

# **NAVY'S VIEW OF PEARL HARBOR: CATASTROPHE THROUGH ERRORS**

Testimony of Admirals on  
Misunderstandings Before  
Dec. 7, 1941

**How danger in Atlantic  
affected use of ships for  
defense of Pacific islands**



**ADMIRAL STARK**

Everyone expected Japan to attack . . .

The Navy's own story of the events that led up to Pearl Harbor now can be drawn from top-secret documents placed before the Pearl Harbor Committee. These documents show that misunderstanding, inadequate co-ordination and other factors helped the Japanese surprise attack, even though the Navy was almost certain a Pacific war was coming.

**The record:** As early as September, 1941, Navy correspondence on war plans spoke of the coming time when "Japan and the U.S. are at war." Everyone expected Japan to attack, but few thought seriously she would hit Pearl Harbor. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the Pacific Fleet at the time, was not receiving decoded Japanese messages which foretold war. Top men in Washington didn't know he was not receiving them, but thought he was adequately informed anyway.

The Pacific Fleet was based at Pearl Harbor because the President, in 1940, decided it should "sit tight." In the spring of 1941, fighting ships were transferred to the Atlantic, despite warnings from Admiral Kimmel against weakening our Pacific strength. In October, 1941, the President ordered the Navy to shoot on sight in the Atlantic, after a speech on Sept. 11, announcing the policy. But the Pacific Fleet was told to keep a peaceful "status quo."

Washington thought the Fleet was out of Pearl Harbor at the time the Japanese struck. An urgent "war warning" on November 27, ten days before the attack, ordered Admiral Kimmel to deploy his forces for defense. That did not necessarily mean sending the Fleet to sea. Admiral Kimmel decided to keep it in harbor. He also decided against long-range air patrol. Result was that fighting ships of the Pacific were sitting-duck targets for Japanese bombers when they hit Pearl Harbor.

Admiral Kimmel and Lieut. Gen. Walter C. Short, Navy and Army commanders in Hawaii at the time of the attack, are to testify before the Committee when it resumes hearings January 15. It will be their first chance to tell in public their own stories of Pearl Harbor. Previously the Committee had the testimony of the War

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and State departments. Now it has the Navy record to round out background for the appearance of the two commanders.

Navy witnesses thus far have been Admiral Harold R. Stark, former Chief of Naval Operations; Admiral J. O. Richardson, in command at Pearl Harbor in 1940; Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, 1941 head of the Navy's War Plans Division, and Vice Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson, who was Director of Naval Intelligence at the time Japan struck. The Committee record includes correspondence between Admirals Stark and Kimmel, and a hitherto secret report of Admiral H. K. Hewitt who made a Pearl Harbor investigation for the Navy. Evidence from these witnesses and documents shows:

**Decision to keep the Fleet** in Hawaii was reached in 1940 during a conference between President Roosevelt and Admiral Stark. The Fleet, normally stationed on the West Coast, was then at Pearl Harbor.

"When we first decided not to bring it back," said Admiral Stark, "I was sitting alone with the President. I remember it as if it were seconds ago. After a few minutes of silence and tense thought, he finally looked up and said: 'Well, I hardly know, but when I am in doubt and am not sure just what is best, I am inclined to sit tight. I think we'd better do that for the present.'"



ADMIRALS RICHARDSON AND KIMMEL



ADMIRAL HART AND THE LATE SECRETARY KNOX

Admiral Richardson testified last November that he tried to persuade the President to return the Fleet to the West Coast, because preparation for possible war could be carried on better there. By 1941, however, top men in the Navy accepted it as settled that the Fleet was to stay in Hawaii as long as the situation remained critical, and in recent days Admirals Stark, Wilkinson and Turner all told the Committee they considered the Fleet, at Pearl Harbor, was where it should have been.

"That, in my mind, was the covering position," said Admiral Stark. But he successfully opposed a State Department proposal to send part of the Pacific Fleet from Hawaii to Manila—a proposal he considered "nothing less than childish."

**The rising war tide.** All through 1940 and 1941, Admiral Stark took the position that the big danger to the U. S. was in the Atlantic, and therefore he opposed doing anything that would involve the nation in war in the Pacific. He wrote Admiral Kimmel in January, 1941, just after the latter

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had been named to succeed Admiral Richardson: "I have fought this out time and time again in the highest tribunals, but I also fully realize that we may become involved in the Pacific and in the Atlantic at the same time; and to put it mildly, it will be one h—— of a job, and that is one reason why I am thankful that I have your calm judgment, your imagination, your courage, your guts, and your good head, at the seagoing end."

