

## Your History Book Lies: Imperial Japan Was Crushed at Pearl Harbor

by Warfare History Network

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### A major strategic blunder.

The battleships *California*, *Tennessee*, and *Pennsylvania*, the latter in dry dock, were also taking their share of punishment. The *Nevada* was able to get up steam and began moving toward the channel—the only escape route out of the harbor. Like hawks spotting a running rabbit, the Japanese planes seemed to halt what they were doing and concentrate all their firepower on her, hoping to sink her and put a large steel cork in the neck of the channel. At the last minute, though, Nevada's skipper, Captain F.W. Scanland, beached her, half sunk, just short of the channel.

Still hovering above the writhing, flaming cauldron that was once America's mighty anchorage, Fuchida felt his plane suddenly shudder. "Is everything all right?" he asked his pilot.

"Just a few holes in the fuselage," Matsuzaki replied calmly.

Satisfied with the answer and with the visible results of the first wave, Fuchida issued orders to bring on the second wave attack by another 167 aircraft, commanded by Lt. Cmdr. Shigekazu Shimazaki. There were 54 horizontal bombers divided into two groups flying at 11,500 feet. Shimazaki's Fifth Group from *Zuikaku* had the mission of putting Hickam Field out of commission, while Lieutenant Tatsuo Ichihara's Seventh Group from *Shokaku* would bomb Kaneohe Naval Air Station and Ford Island.

Accompanying them were Lt. Cmdr. Takashigi Egusa's 78 dive bombers divided into four groups; their job was to finish off any warships that appeared to be unscathed or only slightly damaged. The final component of the second wave was Lieutenant Saburo Shindo's 35 Zero fighters, whose role was to battle any American planes that tried to attack the formations and to strafe installations on the ground at Kaneohe and Wheeler Field.

By this time—approximately 9 am—antiaircraft gunners still at their posts on the burning, listing ships [were demonstrating improved marksmanship](#) and a number of Japanese planes—six fighters and 14 dive bombers—were being shot out of the sky. [A handful of American aircraft](#) managed to get airborne and tangle with the enemy planes, but they, too, were in danger of being downed by the antiaircraft gunners.

By about 9:30 am, the second wave had done its work and was heading back to its carriers. Fuchida, whose plane resembled Swiss cheese by now, was low and fuel and turned to rendezvous with *Akagi*, expecting to see the third wave on its way to Pearl Harbor. The fact that he did not see it puzzled him.

But in his wake was left awful devastation: eight battleships, three light cruisers, three destroyers, and four auxiliary craft damaged or destroyed. U.S. naval aviation also lost 13 fighters, 21 scout bombers, 46 patrol bombers, and seven other warplanes—not counting several American planes shot down by American gunners. It was the U.S. Navy's worst lost ever.

The Army's air component also lost 77 planes, with another 128 damaged. Even more tragic, 2,403 American service personnel had been killed, and 1,178 wounded. Sixty-eight civilian were dead, many in nearby Honolulu, killed by falling munitions.

### **Nagumo's Cautious Mistake**

Returning to the *Akagi* about noon, Fuchida reported at least four battleships sunk. Mission accomplished—at a cost of only 29 planes.

A grateful Admiral Nagumo told him, "Well done, Commander." But Fuchida, and Genda, too, were incredulous that their chief had not ordered the third wave to take off. When pressed, Nagumo said that it was best to leave well enough alone, that the American fleet had been crippled and, because the whereabouts of the American carriers could not be determined, the fleet would have to turn back immediately for Japan lest it be discovered and destroyed.

Nagumo, an overly prudent worry wart also feared that his task force was within range of Hawaii-based bombers and, even though he did not know how many, if any, American planes had survived with which a counterstrike could be carried out, he could not take the chance. He could not afford to push his luck; he had to get back to Japan as soon as possible.

Once he received reports of the attack, Admiral Yamamoto initially supported Nagumo's prudent decision to withdraw after the second strike but then later realized that it had been a grave error to not knock out the fuel depots, dockyards, and maintenance facilities.

