

## December Surprise

### Eighty-two Years Ago: The December Surprise

In the summer of 1941, the man who would become my father, Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Allan Christie Edmands, nicknamed “Ace,” was stationed at Pearl Harbor, and his wife, who would become my mother, Mary Anna Hawes Edmands, and daughter Christine were moved to Honolulu to join him. As Ace was away on duty so much, Mary has happy to have her best friend/sister-in-law, Janie Doyle Hawes, move in. Here is a picture of Mary, Janie, and Christine walking on the sidewalk in Honolulu, just after they arrived.



On December 7 of that year, while Ace was out at sea on the cruiser *Astoria*, Japanese bombers attacked. Mary, now three months pregnant with their second child, me, and Christine, just three and a half years old, and Janie, were able to experience the “Day of Infamy” firsthand. In later years, Mary would often say that December 7 was the first day she felt her expected baby kick, and she would refer to the baby (who, she was sure, was male) as her “rising son,” a pun on the Japanese Rising Sun naval battle flag.

Here is Mary’s reminiscence of the days leading up to a big unpleasant surprise in Hawaii:

Allan came back from a cruise in either October or November 1941 ... he brought back [nesting] tables and a lot of linen from the Philippines. December 5, 1941, we were out to a dinner and a dance at a downtown Honolulu hotel ... both he and [brother] Fred left for another cruise early Saturday morning, which is why both the *Lexington* and the *Astoria* were out of the harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941.

*[Mary was one day off on these dates. The official records state that the Lexington and the Astoria left for their cruises on Friday morning, December 5. (The purpose of these cruises was ostensibly to deliver supplies and planes to Midway, but it might also have been “fishing”—that is, to look for suspicious activity from Japanese naval craft.) The dinner-dance at the hotel must have been Thursday night, December 4. When daughter Christine Edmands Barrett was recently taking an advanced history class, she tried to use Mary’s dates and was corrected by her professor, Dr. Bridgman, who, as she said, was “very kind about family history writings being sometimes inaccurate.”]*

On Sunday morning, while Ace and Fred were both out on their cruises, the attack came. Ace’s cousin, Army Private First Class Nelson Wilfred “Sonny” Edmands, Jr., 19, was on “kitchen patrol” duty at

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Schofield Barracks on Oahu. Hearing the commotion, he dropped a butter dish to run outside to see what was happening. As the enemy planes opened fire with machine guns, he dove behind a concrete pillar to save his life. A buddy of Sonny's, who was completing a 2-year tour of duty and scheduled to go home the following day, was not so lucky. He ran out onto a veranda and was killed immediately by enemy fire.

The unprepared American soldiers returned fire with what they had handy: Springfield rifles and .45-caliber handguns.

Back to Mary's reminiscences:

Janie had stayed overnight with me in my apartment at the Pleasanton Hotel ... since then it has burned, but at the time it was almost directly across from Punahou School, where Christine went to nursery school every morning.

The bedroom was upstairs in the apartment, so when the telephone rang about 8 Sunday morning, Christine went down to answer it. She came back to tell me "that lady" wanted to talk to me ... so when I answered it, I heard: "What are you still doing in bed?! The Japanese are bombing us!" I turned on the radio and heard Webley Edwards describing the whole thing ...

Here is how Janie described it in her diary:

Sunday, December 7, 1941

We are at war with Japan. Early this morning a flight of bombers attacked the island of Oahu—treacherously, while their ministers talked peace in Washington. They came out of the rising sun to spread death and destruction in a sleeping city.

Mary and I were asleep—it wasn't nine o'clock—on a Sunday morning—and the telephone kept ringing downstairs. Finally we woke up enough to send Christine down to answer it. She came back and said a lady wanted her momma, and Mary went down. I don't know why—maybe it was the mixture of sounds—the guns in the distance—the voices in the yard—the odd sound of Mary's voice saying "No! Caroline!" and telling Chris to turn on the radio—but I got up fast and put on my dress and shoes and went down. Mary looked at me so funny. "Caroline says we're having an air raid."

All I could think of was the men from Mars scare of so long ago [*The 1938 Orson Wells radio drama War of the Worlds, which frightened so many people who thought Martians were really invading the Earth.*] I said "she's crazy" and tuned in the radio. It was warm and sputtering. The announcer panted "Keep off the streets! Do not use the telephone! We are being attacked! Keep off the streets!"

