

This past Friday marked 72 years since the bombing of Pearl Harbor, plunging the US into World War II.

Leading the attack that day was a young pilot, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, who was leading the first wave of planes that began the attack.

But while his actions that day were an important detail of history, it's what occurred after the war that is so remarkable with him. Caught up in hatred of the west, and never knowing Christ, in the years that followed he instead got caught up in love, mercy and forgiveness, both receiving it from former enemies, and spreading it's message as he dedicated his life to Christ, preparing the way of the Lord in his soul as John the Baptist exhorts us to do and then doing that for others.

Elizabeth Sherrill, who was a former editor for the Christian magazine "Guideposts," recalls meeting him when he was in his 70s, writing an article on him in 1974. Initially she did not want to meet him, remembering what he did in leading the attack. She was at first relieved she did not have to shake his hand when he made a profound bow rather than extend a hand.

With a translator, they found seats in a nearly empty restaurant and Sherrill drew out her list of questions. Mitsuo Fuchida had agreed to the interview, she quoted from his letter, because of “love for America.” Surely a strange emotion in the man who had led the attack on us, she thought?

“Not strange,” he corrected her. “Impossible.”

That man, the man he had once been, had felt only hatred for Western nations: Britain, France, the United States, and the other colonial powers that dominated Asia. Hatred for the West was implicit in love for his country and its divine emperor. And above all, for Admiral Togo.

“I was almost four years old in 1905” he said “when Japan won the war with Russia, the first time in history that an Eastern nation had defeated a European one. Everywhere people were praising a single hero. Togo!”

The admiral became the idol of Fuchida’s boyhood. When he learned to read he poured over accounts of Togo’s battles, especially the daring surprise attack with which he had bottled up the Russian fleet at Port

Arthur, China. “Over my bed I kept Togo’s picture. I dreamed of becoming, like him, a naval officer.

By 1939 Fuchida had done just that; he’d risen to the rank of flight commander in the Japanese Navy’s Yokosuka Air Corps. He had also married and started a family. And all the while the country armed for what every Japanese knew was their god-appointed task: to drive the Western powers out of the East.

In 1941 the Japanese were ready. Their army and navy were overwhelmingly the strongest in East Asia; the colonial nations were involved in a war in Europe. Only one force could stop them: the powerful U.S. Pacific Fleet, stationed at Pearl Harbor. As it had been for Admiral Togo, the answer was clearly a surprise attack—this time from the air. Thirty-nine-year-old Mitsuo Fuchida was chosen to guide the First Air Fleet planes to the target.

A kimono-clad waitress placed tea in handleless cups on the low table in front of them. Mr. Fuchida drank silently, then resumed. “On December seventh the sky was overcast...”

Six Japanese aircraft carriers were stationed about 200 miles north of the target. In those days Japanese airplanes had no radar, and so they depended on visual contact. All night from the deck of the lead carrier Fuchida scanned the starless sky.

At dawn, despite the weather, he led the first wave of 183 airplanes into the leaden sky. His little three-seater climbed through the cloud bank. As they burst above it the sun stood on the eastern horizon, rays streaming seaward in a pattern resembling that on the Japanese flag.

To Fuchida it was a sign from the gods. He slipped on his goggles and slid back the glass canopy to search below for the break in the clouds that he knew must come.

At last, using binoculars to peer through the tiniest rift in the clouds, he caught a glimpse of coastline. He bent over his charts. Oahu! "Then suddenly there it was below us, Pearl Harbor, under an open sky!" Beyond and behind, the cloud cover stretched unbroken, but directly over the base the gods had drawn the clouds aside. The fleet was there.

He turned to the radio operator behind him and sent out the signal to attack. For two hours, as the first wave of fighters and bombers, then the second, shrieked in beneath him, Fuchida directed the assault on the harbor and adjacent airfields. He returned to Japan on December 23 to find himself hailed as “the Admiral Togo of our day.”

For the next six months he led missions in the Solomon Islands, Java, the Indian Ocean: Each month the Rising Sun rode higher in the sky. Then one day in June 1942 he was on the deck of the aircraft carrier Akagi off a small island called Midway when American planes swooped from the sky. Several bombs hit the ship; there were fires and explosions.

