

JAPANESE NAVAL MILITARY CULTURE IN THE PACIFIC WAR

A Monograph

by

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ABSTRACT

JAPANESE NAVAL MILITARY CULTURE IN THE PACIFIC WAR, by Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Hallett, USMC, 33 pages.

The U.S. Marine Corps established in 2005 the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning in Quantico, Virginia. The intent was to retain lessons from military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, although the importance of culture is obvious during tactical interactions between soldiers and the civilian populous, the importance of culture in planning operations is not clear. This monograph analyzes how Japanese military cultural norms interfered with the tactical, operational and strategic military decisions that ultimately decided the outcome of the war. Imperial Japan was selected because Japanese culture during World War II was dramatically different from American culture and, therefore, the influence of culture on planning would likely be more pronounced and easier to observe. To avoid the cultural generalizations and to narrow the scope of study, the research was limited to the military culture of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) during the Pacific War and considers two major decisions for study, the plans to attack Pearl Harbor and Midway.

Because cultures have a large number of attributes, social, philosophical, and historical, the research investigated only the historical aspect of cultural norms. Beginning with the 1905 Russo-Japanese War the research examined the evolution of the Imperial Japanese Navy's culture until the outbreak of the Pacific War. The Russo-Japanese War was selected as the starting point because Japanese naval leaders focused on the lessons of 1905 when planning for war against the United States.

The study shows that Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor was planned to achieve a specific set of operational goals similar to the attack on Port Arthur in 1904. The plan was heavily influenced by the Imperial Navy's culture.

Similarly, the Battle of Midway became a pivotal point in the Pacific War because the Japanese sought a quick, decisive victory despite the fact that changes in operational factors meant the Japanese could no longer reasonably expect to achieve such a victory. The Midway example shows that the Japanese navy's emphasis on a decisive, first strike was no longer a winning concept but Japanese planners and commanders adhered to the norms of the naval culture, ignoring or overlooking tactical and operational factors. The evidence shows that military culture had a decisive impact on Japanese tactical and operational level decisions but strategically culture had little to no effect on the war's outcome.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last twelve years, the United States military has conducted sustained combat operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Those operations have provided a wealth of knowledge regarding future combat operations. Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM recognized that superior firepower and technology, while important and valuable, were not guarantees for success. A greater emphasis needed to be placed on understanding the enemy, particularly his language, culture and history. As a result, the United States Army and Marine Corps have built new educational centers and doctrine that have attempted to incorporate culture better in operational design and the planning process. The goal of these educational centers is to deliver soldiers and Marines back to the operating forces that appreciate different cultures and consider those differences when developing plans and conducting military operations. This appreciation of culture is not a new development. Several notable military historians and social scientists such as Victor Hansen have assessed that culture and war are inseparable. Assessments such as Hansen's are the foundation in this monograph; specifically assessments of military culture with regards to operational planning and warfighting.

Whether recognized, appreciated or even considered in the planning process, it is not always easy to assess the relationship between a military culture and combat operations. However, a review of history may provide standards by which to assess the relevance of cultural factors in successful military operations. In particular, the conduct of World War II in the Pacific by Imperial Japan presents a useful case to study the role of military culture in operational planning and design. The study of Japan and its Pacific opponent is particularly useful because of the extreme religious, political, historical, geographic and social differences. It is easy to compare Japan and the United States using cultural generalizations but more difficult to assess whether these differences really mattered to decision-making, policy choices and a general approach to war fighting. The study of military history and its impact on modern warfare can often become

broad generalizations that devolve to racial stereotypes without any emphasis on how historical interpretations influenced doctrine, planning or integration.

To avoid the cultural generalizations and to narrow the scope of study, the research was limited to the military culture of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) during the Pacific War. Unfortunately, military cultures like civil cultures have a number of dimensions such as social norms, a specialized language, and an interpretation of history, both national and organizational. Because the intent was to analyze the impact of military culture on operational planning, it was important to further limit the research to understanding how Japanese military leaders interpreted historical events and the impact those interpretations had on doctrine and modernization. Although many historians have asserted that issues such as racism or industrial power had the most influence on the conduct of the war in the Pacific, the evidence will show that Japanese military cultural norms interfered with technical and tactical military decisions that ultimately decided the strategic outcome of the war.

The initial section of the paper examines the military culture of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The study pays greater attention to the Navy because both the operations against Pearl Harbor and Midway were almost entirely naval engagements. Although a good portion of the Imperial Japanese Army's military culture was shaped by events in China, those events did not greatly influence Japanese naval leaders and, hence, lies outside the scope of this research. The section analyzes naval leaders across the IJN and shows how history influenced their view of the war and their subsequent decisions. In particular, the section discusses how their view of war influenced doctrine and modernization. The review sheds light on the impact of culture on both the service and Japanese decisions made throughout the war. The discussion argues that failures in prosecution were not only attributable to luck, personalities and doctrine but also that culture directly contributed to the Japanese operational planning and their implementation of war plans. Particular focus will be paid to the development of IJN military culture from the 1905 Russo-

Japanese War until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. At the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War and World War I, the Japanese understood well what was needed to become a dominant military power operationally but they were not always able to overcome their resource constraints and political and cultural factors to achieve their strategic aspirations. The development of the Japanese navy's culture was also shaped by the events during this period and by how naval officers interpreted those events in terms of doctrine, training, and equipment. The discussion begins with the Russo-Japanese War because the formative experiences of the Japanese navy in the 19th Century have only a small effect on the navy after 1905. Other events as early as the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1892 or as late as the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937 all contributed to the development of Japanese military culture. The Russo-Japanese War was selected because Japanese naval leaders focused on the lessons of 1905 when planning for war against the United States.

In *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* military historian John Lynn defines military culture as the way in which armies think of themselves. He further states that military culture includes conceptions of war and combat within a military.¹ He goes into great detail distinguishing between the different cultural realms, to include societal, military and strategic. While each is intertwined to some degree, Lynn specifies military culture as that which is most relevant in analyzing the “conceptual factors in determining military history.”² Drawing from examples from as far back as the Pacific War up to Operation DESERT STORM, modern strategists often pointed to technology as the most important factor determining combat success. Lynn does not necessarily abandon that notion because there have been technological advancements that have had a profound impact on the battlefield. However, technology is only a

¹John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), xx.

²Ibid., xvii.

tool employed by those who are influenced by a distinct military culture. Lynn uses his definition to demonstrate that the prosecution of war is not just a decision about which side has the most resources or the best technology or the best-trained army. His definition shows that military culture influences everything about war – the decisions, the interpretations of events, the human dynamic, and the decision making cycle.

