

“We’ve Got to Fight Back!”



CHIEF PETTY OFFICER JOHN FINN

When John Finn woke up on a bright Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, he planned a relaxing day off with his wife, Alice, in their palm-tree-shaded bungalow on the Hawaiian island of Oahu.

By the time he went to bed the next night, his life and the world he once knew had changed forever.

Chief Petty Officer Finn was in charge of ammunition at a small naval air station nestled on a cove at Kaneohe Bay a mile from his house. The little base was the home of 36 twin-engine seaplanes known as PBYS that were anchored in the water, tied down on a parking ramp, or sheltered in one of three hangars. At the time, the United States was not at war with anyone. But because Japan was becoming a growing threat, the men at the air station were on limited alert. They flew routine patrols

looking for Japanese submarines off the coast and checking on nearby Pearl Harbor, where several Navy destroyers, battleships, and other vessels were moored.

"Wake up, honey," Finn cooed to Alice. "It's almost eight o'clock and it's another beautiful day in paradise."

Alice pulled the covers over her head and mumbled, "You start the coffee, and then I'll get up."

As Finn padded barefoot into the kitchen, he heard the sounds of machine-gunfire in the distance in the direction of the base. *It's Sunday morning. Why would anyone be firing machine guns at the range today?* he wondered. Finn filled the pot with water and spooned in the coffee. Then he heard the whines of small planes. They weren't the usual rumbling sounds of the PBYS. *Maybe some wise-guy aviators are buzzing the barracks.* He looked out the window and didn't see anything unusual. But he sensed that something wasn't right.

Finn returned to the bedroom and put on his white Navy uniform shirt, pants, hat, and black shoes. "Honey, I'm going to the station for just a few minutes, and then I'll be right back." He kissed Alice, walked out, and hopped into his 1938 Ford.

On the way toward Kaneohe, Finn, a 15-year veteran who had joined the Navy when he was only 17, thought about how far he had come from those troubled teenage days back home in Compton, California. *I have a great wife, I live in Hawaii, and I'm making decent money. Not bad for a high-school dropout.*

A loud roar from above interrupted his thoughts. Peering out of his open car window, he spotted a silver plane flying low and fast. When it banked, he saw a red ball painted on the underside of the wing. It could mean only one thing – it was a

Zero, a fast single-engine fighter-bomber with the Japanese insignia on it.

"Oh, no!" he shouted. "The Japs are attacking us!"

He floored the accelerator and sped toward the air station. On the way, he heard the screaming of more Zeros, dozens upon dozens of them heading west. *They're going to bomb Pearl Harbor!*

When his Ford squealed around the last curve before the air station, he stared in disbelief. Like angry hornets, Zeros were dive-bombing the airfield as one explosion after another erupted into orange balls of fire. The planes' machine guns were raking the parked PBYS while panic-stricken sailors were running helter-skelter in confusion and fear, ducking behind anything that provided cover. The unlucky ones were being mowed down by strafing or were already sprawled on the ground dead or dying. Smoke was billowing up from scores of fires. *My God, all hell is breaking loose!*

Finn's car screeched to a stop near the seaplanes' parking ramp, and he made a mad dash for one of the hangars. During his sprint, a Zero skimming only 100 feet off the ground fired several rounds that kicked up dirt just inches from Finn's feet. He rushed into the hangar as bullets pelted the metal siding. Inside, several men were crouched under desks.

"The war is on!" Finn bellowed. "The Japs are here!"

One of the sailors muttered, "I didn't know they were *that* sore at us."

"Come on!" Finn yelled. "We've got to fight back!"

"With what?" countered another sailor. "We don't have any antiaircraft guns."