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Army Engineers

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Left: Rex Alan Smith in the pilot house at the controls of the dredging ship Kingman, under way in Manila Bay in early 1945.

It was a sleepy Sunday noontime at Stallings Drugstore in Rapid City, South Dakota, when I heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor. I was having an after-church cup of coffee with friends, and in the background a radio was playing soft Sunday music. Then, suddenly we heard:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we interrupt this broadcast to say that the Japanese have bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor!"

We were shocked as we gathered around the radio to listen for further details, and we were very angry at the Japanese for the sneak attack. We kept assuring each other, however, that it would take "our boys" no more than six months to give those sneaky Japanese a military spanking they would never forget.

At the time I was a draftsman for the Soil Conservation Service but would be transferred over to the Army Corps of Engineers as part of a crew surveying what would become a base for advanced training of B-17 bomber crews. (Known first as Rapid City Army Air Base, it would become, years later, Ellsworth AFB.)

I remained there as a draftsman until about November when the base had become operational. And it

was about then that there appeared from somewhere an optional order for me to transfer to the U.S. Engineers in Honolulu. I took that opportunity. Probably I would have been drafted later, but I was eager to get out quickly to where things were happening. In fact, I was thrilled. I had traveled a bit--once to Pierre, South Dakota, once to Greeley, Colorado, and even once on a train to far-off Omaha, Nebraska--but as a South Dakota ranch kid I never expected to see much more of the world than that. Now here I was, on my way to faraway exotic, romantic Hawaii!

I left Rapid City on November 12, 1942, and would not see it again until December 1945. My travel orders put me on a bus to Cheyenne, then on a Pullman to the Oakland Ferry and eventually San Francisco.

In San Francisco they put me up in the Drake-Wiltshire Hotel, which I immediately decided must be one of the world's finest. Then I waited. There were more men waiting to go overseas than ships.

Finally I received orders to report immediately to Oakland Outer Harbor for embarkation. That would have been in late November 1942.

The ship was the *Frederick Funston*, a transport making her maiden voyage and still smelling of fresh paint. She was so crowded by the need to get more men overseas that there were even stands of pipe-frame bunks on her shelter deck, and I wound up in one of them. The deck above provided a roof over my head, but otherwise our deck was wide open to the weather, and until we entered tropical waters the weather was cold. I had two blankets, but could have used four. We were told to use our life preservers as our pillows, to have them handy in case of need. They were canvas over blocks of hard, dry cork and were as comfortable as sacks of rocks. But, at age twenty-one it was still an adventure.

I don't know just what I expected Honolulu to be, but what I found was a city crowded with servicemen in the daytime and totally dead at night. There was an early curfew, and God help you if you were caught

violating it. At this point I was not in the Army at all. I was a purely civilian employee of the Corps of Engineers. But as time passed that distinction would gradually become blurred.

The Army had taken over Honolulu's prestigious Punahou School for the duration of the war, and I was assigned to the Civil Engineering Division in Dillingham Hall. Soon I became bored with it. Civilian or not, I wanted to get out to where the war was. I'd been hearing about an Engineers project way out in the Pacific at a place called Canton Island, a tiny atoll on the perimeter between islands the Japanese had taken and those still held by us. Eventually I received a transfer to Canton--an event that was to change the course of my life.

Canton was right on the equator. It had almost no vegetation, only one palm tree on the entire island, and its surface was white coral. In appearance it was like living on a snow bank. It had a shallow lagoon so studded with coral heads that at low tide it looked much like a lake drying up, and it provided our only recreation. We spent most of our spare time swimming and diving in its balmy waters looking for sea shells, admiring the beauty of the coral heads studded with colorful clams, and watching the fish.

The Engineers at Canton were commanded by Lt. Col. J. J. Kestley. I was assigned as a draftsman, and before long I had graduated to also doing some airfields surveys. Then I progressed to making soundings and drawing up weekly charts of a ship channel being dug from the sea to the lagoon by the Engineer seagoing hopper dredge Pacific. I got to know the guys on the dredge, and I became fascinated by the art of ship handling.