As Lynn stated, how one thinks of themselves is vital to the discussion of military culture. The Japanese people were and are a proud people with a long military tradition. Commonly referred to examples of the Japanese warrior traditions include the samurai and the samurai code of bushido. Up to the Pacific War, Japan's ascendance as a military power had been by deliberate design, based upon long standing traditions. The Meiji Restoration was the result of Japanese elites attempting to reform their social and political structure in response to the colonial threat posed by Western powers. After Commodore Matthew C. Perry's intrusion into the Japanese island in 1853, Japan recognized they had neither the military power nor the political legitimacy to prevent incursions by a foreign colonial power. They responded by changing the Tokagawa Shogunate and by adopting a dual strategy of industrial development and governmental modernization. The Japanese elites felt that by modernizing they could limit any advance into the sovereign territory by western colonial powers. The arrival of Western naval vessels in Japanese waters had produced a deep sense of military inferiority and shame because they knew they could not repel the foreign intruders. Thus, the Japanese had sought to redefine themselves. The Western colonial powers had exposed a weakness in Japan and they were determined to regain their respect as the Yamato race. A newer feudal sense of obligation was enforced and moral authority came from the elites and established Meiji Emperor.³

³Robert B. Edgerton, *Warriors of the Rising Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 306-309.

The Russo-Japanese War also provided some credible insight, militarily and culturally, about the Japanese who had for centuries been isolated from the world. From 1635 when Shogun Tokugawa closed off Japan from the outside world to 1854 when Commodore Perry forced Japanese to reopen their ports, not much had been known about Japan, culturally or otherwise. In the period after the Japanese Civil War in 1877, Japan made significant strides toward modernizing its economy and military. The western nations of Germany, England and France were deeply involved in the equipping and subsequent training of the Imperial Japanese military. The war with Russia provided outsiders an opportunity to see where the Japanese stood as a potential military and political power and to observe Japan's use of western technology and tactics. Analysts, military historians and observers, such as Sir Ian Hamilton who personally observed the war between Japan and Russia, begrudgingly admired how the Japanese deceived the Russians about their intentions and they suggested that there might be lessons to be learned from by studying Japanese deception operations.⁴ However, Western observers were also dismayed by the rapid advance of a small, only recently unified, resource poor eastern country and how it had risen to threaten a traditional power, Russia. Additionally, the West had difficulty in understanding how Japan could have been so successful against a seemingly stronger foe, successfully endure the pain of war and yet, still maintain the political will to achieve victory against Russia.⁵

The second section examines the impact of Japanese military culture on decisions just prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. This is not an assessment of the causes of the Pacific War. It instead evaluates decision maker's assessment of the military problem as it was presented to them and their interpretation of the conditions. Actions taken during the initial attack in Hawaii

⁴Patrick Porter, "Military Orientalism? British Observers of the Japanese Way of War, 1904-1910," *War & Society* (May 2007): 11.

⁵Ibid.

significantly influenced actions during the remainder of the war in the Pacific. The section shows that Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor was planned to achieve a specific set of operational goals but failed to produce decisive victory that would support achievement of the Japanese long-term plans. The section also shows how Japanese military culture hindered achievement of the strategic endstate.

The last section recognizes the Battle of Midway as a pivotal point in the Pacific War. Midway opens a period during which the Japanese could no longer reasonably expect to achieve a quick, decisive victory. Midway changed the course of the war for both the US and Japanese. Up to that point in the war, the Japanese war machine had enjoyed success after success. After Midway, the IJN could no longer influence the war to achieve a favorable outcome. In comparison to the decisions regarding Pearl Harbor, the section shows the IJN's cultural fixation with Mahanian naval concepts and its reliance on Japanese technological advantages such as the torpedo and large battleship guns. By Midway, these advantages were increasingly tactically irrelevant. This section shows that the Japanese navy's emphasis on a decisive, first strike was no longer a winning concept. These operational decisions were deliberately and consciously made but were heavily influenced by Japan's past and its navy's culture.

IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY MILITARY CULTURE

Alfred Thayer Mahan served as a major contributor to the Imperial Japanese Navy's culture that existed in the Pacific War. Along with the lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War, his theories influenced much of the development of how Japanese naval leaders interpreted what role the Japanese Navy would play in foreign policy and national security concerns. Two such naval leaders and veterans of the Russo-Japanese War, Vice Admiral Akiyama Saneyuki and Vice Admiral Sato Tetsutaro played a significant role in codifying these influences that would serve as a foundation in the establishment of the Japanese naval culture that existed in the Pacific War.

Known as the father of modern Japanese naval strategy, Saneyuki was a disciple of Mahan. In 1898, as an observer of the American fleet during the Spanish American War Saneyuki obtained some unique insights to US naval capabilities based off the Mahanian concepts. He also served as a senior staff officer for Admiral Togo's Combined Fleet during the Russo-Japanese War, which won accolades for its performance against the Russians. While he did not necessarily agree with all Mahan's views, he considered Mahan a "meticulous nervous strategist who combines a philosophical brain with a logical mind." He further considered Mahan a spiritualist, which the Japanese generally saw as an integral part of the military culture in both the navy and army.⁶ The spiritual context of warfighting spoke volumes to Japanese military officers and was often seen as more important than material factors. Most notably, Saneyuki applied the lessons learned through war gaming and tabletop maneuvers during Mahan's presidency at Newport to the Japanese Naval Staff College curriculum in 1902.⁷ Mahan, especially his emphasis on fleet concentration and the decisive fleet engagement, heavily influenced Saneyuki's lectures on naval strategy.

Tetsutaro was chosen by Naval Minister Yamamoto Gombei to be the leading theorist and propagandist for a navy first policy. "Traditionally, the navy had been clearly subordinate to the army. In 1898 [Gombei], engaged in a bureaucratic battle with Army Minister Katsura Taro, in an attempt to change the priority for defense spending, from the army to the navy."⁸ Tetsutaro continued Gombei's efforts and warned that no nation could maintain a first class navy and first-class army at the same time. He saw the navy as Japan's first line of defense. Therefore, he thought the navy should be assigned the first priority, "even to the point of suggesting the

⁶Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 30.

⁷Ibid., 31.

⁸Ibid., 33.

withdrawal of troops from Korea and Manchuria.”⁹ He originally saw the United States as a formidable national power, posing the greatest potential threat to Japan. However, he also thought it unwise to try to maintain a fleet on par with the US. Tetsutaro originally insisted that the best course of action was friendly relations with the US. However, five years later, when Japan was knee deep in Manchuria and the US was openly critical of Japanese efforts in the region, he changed his position, a change that pointed toward an eventual conflict between the two nations.¹⁰ As much as Mahan dominated Tetsutaro’s writings regarding command of the sea, fleet concentration, and the need to take the offensive, Mahan also influenced Tetsutaro’s change in perspective regarding the US position. Tetsutaro became disillusioned with Mahan’s concern for the yellow peril and economic determinism. Mahan advocated what he called imperial navalism and a global oceanic expansion that Tetsutaro interpreted as an obstacle to Japan’s right to secure its own expansion in China and the Pacific. According to Sadao Asada, Tetsutaro had been carried away with his visions. Tetsutaro’s version of worldwide expansion to secure vital trade routes and resources probably was limited to the Southeast Asia region but his vision put the IJN in opposition to both the IJA and the US. He became a staunch proponent of the primacy of the Navy over the Army. The Army was constitutionally the senior service and habitually dominated the Imperial defense budget and received the greatest emphasis. His advocacy became so pronounced that he was eventually sequestered to other positions within government that minimized his presence. Eventually he was placed on the reserve list never to hold a viable position in government again. Nevertheless, he continued to lobby for IJN. His determined advocacy of the IJN over the IJA further solidified the cultural divide between the two services that carried into the Pacific War.

