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A STRATEGY HAS TO BE ABLE TO WORK TO BE MASTERFUL

Alan D. Zimm

This essay was written in response to an article by Angelo N. Caravaggio, “Winning’ the Pacific War: The Masterful Strategy of Commander Minoru Genda,” which appeared in the Winter 2014 issue of the *Naval War College Review* (pages 85–118).

Dr. Caravaggio takes to task “criticisms leveled at the Japanese for their ‘ill conceived’ or ‘poorly planned’ attack at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.” Since his endnote supporting this comment listed only my *Attack on Pearl Harbor: Strategy, Combat, Myths, Deceptions* as a source of this criticism, the finger appears to be pointed directly at me. Understandably, I was eager to learn more of Genda’s masterful strategy and to learn how I had missed Genda’s “depth of vision and professional intellect.” I was disappointed.

Dr. Caravaggio’s article never substantiates his view that Genda’s planning for the Pearl Harbor attack was in any way masterful. None of my criticisms were addressed, nor was there any explanation of how my analysis was inaccurate. I found no evidence in the article of any strategic planning created by Genda—only a few suggested courses of action that the author assumes were masterful, without any real evaluation as to their feasibility.

Genda was the lead planner for the Pearl Harbor strike. In my previous life as a commander in the U.S. Navy, performing exercise analysis, I gained some experience in evaluating and criticizing operational planning. I found Genda’s plan full of poor decisions, with some outright blunders, even considering the state of the art of the time.

If Dr. Caravaggio contends that the attack was not “poorly planned,” he will need to address the deficiencies that I have identified in *Attack on Pearl Harbor*—twenty-one specific, major problems. The following are a few of the most significant that are related to planning.

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- Genda’s plan for the torpedo bombers employed a horrendously complicated target-prioritization scheme that could not have been executed even under the best of conditions. It resulted in an overconcentration on two battleships, as well as other targeting errors. One-third of the torpedo hits were wasted on inappropriate targets or in overkill.

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- The prioritization scheme assigned primary (battleship) and secondary (cruiser) targets. There was enough force to allocate killing firepower to six of the eight battleships and all the cruisers. The plan, however, provided for no positive command and control over the attack as a whole, with the result that not one torpedo bomber intentionally attacked a cruiser, and only one bomb hit a cruiser.
- The approach formation chosen by the planners for the torpedo bombers was dangerously wrong. The torpedo bombers did not approach in a mutually supporting defensive formation but rather in long, one-at-a-time, line-ahead “strings.” The heavily loaded aircraft, flying “low and slow” in this formation, would have been appallingly vulnerable had there been any U.S. fighters over the harbor—even a few of the obsolete P-26s based in the area.
- The torpedo bombers’ formation did not allow for anything other than “follow me” leadership, which contributed to poor target selection.
- Due to a lack of practice (another of the planner’s responsibilities) and a poor means to communicate which attack plan had been selected, the torpedo bombers spread and straggled, with aircraft intervals as large as five hundred to 1,200 yards instead of the planned one hundred yards.
- The torpedo attack lacked simultaneity. The bomber strings attacked one at a time. An attack that should have taken ninety seconds stretched into eleven or twelve minutes, allowing time for more antiaircraft (AA) gunners to get into the action. Five of the last seven torpedo bombers were shot down. Had there been any warning, this would have likely been near the loss rate for the entire torpedo force.
- No contingency plan was provided should the carriers be absent, other than “find another target.” Some pilots misidentified USS *Utah* and wasted torpedoes on this demilitarized target ship. Others aborted their runs and chose other attack routes to other targets.
- Attack routes conflicted. Many routes crossed within groups and among groups. When the aircraft assigned to attack carriers went for other targets, the result was several near collisions, causing attack runs to abort and one aircraft to jettison its torpedo. The reattacks allowed more time for the defenders to shoot them down. This was the fault of the planners, not the aviators.
- Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto’s objective was to sink battleships (the symbol of sea power) and thereby inflict a shock to the morale of the American people to induce them to come to a negotiated peace. Genda undermined his boss’s

objective by disproportionately assigning torpedo and dive-bombers to strike carriers.