Even then it didn't seem real. I went to the back door and saw [neighbors] Toots and Anne in the yard looking up. Toots said, "It's time you got up! We're having an air raid!" I remember saying "Yes—I know—"and right then I guess I did know.

I looked up and could see smoke puffs in the sky—and little dots they said were enemy planes—presumably Japanese—we could hear the anti-aircraft guns—big guns—or maybe they were bombs—Mary told Caroline to try and get down [to join them at their place] if she was scared—and to bring the baby—

I decided to move into my new apartment in spite of the Japs. Thought I'd better get my things out of the car in case we needed it [*Janie had just spent the night at Mary's apartment in the Pleasanton Hotel. Apparently, she had left her things in the car, parked out on the curb*]—or

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someone had to have it—so I lugged suitcases, boxes and stuff for about a couple of hours. I had to stop and look up at the sky every once in a while—I used to think how nice it was to know it was only the mailman [*mail plane?*]-but I guess those days are gone for good—or bad—

We got orders over the radio to fill everything in sight with water. The radio went off the air, too—just came on to give orders and information—we filled the tubs in the yard and all the pots and pans in the house—just in case the water mains got hit.

Caroline came in about then with her baby. She was plenty upset—and [??] came in from her house with her baby. She was honestly scared silly—just trembled and shook—and I've never seen anyone so pale and terrified looking.

Anne and I went over to her house, to listen to the shortwave broadcast. We kept hearing of planes coming in. Anne heard one report while I was out, of five troop transports lying off Barber's Point—and I heard a call for the Police to get a man armed with a knife in Punahou Campus just across the street—so I went home [*back to Mary's?*] to tell them to be careful. I looked out the window and saw three women trudging up Punahou Hill—with big bundles tied up in bed sheets—one of them was old, and had a bandana tied under her chin—it looked like the pictures you see of refugees in Europe—and they were refugees from some bombed section of the city.

Greg [*Toots's husband?*] came home from the office picking glass and dirt out of his hair. Just after we [had gotten] up, Toots [had] called him and [had] asked him to come home—he [had] laughed and said it was a joke—but it seems a bomb lit down there on Beretania—killed a woman twenty feet the other side of him, and almost blew him out of the building—he was convinced.

About this time evacuees began to come into the hotel from Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor—when I left and got back to Mary's, she had given my apartment [*Mary must have presumed to give up Janie's apartment without consulting Janie, because of all the emergency confusion—and because she wanted Janie to move in with her during this frightening time. They did indeed live together for the next few months.*] away [to evacuees], and I had to move out again. I didn't mind doing it—but I should rather have offered to, myself, not get told it was already done—but this is no time for little gripes.

Caroline and I got permission from the cop on the corner to go up to her place and get things for the baby—stopped for groceries on the way home—got reports over her radio of [enemy] parachutist landings on Punchbowl and in the mountains at the end of Manoa Valley.

When we got back to Mary's, I finally managed to get through to Mother on the telephone. She and the girls are all right. Naturally her big worry is Dad. Seems they attacked Manila at the same time.

I went out and got permission from the same cop to go pick up some clothes. It didn't dawn on me until much later that the policeman himself was a Jap. Lord what a job these men have on their hands. Imagine having to control a city waked out of a sound sleep by bombs—not a city at war—one at peace and totally unprepared—with all the varied races and people—can they keep it in hand? I hope to God they can—it will be hell if they don't.

Anyhow, I drove up to Mother's and picked up the warmest of my clothes and my slacks in case they evacuate us into a culvert like they have some people. Mrs. Studebaker and her three boys have moved in with Mother—they were living in Waikiki near DeRussy, but the incendiary bombs drove them out. I suggested to Mother that she and the girls each pack a small bag in case of evacuation.

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When I got back to Mary's, I packed a suitcase myself. Toots came over with bandages for us to fold, and Mary, Caroline, and I tried to do that. We spent the afternoon that way. Later Toots brought us some tea. They are planning to use the Main Hotel building for a hospital in case of need.