⁹Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States*, 34.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 37.

Tetsutaro and Saneyuki had significantly influenced the establishment of a Mahanian dominated culture within the Navy. However, their advocacy was not the only influence. The Russo-Japanese War also significantly altered the IJN's thinking on doctrine and strategy. Four significant concepts came out of the Japanese naval engagements with Russia. The first was the concept of the decisive fleet engagement determined by the big guns. The second was the validity of a strategy of attrition against a numerically superior enemy. Third, the Japanese read into the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War a preference for quality over quantity in naval weaponry. Lastly, the Japanese Navy concluded from their experiences that nighttime torpedo attacks had a significant role to play in achieving the attrition.¹¹ The last concept regarding the torpedo may seem surprising in that the success of the torpedo during the Russo-Japanese War was questionable at best. However, in context of structure, organization, capabilities and most importantly, culture, the torpedo was the perfect weapon. At the time, emphasis on the torpedo suited the Japanese who were focused on using a smaller fleet to deal with a larger force. Additionally, “. . . the tactics it called for seemed to recall those of ancient Japanese warfare – the quick, close-in thrust of small groups of warriors against the heart of the enemy – and thus admirably suited to the Japanese martial spirit.”¹²

Lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War were codified into the Naval Strength Policy of the Imperial National Defense Policy of 1907. They established the United States as the navy's hypothetical enemy. The IJA also determined that it was a strategic imperative to maintain a fleet equal to 70 percent of the US Navy's capital ships. As a corollary to that ratio and influenced by the Mahanian ideology, a program was established for building a first-line “eight-eight fleet” consisting of eight modern (dreadnaught) battleships displacing 20,000 tons and eight

¹¹David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 129.

¹²Ibid., 130.

armored cruisers (later, battle cruisers) displacing eighteen thousand tons. Despite the IJN assessment, the IJA disagreed with the Navy over what nation posed the most serious the hypothetical future threat and put their emphasis on planning a war with Russia.¹³ The Imperial National Defense Policy reflected the Navy's cultural emphasis on a Mahanian big gun navy that put it in direct conflict with the Imperial Army. Acquiring the planned fleet would have required greater financial resources that the Navy could not expect to receive.

Because the budget could not support what the Imperial Navy saw as critical to the development of a first rate fleet, Japanese naval leaders began to place a greater emphasis on training and battle simulation. The result sometimes placed crews and captains at greater risk that often ended in tragedy. As commander in chief of the Combined Fleet from 1926 to 1929, Kato Kanji initiated a series of exercises that were conducted at high speed. The exercises were close in night exercises in the stormy waters off Japan's northern coasts. The results were mixed. Japanese captains became more comfortable in such adverse conditions but at the cost of several valuable ships that were damaged or destroyed in collisions and the lives of numerous sailors.¹⁴ The Japanese could ill-afford the training losses. The exercises also highlighted problems in leadership from the admiralty down to the most junior officer. "Such shortcomings included the absence of independent and rational judgment in the average naval officer, his lack of assertiveness, the tendency of too many senior officers to delegate responsibilities to their staffs, the narrow strategic and tactical concerns that monopolized higher naval education at the Naval Staff College, a promotion system that emphasized seniority over capability, the overly rapid turnover in assignments that precluded continuity in naval policy, and of course, the

¹³Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States*, 47.

¹⁴Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 210-211.

overwhelming pride of service that perpetuated the navy's continuing and destructive rivalry with the army."¹⁵

Aviation was not an integral part of Japanese naval culture. Japanese naval aviation, like the rest of the Imperial Navy, was seen as supporting arm to the IJA in the war with China from 1937 to 1941. As such, it had two prime responsibilities; support of army ground force amphibious operations and support to the strategic bombing campaign against Chinese cities and infrastructure.¹⁶ While the battleship remained the centerpiece of naval strategy, the role of naval aviation opened some new doors and extended the reach of what could be brought to bear. Additionally, the war in China provided new tactics, techniques and procedures as well as a cadre of pilots that became the most experienced of any military force that existed in the early 1940s. Unfortunately, the Japanese navy failed to comprehend the full potential of naval aviation in its operational planning. Aviation never fit comfortably into the Japanese interpretation of Mahan's definition of a suitable fleet.

Like naval aviation, Japanese aircraft carriers did not ever assume a dominant role in Japanese naval culture despite the preeminence the carrier came to have during the war. While operational doctrine on the employment of aircraft carriers developed quickly over a relatively short period, the carrier was never more than a raiding platform or a supporting ship for battleships and land forces. Despite this secondary role, aviation planners and carrier advocates worked diligently to ensure that the carrier would be effective when called upon. Once such tactic was the development of the box formation, which allowed for the massing of aircraft on a target. The box formation also allowed for a limited dispersal of the ships but ensured the fleet's anti-aircraft fire from the carriers could also be brought to bear against enemy aircraft. The ability to

¹⁵Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 211.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 340.

command and control this new formation required some reorganization of the Combined Fleet. In 1941, Admiral Yamamoto, in conjunction with Rear Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, formed the First Air Fleet. While this new grouping was conceivably the most powerful conglomeration of naval forces, it could not conduct independent operations since it lacked “an accompanying supply force or any significant surface escort,” a problem the US fleet did not face.¹⁷

Despite the secondary status of Japanese aircraft carriers and their accompanying air wings, it was by far the most lethal naval air power at the start of the war. Unfortunately, because it was not a predominant part of the naval culture or organization, Japanese air assets were also the most vulnerable to losses. The Japanese aircraft could fly farther, faster and outperform any rival at the beginning of the war. However, to fly as far and as fast as they could, Japanese aircraft also sacrificed armor protection for the aircrew and the fuel tanks. Additionally, not much emphasis was placed on sourcing a pilot pool. The Japanese limited their pilot pool to graduates from their Naval Academy whereas US pilots came from numerous sources and in greater numbers. Good naval pilots existed in the US compared to the superior pilots in the Japanese Navy but the U.S. had a much greater quantity. Subsequently what was so readily apparent as an advantage for the Japanese at Pearl Harbor became a hindrance as the war dragged on. Because of the Mahanian influence on naval culture, the Japanese Naval Command initiated the war with the US without understanding the potential of naval aviation as operational resource. Carriers and their aircrews were never intended to be the centerpiece of the fleet.

