

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 2 ★ Issue 5

World War II:

Pearl Harbor

DATE:

Dec. 7, 1941

LOCATION:

Pearl Harbor, Oahu, Hawaii

OPPOSING FORCES

United States: The majority of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet, under the command of Adm. Husband E. Kimmel, along with U.S. Army troops, installations, and air forces under the command of Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short.

Empire of Japan: The Imperial Japanese Navy's Pearl Harbor Strike Force (6 aircraft carriers, 423 planes [354 used in the attack], 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 9 destroyers, 3 submarines, and 8 tankers) under the command of Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo. Nagumo reported to Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

By 1941, U.S. leaders were watching the expansion of Nazi Germany in Europe while at the same time growing increasingly concerned about an aggressive Japan. To many, war seemed inevitable, but a strong isolationist sentiment remained throughout the country. Everything changed on 7 December 1941 – the day that President Franklin D. Roosevelt would call a “date which will live in infamy” – when Japan launched a successful surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor. The devastating attack crippled the fleet, while showing the world the new dominance of carrier-borne aircraft in naval warfare. Japan's tactical success, however, belied her strategic failure. With America's declaration of war the following day, Japan had created a determined and powerful enemy. And while Japan did gain time to expand in the Pacific, that time would be short-lived. Japan had awakened the “sleeping giant” of America.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by Japan: Japan had begun a policy of mercantilist expansion in 1931 with the invasion of Manchuria, a northeastern province of China. This was followed in 1937 by an invasion of the rest of China, and by the occupation of Indochina in 1940. As Japan continued asserting regional dominance through its “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” the United States placed embargoes on oil, scrap iron, and other commodities, while also freezing Japanese assets in America. Japan was also warned that an invasion of the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies would not be tolerated. Feeling the squeeze of U.S. policy, Japan pursued a two-tracked approach. While its diplomats were in Washington to

plan. But it was a plan for a limited war – to prevent America's ability to interfere in East Asia and the Pacific. At its core, the plan would create the conditions for continued Japanese expansion south and east, by neutralizing the striking power of U.S. forces in the Pacific – focusing on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor and the U.S. Far East Air Force in the Philippines.¹ Once these forces were destroyed, Japan would secure resource areas to her south, then establish a defensive perimeter from the Kuril Islands, south through Wake Island, the Carolines and Marshalls, and down to Rabaul on New Britain, to prevent future American interference. (Map 1) The Japanese believed that by dealing a preemptive blow to cripple U.S. military assets in the Pacific, America would eventually negotiate for peace on terms favorable to Japan.



Adm. Yamamoto

When Adm. Yamamoto's plan was approved, it targeted Pearl Harbor – along with near-simultaneous attacks on other American bases across the Pacific, including Midway Atoll, the Philippine Islands, Wake Island, and Guam, along with British Malaya. By August, the blueprint was complete. Vice Adm. Nagumo would lead the Pearl Harbor Strike Force, while Lt. Cmdr. Mitsuo Fuchida would lead the air raid.

The strike force departed Hitokappu Bay in the Kuril Islands on 26 November. Maintaining radio silence, the Japanese sailed on a northerly course – avoiding shipping lanes – before turning south to arrive at their launch point (230 miles north of Oahu) on 7 December. At the same time, a cordon of fleet submarines had moved near Pearl Harbor to attack any vessels at sea and to launch five midget submarines to infiltrate the harbor and attack moored ships. Once the task force was in position, aircraft would attack in two waves of torpedo bombers, level bombers, dive bombers, and fighters. Although updated intelligence reports indicated that the three aircraft carriers of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, *Lexington*, *Enterprise*, and *Saratoga*, were at sea, the Japanese proceeded with the plan.

Actions by the United States: For a decade, American leaders watched with growing concern as Japan extended its influence throughout Asia and the Pacific. In May 1940, amid escalating tensions, Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Pacific Fleet to relocate from San Diego, California, to Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. That summer, American troops and equipment were sent to Iceland and Greenland