

Anticipating local sabotage, commanders ordered aircraft lined up in the open and in tight formation on Wheeler Field's flightline, perfect targets for attack from the air. In the foreground of demolished aircraft is an Army amphibian. (U.S. Air Force Photo)



# A HANDFUL OF PILOTS

by Lt. Colonel Joseph V. Potter  
United States Air Force Academy

In discussions on military leaders, familiar names usually surface: Patton, Eisenhower, MacArthur, Lee, Washington, and many others. These individuals are readily identified by commonly known examples of their professional competence, inspirational qualities, intellectual capacities, and strength of character.

Another valuable dimension to military leadership can be gained by tracing

the responses of lesser participants whose individual performances were among the highest standards of military professionalism but were lost behind headlines which focused on the enormity of the situation. This was the case with a handful of American pilots during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Second Lieutenant Kenneth M. Taylor had attended a social function at Wheeler Field Officers' Club the night of Decem-

ber 6th. After the dance, he and 2nd Lt. George Welch decided to stay at the Officers' Club and play poker. The game had just broken up when the attack on Wheeler Field began the next morning at 8:02. While Japanese planes bombed and strafed the flight line, they ran back into the club and telephoned Haleiwa airstrip where the 47th Pursuit Squadron was on detached service. While their crew chiefs armed their P-40s, Taylor and Welch sped to the north shore airstrip in Taylor's car.<sup>1</sup> This small dirt strip was the only airfield unknown to Japanese intelligence.

Once airborne, and still in their tuxedos Taylor and Welch engaged a flight of 12 Japanese planes over Barber's Point. Taylor shot down three Japanese planes.



They landed at Wheeler to rearm and refuel. Welch took off first. Just as maintenance men were finishing Taylor's aircraft, another flight of Japanese attackers approached Wheeler from the south. Taylor made his takeoff roll to the south and, as they passed through his nose, fired his guns. After becoming airborne, a four-ship dogfight took place in a large spinning wheel as Taylor chased an enemy plane and Welch was on the tail of a Japanese firing on Taylor. Lieutenant Taylor was wounded during this air battle but still managed to down another enemy plane.<sup>2</sup> At the end of this second sortie, Taylor had scored four victories; he had been an Army Air Force pilot for a little over eight months.

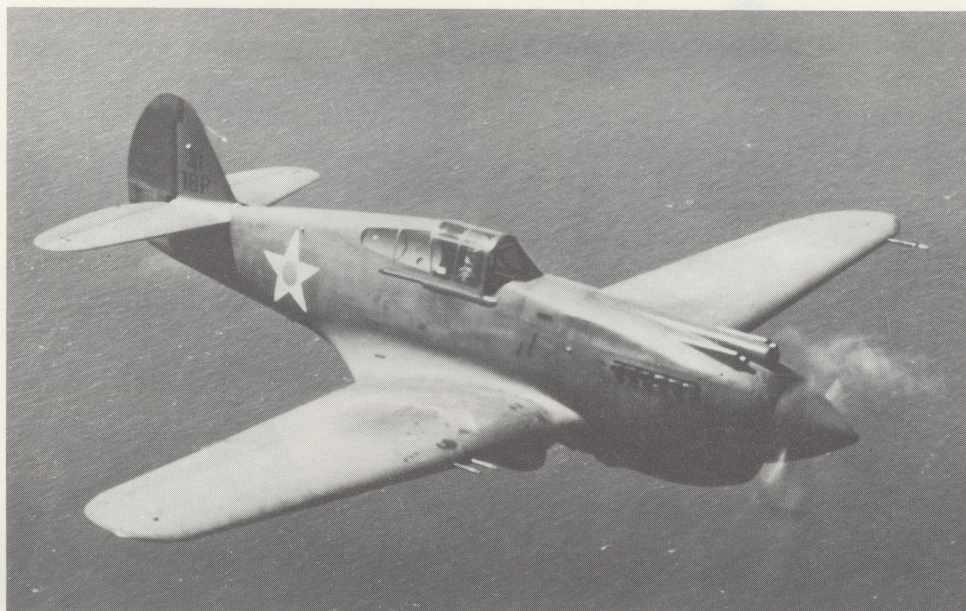
Taylor scored two more victories during the war and, after retirement from the Air Force, commanded the Alaskan Air National Guard. Brigadier General Kenneth M. Taylor (Ret.) returns each year to Hawaii for a vacation from his home in Anchorage, Alaska. He is an executive with a national insurance company.

