

Pearl Harbor Today

Oahu has been changing steadily for 70 years.

But if you know where to look, you can see it as it was on December 7, 1941.

by Burl Burlingame

THERE ARE HOLES IN the windows of Hangar No. 79, a rambling navy structure on Ford Island, in the middle of Pearl Harbor. Some of the holes are neat and round. In other places, entire panes are missing. Historians at the Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor, who restore and display aircraft in the hangar, theorize that the difference is due to whether the Japanese machine-gun bullets struck a pane directly or ricocheted from the airfield ramp outside.

The holes are a reminder that, for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning 70 years ago, Pearl Harbor was the site of a surprising attack that galvanized a Depression-weary American population. The attack by Imperial Japan was a desperate gamble that paid off in the short term, but lit the fuse for American participation in what soon became known as World War II.

The navy never fixed Hangar No. 79's windows. During the war they were a visual reminder, as effective as any propaganda poster, that the men working in the hangar were in a war zone. The Pacific Aviation Museum has no plans to repair the windows, either, despite a renovation plan that calls for air conditioning. The holes are pointed out on every tour, along with concrete scarred by splintering bombs, and meandering trails dug in the tarmac by machine-gun blasts. The damage is visible evidence that The War Started Here.

The words "Pearl Harbor" and "attack" are so inextricably linked in most Americans' minds that people are sur-

prised to learn Japan did not actually attack Pearl Harbor. The primary target was the US Pacific Fleet; if necessary, Yamamoto's strike force would have hit the fleet in Guam, the Philippines, or perhaps even San Diego. The secondary targets were any and all aircraft that might scout the location of the Japanese carriers.

A third wave of Japanese attack planes would have hit some of the oil tanks and shipyard facilities at Pearl Harbor. But Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, blessed with divine luck in crushing the Pacific Fleet so thoroughly in the first two waves, decided not to press his luck. Except for a stunt



raid in March 1942 and some later reconnaissance flybys in submarine-launched aircraft, the Japanese never returned to Pearl Harbor.

The Pacific Fleet had set up shop in Pearl Harbor just 18 months before December 7, and if you look around the edges of pictures of the attack, you'll see scaffolding, paint sheds, and piles of lumber, evidence that the shipyard was very much under construction

at the time. Prior to hosting the fleet, Pearl Harbor was essentially a refueling and liberty pit-stop in the middle of the Pacific, home to only a few destroyers and submarines, and with limited shipyard facilities. The fleet's arrival brought a population boom with the sudden influx of thousands of sailors, and hundreds of civilian contractors who set up camps at the edge of the base. When war broke out, construction shifted into overdrive, and Pearl Harbor likely became the busiest military port in the world. The base we think of as "Pearl Harbor" today is largely the result of this wartime construction frenzy.

So today, one has to look carefully to find evidence of Pearl Harbor as it was on December 7, 1941. The highest-profile artifact of that time is the USS *Arizona*, sunk in the harbor with more than 1,000 sailors entombed in her crumbling hull.

In the early 1960s, a memorial was built spanning the *Arizona*—a gleaming white bridge with upraised ends symbolizing hope and victory that has become nearly as famous as the sunken battlewagon herself. (Ironically, architect Alfred Preis misunderstood the navy's request for a structure resembling a "bridge"—the navy meant a *ship's* bridge.) The *Arizona* and her memorial lie off Ford Island's southeast shore. (Shuttle buses provide transportation to the island, and boats take visitors to the memorial.) Still clearly visible in that area are the trapezoidal mooring quays that defined the line of warships known as Battleship Row. On the shore opposite the

BELL: PHOTO BY BRADFORD BAKER. WWII VATOR IN THE PACIFIC NATIONAL MONUMENT. OPPOSITE PHOTO BY RAY SANDA. PACIFIC HISTORIC PARKS

Legacies of December 7 crop up all over Oahu, but nowhere more than at the USS *Arizona* Memorial and the park service's museum and visitor center. Above: One of *Arizona's* two bells hangs at the visitor center. Opposite: The memorial, seen here from the visitors boat, stands over *Arizona* and 1,000-some men entombed inside her. Oil from the ship's tanks bubbles to the surface daily in what Pearl Harbor survivors call "black tears."



memorial sits the Pearl Harbor Memorial Museum and Visitor Center, operated by the National Park Service and now part of the World War II Valor In The Pacific National Monument.

Other odd bits of property on Ford Island are also part of the national monument, including the hulk of USS *Utah*, off the island's north shore. The ship rolled and became stuck during salvage operations, so she was left in place. Today there is a small pier overlooking the abandoned ship, with a flag and various plaques, although the site is difficult for civilians to access.

