

---

## December 8, 1941: a Reconstruction From a Diary Page

By James J. Halsema

The insistent ring of the telephone woke my parents at their rented home at 14 South Drive in Baguio. It was 4:45 a.m. Monday, December 8, 1941. The long distance operator told Dad the call was from the Associated Press in Manila and was for me. Bureau chief Ray Cronin was asking me to find AP correspondent Russell Brines, who was resting in Baguio after being expelled from Japan. On Saturday I'd taken Russ up the Mountain Trail to see the inauguration of a new public school at Kilometer 21 and to the annual Brent-American [Manila] School basketball game. That evening I took him to the Monday Club's box supper at the Country Club annex. Between the 70 students from the two schools, Army enlisted men attending a West Point prep school and a few Navy and Clark Field officers and the resident American population, it was a gala occasion. "Tell him the Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor," Cronin said calmly.

I drove a short distance along winding, deserted South Drive to Teachers' Camp, where Russ occupied a ground floor apartment. He was a heavy sleeper. I had to pound on the door and the window to waken him. While he fumbled in the darkness for the light switch I shouted "Russ, wake up! Wake up! The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor!" His groggy reply was "They can't do that!"

The reaction was typical of Americans in the Philippines, who were sure their armed forces could and would defend them against an inferior enemy. Even for a man who had just come from Japan, reality was difficult to believe. This attack was a challenge that could only mean all-out war. We were like the children of an aged, ailing parent who know well that he will soon die but are emotionally unwilling to accept the idea. We realized the tension building between Japan and the United States, yet hoped—with more intensity than realism—somehow it could be contained, at least until our side was ready to meet the confrontation.



We were the first in Baguio to know that war had come. Baguio did not have a radio broadcasting station. Manila radio news did not air until six a.m. Col. John P. Horan, the commandant of the U.S. Army's Camp John Hay, got the word from Baguio Vice Mayor Emil Speth at 6:15 (although some claim he was told by the post radio operator). After confirming the report from station KZRH himself, Horan ordered his men to be ready by eight o'clock to assemble for the Lingayen Gulf beach defense envisaged by War Plan Orange 3. He knew it had been superseded but—like the U.S. Army Air Corps—he lacked orders from a stunned United States Army Forces Far East (USAFFE) headquarters, so he thought to cancel his initial instruction in favor of merely putting a guard on post utilities. He telephoned several American old-timers to meet with him at nine to discuss the situation. As a quartermaster corps officer he knew little of soldiering and nothing about the terrain he could see from his post.

After rousing Brines I went to President Manuel Quezon's private residence on the edge of Burnham Park to get the Commonwealth president's reaction to the war. His butler reported he was still in bed. After a long wait, I joined fellow reporters Yay Panlillo of the *Philippines Herald* (and—unbeknownst to me—an undercover agent for the U.S. Army) and Jorge Teodoro of the *Manila Tribune* to be admitted to Quezon's bedroom. Saturday we had been on the porch of his official residence, the Mansion House, after a cabinet meeting convened to receive a message sent by General MacArthur through his Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Richard Sutherland. Quezon had emphasized to us reporters the close relations between Americans and Filipinos at a time of great crisis, so serious that all Philippine public schools would be closed; he was obviously shaken by events and had little to say except that he would order Jorge B. Vargas, his chubby chief of staff, to return from Manila immediately by air.

Yay and I set forth for the Loakan airstrip south of Baguio to await Vargas. In his ghost-written autobiography *The Good Fight*, New York, 1946) Quezon stated that after getting the Pearl Harbor news from Vargas he ordered "George" to send Colonel Manuel Nieto, his senior aide-de-camp, to Baguio (p. 182). Later, he recalled that his valet brought him a request from "a woman reporter from the Philippine

Herald" for a statement, to which he replied with a handwritten note: "The zero hour has arrived. I expect every Filipino—man and woman—to do his duty..." So history is amended.

Two roads go from Baguio to the field. I took the Kennon Road instead of the route through Camp John Hay. En route, we looked across the head of the Bued valley to see planes flying toward Camp John Hay. A few minutes later we saw smoke from what we thought were grass fires at the post. We were so intent on listening to the news from Manila on the car radio that we heard nothing else. We waited and waited. Although a plane circled the field, Vargas never arrived. A mining engineer returning to work from Baguio told us the post had been bombed but we dismissed his news as hysteria.

