

Japan Broke U.S. Code Before Pearl Harb

Asia: Discovery is based on papers unearthed in Tokyo. They show attack may have been prompted by belief that Washington had decided on war.

By VALERIE REITMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

TOKYO—Toshihiro Minohara made a startling discovery while digging through the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Md., last summer.

While researching secret codes used prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor 60 years ago, the young Japanese American professor stumbled upon a document, declassified by the CIA about five years ago, that proved that Tokyo had succeeded in breaking the U.S. and British diplomatic codes. A few microfilmed documents, showing the Japanese translations of the telegrams, were attached.

Minohara knew he was on to something important: For decades it was widely believed that Japan, then a developing country with a fierce rivalry between its army and navy, hadn't been up to measure when it came to code-breaking, particularly the documents of the Americans.

"We are so . . . arrogant," said Donald Goldstein, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh and co-author of "At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor." "It's very possible they could have broken our code, so why shouldn't they have?"

Research in Tokyo Confirms Findings

Further research by a colleague in Japan confirmed the findings—and may shed light on the mind-set that caused Japan's last holdouts for peace to opt for war just weeks before the attack, Minohara said this week.

When Minohara sent fellow Kobe University teacher Satoshi Hattori to check Japan's diplomatic archives in Tokyo, he wasn't optimistic: Most top-secret documents were burned after being read in wartime Japan. Those that remained were confiscated by the U.S. during the occupation that followed Japan's 1945 defeat; they are now housed in U.S. archives.

But Hattori unearthed a folder marked "Special Documents," containing 34 communiques that would have been easy to overlook—and apparently have been by other Japanese researchers numerous times. They are simple typed pages, written primarily in English, of U.S. and British diplomatic discussions and telegrams, many from U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull to various U.S. ambassadors.

The contents of the documents have long been known to historians the world over, and some even pop up on the Internet. But their appearance in the Japanese archives reveals that Tokyo knew what was going on in Washington in the weeks before Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, killing more than 2,000 people.

Minohara says his findings may shed light on why the few doves in the Japanese Cabinet—in particular, Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo—dropped their opposition to war.

piners or instead perhaps Malaya, then a British colony, which would prompt the U.S. to come to the aid of its ally.

The newly revealed documents raise an interesting question, Minohara says. Had the American side accepted the compromises it was considering—lifting the oil embargo for three months, permitting Japanese troops to remain in Indochina and continuing discussions on Japan's occupation of Manchuria—would Tokyo have still gone through with the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor?

Japan's war vessels had long be-

fore set sail for the Pacific, and the command "Climb Mt. Itaka" meant for Japanese troops to go forward with the attack on Pearl Harbor; but there was also a lesser-known command, "Climb Mt. Tsukuba," which meant return.

"The big question is why the U.S. dropped the offer," says Minohara, 30, who did undergraduate work at UC Davis before moving to Japan for graduate school at Kobe University, where he now teaches.

Togo wrote in his memoirs that, when he read the edict from the U.S., "I was shocked to the point of dizziness. At this point, we had no

choice but to take action."

Historians often wondered why he was so shocked. Minohara says Togo's raised expectations that a deal was in the offing led to his anger.

Thomas G. Mahnken, a strategy professor at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island who recently completed a book on U.S. intelligence on Japan in the years before World War II, says the knowledge that Japan was breaking the codes is "significant."

Then again, Mahnken notes, the U.S. diplomatic telegrams "were not tremendously sophisticated," and a

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or, Researcher Finds

number of countries had even broken those used by military attaches.

Neither Japan nor the U.S. had broken the other's military codes prior to Pearl Harbor, Minohara says.

Japanese historians often claim that the U.S. misinterpreted some of the country's telegrams—for instance, that Togo's "Five Points Plan" was translated as a "final offer" when Togo never said that.

Minohara says the Japanese "were doing the same thing. Even though there was no error in the translations, they were still misinterpreting the U.S.' intentions."



Associated Press

Scholar Toshihiro Minohara stumbled upon a key document declassified by the CIA.

sure to allow adoptions to resume.

RUSSIA 12/7/01 7 Held in Alleged Effort to Sell Nuclear Material

Russian police have arrested seven people accused of trying to sell more than two pounds of highly enriched weapons-grade uranium, Russian television said.

The men, arrested in the town of Balashikha just east of Moscow, were trying to sell a capsule containing uranium-235 for \$30,000, NTV television said. The suspects were charged with illegal handling of nuclear materials, it said.

If confirmed, the seizure would be the first acknowledged case of theft of weapons-grade nuclear material in Russia.

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Japan Stunned by Hard-Line U.S. Edict

The U.S., alarmed by the march of Japan's Imperial Army through Asia, had imposed an oil embargo on the nation and told it to get out of China, among other things. Togo had sent a conciliatory rebuttal, known as the "Five Points Plan," offering some concessions and seeking to continue discussions.

Japan knew from the decoded cables that the U.S. had been seriously considering some of the compromises. But on Nov. 26, 1941, the Americans stunned Japan with a hard-line edict essentially ordering Tokyo's troops to get out of China and Indochina or face the consequences. This apparently convinced even Togo that the U.S. had decided on war.

Many historians have speculated that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was looking for an excuse to get into the war in Europe; they posit that he knew Japan would attack but thought the target might be American forces in the Philip-

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Letters to the Editor

12/7/01

We Knew Japan Wa

"As the author of "Day of Deceit," which Robert L. Bartley's Dec. 3 Thinking Things Over column—"September 11, December 7 and Limits of Intelligence"—takes issue with, I would like to make some clarifications. Mr. Bartley is quoting from "experts," who believe that the intercepted Japanese naval radio signals that organized the attack and named Pearl Harbor as the target were not decoded until 1945. The "experts" are quoting from 1950 documents. The U.S. Navy communications intelligence records I obtained in May 2000, pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, state otherwise.¹

1. Although these communication records were withheld from Congress and the American people for more than 50 years, and my discovery of them occurred after the hardcover edition (The Free Press/Simon & Schuster) of my book was published, I have reported on them in the updated paperback edition released earlier this year by Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster.

2. Those documents include a communication dated Nov. 16, 1941 (Manila time), by the commanding officer of the U.S. Navy's secret monitor station on Corregidor Island, Lt. John M. Lietwiler, who notified his superior in Washington, D.C., that his radio cryptographers were "current" in intercepting, decoding and translating the Japanese naval code. One of his cryptographers was able to "walk right across" the Japanese messages, Lietwiler wrote. The Corregidor intercepts were available to the two Philippine commanders, Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Adm. Thomas Hart, but there is no record that they were sent to the Hawaiian commanders, Adm. Husband E. Kimmel and Lt. General Walter Short.

As I reported in "Day of Deceit"'s first edition, on the morning of Nov. 15, 1941, Gen. George C. Marshall, chief of staff of the U.S. Army, summoned the bureau chiefs of several news organizations to his office in the War Department. Pledging them to secrecy, Marshall disclosed that the United States had intercepted and decoded Japanese radio messages and that he expected the danger (war) with Japan to occur in the first week of December.

Harold, maybe you have heard of this book, Day of Deceit by Robert Stinnett & Leo (paper back). He dedicates it to Congressman John Moss (D) (CA) author of Freedom of Information act - a truly important work on Dec. 7, 1941.