

Recent Discoveries

ADMIRAL KIMMEL AND THE QUESTION OF THE PACIFIC FLEET'S STATE OF READINESS

by
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On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor I took a bus trip with some others from Honolulu to the site of the Opana radar station at the northern tip of Oahu Island. While there, our guide, an official historian from the Naval Historical Center in Washington, cited Roberta Wohlstetter's view that, had Opana's radar detection of the oncoming Japanese air fleet been heeded at Fort Shafter, Pearl Harbor would have been afforded about 45 minutes of advance warning. But that time-period would have been of little use, the official Navy historian said, since Admiral Kimmel's navy with many if not most of its enlisted personnel on liberty, was in a "peacetime mode."

Similarly, Colonel Frederick Borch, writing in that fall's issue of *MHQ [Military History Quarterly]* stated that Kimmel and his navy were in a "peacetime in Hawaii mentality" with "sailors on liberty." That is the official Army-Navy line on Kimmel as the Pentagon continues to deflect any responsibility for the success of the Japanese attack, and as it assiduously endeavors to maintain Kimmel as the Navy scapegoat for what happened on December 7th. It is a policy sometimes aided by individual historians, such as Gordon W. Prange, the title of whose best-known book *At Dawn We Slept* (1981) reflects the widely spawned belief that as the Japanese air fleet bore down on Pearl Harbor Kimmel's officers and crews were mostly ashore or asleep in their bunks.

The trouble with that view is that it is not true. Thanks to original U.S. Navy reports not previously discovered or used by historians, we can now state, ship-by-ship, how many officers and enlisted complement were on board vessels in the harbor and were wide awake at the commencement of the attack. Rather than spend time here on individual ship numbers, however, let us consider a general summary of percentage of personnel mustered on station:

Officers on battleships	60-70%
Officers on cruisers	65%
Officers on destroyers	50%
Enlisted personnel on battleships	95%
Enlisted personnel on cruisers	98%
Enlisted personnel on destroyers	85%

Comparatively few men were on liberty. And at 0755, attack time on the 7th, and ten minutes after the forenoon watch relieved the morning watch, ship's complements were not asleep, as Prange would have us believe. Their ships were beehives of activity, white-uniformed officers and sailors seen everywhere about their decks and tops, performing their watch-keeping, gunnery, engineering, cleaning and polishing duties. Bands and guards were assembling for morning colors. The morning watch was below chowing down.

As for the Navy being in a "peacetime mode:" Following the war warning of 16 October, Admiral Kimmel put the Battle Force on 12-hour sailing notice; delayed the sailing of West Virginia to Puget Sound for overhaul; dispatched two submarines to Wake Island; dispatched additional Marines to Wake, Johnston, and Palmyra Islands; dispatched 12 patrol planes to Midway; and placed six submarines on short notice for departure to Japanese home waters.

Following the November 27th war warning, Kimmel issued orders to the fleet to "exercise extreme vigilance" against submarines in the operating areas and to depth charge all contacts. He gave that attack order in direct violation of a restraining order from Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold R. Stark, dated September 23rd. It was thanks to Kimmel's counter order that USS *Ward* and PBY14 PI were able to make their joint attack on the midget submarine outside the entrance channel at 0645 on December 7th.

Kimmel also dispatched two task forces "under complete war conditions." They were TF 8 with the carrier Enterprise under Vice Admiral William F. Halsey to deliver Marine F4F fighters to Wake, and TF 12, built around *Lexington*, under Rear Admiral John H. Newton, to deliver F4Fs to Midway. Both forces were to observe radio silence; to arm all torpedoes and bombs, to sink any submarine sighted or otherwise detected; and to shoot down any aircraft not identified as American. Furthermore, the carrier aircraft were to conduct en route morning and afternoon air searches out to 300 miles from their positions for any sign of hostile ships. Thus, Kimmel **did** in fact have distant air reconnaissance in the western and northwestern sectors, and to a greater distance than could have been achieved by patrol planes based on Oahu. Add to that the patrol plane searches that Kimmel ordered from Midway to Wake, from Johnston to Midway, and from Midway to Pearl and you have air coverage over some 2-million square miles of ocean.

