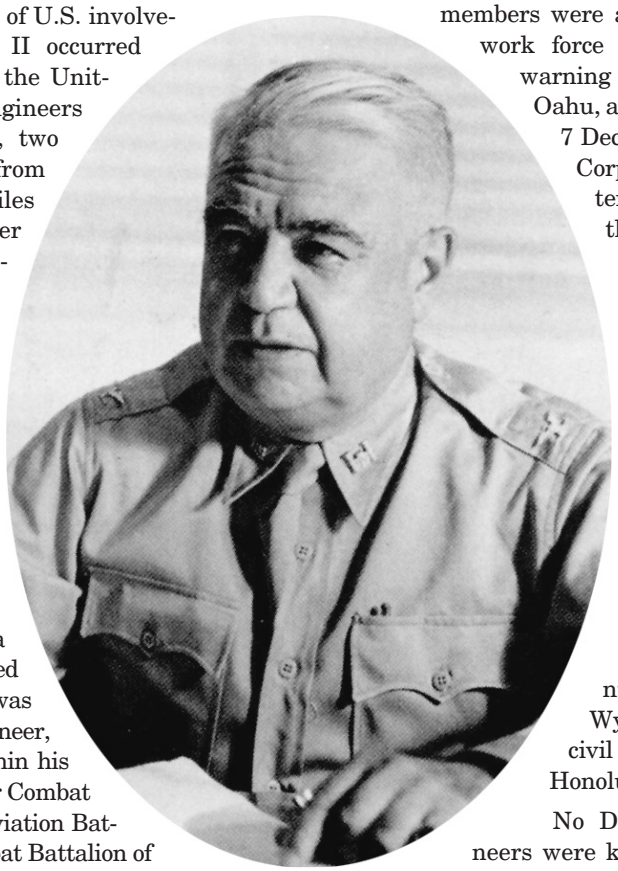
Army Engineers at Pearl Harbor

By the Office of History, Headquarters, United States Army Corps of Engineers

When the opening scene of U.S. involvement in World War II occurred on 7 December 1941, the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) was there. At 0755, two waves of Japanese warplanes from a naval task force about 250 miles north of Hawaii appeared over Oahu. Some headed for American warships at Pearl Harbor and the planes on the ground at nearby Hickam Field; others hit Schofield Barracks, Wheeler Field, and Bellows Field. USACE in Hawaii consisted of Soldier-engineers in the Army's Hawaiian Department and the Honolulu Engineer District, then part of the South Pacific Division.

Colonel Albert K.B. Lyman, a native Hawaiian who later attained the rank of brigadier general, was the Hawaiian Department engineer, with offices at Fort Shafter. Within his command were the 34th Engineer Combat Regiment, the 804th Engineer Aviation Battalion, and the 3d Engineer Combat Battalion of the 25th Infantry Division. All of Lyman's engineers were at Schofield Barracks. These military engineers were enlarging and modernizing facilities at Fort Shafter and Schofield Barracks, building antiaircraft gun sites, and bombproofing coastal fortifications. A portion of the 804th Engineer Aviation Battalion was building U-shaped dirt bunkers for aircraft dispersal at Wheeler Field.



Native Hawaiian Colonel Albert K.B. Lyman, the Army's Hawaiian Department engineer during the attack on Pearl Harbor, commanded the 34th Engineer Combat Regiment, the 804th Engineer Aviation Battalion, and the 3d Engineer Combat Battalion of the 25th Infantry Division. U.S. Army photo

On the civil side, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Wyman, the Honolulu District Engineer, had offices employing 10 officers and 400 civilians at the Alexander Young Building in Honolulu. Fourteen field area offices had 3 officers and 200 civilians. There had been a rapid increase in defense projects after France fell in 1940, so many District team members were at work that morning. Wyman's work force was building stationary early-warning radar sites on Kauai, Maui, and Oahu, although none were operational on 7 December. The transfer of Army Air Corps construction from the Quartermaster's Department to USACE that was authorized in November 1940 also increased Wyman's responsibilities. His District took over enlarging eight airfields and building two new ones and began work on a gasoline and bomb storage site at Hickam Field. In October, Wyman began his most important project—building an air ferry route across the South Pacific to Australia. By December, airfields were being built on Christmas and Canton Islands, in Fiji, and on New Caledonia. In addition to defense work, Wyman remained responsible for civil works projects, such as dredging Honolulu Harbor.

No District team members or engineers were killed when the Japanese struck without warning, but there were close calls. The area engineer in charge of construction at Bellows Field watched with horror as Japanese planes strafed the field, destroying most of the P-40 Warhawk fighter planes. He directed dispersal of his equipment and, because of his efforts, none was lost.

One lieutenant who had been reassigned to the mainland—and who had recently turned over Alpha Company, 3d Engineer Combat Battalion, to his successor—was at Schofield Barracks that morning, preparing to leave the next day. One of the first bomb blasts blew out a window of his house, and he ran to get his pistol to shoot at the low-flying planes, forgetting he had already turned in his

The 804th Aviation Engineer Battalion cleaned up the wreckage caused by the Japanese bombing of Wheeler Field when Pearl Harbor was attacked on 7 December 1941. U.S. Army photo.

weapon. He hurried to Schofield Barracks, where the battalion commander gave him back Alpha Company. He found his men in the street, shooting at attacking planes, and told the supply sergeant to give weapons to anyone who asked for them and to tell them to shoot at the Japanese planes. Later, the lieutenant almost had to pay for the weapons, because in the haste to go to war, no one had asked for—or given out—receipts!

