

## THE MYSTERY OF DECEMBER 8th 1941

On the day that would live in infamy, the 19 year old Privates Lockhard and Elliott were ending their Sunday morning shift at 7:00AM at the Opana radar site on the far northern shore of Oahu Island, Hawaii. On a normal weekday their shift wouldn't have ended until 11 AM, but that was much shorter than the desired 24/7 coverage, due to the lack of spare radio tubes and trained operators for the six new radar sets in Hawaii.

Pvt. Elliott was being trained by Lockhard to operate the portable SCR-70 radar set - portable, that is, on three large trucks and a trailer for the 55 foot mast with its 32 antennas. One of the trucks held the control console, where the operator sat staring at the small five inch diameter cathode ray tube, upon which a target showed up only as a bright blip. The 100 kilowatt pulses it transmitted allowed detection of airplanes up to 150 miles away, more than an hour away at cruising speed.

Since the truck to return them to base for breakfast hadn't arrived by 7:00AM, Elliott asked to keep running the radar for additional practice. Two minutes later he spotted a large blip 132 miles away, larger than either had seen before, and tracked it for ten minutes, moving directly south towards them. At 7:15AM they called it into the tracking center at Fort Shafter, but all the plotters had left at 7:00AM when their shift had ended. The duty phone operator, Pvt. Joseph McDonald, went looking, and found the only officer present, Lt. Kermit Tyler, a fighter pilot on his second day of training on the new radar operations. His shift wasn't over until 8:00AM.

Pvt. Lockhard reported his observations of a large incoming flight. Lt. Tyler was aware of a large flight of 12 new B-17 "Flying Fortresses" due in from Hamilton Field in California, on their way to reinforce the Far Eastern Air Force in the Philippines. Their expected flight path was nearly identical to the track being reported to him, so he told Pvt. Lockhard to forget it. Nevertheless, Lockhard and Elliott continued to track the flight

until they lost it in the “ground scatter” some 20 miles out. They secured the radar, and the truck arrived at 7:45AM to take them back to base. As they arrived at 8:00AM, they saw dark smoke rising from Pearl Harbor, instantly realized what was happening, and returned to their radar.

Lt. “Smitty” Humiston was flying copilot in one of the B-17’s as they approached Hickam Field just after 8AM. He saw the fireworks over Pearl, and his first thought was that they were being saluted by the Navy as they arrived... but quickly realized that Pearl was under attack. The B-17’s had been stripped of all unnecessary weight for the 2,400 mile trip to Hawaii, so they carried no ammunition for their guns. They diverted to Bellows Field under fire, and managed to land safely, although sliding off the runway into a ditch. All survived except the plane, which was strafed with over 200 bullet holes, and never flew again. Ten of the twelve B-17’s survived, but none ever reached the Philippines.

In Manila, on the other side of the dateline, the attack on Pearl started at 2:30AM local time. A large birthday party being given by Air Force personnel for their new Commander, Major General Lewis Brereton, had just broken up at 2AM in the Manila Hotel. During the party, MacArthur’s Chief of Staff, General Richard Sutherland, and Admiral William Purnell, Admiral Thomas Hart’s Chief of Staff separately pulled General Brereton aside to brief him on the gist of a decrypted Japanese diplomatic message indicating that diplomatic negotiations would be ending that night at 2AM Manila time. Brereton quietly left to start preparations for an attack.

At 3:00AM the first official news of the Pearl Harbor attack reached Manila. Admiral Hart was wakened by a call from the duty officer delivering a terse radio message from CINCPAC in Hawaii: “AIR RAID ON PEARL X THIS IS NO DRILL”, and alerted all the Navy personnel. The Army got the news a half hour later, when the signalman on duty heard the news from a commercial station in Morse code. His duty officer called the Signal Corps chief, who went to Army headquarters where Sutherland and two other officers were sleeping on cots. Sutherland woke

MacArthur with the news at 3:30AM, and by 4:00AM a call from the War Department confirmed the news report.

