

Based on the true story of a WW2 Pearl Harbor survivor, Black Cat, and decorated war veteran.

Dear Margaret,

Late night December 7, 1941

Dear Margaret,

December 7th started like any other Sunday in the service for me. Since it was my day off, I slept in, which means I didn't have any breakfast. I was planning on going to a later mass at the Chapel and wanted to have a lazy day, have a quick lunch afterwards, and shoot the bull with the guys.

I remember being slightly aggravated because there was so much noise and I was being rudely awakened from a wonderfully sound sleep.

Well, everything seemed muffled at first. Then, as I started to awaken, I heard was a lot of noise, explosions. I practically fell out of bed, and I jumped up to see what was going on. As I was running toward the window, someone yelled that we were being attacked by the Japs.

You have to understand, all of this took seconds, split seconds that seemed to be in slow motion—watching a train wreck that can't be stopped. Every second's engraved in my eyes and brain as each movement was pulling me forward.

I ran to the balcony in my shorts where I had an excellent view of the harbor. The unmistakable sound of multiple airplane bombers coming at us thundered in my ears.

Looking up, I could see large formations of aircraft going to other targets. I looked over the harbor, and the Jap torpedo planes and dive bombers had a nice clean run at the Battleships.

Watching them drop torpedoes and bombs, I could feel the percussion of the explosions as they annihilated everything on Battleship row.

Some of the men on the ships were firing back, but it was a losing battle. Without any opposition, the Japs had everything going their way.

It was damned sad.

The clear air over the harbor was now encompassed with smoke, and the clean water turned black with oil.

Those of us in the barracks knew we had to get down to the squadron and report in. I don't remember when I grabbed my clothes, or how I managed to dress while I was watching the destruction unfold before my eyes.

As I slipped in my shoes, a bright flash blinded me. Looking over toward Battleship Row, flames were licking the oil in the harbor.

Just about that time there was another large explosion and I could see the USS Arizona was on fire. The black smoke from her went straight up into the sky. The Battleships tied up at Ford Island were settling to the bottom.

Our squadron was about a half-mile from the barracks. On our way down the road leading to our squadron we had to duck for cover a few times. After the Japs dropped their bombs they started strafing, shooting at us as we hightailed it to the hanger.

Someone would yell and we'd hit the dirt. You could see them coming with their guns firing, but we all reported in without anyone getting hit.

The dry docks across the harbor from our barracks were in flames. I hadn't known it then, but the USS Downes was one of the ships that was hit. (The Downes was in dry dock at the time Pearl was bombed.)

Our squadron and all the planes we'd parked two days ago were destroyed. The hanger we shared with VP21 had a couple of large gaping holes.

Since we were still under attack, the strafing aircraft kept us moving as quickly as possible. We had to get the burning planes away from the ones that *weren't* on fire.

All of a sudden, it was dead silent. There was an eerie stillness, a numbness after hearing all the explosions. I stopped for a moment, looking around the harbor. All I could see was burning ships. There were a lot of small whale boats and fishing boats picking up men from the oil blackened water.

The smell was something I don't think I'll ever forget. The stench of burning oil and destruction...

Someone from our squadron suggested to me to set up a fifty caliber machine gun in one of the PBY's. He asked if I ever shot one and I said no.

I learned real quick.

We moved the PBY over to the opening of the hanger, positioning it so we could shoot and protect the airplane as much as possible.

We ended up relieving each other, taking turns being on look-out, etc. I was on the ground after we loaded the machine gun.

Just about then the Japs returned. This time they were doing a lot more strafing. When the planes started coming in our direction, we started firing the fifty that we'd just loaded.

How a handful of seconds could feel like eternity, I don't know. But it sure felt like eternity to me. All I could do was stand near the opening of the hanger, watch, and point to any aircraft coming our way.

I'll tell you right now, when they came back the second time around, anyone that had a gun was firing it.

During all this mess, the USS Nevada which had gotten up steam was coming up the channel, ran itself into a sandbar in the middle of the harbor on purpose. I think they did it so the ship wouldn't sink in the harbor, and foul up the channel.

When the strafing ended, they mentioned the men from the ships would be needing clothing. I left the squadron area and went up to the barracks to open my locker.

For some reason or other I went through the mess hall.

