

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE 7 DECEMBER 1941 JAPANESE ATTACK ON AIR FORCE INSTALLATIONS IN HAWAII

On Sunday morning, 7 December 1941, the largest airborne attack force ever assembled by the Imperial Japanese Navy struck Oahu's military installations and plunged the United States into World War II. Their main objective was to cripple the U.S. Fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor. To eliminate air opposition, however, they needed to destroy the Hawaiian Air Force; so they struck Hickam, Wheeler, and Bellows Fields with devastating fury.

Six Japanese carriers transported torpedo planes, dive bombers, and fighters to a point about 220 miles north of Oahu. Launching the aircraft in two waves, the attackers achieved total surprise and wreaked havoc at all of the Army Air Forces installations. Death, destruction, shock, disbelief, fear, and mounting outrage were experienced by those who were there at the time, as they saw their assignment in paradise turn into a veritable hell on earth.

Wheeler Field--with two pursuit groups assigned, flying P-36s and P-40s--was the first Air Force installation hit. The attacking aircraft, contrary to the movie "Tora Tora Tora," did not come through Kolekole Pass west of Wheeler but flew straight down the island. While the fighters stayed above 15,000 feet, the dive bombers split and attacked from the east and west, beginning their runs at 10,000 feet and releasing their bombs at 500. As soon as the fighters saw that they had taken the base by surprise and there was no air opposition, they joined the dive bombers in high-speed, low-level strafing runs.

The base suffered extensive damage and heavy casualties, including 33 men killed and 75 wounded. Almost half of the P-40s were destroyed on the ground; but smoke from one of the first hangars hit partially covered the P-36s, so only a few of them were destroyed. The badly damaged hangars included one in which much of Wheeler's aircraft and machine-gun ammunition had been stored. Many of the casualties came from a temporary tent city located between Hangars 2 and 3 along the flight line. Base housing was not deliberately attacked, although one bomb did land in the front yard of quarters at 540 Wright Avenue, which was in direct line with an aircraft hangar and a large barracks. The attacker was probably aiming at one of these buildings when he overshot his target and hit the housing area. Schofield Barracks, adjacent to Wheeler Field, was not a primary target; however, at least two Zeros began their strafing runs early and hit several structures at Schofield en route to Wheeler.

Shortly after the attack on Wheeler began, a flight of some 50 dive bombers and fighters struck Hickam Field. The first targets hit were the Hawaiian Air Depot's engineering building and the hangar area, where A-20, B-18, and B-17 bombers were parked wingtip to wingtip. With the large population of Japanese in the local community, sabotage had been feared more than an enemy attack; so instead of being dispersed and in readiness for immediate takeoff, the aircraft were bunched together in one place where they could be closely guarded. Consequently, they were easy targets for the Japanese, whose attack then widened to include the big new consolidated barracks and mess hall, the base chapel, post exchange, enlisted men's beer garden, fire station and guardhouse. Many men were killed while still asleep in the 3,200-man barracks, largest in the Army Air Forces at the time. The chow hall located in the center of the building took a direct hit, killing 35 men eating breakfast. Several cooks who sought shelter in a walk-in cooler were killed by the concussion of subsequent blasts. Remarkably, the base operations building was spared. Until mid-1941, it had housed the Officers' Club in its basement, and maps used by the Japanese still showed the structure as a club. The same maps depicted the area just behind the consolidated barracks as an underground fuel storage dump; however, a

change in plans had placed the fuel tanks elsewhere, and the baseball field built in that location received many direct hits.

Bellows Field in Waimanalo escaped attention until about 0830, when a single Japanese fighter flew in over the ocean and fired its machine guns at the tent area. Shortly afterward, however, nine more fighters arrived and gave the field a thorough strafing. Members of Wheeler's 44th Pursuit Squadron, who were at Bellows for gunnery training, rushed out to arm their P-40 Warhawks. One pilot was killed while getting into his airplane, and a second was shot down at the end of the runway. The third got airborne but was quickly gunned down and crashed into the ocean. Although wounded, he managed to swim ashore.

In the middle of the attack, twelve B-17s arrived from California en route to Clark Field in the Philippines. Instead of the warm Hawaiian welcome they had anticipated, they were greeted by attacking Japanese aircraft. One B-17 landed at Bellows, one at Wheeler, one on the Kahuku Golf Course, two on the tiny fighter strip at Haleiwa on the North Shore, and the rest at Hickam. The flare box in one B-17 was hit, and the ensuing magnesium fire cut the plane in half. Several others were badly damaged.

The Japanese attacked without warning, and the results were devastating; but even in this defeat, heroism abounded. The history of the day tells many stories of men who risked and often sacrificed their lives in an attempt to fight back. By the second wave of the attack, gun emplacements had been set up everywhere. At Hickam, one man even managed to lug a machine gun to the roof of a hangar. Another climbed into a parked B-18, mounted a .30-caliber machine gun in the nose, and kept firing at the enemy until his aircraft was hit by incendiaries and consumed by fire. At Wheeler and Haleiwa, a few P-36 and P-40 pilots managed to take off, engaged the enemy in furious dogfights, and shot down ten Japanese aircraft. Two of the P-40 pilots, Lieutenants George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor, later received the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism. Welch had four confirmed kills, and Taylor got two.

The final act took place the next morning at Bellows Field. The Japanese had launched five two-man midget submarines against Pearl Harbor. All were sunk except one, which drifted out to Bellows and grounded on the reef. One crewmember drowned leaving the sub, while the other, Ensign Kazuo Sakamaki, was washed ashore and captured. Air Force personnel dragged the midget sub off the reef and onto the beach. So it was that little Bellows Field had the honor of capturing the first prisoner of war and the first war prize.

December 7th was, by any assessment, a disastrous day. Casualties at Army Air Forces installations numbered 689, including 240 killed. A total of 76 aircraft were completely destroyed. Reminders of the attack are still visible at Hickam AFB, where the tattered flag that flew over the base that day is encased and on display in the lobby of Hale Makai ("Home by the Sea" in Hawaiian). This former "Big Barracks" now serves as headquarters of the Pacific Air Forces, and its bullet-scarred walls are carefully preserved to serve as a constant reminder to never again be caught unprepared.

In October 1985, the Secretary of the Interior designated the flightline area of Hickam AFB (including base operations, the hangars, and Hale Makai) as a National Historic Landmark. This placed Hickam AFB on the National Register of Historic Places, recognizing it as one of the nation's most significant historic resources associated with World War II in the Pacific. Two years later, in August 1987, the Secretary of the Interior also designated Wheeler AFB as a National Historic Landmark, recognizing it as a site of national significance in the history of the United States.

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