

The pilots' poker game was nearly over. It had started after the Officers' Club dance the night before and now the tired and sleepy players were trying to decide whether to go to bed or pile in someone's car and head down to one of Oahu's white beaches for a wake-up swim. So far, life for a pursuit pilot in the Hawaiian Air Force was everything the young tigers had expected it to be. There were a few "old heads" around but most of the lieutenants were recent graduates of one of the Army Air Force pilot training classes. War had been rumored for months but how could anyone take it seriously on such a bright Sunday morning in December?

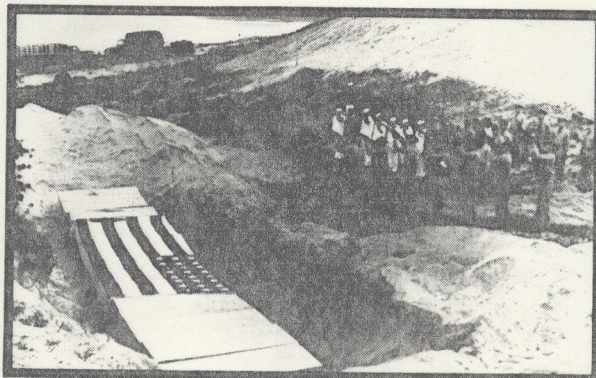
It was nearly eight o'clock when the weary pursuit pilots first heard the roar of approaching airplanes. It sounded like the Navy was going to give them another early morning buzz-job. Showing off for the other services was just one way for the Army or Navy pilots to relieve the monotony of training, training and more training. When they heard the first explosion, most of the pilots figured one of the Navy fly-boys had buzzed too low and crashed, but then the first concussion was followed by more. The pilots scrambled outside their barracks and saw billowing black smoke rising from the nearby flightline where their coveted Curtiss P-36 Hawks and P-40 Tomahawks were parked closely together

