

“Just My Luck”

by Ray Batvinis (1972-1997)

Historical Committee Chair

(Editor's Note: This month the Historical Committee begins a regular column that will cover some of the fascinating history of both the FBI and the Society. Committee Chair Ray Batvinis wrote this first column.)

At 7:55 on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, 22-year-old Dwayne Logan Eskridge was in the Honolulu FBI office, sitting alone at his radio transmitter in a gun vault — spinning dials, checking frequencies and tightening wires.

Eskridge was a quiet country kid; born in Nebraska and raised in Tempe, AZ, a dusty little cowboy town just six miles from downtown Phoenix. His Methodist parents came to Arizona from other parts of the country. His mother, Claudia, was born in 1888 in the tiny town of Hastings, NE. After graduating from the Nebraska Conservatory of Music in 1914, she moved to Arizona where she married Vernon “Mike” Eskridge two years later. After getting her teaching credentials at the Tempe Normal School followed by a college degree at the Tempe State Teachers College, she began a 30-year teaching career. Mike Eskridge, a Kentuckian, arrived in Arizona as a railroad employee. Later he worked as an accountant for a copper mining company in the dusty little western Arizona town of Ray. After a short stay in Pioneer, AZ, he moved his young family to Tempe where he served for years as a municipal judge and later as property manager for Arizona State University.

Dwayne Logan Eskridge was born on Sept. 11, 1919, in Hastings. As a child he moved from one small town to another, attending schools made up primarily of Mexican children — with his mother teaching the class. Young Dwayne, now fluent in Spanish, completed grammar school at the Ira L. Payne College Training School and Tempe Union High School in 1936. As a teenager he joined Troop 78 of the Boy Scouts of America rising by the age of 15 to Eagle Scout with Palm. As a 17-year-old scout counselor at the Roosevelt Scout Camp Geronimo near Payson, AZ, he instructed younger scouts in marksmanship, swimming, electrical signaling and radio.

It was probably during these early years that his life-long fascination with the wonders of shortwave radio started with an Aero Short Wave set available by mail order



Dwayne Logan Eskridge

for \$5.95. When not doing chores, homework, or serving as an Eagle Scout he could usually be found tinkering with wires, adjusting knobs, studying his Morse Code and saving his pennies for necessary radio tubes manufactured by the Neutron Company shipped in their own “attractive container.” Today he would be considered a “techno-nerd,” his son Rod later recalled, spending hour after hour tapping out messages, day and night, to stations like WMI at Deal, NJ; XDA at Mexico City; 3KAA in Leningrad; or JIAA in Tokyo. He spent many hours at his local public library poring over tattered copies of amateur radio magazines filled with engrossing articles that grabbed the imagination of a youngster eager to learn about a larger world.

After high school Eskridge enrolled at Tempe State Teachers College where he majored in chemistry and education with minors in mathematics and radio. Additional training in public speaking and dramatics rounded out his education before receiving his degree in education in May 1940. For the next year, while teaching seventh grade in Miami, AZ, he took night courses in meteorology, principles of navigation, and basic theory of flight at a ground school sponsored by the Civil Aeronautics Administration.

In early August 1941 he boarded an eastbound bus in Phoenix for a cross-country journey to Washington, DC. A new job with the FBI awaited him — starting Aug. 14, 1941.

Already a skilled amateur radio operator, a talent in short supply in the Bureau, Eskridge was quickly assigned to the Laboratory Division under the supervision and tutelage of Ivan Willard Conrad, a seven-year FBI veteran. The 31-year-old Conrad was a pioneer in FBI communications — he joined the FBI as a document examiner before turning to radio communications research and receiving an appointment as a Special Agent in 1936. During the second half of the 1930s he introduced a number of technical innovations including the first radio automobile communication with a central monitoring station. In 1940 he supervised highly secret radio transmissions between the FBI's first double agent in New York and his German Abwehr superiors in Hamburg, Germany. With war looming in August 1941, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover ordered Conrad to lead an emergency effort linking Washington by high frequency radio with strategic field offices, particularly Juneau, AL; San Juan, PR; and Honolulu.

Over the next four months Conrad and Eskridge traveled to the San Diego estate of Herbert Hoover, Jr., son of the former president, where they installed a powerful radio relay station on a remote stretch of his property capable of reaching Juneau and Honolulu. Following a final test of the station in mid-November 1941, Director Hoover ordered both men to Honolulu to set up a similar system.

Traveling by ship, they arrived in Hawaii just two weeks before the



Honolulu FBI Radio Gun Vault July 1942

attack on Pearl Harbor. A shortage of suitable sites forced them to set-up the system in the FBI office on the second floor of the Dillingham Building in downtown Honolulu — in a walk-in vault used for weapons and ammunitions storage that doubled as a photographic dark room. Following completion of the station Conrad returned to Washington leaving Eskridge behind to handle last minute testing before the system went on line. Unbeknownst to Eskridge, Director Hoover had permanently assigned him to Honolulu on Dec. 1, 1941, as the Honolulu Division's first full time radio operator and technician.

Alone on the morning of Dec. 7, in the cramped, makeshift radio room, Eskridge began sending test messages to Jim Corbitt, a radio technician standing by at the new San Diego relay station. Alerted by sounds of explosions at 7:55 a.m., Eskridge and Frank Sullivan, another young a FBI office clerk, ran up the stairs to the roof, where they were transfixed at the sight of fighter planes with big red zeros plainly visible on their wings skirting just a few feet overhead, heading in the direction of the Navy anchorage at Pearl Harbor. A half a century later Eskridge still recalled his disbelief that he could clearly see the pilots' facial features through the canopy as they zoomed past.

Quickly gathering his wits, Eskridge raced back to his radio hoping that Corbitt was still at the other end to receive his warning that the United States was under Japanese attack. As the deafening noise increased, Eskridge frantically flashed, "WFBB from WFNB, if you are still there, stand by for a very urgent and important message." After moments of seemingly endless agony Corbitt flashed his response. Eskridge then tapped out the attack message to the mainland, which was immediately relayed to Washington. Eskridge, the only radio technician in the office, remained at his station for the next 62 hours.