

ATTACK ON PEARL

HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

by Kathy Wilmore

On December 7, 1941, 50 years ago, Japanese forces attacked U.S. air and naval bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In a few hours that fateful day, thousands of people were killed and most of the U.S. Pacific Fleet was reduced to smoking ruins. The surprise attack caught the U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor unprepared. It stunned the nation and plunged us into World War II.

How did it happen?

A World in Turmoil

In late 1941, much of the world was embroiled in war. Europe was torn by fierce fighting between the Axis powers (Italy and Nazi Germa-

ny) and the Allies (Britain, France, and the Soviet Union). Their fighting extended into North Africa.

Meanwhile, Japan was on the march in Asia. That island nation, though tiny in size, was huge in military might. Japan needed natural resources it did not have at home, so it set out to conquer other countries. In 1931, Japan seized the Chinese province of Manchuria. Full-scale war between Japan and China broke out in 1937. In September 1941, Japan joined the Axis by signing a pact with Germany and Italy.

Geographically, the U.S. was far removed from this turmoil. Most Americans hoped that the U.S. could stay out of the conflict.

Even so, U.S. leaders felt that they had to do something to stop Japanese aggression. In 1940, the U.S. banned the export of key resources to Japan. In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered U.S. banks not to release Japanese funds.

Japan was in a tight spot. Without the necessary resources, trade, and money, it could not be a powerful country. What should it do?

In October 1941, Japan's minister of war, General Hideki Tojo (*hee-deh-kee TOH-joh*) became premier. Being a military man, he decided that Japan's only recourse was war.

What Japan Was Thinking

It might seem crazy for such a tiny nation to even *think* of going to war against a huge and powerful nation like the U.S. But think about it. Have you ever been pitted against someone much bigger than you? There are two ways to win a fight like that: outsmart the other person, or hit when and where that person least expects it. Japan decided to try both.

Isoroku Yamamoto (*EE-soh-ROH-koo YAH-muh-MOH-toh*) was admiral of Japan's navy. He didn't like the idea of war with the U.S. "I guarantee to put up a tough fight for the first

six months," he had told the previous premier, "but I have absolutely no confidence as to what might happen if it went on for two or three years." But once Tojo decided on war, Yamamoto approved a plan for what Japan hoped would be a stunning, crippling, first strike.

What the U.S. Was Thinking

World War II had begun in September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Some Americans believed that the U.S. would have to join the fight sooner or later. But for the most part, the war seemed very remote from most Americans' lives.

Didn't people worry that an Axis nation might attack the U.S.? "Not too many," remembers Allan Davis, who was 12 years old in 1941. "We didn't really have an inkling, not a clue, that such a thing could ever happen to us," he told JS. "A terrible war was going on in Europe, of course, and in Asia. But we hadn't really paid much attention to it all."

Government and military leaders suspected war was possible — even likely. President Roosevelt had U.S. diplomats negotiating (bargaining) with Japan to keep the peace. U.S. military leaders were building up

America's defenses. Intelligence officers were busily decoding Japanese communications, searching for clues of a possible attack. But, by the time they figured out what all the clues meant, it was too late.

Countdown to War

On Saturday, December 6, life went on pretty much as always in the U.S. and in the U.S. territory of Hawaii. That night, many of the troops stationed at U.S. bases in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, went into town to enjoy the bars and nightclubs there. But early the next morning, all was quiet — as Japan knew it would be.

Out in the Pacific, it was another story. A Japanese fleet of 33 vessels had reached its launch site. The fleet, called *Kido Butai* (Strike Force), had been steaming east for 12 days. The fighter planes on the carriers were fueled and armed; the pilots were ready to go. At 5:50 a.m., the first wave of planes took off. It was a 90-minute flight to Pearl Harbor — base port of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

At 6:30 a.m., a U.S. ship spotted a Japanese mini-sub trying to slip into the harbor. Another U.S. ship — the U.S.S. *Ward* — went after the sub, ramming it, then blast-

HARBOR!

ing it with depth charges — the first shots in the war with Japan.

