

Killing a Peacock: A Case Study of the Targeted Killing of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Killing a Peacock: A Case Study of the Targeted Killing of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, by Maj Adonis C. Arvanitakis, 45 pages.

In early April 1943, the United States military targeted and killed Imperial Japanese Marshal Admiral and Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, Isoroku Yamamoto. It marked the first time in known history, that the US military specifically targeted an individual commander for elimination.

Examination of various primary source material, to include personal letters, and transcripts from the interviews of eyewitnesses reveals a narrative that describes the circumstances surrounding the decision to target and kill Yamamoto. Starting with an appreciation of the intelligence and its unique value to the Allies during the Second World War, the narrative moves to describe a decision-making process based on strong circumstantial evidence and supporting testimony. The monograph then offers an understanding of the how the mission actually transpired and reveals that successful completion of the mission was anything but a forgone conclusion. Lastly, the aftermath of the mission and the reaction by both the Japanese and Americans, reveal the strategic effect of the mission. The mission had a strong effect on the both wills of the people and though it did not turn the tide of the war per se, it did help secure an American victory at the end of the Second World War. The findings here reveal that the circumstances surrounding the decision to kill Yamamoto revolved around the means, ways, and end.

Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
The Decision.....	7
The Mission.....	19
The Aftermath	34
Conclusion.....	42
Bibliogrpahy.....	46

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Introduction

In the early morning of April 19, 1943, deep in the South Pacific on the remote island of Bougainville, Japanese Army officer Second Lieutenant Tsuyoshi Hamasuna and his men found themselves moving through a dense rain forest.¹ Just the previous day, he and his soldiers were overseeing an indigenous road crew when a villager from the hamlet of Ako came running from the jungle with his hands waiving overhead, eagerly beckoning the soldiers to follow him.² Unsure of the specifics due to the language barrier, the lieutenant understood enough to know that something catastrophic took place. On his own initiative, he decided that he and some of his men would investigate the matter.³ After a full day of hacking through the jungle in sauna-like conditions, the heat and various insects of the rain forest were on the verge of convincing the officer that he should turn back when suddenly his point man came to a scorched clearing.⁴ As the group broke free from the jungle, the acrid aroma of fuel, smoke, and burnt flesh filled the air.⁵ Instantly, Hamasuna understood that he made the right decision. In front of him lay a recently wrecked aircraft, one his country's medium bombers. Insignificant to him at the time, the young lieutenant noticed the number

¹ David Aiken, ed., "Yamamoto's Betty (323) Crash Site," *Japanese Information Clearinghouse, 1* (Apr 1983): 16.

² Burke Davis, *Get Yamamoto* (New York: Random House, 1969), 192; Tsuyoshi Hamasuna, May, 1982, Maxwell AFB, AL (Air Force Historical Research Agency).

³ Hamasuna, "Interview of Tsuyoshi Hamasuna," Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 94.

⁵ Based on the author's experience as a trained Flight Safety Officer in the United States Air Force, the description of crash site consisting of unidentified charred bodies, and the time of discovery relative to the time of the crash, the author asserts that that the smell of burnt flesh and fuel remained strong in the area upon Lt Hamasuna's arrival. See Aiken, "Yamamoto's Betty (323) Crash Site," 16.

323 stenciled on the side of the tail section, a number that would have profound meaning in a few hours.⁶

He and his men, with a newfound source of energy from the discovery, hurriedly organized themselves and began looking for survivors. They fanned out across the crash site and began calling out to their comrades, desperately waiting for responses that never came. As they searched, it soon became apparent that they were not going to find any. The plane had mostly broken up on impact and the site showed signs of an intense fire, which the humid jungle air and moist foliage snuffed out before it had a chance to spread. All that remained identifiable of the Mitsubishi G4M “Betty” bomber were the empennage, engines, and parts of the wings.⁷

Scouring the wreckage, the lieutenant and his men wound up finding eleven bodies in all. Taking extreme care as they gathered them up, they respectfully laid the bodies in a clearing while their Ako guide and his fellow Melanesians covered them with banana leaves.⁸ The whole scenario seemed surreal, however, one of the victims stood out in particular to Hamasuna. Where the searchers found most of the victims inside the fuselage of the cursed aircraft, charred and mutilated beyond recognition, one of the passengers, thrown clear of the wreckage and fire, appeared from a distance to be sitting up in his seat, meditating.⁹ As the lieutenant advanced, he could see that the officer’s left hand was still clutching his *katana* sword, with his right hand laying on top.¹⁰ Giving into a bit of optimism, Hamasuna initially thought he found a survivor. Yet as he worked his way through the dense bush to the front of the man, he lost all hope as a closer inspection showed the man was missing

⁶ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 195.

⁷ Aiken, “Yamamoto's Betty (323) Crash Site,” 16.

⁸ Hamasuna, “Interview of Tsuyoshi Hamasuna.” Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

his lower jaw and part of his left shoulder.¹¹ Taking a moment to revere this Japanese officer's last act, Hamasuna and his men did not realize the significance of their discovery until the official search party arrived at the crash site and informed them later in the afternoon.¹² In fact, the number 323 stenciled on the vertical stabilizer confirmed that Hamasuna and his detail found the body of none other than that of Japanese Marshal Admiral and Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, Isoroku Yamamoto. Shocked they could only wonder what their discovery might mean for Imperial Japan's hopes and dreams for the war.

On the one-year anniversary of the infamous Doolittle Raid, April 18, 1943, the 339th Fighter Squadron launched eighteen specially modified P-38 "Lightnings" from Henderson Field, Guadalcanal on a mission to intercept Yamamoto.¹³ This mission materialized in less than a week, from the first Japanese radio intercept announcing Yamamoto's itinerary to Lieutenant Rex Barber of the Cactus Air Force putting two rounds of .50-caliber machine gun fire into the architect of the Pearl

¹¹ Burke Davis in his book *Get Yamamoto* claims that Lt Hamasuna instantly recognized Yamamoto upon discovery. However, based on that fact that Lt Hamasuna had no previous knowledge of who he was looking for, Yamamoto's lower jaw/face was missing, and Yamamoto was wearing an Imperial Japanese Army Uniform, something he had never done before, the author asserts that it was in fact Capt Wanatabe who actually identified Yamamoto when he arrived at the crash site later in the day. See Aiken, "Yamamoto's Betty (323) Crash Site," 16; Matome Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 353.

¹² Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 195.

¹³ The Doolittle Raid or "Tokyo Raid" was the first significant military strike against Imperial Japan following their surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Led by Colonel James Doolittle, the aerial bombing of mainland Japan by B-25Bs, launched from aircraft carriers east of Japan, displayed American resolve and exposed Japanese vulnerability. Overall, the Japanese suffered little in terms of loss of life or physical damage to infrastructure but the raid was nonetheless viewed as a moral defeat for Japan and a victory for the US. The attack destroyed the illusion of Imperial Japanese military invincibility. Consequently, the Imperial Japanese Navy, charged with homeland defense, stood humiliated in its failure to protect the emperor and his people. Admiral Yamamoto received carte blanche authorization to proceed with his plan to attack Midway Island; an attack he hoped would lead to the complete destruction of the American Pacific carrier fleet. See Clayton K.S. Chun, *The Doolittle Raid 1942: America's First Strike Back at Japan* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 7-17.

Harbor attack.¹⁴ These shots marked the first time in history that US military commanders specifically targeted an individual for assassination.¹⁵ The circumstances surrounding the decision to carry out the attack gives precedence to contemporary targeted killing operations. Today the debate regarding the usefulness of killing a high value target seems somewhat muted in military circles. In 1943, however, that decision required significant deliberation.

The decision to kill Yamamoto hinged on several factors, beginning with the intelligence used to decipher his itinerary. The US Army and Navy intelligence community prized the ability to decipher Japanese code and they realized a mission to intercept his transport aircraft could compromise this critical capability.¹⁶ A closely guarded secret since the 1920s, the ability to understand Japanese naval transmissions proved itself invaluable in aiding the US Pacific Fleet to victories at the Battle of Midway and Guadalcanal.¹⁷ In addition, Yamamoto's command represented a known quantity to military planners. They could safely rely on his predictable habit of beginning his planned major offensives with a preemptive air attack. On the contrary, there was no way to predict the preferences of the Admiral's replacement. The possibility existed that a new commander could bring a new dynamic to the art of warfare in the Pacific, one that could possibly shift momentum back to the Japanese. The Imperial Japanese Navy had just experienced two significant losses to the Americans and Yamamoto gave indications that he believed his navy's victory was now impossible.¹⁸

¹⁴ US military personnel affectionately referred to the US Army Air Forces assigned at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal as the Cactus Air Force; named so for the Allied code name for Guadalcanal. See 70th Fighter Squadron, "70th Fighter Squadron Diary" (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1943).

¹⁵ Damian Mencini, "Blast from the Past: Using History to Shape Targeted Strikes Policy," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 2(2014): 84.

¹⁶ Daniel L. Haulman, "The Yamamoto Mission," *Air Power History* 50, no. 2 (2003): 32.

¹⁷ Edward Van Der Rhoer, *Deadly Magic: A Personal Account of Communications Intelligence in World War II in the Pacific* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978); Ronald Spector, "Military Effectiveness of the US Armed Forces, 1919-1939," in *Military Effectiveness: The Interwar Period*, ed. Alan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (New York: Cambridge), 88.

¹⁸ Hiroyuki Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*, trans. John Bester (New York: Kodansha International, 1979), 345.

As well, it was unclear as to how his death would resonate with the Japanese people. The possibility existed that his death would in fact strengthen Japanese resolve and would further their war effort. The decision makers recognized that there was no guarantee that his elimination would materially contribute to the Allied effort in the Pacific. Nevertheless, Admiral Chester A. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Ocean Areas, with authorization from Washington decided that the operation, later named Operation Vengeance, was worth the risk.¹⁹

Since 1943, debate regarding the Yamamoto mission varied over the years, with the most prevalent discussions centering on the debate of who actually shot down Yamamoto's aircraft. The US Army Air Forces' post-mission reports indicated they shot down three Japanese bombers on that fateful day but independent Japanese records clearly indicate that only two bombers were lost.²⁰ In fact, the testimonies of the two American pilots who claim credit for the shoot down vary to such a degree that only one of their versions can be true.²¹ Unfortunately, this debate largely overshadows the momentous and precedent-setting decision-making process that the mission entailed. As historian Burke Davis noted in his book *Get Yamamoto*, "there is no truly clarifying or definitive document on the Yamamoto mission... [But] official sources (all in the Aerospace Studies Institute, Maxwell AFB, AL) are plentiful."²² Thus, the question that surely started with Lieutenant Hamasuna on April 19,

¹⁹ John Deane Potter, *Yamamoto: The Man Who Menaced America* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 324; George T. Chandler, "Syma Newsletter #13 - the Last One," Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency (Pratt, KS: Second Yamamoto Mission Association, 1996), 1.

