

Joe Walsh, USMC

*In Defense of Pearl Harbor,
December 7, 1941*

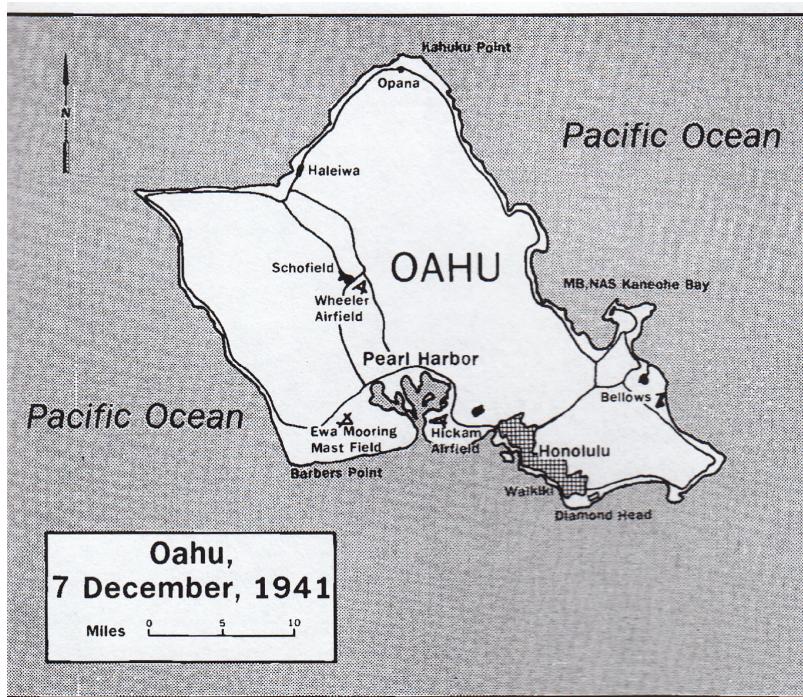
As a Marine in the defense battalions, from May 1940 to March 1943 Joe Walsh was stationed on Oahu, Midway, and Johnston Island. On December 7, 1941 his personal story intersected with one of the most momentous events in United States history. Few dates hold the power of that morning for Americans who were then of age. Even subsequent generations speak of December 7th with a reverence that acknowledges the watershed event it represents. Yet it is a day for which Joe's memories are limited. His recollections of months on Midway and Johnston Island are clearer to him today than the roughly two-hour period between 7:50 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. on December 7, 1941.ⁱ

Thirty-six years later, Joe applied for membership in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association (PHSA). It was a national organization for those in the military who had been on Oahu the day of the Japanese attack. The one-page form asked veterans to write, on the back of the sheet, a "brief account" as to what had happened to them on December 7th. Joe typed a short paragraph. Those sentences are our best record, he agrees, of his December 7th memories. Because they are Joe's words, the paragraph is worth quoting in its entirety:

"At about 0750 I was on my way to Mass (Religious services) aboard either the Arizona or Nevada, either way, never made it. The attack started while I was on the docks and immediately headed back to the barracks. From then on, it was all confusion. I was Company runner and made many message runs but can't remember a name or outfit. While on one of the runs I assisted in manning a 50cal machine gun. The damned thing jammed, full of cosmoline or whatever."

Placed in the overall context of December 7th, Joe's written account contains some generalizations common to all service personnel who witnessed the attack--Japanese planes dropping down out of the clouds, a rush back to one's duty station, and the havoc that ensued. At the same time, Joe's paragraph preserved particulars of that morning that were shared by a much smaller number of witnesses--a Sunday that began with a desire to be part of a morning church service, an assignment as a runner amidst enemy bombs dropping and machine gun fire, and a weapon that failed to shoot. In that one brief paragraph Joe wrote in 1977, he recorded several details from his personal story of what he did in the two hours of the Japanese attack. Those facts can be used to document Joe's experiences on the "date that will live in infamy."