A full nine hours later, 60 miles northwest at Clark Airfield base, the main military field in the Philippines, the B-17's and fighter planes that had been sent aloft for self-protection and reconnaissance earlier that morning, had returned for refueling and to load up with bombs. At 12:35PM Lt. Jack Gates walked outside, and happening to look up into the clear blue sky, saw two perfect "V's" of airplanes approaching the field at a very high altitude. There had been no warning. He was counting the planes when he saw the sun glinting off the falling bombs. He sprinted to the newly dug slit trench nearby, and dove in, to survive the ensuing strafing and bombing that was so accurate that not a single bomb fell more than 200 feet outside the airfield. An hour later, nearly half of the Far East Air Force planes, and much of their supporting infrastructure, had been destroyed, and with it, any chance of a successful defense of the Philippines. With all that warning time, how could this have happened? And how did such a major military failure avoid any military or congressional investigations, unlike Pearl Harbor, where both the Army and Navy commanders were relieved?

Not many years after the U.S. acquired the Philippines from Spain in 1898, U.S. military planners began to assume that Japan eventually would try to gain control of the islands. These concerns arose from the surprise at Japan's easy military victory over Russia in their war of 1904-5, and from the outrage of the Japanese people at the U.S. depredations against Japanese immigrants in California, such as being denigrated in the popular press as being part of the "Yellow Peril", being forbidden property ownership, and segregation of their school children.

Army and Navy planners designated countries by a color in their plans. Japan was designated Orange, the U.S. Blue. Plan Orange evolved from the early 1900's through 1940 when it was superseded by Rainbow 5, in recognition of needing to include more combatants than just the U.S. and Japan. All the Orange plans prized Manila Bay as the most desirable base

in the Philippines, but by 1934 they couldn't see how to successfully defend it against Japan's military might. By 1938 Orange envisioned only a detaining action, with Bataan and Corregidor the final holdouts, until the U.S. could build its naval power in the Pacific over a year or two to allow rescuing them by moving westward via the Pacific islands. Then an economic and naval blockade of Japan was expected to finally bring about its surrender.

Plan Orange foresaw only the U.S. engaged with Japan, but with the outbreak of war in Europe, planners had to take account of both the Atlantic and Pacific fronts, which they then did with their Rainbow plans. By 1940, Rainbow 5 had supplanted Plan Orange, and specifically its recommendation "D", which became known therefore as Plan Dog. Its main thrust was to ally with Britain in war in Europe and Africa, on the premise that Germany could not be defeated without our military support in men and materiel. But to achieve that would necessitate weakening our efforts in the Pacific to a mainly defensive stance. Plan Dog got the nod from President Roosevelt in November 1940, and was adopted by both the Army and Navy.

Plan Orange was the orthodoxy in place when General MacArthur arrived in the Philippines in 1935 to be the Chief Military Advisor to the Commonwealth, at the request of President Manuel Quezon. He brought with him as Chief of Staff, Lt. Col. Dwight Eisenhower, who had been serving on his staff in Washington, And Eisenhower brought along as his deputy an old friend and West Point classmate, Lt. Col. James Ord. Together, they started a ten year plan to build a Philippine army to be ready by their independence in 1946.

MacArthur visualized a core military of some 20,000 – 30,000 men, the Philippine Scouts, supported by a civilian army of 200,000 that was similar to the Swiss, where all able bodied men get initial military training, followed by an additional two weeks every summer until the age of 34. But difficulties emerged, with the military budget being reduced from 37% of the national budget in 1936 to 15% in 1939, and further cuts the next two

years. This partly reflected political pressure, partly Quezon's doubts that the Philippines could be successfully defended, and possibly also to try convincing the Japanese that the Commonwealth presented no military threat to them. Shortages of all kinds also hampered MacArthur's training efforts, from trainers to clothing, guns, transportation, etc., in addition to poor communications exacerbated by the separate languages and dialects spoken by the draftees.

Undeterred, MacArthur continued to eloquently express optimism on the progress of the training, and to maintain (in opposition to Plan D) that the whole of the Philippines would be defensible by meeting the enemy on the beaches, and that all would be ready by the earliest date the Japanese could attack, in April 1942.

In early 1938 MacArthur decided to stage a large military parade in Manila to showcase the Philippine Army, and with an eye toward building popular support for an increased military budget. Eisenhower and Ord were assigned to execute the plan. Quezon got wind of the plans to transport all the men, and quizzed Eisenhower on it, who in turn was surprised that MacArthur hadn't cleared the plan with the President. Quezon was furious, and when Eisenhower returned to headquarters he found MacArthur equally furious, claiming he had only intended a quiet investigation of the possibility of a parade. So Eisenhower and Ord became scapegoats, and in Eisenhower's words: "Never again were we on the same warm and cordial terms".

