

## The Attempted Attack on the Hawaii Temple, December 7, 1941

by Lance D. Chase

One of the most widespread religious legends<sup>1</sup> concerning Hawaii is the account of a Japanese pilot's attempt to destroy the Hawaii temple on December 7, 1941. This paper will not deal with the many variants of the story. Rather, I will discuss the story's validity, and that which moves it from the realm of folklore to religious legend, its origins. I issue one caveat. Elder Harold B. Lee said at General Conference as reported in the Ensign: "It never ceases to amaze me how gullible some of our church members are in broadcasting these sensational stories . . . (105). As an historian, I long ago determined that the most judicious approach to miracle stories is to recognize the powerlessness of miracles to produce true faith. I commend this approach to you since it allows objective examination of such accounts, our efforts influenced only by a desire to determine the truth.

Parenthetically, let me further observe that all historians poach on other's preserves (Isenberg 68). My colleague Ken Baldrige has done considerable research on this story and has graciously made the results available to me. I dare say he would almost rather be giving a paper today on my topic than on his own.

While some men were being miraculously liberated from their overturned steel coffins, others breathed fetid air in their darkened tombs, their slim hopes of rescue fading with each agonized breath. Such was the decision fate decreed for the traumatized men at Pearl Harbor that seventh day of December, 1941. Meanwhile, twenty miles and six minutes away by a "Val" dive bomber to the north, related events are said to have unfolded which constitute the subject of this paper. The story is relatively simple. A Japanese pilot returning from Pearl Harbor with a bomb still undelivered, spotted the Hawaii temple. Determined to destroy the building, a target of opportunity, before it became necessary to jettison his bomb harmlessly into the nearby sea, he dived on the temple. His bomb would not release. He then decided to dive again and strafe but his guns would not fire. It is unclear whether he made three or more passes but on what may have been a third pass his controls failed to work, even as he contemplated a suicide dive. Fearful of expending his fuel before reaching his ship, he headed out to sea. Now he worked his bomb release mechanism and the bomb fell. Now his guns responded. Feeling disgraced, but encouraged by his now properly functioning plane, he decided to try a last strafing run at the building. A final time his controls refused to respond and he was forced to continue back to his ship. (Stout Journal).

This story seems to have been in circulation for some 26 years before its source became generally known in Hawaii. In 1983, Robert Thomas Stout and his wife visited the Hawaii temple on their 25th anniversary. After the session, they spoke with the then temple president, Bob Finlayson. Stout told the president of his tracking out the Japanese pilot in September of 1957 when Stout, a great grandson of Hosea Stout, was a missionary in Matsumoto City, Japan. This city of 200,000 in the foothills of the Japanese Alps, is the sister to Salt Lake City, Utah. Finlayson had heard a version of the story previously from one of his own temple workers, Robert Kahawaii, a professed eye witness. A short while

after this meeting between Stout and Finlayson, the former sent his actual journal to the Hawaii temple for their archives. So now, at last, the Japanese source of the legend was uncovered and could be compared with that of the eyewitness, Kahawaii. Of course, Stout's account had been given regularly in firesides in Boise, Idaho where Stout lived. In Hawaii, Bob Kahawaii had frequently shared his version. Ken Baldrige recorded this for the oral history program at Brigham Young University--Hawaii in 1976. Those who have personally heard Bob Kahawaii tell his story, as I have, are well aware that his accounts varied and some have felt that the variations undermined the credibility of Bob's account. While his versions pose many unresolved problems, it is well to remember that variations between accounts are also characteristic of the visions of the Apostle Paul and Joseph Smith. Certainly, Kahawaii's version has some serious contradictions with Stout's account and also those written by Pearl Harbor historians Walter Lord and Gordon Prange.

Bob Kahawaii's story is that he came home drunk early Sunday morning, December 7 to 55-112 Poohaile Street in Laie, perhaps a quarter mile away from the temple, after he had imbibed too freely at a party. Bob's wife had locked him out so he slept under a coconut tree near his house. He had been to Honolulu stadium earlier Saturday night to see the Willamette University Bearcats play the University of Hawaii Rainbows in the Shrine Classic but, unlike many other Laieans, Bob came home that night as he planned to go fishing with friends early Sunday morning. He awoke and saw a plane diving on the temple. He described the bomb as "not too big, a smaller bomb, and long, just like a torpedo," hanging down as though it were a hook, but it did not fall. At least one pass was made, the 32-year-old high school custodian recalled, before the plane flew away. Shortly later, now at the fishing site at Hukilau Beach and close to the Cooke Boat House, he saw an American B-17 bomber flying toward Kahuku. He could not have known then that the U.S. plane, having flown in from California at the very time of the first attack on Pearl, made an emergency landing on the Kahuku Golf course (Lord 153). This detail is significant because it indicates that according to Bob's account the attempt to bomb the temple occurred during the attack of the first rather than the second strike force.

