

IN SEARCH OF A TALE: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT
(Was there an attempt to bomb the Hawaii Temple or wasn't there?)
by Ken Baldrige

My desire to put this down in writing really began to crystallize when my wife received a phone call from a Canadian tourist visiting here in Hawaii. The visitor was very excited and thrilled because just before leaving Canada she had heard a story about an attempted bombing of the Latter-day Saint temple at Laie during the frightening hours of the surprise raid on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Apparently she had talked to many people about it since arriving in the islands, all of whom had assured her that, yes, it was true that an attempt had been made by a Japanese pilot to bomb the temple and that the Lord had spared his holy house in quite a miraculous way. Now, however, she wanted to talk to me since she had been advised to do so by someone at the Alberta temple. Since I was not at home when the lady called it thus became my wife's reluctant responsibility to tell her that after considerable research in the matter I had come to the conclusion that the story has several flaws of sufficient magnitude that might render the entire tale an example of an instant legend.

Now perhaps it is time to place the matter in proper perspective for those who have already heard the story and for those who may hear it in the future.

What happened on that morning in December has been retold countless times through Congressional investigations, personal accounts, books, and several motion pictures. About 6:00 a.m. on that Sunday 183 planes took off from the Japanese task force of six aircraft carriers, two battle ships and about two dozen other craft for the 300 mile flight due south to the island of Oahu. At 7:02, still about 137 miles from Oahu, they were first detected by a mobile radar station then set up at Opana in the hills behind Kahuku near the northern tip of the island. For almost forty minutes Privates Joseph Lockard and George Elliott tracked the planes until the flight disappeared from their screen somewhere along Oahu's north shore toward Haleiwa.

In his Day of Infamy author Walter Lord tells of a civilian pilot, Tommy Tommerlin, who was giving flight instructions to Jim Duncan, a civilian working at Pearl Harbor. "They had just passed the Mormon Temple near Kahuku Point"--actually about six miles separate the two--"when they heard machine-gun fire and the plane gave a heavy lurch." Duncan dived and swerved and escaped back down the windward coast and managed to get safely back across the island to John Rogers airport near Pearl Harbor. [Lord, p. 82]

A second flight of 170 planes had been launched from the carriers at 7:15, a few minutes before the first group had made its landfall at Kahuku Point. the object of both flights was the destruction of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, especially the aircraft carriers Enterprise and Lexington, which, fortunately for the U.S. were at sea. To carry out this objective as safely as possible, it was necessary for the Japanese to neutralize U.S. military air defenses at the bases at Kaneohe, Ford Island, Hickam Field, Ewa, Wheeler, and Bellows. Maps depicting the attack routes show that the first flight was divided north of Oahu with some planes going along the north shore toward Haleiwa while others paralleled the windward coast toward Kaneohe Naval Air Station. Before the day was over there were approximately 3,500 Americans killed and wounded and the U.S. Pacific Fleet was let in a shamble.

In 1941 Laie was a sleepy Mormon community of Hawaiians and Samoans near the northern tip of the island of Oahu. The people worked at farming, fishing and various trades. The only building of any size was the beautiful white Hawaii Temple, dedicated by President Heber J. Grant in 1919. The Oahu Stake--the only one outside North America--administered the theological affairs of the Mormon Church for the entire island of Oahu.

What did or did not happen in the skies over that community on that December day in 1941 has been the subject of considerable curiosity and some controversy over the past several years. This is an account of the various stories related to that day, an attempt to evaluate them, a look at the extent to which they have spread, and finally, an appeal for perspective.

There are those who will be disturbed by this attempt at clarification. As my daughter says, "It's a neat story," and there are perhaps some people who would hope that such an episode actually did occur as a testimony to God's protective influence over His holy places. On the other hand, still others will be concerned for fear this attempt will merely encourage further spread of the story, somewhat to the discomfort of Church officials who are disturbed about unverified "miracles." Some feel the story so fanciful as to be unworthy of further discussion and that any attempt to refute it will instead add further dignity to the tale. However, as a historian I feel some responsibility for providing enlightenment on the subject before it does break into print as a genuine faith-promoting incident. One example of this possibility occurred last October when I received a letter from Richard Cowan, one of the authors of what was to be the sesquicentennial history of the Church. Professor Cowan of BYU was responsible for the volume covering the period 1930-1950 and had heard the "bombing" story. Fortunately, as a scholar, he understands well the importance of checking his facts and now, has decided not to use the story. However, others in responsible positions of local Church leadership have told the story and so it rolls on and on.

