Chapter 11

December

My name is Thomas Johnson. I have gray hair and hazel eyes. I was 67 in 1941.

The smell of salt and earth surrounded me as I walked outside the base’s headquarters on a brightly lit Saturday. The day was December 6 out here in the middle of the Pacific on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. This air was very different than from in my hometown of Athens, Georgia. Whenever my family would go to the ocean, I would love to sit and just watch the waves of the Atlantic. The Pacific Ocean was not much different, but it seemed more powerful somehow and clearer out here.

Even though I believe this island is beautiful, I dared not bring my wife with me to live anywhere near our base. The growing tensions and war going on in Europe have made me keep my beloved Sarah back at home to be a grandma. Our three children live back in Georgia and grandchild number ten is going to a part of our family soon. I miss them desperately, but I would not wish them here at all.

Being a Vice Admiral, the equivalent of a three star general, most of the bases operations and intelligence reports came back to me or another Admiral around. Mr. President had informed us to not to worry of any attack in the near future because no country would dare want us to enter into a war. Not even the citizens back in the continental United States wanted us to enter into another long war like the one of 25 years ago. How I wished we would have been prepared better.

It was still the morning of December 7 when I began my meeting for the day with other officers and officials to discuss the maintenance and schedules of the United States fleet docked here at Pearl Harbor. All seemed peaceful and quiet on this Sunday morning with Church services being held and men out enjoying the sun by playing basketball and other sports. The time read just before 08:00 hours when a great noise could be heard over the general commotion of the base. All at once it seemed hundreds of Japanese planes flew over our heads, blacking out the sky with silver bodies and red, glowing circles everyone soon learned to hate.

No one had time to prepare as they dived down, dropping bombs onto our docked ships, firing off their ammunition on anyone in their paths. Men rushed about, some trying to reach their planes while other raced on decks to man the anti-aircraft guns. Many never made it. The few brave souls who did normally went down with their ships. The airfields were bombed along with the rest of our ships, so no pilots made it into the air for support.

At some point, I was rushed back into headquarters into a lower level in case they had tried to bomb the barracks and other buildings. Nothing seemed safe out in this battlefield the Japanese had created. These were innocent souls enjoying a Sunday morning, and now they were fighting for their lives against an enemy of the sky. This attack felt as though it lasted days, but it only lasted 2 hours.

When I emerged from the shelter, much of the base was destroyed but this was nothing compared to how the fleet had fared. Many ships were still burning and many more were sunk with some off their crew. The totals came back from a young Lieutenant who reported that 8 battleships, 12 other smaller ships, and 300 airplanes had been destroyed during this attack. The only good news was that all of our aircraft carriers had not been docked with the rest of the fleet but were out somewhere else in the Pacific. I order one of my men to radio those ships immediately and detail what had happened here. They were to be on high alert for any signs of attack.

Even with this attack, we still received reports of the rest of the Japanese plans happening throughout the day. Later on, they had also attacked the Philippines, Wake Island, Guam, Malaya, Thailand, Shanghai, and Midway. While reading the reports, another young officer came in with the casualty reports. 2,000 good soldiers lost their lives and another 1,000 were wounded. Today seemed as though it should be named Bloody Sunday. This may just be the push the citizens needed to enter into the World War.

The next day, reports came in of the Japanese landing near Singapore and entering Thailand. There were only about 30,000 to 50,000 British soldiers stationed there at the moment. The invading Japanese had a force of 70,000 men. Later on, I found out the forces only lasted for about eight weeks before resistance had ended.

During the day, I was listening to the radio when the broadcaster announced our President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, would be giving an important speech to congress very soon, so we should stay tuned. Filling out reports, I waited for the speaker to announce Mr. President’s speech.

Not long after, the President came on with words to America. “Yesterday, December 7, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy-- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” For the rest of the speech, all I felt was pure love for my country and all that needed to be done. After this, congress voted and declared war on Japan. The news also stated that Great Britain had also declared war on Japan. The next day, China had also declared war on Japan.

The rest of December seemed like one nightmare after another. On December 10, Japanese forces invaded the Philippines and seized Guam. Even with 12,000 Philippines and 16,000 American soldiers there, they could not hold off the invasion forces for long.

On December 11, Japanese forces invaded Burma. On the 16th, they invaded British Borneo. On the 18th, they invaded Hong Kong, and on the 22nd, they invaded Luzon in the Philippines.

On December 23, General Douglas MacArthur begins a withdrawal from Manila to Bataan where he can regroup. On the same day, the Japanese forces took Wake Island in the northern Pacific. Two days later, the British surrendered at Hong Kong. The day after, General MacArthur convinced the Philippine government to be declared on open city. On the 27th, the Japanese bombed much of Manila.

The Japanese were very fast with their attacks and strategies just like the Germans seemed to be with their Blitzkrieg war. I told my family that it seemed that with the entry of the U.S. in the war; I would not be home as much but constantly trying to stop the ever approaching advance of the Empire of Japan. I was 67 years old. I wish I had known all that was to come as Japan reached out.