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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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The First Aerial Bombing of Pearl Harbor

On this day, Pearl Harbor lies sleeping quietly. The winter storms that typically hit the island chain of Hawaii are at it again on this morning covering everything to the Northeast of the island with rain and low hanging clouds, obscuring the horizon. But the skies over Pearl Harbor are bright and clear.

Most of the military and civilian personal on the islands are still working to get out of bed. Only a few are on the proud Naval Ships in the harbor, and only a select few of them are doing anything close to duty on this peaceful morning.

Suddenly, the clear sky is full of buzzing spots. As the spots begin diving at the harbor, they start strafing the ground and dropping bombs on the peaceful ships at harbor. The men scramble desperately to get to battle stations, shocked and unclear about who this is and what is happening. This attack was a complete surprise.

As quickly as it started, it was all over. The mighty military force at Pearl Harbor is no more. No ship in the harbor has been spared. The mysterious attacking aircraft disappear back into the stormy Northeastern horizon from which they had come. All land safely on their carriers during the storm that is hiding the small fleet, while their admiral listened with satisfaction to reports of the damage. Called radical and dismissed by some of his associates, this attack proved his most recently ridiculed and disregarded proposal was in fact accurate and a decade ahead of its time.

The Date: Sunday, February 7th, 1932.

The Admiral attacking Pearl Harbor? United States Rear Admiral Harry E. Yarnell.

The fleet in ruins in Pearl Harbor? The United States Pacific Fleet complete with the majority of the American Battleships, eerily all lined up on Battleship Row at Ford Island as they would be nine years later.

The attack was just a war game this time.

Harry E. Yarnell was born near Independence, Iowa, and entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1893. He was serving on the battleship USS *Oregon* during the Battle of Santiago de Cuba on July 3rd, 1898. He served in the Philippines during the Philippine-American War and with the Asiatic Squadron during the Boxer Rebellion. In 1902, he was promoted as the commanding officer of the destroyer USS *Dale*. He moved on to the battleship USS *Connecticut* at her commissioning and sailed around the world with the Great White Fleet from 1907-1909. World War I found him on the staff of Admiral William S. Sims at Gibraltar and then at London. Yarnell then rotated between sea and shore duty until ordered to the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga* in 1927. He served as captain of the carrier from her commissioning until 1928, when he received the rank of Rear Admiral. He served as Chief of the Bureau of Steam

Engineering and later as Naval Adviser to the American delegation at the London Naval Conference in 1930.

By 1932, Rear Admiral Yarnell was based at San Diego, California, which was then home base for the United States Pacific Fleet. Pearl Harbor was an important base, but substantially smaller in size when compared to what it would be nine years later as it ushered in World War II. Pearl Harbor would not become the home of the fleet until the early summer of 1940. He believed that the Navy had more to fear from an aerial attack delivered from the deck of a carrier, than from ever larger confrontations between larger and larger ships and deck guns. He pressed for the reduction in the role of the battleship and the construction of more aircraft carriers.

Every year Pacific Fleet would participate in War Games during which the San Diego Fleet would engage the Pearl Harbor Fleet. The San Diego Fleet was larger and more diverse, with the newest technology and ships in the fleet. Admiral Yarnell's pride was the aircraft carriers. While he appreciated the possibilities this new weapon could have on the naval battlefield, the vast majority of his fellow admirals had little use for them. The majority of the admirals and much of the United States leadership viewed the gem of the Pearl Harbor fleet as the prized asset of the United States Fleet; the United States Battleships.

While smaller than the San Diego Fleet, the Pearl Harbor Fleet won the yearly war games time and time again thanks to these battleships. In past years, Yarnell's ships in California would leave for Pearl, "attacking" the battleships stationed in Pearl. Every year the radio traffic between the massive fleet would be intercepted by Pearl, their battleships would leave harbor, and they would "battle" out in the open sea. The other admirals pointed to this past experience as proof that the backbone of the United States Navy should still be the Battleships and that the Aircraft Carriers Admiral Yarnell prized were little more than niche vessels which had limited uses.

Admiral Yarnell decided that in 1932 he would set out to prove the value of the Aircraft Carriers. He reduced his attacking force, taking only the aircraft carrier's *USS Saratoga* and *USS Lexington* and three escort destroyers. All of his ships observed his orders to maintain radio silence. The course he ordered stayed away from the traveled freighter lanes.

In planning the attack he sought an area where they could not be seen by the radar towers on Hawaii and believed he had found such a location to the Northeast of the island. During the winter months, storms routinely happened near Oahu, and here, he would hide, knowing the radar could not see them. To top it all off, he also decided to attack on Sunday, a day he knew was the day most sailors would be off duty, and also most likely to be off-ship.

The "bombs" and "strafing" fired by the attack planes on this day were just flares and bags of flour, but the referees of the war games judged that Admiral Yarnell's attack had been more than successful, sinking every ship in Pearl Harbor. In addition, he had also figuratively destroyed every land-based plane in Oahu. As far as the success of his hiding location, using what few battleships the Pearl Harbor Team had at sea during the simulated attack could not to locate Yarnell's small fleet during the next 24 hours.

Rear Admiral Harry E. Yarnell had his victory. His prized aircraft carriers had proved that they were the future and the battleship the past. Or so you would think.

In reality, the United States Admirals and leadership disregarded this act as little more than an amusing fluke. They insisted that had it not been a surprise, the battleships would have hunted the carriers down and sunk them before their aircraft could do any damage. In the years between the 1932 War Game attack and the December 7th, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States built another twelve battleships while constructing only four aircraft carriers.

What few knew at the time was the Japanese Naval Leadership was paying attention to this particular war game. They studied the overall attack and used it in planning their own future attack. Records later showed that the Japanese War College studied this attack in 1936, coming to the following

conclusion: *“in case the enemy’s main fleet is berthed at Pearl Harbor, the idea should be to open hostilities by surprise attack from the air.”*

If one example was not enough, in the winter of 1938 then Rear Admiral Ernest King repeated Admiral Yarnell’s example when he took just the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga* and a small group of support ships and attacked the American battleships and other ships at Pearl Harbor during that year’s War Game. In this second air attack, the result was the same as in 1932; in a complete surprise attack Admiral King’s small air unit successfully “destroyed” the ships at Pearl Harbor and won the war game.

Following the pattern set in 1932 by Admiral Yarnell and repeated in 1938 by Admiral King, the Japanese Fleet traveled in radio silence, they traveled off the well-traveled shipping lanes of the Pacific, and they hid in the foul winter weather, and attacked just after dawn on a Sunday. On the day the Japanese picked to attack, December 7th, 1941, they did not use flares and bags of flour. The results of this third attack on Pearl Harbor by naval air units could no longer be ignored.

As seen here with war, in politics today our leaders find it hard to see the value or insight of individuals who think outside the box and embrace new technologies and ideas. It is hard for many of our leaders to see beyond what we perceive as the reality of today and move towards the changing future to come. When faced with something strange and different, we need to give it a full review, especially when faced with strong facts to back it up. If this had been done in 1932 for Rear Admiral Harry E. Yarnell, how different could the results of December 7th, 1941, have been?

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***Look for John on the Web at:
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