing I saw was a Japanese plane headed straight for me, its machine guns spitting. I could look the pilot straight in the eye. The only reason I wasn't cut in half was that he was in the process of pulling up and the bullets were passing overhead. My battle station was as aircraft spotter on the bridge. Our Communication Officer became captain, as the captain was ashore. He ordered the lines that nested the other three destroyers be slipped. Engine speed was brought up and, after the others had backed away, we joined them in the channel.

As we steamed out of the channel, the destroyer ahead of us rammed a two-man sub that had slipped into the harbor, then dropped two depth charges set at thirty feet, crushing those inside. In dispatching the captain's "gig" to try to locate the captain, I found myself running aft. In the confusion, I was unaware that a gunner was firing a 50 caliber mounted machine gun flat out at the attackers. He saw me, even if I didn't see him. He paused until I got by, then shouted rather casually after me, "Almost got you, Willy!"

You often hear that there was a lot of confusion at Pearl Harbor that morning. That is only partly true. We were surprised. There was plenty of anger. But there was no panic. Our sailors were well-trained and incredibly brave. In my mind, I can still see the whaleboats exposing themselves to strafing as they rescued survivors in the water. One dazed sailor refused to be taken aboard, shouting, "Don't touch me! I'm dead!"

With great presence of mind, the skipper of the battleship Nevada grounded her so as to clear the channel, enabling us to move out to sea. We were then one of a squadron of nine destroyers joined by two cruisers in circling maneuvers around the islands. We had no idea what might be coming next — another wave of bombers, amphibious landings elsewhere in the islands, etc. We returned briefly on Monday after dark, passing the devastation, much of it still smoldering. Then we were back out to sea for the next four or five weeks. When finally I returned, I went looking for the gal I'd planned to date on the 7th. She was nowhere to be found. Nobody could tell me what happened to her.

The rest of the war I served on destroyers, sub-chasers, and PT boats. In the course of moving from place to place, I was lucky to find the loveliest wife a man could hope for, my Belle of New Orleans. Late in the war, when I returned to the States for light training, Rosemary and I were married. She had been raised Roman Catholic and I a Presbyterian. Like so many at that time, we settled on the Episcopal Church as a spiritual compromise, a decision neither of us ever regretted.



David Edman is retired and presently living with his wife, Rita, on a ten acre "ranch," the repair of its fences having required completion of a recent course in basic welding. He continues interim and supply work in the Diocese of Fort Worth.