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Abstract: Recounts a retired United States Air Force colonel's World War II experience of being attacked by Japanese fighter planes in Clark Air Field, Philippines on December 8, 1941. Absence of a centralized intelligence effort; Effect of interdepartmental rivalry; Chaos brought by the attack of the Japanese planes.

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MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1941, AT CLARK FIELD

It is hard to remember for sure, but this is the way one second lieutenant bombardier from the 19th Bomb Group remembers it. I was a small town boy from Frewsburg, N.Y. (Chautauqua County). I graduated from high school at age sixteen in 1933. I went for two years to Hobart College, Geneva, N.Y. Then, no more money. I had to go into the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. Any interest I might have had in the Army dissipated there.

In the fall of 1936, I went to the University of Michigan and spent a year and a half in Ann Arbor, with more time used making a living and playing than in studying. For the first six months of 1938, I hitch-hiked all over the country. When Hitler went into Austria, I was in New Orleans and tried to become a flying cadet, but at the recruiting office I was advised my vision wasn't good enough, so I went my merry way toward San Francisco.

In the fall of 1938, I went to Michigan State, where ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] was mandatory, since the college is a land grant school. I refused to take ROTC--primarily from my CCC experience--by telling them I was a conscientious objector.

Then came October 1940 and registering for the draft. I was working only part-time and not even bothering to go to school. The draft board told me that I was just the type of young man they were looking for. The next morning I applied at the recruiting office in Lansing for the Flying Cadets. They found that my eyes were perfect and, so, in December 1940 I was in Glenview, Illinois, going to flying school. I washed out there and was immediately sent to bombardier training at Lowry Field, Colorado, in the first service test class of officer bombardiers. As soon as we finished, we were sent right out to regular bomb groups as cadets. I went to March Field, California, to the 30th Bomb Squadron, under Maj. David Gibbs. We were at Albuquerque Army Air Base in September.

On September 15, 1941, I was commissioned. At the same time that Major Gibbs pinned the second lieutenant bars on my uniform he gave me the word that we were moving to Clark Field. I was to be the transportation officer for the ground echelon, but would fly over with him.

Now to the war and that first day. The ground echelon left Albuquerque on September 27, 1941. My wife and I were married the same day. We put our many friends on the train and started our honeymoon.

In mid-October, the air echelon left Albuquerque. We landed at Hamilton Field and there, I believe, we were briefed by General Lincoln. He stood on the stairway in base operations and told us that we were probably going to war and would be

crossing Japanese held territory with "hot" guns. He intimated that in his opinion war was inevitable and that the Spring of 1942 was the probable time. His last words were, "Good shooting." In Hawaii, we were given practically the same briefing by an admiral; it might have been Admiral Short. I honestly don't know. I wanted to get back to the poker game at the club and, besides, the general at Hamilton had said it all.

Now to Clark and the time immediately preceding December 8. General Brereton came out to Clark Field sometime in late November, or early December, and said practically the same things the Hamilton Field general and the Pearl Harbor admiral had said. Brereton did say that war appeared inevitable and that the 7th Bomb Group was coming over and would be stationed on Mindanao in the immediate future. Our most pressing need was early warning and more radar, in his opinion. Particularly, because of the lack of early warning, he advised us that our alert posture had to be of the highest degree. He expected all of us to be airborne in about ten minutes from the sounding of the alert. We were to wear helmets, gas masks, and side arms at all times. We were to dig slit trenches near all buildings and tents. He came out bluntly and predicted April for war, but said it certainly might come much earlier.

Saturday December 6, I was in charge of a group of enlisted men digging the last few trenches in the squadron area. Saturday evening I was in Major Gibbs' quarters, with "Shorty" Wheless, Ray Cox, Jim Connally, Bill Menaugh, and Lt. [Raymond Gehrig?] Gary. Connally and Gibbs were arguing high level strategy. Major Gibbs holding the view that if he were the Japanese, he would strike now--that very week-end--since the American, British, Chinese, and Dutch attitude left no room for compromise. Jim Connally said that the Japanese would back down; America was too strong. I wanted them to quit talking and play poker. Poker prevailed.

