

My father's face

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This is a photograph of my father, taken the day Pearl Harbor was bombed: December 7, 1941. One of my earliest memories - I was four and a half - watching my father put his Leica on a tripod, taking his own picture with a timing device, and then going into his darkroom to print this.

I can only imagine, now that he is gone and I can't ask him this (and he wouldn't have replied anyway, I suspect, taciturn Norwegian that he was) how he felt that day. He was thirty five years old, a major in the army, with a wife and two little girls. We had only recently left Honolulu, where I had been born, and the Japanese planes had flown in low over the house where we had lived. The explosions and smoke would have been visible from that house.

I had watched my mother listening to the radio that Sunday, and had run to find my father, who was outside, about to get into the car. "Come back!" I called to him. "Mama is crying!"

He came in, listened to the radio with her, and then changed his clothes. He put on his uniform. It seems strange to me now, that he did that. Was it some kind of patriotic gesture? Or did it immediately become mandatory that all military officers wear their uniforms? We were living in New York then. It is likely that they feared New York would be bombed next.

The next thing I remember is his taking the photograph. There must have been telephone calls in between, more radio news, lots of conversation, perhaps more of my mother's tears. But the next thing I remember is the Leica, and the photograph, which he enlarged, and which my mother kept framed in our home throughout the war years when he was gone, off in the Pacific.

I see so much sadness in his face. I thought of it today as I watched the news, saw a funeral on Cape Cod for a soldier killed in Iraq, and an interview with a father in Israel, saying goodbye to his son going off to war. It seems such an unending piece of history, and so pointless, as if humanity is the dumbest of Pavlov's dogs, the ones that never gets it, never makes the connection.

My father came home at the end of the war, and lived to be ninety two, through other wars, and to see one grandchild buried in uniform with a flag draped over his casket.

The home where I lived as a toddler in Honolulu still stands; I took a grandson to see it a few years ago, and to see the Arizona Memorial, with 1100 men inside the hull of the ship visible below, through the water. My grandson was eleven then. We stood silently...with Japanese tourists silent as well...and read the wall and the list of names.

History's list gets longer every day. No wonder my father looked so sad.

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