

B-17 pilot flew unexpectedly into the middle of Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

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Retired Air Force Col. Robert Thacker with his medals including the World War II Silver Star, upper left, and Distinguished Flying Cross, upper center, in San Clemente on Tuesday, December 5, 2017. (Photo by Paul Rodriguez, Orange County Register/SCNG)

As he maneuvered his unarmed B-17 bomber over the island of Oahu, U.S. Army Lt. Robert Thacker was puzzled.

It should have been a peaceful Sunday morning in Hawaii.

Water spouts just offshore?

“Whales!” a crew member guessed.

A plume of black smoke up ahead?

“They’re burning off cane fields,” another suggested.

Thirteen empty, defenseless bombers were flying in from California. Thacker's crew called the air-traffic control tower at Hickam Field. No answer. After 14 hours, the bombers were to land at 8 a.m. Dec. 7, 1941.

"I said, 'I can see which way the wind is blowing,'" recalled Thacker, now 99 years old and living in San Clemente. "'We've got to land.'"

Thacker dropped his flaps, got the landing gear down and headed over Ford Island – over the middle of Pearl Harbor.

Then, Thacker said, this:

"Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!"

This week marks the 76th anniversary of the Japanese sneak-attack on Pearl Harbor. About 2,400 American service members died, hundreds of which were forever entombed at the harbor's bottom. Thacker, a retired colonel in the Air Force (that branch was created after he entered the Army), who served in the Pacific and European theaters of World War II, and in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, recalled that day.

Thacker was born nine months before World War I ended and has always loved airplanes. In El Centro as a youth, he would wash down aircraft at the tiny commercial airport for free rides into the sky.

He went to junior college, then applied to the U.S. Navy and the Army Air Corps. The Army took him.

On Dec. 1, 1941, while stationed in Salt Lake City, Thacker received an assignment: He and a dozen other pilots would fly the new E model of Boeing's B-17 bomber, a technological marvel, from California to the Philippines – via Hawaii.

The United States had already frozen Japanese assets and cut off trade. Now the military was moving bombers to Japan's doorstep.

The 13 bombers took off from Hamilton Field, north of San Francisco, on the night of Dec. 6. The crews were green: Each bomber's navigator was a cadet who had to find their way by the stars.

Two planes had to turn back, and the 11 others approached Pearl Harbor from every which way.

His navigator?

"I had one night flight with that gentleman," Thacker said. "He hit Diamond Head right on the nose after 2,500 miles of celestial navigation."

That, of course, put his crew in the middle of a war zone: 350 Japanese planes, known as Zeroes, were wreaking havoc in two waves of attacks. The water spouts? Anti-aircraft shells falling, harmlessly, into the ocean. The smoke? The USS Arizona, heading to the bottom of the harbor.

U.S. Navy gunners on Ford Island were firing skyward. Japanese Zeroes were strafing away.

“The Japanese performed the most perfectly devised operation of all time,” Thacker said. “Their completion was perfectly engineered.”

Thacker, meanwhile, was flying a lame-duck bomber without guns to make it as light as possible.

“You never found a first lieutenant more surprised than this guy,” Thacker said, who “found out we were being attacked by Japanese aircraft as I’m flying over Ford Island.”

Thacker kept trying the air tower. Silence.

Finally, the tower told Thacker: Pearl Harbor was under attack. Oh, and he was number two to land.

He broke to the right, dropped down and approached a runway. A Zero shot out his right wheel, crippling the landing gear. He got the plane down, with it skidding in circles, and stopping.

Behind him, another bomber landed – but it was picked off by the Zeroes, breaking it in half, the only bomber that didn’t survive.

Thacker ordered his crew out of the bomber. Don’t go toward the hangars, he told them; they hid in a swamp at the runway’s end.

The hangars were destroyed.

The attack continued around him, Americans died, and the Japanese eventually withdrew. After the dust cleared, Thacker spoke with the personnel at Hickam Field – the ones who took so long to respond to his calls.

“I said, ‘Where the heck were you people?’” Thacker recalled. “They said, ‘We were on the floor, man!’”

America, and the Allied Powers, would eventually win – against both Germany in Europe and Japan in the Pacific. Thacker is one of the few left who was there when the war started.

“I was lucky to survive,” he said.



