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It Might Have Been

Into the records of the Pearl Harbor investigating committee last week went a little-noticed document that added new mystery to the disaster of Dec. 7, 1941:

Four months before the enemy struck, the Army and Navy air command at Pearl Harbor drew up a joint defense plan which correctly forecast the hour, the direction, the size of the force, and the strategy by which the Japs actually attacked.

The authors of the prophetic defense plan were Maj. Gen. Frederick L. Martin, commanding general of the Army Air Forces in Hawaii, and Vice Admiral Patrick N. L. Bellinger, air defense officer of the Pearl Harbor Naval Base, who joined in asking for 180 B-17 planes for the dual roles of reconnaissance and a striking weapon.

Analyzing probable Jap strategy, they foresaw, in August 1941, that the Japs would approach via the "vacant sea" where no trade routes existed (which they did); that they would use a force of six carriers (they did); that they would choose dawn to strike (they did); that they would be 680 miles north the night before (they were 800 miles north); that they would steam from this position at 27 knots (it was 26 knots); and that they would launch their planes 350 miles north of Pearl Harbor (it was 200 miles north).

If sufficient B-17s were supplied them for both search and attack, Martin and Bellinger advised Washington, a Jap attacking force could be caught approximately 984 miles from its goal. What action was ever taken on their plan was not an answer sought last week by the investigating committee, but from one witness it did get an estimate of what it would have meant to have caught the Japs before they struck.

The Might-Have-Beens: The witness was General of the Army Marshall, called hurriedly by the committee before his departure to the Far East as the new Ambassador to China. Explaining why he had not believed the Japs would attempt a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, but move toward the Philippines instead, Marshall asserted that surprise moves involve great hazards and result "either in triumph or catastrophe . . . I was inclined to feel the hazard was too great and that they wouldn't risk it," he said. But had we caught the Jap carrier fleet and immobilized it, Marshall estimated that Singapore would not have fallen, the Burma Road would not have been cut, and the entire course of the Pacific war would have been altered.