

# OUT FOR A SUNDAY RIDE

## CIVILIAN PILOTS CAUGHT IN HISTORY'S PATH

BY DAVID AIKEN

**Six civilian aircraft were airborne during the Pearl Harbor attack.** Three were students with their instructors, and three were rented by sightseeing pilots and passengers. All but one came under attack by Japanese aircraft. Two planes were shot down, and those three airmen are still missing.

Cornelia Fort and her student, Ernest Suomala, were downwind in an Interstate Cadet, making practice landings at John Rodgers Field only a few miles south of Hickam Field, a primary target of the attack. Japanese aircraft on their target runs passed directly below them and strafed them as they taxied to the hangar. The Cadet pictured here is reputed to be Fort's actual aircraft. It is on display in the Heritage Flight Museum in Burlington, Washington. (Photo by Lyle Jansma)

**I**n Hawaii, the first step in the U.S. Government's 1938 Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) was the ground school held at the University of Hawaii. Schooling included navigation, aerodynamics, and meteorology. Then came flight training at John Rodgers Field (now Honolulu International Airport). CPTP became a mecca for many aspiring pilots due to government funding. Aircraft owners began giving lessons, and flying clubs were formed.

Three flying service operators—Andrew Flying Service, Gambo Flying Service, and K-T Flying Service—were sales representatives stocked with Interstate Cadets, Aeroncas, and Piper Cubs, respectively. Logically, new students were encouraged to get instruction in the aircraft that they might purchase. For instance, Olin Andrew sold the Underground Flying Club an Interstate Cadet. Marguerite Gambo obtained an Aeronca for the Honolulu Junior Chamber of Commerce, whose Hui Lele Flying Club was a favorite, with some 27 members. On the “Big Island” of Hawaii, the Hilo Flying Club purchased a Piper Cub from Robert Tyce, co-owner of K-T.

### The Three Students

James Duncan, 24, a mechanic from San Francisco, California; Ernest E. Suomala, 31, a sheet-metal pattern maker from Athol, Massachusetts; and Raymond J. Oderwald, 28, an iron worker from New York City, went to Hawaii as contract workers. They were the student pilots airborne

during the Pearl Harbor attack.

Jimmy Duncan's father, Hiram B. Duncan, was a Navy ship's doctor whose continued absence at sea caused a split in the family. So with his mother, Alma, and his older twin sisters, Frances and Helen, Jimmy went to live with Alma's parents. In 1934, Jimmy “jumped ship” in his junior year of high school to make his fortune as an apprentice mechanic. Just before his 20th birthday in February 1937, he was contracted to Pearl Harbor Navy Yard as a government service employee.

Ernest Suomala and Ray Oderwald had a lot in common. Both were first-generation Americans. Ernie's father was born in Finland and Ray's dad in Hungary. Ernie's older brother, George, taught him the sheet-metal business in Massachusetts, and Ray's father worked in the ornamental iron industry, in Queens, New York. They met at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, when they signed onto the contract in early 1941. Because of his experience, Oderwald was made a shipfitter instructor.

