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Remembering Pearl Harbor

Joseph Quentin Nesmith Sr.

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REMEMBERING PEARL HARBOR

by
Joseph Quentin NeSmith, Sr.

and
compiled by
Nancy Pearl NeSmith

Auspices
Bulloch County Historical Society
Post Office Box 42
Statesboro, Georgia 30459
Dear Dr. Mabry,

Thank you for your letter. Yes, you have permission to reprint my father’s account of Pearl Harbor. His connection to your county is as follows:

Joseph Quentin NeSmith is the son of Joseph Glover NeSmith of Cochran, Bleckley, Georgia. Joseph Glover NeSmith is the son of Simeon Green NeSmith of Cochran, Bleckley, Georgia. Simeon Green NeSmith is the son of Garrett NeSmith of Wilkinson County, Georgia. Garrett NeSmith is the son of James NeSmith and Jane Price of Screven County, Georgia. James NeSmith, whose name is on the monument you helped dedicate, is the son of James NeSmith and Elizabeth of Bulloch County, Georgia.

My father’s father worked for the railroad, so my dad lived in Florida (mainly Key West) until he went into the military at age 16. He was born in 1919 which makes him 22 when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

From Hawaii my father was stationed in Mojave, California. From California my father was stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina. From Quínanto he was stationed at Quinns, Virginia. From Quinns he was transferred to El Toro, California. The Korean War broke out and he fought in Korea. From Korea he was transferred to Kaneohe, Hawaii. From Kaneohe he was transferred to Cherry Point, North Carolina. From Cherry Point he was transferred to El Toro, California and then to Japan without his family which made him decide to leave the Marine Corps.

After his retirement from the Marine Corps he became an Orange County, California Coroner Investigator. He retired from the Coroner’s Office and helped with the family business. In 1990 my family moved from Santa Ana, California to Las Vegas, Nevada where he died in 1992.

Among his papers I found one page of a resume which might answer some questions you might have. Also, I’ve included a copy of his pedigree chart. I hope this helps.

Thank you for your interest,

Nancy P. NeSmith
By special request the following is included.

1939 I returned from the Virgin Islands in June. (Had been there 26 weeks.) I went home on furlough and met Dorothy. After I got back to Quantico, Va. where I was stationed I wanted to go to Washington D.C. on Saturday (got a $1.00 room at the 7th Ave. and 9th Ave. dinner to sight-see the museums, Smithsonian etc.) I was walking near Lincoln Memorial when a man in a car pulled over to talk to me. He was in civilian clothes. He told me he was a lieutenant in the Marine Corps in the War Plans Dept. of the Navy. I was in uniform (blue) and he said I looked short. I pointed. He said he had to go to his apartment for something, so I went with him and he introduced me to his wife (I was relieved because I thought he might be queer and I didn't want to hurt him.) He seemed like a nice guy on a weekend drink. But he liked to talk. He told me that we were going to war with the Japanese before the German. The Marines were going to get into it first with the Japs. He said he had friends in personnel at

Headquarters, N.C. and if I wanted to get a transfer to the West Coast California to drop him a card and he would "guarantee it". Well I thought it over and was itching to get in a war so I put in for a transfer to San Diego. I had to agree to letting my enlistment to get the transfer. I sent the Lt. a card (He had given me his name and address). I didn't hear from him but I did get my transfer a couple weeks later.

The outfit I joined at San Diego was Aircraft Two. Which made me having served in all 6 Marine aviation units at that time. Everybody in Marine aviation 1940 stationed in North Island San Diego. I was given leave in May June 1940. Enlistment extended and I signed my 2 year extension. I had a backmark (4 yrs) on my arms and corporal stripes. I went to Florida and got married. Dorothy came to California and we lived in Coronado. Phone call came just about that time because the Marine Corps began to build up its strength. I went from Corporal to Technical
Sergeant in less than a year, 1941. Then, Aircraft Two was transferred to Honolulu in January 1941. Dorothy went back to Florida to her married home.

My unit was stationed at an airship near the Ewa plantation village. (About 5 miles as the crow flies from Pearl Harbor. To get to Pearl Harbor by land roads it was about 12-15 miles.) This airship was the Ewa Mooring Base station where the Navy's zeppelin, the U.S.S. Macon used to moor when it was in Hawaii. (I saw the Macon when it was a yard in Key West, it flew over the Key. It was a huge ship. The Hindenburg was larger ship. I saw them both in my life. We lived in tents at first. I was in the motor transport and was second in charge. (Technical sergeant I made in Jan).

Some of the girls and girl friends followed this men's unit. I wrote Dorothy about this. The girls weren't supposed to come out but there was nothing the unit could do to stop it. Dorothy (always independent, 17 years old, 18 in July) couldn't stand being away from me, and was it just the trip to beautiful Hawaii. She saved money from my allotment check. (Think she had a job too,) and bought a threefoot-long ticket and come out.