Since about 1969 the story of the Pearl Harbor raid has had added meaning for the people of Laie and elsewhere to either the joy or consternation of Latter-day Saints, depending upon the point of view of the listener. Although there are several variations the basic story is as follows, broken into its two distinct--although related--segments.

According to the story, perhaps most often told, soon after reaching the Hawaii shoreline one of the Japanese dive-bomber pilots en route to Pearl Harbor spotted the white Mormon temple in Laie and decided a building of that size--obviously out of place in its immediate surroundings--must have military significance. He therefore left his squadron and attacked the building. His bomb release failed to function, however, so he tried again, and still again. Failing on this third attempt he rejoined his comrades and flew on his way to Pearl Harbor--or Kaneohe Naval Air Station, depending upon the version heard.

Part two is equally intriguing. After his failure to discharge his bomb over Laie, the pilot continued on his way, successfully dropping his load at Pearl Harbor or Kaneohe. After the war--so the story goes--puzzled by his inability to destroy that mysterious white building, the pilot attempted to learn more about it. Eventually he heard of the Church and, impressed by the power obviously present, became a Latter-day Saint. He told of his participation in the raid and of his subsequent conversion to audiences in various parts of the

Pacific, since reports of the story have surfaced in Japan, Australia, Korea, Hawaii, Canada, and mainland U.S.A., and perhaps by now even other areas have heard of it.

My search for truth has produced some interesting results. For example, there are at least four variations of the "bombing" attempt. Besides the one previously cited, another states that the pilot "blacked out" as he attached the building and was therefore unable to release his bomb; another states that the pilots were not to be distracted from their assignment at Pearl Harbor but, noting the temple location on their maps, came back later to destroy it. On their return, however, they were either--a variation within a variation: (1) unable to find it at the coordinates noted or (2) clouds had formed hiding the temple from view. Still another dimension was added by one correspondent in Utah who stated that according the account she heard, "even the suicide pilots couldn't dive into it." Another account describes a mysterious force which prevented the pilot from getting his plane over the building.

Now, what about the possibility that such a thing might have happened? The odds against it are staggering. (1)The raid, of course, was planned and conducted in great secrecy. Surprise was the necessary element for success. The primary objective was the destruction of the American fleet and Pearl Harbor was the first target hit. [Kaneohe was hit about the same time; there is even the possibility the first bomb fell there a minute or two before Pearl Harbor was attacked.] Although the Japanese passed over the huge army post at Schofield Barracks and the two Army Air Corps bases at Wheeler and Hickam Fields, these were not attacked until after the first bombs dropped on "Battleship Row" alongside Ford Island. The likelihood that a plane would be dispatched to bomb some unknown building while still some fifteen minutes from the primary target is remote. (2)Some recitals describe the pilot as flying off on his own private unauthorized bombing mission. Anyone who has served in the armed forces of either the United States or Japan find this possibility difficult to accept. (3)The attacking planes did not bomb non-military targets--with one possible exception. (This was near the Hawaiian Electrical Company powerhouse in Honolulu. [Ford, p. 160.] the damage to civilian targets that was initially thought to have come from Japanese bombs was later determined to have resulted from our own hastily and improperly-fused anti-aircraft shells which exploded on obeying the law of gravity. [Ford. 127, 134, 140.]

However--and this adds the complex factor to the story--in Laie there is an individual who states that he actually saw the attempted bombing of the temple. Although he died a faithful member of the church, in 1941 he was inactive and quite a party-goer. He states that on Saturday night, December 6, he returned home from an evening of drinking with his friends to find that his wife had locked him out of his house, located about 150 yards from the L.D.S. temple. Fearing to arouse the neighbors by pounding on the door, he spent the remainder of the night sleeping under a tree in his back yard. Wakened in the morning by the sound of the planes, [Skepticism begins here, however, as several sources state that in earlier recitals of the story the witness claims to have been fishing at a local beach] he states he saw the pilot's three attempts to dislodge his bomb. Although he confesses his drinking of the night before, he insists he was sober that morning. When I asked him why he had not told anyone of the incident until nearly 30 years after the event, he replied that no one had asked him about it so he didn't think it was important.