²⁰ ComAirSols, "Intelligence Bulletin" (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1943).

²¹ Official Air Force records give shared credit for the Yamamoto shoot down to Rex T. Barber and Tom G. Lanphier. However forensics evidence of the crash site and testimony of the pilots themselves clearly indicate that Rex Barber's testimony most accurately reflects the truth of the matter. Furthermore, the angle of attack by Barber corresponds to the lethal entry and exit wounds to Yamamoto himself. Therefore, this monograph will not further the debate regarding the accreditation. See Kit C. Carter and Robert Mueller, *Combat Chronology, 1941-1945*, World War II anniversary ed. (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1991), 123.

²² Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 228.

1943, and persists to this day remains unanswered. What were the circumstances surrounding the decision to target and kill Yamamoto during the Second World War?

In pursuit of an answer, there must first be an understanding of decision-making process in its entirety. Beginning with the means, the receipt of the coded message, a decision necessitated an appreciation for the sensitive nature of the intelligence and the fallout from possibly compromising its source. As well, a look into the target himself is critical. An account of Yamamoto's unique education and experience will give understanding to his value as a commander and illustrate his importance to the Japanese war effort. Lastly, an account of who made what decision when will give insight into the process. Though Admiral Nimitz may have made the final decision to authorize the operation, the decision to kill Yamamoto did not rest with him alone.

Next, recognition of the ways, the specific mission details, will give awareness into the circumstances of the mission by showing the great amount of risk and chance the mission entailed. An abbreviated planning window coupled with glaring shortages in material and unproven capabilities made the mission "at best a long shot."²³ Where intelligence sources clearly indicated the flight composition and itinerary, those sources could not accurately predict the receiving locations defensive measures. It was possible, as the Americans had done when receiving United States Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox at Guadalcanal, that the Japanese would establish a combat air patrol along the route of travel from Rabaul to Bougainville.²⁴ This proposition greatly threatened the feasibility of mission accomplishment. The success or failure of this operation laid in the audacious hands of those P-38 *Lightning* pilots. The improvised tactics they created a few days earlier and their perception of their mission's importance proved the difference maker. Ultimately, these mission

²³ Major General Brook E. Allen, April 1, 1970, Maxwell AFB, AL (Air Force Historical Research Agency).

²⁴ "Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier" (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1984).

details further facilitate the understanding of the circumstances surrounding the operation to kill Yamamoto.

Lastly, analysis of the end, the aftermath of mission, will give insight into its effectiveness. Examining the immediate Japanese and American post-mission reaction will help determine if some of the expectations of mission indeed matched reality. Analyzing the success and failure of Yamamoto's replacement will help determine the utility of the mission. Addressing the basic question of worthiness, the relevance of this section carries the greatest significance for current and future operations of this nature.

Analysis of the circumstances surrounding the decision to kill Chief Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto starts with intelligence and a decision-making process that is conducive to the potential strategic implications of the mission. Furthermore, mission details define the possibility of such a mission and account for the inherent risk and chance involved. Lastly, the aftermath of this mission addresses the utility of such a mission. Overall, an evaluation of the lessons learned from this precedent setting operation will further aid our understanding of contemporary targeted killing operations. This historic case study not only answers the question surrounding the decision-making process for Yamamoto but also facilitates the discussion of targeted killing operations in general. The circumstances surrounding the decision to kill Yamamoto revolved around the means, ways, and end. Intelligence and the decision-making processes represented the "means," mission details revealed the "way," and the aftermath of the mission exposed the "end."

The Decision

The decision to target and kill Yamamoto was a real-time decision in April 1943. There was no preexisting plan or standing order to target anyone, military or civilian, in Imperial Japan's leadership prior. The entirety of decision-making process started with the receipt of a coded message

on Tuesday, April 13, 1943 and ended with mission approval on April 17, 1943.²⁵ Providing the means, this intercepted message initiated a chain of events that led to the death of Yamamoto and serves as the first example of targeted killing by the US military.²⁶ Yet before any US military or civilian leaders would authorize the mission, they needed to consider its ramifications. First, they needed to determine the accuracy of the message and weigh the consequences of possibly compromising its source. One of the most guarded secrets of the Second World War, the ability to intercept Imperial Japanese Naval code proved to be invaluable to the allied effort as a whole and relinquishing this advantage was unacceptable.²⁷ Next, they needed to look into the target himself. The decision makers needed to answer the basic question, “is he worth it?” An understanding of Yamamoto’s unique education and experience confirmed his value as a commander in the Imperial Japanese Navy and validated his worthiness as a target. Lastly, an account of who made what decision when will give insight into the importance of the motivations and individual personalities of the decision makers. The decision to kill someone of Yamamoto’s position and importance had strategic consequences that superseded the confines of the Pacific theater. Despite incomplete records, circumstantial evidence abounds and indicates an adjudication process at the highest levels of command. Nimitz may have made the final decision to authorize the operation but the decision to kill Yamamoto was not his alone. In the end, the intercept of a coded message, the validation of Yamamoto as a target, and the roles played by the various decision makers comprised the means by which the Yamamoto mission took form.

²⁵ Extensive research by the author did not reveal any references or mentioning of preexisting plan(s) by the United States to target Imperial Japanese civilian or military leadership prior to the receipt of the coded message regarding Admiral Yamamoto’s itinerary on April 13, 1945.

²⁶ Mencini, “Blast from the Past: Using History to Shape Targeted Strikes Policy,” 84.

²⁷ Roland H. Worth, *Secret Allies in the Pacific: Covert Intelligence and Code Breaking Cooperation between the United States, Great Britain, and Other Nations Prior to the Attack on Pearl Harbor* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 48-50.

On Tuesday morning, April 13, 1943, the naval radio station at Wahiawa, Hawaii intercepted a coded Imperial Japanese Navy radio message.²⁸ A regular occurrence by this time in the war, the message nevertheless stood out from the other intercepts.²⁹ Though specifics of the message still needed deciphering, the number of recipients and the level of encryption made its contents significant. The three processing stations at Negat, Washington, DC, Frupac, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and Frumel, Australia, immediately began their deciphering process.³⁰ Referencing their most current version of Top Secret Japanese naval code, JN 25E14, the cryptanalysts worked fervently to generate a usable product.³¹ The progress was slow going but the contents of their initial translation showed much promise: “ON 18 APRIL COMMANDER IN CHIEF COMBINED FLEET WILL [blank, blank] AS FOLLOWS [blank, blank] BALLALE [blank, blank, blank]”³² Wonderstruck, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Alva B Laswell, one of the navy’s most seasoned cryptanalyst-linguists, understood its possible importance and took the lead in the deciphering process.³³ Working throughout the night, he completed the message by mid-day on April 14, when they intercepted a second message. This message used the less secure JN-20H code.³⁴ More easily deciphered, Laswell and his fellow codebreakers filled in the missing parts of the itinerary.³⁵ The completed message read:

THE INSPECTION TOUR OF THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF COMBINED FLEET TO
BALLALE SHORTLAND AND BUIN ON 18 APRIL IS SCHEDULED AS FOLLOWS

²⁸ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 9.

²⁹ Donald A. Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 227.

³⁰ R. Cargill Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, Smithsonian History of Aviation Series (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

³¹ This version of JN 25 came from the exploitation of a captured Japanese submarine, run aground on Guadalcanal in January 1943. The captured submarine yielded thousands of codebooks. See Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 11.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁴ Kyodo News, “Use of Outdated Code Led to Ambush That Killed Yamamoto, U.S. Files Show,” *Japan Times* 2008.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

0600 DEPART RABUAL BY MEDIUM ATTACK PLANE, ACCOMPANIED BY SIX FIGHTERS

0800 ARRIVE BALLALE. DEPART IMMEDIATELY FOR SHORTLAND BY SUBCHASER. FIRST BASE WILL PREPARE ONE BOAT ARRIVING SHORTLAND 0840

0945 DEPART SHORTLAND BY SUBCHASER ARRIVING BALLALE 1030 FOR TRANSPORTATION PREPARE ASSAULT BOAT AT SHORTLAND AND MOTOR LAUNCH AT BALLALE

1100 DEPART BALLALE BY MEDIUM ATTACK PLANE ARRIVING BUIN 1110 LUNCH AT HEADQUARTERS FIRST BASE FORCE SENIOR STAFF OFFICER AIR FLOTILLA 26 TO BE PRESENT

1400 DEPART BUIN BY MEDIUM ATTACK PLANE ARRIVING RABUAL 1540...IN THE EVENT OF INCLEMENT WEATHER THERE WILL BE A POSTPONEMENT OF ONE DAY.³⁶

Laswell then passed the completed message to Lieutenant Commander Edwin T. Layton, Pearl Harbor's fleet intelligence officer, who authenticated the message. Layton knew Yamamoto personally from his time as an attaché in Tokyo, where they often played cards together.³⁷ A movement that close to enemy territory may have appeared as an unnecessary risk to others, but for Layton it seemed perfectly in line with Yamamoto's character as a gambler.³⁸

Layton immediately ran the completed message to his boss's office, Admiral Nimitz. With a quick read of the message, Nimitz looked back at Layton and asked, "[w]hat do you say, do we try and get him?"³⁹ Nimitz's instincts were telling him to act on this information, but he understood that there may be some fallout from using this information and realized they would need to consider several factors before making a decision.⁴⁰ First was his concern about the security of the code. The capability to break Japanese code was a closely guarded secret. Codenamed *Magic*, Americans had

³⁶ David Kahn, *The Codebreakers; the Story of Secret Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 598.

³⁷ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 228.

³⁸ Ellis M. Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1946), 93.

³⁹ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 7.

