

Chapter 3: December 7th, 1941...

A Perfect Harbor in a Strategic Location

The Hawaiian Islands are a small volcanic formation in the vastness that is the Pacific Ocean. Emerging from a seabed 40,000 feet below, the chain includes 1,500 individual atolls and islands, the eight largest of which are inhabited. The chain is the crossroads of the Pacific – roughly a third of the way between North America and Asia on an east-west axis; and half way between the Arctic and the islands of Polynesia on a more or less north-south axis. It is more than 2,000 miles in any direction to any land that is habitable on any scale. One need only a passing concept of geography to understand its strategic setting.

At this ocean crossroads nature provide a near perfect anchorage – Pearl Harbor¹. While most of the islands' shoreline is made up of fierce surf pounding against cliffs or volcanic rock, Pearl is a nearly land-locked lagoon, on the south shore of the island of Oahu, the second largest of the islands in the chain. Counting its fiord-like channels, peninsulas, and islands, the harbor is two miles wide, by two miles long. In its center is Ford Island – which itself is a mile long and a half mile across.

The United States was given exclusive use of Pearl Harbor as a coaling station in 1887. Following the U.S. annexation of Hawaii thirteen years later, Pearl was transformed into the headquarters of the Navy's Pacific Fleet. In the 40 years at Pearl the navy had dredged the harbor and channels, and built a vast array of anchorages, piers, dry docks, repair yards, and fuel depots.

It was not just Pearl Harbor where the U.S. placed its military assets – although the Harbor was the centerpiece. Also on Oahu were two Army air fields, eight Army forts, an Army barracks, a Marine barracks and Marine Air Station.² Collectively they represented the military focal point of American Pacific imperialism. Although late in getting into the colonial game, over the previous half-century the U.S. had become a Pacific power, and the military assets in Hawaii represented American resolve to remain such.

The Coming Storm

For months the U.S. had been slipping towards war with Japan. This was not a fact lost to the American military. The navy had been building up its strength steadily over the previous two years, and now much of its manpower was made up of

¹ So named by the Hawaiians because of its abundance of pearl-producing oysters found there.

² These facilities included: Fort Shafter, Fort Ruger, Fort Armstrong, Fort Barrette, Fort DeRussy, Diamond Head, Fort Kamehameha, Kuwaaohē Military Reservation (Fort Hase), Fort Weaver, Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, Schofield Barracks, and Ewa Marine Air Station.

reservists who had been called up and new enlistees. Pearl City, the finger-like peninsula that stretched down into Pearl Harbor, and neighboring Honolulu, were boomtowns because of the navy buildup.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the U.S. was bolstering its defenses. The U.S. expected a Japanese attack – especially in the Philippines, and at other American outposts in the Pacific such as Guam and Wake. Douglas MacArthur, head of U.S. and Filipino forces in the Philippines, expected a Japanese offensive in the spring of 1942. However, intelligence services in Washington had advised that the timeframe might be earlier, and in early December issued a secret war warning that a Japanese attack – somewhere – was imminent.