At the end of January 1938 Jimmy Ord died in a bizarre accident. Against Eisenhower's advice, he tapped a trainee Philippine pilot to fly him to Camp John Jay in Baguio, the summer capital of Manila, in the mountains 130 miles north of Manila. As was sometimes practiced at the time, he planned to buzz the house of his friends the Fairchilds there to alert them, and then drop a message for them tied to a rock. Sadly, the rookie pilot stalled the airplane in the process, and the ensuing crash killed Ord, although the pilot and plane survived. It was a great personal loss for Eisenhower.

To replace Ord, MacArthur imported Major Richard K. Sutherland from Tientsin, China, even though he was not a WestPoint graduate. Sutherland had wanted to go there, but his father didn't, and sent him to Yale, where he enrolled in the ROTC. Upon graduation he enlisted as a private and emerged from service in World War I as a Captain in the artillery.

In June 1938 Eisenhower went on three months' leave to the U.S. with his family, and under orders to convince the War Department to provide more resources to the Philippines. Sutherland was tapped to fill in for him while he was absent, and in August wrote home to his father:

"MacArthur gives me the widest possible scope - more than any other man I have ever heard of giving. In consequence, the work is intensely interesting. He has a couple of peculiarities, but is marvelous to work for because of the great responsibility he places on me. I am, in the absence of Lt. Col. Eisenhower (June to Nov) acting as his Chief of Staff, and have been asked to replace Eisenhower for as long as I want to stay when he leaves next year."

Then in October 1938 he wrote his father:

"My work continues to be most interesting. I have gotten along in a big way with MacArthur. I find him fine to work with, and my ways seem to suit him. He has just taken action that will be a frightful blow to Eisenhower - who sailed yesterday & will arrive back here on Nov. 5. Eisenhower has been Mac A's Chief of Staff - and a good one, but yesterday Mac A relieved him of the assignment. He specified an organization placing Eisenhower and me on an equal basis - Eisenhower to work certain special studies while I am to carry on as I have for the last few months during Eisenhower's absence. The sum total is that I have usurped his job. It will be a terrific blow to him and my guess is that he will ask to go home.

"His wife had a serious operation in the States, and I have an idea that her health will be the excuse for Eisenhower to cut short his year's

extension that normally would expire in October of next year. Mac A's action was rather ruthless with respect to an extremely able man who has been with him seven years. Eisenhower's toughest spot will be with his wife who is a mean devil, but highly intelligent. She insisted when they left in May that they not come back here - that he has been here long enough if not too long already, and that he would bitterly regret it if he did come back. She said they could leave at that time on the crest of the wave, but that to come back would ruin everything. Well, she was right, the blow has fallen, and she is mean enough - easily - to say "I told you so" and then rub it in.

"This is not for general publication - and the following, naturally, is for you only, otherwise I couldn't say it. About two weeks ago, Mac A, in talking to some Americans here, said he had been a general, commanding one place or another since 1918, and that I was the best Chief of Staff he had ever had, barring none, in peace or war."

There were other descriptions of Sutherland. He told his deputy, Richard Marshall, that someone in this place had to be a first class S.O.B., and it was obvious that would not be MacArthur. Others were much less kind. Although many that knew him commented on his brilliance, unflagging work ethic, and innate honesty, others bristled at his autocratic, stern personality. In an unsent letter, George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff wrote: "his attitude in every case seems to have been that he knew it all and nobody else knew much of anything".

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 caused Eisenhower to actively seek a command position, so he would be ready for front line duty if the U.S. became involved. He asked MacArthur for a transfer, which was reluctantly given, and departed the Philippines in December for a command at Fort Lewis, Washington. The night before he sailed from Manila, he lamented to another officer that his career had been ruined.