Anne brought over a kettle of stew and we all had supper together—but I forgot to eat. And by the time Mary came downstairs, it was too dark to see to eat—we had no lights at all, being totally unprepared for a blackout. I went with Anne to put Mike to bed, but it was so dark and eerie, and she couldn't lock her back door—so she decided to pack a case and come back over here. We stopped to listen to her radio. We could get the mainland—and heard an unconfirmed report that the *West Virginia* was gone.

Here is a letter that Janie's mother, Gertrude Anna Post Doyle, 51, wrote that day to her husband of 28 years, U.S. Navy [Commander?] Walter Edward Doyle, 52, stationed at that time in the Philippines, also under Japanese attack. Gertrude was living in Honolulu [*in the hills? Janie had said "I drove up to Mother's"*] with Janie's sisters. Gertrude addressed her husband as "Pal." I have no idea when she was actually able to send this letter to him.

I'm writing this today—you know that we are O.K. here, Sunday A.M. Dec 7th.

Darling,

We were awakened this morning by Pearl Harbor being bombed by the Japs. We haven't heard a thing yet as to what has happened out there or how it was made possible. The radio said the planes shot down had the "Rising Sun" on the tip of the wings. Oh! Pal, how did they ever get in here? Guess it was going on before we waked up—I didn't sleep half the night, heard the clock strike five, so guess when I finally get to sleep I was sleeping quite soundly and didn't hear the first part of it as it was mostly in Pearl Harbor.

At the present time I can again hear the anti-aircraft guns. It's pretty nerve-wracking, darling, and everything on an emergency basis. The Army has warned everyone to keep off the street, no phone is allowed to be used. They want all lines open for the emergency. Just called for about fifty doctors by name to report to Tripler Hospital, saying that they were needed there immediately on account of casualties. Whether they need all of them there, or just some, they didn't say—But did say that they needed doctors there on account of casualties.

What else has gone on at Pearl Harbor they haven't said, so up to date we don't know—I could see puffs of black smoke in the air from our side bedroom window. It must have been from the anti-aircraft guns. The air seemed to be full of planes and we could hear the guns firing.

Pal, I can't understand how we were surprised like this. Then to think these horrible Japs had the nerve to try an attack on these Islands. They don't seem to fear us to attack without declaring war. Of course the place has been placed on an emergency basis.

What makes it so dreadfully heartbreaking to me is that this is war and now you will actually be in it. O darling Pal, that is my most terrible worry—your safety—God protect you, my darling Pal, and may you come through this terrible situation safely.

We have the radio on. They are doing a grand job of it trying to keep the people calm, play jazz music, etc. Whenever necessary broadcast instructions to the people and report all necessary news items. We are told to keep the radio on for information, also that they will soon tell us what to do for tonight's blackout.

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They are calling all militia, Legion members, emergency ambulances, doctors, etc. to their emergency stations. All Inter-Island ships and planes to the other Islands have been stopped. All cars ordered off the streets. Can't even park them—If you haven't a garage, they are to be driven onto the lawn. Don't know why.

Katie Roper called me just before the order for everyone to keep off the streets—asked us over there—we were dressing to go but thought better of it, so remained at home. Stoney isn't here.

They say that we have the situation well in hand. Maybe we won't have another attack. Where are they coming from and how many are there? The Governor just announced his proclamation for a full emergency. He was terribly upset or scared—you could scarcely understand him. Sounded like he was ready to cry. I'm scared, honey, I don't mind telling you. It affects me like an earthquake. Everything right now so calm—Don't know when another attack will come— and quiet. This is Sunday. Officers having no duty were home, others out “fishing,” etc. Like Fred and Allan—so guess they got their word from their spies.

We are at war at last. Our U.S. and these beautiful Hawaiian Islands threatened by the Japs. I can't go on. I'm just stunned. A man came around to tell us to fill everything with water. Told us that the Philippines were being bombed—and God help and protect you, my darling. Oh! I could just scream. You must be protected by God. I couldn't bear it otherwise—if I only knew how you were out there—all my love is yours.

Now back to Mary's reminiscences:

[That] afternoon about eight of the wives whose husbands were either out at sea or at Pearl moved in with me with their kids ... we moved the mattresses down from upstairs and all slept in the living room that night, scared to death.... we had to leave all the lights off, and could do nothing about a blackout for two days. Then we got a chance to get some black construction paper and blacked out the living room ... also on Tuesday [*December 9*] we sent a telegram to Mother and Dad and to Mrs. Edmands [*Allan's mother, my grandmother*] saying all was well ...