That was a huge mistake. Margaret, I just can't seem to get this out of my head.

Every table had a body on it. They were all covered with oil and blood. The medics were working as fast as they could to help the wounded and relieve their pain. Seeing this, watching the medics, kicked in the reality of what was happening around me.

I swear I started sweating it out right there.

I ran to my locker, bringing back everything to the squadron that I could spare. Handing them to the guy who was collecting the items for the sailors, I turned to the squadron leader for more direction.

He had everyone moving planes around and cleaning up the hanger. We broke out the thirty and fifty caliber ammo, and started linking them in belts so we'd be ready when they came back. Most of us couldn't believe how old the ammo was (WW1), and we all hoped they would work.

Our ships were gone!

All the ships that'd been tied up at Ford Island were on the bottom of the harbor or close to it. Men were putting out the fires, and starting the pumps to get the water out. Taking inventory of what happened on Ford Island, the Japs knocked out all our Battleships, and two of them went belly up.

Over in the dry dock area, billowing smoke was visible, from the ships that were hit. The USS Arizona was still smoking, its forward mast was starting to bend because of the intense heat.

It was a complete loss.

The fishing and whale boats from the island residents were still cruising the harbor, trying to save whoever was left, picking up bodies, and taking pictures.

All three PBY squadrons VP22, 23, and 24 lost most of their planes. My squadron, the VP22 didn't have any planes that were able to fly. All three squadrons were crippled.

The Japs had hit outside of the hanger we shared with VP 21, and also disabled all of our planes on the ramp. We had nothing left and would have to wait for replacements from the States, for planes and ships to be built before we could defend ourselves.

Time was a factor we couldn't control.

The day went by pretty fast, they kept us busy doing a little of this and that. When evening rolled around we ate some dry sandwiches. So much had happened that it wasn't until then I realized I hadn't eaten all day. Dry as they were, those sandwiches tasted good.

They mentioned there was a water truck on the strip so Red (Jack Noonan) and I went looking. As we were out on the strip, with a blink of an eye, the sky lit up with gunfire.

There was a spattering of gunfire everywhere, all day, and I think I was finally scared. I don't think I had time to be scared earlier that morning. There was no time to think, just time to do.

Red and I couldn't find the water tank. We had to beat it back to the squadron area once the gunfire had started again.

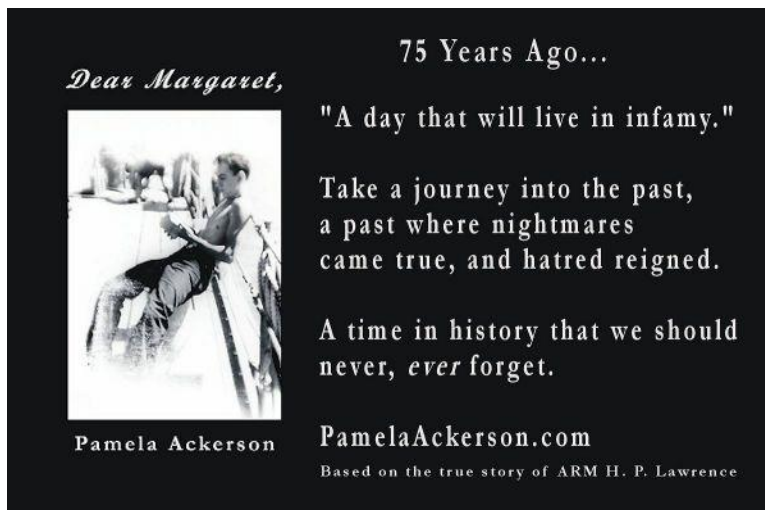
We found out later a few of our own planes were trying to land at Ford.

It was pretty late by this time and the word came down that we might as well turn in for the night.

It was a long day, and I'm sure this letter has been quite a read for you. Thanks for keeping in touch.

Best Regards,
Harry

Thank you for reading the excerpt from Dear Margaret.



Dear Margaret,

75 Years Ago...

"A day that will live in infamy."

Take a journey into the past,
a past where nightmares
came true, and hatred reigned.

A time in history that we should
never, *ever* forget.

Pamela Ackerson

PamelaAckerson.com

Based on the true story of ARM H. P. Lawrence

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