

Admiral Yamamoto as an Innovator

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It must be noted that the English version does not necessarily reflect the original Japanese text.

I was just given an introduction; my name is Aizawa. As my area of study is history of war and the issue of organizations is out of my realm of expertise, I wondered about what I should talk about. After all, the only subject I can elaborate on is history of war. So 80% to 90% of my lecture will be about history of war, and I will spend the rest of my time talking about the assigned subject, “Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto as an Innovator.” Specifically, I will look at how the attack on Pearl Harbor was planned and executed, since Yamamoto was the main architect behind the attack.

The Pearl Harbor attack devised by Isoroku Yamamoto was significantly different from the Imperial Navy’s traditional concept of operations. In early January of 1941, or 11 months before the war with the United States started, Yamamoto, Commander of the Combined Fleet sent an opinion paper, entitled “My view on War Readiness,” to Naval Minister Admiral Koshiro Oikawa, in which he emphasized the importance of an attack on Pearl Harbor as the first phase if a war with the United States was inevitable. Yamamoto argued that “the essential point of what we must do first in the Japanese-U.S. war is to launch a fierce attack on the enemy’s main fleet and destroy it at the opening of the war, making the U.S. Navy and the Americans lose their morale to the extent that they cannot recover.” He then went on to describe the implementation of specific operations as “total destruction of enemy’s capital ships, if most of them are moored in Pearl Harbor, using our fleet of airplanes,” and said that “the First and

Second Carrier Divisions (all the main aircraft carrier forces at the time) make an assault on (the enemy's main forces) with all of our air forces during a moonlit night or at dawn.”

However, the traditional plan of operations against the United States, developed by the Japanese Navy under the glory of the major victory in the naval battle in the Sea of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War, followed the golden rule of so-called interception operations, or the “defensive operations,” which proposes to wait for the U.S. main fleet to come over to the Far East before intercepting it with Japan's main fleet. The leading players in those operations were naturally battleships. The Japanese Navy believed that a major victory in the showdown battle between the fleets would lead to the victory of the entire war, just as it did in the Russo-Japanese War.

In contrast, “air raids” on Pearl Harbor proposed by Yamamoto were designed as the so-called “offensive operation,” an aggressive operation to rush on to the enemy's base from the very beginning and destroy it by aircraft. It was the idea that would turn over the traditional concept of operations of the Japanese Navy. Yamamoto was widely known as a proponent of caution against the war with the United States. It was understood that Yamamoto's cautious stance reflected the fact that he knew how strong the United States was from his firsthand experience in the United States for a total of four years on two separate occasions in 1919-1921 and 1926-1928. On the other hand, the period of his stay in the United States was also the time for him as a military attaché to get to know the United States, which the Imperial Navy consistently regarded as a potential enemy after the Russo-Japanese War, and consider what kind of operations were appropriate in the event of a war. In fact, Yamamoto, upon his return from the United States, emphasized in a speech within the Navy that “it is wrong to go on the defensive in operations against the United States, and that Japan should adopt an aggressive one, where launching an

attack on Hawaii might be an option.”

When Yamamoto was sent to the London Naval Conference in 1930 as a member of naval delegation Japan could not get 70% of what it demanded from the United States at the conference after all. Upon his return home, Yamamoto voiced his opinion that “after being forced to swallow the disadvantageous ownership ratio (of naval vessels), the Imperial Navy, in taking on the superior U.S. Navy, should first deal a staggering blow to the enemy by air raids.” It was in 1930, more than 10 years before the outbreak of the Japan-U.S. war. In other words, the air raids on Pearl Harbor at the opening of the war had been in the making more than 10 years before. It was the secret plan that Japan, a small country, had in order to fight against a superpower like the United States.

Next, I would like to talk about how the plan for the attack on Pearl Harbor had been fleshed out. In late January 1941, after Yamamoto submitted his written opinion to Naval Minister Oikawa, he ordered Takijiro Onishi, a career officer at the Naval Air Corps and the chief of staff of the 11th Air Fleet (who was later called the father of “*Tokko*” suicide attack units), to prepare a rough draft of the operation. In doing so, Yamamoto gave him a note in which he said that “the target is a group of American battleships. Attack units are to be formed for one-way attacks by torpedo planes.” In turn, Onishi in early February 1941 ordered Minoru Genda, staff officer of the First Carrier Division, to conduct basic research on the idea. Genda recalled that when he read Commander Yamamoto’s note, he was “surprised at the idea that defied all expectations.” However, Genda had some doubts about the method and targets of the attack. In early March 1941, Genda submitted his operational draft that said, “the main target of attack should be aircraft carriers, and battleships should be the second targets. All five aircraft carriers of the Imperial Navy (at the time, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* had yet to join the fleet) should participate in the attack. Japan should assume repeated attacks, instead of one-way attacks by

aircraft, and should send aircraft carriers within 200 nautical miles of the attack targets to accommodate airplanes.” Onishi mulled over the Genda plan and submitted it to Yamamoto in April 1941 by adding that “the place of departure should be set at Hitokappu Bay (Kasatka Bay) in Etorofu Island and the attack forces should take the northern route.”