On the other hand, other Laie residents of the time state that they saw no such planes. One, a close neighbor of the "eye-witness," states that she heard planes but only at a distance. The Koizumi family lived about seventy yards from the temple and they were unaware of any aerial activity at all.

Another variation spins off from the visit paid to Pearl Harbor by Commander Mitsuo Fuchida in 1966. Fuchida, leader of the raid, was in Hawaii on the 25th anniversary of the attack in connection with the production of a film on his life, "One Who Came Back." According to the "Fuchida variation," he was being shown around Oahu by his host, the Rev. Abraham Akaka of Honolulu's famed Kawaihao Church. On visiting the temple in Laie, Fuchida is quoted as saying, "Oh, that's the building we tried to bomb."

Correspondence with Rev. Akaka in February, 1976, revealed that he did not bring Fuchida to Laie nor was there any mention made of the Mormon temple. My hopes of contacting Fuchida were frustrated by his death in Japan late in May, 1976.

The question then arises as to whether the "eye-witness" fabricated the entire story or whether he had, in fact, seen something. Although many of his acquaintances dismiss the account as the product of a drinking hang-over the man stoutly defends the accuracy of his story. A possible explanation lies with the civilian plane reportedly attacked as recounted in Lord's Day of Infamy. Perhaps the eye-witness saw either the evasive action of the American civilians or the pursuing Japanese planes flying over Laie and assumed the temple was the target of the activity. However, even this possibility is weakened by the fact that no one else saw this activity nor does it explain the open bomb bay of the diving plane as reported by the "eye-witness." Attempts to find either the civilian flight instructor or the student for further information have so far proved unproductive.

The "eye-witness" variation was apparently first told locally in 1969, generated perhaps by the activities connected with the fiftieth anniversary of the temple dedication. There are, however, accounts of earlier recitals which have been reported on neighbor islands. One of my principal correspondents, Clinton Kanahele, states that he heard the story first on Kauai, before ever asking the "eye-witness" about it; another individual recalls her father telling the story on Maui perhaps twenty-five years ago. Neither account provides details of the incident. The "clouding over" version and "blacking-out" version also seem to have ante-dated the "eye-witness" story.

The Lord says that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established." (D&C 6:28) Here we have only one witness, and many regard that as suspect. However, it is still one, and so the issue remains unresolved.

From this point on, however, it is another matter. In telling me his story the "eye-witness" stated that the pilot was successful in discharging his bomb over Kaneohe, a statement he could not have made based on his own observation. When I questioned this, he introduced me to the second part of the story.

In 1971 Elder Cecil McGavin was serving as a guide at the Bureau of Information attached to the Hawaii temple. In a conversation with a Hawaiian friend, Clinton, Kanahele, Elder McGavin reportedly told of his bishop in Utah having related the story of the conversion of the previously-frustrated pilot.

The bishop, in turn, had heard it from the pilot in Japan while serving there as a missionary. On arriving here in Hawaii, Elder McGavin then sought further information. Kanahele then asked a fellow Laie resident who turned out to be the "eye-witness" previously described. That brought the two stories together and since then they have often been recited as one.

Rulon B. Hinckley served with Elder McGavin at the Temple Bureau, however, and tells the story somewhat differently. Visiting in Hawaii in 1976 he told me that both of them had heard the conversion story from a visitor on the temple grounds but that neither had accepted the report as reliable. He feels that Elder McGavin did not believe the story and that any further recital of it by him was more by way of idle curiosity than anything else. In an interview with Taylor Macdonald of the BYU-Hawaii faculty in 1972, McGavin also denied knowing much about the story and insisted that he not be connected with it. He denied receiving the story from his bishop.

So far, I have found no one who claims to have actually heard anyone identify himself as the mysterious pilot, except for the journal account of Robert Stout. On the other hand, the number of those who have heard someone else say that they heard the pilot is inestimable! On checking back with someone who presumably had heard the first-hand account the response usually was, "No, I didn't actually hear him myself, but 'so-and-so' heard him and told me." On checking with "so-and-so," I would invariably get the same response, that "No, I got it from 'someone else.'"

