

1

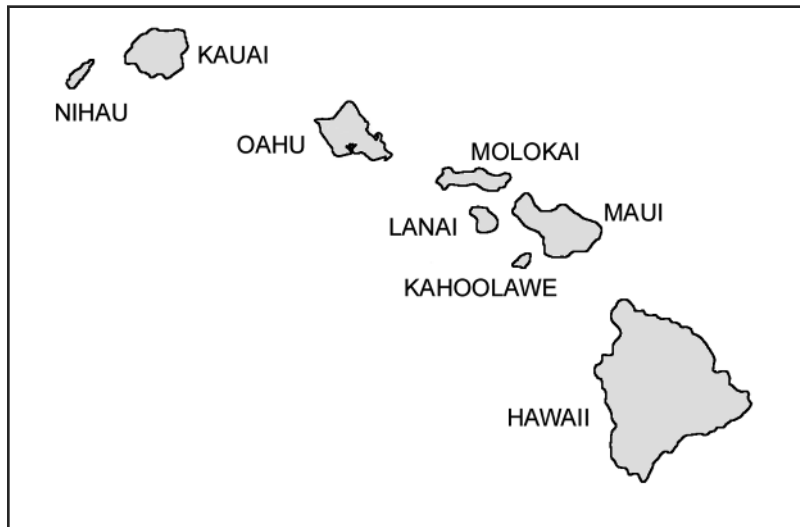
Day Of Infamy: December 7, 1941

One by one, the three PBY Catalina patrol bombers moved slowly toward the seaplane launching ramp on Kaneohe Naval Air Station. Pilots and crewmen busied themselves with preflight checklists in preparation for an 0600 takeoff. The Dawn Patrol, a routine security mission, would cover certain sectors off the United States' territorial island of Oahu, Hawaii, then return to base about 1000 hours. It was Sunday morning—lazy and peaceful—a day in December 1941. The only other activity on the base centered in the chow hall where cooks were preparing the first mess of the day. Here and there a solitary guard paced the steps of his station.

Ensign William P. Tanner, in command of one of the patrol planes, was making his first flight as a Patrol Plane Commander (PPC) although he had flown many training flights as the pilot in command. The other two Catalina commanders, Ensigns Tom Hillis and Fred Meyer were veteran PPCs.

Tanner's patrol track started northwestward from Kaneohe Bay a mile or two offshore circling counterclockwise around the island of Oahu to Barber's Point. From there he was to proceed east along the southern coast of Oahu to Diamond Head, then east-southeast below Molokai and Maui. He would then return on a parallel course south of Lanai about five miles out to sea continuing past Oahu, then clockwise around the island back to Kaneohe

Bay. He was well aware of the alert status that existed and the order to attack any submarine sighted outside the established sanctuary. His commanding officer, Commander Thurston Clark, had also advised his officers that the United States was entering a critical period with the Japanese Empire and to be extra vigilant.



Hawaiian Islands.

