

Pearl Harbor Bomber

The story of Mitsuo Fuchida, who led the attack



Mitsuo Fuchida's story illustrates the sovereignty of God's grace. To tell it, I will have to take you back to the real life events of the Japanese attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbor 60 years ago, dramatised in the film commemorating it.

On Sunday December 7 1941, the US Pacific Fleets lay peacefully at anchor. Without declaring war the Japanese attacked and temporarily broke American naval power in the Pacific.

The man who commanded the Japanese air raid was 39 year-old Mitsuo Fuchida. As the senior commander he was first over Pearl Harbor and the last to leave it.

It was his order that started the fury of death and destruction which engulfed the Far East as part of World War II.

Later Fuchida wrote about that morning at Pearl Harbor. 'Seating myself in the first plane, I led the whole squadron of 360 planes into Pearl Harbor, and having ascertained that the main force of the American Pacific fleet, comprised of eight warships, was at anchor . . . I lifted the curtain of warfare by despatching . . . order No. 1: "Whole squadron, plunge into attack!" My heart was ablaze with joy for my success. . . '

Japanese 'Hitler'

Fuchida was one of Japan's most experienced pilots and took part in most major battles. He was a hardened man who even grew a toothbrush moustache in admiration of Hitler. One Japanese news cameraman had unofficial nicknames for all the senior officers. Fuchida's was 'Hitler', which tells you the sort of man Fuchida was at that time.

Just before the Battle of Midway he had an operation for appendicitis. He struggled up from the sick bay to the deck of the aircraft carrier to wave off his fellow pilots. An American plane dropped a bomb which broke both his legs, but had he not been on the deck he would have burned alive with the other 30 men trapped down below in the sick bay. He was blown into the sea and rescued.

By the end of the war he was the sole survivor of the seven commanders and 32 squadron leaders whom he had led at Pearl Harbor.

The day before Hiroshima

In 1945 he was in Hiroshima the day before the atom bomb was dropped attending a week-long conference. An urgent order came through ordering him to leave the conference and

report to Tokyo. Then came the atomic bomb. In all there were six events in the war where he survived in unusual circumstances.

With Japan's defeat, Fuchida became a bitter, disillusioned man. He took up farming which he found boring. It did, however, give him time to think. He asked himself why he had survived a war which cost the lives of almost all his comrades.

It was now the period of the Cold War and it looked as if another war might start. He wrote a book called No more Pearl Harbor, during which it occurred to him that the mess the world was in was due to human nature.

'But who can change people?' he thought.

Tract at the railway station

Then he was called to give evidence in war crimes trials which the Americans were conducting. As he passed through Tokyo railway station a missionary gave him a tract called 'I was a prisoner of Japan'. In this tract the American, Jacob De Shazer, described how he had read the Bible while a prisoner and how he turned to Christ as a result.

Almost in spite of himself, Fuchida bought a Bible and before covering 30 pages his mind was impressed and captivated. He was reading Luke's account of the crucifixion of Christ when he read Christ's prayer: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'.

Meeting Jesus

He thought of all the men he had killed in battle with his heart full of hatred. In his own words: 'Right at that moment I seemed to meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of his death for my wickedness, and so in prayer I requested him to forgive my sins and change me from a bitter disillusioned ex-pilot into a well-balanced Christian. That date, April 12 1950, is the day I became a new person. My complete view of life was changed by the intervention of Christ. Jesus became my personal Saviour.'

Media reaction was not slow in coming. 'Pearl Harbor hero converts to Christianity' was one typical headline.

Men who had fought for Japan wanted him to give up what they called 'this crazy idea'. One attacked him with a knife saying he had embraced Christianity to impress the American victors.

Full time Christian work

But time proved them wrong. Fuchida wanted to be a full time Christian worker so turned down a well-paid job with the new Japanese government advising on defence forces.

Then he attended theological college in Tokyo and became a Presbyterian minister.

After that he travelled widely as an evangelist, particularly in the USA. Often he would say: 'I would give anything to retract my actions at Pearl Harbor, but it is impossible. Instead, I now work at striking the death blow to the basic hatred which infests the human heart and causes

such tragedies. And that hatred cannot be uprooted without Jesus Christ ... he is the only answer.'

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s he was an active itinerant evangelist who preached in many countries.

One came back

Eventually he settled in his own country. Frequently re-porters asked him for interviews. He returned to Pearl Harbor to make the film One came back, a moving documentary in which he is seen over the spot where a US battleship sank and became a permanent tomb for hundreds of men.

He came back, he said, to express regret, but more to proclaim the biblical faith. Now the new film, Pearl Harbor, has been released, but when the American film company Twentieth Century Fox produced Tora! Tora! Tora! (the re-enacted story of the attack on Pearl Harbor) some years ago, Fuchida supplied Japanese technical information and attended the London premiere in 1970.

Mitsuo Fuchida was 47 when he was converted, showing yet again that the Lord saves people of any age. His story also demonstrates that God calls those who from a human point of view seem furthest from the Kingdom.

Many became Christians because of his witness and his wife, son and daughter followed in the faith.

The years drew Fuchida and Jacob De Shazer together in Christian work in Japan. Fuchida died from diabetes aged 73 in May 1976 and De Shazer, once his great enemy, grieved for his friend in Christ.

So from the ashes of a bitter war these two men were united in Christian fellowship. Hatred was turned into brotherly love.

That is the power of the gospel.

D.J. Stephens