

# THE REAL DAY OF INFAMY



Step aside, Hollywood. The most vivid account of Japan's assault on America's sense of invulnerability comes from the men who were there. BY EVAN THOMAS

**J**AMES WIRE, SHIP fitter third class, couldn't imagine that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor. Reflecting the racial views all too typical of his time, he regarded the Japanese as incapable of such a bold affront. On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, Wire had come on deck of his ship, the Tennessee, to get some sun. The eight battleships of the Pacific Fleet were preparing for morning colors and church. Canvas awnings stretched across decks to provide shade. A band was



**BOMBS AWAY:** The real attack on Dec. 7, 1941 (top), and a scene from the film

playing the "Star Spangled Banner." Most of the ships' antiaircraft guns were unmanned. Coming out of the hatch, Wire noticed a plane dropping something. A sandbag? he wondered. American pilots sometimes dropped sandbags as they practiced bombing runs on nearby Ford Island. But then, on the wing of the plane, he saw a red "meatball"—the rising sun of the Japanese Empire. The

plane was now only 50 feet away. "I could have hit him with a rock," Wire recalled to NEWSWEEK.

The sandbag turned out to be a torpedo. During the next 10 minutes, the quiet anchorage erupted. The battleship West Virginia, moored alongside the Tennessee, sank, with the loss of 106 men. Just aft, the Arizona blew up, killing 1,177 men. Just ahead, the Oklahoma rolled over from torpedo hits, entombing 429 men. Wire joined his crewmates trying to pull aboard survivors. Bodies, stacked up like so many logs, were scorched and hairless; the smell of oil and burning flesh filled the air. A quartermaster on the Tennessee went berserk and started tearing his clothes off when he witnessed the carnage. "It was the most horrible thing I ever saw," said Wire.

One of the dead men pulled from the oily harbor was a Japanese pilot. Told to carry the body to the sick bay, Wire refused. Up to then, "we didn't have any-

thing against the Japanese, really." He had liked the Japanese bar girls in Honolulu, "cute little girls, friendly, overly friendly, you know?" Wire recalled. He later concluded they were part of the Japanese plot. "I never imagined they would cut out throats," he said. "I was so angry that anybody could do that. And then I thought, well, the government must've known something was going to happen. Why didn't the government give us at least

uses state-of-the-art special effects to convey both the sweep and the devastation of the Japanese surprise attack. But some of the grimness is missing.

The moral of the story, at least, is about right: "Pearl Harbor" seeks to portray America's loss of innocence, a Sunday morning in paradise ripped apart by violent deception. Americans are fascinated by the grandeur and heroism of World War II in part because modern life seems

vivors and consulted histories and experts on Pearl Harbor. Though purists will quibble with the details, the movie appears to be reasonably faithful to the battle itself, certainly measured against Hollywood's flexible standards. There is some hedging: the movie makes no real attempt to assign blame for the Navy's laxity at Pearl Harbor. Adm. Husband E. Kimmel, the fleet commander, is sympathetically portrayed, filled with foreboding. In fact, he blundered, according to Robert Love, a professor at the U.S. Naval Academy and a leading authority on Pearl Harbor. "Kimmel was immune to more alerts than Captain Waddle," says Love, referring to the captain of the American submarine that sank the Japanese fishing trawler last February. Love points out that Kimmel failed to send out patrols while keeping his own fleet at a low state of alert, despite numerous signs and portents that war was near. "Kimmel screwed up," acknowledged "Pearl Harbor" screenwriter Randall Wallace (whose credits include "Braveheart") in an interview with NEWSWEEK. "But the Navy said we have absolved him of blame, and the Navy contributed millions and millions of dollars of support to the movie." (A Navy spokesman said Wallace's statement was "poppycock.")



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—RETIRED NAVY SHIPFITTER  
JAMES WIRE, 82

five minutes' warning? Or 10 minutes?"