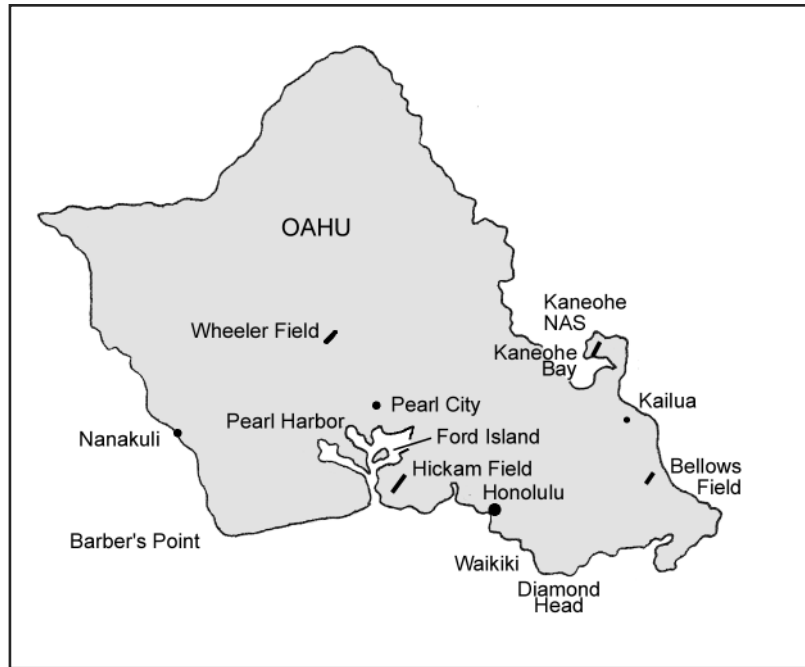
Bill Tanner: One Hour Before The War

Ensign William P. Tanner of Rossmoor, California, a Lieutenant Commander by war's end, remembers the events of December 7, 1941.

“After take-off from Kaneohe Bay at 0600 we had rounded the island and were cruising at 1000 feet and south of Pearl Harbor when we spotted a Navy ship, the USS Antares, entering the harbor. We also saw a short distance behind the Antares what originally looked like a small moving buoy. We turned to investigate and sighted the USS destroyer Ward heading directly toward the object. As we neared the ‘buoy’ it became clear that it was not a buoy but the conning tower of a very small submarine—clearly outside the established sanctuaries. We also saw the Ward, now at flank speed, firing her bow gun at the object and splashes in the water just beyond the ‘object.’

“We were too close to arm our depth charges, but dropped smoke lights to mark the submarine's position, then turned rapidly to return and attack. During our turn, we observed the Ward drop several depth charges as she passed over the submarine's position. We finished our turn and dropped our charges at the projected position of the now submerged or sunken midget submarine.

“We sent an ‘Operational Immediate’ message to our command,

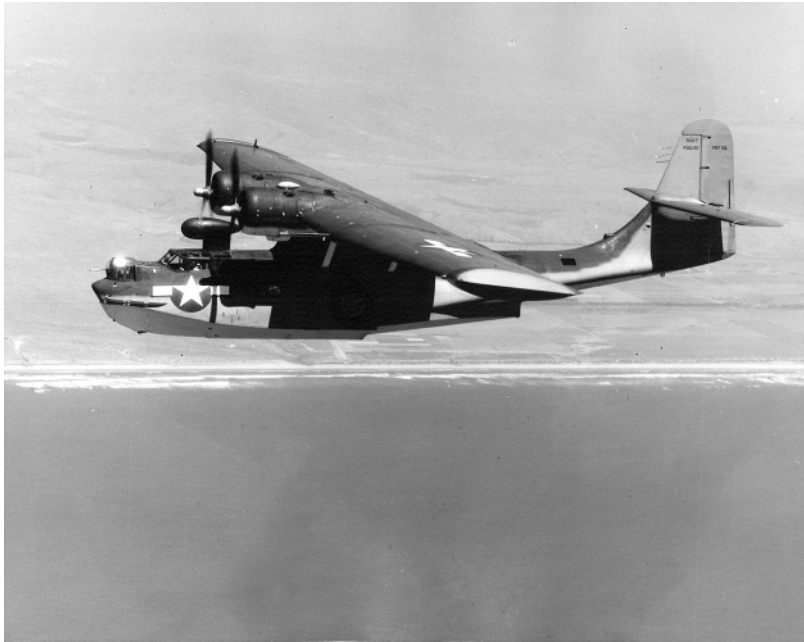


Oahu Island, Territory of Hawaii.

Fleet Air Wing One 'SANK ENEMY SUB ONE MILE SOUTH PEARL HARBOR.' It was acknowledged and we were told to stay in the area and await further instructions. We did so, as did the Ward, and observed wide discoloration and disruption of the water, but no specific evidence of flotsam or debris on the surface. However, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that the attack by the Ward with gunfire and depth charges and our augmented attack had done the job.

"After about fifteen minutes, we were ordered to continue on our designated patrol. As we complied with this order and continued on patrol, I must admit a perplexing and frightening question arose in my mind. Could it have been a US sub? Had we killed our own people? On the other hand: (1) the area was forbidden territory for US submarines, (2) we had never in exercises with US submarines seen such a small conning tower, and (3) the Ward was operating on the same orders we were and her captain had seen the situation just as I had and carried out his orders.