The attack by the torpedo planes envisioned by Yamamoto was thought to be very difficult because of the shallowness of Pearl Harbor, which is about 12 meters deep. Yamamoto was of the opinion that if the attack by the torpedo planes was not feasible, the Navy should give up the whole idea of air raids on Pearl Harbor because the desired effects could not be expected. Eventually, this resulted in the Imperial Navy’s decision to pursue the possibility of making attacks by torpedoes that do not sink deep (torpedo planes would approach the harbor at very low altitudes and torpedoes would be fitted with fin-shaped equipment to enable them to come closer to the water’s surface without diving into the mud). Since Yamamoto was considered to belong to the camp that emphasized the air power as the core of the military strength, his proposal to make battleships as the main target may come as a surprise. But it was then the common practice among the navies across the world to give top priority to battleships as the main force of the military strength, and it can be argued that the call for destruction of an enemy’s battleships had no small political impact. Regarding one-way attacks by torpedo planes, they were apparently designed for a psychological effect on and loss of morale of the U.S. Navy and the Americans by giving them a feeling of fear that Japan could launch a death-defying offensive right from the outset of war.

Upon receipt of Onishi’s plan, Yamamoto made minor changes to the plan and have Onishi bring it to the Naval General Staff, the senior command center, and explain it to Shigeru Fukudome, then first director of operations. Until March of 1940, Fukudome served under Admiral Yamamoto as chief of staff of the Combined Fleet. During this period,

Yamamoto asked him “whether it is possible to strike Hawaii by aircraft.” Fukudome, now first director of operations, put the operation plan handed by Onishi in a safe, keeping it in obscurity for a while.

About six months later, by late July 1941, the Japanese forces advanced into the southern part of French Indochina and the United States slapped severe sanctions on Japan, which culminated in a total oil embargo. Thus, the tension between Japan and the United States intensified in a single burst. The Naval General Staff mapped out the plans of operations against the United States, Britain and the Netherlands by around the end of August 1941. However, these plans did not include the attack on Pearl Harbor proposed by Yamamoto. Meanwhile, the Combined Fleet, without the consent of the Naval General Staff, drafted its own plan of operations, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, by late August as well, and based on that, conducted map exercises for 10 days in mid-September at the Naval War College in Meguro under Yamamoto, Combined Fleet Commander. In mid-September, after the map exercises, First Director of Operations Fukudome and Combined Fleet Chief of Staff Matome Ugaki met at the Naval General Staff and held serious discussions on the advisability of the attack on Pearl Harbor. However, officers on the part of the Naval General Staff were very cautious about the attack, saying that “an attack on Pearl Harbor is based on guesswork, and the likelihood of its success is low. If something goes wrong, the United States would detect us before the attack and wipe out the Imperial Navy” and that “the Navy needs the aircraft carrier force as the air force in the southern operations to be conducted in the initial phase after the opening of the war with the United States.”

However, Yamamoto appeared to have already taken such dissenting views into full account. In his written opinion in early January 1941, he already pointed out that if Japan continued to follow “the defensive strategy to the east” for fear of “enormous damage in the attack on Hawaii,” “the enemy would swoop down on the mainland of the Japanese Empire at a

blow and burn up the Imperial capital and other major cities. In that case, even if the southern operations were successful, nothing could be done about the indignation of the public opinion and the decline of national morale.” Yamamoto’s first determination was conveyed to First Director of Operations Fukudome through Combined Fleet Chief of Staff Ugaki. At around the same time, the new large-sized aircraft carriers of “Shokaku” and “Zuikaku” were completed and the better outlook emerged for flinging them into the southern operations. And so, the Naval General Staff approved the throwing the four aircraft carriers—“Akagi,” “Kaga,” “Soryu” and “Hiryu”—of the First and Second Carrier Divisions into the Pearl Harbor operations ardently desired by the Combined Fleet, making it appear that the confrontation between the Combined Fleet and the Naval General Staff would disappear for the time being.

