

Pearl Harbor pilot became evangelist

He survived Pearl Harbor, Midway, Guam and Hiroshima.

By Paul Newell



Beginning in December 1927, Fuchida, far right, began flight school at Kasumigaura.

Shortly after Mitsuo Fuchida led the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he discovered just how fortunate he was to be living.

Along with the 21 holes that visibly pocked the 39-year-old's aircraft, a mechanic on the aircraft carrier Akagi found a frayed elevator cable that dangled from Fuchida's reconnaissance bomber by a single thread. If it had been severed, the inevitable crash could have killed the flight commander — whose radio message "Tora! Tora! Tora!" was the final go-ahead for the attack that drew the United States into World War II.

To Fuchida, who did not consider himself a spiritual man at the time, dodging the flak over Pearl Harbor was a lucky break. But as the war wore on, escaping death became a rite of passage for the man, leading him 30 years later to tell now-retired Stars and Stripes reporter Hal Drake that "someone had his hand on my head."

A warrior's heritage

Mitsuo Fuchida was born in 1902 to the master of the primary school in Kashihara, about 15 miles southeast of Osaka. His maternal grandfather was a fiery nationalist samurai who was imprisoned for fighting against Emperor Meiji's edict to defeudalize Japan.

In Drake's 1971 interview, Fuchida said his grandfather's tales of former days of glory influenced his choice to pursue a military career. They also planted in Fuchida's young mind a poor opinion of Westerners.

As part of his training cruise with the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy during his senior year, Fuchida was visiting San Francisco Bay aboard the cruiser Yakumo when he learned about the recently passed Immigration Act of 1924. The act prohibited Asian-Pacific people from immigrating to the United States.

"The Japanese and the Chinese built our railroads and the Panama Canal; of course, they were offended," Donald Goldstein, historian and co-author of "At Dawn We Slept" and Fuchida's biography, "God's Samurai," said during a recent interview with Stripes. "We didn't want them."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt said Dec. 7, 1941, would be "a date that will live in infamy," but for Imperial Navy Capt. Fuchida, it would long be remembered as overdue payback that would restore respect for his ancestors and nation.

Japanese success at Pearl Harbor was so shocking that "a story went out saying it wasn't Japanese flying those planes, but German pilots in Japanese planes," Goldstein said. "[The U.S.] did not think they were very good."

The aftermath offered a different assessment. The Japanese lost just 29 aircraft. The U.S. Pacific Fleet lost 2,403 lives, 21 ships — including almost every battleship; 188 aircraft were destroyed and another 159 were damaged.

Fuchida said years later that he mourned those who died aboard the USS Arizona and other ships. But he told Drake he did not regret his role in the Pearl Harbor attack.

"It was a war," he said.

After flirting with death at Pearl Harbor, Fuchida geared up to lead the June 1942 attack on Midway Atoll. But he came down with appendicitis six days before the pivotal battle commenced. Forced to look on from Akagi's bridge, Fuchida watched the other Japanese carriers sink as a dive bomber from the USS Enterprise scored a hit on the Akagi that sent Fuchida flying.

With both ankles broken, Fuchida was dragged from the smoking debris and put aboard a destroyer. The remaining pilots Fuchida was to have led — those who survived the U.S. Navy's onslaught — had nowhere to land and crashed into the sea after running out of fuel.

Fuchida told Drake that providence had again saved his life.

"I would have died," he said. "I know I would have died."

Death's sword misses again

Medically grounded, Fuchida accepted a staff position with Vice Adm. Kakuji Kakuta on Tinian, an island near Japanese-occupied Guam. Two weeks shy of the American invasion to liberate the islands, Fuchida was ordered to Tokyo. When the Japanese failed to repel the invasion, Kakuta and his staff chose seppuku — the samurai suicide ritual of disembowelment.

"Again the sword of death had missed me only by inches," Fuchida told Drake. "What did it mean?"

Perhaps the most convincing proof that he was being sheltered from death, in Fuchida's mind, came at war's end. After Okinawa fell in June 1945, he was ordered to Hiroshima to organize aerial defenses for a final stand against the Allied juggernaut. On the evening of Aug. 5, Fuchida was abruptly directed to attend a briefing 500 miles away.

