

WHO PLANNED PEARL HARBOR?

By William H. Honan
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THE OBSERVANCE of V-J Day next week and the approaching 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor are sure to provide critics of today's Japan with forums for railing once again that the "treacherous sneak attack" of Dec. 7, 1941 was a typical expression of the Japanese national character.

The fact is that all major powers have resorted to surprise attack whenever it suited them. Our own 1846 invasion of Mexico, for example, began several days before Congress got around to declaring war.

In the case of Pearl Harbor, it has come to light that the plan for its Pacific offensive against the United States was originally conceived and meticulously spelled out by a British naval expert -- albeit to discourage Japan -- in a book widely debated in world capitals in the 1920s and into the '30s.

Until now, historians have believed that the Japanese offensive was conceived independently by Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet of the Imperial Navy. But in March 1926 when then-Capt. Yamamoto arrived as naval attache at the Japanese embassy in Washington, an intense debate was in progress over a provocative new book that described a future war between Japan and the United States, written as if by a future historian piecing the story together.

In "The Great Pacific War," Hector C. Bywater sought to deter Japan from aggression by analyzing the best possible naval strategy for each country and demonstrating that ultimately Japan would lose. At the outset, by making a surprise attack against the U.S. naval force in the Pacific, simultaneously capturing the Philippines and Guam and militarizing the formerly German Pacific islands mandated to Japan by the League of Nations, the Japanese could achieve a string of spectacular victories and go on to create a nearly invulnerable island empire, Bywater wrote. Such bold moves, he added, would pose a "well-nigh insolvable" strategic problem to the United States.

And yet, he declared, in time the United States would counterattack. After a reckless and costly attempt to penetrate Japan's protective screen of island bases, the U.S. Navy would pursue a novel amphibious campaign across the central Pacific that would finally defeat Japan. This was the first time a naval analyst had publicly spelled out the concept of island-hopping across the Marshall and Caroline chains that became a fundamental of American strategy in World War II.

A Western expert's view of a possible Pacific war was precisely the sort of thing a Japanese naval attache in Washington such as Yamamoto would be on the lookout for. Moreover, the author of these intriguing strategies was not just any Western expert. Bywater previously had written "Sea Power in the Pacific," a scholarly assessment of the relative naval strengths of Japan

and the United States that had become the most-discussed book at the Washington Conference on Naval Limitation in 1921. By 1926, Bywater was well on his way to recognition as the world's leading authority on naval affairs.

Sifting through a Tokyo archive of diplomatic records, I discovered documents showing that Yamamoto reported to his superiors about the ideas in Bywater's book. Two years later, after returning to Japan, Yamamoto delivered a lecture in which he adopted Bywater's concepts as his own to show how Japan could defeat the United States. In 1934, Bywater and Yamamoto actually met face to face in London and spent an evening together discussing Pacific strategy and tactics.

In 1939, when Yamamoto was named commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet of the Imperial Navy and was charged with preparing it for war, he began to rehearse the strategy and tactics he had formulated in 1928 after having read "The Great Pacific War." What makes Yamamoto's dependence on Bywater's blueprint unmistakable is a body of evidence -- culminating with the fact that he adopted Bywater's war plan in matters ranging from overall objectives and strategy down to such small but critical details as many of the beaches on which invading forces were to land.

In the Philippines, for example, Bywater stated that invading Japanese forces would make three simultaneous main landings -- at Lingayen Gulf and Lamon Bay on the island of Luzon, and on the southeast coast of Mindanao. In the plan approved by Yamamoto in 1941, Japanese troops landed en masse at Lingayen Gulf and Lamon Bay and on the southern coast of Mindanao. Given the innumerable possible landing sites in the Philippines, the odds against any such accidental similarities are very great.

Yamamoto accepted Bywater's analysis -- that although Japan might seem victorious at the outset of a Pacific war, she would ultimately be crushed by the superior industrial, economic and political power of the United States. But once it was clear to him that Japan's leaders were intent on war, Yamamoto became convinced that Bywater's offensive strategy would place Japan in the strongest possible position to press for favorable terms in a negotiated settlement of the war. Yamamoto never learned that Bywater was right; he was killed in 1943 in the Solomon Islands by an American fighter plane.

Bywater's influence on Yamamoto is historically important, I believe, because otherwise he probably would have carried out a contingency plan favored by the Imperial Navy General Staff to attack the Dutch East Indies instead of Pearl Harbor -- and that, as the military historian Louis Morton has written, might not have engaged the United States at all, or, if it had, it might have led to a very different war.

The U.S. Navy also was influenced by Bywater's writing. A year and a half after the publication of "The Great Pacific War," the Navy drastically revised "War Plan Orange" -- the official contingency plan for war against Japan. It discarded the idea of a reckless transpacific lunge, which Bywater had shown to be doomed to failure, and adopted in its place his careful step-by-step advance across a bridge of islands.

Interestingly enough, Bywater was motivated to write "The Great Pacific War" by a running debate he carried on with Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1923. Roosevelt, who had served as assistant secretary of the Navy for six years and fancied himself a naval analyst, had argued in an essay in Asia magazine that the distances across the Pacific were so vast that a Japanese-American war was a physical impossibility. Bywater took issue, and Roosevelt responded. Finally, Bywater wrote his magnum opus in an effort to get in the last word and demonstrate once and for all that the two foremost Pacific powers could indeed come to grips in a decisive struggle.

Although completely forgotten today, Hector Bywater was a fascinating individual. Before and during World War I, he became the Royal Navy's most effective spy inside Germany, having learned to speak idiomatic German flawlessly. After the war, he secured his reputation as the foremost naval journalist of his generation by his headline-making revelations about the secret growth of the German, Italian and Japanese navies.

In 1928, Bywater became the first reporter to tell the world about Germany's secret "pocket battleships" which threatened to upset the old calculations of tons and guns. In 1937, he revealed that Japan was secretly building four "monster" battleships -- seagoing fortresses so fearful that the news of their existence started the naval arms race that led to Pearl Harbor.

The fact that Yamamoto adopted someone else's ideas does not, of course, absolve the Japanese of the responsibility for their actions. It only shows that the ideas themselves were not uniquely Japanese. They were devised by others and were "out there," so to speak, in the public domain. They seemed compelling in terms of geography, and the naval technology and geopolitics of the era. And they were adopted by both sides. In fact, it is not too much to say that Bywater taught a generation of Japanese and American naval officers how to make war against each other.

William Honan is a New York journalist who writes frequently about naval affairs. His newest book, "Visions of Infamy," a biography of Hector Bywater, was published this month by St. Martin's Press.