PEARL HARBOR'S

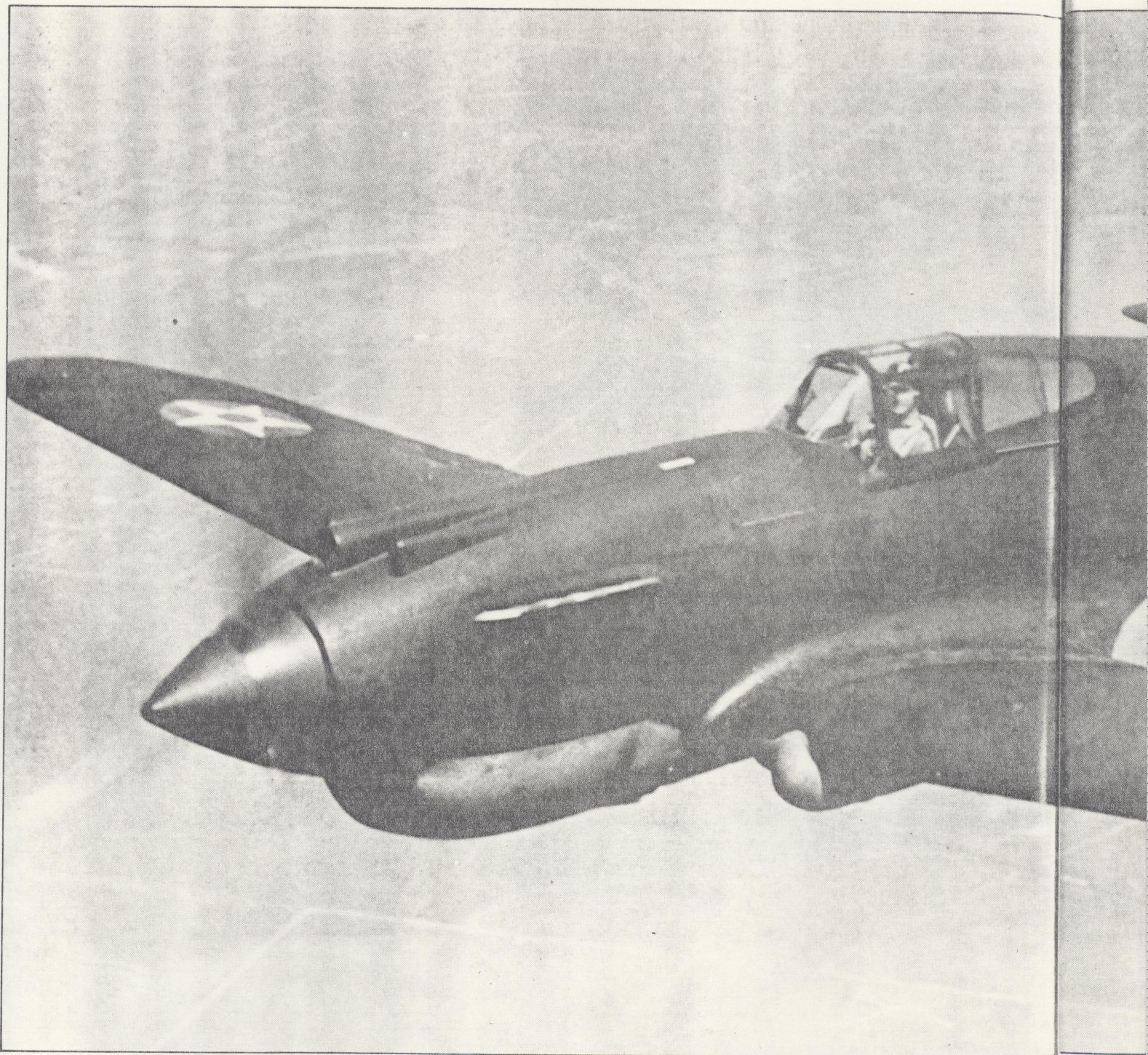
DEADLY DOZEN

The story of the American pilots that fought back during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

By Tom Straub



Ceremonial salute over the mass grave of fifteen officers and men killed by the Japanese during the attack on Kaneohe. (USN/32854)



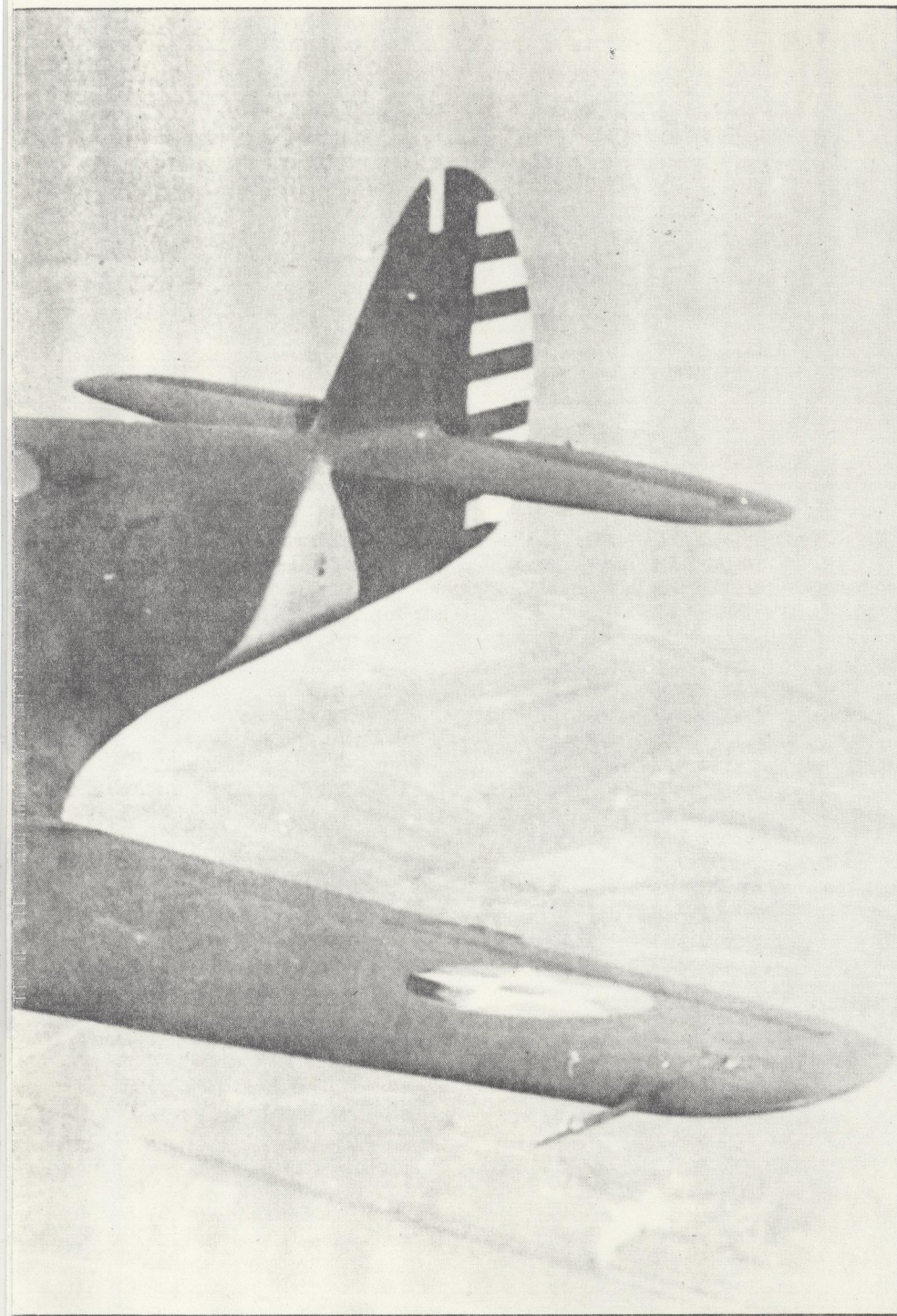
for anti-sabotage protection. "Japs," someone yelled "we're under attack!"