Tetsutaro and Saneyuki set conditions for what the Japanese Navy would deem important to be a pre-eminent naval power. As Lynn suggested, it was how Japanese naval officers saw themselves. The Japanese placed a great faith in the principles of Mahan when they built their navy and those tenets placed them at great odds with the fiscal constraints imposed upon them by

¹⁷Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 349.

the economic situation of the times and by their inferior status. Mahan had prescribed that ideally battleships would strike quickly and decisively to achieve victory. Unfortunately, a dominant fleet of that description was not within Japanese capabilities and, subsequently, put the Navy at odds with members of its own ranks, the army and the Japanese government. Unfortunately, for the theorists like Tetsutaro and Saneyuki, lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War and World War I confirmed what they thought to be true. Technological advances and operational enhancements such as air power and the aircraft carrier did not fit into the established naval culture. The First Air Fleet successfully attacked Pearl Harbor but did not achieve the successes that would lead to achievement of the Japan's overall strategic goals. Author and former Imperial Navy staff officer Masataka Chihaya discussed the Imperial Navy's predilection with the decisive battle concept. He said that the Japanese navy became slaves of the one big battle idea and that this emphasis never went beyond the blue print stage. Based off this idea, he suggests that the IJN was never ever able to conceive of a possibility that actions beyond the decisive battle would be required.¹⁸ It prevented their ability to see the advent of the carrier or naval aviation in a way the US Navy did, it prevented their ability to work in a joint environment alongside the IJA and it influenced their leadership to emphasize the spiritual aspects of the big battle to the detriment of the material. The Japanese Navy's culture was dominated by this mantra to the point it interfered with their leaders' ability to see the bigger picture. The navy became a victim to its influence.

PEARL HARBOR

The attack on Pearl Harbor provides the first demonstration of the decisive battle concept in action. In hindsight, Pearl Harbor is generally seen as an operational success because it crippled the US battleship fleet. However, it also influenced the strategic outcome by changing

¹⁸Masataka Chihaya, "An Intimate Look at the Japanese Navy," in *The Pearl Harbor Papers – Inside the Japanese Plans*, ed. Donald M. Golstein and Katherine V. Dillon (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1993), 327.

how the US utilized the carrier fleet throughout the Pacific War. Japan failed to adapt to that realization. Pearl Harbor was also the culmination of a series of decisions that highlighted the significant divisions within the government, divisions between the services and internal divisions in the naval command structure.

In order to establish Japan as a legitimate power, the Japanese leadership needed to develop a military capable of meeting Japan's long-term goals of national security and economic independence. To build that military, Japan relied heavily on outside assistance for advice, material support and doctrinal development. Germany was one of the major powers Japan relied upon. However, Germany's subsequent defeat in World War I signaled a need for the Japanese to conduct a complete review of their own strengths and weaknesses. It made sense if Germany could be defeated using the same tactics and technology provided to the Japanese, the Japanese could suffer the same consequences. According to historian Michael A. Barnhart, the Japanese concluded that Germany lost because they lacked the economic resources required to wage war in the presence of a naval blockade. It was clear to Japanese leaders that Japan had to be economically viable and independent in addition to being a great military power if it expected to succeed in long-term goals. Economic independence required gaining access to overseas resources, such as oil and iron and development of an industrial base that could produce needed war materials. The debate became how to achieve autarky but still have the financial wherewithal to build a capable military force. Capable military forces cost significant amounts of money to build and more importantly, to maintain.

From the point of view of the army, one solution was to take over Manchuria and establish a puppet government willing to meet Japan's economic and resource needs. However, the creation of Manchukuo in 1932 did not solve Japan's economic problems and created the potential for armed conflict with Russia and China. The tensions within the government over how to address each threat came to a head once full combat operations were initiated between China

and Japan in July 1937. The Second Sino-Japanese War all but assured Japan would not be able to become economically self sufficient, especially as the country mobilized industry and capacity to conduct full-scale war production. “During the frenzied debates of mid-1937, most army officers maintained that operations in China would amount to no more than a short-term affair requiring relatively small forces.”¹⁹ Chiang Kai-shek’s stubborn Nationalist army presented a serious challenge and prevented any short-term solution. Lacking domestic industrial capacity, Japanese imports to support the war machine reached an all time high by 1938. Countries who supplied those resources, such as the US and Britain, were appalled by Japanese brutality and under pressure domestically to stop supplying Japanese aggression. The Japanese recognized that if the US initiated a freeze on all Japanese assets and a halt to any trade with Japan, the resulting embargo would mean that imports could no longer substitute for their lack of domestic production. Along with the interruption of German goods that were no longer able to reach Japan through Siberia because of Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, the Japanese saw only two available options. They could either end the war in China and bow to international pressure or look to expand the war into those areas that could supply desperately needed resources. When the US State Department announced America’s intention to abrogate the American-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation in 1939, Japan pursued the later.²⁰

At this point, divisions with the IJA and Navy came to a head. In an effort to reduce the tensions, politicians decided a full alliance with Germany might dissuade the US and Britain from pursuing their interests throughout the Pacific region. England and Germany had been at war since September 1939 and the US, although officially neutral, was supporting England through its Lend-Lease Program and by selling weapons and war materials. Despite the Army’s efforts,

¹⁹Michael A. Barnhart, “Japan’s Economic Security and the Origins of the Pacific War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1981), 112.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 114.

fighting in China produced nothing tangible except more combat losses and the expenditure of desperately needed war material. Tensions between the two services could not be resolved. “The twelve months after June 1940 were decisive in the origins of the Pacific War. Historians have long recognized that the key actors during these months were the Imperial Army and Navy.”²¹

Plans for the Southward Advance were constantly debated between the services. Initially supportive, the Navy began to see flaws in the overall plan. Such a venture would require significant additions to its wartime resource allocation before any confrontation could be conducted. The Army disagreed and saw Germany’s success as benefitting its own interests centered primarily on French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. However, any plan would necessarily be limited to the minimal amount army troops required to occupy those colonies because fighting was still ongoing in China. Debate also raged in Japanese political and military circles regarding how this policy might possibly bring them into conflict with the United States’ sphere of influence. It was probably a good argument that the US would not have been inclined to fight on behalf of British or Dutch colonial interests if left alone. However, others in the Japanese hierarchy saw Japan as a power with an expiration date, limited oil reserves and steel production and desperate for territory; territory that was also in America’s circle of interest.²² In order to resolve the interservice rivalry, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe stepped in to arbitrate the issues. He proposed that negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek be reinitiated and encouraged discussions with Germany and Italy. He also promised economic and political reforms designed to prepare Japan for the planned operations. On the surface the compromise titled, “Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Situation” seemed acceptable although

²¹Barnhart, “Japan’s Economic Security and the Origins of the Pacific War,” 115.

²²Saki Dockrill, “Introduction: One Step Forward – A Reappraisal of the ‘Pacific War,’” in *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45*, ed. Saki Dockrill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 4.

both services continued to plan for their own version of the Southward Advance.²³ It was clear that despite the drastic measures required to solve the debate and the impending threats to Japan's national security and economic independence, the services would not be part of the long-term solution. Despite the serious threats to Japanese sovereignty and existence as a state, service culture remained supreme over a unified national plan.