Sunday, I flew as a bombardier on a reconnaissance flight up to Formosa. We went North until we could clearly identify the island, then turned back South over the China Sea. A heavy squall line covered most of the sea, so our recon report was only of the weather. Our quarters were some Swali huts in the back of the officers club. Right after landing and debriefing, Sunday evening, I went to my quarters and listened to Don Bell, a radio commentator from Manila. He said it looked like peace would prevail in the Pacific immediately, since the great Japanese ambassador was now talking with Mr. [Cordell] Hull and President Roosevelt. I went to bed, sleeping soundly, thinking Major Gibbs was wrong.

At 5:30 or 6:00 am, Lt. George Markovich came running through our quarters saying that Pearl Harbor had been attacked and that at long last we would help the Russians--he was of Russian descent.

Our operations officer got us the word as soon as possible. It seems to me it was at about 7:00 or 7:30 am that all the aircraft that had camouflage painting were to take off, holding to the immediate south of the field, until Colonel Eubanks could get better instructions. The two planes that were not camouflaged would be painted immediately. Gibbs' aircraft, No. 075, was not camouflaged. I was told to take the 075 ground crew plus some other people and paint it now. We had it in the corner hangar and were at it, probably at about 8:00 am, with spray guns and brushes. Everyone really went at it in a hurry. We were about done at 11:30 and I then went over to the club for lunch. I ate and started back across the field at about 12:10. I walked back with Lieutenant Berkowitz, a navigator, and Lt. Woodrow Holbrook, a communications officer; we were all "comedians." P-40s were landing and taking off, B-17s were landing, dust was flying all over. We put on our gas masks, made faces at each other, horsed around, and generally played the fools that we were. It was about 12:25 when we got back to the hangar. I knew I was supposed to be at the hangar. I was in charge of that painting crew, but I wanted to hear the latest news and rumors, so I left the hangar and went to the operations tent with Berkowitz at about 12:30. On Manila radio, Mr. Bell again, was just saying that there was no news from Clark Field and that there had been none all morning, so quite possibly Clark was under attack. Lt. Jim Colouri or Lt. Ray Teborek was looking up at the sky. Berkowitz was standing beside me. The man looking up in the sky said, "What a beautiful navy formation, two Vees of twenty-seven each." I looked up and I knew it was too late. The bombs were already well on their way. I ran as fast as I could, with Berkowitz behind me, toward the big ditch between the tent and the hangar.

As I ran the few steps, I saw a fire truck and an ambulance parked beside the hangar. Two orderlies were jumping out of the ambulance, one on each side. A fireman had his hand on the fire siren--a hand crank type--on the fire truck and was starting to crank. I jumped in the ditch, just as the bombs were hitting. An Army PFC and I hugged each other as the earth trembled and debris fell. A leg came in on us, I think it belonged to Berkowitz, but I didn't know. It was a bloody mess.

The bombing lasted just a short time. I had seen the formation, so I knew that was all there was to it. I jumped up, full of a terrible [guilty] conscience, since I had not been at my duty station, in the hangar with 075. I ran past the two vehicles. The two orderlies appeared to be dead lying next to the fire truck, with one dead man still holding the siren crank.

In the hangar, a fire was burning in the back, holes in the roof with ammunition in boxes were burning and exploding, 075 seemed okay. Ray Cox came running up. He and I threw ladders, paint cans, pails, and compressors every which way. I jumped in and never having started a B-17 before, I tried to start all four engines at once. It can't happen, but actually two engines caught and were running when Ray

got in and released the brakes, and we taxied out of the building. There were bomb craters all around, so we had to step just outside. What I thought were P-40s were flying all over the place. Then I saw their red ball insignia. Ray and I jumped out of the airplane. He ran one way and I ran back toward the tents.

The next stupid thing I did--a la the movies--I got a box of ammo and a machine gun from the ammo tent and went back to the ditch. I had managed to get a .50 caliber and a .30 caliber guns. I threw them down in disgust. What went through my mind was that we were caught with our pants down. Gibbs was right and I am a vet just like the old GAR [Grand Army of the Republic] Civil War boys.

