

WORLD WAR II

"We Were Caught Flat-Footed"

The Japanese Attack on Marine Corps Air Station Ewa December 7, 1941



By Dick Camp

Captain Richard C. Mangrum, Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron (VMSB) 232's flight officer, was reading the comics in his cottage on Ewa Beach, Territory of Hawaii, near the airfield when he heard the muted sounds of machine guns firing. He initially shrugged it off, thinking the fleet was holding some sort of exercise, but then he thought it strange that this one was so early on a Sunday morning. As he looked out his front door, a tight formation of low-flying planes passed right over his cottage; they had bright red "meatballs" painted on their wings.

Capt Leonard W. Ashwell, the Ewa Mooring Mast Field officer of the day, recalled, "At 0755, I was in the officers' mess when I heard a large formation of planes approaching. Upon stepping outside, I saw 18 torpedo planes at about 1,000 feet flying down the beach from Barbers Point toward Pearl Harbor. From the northwest another formation was just coming over the hills." He thought it was strange that anyone would be flying so early on a Sunday morning, which was a nonflying day.

He watched the group pass north of the base, wheel to the right and head back in a classic "string" attack formation. "What's going on?" he exclaimed. A stream of red

tracers suddenly erupted from the wings of the lead aircraft, and an SBD-1 on the flight line exploded in flames.

Taken aback, Ashwell quickly recovered and ran back inside the mess hall, shouting frantically, "Air Raid ... Air Raid! Pass the word!" He had recognized the Japanese red sun insignia on the wings and sides of the aircraft and knew the event was no drill. His frenzied shouts, coupled with the roar of machine-gun fire and explosions, caused pandemonium in the room as the morning diners stampeded toward the exits. Ashwell ran to the guard house, where he ordered the duty field music to sound the call "To Arms."

The Ewa Mooring Mast Field (later



Left: The primary airfield targets during the attack on Pearl Harbor were Hickam Field, Wheeler Field and Ford Island. Kaneohe Naval Air Station, Bellows Field and Ewa Mooring Mast Field were all secondary targets. It was, however, pandemonium at all of them. Chaos reigns amid the wreckage of aircraft in this photo of Ford Island seaplane base. That's USS *Shaw* (DD-373) exploding in the background.

Below: Marines were perhaps in a better position to defend themselves than personnel at other airfields. The antiaircraft unit with its .50-caliber antiaircraft guns was under the same commander as the rest of the airfield which provided a more coordinated and efficient effort in the issuing of weapons and ammunition.



The phone traffic in the Ewa switchboard tent went wild once Japanese planes strafed and bombed the field with devastating accuracy.

commissioned as Marine Corps Air Station Ewa) was located on Oahu's southwest shore, 7 miles west of Pearl Harbor. The base originally was constructed to house Navy dirigibles, but after three of them crashed, the field was turned over to Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 21, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Claude A. "Sheriff" Larkin.

MAG-21 consisted of Headquarters and Service Squadron 21, Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 221, 22 SBD dive bombers of VMSB-232, eight assorted utility planes of Marine Utility Squadron (VMJ) 252, 10 F4Fs and one SNJ from Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 211's rear echelon and seven SB2U-3 spares left

behind by VMSB-231 when the squadron deployed to Wake Island—a total of 48 aircraft.

Lieutenant Commander Shigeru Itaya (2d Fighter Combat Unit) and Lieutenant Yoshio Shiga (1st Fighter Combat Unit) from the Japanese aircraft carriers *Akagi*

and *Kaga* swept in from the northwest and made devastatingly effective strafing runs against MAG-21's aircraft parked in neat, straight rows, wingtip to wingtip on the runway. The Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters firing 7.7 mm and 20 mm incendiary, explosive and armor-piercing



rounds came in at treetop level.

"The Japs used the old German dive-bombing machine-gun strafing tactics with incendiary and explosive bullets up to 20 millimeter," Larkin explained.