It was early Sunday afternoon, December 7, when the radio told the Hawes family on the Waunch's Prairie chicken ranch north of Centralia, Washington, what had just happened. Mary's father was reading the Sunday paper, and his head shot right through the paper with the shock.

Here are the diary entries of Ace's mother, living in Andover, Massachusetts:

7 Dec 1941: Went to church but didn't stay to communion. Went up to Carters' and heard about Honolulu being bombed by Japs. Came home and listened to radio until 12. War on Japan. Sent airmail letter to Allan. Got one from him written Dec. 2.

9 Dec 1941: Plenty of work. Letter from Jean and John [*Ace's siblings*]. John doesn't know about graduation [from Annapolis].

10 Dec 1941: Got postal telegraph from Mary saying all safe. Wrote to Nelson to see if he'd heard from Sonny.

Mary and Janie made a scrapbook out of clippings from the *Honolulu Advertiser* and another paper. Mary was able to save a few of the dollar bills with “HAWAII” stamped on them in brown ink.

The Territory of Hawaii [*Hawaii was not a state until 1959*] was for Mary, Christine, and Janie no longer a tropical paradise, a sunny vacation spot they were fortunate to live in. Hawaii was now a trap, and thousands of American civilians wanted to get out of it—Mary, Christine, and Janie included. There was a

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constant, and realistic, dread that, with the territory “softened up” with the bombings and with the U.S. Navy so obviously disabled, the Japanese Imperial Army, with their well-earned brutal reputation, would be landed or parachuted in and make the Hawaiian Islands a Japanese province.

“We had missed getting a Christmas tree off the load that came in on a ship on the 5th,” remembered Mary,

so our tree that year was a branch of a hibiscus bush ... by Christmas Janie and I had moved out to Pearl City (where the clipper ships used to land ... there was no real airport in Honolulu then for planes because they still used seaplanes to fly to and off from the mainland).

Here are some more diary entries from Ace’s mother:

11 Dec 1941: Nothing but war news now. Working on Davis and Ferber catalog [at work].

12 Dec 1941: 5 yrs ago left for California. Telegram from John that [Annapolis graduation] exercises would be as usual and for us to come down.

26 Dec 1941: Letter from Mary from Hawaii saying not to worry.

31 Dec 1941: Stayed home and read. Didn’t feel very much like happy New Year but I got a letter from Allan, written Dec 12 and says he’s OK. Bless and keep him safe.

On January 2, 1942, with the United States a few weeks into the war, Ace, 30 years old, was promoted to full Lieutenant. Ace’s brother, John, 24, was graduated early from Annapolis and commissioned as an Ensign.

Mary, 24 years old and expecting another baby, remembered the early months of 1942 on Hawaii, wondering if the Japanese were going to land troops and conquer the islands. They easily could have at that time. She and Janie hardly ever saw their husbands, who were already busy fighting the war. They were on a waiting list of Navy families to be shipped back to the mainland, but they had no idea when the evacuation order might come and they would need to leave on less than a day’s notice.

Allan and Fred did get home once in a while for a few hours, but they had to take a boat from Ford Island to the Pearl City landing because I had sent the car back to the mainland ... it was a case of do it now, or you may not have another chance. Janie’s mother and sisters left, too, because her father was in submarines and had gone to sea ... so Janie stayed with me.

Now since they without a car, it made sense for them to move from Honolulu to Pearl City. Here’s Ace’s mother’s diary entry:

26 Jan 1942: Got postal from Mary from Pearl City, where they had moved. It was written Dec 25 and said ours was the only package they got from home for Christmas.

Ace’s mother was also concerned about her son John, 24 years old, a newly commissioned Ensign:

7 Jan 1942: John came home [*Andover*] about 6 and said he had orders to go to Norfolk as soon as possible, so left on 7:04 train for Boston, I with him. Had shirts and collars at laundry so called up Arthur Lewis who came down and got 3 shirts and all the collars and took us to station. John called up Dave who came over to see him off. Got 11 p.m. train for Wash.

