

The Japanese Perspective

By Lieutenant General Masatake Okumiya,
Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (Retired)

The plan to attack the U.S. Fleet at Pearl Harbor was ordered by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto (opposite). When and how news of that attack reached Washington officials is an intriguing, albeit quirky, story with devastating results.

Many people, including both Japanese and Americans, still believe that the attack by the Carrier Task Force of the Imperial Japanese Navy on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 was intended as a sneak attack. This is not true. The misunderstanding resulted from an unusual mistake made by the Japanese Foreign Office staff concerned.

On 2 November 1941, the Japanese government and the Imperial General Headquarters agreed to prepare for war against the United States and the United Kingdom. Following that decision, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief Combined Fleet, ordered Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, Commander of the First Air Fleet, to prepare an attack of the American fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor.

Japanese Navy officers were under strict orders to adhere to the international treaty concerning the declaration of war. This agreement had been signed at The Hague, in Holland, in 1907.

On 4 December 1941, a joint conference of the government and the Imperial General Headquarters was held. At that time, Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō decided on the following course of action:

- ▶ The diplomatic procedures were to be left entirely to the Foreign Minister.
- ▶ The announcement of the ultimatum to the American government should be in the form of "a declaration of war."
- ▶ The announcement should be given before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Ambassador Kochisaburō Nomura in Washington should deliver the message to the responsible per-

son in the American government.

Navy Minister Admiral Shigetaro Shimada, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, and other members of the conference confirmed the procedure, which was endorsed by Admiral Osami Nagano, Chief of Naval General Staff, and Admiral Yamamoto. Admiral Shimada's testimony on this subject at the Tokyo trial held just after the war reads, in part, as follows: "The delay in the announcement of the declaration of war to the American government was entirely due to the fault of the staff of the Foreign Office. It is clear that the Navy was not responsible for it."

It was true that the Japanese Navy commonly used a surprise attack at the beginning of a war. For instance, a Japanese naval unit opened fire on Chinese warships off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula before the declaration of the Sino-Japanese War in 1897, and the Navy used the same tactic against the Russian fleet at the time of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. But these wars occurred before the Hague Treaty was ratified in 1907.

In a research paper dated 31 March 1941, Major General Frederick L. Martin (Commanding General, Hawaiian Army Air Forces) and Rear Admiral Patrick N. L. Bellinger (Commander Patrol Wings, Hawaiian Islands) stated that: "Japan has never begun a war after the declaration of war." But they did not mention the Hague Treaty.

There was no article in the Hague Treaty concerning when an ultimatum should be delivered to the opponent's government. So, theoretically speaking, one minute before the attack would be enough. Based on this, Admiral Nagano first proposed that the ultimatum be delivered one hour before the attack on Pearl Harbor. This was later changed to 30 minutes.

Foreign Minister Togo and his high-ranking staff took the matter seriously, making all necessary preparations to deliver the ultimatum. They sent a pilot message to the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C., saying that several important and urgent telegrams would soon be transmitted.

Retired Captain Yuzuru Sanematsu, then-Commander



and assistant naval attaché to Washington, recalls: "by 2200 (U.S. time) on 6 December, only eight or nine parts of the memorandum received at the embassy had been deciphered. To make matters worse, a farewell party for Terasaki Hidenori, first secretary of the embassy, was taking place that same evening. So, deciphering and other procedures were interrupted.

"By early the next morning, work had been completed on 13 parts; the fourteenth had not yet been received. Sadao Iguchi, embassy counselor, permitted most of the staff to go home. First Secretary Okumura Katuzo began to type up the message, while other secretaries collated the copies.

"Between 0700 and 0800 several new telegrams were received, however, which necessitated summoning the staff. Not until 1000 did deciphering of the urgent new telegrams begin, though. Unfortunately, the telegrams contained a message from the Foreign Minister acknowledging each staff member of the embassy. Consequently, it wasn't until much later that the final part—saying that the ultimatum should be delivered at 1300—was deciphered. This meant the scheduled attack time was 1330.

"Ambassador Nomura immediately made an appointment with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. He had a luncheon engagement, however, so he told Nomura, "Please meet with Welles, Undersecretary of State." Right after that, though, the ambassador received a message from Hull saying that he would have an interview with him.

"First Secretary Okumura had finished typing all of the translated papers. But another series of corrections and supplements arrived, so he had to retype some parts of the papers. He wasn't able to complete the task before Ambassador Nomura was to meet with Hull.

"Ambassador Nomura knew that he couldn't visit the Secretary of State at the appointed time, so he requested a visit in Hull's office a little later. As a result, the time he handed the ultimatum over to the Secretary was about 1420, 50 minutes behind the actual attack.