- No fighter “top cover” was assigned. The few U.S. fighters that managed to get aloft had clear runs at Japanese bombers.
- No fighters were assigned to escort the main effort—that is, the torpedo bombers—to the harbor. The fighters broke off to strafe airfields, leaving the torpedo bombers undefended for the last ten to twenty miles of their approach.
- The plan assumed clear visibility and unlimited (CVU) weather conditions. The dive-bombers were trained in an attack technique that required CVU weather up to twelve thousand feet. When the second-wave dive-bombers encountered dense clouds between three and five thousand feet, they could not bomb, and their bombsights were not capable of lower-altitude glide-bombing. As a result, the dive-bombers’ hit percentage was miserable. Only two hits were scored on targets appropriate to the dive-bombers’ 250-kilogram general-purpose bombs by the seventy-eight bombers that arrived over the harbor. Their only “kill” was the naval shipyard “gedunk” wagon, which was eviscerated, scattering ice cream and pies all over a quay near Honolulu. If the dive-bombers had performed as expected, with the firepower they had they could have sunk all the cruisers in the harbor. As it was, they scored only one hit on a cruiser—again, a result of poor anticipation by the planners, not poor execution by the aviators.
- The plan, as briefed, included sinking a ship in the channel if one was found under way. The second-wave dive-bombers found the battleship USS *Nevada* under way, and probably fourteen to eighteen dive-bombers attacked it, scoring five hits with bombs that did not have the capability to penetrate the ship’s deck armor. The ship sank, but owing to damage-control and design errors, which the Japanese could not have anticipated (and for which they should not be given credit). The planners knew that these bombs were not lethal against battleships and that it would normally take over sixty such hits to produce any expectation of sinking one, yet they planned for it anyway—a waste of bombs.
- The planners did not make the elementary calculation needed to determine whether a sunken battleship could actually block the channel. As it was, even if a ship had sunk at a right angle to the channel and in the exact center, the channel was wide enough to allow ships to pass in either direction.
- There was no planned suppression of enemy air defenses, though the Japanese employed such techniques in China. U.S. AA was a major factor in

disrupting the attack and reducing weapons-delivery accuracy to well below expectations.

- The planners assumed they would achieve surprise. There were no contingency plans should surprise be lost, even though they knew that the carrier force would attack the island even if it had been sighted as much as twenty-four hours in advance. It was not until the day before the force departed Japan, when Admiral Yamamoto reminded its crews of the quality of their opponents and “the snare of overconfidence,” that the planners realized their plan was not robust enough to deal with conditions other than those envisioned by their initial, rigid, assumptions. En route to the launch point, the planners cobbled together an inadequate “no surprise” contingency plan. The means by which it would be communicated to the first-wave aircraft, while en route to the target, which plan was to be executed—by firing flares—was not well considered. The flare signal was misinterpreted by some of the force, which resulted in a string of blunders that caused the attacking formations to lose all cohesion in their approach, while other elements executed the wrong plan.

Overall, the attack force had the killing capacity to destroy or sink six battleships and eight cruisers, with additional overkill hits available to ensure this result. The killing ordnance (actual hits delivered that were sufficient to destroy or sink the target) destroyed or sank only three battleships. The attack achieved 21 percent of its potential.

This was a poorly planned attack. It does not reflect any particular depth of vision or professional intellect. Dr. Caravaggio’s statement that any shortfalls in the results arose because Genda’s plan was “just not executed as originally envisioned” is specious. Most of the faults of execution can be traced to deficiencies in planning. It is possible that the author was referring only to masterful strategic-level planning, but the text of his article is not clear on this. In Genda’s initial evaluation of the idea of an attack on Pearl Harbor, he suggested that the strike be followed by the invasion and capture of Oahu. Dr. Caravaggio chides those who vetoed this idea, as if they had rejected a war-winning strategy. However, he does not mention why the Naval General Staff originally dismissed it.

