

Jim Hewitt recalls a Dec. 7 at Pearl Harbor

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end World War II, the Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with The Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence veteran.

VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless

James J. Hewitt was born in North Trenton in 1919 and moved with his family to the Eldridge Park section of Lawrence Township at an early age.

He attended Eldridge Park School and Trenton High School. His attraction for the military began at an early age when he exercised horses at the 112th Field Artillery in the 1930s. Many polo games were played by members of the National Guard in those days.

In his early years he would be a witness to three major disasters, giving him a claim to fame unlike any others.

As a Western Union delivery boy from 1938 to 1940, he accompanied a Trenton Times reporter to the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in 1937 to cover the landing of the German airship "Hindenberg." It was his job to relay reports and dispatches between the field and the hangars that day. He was there and witnessed in horror as the "Hindenberg" crashed and burned, killing 37 of its crew and passengers, a scene that would be etched in his memory to this day. In 1934, while visiting relatives in Asbury Park, he also stood on the shore and saw the Ward Line steamship "Morro Castle" burn, taking over 130 lives.

As the country slowly emerged from the great depression of the 1930s, Jim was searching for travel and adventure and enlisted in the U.S. Army on Aug. 15, 1940,

hoping to find it. He served at Fort Totten, N.Y. and Fort Eustace, Va. and was eventually assigned to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, as a member of the 98th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion.

Schofield Barracks was a large Army post located north of Pearl Harbor and adjacent to Wheeler Airfield. As a newcomer, or "kamaaina" as they were called, he was housed in wooden barracks on stilts in the foothills of the Waianae Mountains. Jim was assigned as a machine-gunner with a two-man crew in a battery consisting of four three-inch anti-aircraft guns. Their job was the defense of Pearl Harbor and the surrounding bases, and the tense situation in the Pacific at that time required rigorous training schedules.

It was a warm Sunday morning on Dec. 7, 1941 as the sun rose over the Koolau Mountains, and Jim had been walking a sentry post along a roadway between Schofield and Wheeler Field since 4 a.m. It

was 7:45 a.m. when he glanced at his watch, knowing he would soon be going off duty. The smell of fresh coffee came from a nearby mess hall and a few early risers were waiting in line for breakfast.

Suddenly he could hear the sound of approaching aircraft engines in the direction of Kolekole Pass, and then a group of single-engine planes appeared. The lead planes began to peel off and dive across the pineap-

ple fields in his direction. It was then that he realized they were Japanese dive bombers known as "Vals." The large red circles on the wings and tail confirmed his identification. As they opened fire on the American fighter planes on the airstrip, Jim ran for cover and rolled under a nearby building. The attack planes were then joined by others, and a bomb destroyed the water tower at the base. As the bombing and strafing continued, the American Planes began to explode and burn, and it was a one-sided battle.

At one point an officer in Jim's outfit drove a jeep through a door to a supply building and ammunition was passed out to men who had rifles and machine guns. Jim and one of this crew took a B.A.R. and ammunition clips, and taking cover under a piece of excavating equipment began firing at the attacking planes as they passed overhead. Infantrymen from the compound by now were also firing small arms from windows and rooftops and a few of the attacking planes went down in the pineapple fields, but it was impossible to tell who had hit them.

In the meantime, tremendous explosions came from the direction of Pearl Harbor, and the sky was filled with smoke, and as the enemy planes gradually left, Schofield and Wheeler Field were in ruins. Fi-

nally all the troops were called to their command posts, and Jim and his unit were assigned to a pre-arranged gun position overlooking Pearl Harbor and prepared for another attack, which did not come. The scene at Pearl Harbor was a disaster, and all Americans are familiar with the losses in ships, aircraft and lives as a result of the sneak attack.

If Jim had been looking for adventure, in 1940, he most certainly found it on Dec. 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor. His service in the Pacific continued until 1945, and he saw

action in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and other places in the island-hopping campaign.

He returned home unscathed and was discharged on June 8, 1945.

He married Margaret Miller on May 2, 1945, and they had four children, James Jr., now retired from the U.S. Navy, three daughters, Catherine, Margaret and Elizabeth, and nine grandchildren. His wife Margaret passed away in 1970, and in 1975 Jim remarried to Catherine Chell and they reside at 125 Eldridge Avenue, Lawrence.

Jim served as a police officer in Lawrence Township for 27 years, retiring in 1983, and has been a New Jersey licensed private investigator since that time. He is past commander of American Legion Post 414, a member of VFW Post 3022, the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, and various other organizations. At present, most of his time is taken up with his hobbies, Pacific War research, painting, and writing, as evidenced by his frequent "Letters to the Editor" on Americanism.

In December 1991, Jim returned

Thursday, March 2, 1995



James Hewitt (right) and "Ace" Clarke, a member of his gun crew, walk the streets of Honolulu in 1942.

to Hawaii for the 50th anniversary and reunion of the men and women that had served there 50 years ago. It was nostalgic for all who attended, and while there, Jim visited Schofield Barracks where he was served with the breakfast of hot cakes and sausage that he never was able to eat on Dec. 7, 1941.

The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment, and a summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles, which will be published.

All material should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquiries may be made by calling 882-9108.

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