Magic and Ligh

USAF painting

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For US pilots, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto was a "high-value" target but also a fleeting one.

By Rebecca Grant

On Dec. 7, 1941, 2,390 Americans died in Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, a military operation planned by Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto. It was an act that made Imperial Japan's greatest commander the focal point of intense American hatred and innumerable calls for vengeance.

Yamamoto's goal at Pearl Harbor was annihilation of the US Pacific Fleet, achievement of which would have decided the outcome of the war "on the first day," wrote his biographer, Hiroyuki Agawa. In this, Yamamoto failed. The US fleet began striking back early in 1942.

Even so, Yamamoto, mastermind of Japan's offensive, was still out there in the vast Pacific, commanding Japan's combined fleet. "Yamamoto was the beating heart of the Japanese Navy," wrote Donald A. Davis, in *Lightning Strike,* his 2005 book on the secret mission. The very thought of the admiral roaming free, attacking US forces, was a bitter one to US military officers in the theater.

Then, on April 13, 1943, fortune intervened. A coded Japanese message was intercepted and, when decoded by the Navy's crytographers, it revealed, in stunning detail, that Yamamoto would be flying to a forward airfield near Bougainville, in the Solomon Islands. He would be there in five days.

As US military men saw it, there was just enough time to pull together a long-range P-38 mission to shoot down the airplane carrying Yamamoto and deeply wound the Japanese war effort. This would turn out to be World War II's most audacious attack on what today's airmen would call a "high-value" and "time-sensitive" target.

By April 18, 1943, Yamamoto was dead, killed on the direct order of his US counterpart, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz.

Shifting Momentum

After Japan's defeat in June 1942 at Midway, the initiative in the Pacific campaign shifted to the US and its Allies.

In February 1943, Japanese forces evacuated Guadalcanal. Yamamoto was stuck southeast of Guam aboard his flagship, the battleship *Yamato.* He stayed put for nearly a year in the harbor at Truk, forward headquarters for Japan's combined fleet.

The war in "the Slot," as the waters between the Solomon Islands were called, was a joint project of Adm. William F. Halsey Jr., Vice Adm. Aubrey W. Fitch, and Rear Adm. Marc A. Mitscher.

Mitscher was the Solomon Islands air commander or, in modern parlance, the joint force air component commander.

The early AirSols missions were to prey on Japanese shipping, harass enemy efforts to build new airstrips, and most of all to win air superiority. Air combat was intense.

By mid-1943, Mitscher had nearly 700 aircraft at his disposal, but resources were still limited when Yamamoto made his next move.

Yamamoto tried to get 7,000 troops through to Lae, New Guinea. The result was carnage. In the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, Lt. Gen. George C. Kenney's B-25s terrorized Japanese ships. Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison said that, after Pearl Harbor itself, it was "the most devastating air attack on ships of the entire war." Air attacks sank seven of eight transport ships and two destroyers.

The American strategy in the Pacific was to wage a two-pronged war, and it was beginning to pay off. Nimitz ran Central Pacific campaigns, now focused on the Solomons. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur was on the move in the southwest at New Guinea. Thus, in early 1943, Yamamoto had two major problems. The Japanese Army wanted more support for New Guinea, while other commanders insisted on striking back at Guadalcanal.

Yamamoto was not well placed to do either. The Japanese admiral was unwilling to risk more carriers in the Slot, because of local Allied airpower. He crafted Operation I, a series of large-package airplane attacks intended to wipe out American forces in the Solomons.

Most of Japan's local air units were ashore at Rabaul, a stronghold situated north of the Solomons. Rabaul was now feeding air units operating farther south. Yamamoto seized the chance to get out of Truk and go to the front lines. "I feel happy at the chance to do something," he wrote to his favorite geisha on April 2.

Operation I began on April 7, 1943, when 157 Japanese fighters and 67 bombers set out to find a US naval force and catch it off guard. Yamamoto donned his formal white uniform and stood at the edge of the airfield. "Each time aircraft took off," Agawa recounted, Yamamoto "waved his cap in farewell" then repaired to the operations shack

At left is an Air Force artist's conception of the interception of Yamamoto's airplane. The painting, by Sgt. Vaughn A. Brass, is in the Air Force art collection.