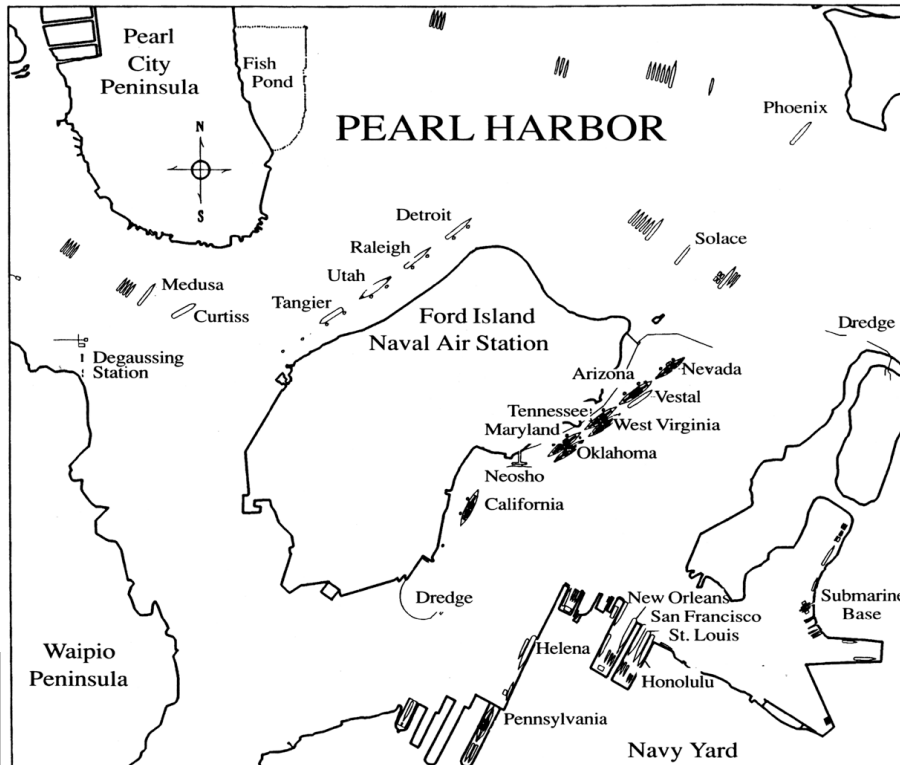
While the U.S. was systematically preparing for a fight, almost no one gave any serious consideration to Pearl Harbor being a strategic target – at least not at that point in time. It was too far for the Japanese to reach. They might strike in the Philippines; they might strike Borneo, or Singapore or even Hong Kong. But those were all thousands of miles from Hawaii. The U.S. therefore managed its Hawaiian military installations as a great staging area well behind the likely lines of battle. It might be subject to sabotage³, but it was not expected to be the object of an actual full-scale military attack.

And Hawaii was far from the main points of interest of Japanese aggression. As the Japanese pushed farther from their initial war in China – into French Indochina and into the Dutch East Indies – the United States had been very clear that at some point it would be too far. So the Japanese felt they had a choice: if they were to be the regional – and world – power they aspired to be, there would have to be a war with the United States. After long debate in its highest ranks, the Japanese decided that if war with the United States was inevitable, they would have to provide a knockout blow at the very beginning – to eliminate America's ability to respond to aggression elsewhere. And that thinking led logically to Hawaii.

Japan had a population half the size of the United States, and even less than half of its industrial capacity. They knew that in a protracted war, where attrition becomes a key factor, that they had no chance of victory. However, the goals of the Japanese – domination of Asia and the western Pacific – were far from American shores. It was felt that if the initial strike were quick enough, bold enough, and violent enough; the US would not have the stomach or stamina to wage a full-scale war over a number of years. That thinking too led to Hawaii. So by early 1941 the Japanese had decided – unless there was an unexpected change in American foreign policy -- Pearl Harbor would be the centerpiece of a coordinated attack across numerous Pacific targets.

³ Fearing sabotage, the Army Air Corps had ordered all its planes at Hickam Field to be placed in close-together clusters far from the base perimeter, a move that ironically, would make for perfect targets on December 7th.

That Morning



Location of US ships on the morning of December 7, 1941. Source: National Park Service⁴

There were 96 ships in Pearl Harbor the morning of December 7th, including all of the U.S. battleships in the Pacific.ⁱⁱ Only the carriers were missing – the *Lexington* and the *Enterprise* having been delayed by heavy weather returning from missions bringing war supplies to Midway and Wake respectively; and the *Saratoga* was in California.⁴ Most of the ships in the fleet were operating on a liberal shore policy, which was common for ships in port on a weekend; the captains and senior crew members of many of the ships were still somewhere on shore. Even those on ships were operating in a stand down mode. The 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. watch had minimal men at station. That would change at 8:00 a.m. when the watch would change bringing more men on-duty. The watch was initiated with the raising of the colors at 7:55.