Second Lieutenant George S. Welch also downed four enemy planes on December 7, 1941; two during his first sortie and two during his second. After finally landing at Haleiwa with the Japanese attackers gone, Welch and Taylor drove back to Wheeler Field. On the way, they were approached by a speeding convertible with its top flopping halfway up. It contained their squadron commander who, noticing their tuxedos and unaware of their eight victories between them, blocked their path and shouted excitedly, "Get back to Haleiwa! Don't you know there's a war on?"<sup>3</sup>

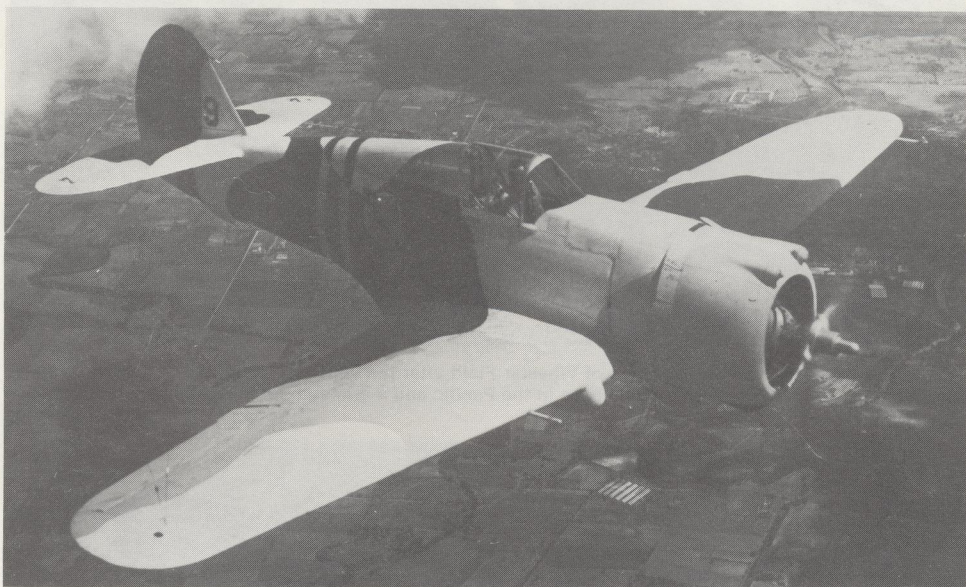
Lieutenant Welch shot down three more Japanese aircraft over Buna, New Guinea, on December 7, 1942. He finished the war as a major with 16 victories. He became a civilian test pilot and was killed in a tragic air accident in the mid-1950s while flying an F-100 for North American Aircraft Corporation.

Second Lieutenant Harry W. Brown was the third P-40 pilot of the 47th Pursuit Squadron who scored a victory during the Pearl Harbor attack. His name, along with Taylor and Welch, is painted on the side of a P-40 on display at Wheeler AFB. Next to their names are their respective victories reflected in nine Rising Sun insignias.