US Naval Historical Center photo

Yamamoto (pictured here in the early 1940s) had one goal at Pearl Harbor—to annihilate the US Pacific Fleet. Doing so, he believed, would give Japan the best chance of prevailing in war with the US.

to confer with his chief of staff, Adm. Matome Ugaki.

As the Japanese strike package swept down toward the Slot, the American Solomons air commander countered with all 76 Navy and Marine Corps Corsairs, Wildcats, and Army P-38s and P-39s available on Guadalcanal. In the ensuing aerial engagement, AirSols fighters shot down 39 Japanese aircraft.

More Japanese raids followed on April 11, April 12, and April 14. Returning Imperial Navy pilots brought back claims that they had shot down many US warplanes and sank many US warships. These claims were exaggerated, but Yamamoto did not know this. On April 16, according to biographer Edwin P. Hoyt, the Imperial General Staff ended the operation and the emperor congratulated Yamamoto for winning mastery of the air.

In reality, Operation I had seen Japan lose 25 carrier aircraft plus 41 land-based bombers and dive-bombers. Needless to say, the American buildup in the Solomons went on unabated.

Yamamoto was due back in Truk, but he planned to make one more trip to the front to emphasize to his pilots the absolute necessity of holding air superiority.

Magic ... and Lightnings

The message that went out April 13 gave the admiral's schedule in fine detail. It stated:

- At 0600, Yamamoto would leave Rabaul in a medium attack airplane, escorted by six Zeros.
- At 0800, the admiral would arrive at Ballalae and proceed by subchaser to Shortland, from which he would make a short visit to Buin.
- At 1540, he would arrive back at Rabaul after a flight from Buin.

The telegram enraged the Japanese commander of the flotilla at Shortland. "What a damn fool thing to do," he charged, "to send such a long and detailed message about the activities of [the commander] so near the front!"

It was a prophetic statement. The itinerary was a gift to the Americans.

Since well before Midway, Navy cryptographers had been breaking elements of the Japanese code through a secret program known as Magic. Even when the Japanese ciphers changed, the code-breakers could usually catch at least 15 percent of the contents of a message and decode more with the help of early IBM computing machines.

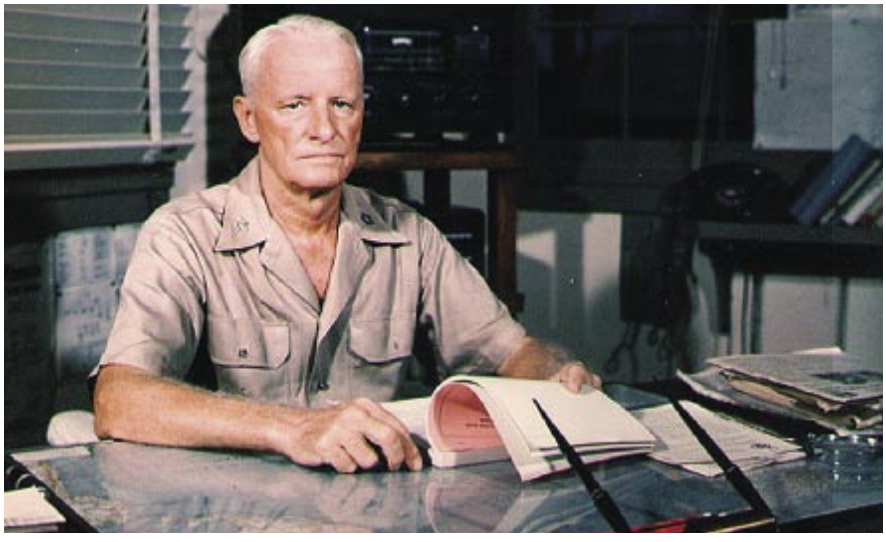
In April 1943, the chief of code and translation at Fleet Radio Unit, Pacific Fleet, usually scanned the messages. The American cryptographers knew that this message, while just partially decoded, was of immense value.

