Ford Island was the 20th century’s ground zero. The goal of the Pacific Aviation Museum-Pearl Harbor is to guarantee that the chain of events that started on Ford Island and eventually changed the course of world history are never forgotten. The museum gives visitors a front row seat to the Pacific theater and how aviation turned the tide of the war.

Hangar 37, the 42,000 square-foot first phase of the museum, opened on Dec. 7, 2006. Not only does the hangar bear witness to the attack on Pearl Harbor but it survived that fateful Sunday morning and WWII to rise again to host an aviation museum like no other.

The museum features a 200-seat theater presenting a short introductory film that shares the memories of BGen Robin Olds as well as two Pearl Harbor survivors who were on Ford Island the day of the Japanese attack. The theater is also used for the museum’s lecture series presenting historic programs unique to Pearl Harbor and the Pacific.

WWII was fought not just on the front lines but the home front as well. From the opening moments of the Pacific War, civilians were thrust into the eye of the storm that engulfed Oahu on December 7th, 1941. Hanging above a large map depicting Japan’s well designed attack plan, a sole citizen survivor hangs overhead. The Aeronca flown by Roy Vitousek and son Martin was caught up in the maelstrom that morning and even though damaged during the first wave of the attack survived to hang in the museum, a true Pearl Harbor survivor.

This museum is not just about the airplanes, although they are an important part. More significantly, this museum is about the history made in those airplanes and because of them. Through interactive exhibits, guests have the opportunity to experience how aviation affected the front lines and battlefields as well as the course of world history.

As visitors enter Pearl Harbor’s latest addition to the island’s historic sites, their eyes are drawn immediately to the huge floor photographic mosaic of Ford Island as it is today. One of the many dedicated museum volunteer docents is there to lead the visitors back through the history of Ford Island and share the little known stories that make such moments in history so memorable.

The museum’s first diorama includes a rare Mitsubishi/Nakajima A6M2-21 Zero. While a WWII combat veteran in the Solomon Islands, the museum’s Zero is displayed as it would have appeared on the Japanese carrier Hiryu, painted exactly as the plane of Japanese pilot Shigenori Nishikaichi. Nishikaichi, as told in greater detail in another museum exhibit, crash landed his plane on the island of Niihau.

The museum uses a Curtiss P-40 Warhawk replica to tell the story of second lieutenants George Welch and Ken Taylor, who were coming from a dinner-dance and all-night poker game when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Still wearing their white tuxedo shirts, they proceeded to an auxiliary strip at Haleiwa on Oahu’s North Shore to join the air battle. Welch downed four Japanese aircraft and Taylor two on that fateful morning.
The exhibit epitomizes the museum’s goal of telling the people side of significant aviation events.

One of our newer exhibits features an *Allison V-1710 in-line engine* opposing a *Pratt And Whitney R1690 Hornet radial engine*. These were the workhorse powerplants for US Army Air Force as well as US Navy fighters.

One of the most unique aviation artifacts in the collection is the Niihau Zero, the only remaining Zero wreckage from the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Niihau Zero was part of the second wave and was damaged by shell fire. It subsequently crash landed on the remote, privately-owned island of Niihau northwest of Oahu. There it remained hidden in the mists of history and where it has been virtually ignored for the past 65 years. The stories and legends surrounding the crash and the island insurrection which followed (led by Nishikaichi) are rich with moral conflict and human frailty. This rare Zero is displayed as it was found on Niihau.

Each of the museum’s dioramas depicts not only a significant moment in the first year of the Pacific war but also the people and planes involved in the events. The B-25 Mitchell bomber displayed on the deck of the USS Hornet is of the type flown by the “Doolittle Raiders.” This particular B-25 wears the nose art of Ted Lawson’s #7 plane, “The Ruptured Duck”.

The Battle of Midway, fought over and near the tiny U.S. mid-Pacific base at Midway atoll, was a decisive turning point in the Pacific Theater. On June 4, 1942, in the second of the Pacific War’s great carrier battles, the perseverance, sacrifice and skill of U.S. Navy aviators, plus a great deal of good luck on the American side, cost Japan four irreplaceable fleet carriers along with their seasoned, front-line pilots, while only one of the three U.S. carriers present was lost. The Douglas SBD Dauntless was the carrier-based dive-bomber of the US Navy that spelled doom for all four Japanese carriers. Visitors also learn about the three torpedo squadrons that bravely flew into a maelstrom of Japanese Zero fighter attacks and ship-based anti-aircraft fire near Midway. The resulting loss rate was 85% of the 41 torpedo-carrying TBD Devastators flown from the Enterprise, Yorktown and Hornet aircraft carriers. Surely the aircrews knew the likelihood of their impending doom, but they went anyway.

The story of Guadalcanal is told using an authentic the F4F-3 Wildcat. The museum’s Wildcat is one of less than a dozen early F4F-3 models which exist today. It faced the brunt of the early Pacific theater action of WWII from the opening volleys at Pearl Harbor through the difficult days up to and including Wake Island, Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal. She held her own against an equally determined enemy flying a far more advanced plane.

The home-front was also responsible for training young men and women to help with the war effort. The Stearman was called the “yellow peril” by all the scared young cadets it taught not only how to fly but also what they were made out of; propelling boys into men, and men into leaders of other men. The museum’s N2S-3 Stearman taught one of our former presidents that lesson in the winter of 1942 when George H.W. Bush soled this very plane while he was a young naval cadet.

What better place to for children to learn about history than under the wing of a WWII-era plane. The museum’s Education Program offers children the chance to interact with the history that many have only read about. During the school’s guided tour, each exhibit is discussed and enhanced with activities that not only highlight the history made in the Pacific but the science and social changes that resulted because of WWII.
All lessons and activities are aligned with the Department of Education’s HCPS III standards for grades 1-12 in the areas of Science, Math, Social Studies, Language Arts and Fine Arts. Attached is a four-page summary of the museum’s education program.

Visiting classrooms can also book a flight in the Education Center’s Flight Lab. Individual interactive cockpit classrooms teach math and science skills that reinforce their lessons in new and exciting ways. Their “flying classrooms” will take the students on a historic flight while teaching them the science and math needed to fly these missions.

The first phase of the museum also offers visitors recreation as well as education. Realistic Flight simulators at the Cactus Air Force Operations Center put guests in the cockpit of a Zero over the Pacific or in a Wildcat defending Guadalcanal. The 20 minute simulator flights allow the participants to engage in air to air combat, seeing and sensing some of the emotions of the moment.

The museum’s Lani ‘Ākea Café over looks the exhibit hangar and the dioramas, immersing diners in the island life of aviators in the Pacific. Great local Island specialties are served under thatched huts and palm trees. You can almost picture Pappy Boyington pulling up a chair next to you.

Situated front and center just inside the museum lobby is the eye-catching Museum Store. Offering over 750 items, the Museum Store is a must stop kind of place. For those who want to learn more about World War II the Museum Store includes an expansive book selection, apparel with the 40’s vintage look including hats, scarves and bomber jackets and a wide variety of model airplanes.

The museum attracts visitors from all over the world. Historians, veterans, aviation enthusiasts, school groups, westbound and eastbound visitors to O‘ahu call it a must see destination. The reaction to the museum experience by those in attendance has been quite positive, as indicated by the attached newspaper articles, testimonials and recap of recognition awards.

Just as Gettysburg and the Alamo occupy a place in time, space and history that is significant to every American so does the bullet scarred ground on Ford Island. Ford Island was at the heart of the attack and holds the stories of the moment when we awoke as a nation to our destiny.

The mission of the Pacific Aviation Museum is to insure that future generations understand the bravery and sacrifice made by aviators and their support personnel as they fought to defend freedom in the Pacific region. By portraying these stories of America’s “greatest generation” in a captivating impression-making manner, their contributions will be preserved forever. What better place to tell these stories than on Ford Island in Hangar 37, a Pearl Harbor Survivor of that infamous attack on December 7, 1941.

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