60 Minutes Over Pearl

WEARING TUXEDOS OR PYJAMAS, STARTLED USAAC FIGHTER PILOTS DID WHAT THEY COULD TO RESPOND TO THE SURPRISE ATTACK ON HAWAII. AMID THE CHAOS, CURTISS P-36s ENTERED COMBAT IN US COLOURS. ANDREW THOMAS RELATES

Above
A Curtiss P-36A of the 55th PS in mid-1939.

Right
Re-arming 1st Lt Lew Sanders' Hawk at Wheeler Field after engaging the Japanese.

Heralded as the USAAC's first modern monoplane fighter, the Curtiss P-36 Hawk was obsolescent by European standards in less than three years. By 1941 it had been largely supplanted in frontline service by such types as the Bell P-39 Airacobra and the P-36's lineal successor, the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk.

Some P-36s were transferred to overseas-based USAAC units in the Panama Canal Zone and, in February 1941, Alaska. About the same time, others were delivered to Hawaii aboard the carrier USS *Enterprise* for use by the 18th Pursuit Group's 78th Pursuit Squadron and the newly-formed 15th PG (comprising the 45th, 46th and 47th PS) at Wheeler Field.

It was aircraft of the 15th PG that were destined to be the only P-36s to see combat in US colours. Among the young pilots with the 15th was 2nd Lt Francis Gabreski, later to gain great success over Europe and Korea:

"I was stepping up to the P-36 and P-40. My squadron commander was Capt Aaron Tyer. When it came to flight leaders, I had a dandy; 1st Lt 'Woody' Wilmot. I would say Woody had more to do with me becoming a successful fighter pilot than anyone.

"I flew the P-36 a lot in Hawaii. The P-36 was about 1,500lb lighter than the P-40, which made it a joy to fly. It had a short nose with a radial engine that pumped out enough power to give you full control during all the aerobatic manoeuvres, and it was responsive to the flight controls. The 45th was equipped with a mixed complement of P-36s and P-40s, so we flew whatever type was available on any given day."

Hurried response

Shortly after 06:00 hours on Sunday, December 7, 1941 the first wave of Japanese aircraft lifted off aircraft carriers 200 miles (321km) north of the Hawaiian Island of Oahu and headed towards Pearl Harbor. The second wave began taking off 45 minutes later.

At Wheeler Field the first bombs fell shortly after 08:00 and swiftly

reduced the base to chaos. Hickam and Bellows Field were also hit and so effective was the attack that it was virtually impossible to put up anything approaching an credible defence.

Among pilots spending the weekend at Wheeler was 2nd Lt Harry Brown, who with his friend 2nd Lt Johnny Dains, started out for the auxiliary field at Haleiwa soon after the attack had started. As they passed the married quarters, the pair stopped to pick up Lt Bob Rogers. They drove desperately to Haleiwa, 15 miles away, still dressed in their tuxedos from the weekend's revelries!

A number of P-40s and P-36s were temporarily assigned to Haleiwa from the 47th PS for gunnery qualifications. Due to a shortage of 0.50in guns, the P-36s were fitted with just one nose-mounted 0.30 machine-gun. At 08:30 a pair of P-40s, soon followed by four P-36s, took off.

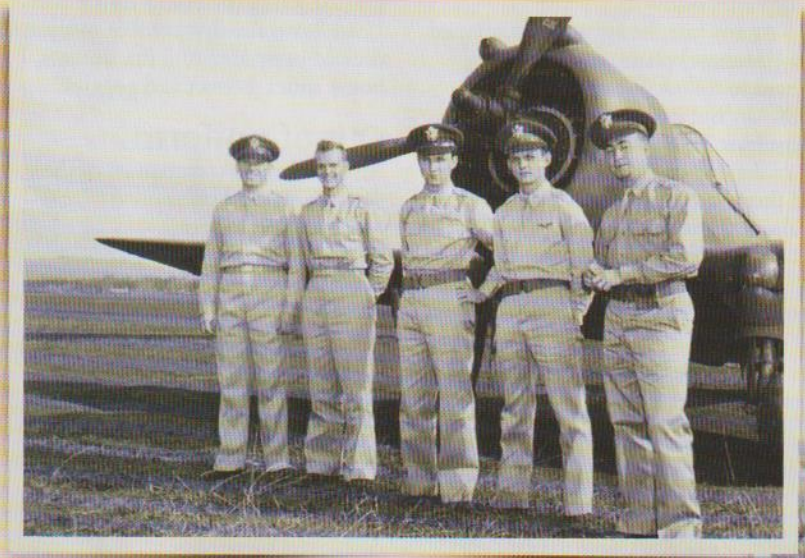
Harry Brown was in one of the P-36s: "I jumped into the P-36 and was quickly airborne. As I got into the air, I heard some reference to Bellows Field on the radio and started in that direction but could see no reason. I had just started back in the general direction of Kahuku Point when I saw another plane.