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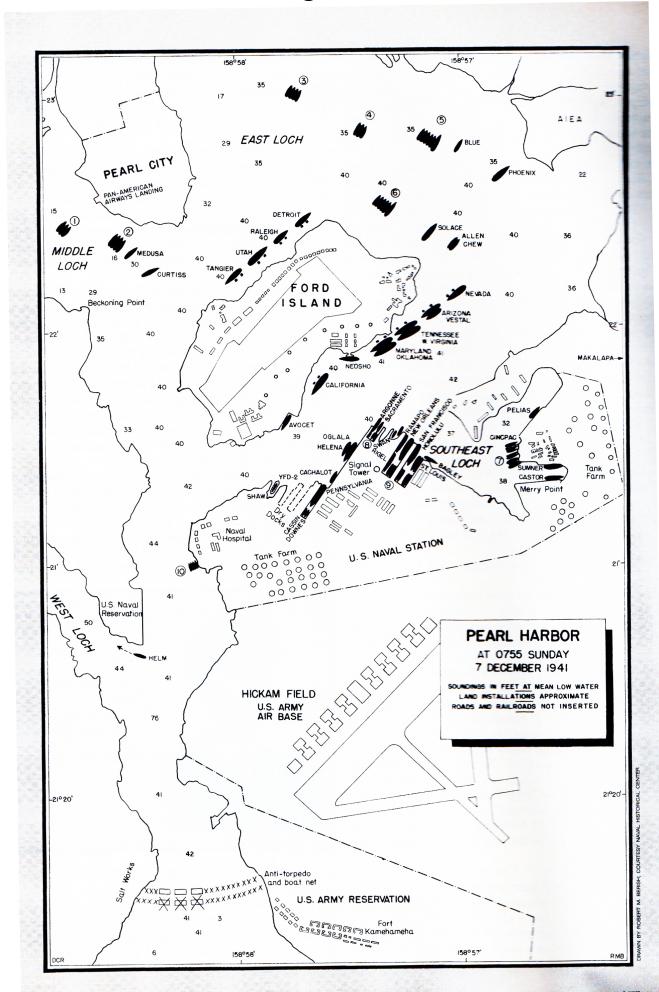


The morning began for Joe at the Navy Yard in the Marine barracks. The 3d Defense Battalion no longer lived in tents on the parade grounds. At the same time, it did not rate what Joe identifies as "a big old stone building" where Marines assigned to the Navy Yard lived. (He believes the transitory nature of the defense battalions explains the less than desirable housing they had.) Once the battalion returned from Midway, the Command quartered the unit in some wooden barracks. According to Joe, the buildings had no interior walls or doors. He adds, though, that "partitions for senior" NCOs had been added. Completed in 1940 and 1941, each barracks could house one hundred men. By late 1941, the Marine Corps had created seven defense battalions. One was stationed in Iceland, one was in training on the west coast of the United States, and five had arrived in the Pacific. Two of those five--the 3d Defense Battalion and the 4th Defense Battalion--were at the Navy Yard on December 7th awaiting their departure to the outpost islands. Additionally, the "rear echelon" of the 1st Defense Battalion and "a token element" from the 6th Defense Battalion were also at the yard.ⁱⁱ

Defense Battalion Marines were not the only members of the Corps at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Approximately forty-five hundred Marines were billeted in the area. Generally speaking, they served in three capacities--on ships, at air stations, and at the Navy Yard. More than eight hundred "seagoing Marines" were assigned to fifteen Navy ships within the harbor. On board, they fulfilled their historic role as orderlies for flag officers and ships' captains. This was in addition to other seagoing Marines who provided security on battleships, aircraft carriers, and on some of the cruisers that were part of the Pacific Fleet. They also manned secondary antiaircraft and machine gun batteries on board some ships. Aside from sea duty, Marines were posted, too, as guards at Naval Air Station Pearl Harbor (located on Ford Island within the harbor) and at Naval Air Station Kaneohe (on the tip of a peninsula about fifteen air miles northeast of Pearl

Harbor). Additionally, Marines were at a USMC air station that had been established on Oahu--Ewa Mooring Mast Field, about seven miles west of the harbor. A Marine Corps aircraft group was based at Ewa (MAG-21, made-up of fighting, scout-bombing, and utility squadrons).ⁱⁱⁱ

And lastly, the Corps was responsible for security at the Navy Yard. Joe thinks he never left the yard during the Japanese attack. Because of this belief, where the Marines were at that location, and what roles had been entrusted to them, should be especially noted. A Barracks Detachment along with two companies lived in a well-appointed, three-story, concrete building (the one Joe refers to as “a big old stone building”). One of the companies guarded the main gates at the submarine base and at the entrance to the Navy Yard. The second company acted as a police force at the yard; it enforced traffic regulations, for example. The Navy Yard’s fire department also fell under the jurisdiction of the Marine Corps. During the Japanese attack, Joe would have seen Marines at the Navy Yard respond swiftly to the enemy planes overhead. He and the other defense battalion Marines joined them in defending Pearl Harbor.^{iv}



Note the Navy Yard directly above Hickam Field.