Meanwhile, the Carrier Task Force under the command of Vice Admiral Nagumo was ordered to attack the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The force consisted of 6 fleet carriers, 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 11 destroyers, 3 submarines, and 8 tankers.

By 22 November, the Pearl Harbor task force of 33 ships had assembled in utmost secrecy at Hitokappu (Tankan) Bay in the Kurile Islands.

At 0600 on 26 November, this force sortied and headed via a devious route for a prearranged standby point of latitude 42° north, longitude 170° west. At this point the force was to await final orders that depended upon the ultimate decision regarding the question of whether or not to go to war.

On 1 December this decision was made, and it was for war. Admiral Yamamoto's order—dispatched the following day to Admiral Nagumo's eastward-moving task force—definitely set 8 December (7 December U.S. time) as the date for attacking Pearl Harbor. On 3 December, the task force altered its course southeastward, and at 1130 on 6 December, it turned due south to close on the island of Oahu, increasing speed to 24 knots.

In the early morning hours of 7 December, with only a few hours to go before the target would be within striking distance of aircraft, the task force received disturbing information from Tokyo. An Imperial General Headquarters intelligence report, received at 0050, indicated that no carriers were at Pearl Harbor. These were to have been the top-priority targets of the attack, from the viewpoint of our fliers, and Admiral Yamamoto had counted on their being in port. All of the American carriers, as well as nearly all the heavy cruisers, had apparently put to sea. Nevertheless, a full count of battleships remained in the harbor.

Despite this late-hour upset, Admiral Nagumo and his staff decided there was no other course left but to carry out the attack as planned. The U.S. battleships, though secondary to the carriers, were still considered an important target, and there was also a faint possibility that some of the American carriers might have returned to Pearl Harbor by the time the Japanese planes struck. So the task force sped on toward its goal, every ship now tense and ready for battle.

In the predawn darkness of 7 December, Admiral Nagumo's carriers reached a point 200 miles north of Pearl Harbor. The zero hour had arrived. The carriers swung into the wind, and at 0600 the first wave of the 353-plane attack force, under the command of Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, took off from the decks and headed for the target.

The first wave was composed of 183 planes: 49 Type-97 level bombers, 51 Type-99 dive bombers, 40 Type-97 torpedo planes, and 43 Zero fighters. The level bombers each carried one 800-kilogram (1,760-pound) armor-piercing bomb; the torpedo planes each carried one 800-kilogram torpedo.

The weather was far from ideal. A 20-knot northeast wind was raising heavy seas. Flying at 3,000 meters (9,750 feet), the formations were above a dense cloud



The Japanese carrier *Akagi* slices through North Pacific waters en route to Pearl Harbor while Japan's negotiations with the United States move inexorably toward war.

layer that extended downward to within 1,500 meters (4,875 feet) of the water. The brilliant morning sun had just burst into sight, setting the eastern horizon aglow.

One hour and forty minutes after leaving the carriers, the pilots spotted a long white line of breaking surf directly beneath the formations. It was the northern shore of Oahu. Fortunately, the sky over Pearl Harbor was clear. Commander Fuchida saw the battleships were there all right—eight of them—but he couldn't see any carriers. At 0749, he ordered his radiomen to send the command, "Attack."

Leading the whole group, Lieutenant Commander Shigeharu Murata's torpedo planes headed downward to launch their torpedoes, while Lieutenant Commander Shigeru Itaya's fighters raced forward to sweep enemy fighters from the air. Lieutenant Commander Kakuichi Takahashi's dive-bomber group had climbed for altitude. Meanwhile, Fuchida's level bombers made a circuit toward Barbers Point to keep pace with the attack schedule. No enemy fighters were in the air, nor were there any gun flashes from the ground.

Fuchida sent the message, "Tora, Tora, Tora" (which meant "Surprise attack successful") to Admiral Nagumo at 0753.

The attack opened with the first bomb of Takahashi's dive bomber falling on Wheeler Field, followed shortly by dive-bombing attacks on Hickam Field and the bases at Ford Island.

Murata's torpedo planes approached the battleships anchored east of Ford Island and released torpedoes. A series of white waterspouts soon rose in the harbor.

Itaya's fighters, meanwhile, had full command of the air over Pearl Harbor. About four enemy fighters that took off were promptly shot down. By 0800 there were no enemy planes in the air, and Itaya's fighters began strafing the airfields.

