

Isoroku Yamamoto, Reluctant Admiral

By William T. Alexander, II



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A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Captain Alexander had several opportunities to visit Japan during his career serving aboard destroyers and submarines. As he got to know the Japanese people and their culture, he developed a strong admiration for them and for their rapid recovery from the destruction of World War II.

In a world sea power history course at the Naval Academy, Alexander learned about the superior skill and knowledge of Admiral Yamamoto. Years later, while planning to write a third paper for the Hagerstown Torch Club, a long held desire to learn more about this Japanese admiral inspired him to research and write this paper, which was presented to the club in September, 2015.

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Both before and during World War II, Isoroku Yamamoto was revered by the Japanese as the most famous, professional, and capable admiral in the Imperial Navy. The esteem in which even his enemies held him was similar to that of Field Marshal Rommel of Germany's Third Reich.

He was born Takano Isoroku (Asian custom is to place the surname first and the given name last) in April 1884 in the northern reaches of Honshu. His given name, Isoroku, was a Japanese term for the number 56, the age of his father at the time of the birth. Later, his surname was changed from Takano to Yamamoto.

He was born at a time of change for his country. In 1877, Japan had instituted radical changes to its feudalistic Samurai Domains to establish a parliamentary government with a constitution, prime minister, and cabinet, all under their emperor. These changes were not without conflict; Isoroku's father was an intermediately ranked Samurai during this transitional period.

Athletic, agile and a diligent student, young Isoroku earned an appointment to the Imperial Japanese Naval Academy. He was graduated in 1904 at the age of 20, his specialty naval gunnery.

The young officer participated in the Russo-Japanese war aboard an armored cruiser. During the naval battle of Tsushima, where the Russian fleet was destroyed in a fierce battle, Isoroku's ship received many shell hits, one of which exploded near his gun mount;

he lost two fingers on his left hand. In later years, whenever he got a manicure at a Geisha House, he'd laughingly tell the ladies the cost of his manicure should be less because of his missing fingers.

Isoroku graduated from the Naval Staff College in 1914 and was promoted to Lieutenant Commander the next year. In 1916, he was adopted by the Yamamoto family, which was headed by a higher-ranking samurai from the same Nagaoka Prefecture. (It was a common practice in those days for samurai families without a male heir to adopt a suitable young man to carry on the family name. This adoption provided a higher feudal rank and status.) In 1918, at the age of 34, Isoroku contracted an arranged marriage to Reiko Hashi, with whom he eventually had four children.

The next year, he left home to become a special student for two years at Harvard University, where he became fluent in English while studying American customs and business practices. His Harvard classmates recalled him as a hard worker, but not a grind, and exceptionally curious and imaginative. When introduced to poker, he played fanatically, with consummate skill. Sometimes he would play all night, winning hand after hand (Morris 162).

He spent his summer vacations traveling around the country, visiting oil fields, steel mills, and factories, getting a firsthand assessment of America's industrial might and plethora of natural resources. A recent article in the *Harvard Magazine*

asserted that what Yamamoto learned in class and what he saw in his travels emboldened him to strike a killing blow to the U.S. Pacific Fleet before America's industrial might could respond. This article further opined that the U.S. military assumed the Japanese would attack the Philippines first if they declared war. We were caught flat-footed at Pearl Harbor with what Yamamoto hoped would be a knockout punch (Primus).

The bright young officer served two tours as the Naval Attaché to the Japanese Embassy in Washington and worked closely with his U.S. Navy counterparts. He regarded the American Navy as a club for golfers and card players, although he enjoyed taking their money in card games. Despite his disdain, Yamamoto was quite aware of the vast power that the U.S. Navy had, especially in the Pacific.

Promoted to captain in 1923, he took command of the cruiser *Isuzu* in 1924. In mid-career, convinced that carrier based aviation had the potential to significantly influence naval warfare, Yamamoto changed his designator from Gunnery to Aviation, and the next year he took command of the carrier *Akagi*. He became head of the Aeronautics Department where he developed tactics for naval air combat, although he never flew a plane, and then accepted a post as commander of the First Carrier Division. The Imperial Japanese Navy promoted Yamamoto to Rear Admiral in 1929.

As Japan modernized its government and industrial capacity in the 1920s and 1930s, the fledgling cabinet was faced with a significant lack of natural resources and the need for more land. 80% of the Japanese Navy's resources were imported from America, but this country needed more. In 1930 both Japan and Germany removed themselves from the Disarmament treaty. Japan claimed that more territory was needed to solve their economic

problems, openly claiming their right to vast hinterlands in China and the southwest Pacific. The world stood idly by.

Both the Army and the Navy had Vice-Ministers in the Japanese Cabinet. The Army representatives, known as the "Young Lions," aggressively espoused military action to obtain more space and natural resources. After seizing control of cabinet policy in 1931, they arranged assassinations of persons who objected to their plans, including the civilian Prime Minister. It is not surprising, therefore, that Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931.

