

Attack on Pearl Harbor!

In 1941, a surprise raid on a U.S. naval base in Hawaii changed Americans' minds about fighting in World War II



Illustration by Dave Seeley

This illustration shows sailors fleeing their battleships as Japanese bombers strike the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Characters

George Elliott, private at a U.S. military radar station, Oahu, Hawaii

Joseph Lockard, private at a U.S. military radar station, Oahu, Hawaii

Adolph Mortensen, a junior officer aboard the USS Oklahoma

John Austin, chief carpenter aboard the USS Oklahoma; Mortensen's best friend

Voice over a ship's loudspeaker

Dorie Miller, a sailor on the USS West Virginia

Mervyn Bennion, captain of the USS West Virginia

***Sailor**

Annie Fox, chief nurse

***Nurse**

Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. president (1933-1945)

Narrators A-E

*Indicates a fictional or composite character. All others were real people.

Prologue

Narrator A: In 1941, World War II had been raging for two years. Germany had conquered much of Europe. The United States was supporting Great Britain and its other allies with weapons and supplies but wasn't involved in the fighting. Many Americans were opposed to sending U.S. soldiers to fight a costly war overseas.

Narrator B: In Asia, Japan—Germany's ally—was expanding its empire by force. After it attacked China in 1937, the U.S. cut off sales of iron, steel, and oil to Japan. To keep its war machine going, Japan planned to invade other nations in Asia, but it wanted to weaken the U.S. first. So it staged a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, a U.S. naval base on the Hawaiian island of Oahu (*oh-AH-hoo*).

Scene 1

Narrator C: On Sunday, December 7, 1941, Privates George Elliott and Joseph Lockard are at work at a radar station on the north end of Oahu. It is just after 7 a.m.

George Elliott: Lockard, there's a huge blip on the radar screen! It looks like at least 50 planes.

Joseph Lockard: That's weird. Is something wrong with the radar?

Elliott (*on the phone with their commanding officer*): Sir, our radar screen shows at least 50 planes heading our way. . . . Roger that, sir.

Lockard: What did he say?

Elliott: He said not to worry. It's probably a group of B-17 bombers due to arrive from California.

Narrator D: But that "blip" is the first wave of Japanese planes aiming for the row of battleships docked at Pearl Harbor.

Scene 2

Narrator E: At 7:55 a.m., aboard the battleship *Oklahoma* . . .

Adolph Mortensen: Hey, did you just hear an explosion?

John Austin: Yeah. Must be our planes taking target practice.

Narrator A: Then a siren wails.

Voice: Air raid! Air raid on Pearl Harbor! This is *not* a drill!

Scene 3

Narrator B: Meanwhile, on the battleship West Virginia, Dorie Miller is doing laundry. His duties are restricted to such chores because the Navy bars African-Americans from combat roles.

Dorie Miller (to himself): I'm a great boxer, but they won't let me fight for my country!

Narrator C: Suddenly, the ship is rocked by an explosion. Miller races to the top deck, where Captain Bennion is shouting orders.

Mervyn Bennion: It's a sneak attack! Get ammo for those guns!

Narrator D: *BOOM!* A nearby battleship erupts into flames.

Miller: They've sunk the *Arizona*!

Bennion: There's another plane. Take cover! We could be next.

Narrator E: *BOOM!* A bomb explodes on the nearby *Tennessee*. Pieces of the ship fly through the air.

Bennion: I'm hit! (*He falls, clutching his wounded stomach.*)

Miller (trying to drag Bennion to safety): I have to get you to a medic!

Bennion: I'm not leaving! They're chewing us to pieces. Someone's got to shoot down those planes!

Narrator A: Miller runs to a heavy machine gun and fires at the enemy planes zooming overhead.

Miller: I think I hit one, Captain! Did you see that? Captain?

Narrator B: But the captain is dead. Over the loudspeaker . . .

Voice: Abandon ship!

Narrator C: Miller escapes, but more than 100 sailors on the *West Virginia* are killed. The *Arizona* suffers the worst losses: 1,177 die aboard that sinking ship.

Scene 4

Narrator D: A huge blast capsizes the *Oklahoma*. Austin, Mortensen, and 14 other sailors are trapped in pitch-black darkness in a room that's rapidly filling up with water.

Austin: The water's up to my chest, and we're running out of air!

Mortensen: We'll drown like rats.

Austin: There *has* to be a way out.

Narrator E: He dives underwater, then returns, gasping for air . . .

Austin: I found a porthole!

Mortensen: Is it big enough for us to squeeze through?

Austin: I think I'll be able to push you out.

Narrator A: Austin leads each sailor underwater. One by one, he squeezes them through. Then . . .

Austin: OK, Morty. You're the only one left.

Mortensen: Wait a minute, who's going to push *you* out?

Austin: I'm too big to fit through that hole, and you know it.

Mortensen: I'm not going to leave you behind!

Austin: You don't have a choice. We're out of time! Come on!

Narrator B: They dive, then Austin uses all his strength to push Mortensen through the porthole.

Narrator C: Austin goes down with the ship, one of 429 men who die aboard the *Oklahoma*. Yet his bravery saves 15 lives.

Scene 5

Narrator D: The attack lasts about two hours. When it's over, 21 U.S. ships have been sunk or badly damaged, and 188 U.S. planes at nearby airfields destroyed.

Narrator E: At the hospital at Hickam Field, which is overflowing with wounded sailors . . .

Sailor: My leg! I can't feel my leg!

Annie Fox: Don't worry, we're here to help you.

Narrator A: Fox gently lifts his leg and examines the gruesome wound. Another nurse turns away.

Nurse: I think I'm going to be sick!

Fox (*pulling the nurse aside*): Now listen to me. These men need you to stay calm and do your job. Can you do that?

Nurse: Yes, ma'am.

Fox: Good. Now come help me. We have to stop the bleeding.

Nurse: What if we can't?

Fox: Act like everything's fine. Don't let him see your fear. If we give up hope, these men will too.

Narrator B: Nurses and doctors work day and night, saving as many lives as possible. In all, 2,403 Americans die in the attack.

Scene 6

Narrator C: The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addresses the nation on the radio.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked. I ask that the Congress declare a state of war between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

Narrator D: With that, the U.S. officially enters World War II. Three days later, war is declared on Germany and its allies in Europe.

Epilogue

Narrator E: For many Americans, the Japanese attack was a call to action. Inspired by the heroes of Pearl Harbor, young men around the U.S. stood in long lines to sign up for the Army, the Navy, and the Marines. Over the next few years, U.S. troops took part in heavy fighting in Europe and North Africa, and on islands in the Pacific. In all, more than 400,000 U.S. troops lost their lives.

Narrator A: Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945. The war in Europe was over. But the war with Japan continued until August 1945, when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (*heer-uh-SHEE-muh*) and Nagasaki (*nah-gah-SAH-kee*). More than 200,000 people were killed. As a result, Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945. World War II was finally over.

CORE QUESTION: How did the Pearl Harbor attack affect Americans' views on joining World War II?

Sneak Attack

Planes launched from Japanese ships in the Pacific caught Pearl Harbor off guard on December 7, 1941.