Itaya's nine planes made one pass down the short, wide northwest-southeast runway and then headed for Hickam Field, while Shiga's nine made at least eight passes concentrating on the planes. The sitting ducks smoked, flamed or sat there with streams of gasoline spurting out of their tanks and pooling on the runway.

MAG-21's report of action noted: "Enemy airplanes approached as low as twenty to twenty-five feet over the ground, attacking single aircraft with short bursts of gun fire. Upon delivering an attack, they would pull up over the tree tops, reverse their course and attack from the opposite direction. After ten to fifteen minutes when they could see that

all tactical aircraft were either on fire or had been well shot up, they concentrated on personnel, general utility aircraft, and planes that were obviously out for repairs ... the whole first attack lasted about twenty to twenty-five minutes. The fact that the Japanese concentrated initially on aircraft in this attack accounts for the comparatively small personnel casualties."

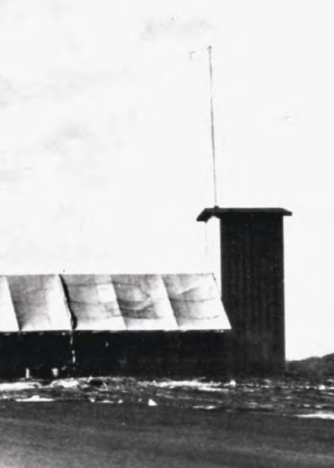
When the enemy fighters drew off at about 0825, they left behind a field littered with burning and shot-up aircraft. "We were caught flat-footed ... and lost everything we had without getting a plane in the air," Larkin wrote to Brigadier General Ross E. Rowell, Commanding General, Second Marine Aircraft Wing.

The field music's "Call to Arms" was punctuated by the sounds of strafing and exploding aircraft. Marines poured from the barracks. Corporal Duane W. Shaw,

Ewa's fire-truck driver, was fully dressed when he heard the approaching planes. At first, he thought they were maneuvers. "We really got the message," he said, "when one of the Japanese planes tattooed the barracks with bullets." Cpl Albert A. Grasselli recalled, "I threw on my khakis, grabbed my rifle and ran outside. I saw fighter airplanes with big red balls on their wings passing in what seemed all directions and firing their guns. Within minutes, or so it seemed, a weapons carrier drove by distributing bandoleers of .30-caliber ammunition for our rifles."

Pilots and ground crewmen rushed to the flight line to try and save the aircraft. Capt Milo G. Haines of VMF-211 was caught out in the open and dove behind a tractor, along with the driver. A Zero came in spraying bullets, one of which clipped off Haines' tie just underneath his chin, and, as he reached up, another bullet sliced

Ewa Mooring Mast Field derived its name from the mooring mast erected years before for the Navy lighter-than-air dirigibles. The mast stood stoically on Dec. 7, 1941, as Japanese aircraft spit 7.7 mm and 20 mm incendiary, explosive and armor-piercing rounds into the Marine aircraft around it.



his finger and part of his scalp. Several Marines took cover in the construction forms for the new swimming pool and fired at the Japanese with their rifles.

Cpl Grasselli was one of the first to reach the dubious protection of the construction project. "I immediately headed for the nearest shelter, which just so happened to be the freshly laid cement foundation for the new swimming pool ... from there, along with several others, we began shooting at the Jap planes."

Technical Sergeant Henry H. Anglin, noncommissioned officer in charge of the photographic section, had taken his 3-year-old son Hank to the station's photo tent just before the Japanese attack. The toddler managed to escape his father's attention and wandered out on the landing mat before he was spotted. His horrified dad grabbed the boy and crawled back to the safety of a radio trailer just as a bullet slammed into the door. Anglin stuffed his son under a wooden bench and grabbed his camera. Just as he stepped into an adjacent tent, a machine-gun bullet tore through the upper part of his right arm. He stopped the bleeding and ran back to see if his son was hurt.

The boy still was crouched under the bench, pointing to a spent bullet on the floor. The child pointed to it, saying,

"Don't touch that, Daddy. It's hot."

