



## OTOW resident catches a glimpse of humanity during attack on Pearl Harbor

By John Koning

Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, was bright and warm in typical Hawaiian style.

On Top of the World resident Barbara Kelley's parents, Tom and Frances Johnston, were readying their young family for church shortly after seven when the calm of Pearl Harbor's naval housing complex was jolted by ground shaking explosions and 300-foot fireballs in the nearby harbor.

Barb's mom corralled her children and moved them to the center of the house in response to the bone rattling tremors. When she looked out the window, she was shocked to see black billows of smoke blocking the sun and hellish fireballs rising from Pearl Harbor, where the US Pacific Naval fleet lay anchored.

Barbara Johnston was 7 years old when the Empire of Japan launched its surprise attack on the fleet. During the attack, Barb's mom instructed the kids to stay put under the stairs on the first floor of the house, where it was safest. However, young Barb, who had a childish innocence, sneaked up the stairs to her room in search of a doll. The second floor of their home offered a tantalizing view of the harbor, so she ventured to her bedroom window. As she did, a Japanese A6M "Zero," one of 353 aircraft that bombed and strafed the base that day, was coming in for an uncontested run.

As Barb watched, she was amazed by two things. She couldn't believe how small the approaching plane appeared and how slowly it seemed to move in the sky. Barb could clearly make out a young Japanese pilot's face - a sight that has been burned into her soul even today. She was transfixed.

Then an amazing thing happened. The pilot cracked an almost



Barb Kelley holds a photo of her with her siblings and cousins, taken against a backdrop of smoke and fire at Pearl Harbor.

imperceptible smile and turned his guns down and away from the young girl framed in the upper window, and strafed the lower part of the house as he flew past.

Bullets ripped through the structure, smashing dishes in the kitchen and tearing holes in the walls. Thankfully, nobody in their home was hit by the buzz of bullets.

Barb's mom was so upset by the shooting, and their narrow escape, that she didn't notice young Barbara, shaking and creeping back down the stairs, where she rejoined her twin sister and her younger brother in the center of the small house.

Barb's dad, Major Lee Johnston, was off duty at the time of the bombing. He had been transferred off the Utah, a Florida-class battleship, the previous day, otherwise he might have perished in the capsized ship, along with the 2,402 other souls who died in Pearl Harbor that day.

Later, a navy truck rumbled through the housing complex, handing out gas masks and blasting instructions over a loud speaker for all to hear.

"All civilians are ordered to stay inside their homes," an announcement said. "Parents are instructed to put kettles and pans on the heads of their children. All military personnel are required to board the truck and return to the base for action."

Barb's dad quickly returned to the base, where he was given the job of hiding under the cover of trees and providing bombing reconnaissance. He had two others helping him with the task. Both of his assistants died during that mission. The loss of his buddies devastated her dad, Barb recalls. On the other hand, Barb's mom seemed to take it all in stride, even posing her children against the backdrop of smoke and fire during a lull in the fighting.

Not long after the attack, all



Barb Kelley's dad, Major Lee Johnston, embraces the Hawaiian lifestyle prior to the Pearl Harbor attack.

Pearl Harbor military families were required to return to the U.S. mainland.

"That's when my mom used her kids to her advantage," says Barb with a wry smile. "First, she said we couldn't go because my brother had Chicken Pox. Next she used my sister as an excuse. She clearly loved living in Hawaii, and couldn't bear the thought of leaving her husband behind."

Eventually, her deception was discovered and Barb's mom and the children were taken to San Francisco by ship. When they arrived in port after a long crossing, they were told that there were other military passengers who had been held below decks during the voyage. Those passengers were Japanese prisoners of war.

While memories of that dark day might fade with time, the physical evidence still survives. Those Japanese bullets that tore through their island home on Dec. 7, 1941, are still in the family's possession.