

'A Day That Will Live in Infamy'

Note: *The following is an excerpt from historian Craig Shirley's best-selling book December 1941: 31 Days that Changed America and Saved the World. Shirley chronicled the events of the infamous day when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and plunged the United States into World War II. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the attack.*

Sunday in America was a day for relaxing, whether you followed the fourth commandment or not. It was a day for church, for family meals, for reading the newspapers, listening to the radio, going for long walks, for afternoon naps, for working in the yard and visiting with neighbors.

Sunday, Dec. 7, was different. Ten days earlier, on Nov. 27, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Harold R. Stark and Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Gen. George C. Marshall authored a two-page memo stamped for their commander-in-chief "Secret."

It read: "Subject: Far Eastern Situation." "If the current negotiations end without agreement," they wrote, "Japan may attack: the Burma Road, Thailand, Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, the Philippines, the Russian Maritime Provinces." Significantly, no mention was made by Stark or Marshall of any other American military installation in the Pacific region, including Hawaii.

An extraordinary Sunday meeting was requested by the Japanese Embassy in Washington with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. The meeting was set for 1 p.m. (EST). It would be 7:30 a.m. in Honolulu.

Tokyo had already reassigned some of its Washington envoys back to Japan. Just one day before, Hull had told reporters he anticipated no further meetings with his Japanese

counterparts.

On Saturday evening, Dec. 6, Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a message directly to Emperor Hirohito, "an unprecedented action—as disturbing reports reached the State Department that two large and heavily escorted convoys were seen yesterday morning steaming into the Gulf of Siam, which washes the shores of Thailand."

The contents of the president's message to the emperor were not revealed at the time. Later it became known—it was utterly respectful and solicitous of the emperor. Words such as "friendship" and "virtue" and "wisdom" littered the missive, but also words like "fear" and "concern."

Although coverage might have otherwise been slight, every radio and newspaper in America covered in detail Roosevelt's olive branch to Japan the morning of Dec. 8, though not all reported on the "two large and heavily escorted Japanese convoys ... steaming toward the Gulf of Siam (Thailand) this morning."

Another large convoy featuring six aircraft carriers heading southeast from Japan and briefly reported on six days earlier had not been seen or heard from since. Adm. Husband Kimmel had received a notice on Dec. 2 that this Japanese task force, moving at flank speed (around 24 knots), had been lost to American trackers.

On the other side of the world, Great Britain declared war against Finland, which had become an "ally" of the Third Reich. In concert with the British declaration of war, FDR put Finnish ships in American ports in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore under "protective custody."

Navy Secretary Frank Knox released a report he'd prepared for FDR that stated America's fleet was "superior to any" in the world and that it had recently been "placed on a war footing with full personnel manning the ships of three fleets,"

including the Pacific fleet in Hawaii.

"I am proud to report that the American people may feel fully confident in their Navy." It is, he said, "without superior. On any comparable basis, the United States Navy is second to none." Knox concluded, "In the Pacific, the strategic importance ... with development of the islands guarding the approach to the Navy's defense in the Hawaiian area with the resultant safety of the Pacific Coast, are obvious."

At 3:42 a.m., the Condor, on patrol outside the entrance to Pearl Harbor, spotted an unidentified and unauthorized midget submarine. Later that morning, at 6:45 a.m., the Ward fired on and hit yet another mysterious midget submersible.

The young captain with the perfectly nautical name of William Outerbridge ordered his No. 3 deck gun to fire on the unknown submarine. A report was made to naval authorities at Pearl Harbor, but no action was taken.

Scout planes from the Enterprise, some 200 miles out and heading back to Pearl Harbor after making her delivery, spotted Japanese bombers and escort planes over the Pacific at 6:15 a.m., heading southeast. Radio confusion between a scout plane and the "Big E" prevented it from taking any action.

At Opana Point Radar Station, set on the highest point on the island of Oahu, two young army privates, Joseph L. Lockard and George Elliot, noticed what looked to be a huge grouping of planes headed for the island.

A call was placed around 7 a.m. to Lt. Kermit Tyler. Tyler, thinking the two were seeing a squadron of American B-17s due in that morning, told them to forget about it. They turned off the radar and went to breakfast.

A private pilot was up for a quiet and leisurely flight over Honolulu early that morning. Ray Buduick, a lawyer, expected to have the airspace all to himself and his 17-year-old son,

Martin. Shortly after takeoff, he realized his expectations were wrong. All of a sudden, the skies over the island were filled with hundreds of airplanes.

A female flight instructor, Cornelia Fort, was also aloft, giving a lesson, when she was overwhelmed with hundreds of planes bearing a red flaming ball. A squadron of Japanese fighter planes, faster than the bombers, arrived at Oahu at 7:30 and orbited the island for 25 minutes while they waited for the slower planes to catch up.

On a beach in Santa Monica, a group of sun worshippers was out early playing volleyball when one of them heard something over the radio and tried to catch the attention of the others. But they were disinterested at the moment in anything other than the outcome of their morning match.

The first wave of 183 planes continued unmolested and basically undetected. They'd been transported in secret since Nov. 26 at 0900, having departed their home waters of Takan Bay.

The six carriers could deploy hundreds of war planes. They were under the orders of the fleet commander, Isoroku Yamamoto, and the command of Chuichi Nagumo.

The massive fleet halted in mid-ocean to refuel on Dec. 3. The standing order was radio silence and, if not recalled by Tokyo, to attack.

Realizing they had succeeded in their audacious sneak attack on the American fleet, the code indicating their achievement was transmitted: "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" "Tora! Tora! Tora!"

Initial reports out of Hawaii were light. The first bulletin went out over the local airwaves, garbled, not from a military source or official government spokesman, but from a broadcast personality, Webley Edwards, who hosted the popular radio show "Hawaii Calls" on CBS, which was heard all over the mainland.

"Attention. This is no exercise. The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor. All Army, Navy and Marine personnel are to report to duty."

Shortly thereafter, a government-ordered blackout was secured on Hawaii, but long-distance phone calls, telegrams or messages from ham radio operators continued. The phone lines eventually became jammed as the Navy was frantically using them.

But this didn't stop anybody from hearing about the attack all across the mainland. It went out over the airwaves, repeatedly, with regular programming interrupted, on every radio station in America. News spread by word of mouth, from neighbor to neighbor, parents to kids.

In the living rooms of America, people huddled around Philco or General Electric radios, listening to war news that for the first time directly involved the American people. On the sidewalks, people huddled around car radios, listening to the flash bulletins.

At the meaningless football game at Griffith Stadium in Washington between the Redskins and the Philadelphia Eagles, 27,000 attendees—including many military personnel and journalists—"were the last to know anything about the world-stirring events."

Throughout the game, there was no announcement whatsoever through the loudspeakers, although radio broadcasters in the booths continually were breaking into their accounts of the game with war bulletins. In the interval after the first half, it became evident to the football fans that something extraordinary was in progress.

As the rumor of war spread, the seats emptied. One enterprising wife sent her husband, who was attending the game, a telegram. "Deliver to Section P, Top Row, Seat 27, opposite 25-yard line, East side, Griffith Stadium: War with

Japan Get to office.”

The Redskins ownership later said using the PA to announce the war news was against its management’s policy.

In all, some 353 Japanese fighters and bombers descended on Oahu. Civilian locations were also bombed and strafed. One of the first to die in the attack may have been a 10-year-old Portuguese girl. {eoa}

Craig Shirley *is the author of two critically praised best-sellers about Ronald Reagan, Rendezvous with Destiny and Reagan’s Revolution, as well as the New York Times best-selling book, December 1941.*

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