

The following scholarly essay examines the Japanese military attack on the US Pacific naval base Pearl Harbor in December 1941 in terms of investigating to what extent the military commanders of Pearl Harbor had been warned of the forthcoming assault beforehand. This essay had been designed as an IB History Internal Assessment (18/20); it was abridged and slightly revised for publication on the Internet.

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## **The Japanese air raid on the US naval base Pearl Harbor in 1941 - To what extent were the commanding authorities of Pearl Harbor informed about the attack prior to its happening?**



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## **Plan of the Investigation**

This investigation will try to answer the following question: *To what extent were the commanding authorities of the US naval base Pearl Harbor (particularly LTG Short and ADM Kimmel)<sup>1</sup> informed about the forthcoming Japanese air raid on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 prior to its happening?*

Using a variety of secondary sources it will evaluate whether the attack really took the US authorities by such surprise as it was invariably claimed in its aftermath. Whereas many revisionist historians have brought up evidence that Roosevelt and the US government were directly involved in what the former believe to be a mere farce, this investigation will in greater depth examine the extent to which the immediate commanders of Pearl Harbor had been informed beforehand.

## Summary of Evidence

### Chronology of events before 1941:

**1932** Admiral Yarnell develops the naval “task force”<sup>2</sup>

### Chronology of events preceding the attack in 1941:

**spring** Japanese training for Pearl Harbor attack starts<sup>3</sup>

**01.11.** US military intelligence loses track of Japanese fleet<sup>4</sup>

**26.11.** Admiral Nagumo’s *First Air Fleet*<sup>5</sup> leaves the Kuriles and heads for Pearl Harbor

**27.11.** General Marshall and Admiral Stark<sup>6</sup> send warnings to Pacific naval bases<sup>7</sup>, General Short and Admiral Kimmel issue sabotage alert<sup>8</sup>

**03.12.** From this date on, units from a combined arms team led by Vice Admiral Halsey sighted unknown military units not too remote from Pearl Harbor, but not a single report was given to Pearl Harbor<sup>9</sup>

**04./05.12.** Modern warships commanded to leave Pearl Harbor - among others, carriers *Lexington*, *Enterprise*, *Saratoga*, heavy cruisers *Minneapolis*, *Indianapolis* are not in Pearl Harbor on 07.12.1941, all 95 remaining ships are veterans, built in World War I

**06.12.** Battleship *Oklahoma* prepared for an inspection scheduled for the following day<sup>10</sup>

Off-duty evening for most military personnel - very low preparedness for an attack, mobilisation slow

### Chronology of events before, during and after the attack on 07.12.1941:

**03:30**<sup>11</sup> Colonel Bratton<sup>12</sup> receives 14 decoded points of a Japanese memorandum intercepted by Magic<sup>13</sup> which makes clear the immediate war threat by Japan but doesn’t reveal the place of action<sup>14</sup>

**03:42** Minesweeper *Condor* discovers the periscope of a submarine 3 kilometers remote from the harbor, coast guard is informed and 3:57 destroyer „Ward” starts to search for the intruder - at 5:00 search is terminated and no alarm is given out

**06:00** Colonel Bratton hands the decoded memorandum - virtually a war declaration - to General Marshall - in accordance with Admiral Stark reluctant measures to alarm the Pacific bases are taken half an hour later

**06:20** 183 Japanese air planes leave the carriers and head for Pearl Harbor - start of the first attack wave

**06:30** Supply ship *Antares* discovers another submarine close to the harbor, destroyer *Ward* immediately alarmed, sinks the sub

**06:53** *Ward* reports to Admiral Kimmel’s staff. Uncertainty however causes the Admiral not to trigger alert phase 3 (i.e. immediate fighting trim) and no further measures are taken.

**07:02** Privates Joseph L. Lockard and George E. Elliott in the mobile Opana radar station discover a great number of air planes 212 km NE; 07:20 Lockard reports to head quarter - Lieutenant Tyler rejects Lockard’s worries and assumes that he detected an expected squadron of B-17 bombers supposed to arrive in Pearl Harbor from California that day - no alarm given to the authorities<sup>15</sup>

**07:15** Second Japanese attack wave with 159 planes started, 39 planes remain on carriers as guards

**07:33** A vague warning by General Marshall (not submitted by phone but by much slower telex) arrives at Pearl Harbor. Since it carries no sign of urgency, it doesn’t reach General Short until 15:00

**07:51** Japanese attack begins with first attack wave, shooting finishes at 08:25

**08:40** Second attack wave arrives, bombardment finishes at 9:45

**later** Several hours after the attack, when the alarm had arrived in Washington and the other Pacific bases, 6 reconnaissance planes and 18 reconnaissance bombers sent to Pearl Harbor from the carrier *Enterprise* were shelled, believing that they were Japanese. US planes searching for the Japanese fleet unit accidentally bombarded the US cruiser *Portland*.

