



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— WWII —

Japanese Intelligence for the Attack on Pearl Harbor

by Peter C. Oleson

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 caught America and the Army and Navy commanders in Hawaii by surprise. The Japanese had prepared carefully for a long time for the attack. Their intelligence was good; America's was not.¹

International Situation

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, a resource-rich area of China, and created the puppet state of Manchukuo. In the face of Western criticism of its actions and atrocities, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations. Relations with the United States, with which Japan had been a major trading partner, deteriorated after the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. By 1941 the US had embargoed machine tools and scrap metal, seized Japanese assets, closed American ports to Japanese ships, and subsequently in July stopped petroleum exports to Japan. Previously Japan had received 85% of its petroleum from US sources.²

Japanese Espionage Against the United States

By 1934, Japan had instituted an aggressive espionage campaign against the US. Japanese spy rings were already active on the West Coast of the United States and in Hawaii. In 1935 Navy cryptanalysts, which had broken some Japanese codes, including the naval attaché code, “discovered two spies – Harry

Thompson, a clerk in the Navy Department, and John Semer Fransworth, a former Lt. Commander.”³

Harry Thompson was a former Navy Yeoman. Recruited in 1934 by Lt. Commander Toshio Miyazaki, who used the cover of a Japanese language exchange student, Thompson was persuaded to use his uniform to visit various ships in San Diego, the US Navy's main port. He gathered intelligence on ships' capabilities, engineering, gunnery and tactical information, and crews. He was paid \$500 and \$200 monthly (\$9,375 and \$3,750 in 2019 dollars). “Unfortunately for Thompson, the Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence at the time took a personal interest in so-called language students like Miyazaki. His suspicions were borne out when Japanese attachés' coded radio messages were intercepted and deciphered.”⁴ “Thompson was arrested in March 1936, convicted, and sentenced to 15 years after Miyazaki returned to Japan.”⁵

John Semer Farnsworth spied from 1933 to 1937. Destitute he recontacted “former associates to solicit documents.” He obtained the publication “The Service of Information and Security,” which contained “plans for battle information and tactics that were gathered from actual fleet maneuvers and tested by high-ranking naval officials.” Raising suspicions and bragging about what he had done Farnsworth was arrested in February 1937. “The court ruled that Farnsworth and others conspired ‘to communicate and transmit to a foreign government-to wit Japan-writings, code books, photographs and plans relating to the national defense with the intent that they should be used to the injury of the United States.’” He had compromised the gunnery capabilities of every US ship.⁶

3. The FBI was not appointed by the president to be the principal counterintelligence agency until 1938. Therefore, the “military was responsible for counterintelligence within its own services.” U.S. Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive. (undated). *CI Reader*. (4 volumes). Retrieved from https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/ci/CI_Reader_Vol1.pdf, Vol. 1, pp 144, 163-164.

4. “Toshio and Thompson.” *Time Magazine*. July 6, 1936. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,770246,00.html>. Miyazaki was already under surveillance by the Office of Naval Intelligence after he was linked to another Japanese naval officer killed in a pedestrian accident in Los Angeles in October 1933 whose briefcase police discovered contained classified US Navy documents.

5. “[T]he Justice and State departments decided that it was more useful to keep Japanese espionage under surveillance to see what other leads it might throw up, rather than cause a diplomatic row by seeking to arrest Thompson and Miyazaki.” Max Everest-Phillips, “Reassessing pre-war Japanese espionage: The Rutland naval spy case and the Japanese intelligence threat before Pearl Harbor,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 21, Issue 2, 2006, footnote 49, 281-282.

6. *CI Reader*, Vol. 1, Chapter 4. Also David Major and Peter C. Oleson, “Espionage Against America,” *The Intelligencer*, Vol. 23, No. 1, p 60.

1. Many books and articles have been written about America's failure to have warning of the attack on Pearl Harbor. This article only addresses what the Japanese did in preparation for the attack.

2. — *Peace and War*, United States foreign Policy, 1931-1941, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1943.

Publicity fed the popular exaggeration of Japanese espionage, which had been building for over a decade.⁷

The Japanese had recruited a British spy, Squadron Leader Frederick Joseph Rutland, an expert in carrier aviation, in 1922. After moving to Japan in 1924 and providing technical assistance, which was vital to its development of aircraft carriers, he began working for Japanese naval intelligence in 1932. Back in London Rutland was tasked to target the US West Coast in 1933 using commercial cover. The FBI was not officially informed by the British of the Rutland case until September 1939, although may have known about him since 1935.⁸ Rutland had been described as “the head of the Japanese espionage system in North America”⁹ and was placed under surveillance. Under threat of prosecution in the US Rutland returned to England in October 1941 and was imprisoned by the British the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor.¹⁰

“The FBI and Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) attempted a double agent operation against the Japanese in 1941. Between March and June the operation targeted a Japanese intelligence ring that had 13 agents on the West Coast and in Hawaii. A critical tip came in March, when Al Blake, a US citizen, told the ONI in Los Angeles that an old acquaintance, Torachi Kono, had asked him to spy for Japan... [T]he Japanese tasked Blake to collect intelligence on Pearl Harbor.” He was to be paid \$2,500 initially and \$5,000 when he delivered the intelligence (\$45,000 and \$90,000 in 2019 dollars). Through a telephone tap, ONI agents learned that the Japanese intended to murder Blake and forewarned him. “Kono was arrested in June 1940 along with Commander Itaru Tachibana, who ran a ring of agents...”¹¹ Following their arrests and Tokyo’s threat to arrest American military officers in Japan, the State Department requested the US attorney in Los Angeles not to prosecute. All were allowed to leave the US for Japan...¹²

7. There was “widespread pre-war US fears of a fifth column sabotage by Japanese residents.” Max Everest-Phillips, 259-261.