Twenty-five Aichi D3A1 dive-bombers, later code-named Vals, had left their carrier *Zuikaku* nearly two hours previously and were now rolling into their 45 degree dives, reducing many of Wheeler's fighters to twisted wreckage. The eight three-story maintenance hangars and adjoining parking ramp presented a tightly clustered target that could hardly be missed; especially by the aggressive Japanese pilots who pressed their attacks until releasing their deadly 250-kilogram bombs less than 500 feet above the airfield.

The Americans quickly reacted but their defense could only be passive because there were no antiaircraft guns protecting Oahu's only fighter base; no machine guns, only a few rifles and pistols responded to the ferocious attack. After the initial dive-bombing attack by the Vals, fourteen of Japan's best fighters, the Mitsubishi A6M Zero, joined in the attack and all thirty-nine aircraft began to strafe the remaining planes and buildings. Hangars 1 and 3 were burning out of control; the 6th Pursuit Squadron barracks had been struck by a bomb with heavy loss of life; the rows of tents lived in by

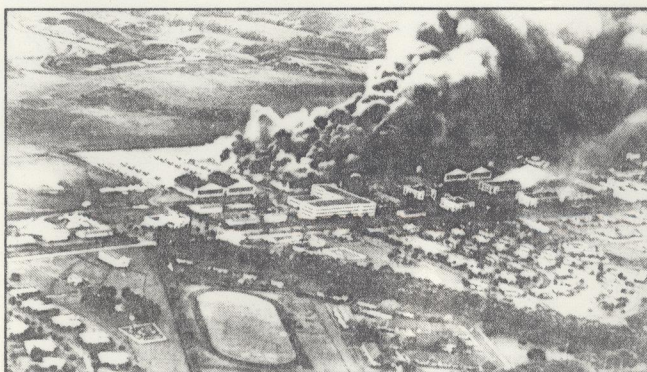
Curtiss Tomahawks were the most modern aircraft available for the defense of Pearl Harbor. Considering the lack of warning, confusion, and the presence of deadly Zeros, the P-40 and P-36 pilots did a heroic job. (USAF)

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most of the ground crewmen was a tempting target to the strafers and was quickly transformed into a fiery furnace. Thirty-eight men were killed and another fifty-nine wounded during the attack.

