

News of Pearl Harbor

The radio initially delivered the news of the Japanese attack to Americans on the mainland. Beginning in the 1920s with the first commercial broadcasts, the radio had become an entertainment and a news medium. Stations broadcast music, sports, and theatrical programs. It is



estimated that in the days before the country entered World War II, the American people owned forty-five million radios. They turned them on approximately four and a half hours each day. Because of the prominent role radios played in the lives of families, only some were small, tabletop models. Larger ones served as a piece of furniture. Radio networks first received news of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in the form of a 1:07 p.m. (EST) Associated Press (AP) bulletin. In

Hawaii at that moment, enemy planes were still dropping their bombs. The major networks, such as the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), contacted Washington, D.C. to verify the AP report with government authorities. Officials in Roosevelt's administration confirmed the news. The networks then interrupted their scheduled shows at 2:30 p.m. with news of the attack, which remained in progress.¹

The night of December 7th was an unsettling one. For every American family with a loved one stationed at or in the vicinity of Pearl Harbor, the end of the day would have been even more disturbing. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had a weekly radio program scheduled for that evening. At the beginning of it, she briefly addressed what the events at Pearl Harbor meant for all citizens, but especially for mothers. "I should like to say just a word to the women in the country tonight." Roosevelt reminded her listeners that she had "a boy at sea on a destroyer," adding that even as First Lady, she did not know what the advent of war meant to him. "For all I know," she remarked, "he may be on his way to the Pacific." Empathizing with her audience, Roosevelt continued. "Many of you all over the country have boys in the service who will now be called upon to go into action. You have friends and families in what has suddenly become a danger zone." The First Lady spoke of feelings she knew the women in her audience were undoubtedly experiencing. "You cannot escape anxiety. You cannot escape a



clutch of fear at your heart...” Yet after acknowledging the anxiety Americans felt, the First Lady added words of confidence, too. “I hope that the certainty of what we have to meet will make you rise above these fears...and when we find a way to do anything more in our communities to help others, to build morale, to give a feeling of security, we must do it. Whatever is asked of us I am sure we can accomplish it. We are the free and unconquerable people of the United States of America.” Even with such comforting remarks by the First Lady, families who had loved ones in the United States

military on Oahu must have slept very little, if at all, on the night of December 7th.²

¹ www.washingtonpost.com/local/war-how-a-stunned-media-broke-the-pearl-harbor-news (accessed August 14, 2015); <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col/ww2/pearlharbor/radio.htm> (accessed August 14, 2015).

² Eleanor Roosevelt’s speech can be found on more than one web site. The quotations here are taken from www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/q-and-a/q21-pearl-harbor-address.cfm (accessed August 14, 2015).