A few weeks later, on February 25, Admiral Stark told Admiral Kimmel that there was a rising tide of U.S. public opinion for action in the Far East if the Japanese went into Singapore or the Netherlands East Indies. If that tide prevailed, against Navy Department recommendations, he said, it would "mean that any reinforcement to the Atlantic might become impossible, and, in any case, would be reduced by just so much as we could send to the Pacific. And that might be a very serious matter for Britain."

### **"Rainbow Five" and "WPL-46."**

Because of the increasing tension in U.S. relations with both Germany and Japan, American military men held staff conversations with the British and Canadians early in 1941. A report of the understanding reached was embodied in a document known as ABC-1. Based on these understandings, the Army and Navy together developed a joint basic war plan, known as Rainbow No. 5, which was to be followed if the United States became involved on the side of Britain against the Axis powers. Then, in May, 1941, the Navy's basic war plan implementing Rainbow No. 5 was promulgated. That Navy plan became known as WPL-46. Through the remainder of 1941, all Navy operations were geared to this basic war plan.

**Transfer of ships to Atlantic.** It was in accordance with WPL-46 that part of the Pacific Fleet was transferred to the Atlantic in the late spring of 1941. Among the combat ships moved were three battleships, one aircraft carrier, four cruisers and eight destroyers. On September 12, Admiral Kimmel wrote Admiral Stark, urging that the Pacific Fleet not be weakened further. Replying, Admiral Stark said: "We have no intention of further reducing the Pacific Fleet except that prescribed in Rainbow Five, that is, the withdrawal of four cruisers about one month after Japan and the United States are at war."

Again, on November 15, Admiral Kimmel wrote: "I have seen the material and personnel diverted to the Atlantic. No doubt they are needed there. But I must insist that more consideration be given to the needs of the Pacific Fleet . . . This must not be considered a training fleet for support of the Atlantic Fleet and the shore establishment."

To this appeal, Admiral Stark replied, "If I didn't appreciate your needs as well as Tommy Hart's and King's [Admiral Thomas C. Hart, then in command of the Asiatic Fleet, and Admiral Ernest J. King, then in command of the Atlantic Fleet], I would not be working all day and night literally eighteen hours a day for all time for you." With reference to Admiral Kimmel's remark about his ships being merely a "training fleet," he said: "I'll hand that one on to King. . . . I think I'll have a gallery ready to see King when he reads that, particularly after a recent statement of his that he noted he was getting fewer men and had less percentage of complement than did the Pacific Fleet."

**Appeals for more personnel.** Admiral Kimmel kept asking for more personnel as well as for more ships. On this point, Admiral Stark wrote to him in February, 1941: "I am struggling, and I use the word advisedly, every time I get in the White House, which is rather frequent,

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ADMIRAL TURNER

Most top Navy men agreed . . .

for additional men. It should not be necessary, and while I have made the case just as obvious as I possibly could, the President just has his own ideas about men." Finally, in November of that year, Admiral Stark told Admiral Kimmel he had persuaded the President to authorize the use of draftees in the Navy. "The President," he added, "in giving final approval said he just hated to do it; but sentiment is fast getting out of my system, if there is any left in it on this war."

**"Shoot on sight."** After President Roosevelt had announced his "shoot on sight" policy with reference to German submarines in the Western Atlantic, Admiral Kimmel asked Admiral Stark if like orders were to be issued for the Pacific. He was told that the Pacific situation was to be kept in "status quo" as long as possible. Nevertheless, Admiral Stark made it clear that the Navy had the right to act in self-preservation, if necessary.

**Admiral Kimmel's information.** Admiral Kimmel repeatedly urged that he be kept fully informed of developments that would affect his operations in the Pacific. Admiral Stark wrote frequently and voluminously, giving the Pacific commander the global picture as he saw it. Nevertheless, he was censured by the Naval Court of Inquiry for not having kept Admiral Kimmel adequately informed.

Testimony before the Joint Committee of Congress has brought out that neither Admiral Stark nor Admiral Turner knew that Admiral Kimmel did not have access to decoded intercepts of Japanese messages. They had assumed that Admiral Kimmel, like Admiral Hart in Manila, had decoding facilities at his Pearl Harbor headquarters. Also, testimony has brought out conflicting views on the part of Admiral Wilkinson and Admiral Turner as to just whose responsibility it was to send information to the field commanders.