Many of the pilots and ground crewmen ran to the neatly-parked planes and began the dangerous job of pulling the undamaged aircraft away from the ones that were still burning. They took on the slow process of arming the fighters despite the need of dashing into the burning hangars to obtain the .30-caliber and .50-caliber ammunition used by the American fighters. Second Lieuten-



Planes and hangars at Wheeler Army Air Field burn shortly after being attacked. This photograph was taken from an enemy plane. (USN)

ants George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor used the Officers' Club telephone to call the Haleiwa auxiliary strip where the 47th Pursuit Squadron was temporarily assigned for gunnery training. They were amazed to hear that there was no enemy action over the North Shore field and ordered all aircraft to be immediately fueled and armed. After hanging up, they sped through the main gate and started out on their seven mile trip, giving no thought to the speed limits.

Two other 47th Squadron Second Lieutenants had the same idea. After partying all night, Harry W. Brown and John L. Dains quickly threw off any signs of hangovers and headed for the nearby married officers quarters in Dains' blue Ford coupe to pick up First Lt. Robert J. Rogers, also of the 47th. They all survived a comic but dangerous encounter with a vengeful Val that chased them all over the dusty road to Haleiwa without achieving any hits.

Welch and Taylor were the first in the air in their Curtiss P-40B Tomahawks armed only with four .30 caliber machine guns in the wing. The pair headed for Wheeler with the idea of taking the heat off the air base and their fellow pilots but found the skies over Wheeler to be empty. They continued their course toward Pearl Harbor seven miles away but spotted 15/20 Japanese planes at their two o'clock position, pounding the Marine air base at Ewa. They dove into the melee quickly flaming one Val each on the first pass. The Japanese had gotten complacent in the absence of any American defenders and it had cost them.

The now-altered Vals headed in different directions attempting to evade the faster Tomahawks. But despite being over 100 mph slower, the Val was able to turn tighter than the heavier P-40s and the rear gunner with his 7.7mm machine gun made it even more difficult for the

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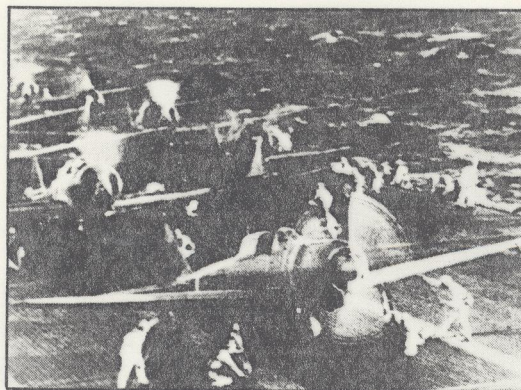
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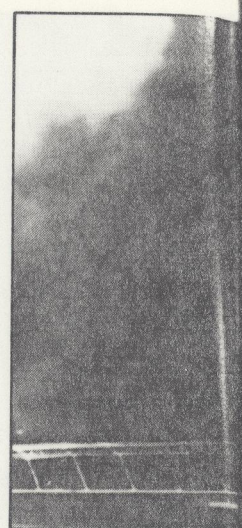


The enemy attacks. Zeros, Kates and Vals prepare to takeoff for the Pearl Harbor raid. This Japanese photo was captured by American troops on Attu during 1943. (USN/80-G-71198)

American fighters to shoot down the Val dive-bombers. Welch and Taylor now split up and attacked targets separately. Taylor nailed one that was streaking toward the nearby ocean. Welch caught another trying the same thing but the gunner was waiting for him and scored hits on the young Lieutenant's plane. Welch pulled up, assessed the damage and returned to the fray. Taylor had just dropped another Val that was smoking and both Americans picked new targets. Welch put another Val in the ocean as Taylor's target headed out to sea, losing altitude and trailing smoke. Now low on fuel and ammunition, the two Tomahawks headed for Wheeler with four kills and two damaged to their credit.

