

Veteran Francis Scholtz

Pearl Harbor Survivor Who Later Soothed Soldiers with Music on Guadalcanal Recalls the Attack

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

In recognition of the upcoming 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Senior Times is devoting its monthly World War II veteran tributes to survivors of the attack living in Florida. Featured this month is Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Francis “Dutch” Scholtz of Jacksonville.

Francis “Dutch” Scholtz played a late gig with his dance band that Saturday at an officers club and didn’t get back to his barracks until 1 a.m.

This was nothing new for the skilled pianist and private in the U.S. Army Air Forces. Officers would often have their wives with them there on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, and the couples’ cocktail parties needed some background music.

Volunteering in late 1940 after high school in Iron Mountain, Michigan, Scholtz’s peacetime year on the tropical island carried this vacation-like gaiety: music, tennis, poker, getting off work early daily.

“It was a nice place to be,” he remembered. “There’s good weather. It couldn’t be better — played tennis every day. Oh, it was great. ... We only worked half days, and so half the day was for fun.”

But the merriment came to a devastating end on Dec. 7, 1941 — “a date,” President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Congress and the nation on Dec. 8, “which will live in infamy.”

For on the morning of Dec. 7, Japan launched 353 planes — torpedo planes, dive bombers, high-level bombers and fighters — in two waves from a fleet north of Oahu. Their target: the naval and air installations at Pearl Harbor.

“When I woke up, all hell was breaking loose,” Scholtz said of the Japanese bombs that acted as an alarm clock. “I thought, ‘Well, what am I going to do?’”

A 19-year-old radio operator for the 46th Fighter Squadron, Scholtz was stationed at Wheeler Field airbase, north of the harbor and relatively central on Oahu.

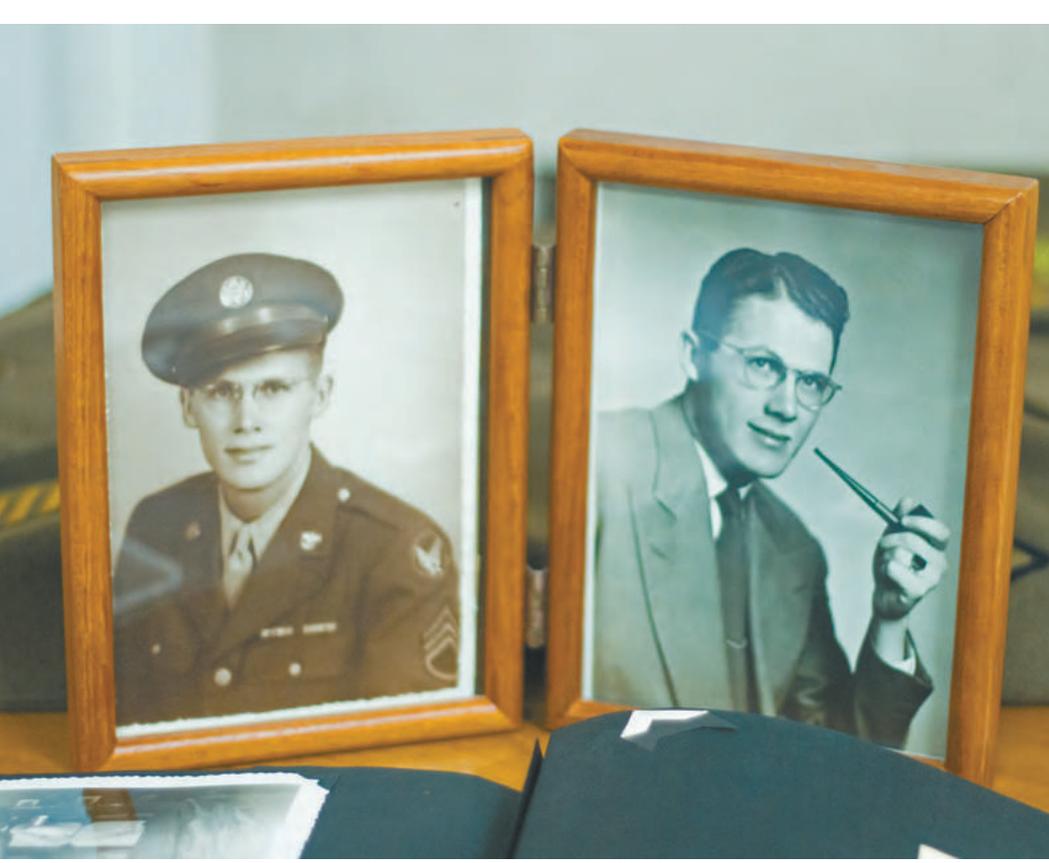
So with Japan’s 183 planes in the first wave jetting in from the north and wanting to quickly knock out the parked U.S. planes to maintain air superiority, Wheeler became the attack’s first target, taking hits a few minutes before the first bomb fell on the harbor at 7:55 a.m.

