

WW2 OPERATION VENGEANCE
THE KILLING OF JAPAN'S ADMIRAL ISOROKU YAMAMOTO
THE JAPANESE ARCHITECT OF THE PEARL HARBOR ATTACK
AND COMMANDER OF THE JAPANESE COMBINED FLEET

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APRIL 4, 1884 – APRIL 18, 1943



OPERATION VENGEANCE – BACKGROUND

On April 14, 1943, Fleet Radio Unit Pacific intercepted message NTF131755 as part of Project Magic. Having broken the Japanese naval codes, US Navy cryptanalysts decoded the message and found that it provided specific details for an inspection trip that the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, intended to make to the Solomon Islands. This information was passed to Commander Ed Layton, the intelligence officer for the Commander-in-Chief of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz.

Meeting with Layton, Nimitz debated whether to act on the information as he was concerned that it might lead the Japanese to conclude that their codes had been broken.

He was also concerned that if Yamamoto was dead, he might be replaced with a more gifted commander.

After much discussion, it was decided a suitable cover story could be devised to alleviate concerns regarding the first issue, while Layton, who had known Yamamoto before the war, stressed that he was the best the Japanese had. Deciding to move forward with intercepting Yamamoto's flight, Nimitz received clearance from the White House to move forward.

OPERATION VENGEANCE – PLANNING

As Yamamoto was viewed as the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instructed Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to give the mission the highest priority. Consulting with Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, Commander of South Pacific Forces and South Pacific Area, Nimitz ordered planning to move forward. Based on the intercepted information, it was known that on April 18 Yamamoto would be flying from Rabaul, New Britain to Ballale Airfield on an island near Bougainville.

Though only 400 miles from Allied bases on Guadalcanal, the distance presented a problem as American aircraft would need to fly a 600-mile roundabout course to the intercept to avoid detection, making the total flight 1,000 miles. This precluded the use of the Navy and Marine Corps F4F Wildcats or F4U Corsairs. As a result, the mission was assigned to the US Army's 339th Fighter Squadron, 347th Fighter Group, Thirteenth Air Force which flew P-38G Lightnings. Equipped with two drop tanks, the P-38G was capable of reaching Bougainville, executing the mission, and returning to base.

Overseen by the squadron's commander, Major John W. Mitchell, planning moved forward with the assistance of Marine Lieutenant Colonel Luther S. Moore. At Mitchell's request, Moore had the 339th aircraft fitted with ship's compasses to aid in navigation. Utilizing the departure and arrival times contained in the intercepted message, Mitchell devised a precise flight plan that called for his fighters to intercept Yamamoto's flight at 9:35 AM as it began its descent to Ballale.

Knowing that Yamamoto's aircraft was to be escorted by six A6M Zero fighters, Mitchell intended to use eighteen aircraft for the mission. While four aircraft were tasked as the "killer" group, the remainder was to climb to 18,000 feet to serve as top cover to deal with enemy fighters arriving on the scene after the attack. Though the mission was to be conducted by the 339th, ten of the pilots were drawn from other squadrons in the 347th Fighter Group. Briefing his men, Mitchell provided a cover story that the intelligence had been provided by a coast watcher who saw a high-ranking officer boarding an aircraft in Rabaul.

OPERATION VENGEANCE – DOWNING YAMAMOTO

Departing Guadalcanal at 7:25 AM on April 18, Mitchell quickly lost two aircraft from his killer group due to mechanical issues. Replacing them from his cover group, he led the squadron west out over the water before turning north towards Bougainville. Flying at no higher than 50 feet and in radio silence to avoid detection, the 339th arrived at the intercept point a minute early. Earlier that morning, despite the warnings of local commanders who feared an ambush, Yamamoto's flight departed Rabaul. Proceeding over Bougainville, his G4M "Betty" and that of his chief of staff were covered by two groups of three Zeros.

Spotting the flight, Mitchell's squadron began to climb and he ordered the killer group, consisting of Captain Thomas Lanphier, First Lieutenant Rex Barber, Lieutenant Besby Holmes, and Lieutenant Raymond Hine to attack. Dropping their tanks, Lanphier and Barber turned parallel to the Japanese and began to climb. Holmes, whose tanks failed to release, turned back out to sea followed by his wingman. As Lanphier and Barber climbed, one group of Zeros dove to attack. While Lanphier turned left to engage the enemy fighters, Barber banked hard right and came in behind the Bettys.

Opening fire on one (Yamamoto's aircraft), he hit it several times causing it to roll violently to the left and plummet into the jungle below. He then turned towards the water seeking the second Betty. He found it near Moila Point being attacked by Holmes and Hines. Joining in the attack, they forced it to crash land in the water.

Coming under attack from the escorts, they were aided by Mitchell and the rest of the flight. With fuel levels reaching a critical level, Mitchell ordered his men to break off the action and return to Guadalcanal. All of the aircraft returned except Hines' which was lost in action and Holmes who was forced to land in the Russell Islands due to a lack of fuel.

OPERATION VENGEANCE – AFTERMATH

A success, Operation Vengeance saw the American fighters down both Japanese bombers, killing 19, including Yamamoto. In exchange, the 339th lost Hines and one aircraft. Searching the jungle, the Japanese found Yamamoto's body near the crash site. Thrown clear of the wreckage, he had been hit twice in the fighting. Cremated at nearby Buin, his ashes were returned to Japan aboard the battleship Musashi. He was replaced by Admiral Mineichi Koga.

