

Cookie and the Clippers

John Cooke, pictured, had studied collection techniques against imperial Japanese Navy communications as a U.S. Navy radioman. He graduated from the course taught in a metal structure on top of the Navy Building in Washington, D.C. in September 1930. This made him a member of the pioneering group of intercept operators that later came to be known as the "On the Roof Gang."



In 1988, Cooke wrote some reminiscences of his career in intercept in the 1930s. The following is a digest of that article.

After an initial assignment on Guam, Cooke and three colleagues did collection from Dollar Steamship Line passenger liners. Each operator was on a different ship, all of which were on a circuit to Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Manila, and Seattle. Over the next two years, each made seven circuits with one of them always being in the vicinity of Japan. Ostensibly, they were assisting in making a weather map of the North Pacific for future airliner use.

On one of these voyages on the *President Jefferson*, Cooke met a college girl and married her. Their marriage lasted a lifetime.

In 1935, Cooke learned that Pan American Airways (PANAM) was about to begin flights from California to various locations in Asia that he was familiar with. PANAM hired him as a radio operator, and he got his discharge from the Navy. Cooke was on duty on November 22, 1935, when the first PANAM China Clipper took off. As he worked for PANAM, Cooke impressed his colleagues with his ability to copy Japanese weather broadcasts -- even when they switched from International Morse Code to a code of their own devising.

Cooke was assigned to Guam in the late 1930s by PANAM, and watched the American military buildup on the island. He was transferred to Wake Island in early 1941, and relocated there with his family, among the few civilians on Wake Island.

Many senior military officers visited Wake Island in those days, and were surprised to find a small civilian community, mostly construction contractors. In October 1941, the Navy ordered all civilian families to be evacuated. Cooke and one of the contractors protested, but were overruled. The families left.

PANAM's Philippine Clipper arrived on Wake Island on December 6, 1941, one day behind schedule. Just as it left on the morning of the 7th for Guam, the islanders got the news about the Japanese attack on Hawaii. Cooke recalled the plane and the Navy commandeered it for a reconnaissance flight.

The Navy commander on the island, a Marine Corps major, the captain of the PANAM Clipper, and Cooke held a conference about their next steps. Driving back from the conference, Cooke was caught in a Japanese strafing attack on the island and narrowly escaped. The enemy hit every building on the island, but did not attack the fuel storage tanks.

The next step was to strip the Clipper of its cargo, seats, floorboards, and navigator's table in order to cram every possible passenger aboard. The Clipper had been hit in the Japanese attack, but was still in flying condition. Cooke served as the Clipper's radioman for the flight. The Clipper stayed at 500 feet altitude all day to avoid detection, then climbed to 10,000 feet after dark.



The China Clipper flying over San Francisco, California

The airplane's next stop was Midway Island, where it was to refuel. They had no difficulty finding Midway, since the island had been shelled by Japanese ships several hours earlier. Many of the buildings were on fire. The Clipper managed to refuel and flew on to Honolulu.

Cooke's father, a Navy commander, met the Clipper as it came in. (Cooke's uncle, by the way, was captain of the battleship USS *Pennsylvania*.) Commander Cooke took his son and the skipper of the Clipper to meet Admiral Husband Kimmel, the commander-in-chief at Pearl Harbor, who wanted a first-hand report on the situation in the islands.

After the report, Kimmel turned to the younger Cooke and asked whether he was the person who had made a fuss when the order came to evacuate families from Wake Island. Cooke admitted he was. "That's the trouble with you civilians," Kimmel said, "You should realize we always know exactly what we are doing."

Cooke made no response. He just looked through the admiral's picture window at the remains of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, still smoldering from the Japanese attack.