The IJA felt the most important portion of the compromise was the alliance with Germany. The Navy still maintained some concerns based upon its assumption that any Southward Advance would ultimately result in conflict with the US. The Navy Minister, Zengo Yoshida and Commander of the Combined Fleet, Isoroku Yamamoto contended that such a confrontation was then beyond Japan's capabilities. Neither was certain Japan could win a war with the United States. Any chance one did have would require a quick strike with definitive objectives that was conducted over a limited period. The longer any conflict went on, the poorer the chances for victory. Ongoing actions in China proved how uncertain that promise could be. Ironically as the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Yamamoto declared to the Emperor several months prior to the attack, "We can give you a wild show for six months to a year, but if the war drags on to two and three years, I cannot be confident of the outcome."²⁴ As Chief of the Naval Staff and the service's oldest officer, Admiral Nagano spoke at a liaison conference in September 1941 saying that, "the Navy thought in terms of both a short war and a long one." He said that the Navy hoped for a quick victory and expected positive results in such a situation, but he also said he did not think it would end there. He felt it would be a longer

²³Barnhart, "Japan's Economic Security and the Origins of the Pacific War," 116-117.

²⁴Ikuhiko Hata, "Admiral Yamamoto's Surprise Attack and the Japanese Strategy," in *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45*, ed. Saki Dockrill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 65.

campaign and without a decisive battle, “we will be in difficulty . . . since our supply of resources will become depleted.”²⁵

Despite these dire predictions, dissention continued within the services. Naval officers such as Admiral Shigeru Fukudome asserted that the Southward Advance was a requirement in order to defeat the Americans. He also strongly advocated the alliance with Berlin in order to dissuade the Americans from interfering with the advance. By the time Germany sent Heinrich Stahmer of the German Foreign Ministry to Tokyo in August and in the wake of a string of successes by the Third Reich in Europe, the decision had de facto already been made. By September of the same year, the alliance agreement was concluded. For the Navy’s support of this alliance, they received agreements that the Navy would receive an increase in material support.

Now that the government had chosen to enter into an alliance with the Axis, the IJA began to hedge on their support of the Southward Advance. Germany was engaged a bitter struggle with the Soviet Union and the IJA’s concern was that any alliance with Germany could possibly open Japan up to hostilities with the Soviet Union. If the Army accepted the Navy’s assessment that the Southward Advance would result in the US’ entry into the war that meant the army would now have to plan for the United States in defending any gained holdings in the region. Along with the ongoing war in China and concerns that Russia might attack Japanese interests in China and elsewhere, the Imperial Army was unprepared to support multiple fronts with the limited manpower resources required to fight three opponents. According to Barnhart, by July the services were in complete “disarray.” The Navy felt the Army was backtracking to protect its own interests and the Army felt the Navy was opening them up to an unwinnable war on multiple fronts. Only upon reevaluating Japan’s economic survival did the Army concede.

²⁵John Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995), 112.

Once again, service rivalry interfered with a solution. Now it was the Navy who began to hedge their bets as doubt began to creep in with regards to whether they could actually defeat the US Navy. The Army felt betrayed and became enraged by this turn of events. This time the Prime Minister could not resolve the drama and resigned. Army Minister Hideki Tojo succeeded him and immediately put the Imperial Navy on notice. If the vaunted Navy that had received all this material support could not defeat the US, what was the point of having a fleet? The Navy, in order to save face, concurred but with a caveat. Any conflict with the US must be conducted within one to two years in order to achieve success. Anything longer would exceed available resources. Despite these dire conditions, the US was elevated to the number one threat to Japanese interests in the region.²⁶

The question of how to best deal with the US threat was a difficult one. It has been noted already that the Japanese Navy did not feel they could wait for the United States to fully mobilize. The Russo-Japanese War was a precedent for attacking first; an example consistent with Mahan's principles and offering a quick, decisive victory. A surprise attack against the United States was also consistent with lessons learned from Japan's war with Russia and Japan's national temperament.²⁷ Ironically, British air operations in the Mediterranean Sea provided an idea about how to best achieve this goal. During Japanese fleet maneuvers, Admiral Yamamoto and his Chief of Staff, Admiral Fukudome began discussions on the merits of a torpedo-based attack. The idea was based upon the success of British carrier based torpedo planes against the Italian battleships moored in Taranto harbor. Yamamoto's subsequent plan envisioned an air strike

²⁶Hata, "Admiral Yamamoto's Surprise Attack and the Japanese Strategy," 55.

²⁷Atsushi Oi, "The Japanese Navy in 1941" in *The Pacific War Papers*, eds. Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2004), 12.

followed by a submarine blockade. He had the paper sent to the Naval Minister and which Rear Admiral Takijiro Onishi, a noted unconventional naval planner, also reviewed.²⁸

The initial response by the Chief of the Naval Staff was not positive. Admiral Fukudome had concerns about using new technologies, specifically air power and to a lesser degree, concerns about submarines. The IJN was a Mahanian battleship-centric force and Yamamoto's plan diverged from that. Nagano also remembered working to bring sunken Japanese ships at Port Arthur back to the surface. The project took only weeks and each ship was returned to the service rather quickly. He envisioned the same in Pearl Harbor. However, Admiral Nagano, to avoid losing face and not to appear weak, sent the plan off to the Naval General Staff and recused himself from the decision. The staff ultimately approved the plan. Captain Atsushi Oi, a member of the planning staff, recalled, "Chief of Staff Nagano was too clever, too afraid of losing face; a Yamamoto or a Yonai might have stood up, clearly stated the Navy's opposition, and turned the course of a nation. The Japanese method, however, was the Nagano method." This recollection defines the Japanese naval culture of senior naval officers during the Pacific War. The primary leaders normally dealt with generalities while their staffs dealt with the details and infighting.²⁹ It also amplifies the inability of those who were tasked with decision-making to bring their subordinates under their influence. This example would be demonstrated repeatedly throughout the war and served as an impediment to strategic planning. These staff arrangements may have been useful in tactical planning but operationally and strategically, the separation between commanders and staff impaired progress by promoting selfish individual interests and furthering the divide between the services. Staffs continually sought out opportunities in which to promote their own or service interests that divided valuable resources in manpower and material.

²⁸Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II*, 131.

²⁹Ibid., 138.

