

*Amid the chaos at Pearl Harbor, a pair of P-40 pilots went on the attack.*

# First to Fight

by TSgt. Robert Van Elsberg, USAFR



**I**t had been a great Saturday evening. The atmosphere in the officers' club had been relaxed as the Hawaii-based fighter pilots eased off a week's gunnery training, trading stories over hands of poker. Whatever might be wrong in the world was wrong somewhere else.

For some, Sunday mornings were set aside for recuperating from too much Saturday night. Sitting up in bed at the Wheeler Field club where he spent the night, 2nd Lt. Kenneth M. Taylor blinked at the light and looked at his watch. It was 7:55 a.m., Dec. 7, 1941 — too early to be getting up.

But something was wrong. Very wrong.

"I was awakened. I heard explosions and my first thought was that it might have been a Navy plane buzzing us — or maybe having an accident."

As 30 Japanese Aichi 99 "Val" dive-bombers passed over Wheeler Field, Lieutenant Taylor slipped into the only clothes he had with him — his tuxedo.

Although stunned by the surprise attack, "It was pretty easy to tell what was going on. While I was making a call to the airfield to get a plane ready and arm it, [2nd Lt.] George Welch and I stood in the hallway as the Japanese strafed right over the club. We could tell they were Japanese planes even without seeing them," the retired brigadier general said.

Despite the complete surprise achieved by the Japanese, not all the good luck went their way. Eighteen Curtis P-40B *Tomahawks* sat unscathed at Haliewa Field, just 10 miles from Wheeler. The two second lieutenants knew they had to get there in a hurry.

The only transportation available was Lieutenant Taylor's car. "Welch and I made a run for the car and took a strafing, but we got in without

getting shot."

Minutes later, the two pilots arrived at Haliewa Field. They found a pair of P-40s warmed up and ready to go. Although other Army Air Forces pilots would later join the fight, Lieutenants Taylor and Welch took off alone in pursuit of the first wave of "Vals."

"They [the enemy aircraft] had departed Wheeler Field by the time we got back there in our airplanes. We flew on down to the coast, talking to radio control out of Fort Shafter. They had the radar and were trying to tell us where things were, but our radar operations weren't very efficient in those days. We just looked down the island and saw the Japanese attacking Ewa, which was a Marine Corps base. They were circling the field in echelon, as they had done at Wheeler, and were strafing."