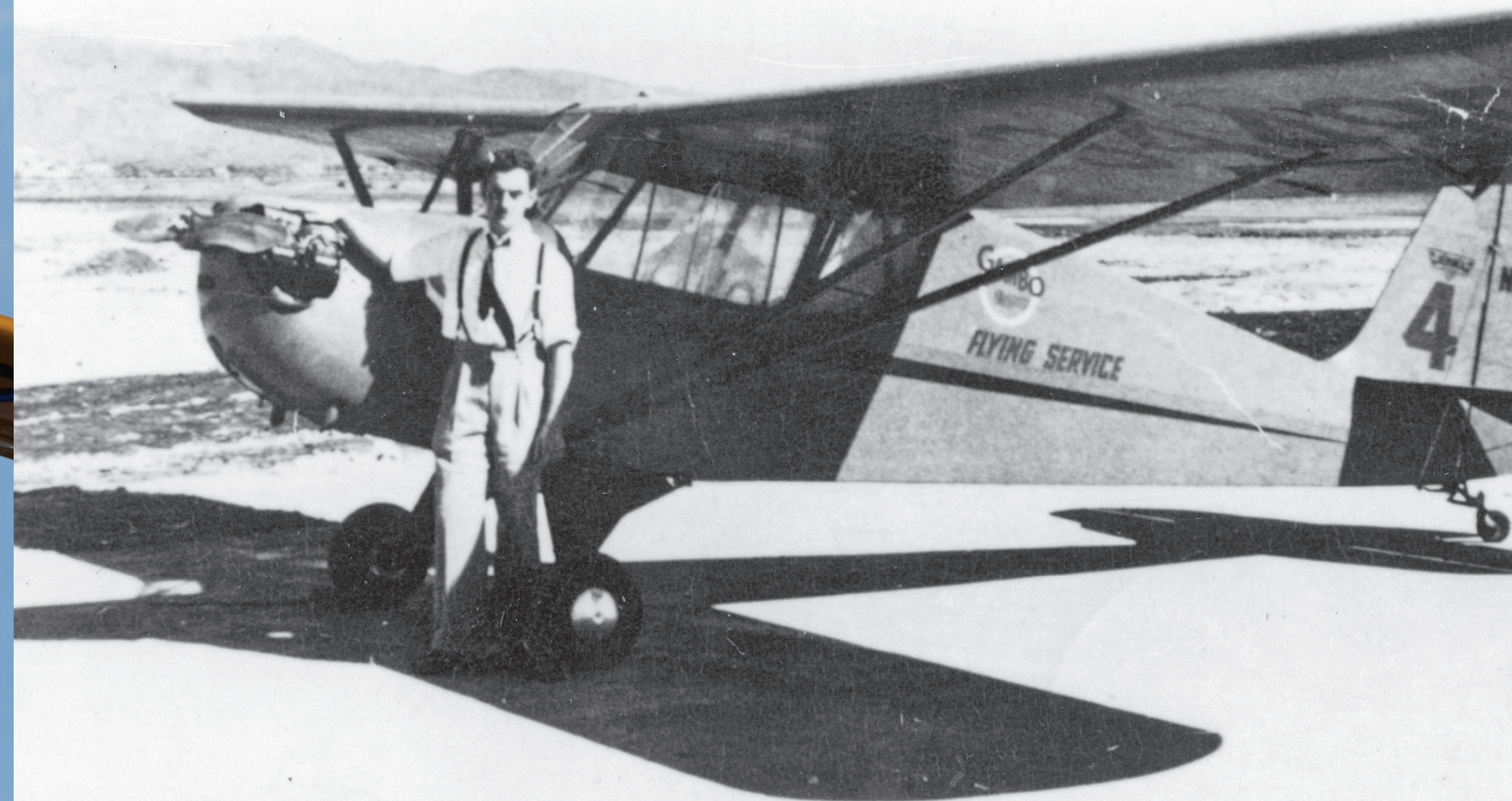
Ernie Suomala and Ray Oderwald became friends with Jimmy Duncan in the Shipfitter Metal Shop, Building 11, Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard. Back home in New York, Ray's younger brother, Leslie, worked at the local airport, which piqued Ray's aviation interest. As Jimmy, Ernie, and Ray had “island fever” and felt there was no place to go and little to do on the weekends, they took advantage of the CPTP.

Each had to choose among the flying services that offered the aerial portion of the CPTP instruction. Jimmy was attracted to the Hui Lele

### EDITOR'S NOTE

There has been significant confusion as to the numbers, types, and identification of civilian aircraft caught in the attack on Pearl Harbor. The information that author David Aiken, the premier historian on Pearl Harbor attacks, presents below is the most current and most accurate yet developed.