8 Jan 1942: John has to go to West Coast after all, as his ship is there. We all feel pretty bad about it, but that’s this devilish war.

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9 Jan 1942: Letter from Mrs. Johnstone saying she saw John's intended wife [*Marguerite "Peggy" Bailey*] in the Wash. Star.

14 Jan 1942: Got clippings of John and Peggy's engagement announcement from Wash. Star. 10 cents returned by Peggy's father. The announcements read that John lived in Amherst [*rather than Andover*].

16 Jan 1942: Letter from Jean and one from John from the U.S.S. Idaho.

22 Jan 1942: Put John's engagement in [*Andover*] Townsman. ... Also put this in [the Lawrence Tribune].

14 Feb 1942: Had a permanent at the Donovan beauty shop. Met Miss Ramsey whose nephew is captain of the Hughes, the ship John is on.

19 Feb 1942: Got letter from Peggy who had a telephone call from San Francisco Feb 8. Were shoving off somewhere then.

20 Feb 1942: Got letter from Allan saying he had seen John last Sunday so he is out in Hawaii with his ship.

In Pearl City, Mary and Janie worked out a code for their ship-bound husbands. Here's Mary's reminiscence:

We had an arrangement with the boys that if we were still in the house at Pearl City, we would have a red cloth on the seawall ... no cloth meant we had been shipped out. We had to be packed and ready to go on 6 hours notice...

Here's another couple of diary entries from Ace's mother, back in Massachusetts, who was seriously struggling with her finances:

26 Feb 1942: Got letter from Mary 2 weeks after she sent it. Has been packed for 2 months waiting for transportation home. [She sent a] check for [my] birthday and one from Allan to help me along. Wrote and thanked Mary.

16 Mar 1942 (55th birthday): Margaret had me in for dinner and had a cake with candles on it. I blew them all out so hope my wish comes true-- that Allan and John will keep safe.

Ace's mother was also asked to become an air raid warden but, after attending some orientation classes, she decided it was a job for someone younger. She did attend a canteen class, however, and made a tremendous amount of bandages for the Red Cross.

Ace's sister, Jean, 33, did become an air raid warden in York Beach, Maine (near the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, naval shipyards), where she lived. She and her husband, Roland, also learned to watch for German submarines and other craft off the Maine coast.

The stress continued for the civilians in Hawaii. "One time there was an alert for an air raid," remembered Mary,

and we dived into the bomb shelter that our landlord had had dug for us by a Japanese gardener ... we were just cooking breakfast when the siren sounded and we just left everything ... our kitchen certainly smelled of burned boiled eggs when we got back.

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The house I rented at Pearl City was like a beach house ... all windows instead of walls in the living room and kitchen, so we didn't try to black them out. We just put black paper on the two bedroom windows and on the bathroom window, and used blue paper on a flashlight for the rest of the house ... Janie and I spent our evenings clipping articles and goodies out of the two papers we bought each day and made scrapbooks ... while Christine slept in the other bedroom with the trunks and suitcases that were always packed.

Civilians were kept in the dark about what to expect and when to expect it. Here's another couple of diary entries from Ace's mother:

26 Mar 1942: Letter from Mary and it was sent March 14-- written the 10th. She said Allan and John were away and she didn't know when she would get back to the States.

31 Mar 1942: Postal card from Allan. Letter from Jean saying she was an air raid warden during the blackout at York Beach.

1 Apr 1942: Letter from John-- first since he left except the one on board ship while he was going over. Sent me a check for birthday. Will do for Easter. Letter also from Allan, sent birthday greetings. He and John see each other so they must be in the same vicinity.

Ace and Fred were hardly ever home. They were "busy doing their job," fighting the war. Finally, in April, the evacuation order came for Mary, Christine, and the expected "Rising Son" baby, to board the liner S.S. *Lurline*, which had been converted into a transport:

I got orders to go home on the Thursday before Easter [*that is, April 2*], to board the ship Easter Sunday [*April 5*] with Christine ... no orders for Janie. So we went to the submarine base chaplain claiming that I got very seasick, that I was very pregnant, and who would take care of Chris ... so we got orders for Janie to leave with me. ...

