

Adversity Reveals Character

In the late 1930s, Nazi Germany, Russia, France, China, Japan, and the U.K. were at war. America and 14 other countries, including Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal, were the only neutral countries. America, by far the most powerful country not engaged in war, had the potential to impact which side would win the war. America's neutral stance abruptly changed on December 7th, 1941, when Japan sneak-attacked the American naval base, Pearl Harbor, and other military outposts on the island of Oahu, Hawaii ^[1]. There were many reasons why the Japanese were able to catch America off guard. The U.S. did not think it was possible for the Japanese to attack them and did not think they were capable of such a feat of military ingenuity. Also, the U.S. did not do enough reconnaissance. Nevertheless, on the day of the attack, U.S. Army Air Corps pilots exhibited bravery, courage, and initiative in the face of danger, America learned the danger of underestimating its opponent, and all witnessed the strength of a unified country.

Kenneth Marlar Taylor, born in Enid, Oklahoma, on December 23, 1919, graduated from Hominy High School in 1938. After two years of studying as a pre-law student at the University of Oklahoma, Taylor dropped out of college to join the Army Air Corps. He graduated from aviation training at Brooks Field near San Antonio, Texas, on April 25, 1941, reaching the rank of Second Lieutenant. In June of 1941, Taylor was assigned to the 47th Pursuit Squadron at Wheeler Army Airfield in Honolulu, Hawaii.^[2]

ID Number:14SC45675

Adversity Reveals Character

04/11/25

1353 words

Page 2

First, during the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army Air Corps pilots exhibited courage, bravery, and initiative in the face of danger. Many U.S. Army Air Corps heroes emerged that day, but Lt. Ken Taylor showed exceptional valor. At the beginning of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Lt. Taylor was with his friend and fellow pilot, Lt. George Welsh, asleep in their brand-new Buick after a late night at the Schofield Barracks officers' club. They woke up at about 8:00 a.m. local time to the noise of gunfire, explosions, and low-flying planes. Taylor told the ground crews at Haleiwa Airfield to load and fuel the planes. Haleiwa, which is about twenty-five miles north of Pearl Harbor, likely looked smaller and less important to the Japanese, and Taylor hoped the Japanese had not bombed it. When he got there, the air-crews had the P-40s fueled but could only load the .30 caliber Browning machine guns because no .50 caliber ammo was stored there. The two pilots flew over to Barbers Point Naval Air Base, while Japanese fighters and bombers attacked them from all sides. Soon they arrived at Ewa Mooring Mast Field, the place where the Americans would repair all the damaged ships and were being shot at by at least twelve Aichi D3A "Val" dive bombers. The two Americans, outnumbered 6-to-1, fought off the bombers; Taylor shot down two bombers and damaged another. After both pilots ran out of ammunition, they landed at Wheeler Field and loaded their .50 caliber machine guns. While reloading, a formation of seven or eight Japanese A6M "Zeros" started firing on the airfield. Welch took off and pursued them because he had run out of ammunition first and had already reloaded. Welch shot one, and Taylor damaged another. After they had run out of ammunition, they landed at Haleiwa. Taylor, nearly killed by a .50 caliber bullet that entered the cockpit and exploded within an inch of his head, commented later that "It was of no

ID Number:14SC45675

Adversity Reveals Character

04/11/25

1353 words

Page 3

consequence; it just scared the hell out of me for a minute." After the attack, the doctors found shrapnel in his arm and leg.^[3]

Of the twenty-nine Japanese planes shot down by the Americans during the attack on Pearl Harbor, Taylor shot down four Mitsubishi A6M "Zeros". Taylor is one of the fourteen American pilots who got airborne. His Curtiss P-40B Tomahawk could fly a top speed of 352 mph, compared to the Japanese "Zero", which was 351 mph. The Tomahawk also had a better armament with two 50. caliber machine guns and four 30. caliber machine guns, compared to the Zero's two 7.7mm machine guns and two 20mm cannons. However, with a superior aircraft, this was Taylor's third month flying his plane, and he was outnumbered 10-to-1 when he took off.^[4]

Over his long Air Force career, Taylor received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Legion of Merit, and the Purple Heart, among many other awards, for serving our country. The main reason that neither Taylor nor Welch received the Medal of Honor is that they took off without orders. Taylor became a Brigadier General in the Alaska Air National Guard. ^[6] No number of medals and badges can adequately capture how thankful we are to the Pearl Harbor pilots for their bravery that day.

While the American pilots showed extraordinary heroism at Pearl Harbor, they also learned the danger of underestimating their opponent. Japan had a smaller army and less resources than the U.S., yet their entire fleet of aircraft carriers still eluded detection from all of the American intelligence agencies. America did not think that the Japanese could or would

attack Pearl Harbor, because the Japanese aircraft carriers would have to get close enough to Hawaii for the planes to be able to fly there, attack, and return. However, America did not have sufficient surveillance, so the Japanese fleet slipped through and were able to deploy the aircraft. The Americans also thought that Japan would attack the Philippines first and set up more defenses there, and they dropped their guard at Pearl Harbor.