Nine days after Pearl Harbor, Admiral Matome Ugaki, who would become Yamamoto's chief of staff during World War II, confided in his personal war diary: "By the help of Providence, we have at last obtained such brilliant results! Nothing can be more praiseworthy. With the entry of the huge *Yamato*, the ratio of 5-5-3 (set at the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22) turned out to be reversed. Instead of by treaty, we retaliated against the enemy with real power. This ought to teach them a lesson. Our 20 years of hard pains have now borne fruit. Here I express my hearty thanks to our great seniors who strove so hard." Ugaki was a bit premature in patting the IJN on the back.

The U.S. carrier fleet, which was at sea, escaped destruction and became the center of future IJN attention. It is notable that all but three of the battleships (*Arizona*, *Oklahoma*, and obsolete *Utah*) were repaired and returned to duty during the war. The Japanese had not considered that the shallow harbor also allowed for salvage.

## Consequences of the Attack on Pearl Harbor

There were a number of consequences of Japan's "success" of Operation Hawaii. First was victory disease. The Japanese military and civilians were consumed by their spectacular victory—at least for a while—and a sense that they were invincible. Combined with Japanese belief in divine support this became a major impediment to rational war planning.

Indeed, in their minds all of their pre-war doctrine was vindicated. This led Yamamoto to another attempt at a decisive battle to rid the seas of the U.S. carriers. The resulting [Battle of Midway](#)—an American victory—effectively ended any chance of Japanese success in the Pacific naval war.

Second was the rapid modernization of the U.S. Fleet. Once war was declared, there were virtually no limits on the funds spent by the United States to rebuild a more modern fleet from scratch and from the remnants of the Pacific Fleet. This fleet building effort dwarfed Japan's efforts during the war by a factor of eight in carriers (including escorts), battleships, and cruisers. Also, by sinking and damaging the battlewagons in a shallow harbor rather than at sea in the Kantai Kessen, America was handed [an ideal repair and refloat scenario](#).

The third consequence was a shift in the U.S. Navy's reliance on airpower and submarine warfare. The Navy was almost instantaneously transformed into a modern air and underwater sea force. There was no debate, only the reality of the situation.

Finally, Pearl Harbor rudely awoke the sleeping giant, in Yamamoto's words, from his isolationist slumber, converted him into an awakened avenger burning with a righteous anger, and propelled him into a position of world leadership. A massive visceral reaction by the U.S. citizenry and military to the Pearl Harbor attack fueled war plans, military preparation, mobilization, and industry forward faster than any other measure could have achieved. Although morale was initially dealt a serious blow, it was only temporary and ensured that revenge was at the top of the list for the American war effort.

Ironically, the level of rage also prevented any attempt at a peace settlement at this time, which might have favored Japan. It became a fight to the death with no possibility of U.S. negotiation with the Empire. It was unconditional surrender or nothing. Yamamoto's lack of foresight regarding this result may have been his greatest strategic failure.

Of course, the Japanese were more or less allowed the freedom of the Pacific for the next six months—until the [Battle of the Coral Sea](#) in May 1942. This, also, fed a number of the incorrect conclusions derived from Pearl Harbor.

However, Yamamoto was ultimately disappointed with Nagumo and the attack. He recognized the significance of the missing carriers. He saw the additional mistakes

in the failure to attack the fuel tanks and infrastructure. He compounded this error with his next plan to eradicate the American carriers and perhaps a return strike on Hawaii. Ominously for the IJN at Midway, they did not question why the U.S. was even present at the Coral Sea or consider that their secret diplomatic and naval codes had been compromised.

### **Kantai Kessen: Japan's Greatest Mistake at Pearl Harbor**

Seventy-plus years after the events of December 7, 1941, it is easy to be harsh in a judgment of Yamamoto. Before concluding, we must comment on his central role in the late acts of the Kaigun drama. He was one of the strongest advocates of avoiding war with the United States. Once he lost that battle, he desperately searched for a solution to the problem as he saw it. The problem was defined in terms of the Kantai Kessen, as were his solutions. However, the problem definition was flawed, and the results of his plan were disastrous for both the navy and his country.