Ray Oderwald, pictured on December 1, 1941, the day he soloed. He was circling Oahu with his instructor, Marguerite Gambo, in an Aeronca, when attacking aircraft flew directly over them. (Photo courtesy of the Ray Oderwald Collection)







**Top:** Postwar photo of NC33838, which was being flown by Jimmy Duncan and his instructor, Tommy Tomberlin, during the attack. They were set upon by two Zeros, and returned with nine holes in the airplane. (Photo courtesy of the Sam Burgess Collection)

**Inset:** Ray Oderwald's pilot's license, which he finally received after his check ride was interrupted by the attack. (Photo courtesy of the Ray Oderwald Collection)

Flying Club because of its low rates. Ray signed up with Gambo Flying Service and Ernest with Andrew Flying Service. The programs had proved popular with both civilians and military personnel, so students had to schedule their training flights two weeks in advance.

Of the three students, Ray Oderwald was the first to solo, on December 1, 1941, with instructor Guy N. "Tommy" Tomberlin, in the Gambo Number Four Aeronca NC34490. Tommy was a copilot for Inter Island Airways and was a part-time flight instructor for both Gambo and Hui Lele. Jimmy Duncan was his first student of the day on that Sunday, and they were first in the air with the Hui Lele plane, Aeronca NC33838.

They took the usual clockwise trek around the island to get more experience with touch-and-go landings on various types of runways, including dirt, gravel, and hard surface. First up

was Haleiwa, on Oahu's North Shore, with a dirt runway, then the gravel runway at Kahuku Field, which was next to a golf course. Jimmy, watched by Tommy, made his three required landings at each field, then headed southerly along Oahu's east shore.

Next Ray was in the air following the same route. Having soloed and completed his training, he was, on that day, to get his approval check flight to acquire his pilot's license through Marguerite Gambo. Ray's logbook indicates that they flew Aeronca Number Two, NC29215.

Marguerite arrived at Haleiwa sometime after Tommy left. She got out of the airplane, and Ray began three solo takeoffs and landings. As she observed Ray's flights, she was approached by Sgt. Charlie Price, the 47th Pursuit Squadron's radio repairman, who spoke briefly with her. Their conversation was interrupted by a large group of aircraft flying high above them.

Marguerite got back aboard, and she and Ray flew on to Kahuku Field. Sometime earlier, Jimmy and Tommy in the Hui Lele Aeronca had made their final touch-and-go and flew south. Again, Marguerite got out, and Ray made his three solo landings on the unpaved runway. On that third landing, one wheel ran off the gravel into the dirt. He had to shut down the engine, and both of them worked the wheel back onto the more solid surface. That took about 30 minutes, which hampered Marguerite's schedule for her next student.

While they were trying to wrestle the little Aeronca back onto the runway, unbeknownst to them, Jimmy Duncan and Tommy Tomberlin were flying into history as the first aerial combatants of America's entry into World War II. Just above the large white Mormon Temple area on Oahu's northeast shore, two Zero fighters from the carrier *Shokaku*—Lt. Takumi Hoashi in EI-121, and Petty Officer 1st Class Jiro Matsuda in EI-122—peeled off from the nine other Zeros to attack NC33838.

Both Mitsubishis banked to the right: Hoashi made a head-on pass and Matsuda came next at the side. The two planes passed over Jimmy and Tommy, then Hoashi in the lead plane made a chandelle and was headed for them again. Tommy dived for the shoreline cliffs, flying



about 50 feet above the water, while the Zeros followed them, making three passes total. Hugging the water and the cliffs meant the attacking fighters could not safely make diving attacks on the little airplane. Tommy later logged the last of the three passes at 0753 and counted nine holes in the plane.

Jimmy and Tommy passed near Kaneohe Naval Air Station (NAS) even as the Japanese strafed PBY Catalinas in Kaneohe Bay. The light plane flew west of the small Kaneohe community toward the mountains. But a rainsquall over the southern portion of the Koolau Range blocked their way. Thus, the quickest escape was through the Nuuanu Pali (Pass).