Fuchida's level bomber group had entered its bombing run on the battleships moored to the east of Ford Island. The altitude was 3,000 meters. As the group closed in, enemy antiaircraft fire began to concentrate on the group. Dark gray puffs of smoke burst all around. Most of them

came from ships' batteries, but land batteries were also active. His group had missed the release point because of clouds. While his group circled for another attempt, others made their runs, some trying as many as three times before succeeding. The target—two battleships moored side by side—lay ahead. The second run was successful. Fuchida presumed they had hit the battleship *Maryland* (BB-46).

Having completed their runs, these bombers headed north to return to the carriers.

Pearl Harbor and its air bases had been pretty well wrecked by the fierce strafings and bombings. The imposing naval array of an hour before was gone. Antiaircraft fire had greatly intensified, but no enemy fighters were in the air.

At 0854, Lieutenant Commander Shigekazu Shimazaki, commander of the second wave, ordered his 170 planes to the attack. The second wave had taken off from the carriers at 0715, one hour and fifteen minutes after the first, and was now over the target.

The 54 Type-97 level bombers of the second wave were armed with either two 250-kilogram (550-pound) or one 250-kilogram and six 60-kilogram (132-pound) bombs. Their targets were the air bases. Led by Lieutenant Commander Takashige Egusa, the dive-bomber group consisted of 80 Type-99 bombers armed with 250-kilogram bombs. Its original assignment had been to attack the enemy carriers, but since there were no carriers present, these planes were to select targets from among the ships that remained unscathed or only slightly damaged by the first wave attack. Fighter cover for the second wave was provided by 36 Zeroes commanded by Lieutenant Saburo Shindo.

Egusa's dive-bomber group attacked several ships; Shimazaki's level bombers concentrated on Hickam Field; and the rest attacked Ford Island and Kaneohe Naval Air Station.

By 1300 all surviving aircraft of both attack waves had returned to the carriers. Of the 353 planes, only 9 fighters, 15 dive bombers, and 5 torpedo planes (whose crews totaled 55 officers and men) were missing.

Against these negligible losses, it had become clear that three battleships were sunk, one battleship was capsized, and four battleships were damaged. Several cruisers, destroyers, and other ships were also damaged. In addition, enemy air strength based on Oahu appeared to have been decisively smashed, with the result that not a single plane attacked the Japanese fleet.

What were the main causes for such a great tactical success?

I think the most important one was the superior air tactics adopted by Admiral Nagumo's force. We Japanese Navy fliers understood at that time that no American or European naval air squadrons had the capability to torpedo battleships in such a shallow anchorage as Pearl Harbor's (namely, 12 meters, or 39 feet). And no other carrier-based air groups showed a better hit rate at level bombing than Fuchida's. Also, no other navies had adopted the tactic of using six fleet carriers in one operation. We knew that the U.S. and British navies usually used one or two carriers at the same time. And as to strategy, no other

foreign carrier task force had attempted such a long-distance expedition—3,500 nautical miles!

There were several pieces of evidence that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had set a trap for Japan: If it were to strike the first blow against the United States, he could use this as a pretext to enter World War II. His decision was likely made on the assumption that the Japanese Navy Air Force had only a third-class striking capability. He probably believed that if they tried to attack Pearl Harbor, the carrier task force would consist of two to four carriers, their planes old and the skill of the pilots and other crew very poor.

Had the ultimatum been delivered before the actual at-

*Pretext
Back
Door to
war
Fueled*



Secretary of State Cordell Hull is flanked by Ambassador Nomura (left) and Japan's special emissary Saburo Kurusu (right) on 17 November 1941 at the White House.

tack, how would FDR's reputation have been damaged? As the commander in chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, he would have been severely criticized for the heavy loss of his fleet, because it would be attributed to his great tactical and strategical misjudgment. Roosevelt was lucky, however, that he received the ultimatum 50 minutes after the first attack on Pearl Harbor was made. Taking advantage of the Japanese diplomatic mistake, he succeeded in substituting it for his tactical and strategical failure. Consequently, he told the American public that the attack by the Japanese carrier task force was a sneak one.

Almost all Americans seemed to believe the President's announcement. They began to support the war under his leadership, shouting "Remember Pearl Harbor!"

As an old Imperial Japanese Navy officer and a historian, I have come to the conclusion that the Pearl Harbor attack was a brilliant success from the point of view of a military tactics and strategy, but it was an unforgettable mistake from the point of view of the nation.

A 1930 graduate of the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy, Lieutenant General Okumiya was one of the first dive-bomber pilots of the Japanese Navy. He joined the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force in 1954, from which he retired in 1964. He has coauthored *Midway, The Battle That Doomed Japan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1955) and *Zero!* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1956), among others.



Phase I of the dive-bomber attack on Pearl Harbor began at 7:55 A.M., 50 minutes before the Japanese ultimatum was delivered in Washington, D.C.