A member of the Naval General Staff Planning Section, Captain Shigenori Kami, was asked to investigate an invasion of Hawaii. Kami found that the islands were not self-sufficient in food, noting that 2,900,000 tons had been shipped there in 1941. He calculated that, under Japanese occupation, thirty ships a month would be required to feed the population, with another thirty ships a month for military supplies. Considering the distance of the routes and the turnaround times (as well as potential losses from submarines), far more than

sixty ships would have been required, ships that Japan did not have. The Japanese military had taken over two million tons out of commercial service to support its offensive, which it intended to return before their absence could cripple the industrial effort; to withdraw half a million tons permanently was not supportable, and the scheme would have presented a stream of targets that would have been an American submariner's dream. A discussion of this study can be found in John Stephan's *Hawaii under the Rising Sun: Japan's Plan for Conquest after Pearl Harbor* (2002), cited in the article's endnotes. The Japanese rightly rejected the idea of invading Oahu at the outset of the war. If they had taken Hawaii, they could not have held it. This strategic idea was not masterful; it had no depth of vision, because it did not consider what had to follow.

My own criticisms of the Pearl Harbor strategy are that the attack displaced an existing plan around which the Japanese navy was designed and built and that it forced the United States into a course of action that would nearly guarantee a Japanese defeat.

The Japanese fleet was designed around a concept wherein the U.S. fleet would be lured to the west, escorting the large amphibious force required to retake the Philippines. The American fleet would be subject to attrition by submarines, long-range aviation, carrier strikes, and destroyer and cruiser night torpedo attacks. After inflicting significant losses, the Japanese expected to close and crush the U.S. fleet in a battle-line engagement. With the U.S. fleet annihilated (as the Russians' had been at Tsushima), there would follow, the Japanese assumed, a favorable negotiated peace.

Their dilemma was that this plan had to be carried out early in the war, before the vast American industrial capability could develop. The Japanese calculated that the Americans were building three to five tons of warships for every ton coming out of Japanese yards and that by 1944 the fleet tonnage ratio would be ten to three. The Japanese needed to lure the Americans into a decisive battle quickly, while the fleets were roughly comparable.

However, if the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor succeeded, they knew, the Americans would not come early. There would be no incentive for the Americans to engage in decisive battle until their fleet was repaired and reinforced to overwhelming strength. The strategic mechanism for victory, then, was changed from that of annihilating the U.S. fleet to undermining the morale of the American people by sinking a few battleships at Pearl Harbor—a strategy forced on the Japanese by Yamamoto. They rationalized the new strategy as “protecting the flank of the southern advance,” when in fact a successful attack on Pearl Harbor would negate Japan's only potential war-winning strategy. Dr. Caravaggio does not address this analysis or explain why he believes the strategy of an attack on Pearl Harbor reflects depth of vision by Commander Genda.

Genda originally suggested that the Japanese carriers remain off Hawaii and deliver follow-on strikes to “deny the use of Pearl Harbor as an operating base.” In my book, I calculate that, optimistically, a follow-on strike would destroy at most 6 percent of the area of the naval shipyard, and I point out that there was significant regeneration capability in the tenders and civilian shipyard at Honolulu. Even further reattacks would not eliminate Pearl Harbor as a base; the Japanese carrier magazines simply did not carry enough ordnance. I would also nudge the author toward the calculation of probable losses by the Japanese attackers from AA and any residual fighter capacity. The Japanese carrier force could easily lose half to three-quarters of its aircraft and pilots in repeated vain attempts to put out of service a base that could be readily regenerated. Considering that the Japanese had few aviators in reserve and a painfully small and inflexible pilot training program, such losses certainly would have changed the course of the war in the Pacific, putting half or more of the Japanese carriers out of service for six months for lack of pilots. In addition, the idea of remaining off Oahu for repeated strikes discounts the American submarine capability. There were four submarines in Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack, with others operating in adjoining training areas. These submarines, even with defective torpedoes, could have severely discomfited the Japanese fleet or any convoy of amphibious and support ships, especially considering the poor Japanese antisubmarine warfare capability. Lastly, the Japanese striking force simply did not have the fuel to hover off Oahu, nor did it have a logistics train that could support extended forward operations far from bases.

A strategy has to be able to work to be masterful.

Dr. Caravaggio seems also to believe that it would be possible to take Oahu with two (later revised to three) Japanese infantry divisions. He does not identify where these divisions would be obtained, along with the eighty-odd ships required for their transport, and more for their sustainment. The Japanese Three-Phase Offensive was stretched thin in troops and vessels, and Japan’s operations in the Philippines, Indochina, and the Netherlands East Indies were only possible through careful staging and reuse of merchant ships in each succeeding wave of landings. The Imperial Army had refused to provide additional divisions to attack what it saw as naval objectives.