## Analysis

The Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbor was a turning point in history. Performed in order to slay the “sleeping giant”<sup>16</sup>, it merely awakened him and many historians claim it to have been decisive in World War II. The Japanese commanders clearly knew the danger - as Admiral Yamamoto<sup>17</sup> recognized, a war against America would have to be won within half a year, otherwise it would invariably be lost. And indeed, exactly 6 months later, on 06.06.1942, the Japanese fleet was destroyed by the US in the battle of Midway - yet another turning point in history since this decisive victory marked the end of Japanese predomination in the Pacific and - together with the German enclosure at Stalingrad the same year - the definite turning point of World War II.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor the US congress put to work eight different commissions<sup>18</sup>, which turned up with different results respectively. The search for the ultimately guilty ones in the command hierarchy of the US military forces brought to the light very different material which opened up completely new perspectives.

While in the beginning the immediate authorities Short and Kimmel were accused of dereliction of duty and forced to resign, later commissions also revealed conscious aggressiveness in the US' foreign policy designed specifically to provoke Japan into committing war acts suited to declare the US war entry. Revisionist historians started blaming Roosevelt and his government and much evidence supported the new theory that a farce had been set up in order to compensate the failure of the New Deal with a flourishing armaments industry. It soon became evident that by secret treaties<sup>19</sup> and a hidden war policy the government had manipulated the relations to Japan in a way which could only be solved by open hostility and so the attack by no means took the government by surprise.

This investigation deals with the immediate authorities for whom the surprise was indeed a complete one. Neither Kimmel nor Short had been appropriately informed even when it was clear that Japan would take aggressive measures. The general staff which was responsible for informing and supervising individual bases and commanders completely failed its tasks and Stark as well as Marshall later openly admitted the deliberate blockade of information created to leave the Pearl Harbor authorities in absolute ignorance.

It is clear how complete the surprise was when one looks at the extraordinary damage and the immense chaos aroused by the attack. A complete squadron of B17-bombers<sup>20</sup> was destroyed, the vast majority of air planes stationed on Oahu was annihilated while standing outside the hangars (as a condition of sabotage alert), 11 ships were sunk or destroyed, 2349 American soldiers died as compared to 100 Japanese. Even worse was the chaos following the attack: US units attacked their own planes and ships believing them to be Japanese, thousands of US citizens with Japanese origins were lynched, arrested or penalized<sup>21</sup>.

However neither Short nor Kimmel can solely blame their superiors. There had been evidence of the coming attack in Pearl Harbor that, had it been interpreted correctly, could have prevented the worst. When the first mini-submarine was sighted near the harbor, it was about 4 hours time until the attack would start - just enough time to mobilise all ships and planes and certainly enough to ambush the Japanese units. Even after sinking the second sighted sub, time would have been enough to at least get the AA (anti-aircraft) artillery equipped<sup>22</sup> and ready. However no measures were taken which suggests that naivety and sloppiness of the Pearl Harbor commanders also played an important role in the assault. On the other hand, a certain naivety can be conceived and justified by the fact that both commanders relied on their superiors (as the military code expects) and, lacking warnings or alarming messages, assumed being in safe keeping.