Joe's religious faith had been a critical part of his childhood and adolescent years. When he was growing up in East Orange, his mother Frances perhaps shared with Joe and his siblings the story of how her grandparents traveled on a horse-drawn streetcar for more than an hour to attend weekly mass in Newark. The example his maternal great-grandparents set, Frances' own devotion to the Church, and Joe's personal faith directed him to seek out a Sunday morning service wherever he was stationed. He knew that a Catholic priest might not necessarily be the chaplain who conducted it. (Protestant denominations dominated the Chaplain Corps.) What was important to Joe was that he attended a religious service. He does recall maybe "four or five" Catholic chaplains, especially one on board the *USS Pennsylvania*; he describes that priest as "an old time chaplain," one who had been in the Navy for many years.

Joe explains that there was no chapel at the Navy Yard on Oahu. As such, Joe remembers weekly postings at the barracks to let Marines know where Sunday services would be held. He usually went to mass at a chapel located on the submarine base. Joe estimates "the distance from the barracks to the sub base was a few miles." Because of that fact, he adds, "it was easier to get to a battleship." Those ships were much closer. Officers also urged the men who Joe identifies as "base Marines" to join the sailors at church services on the ships in port. He recalls "about twelve guys at mass," all fellow Marines stationed at the Navy Yard. On past Sundays, Joe hopped onto one of the small boats that regularly carried men and supplies to battleships clustered around Ford Island, which lay directly across from the Navy Yard. Grouped together as they were, "Battleship Row" became the phrase that identified their location. Seven of those large ships were moored off of Ford Island on that first Sunday in December; an eighth one was in dry dock across the water from the island.^v

In the 1977 paragraph he wrote on his PHSA application, Joe recounted that his intention on December 7th was to board the battleship *USS Arizona* or the *USS Nevada*. Both were anchored off the southeastern end of Ford Island. In fact, the two battleships were near each other on December 7th. Joe believes he got as far as Pier 10 at the Navy Yard where he would have looked for a small boat to take him to Battleship Row. But as Joe wrote years ago, he "never made it" to mass that morning. The first Japanese bombs hit American targets around 7:55 a.m. as Joe looked for transportation to church.



Left: At the time of the attack, nearly half the U.S. Pacific Fleet was in

Above: Taken six weeks before the attack, this photo shows Ford Island

photo take of Pearl Harbor six weeks before the attack; Ford Island on left, Navy Yard in the center, next to Hickam Field

*"The attack started while I was on the docks
and immediately headed back to the barracks."*

While his memories of December 7th are few, Joe does recall seeing planes fly across the Navy Yard. Like so many others that morning, he must have first thought they were United States planes. As Joe remembers it, "They headed toward Hickam," an Army Air Base. The planes, he continues, "banked over the Marine Corps parade grounds. The next fence over was Hickam Field." While the Pacific Fleet was the primary target of the Japanese planes, the attack plan also called for simultaneous bombing of United States air installations. This was to guard against any Navy, Army, or Marine Corps planes becoming airborne and going after the Japanese. Hickam, adjacent to the Navy Yard, was one of six airfields that the Japanese targeted. At one point, perhaps Joe noticed the red sun painted on the sides of the planes overhead. If he did, when he saw it, Joe knew those were Japanese planes. His fellow servicemen called the Rising Sun symbol "the red meatball." Seeing it made every sailor, soldier, and Marine

realize that the planes above them were not American ones. One hundred and eighty-three of them filled the sky.^{vi}