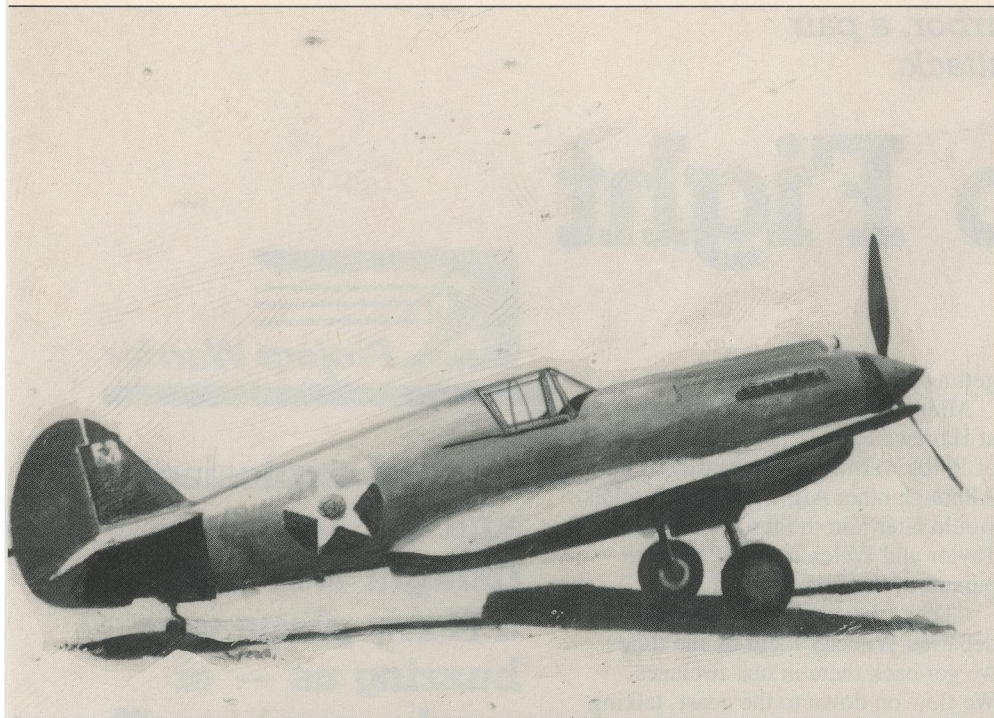
There was little time to devise

**"I heard explosions and my first thought was that a Navy plane was buzzing us — or maybe crashing."**



**WARRIOR TACTICS:** Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Kenneth M. Taylor hand-talks through his fight with Japanese warplanes on Dec. 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor. The tuxedo-clad pilot was credited with two 'kills' that day.





*Army Air Forces P-40B pursuit-fighter*

**Wheeler Field wasn't paved — just a big grass field, and I was headed toward the Japanese planes. I couldn't have planned it any better.**

complex tactics; the two P-40 pilots simply pulled in behind the line of Japanese planes and began attacking the "Val" dive-bombers as they overtook them.

"We just got in on the end of that strafing run and ran right up through them," General Taylor said. "That broke up their party. They went in every-which direction and we did the same."

Lieutenant Taylor's *Tomahawk* packed two .50-caliber and four .30-caliber machine guns. "First crack out of the box we got several 'kills.' They were falling out of the sky and exploding. George and I were flying abreast, so we really don't know which of us shot down the first airplane."

Taylor scored almost immediately, bringing down the first aircraft he fired at. "It was just a short burst, but the guy immediately exploded into flames and rolled over. All I could see were those two fixed landing gear sticking up. He crashed very close to Ewa."

The initial pass by Lieutenants Taylor and Welch took its toll of Japanese planes. A second dive-bomber flamed under Taylor's guns as he and Welch swept through the line of attackers. The "Vals" scattered seaward and Lieutenant Taylor bored in close to one of them.

"I had killed the gunner. I could tell that because I was very close. I had the 'Val' smoking, but couldn't seem

to bring it down. It was strange. Sometimes it seemed they'd pop into flames after one short burst, but other times we'd shoot them to pieces and all they'd do was smoke."

Low on ammo, both pilots streaked back to Wheeler Field. "Welch got there first and landed. When I got there he was already parked and being rearmed. I pulled up alongside him at the hangar toward the east side of the field. The hangar was full of ammunition destined for delivery to Wake and Midway islands.

"The armament crew pulled the dolly up. We were getting all sorts of advice from the brass. They were jumping up and down on the wings trying to tell us how to fight. We looked up and here came the second wave of Japanese planes, moving up the island from Pearl Harbor to Wheeler.

"We knew exactly what that meant, so George went ahead and took off. I sat there and watched them come in while the armament crew was rearming my guns. The crew finally ran for cover, and so did my advisers. I was sitting there all by myself. It was too late for me to run, so I just gave it the throttle and my P-40 jumped over the armament dolly with no damage at all."

Luck, and timing, worked in Lieutenant Taylor's favor.

"Wheeler Field wasn't paved — just a big grass field, and I was headed toward the Japanese planes. I couldn't have planned it any better. There we were, head-on, them coming in low and me on the ground going straight at them. There was no way they could shoot at me without flying into the ground, but I could lift the nose of my P-40 and shoot at them while I was making my take-off run. I was getting hits on them just as we passed."

Lieutenant Taylor got his P-40 airborne and hauled the straining fighter around in a move that put him squarely on the tail of one of the attackers. But as he pumped lead into a "Val," his luck suddenly changed.

"I was beginning to think this was pretty simple. What I didn't know, though, was that I was in the middle of the line instead of on the end, and someone was on my tail. I started taking hits. A slug came through the canopy and went through my arm, striking the trim-tab control and



bursting into my leg. All it did, mainly, was scare me. It reminded me that war was a two-way street and that both sides were shooting.”

Lieutenant Welch came streaking to the rescue, blasting the dive-bomber off Lieutenant Taylor’s tail. Despite his wounds and aircraft damage, Taylor joined Welch in chasing bombers out to sea until both ran out of ammunition. Lieutenant Taylor returned to Haliewa Field and was treated for his wounds. The pilot and gunner of the Japanese plane he attacked while taking off from Wheeler weren’t so lucky. “They crashed out by Schofield Barracks. Welch and I later drove out to see the plane.”