"I started to pounce only to see that it was another P-36. I closed on his wing and saw that it was [Bob] Rogers. He motioned downward and there was the enemy! I couldn't understand why Rogers didn't attack. Finally, reluctantly, he started his dive, got to within maybe 300 yards and fired.

"When he pulled up, I closed on the target [a Nakajima B5N *Kate*]. He rolled out, headed downward, then pulled almost vertical. He hammer-headed to the left and headed for the deck. I had built up a lot of speed and passed him, getting only a quick shot as I went by. By the time I was horizontal again, I was completely blacked out. As soon as I came round I instinctively rolled out in a kind of sloppy Immelmann turn but never saw my adversary again.

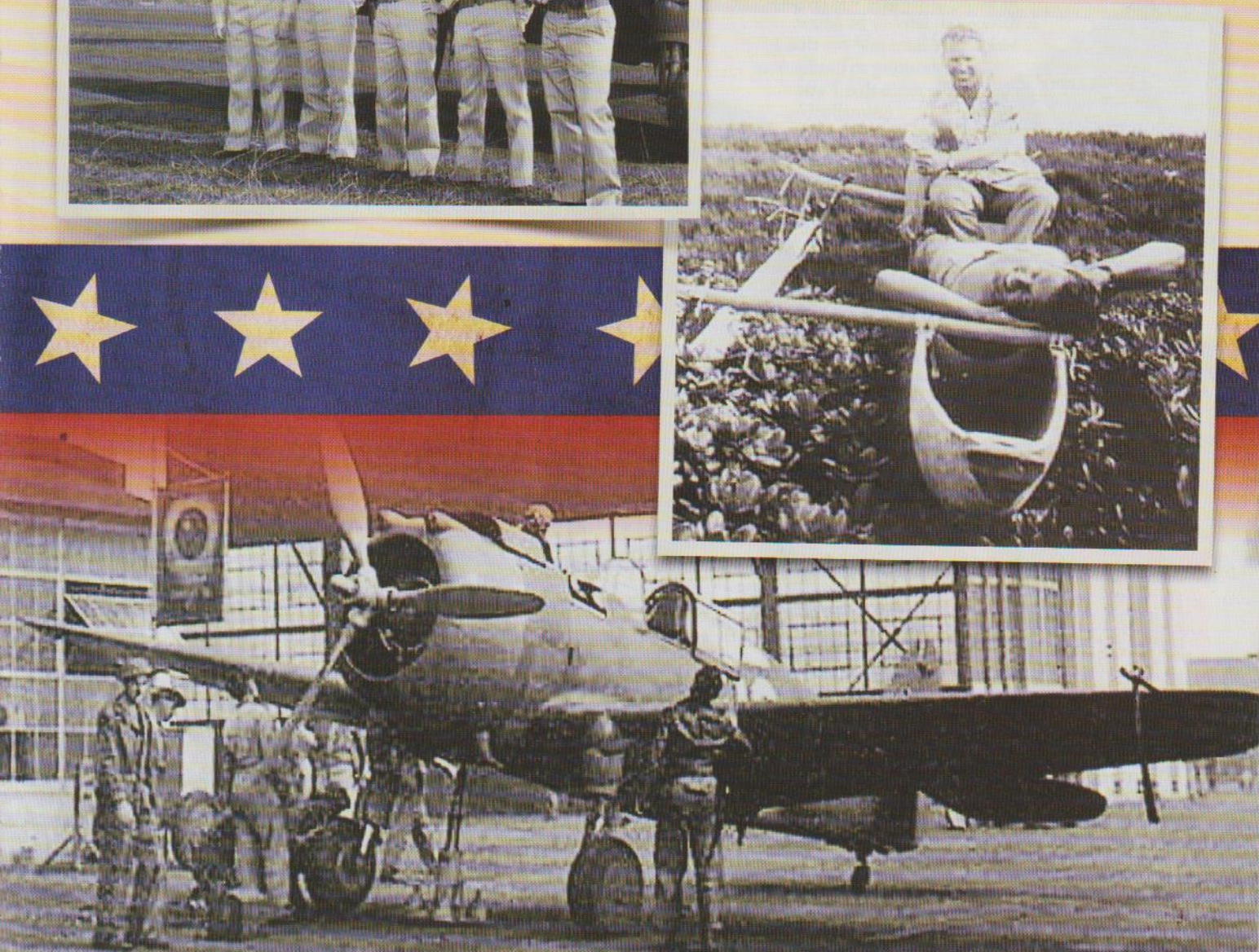
"I could hear Rogers shouting on the radio but couldn't ascertain what he was saying. I started a slow turn to the right and suddenly there were three planes over Kaena Point. I started for them and, as I closed, could see that two Japanese planes were in hot pursuit of a P-36, presumably Rogers.