The planes Joe and others saw that morning had flown off of six Japanese aircraft carriers; they were part of a strike force that totaled thirty-three ships. The enemy carriers held dive-bombers, fighters, and torpedo bombers. (The dive-bombers and fighters attacked Hickam Field, so those were probably the planes Joe remembers seeing overhead, flying toward that target.) The ships had left the Kurile Islands northeast of Japan on November 26th. On the morning of December 7th, the carriers sat two hundred and thirty miles north of the Hawaiian Islands. Beginning at 6:00 a.m., when Joe was probably just starting his day, the Japanese carriers launched the bombers and fighters. Twenty minutes later, when the planes completed their aerial rendezvous, the attack force flew south. In ninety minutes, the pilots were over Oahu.^{vii}

With enemy planes dropping bombs and strafing United States ships and ground installations, Joe instinctively knew what he had to do. In his own words, he “immediately headed back to the barracks.” Servicemen throughout Pearl Harbor--those who were not on their ship or at their base at 7:55 a.m. that morning--desperately tried to get to their duty stations. As a member of a Marine defense battalion awaiting orders to ship out, Joe had no such assignment at the Navy Yard. But he knew he had to get back to his battalion that was located there. He did not need to go through the main gate of the yard when he left the pier. But if Joe had, he would have passed by Marine guards at that entrance who, soon after the attack began, fired their rifles at the enemy planes.^{viii}

“From then on, it was all confusion.”

Once back at the Marine Barracks on the grounds of the Navy Yard, Joe wrote, “From then on, it was all confusion.” His sense of duty led Joe to his unit. At that time, the 3d Defense Battalion had in its ranks eight hundred and twenty-three enlisted men and forty officers. Unfortunately Colonel Pepper, who Joe thought so highly of, was not with his unit that day. He was temporarily at sea, on board the *USS Indianapolis*. The acting CO on December 7th was Major Harold C. Roberts who was off base when the Japanese attack began. Asked his assessment of Roberts, Joe remarked that the battalion Marines “liked him.” Certainly on December 7th, the major proved his leadership abilities. While Roberts made his way to the Navy Yard from Honolulu, other officers gave direction to the enlisted Marines in the 3d Defense Battalion. One who responded immediately to the attack was First Lieutenant James O’Halloran. He served as the duty officer for the battalion and was CO of Battery F, 3-inch Antiaircraft Group. Remembering his fellow Irishman, Joe comments, “You better do what he said. When he talked, you heard him three blocks away. An old-time Marine.” O’Halloran ordered that assembly be sounded, and he directed his Marines to take cover. Just minutes after 8:00 a.m., as more and more of the men from the 3d Defense Battalion exited the barracks, O’Halloran shouted additional orders. The Marines were told to run into battalion storage rooms where the unit kept small arms and machine guns. Other Marines were instructed to grab tractors and haul battalion guns to the parade grounds. But firing positions at the yard for the antiaircraft artillery guns were not the best. The barracks and other buildings

close by limited the firing field. Additionally, Japanese planes flew low and constituted a target for only brief moments. Joe points out, too, that the big antiaircraft guns inherently had a hard time targeting low-flying aircraft.^{ix}

In the minutes after Joe arrived back at the Navy Yard, a horrific event occurred in the harbor that he and everyone must have been aware of in spite of the “confusion”



around them. Sometime between 8:05 and 8:20 a.m., a second Japanese bomb hit the *USS Arizona*. That might have been one of the battleships, recall, that Joe had been headed toward less than an hour earlier. The shell detonated a powder magazine. Within a minute of its impact, one hundred tons of explosives stored within the *Arizona* exploded. The battleship split in two. Decks collapsed. Forward turrets and the conning tower fell into the hull. Fire jumped from the ship to oil that had leaked into the water. The flames and oil made a volatile mixture. Men at the Navy

Yard, including Joe, would have most certainly heard and seen the explosion, smoke, and fire.^x

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Roberts arrived at the Navy Yard around 8:20 a.m.; from that point on, he directed the response of the 3d Defense Battalion. The major established his command post at the southern corner of the parade grounds. With their guns in need of more ammunition, Roberts approved a plan to send Marines to two ammo dumps located outside the Navy Yard with the hope that one man could return with more ammunition. He set up a fire control system in the middle of the parade grounds; eight Marines acted as spotters, using field glasses to get a sighting on the enemy planes for battalion guns. What they saw was communicated to some buglers who then used their instruments as an alert system. One blast from the instruments, for example, meant planes had been spotted coming in from the north. Two blasts signaled an enemy approach from the east. Roberts also ordered groups of about sixteen riflemen each to sit on the ground near each other; an officer or NCO directed their combined fire at the Japanese planes. Knowing that the wooden barracks could catch on fire, Roberts saw to it that hoses, extinguishers, shovels, axes, and even buckets of sand be put in front of the buildings in case they were needed. There was a specific Marine unit, remember, at the Navy Yard that acted as the fire department. But that morning, Roberts knew no one could wait for it to respond to all the erupting flames.^{xi}

