

# Four Pearl Harbor Day Experiences

BY WILLARD J. WEBB AND SOPHIE B. VOGEL

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 had an effect, not only on people who were there, but one which rippled onto those who were far removed from the scene. In this year, the 60th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, it seems appropriate to recall some of their experiences.

## *Walter and Kathryn Wesselius*

Walter Wesselius and his wife Kathryn were in Honolulu on December 7, 1941, and witnessed at close range the Japanese bombing attack.

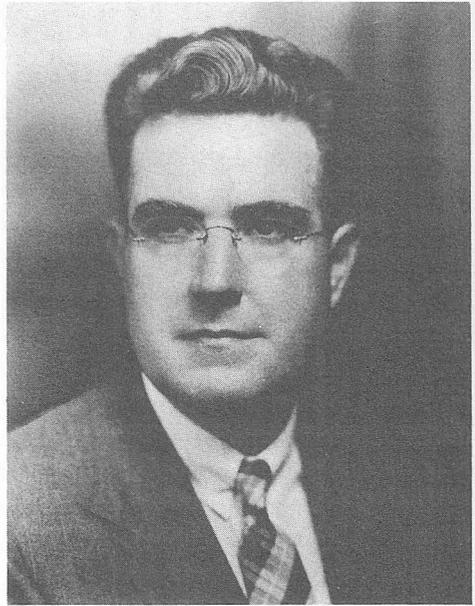
They returned to Arlington at the end of December, and in an interview published in *The Sun* on January 2, 1942, Wesselius gave Arlington one of the earliest firsthand accounts of the bombing strike.

Walter Wesselius was born in Chicago in 1896 and grew up there. After serving as a Navy yeoman and warrant officer during World War I, he began a career with the American Red Cross. Initially, he served as assistant field director for military welfare at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois. He soon transferred to disaster relief work and moved through a number of administrative positions in the Red Cross structure. He directed relief operations in Florida following hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 and subsequently headed Red Cross relief for the New England hurricane and flood of 1936 and the Ohio-Mississippi flood in 1937. Meantime, while in St. Louis, he had met and married a fellow relief worker, Kathryn Glerum, who was from Michigan.<sup>1</sup>

In January 1938, Walter accepted the position of assistant director of disaster relief at the national headquarters of the Red Cross, and he and Kathryn moved to Washington. They soon bought a house in Arlington at 1226 North Abingdon Street in the new Woodlawn Village subdivision.<sup>2</sup>

Then, in the fall of 1940, the Red Cross sent Walter to China to assist in war relief. There he served at the Red Cross headquarters at Kuming in Yunan Province at the eastern terminus of the Burma Road. When the director of Red Cross relief in China resigned in March 1941, Walter succeeded him. During his fourteen months in China, Walter oversaw the provision of over \$4 million in emergency relief to the Chinese, consisting of food and medical supplies as well as millions of yards of blue cloth and white sheeting for both hospital purposes and garments. In all more than 1,200 tons of supplies were moved to Kuming. During his time there, he witnessed many bombings in and around the city and saw much loss of life and the wounding of thousands of men, women, and children.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of 1941, Walter contracted malaria and was evacuated to Tripler General Hospital in Honolulu. Kathryn traveled out to Honolulu to meet Walter and accompany him home. She was staying at the Halekulani Hotel on Waikiki Beach. They both had ringside seats for the Pearl Harbor attack. Just a couple of days before the air strike, one of Walter's nurses had complained to him that Hawaii was too quiet and peaceful and that she planned to apply for service elsewhere. The morning of December 7 was scarcely peaceful. Bomb fragments hit the hospital, though no one was injured. The beautiful Halekulani Hotel (whose name meant "heavenly peace") with its seaside terraces and swaying palms



Walter Wesselius

was not hit. But a bomb struck two blocks away, breaking windows of the hotel and stripping the beachfront palms of bark and fronds. Blackouts followed and all schools closed. From his bed, Walter was able to assist in the relief, sending the Red Cross motor corps to move wounded and furnishing quantities of bandages and other materials to hospitals and wherever needed.<sup>4</sup>

Walter and Kathryn departed Hawaii on December 19 on one of the first ships to carry the wounded to the United States. The ship sailed in complete blackout and in close convoy with several other ships. Walter and Kathryn arrived in San Francisco on Christmas Day and flew on to Washington the following day. Home safely at last, they were reunited with their fox terrier, "Mac," who had been boarded while Kathryn was away. *The Sun* interviewed Walter several days later and published his account of the Pearl Harbor attack on January 2, 1942.<sup>5</sup>

Walter did not return to China. Rather, in April 1943, he became vice chairman for insular and foreign operations at the Red Cross Headquarters in Washington. Subsequently, in 1947, he was named assistant to the vice-chairman for area offices and chapter service, a position he would hold for his remaining nine years with the Red Cross.<sup>6</sup> At the close of the war, Walter and

Kathryn moved from Abingdon Street to a house at 2821 Beechwood Circle just off Military Road.<sup>7</sup>