Americans will get to relive some of James Wire's shock and surprise when they go to the cineplex after Memorial Day. "Pearl Harbor," the movie, is bloody, though not as bloody as the real thing. Or, for that matter, as the epic D-Day film "Saving Private Ryan." To make money on one of the costliest films ever made (\$145 million) Disney studios wanted to preserve its PG-13 rating to draw the widest possible audience. The movie burnishes the golden glow around World War II, a vicious slaughter that now seems distant and Olympian, especially in contrast to the moral ambiguity of Vietnam. It has become perhaps too easy to forget that the so-called Good War killed millions of civilians and was fought by very young men who cried for their mothers when they died. The film

relatively tame and safe today. There is no Hitler or Tojo looming on the horizon. But we forget that most citizens felt pretty safe in 1941 as well. No foreign invader had crossed the sea to attack Fortress America since the War of 1812. Technology had not yet lengthened the reach of aggression—or evil. At Pearl Harbor, the terrifying new engine of war was the carrier-launched bomber aircraft. During the cold war, ICBMs threatened global holocaust. Tomorrow's weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological, will be transportable in a suitcase. James Wire, who is now 82 years old, thinks that making a movie about Pearl Harbor is "great" because it's a warning: "Americans have become complacent," he told NEWSWEEK. "They think it can't happen now. But it can."

To assess the movie's accuracy—and reconstruct "the day of infamy," in President Franklin Roosevelt's memorable phrase—NEWSWEEK interviewed dozens of sur-

The movie wisely ignores long-held conspiracy theories that President Roosevelt provoked or allowed the Japanese attack to justify going to war. Determined to help Britain fight back against the totalitarian Axis powers, Roosevelt was eager to bestir an isolationist public. Some historians have tried to show that Roosevelt knew from broken Japanese codes and other clues that an attack was imminent, yet did nothing. But it is "inconceivable," writes historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "that Roosevelt, who loved the Navy with a passion, would have intentionally sacrificed the heart of his fleet, much less the lives of 3,500 American sailors and soldiers, without lifting a finger to reduce the risk." In Washington, as the movie shows with scenes of a fictional code-breaker, the War Department was able to read Japan's diplomatic cable traffic. On the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Washington knew that Japan was readying to break off peace negotiations.



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But a warning telegram from Gen. George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, was delayed by bad luck and red tape and delivered to Kimmel five hours after the attack had begun.

The Japanese are portrayed in the movie as noble warriors. A line in the script describing—accurately—how the Japanese executed a couple of downed American pilots as war criminals was cut for fear of antagonizing Japanese distributors of the film (the Japanese have been extremely reluctant to accept blame for atrocities). On-screen, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, comes across as dignified and visionary. While the movie accurately renders Yamamoto's prophetic warning—"We have awakened a sleeping giant"—the Japanese admiral is described by Professor Love as a strategic "lunkhead." The Pearl Harbor raid sank mostly obsolete World War I-era battleships. Faster carriers and battleships—the fleet that would ultimately defeat the Japanese Navy—were already under construction in the United States.

Nonetheless, the Japanese attack was brilliant for its total surprise. Under cover of rain and fog, a Japanese fleet of six carriers drew within 200 miles of Hawaii and launched 353 planes at dawn on Dec. 7. U.S. radar operators did pick up the intruders as they bore in on the island of Oahu. But the lieutenant in charge, Kermit Tyler, a pilot untrained in radar, figured the huge blip on the screen must have been a flight of American B-17s coming from the mainland. In the movie, as in reality, he tells the operators, "Don't worry about it." Tyler, who is now 88, told NEWSWEEK that he did not think "the Japanese would have the audacity to do it against a powerful country like ours. Most people thought Japan wasn't all that significant."

The Japanese shot up American airfields on the island before they reached the fleet at anchor. In the movie, clouds of Japanese fighters drop out of the sky, like a scene from "Star Wars." The Japanese warplanes were actually strung out, not bunched together. Their targets on the ground were slow to realize what was hitting them. "We first heard the sound of machine guns, rat-a-tat-tat," recalled Gordon Jones, 79, a sailor with Patrol

Squadron 14 who was in his barracks at Kaneohe Bay. He figured it was just a drill, or some tomfoolery from fellow pilots giving a "wake-up call. We didn't even think about aircraft carriers," said Jones, who was only 19 years old at the time.