**The warnings.** After the fall of the Konoye Cabinet in Japan on Oct. 16, 1941, Admiral Stark sent a message to Admiral Kimmel and other fleet commanders, notifying them that war might result and ordering them to take "due precautions" and "preparatory deployments." Another message went out on November 24, warning the commanders that Japan might make a "surprise aggressive movement in any direction." On November 27, the sharpest message of all was sent. It said, in part:

"This dispatch is to be considered a war warning. Negotiations with Japan looking toward stabilization of conditions in the Pacific have ceased and an aggressive move by Japan is expected within the next few days.

"The number and equipment of Japa-

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nese troops and the organization of naval task forces indicates an amphibious expedition against either the Philippines, Thai or Kra Peninsula, or possibly Borneo.

"Execute an appropriate defensive deployment preparatory to carrying out the tasks assigned in WPL-46."

**Problems at Pearl Harbor.** The order for a "defensive deployment" confronted Admiral Kimmel with several problems. Should he undertake a long-range air patrol? He had only 60 patrol planes—not enough to do a complete job—and he decided against it. Besides, he thought an air raid extremely unlikely. Another question was, should he send the Fleet to sea? He decided against that also. But, in Washington, no report as to what he was doing had been requested. Recent testimony shows that the top Navy men thought the air patrol was being carried on and the Fleet was outside the harbor.



### ADMIRAL WILKINSON

... the Fleet was in the right place

**Prelude to attack.** In the days that followed, other messages were sent to Admiral Kimmel. Two of these, on December 3, told how the Japanese Government had instructed its diplomatic representatives at various points to burn their codes. On December 4, Admiral Kimmel was sent a copy of a message to Guam, ordering the forces there to destroy all confidential matter. On December 6, a message was sent to Admiral Kimmel, authorizing the destruction of secret and confidential documents on outlying islands.

Meanwhile, other things were happening. U.S. intelligence reported that four Japanese carriers could not be located. Admiral Kimmel went ahead with plans to send fighter planes to Wake and Midway islands, using the carriers *Lexington* and *Enterprise* for the purpose. He became involved in an argument with General Short as to whether the Army or the Navy should be in command on those islands. From Washington, orders were sent to Admiral Hart at Manila, directing him to carry on a naval reconnaissance between the Philippines and Indo-China.

**Failure to guess Japanese plan.** But almost all the top men in the Navy, like the top men in the Army, guessed wrong as to what the Japanese would do. The general expectation was that Japan would attack the Philippines, or invade Malaya, or attack the Burma Road. Only Admiral Turner says now that he considered an attack on Hawaii a 50-50 possibility.

**The delayed message.** Thus, when December 7 arrived, scarcely anyone was thinking of the chance that the Fleet was in danger. Some Japanese messages had been intercepted that showed interest in Pearl Harbor—particularly one that divided the harbor into five parts—but these

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attracted no special attention. Then came the interception of the 14-part message on breaking relations and the instructions that it be delivered at the State Department at 1 p.m. This last one was decoded by the Navy at 7 a.m., Washington time, but no Japanese translator was on duty, and it was sent over to the War Department. There it was not translated until after 9, and it was not brought to the attention of Admiral Stark until 10:30. Thinking further instructions to the fleet commanders would only confuse them, he took no action. Only when Gen. George C. Marshall, then Chief of Staff, telephoned him at 11:30, did he conclude it would be well to send a new warning. There followed a delay because the Army radio was not working, and General Marshall's message did not actually reach General Short until several hours after the attack. No message was sent over the Navy radio.

Admiral Stark told the Joint Committee: "I have often thought since that, if I had paralleled it, it might have gone through."

**Counting the cost.** The Japanese sank or damaged 18 ships, including eight battleships. By coincidence, the two carriers that were en route to Wake and Midway were safe. Of 12 heavy cruisers, 10 happened to be at sea, and the 2 in Pearl Harbor were not damaged. Also unhurt were three light cruisers and 27 destroyers. A Japanese lieutenant, who had entered the harbor in a two-man submarine and been captured, said the next day that the attack was much less successful than the Japanese had anticipated.

Admiral Stark told the Committee: "Few people realized how many ships were not hurt at Pearl Harbor. I remember telling the President the next morning . . . There was not much comfort in the fact, but I wanted him to know that our fast striking forces in Pearl Harbor were not much hurt."

The late Frank Knox, then Secretary of the Navy, rushed to Hawaii to review the situation. On December 12, while he was there, Admiral Kimmel wrote Admiral Stark, "No amount of explanation can alter the results . . ."

But the explanations still are being made, and they run into millions of words.



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