

# **Pearl Harbor: Success or Failure?**

## RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor considered successful?

Topic: History

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## **Introduction**

On December 7, 1941 the nation watched in shock as the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on the US Naval Base Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, using bombers, torpedo bombers and midget submarines. On December 8, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his “Infamy Speech” to American citizens, informing them that this happened even though the U.S. was negotiating peace with Japan. That same day, with congressional approval, America entered into World War II.

This extended essay deals with the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, where 2400 people were killed and a number of the U.S. naval fleet was damaged. It will undergo a historical investigation of the successes and failures of the attack. It will attempt to determine if the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was a success or a failure. More specifically, this investigation will answer the question: **To what extent was Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor considered successful.**

The scope of this extended essay will be limited to the reasons for Japan attacking the harbor, as well as several failures and successes of the attack. The essay will not go into much detail on the long term effects of the attack, but will focus mainly on the immediate effects such as the events that happened during the attack. In order to fully answer and examine the research question, primary and secondary sources about Pearl Harbor will be used.

The attack was carried out for several reasons including to gain natural resources and to cripple the U.S. naval forces. At a glance, it is quite difficult to see this attack as anything but a victory. As the Japanese forces took everyone there by surprise and completely decimated the U.S. naval forces, 2400 were killed, 350 aircrafts were damaged or destroyed, and 8 battleships were sunk or badly damaged<sup>1</sup>. While this may seem like a victory, is it enough to be considered one? To fully understand the question, **to what extent was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor considered successful**, an examination of Japan's motives for attacking Pearl Harbor must be conducted. Two primary sources will be used in this investigation. These sources are *Interrogations of Japanese Officials* Vol. I and II by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey and *The Reluctant Admiral* by Hiroyuki Agawa.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ships and Aircraft Sunk or Survived in the Attack on Pearl Harbor." *Pearl Harbor.Org*, [www.pearlharbor.org/ships-and-aircraft.asp](http://www.pearlharbor.org/ships-and-aircraft.asp).

# **1. Reasons for the Attack of Pearl Harbor**

In order to understand the mentality and goals behind the attack on Pearl Harbor, the investigation will first examine the reasons for the attack.

## **1.1 Japan's desire for expansion**

The first reason Japan decided to attack was due to its desire for expansion and their need for natural resources. Following Japan's invasion of China, the U.S. placed a trade embargo on Japan, cutting off 88% of its imported oil<sup>2</sup>. Japan, as an island nation, had always been constrained by their limited access to natural resources such as oil and iron. Unable to be truly self-sufficient, Japan's only choice was to seize other countries and use their resources. At the time, Japan was conquering several territories in Asia as well as a number of Pacific islands. Two areas that were particularly vital to Japan were the tin mines of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, modern-day Indonesia, which were rich in petroleum. However, there were no shipping routes back to Japan that didn't pass within airstrike range of the Philippines, which was then occupied by the U.S. This meant the Philippines had to be taken, which meant war with the U.S. In addition, Japan wanted to expand in power and territory like European countries so it was in need of resources such as oil and aluminum, which were also found in the East Indies. When President Roosevelt moved the US Pacific Fleet from California to Pearl Harbor in 1939, Japan saw it as an obstacle in their path to world domination. The United States stood in opposition to Japan's acquisition of these materials from what was deemed by them as "the

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<sup>2</sup> History.com Staff. "United States freezes Japanese assets." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-freezes-japanese-assets](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-freezes-japanese-assets).

Southern Resource Area”<sup>3</sup>. As seen in an interrogation of Vice Admiral Ozawa (below), Commander in Chief of the Japanese Task Force, Japan did not want to take the risk of having the U.S. interfere, thus attacking Pearl Harbor.

Q. Then the attack on PEARL HARBOR and the PHILIPPINES was a military necessity? To execute your plans it was a military necessity to strike both PEARL and the PHILIPPINES?