It fell to Cmdr. Edwin T. Layton, Nimitz's fleet intelligence officer, to bring the news to the boss. There were definite risks in acting on partially decoded information, but Nimitz did not hesitate. The intelligence was sent to the area commanders, including Mitscher.

The only in-place aircraft that were ready and able to take on the mission were US Army Air Forces P-38 Lightnings. There were 18 of them on Guadalcanal, flown by the 12th and 339th Fighter Squadrons.

The P-38 offered two big strengths for this mission. One was its heavy armament. The Lightning had four .50-caliber machine guns and a 20 mm cannon. Unlike most other World War II fighters, the P-38's guns were mounted in the nose, as the twin engines were on the wing nacelles. Nose guns meant one straight-ahead line of lethal fire.

The P-38's second, decisive advantage was its 1,100-mile range. To fly from Guadalcanal to the intercept point was a round-trip of nearly 1,000 miles.



USN-National Archives photo

Adm. (later, Fleet Adm.) Chester Nimitz was commander in chief, US Pacific Fleet. Yamamoto was killed on the direct order of Nimitz, who was the Japanese admiral's US counterpart.

The Message That Doomed Yamamoto

TO: COMMANDER, 1ST BASE FLOTILLA
COMMANDER, 11TH AIR FLOTILLA
COMMANDER, 26TH AIR FLOTILLA
COMMANDER, 958TH AIR DETACHMENT
CHIEF, BALLALAE DEFENSE UNIT

FROM: C-IN-C, 8TH FLEET, SOUTH EASTERN AREA FLEET

INFORMATION: C-IN-C, COMBINED FLEET

C-IN-C, COMBINED FLEET, WILL INSPECT RXZ, RXE, AND RXP ON "SETSUA" AS FOLLOWS:

1. AT 0600 LEAVES RR BY "CHUKO," A LAND BASED MEDIUM BOMBER (6 FIGHTERS ESCORTING)

   AT 0800 ARRIVES AT RXZ

   AT 0840 ARRIVES AT RXE BY SUBCHASER (COMMANDER, 1ST BASE FORCE, WILL ARRANGE ONE CHASE IN ADVANCE)

   AT 0945 LEAVES RXE BY SAME SUBCHASER

   AT 1030 ARRIVES AT RXZ (AT RXZ A "DAIHATSU" WILL BE ON HAND AND AT RXE A "MOTOR LAUNCH" FOR TRAFFIC)

   AT 1100 ARRIVES RXZ BY "CHUKO"

   AT 1110 ARRIVES AT RXP

   LUNCHEON AT HQ, 1ST BASE FORCE (ATTENDED BY COMMANDANT, 26TH AIR SQUADRON, AND SENIOR STAFF OFFICERS)

   AT 1400 LEAVES RXP BY "CHUKO"

   AT 1540 ARRIVES AT RR

2. OUTLINE OF PLAN AFTER THE VERBAL REPORT ON THEIR PRESENT CONDTIONS BRIEFLY BY EACH UNIT, UNIT MEMBERS WILL BE INSPECTED (1ST BF HOSPITAL WILL BE VISITED).

3. THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF EACH UNIT ALONE SHALL WEAR THE NAVAL LANDING PARTY UNIFORM WITH MEDAL RIBBONS.

4. IN CASE OF BAD WEATHER IT WILL BE POSTPONED FOR ONE DAY.

Source: *Lightning Strike: The Secret Mission to Kill Admiral Yamamoto and Avenge Pearl Harbor,* by Donald A. Davis

The joint air cell swung into action. Maj. John W. Mitchell, 339th FS commander, would lead all 18 P-38s on the attack. Mitscher handpicked four pilots for the killer flight. They were Capt. Thomas G. Lanphier Jr., 1st Lt. Rex T. Barber, Lt. Jim McLanahan, and 1st Lt. Joseph F. Moore.

Ground crews spent the night of April 17-18 modifying the P-38s to hold new 310-gallon fuel tanks in addition to a standard 165-gallon tank. Crews also crammed a ship's compass into Mitchell's airplane. Navigation over the first four legs of the flight would require open-water reckoning based on time and speed.

