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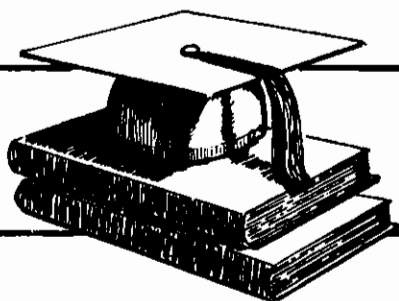
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PROFESSIONAL READING

REVIEW ARTICLES

The Pearl Harbor Attack:

Admiral Yamamoto's Fundamental Concept

with reference to Paul S. Dull's

A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)

by

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*A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)** is the first precise and faithful English language reconstruction of official Japanese accounts of World War II in the Pacific. Students of history and Japanese Navy survivors of that war will certainly be unanimous in appreciating the fidelity of the account, an account from which they can discuss and organize the war's strategic, tactical, as well as logistics lessons. Readers may see in the battles the influence of Mahan whose theories the Japanese Navy had evidently treasured, but they will also observe a strong recurrence of and reference to the doctrines of Sun Tzu that were popular with and ingrained into the structure and thinking of the Japanese Navy.

*Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 402pp.

Prompted by a reading of this book and because it may be of some interest to the readers of the book (and this journal), we should like to take this opportunity to introduce some of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto's fundamental concepts in the strategic decisions leading to the air attack on Pearl Harbor.

On 7 January 1941, Admiral Yamamoto left with Vice Adm. Teikichi Hori, a Naval Academy classmate, an envelope containing memos of his proposals to Adm. Koshirō Oikawa, the Navy Minister.* Attached to the envelope was a request that the envelope be kept sealed until the situation necessitated that it be opened. It was locked in the safe of the Vice Minister of the Navy, Vice Admiral Sawamoto.

On 18 May 1943, one month after Admiral Yamamoto's death in Bougainville Island, Admiral Hori opened the

*Originals held by War History Division, Defense College, Japanese Defense Agency.

84 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

envelope. He, however, sealed and locked it again in the safe and, except for opening it at one time to show it to Adm. Mineichi Koga, the successor of Admiral Yamamoto, Commander in Chief Combined Fleet, it was not opened again until 9 November 1949 when he finally released the memos to the public.

The reasons for his prudence, he wrote, were as follows:

1. During the war, curiosity concerning who might be given credit—or blame—for the Pearl Harbor assault grew strong. Admiral Hori, on behalf of Admiral Yamamoto, wanted to avoid involvement in the controversy. Furthermore, he thought it important to avoid fostering the opinion that Admiral Yamamoto had held a plan contrary to the navy's traditional ambush tactics in the West Pacific theater. He worried that that might confuse the Japanese Navy's military concepts.

2. After the end of the war, it was feared that the memos might be used to paint Admiral Yamamoto as a leading jingoist and to blame him for the surprise attack. Admiral Hori therefore thought it necessary to defer their release until public acceptability appeared more probable.

3. Various war reports and magazines began to be published as the social situation stabilized and Admiral Hori recognized that it would not be long before the documents of Admiral Yamamoto would be required as part of the historical record. To provide for this requirement he made copies of Yamamoto's memos in 1949. He did not neglect, however, to put his comments on them in order to discharge his obligation to a classmate who had entrusted him with those memoranda.*

*Admiral Hori's comments are preserved with the Yamamoto Memos in the War History Division, Defense College, Japanese Defense Agency.

The Outline of Yamamoto's Memos. Admiral Yamamoto's proposals to Admiral Oikawa are composed of five paragraphs whose essential points are summarized as follows:

1. Preparation of equipment.

The Combined Fleet has already submitted its list of required weapons and ammunition but in the event of emergency it will certainly need more, particularly aircraft, as well as manpower to handle them. Emphasis should therefore be placed on the mass management of those weapon systems.

2. Training.

Training of the fleet to date in most cases has been directed toward the tactical concept of waiting for and fighting the enemy in the West Pacific. Each component force should solve the problems of its individual mission under this basic strategy. It would not be useless, of course, to exercise in order to improve their tactical and joint operational capabilities.

Practically, however, it is not considered that decisive combined-force battles against the U.S. or U.K. Fleets will always take place, nor that the classic series of approach, deployment, gunfire and torpedo attack and then a rush by the total force will always be possible. Admiral Yamamoto believes instead that he must concentrate on separate smaller unit tactics that have been neglected in the past.

In this program, the skill level of each ship and aircraft must be fully inspected and encouraged. In 1940, the English and Italian Fleets met and fought each other for 25 minutes in the Mediterranean with no loss to either side. It was not because of their lack of fighting spirit and technical skill however, and these are elements that Japan should never underestimate.

3. Fundamental courses of action.

In the past the Japanese Navy never has won war games that required her to adopt wait-and-react tactics in the Western Pacific. The navy must avoid such an operation in an actual war.