While the U.S. learned some painful lessons due to costly errors, when the attack on Pearl Harbor was over, the Americans discovered the strength of a unified country. Abraham Lincoln famously quoted, "A house divided against itself, cannot stand."^[8] When the U.S. united against one common enemy, they were the strongest country in the world. White, Black, Latino, Asian, women, and men, all combined their efforts to build America up from the ashes. Women worked in factories to create weapons, ships, tanks, planes, and ammunition. Men of all ethnicities joined the military, fighting for one common cause. Even children tried helping the war effort by planting victory gardens, collecting scrap metal to give to factories, supporting war bond drives, and joining the Junior Red Cross ^[9]. If we can unite against the common issues of today, the U.S. will be a safer and stronger country.

In conclusion, during the surprise attack by the Empire of Japan on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at its naval base at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army Air Corps pilots exhibited tremendous grit. America learned the threat of underestimating its opponent and all discovered the strength of a unified country. In the end, the attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in a horrific loss: 2,043 lives were lost, 12 ships were sunk, 10 ships were damaged, 188 planes were destroyed, and 159 planes

ID Number:14SC45675

Adversity Reveals Character

04/11/25

1353 words

Page 5

were damaged.^[10] The influence of these heroes who fought and died at Pearl Harbor has had an extraordinary impact on my life. When I visited the *USS Arizona* memorial in 2018, I was in awe of what the men and women did to protect their country from invaders. The fact that they were willing to sacrifice their lives for someone they will never know brings me immense gratitude towards them. They gave the ultimate sacrifice so that today's generation could have the freedoms of today. Earlier this year, I led my Trail Life troop on a mission to clean up and restore a cemetery in the backcountry of Fort Jackson, which included the graves of two soldiers from the Civil War. Cleaning up this cemetery and visiting memorials all around the world, in Normandy, Washington D.C., Hawaii, New York, Georgia, and Washington, has changed my perspective on life. Good things, like freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and safety, come at a cost. Americans must never forget that freedom is not free, and we must be willing to fight and die, like the brave men at Pearl Harbor, to protect our freedoms.

Works Cited

- 1) <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/december-07#:~:text=On%20December%207%2C%201941%2C%20JapaneseOklahoma%20capsized>.
- 2) Sullivan, Patricia (2006-12-10). "Pilot shot down planes in Pearl Harbor attack". *The Washington Post* (printed in *The San Diego Union Tribune*).
Goldstein, Richard (December 7, 2006). "Kenneth Taylor, 86, a Key Pilot at Pearl Harbor, Dies". *The New York Times*.
- 3) Gailey, Harry A. (1995). *The War in the Pacific*. Novato: Presidio Press. pp. 89. ISBN 0-89141-486-X.
Farfour, Lt Col George R. (June 22, 2005). "The Fog of War: Lt. Kenneth M Taylor on December 7, 1941".
Farfour, Lt Col George R. (June 22, 2005). "The Fog of War: Lt. Kenneth M Taylor on December 7, 1941"
Van Elsberg, Robert (1988). "First to fight (at Pearl Harbor)". *Airman*. **32** (December 1988): 37–39.
Sullivan, Patricia (December 3, 2006). "Kenneth Taylor; Flew Against Pearl Harbor Raiders". *The Washington Post*. pp. C07.
The Aviation History On-Line Museum. "The Attack on Pearl Harbor"
Wolf, William (Spring 1989). "Aerial Action... Pearl Harbor Attack". *American Aviation Historical Society*. 34 (1): 60.
Graybeal, Jay A. (December 7, 2008). "Two planes, eight guns, and lots of "Zeros.""
United States Army. Archived from the original
"Kenneth M. Taylor Dies; Army Air Forces Pilot Shot Down Enemy Planes After Pearl Harbor Attack". *Los Angeles Times*. December 7, 2006.
Department of Defense (January 26, 2006). "The Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941".
Kelly, C. Brian (December 2006). "George Welch proved himself again and again during and after the attack on Pearl Harbor". *Military History*. 23 (9): 74.
Lansdale, James. "Pearl Harbor Japanese Aircraft Crash Sites, Records, & Artifacts: Part II". *j-aircraft.com*.
Smith, Carl (1999). *Pearl Harbor 1941: The Day of Infamy*. Great Britain: Osprey Publishing. p. 62. ISBN 1-85532-798-8.
Clark, Blake (1942). *Remember Pearl Harbor*. New York: Modern Age Books. pp. 30. ISBN 0-935180-49-4.
Potter, Joseph V. (Winter 1982). "A Handful of Pilots". *American Aviation Historical Society*. 27 (4): 282–283.

ID Number:14SC45675

Adversity Reveals Character

04/11/25

1353 words

Page 7

<https://aviation.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/A-Handful-of-Pilots.pdf>

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nnam/explore/collections/aircraft/p/p-40b-tomahawk.html>.

<https://www.pearlharboraviationmuseum.org/news/blog-archives/how-fast-was-the-zero/>

4) Meek, John Martin. "*Ken Taylor: The Reluctant Hero*"

5) <https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/wars-and-events/world-war-ii/pearl-harbor-raid/battleship-row-during-the-pearl-harbor-attack.html>.

6) To Wake the Giant: a novel of Pearl Harbor (First edition.). Chicago / Turabian 17th Edition. Shaara, Jeff.

7) https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/children_ww2/children_w2_menu.cfm

8) Proceedings of the Republican state convention, held at Springfield, Illinois, June 16th, 1858. Springfield, Illinois. 1858.

9) United States Army Infantry School. Ranger Handbook. United States Army Infantry School, 1966.

10) <https://www.pearlharboroahu.com/how-many-people-died-in-pearl-harbor/>