"About 0800, on the return leg of our patrol, heading several miles south of Oahu, we began to pick up both voice and Morse code radio traffic indicating a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Kaneohe NAS and ordering fighter aircraft to scramble and repel the enemy. These messages, and the sight we witnessed as we cruised past Pearl Harbor, several miles at sea toward Barber's Point were the first indications we had that Pearl was undergoing full fledged air attacks as it was completely obscured by smoke.



PBY-6A final design, amphibious. Manufactured in New Orleans, Louisiana, January 1945. (courtesy General Dynamics.)

“About this time we received a message addressed to 14P1, ordering our three aircraft to search for the Japanese task force responsible for the attack to the limit of our fuel from west to north of Oahu. After getting authentication for the message, the other aircraft were advised. Based on our positions at the time of the report, I flew on a search track of 285 degrees, Hillis on a track of 315 degrees, and Meyer on 345 degrees.

“Fred Meyer, in 14P2, was north of the island when he was spotted by Japanese fighters apparently returning from Pearl and Kaneohe. He said he was about 40 miles to the north when he sighted eight or ten Japanese fighters who had obviously seen his aircraft. As they attacked, he employed the procedure we all had been taught and flew very close to the water with violent maneuvering to make their attack more difficult.

“As he maneuvered, the Japanese planes made several hits on the PBY. However, the hits were primarily in the aft fuselage with no control damage. One of the attackers went into a spiral, smoking badly, but the crew was too occupied to verify whether or not it crashed into the water. Fortunately, for Meyer and crew, the attacking aircraft, almost certainly short on fuel, broke off the attack and departed. Since the damage to his aircraft was not disabling, Fred resumed his patrol as directed from 330 degrees to 360 degrees off Oahu.

“We searched to the limit of our endurance, as did the aircraft commanded by Hillis and Meyer and landed at Kaneohe Bay after flights of ten

to eleven hours. I must tell you it was a shocking sight to all of us to see our aircraft destroyed on the ground and burned out hangers.”

Bill Tanner’s PBY Catalina, 14P1, of Patrol Squadron 14, by attacking the Japanese submarine off Pearl Harbor, became the first U.S. aircraft to fire on the Japanese in World War II. Ensign Fred Meyer’s PBY, 14P2, by engaging Japanese fighters north of Oahu, became the first U.S. airborne bomber fired on by the Japanese in that war.

The Dawn Patrol of December 7, 1941, at best a token search of the waters surrounding the territory of Hawaii, began in peace that Sunday morning. It ended with the United States’ military forces on the island of Oahu virtually destroyed. By the time Tanner’s 14P1 and the other PBYs landed, over 10 hours after takeoff, the U.S. Fleet lay in ruins; the Army Air Force detachments were all but wiped out, and the Navy’s PBYs—most of them new—had been reduced from 81 to four flyable and a few repairable. Three of the flyable aircraft were the Catalinas of Ensigns Tanner, Meyer and Hillis.

Whether from the surprise of the Japanese attack, or from a sudden release of long pent-up tensions regarding the possibility of war with Japan, the military forces on the island of Oahu that morning—individually and collectively—reacted with the ferocity and determination of a mother bear protecting her cubs. Collectively, they formed primitive battle stations and fought with grossly inferior weapons. Individually, they faced almost certain death by refusing to seek protective shelter from the exploding bombs and withering machine gun fire of the Japanese aircraft.

One such individual effort was that of Joseph T. Crownover, Coral Gables, Florida, then a Radioman First Class in VP11.

Corrections:

After personally meeting Bill Tanner, who piloted one of three PBYS on patrol out of Kaneohe NAS when the attack on Pearl Harbor began, I learned that his story in chapter one was inaccurately portrayed and needed to be rewritten. He also requested some minor changes to the wording of his story about the mud landing in chapter ten. These changes have been made with his guidance and approval as follows.

Pages 1-5 are corrected on new page inserts.

On page 142, revise the first sentence in the fourth paragraph to read: "I was flying with the commanding officer, who was leading the first division of three PBYS to Pensacola."

Also on page 142, replace the last two sentences of the fifth paragraph with the following: "We made it safely, as did the other Catalina of the group."

And lastly on page 142, revise the first line of the sixth paragraph to begin: "But an unusual thing happened to the third PBY which ..."

Gary Crocker
October 2002