As he ate breakfast in Yamato the next morning, Fuchida learned that everyone he'd been working with in Hiroshima had perished, along with thousands of other Japanese, in the atomic explosion that flattened the city. His next task was to return with a dozen officers to assess the aftermath.

A few weeks later, Fuchida's role in the war came full circle when he was on hand to witness Japan's surrender aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on Sept. 2. Still, death continued to shadow him.

Each of the officers who had accompanied Fuchida in Hiroshima started showing strange signs of illness. Some walked languidly, while others lost their appetites. The officers began losing their hair, and their teeth rapidly disappeared. Just 20 days after strolling through the bomb wreckage, the first member of the assessment team died of radiation poisoning.

"Like drowning men letting go of a lifeline," Fuchida told Drake, explaining how one by one members of the team perished — with the last, on his deathbed, assuring Fuchida he'd be next. But Fuchida displayed no symptoms and was released from the hospital.

Defeated and depressed, the warrior returned to Kashihara to help his wife raise their two children and undertake the unfamiliar family business of chicken farming.

"It was a rainy day in my life," he would recall. "Life had no taste or meaning. ... I had missed death so many times and for what? What did it all mean?"

Hatred turns to forgiveness

In the months following the war, the U.S. military began conducting war-crimes trials, which Goldstein said disgusted Fuchida. He believed war was war, and things should be left at that.

But because of his military relevance, he was summoned to Tokyo in 1947 by Gen. Douglas MacArthur to testify. Before taking the stand, Fuchida was determined to collect his own evidence, confident it would prove that Americans were as inhumane toward Japanese captives as were his countrymen against whom he was to bear witness.

A boat returning 150 Japanese released prisoners was to return at Uraga Harbor near Yokosuka.

"Fuchida would gather his proof there," Goldstein said.

As the men walked toward him, Fuchida spotted a familiar face. Kazuo Kanegasaki was a sailor and friend he thought was long dead. Fuchida asked Kanegasaki about his treatment in U.S. captivity. That he was treated relatively well was a surprise, Goldstein said, but what followed "would ultimately change Fuchida's life forever."

In his book, "God's Samurai," Goldstein writes that Kanegasaki told Fuchida of a young girl named Peggy Covell who cared for the Japanese — not only with respect, but as a sister would treat a relative. What was so amazing was that her parents were Christian missionaries whom Japanese soldiers had killed in the Philippines, but only after the missionaries asked for 30 minutes of prayer.

But what good is it to pray to a God who could not even save her parents? Fuchida pondered. And what did her parents pray?

Kanegasaki didn't know.

Fuchida went to the trials a bit bewildered. He researched what he was told and was astonished to discover it happened as Kanegasaki said: The Covell parents were praying as Japanese swords took their lives.

Fuchida became curious about the Christian god.

He again was ordered to testify in 1948 and, as he got off the train at Shibuya Station, a Western man handed him a missionary pamphlet titled "I Was a Prisoner in Japan." The subject was Jacob DeShazer, one of the Doolittle Raiders whose carrier-launched B-25s bombed Japan in 1942. DeShazer's plane crash-landed in China, where Japanese occupiers captured and imprisoned him.

After his capture, DeShazer was repeatedly tortured and witnessed the execution of three of his crewmembers while another slowly died of malnutrition.

Like Fuchida, DeShazer couldn't understand why his life was spared amid so much death. A friend lent him a Bible, which he quickly devoured. Moved by the story of Christ asking for

forgiveness of those who crucified him, DeShazer vowed he would return to Japan to do missionary work if his life were spared.

For a second time, a story of the human ability to forgive one's enemies rocked Fuchida. This time it stuck.

"That's when I met Jesus," Fuchida told Drake. "Looking back, I can see now that the Lord had laid his hand upon me so that I might serve him."

Fuchida lived out the remainder of his years traveling the world as an evangelist. His story was celebrated in Reader's Digest magazine, and he befriended such notables as the Rev. Billy Graham.

The man who wouldn't die in war was finally conquered by diabetes in 1976.