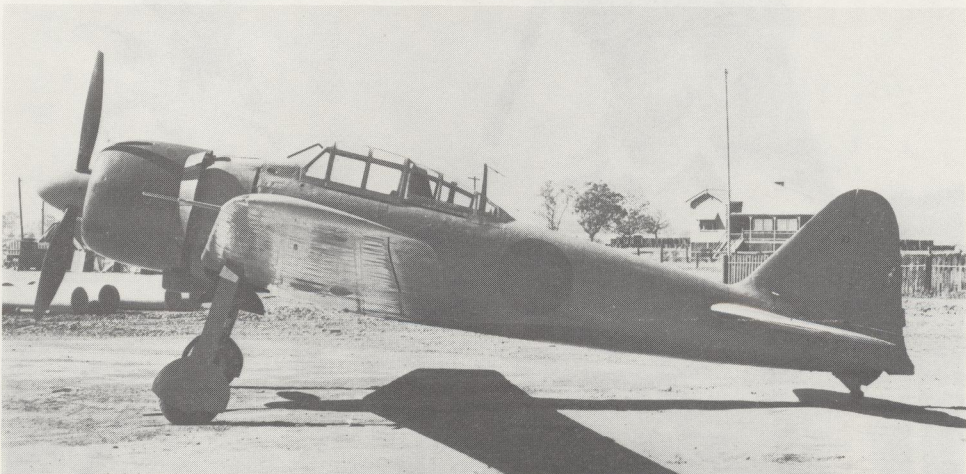
Lieutenant Brown flew 279 combat



The 47th Pursuit Squadron was fortunate that the Japanese intelligence service was unaware of their small dirt airstrip on the north shore of Oahu. Lt. John C. Wretschko was able to get airborne in his P-40 but was mistaken by American antiaircraft gun crews as an attacker and was shot down. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

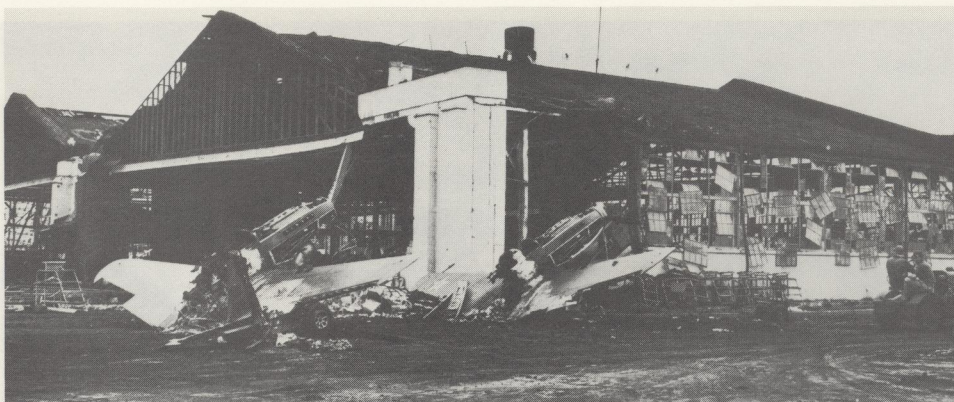


A flight of four hastily armed P-36s, led by their squadron commander, 1st Lt. Lew Sanders, downed three Japanese attackers. One P-36 pilot, 2nd Lt. Gordon Sterling, was lost during the air battle. (USAF Photo)



The famous Japanese Zero fighter was among the huge armada of aircraft that participated in the December 7, 1941, attack. This aircraft, captured at Buna, New Guinea, was restored to flying condition and test flown by American pilots in Australia. (U.S. Air Force Photo)





Destroyed P-40 aircraft on the flightline of Wheeler Field after the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. Wheeler Field was the key fighter plane base in the Pacific and a prime target in their Pearl Harbor attack plan. (U.S. Air Force Photo)



Second Lieutenants George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor were presented Distinguished Service Crosses on the flightline at Wheeler Field on January 9, 1942. Each young airman was credited with four victories. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

missions as a fighter pilot and ended his war service with seven confirmed victories. He was released from active duty in 1948 with his last assignment as Commanding Officer, McGuire AFB, New Jersey. Subsequently, he commanded an Air Rescue Group (Reserve) at Lowry AFB, Colorado. Today, a retired lieutenant colonel, he flies his own Beech Bonanza and works as the benefits and medical manager for a large engineering corporation in San Francisco, California.