In 1956, after nearly 37 years with the Red Cross, and having reached the age of 60, Walter decided to retire on 1 May of that year. Walter and Kathryn planned to move to Florida, and anticipating the approaching retirement, they sold their Beechwood Circle house in February and moved temporarily into Washington. Sadly, Walter did not live to retire. He died suddenly of a heart attack on April 18, just twelve days before the planned retirement. A funeral service was held at Ft. Myer and he was buried in Arlington Cemetery. Kathryn did move to Florida and lived there until her death in October 1984, at the age of 92.<sup>8</sup>

### *Ealton Nelson*

Ealton (Bud) Nelson, a journalism school graduate looking for a job with the New Deal, was living in Buckingham Apartments, #14, North George Mason Drive. He wrote to his parents Dr. and Mrs. Nelson in Essex, Iowa relating his reactions and his experiences on December 7, 1941. He and friends were in the capital as he reported a first hand view of government activity.

December 8, 1941

Dear Folks,

I've often wondered what it is like to live in a capital city when war struck. This morning I know. Like some momentous events it happened without much trapping or stage setting.

Yesterday I read the comics and the sports news, noticed that tension in the Far East was reported easing, ate breakfast late, got dressed and met my friend Clyde Holmes to go to the Washington-Philadelphia football game. It wasn't an important game—just the end of the season for two in-and-out teams. But the weather was bright and crisp and about 25,000 settled back to watch.

It wasn't much of a game the first half. It didn't really matter who won and everyone knew it. Washington's beloved Redskins were losing favor after dropping four straight games and there were occasional hoots of derision as the first half neared the end with Philly leading 7 to 0.

But then something happened and the world hasn't been the same since. It was just about 2:30 p.m.

There were 10 seconds to play in the first half and Washington had the ball in mid-field obviously bogged down. The crowd was moving toward the hot-dog stands. Sammy Baugh faded back for one last desperate heave as the gun went off. A rookie end from San Jose whose name no one including the announcer could pronounce, raced down the field, leaped in the air and came down over the goal with the ball. The game was tied up. Everyone's spirits picked up. Maybe it wasn't going to be such a dull afternoon after all.

Holmes called his wife to arrange a foursome for dinner. The phone was nailed to the wall in the open—no booths. Several other people were waiting for phones. I went after the hot dogs. He almost forgot about dinner as he turned around and shouted to me—“The Japs are bombing Honolulu.” I said, “What?”, which was a silly question as I think of it now, since I heard him perfectly well.

“Mary says, it just came over the radio that the Japs are bombing Honolulu and Manila.”

The news began spreading in waves through the crowd. You could feel it more than hear [it].

“I don’t believe it,” said the fellow next to me, “someone is always starting wild stories in a crowd.”

The loudspeaker on—“Will the Secretary of the Navy and the Commissioner of the Philippines please call their offices at once.” The game started again with interruptions every minute or two as additional big-wigs were called out—admirals, generals, cabinet members. Aquaire, the Mexican boy whose name no one could pronounce, scored 20 points, won the game and became a hero. But to put it mildly—attention was divided. In the third quarter an army bomber swooped in low over the stadium with a deafening roar. Everyone involuntarily ducked and then looked sheepish.

Extras didn’t appear till the game was over. I’m sure newspaper editors will never forgive Japan for declaring war on Sunday afternoon when only the smallest of skeleton staffs are at work.

When we got home all radios were blaring. One battleship was reported sunk. 300 reported dead in Honolulu. Costa Rica had declared war on Japan. The Panama Canal was blacked out—a British gunboat was sunk in Singapore—all air raid wardens stand by—will all Japanese stay off the streets tonite—the President will speak tomorrow at noon—all Senators and Congressmen please report to the Capitol at noon tomorrow—we now return you to our regular program.

We had dinner just like any other Sunday nite and drove downtown to see our war-torn capital. A huge crowd in front of the Japanese Embassy. The gates locked, lights blazing behind drawn shades. Smoke belched from the chimneys as the staff busily burned papers and files before calling for their diplomatic passports.

A long line of black sedans are parked in the White House drive. No one can walk in front of the White House tonite without police permission. A crowd of FBI [agents] gathered in front of the Dept. of Justice, ready to round up Japanese aliens when word comes. Helmeted soldiers with bayonets stand guard at every door of the War Department as clerks and stenographers, hurriedly called from home, report for work. Workmen busily string lights and rig searchlights on the railroad bridge over the Potomac—only link between the north and south on the East Coast.

This morning a machine [gun] unit is a guard on each end of the highway bridges. Army and Navy officials report in full uniform.

It is noon now. The air raid warnings are working from here north. Reportedly the street lights will be dimmed tonite. In a few minutes the President will

speak and we will be officially at war and now I've got to get back to the radio. Life has changed since Sammy Baugh threw his touchdown pass to tie up the game yesterday afternoon. That sure seems a long time ago.

Young Mr. Nelson served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He returned to Arlington where he lived during the mid 1950s then moved to Fairfax County. He worked in the Department of Labor and later the State Department. His wife, Marie, established the Marie Nelson Realty company serving Arlington and Fairfax. Their daughter Joan Mulholland resides in Arlington. She found the letter, which he had retrieved from his parents' papers after they died, among his papers. Ealton Nelson passed away in 1996.

