

Of the many books on the Pacific War I've read this year, Captain Tameichi Hara's has to be one of the most enlightening. That Captain Hara survived the war is probably nothing short of a miracle, but his critical analysis of Japanese leadership and tactics is truly a gift to all historians. As an example, Hara confirms that the Japanese had no troops available to defend Guadalcanal in August, 1942 which was Admiral Ernest King's belief and justification for ordering the Marine Corps to plan and execute the Guadalcanal invasion on very short notice. Hara also knew in November of 1943 that the Imperial Japanese Navy was defeated. He arrived at this bitter realization after surviving many battles in the Solomons and seeing first hand, the advances in American radar, fire-control and aircraft design that neutralized the power of the IJN and the Japanese air force. (Hara did not know that by 1943, the United States had over 20,000 code breakers - over half of them women - working around the clock to extract priceless intelligence from Japanese radio intercepts.)

75 years ago today, Hara witnessed America's first act of revenge for Pearl Harbor, the first carrier-based bombing of the main Japanese naval base at Rabaul. On 1 November 1943, U.S. forces invaded Bougainville, the largest and most northern island of the Solomons chain - next stop surely would be Rabaul. Japanese naval commanders had been pursuing a policy of conservation - holding their heavy cruisers back for a decisive battle. Hara was critical of this "conservation" because he saw American naval forces grow in size and technological superiority throughout the months following Guadalcanal. Now, as he bitterly realized, it was too late.

In order to hinder the American landings at Bougainville, the IJN sent a small task force of destroyers, including Captain Hara's, to land reinforcements and attack the American invasion fleet. The ensuing Battle of Empress Augusta Bay was a defeat for the Japanese but the Japanese Naval command finally decided that the time was right to commit the cruiser force anchored in Truk. By 5 November, 7 Japanese cruisers were anchored in Rabaul, preparing to attack the American fleet at Bougainville.

No IJN ship movements were unmonitored in 1943 and the movement of these cruisers from Truk to Rabaul prompted the U.S. Navy to detach a small carrier force from the upcoming Tarawa operation to attack Rabaul. 75 years ago today, all 7 of these Japanese cruisers were put out of action by our pilots. Captain Hara, a hardened veteran by that point had his destroyer, Shigure, underway immediately after receiving the first air-raid warnings and was able to escape from the harbor undamaged.

The loss of their cruiser force resulted the effective withdrawal of the IJN from the Southwest Pacific Area leaving the remaining Japanese garrisons in the New Guinea vicinity without support or means of supply. Rabaul was surrounded, bypassed and "pacified" with constant bombing until the end of the war. Hara, though convinced by that point that victory was no longer in the offing, continued serve with honor and distinction. Late in the war, he was given command of the IJN cruiser Yahagi and sent on a suicide mission with a small task force centered around the super-battleship Yamato. Carrying only enough scarce fuel for a one-way trip, the task force was to attack the American fleet off Okinawa in a last ditch effort to protect the homeland. The fleet was under constant American surveillance and came under massive air attack on 7 August 1945. The Yahagi was sunk but miraculously, there were no hits on the bridge area and Hara was able to abandon ship. Clinging to log, Hara witnessed the bombing and sinking of the Yamato and with it, the death of the Imperial Japanese Navy.