The discussion of the events leading up to the final decision, capped with Oi's observation about the Nagano method of staff work shows a military culture that was inherently dysfunctional. Nagano had lost the confidence of many in the Naval General Staff as well as the confidence of the Emperor and was unable to control Yamamoto or the belligerent middle echelon officers. Additionally, the concept of mission command or commander's intent was completely foreign to Japanese staff planning. It allowed the staffs to insert their own biases and influences into the plan without regard to the commander's input. Equally, the commander was often subject to the staff interaction and infighting but unable to do anything about it. Supervisors were removed from the detailed planning process and unable to mitigate conflicts, answer questions or clarify intent. Military culture also prevented those with decision-making authority from making reasonable objections. Commanders recognized the fractures that existed within the military and the power militants could generate. They remembered the assassinations and the coup attempts of the 1930s that resulted from the restlessness of the masses. Any lack of legitimacy in maintaining the interests of those power elites might result in their removal by force or by influence. Sadao Asada mentions in his book *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor* what he calls the Navy's drift into Pearl Harbor. He says that to pinpoint the exact time when the drift occurred is difficult but his emphasis is clear that the staffs of the Naval General Staff, the Navy Ministry and the operational commanders were all on their own timelines. Asada highlights that the "middle echelon officers came to the determination before ranking officers did and that the Naval General Staff reached the decision before the Navy Ministry."³⁰ The personality conflict outside the Navy was no better. The continuing interservice rivalry impeded achievement of a common strategic goal and the absence of a common goal was an impediment throughout the war. The Army remained focused on defeating the Chinese and ensuring Russia could never be a threat;

³⁰Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States*, 261.

while the Navy saw the United States as the main obstacle to achieving national aims. The inability of the services to work together toward a common goal divided scarce valuable resources and manpower. Since the military elites controlled the government, Japan suffered as a whole because no one outside the military could block the final decision to go to war.

MIDWAY

Despite the internal disagreements, Pearl Harbor was deemed a success by the Japanese leadership. Yamamoto was seen as a naval genius and an unparalleled strategist. By March 1942, most military historians and even reports submitted by the military at that time indicated that Japan held the advantage. Japan physically controlled British Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, including the oil rich islands of Borneo, Java and Sumatra. The Philippines was almost controlled by the Japanese, except for Bataan and Corregidor. Bataan would eventually fall on 9 April. Thailand failed to put up any fight whatsoever and the British were chased out of Burma back into India. Not a single Imperial Japanese Navy capital ship had been sunk and only a few destroyers, submarines and transports had been lost to Allied forces to this point. Yamamoto's Pearl Harbor plan, despite its failure to destroy the US carrier fleet, seemed initially to support Japanese strategic war aims. Up until Midway, Japan was the supreme force in the Western Pacific and in a position to secure its new territory. The Japanese held the initiative everywhere.³¹ However, the initiative and surprise from Pearl Harbor was wearing off and the US was becoming more capable. Another decisive strike was needed and Midway was Yamamoto's next great blow.

The Midway plan faced significant challenges to its implementation. It was received with even less enthusiasm than the Pearl Harbor plan and there the overall goals appeared to be inconsistent. Authors Jon Parshall and Anthony Tully describe a staff on the eve of Midway that

³¹Jonathon B. Parshall and Anthony P. Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 19-22.

seemed to harbor significant doubts about the success of the plan and remained apathetic during the planning phase. Some were outright hostile and others felt that the mission's operational planning left much to be desired.³² Yamamoto's Midway plan is an artifact that shows the tension between factions in the Naval Staff. Commanders and staffs understood the operation's goals differently and those differences often reflected differences in opinion, politics and the military culture that existed within the Navy. Yamamoto did not help his cause by supporting unpopular plans and threatening resignation when other naval officers objected to his plans. The Navy was split between officers in the Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo who made detailed technical judgments and those deployed with the fleets who conducted the fight in the Pacific, who were more sympathetic to broad concepts from senior commanders like Yamamoto.

During the planning for operations in the Pacific, inter-service rivalry continued to be thorn in the side of the operational planners. The Navy remained subordinate to the Army so any time army units were required to support naval missions there was friction and disagreement. By 1942, the fragmented Japanese military culture split the Navy and the Army over almost every issue. The Army saw the war as a protracted struggle while the Navy maintained its Mahanian focus on the decisive battle. To the Japanese Navy, both the Russo-Japanese War and events from post World War I only confirmed their vision of future naval warfare. Additionally, the Mahanian methodology, the "one great battle at sea [as] the essence of naval war [that] would achieve command of the sea and even decide the outcome of the war," greatly influenced their naval culture to point of conviction.³³ The question as to whether or not to consolidate hard won gains in a defensive strategy or to seek the knockout punch in a vigorous offense was a constant issue

³²Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, 19.

³³Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 132.

between the two services.³⁴ Each worked tirelessly to dispute the other and thwart each other's cause. Despite challenges from the Army and from within the Naval Staff, Yamamoto was a lead proponent of luring the Americans into a winner takes all battle. The result was a plan that was unorganized and strategically detrimental to Japan.

To Yamamoto and to those who supported his thinking, "the first four months of the Pacific conflict had confirmed certain aspects of this Japanese self image."³⁵ The United States had suffered loss after loss since Pearl Harbor. It was clear the Americans had not been ready to fight on 7 December and, thus far, the benefits of the American industrial or material might had not yet revealed themselves. However, as Parshall and Tully outline in their book *Shattered Sword*, Yamamoto and others on his staff failed to comprehend the full nature of the US force. Just as Yamamoto failed to understand how the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would ignite the wrath of a nation against him, he also failed to understand the US' willingness to engage the Japanese force at Midway. Yamamoto further complicated the plan by making concessions to those who wanted to secure the Aleutians to prevent raids on the home islands. The Aleutian campaign divided the available fleet resources and dissipated combat power in a secondary effort.

Isoroku Yamamoto had always been an influential figure in the Imperial Navy whose background seemed at odds with the mainstream of the majority of naval officers. In reality, his personality and character did not necessarily match his mythic Pearl Harbor reputation. Authors Jon Parshall and Anthony Tully describe Yamamoto as one who was born to humble origins and who combined intelligence with an intense drive to better himself. He also possessed several questionable characteristics such as being an avid gambler and an ambivalent family man although those personality flaws did not seem to be discordant with the social norms of the naval

³⁴Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, 26.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 53.

hierarchy.³⁶ While his character flaws may have been easier to overlook, Yamamoto was also a vocal opponent to many decisions made within the Naval General Staff. His opposition included his ardent support of the Washington and London Naval Treaties, naval aviation and the carrier fleet as well as a firm belief that the alliance with Nazi Germany was against Japan's best interests. Despite these character flaws and his consistent opposition to the naval cultural mainstream, he rose to power as Commander of the Combined Fleet.

The challenge for Admiral Yamamoto was to convince his superiors in the Imperial government and his challengers within the Imperial Japanese Army that an attack on Midway was both fundamentally sound in the overall war plan but also would capitalize on the success achieved thus far. The Japanese had never understood their goal to be the conquest of the United States. Rather they felt if they could conclude the war on terms favorable to the Japanese by wearing the United States down to such an extent that the United States would seek terms for ending the war. Additionally, they wanted to forcibly demonstrate to the United States that any invasion of the Japanese mainland would be prohibitive in both lives and material lost.

