



1941 Hickam Field survivor retraces steps, pays tribute to Airmen of yesterday, today

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11/29/2011 - **JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR-HICKAM, Hawaii** -- A U.S. Army Air Corps veteran, who survived the Dec. 7, 1941, attacks on Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor, returned to the Hawaiian island to see the place he was forced to become a man so early in his life.

Nearly 70 years after the infamous day, Durward Swanson, a 90-year-old native of Georgia, returned to the island as a guest to be the grand marshal in the Waikiki Holiday Parade, the day after Thanksgiving Day. Before the parade, he visited Hickam to remember the events that brought the U.S. to the forefront of World War II; to remember those men and women at Hickam who gave their lives to their country; and to pay tribute to the friends and family he lost.



Durward Swanson, Dec. 7, 1941, Hickam Field survivor, looks upon the torn and tattered American Flag that sits in the Pacific Air Forces Headquarters building on Nov. 24, 2011. Swanson was a U.S. Army Air Corps motorcycle patrolman at Hickam when the Japanese attacked the bases on the Island of Oahu 70 years ago. Swanson and his best friend Albert Lloyd pulled the flag off the flag pole at around 9 p.m. on the same night. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Mike Meares)

"I just missed my death by about 10 minutes," he said telling his story to the security forces Airmen who currently work in the same room where he slept so many years ago. "It brought back some memories, it did. It kind of brought back what I had been through."

He described how he was on duty the night of Dec. 6 as a military policeman on a motorcycle patrol and just finished his breakfast in the chow hall. He retired to his quarters, which was on the second floor of the fire station, his section of the building serving as the guard house for the military police.

"My bed was right along here and my foot locker here," he said pointing to a section of the room now used as an office for security forces personnel. "(Harry) Albright runs in and wakes me up hollering about the Japanese attacking us. I got up and looked out of this window right here. I saw a plane banking and the rising sun on the wing, and at that moment knew immediately, we were at war."

"I was scared," he recalls.

When the bombing started, he still had his pants on, threw on his shirt, strapped on his .45 caliber pistol and ran out the door. As planned in the event of an attack, he rallied with the other military policemen at the front gate. Realizing his best friend, Sgt. Albert "Stud" Lloyd, was missing from the group, he asked "Where is Stud?"

"The last we saw him, he was in the middle of the ball diamond with a BAR automatic (Browning Automatic Rifle) shooting and cussing at the Japanese," he recalls being told by another patrolman. "I thought, 'Boy he is going to get himself killed.'"

He jumped back on his bike and raced to get Lloyd. On the way, he encountered an attacking aircraft strafing Hangar Avenue, the same street he was racing down. He looked for the first place to hide, a decision he later thought twice about.

"I thought it was a good thing at the time, but later on I realized how foolish I was to do it," he said. "I laid my motorcycle over and slid underneath one of the cars, and he went on by. But, what if he had seen me and started shooting at the car and hit the gas tank? I wouldn't have been here today."

He continued his tale to a small group of Airmen. He found Lloyd at the baseball field shooting and cussing at planes overhead. As Swanson watched the scene unfolding in front of him, another of his friends, James Strickland, was running across the baseball diamond to find cover. Lloyd fired at an oncoming attacker, but Strickland was strafed by the passing Japanese attacker, cutting him in half -- a memory he told the captivated audience he will not soon forget.

"I am honored to be working in a place with so much history," said Tech. Sgt. Jeremy Nichols, NCOIC of police services, whose office is located in the same place Swanson once slept. "It was more sobering to see him go across the street and point out the place where his friend was killed."

Seeing the historic buildings still riddled with potholes reminded him of the physical and mental scars he has carried most of his life. He said the events were best described as chaos. Of the casualties on the island, 189 Airmen were killed on Hickam field.

"I lost some good friends here," he said. "I have a cousin and a good buddy still entombed in the USS Arizona."

