

# 1940-1941: Living "the Life of Riley" at Hickam Field

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What was military life like on Oahu in the years leading up to Dec. 7, 1941? Even as the possibility of war with Japan loomed, Hawaii remained an "assignment in paradise" to most young airmen at Hickam Field.

Retired Maj. Gen. Russell Waldron, who became an Episcopal minister after his Air Force career, spoke fondly of those pre-war years.

"As I remember, when we first came over here, it was really the life of Riley. We went to work at seven in the morning and were off at one o'clock. ... Five days a week!" For Hickam's officers, the officers' club was the center of social life. General Waldron recalled, "There were many activities at the officers' club, and the Air Force officers really used the club. You know, we were young, full of vim, vigor and vitality, did a lot of drinking; and quite often we went to some big dance or other at the officers' club."

Flyers in the "Hawaiian Air Force" had a good thing going. 2nd Lt. Charles Taylor of the 6th Pursuit Squadron wrote, "Hawaii turned out to be a great assignment. There was a nice social life, and if you had a good sergeant to handle your ground duties you could fly in



Courtesy photo

**The Officers' Club lanai set up for a luau for the 19th Troop Carrier Squadron. The menu included whole roast pig.**

the morning and be on the beach in the afternoon. War really messed up the whole thing."

Pilots flew frequent "air shows" as part of their intensive training, and greeted or sent off important

visitors with grand flying formations called "aloha flights." At some informal flying shows, planes performed mock bombing runs using sacks of flour as non-lethal bombs. For fun, pilots sometimes buzzed passenger ships at dock in the harbor, using flowered leis as "bombs" – although such maneuvers were strictly against orders.

Honolulu was a big attraction for enlisted men. According to one of the artillerymen stationed at Fort Kamehameha, what he did on weekends depended on how much money he was able to scrap together. At the time, he was a buck private and "was only paid a net of \$19 a month!" He would save up his money for one big monthly blowout at the Alexander Young Hotel roof garden dance. "Five bucks would go a long way at the Alexander Young!" he remembered.

Life was not all surf and sun for the pre-World War II air corps. As 1st Lt. Lew Sanders, 46th Pursuit Squadron commander told his pilots in early 1941, "Fellas, don't just go up there and bore a hole in the sky. Learn something every time you fly. There's a war coming

on ... knowing what you're doing is your life insurance."

On Dec. 7, 1941, Lieutenant Sanders' words came all too true.