They noted a small triangle of light above the Pali and went low, some eight to 10 feet, over



**Above:** Instructor Marguerite Gambo continued to fly after the war and was an aerial advisor on the film *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Photo courtesy of the Hawaii State Archives)

**Left:** About 8:30 a.m., three B5N aircraft passed over Wheeler Field shortly before Gambo and her student emerged from the Koolau Mountain's Nuuanu Pali (pass). Sgt. Clyde Bell caught this image just after they passed over Gambo's Aeronca. (Photo courtesy of the Clyde Bell Collection)

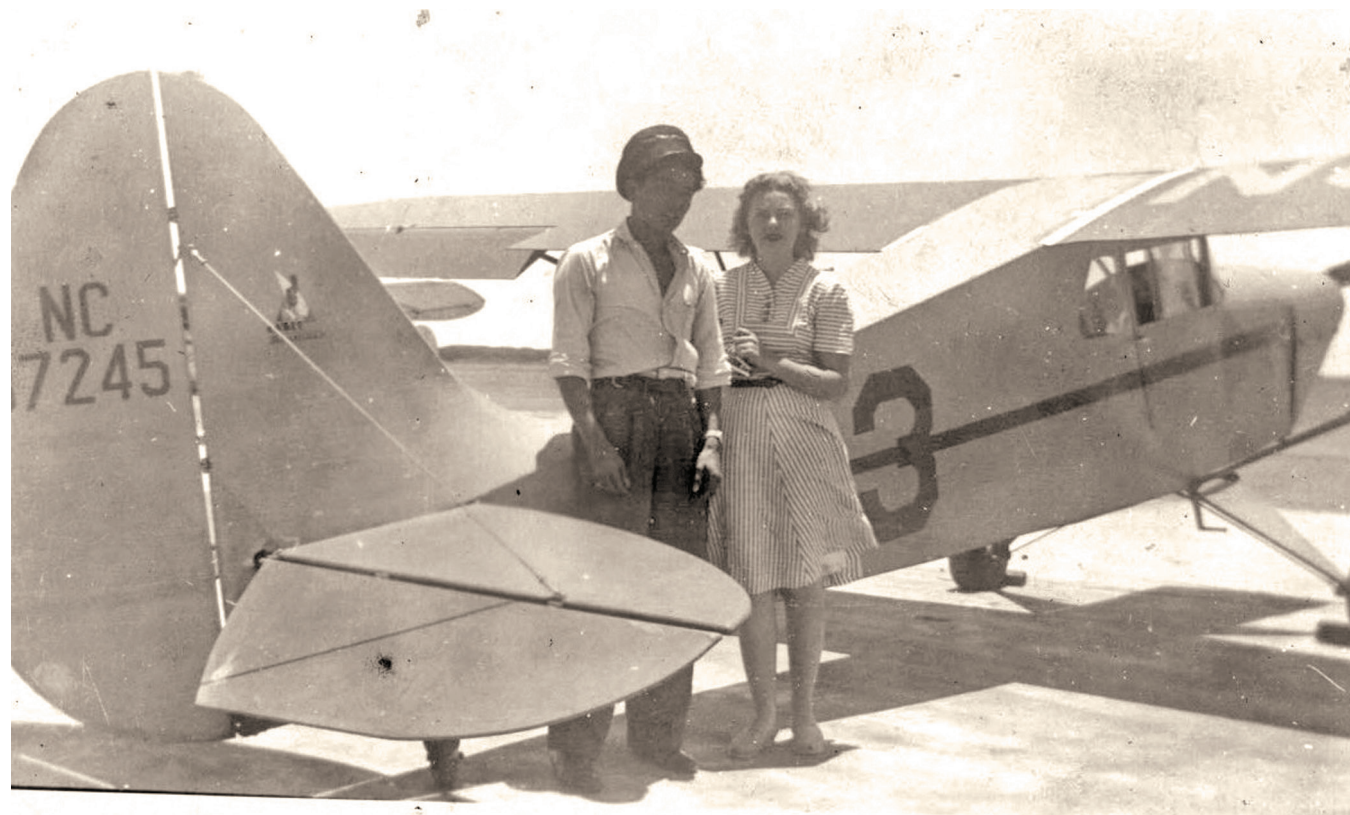
**Hugging the water and the cliffs meant the attacking fighters could not safely make diving attacks on the little airplane.**

the trees. Tommy was glad the infamous wind gusts in the pass did not flip the plane but provided, instead, a tailwind to help them on their way. Once through, Tommy saw the whole vista of the Japanese attack spread out before them. Jimmy and Tommy skirted west over the ocean and away from the harbor area, with the goal of landing at John Rodgers from the west against the wind.