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Admiral Yamamoto, the Navy's representative on the Cabinet, protested this invasion, incurring the wrath of the Army. When in 1937 the Japanese invaded China, Yamamoto again expressed his disagreement. When the American gunboat, The USS *Panay*, was attacked and sunk by the Japanese, Yamamoto took it upon himself to extend an apology to the U.S. Ambassador. The Admiral was in grave danger of facing assassination. He received a steady stream of hate mail and threats, which he accepted serenely. He wrote:

To die for Emperor and Nation is the highest hope of a military man. After a brave hard fight the blossoms are scattered on the fighting field. But if a person wants to take a life instead, still the fighting man will go to eternity for Emperor and country. One man's

life or death is a matter of no importance. All that matters is the Empire. As Confucius said, "They may crush cinnabar, yet they do not take away its color; one may burn a fragrant herb, yet it will not destroy the scent." They may destroy my body, yet they will not take away my will. (Hoyt 101-02)

Yamamoto survived because of his immense popularity within the fleet, his close relations with the royal family, and his acceptance by the naval hierarchy despite the fact that his long time antagonist, General Hideki Tojo, seized the reins as the Prime Minister. The Navy, after promoting Yamamoto to full Admiral, ordered him to depart from the Navy Ministry in Tokyo and return to sea as Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, perhaps partly for his own safety. At this point in his life he ceased making public comments about his country's foreign policy.

However, with Tojo in charge of Japan's highest political office, it became clear that the army would lead the navy into a war about which Yamamoto had serious reservations. He wrote a confidant that it would not be enough to win a war with America by winning the Pacific or even capturing San Francisco. To make victory certain, he opined, it would be necessary to march into Washington and dictate the terms of peace in the White House.

The U.S. government was not completely unaware about the emerging threat heating up in the Pacific. President Roosevelt had to navigate carefully because the national mood was strongly isolationist. In September 1940, Germany seized Belgium, Holland and France, and the Japanese immediately put pressure on their Pacific colonies for oil, rubber, and other needed commodities. The U.S. government debated placing an embargo on selling strategic materials to Japan, but more cautious members of government carried the day, arguing

that this act would cause the Japanese to declare war.

Shortly before Japan signed a tripartite agreement with Nazi Germany and Italy, however, the U.S. broke the Japanese diplomatic code and learned not only that Japan was preparing an expansion southward, but also that Japan would join Germany in a war against America. The Japanese embargo was implemented, Roosevelt got the congress to approve the National Defense Act, and the government realized that another war appeared certain. The Naval War College developed War Plan Orange, which envisioned a war with Japan (Kaiser 43-44).

In October 1941, Hideki Tojo ordered the Navy to prepare an attack against America, the only real threat to Japanese expansion in the Pacific. As the operational head of the Navy, Yamamoto began to plan. His theory that naval aircraft were more effective than battleships had been recently validated by a successful Royal Navy attack on the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean. Some of his subordinates were concerned that Japan would risk losing all their carriers, but Yamamoto was insistent.

In 1940 the U.S. Navy had split its fleet, and the Pacific half had been moved from San Diego to Pearl Harbor. This gave the U.S. an advantage of having its fleet closer to potential threats, but concentrating the force in a narrow basin gave the attacker an advantage. Yamamoto quickly decided that Pearl Harbor would be his target.

He had several aces up his sleeve. His Naval Air Forces had proven the effectiveness of their torpedo and dive-bombers, and their powerful long lance torpedoes were deadly weapons. Simply stated, his plan was to mass his carriers and mass the attack. He wanted the strongest possible strike he could make. Due to his familiarity with the

vastly superior industrial potential of the U. S., he knew this would be his only chance before the sleeping giant arose.

All preparations were made for going to war even while last minute diplomatic negotiations between the Japanese and the U.S. State Department continued in Washington. America insisted that Japan withdraw from China, French Indochina, and the tripartite pact with Germany and Italy. The Americans refused to stop helping Chiang Kai-shek in China. Negotiations were deadlocked.

The order to attack was received. Admiral Yamamoto issued the following message to his fleet: "The fate of the Empire depends upon this war. Do your duty." They did indeed do their duty. In a little less than two hours, 360 aircraft either badly damaged or sank eight battleships. Three cruisers and three destroyers were also damaged. 180 aircraft were destroyed on the ground, about 2,300 men were killed, and over 1,000 were wounded. Japanese losses were relatively minor: about thirty aircraft, two mini-subs, and less than a hundred fatalities. (One downed Japanese pilot was captured on the small Hawaiian Island of Niihau by a shepherd wielding a pitchfork!)

The Japanese did indeed deliver a severe blow to the U.S. ships and aircraft that were present in Pearl Harbor, but it was not the complete knockout that Yamamoto wanted. America's Pacific Fleet carriers had not been in port; they were at sea conducting exercises and therefore escaped unscathed. Yamamoto's Task Force Commander, Admiral Nagumo, was to turn toward Hawaii after recovering his strike aircraft in order to finish the job. Instead, he turned away; Yamamoto was furious. Nagumo had been querulous from the start of preparations for the attack, but no one knows why he disobeyed the order to continue the

attack; he offered only flimsy excuses. His failure to go aggressively after the U.S. carriers was a major contributing factor to the Japanese defeat in the battle of Midway, which occurred six months later.