One explosion left Fuchida with two shattered legs. From the Japanese light cruiser that rescued him he watched as his ship was scuttled and three other carriers sank. The Battle of Midway was Japan’s first defeat of the war.

Fuchida was hospitalized for months; then, on crutches, he was assigned to the war college. Classes were hurried: With less and less preparation,

Japan's young men were being rushed to the front. Still on crutches, Fuchida too returned to active duty.

During the summer of 1944 Japan was losing eight soldiers to every one lost by the Americans. "But though we knew the war was lost, no one spoke of surrender." Until the atom bomb fell. Nine days later Japan surrendered, a feeling of despair settled over Fuchida and millions of his countrymen.

Because of his family, Fuchida did not commit suicide as many officers did. Instead, he moved his wife and children to a farm owned by relatives and supported them by what he grew from the soil. It was a humbling comedown for a national hero.

Meanwhile, in Tokyo, war crimes trials had begun. Some of those on trial had been accused of mistreating prisoners of war. The knowledge that fellow officers had brought such shame upon the nation was another crushing blow for Fuchida.

Although he'd had no contact with the prison camps, he was often summoned from his farm as a character witness. He was walking dejectedly through the Tokyo train station on his way to the court one morning when someone shoved a little leaflet into his hand: "I Was a Prisoner of War."

Something to do with the trials, he supposed; he put it into his pocket to read on the train going home. Sure enough, it was the account of an American soldier named Jacob DeShazer, who had spent nearly three and a half years in a Japanese concentration camp. There it all was, the by-now hideously familiar story of kickings, beatings, starvation. And there was DeShazer's very natural reaction: bitterness, hatred, helpless rage. Very much, Fuchida reflected as he read it, much like his own emotions since Hiroshima.

Now would come the part where DeShazer named his torturers and demanded revenge. But—what was this he was reading? DeShazer loved the Japanese? Rejoiced in the midst of suffering? The transformation had come about, DeShazer explained, through Jesus Christ. Fuchida

recognized the name as one of the gods of the enemy. You could learn about Jesus, the leaflet went on, in a book called the Bible.

DeShazer was captured in China by the Japanese and managed to survive while some other members were killed or died of starvation. In captivity, DeShazar asked for a Bible, and for three weeks was permitted to read it. It changed his life. He learned Japanese, and some of the guards responded with less cruel treatment. After he was liberated, he went stateside and then returned to Japan to preach the gospel, establishing a church in Nagoya, the city he bombed as a Doolittle Raider. He also read about Peggy Covell, whom he learned about from a fellow pilot; she had treated him well as a war prisoner, despite her missionary parents being killed by the Japanese in 1943. In fact, the parents had requested time to pray for their executioners. But Fuchida saw Peggy as weak at first failing to prove loyalty to her parents by not seeking revenge according to his moral code.

The next time he was called to testify, Fuchida went to a Tokyo bookstore and bought a Bible. And all alone in the little farmhouse he began to read. There was much he did not understand. But what he did understand, as the weeks went by, was that there were not many gods, siding with this nation



or that, but one God who loved all nations. This God had come to earth not as an emperor, or a military hero, but as a humble workingman. The more he read, the more Fuchida felt the horror of his past devotion—devotion to armaments, to war, to hatred of one race or another.

“Then,” Fuchida continued, “I came to the death of this carpenter, and read that He had prayed from the Cross, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’

“Why then ... Jesus had prayed for me!”

That night in the farmhouse, Mitsuo Fuchida, who did not know a single Christian, asked God to forgive him and became a Christian himself. And without knowing it, following the pattern of believers, he began to tell others. Told them he’d found the answer to despair and defeat. Told them God had not come to lead armies, but to lead men and women out of hatred into love.

Word of the conversion of the nation’s hero reached the media, and the torrent burst. Hate mail, abusive phone calls, threats to his wife and

children. He had betrayed his country, turned to the foreigners 'God. Even old friends turned away from him on the street.

“That man here today—the first translator!” I broke in. “That was an example?”

“That was nothing,” Fuchida said. “He only walked away.

