

The Bluff

by

Martin Shelton

Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet. Headquarters, Pearl Harbor. Noon, 3 July 1937.

“What do you pack when you have four minutes to leave?”

“That’s it?” Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz’s eyes narrow and a deep frown creeps across his face. In his raspy voice, he asks, “Commander Gregory what do you make of it?”

“Admiral, that’s the entire decoded message. It was sent in their N2 Admiralty code and over Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto’s signature. Time-date stamp is 2334 hours, 3 July 1941. We’re working to deconstruct it.”

Before I continue with this now-unclassified account, I ought to introduce myself. I am Commander Michael Gregory, United States Navy. I am a special duty officer, intelligence and the commanding officer of Station Hypo, the navy’s cryptographic center at Pearl Harbor

We uncorked the Imperial Japanese Admiralty Naval Code N2 several months ago. So far, their message traffic has been routine. That is until this morning when we opened Admiral’s Yamamoto’s signal to Lieutenant General Yoshisugo Saito, commander Imperial Japanese forces, Central Pacific.

Admiral Nimitz rubs his chin, and his eyes narrow. “Reckon Yamamoto is preparing to start trouble?”

“Negative, Admiral. Most of his fleet is sailing in China’s waters, supporting the Kwangtung’s army advance down the coast. The spirit warriors in Tokyo are not ready for serious action yet.”

With finality, Admiral Nimitz commands. “Keep me posted:”

“Aye, aye sir.”

Pacific Fleet Headquarters, Pearl Harbor. Station Hypo. 1440 hours, 3 July 1937.

The buzz of the IBM card-sorting machines suffuses the cryptographic spaces. Commander Gregory asks, “Chief Hollman, what progress on that Yamamoto signal?”

“Nothing solid. Skipper. However, Doctor Hans von Halder, our chess master, reckons that Yamamoto, the best poker player in the Far East, is testing our crypto capability. He wants to know if we have cracked his N2, and he’s monitoring our reaction. Nonetheless, the question is, why the gibberish within the N2 code?”

The teletype bells ring loud and clear, Hollman rips the paper from the machine. A thin smile creeps across his face. “Mister Barkley, what cross-word wizardry deciphered that gibberish?”

“Chief, you are correct. It is gibberish. It’s nonsense intended to confound us and to measure our cryptographic capabilities.”

Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet. Headquarters, Pearl Harbor. 1700 Hours, 3 July 1937.

Sir. Admiral Yamamoto is bluffing. His message is a gambit to measure our reactions. I'm confident that the Japs do not know we're reading their signals. But his intelligence team is testing us. I recommend we do nothing, Admiral. "

Nimitz frowns. "I understand. Very well. I'll keep our fleet in Pearl. But boy, there's a big part of me that wants to give it a shot."

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