The Day the Bombs Fell A True Story

I loved Sunday mornings. That's when Mom had time to fix my favorite breakfast. Over a big scoop of rice, she layered slices of Portuguese sausage sliced round like a quarter and as thick as a hunk of bubble gum. Then she added an over-easy egg and a wedge of ripe yellow-orange papaya.

"Wow, those military airplane maneuvers sound like the real thing this morning," said Dad as he scooted his chair up to the table.

My family -- Mom, Dad, my two-year-old brother, and I -- lived in Pearl City, a finger of land that jutted into the middle of Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii. I was six years old and a first grader in downtown Honolulu.

The harbor sheltered aircraft carriers, battleships, tankers, cruisers, and a submarine base. Army and Navy airplanes practiced frequent takeoffs and landings and then charged and dodged one another in mock battle exercises, often right over our house. So airplanes overhead were not unusual.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of low-flying planes, then loud explosions followed by more planes passing directly over our house. The blasts were too loud for my father to ignore. He bolted from the kitchen table and darted into the front yard. I ran right behind him.

Dad shielded his eyes against the early morning sun and tilted his face skyward. I leaned tight against him and hugged his knees.

"Honey Girl, these are not American airplanes. They don't have a large star painted on them. Look, they have orange-red circles."

The planes were low, just barely above our house. When one pilot craned his neck sideways to check his bombing target, I saw his face and the goggles over his eyes.

In the movies, an airplane attack has the "rat-tat-tat" of guns as the plane dive-bombs its target. When these Japanese planes flew directly over us, the roar of their engines muffled the sounds of the bullets. Even though we couldn't hear them, the incendiary bullets found their targets. Our kitchen was on fire, and parts of our roof were gone. The front door of our next-door neighbor's house was so bullet-ridden, it fell from its hinges.
We watched as the battleship USS Utah turned on its side in the murky water. It had been hit and was sinking. The odor of burning oil hung over the harbor.

"Get in the car! We've got to get away from the harbor," yelled Dad. We piled into our black Ford. But when we tried to leave, military police in jeeps shouted at us to get off the road. Then, truckloads of servicemen tore by us, desperate to get to their posts. Many of the men were still trying to pull on clothing as the trucks sped down the highway.

Dad switched on the car radio. "Air raid -- Pearl Harbor! This is no maneuver. This is the real McCoy!" The message was followed by an urgent order for all military and medical personnel to report to bases and hospitals.

Dad wanted us safe and that meant away from the harbor. After the military trucks sped past us, my dad shifted the car into gear.

"Dad, stop! I can't go without Hula Girl!" I pleaded for him to wait until I could find our dog. Dad promised we'd come back to get her after we found a safe place to hide. I began to cry, knowing how scared Hula Girl would be with the sirens and loud explosions.

Dad headed toward the sugar cane fields in the hills above the harbor. From there, we could see the destruction below us.

We also could watch the skies, and Dad said, if the planes came back, we'd hide in the tall sugar cane.

Soon our neighbors joined us. The adults all huddled together talking seriously while the kids played hide-and-seek. I forgot about not getting to go home. But by the time the sun was high in the sky, I was bored with the games, and I was hungry. I thought of my favorite breakfast left on our kitchen table. I hoped Hula Girl had eaten every bite and licked the plates clean. Then I thought, what if a bullet had hit her? I told my dad I wanted to go home.

But it was too dangerous to go home. The governor declared a state of emergency and placed Hawaii under martial law, meaning that the military was in charge. The military police sent us to a recreation hall at a nearby sugar plantation. The hall was a small wood building next to the sugar mill. There was a kitchen and one bathroom. About 200 civilians from our neighborhood were already there.

We sat in total blackout conditions that long night. We couldn't make any phone calls -- the lines were reserved for military use. There was no radio news -- the stations were ordered off the air in case the Japanese were listening. Anxious for any bit of news, some of the adults took turns manning shortwave radios. There was nothing to do but wait for morning. Our family huddled close together in the dark.

After five days of sleeping on the floor, we were allowed to go home. At last, I would see Hula Girl, I couldn't wait

Our yard was full of shrapnel, and when I couldn't find Hula Girl, I just knew she'd been injured by one of those jagged pieces of metal and had crawled off somewhere to die. Still, I didn't give up. I searched between the houses, under our house, in the bushes, and up in the trees until Mom made me come in for dinner and bedtime.

Lying in bed that night, I thought I heard Hula Girl whimpering. I knew she wasn't under my bed, so she had to be under the house. I called to my dad, and he grabbed a flashlight. Somehow, when I had looked before, I had missed her in that small, dark crawl space, but there she was. We had a joyful reunion.

With Hula Girl at my side, my friends and I spent the next days playing, because all the schools were
closed to students. Mine was converted into a military hospital. Martial law demanded absolutely no lights to show from our house at night, so Dad painted our windows with black enamel. After two months, I returned to a school that had a new bomb shelter.

By the time martial law ended three years later, I was used to barbed wire everywhere, blackouts and curfews at night, young men in military uniforms overflowing Honolulu streets, and wearing my gas mask.

The hardest part of the war for me was saying good-bye to my friends. Many of them sailed to the mainland, where their parents knew they would be safer and they would not have to worry about another bombing or worse, an invasion. I was sad and missed them.

Finally, when I was in fifth grade, the war ended. We turned in our suffocating gas masks, and we played outside after dark. We watched the bomb shelters get plowed in and the barbed wire torn down.

My mom kept a bullet my dad dug out of our kitchen wall with his pocketknife. She carried it in a small black coin purse until she died. Now I carry it as a memory of the Sunday the bombs fell.

Incendiary means causing or capable of causing fire.

Shortwave radios are used in remote areas when other communication is unavailable.

Shrapnel are pieces of an exploded artillery bomb, mine, or shell.

A quiet Sunday morning turned into a terrifying day as Japanese planes unloaded bombs on U.S. ships and bases in Pearl Harbor.

Dorinda was six years old on December 7, 1941.

Dorinda’s family moved to Pearl City, Oahu, in 1941.

Dorinda’s father raced to get the family away from the harbor and under cover of a tall sugar cane field.

After Pearl Harbor, Dorinda and her brother had to carry gas masks with them at all times.

Fire and smoke filled the harbor as Japanese bombs hit their targets. Here, a launch rescues a sailor while the battleship OSS West Virginia, hit by several torpedoes, begins to sink.

Like her mother did before her, Dorinda carries the Japanese bullet that her father pried from their kitchen wall.

Military facilities weren’t the only things destroyed. Private homes and businesses on Oahu also were ruined.

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By Dorinda Makanaonalani Nicholson

Dorinda Makanaonalani Nicholson was a child living in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941. She writes and speaks about World War II history through the eyes of a child. Visit her at www.pearlharborchild.com.

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