



In History's Shadow

Buildings at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, still reveal scars from that devastating day, more than 60 years ago.

Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director



Many photographs taken during the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and other military installations in Hawaii are almost icons—instantly recognized even today. One is this photo (inset) of the American flag, still flying as the main barracks at Hickam Field burns behind it.

Today, bronze plaques surround the original flagpole. They list the names of those killed at Hickam during the attack. The barracks has become headquarters for Pacific Air Forces. And the flag—which later flew over the Big Three Conference at Potsdam, over the White House on the day Japan agreed to surrender, and at the charter meeting of the United Nations—is preserved in a display at PACAF headquarters.

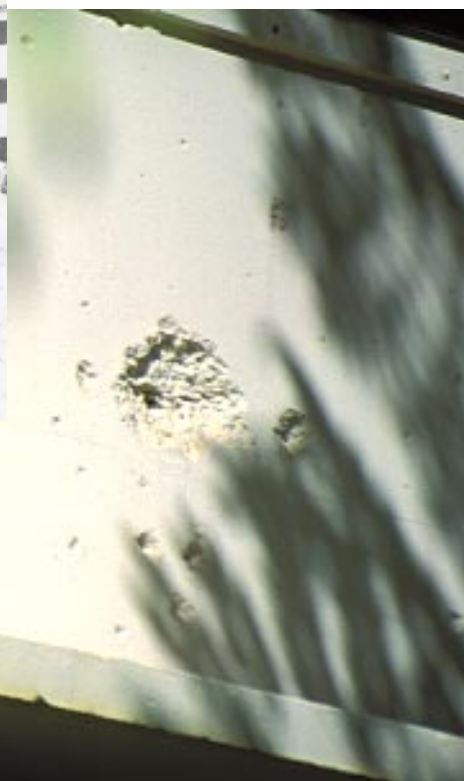
Visitors to Hickam Air Force Base feel these ties to history. Everywhere on base, the black-and-white images of photos from that day come to life.

Hickam was constructed to serve both as a home base for a bomb wing and as an air depot to handle major overhaul work. It had been officially activated for just over three years when the Pearl Harbor attack took place. Army Air Forces units at Hickam that day included Hawaiian Air Force, 18th Bomb Wing, and 17th Air Base Group.

PACAF headquarters, at right, was back then a barracks housing more than 3,000 men. It also contained a huge mess hall, dayrooms for every squadron in the barracks, two barber shops, a branch of the post exchange, a medical dispensary, and tailor and laundry shops.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



At Hickam, located adjacent to Pearl Harbor, the initial targets were the hangars and flight line areas. When the assault turned to the barracks complex, bombs blasted through the roof. In the mess hall, which took a direct hit, 35 men died instantly. The inset photo suggests the extent of the damage. The building's exterior

today still carries the pock marks from strafing by enemy aircraft.



Hickam's unique and historic role in the opening hours of World War II led the Secretary of the Interior to designate the base as a national historic landmark in 1985. The base had already done much to preserve many reminders of the deadly attack. These photos contrast Hangar Ave., then and now.



In 1941, the aircraft at Hickam—as at other airfields on the island of Oahu—had been parked close together to guard against sabotage on the ground. They made easy targets for the Japanese attack. Out of 146 aircraft in commission for the Hawaiian Air Force, 76 were destroyed that morning. Despite this and other losses, airmen at various island airfields scrambled to fight back. These troops pulled together a makeshift gun emplacement in front of Hangar 5, using a burned aircraft engine, sandbags, a table, and other debris.

KC-135s (shown here), C-130s, and F-15s of the 154th Wing, Hawaii Air National Guard, share the flight line at Hickam today. The base uses the adjacent runways of Honolulu International Airport. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, the aircraft on hand at Hickam were B-17s, B-18s, and A-20s; a handful of P-26s and A-12s; and one B-24.



On Dec. 7, B-17s from the continental US were en route to Hickam, as part of the buildup of American forces in the Pacific. Approaching Hawaii at about 8 a.m., the 12 bombers got caught in the Japanese attack. Capt. Raymond T. Swenson, 38th Reconnaissance Squadron, Albuquerque, N.M., was among those who managed to land his B-17 at Hickam. A Japanese Zero then strafed the aircraft, causing flares to ignite and the bomber to burn, as shown here.



Except for a crew member killed by a strafing Zero, everyone on Swenson's B-17 reached safety. The front half of the bomber was towed to this spot on the edge of the flight line, between two wings of the barracks complex. Maintenance crews later salvaged all four engines.

Japanese aircraft used Freedom Tower, a landmark at Hickam, as a reference point. The Moorish-style tower had been built in 1938 and held an emergency supply of half a million gallons of water. Seedlings for trees and shrubs were being propagated around its base. The 171-foot tower was strafed but miraculously escaped destruction.



Not so lucky was the B-18 at left. At the time, B-18 bombers were considered old and too short-ranged to be of much combat value.

Today at Hickam, the F-15 below is part of ANG's 154th Wing. The wing has a mix of fighters, tankers, and transports to handle its diverse missions. It has sole responsibility for air defense of the island state.





At right, an already bombed out Hangar 11—with a wrecked B-18 in the foreground—came under attack again seconds after this photo was taken. Today, cars fill the parking lot next to the hangars.

Preserving Hickam's historic feel has led to some creative solutions: Some World War II-era hangars have been converted into offices by building a separate structure within the restored exterior.



At left, a pilot completes postflight paperwork as an F-15 is prepared for its next mission.

From the "Day of Infamy" in Hawaii to today, Air Force missions have continued at Hickam. The historic sites, the strafing marks, the artifacts coupled with current activities—all bring to mind the Air Force's important role in the war then and the war now. ■