A. If we tried to carry out an operation only against the Dutch and British; the chance the UNITED STATES would intervene was too great. From that standpoint I consider it was better to attack these major points.<sup>4</sup>

Japan realized that a war with the U.S. was inevitable, and with the solution to attack first, Japan carried out the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

## **1.2 Japan’s attempt to weaken and cripple the U.S. naval forces**

The second reason Japan attacked was to try and weaken the U.S. naval forces. When Japan realized that war with the U.S. could not be avoided, they concluded that their next move should be to utilize their element of surprise and destroy a large portion of the U.S. naval fleet. Since Japan sought to conquer the Dutch East Indies and Malaya due to a need for natural resources

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<sup>3</sup> “Japanese World War II Economics: Southern Resource Zone.” *World War II -- economics Japanese Southern Resource Zone*, 3 Apr. 2013, 8:36 PM, [histclo.com/essay/war/ww2/eco/cou/alpha/j/japan/w2ecj-srz.html](http://histclo.com/essay/war/ww2/eco/cou/alpha/j/japan/w2ecj-srz.html).

<sup>4</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. “Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II.” *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12).

attack did indeed do a number on America's naval forces, military historians suggest that the attack was in fact, a failure.

There are several factors that play into that conclusion including missed targets, the fleet that was left standing, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's plan, and the national response as well as the overall consequences that came from the attack. All of these factors link together to an extent and are the pieces that are needed to find out if Pearl Harbor was as big of a success as Japan thought.

## **2.1 Missing targets**

As the Japanese planes closed in on the harbor, they had very few predetermined targets in their sights. These included the moored ships at Battleship Row<sup>6</sup>. While it seemed reasonable to think that crippling the United States naval force would completely remove its ability to battle in the Pacific Theater, Japan targeted only battleships. By only targeting battleships, Japan was not attacking the entire fleet. As seen in an interrogation of Captain Fuchida, Air Group Commander of the Akagi<sup>7</sup>, the Japanese fleet did not know where specific ships were.

Q. Were targets assigned by location, or by the type of ship?

A. We did not know exactly where specific ships were when we came in. First in importance were aircraft carriers, second battleships; but we did not know their exact location. We knew they were in FORD Island Passage, but did not know where. There

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<sup>6</sup> The grouping of eight U.S. battleships in port at Pearl Harbor which were moored next to Ford Island when the attack began.

<sup>7</sup> An aircraft carrier built for the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), named after Mount Akagi.

such as oil, they hoped to distract the U.S. with something. In an interrogation of Captain Watanabe, a Gunnery Officer on Admiral Yamamoto's staff, he claimed that the fleet had no intention of capturing Pearl Harbor, but only crippling it (below).

Q. What was the objective of the attack upon PEARL HARBOR?

A. In Japanese tactics we are told when we have two enemies, one in front and one in the back, first we must cut in front by sword. Only cut and not kill but make it hard. Then we attack the back enemy and kill him. Then we come back to the front enemy and kill him. This time we took that tactic, having no aim to capture PEARL HARBOR but just to cripple it. We might have returned to capture later.<sup>5</sup>

By destroying a large amount of the U.S. naval fleet, they could successfully take over the Philippines and Malaya while the U.S. was still trying to recover from the damages done. Another reason was that Japan wanted to become the top naval power in the world, and the only nation who opposed them was the United States. Japan hoped that by bombing Pearl Harbor, they could cripple the U.S. forces enough to claim that title.

## **2. Failures of the Japanese Forces During the Attack**

Based off all this information, the research question can be asked. **To what extent was the attack on Pearl Harbor a success?** There is some dispute about this matter, and while the

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<sup>5</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. "Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-voli.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-voli.html#no12).



was a priority on targets. I knew that there would be planes, but did not know they would be as closely packed as at WHEELER.<sup>8</sup>

Another major flaw in the Japanese attacks was the date. The Sunday morning of December 7, 1941 was a carefully chosen date by the Japanese officers. This date was picked because a large portion of sailors were on leave, which meant less people were defending the harbor.<sup>9</sup> The reason this date was a bad choice was because a number of Japan's highest priority targets, American aircraft carriers, were absent from the harbor. In an interrogation of Captain Watanabe, a Gunnery Officer on Admiral Yamamoto's staff, he claims that their designated targets were carriers but only targeted other ships because the carriers were not there (below).

