H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter J Shepherd. *Three Days to Pearl: Incredible Encounter on the Eve of War.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000. x + 244 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-815-7.

Reviewed by Charles C. Kolb (National Endowment for the Humanities)

Published on H-PCAACA (July, 2001)

Pearl Harbor: A Chance Meeting that Did Not Change the Course of the War

Pearl Harbor: A Chance Meeting that Did Not Change the Course of the War

This recently written military memoir emphasizes personal events experienced by the author that relate to the initial Japanese attacks on Anglo-Dutch-American installations in December 1941, effectively initiating World War II in the Pacific and creating the global war. The attacks on United State naval, marine, and army facilities in Hawaii, notably the attack on the fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor, and the attacks on British bases, particularly Royal Air Force (RAF) installations in Malaya, are notable events that might have had other outcomes. The author's plausible, fascinating account makes good reading but simultaneously raises serious questions in the mind of the reader.

Peter Shepherd joined the Royal Air Force at the age of 15 1/2 as an aircraft apprentice in 1939. In September 1941 he was transferred from Singapore to a night fighter squadron at the British airbase at Sungei Patani in northwest Malaya, where on 4 December he was ordered on a clandestine mission to Japanese-occupied Vichy French Indo-China, serving as an engine mechanic and observer to a mysterious Dutch pilot-courier, "Jan," who flew an American-built Lockheed Hudson. Following the overnight flight to Kompot, Indo-China (now in Cambodia), Shepherd chanced to meet a drunken Japanese civilian engineer who had been modifying bomb racks on carrier aircraft in northern Japan and had recently arrived in Kompot to undertake similar aircraft modifications. The engineer, assuming that Shepherd was Vichy French, told him a story about a Japanese naval task force that had already sailed from Hittocappu Bay eastward across the north Pacific to a destination that he took to be "Purhabba." He also learned about a Japanese plan to simultaneously decimate Royal Air Force installations in Malaya and on Singapore Island. The veracity of the author's story depends upon accepting the fact that the non-English-speaking, cognac-drinking Japanese engineer–at times slurring his speech and vomiting–was able to communicate the details of these forthcoming events to a British lad, who spoke no foreign languages, through gestures and pencil sketches on pages in a diary and on a map. Shepherd had the good sense to take the latter as he left his unconscious companion.

Returning to Sungei Patani he informed a squadron leader (named Palliser or Balliser) who had Shepherd flown immediately to Kuala Lumpur on 5 December where the story was repeated to a British intelligence officer who retained the annotated map. Returning to his RAF base and serving on guard duty, Shepherd was asleep at the time of the Japanese air attack on the airfield on 8 December which was 7 December at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Severely wounded during this initial attack, Shepherd would spend nearly two years in various hospitals before being discharged–"invalided out" of the RAF in March 1944. He suffered fractures of the lower jaw, left elbow, right ankle, pelvis and sacrum, plus serious internal abdominal injuries including hemorrhaging.

The first 60 or so pages of this 254-page memoir provide background about the author, his enlistment, training, and posting to Malaya. Aspects of his recruitment to the mission to Kompot occupy a few dozen pages, and the details of the hour plus barroom encounter (pp. 118-127) make compelling reading. The next 40 pages are devoted to Shepherd's return from Kompot and his Kuala Lumpur interrogation; much of the remainder of his memoir documents his wounding on 8 December at Sungei Patani

and a series of evacuations to the village of Tanjong Malim, then to hospitals in Johore Bahru and later Singapore, transfers by ship to Batavia (Java) and Karachi (Pakistan), then to South Africa, and finally his convalescence in Oxford, UK. He tells of unrequited romance, meeting in pre-war times a Malay girl, Wan, who later became his nurse in the Singapore hospital but died during a Japanese attack on Friday, 13 February 1942. Shepherd speculates about the "unconventional" squadron leader and interrogator, and concludes that the flight was part of a SOE (Special Operations Executive) intelligence operation, and that Jan was involved in flying contraband goods (probably precious stones rather than opium) from Indo-China to Sumatra. The term "smuggling" is not used or implied.

Shepherd writes, "the reader will ask why events of such potential consequence have remained under wraps for so long. Simply, had the events come to light at a much earlier date the possibility of serious consequences would have been very real indeed and may have adversely and seriously affected certain political and military figures. Even more seriously, they may have stirred up enduring ill will between Great Britain and the United States of America" (pp. xi-x). We are not further informed about these matters. He concludes that "I have endeavored to engage, inform, and intrigue a wide range of readers rather than present a detailed collection of facts and opinions such as would evoke interest, more or less exclusively, in the domain of assiduous historians of military history" (p. 241).

But the inquisitive reader is left asking–where is the documentation concerning this extraordinary event? The author himself states that "I have failed to unearth any official records concerning the more singular events related in this book, and I have only my own observations and feelings to guide me with regard to the characters and circumstances connected with my flight to Indo-China and my later interrogation at Kuala Lumpur" (p. 213). The volume has 19 endnotes and seven general, non-archival secondary references. The longest note runs to eight pages, and is a description of the Pearl Harbor attack taken primarily from the synthetic account in Gordon Prange's well-known volume *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: Viking, 1991). The reference is, more correctly, Gordon W. Prange, with Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 1991 is a reprint edition.

Shepherd then speculates that crucial records were either never made or were lost during the war. However, we are never told when Shepherd began these inquiries. However, the reader should recall that unlike the United States' archives, the Public Record Office in the United Kingdom has yet to declassify a significant corpus of its World War II documents, so there may yet be written evidence to support the author's assertions. The reader assumes that after a 41-year career as an aviation draftsman and a mechanical engineer, and retiring in 1988, he then began to put down on paper the story he tells in *Three Days to Pearl.* Only in 1991, for example, did he travel to Malaya (now Malaysia) and visit his old RAF base.

This interesting account has vestiges of being a well-crafted novel – and we are informed (p. 243) that one of Shepherd's interests is "screenplay writing for the cinema." In sum we have an intriguing but uneven story that leaves the reader with an incomplete narrative. In the main, proof is wanting, and there are a number of loose ends. In particular, during the encounter with the inebriated Japanese engineer, why did Shepherd not take all of the documents that were on the barroom table when his companion passed out? He did tear out the map and took that and the pencil, but why not take the entire diary since it might have held additional valuable information? At times Shepherd has a remarkable eye for detail–dates, times, colors, clothing, weather conditions, specifics about people and places, and, especially dialogues, including word-for-word conversations from a half-century ago. On other occasions his recollections are more generalized or even missing and may be attributed to the extent and nature of his injuries and sedating medications. Shepard speaks of "serious consequences" (p. xi), but for whom? Did implied or real threats accompany his verbal agreement to remain silent about the clandestine mission?

Nonetheless, this is a compelling story, a good yarn that is plausible but lacks verification.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca

Citation: Charles C. Kolb. Review of Shepherd, Peter J, *Three Days to Pearl: Incredible Encounter on the Eve of War.*

H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5309

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.