Of the Pearl Harbor attack, Admiral Yamamoto is alleged to have said, "I fear that all we have done today is to awaken a great sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve." He and the more realistic warlords knew their country had no chance to defeat America in a prolonged conflict, as America's industrial capacity was ten times greater than that of Japan. It turned out that the Admiral was correct.

Japan hoped to use the six-month advantage resulting from the Pearl Harbor attack to consolidate their gains in Asia and the western Pacific and to establish a defense perimeter. Their goal was to convince the U.S. to call a draw on the Pacific war and concentrate on defeating Hitler.

Knowing that the American mainland had not been attacked since 1812, Yamamoto believed that if his country could drop bombs on New York and Washington, D.C., then Americans would be so demoralized that they would sue for peace. A bold attack such as this would strike shock and fear and even do some damage, but designing a delivery system capable of moving undetected around the world and launching a bomber attack on these cities was an immense challenge.

This creative admiral conceived a scheme to build a flotilla of eighteen submarine aircraft carriers with greatly increased fuel capacity, and an enclosed "hangar deck" to house three seaplane bombers stowed with folded wings. His plan was for these "sub carriers" to traverse the Pacific, go around Cape Horn, proceed undetected northward up the Atlantic, surface, and launch their "bombers" to attack their targets.

Being a full Admiral, Yamamoto had enough clout to sell his plan and to get authorization to begin construction of his “sub carriers.” However, significant engineering problems had to be solved, and other items urgently needed for warfare were in competition for the scarce raw materials required to construct these four hundred foot behemoths. In spite of his urging, work progressed very slowly. Eventually only two of these submarines were constructed, but by then, it was 1945, and the atomic bombs had been dropped.

Meanwhile, Yamamoto planned another operation to continue his efforts to cripple the American fleet long enough for Japan to fortify her defensive perimeter in the Pacific island chains: he would attack and seize Midway Island with the intention of drawing the American carriers into a trap. From his viewpoint, the plan appeared sound. He had four carriers and two light carriers, with battleships and cruisers likely to be in the main battle line. The Americans could field only three carriers, eight cruisers, and fifteen destroyers. Yamamoto planned to position a line of submarines to attack U.S. ships as they sailed out of Pearl Harbor toward Midway. It appeared again that the Japanese held all the cards.

American Admiral Nimitz, however, had some fortuitous breaks. First and foremost, the U.S. had broken the Japanese Naval code and knew the exact time of the planned attack on Midway. The Japanese submarines were also late getting on station to intercept the American fleet. Lastly, although the carrier *Yorktown* had returned to Hawaii heavily damaged from combat in the South Pacific, with repairs that should have taken at least three months, Nimitz prodded the shipyard to patch her together in a mere 72 hours, and she was able to join the meager task force of three carriers.

This battle could have gone either way. Luck played an important role; in fact, naval historians refer to this engagement as a “crap shoot” (Gaillard). The Japanese shot many American torpedo bombers. The Americans came upon enemy carriers that had refueled and rearmed planes on their flight decks. Their bombs created blazing infernos.

The Americans lost the carrier *Yorktown* and a destroyer. The Japanese experienced their first naval defeat in 350 years, losing 275 aircraft, one cruiser, and four indispensable fleet carriers. Perhaps even more devastating was the sudden elimination of the crucial core of their elite naval pilots. This was the high water mark for the Japanese Navy, or their Gettysburg. American Admiral Fletcher said, “If the battle had gone the other way, things would really have been in a hell of a mess in the Pacific!” (Gaillard).

Yamamoto remained as Navy Commander in Chief partly to avoid diminishing the morale of the Combined Fleet. However, he had lost face as a result of the Midway defeat.

The Imperial Japanese Navy was still capable of regaining the initiative. The next plan was to take Samoa and Fiji to cut the American lifeline to Australia and pose a threat to the Allied plan to take New Guinea. There was one roadblock. The airfield on Guadalcanal was a vital target for both sides, and the bitter battle lasted for six months. Guadalcanal and New Guinea strained Japanese Army and Navy resources and showed a disastrous inability of their services to coordinate activities.

Yamamoto committed his forces to a series of small attrition actions that stung the Americans, and to several battles around Guadalcanal, but he sustained losses he could ill afford. He tried unsuccessfully to draw the Americans into major battles. His carrier air groups were severely

depleted. As a result, the Japanese Navy’s strength began to bleed off.

After the defeat at Guadalcanal, the Admiral wanted to tour Japanese facilities throughout the South Pacific to boost morale. He published an encrypted schedule that was intercepted and decoded by the Americans. President Roosevelt ordered the Navy Secretary to “Get Yamamoto!” His orders were carried out by a squadron of P-38s on April 18, 1943.

Admiral Yamamoto’s plane crashed near Buin, Papua New Guinea. The Admiral’s body was recovered, cremated, and returned to Japan aboard the battleship *Musashi*, his last flagship. He was given a full state funeral and posthumously awarded the title of Marshal.

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