Q. What were your designated targets?

A. The first aim was at aircraft carriers, but they were out at sea, so attacked other ships.<sup>10</sup>

The USS *Saratoga*, USS *Lexington*, and USS *Enterprise* were all on missions that kept them at sea during the attack. With the carriers surviving the attack and ready to immediately engage the Japanese forces, Japan missed the opportunity to cause major damage on the U.S. fleet. After the attack, the USS *Arizona*, USS *Utah*, and USS *Oklahoma* had all sustained irreparable damage

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<sup>8</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. "Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-vol-i.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-vol-i.html#no12).

<sup>9</sup> "Why did the Japanese choose the date and time for the attack on Pearl Harbor?" *Enotes.com*, Enotes.com, [www.enotes.com/homework-help/why-did-japanese-choose-date-time-attack-pearl-618589](http://www.enotes.com/homework-help/why-did-japanese-choose-date-time-attack-pearl-618589).

<sup>10</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. "Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-vol-i.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-officials-vol-i.html#no12).

and were not able to reenter the war.<sup>11</sup> However, they were only three of the eight ships at the port that morning. The remaining fleet, though damaged, all re-entered the war anywhere from a few months to three years later. Japan may have put a dent in the U.S. forces, but they did so very temporarily. By missing a large number of their most important targets, Japan failed to cause as much damage on the U.S. fleet as they had hoped. In an interrogation of Captain Fuchida (below), he says that even though they could not find the carriers, they assumed the mission was a success after sinking four battleships.

Q. Why, if it was so successful, did you not repeat the attack.

A. We did not realize we had destroyed planes to such an extent. We knew we had done in four battleships, but did not know the extent of damage to American planes, and of course the carriers were not there. We figured if we could sink four battleships, then it was a success. About three days afterwards when the intelligence was gathered, it was realized what had been done; but we thought that you would be re-supplied with planes from the other islands in the HAWAIIAN Group, so it wouldn't pay to return.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.2 Missed opportunities**

In addition to the unfinished job, Japan also missed several other opportunities to completely change the outcome of the attack. The battleships were not the only viable targets for the

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<sup>11</sup> "Ships Present at Pearl Harbor." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 31 Oct. 2017, 11:47:02 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/ships-present-at-pearl-harbor.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/ships-present-at-pearl-harbor.html).

<sup>12</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. "Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12).

Japanese fleets. As Japanese planes focused on the carriers and airfields, they failed to pay any attention to the other important assets such as oil tankers and dry docks. This proved to be a huge mistake as they made the rescue and repair efforts significantly faster and easier.

If the Japanese planes had targeted the dry docks and destroyed them, the damaged ships would have had to be transported back to the mainland for repairs, which would have kept them out of the war for a considerably longer amount of time. If the fuel supplies were destroyed, the U.S. naval fleet would have faced the problem of a lack of resources that were necessary for the war effort. Since very few ships were permanently damaged and the dry docks were left unharmed, they damaged ships were able to be quickly repaired. Any attack on these targets during the bombing would have significantly crippled the U.S. naval fleet.

### **2.3 Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto**

One of Japan's most critical failures was not following the plan of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the brilliant mastermind behind Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto foresaw that a prolonged struggle with the United States would end badly for Japan. He claimed that for a year or so, Japan might be able to overrun local forces.<sup>13</sup> But as the skirmish turns into a war, Japan's war economy would crumble along with its densely packed cities to endless air raids from the Americans. Yamamoto admitted that against such odds, he could see "little hope of success in any ordinary strategy"<sup>14</sup> and confesses that his Pearl Harbor operation was "conceived in desperation."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The reluctant admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Kodansha International, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The reluctant admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Kodansha International, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The reluctant admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Kodansha International, 2000.