She arrived on the Matsonia (one of two of the Matson Steamship Lines) and went out on the pilot boat to meet the ship. She arrived broke owing money on her stateroom. (so I had to bail her out, she had a great time with a flock of gongs training her around. No, actually she was sick with half the try. She rented a little house in EWA Beach (4 rooms at $8.00 a room) she have had come out, and we had a lot of fun, friend living near. We had a little dance across the street (right on the water's edge.) We had a stripped down Chevrolet car. I don't know what year it was —'41. Dorothy was really a sight in that car. All jello up, with her foot on the floor board, going to Schofield Army Base for the convalescence to the EWA plantation village, commandery, she'd even go to Pearl Harbor up at giving those gals a treat. Then she began having morning sickness. And she began to joke but in front. By Thanksgiving everybody knew the facts were evident.

On Dec. 5th (my payday) we went to the Ewa commissary store and bought
groceries. We bought a duck, figuring we'd cook it Sunday. We had never had a duck before and we had never forget our since! (As it turned out we never ate that one. Daddy gave it to some soldiers who were guarding the beach.)

On Saturday, Dec. 7, 1941, we had a parade and review at the base. In order to make room for the parade, the planes were lined up at one end of the parking area. After the parade, everyone wanted to go on Liberty, so the planes were left like they were all lined up close off one side of the area. Off at noon I went home. I don't remember just what we did maybe we went shopping that afternoon and bought the duck.

Charlie and Helen Barker (Bramley H. & wife neighbors) asked us to go to WAI'IALI. They wanted to see Jack Benny in the movie "Charlie's Aunt." I can't remember what the movie was about. In any case the next morning that threw everything back out of my brain.

Dec. 7, 1941, Sunday. Just before 8:00 AM I woke and went outside to bring in the newspaper. I saw a flight of what 6 planes with torpedoes hanging below them fly across just above the beach. They were headed for Pearl Harbor (about 3 miles away). I noticed they were red. Bells painted on their sides. The sound of the Japanese. I thought they were Army airplanes. planes dressed up to look like Japanese.

I went back to the house. The bed. Dorothy was still sleeping. I had barely started reading the funnies when I heard loud explosions over towards Pearl Harbor. Something could be heard. I went out and looked. There were huge columns of black smoke thousands of feet high. Dorothy had dressed and come out. We knew the Japanese had attacked Pearl. There were some Japanese working on some concrete work on a house they were building on the lot next door. A Japanese plane came flying down the block. Fine strafing the houses. Those workers disappeared. Dorothy and I and our next door neighbor Roy Frankel and his wife hid behind our house. While I counted 36 bullet hole pin our fence. The Frankels, Dorothy and I went down the road to Charlie Barker's house. His wife Helen was nearly hysterical. A spell from after a gun at Pearl Harbor had landed in their front yard. Charlie had a .22 caliber pistol which he was
going to shoot at the first plane to come 
by. Helen was afraid he might draw 
fire from the planes, but there weren't 
any more planes that I knew of any 
more planes that I knew of big 
shells shot off. We, Marnie, 
agreed that we should report in to 
the office or Eva. While we 
used Charlie's car and dropped our 
wife off at Capt. Maguire's house. 
Delia was over at Mrs. Maguire's 
and they stayed until several other times.

On the way to the base we had 
shells falling in the fields all around 
us. We saw three planes coming 
over and we jumped out of the 
car and hid in a ditch. But it 
was two military torpedo boats 
with a Japanese plane sandwiched 
in. The American rear gunner 
was shooting at the army plane 
that was about 100 yards ahead of 
us and just ahead they were still 
shooting a lot of hits because another 
Japanese pilot bailed out in his 
parachute. His plane came into 
the ground, but he was so low 
that the chute never opened. We 
were a little concerned because the 
shells then went near Comm Beach 
area where our wives were.

Later we heard that he was captured, 
we moved around all day about the 
American planes. They must have 
done a job on gunners practice for the 
rear feet gunner. That's the only 
planes we saw. We tried to talk to 
by and asked. They didn't think 
that they could fly from Ford Island at 
Pearl Harbor. We went through the village of 
Cuba plantations, I can't remember why 
but we left the car and walked (or ran) the next few hundred yards. At 
the gate the corporal of the guard was 
holding out .45s semi-automatic pistols, 
I took one with some ammunition. 
It was full of 200 rounds. The 
most was under attack by ground 
strafing planes. No bombs. Later I 
learned that there were two distinct attacks 
on two. The first was the one when 
we arrived there. Later there were 
still some more planes came. 
I don't know if they were the same 
one. I went to the Service Transport 
area where I normally worked. It 
was NCO's. Larry Barlow was there 
and he and other senior NCO's (guys with experience in World War 
One at Kansas City) were directing
The fire at the strafing planes. Our planes on the ground were a blaze in fire. They were easy targets all blown up.

An old sergeant (Mr. Pankowski) was near one. He was crew chief on a big two-engine amphibian plane which was parked just near the others, west and from the other planes. He must have felt that plane because he yelled at the young ensign then at little thing to get that damn airplane, at least one of the men a turn on it and if the gas tanks blew up.

Old Jef checked.