Marguerite Gambo and Ray Oderwald followed Tommy's flight path by 30 minutes. Rushed due to the delay at Kahuku, Marguerite told Ray to ignore the regulation to fly only over the coastal waters and to head inland and hug the east side of the Koolau Range. They also took the shortcut through the Nuuanu Pali to shorten their path.

On arrival west of NAS Kaneohe, they saw the





NC37245 was flown by Cornelia Fort and Ernest Suomala on December 7, 1941. "Roy and Betty" posed for pictures. (Photo courtesy of the David Poston Collection)

smoke at the air station and agreed it was probably from a plane crash. Then as they emerged from the Pali and saw smoke also billowing up from Wheeler Field and Pearl Harbor, they knew something much bigger was in progress. Ray's box camera caught an image of their flight near Wheeler. Marguerite noted Japanese aircraft above them, and that box camera recorded them, too. They decided to land as quickly as they could at John Rodgers even though landing from the east meant landing with the wind.

### Back at John Rodgers Field

Cornelia Fort and her student, Ernest Suomala, began their schedule of touch-and-go landings at John Rodgers. They were airborne in the Andrew Flying Service Interstate Cadet NC37245, with vermillion wings and a cream fuselage with a large black "3" over the red stripe.

Barbara Fairweather, the Gambo Flying Service secretary (or "flunky" as Barbara termed it), arrived for work later than usual, after the first three planes had gotten airborne. She recalled that she leased Aeronca Number Five NC33738 to attorney Roy Vitousek, who was next in line. Both Roy and his wife, Frederica, were licensed pilots and hoped that their 17-year-old son, Martin, would get enough training to get his license, too. Roy and his son got airborne about 7:30 for a counterclockwise trek around the island.

Two K-T Flying Service Piper Cubs were rented to soldiers from the 251st Coast Artillery at Camp Malakole. They had completed their CPTP and

also finished their one-year tour in the National Guard. They intended to fly to Barking Sands Field, Kauai, for lunch and circle that island's sites.

Edna Tyce, the "T" in K-T Flying Service, wrote, "We had gone to work early that morning. Bob had two Cub trainers that had gone out early, servicemen that had their pilot's licenses. They were taking their friends 'for a farewell trip.' Their ship was to leave the island on Monday for the mainland. Bob wanted to see the two pilots that had rented the planes. They had been good customers during their tour of duty in the Islands."

The two new pilots were giving rides to Sgt. Warren D. Rasmussen, newly promoted a month before, and Pvt. Myron E. Haynes, 19, a friend, to share the costs. At the last moment, Haynes backed out due to the cost. Robert Tyce had just arrived with his wife, Edna, and he approved the revised flight-plan paperwork, which limited the flight to just a trek around Oahu.

William S. Holloway, foreman of the Hawaiian Airlines propeller shop, had helped get the light aircraft prepped for takeoff. He warmed up Sgt. Henry Blackwell's assigned brand-new Cub NC35111 for takeoff. Rasmussen was really tall and had to squeeze himself in the plane. Cpl. Clyde C. Brown, 21, piloted NC26950. They got in the air about 7:45.

### Into the Air

Roy and Martin Vitousek took off in the Gambo Aeronca about 7:30. Martin recalled, "After takeoff, we headed east toward Honolulu, intending



to circle the island counterclockwise. We flew past Diamond Head and headed toward Koko Head. There was a local rainsquall near Koko Head, and as we approached, it was found to be quite heavy. So we turned back toward Honolulu, intending to circle the island in a clockwise direction, assuming the rainsquall would have dissipated by the time we reached this location again.