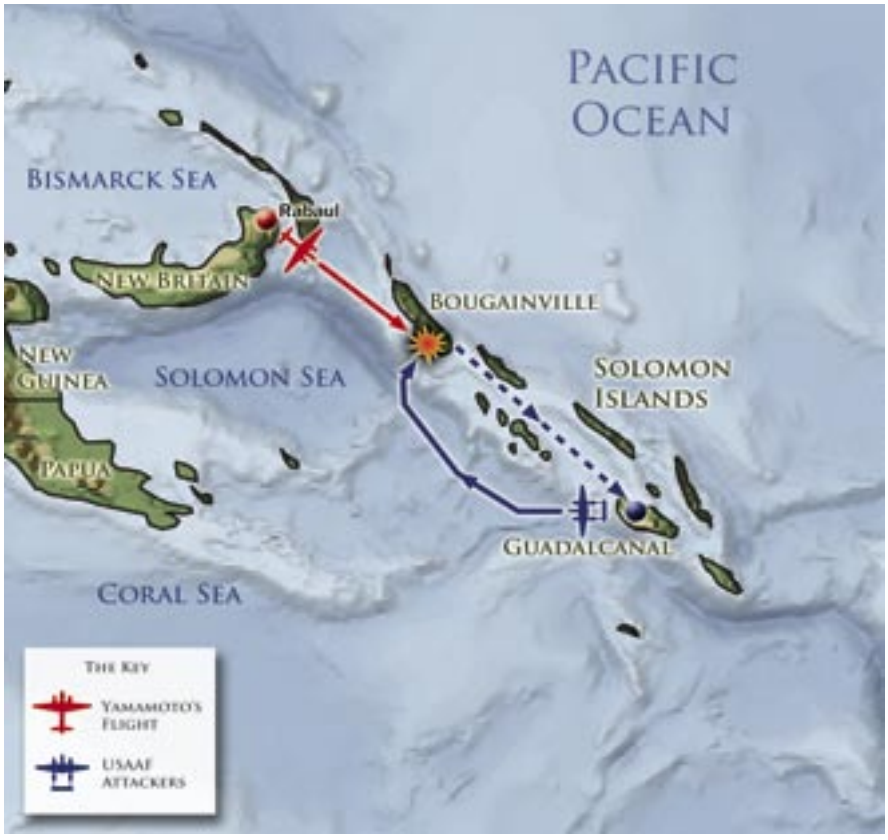
To avoid detection, the P-38s would swing west and fly just 30 feet above the water for nearly 500 miles. P-38s had no air-conditioning and at low altitude the cockpits would feel like a greenhouse, with pilots baking in the sun.

Yamamoto would be traveling in greater style, wearing a new, dark green dress uniform instead of the customary white. Most sources said he was sitting on the flight deck of a Japanese "Betty" bomber. His chief of staff, Ugaki, was flying in a second Betty.

The Navy code-breakers thought Yamamoto would land on Ballalae off the tip of the much larger island of Bougainville. Mitchell wisely planned to intercept Yamamoto's airplane at a point

The April 13, 1943 coded Japanese message contained stunning detail about Yamamoto's itinerary. Once it was decoded by Navy cryptographers, American leaders knew Yamamoto would be flying to a forward airfield near Bougainville, the hour and day of his departure, and the time of his arrival. "What a damn fool thing to do," said an enraged Japanese commander when he saw the telegram.

To avoid detection, the USAAF P-38s swung west and flew just above the water for nearly 500 miles. They intercepted Yamamoto's aircraft as it approached Bougainville and then headed back to Guadalcanal.



Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov

Brig. Gen. Dean Strother pins both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star on Capt. Thomas Lanphier. Lanphier always maintained that he brought down Yamamoto.

40 miles farther out. That was fortunate, because, in fact, Yamamoto was flying to Buin, on Bougainville itself. If Mitchell hadn't planned to engage the admiral's aircraft at the earlier point, the Americans would have missed their target.

