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Victory at Sea



Recent movies like Saving Private Ryan and The Thin Red Line have vividly depicted the face of land battle in the Second World War, but the story of the American war is incomplete without the sweep and strategic stakes of the war at sea, in which 104,985 American sailors and Marines were wounded, 56,683 were killed, and more than 500 U.S. naval vessels were sunk. Lest we forget

by [David M. Kennedy](#)

(The online version of this article appears in five parts. Click here to go to [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#), [part five](#).)

MILITARY necessity is a profligate breeder of inventions. The Second World War incubated revolutionary innovations in all spheres of warfare: tanks transformed land battle; strategic bombers opened new fighting frontiers in the air; submarines and aircraft carriers rendered obsolete centuries of doctrine about waging war at sea. By war's end these vaulting leaps in military technology had swept all the combatants, including the United States, across older moral frontiers as well.

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From the archives:

["One War Is Enough,"](#) by Edgar L. Jones (February, 1946)

"In varying degrees, depending upon a man's length of service, the GI

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, dramatically heralded the new age of naval combat. Aircraft launched from half a dozen Japanese carriers, operating thousands of miles from home, made quick work of crippling the eight aging U.S. battleships anchored helplessly below them. Though it would take some time to become apparent, Pearl Harbor ended the era of the dreadnoughts. In a few minutes of a Hawaiian Sunday morning a few hundred Japanese pilots enormously widened the arc of naval war, and transformed its very nature. Future sea battles would be fought over distances

perspective included bitter contempt for the home front's abysmal lack of understanding, its pleasures and comforts, and its nauseating capacity to talk in patriotic platitudes."

"The Real War," by Paul Fussell (August, 1989)

On its fiftieth anniversary, how should we think of the Second World War?

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

Flashbacks: "Pearl Harbor in Retrospect" (May 25, 2001)

Atlantic articles from 1948, 1991, and 1999 look back at the attack on Pearl Harbor from American and Japanese perspectives.

Books & Authors: "The Other Side of War" (February, 1997)

An interview with historian, literary critic, and veteran Paul Fussell, the author of *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic*.

Web Citation: "Normandy: 1944" (July, 1998)

As *Saving Private Ryan* sweeps the country, learn about the reality behind the celluloid images.

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World War II

Photographs from the United States Navy archive.

once unimaginable, and by sailors who never laid eyes on an enemy ship.

Japan would in time pay a horrific price for its moment of victory at Pearl Harbor, but the attack was hardly a gesture of suicidal folly. It was a carefully calculated risk that held out the prospect of huge rewards. The potential gains seemed especially alluring in December of 1941. Hitler's conquest of France and the Netherlands in the preceding year and the Battle of Britain had left the resource-rich European colonies in Southeast Asia and the Indonesian archipelago temptingly vulnerable. The Americans seemed more concerned with the disintegrating situation in Europe than with events in the Pacific, and appeared unlikely to muster either the resources or the will to fight a two-ocean war. When Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, in June of 1941, distracted Japan's traditional rival for hegemony in East Asia, Japanese expansionists saw a historic opportunity. Now was the time to plunge into the paddies and rubber plantations of French Indochina and British Malaya, and the coveted oil fields of the Dutch East Indies. This "Southern Operation" would seal off China from outside help, thus underwriting victory in Japan's frustrating four-year war against Chiang Kai-shek's feckless but tenacious Chinese army. It would cast out the hated European and American colonizers once and for all, ending centuries of Western dominance in Asia. More immediately, seizing the Dutch East Indies oil fields would secure Japanese fuel supplies, nullifying the effect of the embargo that America had imposed in July, in a futile effort to restrain Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia.

