

WHO COULD FORGET?

By Jim Campbell

Most Americans over the age of 55 can tell you exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, early on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941. But members of the 1941 Willamette football team, and a group of their boosters, know very well where they were and what they were doing on that fateful day. The group was there at Pearl Harbor!

It is said that the events of that day in December 1941 changed the world forever; that lives would never be the same again; that the United States was jolted out of its posture of isolationism if not its innocence. Perhaps all that is true. Certainly, members of the football team from the small college in Oregon felt first-hand the effects of America's entry into the world conflict.

Willamette, located in Oregon's capital city of Salem along the banks of the Willamette River, was founded over 150 years ago in 1842; and is called the "oldest university in the West." The school had a highly respected football program under Coach Roy "Spec" Keene, and he had arranged for his Bearcats team to play in a Shrine Bowl game in Honolulu on Saturday, December 6, 1941. Willamette was given a \$5,500 guarantee; enough to make the trip and still realize a modest profit for the athletic department.

The team knew in advance that it would be going to the islands. Sometimes the trip was used as a recruiting tool, although the recruitment of athletes was not conducted then as it is now. Ken Johnson, a member of the Willamette team, remembers that "we played pretty tentatively the week before we set sail, and it was like we were playing not to get hurt. No one wanted to miss the trip, and we had more trouble than we should have in beating Whitman, 28-0."

The Willamette team and its traveling party boarded the ship Lurline on November 27, 1941. The Bearcats, victors by large scores in seven of their prior eight games, had lost only to Idaho, a member of the Pacific Coast Conference. In Honolulu on that Saturday in 1941, the Willamette gridmen lost their post-season game to the University of Hawaii by a score of 20-6, but a larger story was unfolding. As the ship carrying the Willamette party was sailing west, a Japanese naval task force under Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was stealthily sailing on an easterly tack toward a similar destination, the Hawaiian Islands.

Wayne Hadley and Shirley McKay, a couple that would later marry in November of 1942, were with the Willamette party that sailed to Hawaii in 1941. In Honolulu they were headquartered at the exclusive Moana Hotel, and Hadley explains that the Willamette people weren't really being that loose with their money, and really didn't have much of a choice: "You have to remember that this was long before all those high-rises went up that you see there now. The only hotels on Waikiki then were the Moana and the Royal Hawaiian; that was it.

After the Lurline docked to an elaborate "aloha-style" reception of flowered leis from University of Hawaii coeds, the host Shriners conducted the Willamette party on a tour of Honolulu and took the team inland on the island to see Pali mountain and the Punchbowl. Wally Olson, a center on the Bearcat football team, wasn't so sure that the trip would come off until actually arriving in the islands. "We expected the trip to be cancelled, because of war tensions, right up until we sailed", said Olson. "But once we got underway and landed there, we never thought an attack would occur, the place was just so beautiful, and who would attack such a heavily-fortified place. The Army and Navy were everywhere." Apparently, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and General

Walter C. Short (the Navy and Army commanders) shared those feelings of false security. While it was felt that the Japanese could or would attack, the most likely targets seemed to be in the Philippines or Malaya.

Earl Hampton, a fullback, remembers the game that was played in Honolulu Stadium before 25,000 fans, about one-tenth of Honolulu's population at the time: "It was a hard-fought game. They were bigger than we were, but we played them well for about three quarters. We actually scored first, but then they pulled away in the final period. We still had our sea-legs. Some of us were seasick coming over. It was warm, and we just ran outta gas."

Marshall Barbour's impression of the game was mostly one man – Nolle Smith – known as "the fastest man on the islands." Smith, a slim, 160-pound halfback, could really run according to Barbour. "He was quick and shifty", explains Barbour. "We saw a lot of him from the rear that day. But Ted Ogdahl made the play of the day. He tackled Smith from behind, after a long chase. Still don't know how he did that." Ogdahl, a halfback for Willamette, later coached the Bearcats through twenty successful seasons, from 1952-1971.