Not until we returned to Baguio past the entrance to the military reservation and saw smashed houses across the street did we realize that the aircraft, including the one scouting Loakan, were the enemy's. Finding no planes on the field, the last raider had deposited its payload on the edge of the military reservation. Not only did the bombs hit civilian houses but they killed or severely injured four American Spanish-American War veterans en route from Baguio in a car to meet Horan at his request. The Herolds, who lived nearby, had a narrow escape. So had we.

Two houses had been destroyed. No one was nearby. The ruins were still smoking. We poked around and suddenly came upon the head of an elderly Filipino man, with a bloody, partly burned cadaver nearby. I recognized it as the father-in-law of Casiano Rivera.

### All Too Effective

In shock, we drove into the post through its golf course. The fairways near headquarters were pockmarked with holes and small craters. Later that day soldiers counted seventy-two 250-kilogram (550-pound) bombs had been dropped on Camp John Hay in a pattern that was just a few meters off target. Many hit rain-softened earth and failed to explode, but others were all too effective. (Long afterward I learned from a U.S. Army monograph that the planes had been twin-engined, low-wing monoplanes of the 5th Air Group's 14th Air Regiment, based

at Kato in southern Taiwan. Because of their limited range, Army planes initially operated only as far south as the Lingayen Gulf. The planes (which the Allies came to call Sally 2s) each carried a maximum load of four bombs at a speed of 450 kilometers (280 miles) per hour.)

We came upon Horan standing in front of his headquarters, dazedly pointing to his shrapnel-riddled car. Only the day before he had written to his wife in the States (in a letter that wasn't delivered until 1945): "Things look bad. But I still believe that the Japanese will not attack the Philippines. They might attack Siam, Borneo, Burma, the Dutch East Indies, Singapore or Australia. But not here." The raid had been intended to kill American officers from Clark Field, who usually took long weekend leaves at the Officers' Mess. In recent months as many as 50 or 60 pilots and the same number of officers from adjacent Fort Stotsenburg had come up on leave, but after Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson's November 27 warning that "hostile action" by Japan was "possible at any moment" most had been restricted to base. None of the three guests at the Mess was wounded.

The staff was not so lucky. The left side of Sergeant Bland was spattered over the walls of the lobby. One of the Hong Kong refugee wives, seemingly calm, was trying to wipe what she believed was a bucket of red paint from his face, not realizing that he was beyond help. Taytay, a 16-year old desk clerk, lay in a pool of blood while a tourniquet was applied to his severed leg. The other clerk and the Mess Officer, Lt. Paul L. Bach, also had caught shrapnel. Sue Dudley, a Navy officer's wife who had managed to stay on after other Navy officers' dependents were evacuated to the States, already had been taken to Notre Dame Hospital, a leg hanging by a shred after being hit by a bomb fragment as she protected her baby with her body.

On Scout Hill, Captain Gitter, commander of a company of Igorot Scout soldiers, was standing shell-shocked but unhurt by the bomb that had killed five of his men, to whom he had been talking. Three members of the band had their legs blown off by another bomb. Altogether, 11 were killed and 22 injured on the post in the third Japanese air attack on American-controlled territory of the new war. The second had been against ships in Davao harbor. As we stood on the edge of the valley beyond the Officers' Mess stretching to the Cordillera

Central, Yay turned to me and exclaimed bitterly: "Now we know what a Model T Ford looks like when it flies back!"

### "Don't You Know There's a War On?"

I didn't get the full story of Baguio events until hours later. As 18 planes came over Baguio from the northwest in three V formations, the reaction of its people was pride in how quickly the American Air Corps had mounted a counterattack. It was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and crowds were entering and leaving the Catholic Cathedral above the business district. Natalie and Jerry Crouter, driving down Session Road to the Market after leaving their two children at Brent School as usual, found "everyone was strolling casually, looking into shop windows, going in and out of stores." They "could see that no one knew what had happened. Japanese shopkeepers stood unconcerned in doorways."

Just to the east, Brent students attending the daily 8 a.m. chapel services were waiting for the school's headmaster, Father Richardson, to conclude the prayers when they heard motors in the distance. Bill Herold, the altar boy that morning, couldn't wait to tear off his cassock to run outside to watch and cheer the planes. Eventually Richardson closed the school to all but boarders, sending day students home as their buses arrived from the mines. Bill and his sister Betsy walked home to find their parents frantic with worry but thankful their house near the Camp Hay entrance had not been hit. Elmer sent Ethel and the kids to the Heald Company sawmill 62 kilometers (38.5 miles) up the Mountain Trail to stay with the mill manager Herman and his wife Kluge.