Sutherland was allowed to choose his replacement, and selected Major Richard J. Marshall, an affable and competent logistics and supply

expert. They formed the core of the “Bataan Gang” which ran MacArthur’s war up until the Japanese surrender. MacArthur kept close personal control of politics and press relations, with Sutherland having charge of operations and planning, with wide discretion in speaking for MacArthur, and Marshall in charge of logistics and supply. MacArthur’s personal control was measured by one historian who noted that 109 of 142 communiques issued from headquarters in the first three months of the war praised MacArthur, while mentioning no one else.

MacArthur continued to hound the War Department for additional men, supplies and money, reporting optimistically on the development of the Philippine army. His “contagious optimism” was further enhanced by the airpower promise of the new long range heavy bombers (the B-17 Flying Fortress and the B-24 Marauder, with their 2,000 mile range, high altitude and large bombload capability allowing the potential for bombing not only Formosa but also Japan), and combined with the threats from continued Japanese successes in China, the French Vichy government’s handover of bases in Indochina to Japan and their subsequent invasion, caused the War Department in July of 1941 to change their minds about the defense of the Philippines. Suddenly orders for planes, pilots, munitions and money were issued to reinforce the Philippines.

MacArthur reached out to Major General Lewis Brereton to command his growing air force. Brereton arrived in Manila November 3, 1941 and brought with him “eyes only” secret papers from the War Department for MacArthur. On reading them MacArthur warmly thanked Brereton, turned to Sutherland and said “Dick, they’ve given us everything we have asked for!”. He then briefed Brereton, including about the November 27th directive from the War Department specifying that military action could only be taken after Japan committed the first overt act, and repeated his belief that “nothing will happen before 1 April 1942”.

Brereton inherited the largest air force outside the U.S., consisting of 35 B-17’s and 107 P-40 pursuit fighters, plus some older fighters, trainers and observation aircraft, with additional B-17’s and P-40’s promised and



on the way. He had just two airfields that could accommodate the B-17's - the main base at Clark Field 60 miles north of Manila, and Del Monte base, a grass strip on hard ground on a Del Monte plantation on the island of Mindinao, 500 miles south of Manila, that had just finished being cleared by Army Engineers on December 1st. There were no maintenance or repair facilities, and no housing for officers or men. But it was unknown to Japanese agents and aerial reconnaissance, unlike the other fields, and out of range of attack from Formosa, 1,000 miles north. (Japanese espionage was so pervasive that President Quezon's gardener and masseuse were both Japanese Army officers.)

Clark Field was the largest air field, and housed most of the support infrastructure. But headquarters and the communications center for the Far East Air Force (FEAF) was at Neilson Field, just south of central Manila, and was Manila's commercial airport. Nearby was Nichols Field, the headquarters of the Philippine Air Force. Iba Field was 80 miles NW of Manila, and 40 miles west of Clark, running parallel to the beach on the South China Sea. It had the only full time radar installation, a SCR-270 twin to the ones in Hawaii, that could see 150 miles out into the South China Sea. There were also some other smaller dirt fields in use. Only Clark had anti-aircraft guns, but their shells had been made in 1932 with powder fuses limiting the effective altitude to a maximum of 18,000 feet, while having a high failure rate.

There was a shortage of seasoned pilots for the B-17's, and many of the P-40 pilots were fresh out of pilot training. Some were still on the Pacific en route to Manila. Supplies of 50mm machine gun ammunition were so short that gunnery practice was not allowed, so that many of the P-40 guns were first fired in combat. And 24 newly arrived P-40's were still being uncrated, many of their engines had not been timed, nor guns bore-sighted when the attacks came.

On December 1st MacArthur and Sutherland ordered the 35 B-17's removed from Clark Field to the just completed Del Monte Field, but on December 4th the Chief Engineer at Del Monte reported to Sutherland that

no planes had arrived. The next day, half of them were flown down, loaded with tents and rations for the men. Why the other half stayed at Clark is disputed to this day. MacArthur and Sutherland separately maintained their orders were clear and had been followed up. Brereton claims he was unable to comply, because he was saving space at Del Monte for the twelve B-17's in transit from California. One historian suggested the delay might have been influenced by the imminent large birthday party for General Brereton on Sunday, December 7th.

Around 3:00AM that night the radar crew at Iba Field tracked the first flight of Japanese planes winging down from Formosa. The P-40 pursuit squadron took off to intercept them, guided by the radar, with orders to shoot if they came closer than 20 miles out. Although the Iba radar tracked the two flights crossing 40 miles out, no visual contact was made, probably because the Japanese were flying well above the Americans, who were beyond radio range of Iba. However, the Japanese planes returned north shortly after the missed contact.