Only recently, I thought I had finally encountered someone who had heard the story firsthand when a student told me he had heard the pilot speak at a testimony meeting in Laie III ward in the latter part of 1976. Further inquiry revealed that the student had not actually heard it himself, but that his former wife had. She lives on the mainland so I drew another blank. He was to check with her and contact me with any information. I have not heard from him and my attempts to contact him have been unsuccessful. President Sione Feinga of the Laie-Hawaii Stake presidency was Laie III Ward bishop at the time and does not recall any such experience. Other ward members agree. Another story has the pilot appearing in a similar meeting in Laie First Ward, but former bishop, Joseph Ah Quin states this did not occur.

President Lloyd Walch, President of the Hawaii temple from 1971 to 1976 attempted to verify the story, although he felt it was highly improbable. In February, 1976, he told me of a temple patron visiting from Utah who reported having heard the pilot tell of his experience at a fireside or testimony meeting in Provo. The patron was to return home and send more details. Unfortunately, he never did. Another person reported to President Walch that he had heard someone tell of the incident at a meeting in Honolulu. However, according to President Walch, no one else from the same meeting made any mention of this. President Harry Brooks, Walch's predecessor from 1965 to 1971, has expressed annoyance that the story was being circulated since it appeared to be a clumsy attempt to somehow add lustre to an already sacred building.

Samuel K. Lowe, called as first counselor in the Hawaii temple presidency back in 1978, received as one of his first assignments the responsibility of checking out the "bombing" story. In 1978, temple president, Max Moody, Hawaii mission president, William Cannon and area supervisor, John Groberg, were all interested in seeing the story verified--or laid to rest. Bro. Lowe carefully

interviewed the "eye-witness," who still stuck to his story, although some discrepancies had crept into the story since it was first told. The "eye-witness" stated that he learned about the pilot joining the Church from Clinton Kanahale who "had talked to the pilot." Kanahale never had made this claim and suggested that the "eye-witness" was confused on that part of the story. [In fact, said Kanahale, the situation reminded him of a story in which the general had been told to "advance." By the time the story filtered down through the ranks, the private was under the impression he had been invited to "a dance".]

Another Laie source reported to President Moody that Edward L. Clissold, former President of the Hawaii mission, Oahu Stake (now Laie-Hawaii) and the Hawaii temple had heard the story in Japan where he presided over the re-opened Japanese mission in 1948. According to this source, President Clissold accepted the story as factual. However, this, too, proved to be an error. President Clissold wrote me in March, 1978, that he had heard that story many times and "may have repeated it as hearsay once or twice." However, he always made sure to stress his "own conviction that the story was a figment of someone's imagination." As an intelligence officer in Hawaii during the war, mission president in Japan after the war, and long-time resident of Laie, his disclaimer must be considered of great significance. His letter also contains a possible explanation of the bombing account. In 1943 Clissold accompanied a bombing group which included in their training program a simulated attack on Laie. He reports as the planes approached the little community, "the temple glistened white in the green fields." After passing over Laie the flight headed out to sea. Later he related the story on several occasions and from this, perhaps, came a story of an "attack" on the temple.

Several others are also endeavoring to unravel the mystery. In March, 1978, I received a letter from Kathryn D. Clousen of "the Big Island" of Hawaii, and L.D.S. writer compiling material for a story on the Hawaii temple for their church newspaper. Fortunately, she was interested in verification, also, before she printed anything that might not be true. She had checked with the Historian's Office and received the brief account there that had been submitted several years ago by a former faculty member of Church College of Hawaii. The author of that account had been here in Laie from about 1968 to 1970 and probably heard the "eye-witness" version which was being introduced about that time. According to that story--which I recall having heard also--a bishop standing on the beach verified the account. That interestingly, is the only account in which the "verifying bishop" occurs. Along with the story, the Church Historical Department also warned there was no documentation of the incident nor knowledge of the bishop's name.

