

DECEMBER 7, 1941

TIMELINE

0330 hrs The pre-dawn hours of Sunday, December 7, 1941, were dark and quiet. At 3:30 am, Japanese submarines lurked near the entrance to Oahu's Pearl Harbor released five midget submarines. Their orders: to penetrate the harbor and assist in the upcoming attack.

0358 hrs On patrol near the entrance to the harbor, alert crew members on a small mine sweeper, the USS *Condor*, spotted a periscope. Knowing that U.S. submarines were forbidden to enter these waters, they sent out an alarm. Others joined in the search but no submarine could be found.

0600 hrs 230 miles north of Oahu, the six aircraft carriers in the Japanese carrier strike force turned into the wind and began launching their first wave of attack planes. This wave of 183 planes included 40 torpedo-bombers, 49 high-altitude bombers, 51 dive-bombers and 43 fighter planes. Once airborne, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, leader of the attack force, organized the planes into formation for the 90-minute flight to Oahu. The objective of this first wave was to destroy the firepower of the American Pacific Fleet – the battleships anchored south of Ford Island along Battleship Row. At the same time, this attack was also to hit all air bases on Oahu in order to maintain air superiority over the island. By eliminating the U.S. air forces, the Japanese attack planes would be protected and retaliatory strikes against the carrier strike force would be prevented.

0615 hrs The American aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*, 200 miles west of Oahu, was returning to Pearl Harbor from a supply mission to Wake Island. As part of its normal operating procedures, it launched 18 planes to scout the route ahead into the harbor.

0645 hrs At the entrance to Pearl Harbor, an unidentified submarine was again encountered. The destroyer USS *Ward* fired on and sank the sub. This sinking was the first action that took place that day in the defense of Pearl Harbor!

0702 hrs In 1941, radar was an emerging technology and was in the process of becoming a component of the military's early warning system. The U.S. Army maintained five mobile radar stations on Oahu, including the Opana Radar Station, located on the northern tip of the island. At 7:02 am, Opana picked up a strong signal that was interpreted as a large flight of incoming planes at a distance of 137 miles north of Oahu. A message quickly phoned into the information center received little attention. The newly-assigned officer in the information center knew that a flight of American B-17 bombers was expected to arrive from northern California early that morning and that the *Enterprise* may have scout planes in the air. Sensing the radar was detecting friendly planes, no action was taken by the officer.

0715 hrs The second wave of 167 attack planes launched from the carrier strike force. The air was filled with 78 dive-bombers, 54 high-altitude bombers and 35 fighters. 350 Japanese planes were now in the air, headed toward the island of Oahu

0740 hrs Commander Fuchida, in the lead plane of the attack force, could now see the northern shores of Oahu. As he started the formation down the western coast of the island, there was absolutely no opposition and he deployed the first wave of attack planes. The dive-bombers and fighters (called Zeros by the Allies) separated from the formation and flew down the central portion of Oahu – through the broad saddle between the Waianae Range and the Ko’olau Range. Their mission was to destroy seaplanes and fighter planes at Wheeler and Hickam Fields, Ford Island and Kaneohe Naval Air Stations and Ewa Marine Air Station. The torpedo bombers and the high-altitude bombers continued down the western side of Oahu to attack battleships and cruisers within Pearl Harbor.

0748 hrs The first bombs of the attack actually fell on Wheeler Field and Kaneohe Naval Air Station. Dive-bombers hit the hangers and Zero fighters strafed American planes on the runways. This job was made easier for the Zeros because in response to concerns about sabotage, the Army and Navy had lined its planes up, wingtip to wingtip, in neat rows; planes parked in tight formations were considered easier to guard. The Zeros simply fired incendiary bullets into the rows of planes, setting them on fire. After striking Wheeler Field, Japanese attack planes also hit “targets of opportunity” at the Army’s nearby Schoefield Barracks.

0753 hrs From his position with the high-altitude bombers, Fuchida could see that their attack on Pearl Harbor was going to be successful. He radioed back to the Japanese carrier strike force the code words for achieving a complete surprise: *‘Tora... tora... tora!’*

0755 hrs Many civilians, soldiers and sailors saw or heard planes approaching Pearl Harbor that morning and paid them no attention. As part of an effort to make the Pacific Fleet battle ready, mock air raids had been conducted frequently. So, when at 7:55 am, a dive-bomber swooped down on the Naval Air Station at Ford Island and dropped the first bomb of the Pearl Harbor attack, most observers thought it was just another drill. Even as more explosions rocked the harbor, those not directly involved simply commented “the Army must be using live ammunition”! Those involved in the action, however, were quick to see the “red ball”—the rising sun insignia—of Imperial Japan on the planes and knew they were under attack. An uncoded radio message was immediately transmitted: *Air Raid Pearl Harbor! This is not drill!*

The attack was sudden and terrifying. Continued strikes by dive-bombers and fighter planes succeeded in destroying Ford Island’s 26 seaplanes—the “eyes and ears” of the Pacific Fleet. Simultaneously with these strikes, low-flying torpedo bombers entered Pearl Harbor from the north and south. The USS *Oklahoma* took six hits and capsized... the USS *West Virginia*, struck by at least five torpedoes, was sunk. This photo taken by the Japanese shows huge oil plumes coming from these two torpedoed battleships. The

USS *Utah*, on the northern side of Ford Island, took three hits and capsized, while the USS *California* was sunk by two torpedoes.

To illustrate the power of these 1700-lb. torpedos, two ships were docked side by side during this strike: the light cruiser USS *Helena* and a smaller mine-layer, the USS *Oglala*. A torpedo passed under the smaller *Oglala* and stuck the *Helena*. Even though the smaller ship was untouched, the pressure wave generated from the torpedo explosion was so great that it ruptured the *Oglala's* hull and sank it.

