

THE JAPANESE ATTACK FINDS GENERAL MACARTHUR UNPREPARED

(From James Bowen's excellent website, "Japan Attacks the Philippines, 1941-42)

Japanese preparations for the invasion of the Philippines

By 6 December 1941 (Hawaii time), the Japanese had assembled about five hundred fighters and bombers at airbases on Formosa (now Taiwan) for their assault on the Philippines. The task of this huge fleet of Japanese aircraft was to support a seaborne invasion by destroying the United States Far East Air Force, and seizing control of the skies over the Philippines for Japan.

The Japanese were not expecting to be able to employ their standard tactic of a swift surprise attack for their invasion of the Philippines. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would take place at 8.00 a.m. on 7 December 1941 (Hawaii time). However, because of the difference in time zones, and the separation of Hawaii and the Philippines by the International Date Line, at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor it would be 2.30 a.m. on 8 December 1941 in Manila. The Japanese had planned for their bombers and fighters to begin taking off from Formosan airbases at 2.30 am on 8 December. This timing would enable the Japanese aircraft to reach the Philippines by daybreak on that same day. By that time, the Japanese expected that the commander of American air forces on the Philippines (MacArthur) would have responded to their attack on Pearl Harbor by placing his air defences on full war alert. The Japanese expected that their fighters and bombers would meet stiff opposition from American fighters when they arrived over the Philippines.



MacArthur thought that the new American B-17D heavy bomber (above) could prevent a Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Unfortunately, his inaction during the nine hours following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor caused his air power to be destroyed on the ground.

Before Japanese aircraft could take off from Formosa at 2.30 a.m. on 8 December, thick fog began to envelop the airbases. As hours passed with no sign of the fog lifting, senior Japanese commanders and their staff became increasingly concerned that the Americans might strike first at the Formosan airbases which were crowded with aircraft, fully armed, fuelled, and waiting to take off. They need not have worried. In the Philippines, General MacArthur had neglected to place his command on a full war footing even after learning about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese Attack on the Philippines

MacArthur's inaction and failure to follow war orders causes the loss of American air power in the Philippines

Within minutes of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which occurred at about 2.30 a.m. on 8 December 1941 (Manila time), the news was received at the headquarters of the United States Asiatic Fleet in the Philippines. Admiral Hart was informed at about 3.00 a.m. The news was not passed on to the army. Shortly after 3.00 a.m. on that morning, General MacArthur was informed of the Japanese attack by his Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Richard K. Sutherland. An army signalman had picked up the news while listening to a Californian radio station. At 3.40 a.m., Brigadier Leonard T. Gerow, Chief of the Army's War Plans Division, telephoned MacArthur from Washington to confirm that Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese. He told MacArthur that he "wouldn't be surprised if you get an attack there in the near future". [\[1\]](#)

The commander of MacArthur's Far East Air Force, Major General Lewis Brereton, heard the news about Pearl Harbor from Brigadier General Sutherland shortly before 4.00 a.m. Brereton immediately placed MacArthur's only powerful offensive weapon on war alert. Many of his fliers had only just returned to their airbases from the lavish party at MacArthur's hotel.

It is at this point, that MacArthur's headquarters at Manila takes on the characteristics of a chapter from Alice in Wonderland. History records that the Japanese launched devastating attacks on MacArthur's airbases at about 12.20 p.m. on 8 December 1941. Instead of acting decisively to prepare for a likely Japanese attack on the Philippines, MacArthur took no significant action between 3.00 a.m. and 12.20 p.m. to bring his command to a proper state of readiness to resist an attack and to preserve his air force. Whether MacArthur's paralysis during these critical nine hours was due to indecision or the restraining influence of President Quezon, or perhaps a combination of both, has never been satisfactorily explained by historians. From 5.00 a.m. on the morning of 8 December 1941, Major General Brereton tried to speak to MacArthur about a Far East Air Force response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but he was repeatedly denied access to MacArthur by Brigadier General Sutherland.

At 5.30 a.m. on this morning, MacArthur received a cable from Washington directing him to execute the Rainbow -5 war plan at once. [\[2\]](#) It will be recalled from the preceding chapter, that Washington had amended the Rainbow -5 war plan on 19

November 1941 to include orders for the planes of the Far East Air Force stationed in the Philippines to attack any Japanese forces and installations within range at the outbreak of hostilities. The Japanese airbases and harbour installations on Formosa were within range of MacArthur's B-17s. Two of the most extraordinary aspects of this morning were (a) the failure by MacArthur to contact and confer with the commander of his Far East Air Force between 5.00 a.m. and 11.00 a.m., and (b) MacArthur's failure to obey both the amended Rainbow 5 war plan and the war order transmitted from Washington at 5.30 a.m.

