

'We've got to get the shells to the guns!'

An interview by David Venditta Of The Morning Call, December 7, 2008

Warren G.H. Peters left Slatington High School in 1940 to join the Army. He signed up for the artillery and later that year shipped out for the Hawaiian island of Oahu.

He was a 20-year-old private first class when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, the event that hurled the United States into World War II.

Peters, now 87 and living in Catasauqua, remembers what happened.

We were on maneuvers for two weeks, and the maneuvers were canceled on Saturday. I went into Honolulu on a pass and saw a movie that afternoon, 'A Yank in the RAF.'

Then we went back to Fort Weaver, a heavily wooded area right at the western entrance to Pearl Harbor. It wasn't a big barracks like Hickam Field, because we were just one outfit, Battery A of the 15th Coast Artillery.

It was just a normal Saturday night. We probably played cards. We used to play a lot of rummy and a little pinochle.

The next morning, we woke up to the guns going off. They were enough to wake anybody up. We were just lying in our bunks.

There was an outfit right near us, and they had 3-inch anti-aircraft guns. They were making all kinds of racket, and we were moaning the blues and all that: 'Oh, it's Sunday morning, give us a break!'

A couple of the guys from our barracks and a couple from the other barracks went down to the docks. They went down to watch the 'maneuvers,' the planes coming in.

They didn't know that this was the real thing.

We didn't know what was going on until one guy came back, a sergeant. He came flying into our bar-

racks and yelled that the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor.

I happened to look out the window, and there was the red dot on the bottom of a plane going by.

We said, 'Hey, we've got to get the shells to the guns!'

Our two 16-inch guns were 200 feet from the barracks, on level ground near the beach. We had trains on narrow-gauge tracks, and the trains were used to haul ammunition to the guns. The six of us in our barracks were the train crew; the gun crews had the other barracks.

Outside, we could see the smoke and the Japanese planes over the harbor, and we could hear the explosions.

The poor guys that were in the harbor, trying to get back to their ships, and the other guys the Japanese were attacking, they didn't have a chance. They were sitting ducks.

We didn't sit and watch. You don't think. You wouldn't get anything done if you did. We had to keep moving and get the guns set up, because we didn't know if the Japanese were coming in with ships or not.

The 16-inch guns were useless against airplanes. You can't move those big guns fast enough. They were for ships -- the shells could go 28 miles.

The train tracks were right alongside our barracks. One of the engines was down for repairs; they were overhauling it. So we only had two engines that were working.

The engines pulled six to eight cars. Each car had three shells. Each shell was 6-foot long and weighed a ton. The powder was in 50-gallon drums.

I was an engineer; I ran a train.

One of the guys threw a switch and motioned for me

to go on, not really looking to see if the switch made the rails move the way they were supposed to go. They only went halfway, so my engine went off the tracks. That was after I'd gone about 50 feet.

I went to the guy who was at the controls of the other engine, and he said, "Get in!"

"No," I said, "I'm gonna stay on the outside."

With the tin roof on the engine, there wasn't much protection.

But you don't look for protection; you look for what has to be done. So I hung on the outside of a car that had powder on it. From there, I could make sure that the switches were all thrown and that we wouldn't have any more trouble.

We got strafed on the way to one of the guns. We could see the bullets hitting the ground, kicking up the sand, but they didn't hit us. Here the Japanese were attacking, and we had nothing to fight with. Our rifles were all locked up.

When we got to the big gun, we didn't unload the powder or the shells because we had to wait for orders. The gun crew had to get everything ready until we found out whether we had a target.

We never got any orders. We never fired a shot, because we didn't have any targets. And nobody in our outfit got hurt.

That night, I'll never forget it. The island was dark. Everybody was at their guns. Several planes -- where they came from, I don't know -- they dropped flares just to try to find out where the landing fields were.

And when they did that, one big umbrella of fire went up from our anti-aircraft guns-- everybody firing at the planes from different angles. You could see the tracers.

Our gunners shot them all down. They were our own planes.

Epilogue

Peters spent the war on Oahu with his unit, which became part of the Quartermaster Corps.

Early in 1943, he applied for a transfer to the Army Air Forces. He passed the exams to become an aviation cadet, but never got his orders to make the transfer.

Peters left the Army in September 1945 and went home to the Lehigh Valley. He worked for Bethlehem Steel for four decades.

He and his wife of 52 years, Nadine, have three sons -- Jeffrey, Timothy and Gregory -- and a daughter, Dani, who has made the Air Force her career. Peters also has a daughter, Georgette, from a previous marriage.

He belongs to the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, Lehigh Valley/Pocono Chapter 5.

"The Japanese could have taken the island, no problem, if they had been smart and come in with troopships, because our guns were locked up and there was so much confusion on the island," said Peters, who has returned to Pearl Harbor twice.

"All they did was stir us up."

Note: This article and photography were reprinted with permission from the The Morning Call.