

TWIAH: Two planes, eight guns, and lots of Zeros

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Two planes, eight guns, and lots of “Zeros”

The Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor targeted Navy and Army assets including Schofield Barracks and Army airfields. The first wave struck Wheeler Field, where most of the pursuit (fighter) aircraft were based; Hickam Field, the Army’s largest aviation facility; and Barber’s Point.

Initially caught by surprise, Army Air Forces personnel were soon fighting back and inflicting casualties. Second Lt.'s George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor, 47th Pursuit Squadron, took off in partially armed P-40s and scored several victories. They were recommended for the Medal of Honor but received instead the Distinguished Service Cross -- because they had taken off without orders.

Welch’s citation read, in part:

“When surprised by a heavy air attack by Japanese forces on Wheeler Field and vicinity at approximately 8 a. m., he left Wheeler Field and proceeded by automobile, under fire, to Haleiwa Landing Field, a distance of approximately ten miles, where the planes of his squadron were stationed.

He immediately, on his own initiative, took off for the purpose of attacking the invading forces, without first obtaining information as to the number or type of Japanese in the attacking force, and proceeded to his initial point over Barbers Point. At time of take-off he was armed only with .30 caliber guns.

Upon arrival over Barbers Point he observed a formation of approximately twelve planes over Ewa, about one thousand feet below and ten miles away.

Accompanied by only one other pursuit ship [Taylor], he immediately attacked this enemy formation and shot down an enemy dive bomber with only one burst from three .30 caliber guns. At this point he discovered that one .30 caliber gun was jammed.

While engaged in this combat his plane was hit by an incendiary bullet, which passed through the baggage compartment just in rear of his seat. He climbed above the clouds, checked his plane, returned

to the attack over Barbers Point.

He immediately attacked a Japanese plane running out to sea, which he shot down, the plane falling in the ocean.

No more enemy planes being in sight he proceeded to Wheeler Field to refuel and replenish ammunition. Just as refueling and reloading was completed, but before his guns had been repaired, a second wave of about fifteen enemy planes approached low over Wheeler Field.

Three came at him and he immediately took off, headed straight to the attack and went to the assistance of a brother officer [Taylor] who was being attacked from the rear. This enemy plane burst into flames and crashed about half way between Wahiawa and Haleiwa.

During this combat his plane was struck by three bullets from the rear gun of the plane he was attacking, one striking his motor, one his propeller, and one the cowling.

This attack wave having disappeared he returned to the vicinity of Ewa and found one enemy plane proceeding seaward, which he pursued and shot down about five miles off shore, immediately thereafter returning to his station at Haleiwa Landing Field.”

Although the citation contains some errors -- Welch was actually credited with four victories -- it captures the essence of aerial combat during the opening hour of the attack.

On the first day of the war, Army Air Forces pilots flew twenty-five sorties and were credited with destroying ten Japanese aircraft. America's entry into World War II rapidly accelerated an already transforming Army.

The Army Air Forces defenders at Pearl Harbor and elsewhere developed into a force with unparalleled strategic and tactical capabilities including the first use of atomic weapons.

This article is part of the feature, [This Week in Army History](http://www.army.mil/history/), which is written by employees of the Army Heritage and Education Center and can be found at <http://www.army.mil/history/>