At about that time, the Navy wanted Col. Kestley down at Funafuti Island, an atoll in the Ellice Islands, to supervise the deepening of a channel from sea to lagoon, and he offered me the chance to go along as sort of his "right-hand man." I took it and again wound up

doing soundings, charting the channel, and under the colonel's direction generally supervising the job.

The Navy had us quartered on the Navy survey ship *Sumner* until she was sent somewhere else, then on the destroyer tender *Cascade*, and finally on the ammunition carrier *Sangay*. We were there to deepen Te Bua Bua, an old natural channel that the Navy wanted deep enough for battle-damaged ships, riding low in the water, to be able to come into the lagoon for repairs. Although the Pacific was too small to dig to the required thirty-five-foot depth, we had her there to start the job while waiting for the arrival of the much larger *Alexander MacKenzie*.

It was on the *Sumner* that the line between my civilian status and the military first began to become a bit blurred. My quarters were in "Officers Country," I took my meals in the officers wardroom, at a Purple Heart award ceremony I was invited to stand in formation with the ship's officers, and eventually I was even assigned to a General Quarters station.

And it was while I was on the *Sumner* that the Japanese, making a surprise air raid, missed an opportunity to possibly change the course of the war. I was awakened by General Quarters clanging in the alleyway, and when I swung out of my bunk and my feet touched the deck I could already feel faint tremors from distant explosions. I got my pants on and out into the alleyway just in time to see the watertight door being dogged down from the other side. Not being enthusiastic about remaining trapped in a watertight compartment during a bombing, I looked around and spotted a little screen ventilating hatch overhead. I climbed up some pipes on the bulkhead, pushed it open and wound up on deck almost among the feet of a very surprised 5-inch gun crew.

We learned later that the Japanese planes had come in behind a flight of our returning bombers and so were not detected by radar. It was a bright moonlight night, and on this particular evening there was plenty to be

seen. Half of the Tarawa invasion fleet had assembled in the Funafuti lagoon: battleships, cruisers, destroyers, transports loaded with troops, cargo ships, and other kinds of vessels all lying perfectly exposed in the moonlight. But apparently the Japanese had been ordered to come down and just strike the airfield, and they were people who did not deviate from orders. Consequently, the only bombs going into the lagoon were those missing their target. When that became apparent, the commodore (or whoever was in command of such things) signaled from the submarine tender *Sperry*, "To All Ships, do not open fire unless I do." And nobody did fire--excepting one. We could see far down the lagoon our dredge *Mackenzie* spraying the sky with showers of 20mm tracers. They were too far away from the action and the range of their guns was far too short for them to be doing any good, but they were shooting anyway.

One string of bombs exploded in the water not far from us, but obviously by accident. As for the damage done to the airfield, I never saw an official report, but according to scuttlebutt they had blown up a radio station, destroyed fourteen airplanes, wounded two men, killed a dog, and put the airstrip out of business until eleven o'clock the next morning. But think of what they might have done! As it was, the Battle of Tarawa would be won, but just barely and at terrible cost, and any damage to its support fleet might have been enough to tip the balance the other way.

A few days later we were informed that the aircraft carrier *Independence* had taken a torpedo at Tarawa and was limping back to Funafuti. Well! That's just what we had been digging the channel for! I spent all that day making final soundings and most of the night preparing a channel chart to be flown or taken by destroyer out to the *Independence*. Then we went down to Te Bua Bua to see her coming in--and she didn't. Surrounded by her destroyer escort she came over the horizon moving toward us much like a mother hen surrounded by her chicks. Then she changed course, went

around the island, and came through Te Ava Fuagea, a tortuous natural channel that had always been there. Damn! We had been working like beavers and had fired hundreds of tons of dynamite to get the channel ready for this sort of thing, and the *Independence* didn't even use it.