Yamamoto, after being named commander in chief of the Combined Fleet<sup>16</sup>, predicted many events that would ultimately lead to Japan's downfall. He was strongly opposed to aligning with the Nazi party and reminded the government that three-fourths of its oil and steel imports came from areas controlled by the Allies<sup>17</sup>. The government however, ignored Yamamoto's frequent warnings and in September of 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact<sup>18</sup> with Germany and Italy, and just as Yamamoto had predicted, oil imports from the U.S. were swiftly cut off.

Realizing that war with the U.S. was going to happen, Yamamoto decided to simply fall in line with the planning process. So when President Roosevelt moved the fleet to Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto suggested a surprise attack on the stronghold, claiming that "America has put itself in a vulnerable position."<sup>19</sup> Admiral Osami Nagano, chief of Naval General Staff, was against the idea of this attack. He worried that it would expose Japanese carriers to counterattacks by the U.S. Yamamoto insisted, all the while trying to convince the government to withdraw from the alliance with Germany and Italy. When the government refused to listen, Yamamoto had no choice but to carry out the attack. However, at the time, the Japanese Army, Navy, and Air Force were not too fond of one another. This led to limited communication and cooperation between the three branches, which rendered them to essentially be three different forces.

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<sup>16</sup> The highest seagoing commander in the Japanese Navy.

<sup>17</sup> History.com Staff. "United States freezes Japanese assets." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-freezes-japanese-assets](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-freezes-japanese-assets).

<sup>18</sup> An agreement between Germany, Italy and Japan signed in Berlin on 27 September 1940 by, respectively, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Galeazzo Ciano and Saburō Kurusu. This was the pact that created the Axis powers.

<sup>19</sup> Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The reluctant admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Kodansha International, 2000.

Yamamoto specifically planned for the destruction of *all* the American carriers in an attack that would include Pearl Harbor and Pearl Harbor only. However, just hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor, 36 bombers assaulted Wake Island<sup>20</sup>, viewing it as an easy target. This was not a part of Yamamoto's plan. As a result of the attack, a distress signal was sent to Washington D.C. This essentially served as a warning for the Pearl Harbor attack, which was supposed to be a surprise attack. On one hand, had the Japanese government listened to his warnings, war with the U.S. could potentially have been avoided. On the other hand, the fact that Admiral Nagano allowed Yamamoto to carry out the attack basically lead to Japan's defeat.

#### **2.4 Response from the United States**

Another issue was Japan's miscalculation of the U.S.'s response to the attack. Despite taking the United States by surprise, the attack did not achieve the same results as the Japanese expected. In destroying a portion of the U.S. naval fleet, Japan had hoped to not only cripple the naval forces, but also the morale of the country, making them lose the willpower to fight. The actual results however, were far from what Japan had predicted. All across the country, Americans had a reason to band together and join the war effort, causing an exponential growth in military force which undoubtedly led to Japan's eventual downfall. In an interrogation of Captain Fujita, Staff Officer of 2nd Fleet (below), he admitted that the Japanese did not entertain the possibility of a failed operation at Pearl Harbor.

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<sup>20</sup> Wensyel, James W. "Battle Of Wake Island." *HistoryNet*, World War II, Nov. 2001, [www.historynet.com/battle-of-wake-island](http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-wake-island).

Q. Did the success of PEARL HARBOR alter these plans<sup>21</sup> in any way?

A. The operation plans were made up with the fact in mind the PEARL HARBOR operation was going to be a success.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese forces were so confident in the Pearl Harbor attack that they assumed it was going to be a success and made plans based off of it. This was a mistake on Japan's part because it meant that there was no backup plan in the event the attack of Pearl Harbor does not go the right way.

During the 1930s, the combination of the Great Depression and the losses of World War I contributed to pushing American public opinion and policy toward isolationism. This meant that the United States would stay out of European and Asian affairs as well as international politics. Both the government and a majority of citizens agreed on this stance, but it changed quickly following the Japanese attacks. The day after the attack, President Roosevelt delivered his "Infamy Speech", calling Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor a "date which will live in infamy."<sup>23</sup> Immediately after this, Congress declared war on the Empire of Japan. Not only was the U.S. not brought down by the attack, it brought the nation together and fueled the war effort against Japan. This was a fatal miscalculation on Japan's part since they had awoken, as Yamamoto called it, "the sleeping giant"<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> The plans of Japanese advancement into the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, and British Malaya.

