

An Ever-Present and Highly Disturbing Worry

By Mr. Robert Hiatt

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941, their intent was to destroy the U.S. Pacific fleet in harbor so that it could not interfere with Japanese advances through the South Pacific during World War II. In addition, U.S. Navy aircraft carriers that were at sea were also to be destroyed. Although many in the Japanese navy disagreed, battleships were widely considered the “king of the sea” at that time and aircraft carriers, mere supporting arms. Even the results of the attack on Pearl Harbor had failed to convince the battleship faction that the aircraft carrier might be “king.” So, with U.S. carriers still at sea, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, commander in chief of the 1st Air Fleet—thinking that the carriers could be involved in training exercises south of Oahu—concluded that the first strike had inflicted the anticipated damage, the element of surprise was gone, and the whereabouts of enemy submarines was unknown. He also decided that remaining in the attack range of land-based planes was too risky. Therefore, he ordered the task force to head for the inland sea in Japan without destroying the U.S. aircraft carriers, thus leaving the mission incomplete and canceling a second strike on Pearl Harbor.¹



Vice Admiral
Chuichi Nagumo

At dawn on 18 April 1942, sixteen B-25 Mitchell bombers took to the air from the U.S. Ship (USS) Hornet, at sea more than 600 miles. Their target was the Japanese homeland. The damage that could be inflicted on the Japanese war effort by the B-25s was minimal; however, the main purpose of the Doolittle Raid² was to answer Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor by giving the Japanese a taste of their own medicine.

As the B-25 crew members sped toward Japan, they must have wondered about their own odds for success and whether the Japanese knew about the raid. (They had been informed that their chance of survival was 50 percent.) Their targets consisted of various cities; the most important was Tokyo, since it was the capital of the Japanese empire and, more importantly, the location of the emperor’s residence. In the end, the successful raid deeply embarrassed the Japanese high command. Worse yet, it put the emperor at risk, which was an even more serious breach of the Japanese code of honor.³



B-25s aboard the USS Hornet, en route to Japan,
April 1942

Americans cheered at the radio broadcasts indicating that Tokyo had been bombed. At last, there was some good news about the war—and some payback to boot. But was the attack a surprise, as it was made out to be in the West? Or did Japan know of the Doolittle Raid in advance?

When asked about the raid and where the planes had originated, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt answered, “from a secret base in Shangri-La.” And the American people believed this story until after the war. But did the Japanese believe it? Or did they already know where the bombers had come from?

The historical record indicates that the Japanese were well aware of the threat that American aircraft posed to their mainland. On 26 December 1941, Rear Admiral Matome Ugaki (chief of staff of the

Japanese Combined Fleet) wrote, “Tokyo should be protected from air raids; this is the most important thing to be borne in mind.” And he was not alone. Captain Yoshitake Miwa, a Combined Fleet air officer, did not necessarily consider the possibility of an enemy air raid on Tokyo to be a big problem, but he believed that such a raid must be avoided at all cost. The consensus was that there were only two places from which a raid could originate—in China and aboard aircraft carriers—and aircraft carriers were the most likely points of origin.⁴

So, the Japanese were at least thinking about an attack originating from the sea. In fact, it seems that some even expected it. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of Japan’s Combined Fleet, supposed that the surprise carrier strike on Pearl Harbor had set an example that the Americans might follow; and he felt that the retaliatory strike would come at the earliest possible moment. He went so far as to characterize the American carriers as “an ever-present and highly disturbing worry.” With the weight of this suspicion on his mind most of the time, he diligently monitored the weather reports and was relieved when there was bad weather to the east. He figured that clear weather would be needed to launch a carrier strike and recover the aircraft involved in the raid.

But Yamamoto had been concerned about the threat of an aircraft carrier strike even before the attack on Pearl Harbor. At the start of the war, he had established a picket line 600–700 miles east of Japan, covering a front of nearly 1,000 miles from north to south. In addition, he also sent daily, long-range air patrols by naval aircraft.

Therefore, based on historical evidence, a raid by enemy aircraft carriers would not have been a great surprise to the Japanese. In fact, it would almost have been considered welcome if it led to the destruction of the attacking carriers.⁵

Yet, the Japanese apparently missed several significant clues related to the impending attack. On 3 February 1942, two B-25s were loaded onto the flight deck of the USS Hornet in Norfolk, Virginia. The planes were then moved to the end of the flight deck and spotted for what appeared to be takeoff positions. Later, when the ship returned to port, the planes were gone. Admittedly, it would have been difficult for the Japanese to determine the purpose of these planes had they been aware of the event. (The planes could have simply been loaded onboard for transport to another port.) But, the two planes had actually been placed onboard to confirm that B-25s could, indeed, take off from a carrier deck—which they did. Then, they flew to a land base. A little research would have revealed that the ship did not make port at any other location, begging the question, “What happened to the planes?” Neither the Germans nor the Japanese, who surely must have had spies monitoring the port, appeared to be aware of this event.⁶

Additionally, sixteen B-25s were later moved from the Naval Air Station Alameda, Alameda, California, to the pier and loaded onboard the USS Hornet. As before, Japanese spies could have mistakenly assumed that the planes were simply being transported to Hawaii or some other location. However, it was virtually impossible to hide the fact that there were Army bombers onboard the carrier as it sat anchored in San Francisco Bay ready to go to sea. Yet, again, there is no evidence that Japan was even aware of the event.⁷

But, American carriers began conducting raids in the Republic of the Marshall Islands in February 1942. The raids grew in frequency and intensity to the point that an attack on the Japanese homeland seemed inevitable. With this worry on his mind, Yamamoto ordered the carriers Zuikaku and Shokaku to Japanese waters to reinforce the defensive belt around the home island. The 26th Air Flotilla assumed this mission in April, and the two carriers became available for other operations.