If the mouths of two witnesses are required to establish the validity of a story, we have them. I would like to continue by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of these two accounts.

Sixteen years elapsed between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the narration of the event to Stout, the 19-year-old missionary. Kahawaii's account is not recorded until 34 years after the attack, in 1976. Furthermore, it was 1975 before Kahawaii was prompted to have the document notarized. The transcript of the account still has not been finally edited and it is a problematical document. Kahawaii spoke in pidgin and was not always easy to understand. His account indicates he may have telescoped some of the events, attributing them to December 7, 1941 when it was obvious they could only have occurred much later. For instance, he said the Japanese bomber had bomb bay doors. None of the Japanese carrier aircraft at the time had bomb bays. The bombs were attached externally to the aircraft. What is more, one wonders why Bob never told his daughter-in-law Emma about the incident until about 1965 although she and her husband lived with Bob for a number of years prior to 1965. On the other hand, the character of both the Roberts involved is unimpeachable. Although Bob Kahawaii was irregular in his habits for nearly half his life, he later served three missions and died a temple worker, July 1986. Stout worked for the Church Education



System for 12 years and is now pursuing a doctorate at Arizona State University. He has returned to Japan more than 50 times, once as mission president from 1977-80 and as a temple worker although Bob is still on crutches after a serious car accident. Both Kahawaii and Stout were absolutely convinced of the truthfulness of their accounts of the attempted attack.

In searching for other possible witnesses I met Tom Nakayama with whom Bob went fishing that morning. Tom told me he heard but saw no planes. Cloud cover described by Japanese flyers and ascribed by them to Providence may account for this (Dec. 7 107-09). But he did not even know of Bob's story. Of course, Bob related that they went fishing after he saw the bomber attack so this could possibly account for Tom not seeing the action Bob reported. Other possible witnesses have not come forward; the other fisherman with Bob and Tom that morning has died.

Stout's missionary companion, Gary Hatch Wright of Chula Vista, California died in a plane crash around 1969. I have examined Gary's journal his brother George G. Wright of Mapleton, Utah was kind enough to locate for me. The only entry for September 1957 is by Stout, praising senior companion Wright. There are no entries in the journal after this and nothing before about the temple story. Stout suggested to me that Wright was not an "iron-rodder," possibly in reference to the absence of significant or regular journal entries. Search was made by George Wright for letters from his brother which might mention the story but nothing was found.

Paul Andrus, a Hawaii temple worker, formerly Regional Representative in Hawaii, was Stout's mission president. He does not recall ever hearing the story until after returning from his mission to Hawaii although he heard it from Kahawaii prior to reading Stout's account in 1983. As a former pilot of A-20 attack aircraft in World War II, he has carefully reread Stout's journal account and verified that the military aspects are plausible.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my research allowed me to cater to my fascination with World War II military aircraft. I wondered if accounts were sufficiently consistent that a particular aircraft type could be identified in the attack, helping corroborate either account. The three types of aircraft used were the U.S.-nicknamed "Kate" torpedo and high level bomber, "Val" dive bombers, and "Zeke" fighters.<sup>2</sup> Both functions performed by the Kates seemed to rule out that type as being involved in an attempt on the temple. They were armed with only one bomb or torpedo, each looking very similar, weighing 1,764 pounds and designed for bombing ships only (Rand McNally 300; At Dawn 375). Kahawaii's description of the bomb as "not too big, a smaller bomb, and long just like a torpedo," is admittedly a problem. That describes the bomb on the Kate. For me, convincing evidence that the plane could not have been a Kate is in Stout's account. The pilot planned to strafe the temple and this was a function of which the Kates were incapable since their only gun was a machine gun facing the rear of the plane and providing only for limited defense against other aircraft (Rand McNally 300; Dec. 7 159).

Stout's story also makes clear that the plane could not have been the famed Zeke or Zero since on the Pearl mission the Zekes were not equipped with bombs. Instead, Zekes were used for protecting the slower and more important bombers and torpedo planes and, having done that, for strafing (Dec. 7 84). Of course, once again this is placing considerable trust in a Mormon elder's language skills

in these pre-Missionary Training Center days.

My assumption then is that the plane was a Val dive bomber, armed, not with a torpedo-like bomb but rather with a 550 pound block-buster, intended for ground targets only, and with three machine guns, two of which were used for strafing (At Dawn 259). This aircraft also has a rear gunner who would be another witness in the story could he be located.

