**Pearl Harbor**

**Definition:**

From Collins English Dictionary

1 an almost landlocked inlet of the Pacific on the S coast of the island of Oahu, Hawaii: site of a US naval base attacked by the Japanese in 1941, resulting in the US entry into World War II

**Summary Article:**

**Pearl Harbor**

From Encyclopedia of American Studies

Few moments stand out in the American memory as does the attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor during World War II. In 1941 the United States stood poised to seize its destiny, one that many politicians and historians believed would define the twentieth century as the “American century.” The attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor left the United States little choice but to leap onto the international stage of warfare and retribution.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt believed the Japanese would consider a cutoff of oil supply a reason for attack; instead he instituted an embargo on scrap iron and other goods. But after Japanese troops occupied French Indochina in July 1941, all trade was frozen. Roosevelt urged his diplomats to string out negotiations with Japan until the Philippines had been fortified. It was no surprise to the United States, however, that Japanese patience was waning. Operation MAGIC, a naval intelligence operation, had deciphered the Japanese message sent on December 3, 1941, ordering embassy personnel in Washington to burn codes and to destroy their cipher machine. But where would the attack occur?

There are conspiracy theorists who believe that American leadership expected the attack on Pearl Harbor. This, however, remains unsubstantiated. Leaders in the United States expected an attack against British Malaya, Thailand, or the Philippines. In hindsight, it seems obvious that the United States was only able to control the trade network in the Pacific through its active navy that could freely police the entire region. Therefore, Japanese leaders chose the naval center of the U.S. Pacific fleet in Hawaii. The Pearl Harbor base functioned as the U.S. control center for any effort to protect Pacific trade with Asia.

At approximately eight o'clock in the morning, Sunday, December 7, 1941, the surprise attack was led by 353 Japanese aircraft under the direction of Commander Mitsuo Fuchida. Without a formal declaration of war, the armada of 60 Japanese ships came within 230 miles (370 km) of Honolulu before unleashing the air assault. Altogether the invaders sank or damaged 8 battleships and many smaller vessels and smashed more than 160 aircraft on the ground. A total of 2,403 died and 1,178 were wounded.

Word of the attack was delivered to President Roosevelt by Secretary of War Harry Stimson. The next day, Roosevelt gave one of the nation's most famous radio addresses—a declaration of war against Japan. It took the president less than six minutes to read. The opening phrase stands as one of the nation's first soundbites: “Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” Three
days later, Germany and Italy would honor their tripartite agreement with Japan and declare war on the United States. With incredible rapidity, the United States was pulled into World War II. Pearl Harbor had been the catalyst.

The assault on Pearl Harbor became a symbol of American fears of attack during the war and afterward. Additionally, the attack stirred a vigor for making war that the nation had clearly lacked in World War I. Popular culture suggests the magnitude of this importance. For instance, the 1940s song “Remember Pearl Harbor” includes these lyrics:

   History—in every century,
   records an act that lives forevermore.
   We’ll recall—as into line we fall,
   the thing that happened on Hawaii’s shore.
   Let’s remember Pearl Harbor—
   As we go to meet the foe—
   Let’s remember Pearl Harbor
   As we did the Alamo.
   We will always remember—
   how they died for liberty,
   Let’s remember Pearl Harbor
   and go on to victory.

Pearl Harbor continues to evoke great emotion today. Now, preserved as a monumental, sacred landscape, the Pearl Harbor National Monument combines the story of the attack with the opportunity to view some of the wrecks on the harbor's bottom.

Pearl Harbor Day remains a holiday commemorated throughout the United States but particularly in locales where the impact of the original bombing was most acute. Today, Americans are urged to recall the selfless sacrifice of those killed on December 7, 1941. Truly, it has become a day to live in infamy.

Pearl Harbor bombing. USS Maryland, damaged slightly, was one of the first ships to rejoin the fleet after the Japanese attack. 1942. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.

Pearl Harbor bombing. USS California settles slowly into the mud and muck of Pearl Harbor. 1942. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.

Stricken from the air (left to right): U.S.S. West Virginia, severely damaged; U.S.S. Tennessee, damaged; and U.S.S. Arizona, sunk. 1941. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.
**Pearl Harbor bombing.** Air field sustained extensive damage to apron, runways, and hangar, pictured here. 1942. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.

**USS Oklahoma,** capsized after being blasted by Japanese warplanes. Holes were burned through the hull to permit the rescue of some of the men trapped below. 1942. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.
U.S.S. Neosho, navy oil tanker, cautiously backs away from her berth (right center); at left the battleship U.S.S. California lists after aerial blows. The Neosho was later sunk in the Coral Sea. 1941. Official U.S. Navy Photograph. FSA/OWI, Library of Congress.

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