

= Kenneth M. Taylor =

Kenneth Marlar Taylor (December 23 , 1919 ? November 25 , 2006) was a new United States Army Air Corps Second Lieutenant pilot stationed at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack on December 7 , 1941 . Along with his fellow pilot and friend George Welch , he managed to get a fighter plane airborne under fire . Taylor claimed to have shot down four Japanese dive bombers but only two were confirmed . Taylor was injured during the incident and received several awards for his efforts , including the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart .

Taylor later commanded several squadrons while stationed in the United States and elsewhere , and served for 27 years of active duty . He joined the Alaska Air National Guard until 1971 and worked in the insurance industry before retiring in 1985 . His Pearl Harbor experience was portrayed in the 1970 film Tora ! Tora ! Tora ! and the film Pearl Harbor . Taylor died of hernia complications in November 2006 and is buried at the Arlington National Cemetery .

= = Early years and military training = =

Shortly after his birth in Enid , Oklahoma , Taylor 's father , Joe M. Taylor , moved his family to Hominy , Oklahoma , where Taylor graduated high school in 1938 . He entered the University of Oklahoma as a pre @-@ law student in the same year and joined the Army Air Corps two years later . He graduated from aviation training at Brooks Field near San Antonio , Texas on April 25 , 1941 , reaching the rank of second lieutenant and was assigned to class 41C . In June 1941 , he was assigned to the 47th Pursuit Squadron at Wheeler Army Airfield in Honolulu , Hawaii , and began flying two weeks later . Although the 47th had several types of aircraft ? some obsolete ? he began his training in the advanced Curtiss P @-@ 40B Warhawk fighter . Taylor accumulated more than 430 flight hours of training before the attack on Pearl Harbor .

= = Pearl Harbor = =

Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 , 1941 , Taylor spent the night before playing poker and dancing at the officers ' club at Wheeler with fellow pilot George Welch , and did not go to sleep until 6 : 30 a.m. local time . Taylor and Welch awoke less than an hour and a half later at 7 : 55 a.m. to the sounds of low @-@ flying planes , machine @-@ gun fire , and explosions . Lt. Taylor quickly put on his tuxedo pants from the night before and called Haleiwa Auxiliary Air Field , where eighteen P @-@ 40B fighters were located . Without orders , he told the ground crews to get two P @-@ 40s armed and ready for takeoff . The new Buick he drove was strafed by Japanese aircraft as the two pilots sped the 10 miles (16 km) to Haleiwa ; Taylor at times reached speeds of 100 mph (160 km / h) . At the airstrip , they climbed into their Curtiss P @-@ 40B Warhawk fighters , which were fueled but armed with only .30 cal Browning ammunition .

After they took off , they headed towards Barber 's Point at the southwest tip of Oahu , and initially saw an unarmed group of American B @-@ 17 Flying Fortress bombers arriving from the mainland United States . They soon arrived at Ewa Mooring Mast Field , which was being strafed by at least 12 Aichi D3A " Val " dive bombers of the second Japanese attack wave after expending their bomb ordinance at Pearl Harbor . Although the two pilots were outnumbered six @-@ to @-@ one , they immediately began firing on the dive bombers . Taylor shot down two dive bombers and was able to damage another (the third damaged aircraft was considered Taylor 's first probable kill) . When both pilots ran out of ammunition , they headed for Wheeler Field to get additional .50 cal ammunition , since Haleiwa did not carry any . As he landed around 8 : 40 a.m. , he had to avoid friendly anti @-@ aircraft and ground fire . Once he was on the ground , several officers told Taylor and Welch to leave the airplanes , but the two pilots were able to convince the officers into allowing them to keep fighting .

While his plane was being reloaded with the .50 cal , a flight of dive bombers began strafing Wheeler . Welch took off again (since he had landed a few minutes before Taylor and was already reloaded) . The men who were loading the ammunition on Taylor 's plane left the ammunition boxes

on his wing as they scattered to get away from the bombers . Taylor quickly took off , jumping over an armament dolly and the ammunition boxes fell off of his plane 's wing . Both pilots realized that if they took off away from the incoming aircraft they would become targets once they were airborne , so both headed directly towards the bombers at take @-@ off . Additionally , if the low @-@ flying bombers attempted to fire at the grounded P @-@ 40s at their current elevation , they would risk crashing . Taylor used this hindrance to his advantage and began immediately firing on the Japanese aircraft as he took off , and performed a chandelle .

Taylor headed for a group of Japanese aircraft , and due to a combination of clouds and smoke , he unintentionally entered the middle of the formation of seven or eight A6M Zeros . A Japanese rear @-@ gunner from a dive bomber fired at Taylor 's aircraft and one of the bullets came within an inch of Taylor 's head and exploded in the cockpit . One piece went through his left arm and shrapnel entered his leg . Taylor reflected on the injuries in a 2001 interview , saying " It was of no consequence ; it just scared the hell out of me for a minute . " A few years after the interview , Taylor received from his crew chief two other slugs that had been found behind his seat . Welch shot down the dive bomber aircraft that had injured Taylor , and Taylor damaged another aircraft (his second probable kill) before pulling away to assist Welch with a pursuing A6M Zero fighter . The Zero and the rest of its formation soon broke off the pursuit and left to return to their carriers as Taylor neared Welch . Taylor continued to fire on several Japanese aircraft until he ran out of ammunition . Both pilots headed back to Haleiwa . After landing and driving back to Wheeler , Taylor and Welch passed by their squadron commander , Major Gordon H. Austin , who noticed that they were wearing their tuxedo attire . Unaware of their earlier dogfights , he shouted at the two men , saying " Get back to Haleiwa ! You know there 's a war on ? " The two pilots explained what they had done , and the commander thanked them . In a 2003 interview , Taylor reflected on his actions : " I wasn 't in the least bit terrified , and let me tell you why : I was too young and too stupid to realize that I was in a lot of danger . "