Janie's room had 9 bunks, mine only had 6 where there had been 2. My roommates were 3 pregnant women, a new mother and a baby, and Christine ... There were no deck chairs so when we did go on deck, we had to sit on the deck ... and wear life preservers all day long ... it must have been worth the price of admission to watch me get back on my feet [*my mother said she was very pregnant with me, and to get out of a deck chair, she had to roll*], and poor Christine had to lie flat, put her rear in the air, and stagger to her feet.... My only coat was a summer one I had brought with me from Pensacola, and it did not meet in front! I was cold.

Fortunately, there were no enemy submarine attacks. They reached San Francisco on Saturday, April 11, 1942.

When we got to San Francisco, my first project was a new coat, then a good meal in a good restaurant.... Chris noticed that there was no real blackout there ... [*She loudly sang*] "No more blackout, no more blackout ..." Then I had to try to find the car [*which had been shipped ahead*] ... it could have been in Seattle or Los Angeles [*or San Diego*]. Fortunately it was in Oakland, so after paying nearly 3 months storage on it, we started for Centralia.

We realized that we were short of cash in northern California, and managed to talk a bank manager into cashing a check on a Pensacola bank for us. I had called Mother to tell her we would be on the way, and ask for FRESH VEGETABLES! Especially cucumbers, for some reason. She must have had to pay plenty for them in 1942 in April, but she had them....

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It was really a good thing that we were sent home at that time (they told me it was better to take the baby packaged) ... Fred's ship, the *Lexington*, was sunk the end of May, and Allan's, the *Astoria*, in August, so they knew where to find us ... at home on the farm.

Here are some diary entries from Ace's mother:

15 Apr 1942: Letter from Mary from San Francisco. She arrived there the 11th. Will start for Centralia tomorrow. Was I happy! Christine had a great time with her life belt and wanted to keep it. She couldn't get up when she sat down without going through all sorts of antics. Answered letter.

26 Apr 1942: Went to church and put in a month's envelopes. Mr. Fay Elliot said the Men's Club had heard from Allan and they were much pleased.

27 Apr 1942: Letter from Allan written 3 weeks ago. He had just got 3 letters from me, but didn't know Mary had left.

8 May 1942: Cards from Mary and Christine for Mother's Day. 9 May 1942: Mary sent me collar and cuff set.

11 May 1942: Little Christine 4 years old. Sent her a play suit and 2 books. also \$25 bond.

15 May 1942: Letters from Mary and Jean. Mary thanked me for bond and stuff I sent Chris. Sent Allan a shaving bowl and razor blades for birthday.

19 May 1942: Got letter from Mary with money order in it. 26 May 1942: Got letter from Allan written April 23.

Both Ace, nearly 31 years old, on the cruiser *Astoria* and brother-in-law Fred, nearly 32, on the carrier *Lexington* (CV2) were stemming the spread of the Japanese Empire. They both participated in the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May 1942, the effort to save the shipping lanes to Australia. Here is a story that involved Fred after two Japanese torpedoes and one 1,000-pound bomb had hit, and doomed, the *Lexington*:

Satisfied for the moment that there were "no new injured personnel" for which he could not account, the chief surgeon ordered "main sick bay country" moved to the upper deck.

Fred Hartson had locked the brakes of his plane when he felt the blast. He ran for cover. Just as quickly he realized the *Lexington* was not under attack.

Joe Hart, from Macon, never reached his locker, to which he had been heading with interruptions. He discovered the passageways filled with smoke. Men, holding arms over their eyes, coughed past him. Some were assisted by rescuers.

Hart started back for the flight deck.

Ensign Muhlenfeld went below for the "head." Clouds of smoke were issuing from each of several he approached.

"To hell with it," he would remember thinking, although dispassionately enough. He turned about and never thought of the "head" again.

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Heine” Junker [the chief engineering officer] “personally checked the forward storage battery supply vent in number 2 boiler intake,” where he discovered “a heavy brown oil smoke coming from this intake which hinted that there was an oil fire in the vicinity of the battery locker or that acid-resisting paint in the battery locker was smoldering.”

The chief engineer “believed that this explosion was caused by gasoline fumes leaking into the motor generator compartment and being set off probably from brush sparking of one of the motor generators or some other electrical sparking.”

Chief Binder, the buglemaster, had a hunch that sulphuric acid fumes had something to do with the blast. Others placed the center farther forward.