However, the Combined Fleet in October, based on the map exercise conducted with the flagship “Nagato,” demanded that all the six aircraft carriers, including “Shokaku” and “Zuikaku” of the Fifth Carrier Division, be put into the Pearl Harbor operation. The Naval General Staff strongly opposed to this by citing the shortage of the force strength for the southern operations, giving rise again to the stalemate in negotiations between the two sides. In response, Yamamoto sent senior staff officer and his right-hand man Kameto Kuroshima to Tokyo on October 18, 1941, asking him to convey his determination to throw all the aircraft carriers into the attack on Pearl Harbor and his willingness to resign if he could not have his own way. Despite Yamamoto’s messages, the Naval General Staff, including First Director of Operations Fukudome, did not withdraw its opposition. So, Kuroshima made a direct appeal to Seiichi Ito, vice chief of the Naval General Staff, and Yamamoto’s messages were then passed on to Naval General Staff Chief Osami Nagano. Nagano, accepting Yamamoto’s arguments by saying that he would go along with Yamamoto if he would go as far as to say that. Hence, the Pearl Harbor operation was approved as

desired by the Combined Fleet in a top-down decision. This was how the attack on Pearl Harbor was finally decided.

Now, I would like to briefly explain the developments with the Pearl Harbor operation. The commander of the First Air Fleet, which carried out the attack, was Chuichi Nagumo. His Mobile Fleet was composed of the six aircraft carriers of “Akagi,” “Kaga,” “Soryu,” “Hiryu,” “Shokaku” and “Zuikaku” as well as two battleships, two heavy cruisers and one light cruiser, and they were selected on the basis of their cruising distances as the participating vessels had to sail as far as Hawaii. Even so, as they needed refueling on their way, they were accompanied by seven refueling ships. This underway replenishment was expected to prove difficult on the northern route in winter. The Mobile Fleet kept its movements secret, and marshaled in Hitokappu Bay by November 23, 1941. The last aircraft carrier to arrive was “Kaga,” because it came to Hitokappu Bay only after it picked up torpedoes whose alteration took until the last minute to enable them to run closer to the water’s surface without diving into the mud. Before making a sortie, Combined Fleet Commander Yamamoto gave instructions to commanding officers at various levels, staff members and aviation officers aboard “Akagi” in Saeki Bay on November 17, telling them to kill enemy soldiers and be prepared to die on their swords by saying that he would “make it a principle to make a vigorous attack without relying on a surprise assault.” The attack on Pearl Harbor turned out to be a successful “surprise attack,” but Yamamoto called upon the participants in the attack to be resolutely prepared to die in the “assault” if necessary.

The Task Force departed from Hitokappu Bay on November 26, was blessed with fairly good weather on its way despite earlier concerns, and advanced toward Hawaii while being replenished. On December 2, that famous message, “Niitakayama Nobore 1208,” was wired, and the final decision was made to start a war on December 8, as scheduled. On the day before the attack on Pearl Harbor, in accordance with the tradition since the

Russo-Japanese War, the signal flag was hoisted aboard “Akagi,” which read, “The Empire’s fate depends on the result of this battle, let every man do his utmost.” and the Task Force rushed forward into the enemy’s expected sphere of patrol. After reaching the point 230 nautical miles north of Hawaii in one piece at 01:30 on December 8, the first attack group of 183 airplanes and then the second attack group of 167 airplanes left their carriers and the Task Force continued to advance southward to take in the returning airplanes. The first attack group reached Cup Point to the north of the Island of Oahu at 07:30 on December 7 local time, and Mitsuo Fuchida, leader of the attack groups, concluded that the surprise attack was successful as he saw no signs of the U.S. preparedness for interception over Pearl Harbor, and wired the “Tora! Tora! Tora!” telegram at 07:52. This message of the repetition of Tora is said to have been received aboard “Nagato” in Hiroshima Bay. Regarding U.S. naval vessels in the Pearl Harbor, reconnaissance prior to the attack confirmed that eight battleships were moored in the bay, but two aircraft carriers were not.

To look at the achievements in the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attack forces sank half of the eight battleships, the mainstay of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and damaged all other vessels as well. It may be argued that given Yamamoto’s concept of operations to set battleships as the main targets, the surprise attack had achieved the intended results. However, from the perspective of the Genda plan that set aircraft carriers as the main targets of the attack, the absence of two U.S. aircraft carriers was the major “loss” to the Japanese side. This sense of loss grew larger, in the view of this speaker, particularly in view of the fact that this aircraft carrier force played an active role in subsequent battles including the Battle of Midway. However, it was still of great significance for Japan that the Imperial Navy’s aircraft carrier force put into the attack in a concentrated way remained almost unscathed while inflicting heavy damage on the U.S. main fleet and that the threat of the U.S. fleet was gone to the southern

operations to occupy resources-rich areas in the south, the most important of the operations by all Japanese forces in the initial phase of the war with the United States.

