

Pearl Harbor memories

Dec. 7 bombing painful to remember, impossible to forget

By Penny Blaker Mitchell
Tribune-Star Staff Reporter

On a Sunday morning nearly 50 years ago, Ray Sparks Jr. and a couple of his buddies were looking forward to a day at the beach near Wheeler Field on Oahu, Hawaii. They were young. Their spirits were high.

Coming off a week of intense duty while the airfield was on alert and then chalking up passing marks at the Saturday inspection, they figured they had just cause for celebration.

One of Sparks' friends decided he'd wash his car before heading for the beach. Sparks and the other soldier scoffed at that notion. Leaving their buddy with his car, they returned to the barracks to shoot pool.

They had no way of knowing their lives were about to be forever changed. No way of knowing Japanese planes and ships were but minutes away. No way of knowing what started as a beautiful Sunday morning on Dec. 7, 1941, forever would be remembered as a day of infamy.

The Japanese planes caught the American soldiers and sailors by surprise. The attack on Pearl Harbor was unexpected, and it was furious.

Within minutes, American ships positioned along Battleship Row were sinking, felled by torpedoes and bombs, explosions and flames. American planes on the ground at Hickam, Kaneohe, Ford Island, Ewa and Wheeler airfields were torn into tangled strips of smoldering metal. The loss of equipment was staggering: 18 ships sunk or severely damaged; 347 planes destroyed or disabled.

All of that meant little.

It was the loss of life that tore at the hearts of the American people, and—at the same time—united them in a powerful war effort.

On Dec. 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, 2,403 Americans died, including 1,177 men who were killed when the battleship USS Arizona was destroyed. Another 1,178 Americans were wounded that day.

Fifty years later, at home in Merom, Sparks remembers.

For this soldier, now retired, the images of that morning—and all that it meant—are not to be forgotten.

"We were shooting a game of pool in the day room in barracks ... when we heard the planes dive, it sounded like practice. I said, 'It looks like the Navy is out early this morning.' About that time plaster fell and glass flew. My friend said, 'Navy, hell!'"

The men scrambled from the barracks, dashed across the avenue and ducked behind the string of palm trees across the way, all the while dodging bullets fired from low-flying Japanese planes. Sparks remembers dancing around the palm tree, and using it as a shield when the planes approached and departed.

And he remembers watching his supply sergeant "come to the door of the barracks. He just stood there, his mouth open. I yelled at him to run over to us, but he fell ... Later, we found eight holes from his belly to his chin."

Sparks' friend died while he was washing his car.

Sparks, an aircraft mechanic, had been in Hawaii since December 1939. When the attack on Pearl Harbor started, he knew his first duty was to get to the flight



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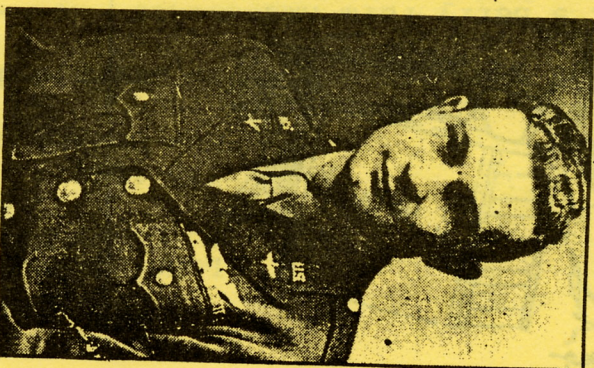
Reminiscing: Ray Sparks Jr. recalls being detained as a POW.

line. One plane in the hangar wasn't damaged, but one of its tires was flat. "Another fellow and I pushed it out. The hangar was burning, and we were trying to put a tire on that plane. It blew up while we were under the wing," Sparks says in a low and studied manner. "We spent the rest of the attack in the dugout at the ball diamond."

Twenty-seven planes were destroyed at that one hangar, Sparks says. Two men from his squadron were killed.

Fifty years have passed since that day, but Sparks' memories are close, his perceptions keen.

He recalls the week before the attack on Pearl Harbor when Wheeler Field was on alert: the P-40s were positioned in a semi-



1st Lt. Ray Sparks Jr.
England 1944

circle around the field, ready for immediate take-off: crews were with their planes day and night; and the engines were revved up every 30 minutes to keep them warm.

