



The Pearl Harbor “Winds Execute” Message

The War Message Was Copied, But What Then?

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It was 4 December 1941 in Washington, D.C. A cold wind was blowing down from the Canadian Arctic. The Christmas decorations were up in all the downtown stores and businessmen were predicting the best Christmas season in years. With all the support for the war in Europe, the last vestiges of the Great Depression had finally ended. There was even talk 'on the hill' of raising the minimum wage to 45 cents an hour.

Near Washington, at the Navy Intercept Station at Cheltenham, Maryland intercept operator Ralph Briggs was glad for the warmth of his peacoat on the way to work, and was pleased with the big mug of Navy coffee which was the first item of business before sitting down at his intercept position.

Since 19 November, when the Winds Code Message, Japanese Circulars 2353 and 2354, had been transmitted by Tokyo and decrypted on the 'Purple Machine,' the head of Navy Communications Intelligence, Captain L.F. Safford, had directed that cards be made, and placed by the operating position of each operator.

Since it has been a routine watch so far, Ralph Briggs glanced at his card once more. Secured with tape on his operating position it read:

A. In case of Japan-U.S. relations in danger: HIGASHI NO KAZE AME

B. Japan-U.S.S.R. relations: KITANO-KAZE KUMMORI

C. Japan-British relations: NISHI NO KAZE HARE

The thick handleless coffee mug on Briggs' position had been refilled more than once, and the watch continued routine until, on 11980 kHz station "JAP" Tokyo, sent the key weather message in Morse at 1330Z (UTC). Briggs copied the message on his RIP-5, the Underwood Code Machine, with Kana characters:

HIGASHI NO KAZE AME (East Winds Rain)

It was not expected. Everyone thought that when it came, it would be war with Britain, and not the United States. Briggs

checked his copy with the card, no mistake, and the next action was to be his.

Ralph Briggs rushed the short distance to the communications room, and stayed to watch the message transmitted to Intercept Headquarters in Washington a few miles away. Then he called his Watch Chief, who lived in the station, and said, "I think I've got what we've been looking for!" The Chief replied, "Good, I'll be up shortly, get it on the TWX to Washington right away, priority precedence." Briggs said, "I've already done that Chief." Briggs hung up the telephone, entered the message in his log, and continued on watch.

On Nebraska Avenue in Washington, the teletype machine was beside the Watch Officer's desk. A bell rang, and the Winds Execute Message, typed out on the Model 19 teleprinter. Captain Safford was called.

At the Pearl Harbor investigation which followed World War II, Captain Safford testified:

"... It meant War and we knew it meant War... I saw the Winds Message typed in page form on yellow teletype paper, with the translation written below. I immediately forwarded this message to my Commanding Officer [Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes] thus fully discharging my responsibility in the matter."

But the Winds Execute Message was lost. The Hewitt Commission, led by VADM H. Kent Hewitt, was conducting a follow up to the Navy Court of Inquiry. Hewitt, in his examination of Captain Safford, said:

"... there is no evidence of a Winds Execute Message beyond your unsupported testimony. I do not doubt your sincerity, but I believe that you have confused one of the other messages containing the name of a wind with the message you expected to receive."

Ralph Briggs, in this same postwar time period was again stationed in Washington. He was located by Captain Safford, and Briggs was willing to testify at Congressional hearings. But Briggs did not testify. He was given a direct order by his Commanding Officer, to talk no further with Captain Safford, and not to testify. Safford respected this,



Ralph Briggs, who intercepted the 4 December Winds Execute Message. (Photo courtesy NCVA by Tom Warren.)



Captain L.F. Safford, in charge of Navy Intercept, 1941. (U.S. Navy photo.)

and Briggs was not called to testify, to confirm that he did indeed, copy the Winds Execute Message.

Years later, Briggs was a commissioned officer, and was Officer-in-Charge of the Navy Depository for Communications Intel-



U.S.S. California after the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. An armed NAS detachment watches for any other enemy raiders. (National Archives photograph.)

ligence. He took the opportunity to search the old intercept files for his logs and the Execute Message. They were missing, and Briggs made an appropriate notation in the files that the logs and traffic were missing.

Today, historians are divided. Some claim that President Roosevelt was informed of the war message and ignored it. Others believe that Winston Churchill knew of the attack because of British intercept, and did not tell President Roosevelt, because Britain was foundering in the war with Germany. Other historians believe that the Winds Execute Message was never intercepted at all.

In recent months, a British researcher has found that the Winds Execute Message was also intercepted by the British Intercept Station on Stonecutters Island, near Hong

Kong. Perhaps for the first time, the original Winds Execute Message intercept can now be confirmed.

But even if the message copied by Briggs had not been 'lost' would it have made a difference? Most historians believe not. The Execute Message gave no indication of a Pearl Harbor attack. But considering that the Japanese fleet was apparently in radio silence should this have given a clue?

While the Freedom of Information Act in the United States has caused the release of considerable information about the subject, British Communications Intelligence files are still mostly covered by the Official Secrets Act. When the British eventually open their files, or when a historian takes a new look at existing U.S. information, we may find that the story has not yet ended. **PC**



Ford Island, Battleship Row, Pearl Harbor, before December 7, 1941. U.S.S. Arizona is the third ship on the right. (Photo courtesy NCVA.)