Pearl Harbor was originally shared by the army and navy, with the army in charge of coastal defenses at Fort Kamehameha at the harbor's mouth, and of half of Ford Island's airfield. Runway No. 22, running the length of the island, is one of the oldest military airfields in the United States, established in 1916 and operating by the end of 1917. The army abandoned flight activities on Ford Island in the late 1930s, when nearby Hickam Field became operational.

The army hangars on the north side of Ford Island aren't recognizable as hangars today. Though classified as historic structures, they are currently being reduced to



COURTESY OF PACIFIC AVIATION MUSEUM PEARL HARBOR

girder skeletons over which new structures will be built to create work spaces for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The navy has a scheme to cover the entire surface of the historic runway with photovoltaic mirrors, which will preserve the flat landscape while generat-

ing electricity—and perhaps be visible from space.

On Ford Island's south shore, the navy hangars are relics of December 7. They currently house the Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor, a relatively new organization devoted to telling the story of Pacific aviation. Hangar No. 37, which housed workshops for light amphibian planes during the attack, tells the war's story from Pearl Harbor through the battle of Midway and the landings on Guadalcanal. The collection in that hangar includes what is likely the most authentically painted A6M2 "Zero" fighter in any museum today, an Aeronca 65TC trainer that is an actual survivor of the attack, the wreckage of a Zero that force-landed on Niihau Island on December 7, a B-25 bomber with "Ruptured Duck" markings like those used on the April 1942 Doolittle Raid, an SBD Dauntless dive-bomber, an F4F-3 Wildcat fighter, and a Stearman trainer that was used by George H.W. Bush on his first solo flight.

Hangar No. 79 currently houses the museum's restoration facility and collection of more modern aircraft. The hangar—except for the bullet holes—was



COURTESY OF PACIFIC AVIATION MUSEUM PEARL HARBOR

recently blasted and cleared of lead paint and asbestos, and probably hasn't looked this clean since 1933. It will be the site of the museum's primary WWII collection, which will include the only B5N2 "Kate" torpedo bomber in any museum.

Also part of the museum is Ford Island's control tower, currently under wraps while it is stabilized, cleaned, and rebuilt. The control structure itself sits atop a two-story concrete building. Immediately behind it is a red-and-white, six-story water tower that is usually mistaken for the control tower. Painted primer gray at the time of the

center but retaining the theater lobby, complete with old movie posters.

HANGAR NO. 6 on Ford Island's south shore was the focus of PBV Catalina flying boat operations in December 1941, and was gutted by repeated bombing. The navy demolished it in the '90s, but the building's footprint can still be made out on the concrete seaplane ramp, along with spider-web patterns of splinter damage from Japanese bomb strikes.

The southeast shore of Ford Island is home to *Iowa*-class battleship USS *Miss-*

board hull where a kamikaze exploded on impact in the spring of 1945.

On the opposite shore, the park service's original large visitor center has disappeared, replaced with a campus of smaller structures designed to better serve the daily flood of thousands of visitors. The scope of interpretation has also grown beyond a focus on the USS *Arizona* to cover Hawaii's wartime experience. The new museum buildings are a direct result of the site becoming part of the new Valor In The Pacific National Monument, effectively ending a decades-long stalemate between



COURTESY OF PACIFIC AVIATION MUSEUM PEARL HARBOR

attack, it was camouflaged during the war.

Nestled next to the aviation museum are various historic buildings that were relentlessly modified during the Cold War era and don't bear much resemblance to their December 7 façades. Two exceptions are the waterfront base dispensary, currently unused but with a plaque in the courtyard indicating where a bomb struck, and the Ford Island Theater, rebuilt as a conference

ouri, as well as an elegant shoreside monument to USS *Oklahoma*. The *Missouri*, upon which Japan's surrender was signed, is right in line with USS *Arizona*. Together, the two ships represent the beginning and end of America's involvement in World War II. *Missouri* fought in every conflict up to the first Gulf War, and her current configuration reflects naval modernization. But there's still a sizable dent in her star-

the park service and the navy on how best to interpret the Pearl Harbor attack for citizens. The navy continues to provide launch rides out to the *Arizona* Memorial.

Next to the new shoreside facility is the USS *Bowfin* Submarine Museum and Park, devoted to telling the story of WWII submarine activities. The site offers tours of the *Bowfin*, an excellently preserved *Balao*-class submarine nicknamed "Pearl Harbor

The Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor, on the portion of Ford Island that was a WWII naval air station, is a treasury of December 7 buildings and artifacts. Opposite, top: Ford Island's control tower (atop the two-story white building) and the island's red-and-white water tower survived the 1941 attack. Opposite, bottom: A WWII ambulance sits outside Hangar No. 79, a naval air facility strafed by Japanese airplanes on December 7. Above: Hangar No. 79's windows still bear scars from machine-gun rounds—a mix of bullet holes and missing panes.

Avenger” because she was launched on December 7, 1942.