Several inconsistencies occur relative to these details. Stout has the pilot with a bomb "left" when a single bomb was all the Val carried. While more than 50 Kates in the Second Attack Force did carry multiple bombs, none of these bombs were torpedo shaped and none of these multiple bomb carrying Kates were in the First Attack Force, which is where I place our pilot (At Dawn 374).

One other factor relative to the equipment is significant. For both the high level bombers with their special ordnance made from 16 inch naval shells and the dive bombers with their 550 pound bombs, special equipment had to be constructed for releasing these explosive devices. In fact, these mechanisms were so new that they were still being installed and adjusted right up to the time the 30 vessel task force left Hitokappu Bay for Hawaii (At Dawn 271-2). Thus, it is possible the pilot might have had difficulty delivering his bomb due to mechanical malfunction, although there is no evidence of any other planes having this problem.

The pilot's name ought to be significant and fortunately, Stout provides a possible lead. He cited two variants, possibly three, Ohara, Ogawa, and Okawa, all common enough in Japan. Outside the house Stout described as sort of a duplex, was the name Nishimoto, but he thought this name was that of the other party in the house. I have attempted to locate a roster of the pilots and understand one may exist but have been unable to obtain it. A professor Ikuhiko Hata in Tokyo has apparently compiled such a list but thus far has been unwilling to send it to me. My estimate is that approximately 816 flyers were involved in the attack, 355 of them pilots.

One of the operational problems concerns the temple as a target. The clearly identified targets for the Japanese force were the U.S. naval vessels and the military air bases on Oahu (At Dawn 27-8, 374). Japanese military leaders emphasized the importance of crippling the American Pacific fleet and in order to do that fully, and to prevent retaliation from U.S. aircraft, they had to destroy American war planes, preferably on the ground. Nevertheless, apparently in the excitement of the actual engagement, Zekes strafed homes, pedestrians, cars, even golf courses (At Dawn 532). In addition, two of the six Japanese carriers, the newest in the fleet, Shokaku and Zuikaku, had relatively untrained pilots and these were assigned only land targets, considered large enough for even these pilots to hit on their maiden voyage (At Dawn 269). One of these planes could have had his target over one of the bases obscured by smoke or had a malfunction of his bomb release mechanism. Obviously, no Japanese pilot would have returned to his ship with his bomb attached and certainly not with it dangling precariously from its hanger, as Kahawaii described it. It was the custom for World War II planes to jettison unused bombs over water, without arming them, when possible.

Another operational question concerns Stout's journal account that the pilot on his last try even thought he would jisatsu, suicide dive. The Kamikaze

phase of the war did not occur until 1944-45 and one wonders if such a detail discredits Stout. Surely, he would have known about the Kamikaze aspect, but probably not when it was instituted. Gordon W. Prange's brilliant 37 year study of the Pearl Harbor attack reveals that Japanese pilots were willing, and in a few instances, actually may have dived their stricken aircraft onto American targets on December 7, 1941 (At Dawn 491, 533). Prior to launch from their carriers, these fiercely committed flyers had vowed to maintain radio silence even if they went down at sea, thus preserving both the surprise factor of the mission, and their fleet from American attack (At Dawn 379). Of course, this also assured their likely death in case of engine failure or plane damage since they wore no parachutes (Dec. 7 85). The depth of their resolve can be measured since their commanders had earlier suggested they break radio silence only if they went down at sea so that rescue vessels could retrieve them. The planes were equipped with small life rafts (Dec. 7 85).

A geographical question must be asked since no flight plans for the attacking force show Japanese aircraft within five miles of the Laie temple, on their way to their targets. On their return, the pilots were supposed to rendezvous 20 miles north-west of Kaena Point, far from Laie (At Dawn 374). Nor would Laie intersect with the return route of those planes which made the rendezvous. Prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, Japanese fighters had never taken offensive action more than a hundred miles from their base and they had no homing device (At Dawn 163; Dec. 7 259). However, Paul Andrus assured me that in the excitement and confusion of combat conditions it is by no means straining credibility to believe Japanese planes could have passed over Laie. The return to the carriers was much less orderly than had been the inbound flight. U.S. radar sites could obtain no definite plot of any planes returning (Dec. 7 304). But, in this matter the two accounts again vary. Stout has his pilot returning from Pearl prior to the temple attack and Kahawaii his flying to Kaneohe, after. Stout's again seems more plausible for the planes attacking Kaneohe first hit Hawaiian landfall several miles to the Kaneohe side of Laie, at the closest on the east, several miles to the Kahuku side, on the west (Combat 29).

