

CAPTAIN MIZUNO'S FANTASTIC HOLIDAY : THE JAPANESE NON-INVASION OF AUSTRALIA

On 2 June 2017, Kimberley Society members and guests mingled and enjoyed an early supper before hearing from the evening's speaker, **Greg Dodds**. Greg is a Vietnam War veteran, former Military Intelligence Officer, and A grade Japanese linguist. His postings have included 25 years with the Department of Foreign Affairs at the Australian embassy in Japan. Greg's summary of his talk appears below.

Introduction

This talk addresses two points:

- ✚ the Japanese never intended to invade Australia. Indeed they went even further: they decided NOT to invade.
- ✚ There is only one incident recorded of a formed Japanese unit setting foot on Australian soil. That was a reconnaissance mission lead by a Captain Mizuno in early 1944.

What's an Invasion?

The insertion of military forces into a foreign country to capture and hold the reins of power. Thereafter, a puppet government controlled by the invading power will act in accord with the invader's wishes and interests.

Downed aircraft or sunk ships and their human cargo don't count. Few downed airmen plan to take over the enemy Government: they just want to get home.

Nor do prisoners of War or internees count.

Naval or air raids (Darwin, Sydney) do not count either.

Think of the German INVASION of Norway: they went there in 1940 and took over the entire country. They surrendered and left in 1945.

Did the Japanese have the capacity to invade us? Certainly not by their own accounts but the Australian government sincerely believed they were about to be invaded, as did our soldiers fighting in New Guinea.

But our sincerity has nothing to do with the question. It's what the Japanese planned that matters.

The Imperial Club Members Only

By the end of WW1, Japan already had a substantial empire; Taiwan 1897, Korea 1909 and mandated Pacific islands 1919. But it wanted substantial presence inside that most desired of all targets; China. But this was not to be, at least not without a substantial fight and a fight not only with the Chinese but also with other imperial powers.

Starting with Australia's opposition to Japan's anti racial discrimination proposal at Versailles in 1919 and the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese Naval Treaty in 1922, the Japanese Government began to feel a sense of isolation from the Imperial Club that had presided over China's decline. Japan's departure from the League of Nations in 1927 and a series of "incidents" in Northern China in the early 1930s, Japan became the number one "rogue" imperial power in the Far East. That is to say, the imperial power that used the fig leaf of anti-imperial ideology to mask its own ambitions.

As the main victims of this process, the Chinese didn't buy it for a minute but other communities in Asia weren't so sure. Asia for the Asians had a certain simple appeal and European colonial powers enjoyed majority support among communities nowhere in the Asian Region. That the Japanese might be fairer and more just masters is another question.

Japan's domestic politics shifted from an apparently well rooted liberal democracy in the early 1920s to a military dictatorship in all but name in the mid 1930s. Open warfare with China began with landings in Shanghai in 1936 and the inevitable friction with other imperial powers merely served to remind Tokyo that it had other scores to settle further South: Indo-China (France), Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma and India (the UK), Indonesia

(the Netherlands) and the Philippines (the US). Remove those people and you would have an Asia for the Asians – or for the Japanese anyway but that is also another story.

Many people recognise the date 7 December 1941 but fewer people are aware of other Army offensives that happened on virtually the same date; the attacks on the Philippines, Malaya and Hong Kong. By early February, all of these had finished successfully and if the Japanese had planned to invade Australia, now was the time to strike. But they didn't and this takes us to the core question of my presentation. Did they or didn't they plan to invade Australia and if not, why not?

Not in the Plan

The driving personal force behind the overall Japanese strategy was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto and he (correctly) believed that the US Navy was the trump card in the game; eliminate that and the Pacific would belong to Japan. Fail to do so and Japan's defeat was almost certain. While their attack on Pearl Harbor was a promising start, it was not enough and their clear defeat at Midway on 7 June 1942 meant that Japan would henceforth be on the defensive. There would never again be the shipping available to launch initiatives like an invasion of Australia.