### *Mary Ballard Shorr*

On December 7, 1941, when the Pearl Harbor disaster struck, Mary Shorr and her two children were living on Oahu where her husband, a U.S. Army officer, was stationed. As the shock of the bombing began to clear a little, wives and children were ordered to be evacuated. Essentials were hastily packed and planes loaded. Mary's plane landed in California, which was a long way from home for many of the families. Since it was Sunday the banks on the island had been closed and few wives had money on hand to pay for the tickets that would take them home.

It had been a harrowing day and young children were restless. Many of them were headed for cold climates with only summer clothes on their backs. Seeing their plight, Mary, who believed in being always prepared, gave each wife who had insufficient funds the amount needed for transportation home. She kept no record of who received the fare money or in what amount. It was just "How much do you need?" She was grateful she had enough cash on hand to provide help for all who otherwise would be stranded. Busy with resettling her family, Mary tried not to dwell on that dreadful day and swift evacuation. But soon letters of gratitude for her generosity came pouring in and in each the amount advanced for tickets was enclosed. By Christmas, 1941, all the money she had doled out on December 7, 1941 was repaid in full.

Colonel Shorr was assigned to the Washington, DC area at about the same time Arthur Vogel came to the State Department. The Shorrs were renting General Quinn's house next door to the one purchased by the Vogels.

### *Arthur Vogel*

He was the first faculty member from Columbia University's Music Department to be drafted into the army. In 1940 physical exams were conducted by the draftee's family physician. Vogel, 6'6" tall and weighing 163 pounds, did

not meet Army specifications. His physician asked if he really wanted to be drafted. When Art replied in the affirmative, he suddenly shrank to 6'5" and gained a few pounds.

Arthur Vogel had spent 1936-38 in Heidelberg on a Barker Music Scholarship for study abroad, which was awarded to him by Columbia University. Motorcycle trips into most European countries in search of manuscripts or to confer with other musicologists alerted him to the tensions building up to war. In Germany he was usually the only one traveling on the autobahn.

Art Vogel was drafted for one year of service in the Army on January 6, 1941 and assigned to the Coast Artillery at Fort Hancock. On December 7, 1942 he was at home on terminal leave. A year later he was writing from Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Hampton Bays, Virginia. The following paragraph is from a letter to his wife before they were married:

Pearl Harbor [Day] I P.M.  
7 - XII - '42

Last year this day I was home playing cards with the family when the news came over the radio. I couldn't believe it. My mother said she thought something would happen. She didn't like to see me pack my ski stuff in anticipation of the spree which would have followed my discharge after a year of service Jan. 6. I still have a terrific yen for a week in the snow.

Vogel was not discharged but sent to tropical Antigua as a corporal. Before the year was over, he was sent home for a short leave before going on to OCS. The one year draft turned into five years of service in the U.S. Army. He was discharged in 1945 with the rank of captain. In 1949 he joined the Cultural Affairs division of the State Department. Housing was very tight in the area. He and his wife were fortunate to find an apartment in a development, Vista Terrace, built by Pomponio Brothers in Falls Church, Virginia. Three years later, in 1952, they moved to a house built by Tony Hinant in Arlington where Arthur lived for forty-one years. He was appointed by both Democrats and Republicans to serve on a variety of committees: as a trustee on the School Retirement Board of Trustees, Building Committee, the Thinking Skills Committee, the School's Fiscal Committee, the County Fiscal Affairs Committee, the Committees on Housing, Families, and others. Art Vogel believed that good government begins at the local level.

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Willard J. Webb is a longtime Arlington resident. He served as a government historian for thirty-four years, culminating in his assignment as Chief of the Historical Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Sophie Vogel resides in the home she and her husband, Arthur, bought in the Highland Park-Overlee Knolls area in 1953. Mrs. Vogel was appointed to the county and the schools telecommunications committees when she retired and now edits the AHS *Newsletter*.

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### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 19 April, 1956, p. 22; American Red Cross (ARC) Press Release 95941-451, "Walter Wesselius," April 1951; ARC Press Release 8283-456, "Walter Wesselius," April 18, 1956; ARC Biographical Info, "Walter Wesselius," n.d.; ARC Archives. *American Red Cross Courier*, August 15, 1927, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *American Red Cross Courier*, December 1937, p. 27; *The [Arlington] Sun*, January 2, 1942, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Wesselius, "Relief for an Ally," *Red Cross Courier*, February 1942, pp. 11, 28; ARC Press Release 995941-451, April 1951; *NY Times*, March 12, 1941, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *The [Arlington] Sun*, January 2, 1942, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> ARC Memo, Fieser to Nat'l Hqs and Office Staffs, April 20, 1943; ARC Memo, Nicholson to Nat'l Hqs and Area Managers, February 24, 1947; ARC Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Alexandria, Arlington County, Fairfax County Telephone Directory, September 1946, p. 157.