That afternoon, the 804th Engineer Aviation Battalion began salvage operations at Wheeler Field. The 3d Engineer Combat Battalion moved with the 24th Infantry Division to the north shore to defend against the expected Japanese invasion, which never came. As eventful as 7 December 1941 was, it was but the first of many days of war for the engineers in Hawaii. The Honolulu District completed the ferry route in January 1942 and built more airfields and port and base facilities for the war. All the Hawaiian Department engineer units served in the war. The 34th Engineer Combat Regiment served in the Central Pacific and landed on Kwajalein. The 804th Engineer Combat Battalion, also in the Central Pacific, saw action at Saipan. The 3d Engineer Combat Battalion and 64th Engineer Topographic Battalion went to the Southwest Pacific and fought and built their way through the Solomon, New Guinea, and the Philippine Islands.[1]

USACE Honolulu District editor's note:

Brigadier General Albert Kualii Brickwood Lyman (5 May 1885–13 August 1942) was born in Paauhau, Hamakua Coast, Hawaii, and was the first ethnic Hawaiian to attain the rank of general or admiral in the United States Armed Forces—achieved during World War II. He attended schools in Hilo and the Kamehameha and Punahou Schools in Honolulu and graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. From a family of 15 siblings, he was the grandson of David Belden Lyman—a Christian missionary from New England who settled in the Hilo, Hawaii area—and the descendent of Kualii, high chief of Oahu. His nephew, Richard Lyman Jr., was a trustee of the Bishop Estate in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Lyman House Memorial Museum in Hilo, the repository of the history of the Lyman family, is open to the public.

Brigadier General Lyman graduated from West Point with honors, number 15 in his class of 103. During his 33 years in the United States Army, he had 25 assignments in 12 states and four overseas posts (Panama, France, Cuba, and the Philippines). Having served in 1913 at Schofield Barracks in Oahu, Hawaii, as a junior officer, he was assigned there in May 1940, where as a full colonel he was commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Combat Battalion. He was also responsible for construction projects, thereby performing virtually two full-time jobs. He was promoted to brigadier general on 11 August 1942. Two days later, he became ill at the home of his brother-in-law and died before medical help could reach him.

Among the numerous awards he received, Brigadier General Lyman was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal posthumously for his service from July 1940 to

August 1942 for completion of "construction of defense projects before the anticipated completion dates." On 19 April 1943, the Hawaii state legislature declared that the main passenger terminal of the Hilo International Airport be called the General Lyman Terminal. The military schools he attended were the United States Army Engineer School and the Army Industrial College.

Brigadier General Charles R.B. Lyman (20 August 1888–15 April 1981), Albert's brother, was the second Asian-Hawaiian-Pacific Islander American (AHPIA) to be accorded the rank of general or admiral. He graduated from West Point on 12 June 1913. During his 36 years in the Army, Charles had assignments in nine states and three overseas posts—Australia, New Guinea, and the Philippines. His duty was almost wholly with the infantry. In July 1941, shortly after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Charles, a full colonel, was appointed military governor of Maui, Lanai, and Molokai. After 11 months in that position, he was deployed to Australia as assistant division commander of the 32d Infantry Division. He was in the first group of troops that attacked Tanah Merah Bay, Dutch New Guinea, and he personally directed the front line units that seized Hollandia.

Charles Lyman was promoted to brigadier general in 1944 and served as commanding general of the 32d Infantry Division, which in June 1945 was deployed in Luzon and subsequently in the Leyte Campaigns, Philippines. The war ended at this point, and Charles participated in the signing of the peace treaty in Baguio, Philippines. His decorations included the Combat Infantryman's Badge; Silver Star for gallantry in leading his troops in the Dutch New Guinea invasion; the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster; the Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster; and four campaign ribbons.[2]

Endnotes

[1]Portions of this article appeared in slightly different form at USACE Headquarters Historical Vignettes, Vignette 002, "The Engineers Fought and Lived Through Day of Infamy," 2000, *<http://www.usace.army.mil/History/hv/Pages/002-Pearl%20Harbor.aspx>*, accessed 28 January 2011.

[2]Japanese American Veterans Association news release, "The Lyman Brothers of Hawaii, Both West Point Graduates, are the First Asian Hawaiian Pacific Island Americans to Gain General's Rank," Vol. II, No. 51, 7 January 2008, *<http://www.javadc.org/Press%20release%2001-07-08%20Lymn%20Brothers%20of%20Hawaii%20Are%20First%20Asian%20Hawaiian%20Pacific%20Island%20Americans%20to%20Gain%20General's%20Rank.htm>,* accessed 28 January 2011; and *<http://www.asianweek.com/2008/01/22/lyman-brothers-first-asian-americans-to-gain-general%E2%80%99s-rank/>,* accessed 28 January 2011.