However important the Imperial Navy may have been in the Tokyo hierarchy, it would be the Army that did the bulk of the work in an invasion and yet here too we draw a blank. After their stunning success in Malaya, the rather limited force of three divisions was quickly assigned to Burma and to Indonesia. There is no mention of invading Australia in these plans. Indeed, Yamashita is said to have estimated that eleven divisions would have been necessary to have conquered and occupied Australia. He also commented that capturing Darwin or Broome would mean nothing; the 2000 kilometres of desert before you reached any places of strategic interest served as a barrier, just like an ocean, except that the Army would have to deal with this, not the Navy.

Still, the idea of invading Australia was not stupid and it did have one enthusiastic supporter in the Japanese General Staff, naval Captain Seiichi Toyoda. He reasoned that the capture of Australia would finish off the need to expand further to secure the Coprosperity Sphere borders. Beyond Australia there was nothing but the wild Southern Ocean and the South Pole: even the Americans would take years to work out that one.

In a style that was practically unique to the Japanese Imperial General Staff, he went ahead with preparing his proposal in the face of his superiors' opposition and it was considered briefly and rejected at an Imperial Council Meeting in 1941. Not prepared to take no for an answer, he went over the heads of the Ministers and pleaded his case directly to the Prime Minister, General Hideki Tojo. This gamble also failed – all he got was a screaming outburst that it was “not in the plan” but this time his superiors were waiting for him outside.

Thereafter, Captain Toyoda vanishes from the pages of history. Perhaps the most serious threat to our shores was sent to command a destroyer flotilla in the northern Kurilles for the rest of the war.

As for the rest of Japan's strategy, it went according to plan, initially anyway. The Dutch in Indonesia were swiftly subdued and the British bundled out of Burma. As mentioned earlier, Midway restored the balance of naval power in the America's favour and the Japanese found themselves playing catch up for the rest of the war. Ironically, the motive behind their campaigns in the New Hebrides and New Guinea that ended at Guadalcanal was to ensure that Australia and New Zealand were cut off and could not be used as a logistics base by the allies. And they failed even in this modest effort. An invasion and occupation of Australia was not even possible after June 1942.

Part Two – Captain Mizuno and his trip to the Kimberley

We now move forward to early 1944. MacArthur has developed the island-hopping strategy that is taking the US Marines swiftly towards the Japanese homeland but the area immediately towards our north is relatively stable. More than 50 bombing raids on Darwin had prevented it from becoming a major allied base.

But while the possibility of Captain Toyoda's invasion of Australia had long since vanished, Japanese interest in what was going on here certainly had not. In late 1943, Japanese intelligence received reliable reports that a large scale secret airbase was to be built in the Kimberley which would give US bombers direct access to targets in most of Java. The construction of the base however could be harassed and delayed by their own bombers if they could confirm the reports and establish its precise location. So they turned to Captain Mizuno and his field intelligence detachment, known as the Matsu no Kikan based in Kupang in Timor.

Military intelligence varies in organisation and behaviour between countries. In the Japanese Imperial Army both officers and men were all graduates of the Nakano Intelligence School and could be relied on to scout an area and provide the accurate information that their tasking required. While the Kempeitai, the Military Police, was notorious for its brutality towards prisoners, the Military Intelligence were quite different and should not be taken lightly. They were determined to get the necessary information and knew how to do that.

Ten members of the Matsu no Kikan and about twenty Timorese left Kupang on an old fishing boat, the *Hiyoshi Maru*, on 17 January 1944. The Wet Season was ending and the planners must have hoped that even if the fishing boat was spotted by allied aircraft, it would not attract attention. They camped the first Admiralty Reef and then turned towards the Australian mainland.

