

On This Day, 7-DEC 1941, We Honor a Fallen Hero



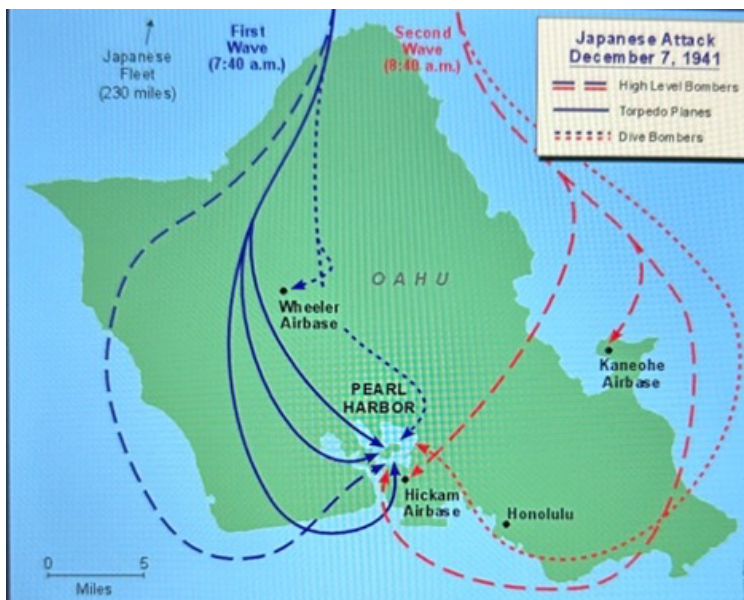
Joseph Gillespie Smartt was born on 19-MAR 1917 in Texas. His father was George Pendleton Smart, MD (1880-1918) and his mother was Sara Alice Gillespie (1884-1968). Joseph had one brother, George Pendleton Smart Jr. Joseph Smartt was in the US Navy Reserve.

Joseph Edward Smartt had an aunt and uncle living in St. Louis in Richmond Heights. The Post-Dispatch, a local St. Louis Newspaper, reported Joseph attended Washington University from 1938-1940 and was a former St. Louis salesman for the Rice-Stix Dry Goods Company.

Ensign Smartt had started his flight training at NRAB (Naval Reserve Aviation Base), in St. Charles Missouri just outside of St. Louis. The number of cadets being trained kept increasing so the Navy purchased several hundred acres of land in St. Charles County near where the Illinois River entered the Mississippi River. The facility became an auxiliary field for the cadets to practice takeoffs and landings. When the United States entered the war and student training was greatly expanded, a large hexagon shaped blacktop area was added with a pair of runways every 60 degrees, so you were never more than 30 degrees out of the wind. This same shape and design was used in hundreds of primary training fields (Navy and Army Air Corps) around the country. A large hangar and aircraft workshop was added and later, barracks and mess halls.

After completion of his training in St. Charles, Joseph Gillespie Smartt was assigned to Patrol Squadron VP-11 at Naval Air Station (NAS) Kaneohe Naval Air Station. On the morning of 7-DEC 1941, there were 36 patrol planes at Kaneohe Air Station. Patrol Squadron VP-11 had a total of twelve aircraft assigned to them. Despite numerous maintenance issues, all twelve PBY's were on standby so they could be made ready for operations within four hours. The disposition of the

planes before the attack were, two in the hangar, four at the south end of Hangar One, and six planes on the ramp.



NAS Kaneohe Bay was the first military base on the island of Oahu to be attacked by aircraft of the Japanese Navy on 7-DEC 1941. At 8:40 AM, planes of the second wave of nine enemy fighters circled at low altitude over the base, took aim at the control tower and started their attack with machine guns. They then circled and started another low-level strafing run concentrating on the

parked aircraft. The attack lasted about 15 minutes. Initially only the duty section personnel for the day which included Joseph Smartt (Duty Officer) and some who had arrived early to take over the ready duty were present at the start of the raid. It was reported, by the Post-Dispatch, "Smartt identified the Japanese planes and helped spread the alarm." As the attack continued, other personnel arrived. Most of the attacks were directed at the planes on the ground but there was some strafing of cars, vehicles, and barracks in addition to the main attack.

The Japanese had caught the Americans completely by surprise. The first attack set ablaze all the planes that were in the nearby water and some of those on the ramp. The second attack hit additional planes setting more aircraft on fire. Squadron personnel took immediate steps to get machine guns into action and save the planes not yet on fire. During the attack, squadron crewmen managed to get machine guns into action against the enemy including firing back from machine guns that were mounted in planes. They also removed machine guns from damaged planes to return fire. During the chaos, squadron personnel were also severely strafed on the roads in automobiles attempting to get to the hangar area. After the first two strafing attacks, all efforts were directed at moving salvageable aircraft away from those engulfed in flames. The strafing fighters destroyed the base only fire truck.

After a brief lull in the attack at about 9:30 AM, a formation of nine two-seat bombers came in from over Kaneohe Bay at an altitude of 1000 feet and dropped bombs on the hangar occupied by Patrol Squadron VP-11. This attack caused the greatest loss of life because a considerable number of men were in the hangar getting ammunition. Two bombs hit the hangar and two more alongside. Immediately behind this wave of bombers, were nine additional bombers that also dropped more bombs on the base. After the bombing attack, there was a final strafing attack about 10:00 AM.

The squadron had received the first shots of WWII from the Japanese and likely suffered the first U.S. Casualties of the Pacific theatre. Seven sailors from the squadron including Ensign Joseph Gillespie Smartt were killed and twenty more were injured in their courageous performance of duty. Joseph Gillespie Smartt was killed when a bomb struck the hangar where he was attached early on 7-DEC 1941 during the attacks at Pearl Harbor. Another Missouri man, Milburn Alexander Manning from Brandsville (in SE Missouri) was also killed in the attack at this base.

Ensign Joseph Gillespie Smartt was among those cited by CinCPacFlt, "For prompt and efficient action and utter disregard of personal danger in the effort to repel the attack on Naval Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, by Japanese forces on 7-DEC 1941, which was made in conjunction with the attack on the fleet in Pearl Harbor on that date."

The airfield in St. Charles MO. was later renamed Smartt Field in honor of Ensign Joseph G. Smartt, who was killed in the Japanese attack on NAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii on 7-DEC 1941. A shipbuilder later named an escort ship the U.S.S. Smartt in memory of Ensign Joseph G. Smartt.



Today some remnants of the old blacktop remain and the hangar, the only one of the buildings remaining, has historical significance and is used by the local wing of the Confederate Air Force. The airport is now called St. Charles County, Smartt Airport.

Joseph Smartt likely earned the following medals and commendations:

- Purple Heart
- American Defense Medal
- World War II Victory Medal

Joseph Gillespie Smartt is buried in Honolulu Memorial Cemetery, Hawaii. Joseph Smartt is honored and remembered at the St. Charles County Veterans Museum.