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A Hero's



When Japanese planes dropped out of the sky to attack Pearl Harbor, two young Army Air Corps pilots rose up to meet them and took their places in the annals of American heroism.

One of them was a Sooner named Ken Taylor.

BY JOHN MARTIN MEEK

Ken Taylor was not unhappy as he was about to begin his junior year at the University of Oklahoma in September 1940. Born in Enid and reared in the small, rural town of Hominy, Taylor had found Norman a major life-style change. He had pledged Acacia fraternity and discovered a love of partying and having fun.

Still Taylor knew that despite the country's isolationist mood, America likely would be going to war in the next year or two. Hitler and his Nazi army were overrunning Europe; Japan was rampaging unchecked through the South Pacific and Asia.

If there was going to be a war, Taylor decided, he wanted to be doing something of his choice; he joined the Army Air Corps and landed in Hawaii. He never dreamed that in less than a year and a half he would be officially designated as one of the first two American heroes of World War II.

After a spate of post-Pearl Harbor publicity, Taylor never spoke of his heroics, although he would spend the next quarter

century in the Air Force, rising to brigadier general. Years later he was fairly accurately portrayed in the movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and badly played by Ben Affleck in the more recent *Pearl Harbor*.

With major television documentaries on the "day of infamy" focused on the sinking of the U.S. fleet in Pearl Harbor itself and less on the destruction of the Army's facilities on Oahu, few Sooners have ever heard of Ken Taylor. Fewer still know of his Oklahoma background.



Taylor's first assignment was not far from Hominy at the Spartan flight school in Tulsa, then on to advanced training at Brooks Field, San Antonio.

Meanwhile, near the eastern shore in Wilmington, Delaware, another young man, George Welch, was home after finishing his sophomore year at Purdue University in Indiana. Like Taylor, wanting his first choice should the U.S. go to war, he joined the Air Corps.

"At the time the Army was not much interested in having pilots," Taylor said

Story

In this December 1991 *National Geographic* article commemorating the 60th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Gen. Ken Taylor is shown in the air aboard a B-25 bomber over California in formation with a Japanese Zero and a P-40, similar to the fighter he flew defending U.S. military facilities.

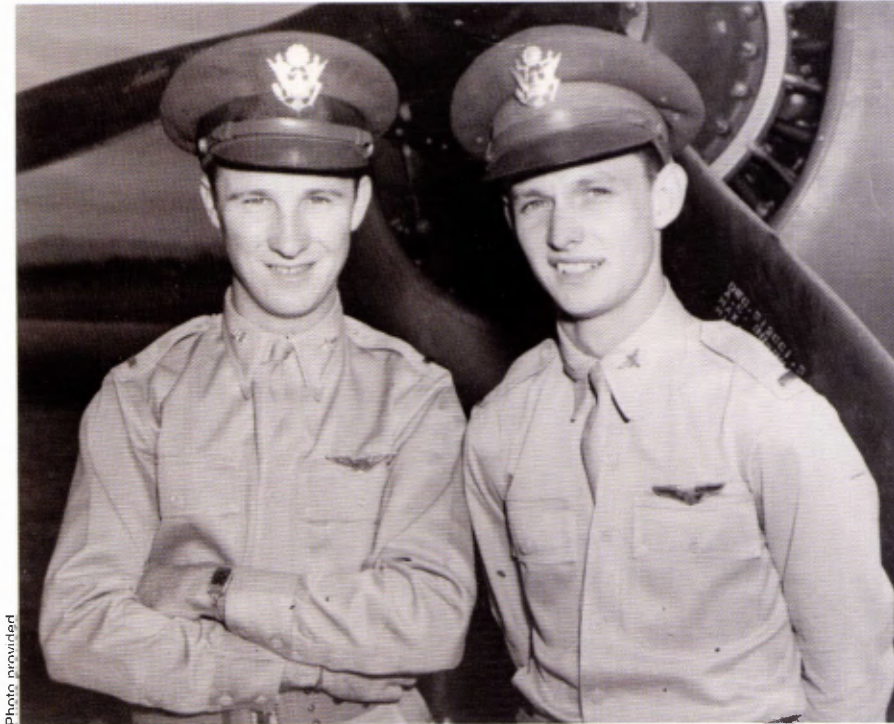


Photo provided

The first officially designated heroes of World War II were Lts. Ken Taylor, left, and George Welch, both of whom had left college to join the Army Air Corps a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

in an interview shortly before his death in 2006. "If you made it through flight school, they really made you work for it."

In April 1941, Taylor graduated at Brooks with silver wings and gold second lieutenant's bars. He was granted his request to fly fighters and to be sent to Hawaii.

