The metropolis of Shanghai on China's central coast beside the mighty Yangtze River was the sixth largest city in the world with a population of over four million people and the western world's mightiest stronghold in the Far East. The Gilmans proudly lived in elegant old-world Oriental luxury, Chinese Art Deco style, in the International Settlement. By 1937, the decade-long Japanese war of aggression against China had escalated, Manchuria and practically all of Northern China was under Japanese military control. Popping surrenders in the spring, hundreds of thousands of refugees streamed into the neutral and cramped territory of Shanghai seeking sanctuary. When a bomb fell through the roof of the elegant French Club in the Settlement during a VIP party, Gil figured it was time to leave. The final "tip of China"—as he called it—had begun.

Gil and Helen fled to Hawaii.

They set up house in a sprucely Hawaiian-style residence in the tropical Waikiki district of Honolulu, a city within a city along the famed crescent-shaped, palm-fringed sandy Pacific Ocean shoreline. Gil published a successful novel, Shanghai Dandelion, which was made into a movie called International Settlement with Dolores del Rio, George Sanders, and Key Lute, and wrote a famous column for the Honolulu Advertiser.

He often greeted celebrities at the Ahuia Tower on the harbor, checked out who was on the Chinese Clipper and had glamorous cocktails with Helen at the "Pink Palace of the Pacific," the Royal Hawaiian, the old Moana, or the Hikikomi Hotel. Years later when my mother was listening to her favorite weekly radio show Hawaii Calls she would talk about the Honolulu roofs and the luminous moon over Waikiki and Diamond Head. She said me that after I was born (on the day the Malo Colony Palace was burned down on the mainland) she would take my brother and me to Kapalua Park to swim in the lagoons. On weekends we went to the Kapalua Groom to catch the breakers, though by December 7, 1941, I was only a baby sailor. After Pearl Harbor the beaches were ringed with barbed wire.

Civilians and all males of the military were confined by the subtle Japanese air attack at Pearl Harbor. Many people thought initially it was a drill or practice alert (a common occurrence on the islands), or one of the many tactical war games played almost weekly at one of the military bases and air fields on Oahu. Gil told me later, when I was grown up, that Honolulu, like the rest of America, was in a very relaxed, "Sleepy Island" mood. Short leaves had been granted for large numbers of sailors and marines...
on Saturday, December 6. The downtown busy tank district of Honolulu was filled with conscientious officers, many of whom visited one of the twenty-five bars in the red light district. Saloons and other places of entertainment were closed, leaving themselves with idle girls, bartenders, American flags and Oriental Dragon flags applied by Japanese terrorists in the Mokiki district. Gil talked ominously about a 2-column "filler" article that had been printed in the Advertiser a week before the attack describing the mysterious "disappearance" of a major Japanese fleet in the North Pacific. Nobody paid any attention to it. He joined the Rising Sun of the Japanese Empire as digging its tail from Shanghai to Honolulu.

It was a perfect day over Oahu on Sunday, December 7, 1941. Lt. General Walter C. Short, commanding general of the Army, and Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, the commander-in-chief of the United States Pacific Fleet, were playing golf. Military or civilian, no one was prepared for the suddenness of the attack and most people couldn’t believe that it was actually happening. My mother told me that the noise from the explosions set me to screaming and crying in my crib, finally knocking it over onto the floor of the room where I had been sleeping. Mother rushed out, picked me up, unharmed, and returned back inside to the safety of the house, her flowing Hawaiian skirt shielding me from the flying glass. My father was frantically on the phone with his editor at the Honolulu Advertiser and rushed out immediately to cover what was later to be called “the story of the century.”

His first-hand eyewitness account that day appeared in a front-page article in the first newspaper published on the islands after the attack, an eight-page double “EXTRA” edition of the Honolulu Advertiser combined with the Star-Bulletin, dated December 8, 1941. Gil said the Advertiser’s printing press had mysteriously broken down on Saturday. Under a banner headline reading “SABOTEURS LAND HERE,” the lead article by Harry Strep was headed:

ADVERTISEMENT: MEN WATCH GRIM SHOW.

