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SITNews: Japan perhaps not so guilty
by Anthony Paul

THE most dramatic photograph to emerge from the Pacific War - indeed, from almost any war - shows the US fleet burning at Pearl Harbour on Dec 7, 1941. Sulphurous with anger, then-president Franklin D. Roosevelt rose before Congress the following day to denounce 'a date that will live in infamy': The United States had been 'suddenly and deliberately attacked' by Japanese naval and air forces.

'The distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago,' the president raged. 'Always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us...'

A sneak attack? Yes - but in the circumstances, according to a book published in the US this month, perhaps not as unpardonable as the president insisted.

The book's most striking detail: Mr Roosevelt and his aides and allies were putting together a similar attack of their own on the Japanese homeland.

The book, a revisionist history of the months immediately preceding that 'infamous' Dec 7, implies that Mr Roosevelt's indignation concealed more than a little American wiliness.

Pre-emptive Strike by Alan Armstrong (Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, Connecticut) presents evidence, much of it supported by Pentagon, State Department and White House documents, that Americans and Nationalist Chinese with British help would have struck at Japanese airfields and shipping more than a month before Japan's Pearl Harbour assault launched the war.

If the Allies had been able to assemble enough aircraft as quickly as they had at first hoped, the story goes, a bombing fleet owned by China but manned by US pilots, and with some of the aircraft possibly fuelled by British petrol stocks, would have launched the Pacific War.

America's 'historical memory' is that the Pearl Harbour attack was 'unprovoked', writes author Armstrong. 'The stark reality,' he says, 'is that America and Japan were (both) planning bombing initiatives and air attacks against the other if diplomatic solutions to the impasse created by the American trade embargo imposed on or about July 26, 1941, were not resolved.'

'The day America imposed the trade embargo, July 23, 1941,' notes the author, 'is also the date president Roosevelt endorsed the plan to bomb Japan.'

A spy called PA

SINGAPORE figured prominently in the US-China-UK war preparations, the book says. To this British island-fortress in July 1941 flew an emissary from Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's embattled Chungking-based government assigned to help with the operation.

The Japanese were aware of all this - and the Allies knew that they knew.

Tokyo had a spy in Chungking whom Allied counter-intelligence identified only as 'PA'. Electronic eavesdroppers in Hong Kong or possibly the Philippines intercepted the agent's warning that bombers stowed 'on board a steamship belonging to the Ford Company' would reach Rangoon in late July and then be transferred to China.

Armstrong cites a document that reports the spy's telling Tokyo that the generalissimo's emissary had gone to Singapore 'to discuss plans with the British and American officials'.

Documents also record that the effort to use American pilots against China's Japanese invaders emerged from a meeting in the Washington home of then Treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau on Dec 21, 1940.

Attendees reportedly included Mr Morgenthau, Colonel Claire Chennault, a retired US Army Air Corps (USAAC) fighter pilot who had been advising the Chinese, Dr T. V. Soong, China's special envoy to the US, and China air force general Mow Pang Tsu.

They were said to have discussed firebombing Japanese cities using B-17 Flying Fortresses operating from secret airfields then being built in south-eastern China's Zhejiang province.

The original idea was to have 450 fighters and 150 bombers in place by October 31, 1941 - based in China, flown by Americans, but without any direct ties to the US government.

Secret notices went out to army and navy flight training schools in the US publicising something called the American Volunteer Group (AVG) forming in Kunming under Col Chennault.

There was little talk of 'freedom's struggle' or other such military rhetoric. Recruiting was based on a business deal - US\$750 a month plus a US\$500 bonus for each downed enemy plane, very good money in an America just emerging from the Great Depression.

Flying P-40B Tomahawk fighters with tiger shark teeth painted on their engine cowlings, this mercenary force - soon named the Flying Tigers by the press - engaged Japanese bombing fleets and their fighter escorts above Burma and China from December 1941 to July 1942, when the unit was disbanded.

Col Chennault got some of his fighters but there appear to have been no bombers in that Rangoon shipment. Bombers were in desperately short supply, especially in Europe and the Middle East. In June, German forces had invaded the Soviet Union and were threatening the Suez Canal, Britain's lifeline to its Asian empire. Only those Tomahawks reached the AVG.

When Pearl Harbour was attacked, some Lockheed Hudson bombers earmarked for the colonel were still in Burbank, California, AVG historian Dan Ford tells The Straits Times. The Army Air Corps (precursor of the US Air Force) quickly repossessed them.

'One AVG bomber pilot and a bunch of ground crew were at sea on Dec 7,' says Mr Ford. 'They were diverted to Australia and re-inducted into the army.'

In his post-war memoirs, AVG commandant Chennault, by then a major-general, regretted his inability to get bombers: 'Begun in time and delivered with sufficient weight, an air offensive from China could have smashed the Japanese southern offensive before it left its home ports and staging areas.'

What if...

AUTHOR Armstrong also ponders the difference the bombing plan might have made. His book's sub-title is America's Plan To Attack Japan Would Have Prevented Pearl Harbour. It claims that 'timely implementation would have pre-empted Japanese aggression in South-east Asia and the western Pacific'.

The author is an aviation lawyer based in Atlanta. He became interested in the subject when an AVG historian gave him a collection of old papers found in a desk at the US Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida.

Marked 'secret' or 'confidential', the documents referred to the mercenary guerilla air force put together by Col Chennault at a time when the US was supposed to be a neutral power.

Further research at New York's Franklin D. Roosevelt Library confirmed that Washington had plans for attacking Japan before the Pearl Harbour incident, the author tells The Straits Times.

One of Armstrong's reasons for writing Pre-emptive Strike was apparently to generate enthusiasm among possible backers for a movie about the Flying Tigers (see author's website: www.flyingtigersfilm.com).

Word of a bombing wing - a so-called 2nd AVG - to serve beside Col Chennault's fighter group has been in print since the late 1980s when a US trade journal for mercenaries, Soldier Of Fortune (not the most respectable of magazines), published an article containing word of America's precocious bomb-Japan plans.

But how much credence should be given to a book that appears to have been written in order to attract investors for a Hollywood movie?

'Because the facts presented in my book are at odds with widely accepted views about the events leading up to the Pearl Harbour attack and contemporaneous Japanese military initiatives,' Armstrong says, 'I believed it was imperative to present the reader with evidence that a Chinese-American (and British) bombing initiative directed towards Japan was real.'

His book has 589 footnotes and a nine-page bibliography.

Why it has taken so long to reveal all this remains something of a mystery. But the heavy documentation - largely the result of enthusiastic cooperation of US government personnel, says Armstrong - does support the view that Pre-emptive Strike is serious history.

It will present wartime history buffs with some intriguing what-ifs, especially in South-east Asia. As the book says, the bombing raids planned for Nov 1, 1941, 'could have smashed Japanese troop transports destined to invade Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines before they left port'.

Imagine our region's post-1940 history if 150 or so bombers sent this way had indeed foiled the Japanese advance and thus the occupation of much of the region.

No precipitous British and US surrenders in Singapore and the Philippines. No conditions permitting communist guerilla leader Chin Peng's insurgency to flourish for a time in the late 1940s. And probably long postponements in the termination of British, American, Dutch and French colonial empires in the region.

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