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Notes: Reminiscences of the day Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese.

Photos: The battleship *California* burning after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. *Keeper of the Faith* by John P. Falter, for *Esquire*, March 1944

DECEMBER 7, 1941



*The battleship California burning after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.
The hull of the capsized Oklahoma is at right.
(National Archives and Records Administration)*

“Most of us kind of wondered where Pearl Harbor was.”

Paul Thompson

Well, you know in those days we weren't interested in things and I remember we were playing sandlot football when the young ladies that were sitting in the car listening to the radio came and told us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. To be very honest about it . . . at the time I think most of us kind of wondered where Pearl Harbor was.

Paul Thompson, Cozad

Student at Boeing School of Aeronautics,
Oakland, California,
later U.S. Army Air Forces navigator,
European Theater.

All I knew when I heard [about] Pearl Harbor that day, I said, “Well there goes my wedding in June.”

Marie Curtis, Genoa

Rural school teacher

[M]y Aunt Rose was listening to the radio and I wasn't paying much attention until they kept hearing the word “war.” I didn't know what “war” was. I had never heard that word before, so finally I got up there and said, “Well, what is it? What is it?” They tried to explain to me what war was and I was appalled! Because up until then, I thought all the grown-ups knew what they were doing, and I could not believe that grown-ups would do this . . . I lost my faith in the adults real quick.

**Rose Marie Murphy Christensen,
Columbus**

Grade school student

My birthday came two days after Pearl Harbor day, and I was quite incensed that my grandmother had forgotten my birthday. Pearl Harbor was December 7 and I thought my birthday was far more important . . . I remember going back to school, back to the fifth grade, the day after Pearl Harbor day . . . and thinking, “Well, is this what you do? You just go on as usual? Here our country's going to war. Am I just supposed to go to school?” And the answer was yes.

Virginia Koehler Knoll, Geneva

Grade school student

I knew we were in very serious trouble and I think if the Japanese had followed up, we would have been defeated because we were caught with no defense. It was really a shock. We had very little to fight with, and if they hadn't returned back and given us that year to prepare, I think it would have been really serious.

Richard Penry, Omaha

Physician, Mead Ordnance Plant,
later U.S. Army Medical Corps,
European Theater

Even though I was only seven and a half years old, I remember December 7, 1941, as if it was yesterday. It was on a Sunday afternoon when we heard on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. It seemed our lives changed right then.

Betty Safarik Spilger, Farwell

Grade school student

I was driving to Omaha, it was on a Sunday . . . when it came on the car radio. You could just hardly believe it . . . My first reaction was that, "It can't be as bad as they're saying it is." We learned later that it really was even worse than they were telling us at that time.

Earl Luff, Lincoln

Vice-president and general manager,
Lincoln Steel Works

I think it [my reaction] was, number one, surprise; number two, I don't think most people [had] even heard of Pearl Harbor; and three, I felt that the Japanese were kind of stupid for even attacking a great, powerful nation like ours, because we put Japan down as a nothing, a tin toy deal . . . On the day before, I think if you had taken a vote among the people, nobody would have wanted to go to war. As soon as we heard about it people were ready to rush down and enlist the next morning.

Floyd Marian, Hastings

High school student, later
U.S. Army Air Forces
C-47 pilot, European Theater

What Did You Do in the War?

There wasn't any question that we were going to be in the war. We had a lot of friends who were pacifists. There was a lot of agitation not to go into the war. A great many people felt that with Europe we had gotten hooked once. We were concerned with the European scene mostly. A great many people — I suppose today we would call them isolationists and certainly pacifists — vowed that they were not going to go over there and mess around again I had one friend, one very close friend in particular, who vowed he would never go to war. I remember wondering that day in December what he was going to do. Well, he went. I mean, it changed a lot of people's minds.

Helen Winter Stauffer, Grand Island

Student at Colorado Women's College,
later Women Accepted for Volunteer
Emergency Service member [WAVES]



"Keeper of the Faith," by John P. Falter. Oil on canvas for Esquire, March 1944. (NSHS Collections - R. Bruhn Photo)

I thought we could go over there and whip them [the Japanese] in six months, but I found out differently. My boss told me differently. The gentleman I worked for who owned the elevator there at Ellis [Gage County] Nebraska, said they had one of the most powerful military machines between them and Germany that ever was. I was just young and foolish and thought, well in six months we'll have this thing over with

I've been to Pearl Harbor a couple of times since then, and I've wondered why at the time when we were squabbling with Japan . . . that all of our battleships were double parked around Ford Island. That didn't make any sense. We had broken the Japanese code and we knew something was going to happen on December 7. We did not know the place, but we knew the time So you wonder about things like that as you get older. You don't think of that when you're young — you're gung ho. Let's go get 'em! In six months we'll be home. That's what I thought.

Gerald Reed, Beatrice

Grain elevator worker in Ellis,
later U.S. Navy firecontrolman,
destroyer USS *McKean*,
Pacific Theater

It was a surprise when Pearl Harbor happened. Of course the draft had been instituted, and we knew that we were going to have to go to the service one way or the other. Nobody really knew that the U.S. would go to war. We knew that things were happening in Europe. You didn't suspect Japan, I don't think, at that time. Things were happening in Europe, which meant at least we were trying to get prepared. That was the time when soldiers were carrying wooden guns and things like that. And that was because nobody really wanted to believe that we were going to have a possible military conflict.

Harry Dahlstrom, Elm Creek

Nebraska National Guard, later
U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps,
Pacific Theater

[A]nother thing that stuck in a lot of our craws, pardon my language, but that's about what it amounted to, was all this iron, junk iron and stuff. They had big prices for it.

What Did You Do in the War?

Well, we thought it was big then, and I don't recall the prices, but so much a ton, or whatever, or pound. And [later] to find out the iron was going to, guess where?, Japan. And then the big sneak attack, and that made everybody pretty unhappy, I'll tell you.

Millard Musil, Potter

Farmer and musician

It was Sunday morning. It was a time of doing nothing, just relaxing on the ship. I was topside talking to some other shipmates when the Japanese came in. We had one chief there who told me not to get excited. He said, "That's just a drill . . ." Then about five or ten minutes later, I saw the *Arizona* blow up . . .

I was young. I wasn't scared. I just was amazed more or less that something like that could happen to us. We knew more or less that the Japanese had crossed the International Date Line with their fleet. They'd done that before and it turned out they were on maneuvers. We had no idea that they could get into Pearl Harbor without us knowing . . . [W]e had patrols out. They had PBYS [U.S. Navy patrol flying boats] and they were running patrols around, but being Sunday morning I don't think they were out there. The thing is, they knew the Japanese fleet was out there . . . The rumor has it that the message came to Pearl Harbor the next morning — too late. It came by Western Union.

Robert Osborn, born in Bertrand

U.S. Navy radioman, battleship USS
California, Pacific Theater

I don't know what to believe about Pearl Harbor. There are some trying to say that Pearl Harbor was a put-up job. That they knew all about it here, and let it go so we could get in the war. That's a stupid high price to pay just to get into a war, when you know very well you could go without that. So I don't really believe that . . . Fifty years later you can't do anything about it. It seems like a hundred years ago.

Jack Jackson, Gibbon

Motion picture projectionist,
later U.S. Army artilleryman,
European Theater