One other order Roberts gave might have directly involved Joe. The major called for battalion runners from all of the batteries. Communication between his 3d Defense Battalion command post on the parade grounds and officers under him was critical. The major needed contact with other units as well. In his 1977 written recollection of December 7th, Joe recalled that he made “many message runs.” But he does not remember to whom he carried the messages, either in respect to “a name or outfit.” Perhaps a level of frustration or anger explains an incident he did recall when he typed that paragraph three decades later. It documents a moment when he stopped to help some fellow Marines^{xii}

*“While on one of the runs
I assisted in manning a 50cal machine gun.
The damned thing jammed, full of cosmoline or whatever.”*

Within six minutes of when the Japanese attack began, Marines in the defense battalions returned fire with eight antiaircraft machine guns. By 8:20 a.m., less than thirty minutes after the enemy planes swooped down, the defense battalions at the Navy Yard had thirteen machine guns “manned and ready.” They used this firepower against the second wave of around one hundred and seventy enemy planes that began its attack about 8:54 a.m. Before the morning ended, the defense battalions were firing twenty-five antiaircraft machine guns as well as small arms fire. Briefly, Joe tried to help out with one of those guns.^{xiii}

In addition to the seacoast artillery gun, Joe’s second area of expertise in his defense battalion was the .50-caliber machine gun. That was the weapon many Marines at the Navy Yard used against Japanese planes on the morning of December 7th. Even though Joe was carrying a message for one of the officers at the Command Post, he would have stopped if he saw an urgent need to do so. Perhaps Joe noticed that the Marines could not get the machine gun to fire. In his written account, Joe explains “the damned thing jammed.” He guessed that cosmoline may have been the culprit. The military coated firearms with the chemical compound to act as a rust preventative. Brown in color with the smell of petroleum, cosmoline feels like wax. Obviously, Joe believed that an excessive amount of the compound might have been the culprit in jamming the gun.

Around 10:00 a.m., the second wave of Japanese planes flew away from their target area. They had completed their mission. Some two hours later, Major Roberts ordered Marines in the 3d Defense Battalion to fall into one of six “task groups.” No one knew if the Japanese planned to return for more aerial attacks. One group was assigned to help guard the Navy Yard. A second and third unit manned antiaircraft defenses and machine guns, respectively. A fourth provided a reserve infantry force as well as crews to fight the fires. The fifth coordinated transportation. The sixth group provided ammunition and equipment. Joe does not recall any specifics of what he did after the attack ended. If he was not a runner in the afternoon, he might have been assigned to one of these groups. Without question, in the hours after 10:00 a.m. Pearl Harbor Defenders helped those who had been injured. Joe may not have been formally assigned to that task. Nevertheless, he

could not have failed to see what the enemy assault cost the Marines, sailors, and soldiers stationed at what seemed to some of them, before December 7th, as a billet in paradise.^{xiv}



Marine Barracks at the Navy Yard



Navy Yard from the north end of the Marine Barracks Parade Grounds



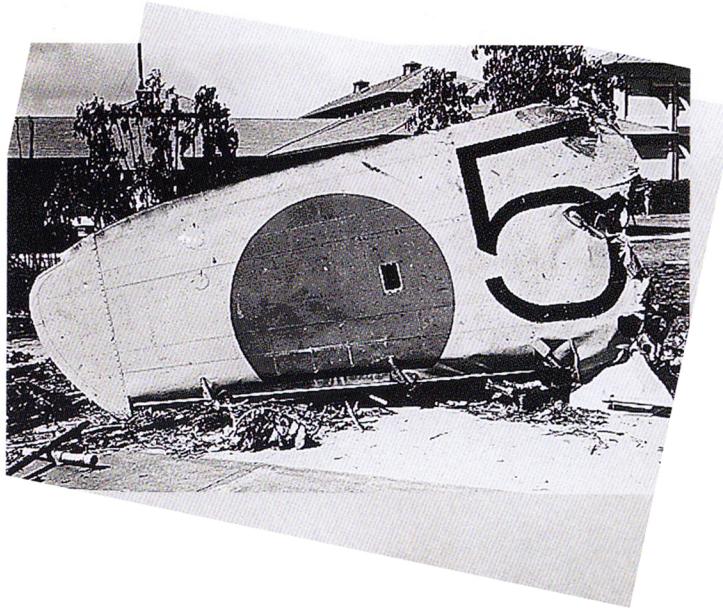
Marine Corps parade grounds at the Navy Yard

