

## Today in History

### December 7

**November 29** – The Admiral was on the bridge when a young officer came in. The young officer said, “Sir, a message.” He handed the Admiral the folded message that had just come from the radio room. The Admiral accepted the message, simply said, “Thank you,” then dismissed the messenger.

He unfolded the message and read it. He contemplated the three words in the message. He re-read it, then folded the message and put it in his pocket. He stared out the window on the bridge, deep in thought. All eyes on the bridge stole glances at him, trying to read any reaction from his face. They could detect none. His face was expressionless, and his eyes told them nothing.

The ship had been at sea for only three days. They were following a carefully planned course, awaiting a message. No one knew for sure what the message would be; they only knew that one would be coming that it would determine the course of their voyage, the course of their lives, and even the course of their nation!

If the “go” message came, it would be the greatest undertaking of any of their lives. They all knew it was the message for which they had been waiting, but only the Admiral knew what it meant.

If it was necessary to carry out the plan, no one knew for sure whether it would work. But they had prepared as well as they knew how. The men were ready for the last phase of the operation. If the “go” message came, they would only have a few days for the final preparations. Then their great task would begin. Suddenly the message was in.

The long awaited message from headquarters read, “Climb Mt. Niitaka.” It was the “go” order. Now they would act on months of careful planning. Details had been painstakingly worked out, then worked on some more.

It was a grand plan, but no one knew if it would be necessary. The Admiral knew the task ahead was daunting, and he had reservations about the plan, but he expected a great victory. The next few days would be tense and his task force continued to maintain radio silence to not alert the enemy.

**December 7** -- On the eighth day after receiving the message, a beautiful sunrise greeted the crew. It was a clear day, with only a few clouds. The conditions were perfect. Once above the horizon, the conditions sprayed sun rays in every direction. Many could not help noticing the resemblance the sunrise had to their country’s battle flag. They saw it as a good omen.

Just after 6:00 a.m., his task force arrived at its destination approximately 230 miles north of the target. Their day of glory had arrived. He ordered all six aircraft carriers to turn into the wind and begin launching planes.

There were a little over 400 planes at his command. He left approximately 40 to protect the task force from any attack. The planes left toward the target in two waves, 353 planes in all. It would have been better to send all the planes at once. (Please note that the actual numbers vary slightly in different accounts. I'm using the most commonly quoted numbers.)

They decided on two waves because if they waited for all the planes to form up at once, many of the very first planes would be too low on fuel to make the return trip to the carriers. It seemed a waste to not recover as many planes and aircrews as possible. Thus, when about half of the planes were launched, the first wave, 181 planes, headed toward the target at 6:15 a.m. The planes had less than a two hour flight to the target.

Just a few miles from the target, Capt. Mitsua Fuchida, the commanding officer, fired a single rocket, indicating that surprise had been achieved. However, the fighter planes did not notice the rocket. Ten seconds later, he fired a second rocket. This time the fighters saw it and formed up to protect a surprise attack.

If surprise were achieved, the plan was to attack with torpedo planes first. If surprise was not achieved, the plan was to strike with dive bombers first. When the commander fired the second rocket, the torpedo and dive bombers failed to notice the time lag between the two rockets and assumed that surprise had not been achieved.

They changed their attack plan to have the dive bombers strike first and then the torpedo planes would attack. That is the reason that the first real strike that morning came from bombs and not torpedoes. Such a mishap could easily have lead to disaster, but not on that day. That day would be a great victory for the Imperial Japanese Navy, perhaps their greatest victory ever.

For their enemy, the United States, it would be the worst defeat in naval history.

The message sent back to the Japanese carriers at 7:53 a.m. was "*Tora! Tora! Tora!*" Literally, "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" the code that meant surprise had been achieved.

When the Japanese planes arrived over Pearl Harbor, there were eight battleships (ten according to the Japanese) all neatly tied to the docks on battleship row. Four were sunk, three seriously damaged, and one slightly damaged in the two waves of the attack. The aircraft carriers of the United States were out to sea and thus spared destruction.

The Japanese also attacked Hickam and Wheeler fields, both U.S. Army air bases. The two waves destroyed hundreds of frontline planes on the ground. Of 394 U.S. aircraft, 188 were demolished and 159 damaged.

Over 2200 men died at Pearl Harbor. The American death toll was 2403, with another 1178 wounded. Almost half of those died on one ship, the *Arizona*.