The proper question is how to attack and thoroughly destroy the main body of the enemy fleet in the first moments of the war—annihilating the enemy's military and national morale and thus preventing it from recovering from its vital damage. With this success and a subsequent defensive posture in the Far East, Japan might be able to obtain her goals and secure the peace in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

4. Operation plan.

The Russo-Japanese War has given the Japanese Navy some good lessons on the necessity of the successful first blow. Studies have suggested that (a) the quick assault to the Russian main body by Japan was quite effective and influential to the ultimate victory; (b) night operation of the torpedo squadron, on the other hand, was not satisfactory; (c) the blockade of harbors was deficient in its planning as well as in its execution. Learning from these lessons, operations plans must be so formulated that Japan can ensure an ultimate victory by making a daring attack on the first day of war.

Under this principle, (a) operations should include an assault on Pearl Harbor first of all by the air forces, and then blockade it by submarines, (b) forces allocated for this mission should be the 1st and 2nd Air Squadrons (at least the 2nd Squadron), one torpedo squadron, one submarine squadron and several oilers; and, (c) if the enemy leaves Hawaii earlier in order to conduct a concentrated first attack on the Japanese Fleet, only then should we wait and fight them in the Western Pacific.

Following the early assault principle, enemy air forces located in the Philippines and Singapore must be caught and destroyed in concert with the above operations directed against the fleet.

If the Hawaii assault ends in large success, antagonistic forces in the West Pacific will also quickly lose their morale and durability to cope with us. Should Japan hesitate to attack Pearl Harbor, worrying about possible heavy damage to her own forces, and continue crouching in the Far East, the enemy would proceed to Japan to bomb and burn down the cities, which inevitably will cause the Japanese Navy to draw back its forces or prevent them from advancing to the South Pacific to secure oil. In this situation, we see very little hope to win the game.

5. Personnel.

Admiral Yamamoto has earnestly requested that he be the Commander in Chief of the assault forces and that the Combined Fleet be commanded by another admiral. [He in fact recommended Adm. Mitsumasa Yonai, who was the Minister of the Navy under whom Yamamoto served as Vice Minister.]

Comments by Admiral Hori. Admiral Hori's annotation on the Yamamoto memos emphasized the following points:

1. Admiral Yamamoto's views on the situation and on his responsibility: He did not want to take drastic measures against the United States. He strongly opposed the Tripartite Treaty and war against the United Kingdom and the United States. He eagerly wished for a peaceful solution to the questions between those countries and Japan.

He held a firm belief, on the other hand, that because he was the Commander in Chief Combined Fleet, he must wholeheartedly devote himself for

86 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

the sake of his nation in an emergency even if personally he did not want to fight.

2. Operational concept. He kept in his mind a different concept of strategy from that which had been esteemed to be authoritative for the past. In fact, the traditional scenario of the navy had been (a) the occupation of the Philippines; (b) to meet and fight an attrition war along the Mariana Islands against the U.S. Fleet which would be heading west for the rescue of the Philippines; (c) to concentrate Japan's Fleet for a decisive fleet war against the enemy, and annihilate them.

The lessons of the Jutland Sea battle in 1916 seemed to underlie this concept. Every naval exercise had been arranged under this hypothesis.

He believed, however, that a strategy of this sort, when accepted as a fundamental concept, is apt to become much too formal and structured for practical use. Ascribing only one course of action to a foe is in no doubt dangerous. In order to be able to wipe out enemy forces on the scene, strategic and tactical flexibility is paramount. In exercises, furthermore, inspection of all details, including the shooting techniques of the crew members, should be greatly encouraged. Training must be realistic, not make-believe.

Admiral Yamamoto, in fear of chronic dogmatism in the Navy, tried to weed it out. When he was appointed Vice Minister of the Navy in 1936, he, with the close cooperation of Vice Admiral Koga, Vice Chief of Navy General Staff, endeavored to breathe fresh air into the offices and in fact did motivate some conceptual improvement.

Their efforts continued after the two admirals transferred to the First and Second Fleets in 1939, and the situation had changed a great deal by the middle of 1940. Still, Admiral Yamamoto appears to have felt there was much room for fresh thought. As an example

of the need, at some prewar game study an officer made a comment that the U.S. Fleet might not always proceed to the Philippines for its rescue but might make a surprise thrust directly to the Japanese archipelago; that Japan should not adhere too rigidly to the campaign for the occupation of the Philippines. An instructing officer representing the General Staff Office insisted that the occupation of the Philippines was the settled program which had been developed with the cooperation of the army and that it was beyond criticism. He added that the purpose of the exercise was to unify the concept of naval operations.

3. Fundamental strategy against the United States. The Japanese people forgot to pay serious attention to the grave meaning of "staking her national destiny." We should not have staked our national destiny on such ideals as "New Order of the Orient" or "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." Such slogans must not be used except in case of legal self-defense. [sic!]

The war against the United States was such a decisive one that Japan was really required to stake her destiny. It would not have been difficult, however, for those who had studied world history from the viewpoint of national power, to predict the consequence of the war. There were incomparable differences between the two countries with respect to the national resources, economic power, industrial capabilities, etc. In particular, U.S. air power was overwhelmingly greater in quantity, quality, and destructive capability when compared with that of Japan.