Back at Haleiwa, the trio of Brown, Rogers and Dains arrived at about the same time as a solitary Val spotted the small strip and the scattered aircraft. The Val, on its way back north to the sanctuary of the Imperial Fleet, made just one strafing pass, damaging a single P-36 and one of the officer's cars. The Haleiwa ground crew claimed credit for driving him off returning fire with the few small arms that were available as well as with one machine gun they had. Each of the three pilots got off individually but Rogers and Brown found each other over Kahuku Point after warily approaching each other suspecting the other to be the enemy. After joining forces, the two Lieutenants spotted three or four Japanese aircraft below them, heading north. They immediately went into a wing-over and started a diving attack in trail. The targets turned out to be highly maneuverable Zeros. After turning and twisting and rolling all over the sky, Brown broke off after nearly diving into the ocean. Rogers possibly damaged his Zero but the P-36 Hawk was no match for Japan's greatest fighter. Fortunately,

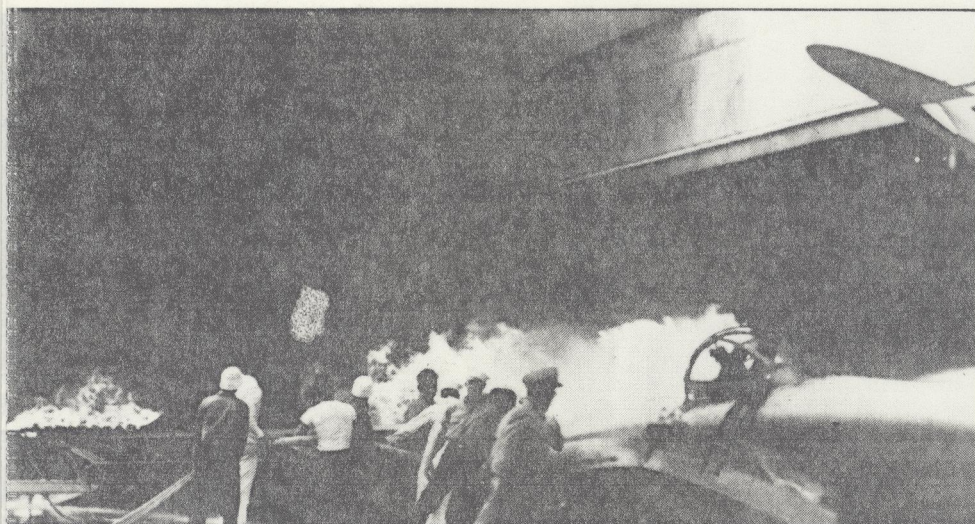
Catalinas
burn after
being strafed
by Zeros.
(USN/32836)



the Zeros were probably low on fuel and broke off the engagement.

The crews at Wheeler, feverishly working on the remaining planes, were able to get four P-36s armed and airborne by 8:50. Although slower and more lightly armed than the P-40s, some pilots preferred the P-36 because its lighter weight made it quicker and more responsive than the Tomahawks. First Lieutenant Lewis M. (Lew) Sanders and 2/Lts. Philip M. Rasmussen, John M. Thacker and Gordon H. Sterling became the first to get airborne from the beleaguered fighter base but were armed with only one .30 caliber and one .50 caliber machine gun. Sterling became sort of a last-minute replacement by jumping into Lt. Norris' cockpit while Norris ran in to get a parachute. The four radial-engine fighters headed immediately toward Diamond Head and made contact with the Information Center at Fort Shafter which directed them toward the bandits working over the Kaneohe and Bellows fields on Oahu's east shore.

The American formation sighted eleven bandits about 5000 feet below and Sanders signaled for the attack. It came as quite a shock to Sanders to see Sterling in Norris' plane but it was too late to send the inexperienced Lieutenant back so down they went. The diving attack produced a temporary speed advantage and the value of surprise gained them an initial favorable position for firing. Lew Sanders saw his tracers walk through the fuselage of his target before it fell off on one wing, smoking. Sanders then saw Sterling behind one Japanese Zero with another Japanese fighter firing at him. Lew set the trailing aircraft smoking but it was too late for Sterling; his plane was last seen on fire and out of control. All three planes in the daisy-chain plunged into the ocean below.