The *USS Monaghan* was an exception to the general state of stand-down. Moored at Buoy X-14 in the East Loch, directly north of Ford Island's northern tip, the *Monaghan* was the overnight "ready duty destroyer," although she was scheduled to

⁴ The U.S. had a total of six operational carriers on December 7th 1941. The *Enterprise*, *Lexington* and *Saratoga* were assigned to the Pacific; the *Ranger*, *Wasp* and *Yorktown* to the Atlantic. A seventh carrier, *Hornet*, commissioned in late October 1941, had yet to carry out her shakedown. On December 7th the *Enterprise* was returning to Pearl from a mission to deliver Marine Corps fighters to Wake Island. The *Lexington* was on a similar mission to Midway. The *Saratoga* was in San Diego.

come off that duty at 8:00 a.m. "Ready duty" meant just that – the ship was on standby to assist with any number of tasks – from escorting submarines in and out of the channel to mail runs, or as Seaman Ed Creighton from Marblehead who was on the *Monaghan* summed it up – "the shit jobs."ⁱⁱⁱ

Creighton had joined the navy a year earlier. Typical of many in his generation, he had few options in life coming out of high school. His father was dead, and he was living with an aunt. College was out of reach and good jobs were few and far between. The build up of the military afforded him his best opportunity, and he had signed up for six years with the Navy, after twice walking the five miles to the Marine recruiting office in Salem and finding it closed.

Creighton was leaving the *Monaghan's* mess hall at 7:51 a.m. on December 7th and was and looking forward to shore leave when the *Monaghan* came off the ready duty in nine minutes. Throughout the ship, sailors were changing into their whites preparing to go to church services or on shore leave. The plans changed at that moment, however. The master-at-arms came around announcing, "make all preparations to get underway" immediately (the *Monaghan* did not have a ship-wide P.A. system). The crew grumbled, thinking someone had thought up a last-minute detail for them to do just before their watch ended.

Actually the *Monaghan* had been ordered out of the harbor to assist another destroyer – the *USS Ward*, which was responsible for patrolling the waters leading into Pearl Harbor. The *Ward* had encountered something unusual, although it had taken two hours from their initial contact until it was reported, and then another hour until someone thought it important enough to send out another destroyer to assist. The "something unusual" was a midget submarine. The Japanese had deployed five of the two-man boats south of Oahu, and their mission was to slip into the harbor and fire off their two torpedoes at targets of opportunity. The *Ward* had sunk one of the midget subs at 6:48, and had spotted a second just after 7:00.

Creighton had just come on deck and was talking to a shipmate when "*all of a sudden, a line of planes came in right at us -- low. I looked at them and they had the big red dot on the side, and I said to the kid 'what the hell are those planes? Where are they from?' And then they veered from us over to Ford Island where the battleships were.*"^{iv}

The Japanese air attack on Pearl was complicated, involving 353 planes that after leaving six carriers 150 miles northwest of Oahu had deployed to come at Pearl Harbor from various directions. The primary targets of the Japanese attack had their anchorage along Ford Island. The carriers typically were moored along the northwest side of the island (just south and a little east of the *Monaghan*), and battleship row on the opposite (southeastern) shore. It is not surprising that the incoming planes gave little initial notice to the *Monaghan* as they streaked towards Ford Island.

Creighton again: *"All of a sudden I heard this explosion. So I went back on the fantail to look, just in time to see the Utah turn over. And then the shit hit the fan. Everything started going off then."* The *Utah*, a former battleship that had been downgraded to a target ship, was at the *Saratoga's* usual anchorage, just a few hundred yards south of the *Monaghan*. Coated in wood planking for its mission as a target ship, the Japanese had mistaken her for a carrier. She was hit by two torpedoes and capsized within the first few minutes of the attack.

Ships at anchorage cannot immediately get underway. The U.S. Naval fleet at Pearl Harbor that morning was powered by oil that was used to fire boilers that created steam to turn the screws that propelled the ship. Larger ships, such as the battleships, had eight boilers; smaller ships such as the *Monaghan* had four. Depending on the ship's size it took between two to three hours for a ship at anchorage to get underway as boilers must be lit and steam built up before the ship can move. However, because the *Monaghan* had been on ready duty two of her boilers were already lit, and she was able to get underway within a half hour.^v During that time, she was only of marginal interest to the Japanese, who used the first half hour of the raid to focus on the battleships on the other side of Ford Island.