On Battleship Row in Pearl Harbor, Gunner's Mate Second Class Leon Kolb was in the turret of one of the Oklahoma's huge 14-inch guns when he was rocked by an explosion. "I never gave it a thought that any enemy could get an airplane into Pearl Harbor," he recalled. He wondered if his ship had been hit by a shell from a German battleship. In fact, torpedoes launched by low-flying Japanese planes were thudding into his vessel. Kolb didn't realize he was being attacked by planes until he heard a pinging sound—machine-gun bullets striking metal. At the same time, he felt his ship begin to list ominously. "General Quarters!" a voice cried over the PA system. "This is no sh--!" Within 15

tols, threatening to shoot crew members for not doing their duty. Askildsen struggled to his battle station. He saw a Japanese plane bank toward him—so close Askildsen could see the pilot's gold tooth. "He was grinning as much to say, 'Well, we're getting you now.' I'll never forget that smile," said Askildsen, 82.

Aboard the aging battleship Utah, Theodore Roosevelt, a very distant cousin of the president, had just turned 17 years old. Now 77, he can remember the first bomb he saw dropped. "It was painted a bright yellow, and it had red rings around it." The projectile hit a hangar on Ford Island. Roosevelt turned to a friend and said, "Somebody's sure going to be in trouble for using live ammunition on this drill." He was soon diving off the side of his own sinking ship. Swimming ashore, he was quickly drafted by a doctor to help with the wounded. He first had to change out of his oil-soaked uniform. The only clothing he



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minutes, the battleship had capsized. Kolb swam off. Hundreds were trapped below.

Aboard the destroyer USS Reid, Finn Askildsen had fallen asleep, still in his dress whites, at 4 a.m. He had been arrested by the shore patrol for fighting in a brawl. He was awakened by an officer shouting, "The Japanese are sinking our battleships!" He peered out of a hatch just in time to see the Arizona explode in a mighty roar. A young ensign was running about the Reid waving a couple of .45 pis-

could find was a golfing outfit—complete with knickers—in an officer's changing room. Without any medical training, all Roosevelt could do was light cigarettes for dying men. "The guy would take about two drags and be gone," Roosevelt recalled.

Pitifully few guns were shot back at the Japanese. Aboard the destroyer Monaghan, Boatswain's Mate Thomas Donahue ran to his antiaircraft gun. While the ammunition locks were being sawed off, a frustrated Donahue flung wrenches at low-

flying aircraft. On the destroyer *Ramapo*, Commander Duncan Curry stood on the bridge firing a .45 pistol, as tears streamed down his face.

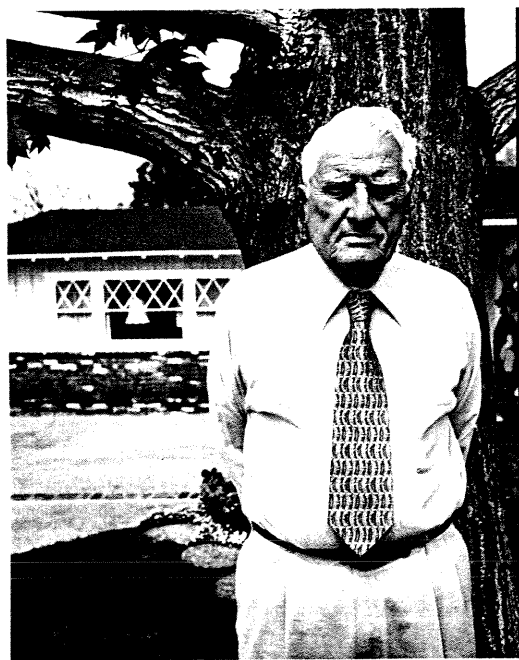
In the movie, there is a dramatic scene when Dorie Miller, a lowly cook played by Cuba Gooding Jr., steps behind an anti-aircraft gun and shoots down a Japanese plane. The Dorie Miller story has become legend. In a characteristic flight of fantasy, Ronald Reagan once described how Miller, a black man, "integrated" the Navy by holding a machine gun in his hands to shoot down a Japanese Zero. The truth is more prosaic. The real Miller was a mess mate, about the only job a black man could get in the prewar Navy (real integration did not