That makes Scholtz’s alarm clock essentially the start of World War II for the U.S.

“I stood there and watched airplanes come in and bomb and strafe our outfit.”

Yet Wheeler’s situation appeared hopeless even before then. Planes there, at Hickam Field at the harbor and Bellows Field in eastern Oahu had been lined up in the center of the runways for better guarding against ground sabotage — but this made them easy targets for an air raid.

Because of the surprise, Scholtz recalled, Oahu’s military installations had no dugouts or other defenses prepared.



Staff Sgt. Francis Scholtz, a survivor of the attack on Pearl Harbor and a pianist, holds a map in his Jacksonville home showing his war route in the Pacific. Stationed at the Army Air Forces' Wheeler Field airbase, Scholtz played a late gig with a dance band the night before and was awoken the next morning by bombs.



Scholtz managed to carry his Gulbransen piano with him through the Pacific, playing it as a morale booster. This happened mainly on Guadalcanal, and the place he performed there — a tent atop a hill — became known as Harmony Hill. The 94-year-old continues to play today.

But most stunning to Scholtz, Oahu's 43,000 Army air, coastal and ground personnel had been called off alert the day before the attack despite being on guard leading up to then. This resulted in them handing over their weapons and receiving leave.

Scholtz found out the stand-down orders in a Wheeler hangar on Dec. 6 from 1st Lt. Lewis M. Sanders, who commanded the 46th, some hours before his band gig at the officers club.

"[Sanders] said, 'I don't understand this. We know the Japanese fleet is out there, but we're going off alert. And you're free to go on pass,'" Scholtz, now 94, remembered in the living

room of his Jacksonville home. "And so naturally, the guys who had been on alert for a month ran off to Honolulu, and I had a dance job that night."

So uncontested, Japanese dive bombers began dropping from 500 feet over Wheeler's hangars, planes and barracks, and once the lack of opposition became apparent, their fighters joined in for strafing runs.

Scholtz emerged from his barracks and saw it unfold.

"I stood there and watched airplanes come in and bomb and strafe our outfit, which is just 30 yards from the hangar line," he said, calling Wheeler's planes "sitting ducks."

Defenseless, Scholtz “knew this wasn’t the place to be.” So he took off for the nearby officers quarters, “plastered myself up against the wall, and I just stayed there until the [first wave] was over.”

There, he also prayed.

“I was just praying to end up alive,” he said. “I didn’t pray any bad things about anybody else. I just hoped we get it over with.”

Once Japan’s first run at Wheeler let up, Scholtz headed for an emplacement nest surrounded by sandbags and containing a portable radio. He contacted Fort Shafter, the Army’s headquarters on Hawaii, and the orders were to get Wheeler’s fighter planes — P-36s and P-40s — in the air.

“They thought that we were going to save them, of course, because we had airplanes,” Scholtz said, “but everybody was attacked at the same time. In fact, I think they hit the airplanes first.”

Though Wheeler took heavy plane losses, it did get a few airborne. The number of U.S. Army planes that did take off — from Wheeler and the other fields — isn’t a widely cited number, but a Dec. 7, 1983, Associated Press article puts it at 11, including one flown by Sanders.