Major General Brereton was aware of the Japanese propensity to launch surprise attacks at dawn, and he wanted to persuade MacArthur to mount a bombing attack on the Japanese airbases on Formosa. While waiting to see MacArthur on this morning, Brereton was informed by Admiral Hart that Japanese carrier aircraft had bombed the American seaplane tender *William B. Preston* in Davao Bay on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. This was clearly a hostile "first overt act" by Japan of the kind referred to in General Marshall's war warning of 27 November 1941. In response to this direct hostile act against an American warship in Philippine waters, Brereton again asked Sutherland to permit him to see MacArthur or approve bombing of the Japanese airbases on Formosa himself. Sutherland refused both requests.

Fearing that his aircraft would be caught on the ground by the Japanese and destroyed, Brereton finally ordered them aloft to circle their airfields. Shortly after 9.00 a.m., Brereton was told that Japanese aircraft had attacked southern Luzon, and he pressed Sutherland again for permission to attack the Japanese airbases on Formosa. Again Sutherland refused. It was not until 11.00 a.m. that MacArthur finally approved a bombing attack on the Japanese airbases. Brereton ordered all of his aircraft to land so that they could be refuelled and the bombers armed.

As a direct result of MacArthur's inexcusable failure to bring his command to a proper state of readiness to resist a likely Japanese attack, most of Brereton's aircraft were sitting on their airstrips when Japanese bombers and fighters arrived overhead at about 12.20 p.m. on 8 December and took them by surprise.

Reflecting the slackness of MacArthur's command structure, radar and other warnings of the approach of unidentified aircraft formations had not been passed on to flight commanders at American airbases. At the Clark Field airbase, located about 50 miles (80 km) north of Manila, the American bombers and fighters were caught on the ground and most were destroyed. Other Japanese aircraft attacked the American fighter airbase at Iba on the west coast of the main northern island of Luzon and destroyed all but two of the American P-40 fighters based there. Half of the aircraft of MacArthur's Far East Air Force were destroyed on the ground on the first day of the Japanese attack. In the following week, continuing Japanese air attacks reduced Brereton's remaining aircraft to a handful of P-40 fighters and a handful of B-17 bombers. Realising that there were not enough fighters left to protect the B-17 bombers, MacArthur ordered Brereton and his staff to take the B-17s to the safety of Australia.

It has been difficult for historians to establish the reason for MacArthur's fatal inaction during the crucial nine hours that elapsed in Manila following news of the Pearl Harbor attack. There was no American government inquiry into MacArthur's behaviour of the kind that addressed alleged failures of command at Pearl Harbor. When informally questioned after the war, the chief actors in the Philippines disaster appeared to be concerned to protect their own reputations by shifting blame to others.

MacArthur's failure to respond appropriately to the emergency was almost certainly influenced by Philippine politics. The President of the Philippines, Manuel Quezon, had been a friend of MacArthur for many years. Despite the Philippines already having been included, without its consent, in Japan's Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, Quezon naively believed that his country was neither militarily or economically important to Japan. In pursuance of this fantasy, Quezon had hoped to steer the Philippines to a course of neutrality in the event of war between the United States and Japan. When Quezon received news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he contacted MacArthur immediately to urge him to avoid action that might provoke a Japanese attack on the Philippines. Quezon's pressure for neutrality was reflected in the orders issued by MacArthur immediately following the news of Pearl Harbor. Although ordering his army and air forces to battle stations, MacArthur directed that the American Army and Air Force in the Philippines was not to initiate offensive action against Japan. The American Far East Air Force was permitted by MacArthur to retaliate only if directly attacked by the Japanese.

Quezon's pressure for neutrality appears to have infected the decision-making process at MacArthur's headquarters in Manila during the critical hours immediately following Pearl Harbor. MacArthur's culpable inaction was particularly damaging for America's most powerful means of retaliation, the Far East Air Force in the Philippines. United States Air Force historian, Dr Daniel R. Mortensen, describes the paralysis at MacArthur's headquarters during the initial hours following news of Pearl Harbor:

"Awakened before dawn on December 8, the military and political leaders at Manila realised that the disaster of Pearl Harbor might prevent the reinforcement of the islands. The shock of the Japanese attack on American territory, and the lingering hope that Japan might somehow ignore the Philippines, confused and paralysed MacArthur and other decision-makers. With Quezon urging neutrality, (Admiral) Hart hoping to regroup to the south, and (Major General) Brereton calling for a strike against Formosa by his ill-prepared bomber squadrons, MacArthur's command post sank in a positive quagmire of indecision". From *Delaying Action or Foul Deception*, "War in the Pacific: Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay" (1991) at pages 53-54.

Drawing on the recollections of those who observed MacArthur at his headquarters during the critical nine hours between news of Pearl Harbor reaching Manila and the commencement of the Japanese air assault on the Philippines, his biographer William Manchester describes MacArthur's mental condition at this time as verging on "catatonic". The commander of America's Army and Air Force in the Philippines was observed to be "grey, ill and exhausted." Manchester was not a hostile biographer. He suggests that MacArthur's decision-making faculties may have become paralysed in the hours immediately following Pearl Harbor owing to "overload" caused by conflicting pressures. See William Manchester, "American Caesar", at pp. 230-231.