About then I saw a nearby B-17 that looked in good shape, but had some smoke coming from the cockpit. A truck was nearby that had a tiny fire extinguisher. I grabbed this little extinguisher, turned it on and was scared that the aircraft gasoline would blow up. I threw that little insignificant extinguisher in the cockpit window and ran as fast as I could toward the mountains. This got me out on the airfield past the tents. I saw an anti-aircraft installation, so I jumped in that. There were two soldiers there, one dead and the other poor fellow was trying to work his big gun, but it was jammed. He and I worked on that gun for an eternity, probably thirty seconds. Then he decided the breech was completely broken and could not be fixed. The gun was well dug in with the sand bags around the edge, but it also was full of ammunition. I was so scared and stupid, I jumped out of there and headed further out toward the center of the field.

It finally dawned on me that I was right in the middle of the shooting, the Japanese fighters were strafing, doing 180 degrees turns, and coming back through again. It appeared they were just doing a pattern like knitting, north to south and south to north, kicking their rudders back and forth to spray everything in sight. I jumped in some tall grass, lay on my back, and futilely fired the two clips of .45 ammo I had for my side arm. Then, I finally had enough sense to pray and it ended.

I went back to the tent. Everything everywhere seemed on fire and dead. A bunch of us were running around helter-skelter. I found Woody Holbrook. A doctor had a truck and was getting the wounded aboard. We helped him until he was loaded and started off in the direction of Stotsenberg.

Woody suggested we go to group headquarters and find out what we were supposed to do. He and I started out that way. Just outside the headquarters, I spotted Lt. Frank Bender--I hadn't known he was anywhere near the Philippines. He was a fraternity brother of mine at Hobart and a particular friend. In fact, his cards and letters, telling how great it was at Randolph and Kelly, were the main reason I had wanted to go in the Air Corps. After much back slapping and carrying on, I took Bender, his buddy, and Woody Holbrook over to our Swali hut, where I

had a fifth of Johnny Walker Red Label.

We had to go back of the club to get to my hut. The kitchen of the club had been hit just as the Filipinos were eating their lunch. Many were dead and wounded. I saw one leg, obviously a female Filipino lying in the dust, then I knew that I hadn't seen Berkowitz since the beginning and that the amputated leg in the ditch with the PFC and me was poor George's leg.

The four of us drank the nearly full fifth of scotch in about five minutes. Bender said he had just gotten in with the 27th, but their planes weren't there. We all, at the same time, got the knowledge that we were truly lost. His airplanes weren't even in the area, probably at sea; ours had been destroyed.

Woody said he was going to his hut and get his valuables. Bender and his friend said they were going to find a way to get back to Manila and they left. I decided I wanted to die in good clothes and if I didn't die I would need good shoes. I changed to my best pants and shirt and put on a brand new pair of shoes that I had had made at Ft. Stotensberg. I left the hut and headed toward group headquarters.

At headquarters, no one knew anything. One captain told me to report to Lt. Sig Young on the flight line. I never found Sig. I think he actually was on Mindinao with the 93d Squadron and Major Combs. I did find Ray Cox and Holbrook. Ray said he was told by Gibbs to salvage parts. By now it was nearing sunset, Ray told us to take off away from the flight line and possible night bombing and come back to him to come dawn.

Woody and I went in the direction of Stotensberg and sat along the edge of the road listening to the tanks and Army units pulling out without lights going off to do battle, maybe to win the war. We hoped, but deep in our hearts we felt nothing but abject defeat. We knew the Japanese had the air battle already won. Clark Field was dead and so probably was Nichols and the Army would be of no consequence without aircraft. We slept by the side of that main road leading out of Ft. Stotensberg.

When dawn broke, it brought chaos, but by then Woody and I had hooked ourselves into Cox's army and we had a job to do. We had no effective warning of Japanese raids. Each job that two men normally would do, took six of us. A lieutenant in charge--me--a non-com, two watchers, and two men to do the work. The four of us non-workers would watch the four quadrants of the sky for the Japanese, while the remaining two would work.