Several controversies quickly brewed following the mission. Despite the security attached to the mission and the Magic program, operational details soon leaked out. This began with Lanphier announcing upon landing "I got Yamamoto!" This breach of security led to a second controversy over who shot down Yamamoto. Lanphier claimed that after engaging the fighters he banked around and shot a wing off the lead Betty. This led to an initial belief that three bombers had been downed. Though given credit, other members of the 339th were skeptical.

Though Mitchell and the members of the killer group were initially recommended for the Medal of Honor, this was downgraded to the Navy Cross in the wake of the security issues. Debate continued over credit for the kill. When it was ascertained that only two bombers were downed, Lanphier and Barber were each given half kills for Yamamoto's plane. Though Lanphier later claimed full credit in an unpublished manuscript, the testimony of the lone Japanese survivor of the battle and the work of other scholars supports Barber's claim.

YAMAMOTO'S REMAINS

Yamamoto's body was recovered by the Navy patrol and transported to the 1st Base Command at Buin, where an autopsy was performed on April 20. Many published accounts state Yamamoto died in his seat, from a bullet wound to his chest. According to the Navy doctor who examined his body at the crash site and performed his autopsy, Yamamoto had no visible wounds aside from a small cut above his eye. This caused speculation he might have survived the crash but died hours later from internal injury or shock.

Afterward, his body and uniform were cremated and buried at Buin. Part of his ashes were transported aboard a G4M1 Betty from Buin Airfield (Kahili) to Rabaul and then Truk. Transferred to Battleship Musashi and transported to Tokyo arriving on May 3, 1943, when news of Yamamoto's death was officially reported to the Japanese press as "having died in combat aboard an aircraft". On June 5, Yamamoto received a state funeral in Tokyo. His remains were buried at Tama Cemetery, and a portion was given to his wife and buried at his family shrine at Nagaoka.

Yamamoto was posthumously promoted to the highest rank of Fleet Admiral, awarded the Order of the Chrysanthemum, First Class, and Nazi Germany awarded him the Knight's Cross with oak leaves - the only foreigner to receive this award.

A BIT OF INFORMATION ON ADMIRAL YAMAMOTO

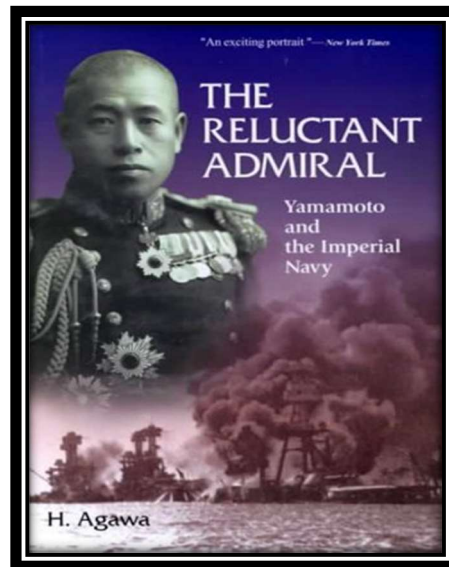
Isoroku Yamamoto was born in 1884. Yamamoto graduated from the Japanese Naval Academy in 1904. He fought in the Battle of Tsushima Straits in May 1905 where Yamamoto lost two fingers on his left hand.

Yamamoto attended the Japanese Naval War College from 1919 to 1921 at Harvard University and between 1925 and 1928, he served as Naval Attaché to the United States. In the 1930s, he gained a reputation for having expertise in naval aviation. As a result of this knowledge, Yamamoto pushed for aircraft carriers to be the dominant force in Japan's navy.

He not only wanted modern ships, he also wanted modern fighter planes to operate from them. Almost invariably, most fighter planes flown from aircraft carriers were inferior to land-based fighters (the Swordfish on British carriers compared to the Spitfire on land for example). Yamamoto wanted Japan's carrier-based fleet to be modern and fast and to carry modern weapons.

He came up against senior naval officers who firmly believed in the supremacy of the battleship - a weapon he described as being similar to a samurai sword - a powerful weapon from the past but one that was being consigned to the history books.

While he had served in America, Yamamoto developed a negative attitude toward the American Navy and the standards he had witnessed within it. He described the American Navy as a club for golfers and bridge players. However, for all this disdain, Yamamoto was aware of the vast power that the US Navy had - especially in the Pacific. He was one of the few senior military figures in Japan who had serious misgivings about challenging America's power in the Pacific. This was not a popular view and to remove him from Tokyo (and some say to protect his life), Yamamoto was sent back to sea as Commander of the Combined Fleet. He cautiously advised the Japanese government that he anticipated success for no more than six months to a year, after which nothing was guaranteed.



In October 1941, Hideki Tojo became Prime Minister of Japan. Yamamoto was ordered to prepare for an attack on America as she was the only real threat to Japanese expansion in the Pacific. To be successful against the Americans, Yamamoto knew that he needed a stunning but quick knock-out blow; one so devastating that America would not recover from it. He planned to destroy Pearl Harbor, America's naval base in Hawaii.

Yamamoto is ranked as the 2nd best Admiral of WW2, preceded only by Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, USN

SCENES FROM THE CRASH SITE





A Japanese G4M Betty Bomber like the one Admiral Yamamoto was shot down in



An American P-38 Fighter like the one that shot down Admiral Yamamoto's plane

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