As his story continues, he recalls pillars of smoke from many fires all over Hickam and Pearl Harbor bellowing high into the sky. During the security patrols after the attacks, he and Lloyd saw the flag hadn't been taken off the flag pole and was still waving in the breeze. The 3,200-man dormitory engulfed in flames, only yards from the flag pole, lit up the night sky.

"We were just out doing our checks," he said through a definitive Southern accent. "We had security guards posted around the entire field. Then it come night time, and I said to Lloyd, 'Stud, the flag is still flying. We've got to take that down.'"

"We took the flag down and folded it the best we could as shattered at it was," he recollects. He said he was angry while trying to fold the flag at the Japanese and "wanted a piece of them," as he put it.

In the days and weeks afterward, Swanson re-entered his first career field as a B-17E crew chief. On June 5, 1942, during the battle of Midway, his plane was shot down with only three members from the crew of 10 surviving, though he suffered severe injuries to his left leg, arm and face.

"We had zeros all over us," he said. "Spot (in the back of the plane) called me and says, 'I'm hit. I'm hit,' and that's the last thing I heard him say. I could look back through the fuselage and I see the tail was just about half gone. I knew they had got him. Blood was dripping all over me from the top turret. I hollered, 'Captain, the zeros are all over us.'"

Capt. Joseph Tuell was not able to fully control the B-17 aircraft. Lt. R. Macey, a bombardier, dropped their remaining ordnance on a Japanese war ship as they passed over before plunging into the Pacific Ocean. Swanson's leg was in bad shape. Tuell and Macey pulled Swanson out of the sinking wreckage as the air and sea battled took place around them.

"(They) pulled me out and my leg was shattered," he remembered. "I don't know what hit me, if bullets hit it or shrapnel or what."

The battle raging in the sky above him was the last thing on his mind once in the water. There was not a safe place anywhere in the area. Shot out of the sky, severely injured and bleeding, Swanson was now worried about sharks.

"Since I was a kid growing up, I've always heard that blood attracts sharks," he said. "I could just feel a shark coming up and taking that leg off, but with the flak and all falling into the water around Midway, there were no sharks around."

A small patrol torpedo boat picked the three men up after less than ten minutes in the water. Once in the boat, they immediately worked on his leg, putting a tourniquet to help stop the bleeding, eventually saving the badly damaged limb.

"My childhood clean up to that day flashed before me while in that water," he said. "There's a lot to look back over and thank the Lord for. I'm glad I turned my life over to him."

Swanson jokes about his service in the military and remembers a desire to stay in for 30 years. "And I would have stayed in except the Japanese decided to retire me early," he quips.

Being back at Hickam has been a dream come true for Swanson. Visiting his barracks, seeing where the chow hall once had a bomb rip through it and visiting the torn and tattered flag he and his best friend pulled down from the pole.

"I can't believe I was standing in the same spot I was more than 70 years ago," he said. "I was just doing what I should have done; what anybody would have done. If you'd been here, during that time of the attacks, you'd done the same thing."

"People have labeled me a hero because of the attacks and the Midway battle, but I don't consider myself a hero," Swanson said. "I consider myself a protector of America like every Soldier, Sailor, Airmen, Marine and Coast Guardsman that's serving today."

And it was those very same men and women, and their families Swanson joined on Thanksgiving Day to serve them turkey in the Hale Aina dining facility on Hickam. Side-by-side with Gen. Gary North, Pacific Air Force commander, and Hickam leadership, they carved turkey, scooped mash potatoes and served all the trimmings.

"To be a part of a Thanksgiving dinner where I once had Christmas dinner, and to be able to serve the Airmen

was an honor for me," he said. "This world is full of surprises."

Before he left Hickam, General North took him to visit the flag encased in the Pacific Air Forces headquarters building. After a long conversation with the general retelling his story, it was finally time for him to leave again.

Swanson was sitting in front of the glass case containing that torn and tattered American flag he helped take down after the attacks. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"I can see me and Loyd taking this flag off that pole on December 7th at around 9 p.m.," he said softly to the small group of people standing nearby. "We folded it the best we could."

As Swanson was being wheeled away in his chair, he rendered a sharp salute, reminiscent of his days in the service.