

From Fear to Forgiveness

an autobiographical essay on the Pearl Harbor Attack
by Joe H. Morgan



I am Joe Morgan, a survivor of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941. I was an aviation ordnanceman, third class in Aircraft Utility Squadron Two (VJ-2) stationed on Ford Island that infamous morning. VJ-2 was housed in a hangar on the southwestern shore of Ford Island which is in the middle of Pearl Harbor. I was just a young sailor from Little River, Texas, who had joined the Navy “to see the world.” I certainly was not expecting to have to fight a war!

It was my lot to have the duty that Sunday morning and was in the hangar waiting for the 8 o'clock muster of the ongoing duty section. At five minutes to eight we heard planes diving. We did not pay any attention to them because we were expecting an aircraft carrier to enter port; the planes always came in ahead of the carrier to land on Ford Island. Occasionally, they were given permission to make mock attacks on the base, and we supposed that was what

was happening—until there was a loud explosion across the runway east of us.

We all ran outside of the hangar thinking a plane had crashed. We looked across the runway in the direction of the explosion in time to see a plane diving out of the sun and dropping two bombs in the vicinity of the patrol squadrons. When it pulled out of its dive, we could see the symbol of the Rising Sun under its wings. Suddenly, we realized we were being attacked by the Japanese Imperial Navy.

Fear gripped my heart, and I started looking for cover. By then planes were swarming all over the skies. I turned and saw a low-flying plane coming from the west and turn up the channel heading northeasterly. As it passed our hangar it was so low I could see the goggles on the rear gunner's helmet. He swung his machine gun in our direction and began spraying our area with bullets. I jumped behind a dual-wheeled tractor parked at the end of the hangar where the large, rubber tires protected me from the .25 caliber machine-gun bullets. The bullets sounded like hail bouncing off of the metal hangar and made puffs of dust as they bounced off of the concrete parking area.

While squatting behind that tractor, I suddenly remembered that less than a hundred feet away in a clump of



Brothers, Joe, Dick & Dubb Morgan, were all three stationed at Pearl Harbor. They joined the Navy to see the world, not to fight a war! (All three survived, thank God.)

trees to the north of me was a high-explosive magazine—where bombs were stored. If the Japanese bombed that, it would wipe out everything within a block! Fortunately, an attempt to bomb the magazine failed when a bomb was dropped in the wrong clump of trees a block north than this one.

My fear turned to terror, and I looked for “taller timber.” In the hangar I found a large “I” beam that supported the roof. The recess in it was large enough for me to squeeze into it where I felt safer with steel on three sides of me.

As I stood there shaking in my No. 8 shoes, I became aware that a couple of our men had picked up .45 caliber pistols that had been used on watch the night before and began shooting at the planes with those pistols. Some other men broke open the emergency rifle cabinet and began shooting at the planes with the 1903 single-shot, bolt-action .30 caliber rifles. And here I, an aviation ordnanceman (trained in maintaining and manning machine-guns) hiding in an “I” beam. I felt like a coward and shame overwhelmed me. This shame begot courage enough to join some other ordnancemen in putting machine-guns in the mounts of about a dozen planes parked near the hangar. The last gun I put in was in the waist hatch of a PBY Catalina patrol bomber, which we used to tow targets, and manned that gun for the rest of the attack. I remained there for the rest of the day and all night expecting the Japanese to return. We even heard a rumor that a Japanese troop landing was expected on the south shore of Oahu.

Some of the most vivid memories included the first Japanese plane I saw shot down. Early in the attack Japanese planes were swarming all over the harbor like bees around a beehive. This plane was traveling southwest on the west side of Ford Island when it

suddenly began to cartwheel and crashed in the water west of our hangar. Someone had shot of one of its wings!

Another vivid memory I have is of the midget submarine that surfaced in the channel just west of our hangar. These midget subs had two-man crews and two torpedoes. They had to surface before they could fire the torpedoes. This one appeared to be aiming at the USS CURTIS anchored across the channel from us in a northwesterly direction. The gunners on the CURTIS were quicker on the trigger than the sub and began shooting at it with 5” guns. While I was watching, two holes appeared in the conning tower of the sub. That not only spoiled his aim, but stopped him from firing a torpedo. It began to sink.

Only the bow and the conning tower were left above the water when a Navy destroyer, the USS MONAGHAN, came steaming down the channel on the way out of the harbor. The MONAGHAN rammed the sub, head on, and dropped two depth charges on it as she passed over it. However, the MONAGHAN was going so fast to keep from blowing off her fantail with the depth charges in such shallow water that she could not make the bend in the channel. She ran aground on Waipio Peninsula, and it took her over an hour to back off of that mud flat. In the meantime, the USS DALE passed by, becoming the first destroyer to get out of the harbor during the attack.

