

A radio operator's recollections – ‘On the Roof Gang’ intercepting Japanese Naval communications

Lieutenant Commander Kenneth Carmichael, USN (Ret), in 1986, talked about his enlisted experiences before World War II.

Carmichael enlisted in the Navy in 1932, and was sent to radio school at Pensacola, Florida. He heard about an opportunity for special training and volunteered for it. Accepted into the special program, he was sent for further training at the Navy Building in Washington, D.C.

He thus became a member of the “On the Roof Gang,” a select number of U.S. Navy radio operators who were trained in the 1930s to intercept Japanese Navy communications. Their nickname came from the site of their training, a shack on the roof of the Navy Building.

Following his rooftop training, Carmichael was sent to the Navy intercept site at the Cavite Navy Yard in the Philippines. The site copied Japanese material and packaged it to send to Washington for analysis. Most of the material was sent in U.S. air mail via the commercial seaplane China Clipper.

In September 1937, after about a year at Cavite, Carmichael was transferred to the U.S. intercept site in Shanghai, China. He had long wanted an assignment in that country and felt that it “was glorious to get to China.”

Carmichael found himself on the roof again, this time atop the headquarters building for the 4th Marines. The Navy was replacing Marine Corps operators with sailors, since many Marines were dissatisfied with the assignment -- under the policies of the day, because they were not riflemen, they couldn't get promoted.

The Shanghai site collected Japanese diplomatic traffic from Tokyo as well as Japanese Navy communications. The diplomatic material was the system the U.S. Army and Navy called “PURPLE.” The Navy operators found it difficult to copy the messages because of the poor transmission quality. Carmichael noted that these communications came from two transmitters in Tokyo, and “both of them belonged back with the Pharaohs. I'm telling you, they were terrible!”

War had already started between the Japanese and the Chinese. Carmichael remembers watching from the roof of his building as Japanese aircraft bombed Chinese installations across the river from Shanghai's international settlement.

Carmichael left Shanghai in January 1940, and, passing through Hawaii, was re-assigned there. Working first at the station in Heeia, then at Wahiawa, his assignment now concentrated on Japanese Navy messages, primarily the Combined Fleet, Japan's main strike force in the Pacific.

The site at Wailupe also produced good direction finding on Japanese naval vessels. It was noted in early December that they could not locate the Japanese carriers; this was “bothersome,” according to Carmichael, but nobody knew for certain what it meant.

Carmichael was watch chief on the night of December 6, working the hours of 2200 until dawn. He and his crew stayed on longer because intercept was heavy (what he later recognized as Japanese Navy movements into Southeast Asia).

After writing his watch report, Carmichael went off duty, “heading for breakfast and the sack.” Once again, he stood on the heights and watched military action. “Kaneohe Naval Air was right across the bay... and they were strafing out there.... We’re watching ‘em strafing those seaplanes that were moored out in the water.” He and a couple of fellow sailors decided they were watching “maneuvers,” and asked each other, “What in the hell are those armies doing today?” Carmichael went back to his quarters and was soon asleep.

Very soon, he didn’t remember how long, he was awakened by the sound of a bomb exploding nearby, and got up. Learning from the radio that the island was under attack, he quickly went back on watch.

As the attack progressed, Carmichael recalled, they intercepted calls between one Japanese aircraft carrier and its planes. Unfortunately, by 1986, he could recall no details.

Carmichael was commissioned in 1944. Later in his career he established a postwar collection site on Guam, and the Navy Training School at Imperial Beach, California.