
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the December session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker, Michael Wenger, author of *A Pitiful Unholy Mess*, will discuss the air battles between the US and Japanese during the attack on Pearl Harbor, exploring the early use of radar.

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

Kidō Būtai 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.

The Army and the Air Corps were not prepared for war. To better protect aircraft from possible sabotage, they were lined up on the flight lines instead of in revetments. Small arms, machine gun, and anti-aircraft ammunition was stored in locked arms rooms and bunkers, and in most cases, axes were needed to access munitions. Guns were not manned; it was another weekend in paradise.

The US Army had deployed 6 new and still experimental SCR-270 radar sets (4 trucks with the components) at various locations on Oahu. Lt. Gen. Walter Short later noted this was mostly for training purposes since no one expected much in peaceful Hawaii. Early in the morning of 7 December, Pvts. Joseph Lockard and George Elliott (a new trainee) at the Opana Radar Site in northern Oahu detected aircraft inbound from the north. As the oscilloscope spiked indicating LOTS of aircraft, Lockard informed Lt. Kermit Tyler, their superior at Fort Shafer, who dismissed it as a flight of B-17s bound for the Philippine Islands coming to rest and refuel. Instead, it was the first wave of 180A IJN aircraft.

Outside the harbor entrance, the *USS Ward* fired at a midget submarine and the *USS Monaghan* sank another north of Ford Island. The 48 aircraft at Marine air station Ewa were destroyed in the first attacks, and shortly afterwards at naval air station Kaneohe, almost all the PBY amphibians on the flightline were damaged or destroyed and the 3 PBYs flying patrol were damaged by air-to-air combat. The

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

naval services failed to anticipate attack, only patrolled to the west and northwest but not the north and spent weekends in harbor.

As the first wave came in on Wheeler Field, two Army pilots recognized the situation despite having spent the night at poker. They realized the aircraft at Wheeler Airfield were under attack and instead drove to Haliewa Field where 18 P-40 airplanes were based. Having called ahead, 2 were warming up when 2nd Lts. Kenneth Taylor and George Welch arrived, still wearing their dress mess uniforms instead of flight gear. Taking off, they queried the radio control center at Fort Shafer but the radar was less than helpful. Gaining altitude, they sighted IJN Val bombers over Ewa Marine airfield. Lining up behind the last Val, they shooting them down. Taylor later was wounded taking off again from Wheeler while as the second wave attack began. Several more P-40s also took flight from Haliewa.

At least a couple of bomber squadrons managed to disperse their aircraft from their positions on the flight line. Radio operator Harold Kaye described the efforts of the 5th Bomb Group to get aircraft armed and ready. 2 A20s (twin engine bombers) took off shortly before their 2 B-17s lifted off from Hickam Field between 1100 and 1145 searching for the IJN carriers. Upon return from their fruitless search naval fighters escorted them in on approach.

Taylor and Welch were both credited with 2 kills, and although nominated for the Medal of Honor by GEN Harold Arnold, both men received the Distinguished Service Cross and Welch spent several months on war bond tours. He flew a total of 348 combat missions in the Pacific and was credited with 16 confirmed kills. Taylor flew out of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, earning 4 more kills (officially he was only credited with 2!) before being injured during an air raid. He spent the rest of the war in training missions.

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 – 16 Jan. 2024, *Ciphers and Codes* – www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
 Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 -

320-616-6050. <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.
 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall
 Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.
 Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
 Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
 Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie –TBA July 2024 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org
 Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org
 Friends of the National WW II Memorial – <http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org>.
 Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club - <http://www.vbcphg.org>.
 Western Naval Historical Association info@wnha.net
 CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org
 Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com

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 2023-2024

- 9 Jan. Casablanca Conference
- 13 Feb. 99th “Viking” Battalion
- 12 Mar. Selling the War – Bill Maudlin
- 26 Mar. Coast Watchers: Hawaii, England
- 9 Apr. War of Supply–Mediterranean
- 14 May Dieppe’s Lessons for Normandy

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2LT Kenneth Taylor



2LT George Welch