The sky was suddenly clear of all planes, friendly or otherwise, so Sanders turned north for a while then reversed back south.

Within minutes he spotted another plane approaching head-on. After determining him to be Japanese, Sanders applied full throttle and entered into a classic one-on-one dog-fight. The Japanese plane was consistently outperforming the P-36 and its superiority became "bewildering and frightening" to Sanders. Japan was not known to have had any planes that could compare to American planes. As Lew would later state, "I realized that if the pilot had any ability, sooner or later he would be able to use his superior performance and altitude advantage to maneuver behind me for a shot." After turning into the Zero one last time, Sanders entered into a diving roll and cleared out of the fight. The Zero was probably just as happy to end the fight and head for his distant carrier with low fuel.

John Thacker was not having much luck against the superior Zeros either. His guns had jammed on the first diving pass so it became a deadly defensive fight on his part. Although hit by 20mm cannon fire from one of the Zeros, Thacker was able to break out of the fight and head back to Wheeler, just over the Koolau Mountains. But Wheeler was not the friendly refuge he had expected. Wheeler had undergone its second attack after the four P-36s had left and by now, the defenders were armed and ready. Thacker coolly broke off his approach when he was welcomed by antiaircraft fire and just orbited out of range while he waited for things to calm down.

Phil Rasmussen got a kill but was nearly shot down himself. His .50 caliber machine gun had "run away" on him so he had to fly around with an uncocked gun until it was time to

fire, then he would cock and the gun would fire and run away again. Despite this distracting handicap, Phil watched a Val fly right into his sights and the pattern of the run-away gun and roll over for his final dive into the sea. He saw the daisy-chain with Sterling in the middle and watched as all three aircraft dove toward the water trailing smoke and flames. Suddenly, he was startled to feel his Hawk shudder as two Zeros found the range with both their 7.7mm machine guns and 20mm cannon. His canopy just exploded off the plane as the radio behind him was hit. His rudder cables were severed, the tail wheel was shot off and the fuselage laced with over 500 holes. A nearby cloud deck provided refuge and Phil quickly ducked into it and turned home. As he approached Wheeler, he was joined by an amazed Lew Sanders who could not believe the plane was still flying and that the pilot was alive. The two aircraft made a circling approach over Schofield Barracks drawing small-arms fire then landed straight-in. Rasmussen fought the P-36 throughout the landing roll without a tail wheel or rudder. Finally, he rolled to a stop and climbed out, clad only in pajamas and a belted .45 Colt. John Thacker alertly snuck in right after the two-ship formation landed. The 46th Pursuit Squadron pilots in their four outclassed P-36s had shot down one Val and two Zeros and damaged at least one other Zero. But it had cost them one pilot, two planes destroyed (since Rasmussen's plane was good only for parts) and the two remaining Hawks were both damaged.

The 44th Pursuit Squadron was temporarily stationed over at Bel-lows Field for gunnery training. Their first indication of war was when a single Zero made one strafing

(Continued on page 78)



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CLIPPED WING 'COUPE

(Continued from page 75)

determine) 90AL-115s, carrying the 115 hp Lycoming O-235C-1. These Lycoming airplanes, built in 1948-49, were the last of the 'Coupes, save only Poston's N16E, although a successor company drastically revamped the old twin design a few years later and built one airplane. Even though modified as recently as 1960, it, too, failed to catch on and vanished from ken.

It's hard to be really accurate about specifications, equipment and even performance, for there probably never was a "standard" Mono-coupe, in any model.

There were literally hundreds of minor variations based on stocks of available components, on individual customer requests and on guesses about what would keep a financially shaky company afloat. The very last 90AL built (N87622, s/n 870) even sported wheel controls and side windows much like an Aeronca 7AC Champ, and the whole airplane was simplified and cheapened up as much as possible for more economical production.