"Just as we were passing over John Rodgers Field, I noticed a big fire had started on Ford Island in the ramp area where PBY aircraft were parked. My father was flying in the front seat, and I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the fire. A few moments later, I saw several aircraft flying low over Hickam Field, and tapped my father and said, 'Look, Dad. P-40s.' He looked down and said, 'P-40s, hell. They are Japs!'

"I too then noticed the red circles of the rising sun on the aircraft. After seeing the fire on Ford Island, fires began appearing in many places in the Pearl Harbor area and explosions [were] visible at Hickam Field. My father later told me that the AA batteries at Fort Shafter were shooting at us because they saw us circling and figured that we were some sort of command aircraft. We noticed a large column of black smoke rising from Wheeler Field, so [we] realized it was an attack on more than Pearl Harbor and Hickam."

Unknown to the Vitouseks, Japanese aircraft were approaching them from behind: The Aeronca had been overtaken by Soryu B5N torpedo planes returning to their carrier. Pilot Juzo Mori was alerted to the civilian plane by his gun-

ner, Petty Officer 2nd Class Junichi Hayakawa: "There is a strange plane following us!"

Mori responded, "What do you mean 'strange'?"

"It has two wings." Perhaps the high-wing design of the Aeronca caused the confusion. Many Imperial Navy trainers were biplanes. Mori gave a bit of right rudder to give Hayakawa some space to fire a warning shot.

Martin exclaimed, "Just after [the] torpedo planes passed us, we could hear the rear gunners of two of them firing and assumed they were firing at us, but to our knowledge, they did not hit us."

### Cornelia and Combat

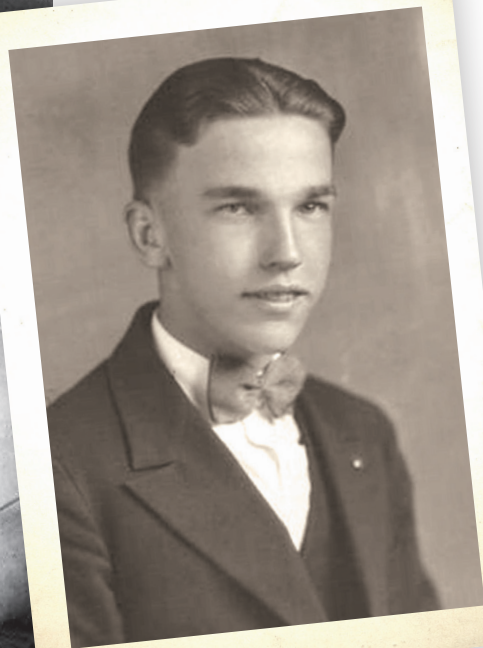
Ernest Suomala needed some takeoff and landing experience. Cornelia Fort set the pace and expected to let him solo at the end of this lesson and told him so.

"On the downwind leg of the field, just prior to the last landing I was going to have him make before soloing, I looked casually around and saw a military plane coming from the sea. We were so used to military traffic and our respective safety zones that I merely noted his position subconsciously and nodded for my student to make his turn on to the base leg of the traffic pattern. I then looked around to see if we were clear to make the last turn into the field and saw the other airplane coming directly toward me. I jerked the controls away from my student and jammed the throttle wide open to pull above the oncoming plane. He passed so close under us that our celluloid win-

J-3 Cub, NC35111 was shot down by a Kaga-based Zero flown by PO1c Akira Yamamoto. This was the first aerial loss of the day. Sgts. Henry Blackwell and Warren Rasmussen of the 251st Coast Artillery were onboard and are still missing. (Photo courtesy of the Robert C. Tyce Collection)

**"My father later told me that the AA batteries at Fort Shafter were shooting at us because they saw us circling and figured that we were some sort of command aircraft."**





**Left:** The only known photo of Cornelia Clark Fort shot while she was still in Hawaii. (Photo courtesy of David Aiken)

**Above:** Ernest Suomala, Cornelia Fort's student, finally got his pilot's license at the end of World War II. (Photo courtesy of the Suomala family)

even with knowledge pounding in my mind, my heart turned convulsively when the bomb exploded in the middle of the harbor."