## Conclusion

In this investigation I examined the question, to what extent the Pearl Harbor military authorities had been informed about the Japanese attack beforehand. As a result of this examination it became clear that the commanders in Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant General Short and Admiral Kimmel, had been kept almost completely ignorant of the possible Japanese threat by their superiors. The assault took both commanders completely by surprise since, although evidence for suspect activities near Pearl Harbor had come up, it was absolutely not within the range of imagination of the Pearl Harbor commanders, that a Japanese air fleet could attempt an attack on the “pride of the US navy”. Several paradoxical, almost ridiculous, coincidences aided the Japanese raid but also some very ominous measures that, considered in the light of revisionist historical investigations, cast a shadow much longer than that of two naval base commanders - a shadow up into the highest quarters that will probably never be illuminated completely.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> LTG is the official military abbreviation for Lieutenant General, ADM the respective one for admiral. Sources disagree about Short's actual rank in 1941 - some state him as Major General, but the majority agrees on him being Lieutenant General (1 rank higher). Kimmel was an actual Rear Admiral (2 ranks below Admiral), but due to his temporary post as commander-in-chief of the US Pacific fleet he was recorded as an Admiral in 1941.
- <sup>2</sup> This development was of great significance for the Japanese attack 9 years later. Admiral Harry E. Yarnell, a navy officer keen on strategic aviation, revolutionized military strategy in a manoeuvre performed in 1932 by developing a new kind of naval unit. Instead of using mainly war ships (as had been common practice before), he only employed carriers, some destroyers guarding them and fighter planes in a simulated attack on Pearl Harbor. This kind of unit (which became known and used later as "task force") completely succeeded in the pretended attack (all ships sunk and all planes destroyed) and for the first time presented the authorities with the vulnerability of Pearl Harbor. Even the strategy of attacking the drowsy base on a Sunday morning (like the Japanese employed it on Sunday, the 07.12.1941) was developed by Yarnell. Japanese observers had closely watched this manoeuvre and drawn important conclusions and tactical ideas from it. On the US' side however the manoeuvre created a power struggle between Navy and Air Force which didn't bring forth any productive changes in the structure of the US military forces and ended with the rather conservative admirals winning the struggle and sustaining the old concept. (see Morgenstern, 47f.)
- <sup>3</sup> In the Kagoshima bay, which offered conditions similar to those in Pearl Harbor (especially shallow water which required the development of special sub-surface torpedoes), the Japanese pilots trained the attack months beforehand without the US authorities noticing such preparations. (see Thürk, 22)
- <sup>4</sup> One month earlier than usual (every 6 months) the Japanese fleet changed its radio codes. In the subsequent time radio communication was minimised and when the ships determined to head for Pearl Harbor left for the Kuriles, their meeting place, absolute radio silence was issued and maintained so that finally the US military intelligence lost track of the Japanese ships. To complete the American confusion, the Japanese fleet had left its radio operators behind. They continued submitting, thereby making the American intelligence services believe that the fleet were still around Japan. (see Thürk, 27)
- <sup>5</sup> Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo was the commander of the fleet heading for Pearl Harbor in 1941. The *First Air Fleet* consisted of 27 war ships (6 carriers, 21 guarding the carriers) and 11 suppliers. It was supported by the *Sixth Fleet* of Vice Admiral Mitsumi Shimizu, which contained 3 cruisers, 20 submarines, 6 suppliers and 5 newly developed mini-submarines (45t) which however couldn't bring about the expected strategic advantage. (see Morgenstern, 46)
- <sup>6</sup> In 1941, General George C. Marshall was Chief of staff in the US army, Admiral Harold R. Stark Chief of staff in the navy.
- <sup>7</sup> Marshall's warning, telegram „No. 472", was actually written by the US War Secretary Henry L. Stimson, but Short received it from Marshall himself. It was an uttermost vague, almost ambiguous warning which stated that Japan could possibly commit hostile actions in the Pacific region. Defence preparations should however be very subtle and so alert phase 1 ("against sabotage") was the only appropriate possibility in order not to alarm civilians on Oahu. See the appendix, chapter "Ambiguous Warnings" for the original text of it and a similar warning addressed to Kimmel by Stark.
- <sup>8</sup> Sabotage alert includes the arrangement of planes outside their hangars in parallel lines. This makes it very difficult for saboteurs to manipulate the machines, but turned out to be fatal since in the attack US planes became an easy target for Japanese attack planes. Sabotage alert

did not include measures like putting up anti-torpedo nets which would have been imperatively necessary in the case of an expected torpedo attack. (*see PH time line*)

<sup>9</sup> Vice Admiral William F. Halsey commanded a combined arms team (with the carrier *Enterprise* as its flagship) that had left Pearl Harbor on 28.11. in order to transfer several fighter planes to Wake Island. Since the order was secret, absolute radio silence had to be maintained throughout the mission. When the team returned to Pearl Harbor, the *Enterprise* sent out reconnaissance planes. One of those, steered by Ensign John H.L. Vogt, discovered a unidentified fleet below his plane, but he had to return due to a scarcity of fuel. Since not even Vogt himself was sure of his discovery, his observation was ignored. In the evening of 06.12., the air plane tender *Wright* (also in Halsey's team) discovered an unidentified obscured ship ('obscured' meaning no light aboard), tried to contact it several times, but soon lost sight of it. The radio silence forbid any report to the *Enterprise* so this evidence also was ignored. The last confrontation of one of Halsey's unit with an unidentified ship ended deadly. When the *Enterprise* was only about 320 km distant from Pearl Harbor, its planes started heading for Pearl Harbor. The pilot of one of those planes, Ensign Manuel Gonzalez, was soon heard yelling through radio "Stop shooting! That's an American plane!", but was shot down anyway. However still no report was given to Pearl Harbor. (*see Morgenstern*, 58ff.)