A 4 March 1942 U.S. carrier strike on Marcus Island (the easternmost Japanese territory), led by Vice Admiral William Frederick Halsey Jr., took place just 1,000 miles from Tokyo and inside the outer ring of Japanese defenses. Japanese military intelligence must have realized that the American carriers were “testing the waters” to determine the strength of Japan’s outer defenses. No one knew how well the inner defenses would fare in an attack, but it seemed that a good system was in place if an attack occurred.⁸



**Rear Admiral
Matome Ugaki**



Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto



**Vice Admiral
William F. Halsey Jr.**

The Japanese Combined Fleet and Navy General Staff wondered what to do about the American fleet—the carriers, in particular. The Japanese had always planned to defeat the Americans in the open sea, far away from their bases. But, the Japanese needed to devise a way to get the American fleet to come out and meet them in a surface battle. A proposal was made to attack Midway Island (near the northwest end of the Hawaiian archipelago) and force the American fleet from its base in Hawaii. Yet, not all were onboard with this plan. The Combined Fleet and Naval General Staff were at odds on the direction the offensive should take. The issue dividing the group was whether the offensive should continue south (as it had been) or head west toward Midway Island. There seemed no way to break the deadlock, short of Admiral Yamamoto issuing a direct order.

In the meantime, not all was missed by the Japanese. A radio intercept station located on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands began picking up an unusual amount of radio traffic, with the first intercept (a conversation between Vice Admiral Halsey and Captain Marc A. Mitscher, skipper of the USS Hornet) coming on 10 April. With the information gleaned from the intercept, Ugaki made some assessments about the American force. He surmised that the force was headed for Japan and would arrive no sooner than 14 April. Plans were made to muster a force to meet the oncoming threat. The 26th Air Flotilla was called upon to back up the home defenses already in place, adding 69 bombing and scouting planes to the defense. The first bombing attack against the Americans was to be launched when their forces reached a point 600 miles from shore.⁹



General Hideki Tojo

But here, the fog of war took over. No more intercepts were made. And when 14 April came and went with no reported sightings, the Japanese began to wonder if the Americans were headed elsewhere—or if they had turned back. However, General Hideki Tojo (the Japanese prime minister) was still convinced that the threat of a raid by carrier aircraft was real and pressing and that Tokyo would be the target. He demanded that the highest level of vigilance be maintained.¹⁰

The picture became clearer for the Japanese on the morning of 18 April, when the guard boat 23 Nitto Maru, on its post in the picket patrol line some 720 miles east of Tokyo, spotted American carriers steaming westward. The headquarters of Japan's Combined Fleet was notified at 0630. Due to unusual enemy radio traffic during the previous several days, the Combined Fleet had already sent a concentration of naval air strength to the Kanto District around the capital.¹¹

Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo was ordered to send his 2d Fleet to sea and to take command of all available surface units in Yokosuka. His mission was to seek out and destroy the American fleet as soon as possible. In addition, Vice Admiral Takasu Shiro's 1st Fleet was ordered from Hiroshima Bay to support Kondo's force. Nagumo's carrier force, which was returning to Japan, began plotting a course to the battle area to support the other two elements en route. Although Nagumo had little chance of making it back to join the battle, he would try.¹²



**Lieutenant Colonel
James H. Doolittle**

The discovery of his force by the 23 Nitto Maru compelled Vice Admiral Halsey to order Captain Mitscher's Hornet to launch Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle's B-25 raiders earlier than planned, which was also earlier than the Japanese expected.¹³ The planes flew low over the water to reach their targets, one of which was Tokyo. After the bombs were dropped, the pilots attempted to escape, as the rule was "every plane for itself." Admiral Yamamoto's statement describing American carriers as "an ever-present and highly disturbing worry" was accurate.

Were the Japanese taken by complete surprise by the Doolittle Raid, as I was informed as a kid growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s? No. But, were there aspects of the attack that the Japanese did not expect? Yes. Did the Japanese believe that the raiders launched from a secret base called Shangri-La? Not for a moment! They knew that the launch took place from carriers, and they even knew the names of the carriers. They knew that the raiders were coming, and they had a good idea of how—they just weren't sure when. Such is the way things are in the confusion that is war.

Endnotes:

¹Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan; The Japanese Navy's Story*, U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, June 1955.

²The Doolittle Raid was the first U.S. air raid on the Japanese homeland during World War II. The raid was planned and led by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle.

³*Doolittle Raid on Japan, 18 April 1942*, Naval History and Heritage Command online library, <<http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/events/wwii-pac/misc-42/doolitl.htm>>, 11 March 2001, accessed on 12 January 2010.

⁴Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstine, and Katherine V. Dillon, *Miracle at Midway*, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, New York, 1982.

⁵Fuchida and Okumiya, 1955.

⁶Carroll V. Glines, *The Doolittle Raid: America's Daring First Strike Against Japan*, Orion Books, New York, New York, 1988.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Fuchida and Okumiya, 1955.

⁹Glines, 1988.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Bob Hackett and Sander Kingsepp, "Ijn Awata Maru: Tabular Record of Movement," *Tokusetsu Junyokan!* 1998–2008, <http://www.combinedfleet.com/Awata_t.htm>, accessed on 13 January 2010.

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Lieutenant Colonel Doolittle (front left) and his "raiders"