This is a factual account of what I saw on a trip between the Advertiser building and Pearl Harbor, accompanied by Labelle Gilson, another reporter. It is unaltered and unvarnished. Shortly before 9 a.m., while aircraft shells were buzzing everywhere in the harbor above Pearl Harbor, we drove around by way of Vineyard Street to avoid the roads of Army and Navy personnel and defense workers who were rushing back to their posts. The streets were lined from one end of the city to the other with men, women and children, some still in their pajamas and nightdresses. All were looking westward, most of them with a somewhat perplexed expression on their faces. We expected to be stopped long before we got to Pearl Harbor, and we kept our police and military posts handy to exhibit in the need might arise. But we were not stopped. Police officers and special officers manned every intersection and road to Pearl and the Army posts beyond were kept open. Speed limits were ignored as thousands of men hurried to return to their posts. Thousands of cars sped toward Pearl Harbor. Traffic toward town was lighter but still heavy.

“You’d think the road would be closed,” I said to Gilson.

“Get to get these men back to their jobs and there’s no time to fool around,” Gil said.

“There’s a plane there low down, just over our heads,” I said, shaking for no reason at all.

“You keep your eyes on the road, I’ll watch the planes,” Gil said.

From Vineyard Street we drove into Houghtailing Road and thence north on King and through Fort Shafter to the old Pacific Road, thence onto the Pearl Harbor Road along to the base. We saw a military ambulance driving toward town on Vineyard Street, later after we went through Fort Shafter we passed four other military ambulances driving toward the city.

“Looks as if there have been a few casualties,” Gilson said. All through Fort Shafter there was great activity and we could hear the steady roar of machine guns and the heavier firing of anti-aircraft batteries. Hundreds of men could be seen deploying and taking up positions in Mountain Park and in the Kaiser Forest surrounding the military reservation.
The anti-aircraft fire became more intense as we neared Pearl Harbor and now and then we could see a low-flying plane. We saw a number of planes emotion- downdraft directly over Pearl Harbor, and presumed that they were dive bombers. What struck us strangely that no effort was being made, even within the immediate area of Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field, to seek shelter. We did see two women attempting to hide under the rear cover of a Ford coupe, and as we sped past they yelled out and shook their hands at us, just as a weathered group both hands in answering the siren to the crowd.

For the most part people, women and children included, stood in the open and watched the show.

While speeding along the Pearl Harbor road just this side of the gate to John Rodgers Airport we got our first taste of real excitement.

A plane, we did not know whose, started close overhead from the rear and we could hear the now familiar roar of a plane. Then suddenly, the tops of several small Banyan trees on the mauka side of the road started falling off.

Then we noticed red sparks bouncing up from the pavement in front of us and a car blew a tire and went careening into the ditch on the mauka side of the highway. As we drove by we looked to see how the driver was making out. He got out and waved us on and we kept going.

Driving past Hickam Field we noticed what appeared to be a cloud of dust, and we could see a large number of planes circling on the edge of the field. Some of these seemed to be damaged.

Within a few minutes we were at the Navy yard gate and on our way.

An hour later we started back to Honolulu, after learning that it was impossible to telephone the paper. All lines were being reserved for the Navy, an officer literally informed us. We understood.

At the Hickam Field housing project we stopped to give a ride to a group of women and children standing alongside the road.

"They ain't going in," a guard shouted, and we kept going.

Press censorship prohibited the writers from describing what they saw inside the military base. My father returned that afternoon (just before dark and we all huddled together during the long night, the stars twinkling brightly above in a cloudless sky, the island below in a complete blackout. Life changed drastically for everyone in Hawaii after the attack. Martial law was imposed on the first day and lasted until October, 1941. With the very real fear of a Japanese invasion, strict night curfews were imposed. Essentials disappeared overnight; severe food and housing shortages developed immediately. Travel priority was given to military personnel. The blackouts every night were real—no half measure—to street lights, no electric signs and no lights in stores visible from outside.