"They were slightly below me and I dove toward the second one. He snap-turned inside me, leaving me almost on the tail of the first one. He made a mistake! He tried to turn away from me and, of course, flew right through my line of fire. I wasn't more than 10-15ft behind him and I couldn't have missed him. I saw the rear gunner crumple and the left wing begin to burn so I snapped to the right and climbed to set myself up for another pass. I saw the plane I had hit go into the water almost vertically."



Below left
Some of the pilots that claimed victories on December 7 posing for the press in front of the P-36 said to have been flown by 2nd Lt Harry Brown to claim his two victories. Left to right: 1st Lt Lewis Sanders and 2nd Lt Philip Rasmussen (flew P-36s, each claimed a 'Zero'), 2nd Lt Taylor and 2nd Lt Welch (flew P-40s), 2nd Lt Harry Brown (P-36, claimed a pair of 'Kates').

Below
CO of the 46th FS on December 7 was 1st Lt Lew Sanders (rear) relaxing in happier days with fellow pilot 2nd Lt Phil Rasmussen. Both claimed Japanese aircraft destroyed on the day.



PEARL HARBOR *Debut*

Pennsylvania-born of Polish immigrants, Francis Stanley 'Gabby' Gabreski enlisted in the USAAC in July 1940 and was with the 45th Pursuit Squadron at Wheeler Field when the Japanese struck on December 7, 1941.

In January 1943 he became a flight leader with the 56th Fighter Group, the 'Wolf Pack' at King's Cliffe, near Peterborough. He finished the war as a Lt Colonel and the European theatre top-scorer with 28 victories in 153 combat missions.

He remained a career USAF pilot and went into combat again during the Korea conflict. Flying F-86 Sabres with the 56th Fighter Interceptor Wing, he added 2.5 MiGs to his 'kill' tally. He retired from the Air Force in 1967, with the rank of Colonel.

2nd Lt Francis Gabreski. VIA W MATUSIAK VIA AUTHOR

Below right
P-36s were also sent to improve the defences of Alaska: 18th PS Hawks at Juneau in mid-1941. DAVID STERN VIA AUTHOR

Inflicting damage

Brown wasn't finished: "I turned left looking for the one I had missed and found myself looking right down the throat of a convoy of about 10 to 12. I think I must have surprised them as much as I had been because they burst in all directions as I flew right through the middle of them.

"I saw what I thought was a straggler and started for him only to find it was another P-36. I closed with him, thinking it was Rogers. It turned out later to be Mike Moore. He later told me that I was shouting so loudly over the radio that I was unintelligible. I was, of course, telling him of the airplanes below us.

"At any rate, he aggressively jumped a [Japanese] plane with me trying hard to follow. We went all over the sky but Mike was so close that I couldn't get a shot. Finally, he broke off, having used all his ammunition. I then started after him [the Japanese aircraft] and got in three good passes before I too, was out of ammo.

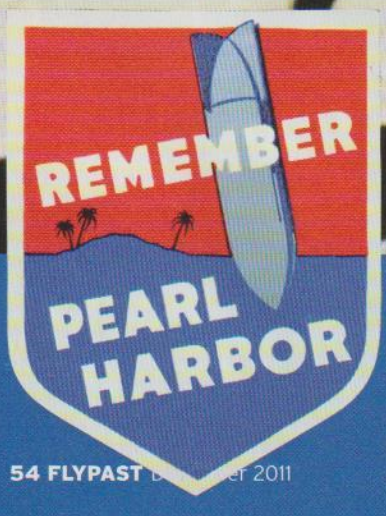
"I know I inflicted heavy damage on my first pass. I saw the pilot's canopy shatter and the engine take some hits. The last time I saw him he was headed out over Kaena Point in the general direction of Kauai trailing a column of black smoke and rapidly losing altitude."

