



Japanese American Veterans Association

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto Air Convoy Shoot Down. Nisei had no Apparent Role.

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In its effort to document the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) role in the shoot down of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's air convoy on April 18, 1943, JAVA has not found any citation that the MIS was involved in the events that resulted in the shoot down. Lyn Crost's *Honor by Fire*, published in 1994, noted that Sgt Harold Fudenna, a translator at the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS), located at Indooroopilly, near Brisbane, Australia, was assigned TDY to the 5th AF, 138th Signal Radio Intercept Company, located near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, to translate a Japanese message intercepted by the Squadron. This Yamamoto itinerary was said to be in *kana*, a form of Japanese written language, however, JAVA has not been able to ascertain the date, time and origin of transmission. Nor has JAVA been able to locate any intelligence dissemination or 138th Signal Radio Intercept Company messages on this subject. Despite JAVA's best efforts, a copy of this alleged intercepted message has not been located. If anyone has a copy of the 138th Signal Radio Intercept Company intercepted telegram, please advise Terry Shima, above. Crost said Walter Tanaka, an MIS colleague of Fudenna, told her:

"Early on April 18, 1943, just before American P-38s were due to take off from Guadalcanal on their hunt for Admiral Yamamoto, Brig Gen [Ennis] Whitehead summoned Fudenna to his quarters to review the translation. The General warned Fudenna that he would hold him (Fudenna) responsible for its accuracy. Fudenna assured him that these new messages verified the original coded message: Yamamoto would be on the flight. . . . A few hours later General Whitehead visited him [Fudenna] to thank him for his part in the successful mission." P.56, *Honor by Fire*.

BG Whitehead was Deputy Commander of 5th AF with headquarters in Australia and Commander of the 5th AF forward base in Port Moresby, where he resided, with responsibility for the 138th Signal Radio Intercept Company. Fudenna is said to have remarked that CAPT

Felix Marshall, 1st Radio squadron commander and other officers accompanied General Whitehead, when he visited Fudenna at his tent.

JAVA's search of NARA (National Archives and Records Administration) documents did not produce any corroborating information on Whitehead's involvement in the shoot down. Maj Gen Ennis Whitehead, Jr, son of Brig Gen Ennis Whitehead, told JAVA a review of his father's published memoirs contained no reference to his role in the shoot down. Therefore, he assumes his father was not involved in this operation. Brig Gen Jim Whitehead, son of Maj Gen Ennis, told JAVA he and his wife reviewed the papers they held and the results were negative. Sam Shearin, an archivist at the Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, where the Whitehead papers are stored said he could not find any citation of Brig Gen Whitehead's role. Ed Rowe, a friend of Wade Ishimoto, who resides near Maxwell AF Base made several visits to the Agency to conduct research and to meet with George Cully, former Air University History Office Director, Sam Shearin, and Dr. Dan Haulman, both archivists at the Agency and concluded there is no documentation in the Whitehead's papers to the issue at hand.

Dr. James McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During WW II*, 2006, page 186: "Fifth AF played little or no role in this incident [shoot down of Admiral Yamamoto's air convoy]"

Story of the Shoot Down

At 5:55 PM on April 13, 1943, when the war was going badly for Japan, the Commander of Japan 8th Fleet, located at Rabaul, New Britain, sent a coded telegram (JN 25) that provided Admiral Yamamoto itinerary of his inspection visit to the northern Solomons area. A reason for the visit was to give the troops a morale boost. The message, which was given wide distribution, said the Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet will visit Ballale, Shortland and Buin on April 18. Message provided detailed arrival and departure information, mode of travel, number of escort fighters and contingency for bad weather. This message was intercepted at FRUPAC (Fleet Radio Unit, Pacific), FRUMEL (Fleet Radio Unit, Melbourne) and NEGAT (US Navy intercept station in Washington, DC).

As the JN 25 code was already broken by the Americans, the message was decrypted and translated at FRUPAC by Marine Lt Col Alva Byan Lasswell and was passed the next day to Commander Ed Layton, CINCPAC intelligence officer. Admiral Chester NIMITZ, CINCPAC, sent the message to Washington. President Franklin Roosevelt approved and requested the shoot down of Admiral Yamamoto's air convoy be given the highest priority. This was

conveyed to RADM Marc A. Mitscher, commander of the Solomons region, via NIMITZ and Admiral Halsey who was responsible for that region.

Details were worked out such as the type of aircraft to use, the selection of pilots, use of detachable belly tanks for extra fuel, precise flight plans to reach target area, to destroy the target, and to return safely, the number of attack planes (4) and the number of escorts (12). The US pilots were drawn from the 12th, 339th and 70th fighter squadrons. The flight commander was MAJ John T. Mitchell, who devised a precise flight plan. Yamamoto's air convoy consisted of the following. one M/B "Betty" with 6 escort fighters ("zeke"), which carried Admiral Yamamoto and one M/B "Betty" bomber with 3 escort fighters ("zeke"), which carried Vice Admiral Ugaki, Yamamoto's chief of staff.

The success of the American plan depended on Admiral Yamamoto's time discipline. He was compulsively punctual, virtually to the split second, which the Americans experienced from Yamamoto's duty in the US. At 7:25 AM on April 18 1943, the American pilots departed Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, to travel a circuitous all water route at ten to thirty feet above the water and radio silenced to avoid enemy radar detection. At 8:00 AM, 35 minutes later and 700 miles away, Yamamoto's convoy took off on schedule from Rabaul airfield and arrived over the southwest coast of Bougainville at 9:35 AM, the exact time the P 38s arrived there.

CAPT Lamphier dropped his belly tanks and moved his plane to Yamamoto's right. Two Zeros attacked him and he knocked one out. Meanwhile, the bomber was making an escape and Lamphier pursued it hitting the right engine and right wing burst into flames. The bomber plunged into the jungle north of Buin. Lamphier climbed to 20,000 and all planes, except one, returned to Henderson field. Ugaki's plane crashed into the sea. Ugaki survived but was critically injured. CAPT Watanabe, who stayed back at Rabaul to complete unfinished work, recovered, cremated, and escorted Yamamoto's remains back to Tokyo.

US lost one P-38 and Japan lost 3 zekes and two Betty bombers. MAJ Mitchell, mission commander, said "the discipline -- intelligent discipline -- was flawless throughout the mission".

US maintained silence over the shoot down until May 21, 1943, when Japan announced Yamamoto's death "while directing general strategy on the front line in April of this year, engaged in combat with the enemy and met gallant death in a war plane". He was given an impressive public burial in Tokyo on June 5, 1943.

According to David Kahn, author of *The Code Breakers: The Story of Secret Writing*, “Yamamoto was the dominant figure of the Japanese Navy. A prophet of air power, aggressive and determined, he devised bold, imaginative plans and executed them under strong leadership. He was the *shogi* (Japanese chess) champion of the Navy and in the 1920’s enjoyed matching with Americans at poker, which he played well. American intelligence rated him as ‘exceptionally able, forceful and quick thinking’. His men idolized him. Layton summed up with the observation that Yamamoto was preeminent in all categories, that any successor would be personally and professionally inferior, and finally, that the death of the commander in chief would demoralize the Japanese, who venerate their captains much more than occidentals do. Nimitz agreed”. VADM Fukudome, Chief of Staff under Admiral Mineichi Koga who was wounded when his plane ditched near Cebu, Philippines, said Yamamoto’s loss “dealt an almost unbearable blow to the morale of all the military forces.” [Sources: NARA, books, NJAHS, BG Whitehead’s family; Maxwell AFB Historical Research Agency]