LtCol Larkin was about a mile from the base when a passing Zero shot at his 1930 Plymouth jalopy, forcing him to jump into a roadside ditch. Unscathed, he got back in the car and reached the base just in time to be strafed a second time. Again he was unharmed. His luck finally ran out when a round from a third enemy plane hit him in the hand and the leg. He refused medical treatment and continued to coordinate the efforts to meet further enemy attacks.

Cpl Shaw and his buddy, Cpl Carl Hines, jumped into the 1930s vintage fire truck and headed for the burning planes. As they pressed forward at the truck's 42-mile-per-hour limit, a low-flying Zero shot out the windshield, but miraculously missed both men. A second strafing shot the rear tires off, ending their race in a cloud of flying glass and bits of metal. The two men abandoned the truck, raced across the runway and took cover behind a stack of crates. Shaw recalled, "We found plenty of company behind them."

Private First Class James W. Mann, the driver assigned to Ewa's 1938 Ford ambulance, was refueling when the attack began. Lieutenant Thomas L. Allman, Medical Corps, USN, the group medical officer, saw the first aircraft break into flames and ordered Mann to take the



After the Pearl Harbor attack, gunnery practice with the anti-aircraft .50-cal. guns at Ewa became a regular drill for Marines assigned there during WW II.

The Mystery of Sgt William E. Lutschan

In the Sept. 3, 1995, edition of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, in an article titled, "War Scenes Were Hard for Boys to Stomach," Domingo Bolosan described what he saw at Ewa on Dec. 7, 1941.

At the time, he was a 13-year-old boy living close to the main gate into the air station. He saw several Marines approach a scrap-metal pile at the end of the village and fire shots into the pile. Next, a car raced back and forth past the pile, spraying bullets into it with a submachine gun. Shortly afterward the car left the area with the body of a dead man. When the car stopped briefly at a railroad crossing near Bolosan, he asked them who the man was. Bolosan was told he was a spy who cut down communication lines and took some guns and ammunition.

According to Bolosan, the Marines told him the name of the dead man sounded like, "Sergeant Loo-zhun."

—Dick Camp

ambulance to the flight line. Pharmacist Mate Second Class Orin D. Smith climbed aboard, and the two sped off.

The speeding vehicle attracted the attention of a passing Zero, and realizing they were under attack, Mann slammed on the brakes. The two bailed out and crawled under the ambulance, amid a hail of machine-gun fire. More than 50 bullet holes were later counted in the vehicle. Smith was hit in the fleshy part of his left calf. Despite the fire, Mann loaded the wounded man into the cab and safely delivered him to the aid station.

Cpl Grasselli was involved in the shooting of a fellow Marine. According to Grasselli, "Shortly after the first attack, the duty officer gave orders to my tent mates and me to arrest one of our fellow tent mates who, we were told, was a German spy." Sergeant William E. Lutschan Jr., a truck driver, had been "under suspicion" of espionage, and he was ordered placed under arrest. "He resisted our efforts to arrest him," Grasselli explained, "and opened fire on us; he was subsequently shot and killed ... thankfully, we never knew which one of us had fired the shot that killed him."

Two more fighter units conducted the second strike 10 to 15 minutes after the initial attack; eight planes from Lieutenant Masaharu Suganami's 3d Fighter Combat Unit from *Soryu* and six aircraft from the 4th Fighter Combat Unit led by Lt Kiyokuma Okajima from *Hiryu*. The attack came from the direction of Pearl Harbor. Aichi D3A1 Val dive bombers from the 12th and 13th Attack units also made several passes. The Vals concentrated their strafing and bombing on camp areas, buildings and personnel dropping small 30-pound bombs as they wove in and out over the field. "We only had about four to five light bombs dropped on the field. They did practically no damage, but the gunfire was terrific," Larkin said.

