

**Brief History of the 7 December 1941 Attack by Japan  
on Army Air Force Installations on Oahu  
(POC: 15 AW/HO, revised December 2003)**

In the months leading up to December 1941, the war in Europe intensified as Germany's aggression continued. Joining Germany in a Tripartite Pact, Italy and Japan were also committed to expansion. With its own national interests in Asia and the Philippines threatened, the United States was wary of Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia. President Roosevelt placed an embargo on shipments of high-grade scrap iron and steel in an attempt to slow Japan's war machine. Many felt that war between the United States and Japan was all but inevitable.

Japan's military leaders decided to attempt the elimination of the only real obstacle to continued Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia: the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. "Hawaii Operation" called for a surprise attack on all military installations on Oahu. Leaving Japanese waters on 26 November 1941, six Japanese carriers accompanied by two dozen supporting vessels transported over 350 aircraft to a point 220 miles north of Oahu. At 0600 on 7 December 1941, the Japanese Navy launched the first wave of the attack: a total of 183 planes, including dive-bombers, horizontal bombers, and torpedo bombers escorted by fighters. Thirty minutes later the carriers launched a second wave of 170 aircraft. Within the space of half an hour, over 350 aircraft were en route to the unsuspecting American military forces on Hawaii.

The first wave of Japanese aircraft approached Oahu's North Shore at 0755. En route to Pearl Harbor, dive-bombers and fighters struck the Army Air Corps' Wheeler Field in central Oahu. Wheeler Field was home to the Hawaiian Air Force fighter command's P-36s and P-40s. Wheeler suffered extensive damage and heavy casualties, including 33 men killed and 73 wounded. Almost half of Hawaii's brand-new P-40s were destroyed on the ground.

Shortly after the attack on Wheeler began, other Japanese dive bombers and fighters struck Hickam Field almost simultaneously with the attack on Pearl Harbor. Hickam Field was home to the Hawaiian Air Force bomber command. Japanese dive bombers attacked Hickam's hangar area and flight line first, where B-17 and B-18 bombers were parked wingtip to wingtip. After devastating the aircraft parked on the flight line, the Japanese attack widened to include the huge consolidated barracks and mess hall and other targets of opportunity. Many men were killed while still asleep in the 3,200-man barracks, the 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 at breakfast. Several cooks who sought shelter in a walk-in cooler were killed by the concussion of subsequent blasts. In all, 189 men died at Hickam Field that day, and 303 were wounded.

Fortunately, thanks to misinformation of Japanese maps, the base operations building and underground fuel tanks were spared. So, too, was Hickam's landmark water tower spared. Legend has it that Japanese pilots thought that the Moorish-looking tower was a religious structure of some kind, and so avoided hitting it.

Bellows Field on the windward side of the island escaped attention until after 0830, when Japanese fighters arrived and gave the field a thorough strafing. Pilots of Wheeler's pursuit

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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. A third pilot who managed to get airborne was gunned down and crashed into the ocean. Although wounded, he managed to swim ashore.

Although the results of the Japanese attack were devastating, even on this "Bloody Sunday" heroes could be found. Fourteen Hawaiian Air Force pilots attempted to engage the enemy, with varying degrees of success. Second Lieutenants George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor were the first to take off. At approximately 0830, Welch and Taylor took off from Haleiwa Field in their P-40s and began shooting down Japanese Zeroes, each getting two confirmed kills during their first engagement. By the end of the day, Taylor had scored two confirmed kills, while Welch had four confirmed enemy scores.

By the time the second wave of Japanese aircraft arrived, gun emplacements had been set up everywhere. At Hickam, one man 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.

December 7th was, by any assessment, a disastrous day. Casualties at Army Air Forces installations numbered over 690, including 244 killed. A total of 76 aircraft were completely destroyed. Overall, casualties to U.S. service personnel were 2,340 killed and 1,143 wounded. At a cost of only 29 airplanes shot down, the Japanese dealt American forces a staggering blow.

Reminders of the attack are still visible at Hickam AFB. The tattered flag that flew over the base that day is encased and on display in the lobby of the building that was originally the consolidated barracks, later named Hale Makai ("House by the Sea" in Hawaiian.) The 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 flight line area of Hickam (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 U. S. history.

Today, memorial tablets surrounding the flagpole at Hickam AFB pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for our country. Dominating the area is a large bronze memorial inscribed with the names of the 189 men killed at Hickam on 7 December 1941. Sponsored by the 11th Bombardment Group (H) Association, this handsome tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice on the "Day of Infamy" was unveiled and dedicated on 7 December 1991, the 50th anniversary of that attack.

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**Key Points of the 7 December 1941 attack and the Army Air Corps**

Events leading up to 7 December 1941:

- Germany continues aggressive expansion in Europe
- Japan continues aggressive expansion in Southeast Asia
- United States tries to slow Japanese expansion by placing an embargo on exports of high-grade scrap iron and steel to Japan
- Many think war between the United States and Japan is “inevitable”
- Japanese military leaders decide on a surprise “first strike” against American military installations on Oahu

On 7 December 1941:

- A Japanese fleet of six aircraft carriers launches 2 waves of aircraft at Oahu from a point 220 miles north
- First wave of 183 planes (dive-bombers, horizontal bombers, torpedo bombers and fighters) arrives at Wheeler Field, Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor nearly simultaneously around 0800 — American forces are caught by surprise
- Second wave of 170 aircraft launches 30 minutes later, for a total of 353 enemy aircraft
- At Wheeler Field (fighter command), half of the Hawaiian Air Force’s brand-new P-40s are destroyed
- At Hickam Field (bomber command), 189 men are killed and 303 are wounded, and some fifteen B-17 and B-18 bombers are destroyed
- Overall, 64 of the 231 aircraft assigned to the Hawaiian Air Force were destroyed, and only 79 of the remaining aircraft were reported as usable
- A few P-40 pilots shoot down several Japanese Zeros: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt George S. Welch gets two kills, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Kenneth M. Taylor gets four kills
- 8 December 1941 — United States declares war on Japan

In later years:

- October 1985 — Hickam’s flight line area is designated as a National Historic Landmark
- August 1987 — Wheeler AFB is also designated a National Historic Landmark
- 7 December 1991 (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack) — a large bronze memorial inscribed with the names of the 189 men killed at Hickam is dedicated at the base flagpole