Guides at the visitors center of the Hawaii temple formerly related the story but now have become sufficiently concerned that they, too, are seeking verification. Ironically, additional variations have originated from that quarter. Another version is provided by Frank Leishman, who in 1978 was serving as a guide at the Hawaii temple. He reports that from 1974 to 1976 he was serving in a similar capacity at the Oakland temple. Sometime in 1975, according to Leishman, he was showing a visiting group about the grounds when an American serviceman and Latter-day Saint told him of an experience he had had. While serving in Korea, the serviceman--so his story went--attended a fast and testimony meeting where one of the other servicemen introduced himself as a former pilot in the Japanese navy who attempted to bomb the temple. According to this story, therefore, the Japanese pilot not only joined the Church, but

ended up in the American Air Force as well! Yes, it must be admitted, the story gets "curiouser and curiouser." In addition to the one recital, Brother Leishman heard the same story from another serviceman just one month later. He gave the matter little thought, however, until he was conversing with another former missionary couple from Sunset, Utah. This couple had been guiding tourists through the Joseph Smith home in Palmyra, New York, when a Japanese identified himself as the elusive pilot. Brother Leishman has written to inquire about the man's name but at this point (April 1978) there has been no response.

Brother and Sister Frank Thorup have been attempting to gather more information and are the source of still another tale. In 1977 they visited with President Robert Stout, passing through Hawaii on his way to preside over the Japan-Kobe mission. *Brother Thorup told me of his conversation with President Stout.* When President Stout was serving as a young missionary in Japan several years before, he and his companion were tracting in the conventional way. They introduced themselves to one man who told them that he had attempted to "bomb their temple" during the Pearl Harbor raid. Apparently he had struck at military targets that morning but at the end of his mission still had one bomb remaining. Flying near Laie on his way back to his ship he spotted the glistening white temple and selected that as his final target. As he told President Stout--who told Brother Thorup--who told me--he was unable to get his plane over the temple in spite of several attempts. This mysterious force convinced him of the presence of "evil spirits" with which he wanted nothing to do, so he flew on and jettisoned his bomb in the ocean. In 1978 I mailed a letter to President Stout requesting more information, but heard no response. Then, of course, in September 1983, President Stout sent pages from his journal to President Finlayson in which he told of meeting a man claiming to be the pilot.

Thus the situation becomes even more confused. In the gamut of stories no two seem to be alike. On checking out a possibility, I received a new story instead of a confirmation of the one I am checking. This has been the pattern consistently.

The story becomes even more fascinating as more versions come to light. In 1972, for example, someone told a story to a Church News writer who, in turn, asked Norman L. Nielsen to check it out. Nielsen was then in charge of public affairs for what was then Church College of Hawaii, now Brigham Young University--Hawaii Campus. The tip received by the Church News adds still another bizarre factor.

A gardener at the temple was a Japanese pilot during the bombing of Pearl Harbor. His mission was to bomb the temple and surrounding buildings. According to the information I have, he flew over the temple several times but couldn't see it so he went and dropped his bombs elsewhere. Several years after the war he came to Hawaii and wanted to see this building that he'd been assigned to damage years before. While visiting the temple grounds he learned of the church and later was baptized.

The News correspondent concluded his letter by asking Nielsen to "verify the story, interview him and provide us with a picture of him working on the temple grounds with the temple in the background." Needless to say, the story never materialized.

Tracking down this pilot seemed a fairly easy chore. Either there was such a person or there was not. He had either joined the church or he had not. My first inquiry was directed to Paul Andrus in February, 1976, former mission president in Japan and regional representative in the Far East. He had heard the story but knew of nothing to verify it. He then inquired of President Kenji Tanaka, first president of the Tokyo Stake, and no president of the Japan-Nagoya mission and Katsuhiko Inomata, of the Tokyo stake high council. They had also heard the story but knew of no Japanese Latter-day Saint who had participated in the raid. Neither Kotaro Koizumi or Adney Komatsu--both living in Hawaii in 1941 and later mission presidents in Japan--knew any details of the story. Koizumi, in fact, was living in Laie about 100 yards from the temple. In October, 1977, I interviewed Masao Watabe, recently arrived from Japan to serve as a temple guide. He had heard the first part of the story in Japan but had heard nothing about the pilot joining the church. Watabe was converted to Mormonism in 1949 after military service in World War II, and to his knowledge, there are very few other World War II veterans in the church. Ruth Ohsiek of Laie knows most of the long-time Japanese Mormons and states there are no Pearl Harbor veterans among them. As recently as April, 1978, she conversed with President Kamio of the Osaka North-Japan Stake and President Kihachiro Ichimichi of the Osaka-Japan Stake. These two had no further information to add and President Ichimichi dismissed it as "a silly story."