The main source in the article, Sanders discusses how he and three other U.S. pilots attacked a group of eight Japanese Zero fighter planes. As he motioned the other three to launch the attack, Sanders noticed that one of the other pilots was 2nd Lt. Gordon Sterling, who Sanders described as not being “cut out for a fighter pilot.”

Sanders had rounded up three pilots — not including Sterling — to take off with him. But while one went to grab a parachute, Sterling had apparently jumped into that pilot’s plane, unbeknownst to Sanders.

“When I turned around, there sat Sterling,” Sanders says in the article of



Scholtz and his wife, Barbara, met as music majors at Lawrence University in Wisconsin and have been married for 65 years.

when he motioned for the attack on the Zeros. “God, I almost died.”

Sanders and Sterling each got one Zero kill, as did another pilot in the four-man attack. (Overall, six U.S. pilots had confirmed kills across the island that day — 10 kills altogether — with six of the kills coming from famed pilots Lt. Kenneth Taylor and Lt. George Welch, whose actions were depicted in the 2001 movie Pearl Harbor.)

But Sterling didn’t make it through, and Scholtz watched from below as his plane was shot down in the close-to-the-ground dogfight. It’d be the only death he saw that day, though he did also lose his friend Don Plant, who was

shot in the head elsewhere at Wheeler in a strafing run.

“It was one big mess,” Scholtz said. “It all was horrific. It was a nightmare.”

Scholtz said Japan’s planes far exceeded the build of the U.S.’s and described the P-36s and P-40s as “antiques compared to the Japanese.”

“The Japanese had Zeros,” he said. “They were fast, and

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they were very lightweight. But most of the weight was in gun armory.”

Sanders’ dogfight likely occurred as planes from Japan’s second wave stormed across Oahu. Not all attack maps show the second wave hitting Wheeler, but several do. And Scholtz remembers follow-up attacks clearly because a Zero went on a strafing run on his sandbag emplacement.

“In fact,” he said, “a bullet just went right by my ear. I carried it for a long time, but then I lost it.”

As the attack continued, Scholtz could see incredible smoke coming from Japan’s main target: battleship row, where the U.S. Pacific fleet took severe blows from bombs and torpedoes, including to three battleships that were so crippled they’d never return to service: the Arizona, Oklahoma and Utah.

The single largest tragedy of the day was an armor-piercing

“In Guadalcanal, we had air raids, and we had one every night for 26 nights straight.”

bomb detonating the forward magazine on the Arizona, which lost 1,177 sailors and Marines in the attack.

Despite the extreme volume of the explosion, Scholtz said he doesn’t remember that sound specifically. “It was just one thing after another exploding — didn’t know what was blowing up.”

By the time the attack ended, 2,403 Americans were dead, including 33 personnel at Wheeler.

When Sanders got out of his plane after landing, “he was just beside himself,” Scholtz recalled. “He didn’t understand how this could have happened.”

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the next attack.

“We thought they would come back and retry to take the island, and that was our fear because they could have,” he said. “They pretty well wiped out our Navy and our Air Force. ... Nobody knew anything, so we just lived in fear.”

But in spite of all the tragedy, Scholtz said, the mood on Oahu remained at: “We can always win.”

“I think the American psyche is not losing,” he said. “We’re winners, so that’s part of it. But there was a lot of fear and a lot of sleepless nights.”

Maybe three or four days after the attack and because of the possibility of another strike, Scholtz said, the Army moved surviving planes to an area with an airstrip on Oahu’s north beach named Mokuleia, also called Dillingham Ranch.

After some time there and into 1942, Scholtz’s squadron was deployed to the Pacific, hopping among a few smaller islands and



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“I think everybody in the country of [my] age is upset that World War II is taught in two paragraphs in a school.”

eventually setting up on Guadalcanal, the site of the U.S.’s first offensive campaign in the Pacific. When the campaign ended by February 1943, the U.S. had lost about 7,100 soldiers, 29 ships and 615 aircraft.

The ground threat had been extinguished by the time Scholtz arrived, but the Japanese continued to hammer the island with untargeted bombings.