At this point, an American submarine surfaced near the fishing boat and began following it. Whether the Japanese could have passed themselves off as Timorese to the Americans we will never know because a patrolling Zero appeared and began attacking the submarine, which hastily dived for cover. There are no records of this incident in US Naval records so the submarine was probably destroyed in the attack. In any case, after spending that second night on Browse Island, the fishing boat made its final approach and landed on the coast around midday on 19 January.

After camouflaging the boat, the Japanese conducted several clearing patrols in the immediate area. While they neither met nor saw another human during their stay, they did find several abandoned campsites and observed a column of white smoke rising from the top of a high cliff in the distance. They remarked that they felt they were being watched much of the time.

The second day they patrolled more extensively, including to the top of high ridgelines but saw no sign of human life. They did not mention coming across animals of any sort although kangaroos and wallabies abound in the area. In spite of my fanciful title, we should remember that these people were professional soldiers, not tourists, and would only report on that which was relevant to their task.

On that subject, they found plenty of places that might be suitable for a large airfield on the plateau back from the coast but they found no sign of work on constructing an airfield, even a preliminary clearing of the scrub. In fact, work started on Truscott Field a mere thirty kilometres from their landing site but six weeks AFTER their expedition, meaning that their information had come from plans rather than local gossip or air reconnaissance. So who exactly had given them this information? A good counter intelligence drama here but a story for another time and place.

But there might have been security problems on both sides. There was no mention of such a reconnaissance by the Japanese on our side for about six months (there couldn't be: we knew nothing about it) when suddenly every pub north of Carnarvon resounded with stories of how a "Jap Battalion" had been slaughtered by the local militia, the police, the Tuesday Morning playgroup and so on. Usually, the teller of the story had played a "key role."

But while most of these stories were exaggerated or false, the location was usually dead accurate. So did we have a spy in the Japanese ranks? Sadly no. It was probably the talk of Aboriginal groups who kept a close watch on the comings and goings of strangers onto their land.

So what should we say about Japanese plans to invade Australia?

Firstly, the idea did make some sense but the task was beyond the resources the Japanese High Command had at their disposal. While the initial campaigns were swift and brilliant in their execution, the Japanese planning staff were not to know this beforehand. Most campaigns do not go exactly to plan and prudence demands that reserves be kept aside for the unexpected. To be at the gates of Singapore was unexpected alright but who could have predicted the brilliance of Yamashita (and the incompetence of his opponents)? Any follow-on invasion of Australia would have required resources that the Japanese Army did not have, in South East Asia anyway.

Probably the more important factor that protected us from a Japanese invasion in 1942 was our inability to fit within the definition of what the Japanese believed they were doing. Liberating Asian countries from white colonialism was their main game and our Aborigines were not Asian. And to most Japanese of the time, they were barely human. They had just finished their own campaign of “assimilate or perish” against the Ainu in northern Japan so they had an odd empathy with us and our White Australia policy.

The Aborigines themselves had firm opinions about colonialism, as do an increasing number of white Australians these days, but you have to try to get into the minds of people at the time. Many more of us thought that our presence here was natural and eternal, regardless of Aboriginal interests. And the Japanese General Staff might have just given us the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, remember the window of opportunity to invade Australia: it was within the frame of 8 December 1941 – 7 June 1942 or not at all.

The question you might take away is why we are so given to this idea of Australia being “saved” from invasion. The war is now seventy-five years ago and counting, yet we are still susceptible to images of “them” storming south to take us over. If we were Russians or Chinese with community memories of millions of dead, it might be at least understandable, but Australians? Doesn't our own propaganda have a use by date (on ourselves)?

Perhaps the answer is the darkest of insults. The Japanese simply weren't interested.

It would be churlish of me to pretend that these thoughts are my own. Peter Stanley, the former official War Historian at the War Memorial and now working at the University of Queensland, issued the most basic challenge in demanding that proponents of the Battle for Australia scenario simply produce the proof. They say the Japanese planned to invade Australia so produce the plans. And of course they can't. There were none.