nett—shot down a half-dozen Japanese planes. Kenneth Taylor, now an 82-year-old retired Air Force general, recalled how he was asleep at the Wheeler Field Officers Club when he heard the shooting start. Pulling on the pair of tuxedo pants he had worn to the Saturday-night dance, he and his buddy George Welch raced to another airfield and jumped into a pair of P-40 fighters. Taylor took off, fought, landed and rearmed—and took off again right into a wave of Japanese planes attacking Wheeler. He shot down two of them. His partner Welch went on to shoot down 16 Japanese planes and become a famed test pilot. Welch was a regular at Pancho's, the test-pilot bar in the Cali-

an iceberg," his wife, Eleanor, observed. He showed no emotion, though Eleanor detected his bitterness. The American people, so complacent up to then, suddenly buzzed with wild rumors. The Japanese were landing on Waikiki Beach! They were invading San Francisco! Even Roosevelt was overheard talking about the possibility of Japanese troops' driving inland from the West Coast as far as Chicago.

In the movie, the president is shown almost immediately demanding that the Navy strike back against Japan. An admiral tells him, "It can't be done." Slowly, with immense effort, the president pulls himself from his wheelchair and stands on his withered legs. "Do not tell me," he says, "It can't be done." The scene is

preposterous; FDR never drew attention to his infirmity. "If it didn't happen, it should have happened," says screenwriter Wallace. Nonetheless, it is true that Roosevelt demanded a retaliatory strike against Japan. And it is true, as the movie dramatizes, that a flight of stripped-down B-25s under Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle took off from a carrier and bombed Tokyo that April. Lacking enough fuel to return, the planes had to ditch or crash-land in China. The attack inflicted little damage. But as psychological warfare, it was brilliant. The Japanese had told their people that the homeland was invulnerable. To prevent future attacks, Yamamoto took the Japanese fleet west, to capture Midway Island. Breaking the Japanese code, the U.S. Navy trapped the Japanese and destroyed their carrier force.



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THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 77

come until 1948). And he was a champion boxer, as Gooding plays him in the movie. But he was regarded as a bully by some of his shipmates. Assigned to the bridge of the *West Virginia* as a stretcher bearer, he did help move the badly wounded captain. And he did—briefly—fire a machine gun, though according to Walter Lord's famous narrative of Pearl Harbor, "Day of Infamy," "at least one witness felt he was a bigger menace than the Japanese."

Most of the American planes were caught on the ground, lined up in neat rows on the airstrips to make them easier to defend against sabotage. Two of the pilots who did get in the air—very loosely, the models for the heroes in "Pearl Harbor" played by Ben Affleck and Josh Hart-

fordia desert made famous by Tom Wolfe's book "The Right Stuff." He crashed and died in 1954.

The Japanese lost only 29 planes on Dec. 7, two of them to mechanical problems. But they failed to bomb the American fleet's fuel-storage tanks at Pearl Harbor, which might have slowed the U.S. war effort far more than sinking obsolete battleships. (The Pacific Fleet's three carriers were all at sea at the time of the raid.) And the attack inflamed the American public and turned isolationists and pacifists into gung-ho patriots hot for revenge.

President Roosevelt was sitting in his study in the White House when he heard about the attack shortly after 1:30 p.m. that Sunday. The president "became almost like

It was a turning point in the war.

