



Video Story Transcript

December 7, 1941: An Eyewitness to the Attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

By: Storyteller Alton Takiyama-Chung
www.altonchung.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUbEogxmz5w>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Alton Takiyama-Chung. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to interview a tour guide at Hawaii's Plantation Village in Waipahu, Hawaii. And it's an open-air museum focusing on what life was like in the sugar cane and pineapple plantation camps in Hawaii from 1850 to about 1950. My guide, Charles Ishikawa, a retired principal and schoolteacher, grew up in the camps around Waipahu. And this is one of the stories that he told me.

My name is Charles Ishikawa and I grew up in the plantation camp in, around Waipahu in the 1930s, uh, 1940s. Waipahu is located about, oh, two, three miles from Pearl Harbor where, uh, WWII began for the United States. Now, my dad worked for the Oahu Sugar Company but we lived in Ota Camp. Ota Camp was, uh, a camp with the flatlands between, uh, Waipahu and Pearl Harbor. He lived there because he wanted to raise pigs and, uh, chickens for extra money. Oh, plenty pigs living close to plenty people. Mmm! Not a good idea because of the, uh... aroma.

But everyone else lived in segregated camps in, uh, above Waipahu, uh, and above the sugar mill. I mean, there was the, the Filipino camp and the Korean camp and the Portuguese, the Chinese, and the, the Puerto Ricans, and the Japanese people like us. Everybody had their own camp but all us kids, oh, we all went to school, Waipahu High School, so we all knew each other and we got along okay. Things changed a little bit after that Sunday, December 7th, 1941.

We're driving to the gymnasium, yeah, on the west side of, uh, of Pearl Harbor for basketball practice when, suddenly, we noticed this plane swooping in low, just over the treetops. Had these big red circles (hinomaru) on the wings. And it'll... the pilot was so low we could see the pilot. I mean, he had big goggles on, a dark helmet and as he flew on by looked like he was looking down upon us and so some of us looked up and we waved. He looked down and kinda smiled and waved down at us.

Further on down the road we see this lone U.S. National Guardsman. He has a Springfield bolt action rifle and he's shooting at the plane. And then, suddenly, all these other planes... gots... diving in. He starts shooting at them.

(Bang! Chi-chick. Bang! Chi-chick.) We pull over. "Eh, howzit," I say, "Uh, these guys, eh, terrific! The maneuvers, they look real!"

"What? Son, those are Japanese! They're attacking Pearl Harbor."

"What? Nah!"

And then a buddy of mine who is smarter than the rest of us kinda put it all together. "Hey, They not fooling around! This for real kine! They dropping real bombs!"

This made no sense. I mean, Japan was far away. How did they get here? And why would they attack us? What did we ever do to dem? Heh! Whatever! I didn't know what to believe but I kinda figure... eh, had, had nothing to do with us.

We didn't want the coach to yell at us so we continued on our way. We arrived at the gym a little after 8:00. People already dribbling, shooting practice shots. But before we could change into our gym clothes, the coach called us all together.

"Japan has attacked Pearl Harbor and, uh, President Roosevelt has declared war. Uh, you should all just, just go home."

Nobody said anything. Just went to the cars.

War? What did that mean? I mean, I was Japanese but I was also an American. And Japan had attacked America and that's wrong. But I had an uncle and cousins and other relatives in Japan. Now that we're at war, that means, will I ever be able to see them again?

Driving back to Waipahu, we could see the, the thick, black smoke billowing up from Pearl Harbor. And the planes diving, zigzagging all across the sky just like, like seabirds diving on a school of fish! Explosions are shaking us! You can see the flames shooting up into the sky! And the air was filled with the screaming sound of, of air raid sirens!

We pulled into town. We could see that, you know, all these people sitting on the roofs of the houses trying to get a, a better view of the... what was going on, the action of, uh, Pearl Harbor. And that's when we learned that, later on, that one of our classmates, one of the Sato boys, was killed by shrapnel from friendly anti-aircraft fire. I mean, we just saw him yesterday. And now, he was make. He was dead! I mean, for real kine. Dead! He's probably one of the first casualties, civilian casualties, of WWII. And it... this was bad... I mean, ships were on fire. Things were exploding ova there! People probably dying! This's really bad.

That night mama called all us kids together. Tell us, "Uh, go through de house, uh. Pull down anything that has Japanese on it or look, uh, Japanese. Take 'em in the backyard. Burn 'em!"

Oh, we took down art work, family photos, even calendars! We burn it all. We were so afraid that the military police would come and arrest us for being spies. I mean, we were Americans but, suddenly, we felt like we were suspects, guilty until proven innocent. Americans but, mmm, maybe not American enough.

Then came martial law. It was 8:00 p.m. curfew and then nighttime blackout. Is... Everyone is so afraid that the Japanese would attack again or, or invade. And so, all the windows had to be covered over so no light shine through so the Japanese wouldn't have any targets to shoot at. You know, the pineapple company, at this time, they would put down this tar paper in the fields to control the weeds. Overnight, rolls of the stuff just disappeared. And, you know, next few days all de windows of all de plantation houses had dis tar paper put on top just like the ones the field. Funny, yeah?

Now, I was in Boy Scouts and so, our job, we had to go patrol at night to make sure that no lights was coming through the windows. Uh, the, the light coming through the windows, we had to knock on the door and tell them to cover the windows. We had the little flashlight that, uh, we put this red paper on top so we can see but not be easily seen. Kinda creepy walking through the plantation town like this. Well, this real tiny red light to guide you.

Then everybody we knew was digging air raid shelters. So, we dug one too. But the only place we could dig it was between the house and the bath house and underneath mama's clothesline. Oh, we spent hours digging that hole. 'Cause it had to be big enough for the whole family to go inside, yah? So, we dug it six feet down and four feet by four feet. We cut steps into the earth to get inside. And then we got these two by fours; we placed them on top. And we got an old piece of totan, this corrugated iron, to put on top the two by fours. And we covered over all the dirt that we dug out from the hole. Trouble was that totan we use was kinda weak and corroded, rotten. But that's all we had. If anyone stood on top, the whole thing would collapse.

But after all dat work, we never used it. I was afraid to go inside that thing 'cause it was dark and dank and it was filled with cockroaches and centipedes. I kinda figured if the Japanese ever attack, I kinda just take my chances rather than go and hunker down in the mud with the cockroaches and centipedes.

Now, in school, they handed out... everybody had the handed-out gas mask. Oh, we had to carry dem wherever we went. They showed us how to put it on; how to breathe in it. Thing was made of rubber, smelled funny, and was kinda gross. You put it on, we all look like elephant people.

One of the scariest things was the soldiers. There were soldiers stationed in, uh, high school and, and off to the plantation camps. I mean, big haole soldiers, Caucasian soldiers, and big guards stood looking at all of us. I mean, do they think that us kids and our parents will cause trouble because we Japanese? I mean, we never figured out what they were guarding. We never ask. But... looking back upon it, they're probably just ordered there. They're probably just afraid of us as we were of dem.

Lots of stuff changed because of that Sunday. We hadda come up with new ways of living. I mean, anything Japanese, we disowned. We disowned part of who we were. And all the leaders of the Japanese-American community, they all got arrested and taken away. We hadda figure out how to do a lot of stuff on our own now. And the soldiers, the soldiers are always watching us. Hoh!

It was a long time before life was normal again in Waipahu. Three months after I graduated high school in 1944, I was drafted into the Army. Huh, Japanese-American boy, learn how to fight the Japanese. Huh, and what happened to me afta dat. Ah, well, dat's another story.