As I recall, it was late in December when Colonel Kestley was called back to Honolulu. He was replaced by Major H. H. Helmboldt, who also became captain of the *MacKenzie*. Directly behind the MacKenzie's bridge were two identical sets of living quarters. Major Helmboldt moved into the captain's quarters on the portside, and at his request I moved into the visiting officers quarters on the starboard. And this, I thought, was a pretty weird thing. I seemed to be both a civilian employee of the Army Corps of Engineers and also a quasi-officer. On the various Navy ships I had been given officers quarters, ate in the officers wardroom, and in all respects was treated as an officer. Here on the Mackenzie it was the same.

My quarters were also the magazine for the 20mm antiaircraft guns on the wings of the bridge. My desk was a piece of plywood laid across two stacks of 20mm magazines, and magazines were also stacked across the cabin bulkhead so that when I went to sleep at night I'd be looking at the painted noses of tracers looking back at me.

In late January Funafuti again became a marshaling point for a large part of the fleet, this time for the invasion of Kwajalein and other Marshall islands. By mid-February those islands had been secured, no damaged Navy ships had needed our Funafuti channel, and I was transferred back to Honolulu.

For a time I had a job with a title far beyond my age, and, according to some, duties beyond my capability. Both the *Pacific* and the *Mackenzie* had been put to work dredging Honolulu Harbor, and I found myself at age twenty-three with the exalted title of Superintendent of Hopper Dredging. That didn't last too

long, but for a while I had the job plus a cabin cruiser and crew for my personal transportation. While I had it, the job was a great learning experience.

When the job was taken over by someone with more years and qualifications, I was transferred to the mechanical engineering department, and once again I wound up as a draftsman.

In October the *Dan C. Kingman*, a sister ship of the *Mackenzie*, showed up, and because of the manpower shortage she had arrived with a short crew, which was now filled out with parolees from the Oahu prison. She was to be sent to some forward area pretty close to the action, because those going on her were to receive hazardous duty pay plus "Rank of Assimilation" cards stating that in the event of capture by the enemy they would automatically become full-fledged members of the Army.

I began to keep a diary, and the first entry says:
November 19, 1944: "Last night I was given an Aloha party at my old friends the Foxes' in Waikiki. I'm a big boy now, but when they gave me the Hawaiian Farewell-- putting their arms around me and singing "Aloha Oe"--I seemed to get something in my eye.

"At 0910 this morning we pulled away from Pier 2-A, and then stood outside the harbor all day while destroyers, aircraft carriers, battleships, and cruisers followed by *Liberty* and *Victory* cargo and troop transport ships all passed us. Then our own convoy of the small and slow was formed: a de-magnetizing ship, a minesweeper, two seagoing tugs, a submarine chaser, and us--at 2,500 gross tons by far the largest vessel in the bunch.

At 1600 we began kicking up a whole six knots, course 174 degrees, medium swell, scattered cumulus, light breeze."

November 20: "Our yesterday's civilian captain, now wearing a lieutenant commander's leaves, has, as I hear it, spent most of his life sailing dredges up-and-down San Francisco Bay, and I know that neither he nor any of

his officers have ever been in a forward war area. But he obviously has read enough novels to know what is expected of him, and he measures up well: Secret orders--we are not to know where we are going until we get there--firm jaw, responsible bearing, measured tread, and his eyes--although a bit watery--have become steely blue. By his very bearing he makes it clear that he is the Captain, by God, of a Ship in a War, by God, and it is not his fault it happens to be a dredging ship whose deadliest weapons are not fired from guns but served from the galley.

"Anyway, I had thought to bring a boat chart along and now the quartermasters and engineers are secretly informing me of our speed and courses, and I think my dead reckoning will keep track of where we are."
December 1: "Atoll sighted on starboard beam at 1630. According to my dead reckoning it should be Mejit. However, since I have had no navigation checks since seeing Johnston Island seven days ago, I could have been all wrong. So I asked the chief mate if it was Mejit. And that was a mistake. He grew red in the face and started shouting, demanding to know how in hell I could know that and accusing me of having somehow snooped into his navigation records. Well, I was feeling pretty good about having hit our position right on the button after seven days of dead reckoning. So I didn't let him know about my chart, and I continued to keep it through the rest of the voyage."