Lieutenant Taylor was officially credited with two “kills” during the Pearl Harbor attack and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Lieutenant Welch was credited with four “kills” that day. Later in the war, while flying with the 44th Pursuit Squadron, then-Captain Taylor flew combat missions over the “slot” near Guadalcanal. There he encountered the Japanese “Zero” fighter plane and was unofficially credited with downing two of the nimble fighters.

In 1943 he returned to the States to train pilots for combat over Europe. He returned to the Pacific too late to fight again, but in time to command the first P-80 *Shooting Star* squadron in the Philippines.

Staying alive over Oahu during the Pearl Harbor attack took more than just luck, the retired general said. “It took a squadron commander who saw to it his pilots got the best training; a leader who wouldn’t have a man in his outfit who wasn’t capable and ready to fight.”

Forty-seven years after he first fired his guns in war, General Taylor feels the key qualities in a fighter pilot remain the same.

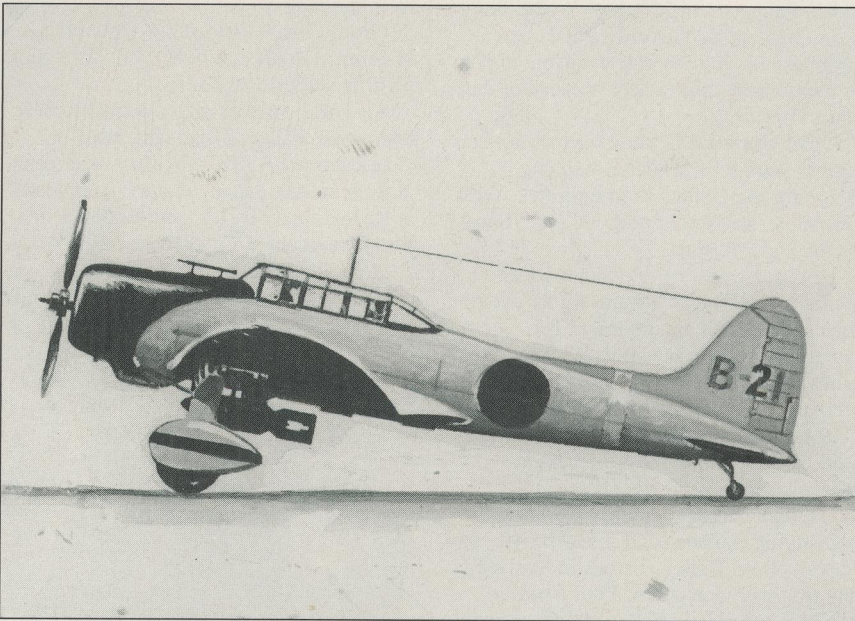
“Self-confidence, competitiveness and determination” are the essence of the fighter pilot, he says. “I think our combat pilots today think of themselves as we did in those days. I believed I was a better trained pilot than the enemy. I had good equipment and I was proud of it. I’m sure today’s F-15 and F-16 pilots feel the same about their aircraft. And I doubt that they’re the least bit concerned about being outnumbered by the enemy. I wasn’t.”

## Squaring Off

The Japanese Aichi Type 99 dive-bomber, code-named “Val” by the Allies, was a two-seat, single-engine naval dive-bomber. It carried a 550-pound bomb and was armed with two fixed 7.7mm (.31-caliber) forward-firing machine guns and a flexible gun in the rear cockpit. The “Val” had a top speed of about 240 mph and was the primary Japanese bomber used over Pearl Harbor.

The American Curtiss P-40B *Tomahawk* was a single-seat Army Air Forces fighter. It was armed with six forward-firing machine guns: two .50-caliber guns above its single engine and four .30-caliber guns in the wings. Top speed was about 350 mph; the improved E model was the best and most numerous Army Air Forces fighter at the start of World War II.

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Illustrations by MSgt. Edwin A. Davis, Airman

## BioStats

At the end of World War II, Taylor was a major. He retired in 1967 as a colonel after serving as a long-range planner for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He moved to Alaska where he served as Assistant Adjutant General of the Alaska Air National Guard, 1967 through 1971, and was promoted to brigadier general. He lives in Anchorage with his wife, Flora. Their son, Col. Kenneth M. Taylor Jr., is commander of the 176th Composite Group, AANG.

*Japanese Aichi-99 ‘Val’ dive-bomber*