At Wheeler Field on Oahu, Capt. Gordon Austin, West Point '36, had been ordered on December 1, 1940, to activate the 47th Pursuit Squadron. Taylor arrived to join the 47th in May, about three months after Welch became one of its pilots.

"I immediately recognized Taylor and Welch as having extraordinary skills as pilots," Austin was to recall, "so we made them flight leaders."

Both men were of medium build, typical of fighter pilots. Taylor often had a little smirk on his face, as if he knew something no one else did, and Welch a lopsided but friendly grin.

The two pilots were assigned to live in adjoining buildings in the Bachelor Officers Quarters at Wheeler, a large patch of green grass near the middle of Oahu where the 47th was based. They became close friends.

Taylor recalled that it was tough, and

the unit lost pilots. Once his engine died when he was over the water, and operations ordered him to bail out.

"I told them I was not about to parachute down into the most shark-infested part of the ocean around Oahu, and luckily I made a landing back at the field."

But there was a problem with the two flying stars of the 47th. In the air they were superb. On the ground they were goof-offs and a real nuisance to the West Pointers.

"We were lazy; they didn't like the way we saluted, and our general military attitude," said Taylor.

At the end of November 1941, Austin was ordered to take the 47th for gunnery practice at a small auxiliary base. The field was near the small community of Haleiwa, where the men lived in tents under trees and flew from a short runway running from the tents almost to the surf.

"We had an old utility plane that carried a flag target behind it, and the idea was to hit the flag," Austin said. "At that time some of my pilots in the 47th had never even fired the machine guns on their planes."

Shortly before the 47th was dispatched to Haleiwa, the Army and Navy high commands met with senior officers to ad-

vise them of the seriousness of diplomatic relations with Japan. Taylor and Welch had thought they would be going to fight alongside the RAF against the Germans. Austin saw those in Hawaii more likely fighting the Japanese in the Philippines.

Neither forecast was correct.

About 4 p.m. Friday, December 5, the only alert issued to commanders was to have men with small arms guard military facilities against possible sabotage by Japanese locals.

At Wheeler, 125 bunkers had been prepared around the field for dispersing aircraft. But for that weekend Gen. Walter Short, senior Army officer in Hawaii, ordered Col. William J. Flood, Wheeler commander, to line the planes up wing tip to wing tip in the middle of the field. The senior officers at Wheeler vigorously disagreed and requested the order be in writing. Short obliged.

Austin was undecided about what to do with the 47th. He wanted to go with other airmen and two artillery officers to the neighboring island of Molokai to look for emergency landing spots and do some hunting. Austin and his operations officer finally flipped a coin, and it was decided squadron members would have the weekend off.

Taylor had a new Buick, so he and Welch drove back to the more comfortable quarters at Wheeler to prepare for their usual Saturday night partying routine.

In 1941 a requirement at military officers clubs was for men to wear black tie. On Saturday evening Taylor donned a white dinner jacket, and the two started their round of partying that began in Honolulu, moved on to Hickham Field, then ended back at the Wheeler club in a poker game.

About 3 a.m. Taylor and Welch left the game and sacked out in their quarters, perhaps not completely sober. Just before 8 a.m., Taylor was awakened by low-flying planes, suspecting the Navy pilots were playing a little reveille game on the Army troops. Explosions followed, and Taylor thought a Navy pilot had been careless and crashed.

"I jumped out of bed and grabbed my nearest pants, which happened to be the tux trousers," Taylor said, "and ran out-

side to see what was happening.”

In the street separating their BOQ buildings, Welch joined him to see Japanese planes firing and dropping bombs on the base.

“Some,” said Taylor, “were no more than 50 or 75 feet overhead, and we could clearly see their faces as they flew by.”

Tossing his Buick keys to Welch, Taylor ran to the only phone in the BOQ and called Haleiwa ordering two P-40s be armed and ready because they were on their way. Driving at top speed, the two pilots were at the little field in minutes, in the cockpits and airborne.

Their first encounter in the air was with a dozen unarmed B-17s flying in from the mainland.

“Luckily we identified them,” said Taylor. “If I had shot one down, I never could have forgiven myself.”

Flying past Wheeler, where most of its aircraft had been destroyed and the action ended, the two pilots spotted a line of Japanese bombers in the distance near a Marine base at Ewa, not far from Pearl Harbor.

Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the Japanese carrier task force commander, had devised a strategy for the surprise attack by sending his first planes in to destroy the American aircraft. This done, there would be minimal resistance for his dive and torpedo bombers assigned to wipe out most of the U.S. Navy’s Pacific fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor.

Yamamoto apparently did not know about Haleiwa, and the Japanese pilots must have been surprised when Taylor and Welch swooped down firing away.

