



"I Led the Attack on Pearl Harbor"

by Mitsuo Fuchida,
as told to John A. Barbour

December 7, 1991, marks the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor on Oahu Island, Hawaii, that brought the United States into the Second World War. Captain Mitsuo Fuchida was general commander of the air squadron that performed the raid. In 1952 Fuchida told John A. Barbour the story of that attack and of how, after the war, he found peace through knowing Jesus Christ.—ED.

John A. Barbour, retired, formerly served as executive minister with American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. He was also editor of that denomination's national newsmagazine, "Crusader," and worked for many years as administrative editor of adult publications with David C. Cook Publishing Company, Elgin, Illinois. He now works as a communications consultant with an office in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He and his wife, Laura May, have four grown children. They live in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where they attend First Baptist Church (American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.). ©1981, 1991 John A. Barbour.

The *Akagi* pitched and rolled in the rough seas as the white surf whipped across the flight deck in the predawn blackness. The crews were hard pressed to keep their planes from sliding into the sea. The time was 5:30 a.m. The day was the seventh of December. The year was 1941.

I stood in the commander-in-chief's quarters. "I am ready for the mission," I said.

Vice Admiral Nagumo stood to his feet and grasped my hand hard in his. "Fuchida," he said, "I have confidence in you."

After a final briefing with the men, I climbed to the command post above the flight deck. My plane was in position, its red-and-yellow striped tail marking it as the commander's plane.

Just before I climbed into the plane, the officer in charge of the maintenance gang presented me with a white cloth headband. "This," he said, "is from the maintenance crew. Take it to Pearl Harbor."

Fifteen minutes later 183 fighter bombers and torpedo planes were

in the air, the six aircraft carriers now tiny streaks on the surface of the water beneath us. We were the first wave of the 359 planes that I led toward Pearl Harbor 275 miles to the south.

By 7:30 we were over the northern tip of the island. There was still no sign that anyone knew we were in the air. If we had the advantage of surprise, the torpedo planes would strike first. Then the level bombers would attack. In the event of resistance the dive bombers were to attack first to confuse and attract enemy fire.

At 7:49 I gave the signal for a surprise attack, but the signal was misinterpreted. At 7:55 the dive bombers tore in on Hickam Field, Ford Island and Wheeler Field. Two minutes later the torpedo planes zeroed in on battleships in the harbor. At about 8:00 fighter planes strafed the air base, and then the level bombers began to drop their cargoes of death on the battleships.

Suddenly it was as though a giant hand had smashed at my plane. A gaping hole appeared on

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the port side. The steering mechanism was damaged but, before returning to the carrier, I managed to drop two bombs on the USS *Maryland*.

During the war, I faced death three times. Once when I was flying on reconnoiter between Formosa (now called Taiwan) and China, I was informed that we were lost and that we had only 10 minutes of fuel left. We were flying above water and, when our fuel was gone, we hit the water near a Chinese junk. On another occasion I crash-landed in a jungle. A third brush with death came during the Battle of Midway. Following surgery, I was confined to a hammock on the *Akagi* when it was attacked by American planes. The side of the ship where I was lying was blown out by a bomb. I was thrown into the ocean and picked up by one of the destroyers.

When the war ended, I was bitter and disillusioned. I had spent 25 years in the Japanese navy, and adjustment to civilian life did not come easily. I took up farming near Osaka, Japan.

I had had very little place in my life for religion. But now, living in close relation to the earth, I began to think in terms of a Creator-God. I had never been an atheist, but I had grown to manhood without any formal religion. In the Japanese navy the former "War Catechism" was the sum total of my ideology.

I began to think too that there must be a reason why I was still alive. Of the 70 officers who took off from the *Akagi* that December 7 morning, I was the only one to survive the war.

Then one day I saw in a list of Japanese war prisoners returning from the United States the name of a lieutenant whom I had known very well. I went to Uruga Harbor to meet him and to ask him about the treatment of prisoners of war in American camps.

My friend told me a story about a young American woman who had

visited that particular camp regularly and had done what she could to make life more bearable for the prisoners. When one of the prisoners asked why she was so kind to them, she said, "Because my parents were killed by Japanese soldiers."



Mitsuo Fuchida

This did not make sense to the prisoners. The young woman, who was no more than 20 years old, explained, "My parents were Christian missionaries in the Philippines when the war broke out. They were captured and ordered shot as spies. They spent their last 30 minutes of life praying for their captors. At first I was bitter when I heard what had happened, but my hatred has been washed away by a Spirit-directed love for all men, even my enemies."

It was a beautiful story, but I could not understand it.

Not long afterward, while leaving a railroad station in Tokyo, I was handed a tract by an American. It told the story of Jacob DeShazer, a member of the Doolittle squadron that bombed Tokyo on April 18, 1942. In the tract DeShazer told how, while a prisoner of the Japanese for 40 months, he had received a Bible. He began reading it and surrendered himself to Jesus Christ.


Soon after receiving that tract, I

read an editorial in a Tokyo newspaper about the Bible being the world's best seller. Impelled to buy a copy of the Bible, I began to read the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke, I came across the words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."¹ These were the words of Jesus on the cross as he prayed for the people who were putting him to death!

It was then that I understood the source of the American woman's concern. That very day I decided to become a follower of Jesus.

I struggled for some time with the problem of making known my conversion to Christianity. Then one day I saw an automobile belonging to an evangelistic group parked at the curb of one of Osaka's busiest streets. The automobile was equipped with a loudspeaker. I asked permission to speak, and as a crowd collected, my voice boomed out, "I am Mitsuo Fuchida who led the air raid on Pearl Harbor. I have now surrendered my life to Jesus Christ."

The next day newspapers carried headlines: "From a 'War Catechism' to the Bible." What I'd said had a mixed reception. Some people denounced me as an opportunist. Some said that I was betraying my ancestors. Some encouraged me. A Communist coal miner wrote me a polite letter urging me to have nothing to do with Christianity. He concluded his letter by saying, "Peace is only attained through Lenin."

It was not Lenin but Christ who changed my life and gave me "peace that passes understanding."² I, who had been steeped in militarism, found the true peace. No other could fill that God-shaped blank in my life. 

(1) Luke 23:34, KJV. (2) Cf. Philippians 4:7

Mitsuo Fuchida became a Presbyterian lay minister. Before his death in 1969, he traveled thousands of miles preaching the message of peace through Jesus Christ.—ED.