

Recent Discoveries

ADMIRAL KIMMEL AND THE QUESTION OF DISTANT AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE

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Under an agreement signed with the Army in Hawaii on 11 April 1941, the Navy assumed the responsibility for conducting *distant* aerial reconnaissance, when required, of the ocean approaches to Oahu, while the Army Air Corps would conduct *inshore* patrols. It is well-known that Admiral Husband E. Kimmel did not undertake such distant reconnaissance during the weeks immediately prior to 7 December. There were two reasons why he did not. The first, and lesser reason, which appears in Annex II of the Pacific War Plan WPPac-46, was that he was not obligated to mount such an air search until W-Day, that is, the day when Japan declared war or opened hostilities, or both. The second and greater reason was that he did not have sufficient patrol aircraft to make searches possible on a full 360° arc.

For a complete sweep of the compass to a distance of 700 nautical miles, eighty-four aircraft would be required each day to make the sixteen-hour flights. Since the same planes and crews could not make such punishing flights every day, the Navy required a fleet of 200 to 250 operational aircraft if it hoped to conduct effective reconnaissance over a protracted period. How many operational (i.e. flyable) patrol aircraft did Kimmel have? He had 49 operational Catalinas, PBV-3s and PBV-5s, plus, upon request, six B-17D Flying Fortresses being used to train crews of the Philippine Air Force. (The Navy Department in Washington had promised Kimmel 100 additional PBVs but they were

sent to Great Britain instead.) For the Navy planes at hand spare parts were extremely scarce--many of the Catalinas were grounded by cracked engine nose sections--, experienced aviation machinist mates were also in short supply, and there were no spare crews.

If Kimmel lacked the air assets required for a 360° search--the only type of search around an island base that deserved the name, said Kimmel, backed up by his relief Admiral Chester W. Nimitz on 7 January 1942 when Nimitz said, "It cannot be assumed that any direction of approach may safely be left unguarded.... Neglect of any sector is apt soon to be known"--if Kimmel could not have performed the *ideal* search, should he not at least have covered the *most dangerous* sectors of an enemy air approach with the aircraft he had available? That was the charge made against Kimmel in 1944 by Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations. Earlier that year Kimmel had been exonerated of the judgment "dereliction of duty" made against him two years earlier by the Roberts Commission, first of many bodies to investigate the Pearl Harbor attack. The exonerating body was a three-admiral Navy Court of Inquiry. Without reading any of the testimony given before the court, as he himself admitted, Admiral King overturned the findings of the court and reinstated the charge of "dereliction of duty." (As we learn later, King did not author his "negative endorsement" nor did he even read it before it was published.)

Why did King act as he did? Because, he told Kimmel to his face, the Pacific Fleet commander, with his limited patrol plane assets, could have covered at least the "more dangerous" sectors of approach to Oahu. Which sectors those were he did not say. It is important to note that it is under the cloud of that single flag officer's peremptory charge of dereliction that the Kimmel name lives to this day.

The same accusation of having neglected coverage of the "most dangerous" sector was made against Kimmel in 1986 by Gordon W. Prange and associates in a book titled *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History*, and in a chapter pointedly entitled "His [meaning Kimmel's] Most Greivous Failure."

Kimmel had enough patrol planes to cover the *north* and *northwest* sectors, charged Prange and his associates, which had clearly been identified to Kimmel as "the most dangerous sectors" by the Martin-Bellinger estimate of 31 March 1941. The Martin-Bellinger report, they wrote, was an "historic work" "famous to all students of the Pacific war." So it may be. But it also seems to be the most famously *unread* work of the Pacific war.

Martin was Major General Frederick L. Martin, commander of the Army's Hawaiian Air Force. Bellinger was Rear Admiral Patrick N. Bellinger, commander of the Navy's air patrol squadrons. Their estimate cannily predicted that a surprise air attack on Oahu would be launched around dawn, prior to a declaration of war, and from a distance inside three hundred nautical miles.

Kimmel exercised poor judgment, Prange and his associated wrote, in not heeding Martin-Bellinger's direct warning about the "most dangerous" north and northwest sectors and for not initiating limited air searches in those directions with his 49 PBVs and 6 B-17Ds. But Martin-Bellinger says *no such thing*. Following Prange and his associates naval historian Paolo E. Coletta wrote that Martin-Bellinger predicted that such an attack would come from the "south." Martin-Bellinger says no such thing. Historian Michael Slackman wrote that Martin-Bellinger predicted that such an attack would come from the "north." Martin-Bellinger says no such thing. And, as late as summer, 2001 naval

historian and technical writer Norman Polmar wrote that Martin-Bellinger stipulated that the Navy should "initiate limited air searches to [the] most likely direction of attack [as] recommended by...Martin-Bellinger." But Martin-Bellinger says no such thing. *Will someone please read the Martin-Bellinger estimate?* In fact, the famously unread estimate names no "most dangerous" or "most likely" directions of attack, neither "north," "northwest," nor "south," nor any equivalent nautical or numerical terms. Nor does it recommend "limited air searches" to any "most likely direction of attack." What apparently happened here, after the original charge was made, has been deftly, though unwittingly, expressed by one of the offenders: Elsewhere in his book *Target: Pearl Harbor* Slackman writes: "A volume of folklore has developed around the Pearl Harbor attack as stories and 'facts' are passed from source to source with little critical examination."

In history nothing substitutes for examination of the original documents.

If Kimmel had ordered "*limited* air searches" with what aircraft he had over, say 128° of arc to a distance of 700 miles, Bellinger said in May 1945 that the PBYS would have been incapacitated after "perhaps four or five days." That means that if Kimmel had established what he called "largely token searches" over a sector or two off Oahu on the day following the so-called "war warning" of November 27th the patrol bomber force would be down for repair or overhaul by December 2nd or a day or so thereafter, leaving the balance of the days prior to December 7th unattended. Kimmel stated:

I decided that I could not fritter away my
patrol-plane resources by pushing them to

the limit in daily distant searches of one sector around Oahu--which within the predictable future would have to be discontinued when the patrol planes and crews gave out.

And that was a central consideration, since the U.S. Navy war plan WPPac-46 required that the patrol plane force on Oahu advance in "maximum practicable strength" prior to W-Day plus 5 to Wake, Midway, and Johnston Islands, as part of the Marshall Raiding and Reconnaissance Plan. As Kimmel's war plans officer Captain Charles H. "Soc" McMorris expressed it, "...If we were called upon to conduct a war, [then] we would find a large proportion of our planes needing engine overhaul at the time we most required their services." For that reason, and also because WPPac-46 mandated distant aerial reconnaissance only from W-Day forward, Kimmel decided to concentrate his aircraft on expansion training until more aircraft, or more information, became available. As Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, senior Navy air commander in Hawaii, said: "Any Admiral worth his stars would have made the same choice." Indeed, Kimmel's replacement as CINCPAC Admiral Chester W. Nimitz stated in 1960: "Admiral Kimmel had been given no information which would justify interrupting a very urgent training schedule."