The 3d Defense Battalion prepared for casualties even while the attack had been going on. Before Roberts arrived at the yard, a Navy dental officer assumed medical responsibility for the wounded. The lieutenant set up makeshift first aid stations; he also formed stretcher parties to carry men who were badly injured into the barracks. Once Roberts and other doctors reached the yard, even more medical preparedness took place. The major ordered dressing stations created at each battalion headquarters and another one in the sick bay. One of the one-hundred-man temporary barracks prepared to receive casualties, as did the NCO club and PX. Some Marines were sent to the pier area to help gather and transport fleet casualties to the Naval Hospital. All of this, again, occurred while the enemy planes bombed and strafed ships as well as military land installations.^{xv}

Three hundred and fifty-three Japanese planes carried out the attack over the course of approximately one hundred and ten minutes. By the time the assault ended, the enemy had inflicted heavy casualties and material losses on the Americans. The number of soldiers, sailors, Marines, and civilians killed reached 2,403. The wounded in those same categories totaled 1,178. Of those numbers, Marines lost one hundred and twelve men; over sixty more were wounded. (Four of those injured were from the 3d Defense Battalion.) The Navy, with 2,718 killed and wounded, incurred the greatest total

casualties since Battleship Row had been the primary target. (Of the 1,500 men assigned to the *Arizona*, 1,177 died.) Eighteen United States ships were destroyed or damaged, as were more than three hundred aircraft. Fires continued long after the last Japanese plane left the sky over Oahu. On what was left of the *USS Arizona*, flames continued to burn for three days, ceasing only because there was nothing left to burn. Survivors of the attack pulled bodies out of the harbor for days afterward. Hundreds of sailors trapped in capsized ships waited frantically to be rescued; only some were.^{xvi}

For months after December 7, 1941, Marines in the 3d Defense Battalion saw evidence of their response to the enemy attack. A wing from a Japanese plane shot down over the Navy Yard stood on display in front of their headquarters. Full of .30-caliber bullet holes, the wing was from one of twenty-nine Japanese planes shot down by Pearl Harbor Defenders. The defense battalions claimed three of that number. Their small arms and machine gun fire proved effective against enemy targets that Sunday morning. Although he does not remember it, Joe most certainly saw the wing in the remaining time he was stationed at the Navy Yard. Whether or not he recalls it today is not important. What should be remembered by generations of Americans is the defense of Pearl Harbor Joe Walsh and others mounted in the first two hours of America's violent entry into World War II.^{xvii}



wing of a Japanese plane shot down on December 7th

ⁱ An April 1943 Muster Roll puts Corporal Joseph T.P. Walsh at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina in April 1943, www.ancestry.com (accessed March 15, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Robert J. Cressman and J. Michael Wenger, *Infamous Day: Marines at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941* (Washington, D.C., 1992) p. 1; Melson, *Condition Red*, pp. 5, 30; the assignment of some Marines in the 1st and 6th Defense Battalions to the Navy Yard is found in

www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Frequently_Requested/Marines_in_WWII... (accessed July 30, 2015); Joe explains that the “rear echelon” from the 1st Defense Battalion were “guys who stayed at Pearl to clean up what was left over” when the battalion pulled out. Muster Rolls (available on www.ancestry.com) identify Joe’s station in Hawaii with the phrases “Marine Barracks, Navy Yard, Pearl Harbor, T.H.” For the following pages on December 7, 1941, statistics on the number of Japanese planes, the time of both waves in the attack, and casualty numbers can vary depending upon the book or web site consulted.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Frequently_Requested/Marines_in_WWII... (accessed July 30, 2015); Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, p. 1; NAS Kaneohe’s location in respect to Pearl Harbor is taken from J. Michael Wenger, Robert J. Cressman, and John F. Di Virgilio, “No One Avoided Danger,” *NAS Kaneohe and the Japanese Attack of 7 December 1941* (Annapolis, Maryland, 2015), p. xi.