However, Admiral Yamamoto did not support executing the southern operations (the subordinate action). He considered it to be no less than the main strategy (the main operation) to execute “with the hope of annihilating” the enemy with the “determination to fight it out on the first day” by “dealing with the matter in an extremely appropriate manner at the opening of war.” In other words, a more thorough expansion of the military achievements should have been gained in the Pearl Harbor attack, and this gave rise to the issue of the so-called “second attack.” First Air Fleet Commander Nagumo issued an order to make preparations for the “second attack” after taking in the planes of the first attack force and asked for a preliminary report on the force strength that could take part in that effort. As it is well known, however, no order was issued for a renewed attack, with the Task Force only moved toward the north even after taking in all the attack units. Though Second Carrier Division Commander Tamon Yamaguchi had been sending the signal of the “preparation completed” for the “second attack” force, no instructions were given for the further attack. With the commanding center of the Combined Fleet in Hiroshima Bay, meanwhile, many officers voiced the view that the commanding center should wire a telegram to instruct Commander Nagumo to “make the attack again.” After all, it turned out to be too late to do so. As it was learned that such order, even if issued, would come only the following morning, Combined Fleet Commander Yamamoto kept such a cable from being actually sent.

As a matter of fact, Admiral Yamamoto, at the end of his written opinion to Naval Minister Oikawa, wrote that in executing the Pearl Harbor operation, he was anxious to be “appointed as commander of the Air Fleet to directly command the attack forces.” In other words, he actually sought

his “demotion” by resigning as commander of the Combined Fleet to become commander of the Air Fleet that belonged to the Combined Fleet. If such “dynamics of the personnel shift” had actually taken place, the “second attack” on Pearl Harbor that still had the base function after the surprise attack by Japan and an attack on the aircraft carrier “Enterprise” that was in waters near Oahu might have been carried out.

Actually, however, Nagumo’s fleet considered it sufficient to destroy the group of U.S. battleships in Pearl Harbor by the “first attack” (by the first attack group and the second attack group). Indeed, the “first attack” did achieve an immense success as the subordinate action to support the most important southern operations for the entire Japanese military. It was considered only natural for the Nagumo fleet to leave the battle waters.

Yamamoto’s intentions of “making a decisive attack on the enemy with the hope of annihilating the enemy” “launching a fierce attack on the enemy’s main fleet and destroy it and make the U.S. Navy lose their morale,” and with the “determination to fight it out on the first day” had not been fully shared by the Naval General Staff, the senior command center, or the subordinate command center headed by Nagumo. They failed to fully understand Yamamoto’s intentions.

At the end of my speech, I would like to point out three things that stand out about Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto as an innovator.

First, if the planning and its realization of the Pearl Harbor operation is considered to be an innovation, we can certainly describe Admiral Yamamoto as an innovator up to a certain military unit level. However, whether he was really an innovator is an open question in the sense that Yamamoto could not fully play out his capability as the commander in bringing together the entire organization. Yamamoto himself was fully aware of this. He asked Naval Minister Oikawa to “relieve him of the post of the commander of the Combined Fleet (and suggested Mitsumasa Yonenai as his successor)” and said that he was anxious to “play the role of

the Air Fleet commander.” So, if he had heard what I have just said, he might have told me that it was none of my business.

Second, he may be referred to as an innovator for having placed an emphasis on the air power as the mainstay of the military strength in the face of the mainstream trend to give top priority to battleships. However, since he initially set “battleships” as the principal targets in the attack on Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto may not be regarded as a fully-committed air power advocate as innovator. In fact, this issue is related to the fact that Nagumo did not move to make the “second attack.” It was Genda who opposed Yamamoto’s initial plan to “make battleships the main targets.” Therefore, who could blame Nagumo or to what extent should Nagumo have taken the blame for having failed to make the “second attack” after a near-complete annihilation of the group of U.S. battleships in the “first attack” on Pearl Harbor?

Third, while this was not the problem with Yamamoto as an individual but the problem with the entire organization, there was no dynamics in the personnel shift prior to the opening of war. It had to do with the rigidification of an organization. Prior to the opening of the Russo-Japanese War, the Imperial Navy did exercise the dynamics in the personnel change by replacing the commander of the Combined Fleet almost six months before the start of the war. Commander Sounojo Hidaka was replaced by Heihachiro Togo. As a matter of fact, Hidaka’s immediate predecessor was Togo. So, the reinstatement of Togo as the Combined Fleet commander came perhaps as a major disgrace for Hidaka, but the Imperial Navy did make the dynamic personnel change ahead of the opening of war with Russia. For the start of the Japan-U.S. war, however, the Imperial Navy did not take the comparable action, with its personnel shift made in accordance with the order of seniority and rank. Under such circumstances, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, despite his ardent wish, failed to get appointed as the Air Fleet commander. This was the problem with the Japanese Imperial

Navy at the time. I would like to end my speech today with a few comments above on the problems of an innovator and the organization witnessed in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Thank you.