"On Friday afternoon, they called off the alert and pulled us back in," he says. The planes in three squadrons were lined up at the hangars. Guns were taken out of the planes and put in the hangars; ammunition was carted to storage in the back of the hangars.

An inspection was set for Saturday, and the soldiers scrubbed the planes until they were spotless. When the inspection was finished, the soldiers were free until Monday morning.

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"The Japanese only had to make about two passes to wipe out the whole field," Sparks says. "It couldn't have been better if they had ordered it."

The planes and ships destroyed at Pearl Harbor were obsolete, Sparks says.

"The planes were old. We couldn't get parts and we couldn't get new planes. The battleships we lost were nearly obsolete . . ."

"In 1940, Congress was determined to stay out of the war. We didn't intend to get in the war, but it got to the point where we couldn't stay out of it."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor spurred the American people to unite, to get behind the war effort, Sparks says. "In six-months time we had a war machine."

Pearl Harbor was the beginning. Sparks was 17 when he graduated from high school in Sullivan County. Too young to enlist in the military, he signed up for a stint with the Civilian Conservation Corps. Shortly after his 18th birthday in November 1939, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was in Hawaii before the Christmas holiday.

During those first two years in the Army, Sparks was an aircraft mechanic. He tended his duties carefully, all the while nurturing a fascination for planes and flying. After Pearl Harbor, he applied for pilot training.

Back in the United States for preflight classes, Sparks met another aspiring young pilot — Chuck Yeager. As they worked their way through flight school, the two became close friends. They were assigned to the same fighter group, accepted into the Flying Sergeants program, and flew combat missions together. Both were shot down over Europe.

Years later, when Gen. Chuck Yeager autographed a copy of his autobiography, "Yeager," for Sparks, he wrote: "To Sparky, A great pilot friend — to the good ole days."

That book, along with framed photographs of Yeager and the other Flying Sergeants and their planes, a shadowbox filled with military ribbons and medals, and an album devoted to 'yellowing newspaper clippings and pictures are among the war memorabilia Sparks holds dear.

"You had to be a good fighter pilot to make it," he says, gazing across the table at Phyllis, his wife of 45 years. "And you had to be lucky, too."

Major Ray Sparks Jr. knows about luck.

On May 8, 1944, about one month before the invasion of Normandy, Sparks was shot down while returning from a bombing mission over Berlin.

His accounts of that aerial fight and of the one year and one day he spent in German prison camps are as vivid as black-and-white newsreels.

Sparks, who had flown escort for the bombing mission, and five other Allied planes were flying at about 22,000 feet, headed back to England, when they spotted a squadron of 16 German planes below.

"We went into a big dive and went after them," he remembers. "They ducked into the clouds, and we boiled down, too, but we got under them and couldn't find them."

Sparks recalls how the Allied planes shot straight back up through the clouds in pursuit. The ascent was too sudden for his plane.

"I was wobbling like a ruptured duck," he says. "I was having difficulty controlling the plane because the air speed was so low."

The German pilots had gone back up through the clouds, and circled around. The Allied planes broke through the clouds in front of them, and Sparks was the last man up.

The fight began.

"I lost my rudder. The wings were sparking like Christmas tree lights. I had no control. I could fly straight and level, but I couldn't turn," he remembers. "There were three on my tail. The plane was smoking. I released the canopy to bail out."

Many American pilots who bailed from their flaming planes were killed by enemy bullets. Sparks was lucky. "The Germans quit shooting and let me bail out. I never saw another tracer go by."

The drama was just beginning. The plane was falling nose first toward the ground. The mighty force of the wind pinned Sparks' arms above his head. He could not free himself from the plane.

"I don't know how I got loose," he says. "Either the wind was strong enough to break the straps, or the plane blew up. I think it blew up. Later I could see three different piles of burning debris on the ground."

Drifting to the earth, Sparks also saw four or five people running along as if they were going to catch him. Then he saw the barbed wire. "It was," he says, "quite worrisome. A lot of pilots were beat to death when they landed. Then I realized it was a prison camp. There was barbed wire all around. . . . I bailed out above the clouds and landed in a prison camp."

He came to rest on a roof. When he regained consciousness, he was on a table, and he was naked. One of his legs was injured, and the people standing around the table were pouring a liquid on the wounds — and laughing.

Sparks played poker the night before his final mission. He woke up late, slipped into a pair of GI coveralls and rushed to his plane. He did not pause to slip on his dog tags, his bars, or any other form of military identification.