Whatever the origin or location, Junker knew there was no time to lose. He ordered an assistant, Lieutenant Frederick W. Hawes, commanding “A” Division, to get down to “the scene of the explosion.” This was a broad and as yet imperfectly defined area affecting many of the ship’s compartments closed prior to the attack, and extending through a midships section comprising central station, the forward gyro, electrical board and interior communications compartments down to certain firerooms.

The engineering officer wished to know not only all of the boundaries of this blackened no-man’s-land but, more important, if any remained alive within.

“Freddie” Hawes, now exhorting Repair Party 4 to “fall in” with utmost haste, was reserved of nature, a tallish, blond officer from Centralia, Washington. He had graduated from Annapolis in 1934 where, as Sherman before him, he had excelled as a boxer. Aboard the Lexington, Hawes had proven himself a meticulous, conscientious leader far beyond the call to “regs.”

Lieutenant Hawes, so at least “Red” Coward thought, could move through a ship “blindfolded.” He popped up at any and all hours of the night in unlikely places, flashlight in hand. He maintained “ninety-one files on everything,” knew “every valve and bolt” in his own division “country.”

A stickler for detail, there were those who would attest that Hawes sometimes measured crewmen’s hair to make certain that it was not longer than the regulation two inches, with a safe margin of several millimeters. “Freddie,” however, commanded respect not only because of a manifest knowledge of his duties but because he was the sort who refused to issue an order that he could not personally carry out. He much preferred to “go it alone” where there [was] the least show of reluctance to accompany him.

There was no reluctance this afternoon in Repair 4, heading down to the damaged forward areas below the hangar deck, especially on the starboard side. Among this unit was Erich Eger, 18, an electrician third class, one of a small group of friends from the Milwaukee area who had been offered a tour of duty on the carrier in 1940 while with the Naval Reserve. Erich also played trumpet in the ship’s band.

Wearing a gas mask, the slender Erich, attached to a safety rope, squirmed through a scuttle to the forward generator room. This was connected both to the gyro room and the forward distribution board—dark, smoky wastelands that had borne the full fury of the explosion. Others in the repair group followed.

The men groped ahead, not knowing what they would find or if even the deck plates were still below the blanketing of smoke. Eger heard the generators “still whirring in spite of their

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punishment. This sound in itself renewed his faith that “this ship is going to stay here.” He did not believe that she would sink.

Nonetheless, there was very little solace in the generator area. Probing behind the faint illumination of just one battle lantern, he could see the “glow coming through the bulkheads” and knew the fires were far from controlled. For that matter, this was the first proof that flames actually existed in explosion “country.”

It seemed to Eger, as her progressed, that the carrier was one endless maze of ladders and damaged compartments. He also was thankful for Hawes’s diagrammatic knowledge of the ship’s interior.

Soon, “Willie” Williamson, the electrical officer, who had recovered sufficiently to join the search, heard someone call, “Take it easy!”

Thus, Repair 4 found the first explosion victim, lying in a passageway half awash in a slimy mixture of oil and water. The man was picked up, carried to a hatch in the generator room and hauled topside through a recessed elevator well. Then he was moved aft by stretcher.

One by one, Repair 4 rescued approximately twenty people. Hawes, who had worn only a gas mask, so that his men might have the scarce oxygen masks, then moved to the starboard compartments next to the hangar deck, “where there was light from opened portholes.” He sat beside Eger for “a chance for rest and fresh air.”

Williamson, who believed the heat in the compartments was upwards of 150 degrees Fahrenheit, heard Hawes say, “It’s no use trying anymore.” He added that about all they could hope to accomplish now was to identify the bodies of those past saving.

As Junker observed the results of Repair 4’s efforts, “this rescue work was carried on under most difficult conditions.” The engineer officer had been provided with two important pieces of intelligence: that there were fires forward and that oil and water lay upon some passageways.

Now even the slowest witted could deduce that the *Lexington* was leaking. And if she were taking water, her hull had been torn and weakened.

“Heine” Junker next gave orders to shore up what forward bulkheads could be reached. . . .

