# "*Only Yesteryear*" by Mary Ann Ramsey
# [Daughter of the Late Captain Logan Ramsey]
# From Naval History/Winter 1991

[**Note**: Ms. Ramsey has been a free-lance writer specializing in the health care field since 1964. She began her career as an editor-writer for a Philadelphia magazine, later becoming director of public relations for several area medical centers, including The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.]

I loved being a "Navy Junior." As the term suggests, even a Navy man's children become immersed in Navy life; wondering where the next duty would be, which old friends we might see again, was an exciting annual ritual. I basked in the reflected glamour of having a father who was an aviator. As a pilot, though, Dad was often subject to last-minute, rush orders.

So it was that when I graduated from high school in June 1941, my father was half a world away. The prospect that Mother and I would soon join him in Pearl Harbor only added to my dismay. Under normal circumstances, his job as chief of staff to Rear Admiral Patrick N. L. Bellinger (Commander Patrol Wings, Hawaiian Islands) would keep us in Pearl Harbor for two years. Apart from the fact that our entire family had come to love Philadelphia, this was the first time I had lived anywhere for more than a single year. I had taken root—socially and emotionally.

The first leg of our journey was by train. I remained unreconciled to my Hawaiian prospects on all counts and was adolescent glum most of the trip west. We boarded the Matson Line in San Francisco on 15 August for the five-day cruise to Honolulu. When we arrived there, I was impressed with the multicolored leis and the soft melody of "Aloha" being played by a Hawaiian orchestra. My mood improved. I shared the universal air of expectancy. Confetti and streamers made the view confusing, but suddenly we caught sight of my father in his whites. As we left the gangplank, he was upon us immediately; in a moment, he had covered our necks with flower leis. We were "home" again. A fine mist began to moisten our faces. "Liquid sunshine, darlings. That's what they call rain out here. Legend has it that one who arrives when it rains like this will have much luck."

There were no girls my age on Ford Island, the naval air station in Pearl Harbor where we lived, across the water from the much larger navy yard. Admiral Bellinger's attractive daughter and I were friends briefly until she returned to college in Washington, D.C., away from the distracting plethora of young pilots and other officers of the Pacific Fleet. We were literally surrounded by them on Ford Island, their ships berthed about us in a seemingly invincible necklace of gray steel.

Admiral Bellinger and his staff occupied quarters at the eastern tip of the island, next to Battleship Row. In the evenings, the soundtracks of the movies being played on the after deck of the USS *Arizona* (BB-39) were clearly audible when she was in port.

There was a sense of isolation living on such a small plot of land, and an island at that. It was just large enough to accommodate a landing field with hangars, administrative and supply areas, a small sick bay (the naval hospital was in the navy yard), and in addition to the handful of dependents' quarters, a fairly large bachelor officers' quarters (the BOQ).

Yemiko, our Japanese maid, was not much older than I. She was not very companionable and, typically reticent, talked only to Asada, the greengrocer allowed on the island to service families and the BOQ with fresh produce. Besides, she was with us only about two months, leaving in the latter part of November ostensibly to help her pregnant sister. There was a natural question in everyone's mind about a general exodus of maids, for, with Yemiko's departure, only three maids of Japanese extraction were left on the island by December.

On Saturday night, 6 December, we had dinner guests. As our friends were leaving, Dad called out, "Well, let's hope the Japs wait until after Christmas before they start raising hell in the Pacific."

It was beautiful and peaceful the next morning when I was awakened at 7:30 by the ring of the telephone. With all of our carriers at sea, there weren't the usual sounds of takeoffs by pilots getting in their flight time from the air station field. Whenever they took to the air, struggling to gain altitude, the rooftops seemed about to come off. Late sleep was normally an unknown on Ford Island. The more sedate PBY flying boats, designed for patrol, took off in reasonable quiet from the other end of the island.

Though I was slow to rise, the urgency in my father's voice produced in me a quick alert.

"Are you sure, Dick? All right. I'll be down immediately!"

Within a few minutes, I caught just a glimpse of Dad, dressed in an "aloha" shirt and slacks, rushing past my bedroom door. He was gone from our carport before I could reach my parents' room, where I found Mother sitting up in bed, confused. Incredulous, she told me a submarine had been sunk just outside the harbor net, and before she had finished speaking, the first bomb fell. We looked at each other in disbelief.

While we had not had any formal air raid drills, we knew we were to go to the admiral's quarters in the event of an attack. All of our houses were typically tropical, that is, sans basements, but the Bellingers' quarters had been constructed over an old ammunition depot and gun emplacement, which were to serve as our shelter for the next four and a half hours.