This was initially credited to Brown as a 'probable' but was later upgraded. "I didn't get confirmation of that second 'kill' until almost two years later. I believe that each of the two for which I claim credit had a blue belly band and one of them had a single yellow or orange stripe, raked on the vertical stabilizer. Both were *Kates*, although my Form 5 records them as [Aichi D3A] *Vals*.

"I returned to Haleiwa and landed. A servicing crew chief teasingly pointed to how I was dressed. Only then did I realize that I had flown my first combat mission dressed in pyjama top, tux trousers, house shoes, helmet and goggles!"

Out of uniform

At Wheeler, the commander of the 46th PS, 1st Lt Lew Sanders, had managed to save several P-36s and get them prepared.



THE AFTERMATH 1941

DECEMBER 8, 1941 – THE US AND BRITAIN DECLARE WAR ON JAPAN.

FEBRUARY 27-MARCH 1, 1942 – THE JAPANESE SINK THE USS HOUSTON IN THE BATTLE OF THE JAVA SEA.

MARCH 18, 1942 – GEN DOUGLAS MACARTHUR IS APPOINTED COMMANDER OF THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC THEATER.

He led four of them off, just as the second wave began its attack over the shattered island of Oahu at 08:55.

Lew Sanders' wingman was 2nd Lt Philip Rasmussen and the other pilots he selected were Lts Moore, Thacker and Norriss. Philip Rasmussen was still in his pyjamas when he raced across Wheeler Field and climbed into to his all-silver P-36A '86'. Also getting airborne was 2nd Lt Gordon Sterling who in the confusion had manned 2nd Lt Norriss' aircraft.

Like those who flew from Haleiwa most of these pilots had recently passed their gunnery tests and were better qualified than some of the other available pilots. Sanders described the frantic departure: "We made a downwind take-off, circled and headed east. We used maximum climb to reach the overcast, which we entered over the east side of the field. I flew on instruments and came out over the clouds about a mile east of Bellows Field."

Having gained height to around 9,000ft, about 20 minutes after taking off Sanders led his small group down onto a formation of enemy fighters. Sanders himself attacked the leading Mitsubishi A6M, probably that was flown by Lt Fujita. (Officially designated the Navy Type 0 the A6M was more often referred to as the 'Zero' than by its Allied codename *Zeke*.)

Sterling was soon in serious trouble as Fujita's aircraft appeared on his tail. Seeing his young wingman in danger Sanders, having climbed up from his initial skirmish, dived on the Zero but was unable to save the young tyro as he described: "Just as I closed in, he got a burst at Sterling, whose plane burst into flames. Four of us then went into a dive: the Japanese in front, then Sterling, firing at him; then another Japanese and then me.

"We plunged into the overcast that way. I was some distance behind, and when I came out, there was no sign of the other planes. The way they had been going, they couldn't have pulled out, so it was obvious that all three went into the sea."

As a result, both Sanders and the unfortunate Sterling were credited with victories, though both the enemy fighters are thought to have survived, albeit damaged.

Elation, then shock

The gallant action by the Hawk quartet was not yet over. Circling over the bay trying to re-cock his guns, Thacker was attacked from the side by another Zero. "A 20mm explosive shell had fractured my tailwheel hydraulic line. I smelled hydraulic fluid in the cockpit, so I quickly ducked under some clouds and left the scene."

That Zero, thought to have been flown by 2nd Petty Officer (Flying) Tanaka, crossed the nose of Rasmussen's P-36 who had also suffered gun stoppages: "I came up on the belly of one and raked it from

"I SAW THE REAR GUNNER CRUMPLE AND THE LEFT WING BEGIN TO BURN..."

1944

APRIL 18, 1942 – 16 NORTH AMERICAN B-25 MITCHELL CREWS CARRY OUT THE 'DOOLITTLE RAID', A CARRIER-BORNE BOMBER OFFENSIVE AGAINST JAPAN.

JUNE 4-5, 1942 – AIRCRAFT FROM THREE US CARRIERS ATTACK AND SINK SEVERAL JAPANESE WARSHIPS IN THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY.

AUGUST 7, 1942 – AMPHIBIOUS US LANDINGS ON THE SOLOMON ISLANDS BEGIN.

JUNE 19, 1944 – WITH THE TIDE OF WAR FIRMLY ON THEIR SIDE, US FIGHTERS DOWN 220 JAPANESE AIRCRAFT IN THE 'MARIANAS TURKEY SHOOT'.