Others had done worse. A young ex-lieutenant, a flyer named Yamashita, had come to his home. The moment they were alone, the young flyer reached into his shirt and drew out an ornate knife, the sacred dagger given to every kamikaze pilot.

“He pressed the point against my throat. He was crying. ‘I looked up to you all my life, ’he said, ‘and now I must kill you.’”

“What did you do?” she exclaimed.

“I told him the story I have told you—with the knife pricking my throat the entire time.”

“And at the end?” I asked.

“At the end he lowered the knife. Today Yamashita is an elder of the church in Amagasaki.”

Elizabeth Sherill closes her story by sharing how the transformation of Yamashita impacted her. In her words:

I saw myself today too. Like Fuchida, like Yamashita, forgiven by God—but holding back the hand of friendship because it was clinging to the hatreds of the past. “We have a custom when we make a new friend,” I said, reaching out my hand.

As our hands met, the love that flowed through Fuchida’s grasp was, I believe, the love that was born in a stable long ago.”

This season of Advent we are in is a time of reflecting on the words of John the Baptist: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” John begins a new exodus; where every valley is to be filled in and every

mountain and hill laid low.” God is coming to redeem a lost and disoriented people, like Fuchida, like you and me.

And so hopefully we ask ourselves a question: what sort of person am I becoming? Do I like the sort of person I am becoming. Advent gives us a time to journey through the wilderness and heed the challenge John gives us to repent.

As humans, we don't even know it, but our actions and the actions of others change us. Yamashita got caught up in nationalism and the opinions of America he heard from others; he came to seek glory and learn hate and distrust. It's nothing new, and we see it happen all the time. His environment changed him. And in our lives, how often we don't see it. A parent can go from being loving to stressed and angry and have their kids come to fear rather than love them because of their actions; a marriage can suffer because one or both parties don't say or show love as they used to; a person can become obsessed with their job, or power or forcing their will on other people; or we can go from having faith to just being too busy for God. Changes happen subtly.

So two challenges as we continue our Advent journey:

First, what needs to change in our lives if our answer to that question “what kind of person am I becoming” is one we do not like. It’s hard sometimes to sit with ourselves and ask ourselves the hard questions about how we treat our families, how we live out (or don’t live out) our faith; or where our priorities are. But we must remember Jesus did not come to condemn, but to seek out the lost. On our part, now is the time to not be content with just being average or comparing ourselves to the so-called “big sinners” who aren’t anything like we are. The paradox of the season is on the one hand it’s a little bit of penance, but also a little bit of joy, as we celebrate the coming of our Lord. Let’s take a look at ourselves and what is truly in our hearts and make way for the conversion that can happen as it did with Fuchida and Yamashita and even with Sherill, the editor who wrote the story about him who by the end of the interview saw him with different eyes. It takes work to prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts; much like when a guest comes over there is food, cleaning, a bedroom prepared and things are made ready, we do this for the Lord through prayer and quiet time, through making a commitment to be at Mass, and to, with Him, look at

what in our lives needs to change and set about doing it as hard as that may be.

And then with John the Baptist, as Fuchida did, we too are messengers. As his story goes to show you, doing this is costly. And so it is for us too as we evangelize for the Christian is often counter-cultural; just as people hated Fuchida, so too will they hate you and me when we challenge with love people to go to Mass; to make a change in how they are living, to think about the faith and morals the Church teaches. But we just might help someone become a saint. Living out our faith through word and action entails time and commitment, but also a willingness to lovingly challenge others, both in the larger world and right in our own families. God opens our eyes and helps us find the words though to do this, the key is to see who in our lives may be in need and help them to see God by evangelizing to them as Fuchida did.

On the one hand, World War II showed many aspects of the dark side of humanity and the evil choices we make, especially with respect to how the Jewish people were treated and how so many suffered through the evil choices of others. Every age has it's issues, and the world we live in today

has plenty - war and hate, apathy, the destruction of innocent human life, and a false notion of what happiness is. This though is also the world the Father loves so much that He sends Jesus to us, and we are His disciples. Inside all of us, as Fuchida's story goes to show you, is the capacity for such good and hope. So let us, like him, heed the words of John the Baptist and become the people God knows we can become, and like him and John the Baptist, be a person of joy and hope and of courage in Christ.