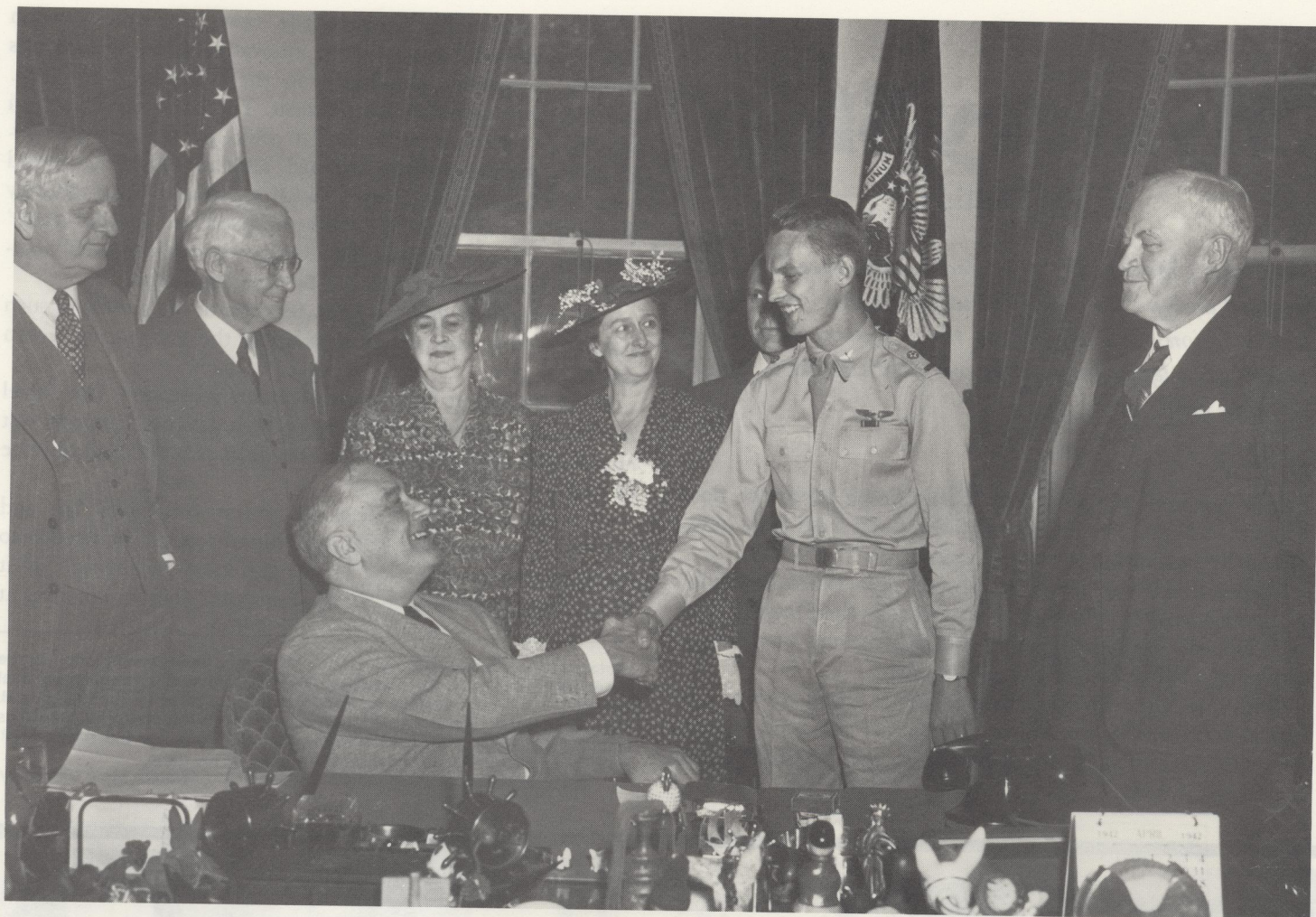
First Lieutenant Lewis M. Sanders, 46th Pursuit Squadron Commander, commissioned in 1936, had been a barnstormer with a flying circus prior to joining the service. He had inadvertently taken action on December 6th that saved most of his squadron's P-36 aircraft from the attack on Wheeler Field the following day. After a military formation on the Wheeler flight line on the morning of the 6th, he directed his men to place their aircraft on the eastern end of the field. During the attack, smoke from the burning planes and hangars drifted over the P-36s and hid them.

He rushed to the flight line from his base quarters at the beginning of the attack. He led a flight of four P-36s out of Wheeler Field, climbed up over Diamond Head and engaged a flight of 11 Japanese. During the air battles he downed an attacker.