December 10: "Since Kwajalein, we have been in a new convoy that requires us to maintain eleven knots speed. The *Kingman* was built for power, but low-speed power, and the diesels pound and strain to keep our position in the formation. The skipper and the chief engineer are at it again--the captain, red-faced and angry, insists that the engineer will, by God, give us enough revolutions to keep up. The chief, also turkey-necked and angry, insists that if we do not ease our giddy pace our engines may bloom like flowers and spread parts from here to Fiji."

December 13: " According to my dead reckoning, here today, Guam tomorrow."

December 14: "At dawn it could be seen at about fifteen miles. At 0730 we could see Rota to the north. The Japanese still hold it but it is no longer a threat. At 1100 we slid past the cliffs of Guam's Arote Point. We could see shell scars, but the cliffs are still beautiful. There is much broken Japanese shipping in the harbor, and especially noticeable is one long hull lying keel up with her bottom out of the water. A lot of captured Japanese landing craft are being used as shuttle boats and are charging around the harbor everywhere."

Our work there was pretty dull and monotonous but with a few bright spots. For instance:

December 27: "At 2300 last night I heard the old man holler, 'Smeeth! To the bridge! ' When I got there the tower on Arote Point was signaling with a red light. The old man asked, 'what are they saying?' And I said, 'Condition Red.' He asked what that meant. I answered, 'Air attack imminent.' And he went nuts. He ran into the wheelhouse hollering, 'Stop her, Mr. Barnes! Goddamit, Mr. Barnes! Stop her I say!' Second officer Barnes was startled and not a little confused, but he recovered well. He rang 'drag up,' threw both screws in full reverse, picked up the bullhorn, and began hollering, 'Bos'n to the foredeck! Bos'n to the foredeck!' Shorty showed up in nothing flat, and on Barnes's command knocked out the anchor chain stops. The chains roared out, rust flew, and we were at anchor. So now what to do? Unlike the *Mackenzie* we had no guns, gunners, or battle stations. But the captain figured he ought to observe the situation somehow, so he hit the fire alarm. "Finally one lonely 'bandit' showed up, very high, and with everyone in the harbor and on shore shooting at it, tracers were flaming up all over the sky. On the *Kingman* they were shooting too--with every fire hose we had."

One day I was walking along the deck, and from right under my feet there came an enormous Wham! The

entire ship shuddered from the impact of something, but what? In this secure harbor it couldn't have been a torpedo or gunfire or a bomb. What it turned out to be was that the water jacket on one of our diesel engines had sprung a leak into a cylinder, and the huge piston had come up and hit it with an impact so great that it actually bent a four-inch diameter piston rod. The chief engineer needed a drawing made of the rod to be flown back to Honolulu for making a replacement. The old man remembered that I had been a draftsman, and thus began my emancipation from the drag tender business.

When the rod job turned out all right, the old man decided he would like another structure built on top of the pilot house and gave me the job of designing and drawing up the plans for it. I didn't have the qualifications for designing something to withstand the stresses of a ship rolling on the sea, but he didn't know that, and besides, the thing never got built anyhow. But while I was working on it, the *Mackenzie* arrived at Guam, and its captain asked our captain if he would transfer me to the *Mackenzie* for training as a third mate. The old man wouldn't transfer me, but the very request seemed to convince him that I was worth more than he had thought I was.

From Guam we were sent to Leyte in the Philippines, but we never knew why. All we did was sit out there in Pedro Bay, which was already about 600 feet deep, and there wasn't much we could do to improve that. So we waited, and while waiting we learn that the *Kingman* was to be gradually converted to an all-Army crew.

From Leyte we were sent to Manila. Coming in, I saw something that really depressed me. The Army had just taken the island fortress of Corregidor with a massive drop of parachute troops on the island's flat top. But as we came by we saw the steep cliffs of its sides white with the parachutes of men who had missed the top, and I thought, how awful it must have been to come down so hard onto those cliffs and the trees sticking out from them.