Ace’s brother, John, must have been involved in the Coral Sea operation as well. Here are some diary entries from Ace’s mother:

30 Apr 1942: Letter from John written Apr 1. He says Com. Ramsey used to live in Andover and went to John Dore school. Must have been during last war. He’s capt. of ship John is on. He also wrote to Jean that he had quite a sunburn and it was autumn where he was so he probably has been to Australia.

12 May 1942: Got another letter from John and he wanted me to send him some stamps. Said he was going to get married if he ever got back to the States.

22 May 1942: Frances [*sister of Jean, Ace, and John, who died as a baby, possibly in the Spanish flu pandemic just after World War I*] would have been 23 years old. Wrote to Jean but didn’t mention it but got letter from her and she did.

## December Surprise

30 May 1942: M. Hodge told me about Commander Ramsey's telephoning from Honolulu. His father came in bookstore and asked for me and said the boys were all right.

2 Jun 1942: Blackout tonight. A surprise one, but I felt it in my bones it was coming. I got home from work at 8:30 and was reading when I heard the air raid warden's whistle blow and looked out and the lights were out. From 9-9:30.

After the sinking of his ship in the Battle of Coral Sea, Fred was able to take some leave. He returned to his parents' Waunch's Prairie chicken ranch, where his wife, Janie, and his sister Mary (Allan's wife) were waiting.

In Centralia, Washington, on June 9, 1942, a day before Ace's 31st birthday, the expected baby was born: Allan Christie Edmands Jr., whom they nicknamed "Butch" in order not to have to name him "Junior." I was told it was one of the hottest days that year in Centralia. Ace was very busy at the time flying missions during the Battle of Midway.

Here is a picture of Butch, on the chicken ranch, a couple of months after his birth.



Here is a reminiscence from Mary:

[When Butch was born, Ace] was on Midway, and somehow a telegram for me got through from him!

Here is the telegram:

R3 23 CABLE VIE=CPC F MIDWAY ISLAND 11 NFT NLT MRS ALLAN C  
EDMANDS =CARE FRED W HAWES ROUTE 2 BOX 236 CENTRALIAWASHN=

ALL MY LOVE AND GOOD LUCK

=ALLAN C EDMANDS. 2 236.(11)....

Here is a newspaper clipping that Ace's mother managed to put in the local paper in Massachusetts:

## December Surprise

Born on Father's Birthday. A son was born Wednesday to Naval Lieutenant and Mrs. Allan C. Admands [sic] in Centralia, Washington, on the anniversary of Lieut. Edmands' 31st birthday. Lieutenant Edmands is on duty with the Pacific fleet.

And here are a couple of her diary entries:

9 Jun 1942 (Tuesday) [*written afterward*]: Allan Christie Edmands Jr. born 1:10 pm, 7 1/2 pounds.

10 Jun 1942: Allan 31 years old. Got telegram from Mrs. Hawes of the birth of a son to Allan and Mary. Got it at 5:30 so thought the baby must have been born on Allan's birthday but found out later it was on June 9. Got letter in the a.m. from Mary dated June 5 saying she hoped the baby would be born on Allan's birthday.

12 Jun 1942: Letter from Allan dated May 27.

13 Jun 1942: Sent bag to Mary for birthday with blanket holders for baby.

15 Jun 1942: Letter from Jean and the baby's birth notice from Mary. June 9.

24 Jun 1942: [I've been] Married 34 years and 14 of them have been alone [*her husband, Ernest Carl Edmands, my grandfather, died of kidney failure at the age of 44 in 1928*].

25 Jun 1942: Got telegram from Allan and John saying they are OK. Scared me at first.

29 Jun 1942: Rec. letter from Mary with \$25 in it. She got back to home [*from the nursing home in town where she gave birth to the chicken ranch on Waunch's Prairie*] on the 23rd her [25th] birthday and had a great reception. Allan called her up from Honolulu.

### Notes:

Here is a short bio of my father, Allan Christie Edmands Sr. (1911–1945 [he was killed in action during World War II]: <https://milkcanpapers.com/edmands10.html>

Here is a short *partial* bio of my mother, Mary Anna Hawes Edmands Ashbrook (1917–1992): <https://milkcanpapers.com/hawes9>

Here is a short bio of my grandmother Mary Caroline Findley Edmands (1887–1970): <https://milkcanpapers.com/findley4>