In a heart-wrenching scene, the movie shows one of the hero pilots returning from the Doolittle raid in a coffin. The scene of the fallen serviceman coming home in a flag-draped coffin while bands play and the politicians tear up is a modern spectacle. There was no time and inclination for such ceremony during a war in which thousands could perish in a single morning. In the Doolittle raid, the men drowned or died in muddy ditches in China. But they died so that their countrymen could go to the movies in peace, and know war only as a distant and romantic spectacle.

With DONNA FOOTE, ANDREW MURR and JOHN HORN in *Los Angeles* and RYAN RIPPEL in *Washington*

Pearl Harbor was a signal event in American history, waking the country from its isolationist slumber, uniting its people in the spirit of shared sacrifice and forging a noble common purpose. BY TOM BROKAW

## A GENERATION'S TRIAL BY FIRE

**I**T'S HARD TO IMAGINE A SINGLE event that had a greater instant effect on the collective behavior of an American generation than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When the news came, many were at home by the radio or on a Sunday drive, at football games and in movie theaters. We were just emerging from a Great Depression and trying to keep our distance from the wars in Europe and the military ambitions of an imperialistic Japan.

Then came the electrifying radio dispatches and word-of-mouth reports that the Japs, as they were called, had bombed Pearl Harbor. Overnight, isolationists became converts to intervention, stirred in part by the eloquent call to service from Franklin Roosevelt and in part by the great tidal wave of gung-ho patriotism that swept across the land. Pearl Harbor had enraged and unified a country, committing the United States to a common goal.

Pearl Harbor was a rite of passage for those I have called the "greatest generation." Great, but not perfect.

Some Americans dodged the draft, or pulled strings to get cushy assignments. Black Americans in uniform had to fight to get into combat; most of them were assigned as hospital orderlies or as kitchen stewards. In the business world, war profiteers cashed in. But by and large America responded magnificently to its greatest challenge since the Civil War.

The Japanese who had thought their attack would eventually force the United States to sue for peace had monumentally miscalculated. Within months the United States had been converted from a peaceful, almost pacifist, nation into a warrior state whose national purpose was to fight the Japanese and the Germans to an unconditional surrender. Everyone understood the terms and, to a remarkable degree, almost everyone participated in the war effort.

Marriage plans were accelerated; brothers and buddies rushed to enlist in the same service; college kids arranged to graduate early. So many members of that generation have said the same thing to me: the day they heard about the attack on

Pearl Harbor they knew their world had changed. They just didn't realize how much.

Young men and women traded in their days of innocence for years of separation, sacrifice and loss. In the early going, when the daily news was bleak and the outcome was uncertain, the small chorus of critics grew bolder. But the American will held firm, fortified by the carefully screened news reports from the front and the relentlessly upbeat tone of the commander in chief.

Would we have stayed the course had there been television cameras on those murderous beaches in Normandy or on Iwo Jima, had the American public known the full details of how the invasion of Italy had bogged down? No one can know for sure.

But in the era of modern communications it will always be a provocative "what if" proposition. During the Vietnam War, President Lyndon B. Johnson was determined that America could have both guns and butter—marshaling the resources to fight a far-off war while requiring no sacrifices of the civilian society. It was not only a dubious economic proposition; it added to the national schizophrenia about America's role in the war. There was no common material sacrifice at home as there was during World War II, when families rationed gasoline, meat, sugar and, yes, butter.

Not everyone was happy about the restrictions, and there were more than a few episodes of hoarding. But the rationing system was a constant reminder that greater sacrifices were being made elsewhere. There were other reminders. Picture a neighborhood of modest family homes, many of which had gold stars hanging in the front window. Those were the homes of mothers who had lost a son in the war.

I like to think that America would have gotten involved in the war without the attack on Pearl Harbor. The threat to our own security and all we believe in was simply too great to ignore forever, despite the reservations of those who believed we could be a self-contained fortress. The despicable behavior of the Japanese that one Sunday morning in 1941 ended the argument and forged a new American generation that, in my judgment, will always have a place in bold print in the history of the world.

BROKAW is managing editor and anchor of NBC "Nightly News" and author of "The Greatest Generation."



**BATTLE STATIONS:** USS Ward crewmen, keeping score