Admiral Yamamoto had well known the difficulty of war against the United States. What he really meant when he proposed the air raid on Pearl Harbor was that if Japan conceived the war to be unavoidable, the Navy must attack Hawaii; if that attack was impossible, the war must be given up. Sneaking deception was no part of the basis of his

military plan. His assault plan reads, "We will make a storming assault (or a surprising attack) against the enemy in the moonlight or dawn." It meant that he had planned a storming assault but if he were lucky enough, he would also have the advantage of surprise. This was why he sincerely wanted to command the expeditionary forces to accomplish his aim by himself.

The Navy General Staff Office did not initially agree with the Pearl Harbor attack plan because of its risky feasibility. Adm. Osami Nagano, the Chief of the Naval General Staff did, however, eventually approve it and allocated six aircraft carriers for the operation. But the Navy Minister did not accept Admiral Yamamoto's request to be the Commander in Chief of the attack forces, and Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo commanded them.

The key problem for the Japanese Navy to solve was how to take a gigantic task force, in secret, to far away Pearl Harbor. It was not an easy task, even for a skilled navy, but Admirals Yamamoto and Nagumo did it well.

The air assault on Pearl Harbor concentrated on ships and aircraft and only incidentally damaged such facilities as repair shops, dockyards, oil tanks, etc., a fact with which Admiral Yamamoto utterly was dissatisfied. Those surviving facilities greatly contributed to the quick recovery from the damage.

There will be another charge, Admiral Hori remarks, that if Admiral Yamamoto opposed the war against the United States and the United Kingdom, he should have rejected any directives, even the Emperor's order, to open fire.

Frankly, however, military forces exist in order to discharge their duty when directed. Military men, particularly Japanese, must not resign for personal reasons once they have received the supreme order. Such is their identity. Admiral Yamamoto in fact left a *waka* which says, "Though I face hundreds of thousands of adversaries, I

will resolutely go to battle, taking an oath of allegiance to our Emperor." Another says, "What does the world think? I do not care nor for my life for I am the sword of my Emperor."

Admiral Hori added, in closing his comments, that he did not wish to exaggerate nor distort the partial facts in pleading Admiral Yamamoto's "case." He earnestly wished instead that the readers of Admiral Yamamoto's memos would be able to understand better what those memos were intended to explain.

It is interesting that a rumor of the Pearl Harbor attack was given to the U.S. Ambassador by a Peruvian diplomat shortly after Admiral Yamamoto briefed his plan to Admiral Oikawa. On 27 January 1941 the Ambassador reported to the Secretary of State:

My Peruvian colleague told a member of my staff that he had heard from many sources including a Japanese source that the Japanese military forces planned, in the event of trouble with the U.S., to attempt a surprise mass attack on Pearl Harbor using all of their military facilities.*

He added that although the project seemed fantastic the fact that he had heard it from many sources prompted him to pass on the information.

It is further quite interesting that although the rumor was rather popular, it was considered fantastic by people at that time. It certainly was a blind spot although the attack idea was not really new among the naval officers.

While Admiral Yamamoto was the force behind the preparation of the assault plan, the concept did not originate with him. The same tactics are discussed in a 1936 draft paper by an instructor at the Japanese Naval War

**Foreign Relations of the U.S., 1941, Vol. 4, "The Far East," p. 17.*

88 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

College.* In addition to that, on 7 February 1932, U.S. Admiral Yarnell conducted an exercise attack on Pearl Harbor, 30 minutes before sunrise, by 152 aircraft launched from U.S.S. *Saratoga* and *Lexington*. That exercise attack ended up in a great success for the "attackers."**

Not everyone agrees with Admiral Hori that Yamamoto's plan was best in the given circumstance. Some argue that the method and location of the attack gave the U.S. Government a rallying point around which public opinion, heretofore fragmented, could be unified. The critics also maintain that Admiral Yamamoto's plan centered on the decisive fleet battle, a concept whose possible adverse results were quite contrary to affording the protracted war.

These last opinions have, of course, logical inconsistencies. First, Admiral Yamamoto's view was that in order to obtain oil Japan had no choice but to go to the Netherlands East Indies. To do so

they must, first of all, clear both sides of the route to the south, which meant the occupation of the Philippines as well as of Singapore. As this course of action and the resulting war declarations against the United States and the United Kingdom were unavoidable, their public opinion toward Japan could no longer be considered vital to Japan. Second, the attack on Pearl Harbor was not an example of a decisive fleet battle but rather was a graduated measure based on the doctrine of offensive tactics in a defensive strategy in an effort to permit the endurance of a protracted war.

How a war is fought will, in the end, rest upon the leader's perspective and personality. The Pearl Harbor assault could never be guaranteed as the only or best solution of Japan's then contemporary grand strategy. The wait-and-react strategy in the Far East theater which had long been cherished by the Navy might have been more trustworthy, had solution of its defects been accomplished.

What is most important is not to force the matter into a single answer. An inquiring attitude is most requisite in order to reap a rich and substantial harvest of the study of the Pearl Harbor assault.

*Original held by War History Division, Defense College, Japanese Defense Agency.

**Noboru Kojima, *8th December 1941* (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1962).