At Oahu itself, three PBYs flew **armed** dawn patrols over the approaches south of Pearl. At Oahu, too, Kimmel established an offshore patrol of the island perimeter by ship; activated the harbor patrol post; deployed sonobuoys to detect submarines; instituted regular sweeping of channels; and updated daily a memorandum entitled "Steps To Be Taken in case of American-Japanese war within the next 24 hours."

Today's historian might well ask, does all that sound like a Navy in "peacetime mode?" or, as Colonel Borch expressed it in *MHQ*, in a "peacetime in Hawaii mentality?"

Does all that sound like a commander-in-chief who was "derelict in his duty?" The terms Kimmel and dereliction, this historian submits, were antithetical.

While the primary responsibility for anti-aircraft protection of the naval station and Fleet was the army's, and while Kimmel thought that a submarine attack was more likely than an air attack, he ordered that all ships must have a sufficient number of officers and men trained for the job in each watch to man all anti-aircraft batteries. Ships were to be moored by sectors in such a way as to provide each a clear arc of fire. And there had to be on board at all times, day and night, a sufficient number of officers and men to repel enemy aircraft, to get the ships underway, to go to sea, and to fight the ship. On the morning of December 7th Admiral Kimmel's navy met all those numbers, and more so.

Each battleship had two machine guns continuously manned day and night, with two cases of .50-caliber ammunition, and crews standing by two 5-inch AA guns with

fifteen rounds of ammunition for each. Kimmel had ignored *Navy Regulations* and made the critical decision to have "ammo at the guns." The result was that gun action on battleships engaged the enemy within four minutes, and Vice Admiral Nagumo Chuichi, commander of the attacking Japanese force, wrote in his after-action report that "the enemy's anti-aircraft fire reaction had been so prompt as virtually to nullify the advantage of surprise."

The weapons at Kimmel's disposal were wretchedly inadequate for defending against fast-flying modern aircraft. The .50-caliber machine guns lacked heft; the 3-inch gun was not rapid fire; and the 1.1-inch was subject to overheating and jamming after a few rounds. On the previous 26 April Kimmel had pleaded with the Navy Department for Oerlikons and Bofors, which had been adopted by most Western navies, but was turned down.

Kimmel's disposition of ships and state of readiness were criticized after the attack by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. The Secretary made a flying visit to Pearl on December 11th and, after thirty-two hours of investigation, returned to Washington, typing his report on Fleet losses as he flew. To President Franklin D. Roosevelt he reported that Kimmel had not been in a "state of readiness." He made the same charge against Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short, Commanding Officer of the Hawaiian Department. Subsequently, on the 16th of December both officers were relieved of their commands. Kimmel was replaced by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz.

What was interesting to me about the change of command was my recent discovery in the Kimmel papers at the University of Wyoming of a communication from Nimitz at Pearl to the new Commander-in-Chief United States Navy Admiral Ernest J. King at Washington, dated January 7, 1942, in which Nimitz stated his conviction that the Japanese carriers would return for a second air strike, perhaps more. "The attack of 7 December will be followed by others," he wrote King. What was even more interesting was that, in the face of such immediate expectations, Nimitz maintained *the same state of readiness* that Kimmel had in place on December 7th. Indeed, Nimitz re-issued without change Kimmel's Pacific Fleet Confidential Letter on port security, No. 2CL-41, entitled "Security of Fleet at Base and in Operating Areas," dated 14 October 1942.

That letter called for Condition III. Condition I, which was General Quarters with all guns manned on maximum alert, could not be sustained for longer than twelve hours. We remember that, on August 8, 1942 at Savo Island, the U.S. Navy lost four heavy cruisers in a night battle to a Japanese force because the ships' crews were exhausted from being kept at maximum alert for sixteen hours without rest.

The 2CL-41 letter with Kimmel's name on it was re-issued by Nimitz *without change* as to watches and conditions of readiness, and it remained in force throughout 1942. I mention this because the critic who would skewer Kimmel on his state of readiness must be prepared to take on Admiral Nimitz as well