

Three 44th Pursuit Squadron pilots among heroes at Pearl Harbor

by Casey Connell
18th Wing Historian

12/7/2011 - **KADENA AIR BASE, Japan** -- Seventy years have passed since Dec. 7 brought the calamity of war to an American territory, which led to a four-year struggle and more than 418,500 American casualties.

Amidst the many heroic actions rendered by service members from all services that infamous Sunday morning, three Army Air Force pilots of the 18th Pursuit Group, 44th Pursuit Squadron attempted to get airborne to defend their country against a foreign foe.

Two of the three 44th pilots ultimately gave their lives, while their other wingman made a crash landing into the sea, surviving the ordeal but severely wounded. Today, on Kadena Air Base, the 44th Fighter Squadron pilots trace their proud lineage back to those three pilots and their comrades who were to fly and fight across the Pacific.

The 44th Pursuit Squadron was stationed at Bellows Field, Hawaii, when the Imperial Japanese Navy commenced its attack against American forces. Founded as a casual training camp on Aug. 7, 1941, to provide basic training for newly arrived casualties or recruits, Bellows Field was also home to the 86th Observation Squadron.

The 86th Observation Squadron had six O-47 observation monoplanes and two O-49 Vigilant light observation aircraft, in addition to one squadron of P-40 Warhawk fighter aircraft. The three 44th PS pilots, 2nd Lt. Hans C. Christiansen, 1st Lt. Samuel W. Bishop and 2nd Lt. George A. Whiteman, were at Bellows undergoing gunnery training on their P-40 Warhawks.

One of the objectives of the Imperial Japanese Naval Force was to annihilate land-based airpower on Oahu by seizing control of the air and coordinating with Japanese D3A Val dive bombers in attacks against Hickam, Wheeler, and other airfields. The Japanese achieved their tactical goal of total surprise.

The United States Army Air Forces initial response was slow, only to gain momentum as each explosion rocked Pearl Harbor. According to various sources, a little after dawn the acting first sergeant at Bellows Field "ran into the tent area to rouse the sleeping men" yelling that Kaneohe Naval Air Station, just a few miles north and west



44th Fighter Squadron



44th Pursuit Squadron World War II-era patch

of Bellows, had been "blown to hell."

It was not until Hickam Field called Bellows Field at 8:10 a.m. requesting a fire truck to fight the flames already raging on Hickam that officials confirmed an attack was in progress. At 9 a.m. a lone Japanese fighter plane flew in over the ocean from the east firing at the tent area, followed by an attack of Japanese fighters in three formations from the north.

As field personnel rushed to disperse fuel and arm the 12 P-40 Warhawks lining the edge of Bellows Field runway, Christiansen was one of the first to reach his plane. However, as Christiansen started to get into the cockpit, enemy fire struck him in the back and he fell at the feet of his mechanic.

For his actions that day, Christiansen received the Silver Star for gallantry, the Purple Heart for wounds resulting in death, the American Defense Service Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, and the World War II Victory Medal.

The same morning, Whiteman drove from his room at the bachelor officer's quarters to Bellows Field. Upon arrival, Whiteman found the P-40s being readied for takeoff while Japanese fighters commenced strafing attacks. While his ground crew began loading ammunition onto his plane, Whiteman waved them off, jumped into the cockpit and immediately taxied for takeoff. As he began his takeoff run, two Japanese A6M Zero fighter aircraft spotted him and started their attack. Although Whiteman managed to get his plane airborne, he took heavy fire which hit the engine, wings and cockpit. The plane burst into flames and crashed at the end of the runway. Ground personnel attempted to remove Whiteman from the inferno, but were unable and Whiteman perished in the wreckage.

For his actions that day, Whiteman received the Silver Star for gallantry, the Purple Heart for wounds resulting in death, the American Defense Medal with foreign service clasp, the American Campaign Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign with one bronze star, and the World War II Victory Medal. On Dec. 3, 1955, Air Force Chief of Staff General Nathan Twining renamed Sedalia Air Force Base, Mo., after Whiteman in honor of his actions on Dec. 7, 1941.

Following Whiteman off the runway, Bishop managed to get his P-40 airborne, however he was unable to gain significant altitude before coming under attack by Zeros. Due to extensive damage to Bishop's plane and a bullet wound to his leg, he was forced to crash land into the sea. Swimming back to shore, Bishop survived the ordeal to fight another day and received a Silver Star for his actions. His citation read, Lieutenant Bishop's initiative, presence of mind, coolness under fire against overwhelming odds in his first battle, and determined action contributed to a large extent toward driving off this sudden enemy air attack.

Though the attack lasted only 15 minutes, the names of Christiansen, Bishop and Whiteman are now forever honored in the rolls of 44th Pursuit Squadron history.