8. The British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and Security Service (MI5), were aware of Rutland’s activities and monitored him from the beginning as the Government Communications and Cipher School (GCCS) had also broken Japanese attaché codes. Max Everest-Phillips, 269-273.

9. Max Everest-Phillips, 273. It is unclear how much intelligence Rutland provided Japanese naval intelligence. Intercepted communications indicate he was constantly bickering about payments with his handlers.

10. Max Everest-Phillips, 275.

11. Tachibana had previously been identified as an intelligence officer through FBI surveillance of Rutland. Max Everest-Phillips, 274.

12. Major and Oleson. Also Lt. Cmdr. W. M. Swan. “A Century of Japanese Intelligence.” Naval Historical Society of Australia, September 1974. <https://www.navyhistory.org.au/a-century-of-japanese-intelligence->

“The well-funded Japanese espionage efforts that had operated in America for several years before the war passed a high volume of intelligence to Tokyo,” which compiled a 200-page encyclopedia of the US Navy and its capabilities.¹³

Although the FBI and ONI had rolled up several Japanese spy operations, one unusual opportunity was missed. “British double agent Dusko Popov... was sent by his Abwehr controllers to the United States in August 1941 to set up a spy network.” His collection requirements included many regarding Pearl Harbor. Unfortunately, J. Edgar Hoover, often at odds with British intelligence, “dismissed Popov as an untrustworthy and immoral double agent and did not take him seriously... [S]omeone... should have been smart enough to ask why the Germans seemed so interested in Pearl Harbor.”¹⁴

Japanese Technical Intelligence

With war raging in Europe, on the night of November 11th, 1940, the British Royal Navy launched a carrier based aerial torpedo attack on the Italian fleet anchored in the bay at Taranto in southeastern Italy. The bay was shallow, so the British modified their torpedoes not to dive too deeply and hit the bottom. The attack inflicted severe damage on the Italian fleet. A Japanese delegation later studied the Taranto attack, which demonstrated the impact of naval aviation and the use of an innovated torpedo.

A Spy in Honolulu

In March of 1941, Lt. Takeo Yoshikawa, of the Imperial Japanese Navy, was assigned to the Japanese consulate in Honolulu. Yoshikawa (under the alias “Tadashi Morimura”) was a spy. Formerly a trainee pilot,¹⁵ Yoshikawa spent four years studying the US Navy and learning English before arriving in Hawaii.¹⁶ He scouted all of the military bases on O’ahu but concentrated on Pearl Harbor. He occupied an apartment that overlooked Pearl Harbor, rented small planes, took the Navy’s own harbor tugboat, swam extensively, and drove around the island. He relied on his memory, not writing down anything potentially incriminat-

part-1/.

13. Major and Oleson.

14. James M. Olson, *To Catch A Spy: The Art of Counterintelligence*. Washington DC; Georgetown University Press, 2019, p 93.

15. Nicholas Best, *Takeo Yoshikawa: The Japanese Spy at Pearl Harbor, The History Reader. Dispatches in History* from St. Martin’s Press. December 2, 2016. Excerpted with permission from *Seven Days of Infamy: Pearl Harbor Across the World*, by Nicholas Best. Published by Thomas Dunne Books. Copyright 2016.

16. Ron Laytner. “The Last Samurai.” Edit International, 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20061207181050/http://www.editinternational.com/index.php?page=stories.php%3Fcat%3D3f5121f82466f>.

ing, to describe the layout of facilities, the pattern of military activities, and the anchoring of ships in the harbor. He also reported on the harbor's water depth. He collaborated with the German Abwehr agents in Honolulu, Otto and Friedel Kuehn, who provided intelligence on Pearl Harbor from 1936 to 1941.¹⁷ Although Yoshikawa was suspected as a spy and tailed by US agents, they could not gather evidence of his espionage in order to have him expelled.¹⁸

Japanese SIGINT

The Japanese operated a radio direction finding (RDF) station on Kwajalein Island, one of the former German Pacific islands awarded to Japan after World War I, which could track US planes operating from Hawaii. By knowing patrol routes, the Japanese could discern gaps in coverage, which were helpful in planning their approach to Pearl Harbor. The Japanese had also achieved some successes in reading American diplomatic codes.¹⁹ By November 1940, the Japanese also had an intercept team targeting the US Navy from Mexico.²⁰

Conclusion

Japanese intelligence contributed significantly to the success of its attack on Pearl Harbor. Its fleet approached undetected from the north-west, an area radio direction finding revealed was rarely patrolled by American planes. The targets were well identified through Lt. Yoshikawa's reconnaissance efforts up to December 6th. The Japanese Koku Gyorai Type 91 modified torpedoes were effective against the anchored battleships in the shallows next to Ford Island. Twenty years after General Billy Mitchell's controversial demonstration, Japanese dive bombers showed the effectiveness of penetrating bombs on capital ships. Japanese intelligence had contributed to the greatest naval defeat that the United States had ever suffered.

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17. Major and Oleson. Also Ron Laytner. "The Last Samurai;" and David Wallechinsky & Irving Wallace, <https://www.trivia-library.com/a/pearl-harbor-and-the-japanese-spy-family-part-3.htm>; and Wil Deac. "Takeo Yoshikawa: World War II Japanese Pearl Harbor Spy." The HistoryNet. https://web.archive.org/web/20070927215840/http://www.historynet.com/magazines/world_war_2/3035811.html.

18. Best.

19. Valerie Reitman. "Japan Broke U.S. Code Before Pearl Harbor, Researcher Finds," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2001. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-dec-07-mn-12562-story.html>.

20. Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942-1945*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992, p 13.