It was easy. It kept your mind off your troubles. Ray got his orders from Gibbs;

there were all desperate things. "Salvage all aircraft instruments, keep them in the tent until we have a safe place to hide them." "Salvage engines and put them close to the railroad tracks, so they can be moved quickly." "Try and keep the airfield operational, with or without the cooperation of the engineers." Ray's orders to me were always simple: "Austin go take five guys and pull all the instruments that are any good off 067 and bring them back to here." With something to do, no matter how futile, you can keep from being scared and worried. Those first few days passed, from then on it's a long story.

What were the beginnings? How could it have happened?

Jealousies between the countries--A-B-C-D (American, British, Chinese, and Dutch). Jealousies between the Filipino and the Americans. Jealousies between the Army and the Navy. Jealousies between the Army ground and Army air elements. In Washington, interdepartmental rivalry--too much empire building and organizational loyalty (above loyalty to our cause) all of the above really doomed us to poor intelligence.

What went on down in Manila on Monday morning, I doubt anyone knows. I can best describe the whole thing to you by reminding you of the day JFK [President Kennedy] was shot. The two situations were very much alike, if you can remember how you felt then, you will know how a second lieutenant bombardier felt at 4:00 pm, on Monday, December 8, 1941, at Clark Field.

The breakdown in intelligence, communications, command relationships, morale, even food was complete and unique: but that horrible pall of defeat and abject sorrow in both Kennedy's assassination and the December 8th fiasco were the most remembered feelings.

At the time you couldn't blame anyone, but everyone has to have someone to blame, to vent his frustrations on someone or something. Today in Xenia, Ohio, the people are really upset with the weather service's communication of their warning.

I now feel that the scapegoat for the particular Clark Field fiasco was General MacArthur and his staff for not laying on an immediate retaliatory raid against Formosa. To wait for an attack on the Philippines, after Hawaii had already been attacked, was criminal.

Beyond that, and probably much more important in the long run, I blame the interservice and interdepartmental rivalries that kept us from having a centralized intelligence effort that possibly could have kept President Roosevelt honestly informed.

The whole thing was too much an Army-Navy football game.

Lt. Roy Cox was killed in Java. Lt. Holbrook was taken prisoner on Mindanao and was killed when the Americans sank a prison ship late in the war. Major Gibbs was lost in a B-18 en route to Mindanao from Clark early in the war. He had left orders for me to come down by the following B-18 the next night. We made it. Lt. Bender was the pilot. I was picked up as a member of the 93rd Bomb Squadron and flew with the Earl Tash crew through the Java campaign and on into Australia. Bender was, for a long time, in the jungles of New Guinea in late 1942. He had had to bail out. He retired in 1965 or 1966 at Bergstrom AFB as the wing commander there and is doing something in the Houston area for John Connally, the politician.

This is absolutely the first time I have ever tried to put this in black and white--the way it was that day for me.

Fred Crimmins was down at the next hangar and had a bad experience. He had to have a steel plate put in his head and I heard somewhere that he died, not many years ago.

I saw Berkowitz in Sydney, Australia, in March or April 1942. He was in a bad way with his leg off at the hip, but I heard he got well and was active as a navigator instructor at Monroe, Louisiana, during most of the war.

In Edmunds' book, *They Fought With What They Had*, on pages 183 and 184, he tells about the morning mission we flew across the Japanese fleet at Lingayin Gulf. Mr. Edmunds has it just the way it was. I think he got that information from Art Hoffman, who was our navigator in Tash's airplane and was looking over my shoulder as we bombed.

Note: On April 6, 1974, Col. Austin W. Stitt, USAF(Ret) wrote this letter, in longhand on yellow legal pad paper, to aviation writer Sky Beaven. Mrs. Beaven passed it on to Air Power History to enrich the historical record.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): (Overleaf) Clark Field, in 1939.

MAP: World War II map of the Philippine Islands

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Clark Field In an earlier era, around 1929, looking much like a summer encampment.

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By Austin W. Stitt

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