The Germans, he says, "treated me as a spy. They were going to shoot me. They put me in solitary confinement and gave me, two slices of bread and a tin can of water."

At one point, the German guards took Sparks from his cell and led him up a road. Sparks remembers: "It seemed like a lot of guards for one little soldier. Then I realized they weren't guards. They were a firing squad."

The Germans marched Sparks to a post atop a knoll, and tied his hands behind his back, then they stepped back and prepared to fire.

"All I could think was 'God! What's that gonna feel like when those bullets hit?'" he says.

The guards didn't fire, but they repeated the process of raising and lowering their weapons three or four times before taking Sparks to a German official who was seated nearby.

"You're lucky. We're not going to shoot you," the German said. "Thank you," Sparks replied.

"We're going to hang you in the morning," the German answered. Several weeks of solitary confinement passed before, the Germans appeared with a copy of Sparks' service record.

"They finally agreed I was Lt. Sparks, and not a spy," he says.

The interrogations stopped, and Sparks was moved to a regular prison camp.

Liberation came in April 1945.

On April 30, he wrote a letter to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Sparks Sr. of Merom: "Yesterday was a great day for me. I'm a free man now . . . free, safe, healthy and happy. . . . It was sure a wonderful sight yesterday to see the old stars and stripes go up on the flagpole of Mooseburg and also at the main gate of our camp and American tanks come rolling down through the camp."

He came home in May.

At the beginning of the war, Sparks harbored the notion of making a career of the military, but by the time he was liberated from the German prison camp, all he wanted was out.

Back in the states, he transferred to the Air Force Reserve, and remained in that service until he was 60.

He is not without pride when he says that — for pay purposes — his military service encompassed 41 years, 10 months and 22 days.



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Honored: Sparks displays medals earned from World War II.

Tom and Nema Beemer, 8132 E. Leavenworth Rd.
Leavenworth, WA 98826 (509) 548 4112

January 29, 1992

Joseph De Shay
465 NE 34th Street
Bora Raton, FL 33431

Dear Joe,

Everybody's friend, Lynn Howard Drollinger, "Junior" that is, died December 31, 1991. Junior joined the 357th state-side, crossed on the Queen Elizabeth, was shot down over France, and evaded and escaped.

He enjoyed life, the good and the bad. He was like that kid who was joyous with all the manure that surrounded him - 'cause there was bound to be a pony nearby. From what I hear, Junior even found a "pony" or two among all the life-threatening bad, while evading the gestapo in France.

At the conclusion of the last western mini-reunion at Laughlin, Nevada, he and his copilot, Ginny, invited us to their little town of Sunnyside, Washington for the next mini-reunion. The date was set for Labor Day, 1992. But with Junior gone, the Sunnyside reunion is not to be. Come September 7, wherever we may be, let's tip one to Lynn Howard Drollinger, Junior that is, for making our lives brighter.

Respectfully,

Tom and Nema

THIS IS WESTMINISTER ABBEY

Next time you're in London, tear yourself away from Piccadilly Circus (if you can) for a couple of hours and stroll down to Westminster Abbey. That's the place you heard so much about during school days, remember??? It's the famous old church where all the great personalities in English history are buried--poets, statesmen, scientists, military and naval heroes, educators, kings and queens, the British unknown soldier. You walk in through the portals removing your officer's cap and immediately you're impressed with the strange silence, a slight musty smell as of great age. A queer sensation of smallness and of insignificance sweeps over you, for all at once you realize that yourself (a wonderful person around whom the earth revolves) doesn't amount to a HILL OF BEANS. You are glad, nevertheless that such a memorial does exist. It has recalled to your mind great men and the deeds they performed. It has inspired you a little, for you became acutely aware that though men's flesh may decay, his spirit lives on, communicated through other men. Men of younger generation. Men like yourself.

This pilot's room is our WESTMINISTER ABBEY.

