

Summary: Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941

At 7:02 a.m., December 7, 1941, an army mobile radar unit set up on Oahu Island in Hawaii picked up the telltale blips of approaching aircraft. The two privates operating the radar contacted the Army's General Information Center, but the duty officer there told them to remain calm; the planes were probably American B-17s flying in from California. In fact, they were Japanese aircraft that had been launched from six aircraft carriers 200 miles north of Hawaii.



At 7:55 a.m., the first Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, the main base of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Moored in the harbor were more than 70 warships, including eight of the fleet's nine battleships. There were also two heavy cruisers, 29 destroyers, and five submarines. Four hundred airplanes were stationed nearby.

Japanese torpedo bombers, flying just 50 feet above the water, launched torpedoes at the docked American warships. Japanese dive bombers strafed the ships' decks with machine gun fire, while Japanese fighters dropped high explosive bombs on the aircraft sitting on the ground. Within half an hour, the U.S. Pacific Fleet was virtually destroyed. The U.S. battleship *Arizona* was a burning hulk. Three other large ships—the *Oklahoma*, the *West Virginia*, and the *California*—were sinking.

A second attack took place at 9 a.m., but the damage had been done. Seven of the eight battleships were sunk or severely damaged. Out of the 400 aircraft, 188 had been destroyed and 159 were severely damaged. The worst damage occurred to the *Arizona*; a thousand of the ship's sailors drowned or burned to death. Altogether, 2,403 Americans died during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; another 1,178 were wounded. Japan lost just 55 men.

It was not a total disaster, however. Japan had failed to destroy Pearl Harbor's ship repair facilities, the base's power plant, or its fuel tanks. Even more important, three U.S. aircraft carriers, which had been on routine maneuvers, escaped destruction. But it had been a devastating blow nonetheless. Later in the day on December 7, Japanese forces launched attacks throughout the Pacific, striking Guam, Hong Kong, Malaya, Midway Island, the Philippine Islands, and Wake Island.

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