But first, we had to get there. Easier said than done. Mother seemed frozen in place as I urged her, simultaneously with the sound of exploding bombs and the eerie whine of planes diving overhead to follow me out of the house. Running across our back lawn toward the admiral's quarters, I glanced to the right. The *Arizona* was engulfed in flames and literally exploding. Fragments of the ship and great billows of black smoke were everywhere. The relentless waves of Japanese planes, having released their deadly torpedoes, came out of their low-altitude run just over our house.

At that moment something struck my wrist, but was deflected by the native-made silver bracelet I was wearing. Dad had brought it back to me after his recent flight to Noumea. Whatever hit me knocked out a small chunk of the design. Though I still have the bracelet, this was the first and only time I ever wore it. For sentimental reasons, I had grabbed my jewelry and high school yearbook before leaving the house. I also had taken a vain moment to remove the dreadful tin curlers we wore to bed in those days.

We seemed to be taking forever to cross our own and our neighbor's lawn to reach the Bellinger house. I glanced behind me to see where Mother was. She had almost hidden herself from view in some shrubbery after she, too, had seen the low-flying torpedo planes.

Others had arrived in the shelter before us, including a group of Marine guards. Once there, we were no longer able to see much of what was going on. A single window at the north end afforded a view of the hospital ship, *USS Solace* (AH-5). Geysers of water rose skyward as bombs fell around but not on her, whether by design or accident we couldn't tell.

The perception of war is not confined to sight, and the harrowing noise of the destruction wrought by the torpedo planes and bombers pounding our fleet was almost more than we could bear. Our closeness to the major targets of the Japanese attacking force could be measured in yards. It was no wonder that our eardrums seemed about to burst with each explosion.

At first only a handful of families were there—those of us from the immediate area around Admiral Bellinger's house. Soon others arrived, many of them unknown to me, perhaps from quarters on the western side of the island. One of our neighbors—six-year-old Chuckie Coe, a favorite of mine—created a minor riot by trying to climb up on the window for a better look, but was pulled back by a stalwart Marine.

Shock, fear, anger—virtually every definable human emotion—gripped us all. In one corner a woman knelt, obviously praying as she fingered a rosary. A young mother held her three-week-old baby, who was screaming in terror at the terrible noise. The child tight against her chest, her own fear so raw, so vivid, the mother seemed on the verge of fainting.

Every newcomer to the shelter was deluged with questions of how we were faring, especially a new group of Marines who began to bring mattresses, linens, and even canned goods stripped from our vacated quarters. “Have they gotten the Panama Canal yet?” someone asked, not such a farfetched query at the time, considering the fact that the impossible already was happening.

A close hit shook the shelter with the ferocity of an earthquake and threw us, partly from its force and partly from our own instinct, closer to the walls. The entire island seemed to be blowing up. It was then that a fluster of activity outside telegraphed the arrival of our wounded. Passenger cards, Navy vehicles—any transport at hand—began to pull up, discharging men from the *Arizona* and the ships around her.

A young man, filthy black oil covering his burned, shredded flesh, walked in unaided. He had no clothes on, his nudity entirely obscured by oil. The skin hung from his arms like scarlet ribbons as he staggered toward my mother for help. Looking at me, he gestured to his throat, trying to speak: he must have swallowed some of the burning oil as he swam through the inferno. His light blue eyes against the whites, made more so by the oil clinging to his face, were luminous in visible shock at what they had seen and experienced that awful morning. He remains my most vivid and lasting memory of Pearl Harbor.

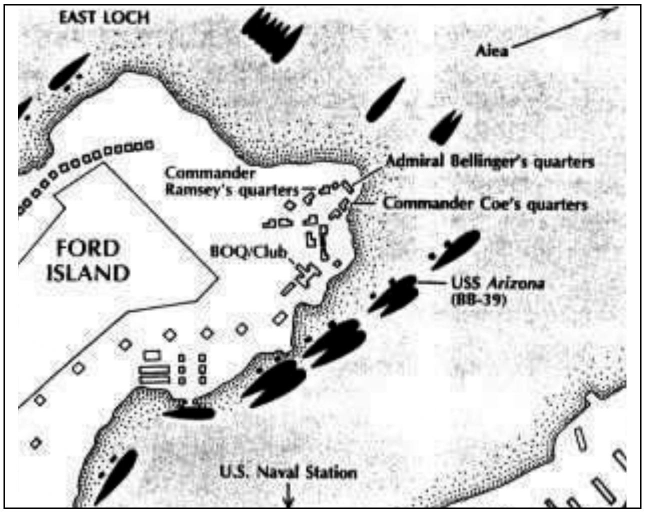
We directed him to the mattresses now lining the corridor of the shelter, as the Marines herded us into a side room in order to keep the passageway clear for the arrival of more wounded. After a while, I went back into the corridor to help wherever I could, while Mother occupied herself trying to soothe some of the small children.

