

'IN OUR DEFENSELESS PLANE, WE WATCHED THE JAPANESE BOMB PEARL HARBOR'



Caught in the air during Japan's historic attack on the U.S. fleet, Roy Vitousek and his son Martin stared with horror . . . and then made a run for their lives.

BY DON DWIGGINS

December 7, 1941 began quietly enough for Martin Vitousek, 17-year-old son of Roy Vitousek, a Hawaii legislator and private pilot. The sun played hide-and-seek through broken clouds scudding across Oahu at 3000 feet. It was a perfect day for Martin and his father to take a Sunday spin in the family plane, an Aeronca Scout.

"Let's fly around the island, Dad!" Martin urged



Roy Vitousek in 1941

We Watched the Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor

as they took off from John Rogers Airport near Pearl Harbor at 7:30 A.M. They swung east, climbing easily as they flew over Waikiki Beach—not yet crowded at that hour—and past the pink-stucco Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Honolulu lay sleeping peacefully below them, as unaware as they that at that moment 190 Japanese planes were streaking toward the island from the north. The first attacking wave of Kates, Vals, and Zekes was led by Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, air group commander of the carrier *Akagi*. Its mission was to wipe out the United States Navy's carrier fleet, mistakenly believed to be anchored at Pearl Harbor.

Ahead of the Vitouseks, ugly black rain clouds towered, shrouding Diamond Head. The frail little Aeronca was tossed violently about in rough air. Roy Vitousek shook his head. "Let's try the other way," he said.

Martin checked his wristwatch. It was 7:50. They'd been up 20 minutes. They could still circle the island with the gas left in the tanks. Flying offshore, father and son looked down with a sense of pride at Pearl Harbor, America's supposedly impregnable "Gibraltar of the Pacific," lying below them on their right.

Martin's attention froze. Formations of planes, sleek low-wing craft with rounded wingtips, were making low strafing runs directly beneath his father's plane, the way he'd often seen Army and Navy planes do it in mock attacks on the giant naval base.

"Look, Dad!" he cried. "P-40s!"

His father's eyes widened at the sight of bright red discs on the planes' wingtips. "P-40s hell!" he shouted. "They're Japs!"



We Watched the Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor*Martin Vitousek (left) in 1970*

Smoke and flames erupted from a seaplane ramp on Ford Island. A flying boat was suddenly engulfed in flames. A hangar began to burn furiously.

Curiously enough, the Vitouseks, at that unforgettable moment of history—7:55 A.M. of December 7, 1941—were virtually alone in realizing that Pearl Harbor was under enemy attack. On the ground, others sought some reasonable explanation; they thought it was a sham battle that had tragically gone awry.

Unsure what to do, the Vitouseks flew in circles over the battle area, as the attack increased in tempo. A dozen planes swept down from the mountains, while others bored in from the west. Parked aircraft and the big hangars at Hickam Field exploded in balls of orange fire. Then came the dive bombers.



From high above the Vitouseks came two torpedo planes, diving out of the morning sun. Martin Vitousek clearly saw the greenhouse canopies of both slide open. From the rear cockpit of each, gunners poured machine gun fire at the Aeronca as they swept past. The chatter of the guns sounded above the noise of the little plane's engine. Slugs ripped across in front of its nose, but none of them made a hit.

We Watched the Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor

Then it was that Martin and his father saw the torpedoes drop into Pearl Harbor and streak through the water, leaving white wakes. The U.S. Navy carriers were at sea on maneuvers, but Battleship Row offered a tremendous prize to the Japanese. One by one the ships lurched, mortally hit: *Arizona*, *Oklahoma*, *Utah*. There was no time for the Vitouseks to watch any longer.



Roy Vitousek chopped the throttle of the Aeronca and threw the little plane over into a steep spiral, diving to get back on the ground before more attackers came. Like an orange butterfly fleeing in panic from a diving hawk, the plane winged into the traffic pattern at John Rogers and quickly slammed onto the runway. The Vitouseks leaped out and started running before the plane stopped rolling. They dove for cover in the underbrush.

Again, Japanese planes came in, sweeping low over the airfield. The Vitouseks felt slugs thudding past them, toward the hangars. On the ramp they heard a pilot friend, Bob Tyce, cry out. Slugs had caught him, sending him sprawling. Martin and his dad raced back to the Aeronca, started the engine, and taxied fast to the ramp. A mechanic yelled: "Get out of here! Some drunken Army pilots just killed Bob!"

Minutes later, the Vitouseks were racing for town in their car. Roy Vitousek, a volunteer policeman who later would become the territorial judge advocate, pulled to a stop at police headquarters. Inside, confusion reigned. The switchboard was jammed. The duty officer thrust two hastily scribbled messages into Martin's

Martin jumped into his father's

We Watched the Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor

Martin jumped into his father's car and broke all speed limits racing to stations KGV and KGMB, ten blocks away. Rushing inside the stations to deliver the messages, he was a modern Paul Revere. Within a minute the alarm was being flashed over the air: THIS IS AN ENEMY ATTACK NOT A SHAM BATTLE! ALL MILITARY PERSONNEL REPORT TO YOUR STATIONS IMMEDIATELY!

For the rest of the day, Martin Vitousek and his mother huddled over their radio at home, listening to wild rumors and shocking bulletins of the growing disaster. A midget, two-man submarine was seen surfacing in the city reservoir high in the hills . . . paratroopers were raining down in Kolekole Pass. When night fell, Martin took his rifle and went out looking for them.

Not until much later did the full story of the Pearl Harbor sneak attack unfold, but the complete surprise with which it came will never be forgotten. Commander Fuchida announced its success to the invasion fleet with the historic radio message: *TORA! TORA! TORA!*

I met Martin Vitousek recently at the University of Hawaii. His father is dead now, leaving Martin as the sole living person to have seen the Pearl Harbor attack from above. A geophysicist, Martin is deeply engrossed in designing sensitive sonar devices which he sinks to the ocean bottom around Hawaii to warn of another kind of attack—that of the catastrophic tsunamis, tremendous sea waves that are caused by submarine earthquakes.

On a flight around the island of Oahu with Dr. Vitousek, in a new Piper Cherokee 140, I saw exactly where he and his father had been when history was made that morning 28 years ago. We were up watching the filming of *TORA!*

We Watched the Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor

TORA! TORA!, a \$25,000,000 20th Century-Fox moving picture being made on the exact location where 2403 Americans lost their lives and another 1178 were wounded.

Dr. Vitousek's face turned pale as we saw a formation of dive-bombers streaking in below us, red suns on their wings. Fearful explosions lit the sky. From the sweat standing out on Martin Vitousek's forehead, I knew that the realism of this replay of the Japanese sneak attack had stirred memories burned into his mind when he was a 17-year-old boy—memories he would never forget in all his life.



PAGEANT

January, 1970: p. 44