At 7:40 a.m., the first wave of Japanese planes reached Pearl Harbor. Some U.S. soldiers and sailors noticed the planes, but assumed that they were U.S. planes on a drill — or a squadron of U.S. B-17s due in from California.

The Japanese were hoping to achieve total surprise, but were amazed to find that they had achieved it. Flying over Pearl Harbor was a Japanese commander who later wrote: "Below me lay the whole U.S. Pacific Fleet in a formation I would not have dared to dream even in my most optimistic dreams." He gave his men the signal — "Tora! Tora! Tora!" (meaning *Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!*) — and they opened fire.

The shattering attack lasted two hours and 20 minutes. In that time,

Japanese gunners ripped U.S. ships and planes with machine guns and torpedoes. Hundreds of men were trapped in sinking ships. Planes and fuel tanks on U.S. airstrips exploded. The ill-prepared U.S. forces were unable to organize an effective defense. The devastation was overwhelming. (See box, p. 5.)

The Folks Back Home

When the news hit home, Americans were stunned. Julia Clark, who was 13 and lived in Philadelphia, will never forget that day. "My brother and sister and I were just on our way to our weekend movie," she told JS. "We'd gotten about two blocks away when my mother came running after us. 'You can't go!' she said. She told us that war had started, and hurried us back to the house. We all sat around the radio, listening to the news reports on Pearl Harbor."

Was she afraid of bombs falling closer to home? "Not at first," Clark recalls. "My parents were more afraid than we [kids] were, because they could remember World War I. But we kids didn't have much idea of what war was like; we knew nothing of bombs or what they could do."

A Giant Wakes Up

It was a lesson that America was about to learn. As reports of the devastation at Pearl Harbor poured in, the reality of war was suddenly brought home to every American. On December 8, President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war. (See p. 1.) There was no turning back.

Japan knew it, too. Said Yamamoto, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve."

He was right. That "terrible resolve" swept the U.S. into World War II. Three and a half years and 400,000 American deaths later, victory belonged to the Allies. ☆

Pearl Harbor Chronology

The following is a brief summary of events leading up the attack on Pearl Harbor.

1. Japan starts wars in 1894, 1904, and 1914 with simultaneous declarations of war and surprise attacks.
2. United States restricts Japanese immigration with Gentleman's Agreement in 1920s.
3. Japan invades China and conquers Manchuria in 1931.
4. Japan signs Tri-Partite Treaty with Germany and Italy in 1939.
5. During 1940 and 1941, the United States restricts and finally stops most trade with Japan. Japan is cut off from a major source of oil. United States freezes Japanese assets in 1941.
6. In the summer of 1940, the United States breaks Japan's top-secret diplomatic code (Purple). Washington has decoding machines (MAGIC) sent to the Philippines and London, but not to Pearl Harbor.
7. In the summer of 1940, the United States Pacific Fleet commander requests the fleet be moved from Pearl Harbor to the West Coast, citing unpreparedness. President Roosevelt refuses.
8. 1940–1941—Japan ponders expanding into Dutch East Indies and Malaya for oil and rubber. The biggest danger—possible intervention by the United States Pacific Fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor.
9. In March, 1941, FDR authorizes transfer of twenty-six ships from the Pacific Fleet to duty in the Atlantic.
10. In June, 1941, Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Kimmel asks to be immediately informed of any important developments in the Pacific.
11. In August, 1941, America rejects Japanese request for summit meeting.
12. In September, October, and November of 1941, Japanese agents in Hawaii regularly report the size, type, and location of the ships in the harbor at Pearl Harbor. MAGIC decodes this both in the Philippines and in London, but the information is not relayed to Pearl Harbor.
13. November 28—General Short puts Army personnel on “sabotage alert” and so notifies the War Department. This means that planes and other equipment are bunched together to be more easily guarded.
14. On December 3, Japanese embassies in London and Washington have carried out orders to burn code books and destroy files. MAGIC decodes this. Pearl Harbor is not informed.
15. December 3, 4, 5—MAGIC decodes greatly increased radio traffic from Hawaii to Tokyo regarding the fleet at Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor is not notified.
16. December 6—MAGIC decodes thirteen parts of a fourteen-part message. FDR reads it and says, “This means war.” No warning is sent to Pearl Harbor.