The admiral’s wife, gracious even in such extreme circumstances, moved through the area checking on the men, speaking words of encouragement. We gave cigarettes to those who wanted to smoke, and held them for others who could not use their hands. We covered the men with sheets and tried to reassure them that transport to sick bay was forthcoming. There wasn’t much else we could do except listen if they wanted to talk. A sailor told me, tears streaming down his cheeks, how his best friend was blown apart in front of him; another was grieving over the loss of his brother. From many there was only the deadly silence of shock or the soft moaning of pain.

It had seemed like hours, but in fact, less than half an hour had passed when, as suddenly as it had started, the bombing and gunfire stopped. There was a momentary hope that the attack was over, though we knew better. No one had dared say it out load, but most of us had little doubt that an invasion was in the offing.

For the first time, I wondered about my father. Was he alive? Might the Japanese have bombed command headquarters at the southern end of Ford Island? We knew they had been destroying the hangars and planes on the airstrip close by. As men came in and out of the shelter (now that the ambulances began to arrive to take the wounded to sick bay), we heard more and more bad news. The *Oklahoma* (BB-37) had capsized; men were trapped inside.

It was a short respite. The ominous growl of planes filled the air once again as the attack resumed—this time for an even longer period. The sound of antiaircraft fire and the screeching some downed Japanese planes was reassuring. As long as the injured were with us, I had few thoughts of the air raid itself. As they were being moved, it seemed as if the attack had taken on new and greater ferocity. Turning my attention to my mother for the first time, I realized her face had become an ashen mask. I had been so preoccupied with the wounded, and she with the children, that the initial fear for self had disappeared. For her, it was back. As the noise increased, we looked at each other almost like strangers. I had no fear at all. I believe now that this was simply the difference in our ages. When I saw that first sailor, so horribly burned, personal fear left me. He brought to me the full tragedy of that day, drastically changing my outlook. At 16, the idea that any man could be the instrument of such desecration of another, in so hideous a manner, had been incomprehensible. I had read nothing in history books that could match the impact of those first 15 minutes in the shelter.



**[The eastern tip of Ford Island and Battleship Row as they looked in the pre-attack Hours of 7 December 1941]**

My sense of values, my self-centered world had been shaken and changed forever. Mother was, frankly, afraid, not only for herself, but for everyone else as well. But then, she had experienced life, its joys and dangers, and I had not—at least not very much. I wanted to act, to do something useful, something that mattered.

Shortly after noon, though the attackers had been gone for some time, we received word from my father that we were all to be taken to the BOQ. It was a profound relief to know that he was intact. When we got there, hundreds of men and dependents were milling about, all trying to learn more of what had happened and might happen yet. I worked from 12:30 until 11 P.M. serving food and coffee and passing out the cigarettes to the officers and enlisted men. Almost all of them were at the point of exhaustion when they arrived. Some were walking wounded; a few of the more seriously hurt—overflow from the sick bay—were in first floor rooms. It was here that I heard many stories of the heroics of the command, how well chronicled in published accounts and histories.

There were light moments as well, so characteristic, I believe. Of the bounce-back American spirit. It was comical to see some sailors, having lost their clothes, now in their skivvies or makeshift coverings that included an admiral's jacket and in one case, a women's bathrobe. The story my father often recalled concerned the Marine who, oblivious to the improbability of his act, shot down a Japanese pilot with an ordinary rifle. When Dad asked how he managed such a feat, he answered, "Well, sir, that bastard was flying so low I could have gotten him with a bayonet!"

Before the night was over, we got word to return to Admiral Bellinger's house. This time there were only those of us who lived in the quarters surrounding his. We tried, but no one could sleep on the mattresses in the shelter. The only bathroom had given up the ghost that morning when the Arizona sank atop the pipes that supplied water to the eastern side of the island. We boiled water collected from the swimming pool for drinking and cooking purposes only.

Rumors had been rampant all that day and into the night about new attacks and possible occupation. During the early morning hours of 8 December, there were sporadic sounds of warfare, but our only enemies then were ourselves. Exhausted and battle weary, our gunners shot down some of our planes. With the daylight we came out of the shelter and upstairs into the house for meals that somehow Mrs. Bellinger and the other wives scared up. After lunch, we all gathered in the living room to listen to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech to Congress and the formal declaration of war against Japan. Even the children were pin-drop quiet as he talked. When it was over, the national anthem was played. Without a word, every woman and child rose, standing as I had so often seen the smallest of the Navy Juniors do at taps, when the flag was taken down at sunset. Even Chuckie Coe's young face was somber as he placed his hand over his heart. Adults wiped away tears.