“They’d come over at night and drop bombs and just not knowing what they’re trying to hit,” he said. “In Guadalcanal, we had air raids, and we had one every night for 26 nights straight.”

The intensity of the conflict hit the soldiers hard mentally, but they received some relief from Scholtz.

Before, when he was about to deploy from Hawaii, Scholtz bought a Gulbransen piano for \$50 from a chaplain and asked Sanders if he’d be able to bring it along as a morale booster. Sanders said yes, so the piano was crated up and followed Scholtz through the Pacific.

Though formally a radio operator, coordinating plane takeoffs, landings and other movements, Scholtz became more

known for his piano playing, on Guadalcanal and the previous islands he stopped on.

“They didn’t know what the hell” was in the crate, he recalled. “The sailors who unloaded the ships caught on maybe about the third island, and they said, “There’s that damn piano again.”

He performed in a large tent on Guadalcanal, and it sat atop a hill overlooking an airstrip. And because his playing could be heard by nearby soldiers of all branches and ranks, and brought them together under the tent, the hill became known as “harmony hill.”

The Japanese “would bomb us, and I would play the piano after the bombing,” Scholtz said.

His peaceful presence on Guadalcanal got him the ironic name “Dutch,” a reference to the mobster Dutch Schultz. “And I was just the opposite of a gangster.”

Sometime in 1945, before the war came to a close, Scholtz received orders to leave Guadalcanal and head to Australia. But now a staff sergeant, he had enough points to instead be sent back to the States and be discharged.

After the war, Scholtz got a music degree from Lawrence

University in Appleton, Wisconsin, through the G.I. Bill. There, he met fellow music major Barbara, and the two have been married for 65 years and have two children, six grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

“In the beginning, it was just something all the guys did,” Barbara Scholtz said of her husband’s service. “They didn’t talk about it. When I went to Lawrence, the upperclassmen were former G.I.s, and they just got on with their lives. They didn’t talk about it much — ever.”

Dutch Scholtz continued with music in Appleton after college, serving as a church organist, dance-band player and school band director. He continued with those gigs until 1968, when he became superintendent of schools for the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, and six years later, he headed for Minneapolis-Saint Paul for the same position.

Then, in 1986, he left for Jacksonville, where he worked as director of stewardship under John Snyder, the bishop of the Diocese of Saint Augustine, before retiring in 2002 at age 80.

When the Scholtzes first moved to Florida, they made friends through the state’s northeast chapter of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association.

Obituaries indicate that maybe only three or four members of the chapter are still living, and it — along with the overall association — disbanded in 2011 because of the dwindling number of Pearl Harbor survivors.

The main group now carrying on the legacy is the Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors, and member Rick Carrway, the immediate past president, estimated the number of living survivors at perhaps about 2,300.

A precise number isn’t possible because even though the final president of the survivors association keeps a death roster of past members, not all survivors were association members, said Carraway, whose dad, Navy vet Jay Carraway, a Pensacola resident who was a crewman on the USS Hulbert during the attack, died in August at age 94.

A main mission for Sons and Daughters — a non-political organization that takes a stand only on having a strong military — is ensuring today’s Americans have a thorough understanding of the events leading up to, during and after Pearl Harbor, Carraway said. Members will speak to “anybody that’ll have us, really” but especially to schools.

“Part of what the Sons and Daughters wants to do is keep these memories alive in the school system,” he said. “And obviously, it’s not going well: I think everybody in the country of [my] age is upset that World War II is taught in two paragraphs in a school.”

On being able to continue to tell his personal story of the roughly two-hour attack that changed the course of America, Scholtz said, “I’m very proud of the fact that I contributed something to it.”

“It wasn’t much,” he added, “but it was the best I could do.”

But what Scholtz leans toward more from his time in the service: comforting his fellow soldiers with music.

“I’m proud of the fact that I provided a lot of entertainment for troops, for officers, because the piano, like on Guadalcanal, was an attraction,” he said.

“I had a great life. I loved everything I did.” ■

If you know a WWII veteran in North Central Florida who would like to tell his or her story to Senior Times, please email Michael Stone at MichaelStone428@gmail.com



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