That no one in Japan seems to know anything about the pilot joining the Church was explained by one rumor which stated that the pilot traveled to Hawaii and the mainland telling his story and then moved to Australia. An attempt to question bishops in Australia was discouraged by Elder Robert L. Simpson of the First Council of Seventy, area supervisor for Australia and New Zealand. Naturally reluctant to see busy bishops plagued with still more papers to fill out he protested that "our oriental population in the area is practically nil." He added his testimony of the matter by stating, "frankly, I have little faith in the story in question, and have felt quite uncomfortable each time I have heard it alluded to."

Since church sources in Japan yielded no pilot, I began checking on possible survivors of the raid. (Again I should emphasize that I have done this expecting to find nothing, since I do not accept the story. However, the discipline of history cries for verification--one way or the other.) I asked Hiroshi Ueno, an official of the National Diet Library--the Japanese counterpart of America's Library of Congress--whether any books or memoirs of survivors are extant. His response was negative. The likelihood of their being any survivors is negligible since in 1966 Commander Fuchida reported that most were killed during the Battle of Midway six months after the Pearl Harbor attack. An inquiry to Professor Hisao Iwashima, Chief of the Office of War History Research of the National Defense College, likewise yielded nothing.

Surely, there must be some explanation. Behind nearly every rumor there is a grain of truth that originally served as the vehicle by which the story was expanded. The question now is, where is the grain? My guess is that the idea of the pilot joining the Mormon church resulted from the story of the conversion to Christianity of Commander Mitsuo Fuchida. Lyle Nelson of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin relates that Fuchida was converted in Japan after the war during the period of the war-crimes trials. Fuchida, one of the few Pearl Harbor veterans to survive the war, accepted Christianity partly as a result of seeing a religious tract written by Sgt. Jack Deshazer, one of the Doolittle

raiders of 1942. Fuchida later became a traveling evangelist and told his story many times in Japan and North America in his speech "From Pearl Harbor to Calvary." My guess is that some Mormons heard the story, repeated it a time or two, and after two or three recitals the story eventually evolved into its present form.

This, then, is the story of the creation of folklore. The first part of the story admittedly presents some problems because an individual claims he saw an attacking plane and another individual talked to a man claiming to be the pilot. In spite of the absolute unlikelihood of violating surprise, in spite of the absence of any other bombing attacks on civilian targets, in spite of the fact that no one else in Laie saw any such incident, in spite of the lack of corroboration from supposedly supporting sources, in spite of the somewhat unusual circumstances which caused the eye-witness to be in a situation to view that Sunday morning activity, in spite of any evidence whatsoever, the "eye-witness" sticks to his claim. As Latter-day Saints we are aware there have been previous occasions when only one person has had a particular experience. Perhaps this is such a time. Ironically, the confusion seems to stem not from the absence of what might be called information but rather from its overabundance. There are just too many stories.

There should, on the other hand, be no hesitation whatsoever in declaring the second part completely false. In fact, it is an almost classic example of rumor, misunderstanding, and exaggeration based, very probably, on the conversion of commander Mitsuo Fuchida to Christianity--NOT to Mormonism--and his recital to American audiences of his part in the Pearl Harbor raid.

I wrote this originally in early 1978 hoping that I would be able to conclude this study well before the rededication of the Hawaii temple in mid-June, 1978. This historic and spiritual occasion could well stir the ashes of a story that should perhaps have been left alone. I already feel I know more about this than I ever wanted to know. But at every supposed dead-end is another lead, another name, another "witness." I want to move on to something else but the tracking is still not complete and the questions have still not all been answered. However, although it may still be somewhat premature, I feel the need to get this recorded without waiting any longer. Still, I must confess I am curious about just how far afield the stories have spread and in just what versions they may yet appear.

Based on my conclusions, however, may I humbly suggest that the tale be confined to the vast collection of Mormon folklore and not be repeated as an actual faith-promoting incident? I still shudder occasionally to think that sometime it will appear in print and then it, like the poor, will "always be among us."

Endnotes

1. Lord, Walter. Day of Infamy. New York, 1957, p. 82.
2. Lord, p. 160.
3. Lord, pp. 127, 134, 140.