After Mother had told her by phone that war had begun, Betty drove her friend Mary Kneebone 2,000 feet (610 meters) up the narrow, twisting road out of the canyon from Atok-Big Wedge mine, where their husbands were employed, to Baguio to buy groceries. When they stopped to chat with my Mother to tell her about the babble of rumors they had heard downtown, she cut them off with a stern rebuke. "What are you doing up here? Mary, why aren't you at home looking after Kim (her child)? Don't you know there's a war on? You passed right by those houses at the entrance to Camp Hay that were bombed this



morning. Those weren't our planes—they were Japs. People were killed! Rivera's father-in-law had his head cut off. Jim saw it himself. Get right back where you belong!" Shaken, the two young women drove back to the mine. Not until then did they learn that the bombs aimed at the nearby Army post included some that had fallen near their houses but failed to explode.

### The Awful Truth

Despite the explosives raining around him, Tech. Sgt. William E. Bowen, the John Hay radio operator, stuck to his post and while the raid was still in progress sent a message to headquarters in Manila reporting the situation. Disbelieved, he was ordered to repeat it. The information did not reach the air warning center at Nichols Field near Manila until more than an hour later.

Much to the relief of my parents, I returned for lunch after a full morning. Still not fully comprehending the horrors I had witnessed, I managed to eat a good meal with some of Benguet's famous strawberries for dessert. Even later that afternoon when Frank Morehouse, the General Superintendent of Atok-Big Wedge, provided an eyewitness account of the devastation of Clark Field by the Japanese, no one (including me) wanted to believe that virtually nothing was left of the American air units. Morehouse had been driving back from Manila when his car was commandeered at the entrance to the installation just before the raid began. He spent several terrified hours cowering under his vehicle and got home shaking with fear. His listeners, including the Halsemas, had heard optimistic reports on their radios and wanted to assume he was exaggerating the havoc. Morehouse had witnessed the awful truth. He ordered wives and children of his staff to evacuate to the Km. 62 sawmill to join Ethel Herold and her children. After several days they all drifted back home.

Partially recovering from his shock, Horan angrily ordered the internment by the Philippine Constabulary of some of the adult male Japanese population of Baguio and nearby Itogon, Tuba and La Trinidad. Over a thousand Japanese citizens made it the largest alien group in the Baguio area and the third largest in the entire country. Although Japanese dependents were allowed to concentrate at the

Japanese School on Trinidad Road (now Magsaysay Avenue), harsh treatment by Philippine Constabulary guards and confinement in a bomb-damaged barracks in a military zone likely to be hit again infuriated the male internees. At first Horan allowed them to place a large Rising Sun flag on a barracks roof, then thought better of the idea. This reversal would soon have painful repercussions for the American community. European enemy aliens were told to report but were not immediately imprisoned. Dad and I were implored by our next door neighbor Paul Kowalski to intervene on behalf of male German and Austrian Jews. Only after much argument was Dad, normally in command in any situation in Baguio after his years as its leader, able to convince the Constabulary that Jews were victims of the Nazis rather than true enemy nationals. Kowalski and his buxom blonde 100% "Aryan" wife Emmi would repay the favor by saving much of contents of our home.

Spurred to action by the Japanese attack, Baguio was feverish with long-delayed protective activity. Before he departed for his farm in Pampanga in the late afternoon of December 8, Quezon had taken refuge in Baguio's only air-raid shelter, built by the prescient Major Speth near his home. Now others were begun all over town. At Dad's suggestion, Horan turned to Benguet and Balatoc mines for assistance in digging a 230 ft. (70 meter) U-shaped tunnel with two exits and a ventilation shaft into the hill behind his headquarters. Within days their skilled workmen and equipment had it ready for offices and communications equipment, then built another shelter in the hill behind Notre Dame Hospital which one day would save Mother's life.

—11 April 2002

*James J. Halsema was born in the Philippines and grew up in Baguio, where his father was mayor for many years. A career Foreign Service officer, he is now retired and an amateur historian of, and book collector on, the country of his birth. He is a frequent contributor to the Bulletin.*