Mitchell's group hit trouble right at the start. McLanahan's P-38 blew a tire on takeoff, and, en route, Moore's drop tanks would not work and he had to turn back. First Lts. Besby F. Holmes and Raymond K. Hine, the backups, joined the killer flight.

Two-and-half-hours later, the Lightnings had flown for 494 miles. They tested their guns and were climbing through about 3,000 feet when pilot Douglas S. Canning spotted bogeys at 11 o'clock. Both groups of aircraft had arrived right on schedule.

Shocked to see P-38s, the escorting Zeros dove to attack.

The P-38s dropped tanks and leapt upward. Mitchell pushed his cover flight up to higher altitude, where they would be in position to fight off the horde of Zeros they expected to jump them from nearby Kahili airfield. He ordered Lanphier to take the killer flight through the six escort Zeros to get the bombers.

The killer flight was expecting just one Betty. Its pilots no doubt were surprised to find two. Still, Lanphier's flight committed to complete the job. There is considerable uncertainty and dispute about exactly who did what next.

First to be hit was Yamamoto's airplane. It caught fire and crashed into the jungle. Those aboard Admiral Ugaki's bomber saw Yamamoto's Betty go down as they headed out over the sea, twisting to get away from the attacking Americans. They felt bullets hitting their bomber, and then it crashed into the water. The pilot, Flight Petty Officer Hiroshi Hayashi, and Ugaki both survived the sea crash.

Fog of War

Three pilots from the killer flight each told debriefers they shot down a Betty. Navy record keepers gave Lanphier, Barber, and Holmes each credit for one Betty. That account stood for years. Eventually, however, Japan released records showing that only two Bettys had been in the air that day.

According to mission reports and subsequent accounts, here is what happened on April 18, 1943.

Lanphier and Barber were heading for the Bettys at a 90-degree angle. Then the Zeros engaged. Lanphier attacked the lead Zero head on—normal P-38 tactics. His wingman, Barber, realized he was heading in for the bombers too fast. Barber turned to get on the tail of what turned out to be Yamamoto's airplane. Hayashi, piloting the second Betty, later said he saw a P-38 almost sitting on top of him.

Barber completed the turn and put three long bursts into Yamamoto's Betty. Pieces of the engine cowling flew off, the bomber caught fire, and Barber did not see it again as he zoomed forward and the Betty fell.

Lanphier was at higher altitude. He rolled over, hanging in his straps for a quick look below. Lanphier bore down on Yamamoto's Betty at a 70-degree angle of deflection, making for an easy shot.

Meanwhile, Holmes and Hine were in the fight after having trouble releasing their drop tanks. Each attacked the Zeros. Then they took aim for the second Betty, which was now hugging the water.

Photo courtesy of James F. Lansdale via George T. Chandler

At right is 1st Lt. Rex Barber. Official Air Force records gave Lanphier and Barber joint credit for the shootdown of Yamamoto's aircraft.

Yamamoto: With a Gambler's Instincts

His origins were humble. Born Isoroku Takano in 1884, Yamamoto had samurai lineage but little money. The youngest son of his family, he learned English from a missionary and won a place at Japan's naval academy. At age 32, he was adopted by the Yamamoto clan—a warrior family that had no sons—and formally changed his surname.

Yamamoto made his mark as an ensign when he received a commendation for bravery in the 1905 Russo-Japanese naval battle.

He spent several years in America, first as a student at Harvard and later as an attaché. Yamamoto traveled widely and indulged his passion for gambling. He played everything from Japanese shogi (similar to chess) to bridge and believed he had a system for winning at roulette. According to biographer Edwin P. Hoyt, Yamamoto visited Monte Carlo and later maintained that if he did not advance in the Navy he'd happily return to the casino as a professional gambler.

The colorful side of Yamamoto came out in a definitive 1969 biography by Hiroyuki Agawa, published in Japan. Based on personal accounts and Yamamoto's own letters, the book caused a sensation because it revealed the intimate life of the hero admiral, complete with geisha dealings and ambivalence about World War II.

By 1929, Yamamoto was captain of the carrier Akagi, perhaps the most advanced aircraft carrier of its day. The experience was a searing one for him. On an early exercise, most of Akagi's air wing was lost when the aircraft could not be recovered in bad weather.