⁴⁰ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 228-30.

been intercepting Japanese encrypted communiques since the 1920s.⁴¹ By May 1942, the Americans intercepted sixty percent of Imperial Japanese Naval codes and deciphering forty percent of those in their entirety.⁴² This capability already proved critical at the Battle of Midway and Guadalcanal.⁴³ As well, this capability, at this point of the war, did not belong to America alone. The Allies, namely the British, also depended on the ability to break Japanese code.⁴⁴ If the Japanese became aware of the security breach in the communications then it was likely that they would change their code combinations and most assuredly would give notice to their German allies to do the same.⁴⁵ This potential strike not only put *Magic* at risk but by extension also endangered *Ultra*, the British program for deciphering Nazis communications. Nonetheless, Nimitz and Layton decided that they could credibly implicate the Australian coastwatchers near Rabaul.⁴⁶ The Japanese Navy already had a great amount of respect for the capabilities of coastwatchers and to claim them as the source of such valuable intelligence was certainly plausible. Satisfied with implicating the coastwatchers, Nimitz next wanted to know who Yamamoto was; he wanted to know if he was worth the risk.

⁴¹ Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1990), 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Imperial Japanese Naval forces and US Naval forces fought the Battle of Midway six months after Pearl Harbor, 4 – 7 June 1942. Yamamoto received approval to expand naval operations and capture Midway Island immediately after the Doolittle Raid. The Japanese battle plan was to lure the surviving US aircraft carriers from Pearl Harbor into a trap, where they would destroy them in detail. Instead, US codebreakers intercepted Japanese communications and set their own trap. The result was an overwhelming US Naval victory in the Pacific, the first of the war. See Van Der Rhoer, *Deadly Magic*, 141; The Guadalcanal Campaign, 7 August 1942– 9 February 1943 was the first major offensive launched against Imperial Japan on the island of Guadalcanal. Aimed at capturing a Japanese airfield prior to the completion of its construction, US success marked a turning point in the war in the Pacific. See Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 38.

⁴⁴ Worth, *Secret Allies in the Pacific: Covert Intelligence and Code Breaking Cooperation between the United States, Great Britain, and Other Nations Prior to the Attack on Pearl Harbor*, 48.

⁴⁵ Kyodo News, “Use of Outdated Code Led to Ambush That Killed Yamamoto, U.S. Files Show.”

⁴⁶ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 229.

In 1943, most Americans needed no reminding that Yamamoto carried out the attack at Pearl Harbor. Viewed with disdain, his was a household name for many in America representing evil incarnate, a man who lacked honor, a trickster. Tom Lanphier, one of the P-38 pilots who shares credit with shooting down Yamamoto, remarked that Yamamoto was “a conceited and arrogant man...with a face like a frog...an easy man to hate...For in his malevolent person he contained such power for evil.”⁴⁷ Conversely, the Japanese viewed him as a hero, a man who restored Japanese honor on December, 7 1941, with an attack on Pearl Harbor. Seen as transcendent personality, the Japanese believed Yamamoto could lead them to ultimate victory against the Western barbarians.⁴⁸ In this regard, both sides propagandized a version of Yamamoto that simply was not true. Though he was indeed an exceptional leader, Yamamoto was neither a malicious villain nor all-powerful hero that they claimed.

Born in 1884, the sixth son of a former samurai, Yamamoto seemed destined to die a warrior’s death with sword in hand.⁴⁹ His father raised him in line with his familial tradition of service to the Emperor. Despite an anti-western samurai heritage, his elderly father allowed him to learn English from the Christian missionaries in his town.⁵⁰ Yamamoto personally embraced western culture and even studied the Christian religion. Though he never claimed to be a Christian, he often carried around a Bible.⁵¹ When questioned about this habit by his peers, he simply responded, “in order to understand Westerners, you must understand their beliefs.”⁵² Accepted in 1901 to the Imperial Naval Academy, he was an excellent student. His military bearing was impeccable and his

⁴⁷ Tom G. Lanphier, “The End of Yamamoto,” accessed January 16, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/article/archives>, *New York Times* (September 14, 1945),

⁴⁸ Bruce Gamble, *Fortress Rabaul: The Battle for the Southwest Pacific, January 1942-April 1943* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2010), 328.

⁴⁹ Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 358; Edwin P. Hoyt, *Yamamoto: The Man Who Planned the Attack on Pearl Harbor* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 1990), 35.

⁵⁰ Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 18.

⁵¹ Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 75.

⁵² Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 22.

devotion to duty only intensified when his closest brother, and only family advocate, died that same year. Informed by his brothers that as the youngest son in the family, he would not receive an inheritance when their father died, Yamamoto adopted Japan as his new family and committed himself to everlasting service to the Emperor.⁵³

In 1904 Yamamoto graduated from the naval academy, finishing seventh of more than 200 students. He would see combat early in his career.⁵⁴ Stationed aboard the *Nisshin*, Yamamoto served as gunnery officer during the Battle of Tsushima Strait.⁵⁵ During this engagement, he served with courage and distinction. Peppered with shrapnel and losing his middle three fingers on his left hand from an exploding shell, Yamamoto wrapped his hand with his handkerchief and resumed his duties until the end of the battle.⁵⁶ Personally recognized by Admiral Togo Heihachiro, Japan's most venerable naval commander and national hero of the time, he received a commendation medal from Togo himself, an honor that set him apart from his peers.⁵⁷ In 1913, he received an appointment to the Naval Staff College at Tsukiji.⁵⁸ Here, he set himself apart again, drinking little and reading much to increase his knowledge of everything Western.⁵⁹ In 1919, the Imperial Japanese Navy, in an effort to learn more about their most significant Western threat, sent Yamamoto to study at Cambridge and Harvard University. He sought to gain as much understanding of the American industrialization phenomena as possible. Skipping class regularly, he traveled around the United States and Mexico to

⁵³ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵ May 14, 1905 marked the first time in battle that an Asian nation, Japan, defeated a European nation, Russia, in a major battle. Russia's naval defeat was total and the battle marked the end of the Russo-Japanese war. Victory solidified Japan's claim to continental East Asia hegemony. Some naval historians consider this amongst the top five naval battles of human history. See Constantine Pleshakov, *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xvi.

⁵⁶ Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 29

⁵⁷ Ibid; Pleshakov, *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima*, 337.

⁵⁸ Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 33.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 35.

see petroleum plants, shipyards and even toured the Ford assembly plant in Detroit.⁶⁰ The most significant observation he made was with regards to the emergent capability of military aviation.⁶¹ Colonel William “Billy” Mitchell, United States Army Air Service, had just returned from Europe and press headlines screamed his declarations for the importance of airpower. Though Mitchell’s grandiose assertions by-in-large fell on deaf ears in the United States, Yamamoto nevertheless took special interest in Mitchell’s claims, and returned to Japan in 1921 with an increased appreciation for American industrialization and burgeoning admiration for airpower.⁶²

In 1924, he petitioned to join the new Kasumigaura Aviation Corps.⁶³ Accepted, he learned to fly and quickly started to mesh his traditional battleship experience with his appreciation for the theoretical strength of airpower. In 1925, he was again sent to America to serve as a Naval attaché in Washington, DC.⁶⁴ In Washington, Yamamoto developed a reputation for his hard gambling and insatiable thirst for information on American aviation. It was through gambling that US Naval Intelligence officer, Captain Ellis Zacharias, first crossed paths with Yamamoto.⁶⁵ In 1930, when he became director of the technical division of the navy’s Aeronautics department, he pushed for extensive development of a naval air force.⁶⁶ He scrapped plans for the development of more battleships, and instead advocated for the production of modern aircraft carriers.

By 1940, Yamamoto developed unprecedented tactics for integrating naval power with airpower, innovations that no other nation had considered at the time.⁶⁷ In preparation for what he

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 92-93.

⁶² Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 44.

⁶³ Kasumigaura Aviation Corps was the center of military aviation for Imperial Japan. Similar to what could be found at Maxwell Field in Montgomery Alabama at the time, the Kasumigaura Aviation Corps wrestled with the finer points of airpower theory and requirements.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁵ Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 86; Zacharias, *Secret Missions*, 92-4.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hoyt, *Yamamoto*, 99.

considered an unavoidable war, he planned the Pearl Harbor attack but did so only out of sense of duty to create the best possible plan. Personally he did not desire a war with United States and sought to convince Japan's leadership that such a proposition would likely lead to a defeat. His opposition to the war became so fervent that entities within the Imperial Japanese Army viewed him as a threat to their own ambitions and rumors of a looming assassination circulated Tokyo. Against Yamamoto's wishes, a security detail set up fighting positions with tanks and machine gun bunkers outside the Navy Ministry.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, he devoted himself to creating an audacious plan to win battles even though he had doubts about the war as a whole. In a letter to Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye he wrote:

If it is necessary to fight, in the first six months to a year of war against the United States and Great Britain I will run wild. I will show you an uninterrupted succession of victories. But I must also tell you that if the war be prolonged for two or three years I have no confidence in our ultimate victory.⁶⁹

Consistent in his views, Yamamoto gave no indication that he changed his perspective throughout the war. Months prior to Pearl Harbor in a letter to Ryoichi Sasakawa, an ultranationalist and supporter of his, he wrote,

Should hostilities breakout between Japan and the United States...To make victory certain, we would have to march into Washington and dictate the terms of peace in the White House. I wonder if our politicians...are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices.⁷⁰

Made public after the attack on Pearl Harbor, both the Americans and Japanese propagandized its meaning to support their cause but neither really appreciated its true meaning. Yamamoto was going to do his duty and do so with all his energy despite the belief that he would not be successful. He doubted that Japan appreciated the strength of the United States or understood what a war with such a power would mean. His devotion to duty, his unique training, experience, and pragmatic

⁶⁸ Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 10.

⁶⁹ Potter, *Yamamoto*, 58.

⁷⁰ Gordon William Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 11.

understanding of the situation is what made Yamamoto such a dangerous and worthwhile target. A modern Samurai in character, Yamamoto would fight until the end.

Thus, Layton responded to Nimitz's question of Yamamoto's worthiness with:

He's unique among their people. He's the one Jap [sic] who thinks in bold strategic terms – in that way more American than Japanese. The younger officers and enlisted men idolize him. Aside from the Emperor, probably no man in Japan is so important to civilian moral. And if he's shot down, it would demoralize the fighting Navy. You know the Japanese psychology; it would stun the nation.⁷¹

Satisfied with Layton's response, Nimitz next needed to decide who could ultimately authorize the mission. After sending a preliminary dispatch to notify and ultimately seek approval from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Nimitz sent another dispatch to Admiral William "Bull" Halsey Jr., Commander South Pacific Area. In his message, he wrote, "[if] the forces under your command have capability intercept and shoot down Yamamoto and Staff, you are hereby authorized initiate preliminary planning." Nimitz decided there and then that planning would begin and if Knox replied in the affirmative then they would be ready.⁷²

Knox's office received the message from Nimitz late in the evening on April 14. On the morning of April 15, Zacharias called Knox to confirm Nimitz' message.⁷³ He briefed Knox on the contents of the Japanese message and, because he too knew Yamamoto personally, advocated for authorization to target Yamamoto. Knox took the matter seriously. Immediately after their conversation, he made contact with the Chief of Army Air Forces Henry H. Arnold.⁷⁴ An enthusiastic but pragmatic Arnold deferred the decision back to Knox, understanding that the mission's location

⁷¹ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 7-8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷³ Conspicuously there are no official records of Knox's office receiving any messages from Nimitz on this subject. However, by piecing together statements made by several individuals who claim to have deliberated with Knox on the subject, we see that Knox more than likely received the message from at least two sources. See "Yamamoto Mission Account and Statement: Personal Account by Rex Barber" (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1985); Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 15.