George Constable, a tackle for the Bearcats in 1941, echoes Barbour: "You ask what I remember most about the game; simple, seeing the back of Nolle Smith's jersey all afternoon" Smith also

impressed Willamette's center, Pat White, "I thought I had him (Smith) once. I was covering him on a flat pass. He was up in the air, both feet off the ground, and I drove my old leather helmet into him, thinking I really nailed him Funny, I felt it more than he did He was fast, but he was tough too. Al Walden, Chuck Furno, and Ogdahl were our best backs – they were good football players – but Smith and his team were just better that day."

White continued, as he remembered the next day: "We were up early on Sunday, the seventh, to take a scheduled bus tour of the island, the base at Pearl Harbor, and then picnic on the north shore with a group of U of H coeds. But the bus never showed. Some Army MPs herded us back to the Moana. We saw troops going by, but didn't know what was up." Halfback Chuck Furno had similar recollections: "The Army and the Navy were everywhere around our hotel – telling us where to go and what to do – but we didn't know what all the hustle and bustle was at first."

Hadley and Ms. McKay were also waiting for the bus that didn't get there. Hadley said, "We began to hear stories that the bus wasn't coming; no explanation. So, Shirley and I went to Waikiki Beach for a swim. We could see splashes and air bursts, but like so many others, we thought they were part of Navy maneuvers. We didn't realize we were seeing the start of World War II for the U.S.; mostly we just heard noise. Pearl was eight miles away."

Constable had a different perspective on the morning attack "we were on the roof of the Moana, watching what we thought were some pretty realistic maneuvers. We heard shells, saw splashes, but were kind of oblivious. Ironically, I had a Kodak box camera in my room, but I wasn't about to go get it just to take snapshots of practice runs." Olson was another who saw splashes while eating breakfast at Moana. His waiter told him they were just "whale spouts." Olson said, "We were just farmboys and lumberjacks, but after about a half dozen eruptions in the water I knew something was up; there couldn't be that many whales out there."

White remembered, once it was evident what had happened, how he and Barbour went to Waikiki. "Mush (Barbour's nickname) and I went to the beach to string barbed wire", he explained. "We dug some trenches too. By then, there were machine gun emplacements and we protected them. You have to understand that the threat of a land invasion was still very real to us. Later, we went with others to stand guard at Punahou School, which the Army Corps of Engineers took over as their headquarters."

The Willamette players had been "volunteered" for duty by Coach Keene, and they were issued outdated Springfield rifles, a little ammunition, and little in the way of instructions. While White and Barbour were standing guard at Punahou, White recalled a scary incident: "We were standing guard at a water tower at night, and our relief came early. We expected them from downhill; they came from uphill. We thought Jap paratroopers had landed. We might have shot them had we not recognized them in the flashlight beams. I guess we all had itchy trigger fingers."

Glenn Nordquist was a 200-pound freshman tackle for the 1941 Willamette team, and he remembers that day well. "When I was a teenager, I decided I would study for the ministry, but then I had some success as a high school football player and thought that was for me", explains Nordquist. "I would soon learn differently. After the attack, I was walking guard at Punahou at night. I had a very long and personal talk with the Lord and knew what I had to do. After my freshman year, I transferred to Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, graduated, and went on to seminary and became a pastor." In his ministry throughout the Northwest, Nordquist – now a prison chaplain in Gainesville, Florida – made an unlikely acquaintance. He was surprised one day to find that he was a speaker on the same program at a youth rally, as Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the pilot who led the raid on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Fuchida had been converted to Christianity not long after the close of the war.

The Willamette traveling party stayed in Hawaii, doing what it could to help the war effort – men walking guard: women assisting nurses at Tripler General Hospital and other facilities. Eventually, the Willamette team and its party would sail for home on December 19, 1941, on the ship called the President Coolidge. McKay, just days earlier a rather carefree 18-year old coed, now had seen the horrors of war on a personal level. Her father was Douglas McKay, then an Oregon state senator, and later destined to be the state's governor before becoming Secretary of the Interior under President Dwight D. Eisenhower; and she remembered the trip home: "It took longer. To avoid submarines, we zig-zagged somewhat. We had a cruiser and a destroyer escort, but we were still concerned, especially as the shipping lanes narrowed as we got closer to San Francisco."

The President Coolidge docked safely on Christmas Day, 1941, and a large number of family, friends, and well-wishers greeted the Willamette group. They would all go back to Salem by train – a never-to-be-forgotten trip had ended.