To get out of the harbor from its anchorage at Buoy X-14, the *Monaghan* had to travel south down a half-mile-wide stretch of water between Pearl City on the west and Ford Island on the east. Creighton's job was that of a belt loader on a fifty-caliber machine gun on the starboard side near the stern. Although the ammunition was initially slow in getting to the deck, the gun operator more than made up for lost time. *"The kid on the gun -- he was shooting everything -- lobster buoys, palm trees, coconuts, automobiles over on the beach. When we got a break in the action, I said to him 'for Christ sake what are you shooting at?' 'Oh,' he says, 'I'm so f__ing scared I just couldn't let go of the trigger.'"*

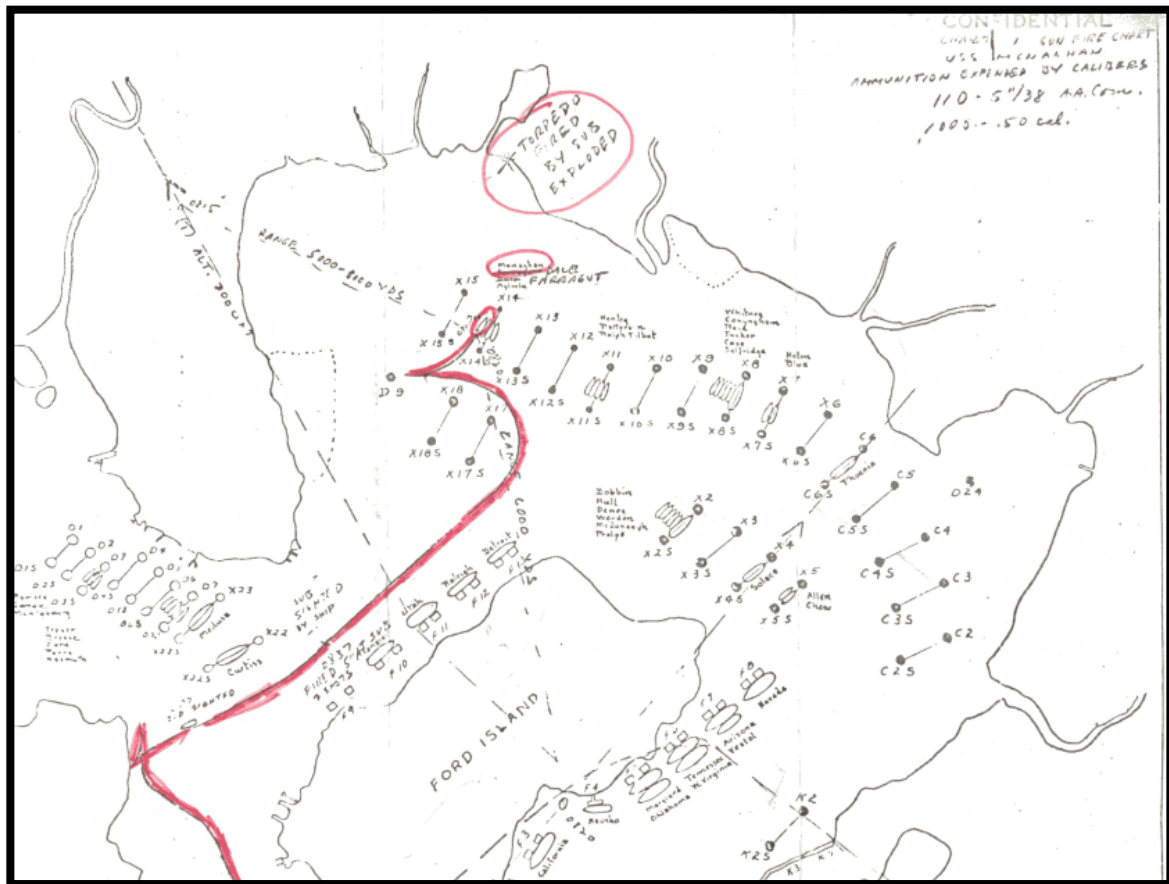
The *Monaghan* passed the capsized *Utah* at 8:35 heading for the channel out of the harbor when she spotted the conning tower of a Japanese midget submarine. Going to flank speed the *Monaghan* charged to ram the sub, passed within a few yards of it, and then dropped two depth charges directly over it, obliterating the midget sub and nearly blowing the stern off the *Monaghan*.