Ernest was not aware of what was happening and asked when he would solo. Cornelia's reply was quite curt: "Not today, brother!" Her logbook also added, "another plane machine-gunned the ground in front of me as I taxied back to the hangar."

Nine *Akagi* Zeros escorted the *Shokaku* D3A dive-bombers to their targets on Ford Island and Hickam

Field, then broke to establish air superiority. The Zeros flew south over Honolulu, then back north to approach John Rodgers Field and Hickam Field. Two attacked Cornelia and Ernest. They started a fire in the new Hawaiian Airlines DC-3 while the passengers ran for cover. Then the *Akagi* aircraft went on to strafe Hickam.

### K-T Lost Two Piper Cubs

At 8:05, Lt. Yoshio Shiga wrote, "Making sure there were no U.S. fighters in the air, we went down to 4,500 meters height. After the torpedo bombers and light bombers ("hell-divers") attack finished, I began to spiral down mildly, left turning in order to hit Hickam Field. I found a lovely



yellow plane flying on the blue sea. It looked as if [it were] a yellow butterfly. I hoped it get off in a hurry and landed.

"After I landed on board *Kaga*, I found PO1c Akira Yamamoto's report, 'shot down 1' and asked 'What type?' He said 'Yellow one.'"

Shiga's reply to Yamamoto was unkind in the least. Shiga used the term "*Baka Yaro* [bloody idiot]." Yet Shiga was unaware of the attacks on other civilian planes that day.

In one pass, the *Kaga* Zeros overflew John Rodgers Field, and one hit the burning DC-3, which blew up a fire extinguisher onboard that put out the fire! Many sources say that Robert Tyce was hit at this time, yet Edna Tyce detailed that "a plane came from Hickam way, flying low. I could see the pilot and gunner. I waved at the pilot but they never waved back, but went out at sea, turned, and came back. Strafed us. Bob was hit in the back of his head." The two-seat D3A dive-bomber was from *Shokaku*.

The *Akagi* Zeros completed their maximum three circuits strafing Hickam Field, just as the *Kaga* Zeros arrived. *Akagi's* Lt. Cmdr. Shigeru Itaya, leader of all the first-wave Zeros, was on the third strafing circuit of Hickam Field and passed a "transport" (no guns seen) on final approach. It was a B-17C piloted by Capt. Ray Swenson; Itaya's two wingmen passed the plane too quickly,

while Itaya slowed and filled the fuselage with 7.7 machine-gun bullets. The magnesium flares began to burn in the radio compartment as the plane landed at Hickam to burn in two.

Itaya's wingmen, Petty Officer 1st Class Shinaji Iwama in AI-153 and Petty Officer 1st Class Takeshi Hirano in AI-154, just made their strafing pass of the B-17 and sighted a yellow trainer. Clyde Brown was trying to sneak into John Rodgers Field while the Japanese were distracted by bigger game. He went down west of the channel entrance and is still missing. The Inspectors Report of the Civil Aeronautics Authority stated, "Sufficient pieces of fabric have washed ashore at Ewa Beach, T. H. to determine the identity of the aircraft." Edna Tyce added, "fabric from the wing washed up on the beach. A Chinese man found it and brought it over."

The movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* depicted a little old lady character "Cornelia Fort" teaching her student named "Jimmy" and portrayed several of the civilian aviation adventures above Oahu. The advisor for the civilian aviation segment was Marguerite Gambo-Wood, who had been airborne during the attack. She continued to be the source of so many civil aviation details about that day. She was one of the many noncombatants who were caught standing in history's doorway while a new enemy blasted its way through. †

Roy and Martin Vitousek flew this Gambo Flying Service Aeronca #5 surrounded by a *Soryu*-based B5N unit until fired upon. The airplane is displayed in the Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor on Oahu. (Photo by KT Budde-Jones, courtesy of Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor)