

For Immediate Release

## Female Pilot Reacted Swiftly During Pearl Harbor Attack

*On December 7, 1941, pilot Cornelia Fort was in the air at Pearl Harbor when Japanese bombers attacked. Her quick reactions saved her plane during the surprise Japanese raid.*

(Bellingham, WA)—Call her the very first American woman pilot in a combat zone. On December 7, 1941, 22-year-old pilot Cornelia Fort was in the air in a two-seater Interstate Cadet monoplane, teaching takeoffs and landings to a student when Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor. With hundreds of hours of flying experience, the Nashville belle turned flight instructor was one of the most experienced pilots in the country.



About 8 a.m. as her student prepared for a landing at John Rodgers civilian airport near Pearl Harbor, Fort saw a military plane heading directly toward her. She jerked the controls away from her student, jammed the throttle wide open, and pulled up above the oncoming aircraft. The plane passed so close it rattled the celluloid windows of the Cadet. When she looked down, she saw bright red balls, the Rising Sun emblem of Japan, on its wings.

“It was a moment of utter disbelief for her,” said historian Margaret Regis, author of the book, *When Our Mothers Went to War: An Illustrated History of Women in World War II*, just released by NavPublishing. “What Fort probably didn’t realize in that split second was that a major Japanese assault was underway. Three-hundred-fifty Japanese fighters and bombers were flying in to attack the air bases on Oahu and the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.”

At the moment of the attack, Fort’s monoplane and a few small civilian aircraft were the only American planes in the air near the harbor. Looking at Pearl Harbor, Fort saw billowing black smoke and formations of silver high-level bombers roaring in. A bomb detached from one of the attacking airplanes and plummeted down, exploding near the ships. Fort dropped her plane down quickly to land and heard a close burst of machine-gun fire as she began her descent.

“If danger comes as suddenly as this did,” Fort wrote after the attack, “you don’t have time to be frightened.” When she touched down, her student, who may not have realized yet what was happening, asked plaintively, “When am I going to solo?” Within seconds, a Japanese plane strafed the runway and they sprinted into the hangar for cover. The attackers shot down two civilian planes that morning.

After the Japanese raid, the U.S. military banned all civilian flights in the Hawaiian Islands. Fort returned to the mainland in February 1942. Seven months later, she was among the first 25 pilots the War Department recruited for the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS). WAFS pilots supported the World War II war effort by delivering military planes to bases throughout the United States.

In March 1943, Cornelia Fort was killed in a midair collision while on a ferrying mission to Dallas. She was the first American woman pilot to die on active duty. “Fort had a premonition that she might die while flying,” said Regis. “Not long after the Pearl Harbor attack, she wrote in a letter to her mother: ‘I was happiest in the sky. . . . Think of me there and remember me.’”

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### **About NavPublishing**

NavPublishing, LLC publishes pictorial history books. Its newest release, *When Our Mothers Went to War: An Illustrated History of Women in War II* by Margaret Regis is available from [www.navpublishing.com](http://www.navpublishing.com)

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