Midway as a piece of territory in of itself was rather unremarkable. The United States had held this territory since the Spanish-American War and had worked hard to make it a logistical hub in the vast Pacific Ocean. A runway and refueling station had been built to accommodate civilian air traffic and it was placed in such an area, that military transport and bombers could use it to attack the Japanese homeland. Located 1,185 nautical miles from Pearl Harbor and 1,135 from Wake Island, it presented some challenges to planning an attack and subsequently defending the island.³⁷ As it is today, the ultimate challenge for Pacific planners is about the tyranny of distance and geography. The other challenge was convincing the Japanese leadership of its value

³⁶Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, 22.

³⁷Craig L. Symonds, *Pivotal Moments in American History: Battle of Midway* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101.

in making it the next engagement; Midway was not a priority for the Imperial Army planners, who controlled the military arm of the political decision makers.

Another challenge would be overcoming the logistical advantage that rested with the United States Navy in this regard. Nevertheless, the plan on the surface was bold but manageable. Japan still enjoyed an advantage in fleet assets across the Pacific. The Japanese were riding a wave of multiple successes. To surrender this advantage, to lose face at such a critical junction would have been demoralizing. Yamamoto could not wait until the US shifted additional assets to the Pacific, such as the carriers USS Wasp and Ranger, or wait for ships that had been damaged to be repaired and returned to action, such as the USS Saratoga. Nor could they simply wait for the full force of the American industrial power to reach its apex. The time to attack was now.³⁸

Any challenge to Yamamoto's plan by the Army or by the civilian leadership melted away with the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in April. Originally, the Army had supported the plan in theory only because they had a tacit agreement the army would not need to provide troops in support of an amphibious assault on Midway. Doolittle's Raid on Tokyo changed the plan; not only did the Imperial Army agree to the naval attack but now they would furnish troops to assault and occupy the island. The attack on Tokyo had shaken many in government and they needed a victory to show they could protect the Japanese homeland.

Most of the Japanese Midway participants were veterans of the previous six months of naval war and as such, they had yet to suffer a defeat or a significant setback. While the plan lacked the cohesiveness of Pearl Harbor plan and as stated earlier, some officers harbored concerns about the planning, others seemed casually disinclined to worry about possible defects in the plan; if there were defects, they could take care of it when it came along. This dismissive attitude due to established norms was revealed again later when Yamamoto asked his strategic

³⁸James P. Levy, "Was There Something Unique to the Japanese that Lost Them the Battle of Midway?," *Naval War College Review* 67 (Winter 2014): 120-121.

aviation genius, Captain Genda, about what would happen if American carriers showed up in an unexpected place as the Japanese force was engaged in operations against Midway Island. Genda replied, “Gaishu Isshoku” which literally means, “One touch of the armored gauntlet” or idiomatically, “Easy victory.” Genda’s overconfidence demonstrates that it was not Yamamoto who needed to worry about the details; the staff would ensure success of the plan. Yamamoto did not follow up on questioning Genda or the staff on the details. His lack of attentiveness shows how committed Yamamoto was to the spirit of the plan, regardless of the challenges in tactical and technical requirements that would ensure success. The irony is that two years earlier, Yamamoto had been quoted as saying, and “It is a mistake to regard the Americans as luxury loving and weak I can tell you Americans are full of the spirit of justice, fight and adventure.” Yamamoto had forgotten his own advice and therefore failed to consider the concerns of some of his staff.³⁹

Others in command or leadership positions had other concerns. Admiral Nagumo, commander of the force assigned to attack Midway, was more concerned about how he was being perceived at Combined Fleet Headquarters and was hesitant to expose any flaws in the plan.⁴⁰ Yamamoto was a recognized force to be dealt with, a hero from his Pearl Harbor success and through sheer power of force and intimidation, got what he wanted. His success thus far made any attempt to disagree or cross him inadvisable. Intent on saving face and submitting to Admiral Yamamoto’s influence, Nagumo kept his mouth shut about possible concerns and was determined to make the plan work. His own reputation depended upon it. Once again, the Japanese custom of saving face and avoiding conflict prevented senior officers involved from criticizing the plan's shortcomings that undermined the operational concept and the conduct of the campaign.

³⁹Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II*, 128.

⁴⁰Symonds, *Pivotal Moments in American History: Battle of Midway*, 177.

On another occasion and during the Midway war games, the Japanese officer commanding the Red (American) Force sent out his carriers early and positioned them on the flank of the approaching Japanese force. A prudent move, his action was ruled invalid by Admiral Matome Ugaki, Chief of Staff of the Combined Fleet because he did believe the Americans had “the kind of fighting spirit necessary to attempt such a bold maneuver.”⁴¹ In a true case of irony, the US did exactly what the Red Force Commander predicted and laid in waiting for the Japanese fleet, undiscovered until it was too late. During the war games, Ugaki further mitigated the outcome of the war game by reducing the damage assigned from an attack from nine hits to just three, thereby, cutting losses from two carriers sunk and a third damaged to just a single carrier sunk and one damaged. “The hypothetically sunken carrier then rematerialized to participate in the next phase of the war game.”⁴² These examples show how the Japanese military culture of an emphasis on spirit and personal agendas heavily influenced the assessment of the plan and decisions made in preparation for battle; ultimately to the detriment of the Imperial Japanese fleet.

Yamamoto had many detractors, especially those that reviewed the battle after the fact. Many deride him for splitting the fleet between the Aleutian and Midway operations, thereby, reducing his combat power at Midway. One myth is that Aleutians were designed to be a diversion for the main thrust at Midway. The intent was to help lure the US fleet out of Pearl in order to meet them head on. According to Parshall and Tully’s research in *Shattered Sword*, this was not the case. Both operations were conducted exclusive of one another and more a result of cultural and political concerns, rather than operational. Parshall and Tully draw upon numerous documents, to include Admiral Nagumo’s official report, that discuss the operations as

⁴¹Symonds, *Pivotal Moments in American History: Battle of Midway*, 177-178.

⁴²Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II*, 314.

simultaneous operations, neither which mentions the one as a diversionary effort for the other. As Parshall and Tully also point out, the operational sense of the simultaneous operation does not make sense if they were to work in concert with one another. If the attack on the Aleutians Island was intended to draw the US fleet away from Pearl Harbor and into the open, the Japanese attack on the Aleutians should have been conducted prior to Midway, not in conjunction with it. The reality is that the Aleutian plan was a concession by Yamamoto to the Naval Staff in order to get what he wanted which was Midway.⁴³ This myth further highlights the divisions within the Naval Staff and Yamamoto. Divisions not only existed between the services but within the services that created difficulties for operational planning and implementation. The Aleutian compromise highlights the failure of a plan that did not incorporate integrated staff planning due to extreme personal differences amongst the staff and a desire to save face despite heavy opposition to the compromise.

Other challenges that arose due to personalities and differing perceptions on what the end state should be revealed themselves in the planning process for Midway. Yamamoto's own staff was not coordinated and its officers often worked against each other, reflecting the widening cultural gulf between the young and old or zealots and moderates. Midway was significant in that it signified a shift in the Pacific War. The Japanese were never able to respond effectively to this loss. The industrial capacity to replace four carriers and hundreds of planes did not exist, especially in the middle of a war. The manpower loss in certified, trained and experienced pilots was an even bigger blow and sorely needed as the US fleet approached mainland Japan.⁴⁴

The study into the Battle of Midway is more than just one of tactical missteps or poor decision-making. As quoted in Colin Babb's article for *Naval Aviation News*, authors Parshall

⁴³Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, 36.

