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Witnesses to Pearl Harbor's infamy and its aftermath

By Jack Estes, *The Oregonian*

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The sky was blue that summer day in June, as Claire Hurly stepped off the Portland Trolley in front of Meier & Frank, crossed underneath the green awning and pushed through the double doors. The store was packed. The Rose Festival ships were in town tied up along the Willamette River's banks, and the city was buzzing with promise and excitement.

This was exhilarating for a girl who grew up on a small dairy farm in Salem. Blond and blue-eyed with full lips, Claire had a Grace Kelly kind of beauty. She lived in the city then and worked as a sales clerk. It was 1941; she was 22 and in love.

Much of the world was at war: Germany with Europe; Japan with China and French Indochina. The United States was staying out but worried about the aggression. In May that year, main elements of the U.S. Navy were strategically transferred from the West Coast to the Hawaiian island of Oahu. There, at Pearl Harbor, the Navy yard had a dry dock capable of holding the largest warships. Its massive docking was called Battleship Row. In or near the harbor were a submarine base, hospital, Hickam and Wheeler airfields, Schofield Barracks and bases at Ford Island. This made Pearl Harbor a formidable target. Tensions were high as President Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to negotiate with Japan and avoid the U.S. being sucked into war.

Patrick O'Callaghan was a tall, handsome man. He boxed out of the Multnomah Athletic Club and in 1936 won the Oregon Golden Gloves heavyweight championship. His smile rang as true and honest as his powerful punch and firm handshake. He attended Oregon State College, left school early and joined the Army Corps of Engineers, specializing in constructing airfields and fortifications.

Pat met Claire for the first time in February of '41, on the dance floor at the Thai Ping Terrace on Portland's Barbur Boulevard. Both knew immediately something huge was stirring. The next day he left a sweet note and a dozen red roses on her doorstep. But by the end of March, Pat was in Hawaii, assigned to work at Pearl Harbor.

Even though they had seen each other fewer than a dozen times, Pat wrote Claire in a letter home, "If you come to Hawaii I'll ask you to marry me." So, Claire's heart was bursting that summer day at Meier & Frank, reading his note again and again, at lunch and on the trolley going home. Soon, Pat sent her a steamship ticket for Hawaii. By the end of July, Claire, against her mother's wishes, was on a train to San Francisco, where she boarded ship and left port, steaming across the Pacific.

Pat stood on the dock, tanned in a white linen suit and wearing a pink, plumeria lei. When Claire reached him, he slipped the lei over her head, bent down on one knee and asked her to marry him. They were married on Aug. 2, 1941, in a small white church surrounded by palm and mango trees that looked down on Pearl Harbor. They settled into a modest home at Hickam Air Field, in direct line with Battleship Row.

September melted into October as Claire worked at the library or volunteered at the hospital. Pat spent long days near Hickam Field, laying tarmac, building bunkers and repairing roads. On the weekends they stretched out on the beach or explored the island. At night they would meet Army and Navy officers or enlisted men and play cards on their front porch and discuss the possibility of war.

On Nov. 26, the Japanese attack fleet left its northern borders with six aircraft carriers, 400-plus fighter planes, 33 warships and submarines carrying piggyback five two-man midget submarines. They were headed toward Pearl Harbor. On Dec. 1, the Japanese commander, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, received orders to attack the harbor on Dec. 7. They moved their ships closer to the island and settled in 200 miles from shore. On the night

of Dec. 6, midget subs were released, hoping to hide on the harbor floor, then rise to fire torpedoes as the attack began.

That same evening, Pat and Claire O'Callaghan threw a party at their house. Friends came to eat and drink; a few were officers and sailors from the battleship USS Arizona. They partied into the night, and some folks wandered home, but a few sailors slept on couches as ships lay quietly in the harbor.

At 7:53 a.m. Dec. 7, the first wave of Japanese planes hit Pearl Harbor. Enemy fighters with red suns on their wings flew so close to the ground Pat and Claire could see the pilot's goggles. Hundreds of dive bombers strafed the ships, their machine guns ripping, bombs and torpedoes dropping. The officers and sailors at Pat and Claire's rushed desperately toward the harbor. The Arizona was one of the first ships hit. A 1,700-pound bomb struck its forward magazines, exploding into 200-foot high balls of flames and pillars of black smoke -- 1,400 men were killed instantly. Three hundred survivors, some of them on fire, dived from the ship into the oil-burning harbor.

Battleship Row was hit again and again as sailors and Marines fought back from their flaming ships with anti-aircraft guns and machine guns. The USS Oklahoma was hit by torpedoes and capsized; 400 men died, trapped inside. At Hickam Field, a direct hit on the mess hall killed 35, and more bombs destroyed sitting planes there and at Wheeler. One hundred eighty-three planes were destroyed and only five U.S. planes made it off the ground. In two hours, more than 2,400 military personnel and civilians were killed and 1,300 wounded before the attack ended.

The island was in full panic, expecting an invasion. Pat and Claire moved toward the hills, where a shaken colonel gave Pat an immediate commission as a second lieutenant. He was issued a .22 Colt pistol and sent out with 30 native Hawaiians to forge a perimeter, dig fighting holes and build fortifications. Claire, terrified, was back at the hospital tending to the wounded.

On Dec. 8, the United States and Britain declared war on Japan. Pat and Claire stayed on in Hawaii. A daughter, Lani, was born in October of '42. In December, Pat was assigned to Camp Butler, N.C., for training, and Claire shipped back to the mainland. She lived in a wartime housing project, called Kellogg Park in Milwaukie.

Pat was attached to the 389th Engineer Regiment and volunteered to lead a platoon of all-black soldiers. These men, many of them illiterate and never having worn shoes, came from the poorest farmlands. Pat's regiment, made up of about 70 white officers and 1,300 African American troops, traveled by train to New York in December 1943 and shipped out to England. For the rest of the war, Pat built bridges and roads, and his regiment endured attacks by German planes, buzz bombs and V-2 rockets.

When the war ended, Pat came home and became a contractor but never talked much about the war. Claire did well in real estate investment. The couple had five more children, including my wife, Colleen. They were married for over 50 years, living most of their life in Tualatin. When Pat died, Claire spread his ashes over a peaceful bay in Hawaii, along with pink petals of plumeria. Years later, Claire's ashes followed.

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