Capt. Fuchida urged Admiral Nagumo to launch a third strike. There were still a lot of targets he felt the Japanese should hit, but Nagumo decided to withdraw.

Capt. Fuchida also noted that a few American planes did get off the ground. He was impressed with their courage. Despite being massively outnumbered, they flew straight into the superior plans and numbers and attacked. A few American aircraft that launched shot down at least six of the 29 Japanese planes lost.

On December 8, the day following the attack, in a speech to Congress, President Roosevelt declared, “Yesterday, on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, forces of the Empire of Japan...” His speech resulted in the U.S. Congress declaring war on Japan with one dissenting vote. Then Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. as well, and Congress followed by declaring war on them. The U.S. was launched into war by the strike at Pearl Harbor.

In retrospect, the “victory” for the Japanese at Pearl Harbor had unintended consequences for both sides. The Japanese did achieve their aim of crippling the U.S. fleet, but they failed to destroy the dock facilities, the repair shops at Pearl Harbor, and the three American aircraft carriers. Strategically these were more important than the battleships, though few saw it at the time.

What Pearl Harbor proved to the U.S. was how obsolete the battleship was as the primary naval ship. The air power advocates were proved correct. Battleships still had their place, but they were no longer the primary ships that would win a war. The age of the aircraft carrier had come.

For most of the U.S. military, it came quite suddenly and unexpectedly. In Japan, the realization of the value of air power would not come for almost six more months. By the time they figured out that air power would win the war, it was too late for them. That is odd considering that as the victors at Pearl Harbor, they failed to grasp that they achieved their primary objective almost entirely through air power at very little cost to their forces. They lost only 29 planes. None of their surface ships were damaged, though they did lose a submarine and five midget submarines.

The Japanese attack came prior to Japan’s formal declaration of war. By the time Japan’s embassy in Washington, D.C. decoded and translated the last of a 14-part message, and delivered it to the U.S. President, the attack at Pearl Harbor was well under way.

Admiral Yamamoto, the man who designed the raid on Pearl Harbor, said, “I fear we have awakened a sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve.”

His words were prophetic. The surprise attack united Americans in a way that nothing else is likely to have done. For the rest of the war, the American battle cry was “Remember Pearl Harbor.” American servicemen DID remember Pearl Harbor.

The American loss at Pearl Harbor was not as bad as it may have appeared. The battleships that we lost were old, but they were also far more obsolete than most had imagined. Without them, the U.S. strategists were forced to use air power because it was all they had to work with in the Pacific for a while.

Despite the fact that the U.S. planes were, at that point in the war, inferior to the Japanese planes, Americans began using their air power far more effectively. That was something the Japanese did not really do until after they had lost too much air power to make a difference.

Admiral Yamamoto had been against going to war against the U.S. He had lived in the United States and traveled the country extensively. He knew of America's industrial might. He did not believe Americans to be soft and unwilling to fight.

Many in the Japanese military believed that American troops lacked courage. Going into the war, Japan believed that the individual warrior's spirit would be the primary factor in winning the war. It wasn't.

Like almost all wars, it came down to economics. The stronger American economy could crank out more weapons of war than any other nation. Wars are won by economic strength, raw materials, the ability to convert those raw materials into usable weapons of war, the ability to deliver those weapons to men who knew how to use them, and the courage of the men to use those weapons effectively.

Japanese military men were courageous, but they seriously underestimated Americans for the first six months of the war. Most of those in Japan who were anxious for war with America had no real concept of what it would take to win a war against America.

With any American fighting spirit at all, Japan never really had a chance. Had they not attacked Pearl Harbor, or any other American assets in the Pacific, America might not have been thrust into the conflict. Japan could have simply attacked Dutch and British areas and achieved their goal of obtaining more resources.

Had America not entered the war, they would almost certainly have defeated the British and Dutch forces because those two nations were already embroiled in a fight to the finish with the Germans, and they weren't winning at home. The Pacific was a LONG way from home for them, but for the Japanese, the Pacific was their back yard.

The attack at Pearl Harbor caused a panic in the U.S. In some places on the west coast, Japanese forces were spotted, though fleetingly, trying to carry out attacks and invade the U.S. Exactly what those sharp-eyed individuals actually saw is not clear, but the Japanese never considered an attack on the west coast and had no forces within 2000 miles of the U.S. west coast.