The inexcusable failure by MacArthur to place American military forces in the Philippines on a proper war footing immediately following news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor compromised the defence of the Philippines. His neglect of his duty to the United States resulted in the effective elimination of American air power in the western Pacific by 15 December 1941, forced the complete withdrawal of the United States Asiatic Fleet from Philippine waters, and paved the way for the Japanese invasion that followed. The Navy and Army commanders at Pearl Harbor were relieved of their commands even though they were taken completely by surprise by the Japanese attack. MacArthur's disgraceful neglect of duty was much worse and would appear to have justified at the very least dismissal from command, and arguably consideration of court martial. MacArthur's subsequent escape to Australia with only his closest staff officers and family enabled him to escape scrutiny of his behaviour at that time. Brereton was posted to duty elsewhere. Senior officers who might have testified to MacArthur's neglect of duty and incompetence as a commander remained in the Philippines, and either died or suffered lengthy imprisonment in Japanese prison camps. Even after the truth became known at the end of World War II, MacArthur had established himself as an heroic figure and was never brought to account for this disgraceful episode in the Battle of the Philippines.

MacArthur was criticised after the war for what appeared to be an inexcusable failure to bring his command to a proper state of readiness to resist the Japanese attack that took place on 8 December 1941. It was suggested that he had failed to obey orders imposed on him by the amended Rainbow -5 war plan and the 5.30 a.m. cable from Washington on 8 December 1941. In his defence, MacArthur relied on the words "...the United States desires that Japan commit the first overt act" in General Marshall's war warning of 27 November 1941, and said, "my orders were explicit not to initiate hostilities against the Japanese". This ludicrous defence ignored the obvious facts that Pearl Harbor and the bombing of the *William B. Preston* in Philippine waters were each a hostile "first overt act". In conformity with his standard approach of blaming others for failures in his commands, MacArthur blamed Major General Brereton for the loss of half of the Far East Air Force on the ground.

Major General Brereton cannot escape criticism for the debacle that wiped out American air power in the Philippines in such a short time. Even allowing for MacArthur's fatal inaction during the crucial nine hours that elapsed after news of Pearl Harbor, Brereton should have responded to the danger created by MacArthur's inaction by taking sensible precautions to avoid all of his aircraft being caught on the ground by the Japanese. Those sensible precautions could have included maintaining combat fighter patrols over the main airbases while other fighters were being refueled, dispersing some of his fighters to secondary airfields, and withdrawing all of his B-17s to Mindaneu while MacArthur was paralysed by indecision.

The Japanese cut the American supply line to the Philippines

The Japanese plan to capture the Philippines included necessary military action to isolate the defenders of the Philippines from any hope of reinforcement from the United

States. Within hours of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese aircraft bombed Guam and Wake, America's two island outposts between Hawaii and the Philippines. On 10 December 1941, 5,000 troops of Japan's elite South Seas Detachment stormed ashore on Guam and quickly overran the small garrison of 300 US Marines. On 11 December 1941, a Japanese amphibious invasion force approached Wake Island. Here the Japanese received a nasty surprise. The Americans had reinforced their Marine garrison with twelve Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters and 5 inch coastal guns. As the Japanese warships approached Wake, they were subjected to heavy bombardment and were forced to withdraw with the loss of two destroyers and damage to several cruisers, destroyers and transports.

The Japanese mounted daily air attacks on the small Wake Island garrison, and after all of their aircraft had been destroyed, a second much more powerful invasion force attacked the island successfully on 22 December 1941. This second invasion force included two of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's powerful fleet aircraft carriers, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*. With three aircraft carriers at his disposal, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Kimmel, could probably have reinforced the defenders of Wake Island from Hawaii, and forced the Japanese into a drawn-out war of attrition in the central Pacific which would have hampered their aggression in the Philippines and the South-West Pacific. Unfortunately, Kimmel was not a bold commander. He passed up the opportunity and allowed Wake Island to fall to the Japanese.

Japanese troops land in the Philippines



Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma steps ashore at Lingayen Gulf after his troops have secured a beachhead.

Having won complete control of the skies over the Philippines, the Japanese poured in their troops on 22 December 1941. Two divisions of Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma's 14th Army landed at Lingayen Gulf which is located 120 miles (193 km) north of Manila on the west coast of Luzon. They were opposed by two Philippine Army divisions, but these inexperienced and poorly equipped troops were unable to hold their ground against the battle-toughened Japanese troops, and the Japanese advanced steadily towards Manila. The ease with which the Japanese established themselves on Philippine soil exposed the absurdity of MacArthur's boast that his troops would hold the Japanese on the beaches.