From then on, Yamamoto was just as concerned with technology as he was with tactics, and he was instrumental in shaping the Japanese Navy into the sophisticated fighting force it was by the time of Pearl Harbor.

His disinterest in politics served him well during Japan's turbulent 1930s. He was not harmed by a February 1936 Army coup attempt and was not associated with the sympathetic "fleet faction" of the Japanese Navy. Nearly put out to pasture, by 1939 Yamamoto was well-placed to take over top command.

He watched the early part of World War II with some misgivings. Japan's Army was already on its bloody march in China. Evidence suggests that Yamamoto had no taste for the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis, and his concern about fighting the Americans was apparent.

But broader war was coming, and there was no questioning the fact that Yamamoto was a formidable commander.

All agree that Holmes poured gunfire into this Betty.

Holmes thought he zoomed over Barber as Barber tangled with Zeros. According to Holmes, he hit the Betty on the third burst, drilling in bullets before he overshot it.

Barber told it differently, saying he was free of the Zeros when he saw Holmes fire on the Betty. It was smoking but airborne as Holmes and Hine overshot. Barber pulled to within 20 feet to deliver a burst that ignited the Betty and sent it into the water.

Holmes contended that Barber shot only at the wreckage.

One person who might have sorted the confusion out never came home. Hine, an experienced P-40 pilot who was not current in the P-38, was lost on the mission. Mitchell had seen a Lightning trailing oily smoke, being chased by a Zero. A Japanese ace named Shoichi Sugita, an assistant flight petty officer in Yamamoto's escort flight, reported severely damaging a P-38 that was flying next to another P-38 struggling to drop its tanks. It was Hine.

Lingering Controversy

The three pilots of the killer flight straggled back. Doug Canning helped Holmes limp to an emergency landing on an uncompleted airstrip in the Russell Islands. Barber reached Guadalcanal with a dented fuselage and 104 bullet holes. Lanphier, just before landing, broke discipline and radioed a message to Guadalcanal's ground station. Yamamoto would not be "dictating any peace terms in the White House," he declared.

Nimitz, Halsey, and other commanders had tense moments wondering whether the Japanese would figure out their code was broken. The Navy concocted a cover story to the effect that coast-watchers had spotted Yamamoto boarding his bomber.

On Bougainville, a Japanese Army search party located the crash site of Yamamoto's airplane. According to Agawa, the soldiers found Yamamoto thrown clear of the crash. He was still wearing his ceremonial sword.

Jubilation spread on Guadalcanal, but sparring between Barber and Lanphier began right away. Lanphier joyously claimed he'd shot Yamamoto and seemed to bask in Mitscher's congratulations. Official Air Force records gave Lanphier and Barber joint credit for shooting down Yamamoto.

In the 1950s, Lanphier recounted his version of events in many magazine articles, some of which seemed to leave Barber out of the action altogether. Barber protested.

Eventually, in 1985, a Victory Credit Board of Review upheld the shared credit.

Lanphier died in 1987, but the controversy did not disappear. Barber took his case to the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records. The Air Force History Office advised in September 1991 that "enough uncertainty" existed for both Lanphier's and Barber's claims to be accepted.

The board split on Barber's petition and could not reach a decision. That prompted Air Force Secretary Donald B. Rice to rule that he was "not convinced that the award of shared credit for the Yamamoto shootdown was either in error or unjust."

Barber took his case to federal court with the argument that Rice had not abided by the eyewitness confirmation rule in assigning Lanphier even half-credit for killing Yamamoto. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals also declined to change anything, deciding not to "express an opinion as to which pilot, if indeed only one pilot, was responsible for shooting down Yamamoto."

John Mitchell, who planned and led the raid, may have had the best perspective. As he later wrote: "No one on God's green Earth knew who had shot down which bomber, much less who had shot down Yamamoto."

Ultimately, the question of who did the shooting was far less important than the fact it had been done. The mission to kill Yamamoto was a success. Japan's greatest naval strategist, commander of its combined fleet, and the figure that the public connected with Pearl Harbor was dead. ■

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