There were sunken enemy ships all over the place, and we wound up anchored by a sunken destroyer. Having always been as curious as a puppy I hurried to recruit some other guys and a boat operator to go over there and look at the thing with me. After it was sunk it must have been used as a hideout by Japanese snipers. And I would guess it had been Filipino guerrillas who finally took them out. The bridge structure had been burned, but sticking out of it was a wooden two-by-four from which dangled, by a rope around its neck, the body of one Japanese soldier, and the body of another lay on the foredeck.

Back on the Kingman we reported what we had seen and went to chow. Then I joined the old man and a few others on the fantail to enjoy the evening breeze. Suddenly, from the galley, which was only a little way forward from the fantail, there came a terrible stench. The captain went in to investigate, and I heard him shriek, "T'row it out! T'row the goddam t'ing out! T'row it over the side, and I mean now!"

What had happened was that we had aboard an old World War One re-tread sergeant who, it turned out, had always wanted a skull, and now he had one. He had taken one of the Japanese heads from the destroyer and was now cooking the flesh away in one of the galley cooking pots. Needless to say, he never finished the job. Public opinion was against it.

We were put to digging ancient mud out of Manila's Inner Harbor, and in the process brought up enough historic cannonballs to have armed the Spanish Armada. Once we even brought up a dainty cup and saucer that had miraculously survived their trip through the drag-pipe, the huge pump, and the steel distribution boxes.

By the time we arrived there the fighting had moved well out of the city, but even so, the first time I went ashore I found myself stepping over the body of a Japanese soldier on the dock. And it was on that trip that a couple of us came across what had been the Japanese central bank. The building had been blown open,

and in its vault we found ourselves walking across a carpet of Japanese occupation money, and money was stacked in cases against the walls. It was worthless, of course, but just the same we stuffed our pockets with it. When we got back to the ship, other men said they wanted to go and do the same. Next day I took some of them over there, only to find a Navy shore patrolman guarding the door. He said, "You can't go in. Last night they took fourteen booby traps out of there." Well! Yesterday we were the boobies, and it was just by dumb luck that we hadn't gotten ourselves blown up. After the booby traps were cleared out, the place was open to anyone to carry out as much money as he wanted. And even then there was so much of the stuff that to clear the building they were burning it in the alley. Then somebody got a great idea: "Let's send it to the Navy hospital at Guam as souvenirs for the men there." And that is what they did.

We had started at Leyte to let men off and replace them with Army, and continued it at Manila until eventually the electrician Rex Oldfield and I were the only civilians left aboard, and we were "assimilated"--he as a second lieutenant and I as a warrant officer.

It was well after the A-bombs had been dropped and Japan had surrendered that my warrant officer appointment finally came down. Meanwhile, the *Kingman* had continued dredging and I had continued to serve as third mate. But now I was faced with a hard decision. Had I known then what I know now, probably I would have taken that commission, because I did dearly want to become a legitimate member of the Armed Forces. On the other hand, I had not seen my home for almost three years, nor even the United States, and I didn't know but what it might be another two years before I could. In the service then you got to go home only after you had earned a certain number of "rotation points," and the points depended on your time served overseas, but my three years there with the Corps of Engineers did not count--I had no points.

So, on September 13 I reluctantly wrote a letter declining the appointment. On September 22 I reluctantly left the *Kingman* for quarters ashore in the GENED (General Engineer District) Officers Club while awaiting transportation home. Rex Oldfield came with me because he, too, had become concerned about the extra time he might have to spend overseas if he accepted his commission.

Then we discovered we were orphans. We didn't know if we were getting paid anymore. We had no way to get in touch with our office in Honolulu, so we wandered around trying to get travel orders on our own. Finally we got a set and had just gotten comfortably settled down in a nice compartment on a homebound Liberty ship when the old man called for us and said, "I am sorry, but these papers are not in order!" So, it was back to the beach again.

We ended up walking miles across Manila, trying one office after another. At last we got another set of orders, only to have the ship we were to sail in damaged by collision with another ship. After the passing of some sixty years I can't remember exactly how we got the Navy involved in this problem. But however it was, the captain of the destroyer *Kalk*, which was about to sail for Pearl Harbor, told us there were a couple of bunks in his chiefs quarters that we could have. To make a long story a little shorter, we got into Pearl Harbor on November 15 and were picked up at Pearl City by an Engineer weapons carrier sent to take us to the Engineer camp at Red Hill. But we had enough of camps for awhile and told the driver to take us instead to the Alexander Young, a fine hotel downtown. Then we went out and had a wonderful dinner of fried oysters, fresh vegetables, fresh milk, and a malted milk.

