
Pearl Harbor remains one of the seminal battles in American military history. Even today, its impact on the course of human history is difficult to overstate. It propelled the United States into the Second World War, thereby launching a series of events which re-shaped the entire second half of the 20th Century.

Pearl Harbor also remains, of course, one of the most epic defeats in American military history. The pre-war overconfidence of the American people—who viewed the Japanese nation and its military with contempt—evaporated in the face of the astonishing onslaught against Oahu. The destruction of a substantial portion of America’s battle line seemed to open the door to all manner of potential calamities, up to and including an invasion of the U.S. west coast. It would take months before the initial public panic over Pearl Harbor began subsiding. To this day, the enormity of the defeat also spawned not a few conspiracy theories that purport to explain how the U.S. military could have been caught so badly unprepared.

“Hawaii Sakusen”, as the Japanese referred to it, was stunning both in its scope and sophistication. In 1941, both the U.S. and Royal Navies still operated their aircraft carriers in ones and twos, and usually only for scouting purposes. Only the Japanese navy had made the conceptual leap towards creating true carrier task forces. With the formation of their Mobile Striking Force (Kidō Butai)—first consisting of four, and later six fleet carriers—the Japanese had
established the first naval aviation force capable of creating strategically meaningful results on the battlefield. Kidō Butai had “the complete package”—a large number of flight decks, a corps of generally very well-trained aviators, good aircraft, and a workable doctrine to put all the pieces together. The result was a carrier force that was as revolutionary in its own way as the advent of the German panzer division had been to ground combat at the start of WWII. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that in 1941 the Imperial Navy was the only fleet capable of carrying out an operation like Pearl Harbor.

Despite these outward appearances of invincibility, Japan’s victory was flawed in many respects. America’s battleship force had been crippled, but not destroyed. Most of the smaller warships and submarines in the harbor received little or no damage. Crucially, none of the U.S. Navy’s own carriers had been present. Finally, of course, the fuel and logistics facilities at the base were left largely undamaged. While it is questionable whether these base facilities could have been destroyed by Kido Butai during follow-up attacks on the 7th or 8th of December (as well as what impact their destruction might have had), they point to the limitations of even Japan’s powerful striking force.

Far more important than the tactical tally sheet, though, at the level of grand strategy Pearl Harbor represented a catastrophic miscalculation on the part of Japan’s leadership. As it turned out, feelings of contempt for one’s potential enemy were prevalent on both sides of the Pacific during the months leading up to war. The Japanese military, while paying lip service to the industrial power of the United States, felt that the United States was divided and morally weak. By launching a series of sudden, devastating attacks (so the theory went) American morale might be destroyed. This would hopefully lead to a negotiated peace settlement that would cede Japan’s ill-gotten conquests to her in perpetuity. The Japanese aimed not just at destroying the U.S. battle fleet at Pearl Harbor; they were aiming at destroying America’s will to fight.

In this, of course, the Japanese militarists were fundamentally deceived. The very form of the attack—its perceived “dastardly” nature, its heavy casualties, and the shock and humiliation of the defeat—infuriated and united the American people to an extent that would have been unimaginable just a day before. Pearl Harbor virtually guaranteed that the war the U.S. waged would be unlimited in scope, relentlessly prosecuted, and aimed at a single goal: Japan’s unconditional surrender. When set against the hopes of Japan’s militarists, it’s not difficult to argue that while Pearl Harbor was a stunning tactical triumph for the Imperial Navy, it paradoxically also represented a crucial strategic defeat for the Japanese nation.

Our speaker tonight, Dr. Alan Zimm, will examine several of these facets of the attack, including Japanese errors in the planning and execution, as well as exploring and debunking some of the myths of the operation.

Further Readings:
Gordon Prange, At Dawn We Slept (New York: Penguin, 1981)

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