Welcome to the December session of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speakers are CPT (R) Thomas Kimmel, USN, grandson of Admiral Husband Kimmel, naval commander at Pearl Harbor, and John Lambert, author of *Defenseless*; they are joined by Jim Johns and veterans of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 7 December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy ended the uneasy peace the United States had enjoyed behind its Pacific and Atlantic moats. Crossed the northern Pacific unobserved, IJN naval aviators pounced on the American battle fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor and the US Army Air Corps aircraft parked wing tip to wing tip at Hickam Field. Two waves of Japanese aircraft executed Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku’s daring plan. Although a tactical success for the Japanese, the attack was a strategic and operational failure. Strategically, it unified the America populace behind war. More importantly, at the operational level the attackers failed to destroy the fleet repair facilities and the fuel reserves that supported Pacific Fleet operations for the next year.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, speculation arose over how much the US government knew about Japanese intentions. During and immediately after the war, there were nine investigations into possible “conspiracies” behind the Pearl Harbor attack, and a tenth one in 1995. In additions, numerous books have been written about possible conspiracies that run the gamut from the respected to pure fantasy. All of these inquiries have found that there was incompetence, miscommunications between service branches, little concern over Japanese intentions, and too few resources devoted to intelligence, but none have ever proven or a conspiracy – with or without Presidential involvement.

Underlying all the notions of a conspiracy is whether President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew of the attack and did nothing in order to have a reason to get into the war in Europe. An attack by Japan only guaranteed war with Japan. Adolf Hitler had carefully avoided giving FDR any pretext until after the Japanese attacked without informing their “ally.” Without treaty obligation, he needlessly declared war on the United States and brought the US into the European war. Hitler’s reasoning had nothing to do with the Japanese; he was upset at US support of the British, particularly naval actions in the Atlantic. His contempt for the United States and its “mongrel” (racially mixed) population made war an easy choice once his honorary Aryan ally acted.

At the November session, David Kahn pointed out we had broken the Japanese Foreign Office’s Purple and other codes. These gave us very little information about an impending attack because the Japanese military did not trust the civilians and did not inform the Foreign Office about operational matters.

The US Army’s Signals Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Navy’s Office of Naval Intelligence cryptographic group (OP-20-G), each understaffed and poorly funded, competed against one another and did not share information. We had few analysts and most did not know the broader cultural context necessary to interpret messages. Recipients were not allowed to retain the actual messages or to take notes on them for security reasons, hampering them in putting pieces together. The great breakthroughs in signals intelligence and code breaking were still in the future, as were adequate analysis and use in joint planning.

During November, both the Navy and the Army sent explicit war warnings to their Pacific stations about Japan. However, ADM Kimmel and Lt. General Walter C. Short, the Navy and Army commanders at Pearl Harbor, did not receive specific intelligence; British East Asia and the Philippines were regarded as the likeliest targets. Kimmel and Short were friendly, but neither shared his information or concerns with the other, and no efforts were made to plan a joint or coordinated defense of the Islands and their various commands. (Each service was wholly independent and reported to its Secretary; local commanders could cooperate or not as it suited them.) Short was more concerned about sabotage, which was why the Army Air Corps planes were parked for easier guarding.

Several of the conspiracy theories focus on the absence of the carriers. In 1941, aircraft carriers were considered fleet scouting vessels rather than capital ships. The IJN in particular, despite its lead in carrier aviation and operational theory, and the USN both considered battleships the main combatants (RADM Alfred T. Mahan’s theory), and planned for a decisive meeting engagement in the western Pacific that would settle things. FDR, a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy,

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understood Mahan’s theory and would not have left his battleships in harbor if he a) knew an attack might/would happen and b) wanted a war. One carrier was in a west coast port for repairs, and the other two were delivering aircraft to Midway and Guam. After 7 December, when only carriers were available, the Navy finally began to treat them as main combatants.

Even with all the signals intelligence intercepts and any other possible, misplaced, pieces of information, nothing was going to overcome the racially laced American hubris towards the Japanese. US officials would not/could not believe that these “little yellow men” would ever dare to attack.

Further Readings:
Reviewed (favorably) in the Journal of Military History or Military Affairs:
Not reviewed in any professional history/military education journal so far as Dr. Fitzharris could determine:
John Costello, Days of Infamy (Packet Books, 1994).
Edward Beach, Scapegoats: A Defense of Kimmel and Short at Pearl Harbor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995).

Announcements:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Dec. 17, 2013 – Higher Ed & Civil War- www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Civil War Round Table - Jan. 27, 2014 – Grant Before Vicksburg, D. Page - 715-386-1266 – rossandhaines@comcast.net
Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; www.ww2rountable-rochester.org
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523

Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org

Round Table Schedule 2014
9 Jan. Eastern Front
13 Feb. Encounters with WW2 Leaders
13 Mar. Operation COBRA and Falaise
27 Mar. World War II in China
10 Apr. Rabaul and the SW Pacific
8 May Landing on Omaha Beach
10-27 May Tour of Normandy

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