Then I went into furious action. I was determined to get home for Christmas. There was a transport leaving on the nineteenth, and I worked desperately at getting my Engineer affairs straightened out and my possessions

gathered and packed so as to make it. And I did make it, but just barely.

November 19, 1945: "It happens that my old friends Charlie and Mabel Fox are going home on this same vessel, and at 5 o'clock we were standing on the fantail of the transport *Evangeline* watching the harbor slide by. The ship is loaded with home-going servicemen, and as we passed through the harbor things got pretty noisy when the ships there are all began saluting us by sounding...___ ' (V for Victory) on their whistles and horns."

Passing Diamond Head I felt a little depressed to think I might never see Honolulu again. But there was a superstition that if in passing Diamond Head you threw a lei overboard and it drifted toward shore you would return. Friends seeing us off had given us leis, so I did throw mine overboard and it did drift toward shore. (And although it would take fifty-seven years for it to work, it did! In December 2002, I returned to do something I never dreamed I would be privileged to do-- join my co-author Jerry Meehl in signing copies of our book *Pacific Legacy* at the exact place where the Pacific war had begun: Pearl Harbor.)

My experiences in the Philippines during the war directly affected and probably even molded my future life. There, a Captain Trinidad, who had been the skipper of a Philippine inter-island steamer sunk by the Japanese became a part of the *Kingman* Filipino "Shadow crew"--a device used to help the Manila Filipinos get back on their feet after almost four years of vicious oppression and plunder by the Japanese. We spent a lot of time on the bridge together. He invited me to his home, and he and his family became my fast friends. In spite of their war-depleted resources they even gave me a big birthday party, and Mrs. Trinidad entered into correspondence with my mother.

They, in turn, introduced me to the Agcaouilis, who lived next door. We, too, became the best of friends.

Felix Agcaouili was a prominent attorney who had as one of his clients a Major Ferdinand Marcos, who later was to become president of the Philippines. Marcos had formed a partnership with Brigidio Cifra who had large timber concessions on the island of Mindoro. Somewhere along the line Agcaouili and Marcos came up with the idea that I should become American representative for sale of their furniture-grade logs. I didn't know a damn thing about that kind of business or, for that matter, any other kind of business. However, I had read so many Horatio Alger books as a boy that I figured it didn't matter very much--all it took was determination.

I moved to Chicago, set up shop, and actually did sell a shipload of their logs. Man! I was walking tall! My commission would have been \$14,000, and in 1946 that was *money*! But right after that I came down to breakfast one day and saw the headline, "Philippines Embargo Hardwoods." And that was the end of that.

I finally ended up in the insurance business, and actually insurance turned out all right. I spent more than thirty happy years in the service of a wonderful company, in a career that if not distinguished was satisfying and good. Then quite by accident I wound up in the writing business. At the urging of a friend I wrote an article on inflation for the *Life Association News*. It caught the eye of a *Readers Digest* editor who asked if I could do anything else. The result was *Let Not This Sparrow Fall*, the story of one of my flying experiences, and it appeared in the June 1973 *Digest*. This led to a book, *Moon of Popping Trees*, published by *Reader's Digest*, and later the text for *One Last Look*, the story of the Eighth Air Force in World War II, and *The Carving of Mount Rushmore*, both published by Abbeville Press.

I found that I love research, and I like being published. But I do hate writing. For me, at least, trying to do it so that people will read it is the most exasperating drudgery I have ever known. But I do it anyhow, to tell stories that I think should be told of

things I think should never be forgotten. For instance *Pacific Legacy*, written with co-author Jerry Meehl, was published by Abbeville as a memorial to those in the Pacific war who fought and died for their country and whose sacrifices must never be forgotten.