

Matson Liner Lurline Intercepts Coded Japanese Low Radio Frequency Transmissions

The luxury liner Lurline was at sea with passengers on a voyage from California to Hawaii on November 30, 1941 when her first assistant radio operator, Leslie E. Grogan, one of the most experienced radio operators of the Matson Line, recorded that he picked up a faint signal which he could not identify. The direction of the signal was from northwest by west considered to be a peculiar area for traffic that time of the year.

John Toland provides a detailed explanation of the source of this signal Station JCS, Yokohama, Japan copied on and off from November 30 to December 2. Grogan documented the results of his endeavors in the ship's journal, allowing this author to benefit from his efforts.

"The Japs are blasting away on the lower Marine Radio frequency it is all in the Japanese code, and continues for several hours. Some of the signals were loud, and others weak, but in most every case, the repeat-back was acknowledged verbatim [sic]. It appears to me that the Jap is not using any deception of "Signal Detection" and boldly blasts away, using the Call letters JCS and JOS, and other Japanese based stations that have their transmitting keys all tied-in together, and controlled from a common source, presumably Tokio" [sic]. . . .

So much of the signal reaching us on the SS Lurline were good enough to get good R.D.F. [Radio Direction Finding Bearings]. We noted that signals were being repeated back, possibly for copying by crafts with small antennas. The main body of signals came from a Northwest by West area, which from our second night from Los Angeles bound for Honolulu would be North and West of Honolulu.

Having crossed the Pacific for 30 years, never heard JCS Yokohama Japan before at 9 P.M. our time on the lower Marine Frequency, and then rebroadcast simultaneously on the lower Marine frequency from some point in the Pacific.

If anyone should ask me, I would say it's the Jap's Mobilization Battle Order. Rudy Asplund kept Captain Berndtson [the ship's master] informed and presume the Bridge Officers must have thought us "Nuts" with so much D.F. Tracking down of signals.

It is now 3AM and am trying to cool off after that hectic session earlier.

Have jotted down all the particulars as they present themselves, and it is my desire to make a record of this because [I] sense things! Might prove worthy, who knows GM 3.30 [sic] AM Dec. 1, 1941.

(Leslie Grogan of Daly City, California, was born on November 14, 1894 and died in August 1974, may he rest in peace knowing his contribution to the history of a free nation has been recognized.)

On the night of Monday, December 1, the Japanese signals were once more intercepted.

Again Rudy and I pick up without any trouble all the Japanese coded Wireless signals like last night it goes on for two hours like before, and we are now making a concise record to turn in to the Naval Intelligence when we arrive in Honolulu, Wednesday December 3rd, 1941.

On Tuesday night, December 2nd, the signals became even stronger as Kido Butai drew closer to its target.

We continue to pick up the bold Japanese General Order signals it can't be anything else. We get good Radio Direction Finder bearings, mostly coming from a Northwesterly direction from our position. The Jap floating units continue their bold repetition of wireless signals, presumably for the smaller crafts in their vanguard of ships, etc. The Japanese shore stations JCS and JOS are keyed by remote tie-in, coming from Tokyo I presume, and if we had a recording device, it would only prove what we ourselves jot down, and we can't help but know that so much of it is a repeat back, letter for letter, because we have copied the original signals coming from Japanese land based stations, etc.

The Japs are so bold in using these low Marine frequencies too, but with all the tension we've seen up to now, it's safe to say something is going to happen, and mighty soon, but how soon All this display means something time will tell, and tonights [sic] Radio Detection signals have come from a NW by W from Honolulu, and from the signals, the Japs must be bunched up, biding time.

At 9:00 A.M. on December 3, 1941, the USS Lurline docked at its usual pier near Honolulu's famous Aloha Tower, as stated by Toland on Pg. 285.

Grogan and Asplund hurried the few blocks up Bishop Street to the downtown intelligence office of the Fourteenth Naval District in the Hotel Alexander Young Building. After introducing themselves to Lieutenant Commander George Warren Pease, they turned over the data. Pease promised to pass on the warning but there is no record that he forwarded the information either to the Fourteenth Naval District intelligence officer, Captain Irving Mayfield, or to Washington.

Pease was killed in an air crash in 1945.

If Pease ever submitted a report on the Lurline's locating Japanese warships north of Hawaii by RDF, it has disappeared. So has the Lurline's original radio log. On December 10, the liner returned to San Francisco and Lieutenant Commander Preston Allen boarded the ship and confiscated the radio log. Allen, a member of the Twelfth Naval District intelligence unit, took the log containing the details of Grogan's interceptions to his District office. It has never been seen since. Grogan's account, quoted in this book [Day of Deceit] is based on a reconstruction of the missing log that he prepared for Matson Lines after Allen took possession of the log.

During research for this [log] book, the author [Stinnett] uncovered details of the Lurline log's disappearance. In the late 1970s, shortly after John Toland began research for his book [Infamy Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath], he filed an FOIA [Freedom of Information Act request] with the Navy asking to see the log. The Navy said there was no record of such a log, but a withdrawal slip in the National Archives, San Bruno, California, tells another story. After he took possession of the log, Lieutenant Commander Allen did not return it to Matson Lines. Instead, he filed it in the voluminous records of the Port Director, Twelfth Naval District. There it remained, unknown to all Pearl Harbor investigations. In 1958, the Port Director files were turned over to the Federal Records Center [FRC] in San Bruno, a division of the National Archives.

Sometime in the 1970s someone removed the log from the National Archives and left a withdrawal slip form in its place. The caption on the slip refers to the Lurline's radio log, but it is not dated or signed a possible felony violation of National Archives procedures. "It had to be someone connected with the Navy," said Kathleen O'Conner, who discovered the withdrawal slip in August 1991. O'Conner, an archivist at San Bruno, told the author [Stinnett] that the white withdrawal slip is yellowed, indicating deterioration based on a storage period of about twenty years from about the time that Toland made his FOIA request. At the time the Lurline's log was in the physical custody of the Center but under the legal control of the Navy. The FRC is a government records center where both temporary and permanent Federal records are kept. Permanent records are eventually transferred to the National Archives' custody and opened for public access. Most FRC records are not opened for public inspection. "Only naval personnel had access," explained O'Conner.

She noted the "curious coincidence" of the above events. "Every federal regulation pertaining to the care and preservation of archival documents was neglected," O'Conner said. "There is no date of withdrawal, nor any signature of the person who removed these highly significant records."