
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the December 2021 session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is Michael Wenger, co-author of *They're Killing My Boys* and the forthcoming *A Pitiful, Unholy Mess*. He is joined by "Bud" Nakasone, a teen-ager, who witnessed the attack by Japanese Forces on 7 December 1941.

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 reshaped 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.

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, C-in-C of Japan's Combined Fleet, had been mulling the possibility of an operation against Pearl Harbor for some time. Putting the U.S. Pacific Fleet out of action at the beginning of a war would allow the Japanese to conquer their objectives in Southeast Asia without having to guard against an immediate U.S. counterblow. The *Kidō Butai*, training hard for its mission against Pearl Harbor, gave him the revolutionary proficiency possessed by no other navy—the ability to concentrate and coordinate hundreds of aircraft operating from multiple flight decks. Massed carrier airpower was now a reality. He had the tool to deliver such a blow and the U.S. Navy had no inkling that Japan possessed such a weapon.

Kidō Butai sortied for Pearl Harbor on 26 November. The Americans, through their reading of Japanese diplomatic codes, were coming to the realization that negotiations with Japan were increasingly futile. However, despite conspiracy theories to the contrary, Pearl Harbor's importance in Japanese planning was unknown. The Imperial Navy's operational code (JN-25) had not yet been broken sufficiently to derive usable intelligence. And while ominous signs began developing that war was imminent, the location of Japan's initial attacks was difficult to discern, partly because of a welter of conflicting information, and partly because Japan intended attacking in many directions at once. Likewise, while some American naval planners had contemplated a carrier raid against Hawaii, they conceived of it in just those terms—a small-scale attack by one or two carriers and a handful of aircraft. Instead, Yamamoto's plan not only envisioned a multi-wave assault against the naval anchorage but coordinated attacks against every airbase on Oahu. Japanese capabilities, in other words, were completely outside the scope of American understanding. The result was total strategic, operational, and tactical surprise.

By the end of the morning of 7 December 1941, burning American ships, blazing aircraft, and wrecked hangars lay under palls of black smoke. The Pacific Fleet's battle line was demolished, with five battleships sunk, and four

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

more damaged. American airpower on Oahu had been nearly exterminated, with 350 aircraft destroyed or damaged. More than 2,400 Americans were dead. The United States was now at war.

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 Japan's part. The Japanese military, while paying lip service to the industrial power of the United States, felt that America was divided and morally weak. By launching a series of sudden, devastating attacks (so the theory went) American morale might be destroyed at the outset. This would hopefully lead to a negotiated peace settlement that would cede Japan's ill-gotten conquests to her in perpetuity. However, the attack had just the opposite effect, uniting the American people in fury against the Japanese, with disastrous implications for Japan's ability to conclude the war successfully.

FURTHER READINGS:

J. Michael Wenger, Robert J. Cressman, and John F. DiVirgilio, *They're Killing My Boys: The History of Hickam Field and the Attacks of 7 December 1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

Wenger, Cressman, and DiVirgilio, *This is No Drill* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

Wenger, Cressman, and DiVirgilio, "No One Avoided Danger" (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015).

H.P. Willmott, *Pearl Harbor* (London: Cassell & Co., 2001).

Gordon Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: Penguin, 1981).

Walter Lord, *Day of Infamy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1957).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 21 Dec. 2021 – *How Christmas Won the War* – www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table – 27 Jan. 2022 – *Queen City's Revenge* - 715-386-1268 -

rossandhaines@comcast.net

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 -

<https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 -

<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 2022 - 320-564-6644 -

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org

Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST,

<https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/>

Western Naval Historical Association

info@wnha.net

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

crazyjerry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -

www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2022

11 Jan. Patton: the Enigma

8 Feb. Wake Island

8 Mar. Nuremburg Trials – Goering

22 Mar. Florence Finch - Filipino Heroine

12 Apr. Doolittle Raid

10 May Last Battle: in the Alps

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