<sup>10</sup> The *Oklahoma* was scheduled for an inspection on 07.12.1941, which meant 1. it was moved out of its strategic position into one which was an easy target the next day for the Japanese and 2. all hatches had been opened which was fatally aiding the ship's sinking the next day. (*see EuroVideo*)

<sup>11</sup> The time used is PHT (Pearl Harbor Time), which in 1941 had a difference of +05:30 to Washington

<sup>12</sup> Colonel Rufus S. Bratton was head of the „East Asia“ department in the Army's Intelligence Service in 1941

<sup>13</sup> "Magic" was a secret project of the military intelligence that aimed at decoding the Japanese codes. It completely succeeded in doing so and therefore the US authorities could intercept almost any intercontinental messages (between Tokyo and the ambassadors in Hawaii, Washington and elsewhere) as well as decode most of the radio traffic within the Japanese navy. That's why it is very dubious, whether the US were really so ignorant of the Japanese intentions as the authorities claimed later. There is clear evidence that at least Roosevelt and his government (in particular War Secretary Stimson whose diaries were published after the war, revealing extremely startling facts about Roosevelt's policy) knew well about the Japanese intentions in the Pacific long before the Pearl Harbor attack (*see Morgenstern*, ch.12 and *Herde*, ch.5).

<sup>14</sup> There was a strong hint however: The memorandum contained a paragraph stating that it should be handed over to US authorities in Washington by the Japanese ambassador exactly at 13:00 Washington Time. This suggested that hostile acts would begin soon afterwards. Yet since 13:00 Washington Time equals 2:00 Philippine Time it was very unlikely that these hostile acts should be committed in the Philippine region. As opposed to the Philippine Time, the respective PHT (7:30) was almost ideal for an attack, so it was very likely the US authorities could guess the target of the Japanese attack quite precisely beforehand. (*see Herde*, 361)

<sup>15</sup> This can be seen as an extraordinary coincidence of misunderstandings and paradoxical accidents. For the first, the radar system on Pearl Harbor was very recent and inefficient. General Short had asked for modern radar devices since March 1941, but wasn't supplied with any radar until August 1941. The material delivered was quite old and incomplete, so that in December 1941 no more than 5 radar stations were active on Oahu, handled mostly by unskilled and insufficiently trained soldiers. Apart from the fact that the radar was only in use for three hours a day (04:00-07:00), it often broke or had technical problems, so it was easy and almost logical to reject the impulse of the Opana radar as a technical error. Secondly, at