Another memory that stands out in my mind involves the shooting down of a Japanese plane in which our squadron had a part. A plane was crossing the landing strip from east to west when all of

our gunners were shooting at it. Just as it passed over our hangar, it burst into flames. We expected it to crash in the channel, but the pilot guided his plane to crash on top of the USS CURTIS. This was the first kamikaze of the war. (Kamikaze is a Japanese word meaning suicide plane. This tactic was used extensively and successfully against American ships toward the end of the war.)

I have already shared with you some of the emotions I had at the outset of the attack, but there were stronger emotions that developed as the attack progressed. One was anger at the attackers and anger over the fact that we were attacked without warning. This anger developed into hatred toward the Japanese nation. (Curiously, it was not felt toward the American Japanese—they proved to be loyal American citizens.) My hatred grew into animosity. I experienced a psychological state that I later learned was called the dehumanization of the enemy.

This is a state of mind that thinks of one's enemies as being less than human. It is a common experience for service personnel. It makes it easier to shoot at the enemy. It is evidenced when we call the enemy by derogatory nicknames. We called our enemy, "Japs" and "Nips" with a sneer in our voices. In this state of mind I wanted to shoot down the Japanese planes. I wanted to kill them. This feeling also led me to rejoice in American victories in subsequent battles. Even when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, I felt exhilarated, like my team had won the World Series.

Yet, none of these emotions were stronger than the feeling that morning that I was out of God's will. You see, ever since I was four years old, I had received certain indications that God was calling me to be a preacher. And, like Jonah in the Bible, I joined the

Navy instead! However, like Jonah, who got down on his knees in the belly of that big "fish," I prayed that night, "Oh, Lord, get me through the war alive, and I'll be a preacher." God took me seriously. Three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, I was transferred to the Island of Maui where I spent the rest of the war without seeing any more combat.

The attack on Pearl Harbor changed my life greatly in another way. For a couple of months before the attack I had been having a casual relationship with a local girl-going to the beach, having lunches together, visiting her and her family in their home-enjoying each other's company. Around the first of December, we decided to stop seeing each other. After all, I was engaged to a girl back in Texas, and the local girl was engaged to a local fellow.

After the attack I called her at her office to let her know I had survived the attack, and I asked her if we could have lunch together. At that lunch we discovered that we meant more to each other than we had earlier realized. We started dating again and broke off our engagements with our fiancés. On March 7, 1942, three months exactly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Blanche Fernandes and I were married. The very next day I got orders to Maui!

While we were on Maui, some Southern Baptist missionaries started a small church in Kahului. We started



Joe & his fiancé, Blanche, enjoy a day in the Hawaiian sun back in 1941.

attending that church, and I had an opportunity to make a public commitment to enter the ministry. Up until this time I hated school. I was a high school dropout. After I had made this commitment, I knew I needed to get some more education. By the time I got out of the Navy in 1946 I had earned my high school diploma. We went to college and the seminary, and my first full time pastorate was back on Maui! I became the pastor of the Wailuku Baptist Church in August, 1954. About the middle of my four years as pastor at Wailuku the man who led the attack on Pearl Harbor came to Maui!

Mitsuo Fuchida was the commander of the naval air forces that led the attack Oahu on December 7, 1941. After the war, he was disillusioned until he met a Christian missionary who had been a prisoner of war in Japan. He was so impressed with the missionary's story that he went out and bought a Bible. After reading the Bible daily he came upon the verse in Luke 23:34 where Jesus says from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He later wrote, "It was then I met Jesus and realized He died for our sins on the cross."

Someone had invited Captain Fuchida to Maui to tell his story. I had mixed feelings about going to hear him. I still harbored some of these feelings from the war. How should I as a Christian react to this man who had led the attack on us fifteen years before, even if he had become a Christian? I decided to go and hear his story.

After he finished, I went up to him and introduced myself as a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack. His response was a slight bow and the word "Gomenasai." (I'm sorry.) As he reached out to shake my hand, I realized God had changed my heart. The anger, hatred, and animosity toward this man and

his country were gone! God had replaced them with forgiveness!

We shook hands not as former enemies but as brothers in Christ. We both had received God's mercy and forgiveness. I believe what we both experienced is the answer to bringing peace to our world today.



Captain Fuchida shakes hands with Joe Morgan 15 years after Pearl Harbor. Once they were shooting at each other. Now, as brothers in Christ, they fight a common foe: hatred and unforgiveness.

Dr. Joe H. Morgan died at Tripler Army Hospital on October 24, 2002 in Honolulu, Hawaii. He was buried in the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery beside his bride, Blanche, in Kaneohe on November 4th, 2002 with full military honors. His story will live on...