It was too much for me. My heart full, I left the house to take our car around the island to comprehend for the first time the full extent of the holocaust. First, I walked across the yard to the home of Commander Charles Coe, Chuckie's father, to look at the stricken *Arizona,* billows of black smoke still rising from her sunken hulk. She burned for almost three days. Although I didn't know it at the time, more than 1,000 men—virtually half of all the dead and missing of 7 December—lay entombed in her hull. It was then that I wept for the first time.

The drive around the rest of the island—to the hangars and airfield—confirmed all the stories I had heard. Mercifully, I learned that the men in the capsized *Oklahoma* had been saved from their death trap when the hull was opened by a work crew.

The last week we spent on Ford Island was uneventful, save for constant air raid alarms that proved false. We listened to the war news and found in it only a forecast of ultimate defeat. The harbor told its own story of what lay ahead. Yet, gradually, an indomitable spirit replaced the shock of 7 December as the command set about reclamation with the strength of determination that can come from adversity.

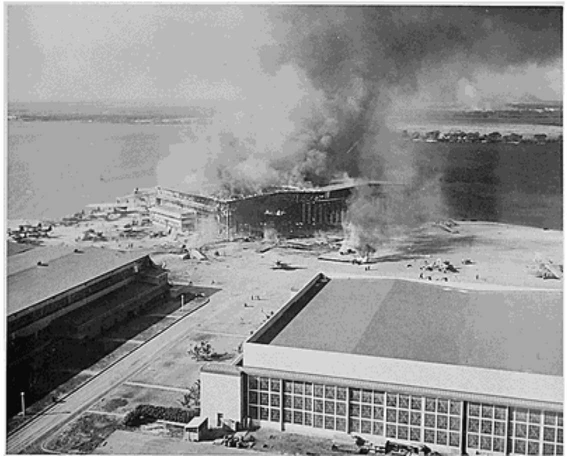
On 13 December, Dad came to our quarters mid-morning to tell us we had 45 minutes to pack a single suitcase for a Pan American flight back to the States. Admiral Bellinger had determined that his staff should be worry free for the tasks that lay ahead, a condition best achieved by removal of their families from harm's way. It would be some time before ships could be obtained to return the bulk of dependents from Hawaii to the mainland. Throwing a few belongings into our suitcases, Mother and I joined the others for the boat ride to Pearl City, where Pan Am had established its early commercial outpost.

At Pearl City, we gathered into separate groups while we waited for our luggage to be checked. This was to be the first flight Mother and I had ever made and we would be taking off from the water—a fact neither of us relished. All of us were leaving with the unspoken thought that we might never see our fathers or husbands again. As we walked to the plane, Dad spoke of cheerful things and joked about having no leis for a proper farewell "Aloha."

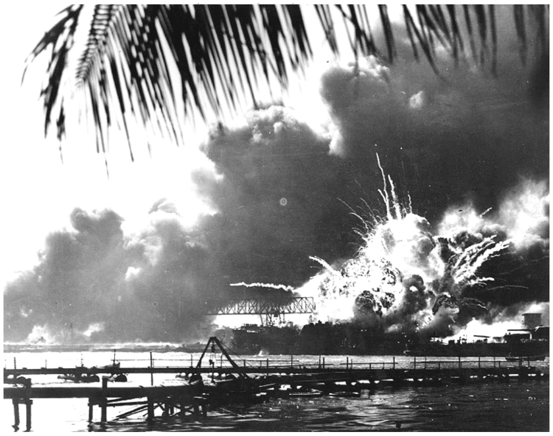
But he could not hide his concern, for at the last moment, he turned to me with a special word. I have since thought how like a B movie script it sounds today, but it was real then and what he truly felt.

"Take care of your mother, M'nan, and behave yourself. I'll try to send you the car soon. I want you to have fun while you can. The world's going to change quickly."

He kissed me good-bye and turned to Mother. "Harriet, darling, try not to worry. We'll be together again, but remember, I'm going to stay out here as long as they'll let me. I've been paid to learn for 25 years. Now's my chance to earn my salt. For the first time in our lives, my family comes second." He held her close, telling her how much he loved her, then turned away, walking back to the platform we had just left. As we boarded the plane, we heard him calling out, "God bless you!" I'd never heard him say that before, and those final words echoed in my ears as the Clipper winged its way on the first and probably the saddest flight of my life.



**Naval photograph documenting the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii that initiated US participation in World War II. Burning barracks at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, after being attacked by Japanese aircraft on 12/7/41.**



**The forward magazine of USS *Shaw* (DD-373) explodes during the second Japanese attack wave. To the left of the explosion, *Shaw*'s stern is visible, at the end of floating drydock *YFD-2*. At right is the bow of USS *Nevada* (BB-36), with a tug alongside fighting fires. Photographed from Ford Island, with a dredging line in the foreground.**

***U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph.***