<sup>22</sup> United States Strategic Bombing Survey. "Interrogations of Japanese Officials - Vol. I & II." *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 26 Oct. 2015, 11:40:15 EDT, [www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12](http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/interrogations-japanese-official-s-voli.html#no12).

<sup>23</sup> "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/day-of-infamy](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/day-of-infamy).

<sup>24</sup> Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The reluctant admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. Kodansha International, 2000.

### **3. Successes of Japan During the Attack**

When looking at the attack of Pearl Harbor, not many successful points can be picked out from Japan's numerous failures. The attack on Pearl Harbor had three major objectives:

1. To sink American battleships that were moored in Battleship Row.
2. To sink American carriers in order to cripple the naval fleet.
3. To destroy maintenance and fuel facilities located at Pearl Harbor

In reality, Japan only managed to achieve one of the goals on the list, which was the first one.

#### **3.1 Japan's element of surprise**

The only thing that can be considered a success for Japan was the fact that Japan was able to achieve tactical surprise in the attack. Credit to Japan should be given here, as their naval code had been broken for years at the time of the attack. The U.S. knew the attack was coming, but they didn't know where the attack was going to take place. The two likely candidates were Singapore and the Philippines. The U.S. simply did not consider Pearl Harbor to be a likely target given how deep into American territory it was. So when the attack was launched, it took everyone by surprise.

This was the single most important element for the Japanese fleet. Since Japan could not stand up to the U.S. in a head-to-head battle, the only choice was to use the element of surprise. The Japanese carriers avoided detection by approaching Pearl Harbor on a northern route<sup>25</sup>, which was rarely used by merchant ships. The use of radios were limited to avoid detection. Also, the

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<sup>25</sup> Hanyok, Robert J. "How the Japanese Did It." *U.S. Naval Institute*, Naval History Magazine Volume 23, Number 6, Dec. 2009, [www.usni.org/magazines/navalhistory/2009-12/how-japanese-did-it](http://www.usni.org/magazines/navalhistory/2009-12/how-japanese-did-it).

pilots in the aircrafts were all combat veterans who had practiced the attack carefully. The attack occurred on Sunday, December 7, 1941 at 7:55 A.M.<sup>26</sup>. At the time, most of the men aboard U.S. ships were asleep. The ammunition storage was locked, the guns were unmanned, and the aircrafts were still parked. The Japanese fleet also attacked on a Sunday, which was considered by Americans to be a day of rest.

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<sup>26</sup> History.com Staff. "Pearl Harbor bombed." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/pearl-harbor-bombed](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/pearl-harbor-bombed).



## **Conclusion**

After having examined the different reasons for Japan's attack of Pearl Harbor as well as the successes and failures of the attack, the investigation comes to the conclusion that the attack on Pearl Harbor was most definitely a failure. Even though the death toll reached a staggering 2400 and a large number of aircrafts were destroyed, what the Japanese failed to do simply outweigh what they did manage to do. The ultimate goal of the attack was to cause enough destruction to the U.S. naval fleet to prevent them from fighting in the Pacific Theater, at least for a while. In the end, Japan was unable (or even come close) to achieve this goal. In fact, the attack on Pearl Harbor did just the opposite.

The original idea of the attack was to destroy the American carriers at the harbor. The actual attack not only failed to meet that objective, but the battleships that were hit did not sustain permanent damage and were able to be repaired rather quickly. This ties in with the Japanese fleet's failure to target and destroy fueling and maintenance stations located throughout the harbor. This was part of the reason why the damaged ships were able to be repaired so quickly.

As has been revealed, the Japanese fleet failed to carry out the mission at Pearl Harbor, causing a chain reaction that led to the eventual downfall of Japan. Despite all the casualties and damages that were caused by the Japanese fleet, they failed to achieve the ultimate goal of preventing the U.S. from entering a war against them, making the attack on Pearl Harbor a complete failure.

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