
“Newsreel Footage from Pearl Harbor: Now It Can Be Shown!”

BY GREG WILSBACHER, CURATOR AT MOVING IMAGE RESEARCH COLLECTIONS,
NEWSFILM COLLECTIONS, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS FILM REPOSITORY

Pearl Harbor, two words that should foremost name a place, a harbor on the southern shore of the Island Oahu. Seventy-five years ago this geographic label was transformed through a complex series of events into a national symbol of individual grit and determination struggling against the full fury of a treacherous foreign empire, a cautionary tale of complacency and a warning that the nation could not insulate itself from global conflict. *Remember Pearl Harbor*.

Such a complex symbol did not spring *sui generis* from the minds of Americans in the weeks following the attack on December 7th. It was, of course, constructed by the government and the media in the months and years following. Like other newsreels of the time, Fox Movietone News played its part in the construction of this symbol—indeed, it had a special role to play. Unlike the other newsreels, Movietone had positioned a cameraman in Hawaii months in advance of the attack in anticipation of war with Japan. Al Brick’s films of Pearl Harbor the morning of the attack became a cornerstone of the visual narrative underwriting the larger symbolic structure of *Remember Pearl Harbor*. When his films were released by the Navy Department a full year after the attack, Movietone created a special release entitled *Now It Can Be Shown!*

Now It Can Be Shown! features sweeping panoramas of the entire harbor from Aiea in the waning moments of the Japanese attack and close in sequences of American battleships blazing with smoke and fire taken from inside the harbor. Even though he is rarely credited for shooting them, these scenes are among the most enduring images of the attack and have played an important role in the symbolism of Pearl Harbor. Both the panorama and close in scenes emphasize the scale of the attack and the horrors faced by Americans onboard *Arizona* and other battleships. Brick’s films also invite viewers to pose questions about the morning that feed the symbolic narrative constructed about the attack. What if the Japanese attack had not been so ‘sneaky’? What if the fleet had been better prepared? What if soldiers, sailors and Marines had known an attack was coming? Clearly the amassed might of the fleet visible in Brick’s panorama of the harbor would have beaten back the Japanese if they had had a chance.

Al Brick’s films were not the only ones made that morning. In fact, the attack on Pearl Harbor was documented by a surprising number of still and moving image cameras. Still cameras were present and operating on Ford Island, in the Navy Yard and from Aiea heights. In addition to Al Brick’s camera, motion picture cameras were present and in use on the *USS Solace*, the *USS Argonne*, and the *USS Mugford*. The release of different images (some of them in color) from different moments that morning would have enabled other interpretations of December 7th.

Images that forefront the speed with which sailors and Marines manned anti-aircraft guns and ships sortied from moorings to seek out the Japanese—most significant of these the battleship *Nevada* which can be seen in one film moving down channel fighting madly against swarming Japanese dive bombers. Confronted with these images, the narrative of a sleepy nation caught unawares would have proven more challenging to construct. The fleet was prepared and had only the weekend before been on full alert in preparation for war with Japan.

It is not surprising that the government carefully selected what images to release and when to release them as part of its concerted effort to focus the nation’s energy on the new reality of total war. *Now It Can Be Shown!* provides an essential look at a carefully crafted narrative. But our commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the attack and the nation’s entry into World War II should not be bound by that story.

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