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Revisiting the Dispute over the Identification of "AF" as Midway

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On page 50 in *A Priceless Advantage: U.S. Navy Communications Intelligence and the Battles of Coral Sea, Midway, and the Aleutians* (published by the Center for Cryptologic History in 1993), I concluded my discussion of the problem of the identity of "AF" in the Japanese navy designator system by describing the famous water message episode. This is the story of how CINCPAC decided to deceive the Japanese by directing Midway to send an urgent message to the headquarters of the 14th Naval District in Honolulu complaining of a shortage of water. The message was to be sent in the clear where, hopefully, it would be intercepted by the Japanese radio intelligence service and reported to Tokyo. Using the cable between Oahu and Midway for the tasking message so there would be no possibility that the Japanese could discover the deception, the scheme worked to perfection. I knew that the episode had been reported by other historians whom I respected, but while recounting the events themselves, I said that "no direct evidence exists" that the episode actually occurred. These words were written following an exhaustive and comprehensive search of the CINCPAC message files and the CINCPAC War Diary for May 1942, where I had every reason to expect to find either the message tasking Midway or a reflection of the decision to employ deception using radio communications, or both. Lacking this evidence but giving the conclusion the importance it deserved in removing all remaining doubt in Washington concerning the identity of AF as Midway, I hoped this would be considered an even-handed treatment of an important event which intimately connected communications intelligence and the CINCPAC decision-making processes. Well, almost!

I have heard from a reader who was an actual witness to the episode – then Ensign and now Rear Admiral USN (ret) Donald M. Showers. In his letter to me, Admiral Showers described the crowded working conditions, the friendly relationships and the fact that professional exchanges among Joe Rochefort, Tommy Dyer, Joe Finnegan, Tom Huckins, "Ham" Wright, Jack Williams, Jasper Holmes, and "Red" Lasswell in Hypo's basement home were frequently conducted while standing at each other's desk. He also described his role as an eyewitness. Here is his story.

At this time Showers' and Holmes' desks were side by side. One day in mid-May 1942, Rochefort came to Holmes' desk accompanied by Tommy Dyer and asked Holmes if he had any idea how we might go about verifying and confirming the identity of "AF" as Midway. Finnegan promptly joined this group and entered into the discussion because this issue was uppermost in everyone's mind at that point.

Holmes' story in Double Edged Secrets *has this meeting taking place at Rochefort's desk and attributes inputs from Finnegan that I don't recall. I put the meeting at Holmes' desk because I was sitting next to his desk and witnessed the entire proceeding.*

Holmes then related his experience with the Midway water situation while at the University of Hawaii. Holmes also knew of the still-operable submarine cable from Oahu to Midway. It was Holmes who put these facts together and proposed the instruction via cable for the island commander to send a plaintext message reporting a major evaporator casualty. Finnegan then chimed in to speculate that Wake would almost certainly pick up this transmission and, if "AF" was Midway, it would certainly be reported promptly to Tokyo.

After Holmes outlined his knowledge of the water production and the cable link and suggested the fake message, Rochefort then gave his famous low-key praise, "Very good, Jasper, very good." Those words are indelible in my memory because this was the most fascinating original conception at problem solving that I had seen up to this point in my young life. The scene will never fade from my memory.

Admiral Showers' letter then continues with an explanation of the different treatments given to these events by Holmes himself, Lewin, and Layton and his coauthors Pineau and Costello. His letter in its entirety will eventually become part of the records of the Center for Cryptologic History.

The deception was completely successful. As expected, and as I reported in the official history, the Japanese intercepted Midway's message and the reported intercept was in turn intercepted by Melbourne. On 22 May 1942, Melbourne published the following report: *"KIMIHI (Naval Intelligence Tokyo)-The AF (Midway) air unit sent following radio message to Cmdt 14th District: "AK" on 20th. 'Refer this unit's report dated 19th, at the present time we have only enough water for two weeks. Please supply us immediately.' Note: Have requested 14th District check this message-if authentic it will confirm identity AF as Midway."*

Surviving records do not reveal any response from those in Washington who had doubted the long-standing correlation of AF and Midway. The first correlation was made on 13 March 1942 by Corregidor, followed by Hawaii, and then, in April, by Melbourne based on its position in the "A" or American digraphs in the Japanese designator system. The doubts had taken bizarre forms. Between 15 and 20 or 21 May 1942, OP-20-G and perhaps others in Washington – including the War Plans Staff – subscribed to the idea that AF was Samoa, the U.S. West Coast, and even Hawaii itself.

The message from Melbourne on 22 May ultimately ended all controversy over the identity of AF as the Japanese objective – Midway.

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