The author appears to agree with Genda’s assessment that taking Hawaii would be a “knockout punch.” Yamamoto had considered this strategy and thought that having 400,000 American citizens under his control would bring the United States to the negotiating table. As in the case of his belief that sinking four battleships at Pearl Harbor would break the Americans’ morale, I suggest that this idea is flawed. The capture of Oahu would likely have further enraged the American population, possibly to the extent that the “Germany first” strategy would be

abandoned and U.S. forces concentrated instead against the Japanese. Considering that most of the Japanese gains in the first phase of the war were due to a vacuum of U.S. and British power, it is likely that, had U.S. air, ground, and naval assets been directed initially against Japan, Japan would have been overwhelmed earlier, resulting in a stay of execution for Germany but a disaster for Japan.

As noted, the author seems to accept that two or three Japanese infantry divisions could overcome Oahu's two defending U.S. Army divisions, each with two regular and one National Guard regiment. Japanese infantry divisions were not well suited to combat against opponents heavy in firepower, as the 80 percent losses suffered in 1939 at Nomonhan against the Soviets demonstrated, as did the failure of Japanese wave attacks during the Guadalcanal campaign. The lack of Japanese artillery would not be made up by shore bombardment or by close air support, as the Japanese ships and carrier aviators were not trained, equipped, or supplied for these roles. As for the prospects of success through a flanking strategy, traversing a mountain chain on the eastern side of Oahu (as mentioned approvingly in the article), Japan's lack of success using a similar strategy in New Guinea, along the Kokoda Trail, is well known.

Which brings us to what the article contends is the "opportunity lost"—Genda's proposal after Pearl Harbor to collect troops from Guam, survivors of the Wake Island assault force, and forces earmarked for the seizure of Rabaul and redirect them to invade Midway and Johnston Islands. Dr. Caravaggio contends that this "plan" is a "clear [indication] of [Genda's] impressive ability to connect the strategic imperative with the tactical necessity."

I would have been more impressed with Genda's "strategy" (really, an off-the-cuff suggestion, with little thought to feasibility) if there had been a more detailed look at the practicality of the suggested actions. From where were the ships coming that would move these troops? Where were the logistics, and the intelligence? Was there sufficient force to carry off multiple opposed amphibious operations successfully?

The Japanese did not have a good record of opposed amphibious assaults. The first landing at Wake Island was repulsed, the landings at Rabaul succeeded only on beaches where they were unopposed, and the invasion of the Philippines at Lingayen Gulf was nearly stymied by a single .50-caliber machine-gun post.

The Rabaul invasion force was embarked on 14 January 1942. This is the earliest date on which Genda's proposal could have been put into motion. There was no shipping to pick up the troops occupying Guam without displacing other Japanese movements, a very unlikely option. American reinforcements to Midway began 17 December, and additional infantry, coastal batteries, and anti-aircraft were in place by 26 December, while reinforcements were in motion for Johnston. (See Glen Williford's *Racing the Sunrise: Reinforcing America's Pacific*

Outposts, 1941–1942, published in 2010, for more on the reinforcement of the Pacific Islands after Pearl Harbor.) Genda’s “strategy” would not strike a vacuum. It was impractical and not within the capabilities of the available forces.

The Japanese showed throughout the war that they lacked flexibility and were less effective when operating outside preestablished plans. Genda’s strategic suggestion took no account of Japanese capabilities to execute the idea or of potential U.S. countermeasures. Dr. Caravaggio would have a difficult time convincing any U.S. Marine that a pickup team of Japanese soldiers without local intelligence or proper assault or logistics planning, short on landing craft, and with no particular preparation or advance planning could have taken and held these islands.

It is easy to say an idea is brilliant, divorced from messy questions regarding feasibility. But details of practicability are important. Genda could just as well have suggested an invasion of Los Angeles or the capture of Washington, D.C. Both would have been brilliant coups and would have changed the course of the war, but would have been masterful strategies only if they had potential to succeed.

However, Dr. Caravaggio is to be praised for bringing attention to the interviews between Gordon Prange and Genda and the other Japanese officers. He has brought forward some new information to the historical community. Yet I would caution readers to be careful in accepting the accompanying analysis. Dr. Caravaggio’s effusive praise for Genda’s strategy needs scrutiny before that strategy can be accepted as masterful.