The ship's forward momentum sent it headed towards the west shore of the entrance to the West Loch, where it slammed into a burning derrick along the shore and became stuck. Japanese planes swarmed over the stalled destroyer. Creighton recalls the closeness of the combat: *"The Japs were strafing us. And after they would strafe us, they would go down around the fantail and they come back up the starboard side. And they were about five feet off the water and about ten feet out -- they were looking right at us as they went by and grinning. Christ, you could see the gold in their teeth! You could look them right in the eye."*

An officer ordered Creighton to the bow to assist in getting the ship free of the derrick. As he went forward he noticed a damage control crew who were "standing

by” a level above on the ship’s superstructure. The damage control crew – frustrated and angry – had taken it upon themselves to throw whatever was at hand at the passing planes, including wrenches and vegetables. An opportunity thus presented itself to the young Marbleheader – “as I was going up one of the potatoes rolled off the deck right in front of me because I was walking up towards the bow. So I picked it up, and as luck would have it – here come the Japs – so I reamed back, called them a few names and let it fly.” The passing plane was so close Creighton could see the pilot grin at his futile effort. Then he banked and started another strafing run.

Soon thereafter the *Monaghan* managed to back free of the derrick and make way to the channel out of the harbor. The *Monaghan* cleared the harbor shortly after 9:00 a.m. She was the second American ship out. That was the high point of fear for Creighton – wondering what waited beyond the mouth of the burning harbor. But the Japanese were far to the north.



Path of the USS Monaghan on the morning of December 7, 1941. Source: Edward G. Creighton^{vi}

When Creighton sailed out of Pearl, unbeknownst to him, he left eight Marbleheaders behind. Foremost among them was Warren Boles, an officer assigned to the light cruiser *USS Helena*.

Boles was of old Yankee stock. He had grown up an avid yachtsman and sometime adventurer. In the Marblehead sailing circles -- which was not the richest group of recreational yachters in the nation -- but perhaps the most proficient -- Boles was well known. He had sailed in numerous ocean races; had for a time been the assistant yachting editor of the Boston Herald; and had once jumped into a heavy sea during a yacht race to save the life of a fellow sailor who had fallen overboard. In 1933, at the age of 22, he had joined the naval reserve as an officer -- a somewhat common practice among the better-off Yankees of New England dating back to the 19th century.

Boles was called up to active duty shortly after Europe went to war. In his two-plus years of being in the full-time navy he had know only the *Helena*, to which he had been assigned at her launching. The *Helena* was assigned to the Pacific fleet and its home port was Honolulu. On the morning of December 7th she was anchored at the 1010 pier in the southeast corner of Pearl Harbor -- the spot usually reserved for the battleship *Pennsylvania*, the flagship of the Pacific Fleet. Boles however, was not on board. He was 12 miles away in the hills overlooking Honolulu.^{vii}

While in an advanced state of military readiness, life in Hawaii before December 7th was far from that of being "at war." So much so, that like many others, Boles' family had moved to Honolulu to be with him. Since March 1941, his wife, two young sons and mother had lived in a bungalow in the high hills overlooking Honolulu and Waikiki beach. When in port, officers worked a sort-of working day, and on the *Helena* officers had every other weekend off. The 6th and 7th were Boles' turn to be off-duty.

As the planes streaked over Ed Creighton's head in Pearl Harbor, Lt. Boles and family were finishing breakfast in their bathing suits, unaware of the attack.^{viii} They had planned to go down to the beach to swim -- something the family did every morning. As they were readying to leave they noticed spurts of water and puffs of smoke from anti-aircraft guns near Ft. DeRussey and assumed that they would have to postpone their swim until after the "target practice" was over.