⁴⁴Symonds, *Pivotal Moments in American History: Battle of Midway*, 360.

and Tully argue, “the Japanese defeat was not the result of some solitary, crucial breakdown in Japanese designs. It was not the result of Victory Disease, or of a few crucial personal mistakes. Rather, what appears is a complex, comprehensive web of failures stretching across every level of the battle — strategic, operational and tactical. They were the end products of an organization that failed to learn correctly from its past, failed to plan correctly for its future and then failed to adapt correctly to circumstances once those plans were shown to be flawed.”⁴⁵ What this quote emphasizes is the failure of the Japanese Navy to recognize a plan that was fundamentally flawed from the outset. Numerous opportunities availed themselves to Yamamoto and the staff prior to the actual battle that should have indicated that the desired outcome would be difficult to achieve at best. More importantly, the planners should have recognized that the price tag for such a loss would be detrimental to the long-term strategic goals that the Japanese deemed as important to their survival as a nation. The Japanese military culture created an environment that meant the Navy could not learn from its history and could not see past the operational limitations that Midway presented to them. This failure to see beyond the well-established limitations is consistent with Masataka Chihaya’s reference to the blue print of the decisive battle only. Shaken by the attack on its homeland by the Doolittle Raid, the Japanese hierarchy sought to reassert themselves based upon a fundamental belief that past success would spell success at Midway. The divisions that existed between the services became more pronounced. Those interservice divisions, joined with the growing internal divisions within the Naval leadership, made coordination and implementation that much more difficult to overcome. Historians often point to the events during the Battle of Midway as events that determined the battle’s outcome but it is clear that the foundation upon which the Midway plan was built spelled its defeat long before the battle even began.

⁴⁵Colin E. Babb, “Explaining the ‘Miracle’ at Midway,” *Naval Aviation News* 94 (Spring 2012): 36.

CONCLUSION

Alfred Thayer Mahan's influence on the development of the Japanese naval culture has been well documented by numerous historians and political scientists. Japanese naval theorists who adopted Mahan's ideas did not foresee how Mahan's ideas would ossify Japanese naval thinking. The focus on employing a big gun battleship navy in order to achieve the decisive, quick victory required Japan to build a fleet capable of sustaining itself against its potential adversaries. Japan's limited industrial and natural resources could not build such a fleet. Additionally those such as Vice Admiral Saneyuki and his colleagues who doggedly supported a battleship-based fleet, could not adjust to the advent of carrier-based warfare and advances in naval aviation. Once the war began, the Japanese were wedded to the Mahanian construct and unable to adjust to the changing nature of the operational battlefield.

Japanese naval culture was also held hostage by its history and how it interpreted that history, specifically from 1905 onward. The lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War and the outcomes of World War I shaped the IJN's decisions that would ultimately spell its defeat. Ultimately, it became an institution that developed a military culture that prevented naval commanders from cohesively and decisively coming to terms with the changing nature of the Pacific War. Along with the ongoing interservice rivalry with the IJA, the Navy also suffered internal divisions between the old and the new, those that subscribed to the Mahanian influence and those that saw the relevance of new technologies like the carrier and naval aviation. It could also not resolve the internal division between militant junior officers and those commanders who stressed moderation in light of an overwhelming and capable US Navy. The Japanese Navy became fixated on the lessons of 1905: reliance on the torpedo, the decisive first strike, and the emphasis of the spirit over material capacity. Those concepts fit nicely into the concept of what it meant to Japanese but did not lead an overall war plan that could adapt to the technological might of the US Navy.

In a strange case of irony, the war was initiated by the Japanese need for resources and territory. Japan knew from watching Germany during World War I that it needed to be economically viable before initiating conflict. However, to gain that viability, the Japanese would inevitably need to confront the United States. The established military culture did not block the naval commander's recognition of the futility of its cause in going to war with the US but that same culture prevented those commanders from deviating from that course in order to achieve its goals. Vice Admiral Kato Kanji voiced an opinion at the Washington Conference that the "cardinal lesson of the world war . . . was the vital importance of effecting a decisive fleet engagement early in the war before the United States could mobilize its formidable industrial potential."⁴⁶ He determined that Japan would be at the disadvantage in a protracted war. "At the outset of the 1920s, the estimated ratio of American to Japanese capital ship construction capacity was three or four to one. Therefore, it was clearly in the interest of Japan for any future conflict to be as brief as possible before the margin of superior American firepower became overwhelming."⁴⁷ Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto wrote a letter to the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Osami Nagano, as late as September 29, 1941 that it was obvious the coming war with the United States would be a protracted one. He stated that the US would never stop fighting as long as Japan remained in what he called a favorable position. He continued to say, "as a consequence, the war would continue for several years, our supplies would be exhausted, our ships and arms would be damaged and ultimately we would not be able to escape defeat. Not only that, as a result of the war, people of this nation would be reduced to abject poverty."⁴⁸ His comments reflect an appreciation that operationally, the Japanese were at a disadvantage and

⁴⁶Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States*, 56.

⁴⁷Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 202.

⁴⁸Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II*, 114.

strategically any opportunity to overcome this disadvantage would require a significant resources to defeat the American threat. It is as author John Prados states, “a remarkable comment on the fatalism of the Japanese.”

Ironically, the Washington Conference may have contributed to the Japanese in thinking they could successfully mitigate the fiscal challenges associated with building a fleet on par with the Americans. The 1923 Tokyo earthquake and the declining economy and worldwide economic depression limited what the Navy could expect to receive. Because the Washington Conference established limited capital ship construction, the IJN took great pains to ensure that the ships it did build possessed a qualitative advantage. The naval commanders also placed faith in the fighting spirit of its sailors to overcome a shortfall in numbers. “Indeed, all the measures of the Japanese navy that aimed to counter the quantitative superiority of the US Fleet can be subsumed under the Japanese principle of *ka o motte shu o sei-su* (using a few to conquer many), which had been invoked in both the Sino and Russo-Japanese Wars.”⁴⁹ As in the past, Japanese planners placed great emphasis on the spirit over material capacity in what they hoped would be the deciding factor in combat. Combined with the spirit, Japanese industry, technological initiatives and training would make up for any quantitative discrepancies. Realizing the inadequacies of material strength, the Japanese military culture focused on “Japanese fighting spirit, willpower and moral superiority.”

The conclusion is that Japanese planners saw the events at Pearl Harbor as a confirmation of what they saw to be true based off lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. Utilizing the same tenants learned from the experiences the Japanese felt assured that Midway would provide the same results. Unfortunately for the Japanese, this blueprint for success could not be replicated. Japanese naval culture contributed to their defeat at Midway.

⁴⁹Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*, 206.

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