Some one had gone to the quartermaster and broke down the door to the gun storage room. He brought a band of .30 cal. Springfield 1903 rifles with a few cases of ammo if we could get a rifle with a couple barrels or ammo. (the pistol I had cleaned in my pocket), gasoline was poured on the airplanes. We new it was a rough place and a bulldozer. Someone yelled for me to lead the planes. From a couple colony planes lengths ahead like shooting blocks. The pilots must have been concentrating on the parked airplane. They were firing with fixed machine guns straight ahead. They were to start. Then you could see the pilot places with the sunblind helmets. One plane was a two seater but the rear seat gunner was dead hanging over the side with his arms flapping in the wind. It is peculiar the quicker you become a killer yourself. I thought nothing I shot at those planes trying to fire one down, and we did. There was the wreckage of six planes against the outboard of our field. Maybe we got more credit than we deserved.

I had an American P-38 fighter plane (422 Air Corps) dive on one of the strafing planes and it went down in flames. I immediately pulled up and another Jap plane chased it down. You should have counted the checks that were done by those Marines for the Army Air Corps (later to become the U.S. Air Force).

That pilot must have been either Taylor or Welsh, two army pilots who were stationed at Wheeler Field.
At Leopold Barracks Army Base, they jumped in a car and raced to Haleina Beach on the north side of the island. There was a grass landing strip there and the planes were parked there with the guns loaded. They had been using the field to fly gunnery practice missions. The become national heroes because they were the only American pilots to get in the air. The Taylor shot down 2 planes and 1 Japanese got hit. I panned my flight path to get into the air — actually they were the only ones to come back. The guys in the Navy torpedo plane that he saw shot down. The gun planes were never heard from.

At a time of crisis, you never can tell what will become a hero. Our adjutant took a bullet through his hand. A private, a real good man by the name of Griswold, helped him grab my hand and told him, "Captain get your gun under that bulldog and stay there!" The adjutant covered the wound and stayed. When the attacks were over...

...my boss Harry Davis asked me if I had seen Tschum (one of our black sergents), I told him no and someone else said he saw him over near the railroad siding. Harry told me to go get Tschum and bring him on dead or alive. He said he was a German spy. Harry had also sent other people looking for him. I went where he had told last seen and saw him alone in the brush. I didn't get close to him because another man, a corporal named Remers, from our section came by on the other side of Tschum. He saluted to a group of men (he had not seen Tschum) that if they saw Tschum to bring him in. He was an open case. Tschum appeared to have heard him and swung around to aim his rifle at Dunn. I don't think if he fired because everybody (me) started shooting at him. I was in the line of fire and had to "hit the deck." When the shots were over Tschum was dead. He was one of the few that were killed that day by the Japanese. I found that the old C.P. (Col. Barrett) had been told that Tschum's father in Calay was a paid German agent and...
That Luchan had been sent into the field by his father including maps of the area for the day. One more bomb training plane arrived. It was parked a long way from the other planes for a different reason. One plane, through its hand, a photographer shot through the upper arm and a private shot through the cheek of his bull.

We were lucky, I guess we were a secondary target for planes who had unloaded on Pearl Harbor and were on their way back to their ships. I was never afraid of getting hit when we were under fire. They were shooting from planes which were firing straight up ahead and we could always tell when to duck. Some people left their cars in the auto partly lit. A shell hit among them and exploded, one of our own from back.

We wouldn't allowed off the base the rest of the day and that night. We got a message from the base that it was all off. There were wild rumors about Japan landing at Nanikuli beach. We were ready and armed to the teeth. Gas masks, too. Everybody was issued one.

That night about 9 P.M. a lot of fire was heard from Pearl. A plane was hit my with anti-aircraft fire. Later, we learned that it was a fighter plane that came in from a carrier to land at Ford Island Navy Field. They were all shot down. Once one crew fired at them everybody else followed suit. They didn't stand a chance.

Dorothy began crying with John Day's wife and daughter. John a 24 yr. old, would get off one night and I was off the next. That way, one of us was always there at night. Dorothy stood it as long as she could and she left to Pearl Harbor to see the chaplain. The chaplain she saw was the same one that was helping on a grey train on Pearl Harbor day and yelling, "Pray the Lord and pray for the ammunition." That story became world famous. Even a song was written about it. Will be could see the scared, pregnant girl wanting to go home to be safe with her father and the baby untouched enough to get them on a ship home. She paid her way out with the government paid her way back. She came home on a Dutch ship in a convoy and was seasick.
most of the way, but it's a long story. I got there after D-Day, and when I went to Midway Island, I got a new job there, and a promotion to Master Technician Sergeant. I was put in charge of Ordnance.

In December, the Air Corps sent 25 B-24 heavy bombers, the Liberator, to attack Wake Island, which was captured at the beginning of the war by its people. The bombing was to take place on the morning of Christmas Day. Each plane carried five 500-pound general purpose bombs and one 500-pound incendiary cluster. We celebrated Christmas by loading the planes. They used our bombs and fused and dropped all 950 bombs. We worked all night. I checked and double checked everything. Later reports said they all worked perfectly. This was my Xmas present! We hit all we got 25 numbers on ships 1 printer in a hat. We paid a dollar each for the damage. My number was 25. We were betting on the number of planes that would return. We counted them as they came back that afternoon. All returned.
Mr. Ed Duncan
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