President D. Arthur Haycock of the Hawaii temple has strong feelings about this story. He asks how two missionaries whose Japanese was so elementary that they did not understand they had been told their "contact" was not interested and instead entered his home, could have understood the detailed account Stout scribbled on Wright's map? I asked both Andrus and Stout about this. The former said the explanation could be simple. If the man said something like "it doesn't matter" or "it's all right" or even "I'm all right" meaning "I'm all right now as I am," the difference in both Japanese and English is sufficiently slight that the man easily could have been misunderstood. Stout recalled the man gave his explanation of the attempted bombing in broken English with many gestures.

Some of the more mythical aspects of the story are worthy of comment. Stout reported that he had on that ninth day of September 1957 in Matsumoto City a post card aerial view of the Hawaiian temple that piqued the pilots attention. When the latter saw this picture, "Ohara-san turned pale and was shocked." In fact, it was this picture that provoked the middle-aged man into telling his story. After his airplane's controls froze on his next to last attempt, "great fear scared me and I realized a strange power protected that white building with its blue pools." On his last attempt he felt a powerful influence, felt he had angered God (Kamisama). He did not even look back so great was his fear. The Elders told him about the temple to which the man replied: "It has giant magic



power and protects it. You two missionaries make me feel those feelings again. You must leave me alone and not torment my mind and heart (Kokoro). Please excuse me. I am very busy." One of the prominent characteristics of many of the military personnel among the attackers was their concern that the powers of heaven aid them. Here is the classic case of both sides praying for divine intervention in their behalf, no doubt complicating the divine economy.

Some critics of the story have asked how it could be true when God apparently has not seen fit to protect his other temples, such as Solomon's, Herod's, Nauvoo, and even Salt Lake when a bomb damaged the east door. Stout's response to this was that he thought it unlikely temple work was slowed in Salt Lake when the bomb exploded there but the work in Hawaii would have been set back severely had the Japanese aviator been successful with his bomb. Of course, no one who has witnessed the faith of the Polynesian people would question the power of that faith, even to the protection of buildings from eminent destruction.

In 1977, Stout returned to Japan and sought his interlocutor of twenty years earlier. He was told by a neighbor of the man that he had died, of orneriness. Apparently, the man had been known by at least one member of the LDS Church. However, this member, or members, had known nothing about his involvement with the Hawaii temple (Stout). As to reports the pilot later joined the Church and even visited the building he had attempted to destroy, there is no evidence. Thy myth probably stems from the fact that Japanese Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, brilliant leader of the attack, later became a Christian, not a Mormon, and toured the U.S. as a non-denominational evangelist (At Dawn x).

As historian Benedetto Croce wrote: "There is no history that completely satisfies us because any construction of ours generates new facts and new problems and solicits new solutions" (Isenberg 38). Clearly, there is much more that could be done on this story, especially by someone in Japan. For example, more information than is currently available to me concerning the Pearl Harbor attack roster might provide further evidence for or against the story.

Several people working on the story have been discouraged by others from proceeding with this topic, possibly since some may fear it is not true and thus faith might be diminished. It would be well to see that the purpose of historical knowledge is understanding, not certainty (Isenberg 27). The increased knowledge and understanding I have gained preparing this paper have been so satisfying and exciting that I have found the experience yielding satisfactions that are in themselves affirmations of faith.

## Works Cited

- Brunvand, Jan. The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968.
- Combat: Pacific Theater World War II. Ed. Don Congdon. New York: Dell Publishing, 1958.
- Isenberg, Michael T. Puzzles of the Past. College Station: Texas A & M University, 1985.
- Lord, Walter. Day of Infamy. New York: Bantam Books, 1957.
- Prange, Gordon E. At Dawn We Slept. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Dec. 7, 1941. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1988.
- Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft. Ed. Enzo Angelucci.
- Stone, Scott C. Pearl Harbor: The Way it Was. Honolulu: Island Heritage, 1977.

1. Jan Brunvand in The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction describes religious legends as stories attested by an official investigation and thus entered in printed accounts. These remain folklore while they circulate orally in traditional versions. Since the "legend" is now no longer anonymous, I have chose to classify it as legend rather than folklore or myth since Brunvand suggests myths usually have gods or animals as their principal characters (cf pp 4, 78, 87).

2. These were names given by the U.S. military. The Kate was actually a Nakajimi B5N2. The Val was an Aichi D3A1 and the Zeke an A6M2 Mitsubishi also commonly known as Zero. (cf Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft, pp 300, 288, 224-5).