



Courtesy Photos

P-26 Peashooters and B-18 Bolos on Hickam Field flight line in 1940. The aircraft were assigned to the 14th Pursuit Wing stationed at Wheeler Field.

Building a Pacific Bomber Command, 1937-1941

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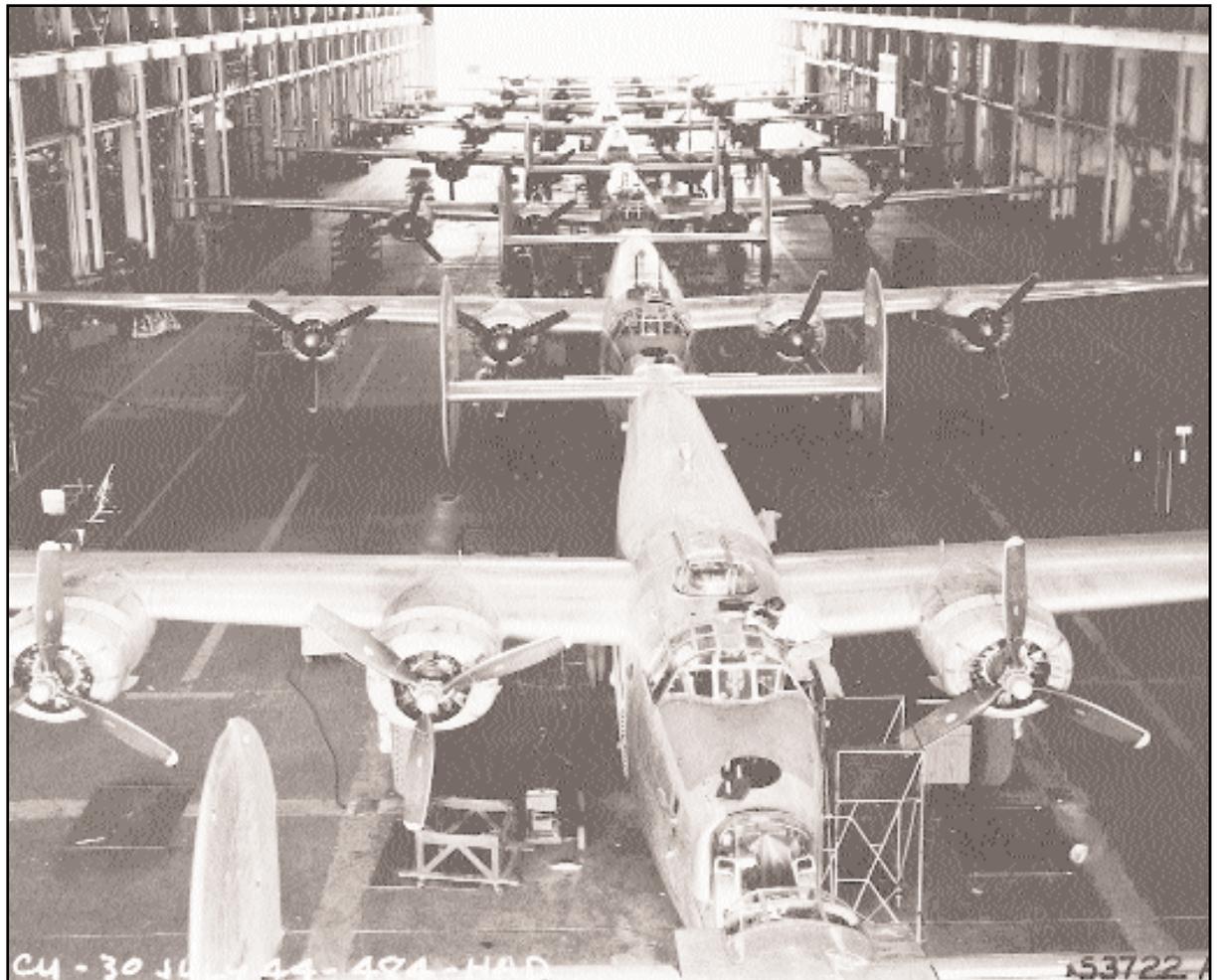
Editor's Note: This is the second in a four-part, monthly series on the history of Hickam AFB. The next part will appear in the Nov. 21 Kukini.

With a steady stream of wide-body aircraft like KC-135s, C-130s, and C-17s passing through Hickam almost daily, it's easy to see the base's airlift role. But how about Hickam as a bomber command?

As World War II loomed in Europe in the late 1930s, the Army quartermaster corps hastened to complete construction of Hickam Field. At the same time, war planners in Washington hurried to build up a bomber and fighter fleet on the island. When completed in 1938, Hickam Field was the largest airdrome in this broad land of ours, and Oahu was the centerpiece of an aerial defense curtain stretching from the Aleutian Islands to American Samoa.

In October 1937, even before Hickam Field was completed, the Army Air Corps 18th Wing transferred from Fort Shafter to Hickam. As a composite wing, the 18th flew both B-18 Bolos and P-26 Peashooters. When the Hawaiian Air Force activated in 1940, officials organized bombardment and pursuit units into two separate wings: the 18th Bombardment Wing (Heavy) at Hickam, and the 14th Pursuit Wing at Wheeler Field. America's newest bombers, the B-17, began arriving on island soon thereafter. Later on during the war years, Hickam would become one of seven modification centers for B-24s. Hawaiian Air Depot workers installed nose turrets in more than 200 B-24J Liberators.

Compared to America's other overseas "air corps garrisons" at the Panama Canal and in the Philippine Islands, the Hawaiian combat squadron was the strongest. However, with the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939-1940, the War Department turned most of its attention toward that continent.



B-24J Liberators undergoing modification in Hickam Field hanger, 1944.

Of the 231 aircraft assigned to Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941, only half were up-to-date models. A dozen each B-17Ds, A-20As, and P-4Cs, along with eighty-seven P-40Bs, counted as the more modern machines of the Hawaiian Department. The remaining aircraft, B-18As, P-36's, P-26's,

and an assortment of observation and training planes, were already obsolete. The enormous impact of the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the full attention of America's war planners back to Hickam and the build up of America's Pacific bomber command.