The first sign that something was amiss was when they saw an officer's car racing down the curving mountain roads at a breakneck speed. Then the officer's wife came in and "white as a sheet" told the family to turn on the radio. Lt. Boles frantically dressed -- although not so frantically that he went out without his hat and tie -- jumped in his old "Cadillac eight," and joined the wild racing out of the hills towards Pearl Harbor. Hundred of cars sped down the three-lane highway at speeds nearing 100 miles an hour, creating a less-talked-about, but nonetheless dangerous, element to the raid. Boles stopped several times to pick up naval personnel on foot running towards Pearl Harbor; and by the time he made the gate the car was full.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor lasted two hours.⁵ While Boles had missed the opening moments of the battle he arrived long before it ended. Amazingly, amid bombs and blazing guns, he drove directly to his ship, parked the Cadillac at the 1010 Pier alongside the *Helena*, and manned his battle station. A torpedo had hit the *Helena* in the opening moments of the raid, but the light cruiser, which would earn the nickname “the fighten’est ship,” was still afloat and blazing away at the Japanese planes.

Boles’ duty station on the *Helena* was “Spot One” – high up in the crow’s nest, where he was the gunnery officer for the ship’s main batteries. However, there was no role for six-inch guns in an air attack, so Boles left his front row seat to pitch in elsewhere. By the time the last Japanese plane headed northwest out to sea, the *Helena* would claim to have shot down five Japanese planes.⁶

By 10:00 a.m. the raid was over...

Aftermath

The sound of a war ship with all guns blazing, combined with the concussion from nearby exploding bombs and torpedoes is a sensory-overload that those that experience it have trouble fully explaining. Close proximity to explosions themselves can cause great damage. Such was the case with the *USS Oglala*, an aged, wooden-hull minesweeper tied to the port side of the *Helena* that morning. The torpedo that struck the *Helena* had passed under the *Oglala* without touching it. Not that it mattered: the percussion shook the *Oglala* into oblivion – its hull collapsed and she capsized.

Something similar happened to Boles’ car. Although not hit in the wild ride from Honolulu to the 1010 Pier, and not hit while on the pier, the old Cadillac had a number of close calls, especially when parked next to the *Helena*. Several days later, when Boles was able to go back to Honolulu to see after his family, he got in the car and started it up. “But before he had driven a hundred feet, a headlight fell off, then a fender clattered to the ground and a wheel rolled away. Literally shaken to pieces by the concussion of the bombs, the car came apart under him. Boles got out and walked home.”^{ix}

At Home

8:00 a.m. in Hawaii is 1:00 p.m. in Marblehead.

⁵ According to Walter Lord in *Day of Infamy* the attack started at 7:55, and ended just before 10:00. There was a 15-minute lull around 8:30.

⁶ This is a boast made by C.G. Morris in *The Fighten’est Ship*, a wartime published account of the *USS Helena*. Later accounts of the attack at Pearl do not corroborate this boast, however.

That Sunday afternoon was bright, clear, and crisp – a strong wind had blown out the unusually warm and foggy weather that had lingered at the end of the week – and the temperature had dropped 30 degrees in less than 24 hours. The wintry weather had put people in a Christmas spirit. Elizabeth and Charles Haley, a young couple who lived on Cliff Street, took the opportunity to spend time in the open spaces of the Neck to collect greens for Christmas decorations.

There was little retail business that Sunday – either in Marblehead or Boston. The Christmas shopping season would not get underway in earnest until Monday the 8th. Sunday was truly a day of family and leisure. On Sundays, families – and especially extended families -- typically ate their large formal meal of the day in mid-afternoon. Contrary to what would become folklore years later, most were not listening to the radio – but as news spread – by phone calls, by knocks on doors, by word of mouth – it was to the radio everyone turned for details.

On the radio, the first reports started filtering in near the end of the attack. The attack ended shortly before 3:00 p.m. Marblehead time.^x Salem-based WESX, new and parochial, still had trouble filling all its airtime -- was broadcasting Foreign Language Programs. The larger Boston-based stations offered a wide variety of entertainment and news. WBZ, one of the larger Boston stations, offered a typical schedule of programs that early after noon – from 12:30 to 2 Radio City Music Hall; from 2 to 3 Great Plays: the Inspector General; and from 3 to 4: a news forum called “Wake Up America.”