⁷⁴ Potter, *Yamamoto*, 324.

and forces, if authorized, would fall under the jurisdiction of the Navy.⁷⁵ Zacharias in turn requested a report from the Navy's Judge Advocate General regarding the legalities and historical precedents for the mission as he sought to build a case for authorization. Zacharias seemed befuddled. He could not understand why Knox hesitated to authorize the mission himself.⁷⁶

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had left Washington, DC via train on the afternoon of April 13, 1943 for an inspection tour of military installations and defense plants.⁷⁷ The last official record between him and Knox was on April 9, 1943, five days prior to any alleged deliberations. In fact, there are no official records of direct contact between Knox and Roosevelt between April 13 and 18, 1943. However, Captain William C. Mott, a communications specialist on duty at the White House Map Room, attests to passing word of the developing situation to Roosevelt on April 15, 1943.⁷⁸ It is likely, but not unequivocally provable, that the President himself authorized the mission with a Presidential order, an order that Lanphier and Barber claimed to have seen in Guadalcanal on April 17.⁷⁹ These two do not agree on much regarding the events that transpired during their mission to kill Yamamoto, but both distinctly agree that Knox's signature was on the order and Lanphier in particular remembers seeing the special order written on "blue" tissue paper.⁸⁰ The implication is that Knox did not willfully draft the order because he seemed hesitant to authorize it in the first place. Additionally, Zacharias cannot recall from their deliberations on the subject that the Secretary of the Navy ever came to a final decision. Yet both Barber and Lanphier distinctly remember Knox's signature. If so, then the existence of such a letter strongly implies that the order likely came from the President himself. After all, he was the only person with the authority to make Knox issue the order.

⁷⁵ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 17.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 16.

⁷⁹ "Yamamoto Mission Account and Statement: Personal Account by Rex Barber."

⁸⁰ "Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier."

Again, no official record of this order exists but circumstantial evidence and testimony by witnesses suggest that authorization to kill Yamamoto likely came from the Roosevelt himself.

At a minimum, the order and its signature, if they existed as claimed, suggest that Knox was indeed in communication with Roosevelt and that these communications ultimately resulted in authorization for the mission. To this point, the first official record mentioning the mission to Roosevelt took place on April 19 when a dispatch from a Colonel Boone, stationed in the “Map Room” at the Whitehouse, indicated that P-38s shot down three bombers on April 18, 1943.⁸¹ In Boone’s dispatch, there was no explicit mentioning of Yamamoto. Yet in Roosevelt’s April 18, 1943, archival notes, his staff wrote, “Boone’s material suggests the possibility that Admiral Yamamoto may have been in one of the bombers shot down.”⁸² Again, by the process of deduction, the only way Roosevelt’s staff could derive this from Boone’s original message is if they already knew the details of the mission beforehand. Therefore, when Boone mentions the successful downing of three bombers, the staff assumed that the Yamamoto mission might have succeeded. This assumption could prove the case; however, it is also possible that Roosevelt’s staff received a phone call later in the day expanding on Boone’s message. Roosevelt forbade the recording of phone calls.⁸³

Regardless, enough circumstantial evidence exists to suggest that a decision process took place at the highest levels. The details of who talked to whom about what remain murky and subjective to the memories of those few involved. In fact, most if not all of the individuals involved are dead today and research shows that there are significant discrepancies. However, most agree that Roosevelt knew of the mission and insinuate that he likely made the decision to kill Yamamoto. At the same time, there is no testimony or evidence, suggesting the existence of a preexisting plan or standing order to target anyone, military or civilian, in Imperial Japan’s leadership prior. Thus, we

⁸¹ “President’s Mexico Trip, Map Room, Box 15” (Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum, 13 - 28 April 1943).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

can conclude that the entirety of decision-making process took five days from receipt of the coded message until mission approval on April 17, 1943. The process included the means of authenticating the message, considering the implications of possibly compromising its source, understanding the value of Yamamoto as a target and the deliberations at the operational and strategic echelons of the American government. Records indicate that Nimitz made the final decision to authorize the operation, but the evidence clearly indicates that the decision to kill Yamamoto was most assuredly not his alone.

The Mission

The Yamamoto mission, to be sure, certainly did not follow any known contemporary or deliberate planning process to ensure its success. Rather, the mission relied on courage, skill, and that eternal element of warfare, which 18th Century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called “chance.”⁸⁴ Understanding that chance fundamentally defies quantification, this section instead concentrates on recognizing the ways—the skillful planning and courageous execution of the Yamamoto mission. Beginning with a brief description of how and why US forces came to be on Guadalcanal, this section shows some of the actions that Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, commander of air operations in the Solomons (ComAirSol), and other key figures took when they initially received Halsey’s notification to commence planning.⁸⁵ Furthermore, this section reveals how an independent and impromptu planning process at the tactical level decided on a midair interdiction mission. A truncated three-day planning window coupled with glaring shortages in material and

⁸⁴ 19th century Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz considered chance to be an eternal element that makes war a gamble. Though writing on the subject of war in general, Clausewitz assessment of chance fits within the reality that the Yamamoto mission was a gamble. It relied on chance, the interplay between courage and talent. See Carl von Clausewitz, F. N. Maude, and Anatol Rapoport, *On War*, New & revised ed., Pelican Classics, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 26.

⁸⁵ ComAirSols, “Radiogram Commander 3rd Fleet,” Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1943.

unproven capabilities, caused many to consider the success of the mission “at best a long shot.”⁸⁶

Lastly, a review of the actual events of April 18, 1943, from takeoff of the P-38s to the shoot down of Yamamoto’s Betty, to the return back to the “Opium Den” will show that it was the skill and courage of those P-38 pilots that proved to be the difference maker. Ultimately, these mission details represent the “ways” and facilitate a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the targeted killing of Yamamoto.

The Pacific strategy in Second World War followed a similar impromptu evolution as the planning of Yamamoto mission. Where most Allies and American military leaders agreed on the soundness of a Germany first policy, by February 1942 intelligence reports clearly indicated that Japan was attempting to take full control of the South Pacific by pushing out American forces and isolating its allies in the region.⁸⁷ Admiral Ernest Joseph King, Commander in Chief US Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, was one of the first senior American officials to recognize that Japan’s incursion into the South Pacific not only threatened the security of Australia and New Zealand but also America’s access to the region.⁸⁸ He contended that the Allied grand strategy of holding a defensive line in the South Pacific while attacking in Europe would need an adjustment if it were to succeed. King argued that defensive operations principally required territory to defend from and at the rate the Japanese were gobbling up contested territory, the potential for successful defensive operations in the Pacific were dwindling.

Conversely, his strategic counterpart, Yamamoto advocated for a push into the Solomon Islands. He believed that the American naval forces were particularly vulnerable to air attack and that by establishing airfields throughout the Solomons, specifically Guadalcanal, the Japanese could effectively use airpower to prohibit American naval operations in the western Pacific. His naval

⁸⁶ Allen, “Interview of Mg Brook E. Allen,” Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁸⁷ Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-10.

strategy of occupying the South Pacific islands of the Solomons would isolate Australia and New Zealand. This isolation would complement his partial destruction of the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor six months prior. This combination of destroying the American fleet and denying its remnants was the cornerstone of the Imperial Japanese Navy's strategy to defeat the United States. Ironically, it was the pursuit of this strategy that cost Yamamoto his life. The airfield he ordered constructed on Guadalcanal not only precipitated the need for an early American offensive into Guadalcanal but also served as the base of operations for his would-be assassins.

Operation Watchtower, the first American offensive in the Second World War, began in early August, 1942 with a US Marine Corps amphibious assault on the southern Solomon archipelagos of Tulagi, Florida, and Guadalcanal.⁸⁹ The main objective was to seize the airfield on Guadalcanal and expand the defensive perimeter of the airfield to the point where ground based aircraft could operate out of the captured field and support clearing operations on the island. Overall, the use of airpower would facilitate the taking of the island and allow the fleet to push off into deeper waters instead of remaining fixed and vulnerable in the Solomon shallows. Landing on the North side of the island, US forces quickly overran Japanese defensive positions and seized the airfield in less than forty-eight hours.⁹⁰ Yet, Imperial Japanese forces refused to surrender the island in its entirety and over the next few months launched several operations to retake the airfield. Japanese forces finally surrendered the island when successive offensive operations failed and withdrew their troops by February 8, 1943.⁹¹ The seized airfield served its purpose well as it gave the Marines much needed air support during the rest of the Guadalcanal campaign.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁹¹ John Miller, *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Dept. of the Army, 1949), 349.

⁹² The airfield was named Henderson Field after a Mariane aviator that lost his life at the Battle of Midway. See Ibid., 83.

However, it became apparent that the P-39 *Airacobra* and P-400, the export variant of the P-39 that the British rejected for use in the European theater, were woefully inadequate in range and altitude performance.⁹³ Fighting as valiantly as they could, the United States could not overcome the technological superiority of the Mitsubishi A6M “Zero,” with these aircraft.⁹⁴ During the campaign in aerial-combat, the Japanese lost eighty-three fighter type aircraft while the Americans lost 107 P-39/P-400/F4Fs.⁹⁵ Thus, even though the island and the associated airfield were secure, the lack of high performance aircraft, aviation fuel, and Airmen prohibited the allies from taking strategic advantage of this foothold in the South Pacific.⁹⁶ This continued until the arrival the newer and much more capable P-38 Lightning arrived in early March 1943. Maintainers and pilots cheered its arrival. Yet, it was not until it proved itself in combat that the Marines on the ground would also come to appreciate the P-38.⁹⁷

The P-38 was for the time the most advanced fighter aircraft that American industry had produced. Originally slated for the European theater, General Henry A. Arnold leaders hastily rerouted the P-38s to Guadalcanal when the shortcomings of the P-39/P-400 became glaringly apparent.⁹⁸ Able to outclimb, outdive, and outgun the Zero, the P-38 originally only flew high altitude escort missions for B-17 “Flying Fortresses” out of New Espiritu Santo.⁹⁹ By the end of March,

⁹³ Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 15.

