

Basic Detail Report

[Letter to Clara Breed and Mrs. R. L. Breed from Eleanor Breed, January 2, 1942]

Date

1942

Primary Maker

Breed, Eleanor D.

Medium

paper, ink

Description

1 letter and envelope from Eleanor Breed to Clara Breed and Mother, Mrs. R.L. Breed + Robert Gordon family photo Christmas card and newspaper photo of Gordon family.;Transcription: Berkely - 1/2/42 / Dearest Family, / New Year's Eve, about 7 p.m. when I was thinking of getting ready for the party at Dick's, the phone rang and a voice said, "Eleanor? Do you know who this is?" I didn't. "Well, it's Mrs. Robert Gordon of Honolulu!" And I was surprised at the ring in my voice as I fairly shouted, "Oh!!! Milly!" I hadn't realized how glad I'd be to hear from her, for I'd persuaded myself she and the children were probably safe, all right. We made a date immediately for the next morning, and I spent New Year's Day in the city with the Gordon refugees (see newspaper photo). Almost the first words Milly said when she greeted me was, "Oh, Eleanor, it's just wonderful to be alive!" / Let's see if I can give a resume of all she said -- hard to do for a day's conversation. About the attack (if you quote this, leave her name out -- might be better) -- as I imagined, they were at home on their ranch over across the Pali. First they knew was the radio reports of planes bombing Pearl Harbor, which they couldn't believe any more than we could, getting them here. The night before they had been at a party with the British Consul and his wife, and had discussed a possible Japanese attack, agreeing that it would come on a Sunday morning when everyone was sound asleep after spending his paycheck in the hot spots and officers were off week-ending -- so this particular Sunday morning seemed especially incredible. They thought it was practice for a while, but the calls came through (some Japanese interference on the frequency even at the start) saying "All nurses report here -- all physicians there -- all engineers somewhere else" and finally they began to believe it. No bombs fell on their side of the island, though they fell up Nuuanu and one on the Punahou campus, and a good many at Waikiki (aimed at Ft. De Russy) and of course most of all at Pearl Harbor. "It's much worse than we know," she insisted. "Four major battleships sunk in the harbor -- probably more like 4,000 casualties, for they're still toting up the number of lads that died trapped in their berths, without a chance to fight for their lives. They got 200 airplanes in on hangar alone, others spread out on the ground." "What about your airplane interceptors -- were they pointing due west to catch the Japanese coming from that direction, and the Japanese foxed them by coming in from the East? That's been my xxx theory," I said. "They were shut down for the week-end," she said. "I don't know as to the authenticity of this, but the story goes," she went on, "that a man out Diamond Head way was up early in the morning and caught sight of the planes through strong glasses, and ran to the phone to telephone the Commander at Pearl Harbor, but all he got was the reply, "Japanese planes? You're drunk. Go back to bed!" / She said that the American-born Japanese mayor of Waimea was found to have a short wa ve set on which he tapped out directions leading in the attacking planes -- and he was shot. The organization for relief in Honolulu went through in fine, efficient fashion, everyone responding quickly and working wherever help was needed. However, there was still stupidity and waste -- two huge trucks loaded with soldiers dashed too fast around the curves of the road to Diamond Head and crashed, killing a large number. Guards were jittery and shot civilians. / "What about some of our men who I hear were able to get their planes up off the ground in five minutes?" I inquired. "There weren't but a few that could -- they hadn't any gas, and supplies were locked up. So was ammunition, and no good going up unless you had something to shoot with." / As to the trip back -- the Lurline, the Matsonia and a third former Matson liner came in, leaving Christmas Day. The Matsonia, on which Milly traveled, was painted a dirty gray and carried some 1100 passengers, in addition to unnumbered wounded, who were on a deck to which civilians were not admitted. Her cabin was so far down in the ship and had so many alleyways that she decided not to sleep there -- they'd have no chance to get out if attack came. So with the children and a stenographer from the Kodak / [Page 2] office who helped her look after them she slept on a mattress in the lounge, along with some fifty or more others. They had to wear their lifebelts every single minute, and sleep with them by their heads, and the ship was blacked out. They were convoyed, and the big moment for Sonny and Brucie was when the convoy fired a round or two of blank shells. She didn't dare let the children out of sight, and with everything so crowded they were pretty cramped and repressed. Three children were born on board ship; one of them died -- its father had died on Wake. As time wore on the children (not Milly's, I imagine, but many of the rest) got naughtier and their mothers, under the tension, got more nervous and began to whack them. Water was scarce -- the ship didn't know where it was going until it arrived; that is, it planned to veer off to Seattle, or south to Panama, if word came that