By 4:00AM on December 8th, Army and Navy units had all been alerted, but not until 5:30AM was the official notice from Washington, sent two hours earlier, received and decrypted, announcing that hostilities had commenced. At 5:00AM Brereton arrived at MacArthur's headquarters to see him and get his orders, but Sutherland stopped him, explaining that the General was in conference, thus initiating a sequence of disputed events that are inadequately explained to this day. General Hap Arnold, Commanding General of the Air Force, eight years after the event, wrote that he was never able "to get the real story of what happened in the Philippines."

At the 5:00AM meeting with Sutherland, Brereton requested permission to immediately bomb Formosa, in accordance with Rainbow 5. Sutherland agreed with preparations for the attack, but told him to hold off until he had confirmed MacArthur's agreement.

At dawn, 6:15AM, GHQ received reports that Japanese planes had attacked the town of Aparri on the far north coast of Luzon, and dive bombers attacked U.S. seaplanes and their tender at Davao, on the southern shore of Mindanao, some 600 miles south of Manila.

Brereton returned to Headquarters at 7:15AM, and Sutherland ordered him to go back, prepare the B-17's for action and await orders. A few minutes before 8:00AM Brereton reported this to his staff, and that "We can't attack till we're fired on". At 8:00AM Hap Arnold called Brereton from Washington to warn him not to let his planes be attacked on the ground. By 8:30AM he had ordered all his B-17's at Clark to be launched without bombloads to search the seas around Luzon until recalled, along with fifty-four fighter planes to provide cover for Clark and Nielson fields.

Again at 8:50AM Brereton requested permission to raid Formosa, but was ordered by Sutherland to wait.

Meanwhile the War Department in Washington was anxious to hear what was happening in the Philippines. General Marshall had radioed "Hostilities commenced" at 3:22AM, and several hours later, "Reply immediately", followed up by a 7:55AM phone call from his Chief of Staff because they hadn't yet heard from MacArthur. At 8:30AM MacArthur reported to Marshall that the airfield at Baguio, the summer capital 130 miles north of Manila, had been bombed, along with two other small airfields north of Clark, and the harbor at Davao. But again, two hours after the Clark Field attack had started, Marshall radioed MacArthur: "Request report".

At 9:25AM Brereton received the report that Baguio had been bombed, along with two other small airfields, which he reported to Sutherland, and again requested permission to attack. Around 10:00AM Sutherland called back to say MacArthur had authorized a three plane photo-reconnaissance mission of Formosa. One hour later Sutherland called and authorized a bombing mission of Formosa.

By 10:30AM the B-17's had been recalled to Clark Field for refueling and loading with bombs, followed directly by the fighter squadrons which needed refueling, after being in the air for two and a half hours. At 11:20AM the radar at Iba picked up a large formation of planes about 100 miles out and apparently headed towards Manila. Fighter squadrons at Iba were sent up to be ready to intercept, and reports were radioed to the Nielson Field headquarters plotting room, because telephone and telegraph at Iba had gone out at 11:00AM, probably from sabotage. Radio communications were poor, and probably being jammed in addition.

Combining the radioed information from Iba's radar and telephone reports from spotters on the ground, warnings were sent out from Nielson at 11:30AM and 11:45AM to all Air Force units by radio and teletype of the planes headed toward Iba and Clark. Further notification was sent at 12:15PM, but apparently none of them reached the command at Clark, who were caught by surprise. One fighter squadron was taking to the air as the first bombs hit Clark Field at 12:35PM. A few planes got airborne and engaged the attackers, but none of the B-17's got off the ground. Ten minutes later, a massive air attack on Iba began, ending with the field being completely destroyed, along with the radar and the planes that had returned to refuel. An hour later half of Brereton's offensive bombers and forty percent of his fighter force had been eliminated, along with his Air Warning System, leaving Japan in control of the skies.