But, unlike the original, it recalls fellows with wings who are not necessarily dead--though some of them are. Those knife-carved nudos upon the wall, for example, were done by a handsome kid named Beemer who is a prisoner of war in Germany with a couple of broken legs. He intended to decorate every panel, but a bunch of ME-109's upset his plans shortly after we went operational. The ash trays made out of practice bombs (which you so frequently don't hit with your butts) are the handwork of husky Lt. Connaghan, a guy who didn't smoke himself. He had a mid-air collision with an ME-110 over Munich. The linoleum on the floor was procured by a high-strung fellow named Broadhead. He became our C. O. and a Major, finished his tour and went home to the good old States. His ship was christened "Baby Mike" and it turned out to be a sweet baby. Athletically-built, Lt. Mace did the Mustangs on the wall and cut out the swastikas. We had several awfully good days and Mace got discouraged trying to keep it up to date. Jorrios were getting shot down faster than his knife could carve. California's Captain Becker did most of the work on that fireplace in back. (His shell-shattered windshield is resting over the mantelpiece; a souvenir of one of the early "Big-B" raids). And in case you wondered how that classy snack bar ever came into existence, here's a synopsis: Lichter, a P.O.W. who bailed out over Holland, did a great part of the bricklaying, along with Rodney (Mosquito Mauler) Starkey and "Obie" (Shanty Irish) O'Brien and "Kit" Carson. Junior Drollinger, the lad who evaded Jerry with the help of French underground and came back, laid the top. And Captain Johnny England, our high scorer and operations officer, painted the darned thing. The card tables materialized through Captain Dave Perron, a triple-killer boy, who spun in one day when the overcast was so thick that the birds were walking. Of course, everyone pitched in on the interior decorating--Williams, Baker, Lingo, Harris, Adams, Hagan, R.D. Brown, Rydberg, Vogol, Norris, Roberson, even Lt. Col. Egnos. Everybody had a hand in it. That's for sure.

Some of that elusive stuff commonly referred to as "money" made the lounge as nice as it is. We chipped in and purchased the radio,

the record player, the Begin-the-Beguines and Rock-It-For-Me's and Star-Dust's and Beau-Night-In-Hotchkiss-Corners, the Dinah Shores and Fats Wallers and Glenn Millers and the T. Dorsey numbers you like to play so much. During the invasion days when we flew so often and had cots bunched all around the room, we forgot about music and listened continually to B.B.C. and A.F.N. That was the only way to keep up with the news, for there was little to be seen from the air. Money paid for the bottle of liquor from which each pilot downed his shot after getting his first Jerry. We needed money, too for the refrigerator and the enlisted man's wages. It's been convenient as hell to get up late and eat hot cakes, French toast, eggs sunny-side-up, and drink fruit juice and steaming coffee before a mission. That's what money is for, though.

Westminster Abbey, we called it but in a different sort of way from the original. We don't want the place solemn and dark, it should be light and cheerful. We want comfortable chairs and not hard benches. We don't want sacred hush-hush, but the right to storm in after pitching a good drunk and raise all kinds of hell in our own way. We want those luscious pin-ups on the walls where they belong and we insist on hanging that pink lingerie which Hollywood stars autographed and sent us hanging so we can caress it once in a while. We're young and alive and we might as well gather our rosebuds while we may. The guys who have gone would want it that way. That's why they helped make this lounge. And that's how we want it for you, too.

This room has seen a lot of things in the past, all right--from a pair of Sealyhaum pooches to General Kepner from a cat who had five kittens on D-day to an Associated Press reporter, from a Red Cross gal trying to kiss bashful Captain Hank Beal after he knocked down a Jerry to little Johnny Pugh working mighty hard (without success) to get close to a beautiful blonde around two o'clock in the morning. It has seen lots of fellows nervously putting on their parachutes for their first hop across the channel, happy and afraid at the same time. It has seen pilots exuberant after a successful day, everybody chattering loudly, going through the gestures of combat, doing Immelmans and snap rolls with the hands, dumping the stick or firewalling or dropping flaps to keep from over-shooting all over again. It has seen pilots irritable, browned off because their engine got rough and they had to abort; or because another bed in the nissen hut where they live is empty. It has seen fellows like yourself playing cards, reading mail from home, throwing darts, opening a can of corned beef, batting the breeze, scuffling around and shrieking like a bunch of wild Indians. This place is home--over here.

At first, the new replacements act kinda'meek in this room. They are quiet and do a lot of reading and walk up to the area instead of riding and wait for the older guys to speak first. They feel that they will never catch up, that they missed the big show. We're all that way at first.

And then, not long after, they're going on a combat mission for the first time. They come back talking a blue streak, acting a bit more bold as they step up for their fried eggs or yell for the weapons carrier. They've become a part of this squadron, you see and they belong to this room as it belongs to them.

It's YOUR Westminster Abbey, too, pal.

(The above story was sent to us by Robert Dunn, 362nd F.S. on 2 Feb.1989)