= = = Records and awards = = =

According to the 25th Infantry Division 's Tropic Lightning Museum , 14 different American pilots were able to take off during the surprise attack and record 10 Japanese aircraft kills . Air Corps records credit Welch with four kills and Taylor with two , yet new research of Japanese combat reports confirms Taylor got four kills (when the two probable kills are included) . Taylor claimed in an interview : " I know for certain I shot down two planes or perhaps more ; I don 't know . " On the 13th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack , the United States Air Force stated that they could not determine which of the two pilots shot down the first Japanese bomber : " Each of them in his first attack shot down an enemy bomber , so the difference in time would have been but a few seconds in any case . " While in the air during the dogfight , the two pilots agreed that whoever survived the battle would claim credit to the title for the first kill . However , both pilots survived and because Welch outranked Taylor (he was a 41A , Taylor a 41C) and was the lead aircraft in the fight , he was credited with the first kill . The efforts of the two pilots ? dogfights were able to divert the Japanese from destroying the Haleiwa air field , which the Japanese intelligence did not know about prior to the attack . Taylor later reacted to the attack , saying " I believed I was a better @-@ trained pilot than the enemy . I had good equipment , and I was proud of it . "

For their action on December 7 , the U.S. War Department in Communiqué No. 19 on December 13 , 1941 , designated Taylor and Welch as the first two American heroes of World War II , and awarded both the Distinguished Service Cross on January 8 , 1942 . Taylor learned that he was to receive the award in mid @-@ December after reading several newspapers . The award is the United States Army 's second highest honor for valor in the heat of combat . Additionally , he later received the Distinguished Service Medal , the Legion of Merit , the Air Medal , and a Purple Heart for injuries he sustained . Both men were recommended for the Medal of Honor , but were turned down because they had taken off without orders .

= = Military and National Guard service = =

After the Pearl Harbor attack , Taylor was assigned to the 44th Fighter Squadron , and went to the South Pacific at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal . He was able to record two additional aerial kills : the first on January 27 and the other on December 7 , 1943 , two years after Pearl Harbor . This brought his total number of career kills to six , making him a flying ace . Officially however , Taylor is still only credited with two aerial victories on December 7 , 1941 and one on January 27 , 1943 . At Guadalcanal , he was injured during an air raid and was sent back to the United States in 1943 . In the U.S. , he trained pilots in preparation of combat in Europe and was then assigned to the 12th Pursuit Squadron . At the end of World War II , Taylor had reached the rank of major and went to the Philippines to command a squadron that used the first United States Air Force combat jets , the Lockheed P @-@ 80 Shooting Star .

Afterwards , he commanded the 4961st Special Weapons Test Group , became a tactical evaluator at the USAF Inspector General 's office , and worked in The Pentagon . He was also the Deputy Chief of Staff and Plans for the Alaskan Air Command and was a long @-@ range planner on the Joint Staff .

After 27 years of active duty , he retired as a colonel in 1967 , and soon started as the Assistant Adjutant General for the Alaska Air National Guard , retiring as a brigadier general in 1971 . Taylor then worked in the insurance industry in Alaska until 1985 .

= = Personal life and depictions in film = =

On May 9 , 1942 , Taylor married Flora Love Morrison of Hennessey , Oklahoma , whom he had met when she was visiting her father in Hawaii . Married for 64 years , the Taylors had two children (daughter Tina and son Ken II) , three grandchildren , and two great @-@ grandchildren . While he lived in Anchorage , Taylor would vacation in Hawaii each year . Taylor 's son later retired as a brigadier general commanding the Alaska Air National Guard , the same position formerly held by his father .

At a 50th anniversary symposium of the Pearl Harbor attack , Taylor met with a Japanese pilot who was part of the first wave of bombers to attack Pearl Harbor . The pilot reflected on Taylor 's efforts , " I was impressed by Mr. Taylor 's grit to storm into the pack of Japanese fighters " , and Taylor also told a reporter " I have no hatred against Japanese people , but I do against those who started the war . "

Taylor was a technical adviser for and was portrayed in the 1970 film Tora ! Tora ! Tora ! by Carl Reindel . The 2001 film Pearl Harbor featured a sequence in which the characters portrayed by Ben Affleck and Josh Hartnett took to the skies to fight the Japanese . This sequence is understood to be a fill @-@ in for Taylor 's and Welch 's roles , but the characters do not bear any other similarities to Taylor and Welch . Unlike Tora ! Tora ! Tora ! , Taylor was not consulted for the Pearl Harbor film , and later called the adaptation " ... a piece of trash ... over @-@ sensationalized and distorted . "

= = Death = =

After contracting an illness from a hip surgery two years prior , Taylor died on November 25 , 2006 of a strangulated hernia at an assisted living residence in Tucson , Arizona . His son stated that he wanted " to be remembered mostly as a good father , husband , grandfather and great @-@ grandfather . He was very loyal and dutiful , and to him that was more important than what he did in the war . " He was cremated and later buried at the Arlington National Cemetery in June 2007 with full military honors . Alaska Senator Ted Stevens gave a eulogy at the United States Senate prior to the service at Arlington .