He remained as Squadron Commander of the 46th Pursuit Squadron through 1942 then transferred to the 318th Fighter Group as its commander. He participated in the Saipan, Tinian, Guam and Okinawan invasions. After the war, he attended the first Air Command and Staff College class at Maxwell AFB but suffered a heart attack just prior to graduation and was subsequently retired for disability. (NOTE: On December 7, 1977, Colonel Lew M. Sanders, USAF [Ret.], was guest speaker for the Air Command and Staff College and received his long-overdue diploma.) Today Colonel Sanders lives in retirement in southern Alabama.

Second Lieutenant Gordon H. Sterling, Jr., took off from Wheeler Field in a P-36 on Lt. Sanders' wing. Just before, he had handed his wristwatch to his crew chief and said, "Make sure my mom gets this."<sup>4</sup> After downing an enemy plane over Kanehoe Bay, he was shot down and killed.





Second Lieutenant George S. Welch received a hearty handshake and congratulations from President Roosevelt at the White House on May 25, 1942. Standing L to R are: Sen. James M. Tunnell; Sen. James H. Hughes; Mrs. Hughes; Mrs. George Schwartz, Welch's mother; George Schwartz, his stepfather; Lt. Welch; and Rep. Philip A. Traynor of Delaware. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

Second Lieutenant Philip M. Rasmussen, also a member of the 46th Pursuit Squadron, shot down a Japanese attacker, flying a P-36. He retired from the Air Force in 1965 and settled in Fort Myers, Florida. Today, he is president of Cayo Costa Land, Inc., a real estate firm.

Lieutenants Taylor and Welch received the Distinguished Service Cross. Lieutenants Sanders, Brown and Rasmussen were awarded the Silver Star. Lieutenant Sterling was recommended for a citation for gallantry in action and received a posthumous award of the Distinguished Flying Cross.<sup>5</sup>

Six pilots: twelve victories. Although several other fighter pilots managed to get airborne, they were unsuccessful in bringing down an attacker. Several others were able to get airborne in unarmed aircraft which prevented almost sure destruction on the ground. One of these pilots was Lt. Francis S. (Gabby) Gabreski, a P-26 fighter pilot out of Wheeler Field who later became Amer-

ica's top ace of World War II.

Others were not that successful. The 44th Pursuit Squadron was on detached service at Bellows Field for gunnery training. Upon being notified of the attack at Wheeler Field, the crews began arming their P-40s. In an effort to take off under heavy fire from the enemy, Lt. White-man was shot down immediately after takeoff; Lt. Hans C. Christensen was killed while getting into his plane; Lt. Samuel W. Bishop took off and was shot down into the ocean. Although wounded in the leg, he managed to swim ashore.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these men made a supreme individual effort to defend the island against the Japanese. The awesome destruction of U.S. military equipment, ships, and planes was enormous, and, coupled with the shocking loss of life, overshadowed their outstanding accomplishments that day. The six fighter pilots who scored victories set an example of courageous response and superior air-manship that marked a high standard of

military excellence for American pilots who followed them.

#### NOTES

1. Hibel, Franklin. "Caught with Our Planes Down," *The Wild Blue*, John Foosbrock and Richard M. Skinner, ed., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1961.
2. Interview with Brig. Gen. Kenneth M. Taylor, USAF (Ret.), 14 Mar. 75.
3. Interview with Brig. Gen. Kenneth M. Taylor, USAF (Ret.), 14 Mar. 75.
4. Interview with Colonel Lewis M. Sanders, USAF (Ret.), 6 Aug. 77.
5. Report dated 17 January 1942 from Major Paul W. Blanchard, Commander, 15th Pursuit Group, Wheeler Field, to the Adjutant General, Washington, D.C.
6. Report dated 18 December 1941 from Brig. Gen. H.C. Davidson, Commander, Hawaiian Interceptor Command to Commanding General, Hawaiian Air Force.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt. Col. Joseph V. Potter, USAF, serves at the USAF Academy as the Director of Plans, Policy & Scheduling for the Commandant of Cadets. While assigned to the 22nd Tactical Air Support Squadron at Wheeler AFB from 1971-1976, he was instrumental in the restoration and display of a P-40 aircraft and research into the air battles associated with the Pearl Harbor attack.