⁹⁴ The Battle of Bloody Ridge or Edson’s Ridge was fought between September 12 and 14, 1943 along the southern perimeter on Henderson Field, Guadalcanal. USMC positions were on the verge of being overrun on September 13 when P-39/P-400s helped turn the tide with close-air-support missions. The Battle of Bloody Ridge is one of numerous examples during the Guadalcanal Campaign where the Marines depended on air support to defend against Imperial Japanese offensives. See Miller, *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, 114-20; Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 42.

⁹⁵ *Guadalcanal*, 645.

⁹⁶ Henry Viccellio, interview by Dr. Murray Green, May 1970, Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁹⁷ Nathan F. Twining, May 1967, Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁹⁸ Viccellio, “Interview of Henry Viccellio,” Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁹⁹ Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 19.

Mitscher, answered the Marines' prayers for a better performing close-air-support platform when he allowed the P-38 to fly low-level close-air-support missions. Instantly proving itself in combat, the P-38 turned the heads of the Navy brass when on March 29 a flight of P-38s successfully engaged and sunk an enemy destroyer.¹⁰⁰ In less than a month, the arrival of the twin-boomed P-38s definitively turned the tide for allied air superiority over Guadalcanal, repulsing numerous air raids by Japanese bombers and escort fighters. In fact, the P-38 destroyed more Japanese planes in the war than any other American aircraft.¹⁰¹ Shortly after the arrival of the P-38, Operation "I," the Japanese air offensive to destroy Henderson field, was Yamamoto's last directed offensive of the war. He hoped that given the historically poor performance of his opponent's fighter aircraft, that a Japanese air offensive would bleed the Americans and halt their ambitions to move up the Solomon Island chain. From April 7 to 14, 1943, the Japanese flew some 680 fighter and bomber sorties against the Americans on Guadalcanal.¹⁰² Yamamoto received news that Operation "I" was succeeding but despite inflated reports of Japanese success, he viewed the loss of his aircraft as unsustainable. With this in mind, he sensed that morale was sagging when on April 13 he fatefully decided to conduct a morale visit of his forward deployed troops.¹⁰³ The arrival of the P-38 and its effectiveness in combat added to the sinking moral of the Japanese pilots, they called the P-38 the "fork-tailed devil."¹⁰⁴ Thus, in more ways than one, it was the performance of the P-38 that helped lead to Yamamoto's death.

On April 16, 1943, word came from Halsey to begin planning for the Yamamoto mission. When Mitscher received the planning order, he was just starting to appreciate the capability of the P-

¹⁰⁰ In many ways, the sinking of an enemy naval vessel by an US Army aircraft vindicated the claims by airpower enthusiast Billy Mitchell. See 70th Fighter Squadron, "70th Fighter Squadron Diary."

¹⁰¹ Robert F. Dorr and David Donald, *Fighters of the United States Air Force : From World War I Pursuits to the F-117* (New York: Military Press Distributed by Crown Publishers, 1990), 581.

¹⁰² Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 18.

¹⁰³ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 345.

¹⁰⁴ Lockheed Martin, "The P-38: When Lightning Strikes," accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/us/100years/stories/p-38>, Lockheed Martin, February 1999.

38. He must have originally thought that such a high priority mission like this would do wonders for his Navy and or Marine aviators' morale. After all, they had been slugging it out with Japanese pilots for over eight months and these new planes from Lockheed had just arrived. No doubt with this in mind, Mitscher originally only called in other naval and Marine officers to discuss planning.¹⁰⁵ However, after a night of debates it became readily apparent that the location of Yamamoto's flight made it so that no Navy or Marine aircraft could reliably reach the target area. Realizing that only the P-38s had the capability, he reluctantly called for Lieutenant Colonel Henry Viccellio of the XIII fighter command detachment to join in the deliberations on April 17.¹⁰⁶ Upon receiving an update brief of the planning order, Viccellio immediately identified a problem. He knew that the P-38's fuel consumption rate at low altitude reduced its ability to fly the distance required. To compensate, he requested that the 5th Air Force expedite its delivery of the drop tanks.¹⁰⁷ They had waited for delivery of these tanks for weeks, but a previous lack of priority seemed to ensure that they missed every resupply of parts. Yet with one phone call from Viccellio and with the backing from Admiral Mitscher, the long awaited delivery of the drop tanks came later that evening.¹⁰⁸

As well, Viccellio requested that he bring in additional Air Force pilots to aid in planning. The Navy and Marine planners had done exceptional work. However, they did not understand the intricacies of the P-38, planning a flight over the open ocean at low altitude while operating at the margins of man and machines' capabilities required more than a chart and a watch. It took an intimate understanding of the P-38. To this end, Viccellio could think of none more qualified than his Commander of the 339th Fighter Squadron, Major John Mitchell. A confirmed fighter ace by this

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1954), 150.

¹⁰⁶ Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 18.

¹⁰⁷ "Drop tanks" were external fuel tanks attached to the underside of an aircraft. They greatly extended the range of the aircraft. However, they also limited the aircraft's maneuverability in combat. In the event an aircraft needed to maneuver aggressively in combat, the pilot would release the external tank in mid-flight. This ability is why they were called "drop tanks." See *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

time in the war, Mitchell received word of the “Top Secret” mission at the “Opium Den,” the fighter command’s smoke-filled operations center on Henderson field. He was directed to report directly to Mitscher and to bring the newly arrived commander of the 12th Fighter Squadron, Major Louis Kittel. Viccellio added that pilots Barber and Lanphier were preselected for the upcoming mission. Admiral Mitscher and his staff knew their names well, as they were the two legendary pilots that sunk that Japanese destroyer only a couple weeks earlier. Barber got so close in his strafing run that he clipped off two feet of his left wing, a feat that would earn him his first silver star.¹⁰⁹ With those names already in mind, Mitscher canceled their scheduled leave the day prior, even before he notified Viccellio of the mission.

Now quickly assembled in the planning tent, a naval intelligence officer briefed Mitchell, Kittel, and Lanphier on the mission details. Lanphier recalls the briefer handing them a message, signed “Knox.” Titled “Top Secret” and typed out on a “blue” colored tissue paper, the message appeared as an oddity to him in that it appeared to have come directly from teletype machine, an original printout. It read, “SQUADRON 339 P-38 MUST AT ALL COST REACH AND DESTROY. PRESIDENT ATTACHES EXTREME IMPORTANCE TO THIS OPERATION.”¹¹⁰ Yet no sooner did they receive the brief than the other service officers turned their chairs around and returned their focus to the large planning table in the center of the room. The Naval and Marine delegation ignored the three unshaven and unkempt junior Army officers, for them this still remained a Navy mission. Silently, the Air Force pilots regulated themselves to stand in background as the high-ranking staff debated the merits of striking Yamamoto at sea. While discussing the plan to strike the subchaser carrying Yamamoto from Ballale to Shortland Island, one of the planners began speaking in terms of

¹⁰⁹ 70th Fighter Squadron, “70th Fighter Squadron Diary.”

¹¹⁰ No physical evidence exists today of the blue teletype letter, its contents were derived from an interview between author Burke Davis and Tom Lanphier. In addition, there are other accounts referring to a letter signed by Knox, which explicitly mentions the President’s authorization, but none are as vivid as Lanphier’s account. See Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 122.

“port” and “starboard.”¹¹¹ Mitchell, no longer able to contain himself, finally interrupted. He said, “Port quarter, what the hell does that mean! Listen, I honestly can’t tell you the difference between a subchaser and a sub. What if there are several boats? What if the guy can swim? No, this doesn’t make sense.” Pausing, he stared intently at Mitscher and said, “[w]e’re fighter pilots. We should take him in the air!” Mitscher then looked around the room at his now silent team and said, “[h]e’s right, we get him in the air.”¹¹² With that, the Admiral settled the issue and everyone knew that the “Cactus guys” were now taking the lead. Mitchell and his fellow pilots turned for the door to head back to the “Opium Den” to begin their own preparations when Mitscher stopped them and asked, “Is there anything else you need from us?” Mitchell responded, “A compass, one of those big Navy jobs installed on the ships.” Mitscher nodded, “You got it.”¹¹³

Back at the “Opium Den” Mitchell alone began updating the Navy’s plan. Diligently, he “laid out course, speeds, gas mixture settings, and wind estimates.”¹¹⁴ He knew early on that this was going to be a tough mission to pull off. After all, they had missed several preplanned rendezvous with their own large bomber formations. Now the Admiral wanted to intercept a low flying enemy bomber with an escort of fighters heading in the opposite direction.¹¹⁵ The daunting prospect compelled Mitchell to work into the early morning of April 18. The last of his calculations revealed that they had only ten minutes of fuel at the intercept point.¹¹⁶ Thus, if Yamamoto were a few minutes ahead or behind schedule then they would surely miss him.

¹¹¹ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 239.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹¹⁵ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹¹⁶ “Yamamoto Mission Account and Statement: Personal Account by Rex Barber”

Meanwhile, Viccellio and Kittel posted the pilots names outside the operations center. A mix of both squadrons, the best eighteen of the Cactus Air Force were:

John Mitchell	339th	Thomas Lanphier	339th
Roger Ames	12th	Albert Long	12th
Everett Anglin	12th	Louis Kittel	12th
Rex Barber	339th	Julious Jacobson	339th
Douglas Canning	339th	Besby Holmes	339th
Delton Goerke	339th	James McLanahan	339th
Lawrence Graebner	12th	Joseph Moore	339th
William Smith	12th	Eldon Stratton	12th
Gordon Whitaker	12th ¹¹⁷		

The designated “hunters” were Barber, Lanphier, McLanahan, and Moore. The plan directed the other pilots to fly at 10,000 feet for top cover and engage any Zeros attempting to get between the “hunters” and their prey.¹¹⁸ Conversely, the “hunters” would come in low at 2,000 feet and concentrate only on the bombers, one of which was sure to have Yamamoto in it.¹¹⁹ Mitchell would lead the entire formation while Lanphier led the flight of “hunters.”¹²⁰ The plan required that they fly the first four segment of the flight plan at wave top level to avoid Japanese radar and then climb on the last segment to their assigned altitudes.