The eleven 90ALs all had hydraulic toe brakes—a feature that never fails to surprise other 'Coupe owners, who must make do with mechanical heel brakes. But they had two slightly different styles of wheel pants, some had additional fairings from the gear leg. . . .

Basics never changed, from first to last: The one-piece wood wing with two routed spruce spars, on which the steel tube fuselage was slung by four bolts; the flat-wrap windshield; the "V" wing struts and the braced tailplane. Some minor items also never changed, such as the wood-and-wire over-center latch for the pilot's window (an item adapted from a 1920s toilet paper holder, and impossible to find, nowadays) to give a pilot eight inches of open air and enable him to see for landing regardless of ice or engine oil. But almost everything else did.

Landing gear became wider, more streamlined and efficient. Flaps appeared, on the 90A only. Wing tips were rounded, struts wrapped in fabric, tailplane shape changes, the fuselage was made more rounded and better faired with the engine cowl. Small fairings appeared and disappeared, wheel size and pant shape varied. Most later airplanes showed evidence of careful streamlining, with fabric and aluminum strips over control surface gaps and a distinctive

stabilizer-to-fin fairing of fabric snugged tight with elastic.

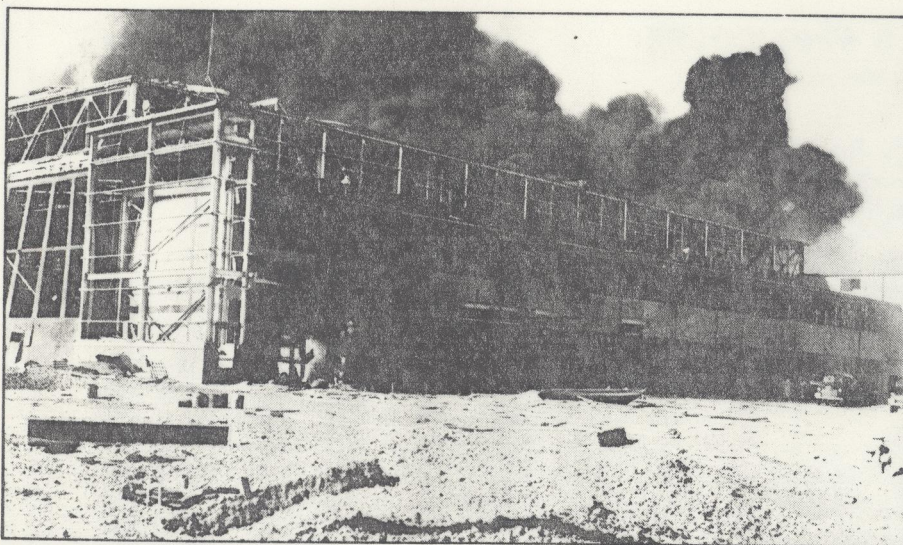
All this makes generalizations nearly impossible, leaving only one flat statement true for all: They're unforgettable!

DEADLY DOZEN

(Continued from page 21)

pass on the tent area at about 8:30, 35 minutes after everyone else on Oahu went to war. A portion of the second wave was targeted against Bellows and about 9:00, nine Zeros showed up to strafe any available targets. They were pleasantly surprised to find a Boeing B-17 there that had come in from the mainland and proceeded to tear it apart even though it had gotten damaged during the landing. Three P-40 pilots attempted to get into the fight despite the Zeros overhead but none were successful. Lt. Hans Christianson was killed in the cockpit of his Tomahawk while still on the ground, Lt. George Whiteman was shot down immediately after takeoff and was killed and Lt. Samuel W. Bishop was also shot down but managed to wade ashore although shot in the leg.