Pearl Harbor has caused a lot of controversy on both sides of the Pacific. Some say that the U.S. march across the Pacific was delayed for at least two years because of the fleet losses at Pearl Harbor. Other say it may have sped up the advance by ridding the U.S. Navy of any illusions about the proper place for battleships.

The U.S. did start its push across the Pacific about eight months after Pearl Harbor. It is hard for me to see how a good argument can be made that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor delayed our striking back for two years in light of the fact that America began to attack Japanese strongholds only eight months later.

Some say that some Americans knew the attacks were coming, but made no effort to stop them so that America would be united following the surprise attack. There are two issues related to this I will address. One is figuring out what the messages actually meant and the other is what action high-level American leaders might have taken had they really known the attack on Pearl Harbor was coming. This is just my opinion of course.

First, there is no doubt that in the large volume of coded messages that messages indicating there would be an attack on Pearl Harbor did exist. The problem comes in determining how to interpret such messages. Now you may be thinking, “Exactly how many ways are there to interpret a message saying there would be an attack.” As you will see, there are a lot of ways that could happen.

There were thousands of messages. Those messages identified numerous targets. I have no trouble believing that other targets were considered more likely than Pearl Harbor. The U.S. was trying to protect its fleet and planes from sabotage, not surprise attack. Was a surprise attack possible? Of course – events proved that. But Japan perhaps had better strategies for going to war than a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Certainly given the grand Japanese strategy of opening hostilities and within 120 days capturing many targets to strengthen their position could have been achieved without attacking American forces directly.

Japanese naval strategy had always been to draw the American fleet to them for a decisive action. If that could have been done that early in the war when Japan had superior forces, Japan would still not likely have won the war, but it might have achieved a more favorable negotiated settlement. Why?

By hitting the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor, Japan struck on a day (Sunday) when more ships would be in the harbor. However, those ships were not full of men. Most had no more than half their regular complement of sailors, and many had only a few men aboard. Personnel losses for the U.S. would have been much higher, perhaps taking out some of the key commanders who would lead U.S. victories later.

By attacking ships in Pearl Harbor, which is only 40 feet deep, many of the ships sunk could be raised. Had those losses occurred in the open ocean, every ship lost at Pearl Harbor would have been lost permanently. Many of the ships that were seriously damaged might have to be scuttled. On the other hand, in the open ocean, those ships would not have been sitting still either.

Another factor is that war that came about by surprise attack really angered the Americans and after that they were in no mood for any negotiating. Almost from the beginning America was unwilling to settle for anything less than a total victory over Japan.

Getting back to the messages though, there were so many messages on so many different topics that it just made sorting the wheat from the chaff difficult at best. Also, many messages weren't decoded until later.

When one is looking at say a hundred messages, and let's suppose that there are ten messages on ten different subjects, and you know that of those ten subjects, not more than two or three could be the real target, how do you decide which ones to pay attention to? It is difficult, but nothing like the difficulty facing U.S. intelligence at the time.

The message volume was well into the thousands. Only a small handful indicated an attack at Pearl Harbor. Given what Japan actually needed, those messages were easier to discount than some other messages.

It seems to me that in 20-20 hindsight we can see that those messages were real. Looking into the future based on the available information is not nearly so clear. Yes, we had broken Japan's diplomatic code and could actually read the messages faster than the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C. We could also read a lot of the military messages since we had broken their naval codes as well. Despite all of that, determining which few messages in a vast sea of messages have the best information is not easy. There just was not enough to really figure out what is coming in most cases.

In the case of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese task force operated under strict radio silence, not even using low-powered ship-to-ship radios to communicate. Thus, once the task force left Japan, it did nothing to give itself away.

Later in the war, when Japanese strategy became a little more clear by their actions, guessing their true intentions might have happened. But prior to December 7, 1941, it just was not happening.

Thus, I don't really believe that Americans "knew" that Pearl Harbor was going to be attacked. Oh some may have, but generally high level people could only have recognized it as one of many possibilities, not as a certain event to occur. Later, when more information was available for just such a precise reading of Japanese intentions, the interpretation of such material was still subjective. Not everyone seeing the same things agreed on the meaning of those messages. There are just too many problems with believing that messages were ignored for any purpose in hopes of getting the U.S. into the war.