Just prior to sunrise on April 18, the pilots grouped up at the “Opium Den” to receive a weather report and flight plans. Written in extreme detail, Mitchell’s flight plan dictated each man’s position in the formation and their responsibility. With no room for interpretation, they all knew that if this mission actually worked out, then all the credit would need to go to Mitchell.¹²¹ He planned everything and they understood that they were executing his plan.

¹¹⁷ 339th Fighter Squadron, “339th Fighter Squadron Diary” (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1943).

¹¹⁸ ComAirSols, “Combat Report” (Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1943).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ 339th Squadron, “339th Fighter Squadron Diary.”

¹²¹ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

Meanwhile at 5:50 a.m. on Bougainville, the sky was just starting to lighten with the rising sun when Yamamoto's chief of staff, Admiral Matome Ugaki, met him at the airfield.¹²² Dressed in Imperial Army khaki uniforms, Yamamoto and the rest of the contingent of officers appeared within seconds of each other. Punctuality was key and everyone understood that showing early or late would be seen as disrespectful, an attribute that would cost them their lives later in the day. At the same time, the Bettys were ready and in place, having just come in from a nearby field, the two bombers held for a 6:10 a.m. takeoff.¹²³ Taking off precisely on time, they climbed to their cruising altitude of 4,500 feet, while six Japanese Zeros formed up in trail at 6,500 feet. Radio calls were minimal and like Mitchell, the chief Japanese pilot meticulously planned the formation's flight plan. Adjusting power throughout the flight to maintain his timing, the lead bomber with Yamamoto was setting the pace for the others. The second bomber flew in formation and the pilot only had to focus on maintaining his position.¹²⁴ His defensive scan in front of the aircraft was minimal, as none of the crew received a warning of enemy activity in the area. As a result, the gunners on the bombers took only one belt of ammunition for their weapons and the Zero pilots felt free to carry on casual banter on a discrete inter-plane frequency.¹²⁵ Ugaki, on the second bomber, recalls how uneventful the flight had initially been. No radio calls, no extraneous conversation amongst the crew in the bombers, just business. He dozed in and out of a shallow sleep when he looked down at his watch one last time to see 7:30 a.m. on his watch. They were fifteen minutes from their scheduled landing and he eagerly anticipated an on time arrival.¹²⁶

¹²² Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 330.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Hiroshi Hayashi, interview by Jay E. Hines, June 1990, Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 353.

Back at Henderson field, Mitchell jumped into his P-38 and smiled at the enormous compass mounted on his dash. Mitscher had come through. Likewise, the other pilots strapped in their aircraft as the mechanics buttoned up the last of the open panels. Each plane was mission ready only because the maintainers also worked throughout the night, installing the new drop tanks and patching up previous battle damage. Viccellio ordered the maintenance crews on the day before to get the best eighteen aircraft ready for launch in the morning. Rumors spread amongst the ground crews that these planes were going north to get somebody important.¹²⁷ Yamamoto's name came up but nobody could really confirm it, but it did indicate that neither Mitscher nor his staff could keep the mission a secret. After all, Henderson field had numerous reporters on assignment and surely the bustling activity and rumors would garner their attention.

On takeoff roll, each fuel-laden P-38s slowly lumbered into the sky, where the plan was to form up on a small island north of the field before heading out. Mitscher stood stoically at the end of the runway, watching as each plane took off.¹²⁸ Some of the P-38s were already airborne when McLanahan on his takeoff roll ruptured a main tire. At full power, he chopped his throttles and fought to keep his bird on the runway when he finally stopped just short of the end. As well, Moore, who was already in the air, determined that he could not feed fuel from his external tanks. Disappointed, he signaled Mitchell that he was returning to the field. Five minutes into the operation and two of the four "hunters" were out of the fight. Nevertheless, no one panicked. Mitchell's plan had contingencies and with hardly a word Hines and Holmes took their new spot as "hunters." Now a formation of sixteen, they pushed off on a heading of 265, descending down to 50 feet. This is how the "hunters" began their journey.

The flight for them was boring to say the least, no radio calls, nothing to do but keep formation, check engine instruments and fly Mitchell's route. However, creating an unanticipated

¹²⁷ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 245.

¹²⁸ Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, 152.

stress was the fact that the P-38 had one gross design flaw. Built as a high altitude escort plane, its canopy could not open in flight to regulate the cockpit temperature. Instead, it acted as convection oven building up heat as the sun beat down on it. Each man with sweat in his eyes anxiously stared off into the horizon, cursing the heat but knowing that any loss of concentration at that altitude would mean an immediate and permanent end to their temporary misery. Instead, they maintained steely focus for two hours when at 7:10 a.m. and on their last leg, the formation started to climb to their assigned altitudes. Leveling off, Mitchell began doubting himself as he searched into an empty horizon when the shape of a distant mountain on Bougainville started to come into view. Reassured, he was now looking for that proverbial “needle in a haystack.” The “hunters” meanwhile were below at 2,000 feet, desperately looking into the same tyranny of an empty windscreen. Then Canning, searching with what many regard as the best eyes of the pilots out there, spotted several dots coming into view.¹²⁹ He broke radio silence with a poised “[b]ogeys, Eleven o’clock...high.” Mitchell responded “skin off your tanks” as a sign that the fight was on.¹³⁰

Ugaki’s head slowly nodded down when he felt the plane lurch downward. He immediately looked outside and could see Yamamoto’s plane aggressively diving as well. He could not recall hearing any prefatory radio call, when his pilot dropped the nose of the aircraft and pushed his throttle to full power to keep up with the lead bomber. He thought, “[t]his must be some mistake, the pilot committed an error.” Suddenly he heard the distinct sound of cannon and machine gun fire. When he looked out the right side of the plane, he saw Zeros swooping in from overhead, chasing the distinct silhouette of an “H” as it zipped behind the bomber. Unfamiliar with this aircraft type, he knew enough to know it was not Japanese and fear for Yamamoto’s life suddenly consumed him.¹³¹

¹²⁹ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹³⁰ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 255.

¹³¹ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 354.

The four “hunters” turned to approach the oncoming dots, Lanphier, Barber, and Hine dropped their fuel tanks but Holmes’ tank did not release.¹³² Hine formed up on Holmes as he tried a series of up and down maneuvers in an effort to get his tanks to drop. The “hunters” were back down to two aircraft. Lanphier climbed with Barber to face the bombers when the Zeros began to bear down on them, the leading edge of their wings winking at them with machine gun fire. Lanphier opened up with his own machine gun fire as he turned away from bombers and headed straight for the oncoming Zeros.¹³³ Barber as well began firing but broke formation to avoid a midair collision with a Zero that split between himself and Lanphier. Mitchell, watching from above radioed, “[g]et the bombers...damn it all, the bombers!”¹³⁴ Neither Barber nor Lanphier recall hearing this radio transmission, they were too focused on staying alive.

As Barber broke away, he rolled wings level and saw one of the bombers in a steep dive over the island. The bomber was about 200 feet above the jungle and a half-mile in front of him, when he got back on his guns. Starting at the left side of the aircraft, he strafed the engine and smoke instantly began to pour out. Continuing, he walked his fire onto the bombers’ tail section. Closing at incredible rate, he passed directly overhead the bomber. Barber recalls seeing chunks of the empennage peel off and the plane lurch downward as he passed within feet of the Betty. Oddly, he did not recall the tail gunner every shooting back at him. Then a series of hollow *dins*, the telltale signs that his aircraft was being hit with enemy fire, caught Barbers attention. Instinctively, he committed a hard climbing turn back towards the water, when two Zeros screamed by. Looking back as they passed, he saw black smoke trail begin to rise from the jungle; he knew he got the Betty.¹³⁵ He rolled out towards the water

¹³² “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹³³ ComAirSols, “Intelligence Bulletin.”

¹³⁴ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 260.

¹³⁵ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

when he saw a second bomber flying low, 10 feet or less above the waves. To his surprise, Holmes and Hine had dropped their tanks and were attacking, unloading their guns on the second bomber.

Lanphier tore through the approaching Zeros, and made a left-hand 270-degree turn to catch a Zero with gunfire. Smoke spewed out from his target as it tightened up its turn to avoid a continued red string of tracers coming from the P-38. Lanphier was going to continue his pursuit when he saw a bomber flying low over the island with smoke trailing behind. He remembered the mission's priority and rolled out to strafe the Betty. Letting loose with cannon and machinegun fire he approached the Betty from the 3 o'clock position and walked fire across the right wing into the fuselage and onto the left. He recalled the left wing broke off and seconds later the bomber hit the trees creating an enormous fireball.¹³⁶ Passing over and flying east over the island, Lanphier could see dust clouds forming on nearby Buin airfield on Bougainville. The Zeros there would soon launch and with that, he decided to head back to Henderson.¹³⁷

Ugaki tried to look for Yamamoto's plane but could not get to a window. His plane was in a deep dive and he could feel the vibrations of rounds striking the aircraft. The tail gunner let out a few short bursts but soon went quiet as more rounds tore through plane. Ugaki could see blood and smoke but heard no cries. He knew the gunners were all dead. All he could do now was wait for his turn. He began to prepare himself for the inevitable when a slight banking of his aircraft allowed him look out one of the windows to catch a glimpse of smoke trail rising from the island. His heart sunk, as he knew Yamamoto was gone. He reached a new level of despair when the bottom dropped out of the aircraft. His bomber violently pitched forward at full speed and now at ten feet of altitude, it struck the water with an unbelievable force. Ugaki's last memory was of a loud bang, a bright flash then darkness.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ "Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier."

¹³⁷ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 164.

¹³⁸ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 354-55.

Barber came in over the top of Holmes and Hine firing his guns and getting good hits, he was amazed that the bomber was still flying when it too suddenly lurched forward and disintegrated on impact with the water. Barber heard pieces of debris strike his aircraft as he passed by. He smiled as he thought “another one down.”¹³⁹ He was able to cherish the thought for only a moment when that all too familiar hollow *din* came back. He was back on the receiving end of enemy machinegun fire and knew that his time in the fight was over. Barber was done and headed home alone.

During the fight, Mitchell and the others had done their job, too. Attacking ad hoc, they made it so no Zero could target the “hunters” for any length of time. In addition, a couple P-38s strafed the Buin airfield for good measure. Regardless, in less than two minutes the fight was over. One by one the P-38s started to follow Lanphier and Barbers lead, they were heading home. On the way, Mitchell attempted to count P-38s when he noticed one flying low and slow over the water.¹⁴⁰ Getting no response from his radio calls, he later determined that it must have been Hine. Only Hine did not return.