Those not at home with their families, were out and about when they heard – Alice O’Keefe heard when she was leaving the Sunday matinee at the Warwick Theatre, Charlie McCune was “shooting the breeze” with friends at five corners when someone ran up and told the group. Similar groups formed on corners throughout town, as neighbors shared what little hard news they had, and speculated what the consequences would mean.

Elsewhere

8 a.m. Honolulu time was 8:00 p.m. in Cape Town, South Africa. The *USS West Point* was nearing the Cape of Good Hope when word of the Japanese attack was received in her radio room by Marbleheader Tom Monahan. The fast troop ship with four Headers in her crew was already fully integrated into the war effort, like most of the U.S. Navy ships operating in the Atlantic. At that moment the *West Point* was part of an American convoy transferring British troops from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Specifically, the *West Point* was moving more than 5,000 members of the 55th Brigade of the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire battalions from Halifax, where they picked them up, to Bombay (via Trinidad).^{xi}

The Japanese attack had been much more sweeping and dramatic than just the attack on Pearl Harbor – it had stretched across the entire Pacific, including the

British possessions of Hong Kong and Singapore. The attack had an immediate impact on the voyage of the *West Point* and the troops she was moving. They were ordered to pull into Cape Town while the British considered the re-deployment of the troops she carried. Frank Devine, another of the *West Point's* Headers, remembered the astonishment of the locals when the *West Point* pulled into the docks of Cape Town shortly after news of the attack – “damn, you Yanks don't waste time. You've been at war a couple of hours and here you are already with a ship full of troops” one of the dockers noted.^{xii}

8 a.m. Honolulu time is noon in Louisville, Kentucky. Nearby Fort Knox was home to the Armored Forces Replacement Training Center, one of the major clearinghouses for basic training in the Army. Of the 20,000 men at Fort Knox, a half dozen were recently drafted Marbleheaders. Though a large camp, the Headers frequently socialized with each other in their spare time and off hours. Sunday afternoons were quiet ones in the pre-war Fort, and most of the Headers were off duty when the news swept through camp.

John Woods, who had been drafted into the Army from Marblehead three months earlier, was lying in his bunk writing a letter to his mother: “*Well here it is Sunday afternoon and I am again laying on the bunk writing. Did you hear the news on the radio just now?? It looks like the beginning, don't it? We had some jazz music on when they broke in with it. It is now about three o'clock and they have been talking about it on the radio since about two fifteen. It don't look as though I will need that money now. They'll probably cancel all furloughs. It will probably be all straightened out by the time you receive this. Lets hope so anyway.*”^{xiii}

ⁱ Map from North Carolina Digital History at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-worldwar/5821>. Original source: National Park Service

ⁱⁱ Timing and locations of events at Pearl Harbor are taken from *Day of Infamy* by Walter Lord, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 1957

ⁱⁱⁱ Details and quotes from an interview with Ed Creighton on August 18, 2001 in Marblehead, Massachusetts

^{iv} Interview with Ed Creighton, August 18, 2001 in Marblehead, Massachusetts

^v Details of the Monahan's boilers are described in Walter Lord's *Day of Infamy*

^{vi} From *War Diary of the U.S.S. Monahan, DD354*, by Edward G. Creighton, unpublished

^{vii} The account of Lt. Boles' experience on December 7th are taken from an extensive interview given by his mother to the *Marblehead Messenger*. Multiple articles ran in the paper in April 1942.

^{viii} There are conflicting stories about exactly what Boles was doing when he heard the news that Pearl Harbor was under attack. In the book *The Fightin'est Ship*, author C.G. Morris claims Boles was playing with his sons on the lawn.

^{ix} From “*The Fightin'est Ship*,” *The Story of the Cruiser Helena*, by Lieutenant C.G. Morris, USNR, with Hugh B. Caves, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1944

^x From *Day of Infamy*, by Walter Lord, page 212.

^{xi} From “History of the West Point” http://www.town-local.net/sibiski/west_point.htm.

^{xii} From an interview with Frank Devine, August 16, 2000, in Marblehead Massachusetts.

^{xiii} From *The War Letters of John N. Woods*, Edited by Sean M. Casey, Unpublished.