Windows were covered with corrugated paper and paint and had to be kept closed at night—a difficult situation in an age and place where air-conditioners were unknown. Almost everybody was in bed soundly and went to bed early, unless they were on duty.

Fans and suspended oil lanterns were banned. It was a show of fairy light from the glow of a radio dial or a lighted cigarette.

After the attack, Gil started writing a column in the Advertiser called "Hawaii War Diary." The May 2, 1942 column noted the rigidly enforced blackouts:

"which brings us to another gripe—those terrible 'flick' voices . . . those cops out in the car waiting for some rain-meeting victim to show a manuscript light—the tail light—tail light—don't we all have tails?—a town itself—what a mutilated landscape—what a hostile city.”

Blacks restrictions were not lifted until July, 1944.

Another column commented on the unusual mandate decree that all children over the age of right must wear one day in the fields. Fortunately my brother and I were too young to be affected by this edict.

"For avoiding zombies and making nuisances of themselves," my father wrote, "the shoe-shine boys are particularly the worst. Newspaper vendors, how- ever, are a class around. Along Hotel Street . . . shoe-shine boys—apparent ages, 6 to 12—grasp . . . at the hands or clothing of passersby, particularly women . . . and shout 'Shine Man,' and 'Hi, Pup,' . . . ."
My parents were hosts to many VIPs and U.S.O. celebrities passing through the islands on their way to the South Pacific to entertain the troops. Our wide-open home was visited once by Bob Hope—according to my mother I sat on his lap—and I was coddled by glamorous Dorothy Lamour, comedian Jerry Colonna, and singer Frances Langford (whom, I was told, was quite taken with the "Pearl Harbor Baby"). One of our most illustrious visitors was none other than Madame Chiang Kai Shek, the Nationalist Chinese leader's wife, and one of the famous Soong sisters. Invoking an ancient Chinese tradition, she made a gift of her antique Oriental lapis lazuli ring to my mother who had admired it. For many of these gatherings my parents, against all regulations, concocted a home-made tropical champagne brewed in a storage cellar from fermented pineapple. My mother performed the hula, which she also did professionally on occasion with the "Hula Troupes" who entertained servicemen at island camps. During the war, my father was recruited by Naval Intelligence as a special war correspondent and was transported by submarine throughout the South China Seas.

Shattered by the stress and pressure of wartime in the islands my parents divorced, re-married, and divorced a second time. After the war, my mother, my brother, and I returned to the U.S. mainland and lived on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. Gil wrote stories for the Saturday Evening Post and Collier's Magazine and authored several successful Far Eastern adventure novels, which included, in addition to Shanghai Deadline, The Dragon's Mouth, The Golden Horde, The Red Gate, and Sav the Wind.

My own interest in collecting Hawaiian and World War II memorabilia has grown since I discovered a few years ago an original copy of the December 8th, 1941, "EXTRA" edition of the Honolulu Advertiser featuring my father's harrowing adventures on Pearl Harbor Day. My collection now includes Hawaiian shirts, "Remember Pearl Harbor" buttons, pins, satin pillowcases with images of Diamond Head and Waikiki, Hula-girl lamps, Marson line menus, and other printed period ephemera. I was amazed recently when I found a photo magazine called Looking at Honolulu published in Honolulu in 1943 which featured a prominent picture of my mother, my brother, and myself accompanied by my mother's best friend Barbara Dole, the pineapple heiress, and her two daughters. The women were wearing low-cut halters and tropical patterned sun skirts. The caption read: "Residents of Waikiki revert to the comfort of the early islanders in the scantiness of their everyday attire." These mementos and gathered impressions allow me to visualize my childhood in Hawaii, though I have no real, concrete memories. However, the special media focus on Pearl Harbor Day throughout the years and spotlights on anniversaries, particularly the fiftieth, combined with my parents' stories, have given me the curious feeling of almost remembering.