The P-38s returned in piecemeal, all of the “hunters” had suffered damage, and were empty or low on ammunition. Barber’s aircraft alone had 104 holes from some fifty-two hits in it and had green paint transfer from his near miss with one of the bombers.¹⁴¹ Indeed the day could have gone much worse and they knew it. Nevertheless, the pilots were ecstatic and could barely contain themselves as they came into Henderson field. A young Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade John F. Kennedy Jr., recalled how one of the P-38s did a barrel roll over the field before landing.¹⁴² As Lanphier unstrapped from his plane, he smiled ear to ear as he told one of the crew chiefs, “I got him,

¹³⁹ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹⁴⁰ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 286.

¹⁴¹ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹⁴² Robert J. Donovan, *Pt 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 58.

I got that son-of-a-bitch, I got Yamamoto!”¹⁴³ The rest of the pilots had similar expressions when they finally got out of their planes. Mitscher met the men with a case of bourbon, Viccellio a case of fresh milk, both in their own right were luxuries that signified how proud the commanders were of their men.¹⁴⁴ Back the “Opium Den” they drank and sang the night away, with the occasional somber pause to think of Hine. Mitchell was proud to be sure but thoughts of Hine consumed him.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, they were successful but as the commander, he could not allow himself to forget that the mission had a price.

The Yamamoto mission relied on chance, luck, skill, courage, and risk. It started with the invasion of Guadalcanal and ended with a victorious barrel role. This section illustrates an improvised planning process that incorporated both a general understanding of the task and particular vision of how to do it. In fact, the tactical decision to interdict Yamamoto’s bomber in the air proved fortuitous, as they learned after the war that Yamamoto was not enroute to Ballale Island, but rather the nearby Buin airfield on Bougainville.¹⁴⁶ Had they gone with the original plan for an attack on the subchaser they would have surely missed him altogether. These mission details enable a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the killing of Yamamoto and represent the ways of the mission.

The Aftermath

By midafternoon on April 19, 1943, the P-38 pilots from the Yamamoto mission were just starting to wake from a hard night of celebration. At the same time in the jungle of Bougainville, Captain Masao Watanabe, Yamamoto’s Chief of Staff, was confirming the identities of the bodies at

¹⁴³ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 274.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁴⁵ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹⁴⁶ Hayashi, “Interview of Hiroshi Hayashi,” Maxwell AFB: Air Force Historical Research Agency.

the crash site, including that of Yamamoto.¹⁴⁷ Both parties, one elated with success and the other despondent from failure, were just now beginning to try to make sense of it all. To this end, this section examines the aftermath of the mission by looking at the various reactions to the death of Yamamoto. First by looking at the actual mission results, the mission reports by both the Japanese and Americans will show that they were terribly inaccurate and contradictory. Finding some truth behind what actually happened will demonstrate that if not for Yamamoto's death, this mission had little tactical significance. Next, a review of the reactions of the Japanese military, government, and people will illustrate how the loss of Yamamoto grossly affected Japanese moral and naval strategy. The Japanese selected Admiral Mineichi Koga as the new Commander in Chief, an officer by his own admission, was not capable of matching Yamamoto's skill as a commander.¹⁴⁸ Lastly, a review of the American reaction and the fallout from acting on sensitive information will confirm that some viewed the risk to Allied codebreaking efforts as unnecessary. The Americans certainly had high expectations for the mission. Understanding if the operation met those expectations carries a great significance for current, and future targeted killing operations.

Almost immediately after the mission, prior to the first P-38 landing back at Henderson Field, controversy arose. The other aircrew back at the "Opium Den," listening to the interplane frequency for updates, recalled an ecstatic Lanphier braving radio discipline and exclaiming over an unsecure radio, "That son of a bitch won't be dictating any peace terms in the White House!"¹⁴⁹ With that, the "Opium Den" erupted into jubilant cheers and they raced outside to greet the arriving heroes. Those returning aircraft with enough fuel did barrel rolls and low-level passes over the field before an enthralled crowd of onlookers. In this electric atmosphere, Lanphier finally landed and exited his

¹⁴⁷ Aiken, "Yamamoto's Betty (323) Crash Site," 149.

¹⁴⁸ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 200.

¹⁴⁹ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 273.

aircraft; he made a statement that gave no doubts what “he” had done. His crew chief Robert Pappake captured the sentiment in his diary. In it, he wrote a poem about Lanphier’s first words:

“I got him!” “I got him!” is what Capt. Lanphier said
I alone shot Yamamoto dead
Let no other man make this claim
He’d steal my honor and soil my name.¹⁵⁰

When Barber finally landed and heard the commotion surrounding the claim by Lanphier, he took exception. He knew that he shot down a couple bombers, too, but he was not willing to claim anything more than that.¹⁵¹ Barber believed that no one could possibly know who actually shot Yamamoto down and confronted Lanphier on the flight line. As well, when Mitchell landed, he caught wind of the brewing controversy but true to his humble nature, he stayed out of the fray. He also could not say for sure who did what, it all happened all too fast to know and he was content on calling it a “team kill.”¹⁵² Instead, he left resolution of the issue to Barber and Lanphier. Holmes diverted along the way back to Henderson and missed the original discussion. He landed hours after everyone else and had a strong opinion of what happened but his absence marginalized his perspective. Without Holmes or the missing Hine, the two remaining pilots, Barber and Lanphier, came to some agreement by piecing their stories together. They reported shooting down three bombers and three Zeros, with credit for two of the bombers going to Barber, one to Lanphier and credit for the Zeros spread out amongst Barber, Hine, and Holmes. Lanphier later in the day assured Barber, “Don’t worry about it, Rex. I went over to the Ops Tent...and wrote the report...I saw that we

¹⁵⁰ Lanphier did not deny the radio call but did deny saying that he alone shot Yamamoto down when he landed. However, the popular opinion is that he indeed said something to the effect. See *ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵¹ “Yamamoto Mission Account and Statement: Personal Account by Rex Barber.”

¹⁵² Mitchell letter, “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

all got proper credit.”¹⁵³ The report itself is a lengthy four-page narrative, written in fanciful language that makes it stand out from the other dull reports of the time. In reality, it probably took more time to write the report than the engagement lasted over Bougainville. It mentions only the efforts of Lanphier, Barber, Holmes, Hine, and Mitchell, ignoring the essential contributions of the other pilots. Burke Davis, in his book *Get Yamamoto*, recounts the response of an Air Force officer charged with reviewing the case in 1967, “The report is enough to make one weep. It reads like a fiction tale and the facts appear to be entwined like Medusa’s lock.”¹⁵⁴

The exaggeration of events did not rest with the Americans only. The Japanese pilots inflated their numbers as well, claiming to have shot down six P-38s and critically damaging another three.¹⁵⁵ The total from both the initial American and Japanese accounts left the impression that the engagement was more tactically significant than it truly was. In reality, only two Bettys and one P-38 were destroyed, hardly a substantial loss of materiel at this time of the war.¹⁵⁶ No, the true loss came from the death of Yamamoto. The numbers of planes lost and accreditation of kills is irrelevant to the overall strategic significance of the mission. Even still, the preponderance of secondary and some primary sources of information that mention the aftermath of the mission erroneously focus on the debate of who shot down Yamamoto.

The reaction by the Japanese is much more telling. On the military side, the significance of Yamamoto’s death continued to affect the Japanese for the duration of the war. It started when Watanabe first passed word of the loss to the Imperial Japanese Navy Ministry on April 20, 1943.¹⁵⁷ Officials from the Japanese government implicitly understood the gravity of the loss and immediately

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 184-85.

¹⁵⁵ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 359.

¹⁵⁶ “Letters from John Mitchell and Rex Barber to Thomas Lanphier and Replies from Lanphier.”

¹⁵⁷ Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 380.

made the decision to withhold the announcement until they could come up with an appropriate message to soften the blow for the Japanese people and military. They did not want panic to spread at home, especially at time when they needed public support the most.¹⁵⁸ In the interim, Koga, a conservative and doctrine orientated commander of the Second Fleet, became the new Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet.¹⁵⁹ Yamamoto had personally named him as his replacement, even though Koga never saw himself worthy.¹⁶⁰ Upon hearing his promotion, he said, “There was only one Yamamoto and no one is able to replace him. His loss is an unsupportable blow to us.”¹⁶¹ He knew that he inherited a war that he could not win, but Koga, in the tradition of the Samurai, dutifully carried on.¹⁶² This is likely why Yamamoto selected him as his replacement, for he knew that Japan needed a commander that was willing to fight what he had already come to see as a lost war. Koga commanded for only a year, when on March 31, 1944 he, too, died in an airplane crash in the Philippines.¹⁶³

On May 21, 1943, the Japanese government finally released a public announcement. A radio broadcast from Tokyo, retransmitted throughout the Japanese empire, stated: “Admiral Yamamoto, while directing general strategy in the front line in April of this year, engaged in combat with the enemy and met gallant death in a war plane.”¹⁶⁴ The transmission ended with the announcer weeping into the microphone. Interred on June 5, 1944 at a state funeral, Yamamoto’s was the twelfth ever given to a Japanese commoner.¹⁶⁵ Everybody of significance in Japanese government and military

¹⁵⁸ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 297.

¹⁵⁹ Haulman, “The Yamamoto Mission,” 35.

¹⁶⁰ Ugaki et al., *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*, 331.

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 200

¹⁶² Davis, *Lightening Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 301

¹⁶³ Haulman, “The Yamamoto Mission,” 35.

¹⁶⁴ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 202.

¹⁶⁵ Van Der Rhoer, *Deadly Magic*, 149.

attended the funeral. Even Japan's Prime Minister Hideki Tojo attended.¹⁶⁶ The only notable exception was that of the Emperor, tradition dictated that he did not attend such events. Over the next few days, hundreds of thousands of mourners passed by the memorial to pay their respects. As Hiroyuki Agawa wrote in *The Reluctant Admiral*, "Both for the Navy and the general public, Yamamoto's death was a source not only of deep grief but of anxiety about the future course of the war for the Japanese."¹⁶⁷ In many respects, the Japanese felt lost at sea without their beloved admiral to guide them.