Within seconds of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese dive-bombers and Zero fighters struck Hickam Field and Ewa Marine Air Station. Again, the dive-bombers targeted hangers and the fighters strafed and destroyed rows of American planes on the runways.

0806 hrs The coordinated attack on Battleship Row continued minutes later with the release of bombs from the high-altitude bombers. These exploding bombs started huge fires onboard the ships, which quickly ignited floating oil on the harbor from the ruptured battleships. Battleship Row was a blazing inferno, engulfing everything within its reach – other ships and sailors attempting to swim to safety.

Four armor-piercing bombs hit the USS *Arizona*—one penetrating the ship and exploding three decks below the surface. This detonation ignited a hundred tons of blackpowder in the interior of the ship. The resulting explosion broke the battleship in half and sent a column of fire and red smoke a thousand feet in the air. Within eight minutes of the first bomb strike, the *Arizona* lay on the floor of Pearl Harbor. 1177 officers, sailors and marines went down with the *Arizona* that Sunday morning, making this attack the worst single disaster in U.S. naval history.

0820 hrs In the middle of this ferocious attack, the 11 American B-17 bombers from California arrived at Oahu. They were scheduled to land at Hickam Field... but as they approached the airfield, they became additional targets for the Zeros. Three crash-landed at Hickam. Others sought alternative landing sites, one setting down on the **Kahuku** Golf Course in northern Oahu. The 18 scout planes from the USS *Enterprise* also arrived at Pearl Harbor at this time. Five were shot down by Japanese fighter planes and a sixth was lost to U.S. anti-aircraft fire – one of several tragic “friendly fire” incidents to occur that day.

0854 hrs By the time the Japanese second wave reached Oahu, the attack was no longer a surprise. This formation of planes flew down the eastern coast of the island, before separating into small groups to strike Pearl Harbor from the south and from the north. This wave would have a little different strategy... this time the high-altitude bombers would strike the airfields and the dive-bombers would hit ships in Pearl Harbor.

The success of the first wave actually made this mission a bit more difficult... and more dangerous for the Japanese. The black, thick smoke rising from the crippled battleships along Battleship Row made targets harder to find. And American forces were now

responding with anti-aircraft fire. This wave would lose 20 aircraft to American resistance, compared to only nine losses in the first wave.

During a slight lull in the fighting between the two attack waves, the USS *Nevada*, despite suffering torpedo damage, started to pull away from Battleship Row. It was making a run for the entrance to Pearl Harbor... and the open ocean. A cheer went up from the sailors fighting fires on the many stricken ships.

0900 hrs The cheers were cut short when the dive-bombers of the second wave saw the *Nevada* moving and swooped down to stop her. The ship took at least five direct hits. To avoid the possibility of being sunk in the channel and blocking the entire harbor, she was purposely run aground at Hospital Point.

The dive-bombers then turned their attention to other ships in the harbor. In Dry Dock No. 1, they found and struck the battleship USS *Pennsylvania* and the destroyers USS *Cassin* and USS *Downes*. Bombs ignited fires on the destroyers; the fires detonated on-board depth charges and torpedoes, sinking both ships. In Floating Dry Dock No. 2, dive-bombers concentrated on the destroyer USS *Shaw*. These bomb strikes eventually ignited gunpowder in the ship's forward magazines. The resulting explosion rocked Pearl Harbor and sent a fireball into the air that was visible for miles.

At Hickam Field and Kaneohe Naval Air Station, high-level bombers destroyed hangers and surface facilities. Zeros also strafed the runways... targeting airplanes and anything else that moved. Three American fighter planes tried to get into the air from Bellows Field. Eight Zeros swept over the runways and shot down all three planes. However, at Wheeler Field, six P-36 fighters did get airborne and broke up an approaching air raid.

1000 hrs By 10:00 am the Japanese assault was over! The attacking planes had all retreated to their carriers, leaving in their wake an incredible swath of carnage. 21 of the 185 vessels in Pearl Harbor had been sunk or seriously damaged. 188 airplanes had been destroyed and another 159 damaged on Oahu's six airfields. But more significantly, 2390 had lost their lives in the attacks and another 1178 were wounded. Nearly half of this death toll was accounted for by the sinking of the *Arizona*.

These casualties also included civilians... some of which were working on Pearl Harbor, but the majority were from the downtown Honolulu area. A shower of unexploded anti-aircraft shells fell to earth... many detonated on impact... causing property damage, injuries and most of the 49 civilian fatalities that day.

With the departure of the second wave, American forces had time to regroup and brace for what might come next. It wasn't long before rumors started flying. "*The Japanese had landed troops on the north shore as the first of an invasion force and were moving overland.*" False reports of water supplies being poisoned and of enemy paratroopers were coming in from all parts of Oahu. Needless to say, everyone was on edge.

This edginess led directly to a **final** “friendly fire” incident. That afternoon, the *Enterprise*’s scout planes, bombers and fighters were in the air looking for the Japanese carriers. All planes returned to the *Enterprise* that evening... except six F4F fighter planes that went on to land at Ford Island. The control tower had advised all ships that American planes were incoming... but once the planes were spotted, the entire harbor began shooting. Four of the F4F fighters were shot down, killing three American pilots.

By this time, the Japanese carrier strike force was five hundred miles northwest of Oahu on a course for home, having, in a two-hour time span, introduced to the United States and the world, the Era of the aircraft carrier and its pivotal role in modern warfare.