What caused the failure? Most observers point to an underlying widespread under-estimation of Japanese capabilities: of military ability, of personnel, of equipment, of performance and of planning. Within a few hours on December 8th the Japanese had successfully attacked Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaya. Secondly, the sudden switch from the defensive Rainbow 5 plan to an offensive air plan in the summer of 1941 was only in its infancy by December 8th. The Far East Air Force build up had just started, and there were shortages of everything, from trained pilots to ammunition, airfields to anti-aircraft, communications to air warning

systems. And lastly, it was also due to MacArthur's continuing optimistic assessment of the situation, and repeated assurance that nothing would happen before April 1942, when much of the promised reinforcements would have been in place.

And why was there never any accountability for the devastation on December 8th? MacArthur's popularity in both the U.S. and the Philippines, and the success of his self-promotion as our first World War II war hero, bravely holding out in Corregidor against invincible odds, promising the Philippine people that "I shall return", certainly would have restrained the Chiefs of Staff and the President from opening an investigation. The destruction of records, and inconsistency of recollections also blurred the picture. When the historian Louis Morton interviewed Sutherland in 1945, he was told that Morton would never get his hands on the G-3 records (Operations and Training), "they are the most important body of records on the operation and are in MacArthur's possession". Before the departure from Corregidor, a trunk containing joint records of MacArthur and Sutherland was slipped out by submarine and sent to Riggs Bank in Washington, to be available only to them. On a subsequent wartime trip to Washington Sutherland went to the bank, only to find that MacArthur had ordered the trunk removed.

Finally, how can MacArthur's inactions during the morning of December 8th be explained? These include his multiple failures to see General Brereton, his failure to send timely situation reports to his boss, General Marshall, and his failure to give any orders to Brereton? Some analysts have pointed to reports of his pale and haggard appearance at the time to support a theory that he may have suffered a temporary mental paralysis as he realized the lack of preparation for war, and shock that war had erupted before April 1942.

Others have theorized he may have felt the "indeterminate" political status of the Philippines (as a commonwealth), meant an act of war against Hawaii might not apply to the Commonwealth. Both he and President Quezon had talked about the potential for Philippine neutrality, and the

War Department had been adamant he not initiate any hostile action until attacked. And MacArthur may have wondered why there had been no dawn attacks on Clark, Neilson or Manila Bay, as would have been expected? He had no way to know that most of Japan's airfields in Formosa had been shut down by a heavy fog that had settled in around midnight, and had not dissipated until after 9:30AM, thus delaying their planned attack, and making the Japanese extremely anxious due to their worry that any element of surprise had been lost.

Most of the "facts" about the morning of December 8th are contradicted by other reports, adding to the "fog" that exists to this day. For example, MacArthur himself has written that he had no knowledge of Brereton's visits to request the bombing of Formosa, and would not have allowed it if he had, due to lack of target reconnaissance and the inability to provide fighter cover so far away. So we have to leave it to our imaginations to fill in the history of December 8, 1941.

In epilogue, our subsequent defeat in the Philippines is often considered one of the worst in our history. Four months after the December 8th attack, we surrendered the islands to Japan after losing about 23,000 American and 100,000 Philippine troops killed or captured, and suffered the subsequent Bataan Death March. On February 20, 1942, President Quezon and his family left Corregidor on the submarine Swordfish, three weeks before MacArthur's departure. On February 14th Quezon signed Executive Order #1, which had been composed for him the night before by Sutherland, and pre-dated to January 3rd, authorizing deposits to be wired from the Philippine treasury to the Chase National Bank; \$500K for MacArthur, \$75K for Sutherland, and lesser amounts for three others. In today's dollars, that was \$8.9MM and \$1.3MM respectively.

The day before he left, February 19th, not yet having received confirmation from Chase, Quezon had the equivalent in pesos delivered in cash to MacArthur, who returned it six days later, after the Chase deposit was confirmed. Although no records have been found, the deposits would

not have been allowed without the approval of MacArthur's superiors, including President Roosevelt. There was nothing implicitly illegal about the payments, but it is notable that no mention of them was ever found in MacArthur's published or private records, and that General Eisenhower turned down Quezon's later offer of \$60,000 for his own contributions. Executive Order #1 stated that the rewards were in recognition of: "magnificent defense", "outstanding generalship", and "outstanding service".

*Presented by Peter B. Dunckel to the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco on 9 February 2021  
(Maternal nephew of General Richard K. Sutherland)*





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