The American reaction was for the most part positive, but there was some serious anxiety about the use of top-secret codebreaking capability and the general lack of secrecy regarding the mission. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was furious. Protesting directly to Roosevelt, he could not understand why the Americans would jeopardize the Allied codebreaking effort. In protest, the British stopped the exchange of *Ultra* and *Magic* related communications with the Americans for weeks. They did not resume the swap of information until later in May 1943.¹⁶⁸ After all, Churchill carried an immense emotional weight over the Coventry Blitz. In November 1940, British codebreakers notified British high command in advance that the Germans were going to bomb the town of Coventry. Churchill decided it was better to keep silent and sacrifice the town than to jeopardize *Ultra*.¹⁶⁹ If he was not willing to spare Coventry then he certainly was not about to spare Roosevelt's feelings.

On May 11, 1943, ten days before the Japanese admitted to the death of Yamamoto, US Navy censors on New Caledonia reviewed an article submitted for approval by J. Norman Lodge of the Associated Press. In it, Norman wrote a detailed description of the top-secret mission, including

¹⁶⁶ Tojo and Yamamoto were often at odds over the strategy for war with the United States and their relationship at times was contentious. See. Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, 338.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 338

¹⁶⁸ Hall, *Lightning over Bougainville : The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered*, 26.

¹⁶⁹ This assertion is in dispute, some claim Churchill knew a raid was going to take place but did not know which town. Regardless, the story speaks volumes as to how important programs like *Ultra* and *Magic* were to the Allies in World War II. See. Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 306.

references that were eerily similar to the classified mission report that Lanphier allegedly wrote.¹⁷⁰ Incredulous, the censors reported the potential breach of classified information to Halsey who was already feeling pressure from Nimitz and Washington to make sure no publicity was made of the mission. The article caused Halsey's temper to erupt. He called for Lanphier and Barber to report to him without delay. Those in the military could see what was about to happen next. As Donald Davis notes in *Lightning Strike*, the old axiom "Shit flows downhill" came to fruition.¹⁷¹ When Barber and Lanphier showed at Halsey's office in New Caledonia, he tore into them without mercy. He turned down their Medal of Honor recommendations from Mitscher and told them, "as far as I'm concerned, none of you deserve even an Air Medal for what you did! You ought to face a court martial."¹⁷² Barber, Lanphier, Holmes, Hine, and Mitchell had their Medal of Honor awards denied; Halsey begrudgingly approved for them the Navy Cross instead. He was infuriated for sure, but maybe that is because he knew that he personally had put the codebreaking capability at risk. When Mitscher first messaged Halsey and mentioned the results of the mission on April 18, 1943, Halsey replied with "CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU AND MAJOR MITCHELL AND HIS HUNTERS. SOUNDS AS THOUGH ONE OF THE DUCKS IN THEIR BAG WAS A PEACOCK."¹⁷³ If the Japanese read between the lines, they certainly would have known that the Americans were talking about the loss of Yamamoto. Serendipitously, this message traffic occurred even before the search party had found Yamamoto's body. Japanese codebreakers could not make the connection.

Regardless of the controversy surrounding the accreditation of the kill and despite the apprehension over the use of codebreaking capability, the mission was an indisputable success.¹⁷⁴ The

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 305.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 304.

¹⁷² Tom Huntington, "Payback for Pearl Harbor: Assassinating the Mastermind of the Attack," *America in WWII* (2008): 33.

¹⁷³ Davis, *Get Yamamoto*, 188.

¹⁷⁴ Huntington, "Payback for Pearl Harbor: Assassinating the Mastermind of the Attack," 35.

response of the American public and national command authority was positive. Newspapers heralded the news to a public that was thirsting for something positive from the front in the Pacific. When the White House press corps asked President Roosevelt on May 21, 1943 what he thought of the Tokyo radio report, he responded with a coy smile and said “Is he dead? Gosh?”¹⁷⁵ A mock letter, penned by Roosevelt, circulated throughout the White House captured the sentiment perfectly. In it, he wrote:

Dear Widow Yamamoto:
Time is a great leveler and somehow
I never expected to see the old boy at the
White House anyway. Sorry I can't attend
the funeral because I approve of it.
Hoping he is where we know he ain't.
Very sincerely yours,

[Signed] Franklin Delano Roosevelt¹⁷⁶

The various reactions to the aftermath of the Yamamoto mission illustrate that it offered little tactical significance; rather, it demonstrated great strategic value. The controversy surrounding accreditation of the kill is irrelevant. If Yamamoto had lived, maybe Japan would have won a few more battles, but it would have certainly lost the war.¹⁷⁷ Japanese high command chose Koga as Yamamoto's replacement because he would fight, not because he was able to win. The sinking of Japanese morale juxtaposed to the rise in American morale was tantamount to a swing one would see following a major battle. The mission no doubt met expectations. No one anticipated this effort would directly lead to the defeat of Imperial Japan. The people of the rising sun did not fold after the death of their naval commander, but their will did buckle. If war is a competition of wills, then this mission no doubt furthered the American cause and hurt those of the Japanese. Thus, it serves as an excellent example of the value of targeted killing in the contemporary and modern sense.

¹⁷⁵ Davis, *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor*, 310.

¹⁷⁶ This letter, found in the personal archives of President Roosevelt's secretary Grace Tully, serves as another possible indication that if Roosevelt did not directly authorize the mission then at the very least he approved of it. See. Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 24 1943.

¹⁷⁷ Haulman, “The Yamamoto Mission,” 36.

Conclusion

This monograph answers the question “What were the circumstances surrounding the decision to target and kill Yamamoto during the Second World War?” To this end, a narrative emerges that history largely ignores. Instead of fanciful stories about meetings that never took place, such as in author Dean Potter’s 1967 book *Yamamoto* in which he described an impossible conference between aviation hero Charles Lindberg, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and President Roosevelt on April 16, 1943, this narrative seeks to illuminate only objective facts and assert reasonable assumptions.¹⁷⁸ Additionally, it ignores the irrelevant debate surrounding who specifically shot down Yamamoto. This debate is of no significance to military operational art or in determining the strategic value of the mission. As well, the account given seeks to remove emotion from the story, though no doubt emotions played a significant part in the mission, overplaying those emotions is counterproductive to learning what actually transpired. Even the commonly referenced name of Operation Vengeance is an artificial play on emotion. According to the Air Force historical archives, there is no operation named Vengeance. In fact, the mission itself has no official name.¹⁷⁹

In an effort to answer the original question with the most objectivity, the monograph organized the narrative from the perspective of those personally involved. Primary source material, personal letters, and interviews comprise the bulk of its sources. As well, notable secondary sources proved useful in filling in the blanks as the authors themselves conducted interviews and had access to information of which the Air Force Historical Research Agency has no record. In this effort, the findings reveal that the circumstances surrounding the decision to kill Yamamoto revolved around the

¹⁷⁸ Potter, *Yamamoto*, 324.

¹⁷⁹ The Air Force has no record of an Operation Vengeance per se; As best as the author has found in his research, the name first appeared in John Deane Potter’s 1967 book *Yamamoto*. There are no references to Operation Vengeance prior to 1967. See. *Ibid*.

means, ways, and end, with the intelligence and decision-making processes representing the “means,” mission details revealing the “way,” and the aftermath of the mission exposing the “end.”

Beginning with an explanation of the means, the first section offers an appraisal of the intelligence used to decipher Yamamoto’s itinerary. It illustrates how the US Army and Navy intelligence community prized the ability to decipher Japanese code, and shows how they realized that a mission to intercept his transport aircraft could compromise this critical capability.¹⁸⁰ Next, a short biography of Yamamoto uncovers his distinct worth as a commander. Yamamoto unique character and education made it so that his value as a target superseded his position in the organization of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Lastly, the specifics of who made what decision when exposes a convoluted decision making process at the strategic echelons of the US military. A process that likely reached the President of the United States himself and that resulted in Nimitz, with presumed authorization from Washington, deciding that the operation was worth the risk.¹⁸¹

The second section recognizes the ways. Specific mission details give awareness into the conditions of the mission by exposing how luck, skill, courage, risk, and chance were involved in accomplishing the mission. Starting with how and why American forces were on Guadalcanal, this section underscores an ad hoc planning and execution process that was analogous to that of the decision making process. The obvious difference being, those in Washington, DC only risked their political lives while those pilots of the Cactus Air Force who risked everything. They were the ones who ultimately made the mission happen. An often-overlooked reality of war, individuals and their actions make history. These mission details facilitate a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the targeted killing of Yamamoto.

The third section deals with the end. The aftermath of the Yamamoto mission illustrates that the mission offered little in the way of tactical significance. The aircraft lost mattered little in the

¹⁸⁰ Haulman, “The Yamamoto Mission,” 32.

¹⁸¹ Chandler, “Syma Newsletter #13 - the Last One,” 1.

grand scheme of things, both sides could replace them easily. The value of the mission came from the strategic shock inflicted upon the will of the Japanese people and military. Even though the Imperial Japanese Navy filled his position as Marshal Admiral and Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet within days, they were never able to replace the inspiration and ingenuity that Yamamoto presented as a commander. The Americans at the same came to question and then confirm that the end justified risk presented to their means, *Magic*.

The significance of the findings here are that in a time when targeted killing is a commonly accepted tactic of military operations, where the decision-making process is well structured, and where execution seems flawless, the US military does not seem to be achieving its desired effects with targeted killing.¹⁸² Looking at the first example of targeted killing and comparing it to today's efforts, we see a stark contrast. The process of targeting killing today is well regulated and precisely executed, but lacks that effectiveness that we see in the Yamamoto mission. The Yamamoto mission was anything but precise or well regulated; it was an extemporized from the beginning. Yet it was highly effective. The reason of course is that Yamamoto meant something more than rank or position in a task organization. What they understood in 1943 and what we need to understand today is that the targeted killing needs to be more than eliminating the next person in the chain of command. Because we can eliminate a target does not mean we should. Rather we need to appreciate the value of a target in a holistic sense and evaluate what eliminating a target means in both immediate and protracted terms. Yamamoto represented more than a position in an organization. He was truly unique, irreplaceable. His elimination had long lasting effects in terms of Japanese morale and will. At the same time, US military leadership by no means expected the mission would end the war, but understood that it was necessary to helping achieve a larger cumulative effect. They were pragmatic in their expectations. In this way, the Yamamoto mission not only set the precedent and demonstrated

¹⁸² David Ignatius, "Killing Top Terrorists Is Not Enough," accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/targeting-top-terrorists-is-not-enough>, March 5, 2015.

how the elimination of one particular target could have a strategic effect but also set the precedent for what the United States should expect from such operations. After all, the war in the Pacific raged on for another two and a half years before Japan finally surrendered.

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