“The bombers were no match for our P-40s,” said Taylor, “and we had a grand old time running up and down the line shooting them down.”

It did not take long for their .30-caliber gunnery practice ammo to be expended, so first Welch, then Taylor, flew back to Wheeler where there was a good supply

of .50-caliber bullets. However, as the two pilots were being rearmed, they found senior officers climbing up on the wings of their planes.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” the officers demanded. “Disperse your aircraft and do not go up again.”

Yamamoto had an estimated 350 planes in his task force and at odds of about 175 to 1, it could be argued the senior officers were only trying to keep Taylor and

its cart in front of Taylor’s P-40, but when he gunned his engine the plane’s wing knocked the cart out of the way.

Taylor, too, soon was up for a second flight with both pilots risking their lives and courts martial for disobeying orders.

Once aloft, a problem Taylor faced was that instead of being at the end of a line of Japanese planes, he was in the middle. A bullet from a plane behind him came through his canopy about an inch from his head, hit the trim tab, went through his left arm and exploded – the brass shards ruining his tux trousers.

Welch luckily saw Taylor’s predicament and shot down the plane on his friend’s tail, likely saving his life.

Both pilots continued their aerial combat until they had chased the Japanese planes off the north shore and again were out of ammunition.

A few other pilots were able to get into the air that day both from Wheeler and Haleiwa. Welch was credited with four kills and Taylor two, although the latter thought another two he shot down fell into the ocean.

With all the chaos and many Army facilities destroyed at Bellows, Hickham and Wheeler fields as well as Schofield Barracks, the Army high command made a quick public relations decision to recommend Taylor and Welch for major medals.

Only six days later on December 13, 1941, the U.S. War Department issued a press release in Washington, D.C., naming Lts. Taylor and Welch as the official first two heroes

of World War II.

A week later Austin was ordered to arrange a medal ceremony and for all Army personnel at Wheeler Field to turn out on January 8, 1942, for the event. Present were Brig. Gen. Howard C. Davidson, 14th Wing Commander; Brig. Gen. Clarence Tinker, for whom Tinker Field in Midwest City is named; and



Along with other national media paying tribute to World War II’s first decorated hero, *Sooner Magazine* featured former University of Oklahoma student Ken Taylor on the cover of the January 1942 issue.

Welch from a suicidal situation.

All that became immaterial when a second wave of Japanese planes approached Wheeler from the south in the direction of Pearl Harbor, and “the brass,” as Taylor called them, ran for safety.

The Wheeler runways were grass, so Welch gave his engine full throttle and was in the air. The rearming crew had left

Maj. Gen. Frederick Martin.


Both Welch and Taylor were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the military decoration second only to the Medal of Honor.

“At the time we were awarded the medals,” said Taylor, “we really didn’t understand the full significance of this recognition. It was quite an honor.”

Virtually every newspaper across the country carried the story of the Taylor/Welch heroism with photos and drawings. *Life Magazine* ran an article, and newsreels of the ceremony played in theaters everywhere. Early in 1942 Taylor’s photograph in helmet, goggles and white scarf was on the cover of *Sooner Magazine*.

Both pilots eventually were sent to the South Pacific. Taylor, according to a fellow pilot, shot down the first Japanese plane headed to bomb their base on Guadalcanal and saved major damage. Later during an air raid, some men jumped into a foxhole on top of him, breaking his leg; he was sent home.

Welch shot down twelve more enemy planes and became one of the top aces in the South Pacific campaign. In 1954 he was killed as a civilian test pilot flying the F100.

Ken Taylor retired as an Air Force brigadier general and commander of the Alaska Air National Guard. He died November 25, 2006, only a few days shy of the 65th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack. He was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. 

Author’s Note: During the fall of 2006 the fun and good times of my 40 years of friendship with Ken Taylor continued. I would record the Sooner football games on TV, then drive up to his assisted living facility in Tucson and have a drink or two with Ken while watching our Sooners whomp their opponents. He was not just one of our first World War II heroes but one of the greatest. (See more at www.pearlharborhero.net.)

John Martin Meek, ’58 journ, is the author of The Christmas Hour, a novel, and I Might Just Be Right, a collection of his newspaper columns and features. He has been researching the heroism of Ken Taylor and George Welch for six years in an effort to have them upgraded to the Congressional Medal of Honor.



Oklahoman Ken Taylor is pictured in front of a P-40 fighter painted with the iconic World War II Flying Tiger design.



Ken Taylor, center, shakes hands with actor Carl Reindel, left, who portrayed the Sooner hero in the 1970 film, “Tora! Tora! Tora!” Actor Rick Cooper played George Welch in the movie, directed by Richard Fleischer, far right.