there was danger ahead. When they finally came into land and found it was going to be San Francisco, and when they saw its lovely hills and bridges on a crisp, clear day, everyone cheered and shouted and cried. "But after that trip I don't care whether I ever see a ship or an ocean again," says Milly, "And I want to find some plane safely inland." She's picked on Tucson, as a place where the boys can have horseback riding and out-of-door sports. / The books I sent to her didn't arrive, though my letter, enclosing Clara's card with its question about them, did get there just before she sailed. Too bad -- I'll bet that package is in a San Francisco Post Office, if I could just have it dug out somehow. They could probably use the books down in Tucson. / Txxxxxx The children were as interesting and delightful as ever, Clara. Ann is a sweetheart -- Brucie a great talker -- Sonny the quiet one who carries through. We went out to the zoo, and the children romped on the slides and the swings a while. Milly said it was doing them lots of good to blow off steam and get some real exercise that way. And you should have heard them laugh at the monkey island, and at the wallabies and the giraffes and the parrots. We all had a ride on the merry-go-round, and then taxied back through Golden Gate Park and moved out of the hotel and down to the train, where I saw them off. A good many of the passengers on the train were also refugees, with the Customs letter still dangling from their baggage. One harassed young mother with a small boy, very fussy, and a nursing baby -- in the seat behind Milly -- I heard say to someone, "My husband is probably on Midway now." The car was full of children, and Milly could get only two uppers, so the train part of their trip will probably be pretty much a nightmare. Hope she gets some good rest in Arizona. / I begged this copy of their Christmas card, Clara, so you could have one, because it's so good of them. Don't return either picture. / Guess that covers the Gordon visit -- now for Joe Juneman's. He picked up Dorothy and took her to dinner in San Francisco and then came home with her, and we all went down to Dick's, where with George and May we played skittles a while and had a couple rounds of Old Fashioneds, and then it was midnight, and we listened to the radio and Ballad for Americans, and Ned and his girl came, and we had scrambled eggs and coffee, and went home. A quiet celebration, but about all we felt like. Joe was miserable with a cold, poor man -- hope he conquered it fast. He's as nice as you said, Clara -- I hope we can see more of him. I liked him a lot. Such good straight eyes and easy way of fitting in. I think he and Dick and George liked each other immediately. / Any books on your shelf you could spare for a sick girl aged 13 or 14? Dr. Loper's younger daughter, Mary Lou, today took a turn for the better. It's been a mean case of lobar pneumonia, hanging on with serious high temperatures for a long time, but now they think they can let one of the nurses go and get on with just the other and Mrs. Loper's help. It's a great relief after a long strain, and Mary Lou will probably be a long time getting back her strength. So maybe books would help. / Got a fine idea the other day for my bedspread problem -- from the stencilled apron Jean Burton gave me. I'm going to spend a week-end with her and stencil myself a bedspread, with the long-life-and-happiness character on it in Chinese red. Won't that be handsome? Guess I'll write Jean and invite myself down to work under her direction. / [Page 3] The gloves came today, thanks, Mother. / Got thousands of letters to write -- but my shoulder aches, and I've to magazines and a book to read, so I guess I'll sign off with this, postpone the letters till Sunday, and go to bed. I'm going over to S.F. tomorrow (Saturday) and do some shopping and stay to see "How Green was my Valley" with Helen Heskins and another friend. / Mrs. Davisson stayed through at our New Year's Eve, and was very affable. Dick took Dorothy and me to see the Ohio State-Stanford basketball game on Tuesday night and we worked up the little party then. All very modest and thrifty. / Did you get Ralph's card, with the reproduction of his sea painting? Nice, huh? I got a lovely card from Jo Bedford with a picture of her four children. I'll send it home later on, after I've written her. / BOY, it's been cold! My first adventure, starting off yesterday to meet Milly in the city, was to slip on the brick walk over here by Bancroft Steps -- you couldn't see, with the red bricks, that they were ice-covered, and skid along on my rump for several feet before I managed to stop -- and then I had to turn around and pick my way back home to change stockings, having torn one. I was careful, next time, and got down to College Avenue and the car safely, but noted several long icicles hanging from the plants. And there was snow on Grizzly and on Diablo. It's still cold tonight. There's a handsome big full moon up -- but that means bombs on Manila, so it's not pretty any more. / Must get to bed. Did the ring turn up? Guess I should foreswear jewelry. / Take good care of yourselves. I love you so much! / Eleanor / And now Manila has fallen, and the radio commentators are trying hurriedly to say, "Oh, well, Manila isn't so very important. You just watch, we'll show them some-thing unexpected tomorrow." Don't you wish they'd stop trying to sugarcoat the news and come out and tell us things are in a terrible mess and we're being pushed back toward complete loss of Manila, and we've already taken a terrible licking in Pearl Harbor and the loss of Guam and Wake? We could take it -- we're as tough as the British -- and it would make us good and mad, as well as ashamed at having such stupidity in command of our forces. And maybe we'd demand a tough shake-up. The saddest thing to me is the thought that the big moneyed men who wangled, against public opinion, the sale of all that oil and scrap iron to Japan, are secure. They ought to be out in the thick of it where they'd be sure to meet the scrap iron face to face. But it's the little fellow who gets drowned in his bunk, when a bomb hits his battleship.

Dimensions

H: 11 in, W: 8.5 in (sheet); H: 4.25 in, W: 5.5 in (Christmas card); H: 5.5 in, W: 6.375 in (newspaper clipping); H: 4.375 in, W: 5.625 in (envelope)