

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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## LONGEST FIGHTER INTERCEPT IN HISTORY

On 18 April 1943, aircrews of the US Army Air Forces operating in the South Pacific pulled off one of the most spectacular coups in the history of air warfare. Taking off at 0720 hours from a base on Guadalcanal, at the southern end of the Solomon Islands chain, sixteen P-38 Lightning fighters fitted with long-range fuel tanks covertly flew north 300 nautical miles across open sea, deliberately avoiding all islands along their route and flying at no more than 50 feet above the waves, and successfully intercepted a group of Japanese aircraft approaching Buin on the southern tip of Bougainville Island.

In an aerial combat lasting a maximum of ten minutes, the American fighters tore into the Japanese formation comprising two G4M1 bombers escorted by six Mitsubishi A6M3 Type 32 fighters. While most of the Lightnings engaged the fighter escorts, a designated team of American pilots attacked and pursued the two bombers, shooting both of them down—the first into the jungle a few miles from the coast, the second into the sea within sight of the airfield at Buin which had been their destination.

All on board the first aircraft perished, including the intended target of the operation Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto—the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet. Yamamoto was also the man reviled across the United States as the mastermind of Japan's surprise air assault on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which had brought America into World War II eighteen months earlier. The aerial ambush of Yamamoto, hailed as the longest fighter intercept in history, unleashed a torrent of debate and comment, though much of it conducted away from public view.

The mission which targeted Yamamoto with such precision had been possible only because of accurate and reliable intelligence regarding the Admiral's travel that day. This

information had fallen into US hands by virtue of a top secret allied enterprise which involved breaking the codes that protected Japanese radio communications. It was this project that had handed allied intelligence the detailed itinerary of Yamamoto's planned visit to Buin, and enabled American air power to shoot his aircraft down.

Because signals intelligence (or SIGINT) was making such a valuable contribution to the joint allied war effort, it was recognised that knowledge of codebreaking successes had to be prevented from reaching the enemy. In this instance, though, the Americans decided that snaring a figure like



*The shooting down of Admiral Yamamoto  
(Painting "Mission Accomplished" by Roy Grinnell (2006),  
with permission of grinnellart@yahoo.com)*

Yamamoto justified the risk of alerting the Japanese, and thereby prompting them to make a change of codes which could throw allied intelligence analysts into the dark for a period of months. The intrusion of US fighter aircraft so deep into Japanese-held territory and so far from their bases, on that day and at that time, was to be explained publicly as the result of 'information from Australian coastwatchers'. They also continued to fly operations in the area

for some time afterwards, to give the impression that the Yamamoto mission was not a one-off.

The decision to target Yamamoto deeply offended America's allies, who considered that they had an equal investment in the codebreaking operation and still regarded protection of the 'ultra secret' as paramount. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was so incensed that he protested directly to US President Franklin Roosevelt. He could not believe that such highly sensitive sources had been put at risk 'in so venal pursuit as the killing of an enemy admiral'—something he regarded as an 'act of self-indulgence, not a military operation at all.' To reinforce his displeasure, Churchill ordered a long pause in negotiations which were then underway between Britain and the US for a regular and full exchange of SIGINT information.

At the heart of Churchill's complaint was his assessment that there was little point to killing an enemy commander like Yamamoto. The American rationale for going after the admiral was certainly not driven by consideration of necessity, based on the admiral's actual power, command authority or strategic vision. Underscoring its true motive was the codename selected for the mission: Operation *Vengeance*. In later years this aspect would prompt some commentators to characterise such targeted killings as assassination, and something unethical even in time of war, although the weight of legal opinion still holds that because Yamamoto was a combatant he was a perfectly legitimate target.

The death of such a revered figure as Yamamoto was undoubtedly a huge blow to Japanese national morale. Following the return of his cremated ashes, he was accorded a state funeral in Tokyo on 5 June which was only the second for a non-royal person in Japan's history and attracted an estimated three million onlookers. But the impact of his loss soon passed. He was simply replaced as naval commander by another admiral whose performance (before he, too, died in a plane crash a year later) was arguably no better or worse—given the huge problems and limitations that Japan already faced in prosecuting its war aims.

While the point and justification to undertaking the military operation that resulted in the killing of Admiral Yamamoto might be in dispute, there is one aspect to that event that remains incontestable. The allied capacity to carry out such a mission in 1943 was due entirely to the unique characteristics of air power: penetration, precision, reach, and speed. Air power still provides the key to enabling such blows to be delivered today.

- *Targeting enemy military leadership is a legal and ethical objective among the range of effects which commanders may be tasked to generate within a battlespace.*
- *Precise and reliable intelligence is critical to conducting the time-sensitive operations entailed in pursuing military leaders that have been targeted.*
- *Only by optimising the unique characteristics of air power can such operations be successfully undertaken.*



*Adachi surrenders*

Six months after the killing of Yamamoto, the RAAF was involved in a very similar operation in the New Guinea area. On 2 October 1943 eight Kittyhawks of No 77 Squadron were sent on temporary detachment from Goodenough Island to Nadzab, near Lae, to fly escort for Boomerangs and Wirraways of No 4 Squadron conducting tactical reconnaissance for the Australian 7th Division in the Markham Valley.

When intelligence—almost certainly from intercepted radio communications—indicated that a Japanese general would be flying from Wewak to Rabaul on the morning of 6 October, the 77 Squadron detachment was briefed to attempt to shoot down his aircraft as it passed over Karkar Island, a volcano off the north coast which lay along the general's expected flight path. After getting airborne at 0830 hours the Kittyhawks broke into two groups of four, each orbiting north and south of the island from 0945 hours, but in the event no enemy aircraft turned up at the anticipated time.

As the headquarters of the Japanese 18th Army was at Wewak, the intended target of 77 Squadron's unsuccessful mission was most probably Lieutenant General Hatazo Adachi. Having been spared Yamamoto's fate (for whatever reason), he survived the fighting in New Guinea and surrendered to allied forces at Cape Wom in September 1945. He suicided at Rabaul in September 1947, having been sentenced in July to life imprisonment for war crimes that included encouraging his men to kill captured allied airmen.

*Attacks on the decision element of command are limited only by the imagination.*

Col John A. Warden,  
*The Air Campaign* (1988), chap 3



**Air Power Development Centre**  
TCC3, Department of Defence  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041  
Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)  
Web: <http://airpower.airforce.gov.au>

The views expressed in this Pathfinder are not necessarily those of the RAAF