Top
The P-36's lineal successor, the P-40 Warhawk also engaged the Japanese over Pearl Harbor.

Above
One of the P-36 pilots lost over Pearl on December 7 was 2nd Lt Gordon Sterling who was shot down by a 'Zero'.
ALL USAF VIA AUTHOR UNLESS NOTED

nose to aft. I did not see the craft I shot actually crash, but he was smoking."

Rasmussen claimed the result as 'uncertain', though it was later confirmed by the authorities. His elation was short-lived: "At almost the same instant, I was hit by two 20mm explosive cannon; one, in the radio compartment behind my head, shattered the canopy above me. The other, in the tail section, severed my rudder cable and blew off my tailwheel. In addition, I was stitched with 7.7mm bullets. Having hardly any control over the aircraft and scared as hell, I popped into a cloud, struggled to stabilize the plane and headed for Wheeler."

After landing it was discovered that his little Curtiss had two 20mm cannon shells buried in the radio behind him and he was without rudder, brakes or tail wheel.

Horrible mess

Back at Wheeler, 2nd Lt Bill Haney had sprinted to the line of P-36s that were being armed. With bombs falling he managed to get airborne to join Sanders' small group only to be struck by fire from the USS *San Francisco*. With his engine out, he was forced to make a dead stick landing.

Undaunted, he jumped into *another* P-36 and took off only to be hit by ground fire once again. For the second time in less than an hour he glided back to base.

As the remaining Japanese fighters, some of them damaged, headed back to their carriers they were spotted by Sanders who had moved up to the north before heading south again: "I levelled off and I saw an unidentified plane headed in my direction. When closer, I saw the Japanese insignia, applied full throttle and, as we closed, I did a steep climbing turn and roll-out in an effort to get on his tail."

However, the enemy remained in the distance and flying farther from shore, Sanders returned to Wheeler where he landed, followed by Thacker, though each of them had to avoid anti-aircraft fire from nervous ground defences.

By then seven P-36s and a pair of P-40s had also taken off, but having missed the enemy formation, remained on patrol. Having now found an aircraft (Sterling had taken 'his' P-36) 2nd Lt Othneil Norriss was airborne along with 2nd Lt Francis Gabreski: "Only about ten or eleven planes were ready, so Captain Tyer and the flight leaders looked over who was available to fly them and came up with a flight roster. Woody Wilmot must have read in my eyes that I was eager to go, so he assigned me to fly No.4 in his flight.

"This was it. War was on. We had a mixed group of P-40s and P-36s; I got a P-36. I tried to keep myself calm as we climbed out together, heading south. In a few minutes we were over Pearl Harbor. Boy, what a sight! Black, billowing smoke rose high into the heavens. I could see ships over on their sides, burning. It was a horrible mess.

"We flew over at about 4,000ft, but by now everybody down there on the ground was so jittery that they fired on any airplanes they could see – including ours. We were high enough that small arms fire couldn't reach us, but they blasted away nevertheless. We could see tracers arc up toward us, and occasionally a smoky burst of flak would explode nearby.

"We continued to search the skies for another 45 minutes, but the Japanese were long gone. We never did receive any orders from the ground, so when our fuel started to get low Captain Tyer led us back to Wheeler."

Sadly, on his third defensive sortie, 2nd Lt John Dains was killed by indiscriminate ground fire. It was a tragic end to the efforts of the P-36 pilots during the 'Day of Infamy'.

By midday a dozen P-36s were ready for operations, though the Japanese were now back on their carriers. In its native country the P-36 Hawk's combat service had lasted little more than an hour. ●

THE AFTERMATH 1945 → VJ DAY

APRIL 1, 1945 – THE FINAL AMPHIBIOUS LANDING OF THE WAR OCCURS AS THE US INVADES OKINAWA.

AUGUST 6, 1945 – THE FIRST ATOMIC BOMB IS DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA FROM A BOEING B-29 SUPERFORTRESS.

AUGUST 9, 1945 – AN ATOMIC BOMB IS DROPPED ON NAGASAKI, PROMPTING EMPEROR HIROHITO TO SEEK AN IMMEDIATE PEACE SETTLEMENT.

SEPTEMBER 2, 1945 – THE JAPANESE FORMALLY SURRENDER ONBOARD THE USS MISSOURI AS PRESIDENT TRUMAN DECLARES VJ-DAY.