At an imperial conference in the first week of September, 1941, Japanese officials resolved that if a reversal of the American embargo was not achieved through diplomatic means by early October, Japan should launch the Southern Operation. But as Japanese war games had repeatedly demonstrated, for the operation to be successful Japan must first knock out the British naval facility at Singapore, deny the Americans the use of the Philippines as a forward basing area, and venture far out into the Pacific to cripple the main elements of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The plan was hugely ambitious but not mad. Its slender logic resided for the most part in the hope that the isolationist and militarily unprepared Americans would be so stunned by Japan's lightning blows that they would lose the will to fight a protracted war, and would accept a negotiated settlement guaranteeing Japan a free hand in Asia. All the Japanese planners understood that a

**World War II
Imperial Japanese
Naval Aviation Page**

A privately maintained site with photos and information about Japanese naval officers, aircraft, and battles of the Second World War.

World War II in the Pacific

A gallery of photographs posted by The History Place.

**Royal Naval Vessels of
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World War II**

A collection of photographs of World War II naval vessels and submarines.

**The Navy Historical
Center**

This comprehensive site includes a collection of information about the Navy in World War II, and a World War II Naval Aviation Chronology.

December 7, 1941

A collection of photographs of the Pearl Harbor attack, as well as related maps and documents.

**Pearl Harbor, Hawaii,
Sunday, December 7,
1941**

Photographs and a detailed accounting of events.

conventional victory, ending in the complete defeat of the United States, was an impossibility. Admiral Takijiro Onishi was one of the few voices warning that an attack on Pearl Harbor might make the Americans "so insanely mad" that all hope for compromise would go up in flames. Everyone knew that if the Americans should choose to fight a war to the finish, Japan was almost certainly doomed. The Emperor, a diminutive figure revered by his people as the son of God, a taciturn man who usually sat impassive during these ritualized conferences, appreciated the perils ahead. He sharply reminded his military leaders that China's extensive hinterland had cheated Japan of victory on the Asian mainland, and that the Pacific was "boundless." To that cryptic utterance there was no effective rejoinder. The plan was approved.

Pearl Harbor

SO it was that in early December of 1941 Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of Japan's Combined Fleet, fretted in his headquarters aboard the battleship *Nagato* in Hiroshima Bay. He had directed a powerful task force under Vice-Admiral Chuichi Nagumo to sortie on November 26 from Hitokappu Bay, in the Kurile Islands, under orders to attack the U.S. Pacific Fleet base at Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto had provided that "in the event an agreement is reached in the negotiations with the United States, the Task Force will immediately return to Japan," but the negotiations had by now irretrievably collapsed. There would be no turning back.

Other Japanese naval forces were at the same time initiating the enormous Southern Operation, slicing southward from Japan to land invasion troops in the Philippines, Malaya, and the great oil-rich prize of the Dutch East Indies. The Pearl Harbor expedition was the pivot of this complex scheme, and surely the most perilous of the several daring military operations Japan now had under way.

So much could go wrong. The strike force, designated First Air Fleet, had been organized only eight months earlier, and had never fought a concerted action. The six aircraft carriers that composed its fighting core embodied the experimental concept of naval air power, long

advocated by visionaries such as the American Billy Mitchell and the First Air Fleet's own air staff officer, Commander Minoru Genda, but still virtually untested in the unforgiving crucible of battle. The very length of the 4,000-mile attack route, well beyond the Japanese navy's traditional radius of action, necessitated tricky refueling at sea, and amplified the chances for detection.



Minoru Genda
(Photo courtesy of
The U.S. Naval Institute)

Surprise would enormously enhance the prospects for success, just as surprise had favored Japan when it launched its other great war against a Caucasian power by besieging the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in 1904. So Nagumo's ships ploughed methodically eastward from Hitokappu Bay in strict radio silence, enveloping themselves as well in the cloud and mist of an eastering weather front. Yamamoto could trace their putative movements on his charts, but would know nothing for certain until radio silence was broken.