^{iv} Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, p. 1.

^v According to Kennedy, *The Library of Congress, World War II Companion*, p. 492, seven battleships “lay at anchor” at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. An eighth one, the *USS Pennsylvania*, was in dry dock at the Navy Yard, Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, The Rising Sun in the Pacific, 1931-April 1942* (Boston, 1948), p.103, 105 map.

^{vi} Six United States military airfields were on Oahu. Three were Army--Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, and Bellows Field; three were under the Navy--Ford Island, Kanoeha, and Ewa, which was the Marine Corps’ air station (www.worldwar2headquarters.com/HTML/PearlHarbor/PearlHarborAirFields/airfields.html; accessed July 31, 2015). The number of planes in the first wave is taken from Joy Waldron Jasper, James P. Delgado, and Jim Adams, *The USS Arizona, The Ship, The Men, The Pearl Harbor Attack, And The Symbol That Aroused America* (New York, 2001), p. 103.

^{vii} Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, p. 2; Jasper, Delgado, and Adams, *The USS Arizona*, p. 103; Kennedy, *The Library of Congress, World War II Companion*, pp. 488, 490; Japanese dive-bombers and fighters are identified as the Japanese planes that hit Hickam on www.15wing.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=5108 (accessed July 31, 2015)..

^{viii} At one point early in the attack, Marines guards at the main gate fired their rifles at the Japanese planes (Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, p. 25). The number of planes in the second wave is taken from Jasper, Delgado, and Adams, *The USS Arizona*, p. 104.

^{ix} Hough, Ludwig, and Shaw, *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal*, p. 67 on the number of Marines in the 3d Defense Battalion right before December 7, 1941; Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, pp. 23-24, 26.

^x Jasper, Delgado, and Adams, *The USS Arizona*, p. 147; Kennedy, *The Library of Congress, World War II Companion*, p. 493,

^{xi} Cressman and Wenger, *Infamous Day*, p. 26.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Melson, *Condition Red*, p.1 is the source of the quotation and the response of the defense battalions; for more on the defense battalions’ antiaircraft machine gun response, see www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Frequently_Requested/Marines_in_WWII... (accessed July 30, 2015). The time the second wave of Japanese planes launched its attack is taken from Susan Wels, *December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor, America’s Darkest Day* (San Diego, 2001), p. 145 insert. Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept, The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York, 1981), p. 530 gives 167 as the number of planes in the second wave.

^{xiv} Melson, *Condition Red*, p. 30.

^{xv} Ibid., p. 26. The dental officer was Lieutenant William R. Franklin. Decades after the war, he ended up living in the same city as Joe and Bea did, Fallbrook, California.

^{xvi} United States casualty and material losses are taken from James M. Scott, *Target Tokyo, Jimmy Doolittle and the Raid That Avenged Pearl Harbor* (New York, 2015), pp. 14, 23; Jasper, *The USS Arizona*, pp. 104, 145, 147; Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, p. 539; *Infamous Day*, p. 30 for the 3d Defense Battalion; www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Frequently_Requested/Marines_in_WWII... (accessed July 30, 2015). A concise summary of these statistics can also be found at www.nationalww2museum.org under “Remembering Pearl Harbor, A Pearl Harbor Fact Sheet” (accessed August 3, 2015). Japanese losses were

twenty-nine planes, five midget subs, and less than one hundred men (Scott, *Target Tokyo*, p. 133; the National WW II Museum's web site's "Pearl Harbor Fact Sheet" gives "129 Japanese soldiers" killed).

^{xvii} Paul Stillwell (editor), *Air Raid: Pearl Harbor! Recollections of a Day of Infamy* (Annapolis, 1981), p. 214 for the story of the Japanese airplane wing; Scott, *Target Tokyo*, p. 133 is the source for the number of Japanese planes shot down on December 7, 1941. Melson, *Condition Red*, p.1 states that the defense battalions claimed to have shot down three enemy planes.