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Airmen gather at Hickam to remember Dec. 7 sacrifices

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JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR HICKAM, Hawaii -- Airmen, families and veterans gathered beneath Old Glory, carried by the same flag pole that Airmen perished protecting on Dec. 7, 1941, at Atterbury Circle in remembrance of the 69th anniversary of the attacks on military bases on Oahu.

As the national anthem began, civilians placed their hands over their hearts and military members rendered salutes rendered with a sense of extraordinary pride and a lingering solemn presence in a sacred place where blood was shed.

The flag pole they faced was bombed three times by 500-pound bombs. She was strafed, torn and tattered, but she never fell. She stands today as a tribute to those men who manned a .50-caliber water-cooled machine gun at her base. As one man was gunned down, another took his place. It is a place where blood was shed.

On the last note of the refrain, the "sound of freedom" roared overhead as the Montana Air National Guard's 186th Fighter Squadron, F-15 fighter jets flew a four-ship missing man formation over the ceremony.

"Reminders of the attack are still visible today," said Col. Sam Barrett, 15th Wing commander. "The former big barracks, now the headquarters of the Pacific Air Forces and its bullet-scarred walls are carefully preserved as a constant reminder. The U.S. military shall never again be caught unprepared, and our resolve will never falter. As Americans, we will always remember the heroism, the dedication, and painful sacrifice of our service men and women on that terrible, terrible day."

Coinciding with a ceremony conducted by the National Park Service at the Arizona Memorial, the Hickam ceremony featured performances by the PACAF Band. Veterans choked back their tears as they listened to the music and reflected back to their experiences which forever changed their lives. In conclusion, the honor guard performed a three volley salute, which rang out throughout the hallowed grounds at Atterbury Circle.

Lt. Gen. Hawk Carlisle, 13th Air Force commander, spoke about the time of the attacks and the sacrifice of those who wore the uniform in yesteryear. He explained the Army Air corpsmen and Sailors in 1941 were recently finished with a series of major exercises, and the members involved were looking forward to a break through the holidays.

"The alert level was high. Sabotage was thought to be the primary threat," said General Carlisle. "But still on that Saturday night, 6 December, the mood was joyful on this Hawaiian paradise."

The events of the next morning changed their lives forever.

"The next morning, Sunday morning, life started along a serene path, as the veterans will tell us," General Carlisle said. "But soon, in the course of just over two hours, hundreds lost their lives and hundreds more became heroes trying to save lives."

During the attacks, the Japanese dropped more than 100 bombs on Hickam's Army Air Field, and nearly every bomb dropped was a direct hit. Twenty-seven bombs were dropped on the main barracks alone. At the time, former Army Air Corps Pvt. Joseph Corsello was a resident of that particular barracks, but by a stroke of providence he was on guard duty when the attacks began and his dorms were bombed.

"The first thing I did was look for a place to hide," Mr. Corsello remembers. "I was standing next to an old wooden building at the time, and when we opened it up, it was full of ammunition: guns, 50-calibers, 30-calibers, 45-automatics and all kinds of weapons. We set that up outside and waited. After the first wave left, we looked for somewhere else to set up so we could fight them. But it was a little more than we were prepared for."

Don Thaw, another survivor who vividly remembers the events from his perspective, was a Hawaiian Air Depot civilian employee. Mr. Thaw, a sheet metal shop foreman, worked on the aircraft at Hickam for four months when the attacks occurred.

"As soon as the bombs started falling, I left the house in a hurry," he said remembering his reaction was so quick he forgot to tell his wife he was leaving. "She was busy hanging out the morning laundry in the backyard of our civilian base housing."

"When I got to the hangar, you could see how a bomb fell through the roof causing structural damages as well as destroying the aircraft we had scheduled for maintenance," he said. "The flat roof building next door was where we kept our tools, and fortunately not much damage was done there."

Mr. Thaw was eventually credited in 1948 by the Department of the Army with a Commendation for Meritorious Civilian Service for his actions that day. With utter disregard for his own life, he gave assistance to the wounded, removing them from bombed and burning buildings in the face of enemy attacks.

"Those men who survived the attacks have felt a responsibility to remember the true heroes, the 189 who gave their lives," said Jessie Higa, Hickam Field survivors liaison. "This is our heritage, this is our legacy."