Short, deep-chested, swift and sarcastic in argument, bold and ingenious in battle, born in 1884 in the great flowering of the Meiji Restoration, Yamamoto was at the summit of his distinguished naval career in 1941. He had firsthand knowledge of his adversary. He had studied English at Harvard in the 1920s, and later served as naval attaché in Washington, where he had earned a reputation as a shrewd poker player. He had also acquired a sober respect for the war-making potential of the United States. He knew that its vast industrial base and large population would make it a formidable foe if it ever mustered the political will to fight, and probably an invincible foe if the conflict was protracted. Through the tense debates since 1937 about Japan's foreign policies, Yamamoto's had been a voice of moderation. He did not fully trust Japan's Axis allies, and repeatedly pleaded for alternatives to war with the United States. Yet to Yamamoto had fallen the task of devising the battle plan for that war. A devoted patriot and loyal warrior, Yamamoto had done his duty faithfully -- and brilliantly.

The attack on Pearl Harbor fitted Yamamoto's gambler's temperament. It entailed gigantic risks, but also held out the promise of extravagant rewards. If fully successful, it

might cow the isolationist Americans into acquiescing in Japan's dominance over China and the Pacific. At a minimum, knocking out the U.S. Pacific fleet would buy precious time for the Southern Operation to go forward unmolested, and for Japan so to consolidate its hold on Southeast Asia that it could not easily be dislodged.

Success at Pearl Harbor would vindicate the Japanese navy, so long denied a role in the land war in China, yet fiercely proud of the part it had played in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 -- especially its legendary conquest of the Russian fleet at the Battle of Tsushima Strait, in 1905. For the Japanese people, and especially for seamen like Yamamoto, Tsushima represented not only a glorious naval victory but a confirmation and font of racial pride. Tsushima had demonstrated the vulnerability of the haughty Western powers in the face of Japan's rising industrial might and abiding moral superiority. Yamamoto himself had been blooded at Tsushima. His left hand, missing two fingers lost in that battle, daily reminded him of the near-mythic spell that Tsushima still cast for his service and his nation.

At sea on December 4, silent and undetected several hundred miles northwest of Hawaii, Vice-Admiral Nagumo's sprawling flotilla of nearly three dozen ships swung from its easterly course to a southeasterly bearing. On the morning of December 6 Nagumo completed his final refueling. His oilers angled away to take station at the rendezvous point for the return voyage. Freed of the lumbering tankers, at 11:30 Nagumo ordered speed increased to twenty knots and pointed his ships due south, carving a course that would bring them to the launching sector, 200 miles north of Oahu, just before dawn the next day. At 11:40 his flagship, the giant carrier *Akagi*, ran up the very "Z" flag that Admiral Togo had flown at the Battle of Tsushima Strait, thirty-six years before. Flushed with patriotic emotion, Japanese sailors and pilots cheered wildly.

With Togo's historic pennant snapping in the wind, Nagumo's arrowhead-shaped armada plunged through heavy seas, bearing relentlessly down on its target. Destroyers patrolled along its flanks, submarines guarded its rear, and an imposing cordon of battleships and cruisers closely jacketed the precious carriers with their lethal cargoes at the arrowhead's heart.

Just before 6:00 A.M. Nagumo wheeled due east again, to

launch his planes into the wind. Pilots, wearing bandannas emblazoned with the word *Hissho* ("Certain Victory"), scrambled into their aircraft. Within minutes 183 planes had lifted from the decks of the six carriers and were shaping their triangular formations for the first attack wave. Fifty-one dive bombers made up the high squadron, with forty-nine level bombers below, and forty torpedo planes lower still. High overhead ranged forty-three Mitsubishi A6M fighters -- the swift and nimble "Zeros" that would soon terrorize American fighting men all over the Pacific. By the time the second attack wave had been launched, about an hour later, some 350 aircraft, led by Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, were droning southward toward Oahu.