Together, the four museum complexes provide a wealth of interpretation, authentic artifacts, guided tours, and historical immersion into the events of December 7—altogether too much to absorb in one day. Visitors should see the *Bowfin*, the park service site, and the *Arizona* Memorial on one day, and take in the *Missouri* and the Pacific Aviation Museum on another day. Visitors on package tours may find themselves hustled through the sites too quickly.

Pearl Harbor was recognized as a National Historic Landmark district in 1964. But it is also an active naval base, continually changing to meet modern

demands. Although this means that some older structures have been saved when they could have been knocked down, all structures at Pearl Harbor are potentially targeted for demolition and rebuilding. The navy keeps an architect versed in the base’s historic structures on staff.

THE 2005 BASE CLOSURE and Realignment Commission merged the naval base at Pearl Harbor and the Air Force base at Hickam into one command—Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam, or JBPHH—effective in 2010. Essentially, the navy has taken over all operations, while the air force retains title to the base golf course.

Pearl Harbor’s shipyard remains busy,

avoiding federal budget cuts by repairing active-duty ships in the harbor’s mostly WWII-vintage dry docks. The navy focuses on berthing and support for ships and submarines, and houses something like 160 separate commands. But civilian contractors—chiefly Texas-based Hunt Building Corporation—handle nearly all other activities, especially housing, and personnel and family support services.

Hunt is currently busy building hundreds of new homes on Ford Island, naval housing needed since the closure of nearby Barbers Point Naval Air Station in the ’90s. At Hickam Air Force Base, all housing is being modernized, and one sample of each of the 24 original home designs is being

Below: USS *Missouri* is at Pearl Harbor, where the war began, as a representative of the war’s end. Japan’s surrender was signed on her deck.



restored to a 1940s ambiance. Air force families in these restored homes have their modern conveniences hidden behind Art Deco woodwork. Historical architects were delighted to discover beautiful terrazzo floors beneath faded shag rugs.

In many cases, interpreting Pearl Harbor's history has been turned over to Hunt contractors. Several moves to preserve the remains of the marine air station at Ewa Field—hard hit on December 7—abruptly stalled this year when the navy awarded the property to Hunt in exchange for a legal settlement.

The Japanese hit other Oahu sites on December 7, attempting to wipe out aerial opposition and reconnaissance. The original barracks at Hickam Field, later US Pacific Air Forces headquarters, is still



US NAVY

Above: The sub USS *Bowfin* sank 23 enemy ships in World War II. At Pearl Harbor, she represents the Pacific war's undersea component. Here, she is dry-docked for repairs in 2004.

pockmarked with dozens of bullet holes, despite occasional attempts to plaster and repair the damage. The Art Deco water tower on Hickam's parade ground still stands, even though it was damaged on December 7 and hasn't held water since. Hickam's hangars still bear the US Army Air Corps insignia.

At Wheeler Field in the center of the island, where the ramp was relentlessly strafed, the flight line still looks the way it did in 1941—for that matter, the way it did in 1931. Wheeler Field is a time capsule of a '30s air corps base. It is currently used for army helicopter operations.

Bellows Field on Oahu's east shore, still a sandy runway flanking a beach, remains under air force control as a vacation facility. The exact spot where a midget submarine was dragged ashore is today a barbecue revetment. A couple of times a year, the marines practice amphibious landings on the beach while tourists watch.

Just to the north, on Oahu's "windward" side, the naval air station of Kaneohe is now jointly operated by the marines and the navy. The hangars that were bombed and strafed on December 7 are still there, as is the hulk of a sunken PBV just offshore. The Marine Corps is currently planning a museum to be built at the front gate.

Despite what you may have seen in *From Here to Eternity*, Schofield Barracks,

next to Wheeler Field, was not targeted by the Japanese. Today, however, it features a small but nice army museum with a late-model Sherman tank out front.

Barbers Point, no longer a naval air field, is now a civilian airstrip called Kalaeloa. A small Naval Air Museum there focuses primarily on postwar aircraft.

In Waikiki, in the coastal defense structure once known as Battery Randolph, is the US Army Museum of Hawaii, with excellent displays about the Pearl Harbor attack. The state's King Kamehameha V Judiciary History Center in downtown Honolulu has an exhibit examining local life under martial law.

Not much remains of December 7, 1941, in Hawaii today—certainly nothing like the carefully preserved sacred ground at Civil War battle sites on the mainland. One long-running, bitter joke in the islands is that the Hawaii state bird is the construction crane. But sometimes, when you're out at dawn on the aircraft ramp on Ford Island or at Wheeler Field, or watching the sun rise over the Koolaus to illuminate the gently rolling waters of Pearl Harbor as a warship glides past, it's easy to imagine what it might have been like in those last seconds of peace. ★

BURL BURLINGAME *grew up around Pearl Harbor and now lives in Kailua, on Oahu's "windward" side.*



USS MISSOURI MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION