

# This Day in History... December 7, 1941

## “A Date Which Will Live In Infamy”

On December 7, 1941, Japanese bombers attacked American troops at Pearl Harbor, launching the US into World War II.

Imperial Japan had visions of controlling Southeast Asia. They needed the natural resources there to continue their war efforts, but the military presence of the United States prevented them from expanding their territory. So, they began planning a surprise attack, targeting battleships in an effort to eliminate America's influence in the region.

The arriving Japanese fleet consisted of six aircraft carriers, 408 planes, and five submarines, each with its own midget submarine. The midget submarines were launched toward Pearl Harbor around 1:00 a.m. on December 7. An American minesweeper saw the periscope from one of these midget submarines and informed the destroyer *Ward*. The *Ward* sank one of the other midget submarines at 6:45 a.m., firing the first American shots in the Pacific War. Another midget submarine failed in its attacks on a seaplane tender and destroyer and was eventually sunk by the destroyer *Monaghan*.

Shortly after 6 a.m., the first Japanese planes departed their aircraft carriers for Pearl Harbor. About an hour later, as they approached Oahu, the planes were detected by US Army radars. The radar post was still in training mode and its staff new to the technology. Two operators informed their superior of the approaching aircraft, but as they were expecting 12 B-17 bombers to be delivered from California, he told them to ignore it.

Near Oahu, the Japanese shot down several US planes, one of which managed to radio out a warning, though it was hard to understand. Ships in the water also sent out warnings, but they were still being processed by the time the Japanese bombers arrived at Pearl Harbor.

The attack commenced at 7:53 a.m., with the first ship being struck five minutes later. Japanese torpedo bombers led the first wave, targeting battleships, while dive bombers went after the air bases, including Hickham and Wheeler Fields, as well as the US Army Air Force fighter base. Sailors aboard the battleships anchored in the harbor awoke to a message from the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet: “Air raid on Pearl Harbor. This is no drill.” They quickly got to their positions to man the guns or otherwise protect their ships and crew. On land, men in the barracks had a similar startling awakening, and also rushed to take up arms. A few even managed to get in their planes and fight back in the sky.

Amidst the chaos and destruction, heroes like Doris “Dorie” Miller, a Mess Attendant on the USS *West Virginia*, emerged. Finding his battle station ruined, Miller helped carry wounded sailors to safety, including the captain of the *West Virginia*. With no other wounded in sight, Miller then manned a .50-caliber anti-aircraft gun, even though he'd never been trained in its use. That didn't prevent him from shooting down two confirmed Japanese planes, with more unconfirmed. As torpedoes blew through the deck, the crew was ordered to abandon ship. Miller dove overboard as the *West Virginia* settled to the harbor floor. Miller was one of several American servicemen to risk his life in the aid of others that day.

About an hour after the attack began, the second wave of about 170 Japanese planes arrived over Pearl Harbor and unleashed more destruction on American ships, aircraft, and hangars. Just 90 minutes after it began, the attack on Pearl Harbor was over. Casualties were high – 2,403 American civilians, Navy, Army, and Marine personnel were killed and another 1,778 were wounded. There

were 18 ships sunk or run aground, including five battleships. Though 13 of these ships were eventually repaired and returned to service to fight later in the war. Additionally, 188 of the 390 aircraft were destroyed with another 159 damaged. Japanese losses were much lower – 64 dead, one captured, and 29 planes lost. They considered launching a third wave of attacks but ultimately decided against it. The Japanese did however attack the Philippines hours later.

The Japanese military had hoped an attack of this size would discourage the United States from committing to war, but it had the opposite effect. As Admiral Hara Tadaichi said, “We won a great tactical victory at Pearl Harbor and thereby lost the war.”

The bombing galvanized support for America's involvement in World War II. The following day, President Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Japan, calling December 7, 1941, “a date which will live in infamy.” It took Congress just 33 minutes to declare war on Japan, after which Germany and Italy quickly declared war on the United States.

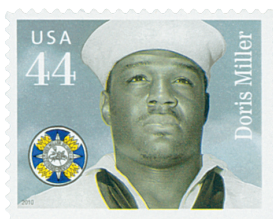
Back in Pearl Harbor, rescue teams searched for survivors, then salvage operations began. Navy divers spent 20,000 hours under water patching holes, moving debris, and pumping water out of ships so they could be refloated. Within six months, they had five battleships and two cruisers afloat and ready to go back to the mainland for repairs. Not all ships were as easily salvaged.

All of America committed itself to the war effort. Young men enlisted by the thousands, housewives contributed by rationing, and young women manned factory assembly lines. Over the coming years, virtually every United States citizen contributed to the war effort, leading to Allied victory.

Among the ships destroyed at Pearl Harbor was the USS *Arizona*, which lost 1,177 of its crew – about half the lives lost that day. Some of the ship was salvaged for use on other boats, but the hull and two gun turrets sat submerged in 40 feet of water. In 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the site as a national memorial, and public and private donations were used to finance it. Among the fundraising efforts was a benefit concert by Elvis Presley that collected over \$50,000. The memorial was dedicated in 1962.



*This stamp image was based on a US navy photo picturing the West Virginia and the Tennessee.*



*Miller was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions at Pearl Harbor.*



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*The Arizona was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1989.*

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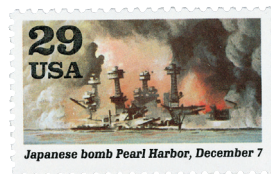
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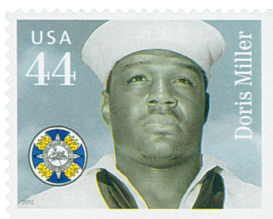
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