At the very moment that Nagumo ordered his carriers to point their bows into the wind, shortly before noon Washington time, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall was returning from a Sunday-morning horseback ride to his War Department office in Washington. There aides presented him with a translation of a freshly decrypted message from Tokyo. It contained a lengthy and final reply to the ten-point American position that Secretary of State Cordell Hull had presented to Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura on November 26, and instructed Nomura once and for all to break off negotiations. As Marshall scanned the sterile diplomatic prose, he reached its alarming codicil, ordering Nomura to submit the reply "at 1:00 P.M. on the 7th, your time." To Marshall the highly unusual specification of a precise time, and on a Sunday at that, was ominous. The time was scarcely an hour away. Marshall immediately drafted a message to be sent to Army commands in the Philippines, Panama, Hawaii, and San Francisco: "Japanese are presenting at one pm eastern standard time today what amounts to an ultimatum.... Just what significance the hour set may have we do not know but be on the alert accordingly. Inform naval authorities of this communication." Within minutes the message was encoded and dispatched by radio to all destinations -- except Hawaii. Atmospheric conditions were creating heavy static that temporarily blocked the wireless channel to Honolulu. The War Department signal officer chose the next-fastest communication route: a commercial Western Union teletype. The message left Washington on the Western Union wire at 12:17 P.M., and was relayed by the Radio Corporation of America installation near San Francisco to Hawaii. It reached Honolulu sixteen minutes later -- 7:33 A.M. Hawaii time. A messenger picked up the telegram at RCA's Honolulu office, mounted his

motorcycle, and roared away to deliver it to General Walter C. Short at Fort Shafter, several miles away. Fuchida's planes were then twenty minutes north of Oahu. Still en route when the attack commenced, the messenger reached Fort Shafter only after Fuchida's planes had wreaked their destruction.

That communications delay was not the only missed opportunity to spoil the Japanese surprise. As Fuchida's attackers formed up over their carriers, just before 7:00 A.M., an American destroyer patrolling outside Pearl Harbor's mouth sighted and depth-bombed a Japanese midget submarine trying to slip into the anchorage. But the destroyer's report of this contact was discounted as another in a series of frustratingly unconfirmed submarine sightings, and set aside for further verification.

Minutes after the submarine contact, an Army radar operator on northern Oahu reported an unusually large flight of incoming aircraft. They were, in fact, Fuchida's first wave, still nearly an hour away, but the operator's superior officer irresponsibly intuited that the blips on the screen represented a flight of B-17 "Flying Fortresses" being ferried in from California to Hickam Field. The officer was brought to this tragic miscalculation at least in part by his recollection that radio station KGMB had been broadcasting all night -- a programming schedule that almost invariably meant B-17s were arriving from the mainland, their navigators using the station's beam as a homing signal. Fuchida's pilot was meanwhile using that same beam, carrying saccharine Hawaiian tunes, to guide him to Oahu.

When Fuchida sighted land from his lead bomber, at about 7:30, he gave the order to assume attack positions. Below the warplanes the American ships and aircraft lay serenely unsuspecting and virtually undefended, exactly as described by the espionage reports from Japan's Honolulu consulate. For more than an hour bombs and bullets pelted down on the unmaneuverable American battleships, mostly moored in pairs in "Battleship Row," off Ford Island, and on the unflyable American airplanes, parked wingtip-to-wingtip at Bellows, Wheeler, and Hickam Fields so that they could be guarded against land-based sabotage. When the last Japanese plane winged away, at about 10:00 A.M., eighteen U.S. naval vessels, including eight battleships, had been sunk or heavily damaged. More than 180 aircraft were destroyed, and at least 120 disabled. The dead numbered 2,403 -- 1,103 of them entombed in

the battleship *Arizona*, which sank rapidly after a bomb exploded in its forward magazine. Another 1,178 men were wounded. Columns of smoke obscured Fuchida's final reconnaissance as he departed for the *Akagi*, but he knew beyond question that his airmen had triumphantly accomplished their mission.

Continued...

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David M. Kennedy is the Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History at Stanford University. His article in this issue will appear, in slightly different form, in his book *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, to be published by Oxford in May.

Illustrations by [Laszlo Kubinyi](#)

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