Second, an attack on Pearl Harbor was not without risk. If the attacking planes were spotted on the way in, they might still have done serious damage to battleship row, but if American planes had been scrambled and fought back, Japanese losses would certainly have been much higher. It is even possible that the attack would have been beaten back entirely and the U.S. suffered only minimal losses.

Had all American planes available been scrambled and air borne at the time of the attack, American planes would have easily outnumbered the Japanese planes. Further, with more warning, it seems likely that an effective counter strike against the Japanese carriers could have been highly successful.

Had an American attack force simply followed the Japanese planes back to their ships, they could have attacked while the Imperial Navy was trying to recover its attacking planes. The

opportunity to hit six carriers in that condition on the first day of the war could have resulted in a tremendous American victory. And the fact that Japan attacked without warning, did serious damage to the American fleet, and killed a lot of Americans before declaring war, would still have been rallying factors for the U.S. We would still have been at war, but Japan would not have been nearly as strong.

Let's suppose that American commanders at the highest level knew Pearl Harbor was going to be attacked. They could have ordered the fleet out to sea in the waters right around Hawaii and lessened the damage since it is unlikely the Japanese would have been successful sinking so many and damaging them all in an expected battle.

They could have had planes ready to meet the attack. They could have placed American carriers in a position to have scrambled their aircraft once the Japanese planes were spotted, then been prepared to follow those planes back to the mother ships, and attack then.

All of those strategies could have been used to our advantage. Japan would still have attacked without declaring war, which was certainly a uniting factor. The attack would still have been unprovoked, which was also a uniting factor. The difference is we would not have lost as much material, and perhaps not as many men. Or, if we had lost as much, the Japanese would have paid much more dearly for that success, probably so much they could not have termed it a success.

What if our leaders had decided that was not enough to get America "up" for the war? They still had other options.

Let's suppose that some truly insightful leader had figured out that what would work the best was the loss of so many battleships because they recognized that the day of the battleship as the front line naval weapon was over. They could have ordered the battleships to have the lowest possible amount of manpower available. They could also have removed valuable items like ammunition and fuel from the ships and saved those supplies. Then when the Japanese struck, we would still have lost the ships but not nearly as many men or as much collateral material.

Losing those ships would still have been a rallying point for America. Then they could have had our troops ready for a counter strike. Tactically Japan might still have achieved a victory, but it would have been a lot closer, and it is possible that we could have started the war off with what was a tactical victory Japan, still united Americans to war, and achieved a strategic victory for America.

Such a scenario would have been much better for us. It might, in fact seems likely to, have shortened the war. Japan might still have achieved the initial success it did, but the come back road would have been shorter. It almost certainly would have saved American lives in the long run.

I'm no fan of FDR, but I don't think he knew what was going to happen at Pearl Harbor. He loved the navy, and though I may disagree with some of his policies, I believe he loved this

country and don't believe that he would have done anything as unpatriotic as allow the kind of defeat at Pearl Harbor that he has been accused of.

Nor do I find it likely that Winston Churchill knew and failed to warn us. Is it possible? Yes, but Churchill was interested in winning the war against the Germans. Britain was reeling. Was America likely to save Britain if it got in the war? Yes, but an American victory at Pearl Harbor would have achieved that aim much quicker and at less cost to Britain. Further, an American victory at Pearl Harbor would be more likely to allow the British to keep more of their empire together.

Britain may have been on the winning side in the war, but it lost a lot of its empire forever because of the war. One may disagree with Churchill's desire to see America in the war. One could easily argue that he did what he could to push America into the war. However, that could have happened with an American victory, or at least a strong American counter attack, at Pearl Harbor.

For those two basic reasons, the volume of message traffic and the availability of better options, I do not believe that there was a high-level American conspiracy about the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Americans love to figure out whom to blame when things go wrong. I think that is why there is so much analysis about what really happened. I think those things have value to help us avoid mistakes, but I think they can be done without placing blame.

At any rate, from December 7, 1941, America was at war. Over 400,000 Americans died in that conflict, but we suffered way less than any of the other major participants except Great Britain. But compared to our relative sizes, we actually suffered fewer military casualties than the British.

In the final analysis, I think the Japanese "victory" at Pearl Harbor is greatly overrated, but clearly it was a tactical defeat for America. Frankly I have more fun writing about clear American victories, but this date is a hard one to ignore for a history lesson. I hope you enjoyed today's history lesson.

*Rex L. Hogue*

Copyright © Rex L. Hogue. All rights reserved.