

The Vintage Voice

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I Remember Pearl Harbor — Sort Of

Fred Peck

In late summer of 1941, my mother and I set off on a journey from upstate New York to Honolulu, Hawaii. I was four months old and my parents' firstborn. She was twenty-seven years old, recently released from a tuberculosis sanitarium, and set on getting us close as she could to my father in his first assignment as a new Navy chaplain, aboard the USS Curtiss at Pearl Harbor. She had gone to the town library to look for Hawaii in an atlas; she had no idea where it was.

Heading west by train, she decided in Chicago to try to get onto a nearby Navy base and ask for help. It turned out to be a small air station, and word spread quickly about the chaplain's wife and baby trying to reach the West Coast. In short order, the pilots took charge. As they radioed ahead, we were slipped onto a succession of generally westward-heading DC-3 cargo flights.

For days, wedged among crates and boxes, Mom was continually airsick, so I was taken care of by cockpit crews, which included regular feedings of coffee and donuts to which I am addicted to this day. She and I eventually reached San Francisco, got down to the docks, and booked last-minute passage aboard a Matson Line ship to Honolulu. She had never been farther than 100 miles from her birthplace.

By the end of September, we were settled in a little beach cottage — shack really — on Waikiki near the Royal Hawaiian. My father was able to get a few hours of shore leave when he was in port and join us several times a month that fall.

Early on Sunday, December 7, Dad was preparing for "Divine Services" aboard ship, when he heard the aircraft above. Fourteen miles away at Waikiki, so did my mother. When the strafing began, showing the exquisite practicality of mothers everywhere, she placed me in a corner of the cottage and then she ran down to the water's edge. She and I stayed this way for hours, ninety feet apart, while the attack went on. She said later that she wanted my father to have a son if he lost his wife. And she wanted him to have a wife, so that he could have more children, if he lost his son. By the end of that day, we were a wartime military family, like thousands of others.

For several weeks after the attack, my parents had no direct contact, but Dad eventually got ashore, and we were reunited, alive and unhurt. Panic and fear of another attack still consumed people on the Islands, and word got out among the little beachfront Navy community that a chaplain was ashore.

Military families and some locals started showing up with their children, saying they wanted them baptized before the next attack. I had not been baptized either.

My father — staid Presbyterian Easterner — waded into the Waikiki surf in his uniform. On that day he baptized over forty children and adults, including me, by immersion or not, depending on the size of the wave. My “baptismal certificate” is Dad’s handwritten note in a little standard issue military New Testament, just above the greeting from President Roosevelt.

Every Advent I remember Pearl Harbor. Not really, of course. I remember what my family told me about that place and time, and about other times and places later. The older I get, the harder it is to distinguish what I experienced from what I was told. I think it probably doesn’t matter.

My parents’ generation has been called “The Greatest Generation,” which may be true. But I think of them as the most adventurous generation. They grew up in the Great Depression. They had nothing to lose and no reason to stay put. They got up and out and rarely looked back. I am retired now and swap stories with other retirees. We have a common problem: our children think our cars do not have enough airbags for us to safely transport grandchildren. I think of my mother and our journey across the country and across the ocean. We didn’t even have a car.

Dad stayed in the Chaplain Corps for twenty-eight years. We lived in thirteen states. We had a special ritual when we got orders to move: we would take our set of dishes out to the driveway, and everyone would throw them at the garage door. It was time to move on.



Fred Peck retired in 2007 after forty-one years in ordained ministry. He served in two parishes and was on a seminary faculty. Then for twenty-five years he directed foundations for higher education and for health care in California and the Pacific Northwest. He and Kim-Lien Peck live in Vancouver, Washington. He can be reached at fearandloafing@pacificwest.com.

Walter S. Peck and Marjorie Mills Peck are buried in the chaplains’ section at Arlington National Cemetery.