- exactly the time when Lockard received the impulse, most officers of the air surveillance centre were having breakfast and only Lieutenant Kermit A. Tyler, an inexperienced young officer who didn't really know what to do in such situations, was on duty. (see Schneider, 84f.)
- <sup>16</sup> This is a metaphor often used for the USA, since the predominant Isolationists spoke up against an American participation in World War II. The war entry of the economical "giant" USA was recognized to be decisive (on either side) which proved to be true within several months after Pearl Harbor.
- <sup>17</sup> Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was commander-in-chief of the Japanese Fleet from 1939 on. He had studied in Harvard, became Marine-Attaché in Washington and finally ordered the preparation and realisation of an air attack on Pearl Harbor in early 1941 in order to free Japan from the oil embargo imposed by the US (with an ultimatum for Japan to withdraw all troops from the Pacific region and end hostile actions against western protectorates) and gain access to the resources as well as strategic key points occupied by the British and American forces in the Pacific. (see Schneider, 76f.)
- <sup>18</sup> Following commissions were set to work in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor: *Roberts-Commission* (under judge Owen J. Roberts) - 18.12.1941-23.01.1942; *Hart-Commission* (under ADM Thomas C. Hart) - 12.02.1944-15.06.1944; between June and October 1944: *Army Pearl Harbor Board* (under LTG George Grunert); *Navy Court of Inquiry* (under ADM Orin C. Martin); *special inquiry under Colonel Carter W. Clarke*; *investigations under Major Henry C. Clausen and Admiral H. Ken Hewitt*; "*Joint Committee of the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*" (10 congress members under senator Alben W. Barkley - 6 Democrats, 4 Republicans) - 15.11.1945-31.05.1946. (see Morgenstern, 15ff.)
- <sup>19</sup> Probably the most important secret treaty Roosevelt's government signed was the ABCD treaty. This was an American-British-Chinese-Dutch settlement which obliged the USA to enter the war in case 1. Japan should attack American, British or Dutch territory or 2. Japanese forces pass one of several specified lines in the Pacific and thereby threaten the territory of these countries. And indeed, on 06.12.1941 a Japanese fleet crossed one of the specified lines which means that already by the evening of 06.12.1941 America had been in war with Japan. (see Morgenstern, 17f.)
- <sup>20</sup> This squadron of 12 B-17 bombers type „Flying Fortress" should be moved from Hamilton Field (San Francisco, California) to Pearl Harbor. The planes had no weapons whatsoever aboard since those were yet to be mounted to them in Pearl Harbor. The bombers arrived at exactly the time of the first Japanese attack wave and were exhilarated right away. Scarcely any of the unarmed "Fortresses" could land or survived the attack otherwise. Had they been armed however, they could have done serious harm to the Japanese fleet (especially the carriers) - another paradoxical accident which supported the Japanese efforts. (see Thürk, ch. 13)
- <sup>21</sup> Another interesting sign of chaos presented itself on Honolulu, the main island of Hawaii (not far away from Oahu): Out of 40 grenade detonations within the area of Honolulu-Town only one was caused by a Japanese plane. All other 39 grenades had been fired by US soldiers. In the panic of assault, they had accidentally used grenades with percussion fuse that didn't explode until they returned to the ground again. (see Thürk, 112)
- <sup>22</sup> This was another problem in the immediate mobilisation of troops: The AA guns had not been equipped with ammunition, partly because of the sabotage alert, partly because the shells shouldn't get dirty. So when the raid began, it took soldiers another 20 minutes until the first battery started firing. Within an hour after the first bombs had dropped, four AA batteries were active, but the other 28 stationed on Oahu ominously remained silent during the attack. It took six hours to supply all 60 mobile AA guns with ammunition and so resistance to the Japanese was inconceivably small - only 29 Japanese planes were brought down. (see Morgenstern, 109f.)

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## Appendix

### Ambiguous Warnings

On 27.11.1941 Admiral Stark sent the following „War Warning” to Kimmel:

„Consider this telegram as a war warning. Negotiations with Japan, which aimed at stabilising relations in the Pacific, are terminated. Japan is expected to commit an aggressive offensive within the next days. Number and equipment of the Japanese troops and the arrangement of their naval forces indicate an amphibian enterprise, either against the Philippines or the peninsula Kra, possibly Borneo. You will deploy a defensive in preparation for accomplishing your tasks according to WPL 46 [War Plan 46 of the US Navy, HH]. Guam, Samoa and the continental districts have been ordered to take appropriate measures against sabotage. A warning of similar content will be send to you by the War Ministry. Inform the marine district and the authorities of the Army. Britain will be informed.”

General Short received a similar warning written by Stimson, sent by Marshall on the same day: „No. 472. Negotiations with the Japanese seem to have actually ended. It is quite improbable that the Japanese government bethinks itself and offers further negotiations. The further Japanese behavior is not foreseeable, but hostile actions are possible at any instant. If hostilities cannot, I repeat: cannot, be avoided, it is the desire of the United States to let Japan take the first offensive step. This policy should not, I repeat: not, be interpreted as a restriction of your discretion that could threaten your defense. Prior to Japanese war acts you are ordered to take appropriate measures of reconnaissance and alike as you see fit, but these measures shall be taken in a way to neither alarm the civilian population nor reveal our intention.“

Both messages suggest that Pearl Harbor was not at all expected to be target of Japanese aggression and neither indicates to Kimmel or Short specific endangerment which would require any extraordinary measures. The only defense measure demanded by both warnings is alert against sabotage, which should turn out to be fatal for US air planes during the raid.

Both texts are quoted in Morgenstern, ch. 17, pg. 258f. and have been translated by the author of this investigation.