MAG-21's report noted: "This attack

was very heavy and prolonged. Their primary objective was still the planes on the ground, but when it became evident that all the planes were out of action ... they concentrated on the camp area, buildings, installations, and personnel. It was met by heavy fire of rifles, Thompson submachine guns, and .30-caliber machine gun fire from small groups and individuals who had taken cover in and around the field area. The Japanese pilots would fire their forward guns from extremely low altitudes, then pull up into a steep wing-over and the free gunner would open fire on personnel."

Captain Mangrum, VMSB-232, recalled, "Between the first and second [attacks] was long enough for me to get from our house at Ewa Beach into my pants and out to the field in time to see my planes destroyed in most expert fashion. ... And I got a bullet through my erstwhile best Saturday morning inspection pants—but without touching me!"

By then the initial shock of the surprise attack had worn off, and the Marines were fighting back with rifles and .30-cal. machine guns taken from damaged aircraft and from the squadron ordnance rooms. Master Technical Sergeant Emil S. Peters, a veteran of Nicaragua, spotted a Douglas SBD-2 Dauntless dive bomber parked behind the squadron's tents. He grabbed Private William G. Turner, VMSB-231's squadron clerk, ran over to the aircraft and unshipped the .30-cal. Browning machine gun.

After rounding up the ammunition, the two manned the "free" gun and put bursts into every Val that came within range. They shot down two witnesses thought were at least two of the attackers before bullets made a sieve of the Dauntless, wounding both men. Peters still kept the gun in action, but Turner toppled from the wing, mortally wounded. He died a few days later.

The interval between the second and



Located 7 miles west of Pearl Harbor, Ewa was a tar-covered runway and field that emerged from the jungle of tropical bush. On Dec. 7, 1941, its planes were parked in "neat straight rows, wingtip to wingtip on the runway."

third attacks was utilized to reorganize defenses, distribute ammunition, put out fires and care for the wounded. The hospital, its medical stores, equipment and installations were housed in canvas tents and were set afire early in the attack. Working under heavy machine-gun fire, LT Allman and his corpsmen cared for the wounded throughout the attack.

MAG-21's report stated: "The last attack was made by approximately fifteen fighters with fixed landing gear and very maneuverable. ... This attack was light and ineffectual on comparison with the



USMC

first two as our defensive gun fire was quite heavy. Two or three, two-plane sections of fighters remained over the field making sporadic strafing attacks against personnel for a short time." Sgt Carlo A. Micheletto of VMJ-252 continued to help put out fires until the last strafing attack when he put aside his firefighting equipment and grabbed a rifle. He took cover behind a small pile of lumber and fired at the attacking planes until he was struck in the head and killed.

MAG-21's report noted: "During the three attacks on this field, casualties were comparatively light, three enlisted killed, one fatally injured (dying three days later), 10 enlisted and [two] officers minor gunshot and bomb fragment wounds. Damage to material, installations, machinery, tentage, and building was quite considerable;

government motor vehicles slight, privately owned automobiles heavy, these vehicles were in most part owned by enlisted personnel and were in parking space. Damage to aircraft extremely heavy [47 of 48] as the primary objective was aircraft on the ground and attacks were made on individual aircraft by individual enemy pilots using explosive and incendiary bullets from extremely low altitudes."

Larkin wrote, "Every officer and man, with very few exceptions, of this group who were on the field during this fight behaved faultlessly. We had nothing to fight back with except rifles, pistols, and a few of the free machine guns we managed to put in commission." He placed the following notation in their service record books: "Participated in defense of Ewa Field, Oahu, T.H., against Japanese aerial

attacks on December 7, 1941, displaying undaunted courage while under direct fire."

Author's bio: Dick Camp, a retired Marine colonel, is the former director of operations for the National Museum of the Marine Corps, former deputy director and director (acting) of the Marine Corps History Division and a prolific author. His latest e-book, "The Killing Ground: A Novel of Marines in the Vietnam War," is available online at Amazon.com, and he has two new nonfiction books, "Shadow Warriors" and "Assault From the Sky," available from The MARINE Shop. He is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck.