The dynamic duo of Welch and Taylor had problems of their own at Wheeler as they were ordered to disperse their fighters into revetments instead of returning to the fight. Fortunately, the second attack came along and it became too dangerous to taxi their planes to the revetments so they were forced to takeoff instead. Welch got off before the mixed force of Vals and Nakajima B5N2 Kates reached the field but Ken was not so lucky. He did not have time to taxi out to the normal takeoff position but rather had to ignore the wind and just takeoff straight ahead from his parking spot. The Japanese pilots frantically tried to maneuver to become the first to get at the crazy American while he was still on the ground, but they were not quick enough. Taylor was firing even before his wheels had retracted as he pulled into a tight chandelle and rolled out right behind a Val—but another one, unseen, was right behind him. Taylor had no speed advantage after the chandelle but he fired at his close range target . . . so did the Val behind him. The Val's 7.7mm bullets stitched the Tomahawk and Ken was hit in his throttle arm and leg. As he attempted to maneuver his crippled Tomahawk away from the relentless Val, George Welch suddenly showed up and knocked the Val off his tail. Despite his wounds,



The destruction to the airfields was intense. A hangar and its aircraft burn after being hit by a bomb from a Val. (US/80-G-32842)

Taylor continued his dogged pursuit of the departing Japanese bombers until out of ammunition. Welch got one more Val before he too had to land for more ammunition.

Johnny Dains had flown two short sorties in his P-40B by 9:30 but, upon landing back at Haleiwa after his second mission, he had to abandon the Tomahawk because of battle damage. Unperturbed by his close brush with death, he jumped into a P-36 and took off again with George Welch in his P-40. Both were on their third sortie. As they crossed over Schofield Barracks, ground fire rocked Dains' Hawk and he plunged to his death on the Schofield golf course. After having attacked the enemy alone on his first two missions with unknown results, he met his untimely death at the hands of his fellow Americans.

By the time the second wave was leaving the target area, the Americans had realized the Japanese were rendezvousing for their return to their carriers over Kaena Point, Oahu's northwest point 15 miles from Wheeler. Rogers and Brown had been joined by 2/Lt. Malcolm A. Moore in a P-36 from Wheeler and 1/Lt. John J. Webster in a P-40 from Haleiwa. Also getting airborne at 9:20 in a P-36 was 2/Lt. Othneil Norris, the victim whose earlier mission was fatally appropriated by Lt. Sterling. There were more than enough enemy planes for all, but the numerically inferior Americans had to spend most of their time defending themselves rather than being on the attack.

Harry Brown was the last pilot to register a kill when he rolled

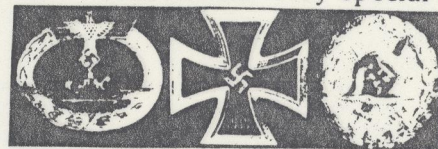
out just fifteen yards behind a Val that was one of two chasing Rogers. He loosed one long burst into the Val as the terrified gunner tried to bring his gun to bear but it was too late for them. Rogers had to leave the action and nurse his crippled P-36 to the nearer Haleiwa strip. Moore and Brown continued engaging the retreating Japanese well out to sea when they finally had to break it off due to fuel and ammunition. One last Japanese plane was left smoking but was never seen to crash, so it could not be confirmed as a kill.

Finally, the skies over Oahu were clear of enemy planes, but the Americans could not know the attack was over. Continuous sorties were flown by the 15th Pursuit Group for the rest of the day. Many were fired upon by nervous Army and Navy gunners but, fortunately, no one was wounded or killed.

The twelve pilots, many in P-36s that saw combat for the first and last time, gave more than just a good account of themselves. Only one American fell to the enemy's guns while six pilots had downed ten confirmed Japanese planes. Welch was credited with four and Taylor with two. Most likely some of the probable kills never made it back to their carriers either. Although only twenty-nine Japanese planes were shot down, over 100 were damaged; as many as fifty were damaged so severely as to be total losses.

They took off against overwhelming odds, some with only partial firepower, yet demonstrated the courage that would characterize military men of all the services through a costly war that encompassed the globe. The attack on Pearl Harbor is usually remembered as a naval defeat, but not by aviation enthusiasts. They remember the twelve who challenged 350 . . . and won.

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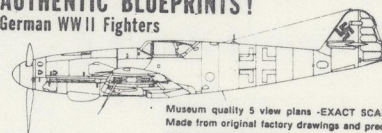
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